

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



# Literary Heritage

Lessons from the Coronavirus  
Pandemic

DAVID RUDRUM  
AND HELEN WILLIAMS



# Literary Heritage

*Literary Heritage* examines the literary heritage sector in the post-pandemic moment. This book argues that this is a unique time for literary heritage management and demonstrates that the key to understanding it is an analysis of the transformations that took place because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through an analysis of literary heritage sites across the UK's four nations, this study provides an overview of practice from sites managed by national organizations as well as independent museums. Presenting a quantitative and qualitative overview of the challenges faced by the sector in the wake of the pandemic, Rudrum and Williams explore the innovations literary heritage organizations initiated in response. This book displays the wealth of ingenuity that was on display during this trying moment for the sector. It also looks forward to the new normal in the industry: a move towards the outdoors, increased use of online engagement, and creative arts and community programming that brings the literary past to the political present. Featuring interviews with 16 heritage practitioners, this book shares examples of best practices in the hope that lessons will be learned from the enforced closures prompted by the pandemic.

*Literary Heritage* will be of great interest to academics and students working in Heritage Studies, Museum Studies, and English Literature. It will also appeal to a broad readership of cultural heritage professionals.

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# **Literary Heritage**

Lessons from the Coronavirus Pandemic

**David Rudrum and Helen Williams**

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# 1 Introduction

After the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in the UK in early 2020, the consequences for the cultural and heritage sectors were nothing short of devastating. The ensuing lockdowns and social distancing restrictions posed an obvious range of challenges, most of a magnitude that seemed almost inconceivable at the time. Almost overnight, many museums had to reinvent nearly every aspect of what they do, in a situation where drastically new models of outreach and community engagement were called for. Only now, with some measure of hindsight, can the impact of the pandemic be evaluated properly.<sup>1</sup>

This book contributes to recent innovations in literary tourism research which seek to put theory into practice, especially the case studies undertaken by Ian Jenkins and Katrin Anna Lund.<sup>2</sup> Jenkins and Lund's practice-led approach, in turn, builds upon the interdisciplinary work of scholars of literature; art history; tourism; business; sociology; and cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup> While this body of scholarship sheds light on the motivations of literary tourists and the appeal of the writer's museum, and the case studies share the practice of heritage professionals including the digital turn, scholars have yet to consider the continued appeal and the digital or distanced workings of literary house museums during periods of enforced closure or reduced capacity.

This study came about because the authors had reason to believe that literary heritage sites, especially writer's house museums, were facing a particularly intractable range of problems and difficulties during the coronavirus pandemic. To provide some background: there are, across the regions and nations of the UK, nearly 80 writers' homes and birthplaces open to the public, typically as museums. Some are far-famed international tourist destinations attracting high levels of annual footfall, dedicated to renowned household names like Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Robert Burns. Others are hidden gems, run on a shoestring by small groups of volunteers. Between these extremes fall many underappreciated national treasures, such as Laurence Sterne's Shandy Hall, Elizabeth Gaskell's House, and Strawberry Hill House, the home of Horace Walpole. Collectively, these organizations form a vital part of the UK's cultural identity and position the country as a world leader in the field of literary heritage.

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These organizations were especially, and perhaps uniquely, vulnerable to the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example: social distancing was clearly a challenge even in many large, purpose-built museums and galleries, while implementing a one-way system around castles or stately homes often proved more challenging still. However, many writers' houses are as small, intimate, and homely as any other houses. One-way routes were sometimes physically impossible, while social distancing resulted in invariably small visitor capacities: Milton's Cottage could accommodate only four visitors per hour, while Laurence Sterne's Shandy Hall could admit only three people at a time.

In museums such as these, the object of interpretation is often a text. Thus, traditional text-based interpretations, such as captions or other printed material, are less widely used than in other museums or historic houses: after all, adding an extra layer of texts about texts risks overloading the visitor's appetite for reading. Instead, many literary heritage sites are interpreted through (for example) guides or room stewards, technological aids (whether handheld or touch-screen), or object handling (sometimes books themselves) – all of which were prohibited by Covid-related restrictions. Hence, many sites required complete reinterpretation, often at very short notice.

At the same time, the pandemic might have presented opportunities for new ways of engaging the public with literary heritage. Besides the so-called 'digital turn' that characterized cultural consumption during the lockdowns, there was reportedly a surge in 'lockdown reading', widely discussed in the press,<sup>4</sup> which could have helped literary heritage organizations connect with new readerships and audiences.

Previous research has established that literary tourists are often long-distance or international visitors,<sup>5</sup> bearing out the common analogy between literary tourism and making a pilgrimage to a shrine.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it was very possible that literary museums and sites would have been especially heavily impacted by travel restrictions. At the same time, though, the resurgent interest in reading may well have created a demand for engagement with literary heritage from local communities, while travel restrictions created the perfect conditions for localized projects – in short, the pandemic might have led to a wholesale rethink of how literary heritage connects with society, and society with it.

Given the scale and scope of these challenges and questions – some amounting to nothing less than existential threats – an ambitious, large-scale study of the impact of Covid-19 on the UK's literary heritage was undertaken, investigating the nature and specificity of the challenges and obstacles faced, the extent of the ensuing costs (not just financial), the lessons that can be learned from the response to the pandemic, and the prospects for the future of literary heritage sites in building back after Covid-19. This book presents key findings from the study, which was funded by UK Research and Innovation, under the auspices of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, as part of the Covid Emergency Response Fund (grant reference number AH/W003694/1).

## Notes

- 1 For an eclectic range of reflections on the impact of the pandemic across society, culture, and industry, see Manchester University Press's remarkable book series *The Pandemic and Beyond* (series eds. Pascale Aebischer, Fred Cooper, Des Fitzgerald, Karen Gray, Caroline Redhead, Melanie Smallman and Victoria Tischler). <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/series/the-pandemic-and-beyond/>.
- 2 Ian Jenkins and Katrin Anna Lund (eds), *Literary Tourism: Theories, Practice and Case Studies* (CABI, 2019).
- 3 See, for example, Nicola Watson, *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain* (Palgrave, 2006); Marion Harney, *Place-Making for the Imagination: Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill* (Ashgate, 2013); Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost, *Books and Travel: Inspiration, Quests, and Transformation* (Channel View, 2012); Hans Christian Anderson and Mike Robinson, *Literature and Tourism* (Continuum, 2002).
- 4 See, for example, Alison Flood, 'Research finds reading books has surged in lockdown', *Guardian*, 15 May, 2020; Jonty Bloom, 'Booksellers hope soaring sales will continue as we read more', *BBC*, 7 October, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58802805>; Abigail Boucher, Chloe Harrison and Marcello Giovanelli, 'How reading habits have changed during the COVID-19 lockdown', *The Conversation*, 5 October, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-reading-habits-have-changed-during-the-covid-19-lockdown-146894>.  
For empirical evidence and data, see the surveys by the Reading Agency, <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/new-survey-says-reading-connects-nation-in-lockdown.html>; The Scottish Book Trust, 'Reading in Scotland: Reading over Lockdown (2020)', <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/our-impact/reading-in-scotland-reading-over-lockdown>; and Nielsen, 'The Record-Breaking Year that was 2021', <https://nielsenbook.co.uk/research/2021-record-breaking/>.
- 5 See Laing and Frost, *Books and Travel*.
- 6 The analogy is a commonplace, but is most clearly explored by Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford University Press, 2016).



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## 2 Methodology

Investigating the impact of Covid-19 on Britain's literary heritage sites necessitated gathering a range of data, both qualitative and quantitative, from a sample group that reflected the complexity and variety of the many different kinds of institutions and organizations from across the UK.

In compiling the sample group, care was taken to include at least one organization from each of the four nations of the UK, and from as many regions of England as possible, including regions such as Greater London or Greater Manchester where powers of local government are devolved to a mayor. This was particularly important because cultural matters, including policy and funding, are devolved to the four nations of the UK, as was every aspect of the public health response to Covid-19, with the governments of Scotland and of England, in particular, differing substantially in their handling of both.

It was also important to include organizations ranging from the best-known and most-visited to the least-known and least-visited. The sample group comprised both independent museums and properties managed by larger organizations such as the National Trust (and its counterpart in Scotland).

Most of the organizations approached met Nicola J. Watson's definition of the 'writer's house museum', but there were some exceptions.<sup>1</sup> For example: the birthplaces of Ted Hughes and of Dylan Thomas admit visitors, but are too small to operate as conventional writer's house museums; Seamus Heaney HomePlace is a modern, purpose-built facility; Jarrow Hall, formerly known as Bede's World, involves a reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon environment in which the Venerable Bede lived and wrote; Strawberry Hill House is a writer's house museum, but shares the site of Horace Walpole's home with a University campus. Their perspectives, involving a slightly different set of challenges, were important to constructing a well-rounded picture.

The aim had been to work with 20 organizations, but in the event, only 16 were able to participate. The sample group was as set out in Figure 2.1.

