HISTORIC
HOUSES

Endangered Spaces: Protecting ‘at risk’ heritage

September 2026

Introduction


Castle Howard

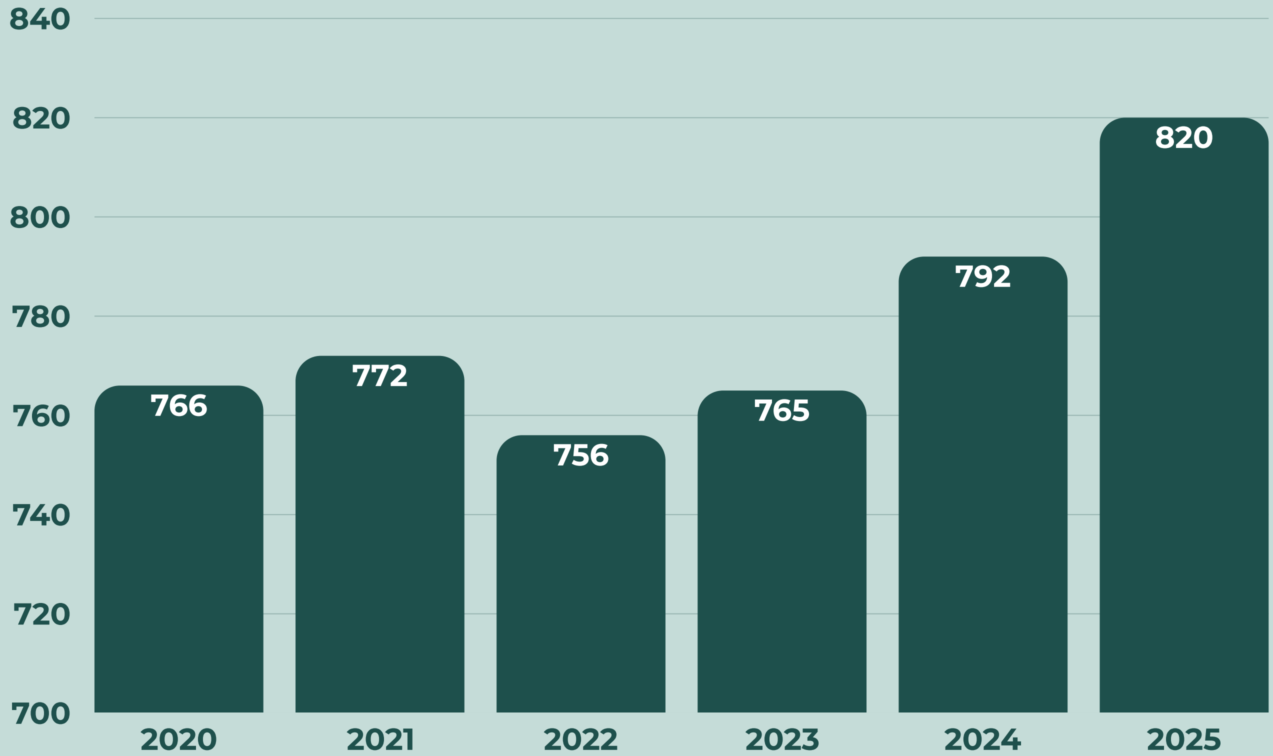
The UK's astonishing historic environment is one of its greatest assets. Our national story can be read from the rich legacy of the buildings and architecture that surround us. The future of this heritage is never guaranteed, however. It faces constant challenge, and parts of it are now under particular threat. This report highlights the value of maintaining lists of 'at risk' heritage, which draw attention to these threats. The removal of buildings from at risk registers is always a cause for celebration, and might be achieved through changes of ownership, finding new commercial uses for redundant historic buildings, or imaginative grant-giving. **Our report highlights what more could be done through government policy to reduce the perils facing our precious built heritage.**

Every year, Historic England releases its Heritage at Risk Register (HARR), a list of heritage sites they deem to be 'at risk'. This is a valuable tool in understanding the state of the nation's heritage and protecting and managing the historic environment. All kinds of heritage are included on the register, including archaeological sites, designed landscapes, and marine wreck sites. Our focus in this report is on what the HARR tells us about historic buildings.

