

# A Fragile Inheritance: the state of the UK's historic houses

2026

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# A Fragile Inheritance: the state of the UK's historic houses

**Much of the UK's heritage remains in private or independent ownership, including more than a thousand country houses. These houses constitute one of the largest and most distinctive collections of historic and lived-in properties anywhere in the world.**

A handful are household names, each attracting hundreds of thousands—sometimes over a million—visitors each year. But most operate on a far smaller scale. They are family-run enterprises, deeply rooted in their local communities, sustaining jobs and economic activity in rural areas where opportunities can sometimes be scarce.

Historic Houses represents this extraordinary sector. We speak for over 1,400 historic houses, parks and gardens across the UK, and each year we survey our members to understand better how they are faring.



*Image courtesy of Alnwick Castle*

This report is, in effect, a health check for the nation's stately homes. There is much to celebrate: together, these properties welcomed over 21.3 million visitors last year and supported more than 12,000 jobs. They are a powerful draw for domestic and international tourism, and a cornerstone of the UK's global image.

But the findings also reveal some serious problems besetting this heritage. Our research uncovers a series of stark and alarming realities for owners and custodians:

- Nearly a third of Historic Houses member places are yet to recover to pre-pandemic revenue, and visitor numbers remain below 2019 figures.
- Rising employment costs are forcing owners to cut back, choking off new jobs and opportunities in rural economies.
- The cost of doing business continues to grow year on year, as new tax burdens hit home and insurance premiums escalate in value.
- A complex and inflexible planning system continues to obstruct sensible development, including essential upgrades to improve energy efficiency in historic buildings.

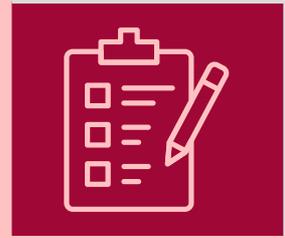
These challenges create a difficult situation for many of our member houses. The consequences could be profound for some, as we may see the breakup of some historic estates, the dispersal of some collections, and potentially a reduction in public access where houses are sold.

These outcomes are not inevitable. There are practical, achievable steps that governments across the UK could take to safeguard this irreplaceable heritage, and to help these places throw open the doors to more people than ever before. These findings are a call to action. We hope it is heard.

Ben Cowell, Director General

March 2026

# The Historic Houses Annual Survey



Every year, Historic Houses circulates an annual survey: this is open to all Historic Houses member places with questions focused on activities from the calendar year.

The survey provides the Historic Houses team with a snapshot of the activities and operating conditions at our member places.

For the 2025 calendar year, the survey was completed by 338 member places representing just under 25% of the total membership.

## Visitor numbers

In 2025, we calculate that Historic Houses member places welcomed over **21.3 million visitors** between them. This represents an increase of 14% on 2024's figures.

Typical entry prices to our member houses in 2025 were £14 for adults and £5.90 for children. This is significantly below the average cost of an adult ticket at Historic Royal Palaces (£22.78), and sits between the average cost of an adult ticket at National Trust properties (£14.90) and English Heritage sites (£11.98).<sup>1</sup>



*Blenheim Palace - image courtesy of Historic Houses*

Blenheim Palace (right) was our most visited member property in 2025 with 980,678 visitors.

1. The average prices given for National Trust and English Heritage sites have been produced using a random sample of 50 paid-for properties from each organisation.

## Our top 20 most visited places were:

Rank	House	2025 Visitor Numbers
1.	Blenheim Palace*	980,678
2.	Chatsworth House*	679,232
3.	Hever Castle	389,928
4.	Beaulieu*	310,384
5.	Waddesdon Manor	306,061
6.	Castle Howard*	289,000
7.	Bamburgh Castle	255,479
8.	Alnwick Castle	255,047
9.	Arundel Castle Gardens	192,000
10.	Painshill Park	178,094
11.	Raby Castle, Park & Gardens	171,927
12.	Dunvegan Castle & Gardens	171,115
13.	Harewood House	164,538
14.	Dunrobin Castle and Garden	158,916
15.	Burghley House	144,809
16.	The Bishop's Palace and Gardens	134,430
17.	Sewerby Hall Gardens	131,020
18.	Blair Castle & Gardens	125,000
19.	Lowther Castle & Gardens	124,676
20.	Wentworth Woodhouse	120,865

\* 2025 visitor figures from Historic Houses members who did not complete the annual survey.