Quantitative data – pertaining to changes in visitor numbers, website traffic, staffing levels (both voluntary and paid), memberships and friends/supporters organizations, income levels and income sources, reduction of capacity due to social distancing regulations, additional Covid-related costs,

Abbotsford: Home of Sir Walter Scott  
Robert Burns Birthplace Museum  
Seamus Heaney Homeplace  
Hill Top: Beatrix Potter's Farm  
Wordsworth Grasmere Trust  
Jarrow Hall (formerly Bede's World)  
Shandy Hall  
Ted Hughes's Birthplace  
Elizabeth Gaskell's House  
Shakespeare Birthplace Trust  
Dylan Thomas Birthplace  
Milton's Cottage Museum  
Gilbert White's House  
Strawberry Hill House: Horace Walpole's home  
Jane Austen's House  
Thomas Hardy's Cottage



*Figure 2.1* Literary House Museums Participating in this Study: A Four Nations Approach

and additional Covid-related financial support – were gathered by questionnaire. Several of the organizations we worked with were unable to provide us with some of these data. (For example, a surprisingly low number of literary heritage websites were monitoring website traffic.) Hence, some of the statistics presented in what follows were based on a very small dataset. Where needed, further methodological details on statistics are given below. Unless otherwise stated, numbers pertain either to the calendar year 2020, or the tax year 2020–21.

Qualitative data were gathered in interviews with museum professionals carried out between August and December 2021. Interviews were semi-structured, starting out from the same set of questions in each case, but following lines of discussion taken by interviewees themselves. Those interviewed included (variously) those with backgrounds in curating, visitor experience, finances, education, outreach and marketing, and often managers or directors with responsibility for all of the above. Thus, the data gathered once again represented a range of perspectives.

Interview questions were approved in advance by an Ethics Committee, since discussing the experience of the pandemic might be potentially traumatic.

Participating organizations were paid £200 for their time and input, the money being provided by the UKRI grant.

## Note

1 See Nicola Watson, *The Author's Effects: On Writer's House Museums* (Oxford University Press, 2020), esp. 9–18. Though most of our research focussed on writer's house museums, we often use the term 'literary heritage sites' to reflect the fact that two of the literary museums we studied were not in writer's houses, whilst two of the writer's houses we studied do not operate as museums. They were included in order to reflect the variety of the UK's literary heritage sites.



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## 3 Meeting the Challenges

This section outlines the main kinds of obstacles and difficulties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and how the literary heritage sector tried to meet them. As an important backdrop to the issues discussed herein, it should be kept in mind that, according to the Museums Association's *Code of Ethics for Museums*, there is an ethical obligation for museums to 'act in the public interest in all areas of work' and to 'uphold the highest level of institutional integrity and personal conduct at all times'.<sup>1</sup> The literary heritage organizations we spoke to were admirably scrupulous in maintaining these standards throughout the pandemic, in spite of a range of intractable difficulties.

### 3.1 Adapting the Space

Many writers' houses are scarcely bigger than any other houses. The problems posed by this fact were aptly summarized by an interviewee from Hill Top (Beatrix Potter's farmhouse):

I think the domestic scale of a lot of these sites will have had unique challenges, because we're not a museum with an entrance, a site ticket office. We're not built as a visitor experience, we're a tiny house.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the small size of these buildings is part of their charm: their domestic scale creates a sense of intimacy and authenticity which was easily undermined when the sites were adapted to comply with social distancing measures. As the same interviewee put it:

To me the house looks very strange because all the furniture is pushed way back so that people can have more space in the rooms. I think if we could I would move some of the furniture again and get that, kind of, cosy, domestic atmosphere back again.

(Hill Top interview)

Similar concerns were voiced by an interviewee from Jane Austen's House, where it was felt that a more satisfactory compromise had been struck between the pandemic's regulations and the homeliness of the visitor experience:

I was very keen to ensure that the house still felt like a home. [...] So we had everything in place: face masks, hand sanitizer, one-way signage, all of the florescent yellow warning signs, but despite that it needed to still feel like a home and still be really welcoming. And we wanted to make sure it felt like the Austen women had just walked out.<sup>3</sup>

The concern that these museums should retain the feel of authenticity associated with a home was widespread and threw up some interesting paradoxes. Emma Treleven, assistant curator at the Charles Dickens Museum, wrote:

Being in the museum in the months it was closed was a strange experience. 48 Doughty Street is dressed as a home—wallpaper, carpets, and all—but when you have up to a few hundred visitors a day exploring it, the building loses some of its intimacy. During our closure periods, it felt like the Dickens family and their staff had just stepped out of the room. It was amazingly quiet—you could hear the hall clock chime through the whole house—and I loved watching how the sun travelled around the different rooms. It made the house really feel like a home.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, perhaps, it might seem as if the lockdown revealed that the very presence of visitors who had come to experience what Dickens's home was really like was preventing visitors from experiencing what Dickens's home was really like. Accordingly, as we will see below, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to serious questioning of the optimum number of visitors to a literary heritage site.

Dove Cottage, the home of William Wordsworth, also faced a dilemma that pitted authenticity against Covid regulations. An interviewee from Wordsworth Grasmere recalled how, in the recent past, it had been 'discovered, researched or established that there was a door from one room into another that wouldn't have been there in Wordsworth's time. [...] We thought it could have been added after the house opened to the public to ease visitor flow'. Since 'our whole aim here is to go back to Wordsworth's time', the decision was taken to 'block this throughway door up and put the bed in front of it', thereby changing the route of the visit to something more authentic to the building the Wordsworths knew: 'you would have to go into the room and come out of it again and then go to the next room and come out of it again, instead of just going on a circuit'. Thanks to the pandemic, however, this development was short-lived: 'Well, of course, with the one-way system we couldn't do that' – so the less authentic circuit route had to be reinstated.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the issues surrounding this sense of domesticity, intimacy, and authenticity will have been experienced by any number of smaller historic

houses and museums. Yet in those with links to literary heritage, there is often a particularly acute need to retain a feeling of authenticity, because of their highly site-specific nature. For many visitors, the aim is not just to visit an authentic historic house; it is to visit the site where a masterpiece was written, or where an author was born, and to (try to) experience first-hand something of the influences and contexts behind these inceptional moments:

The way that people engage with these sites is very different, as well, from museums, because it *is* a site, it's the specific thing of that place, coming to that special place. People are familiar with the work, that's why they're here, so it's not like you can transfer that unique place-based experience [...]. It really is a secular pilgrimage – isn't it? – for many people who come. So it's important that people have the time and the space to feel that.  
(Hill Top interview)

Arguably, these feelings are the very *raison d'être* for literary heritage sites and writer's house museums, and they were easily compromised by the restrictions surrounding Covid-19.

Needless to say, though, such feelings are not experienced automatically by all visitors. For one thing, it cannot be presupposed that all visitors come to these sites having read, or even heard of, the authors in question. As one of our interviewees put it: 'We get people coming to us predominantly that want a day out in an historic house or a stately home and they discover the author through the back door, if you like'. Thus, literary heritage sites must be curated and interpreted not only to convey a unique experience to aficionados, but also to arouse the curiosity of more incidental visitors, and to prompt them to find out more.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, a site's sense of authenticity is in no way predicated on the actual authenticity of the site or the exhibits – that is an altogether separate matter. Like the sense of uniqueness that derives from the site's literary associations, it is constructed through curating and interpreting, rather than something that just comes naturally. All told, then, the interpretation of literary heritage sites, and especially writer's house museums, involves a distinctive set of challenges. As the next section illustrates, these challenges were exponentially amplified by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 3.2 Emergency Reinterpretation

Recent research into literary heritage sites in Italy, Russia, Spain, and Catalonia has identified an international consensus that the best and most common way of interpreting literary heritage sites is through face-to-face, in-person guides.<sup>7</sup> Guided visits not only provide human mediation, they can also adjust their interpretation to the individual visitor's levels of background knowledge. Typically, literary heritage sites in the UK are interpreted this way, whether

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through guided tours or through room stewards. In the words of an interviewee from Elizabeth Gaskell's House:

our volunteers are trained that they listen, that's what they do, they listen and respond to individuals rather than having a script. And we also allow our volunteers to allow their own interest to come through because you can see their enthusiasm and specialisms come through.<sup>8</sup>

The restrictions aimed at curtailing the pandemic imposed strict limits on the numbers of people permitted in enclosed spaces, and also prohibited any mixing between different households or 'bubbles' (as extended household groups were called). Hence, guided visits were not just impracticable, but illegal. So, as one museum professional we interviewed observed: 'any literary site that relies on that domestic, informal style of interpretation will have suffered more, I think, than [other] museums' (Hill Top interview).

That was certainly the experience recounted by interviewees from Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust, who felt that their costumed tour guides were 'one of the strongest parts of our visit', because they would

deliver the warmth of the experience [...]. [S]o much of that previously did entirely rest on our guides and their ability to give a tour or a talk or a hands-on experience – all of that taken away was actually really hard. [...] [H]aving that depth and quality of guiding experience where people are talking you through Tudor life. All of that then drops away and then you're left with a relatively blank house setting that needed substantial work.<sup>9</sup>

They added that, even when the guides were allowed back, 'people walking round socially distantly' were not 'able to talk to guides in the same way' (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview).