The latest HARR, published in November 2025, comprised 4,891 separate entries, with 1,460 of these being secular buildings or structures (an increase from 1,419 in 2023 and 1,442 in 2024).[1 2 3] Of these buildings, 550 were Grade I, and therefore of 'exceptional interest' at the national level. The last three years has seen a sharp rise in the number of Grade I and Grade II* secular buildings on the register (from 756 in 2022 to 820 in 2025) – a worrying trend, and a spur for action.[4]

1. Historic England - Heritage at risk statistics 2025
2. Historic England - Heritage at risk 2024
3. Historic England - Heritage at risk 2023
4. Historic England - Heritage at risk 2022

Grade I and II* Listed Buildings and Structures on HARR (secular only)



Data taken from official figures published by Historic England

There figures illustrate the challenges involved in conservation. Heritage buildings are expensive to run and manage. Routine maintenance requires specialised skills and materials. As an example, Blenheim Palace's two-year project to restore their roof started in 2025 and is expected to cost £12 million. Equally, historic buildings are vulnerable to external pressures such as changes in the climate and extreme weather events. Buildings bear the brunt of heritage crime too, such as through acts of vandalism or the theft of lead from roofs. In a 2025 survey, four in ten heritage sites reported incidents of intentional damage at their properties.[5]

Regular monitoring of heritage at risk creates an opportunity to tell stories about heritage. Although the number of 'at risk' sites is growing, we know that careful stewardship and supportive fiscal and regulatory frameworks can do much to incentivise positive action. Historic Houses has developed some key policy proposals that would remove a larger proportion of properties from HARR, while enabling other heritage buildings to stay off the list completely.

5. NLHF - UK Heritage Pulse - Spotlight on Heritage Crime

Historic Houses represents over 1,400 of the UK's most significant heritage sites. Currently, 41 Historic Houses member places in England feature on the HARR published by Historic England. These include well-known heritage sites used by thousands of people every year as tourist destinations, concert and wedding venues, and educational resources. Among them are West Horsley Place in Surrey and the Norman keep at Hedingham Castle in Essex. Since 2013, the year HARR was first released in its current, national format, twelve Historic Houses member places have been successfully removed from the register. That means that the future of a significant heritage building open to public access has been guaranteed every year since 2013.

West Horsley Place

Knebworth House

This report will focus on Historic England's list, as they are the only official, national heritage body in the UK to produce a centralised annual list of heritage 'at risk'. Historic England's decision to publicly and continuously update their list is very welcome. A transparent approach to the state of heritage is important for accountability, as well as for recognising opportunities. The Culture, Media, and Sport Select Committee's Protecting Built Heritage Inquiry report (2026) rightly noted that data collection on heritage assets is vital: 'without fully understanding the current state of the sector, the government will not be able to unlock the value of built heritage.'[6]

6. CMS Committee - Protecting built heritage report

Other Nations and Registers

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) made the decision in 2024 to pause their equivalent list, the Buildings at Risk Register (BARR), stating that there was 'insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the BARR has a significant impact in bringing buildings back into use'.[7] Without a register, however, it is unclear how heritage successes and losses will be meaningfully tracked by HES. Save Britain's Heritage produces its own list of 'at risk' heritage, and added a record number of Scottish heritage sites to its own 'at risk' list in 2026.[8]

Similarly, Cadw in Wales has not publicly updated their list of heritage at risk since 2015.[9] The Department for Communities in Northern Ireland maintains a rolling list of 'heritage at risk', but the list is not as accessible as Historic England's.

Some local authorities also maintain their own lists of 'heritage at risk'; Historic England work closely with local authority partners to gain a grassroots understanding of the state of heritage. We encourage the governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to regularly, and publicly, update their own 'at risk' registers, to ensure the true state of the UK's built heritage is better understood.

7. HES - Review of buildings at risk register published
8. BBC - Record numbers of historic Scottish buildings added to 'at risk' list
9. Cadw - Listed buildings at risk

What is heritage at risk?

Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register (HARR) is the principal national mechanism for identifying designated heritage assets that are vulnerable to loss, decay, or damage in England. Published annually, the register provides a comprehensive assessment of the condition and vulnerability of England's historic environment, highlighting sites where deterioration, or other threats, place their long-term survival at risk. The register does not claim to be complete or comprehensive. Instead, it is a selection of the 'at risk' sites known to Historic England. For this reason, it can only give us a partial view into the true extent of 'at risk' heritage in England.

