

Children's literature and young people's engagement with heritage and the historic built environment

Principal Investigator: Professor Matthew Grenby (Newcastle University)

SUMMARY

Those who manage heritage sites face the continuing challenge of how best to engage children and young people with the buildings and landscapes they have been charged to present and protect. It is a vital task. The future of these sites can be safeguarded only by interesting the young in their heritage.

One strategy for achieving this end has been to use literature and storytelling to engage children with the past and with specific heritage sites. Indeed, it is a strategy as old as children's literature itself. Thomas Boreman's 'Gigantick Histories' (1740-43), often called the first children's books, were designed to stimulate their readers' imagination with accounts of 'Curiosities in the Guildhall', 'What treasures in the Tow'r [of London] are laid' and the architectural splendours of St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey. Ever since, authors and illustrators have sought to produce books that cement the bonds between children and their historical environments: Kipling's 'Puck' stories (1906-10) for example, through to Jacqueline Wilson's 'Hetty Feather' (2010, inspired by her fellowship at the Foundling Museum). Children's fiction has sometimes even directly addressed preservation issues, as in Penelope Lively's 'The Whispering Knights' (1971), a fantasy set around the Neolithic Rollright Stones and dealing in part with the incursion of a motorway.

This - how literature has hitherto been used to engage children with heritage sites - is what the first phase of this project will investigate. The chief source, besides the books themselves, will be the archives of the project partners: English Heritage, Historic Royal Palaces, and Seven Stories: the Centre for the Children's Book. The latter in particular holds a wealth of printed and manuscript material from authors, illustrators, publishers, teachers, and children, which will illuminate how the producers of these books hoped they would be used. The archives of English Heritage and Historic Royal Palaces, as well as Seven Stories, will reveal much about how literature actually has been used in heritage education, and with what results. Contributors from other academic disciplines will contextualise these findings, by presenting both theoretical and applied research on young people's interactions with heritage, and on heritage education.

The second phase of the project is concerned with how these research findings can be used to inform current and future policy and practice. The project partners already use literature in their educational programmes. But this kind of activity now stands at a crossroads. Digital technologies allow young people to access writing in many new ways. They are as likely to read on smartphones, iPads or computers as in books, and might read while at the sites as well as at home and in school. Above all, new technologies allow reading experiences to be much more interactive: with specific reading experiences triggered by GPS technology for example, or with stories leading via embedded links to different kinds of information and activities.

The project's workshops have been conceived to consider exactly how creative literature can now optimally be used in heritage education. To achieve this, the project will bring together a group of partners, some from the heritage sector and others from a range of disparate academic disciplines. Academic participants in the workshops will come from children's literature studies, heritage studies, development studies, and creative writing. The project

will also have the input of Newcastle University's Culture Lab, a centre for the creative arts and interactive technology, as well as from consultants from the private sector who specialise in digital media. The exchange of knowledge between these academic and commercial partners, and with Seven Stories, English Heritage and Historic Royal Palaces, is the principal purpose of the project. Further collaborations will, it is to be hoped, spring from these newly forged links.