Similar concerns were voiced by the interviewee from Jane Austen's House, which had in turn given rise to concerns about the medium-term future of this kind of interpretation:

We knew that we were going to have to change [...] some of our interpretation and our layout. Our visitor experience pre-Covid relied quite heavily on [...] stewards – so we don't have too much text-based interpretation on the wall, it's relatively limited as it is in most literary houses – and a lot of our interpretation delivery was relying on in-person stewards. [...] [A]nd we expected and completely understood that a lot of our volunteer stewards [...] would not be comfortable coming back straight away.

(Jane Austen's House interview)

Problems peculiar to the interpretation of literary heritage sites and museums came to the fore at Hill Top, where an innovative approach to this issue

was incompatible with Covid-19 restrictions because it involved object handling – specifically, books:

The other thing that we normally use to interpret the house is Beatrix Potter's books. We normally have lots of the books around for people to pick up and handle and look at, because there are direct connections we want to draw between the illustrations in the book and the house. [...] We haven't wanted people touching things and sharing books so we took all of those out and so really it leaves the house with no interpretation. [...] We relied so much on books and handling things, rather than – we don't have displays, we don't have any text panels, we don't have labels next to anything in the house, we really relied on face-to-face and handling books.

(Hill Top interview)

Under circumstances such as these, many literary heritage sites needed to be completely reinterpreted, typically within very tight timescales. At Dove Cottage, Covid-related restrictions led the museum to replace guided tours with an introductory film:

It's a tiny cottage and one of the things we concluded, we decided we wouldn't do guided tours anymore, that people were going to watch an introductory film and then they would explore the house with their own imagination.

(Wordsworth Grasmere interview)

Whereas other museums or houses might have resorted to labels, captions, or text panels, writer's house museums need to be sparing with such text-based interpretation, because their visitors' appetite for reading is typically directed to extracts from the writer's works, letters, diaries, and manuscripts. Other solutions had to be found, and these often involved digital technology. This brought problems of its own: some interviewees felt they lacked the skills, experience, and resources to develop digital solutions swiftly and successfully. Difficulties along these lines were reported at Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust:

with very limited resource we're not able to do a huge intervention, but we did work with one of our Trustees, and we put together some video tours that were then QR code-driven so that you could have them on your mobile phone, which works for some of your audience and doesn't for others. So there is something about the detailed, nuanced storytelling that you would like to be able to achieve in a house that's connected to a figure such as Shakespeare that is much, much more difficult in a Covid setting.

(Shakespeare's Birthplace interview)

While admitting that under the restrictions in place at the time, Shakespeare's birthplace 'hasn't been reinterpreted in the way we might have wanted', the interviewees nevertheless felt that a salutary lesson had been learnt: 'with the interpretation side – previously it was, "We shall have no digital intervention in the houses. It cannot be done because it's all about the guides". We've shown that it can work, but it's not perfect'. Hence, their next task was to 'imagine a blended model moving forward that gives different audiences what they want in different ways' (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview).

The exception that proves the rule was Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott. As with many writer's house museums, 'There's no labelling or captions on anything because it's supposed to be very immersive'.<sup>10</sup> Instead of using guides or room stewards, Abbotsford was already interpreted through digital technology, using handheld audio guides. As with any object passed from hand to hand, these devices could transmit the Covid-19 coronavirus, and so, like the books at Hill Top, they could not be used. According to an interviewee:

Our interpretation model is fundamentally designed upon a very fancy, infrared device – a little audio guide that, obviously, requires programming and handling and so we very quickly came up against this issue while planning to reopen [...] It was a, 'OK. How on earth...?' [...] So how do you deliver that core experience in a different way?

(Abbotsford interview)

As with Shakespeare's Birthplace, the solution involved visitors using their mobile phones: Abbotsford 'started converting the experience onto a progressive web app' and did so because it was felt that text-based interpretation was out of place in a writer's house museum of this kind:

I realized that, actually, without that audio tour we were just giving people disposable transcripts of something – you're eroding so much of the experience that we've been working for several years to build up as a re-imagined Abbotsford. So it would have done us too much harm to go back to something like that.

(Abbotsford interview)

Abbotsford also turned to the digital with regard to their programming, transforming what had originally been intended to be a site-specific lightshow, *Young Scott*, by Andy McGregor, into a worldwide live-streamed event, combining the draw of the heritage location with the irresistible pull of the author's anniversary, and demonstrating that literary touristic 'presence' could be more than simply physical.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the interpretation of built heritage, exhibitions at literary sites were also adapted to respond to public health measures, as when Katrin Moye's ceramics exhibition at Shandy Hall, *Filthy Trash*, comprising statues

responding to *double entendres* in Laurence Sterne's fiction, was accompanied by apothecary jars decoratively emblazoned with UK Government pandemic messaging.<sup>12</sup>

At Jarrow Hall, the skeleton staff had to additionally serve as animal handlers in order to manage the extremely diverse collections of that site during closure. Collections management, event programming, and curation were all affected in unforeseen ways, meaning staff had to respond quickly and flexibly to emergency measures.

### 3.3 The Psychological Impact

The toll taken by the Covid-19 pandemic led to a related epidemic of mental illness. This was not confined to any particular segment of society or sector of industry. Given some of the challenges and obstacles set out in this study, it came as no surprise that professionals working in literary heritage had experienced their share of mental health problems. Six of the 16 organizations interviewed emphasized the 'staff morale point of view', with phrases like 'burnout', 'mental exhaustion', 'mentally demanding', 'drain', and 'isolation' being some of those used to describe the experience.<sup>13</sup>

A sense of the scale of these problems can be glimpsed in the Abbotsford interview. Those interviewed said they were extremely 'concerned' because:

We have a huge volunteer base [...] [W]e've got the best part of 120 volunteers at Abbotsford and [...] there was the Trust's commitment to trying to making sure that they were well in and of themselves – mentally as much as anything else. A lot of them come to us to ease social isolation so we were incredibly worried about that. [...] [M]any of them – or a significant proportion of them – were shielding as well. So [...] they were terribly anxious [...] for their own safety.

(Abbotsford interview)<sup>14</sup>

Maintaining contact with another group of stakeholders was also a problem at Strawberry Hill House: 'we had a few community programmes where we do quite a lot of work with some vulnerable adults with either learning difficulties or people living with dementia', including a 'feelgood garden'.<sup>15</sup>

Staying in touch and looking after well-being became a priority, if not an obligation, yet those best placed to carry out this task were often furloughed.<sup>16</sup> Striking a balance between undercommunicating and overcommunicating – both of which were counterproductive in terms of mental health – was far from easy.

Such problems were probably common across the museums and heritage sector, and indeed far beyond it. What is unique to literary heritage here is that in some cases, these organizations' connection to literature could form part of the solution. The beneficial effects that reading can have on well-being and mental health are beginning to be recognized,<sup>17</sup> and lockdown conditions

meant that public demand for literature soared (see note 2, below). Some interviewees reflected on the positive role that literary heritage played in helping communities and the public at large cope with the stress of the pandemic:

I think what we were able to offer people was [...] solace and help, that what people really liked was the fact that we were still there. You know, we were 200 years of history [...]. In the time of trouble we were still here. [...] It was just that sense of stability and the words and the hope [...] And so maybe literary heritage [...] offered that timelessness. (Wordsworth Grasmere interview)

The interviewee from Jane Austen's House also mentioned the power of 'lockdown reading': 'Austen's work has been for so long such an escape for people that actually a lot of people went home and read *Pride and Prejudice*' (Jane Austen's House interview). This museum faced the threat of closure as a direct financial result of the pandemic, and a survival appeal was launched to raise funds to save the museum. The appeal exceeded its £75,000 target and eventually raised £133,000, and this was partly attributable to the way the public found solace from the pandemic in reading Jane Austen. One of the most moving anecdotes we heard was about:

a lady who gave us £5. She was unemployed and her message on Just Giving was, I'm unemployed at the moment so this is all I can give but Jane Austen is helping me to get through the pandemic.

(Jane Austen's House interview)

The lady in question stated she felt it was important to her to 'help [Austen's] house'.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/>.
- 2 Interview with Hill Top (NT), by David Rudrum, digital recording, 13 October, 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Hill Top interview'. Since the interviews often touched upon deeply personal experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviewees herein will remain anonymous.
- 3 Interview with Jane Austen's House, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 12 August, 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Jane Austen's House interview'. It is worth adding that Jane Austen's House is slightly larger than Hill Top, but not vastly so.
- 4 The quotation is taken from an essay rather than an interview: the Charles Dickens Museum declined to participate in this study. See Emma Treleaven, 'Curating historic interiors at the Charles Dickens museum during Covid', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 32 (2021) n.p. [para. 16].
- 5 Interview with Wordsworth Grasmere, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 6 August 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Wordsworth Grasmere interview'.