The loss of these remarkable buildings is not an abstract threat. Over 2,000 country houses, representing some of the UK's best architectural assets, have been demolished, fully or partially, within the last century and a half. The Lost Heritage website serves as a memorial to these great buildings, and a reminder of the irreversible outcomes if 'at risk' heritage is not protected.[10]

Importantly, inclusion on HARR should not be viewed as an indication of inevitable loss. Rather, the register functions as a catalyst for action, so that owners, local authorities, statutory bodies, charities, and community groups can secure sustainable conservation outcomes. Many assets, including Historic Houses member places, have been successfully removed from the register following repair, restoration, or improved management, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted intervention, collaborative stewardship, and access to funding.

'the register functions as a catalyst for action, bringing together owners, local authorities, statutory bodies, charities and community groups'

More needs to be done to bring some of the nation's most treasured heritage assets off HARR. An improved planning system, a more supportive fiscal framework, and greater opportunities for skill development in heritage-related professions would greatly improve the nation's heritage sites (as flagged in our 2026 report, In Good Hands.)[11]

10. Lost Heritage website
11. Historic Houses - In Good Hands

Case Study: Dr Jenner's House

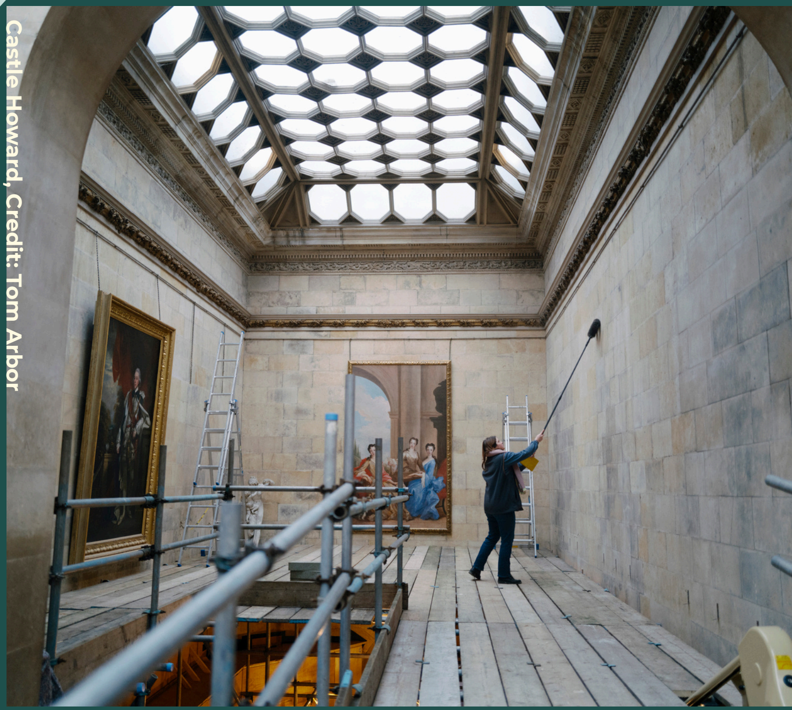
Historic Houses member, Dr Jenner's House, Museum & Garden has, within its grounds, the world's first vaccination centre, Jenner's 'Temple of Vaccinia' (right). Edward Jenner used the thatched hut in his garden as the space to trial his vaccine for smallpox in the late - eighteenth century. The hut fell into decay over the years and was added to HARR in 2025.

However, the Jenner Trust has now received a £221,508 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to restore it to its former glory. Through well-timed and targeted funding, the 'Temple of Vaccinia' will be a community hub and an educational space.

'HARR helped shine a light on the urgent need to protect the 'Temple of Vaccinia'... ensuring that visitors can continue to connect a local Gloucestershire story with one of the greatest public health achievements in world history.'

James Rodliff, Director of Dr Jenner's House

Several Historic Houses members have successfully been removed from the HARR in recent years including Barrington Park, Castle Howard (right), and Stonor Park. These examples demonstrate excellent stewardship from independent heritage owners. This important work has meant that more visitors can see the Ionic Temple at Duncombe Park and the Orangery at Blithfield Hall can be used for its original purpose.