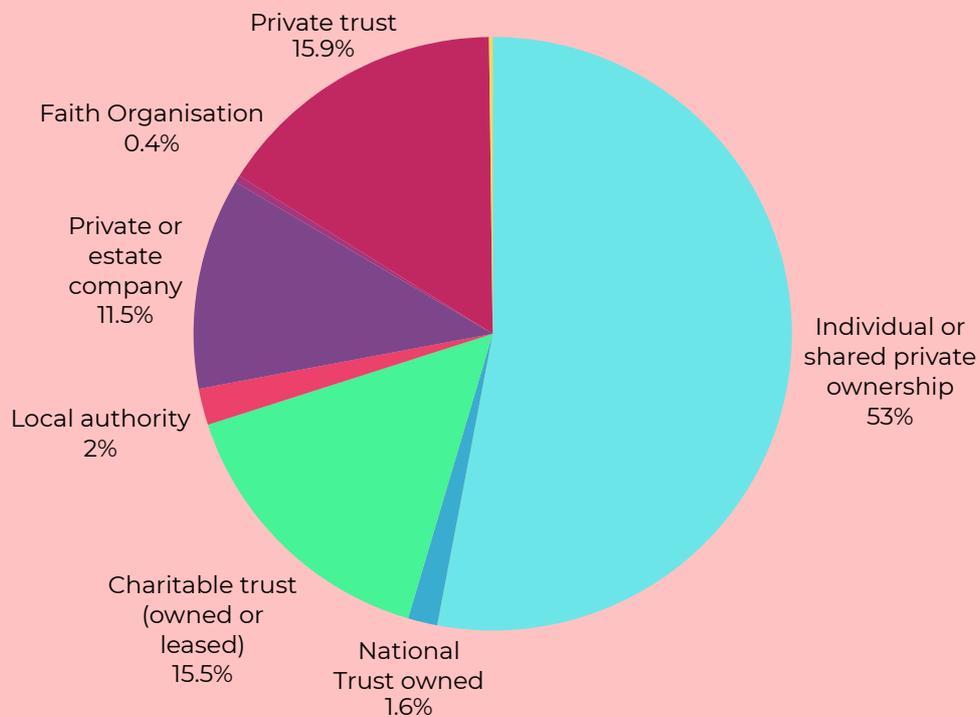
These are the Top 20 most visited Historic Houses places, according to the number of paying visitors recorded and reported to us by the houses themselves. Despite these undeniably impressive figures, total visitor numbers are yet to return to pre-pandemic estimates of 26 million in 2019. 31% of respondents also told us revenue is yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

## What kind of places do we represent?

Historic Houses is a membership association for independently owned heritage. The majority of the UK's c. 500,000 listed buildings are in different forms of private ownership.

Most of our member places (53%) are in individual or shared private ownership. Ownership by charitable trusts forms a sizeable minority, as do properties owned by local authorities.

Historic Houses members by ownership structure



Historic Houses member places offer a wide range of business interests and forms of public engagement, from traditional day visitor attractions to hosting festivals and exhibitions. The table below shows the percentage of respondents to our annual survey undertaking activities.