- 6 The motivations and interests of visitors to literary heritage sites are complex and multifaceted. While most of us will be familiar to some extent with Beatrix Potter and William Wordsworth, many visitors to Hill Top and Dove Cottage may have come for a rainy day activity to save them from the fickle climate of the Lake District. In all likelihood, more visitors come to Jarrow Hall to see its (re)construction of a working Anglo-Saxon farm than come because they have read the Venerable Bede's eighth-century classic *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. For more on the habits of literary tourists, see Booth, *Homes and Haunts*; Jenkins and Lund, *Literary Tourism*; Anderson and Robinson, *Literature and Tourism*; as well as Rita Baleiro and Silvia Quinteiro, *Key Concepts in Literature and Tourism Studies* (Universidade de Lisboa, 2018).
- 7 See Marina Strepetova and Jordi Arcos-Pumarola, 'Literary heritage in museum exhibitions: Identifying its main challenges in the European context', *Muzeológia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo* 8, no. 3 (2020): 95–109; also Marina Strepetova, 'Exhibiting literature: The challenges of literary heritage's value in the museological context', *Tourism and Heritage Journal* 2 (2020): 17–27.
- 8 Interview with Elizabeth Gaskell's House, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 3 September 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Elizabeth Gaskell's House interview'.
- 9 Interview with Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 1 September 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Shakespeare's Birthplace interview'.
- 10 Interview with Abbotsford: the Home of Sir Walter Scott, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 30 September 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Abbotsford interview'.
- 11 David Rudrum and Helen Williams, 'Creative contemporary arts programming in the literary heritage sector amidst the Covid-19 pandemic: Before, during ... and after?' in *The Routledge Handbook of Heritage and Creative Practice*, ed. Nick Cass and Anna Powell (Routledge, [in press]).
- 12 Rudrum and Williams, 'Creative contemporary arts programming'; Helen Williams, 'Katrin Moye's *Filthy Trash*: Interview with the Artist', *Shandean* 34 (2024), 104–114.
- 13 The terms used in this paragraph are all direct quotations from various interviews. The main reason we have anonymized interviewees throughout is because the conversation turned to personal accounts of mental illness on so many occasions.
- 14 For those unfamiliar with the UK's terminology, 'shielding' was the term used to describe the highest level of precautionary measures for the elderly and 'clinically extremely vulnerable'. Those in this category were instructed to stay at home and avoid all face-to-face contact. Since many volunteers are past retirement age, the impact on the voluntary sector was huge.
- 15 Interview with Strawberry Hill House by David Rudrum, digital recording, 9 August 2021. Hereafter referenced as 'Strawberry Hill House interview'.
- 16 Between March 2020 and September 2021, the UK government operated the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, colloquially known as 'furlough'. Employers could claim a grant enabling them to pay up to 80% of an employee's wages, on condition that those furloughed could undertake no work for their employers for the duration of the grant. During the 18 months of its operation, 11.7 million jobs were furloughed, at a cost of around £70 billion. Some commentators credited the scheme with averting an economic catastrophe brought about by redundancies and bankruptcies. See <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9152/>
- 17 For a general overview of the field of bibliotherapy – i.e., the reading of literature as a mental health intervention – see Debbie McCulliss, 'Bibliotherapy: Historical

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and research perspectives', *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 25, no. 1 (2012): 23–38. For an accessible discussion of the broader issues involved, see Josie Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?* (Oxford University Press, 2016). For an investigation of the role of bibliotherapy during the Covid-19 pandemic, see Daniela Monroy-Fraustro Isaac Maldonado-Castellanos, Mónica Aboites-Molina, Susana Rodríguez, Perla Sueiras, Nelly F. Altamirano-Bustamante, Adalberto de Hoyos-Bermea, Myriam M. Altamirano-Bustamante, 'Bibliotherapy as a non-pharmaceutical intervention to enhance mental health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: A mixed-methods systematic review and bioethical meta-analysis', *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (2021): 1–15.

- 18 Jane Austen's House interview. The interviewee described this as 'the one that really makes me cry and makes me think about it, and I think it really sums up the whole tenor of the appeal'. It is hard to disagree with this assessment.

## 4 Counting the Costs

Numbers in this section are for the year 2020 (or, in some cases, the tax year 2020–21).

### 4.1 Impact on Visitor Numbers

#### 4.1.1 *Falling Footfall*

Unsurprisingly, the area where the impact of Covid-19 was felt most acutely was in a disastrous collapse in visitor numbers.

For each museum that provided us with sufficient historic data ( $n = 9$ ), a mean annual number of visitors was calculated for the years 2017–19. This three-year average provided a baseline with which to compare the number of visitors in 2020.

- *The results indicate that in 2020, visitor numbers to literary heritage sites dropped by an average of 84.3%*

#### 4.1.2 *Safety Measures*

Obviously, this high figure is not attributable to the lockdowns alone. Since most museums were forced to reduce their visitor numbers drastically in order to comply with social distancing regulations, we tried to quantify the extent to which the reduction in visitor numbers was attributable to these measures.

Each museum was asked to provide us with their ‘best estimate of the proportion by which ... visitor capacity was reduced, owing to Covid-related restrictions’, from which a mean of these percentages was then calculated.

- *Social distancing measures resulted in a reduction of visitor capacity that averaged 68.1%*

To contextualize this within the parameters of the concerns about public health that existed at the time: the organization that came closest to this average was Seamus Heaney HomePlace, which reduced its capacity by an estimated 65%. When Tourism Northern Ireland were developing an accreditation scheme to gauge the safety measures taken by visitor attractions prior to re-opening, they regarded the steps taken at Seamus Heaney HomePlace as a model of good practice.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.1.3 *Visitor Capacity*

Placing these two sets of numbers in dialogue with one another yielded some interesting results. In some cases, there was a close correspondence between the drop in visitor numbers and the reduction in visitor capacity.

For example, Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 'at least 95%', and experienced a drop of 97% in visitors; both Jane Austen's House and Strawberry Hill House estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 80%, and experienced an 81% drop in visitors.

In other cases, the drop in visitor numbers was substantially greater than the reduction in visitor capacity.

For example, Elizabeth Gaskell's House estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 25%, but experienced a drop of 70% in visitors; the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 30%, but experienced a drop of 75% in visitors; Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott, estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 40%, but experienced a drop of 80% in visitors; Wordsworth Grasmere estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 50%, but experienced a drop of 92% in visitors.

It may well be significant that most of the latter group of museums were situated in areas (Scotland, Greater Manchester) where Covid-related restrictions were enforced more strictly, and for longer, than they were for the majority of the UK population, in England. The interviewee from Elizabeth Gaskell's House, in Greater Manchester, specifically mentioned the additional local restrictions imposed there as a key factor. Interestingly, the interviewee from Seamus Heaney HomePlace described the approach to Covid-19 in Northern Ireland as falling 'possibly somewhere in between [England] and Scotland' in its cautiousness (Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview), and this is borne out by the data: they estimated a reduction in visitor capacity of 65%, but experienced a drop of 85% in visitors.

Only one literary heritage site bucked these trends. In contrast to both groups, the museum at Gilbert White's House is more spacious, more remote, and less visited than many of the other museums in our sample group. Though capacity was reduced to just 50 people, we were told by the interviewee that 'the idea that during the pandemic there would be 50 people in the house all together at the same time was fairly unlikely'. They further commented wryly

that ‘It’s quite disheartening [...] on the phone to tell somebody that you’ve never been that busy enough to have turned anybody away’.<sup>2</sup> But it is arguable that this anomalous experience is partially attributable to their successful interpretation of the work and legacy of Gilbert White.

White is best remembered as the author of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, a landmark text in the tradition of English nature writing that has never been out of print since it was first published in 1789. Visitors familiar with it will likely be more attracted to the 30 acres of gardens and grounds than to the house, so it is quite logical that having 50 visitors all together in the house would be unusual. Indeed, if a better sense of White’s inspiration and legacy can be gleaned outdoors than indoors, then arguably, the fact that visitors do not congregate in the house means the museum is doing its job well. (The role of the outdoors is explored in more detail in Section 5.2.)

## 4.2 Impact on Finances

In the first year of the pandemic, the cost of Covid-19 to just eight literary heritage sites can be estimated at **£10,775,228**.

To place this figure in context: based on a three-year average of the years 2017–19, the combined annual income these eight organizations could have expected in a normal year would have been in the order of **£16,711,111**.

### 4.2.1 Outlining the Costs

The costliest aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic consisted of income lost through closure.

Ten museums were asked to itemize their best estimates at lost income during this period based on the headings listed in the Table 4.1. However, only eight museums were able to provide this level of granularity in their data. The results were as follows:

During the pandemic, the Office for National Statistics routinely estimated deaths from Covid-19 by comparing the number of deaths in any given week with the average number of deaths at the same time in the average year. We found a similar method useful for gauging the impact on income – that is, we simply compared income in the tax year of 2020–21 with that of the three previous tax years. Each museum (n = 10) provided us with annual income figures for the years 2017–19, from which a three-year average was calculated, and compared with annual income for 2020.