Castle Howard, Credit: Tom Arbor

Pitchford Hall

Having the right owner of historic properties is a vital component for their survival. The Gowers Report (1950), commissioned by Clement Attlee's Labour government, found that private owners almost always make for the best stewards of these properties. This proved to be the case for Historic Houses member Pitchford Hall (left) in Shropshire, which was removed from the register in 2019 following its repurchase and repair by the Colthurst family. (The house had fallen into a dilapidated and derelict state while it had been in another owner's hands.)

Funding works: more opportunities for independently owned heritage

Independent owners of heritage are passionate and innovative stewards of their historic buildings, but they still face significant challenges and have access to fewer major grant schemes than publicly- or charitably-owned heritage sites. Harlow Consulting and the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Heritage Funding Ecosystem Research, produced in 2025, recommended that the Heritage Fund, National Trust, Historic England, and others in the UK heritage sector should consider undertaking further research into the funding of privately-owned heritage assets.[12] Equally, the Protecting Built Heritage inquiry report found that the short-term cyclical nature of funding opportunities is ineffective for the UK's heritage and recommended a long-term strategy supported by a more coherent system.[13]

As a recent example, in April 2026, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) announced 130 cultural venues, museums and libraries were to receive £130 million to protect them for present and future generations. Despite being essential to the heritage ecosystem, none of this money has been allocated to privately owned heritage. If the UK's heritage is to thrive, a fairer and wider-reaching funding system must be developed.

'Our historic buildings are measured in centuries, but funding opportunities are offered in short-term cycles'

Occasional exceptional grant schemes can be a lifeline in difficult times for heritage properties. Martha Lytton Cobbold, owner of Knebworth House (right) in Hertfordshire, told us that 'the Heritage at Risk grants available during the Covid Pandemic were extraordinary and really made such a difference to the retention and survival of many heritage properties'.


Knebworth House, Credit: Luna Drone

12. Harlow Consulting and National Lottery Heritage Fund, Heritage Funding Ecosystem Research, July 2025
13. CMS Committee - Protecting built heritage report

'...the Heritage at Risk grants... really made such a difference to the retention and survival of many heritage properties.'
Martha Lytton Cobbold
Owner, Knebworth House

However, overall grant funding available for at risk heritage in England has shrunk over time. Last year, Historic England provided £7.4 million in grants to sites on HARR.[14] In 2019, this figure was £8.96 million.[15] Combined with inflation and the significant increases in the cost of labour and materials, this is a major reduction in spending power.

DCMS' Heritage at Risk Capital Fund Projects consists of £60 million for allocation until 2030. The fund prioritises projects in areas of England with the highest level of deprivation and those that will bring the most community benefit. Again, the funding is generally not available for private owners. The fund's criteria notes that 'private dwellings... are only exceptionally considered'.[16] This is short-sighted, since it fails to reflect that so much heritage open to public access remains in private ownership.

Watts Gallery (left) near Guildford was, when it opened in 1904, the first purpose-built gallery for one specific artist: George Frederic Watts, and this collection is still at the centre of this cultural hub today. In 2004, Watts Gallery was placed on HARR and closed to the public due to the need for extensive repairs, maintenance and energy efficiency updating including a new boiler system.

The Gallery embarked on a major funding drive, which culminated in a £4.9 million grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, as well as donations from generous individuals, trusts and foundations. In 2011, Watts Gallery reopened its doors to the public. Today, it has over 40,000 visitors annually, and hosts exhibitions, lectures, family workshops, as well as an artist in residence scheme that ensures that the site's legacy continues. This thriving heritage and cultural attraction is a testament to the public and community benefit of well-timed, well-placed funding.

14. Historic England - HARR statistics 2025
15. These figures do not include HE's grants to Grade II assets which do not appear on HARR, as well as funding that stops assets appearing on the register before they are 'at risk'.
16. Historic England - Heritage at risk capital fund

Case Study: Elizabeth Gaskell's House

Elizabeth Gaskell's House is a rare surviving example of a suburban Victorian Villa in Manchester. The house was in decay and had been considered 'at risk' since 2006. Following a £2.5 million restoration, supported by a £1.8 million National Lottery Heritage Fund grant, Elizabeth Gaskell's House has been restored to its original glory and opened to the public; it was removed from HARR in 2014. Today, visitors can walk in the footsteps of the Victorian literati from Dickens to Ruskin. The house has become a cultural landmark, hosting several exhibitions every year, plays and musicals, school visits, and running an online book club dedicated to classic works of fiction. Elizabeth Gaskell's House is testament to the cultural and community benefits that investment in 'at risk' heritage assets can bring.