### Activities undertaken by our members

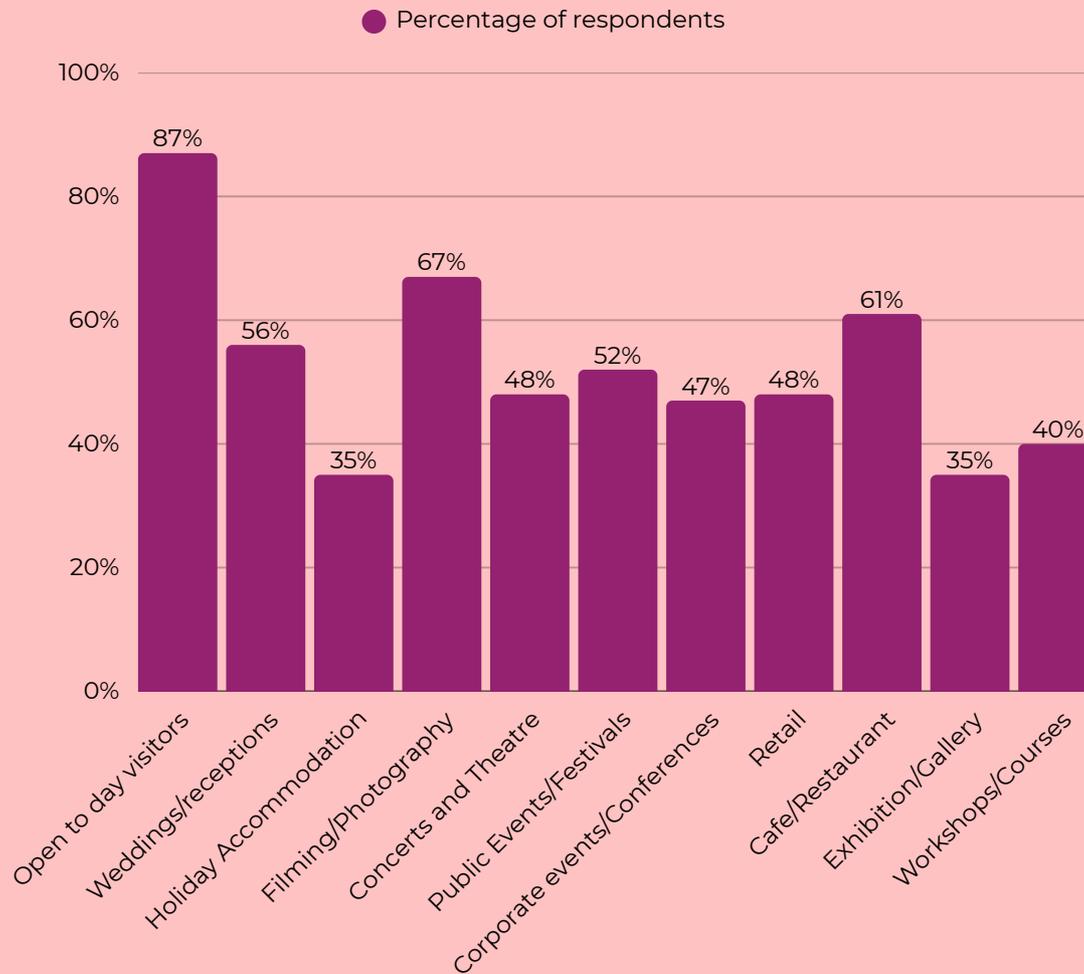


Image courtesy of Hay Castle



Image courtesy of Powderham Castle

# Heritage means business



Historic Houses member places have a sizeable economic impact. We calculate that our member places contributed **an estimated £1 billion economic benefit** to the UK in 2025, with no difference from 2024.

75% of expenditure by Historic Houses places is local or regional, and the 338 respondents to our annual survey estimated they had purchased supplies or services from a further 8,762 businesses in their local area during 2025 alone.

As employers across some of the most rural parts of the UK, Historic Houses member places make a vital contribution to the rural economy by providing great jobs for talented people, no matter where they live.

Film and television productions continue to be a popular business activity at our member places. There was a slight fall (10%) in the number of houses reporting that they had hosted film and television production companies in 2025 compared to the previous year. This still represents nearly two-fifths of houses reporting that they had filming on site, for filming sessions of at least a week or more in nearly a quarter (22%) of the cases.



*Image courtesy of Knebworth House*

Our member places directly **employed over 12,000 FTE staff** in 2025. This figure remains almost static from 2024: the rise in National Minimum Wage (and its knock-on effects) combined with the rise in employers' NICs has seen many delay or reverse plans to create new jobs as their wage bills rose dramatically in 2025.