The museums surveyed included a range of small, medium, and large museums in terms of their visitor numbers and their annual income. Indeed, over the three years prior to the Covid pandemic, the museum with the highest income had an annual average nearly 60 times larger than the museum with

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*Table 4.1* Income lost, by source, from eight museums

<i>Income source</i>	<i>Total amount lost (by museums' own estimate)</i>	<i>No. of museums reporting income loss</i>
Admission	£6,178,500	8
Gift shop sales	£3,012,000	8
Refreshment sales	£528,000	4
Hiring of premises/facilities	£70,000	3
Guided tours	£44,000	2
Events	£39,000	2
Membership/season ticket/similar:	£30,000	1
Other (please specify):	£560,000	1
Learning		
Other (please specify):	£45,600	2
Letting holiday accommodation		
Other (please specify):	£22,000	1
Car park fees		
Other (please specify):	£5,000	1
Weddings		
	<b>Total estimated losses:</b>	
	<b>£10,534,100</b>	

the lowest, with over 140 times as many visitors per year. For this reason, it is neither meaningful nor possible to calculate the average cost to each museum, nor to try to scale the impact on these eight museums to a national level: despite many overriding similarities, there simply is no such thing as an average or representative writer's house museum.

Unsurprisingly, then, the impact of Covid-19 was erratic. In 2020, 4 out of 10 museums reported a roughly typical annual income – i.e., within or close to a range set by the highest and the lowest of the previous three years.

Five out of ten museums reported a financial loss, ranging from 83% to 27%, and averaging a loss of 48.6% on the previous three-year average.

One organization reported a substantial increase in income; however, this was not a representative experience because (i) the organization in question has a disproportionately small annual income (less than £10,000), meaning that small-scale grants and fundraising had a relatively large impact, and (ii) the organization in question does not operate as a conventional literary museum.

We had expected to find that museums with higher income levels would be better placed to weather the financial storm than museums with lower income levels. However, this turned out not to be the case. Perhaps surprisingly, fluctuations in income did not appear to be associated with size of income. Ranking museums in order of size of income yielded absolutely no correlation with whether they suffered loss, nor to the size of losses. Interestingly, there was no apparent link between income size and income loss.

Instead, we found the financial impact of the pandemic seemed to correlate more closely with visitor numbers, as discussed below.

#### 4.2.2 Additional Costs

Additional costs were incurred as a direct result of the pandemic itself. These museums were also asked to ‘list major additional costs, with amounts spent, that you have incurred as a direct result of the pandemic (e.g. signage, tensa barriers, PPE for staff, contact tracking and tracing, reinterpretation of the site, publicizing shutdowns and re-openings, and so on)’. Only six museums were able to provide us with these figures, spending a total of **£180,846** across all categories, including the following additions: marketing, screens, enhanced cleaning, equipment/equipment hire, additional security, and gazebos. One museum manager aptly remarked these additional costs were ‘too many to list’.

However, the two museums which did not supply additional cost data are not so substantially different in the physical nature of the site from the other six as to make extrapolation meaningless. The average spend per museum of these Covid-related costs was £30,141, so it can be estimated that eight museums would have spent in the region of **£241,128** on responding to the pandemic in these ways.

Added to the total lost income in the above table, this yields a ‘cost of Covid’ figure of **£10,775,228**.

#### 4.2.3 Alternative Income Sources

Evidence of alternative sources of income is almost negligible. The museums were asked ‘Were you able to generate income from new sources to help you through the pandemic (e.g. online events, Covid-specific fundraising initiatives, etc.)? If so, please describe them and indicate approximately how much money they each raised’.

Five museums listed the following alternative income sources (Table 4.2):

This amount, though a commendable tribute to the resourcefulness and resilience of the sector, was nevertheless less than one fiftieth of the ‘cost of Covid’ during the same period.

Since lack of evidence does not always equate to evidence of lack, we should be cautious in the conclusions we draw: it is possible that the museums that did not supply data were able to attract income from new sources without

Table 4.2 New income streams by source

<i>Income source</i>	<i>Total income from source</i>	<i>No. of museums reporting income</i>
Covid-related fundraising appeals	£176,000	2
Online events/talks/tours	£31,620	5
Online shop	£5928	2
	<b>Total from new income sources:</b>	
	<b>£213,548</b>	

being readily able to quantify it accurately, for any number of good reasons. However, it seems unlikely that any such income would have gone anywhere near to remedying the huge shortfall identified above.

There are two clear conclusions to draw from this: one is that the survival of the literary heritage sector was dependent on additional funding from grants, loans, and emergency funding; the other is that the so-called ‘digital turn’ that was said to characterize cultural consumption during the pandemic – and which is discussed below – has a long way to go before it is monetized successfully.

### **4.3 Impact on the Workforce**

The Covid-19 pandemic took a costly toll on the livelihoods and careers of those who work in literary heritage. Four out of ten museums surveyed reported having to make staff redundant. The proportions of staff made redundant in each were 50%, 30%, 20%, and 15% (mean average = 29%).

It might have been supposed that museums with high levels of income would be less likely to make staff redundant. But there did not appear to be any link whatsoever between redundancies and average annual income, high or low. Instead, there was a close association between redundancies and visitor numbers. Higher redundancy levels appeared to be linked to higher visitor numbers.

The three museums with the highest proportions of redundancies corresponded exactly (and in order) with the three museums with the highest average annual footfall. Unsurprisingly, two of these museums reported that redundancies were most common in positions directly connected with visitors (front-of-house, catering/hospitality, retail, cleaning).

The fourth museum, which experienced the lowest levels of redundancy, also had some of the lowest visitor numbers of the museums surveyed. Here, moreover, the redundancies were in positions not directly connected with visitors—they were specifically in administrative positions. This therefore bears out further the association between visitor numbers and redundancies in public-facing roles: the lowest levels of redundancy were in less-visited museums and were not in public-facing roles.

Positions most commonly described as least at risk of redundancy were curatorial and managerial/directorial, with positions in finance, maintenance, and learning also mentioned.

Impact on volunteer staffing was harder to gauge. Of ten museums surveyed, one did not use volunteers, and two more were unable to provide data on their numbers. A further two said that their numbers of volunteers had decreased during the pandemic, but did not quantify this decrease. Of the remaining five, the two with the highest percentage decrease in volunteers were the two museums with the highest annual average footfall. The most-visited museum reported a drop in volunteers of over 90%, and the

second most-visited museum reported a 40% drop. The other three museums, which all had lower numbers of visitors, experienced drops of 10%, 10%, and 12% respectively.

Overall, the link between visitor numbers and loss of public-facing staff roles also applies to volunteers but is much less clear cut. The museums were asked which kinds of positions saw the biggest loss of volunteers, and which the smallest. Three replied that the losses fell evenly across all positions. The other four museums all specified that public-facing roles such as guides, room stewards, visitor experience and front-of-house positions experienced the highest levels of decline. There was a clear consensus that outdoor roles, especially gardening, had seen the lowest levels.

This impact on staffing levels may well prove to be long term. The museums were asked 'How confident are you of returning to pre-pandemic levels of paid staffing?'. Of the four that reported redundancies, one museum said it was 'not very' confident, another said it was 'moderately' confident, a third responded it was 'less confident' and 'would not look to return to pre-pandemic levels/way of operating', and the fourth made no comment.

Interestingly, the same question was answered by three museums who did not experience redundancies, suggesting that staff were lost during the pandemic without having been made redundant. Two were 'not very' confident of returning to pre-pandemic levels of paid staffing; the third was the only museum to describe itself as 'very confident' of returning to pre-pandemic staffing levels, and reported it was in the process of doing so. Perhaps surprisingly, this museum sits amongst the lowest-ranked of museums both for average annual budget and for average annual visitor numbers.

When asked about returning to pre-pandemic levels of volunteers, a slightly more optimistic picture emerged, with half the museums surveyed expressing various levels of confidence that they would return to pre-pandemic numbers of volunteers: two museums said they were 'very confident' of doing so, and others used phrases such as 'fairly confident', 'moderately confident', and 'reasonably confident'.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

Two of the most negative consequences of Covid-19 – loss of income and loss of jobs – appeared to be directly correlated with higher levels of visitor numbers.

The link between visitor numbers and income loss was complex, though a pattern did seem to emerge. Simply put: financial stability appeared to be linked to mid-sized visitor numbers.

Both of the two most-visited museums (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust – average footfall 861,613, and Robert Burns Birthplace Museum – average footfall 224,333) experienced financial losses in 2020.

Less-visited museums (averaging below 40,000 visitors per year) were also likely to suffer financial losses.