From *'near dereliction'* to *'a key element of Manchester's rich heritage and literary cultural offer attracting visitors from all over the UK and from Europe and North America.'*

Alex Walker, Chair of Elizabeth Gaskell's House

The upcoming review of the National Lottery Good Causes fund is an opportunity to celebrate the excellent work the Heritage Fund does in supporting heritage. Since 2022, over twenty Historic Houses members have received funding through the National Lottery Heritage Fund. They range from the regeneration of the Toy Museum at Penshurst Place in Kent to the restoration of the Cascade at Chatsworth in Derbyshire. These grants have therefore enhanced public access to important buildings and collections.

Samuel Wyatt Vinery, Holkham Hall

The Samuel Wyatt Vinery in the Walled Garden at Holkham Hall (right) was added onto HARR in 2018. Built in 1780, the Vinery needed repairs to its timber glasshouse structure, the north slate roof, as well as general masonry work. Following a grant from Historic England, the Vinery was removed from HARR in 2022. The planting scheme is being developed and will contain scented plants, citrus trees, and, of course, vines. There is also discussion about the possibility of introducing a red grape variety. In a few years, Holkham Hall may be selling a red wine produced in North Norfolk in their shop.

Every Historic Houses member property that has been removed from the HARR since 2013 has successfully stayed off the register. Many have found creative ways to use these rejuvenated spaces. Funding for privately owned heritage sites can drive innovation, economic growth, and public access to culture.

Every Historic Houses member property that has been removed from the HARR since 2013 has successfully stayed off the register.

Heritage needs a supportive fiscal framework

Combermere Abbey (right, below) in Shropshire was in such a poor state of repair in the 1950s that it was very nearly demolished but was added to HARR in its first national iteration in 1998. However, the current owner, Sarah Callander Beckett, who took over the estate in 1992, has led the resurrection of the property, converting the stable block into nine holiday cottages and letting it as wedding and events venue.

Combermere Abbey

The Library and North Wing have also been restored, supported by grants from the Country Houses Foundations and English Heritage. Through turning the dilapidated aspects of Combermere Abbey into a viable, successful business operation, its future has been secured; the North Wing was removed from HARR in 2016, the same year the site won the Historic Houses Restoration Award.

Whether a building is 'at risk' or not, maintaining an historic property is expensive. Maintenance of listed buildings requires specialist craftspeople, techniques and materials. On average, every year, Historic Houses member places spend on average £160,000 on essential repairs and maintenance.

Most repair work to existing buildings is subject to VAT at the standard rate of 20%, whereas new builds are zero-rated. A VAT rebate scheme to support the repairs and maintenance of listed buildings which are open to the public for a minimum of 28 days per year would help to lessen the estimated £2 billion maintenance backlog, creating jobs and opportunities for construction and retrofit organisations.[17] Our research suggests that this scheme would have an annual net benefit to Treasury of £7 million, alongside the cultural benefits to local and global communities of having more heritage sites open and accessible.

13. Historic Houses - VAT Rebates report

Rising insurance premiums

In a 2025 survey, Historic Houses member places told us that, on average, they pay £61,453 per property on insurance premiums each year, up 72% on 2024. This enormous increase is an issue across the heritage sector and is a product of the rising costs of labour and construction materials.

The cost of repair and maintenance, according to the construction output prices indices, has risen 21.4% since 2021. [18] The Heritage Alliance has noted that growing numbers of heritage organisations have no choice but to scale back their policies as the cost of insurance has become a 'bigger budget pressure'.[19]

Insurance is a vital risk management tool for heritage; its increasing unaffordability is a danger to all heritage, whether currently 'at risk' or not. New entrants to the insurance market could help to reduce the pressure on premiums. But government could also help by considering lowering or removing the 12% insurance premium tax charged to the insurance taken out on listed properties.