Alongside rising employment costs, our members have seen significant increases in recent years in the cost of doing business. The costs of repairs continue to rise with general market conditions and the cost of insurance policies has risen significantly. In a 2025 survey, our member houses told us that, on average, they pay £61,453 per property on insurance premiums each year, up 72% on 2024.

2. Historic Houses insurance survey, summer 2025

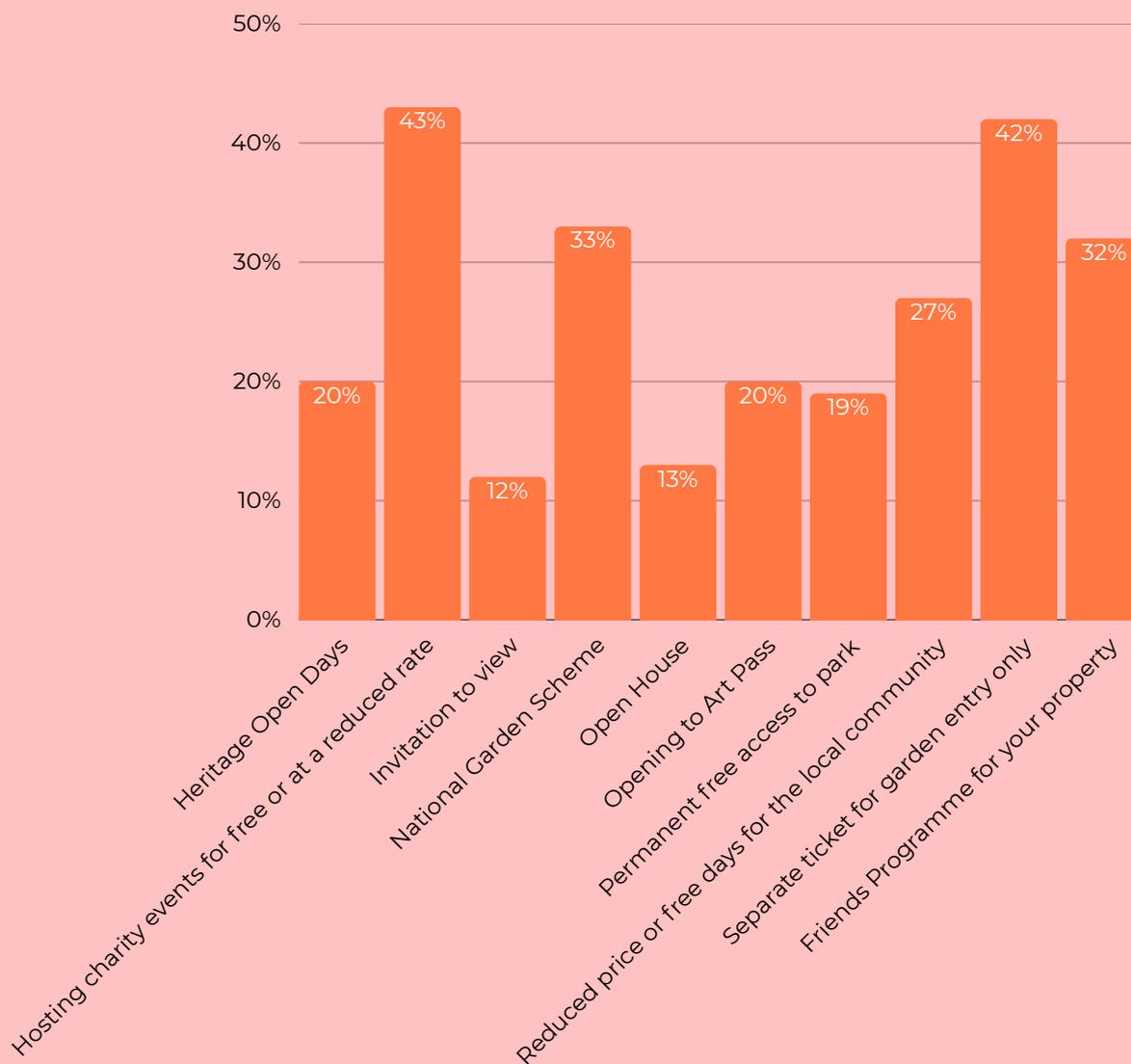
## Drivers of community & culture

In 2025, Historic Houses member places welcomed **over 242,434 learners** of all ages. 44% of respondents undertook learning, outreach or community work. **Over 314,000 people were welcomed to charity or community events** in 2025 and **over 14,000 volunteers** offered their time to support Historic Houses member places in their work.