Moderately well-visited museums (i.e. museums averaging between 40,000 and 50,000 visitors) did not tend to experience a substantial financial impact during this period. Their income remained either within or close to the range set by the highest and lowest of the three previous years, or else not drastically different from the mean average.

The reasons for this are not fully understood. An interviewee from one of the most-visited of the museums observed that one of the lessons the Covid-19 pandemic had revealed was that the organization had become overly dependent on revenue from admissions, and had not diversified their income; one might extrapolate from this that museums of mid-sized popularity had been obliged to do so over the years. But this is more speculation than explanation: more research would be useful here.

The link between visitor numbers and redundancies is much easier to explain: since visitor-facing roles were at most risk of redundancy, it stands to reason that redundancies would be highest in the museums with the most visitors.

All told, these quantitative data seem to prompt the question as to whether there might be an optimum number of visitors to a literary heritage site such as a writer's house museum. When placed in dialogue with some of the qualitative data, the question becomes more thought-provoking still. Comments by several interviewees suggested that attitudes, working practices, and business models had adapted in the wake of the pandemic, sometimes in ways that placed less emphasis on visitor numbers.

While operating at reduced capacity, most museums introduced pre-booking systems, as the best way of limiting visitor numbers. Ten of the 16 museums regarded this as a positive step, and intended to retain it. Some regarded it as useful for data collection, others said it helped them plan the working day better.

Interestingly, one-quarter of the museums said they would use the system to restrict visitor numbers in future, and that they had chosen not to return to their pre-Covid levels. They agreed that smaller groups delivered a better visitor experience, and a more intimate, more in-depth sense of the space. This is a significant benefit in a context where online reviews such as TripAdvisor are used as a metric for positive outcomes. It also seems like a strategy that would please the visitors who have the most invested in their visit to the site: dedicated readers seeking some sense of connection with a revered author will probably appreciate a quieter, less crowded visit.

More importantly, there is cause for concern that high levels of visitor traffic had been physically damaging to the buildings, which were not built to accommodate mass tourism. Concern about this was expressed at Shakespeare's Birthplace and at Thomas Hardy's Cottage, where substantial conservation work had been undertaken immediately prior to the pandemic to rectify damage caused over the years by the volume of visitor traffic.

To elaborate on this point from the qualitative data, an interviewee from Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust recalled that in the years before the pandemic,

their ‘first come, first served’ approach to admissions had sometimes resulted in occasions when ‘everyone gets crushed around’, because:

You might have 3,000 people on a bank holiday. Financially fantastic, but a bit overcrowded for visitors. They’re not getting a great experience, and the building – which is obviously hundreds of years old – is suffering.

(Shakespeare’s Birthplace Interview)

Consequently, the restrictions on visitor numbers imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic had offered an insight into a qualitatively different and more sustainable kind of business model, which the Trust had decided to retain:

It will mean, in the future, that our admissions income will always be capped. It will never get to the admissions income that we were managing to garner in our best ever year, which was 2018. We’ll never get back there again. But actually we’ll have space to conserve this incredibly important building, we’ll be able to offer a different quality and style of visit in the future.

(Shakespeare’s Birthplace Interview)

Similarly, since 2021, the National Trust has gone on to implement a new heritage management model for smaller properties whereby booking remains essential.

In short, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have led some literary heritage organizations to undertake a significant re-evaluation of how they operate, prioritizing the quality of their visitor experience over the quantity of visitor numbers. Given that high visitor numbers were associated with negative outcomes, this could well be a positive step. Perhaps this is an instance of when less is more.

That said, it is important to remember that organizations choosing to operate with lower numbers of visitors either had very high levels of footfall to begin with, or else operate under the auspices of a larger organization such as the National Trust. Obviously, organizations with fewer visitors will likely need to continue seeking to grow their visitor numbers in the interests of viability.

To sum up: there is strong evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, to suggest that for literary museums and heritage sites, there are clear limitations to growth-based business models based primarily on expanding visitor numbers. We would suggest that seeking to grow visitor numbers beyond their optimal level might well prove counterproductive to these organizations. The optimum number of visitors will, of course, be different for each organization: literary heritage sites come in all shapes and sizes, and there is probably no such thing as the average writer’s house museum.

## Notes

1 Interview with Seamus Heaney HomePlace, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 9 August 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview’.

2 Interview with Gilbert White’s House and Oates Museum, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 6 October 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Gilbert White’s House interview’.



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## 5 Doing Things Differently

As the pandemic progressed, and the restrictions associated with it evolved, literary heritage sites tried different strategies for keeping up their connections with their publics and audiences. This section summarizes some of the main innovations and departures that were reported by interviewees.

### 5.1 Was There a ‘Digital Turn’?

It is well documented that patterns of cultural consumption and engagement changed during the Covid-related lockdowns, principally by moving online.<sup>1</sup> If, as Nicola Watson described, literary tourists link text with place by supplementing reading with travel, that process necessarily became an imaginative rather than a physical one during the coronavirus moment, putting paid to the necessity for travel at all to satisfy the literary touristic impetus.<sup>2</sup>

Those we spoke to in this study reported experiencing this trend: ‘during the pandemic – because people were at home – there was a huge appetite for digital heritage content and a far more willing and engaged audience than I’ve ever seen online before’ (Abbotsford interview).

Of the 16 organizations we spoke to, 13 emphasized the importance of moving their activities online during the pandemic. Most regard these innovations as successful: ‘it’s been really positive to see the response to some of our digital and online engagement’ (Shakespeare’s Birthplace Interview). However, the quantitative data suggests that some of this success was patchier than described in the qualitative data. Nevertheless, irrespective of its success, there was certainly a wave of digital innovation that was directly attributable to the pandemic: when speaking of forays into digital exhibitions and live-streamed events, the interviewee from Strawberry Hill commented: ‘These are things that would not have been done had it not been for COVID’ (Strawberry Hill House interview).

5.1.1 *Virtual Tours*

In the interviews we conducted, one of the most talked-about aspects of digital adaptations to the pandemic was the popularity of virtual tours. The outstanding example of the virtual tour in a literary heritage context was described by the interviewee from Jane Austen's House, and the account is worth quoting at length:

The house has reached nearly as many people digitally over the last 12 months as it would have done in person, and from all over the world, in ways that it wouldn't have done before. That's been extraordinary, [...] the way we've been able to communicate with people. [...] The virtual tour has been hugely successful. When the November lockdown happened we decided to do guided, paid-for virtual tours and this has been extraordinary and it's been one of the real success stories for us, actually. [...]

We did special versions for Mother's Day, and for private groups and individuals as well: we've even done some for the British Embassy in Paraguay, and for YPBS Broadcasting Service, the public broadcaster in the States, with over 400 people attending them. So they've been very, very successful and – I'm very proud of this – they were included in the list with *Forbes Magazine* as one of the best virtual tours in the world. It was really, really quite exciting: there's Google Arts and Culture up there, Amazon, all these really big guys and then us! [...]

They've also enabled people who would never otherwise have been able to visit the house to come and see it. I think that by a couple of weeks ago 32,000 individual users have used the virtual tour; in a normal year we would have about 40,000 visitors through the door, so between October and August we've had nearly that many accessing the house virtually, which I think in a year when they couldn't come in person is quite extraordinary. And in fact if you include the virtual and the in-person visits it's almost the same as a normal year.

They've really driven engagement; we've had people come to the tours from all over the world, Sweden, Spain, lots from the States, Brazil, Paraguay, who have been able to come and visit virtually and engage with our team and with Austen's story, so it's hugely increased access.

(Jane Austen's House interview)

While few other literary heritage sites could match this extraordinary success story, many others echoed its key points. Elizabeth Gaskell's House found that their virtual tours had been 'transformational' in qualitative terms: 'we've got to know our online audience so much better because of the questions, the dialogue' (Elizabeth Gaskell's House interview). The interviewee from Wordsworth's Dove Cottage remarked: 'with the virtual tours that we did we were able to reach universities throughout the world' (Wordsworth Grasmere interview).

Abbotsford agreed that virtual tours had helped them connect with ‘student researchers right around the world’, but were less upbeat about their success in monetary terms: ‘It was never going to change things for us hugely financially but it was nice that that was there as a safety net for people’ (Abbotsford interview).

However, in a literary heritage context, the virtual tour could also appear as a kind of threat. After all, a visit to a writer’s house museum is based primarily on site-specificity and even ‘site sacralization’.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, by circumventing the need to visit the site in person, the virtual tour strikes at the very *raison d’être* of literary heritage sites. Such was the view taken at Seamus Heaney HomePlace:

We felt that we didn’t want to go down that route because people have to be here, and this is the essence of what HomePlace is [...] and anything else would dilute that. So we held fast to that and I’m glad we did, because it’s all about being here. You can’t get that experience unless you stand in the landscape [...] 50 percent of his work is sited within a three-mile radius of where I sit today and that is very, very unique, that it is so focused on people and place.

(Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview)

It will be interesting to see how the future of the virtual tour navigates between such different perspectives on literary heritage sites.