72%
rise in insurance premiums since 2024

£61,453
average insurance premiums per property

21.4%
increase in the cost of repairs and maintenance since 2021

18. ONS - Construction output price indices
19. Heritage Alliance - On The Brink: Heritage in the Cost-of-Living-Crisis

Skills shortages, training, supply chain issues

The UK is sleepwalking into a skills and supply chain crisis which will put more heritage at risk. The UK does not have enough specialist heritage contractors capable of working on listed buildings. Out of 350,000 construction companies registered in Great Britain, fewer than 250 are accredited to carry out conservation and repair work on listed buildings.[20]

Currently, owners of heritage buildings are paying more but getting less than they were ten years ago, and the gap is ever-widening. Rises in the cost of materials and labour mean that project work is increasingly dependent on the availability of grants. This results in a 'stop/start' approach to repairs and maintenance work.[21]

Fewer than

250

out of 350,000 companies are accredited to work on listed buildings

On the macro-scale, heritage is not a barrier to housing targets. Rather, it has enormous potential to boost the UK's housing. About 21% of the UK's housing stock and 33% of non-residential properties are pre-1919 buildings made from traditional materials. Moreover, Historic England estimates that 560,000 to 670,000 new homes could become available through repairing and repurposing existing historic buildings.[22] The Protecting Built Heritage inquiry report recognised this potential, advocating for government to unlock the potential of heritage and improve access to skills training and apprenticeship schemes.[23]

20. IHBC - Heritage Skills in Conservation
21. Historic England - Skills Needs Analysis
22. Historic England - New Homes from Vacant Historic Buildings
23. CMS Committee - Protecting built heritage

The government's plan to publish a new strategy for the built environment professions, trades, and occupations in 2027 is an excellent opportunity to place heritage at the core of the construction sector. With fewer buildings added to the HARR, and removed through positive action, heritage will be recognised as a valued long-term component of UK's construction sector.


Castle Howard, Credit: Charlotte Graham

The planning system

The planning system can be crucial to reducing the number of 'at risk' properties. As it stands, 48% of Historic Houses property owning members think the heritage protection system works 'poorly' or 'very poorly'. Local authority planning teams are often underfunded and overworked, leading to 84% of Historic Houses properties saying they experienced delays. The Protecting Built Heritage inquiry report also found that there was a lack of capacity and shortage of heritage expertise within local authority planning departments. For example, only 16% of planning officers felt 'confident' when making decisions on retrofit.[24]

There is a way to unblock the planning system, efficiently and effectively, at no cost. Listed Building Consent Orders (LBCOs) were designed to do exactly this: to ensure a level of sufficient heritage protection while fast-tracking certain low impact changes to listed buildings.[25] They streamline the operation of the planning system by avoiding the need for unnecessary and time-consuming applications. This also eases the burdens faced by local planning authorities. Enabling these positive changes will save money, protect heritage buildings, and mean fewer heritage assets slip into the 'at risk' category.

16%
of planners
feel
'confident'
making
decisions
on retrofit

24. Grosvenor - Retrofit or Ruin report
25. Historic Houses - The Case for National Listed Building Consent Orders-listed-building-consent-orders/

Conclusion

The Heritage at Risk Register shows the fragility of the nation's heritage. But it doesn't have to be this way. The regeneration of heritage assets is a brilliant opportunity to generate jobs, develop workforce skills, and celebrate our cultural assets. The government have the potential to unlock the potential of the heritage sector. As shown in this report, the planning, tax, and funding systems can work better for heritage with targeted support from UK government. **This would be a positive move that goes far beyond brick and mortar; it would bring real benefits to communities and economies.**

Our policy recommendations

Create a supportive fiscal framework through tax reliefs and greater funding opportunities for independently owned heritage. Heritage businesses are often marginal and rising costs are damaging.

Streamline the planning system by introducing national LBCOs on low-risk energy saving measures. This will benefit heritage and ease the workload of local authorities.

Invest in skills, training and supply chains within the heritage sector to ensure the nation's heritage is ready for the future. The heritage sector is a diverse employer demonstrated through Historic Houses' new recruitment and networking site, Work In A Castle.

The devolved nations should publicly update their respective 'at risk' registers to better understand heritage, increase accountability and not miss opportunities for growth and development.

Credits

Elizabeth Gaskell's House

Produced by the Historic Houses Policy Team

Lead report writer: Dr Joshua Rice, Policy Officer

Design: Madeleine Eagan, Parliamentary Affairs Officer

Further design support: Kai Seren Rose, Design & Brand Officer

With thanks to: Dr Jenner's House, Elizabeth Gaskell's House and Martha Lytton Cobbold