Image courtesy of Van Gogh House

### Alternative forms of public access and percentage of members undertaking them



## Held up by the planning system

More than a third (35%, or 119) of the member places that responded to our survey made a listed building consent application in 2025.

Of those applying for listed building consent (68), 72% of applications did **not** have a decision made within the statutory eight-week period. 34% waited more than 16 weeks for a decision. It is little wonder that 87% of historic building owners see the UK's planning system as a major barrier to decarbonising their property; this adds further weight to our call to implement national listed building consent orders for grade II buildings on a range of low impact measures.<sup>3</sup>

Applications had varying success rates. Notably, only 50% of applications to install energy efficiency measures were successful, whilst 67% of applications to install a renewable energy source or heating system were successful.

Purpose of the applications	Success Rate
Restoration/repair work	70%
Installing energy efficiency measures	50%
Installing a renewable energy source/heating system	67%
Conversion of disused space into new commercial use	58%

These findings confirmed what we already knew. Nearly half (48%) of Historic Houses and CLA properties reported in 2022 that their experience of the planning system was 'poor' or 'very poor'.<sup>4</sup> The latest available data from Historic England revealed that 44% of listed building owners viewed their experience of applying for listed building consent as either 'poor' or 'very poor,' a significant increase on the figure reported in 2017 (33%).<sup>5</sup>

**“ 87% of historic building owners see the UK's planning system as a major barrier to decarbonising ”**

- <https://www.historichouses.org/news/87-say-planning-rules-block-decarbonisation-of-historic-buildings/>
- <https://www.historichouses.org/news/87-say-planning-rules-block-decarbonisation-of-historic-buildings/>
- <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/current/social-and-economic-research/listed-building-owners-survey/> (p 55)



# The bigger picture

This report illustrates the enormous public benefit Historic Houses member places provide, as well as highlighting their role as economic lynchpins across rural Britain in 2025.

But they also show how the regulatory and policy conditions in which these places operate have dampened the prospects for growth. Collectively, these increased burdens serve to diminish the prospects for many of our member properties.

A slow and cumbersome planning system creates barriers to development. Ever-increasing taxes on businesses have reduced the incentives for investment. New tax burdens include the end of hospitality, retail and leisure business rates relief, the proposed introduction of a new High Value Council Tax Surcharge in England, new visitor levies across the UK and new inheritance tax burdens following the merging and capping of Business and Agricultural Property Relief.

**“ They are family-run enterprises, deeply rooted in their local communities, sustaining jobs and economic activity in rural areas where opportunities can sometimes be scarce. ”**



*Image courtesy of Browsholme Hall*

## What can be done?

Plenty. Historic Houses members are dynamic and entrepreneurial: they care deeply about the places they find themselves custodians of, and they are constantly looking for ways to generate income and provide public benefit. A supportive fiscal and regulatory framework is essential for these businesses.



### Our policy recommendations:

1. Unleash the potential of the rural economy, through investment, infrastructure and targeted support for SMEs.
2. Streamline the planning system, and cut unnecessary red tapes: introduce a National Listed Building Consent Order for targeted energy efficiency / low-carbon energy sources for Grade II buildings.
3. Protect heritage through a supportive fiscal framework.
4. Stimulate investment through VAT reform.
5. Invest in heritage skills and careers to develop a workforce that will support the UK's historic houses being ready for the future.

More information about our policy asks can be found in our 2026 policy card [here](#).

The UK is rightfully proud of its unique heritage, and we are proud to represent some of our nation's most treasured historic houses. We hope this report will provide a route map towards ensuring the longevity and ongoing relevance of these remarkable places in the centuries to come.



*Image courtesy of Doddington Hall*