### 5.1.2 *Online Events*

Another common phenomenon was a turn to digital events. Here, Seamus Heaney HomePlace spoke for many of our interviewees:

[We] went online with our arts programme output and that proved to be very, very successful. It was very difficult because we weren’t set up for that at all and we were all trying to do that remotely. [...] [W]e had about 350 people [who] paid for events right from Japan to Brazil, and it was great for us to be able to track the impact [...] [I]t brought us to a new audience, you know, people that hadn’t been here before that we were reaching via online, there was [...] the opportunity to reach globally [...]. [T]he events that we did online were able to be new, fresh, interesting, engaging, and we were using those as opportunities on a fortnightly or monthly basis to stay relevant and to stay connected. [...]. [T]he feedback that we received from people from the online activity was exceptionally important.

(Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview)

The benefits of the international reach of online events was mentioned by interviewees from Abbotsford, Jane Austen’s House, Shakespeare’s

Birthplace, Elizabeth Gaskell's House, Wordsworth Grasmere, and Milton's Cottage, where it was estimated that the online lectures 'have had probably a majority of international audiences and so that actually has been a really nice opportunity to look at how we continue to engage with those audiences'.<sup>4</sup>

While we did not attempt to gather quantitative data about the popularity of online events, some interviewees did volunteer rough estimates. Prior to the pandemic, Wordsworth Grasmere programmed talks in their library which attracted 30 or (occasionally) 40 people, 'but they're all Cumbria-based'. When they launched 'a series of webinars called "Disparate Romantics" [...] we were getting 90 people', and felt 'that we shared Wordsworth throughout the world, literally, and that was such a good feeling and brought so many people together as well' (Wordsworth Grasmere interview). Similarly, Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust had held a monthly 'research conversation':

We might get 50 people and we made no money from those in donations. We switched those online. [...] Audiences between two and four, five hundred. And making £100 to £400, £500 worth of donations every time [...] and audiences from seven or eight different countries is the typical thing.  
(Shakespeare's Birthplace interview)

Strawberry Hill House achieved similar successes by teaming up with other nearby historic houses and offering talks collectively.

Online events were not just better for reaching broader audiences: they enabled literary heritage sites to offer a more varied programme. As the interviewees from Shakespeare's Birthplace put it: 'we can get a broader range of speakers because previously our speakers had to be in Stratford at five o'clock on a Wednesday – well that does give you quite a narrow pool!' (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview). Another interviewee observed that online speakers did not require hotel accommodation or travel expenses.

Online events were by no means limited to traditional talks and lectures: interviewees from Jarrow Hall recounted collections-based sessions in which they handled and discussed objects from the collections with an audience via Facebook Live. Perhaps the most ambitious approach to digital events was at Gilbert White's House, where an entire literary festival was programmed online at relatively short notice:

Had you asked me six months previous whether I thought that we could pull off a literary festival [online] I would have said, 'Oh, well, you know, our demographic that visits and supports the museum aren't tech savvy enough to want to celebrate anything online'. And, actually, it worked really well and, obviously, since then, like every museum, we've done a lot online and realized the potential for working in a hybrid way [...] so yes, there are definitely new things that we've started doing.  
(Gilbert White's House interview)

### 5.1.3 *Educating Online*

One of the newest of these departures was in the educational mission of literary heritage sites. The highly site-specific nature of literary heritage (as discussed above) means that the educational programmes of these museums were orientated almost exclusively around school visits. The Covid-19 pandemic changed all this overnight: both museums and schools had to close. The hole created by these closures was filled by demand for educational content from parents struggling to teach their children at home.

Accordingly, Gilbert White's House reported that they 'tried to up our social media content. Our education manager and I put out as many education downloads and resources as we could for home-schooling parents' (Gilbert White's House interview). It was, however, a crowded marketplace, as Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust found:

Every museum in the height of lockdown was doing a homework club [...]. And I think: 'How do you make yourself stand out when you've got Chester Zoo doing a chat with a penguin?' There was so much exciting things going on! How do you make Shakespeare fun and engaging online? And it's one of our challenges – and we found really great ways to do that.  
(Shakespeare's Birthplace interview)

Since Shakespeare is the only compulsory author across the English school curriculum, it is not surprising that this organization switched its educational programmes online very successfully:

All of our engagement with schools, colleges, universities and leisure learning – we'd sort of dipped our toe in the water with doing stuff online. But because we were very successful at delivering it in person there'd never been that impetus at the Trust to really embrace what digital might mean for us in a learning context. So [...] we switched very rapidly to delivering all of that teaching digitally and that's been hugely successful. What it's shown is the appetite there is for engaging with our educators and the quality of what we offer can be replicated online, which was great for us to be able to see, and great for the team to be actually delivering teaching again. It's been more challenging for us I think from a primary school perspective because that hands-on input engagement is really what they're looking for. But certainly when we get to secondary and university groups who come to us for that very specific Shakespeare, curriculum-led activity, that's gone really, really well and we see it as a fundamental part of our future.  
(Shakespeare's Birthplace interview)

Indeed, such was the success of digital education at Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust that they launched 'a new digital learning memberships model' to capitalize on it.

Moving educational programmes online was different from moving events online in that events are typically live-streamed, whereas some educational content can be delivered asynchronously, making it far more accessible: ‘While all of our teaching before was live we can now do pre-recorded stuff which people can use [...] when they want it – not when they happen to get a booking with us to come to Stratford’ (Shakespeare’s Birthplace interview).

Even when delivered live, online education had some of the same advantages as online events in terms of widening participation. The interviewee from Jane Austen’s House said of their educational sessions that

because they were online, and they were grant-funded so they were free, we were able to reach kids that we wouldn’t otherwise have been able to reach. They wouldn’t have necessarily been able to come or wanted to come to Chawton. [...] [W]e had kids from Northern Ireland, the Midlands, London, Bristol, and also [...] from Nairobi [...] That was a group of children who would not have otherwise been able to come to us and that was a great positive.

(Jane Austen’s House interview)

Similarly, interviewees from Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust reported that:

we have been able to reach – and we’re just at the beginning of this – new audiences from schools, particularly for overseas ones who couldn’t afford to come. One of the early engagements we had was with a community college in Massachusetts. They could never have afforded to come to Stratford but they could afford an hour of one of our lecturers talking to their class and they found it really powerful as an opportunity so that’s been great.

(Shakespeare’s Birthplace interview)

Jarrow Hall might not be as well-known a museum as Shakespeare’s Birthplace or Jane Austen’s House, but they, too, reported organizing an online digital session at the request of a school in Florida.

It is important to remember, though, that not all educational programmes are aimed at schools and universities. Abbotsford runs a massive online open course (MOOC) on Sir Walter Scott with Aberdeen university, which, ‘just through sheer fluke’, was due to begin a new iteration in late March 2020 – precisely when the pandemic arrived in the UK. The uptake of the MOOC surged, both quantitatively and qualitatively,

And I found it to be one of the most emotional experiences in a professional vein I’ve ever had because there were people who were terrified, who had relatives in hospital – we had people who actually lost loved ones – doing this course, finding some respite, talking to myself and the

rest of this little learning community. And it was wonderful. [...] What I found was that the level of engagement and passion in that virtual space just changed completely because of Covid.

(Abbotsford interview)

Thus, in certain respects, the educational and community-based aspects of literary heritage found ways to complement the turn to ‘lockdown reading’ and to harness it as a form of public engagement at a time when the need for such activities was more urgent than ever before.

#### **5.1.4 Digital Public Engagement**

Similarly, many literary heritage organizations used digital platforms, especially social media, to engage the public in various forms of ‘shared reading’ during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> One such experience was recounted by the interviewee from Elizabeth Gaskell’s House:

We started by doing an online read-along on Twitter and Facebook, just when it was early days and we all didn’t really know what was going on. It felt like a nice thing to do. And it was, actually. We just read a couple of chapters every week and then, sort of, caught up on social, and I did Twitter, someone did Facebook, and we just talked about it and had a couple of questions that we put out there.

(Elizabeth Gaskell’s House interview)

It was also reported that the use made of social media changed during the pandemic, becoming more interactive in nature. The interviewee from Gilbert White’s House remarked that on social media ‘our usual thing is telling people what’s happening in the museum, [...] what events we’ve got going on’ and so forth. However, during the pandemic, their social media became ‘more and more focused on getting people engaged and giving something for people to either watch or go out and do’, and found that when they did so, ‘people were definitely more active on social media and more engaging than in past times’ (Gilbert White’s House interview).

There were also instances of more advanced forms of community engagement and co-production facilitated by digital technology. The interviewee from Wordsworth Grasmere Trust described a collaboration with Grasmere Women’s Institute (WI) centred on Wordsworth’s poem ‘Simon Lee’, in which he wrote:

O gentle Reader! you would find  
A tale in every thing.

Members of Grasmere WI were invited ‘to send an image of something that took on a new meaning over lockdown that they could never have imagined’,

and to write an accompanying text explaining its significance. For example: buses empty of passengers, or egg boxes that told a tale of dwindling food supplies. They then ‘created a website of about 40 odd things that took on new meaning [...] written by the WI members. And that was, kind of, a collaborative venture that we’d never done before’ (Wordsworth Grasmere interview). Reflecting on it, the interviewee described it as an important step forward in engaging with the local community:

There’s always been this thing in Grasmere: [...] academic strange types here [in the museum], and the rest of the village is something separate. And so somehow this project managed to cross that barrier, cross that divide and, I would say, those sorts of things really, really worked [...] So digital innovation helped us to be that bit more collaborative  
(Wordsworth Grasmere interview)

Thus, the digital turn necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic facilitated not just greater international outreach but greater local connectivity too.

To build upon the work of Laurajane Smith in the *Uses of Heritage* (2006), the coronavirus pandemic temporarily detached our gaze from the physical attributes of built and material heritage.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic did not herald a demise of literary heritage, but temporarily returned us to the stories that underpin it and redirected its focus from a discourse of national literary culture to the privileging of the hyperlocal. Literary heritage’s survival throughout, and in some cases its thriving through, lockdown scenarios demonstrates its ability to continue to deliver the ‘fruitful’ work of heritage, privileging the formation and negotiation of social and cultural values at a time of global crisis.

### 5.1.5 *A Quantitative Counter-Narrative*

In general, the qualitative accounts gathered in interviews suggest, as we have seen, a narrative of partial or complete success in adopting digital technology as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the picture painted by the quantitative data suggests a more measured evaluation.

A total of ten museums returned the questionnaires that itemized quantitative data. The questionnaires asked how many hits the museum’s website attracted in 2020. To gauge trends over time, they were also asked to provide numbers for the three previous years.

Only four of the ten museums shared data about website traffic. The other six did not, presumably because they were not keeping track of it. However, nearly all these museums provided the same data about in-person visitor numbers. This in itself might imply that the sector (still) does not attach the same importance to their digital offer as it does to museum footfall, where numbers are counted carefully.

Of the four museums that provided data, one had data to compare from 2019, but not before. Only three out of ten museums had ready access to data covering the period 2017–20.

Comparing the number of website hits in 2020 with that of 2019, the four museums recorded (respectively) a 28% increase, a 25% increase, a 22% drop, and a 41% drop. Compared with the three-year average of 2017–19, website hits in 2020 declined in almost all cases.

Only one museum recorded any growth on the three-year average during 2020: Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust increased its website hits by 74%. This museum has the highest annual income, the largest number of visitors per year, and the most website hits of any literary heritage site in the UK. Moreover, as we have seen above, this organization had invested substantially in developing a new digital learning model, and, since Shakespeare is the only compulsory author across the English school curriculum, the boom in web traffic may be attributable to home schooling, at least in part.

The qualitative data emphasized that investment and development in the digital offer was huge throughout the UK's literary heritage sites. However, as established earlier, the quantitative data revealed that online activities yielded less than 2% of the combined annual income that our sample group would have expected in an average year.

All told, then, the data received did not bear out the straightforward narrative of a dramatic turn towards digital culture during the lockdowns of 2020. We found that most museums were still not monitoring their web traffic; those that did found it was likelier to decline than to increase; and attempts to monetize the digital offer did not typically yield sizeable results.

### **5.1.6 Caveats**

The following considerations should be applied when interpreting the findings of Section 5.1.5:

First, the quantitative data returns about web traffic were too few to generate a reliable overview. Only four museums provided recent data, and one of those could not provide historic data.

Second, the data received might not be strictly commensurable, because there are many different ways of monitoring web traffic, which have been known to yield very different results.

Third, lack of evidence does not mean evidence of lack: thus, though it is certainly surprising that most museums did not have ready-to-hand data about their websites, it does not follow that they still regard their web presence as a secondary activity compared with in-person visits. The qualitative data suggest a different picture.

Finally, in an increasingly fragmented digital ecology, a museum's homepage might not be the main gateway to its digital offer. We gathered data only on website hits, and made no attempt to monitor engagement with social media.

Given these clear limitations in the quantitative data gathered, there are few self-evident conclusions to be drawn. However, it is clear that the evidence for the so-called ‘digital turn’ is patchy and mixed.

### 5.1.7 *A Mixed Picture*

To sum up: interviewees from different organizations made very different comments about their experiences of ‘going digital’ during the pandemic. Some were much more enthusiastic than others.

The interviewee from Jane Austen’s House was very clear that in the event of any future closure – whether because of a pandemic or any other reason – they would

just go digital, just put everything online, online events, learning workshops, guided tours, e-commerce. All those conversations you would have on site, in person just take them online. It’s easy and rewarding and we now have [the] mechanisms in place.

(Jane Austen’s House interview)

Interviewees from Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust felt that the potential of digital outreach was going to form a large part of their future in moving on from the pandemic, because:

the numbers we can engage with in different ways online or elsewhere are much greater. So it does change our ambitions, I think. [...] We’re much more ambitious as an organization. [...] We’re really clear we’re not going back to how it was. It’s going to be a blended offer of in person in Stratford and remote – whatever form that takes.

(Shakespeare’s Birthplace interview)

The interviewee from Elizabeth Gaskell’s House commented that in digital outreach ‘the overheads and expenditure is less so we’ve been able to take more risks, I think, and try more things’ (Elizabeth Gaskell’s House interview).

In these terms, online forms of engagement are easy to set up, rewarding to run, are low cost, and reach large numbers. Thus, most organizations anticipated that digital activities would play a larger role in their futures, and viewed this with a certain amount of (sometimes guarded) optimism, as for example at Abbotsford:

The opportunities that the virtual world gives us we only really recognize now and probably wouldn’t have got to this point so quickly were it not for Covid. [...] I think we’ll never be the same again but that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

(Abbotsford interview)

At the same time, the interviewee from Strawberry Hill felt that: ‘the virtual stuff will keep things ticking over but it’s never going to light someone’s fire in the same way as actually being there’ (Strawberry Hill interview).

The interviewee from the Elmet Trust emphasized the power of live events over digital events:

the online stuff is amazing but there’s just something about somebody reading a poem in a room with a bunch of other people listening [...] so I still think our first impulse is going to be to do live events again and I think that should be a top priority.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, the interviewee from Dylan Thomas Birthplace wryly remarked that ‘I’ve got a feeling Zoom has lost its attraction for people now’.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, there is a competing sense that digital outreach has lost much of its novelty and cannot replace the live, in-person, real-world experience.

Given this, it was not surprising to find that several interviewees were reflecting on the ambivalence of the ‘digital turn’, and were uncertain of the extent to which it would or should form part of their future plans. For instance, at Robert Burns Birthplace Museum:

Are people going to want to come to museums or are they going to want to go and look at a museum – albeit it in a small and digital format? [...] I’ve often felt that the way we interpret museums and heritage sites is if you make the interpretation more interesting than the objects themselves you’re shooting yourself in the foot a wee bit. I’ve always felt it’s a bit of a delicate balancing act [...] [H]ow are people going to access us in future? [...] And yeah, that’s maybe a bit of a science fiction answer, but I think it’s something we have to consider. If people don’t want to come back in their great swathes that they did in the past, how do we make our collections available to them? And for a long time now the museums have had an online presence but perhaps people are going to want more than just a picture on their phone and a bit of text.<sup>9</sup>

## **5.2 The ‘Outdoors Turn’**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions on travel meant that people in the UK were unable to leave their local areas. Lockdowns stipulated that taking exercise outdoors was the only leisure activity permitted outside the home. Accordingly, green spaces took on a huge importance, as people reconnected with the simple pleasures of nature and walking outdoors. As an interviewee from Hardy’s Cottage put it: ‘The outdoors became incredibly important for audiences through the Covid pandemic’.<sup>10</sup> At literary heritage sites, as Kate Marsh has demonstrated, ‘a visitor can still walk out of a house and into landscapes which have barely changed since the writer drew breath from them and

breathed literature into them', comparing the process to walking in a writer's footsteps and seeing through their eyes.<sup>11</sup>

In response to this huge upsurge in demand for green spaces, literary heritage sites began to make innovative use of their gardens, grounds, and local landscapes. Thirteen of the 16 museums we spoke to reported either engaging with the outdoors in new ways, or planning to do so in future. There were some astonishing success stories: for example, Abbotsford recorded a 400% increase in visitors to their grounds during the course of the pandemic.

The picture was far from even or consistent, because many writer's houses are modest dwellings without extensive grounds. As the interviewee from Hardy's Cottage said: 'I just wonder – some of those smaller places in the literary sector [...] haven't necessarily got that expansive parkland and other facilities' (Hardy's Cottage interview). Conversely, an interviewee from Jarrow Hall remarked:

We were lucky to have a lot of outdoor space. We're quite positive in the fact that we were able to open up those spaces and we were able to then allow visitors to come back and make use of those spaces again, which I think was such a welcomed thing, especially with so many people spending so much time in the house. People would come in in order to just have that little bit of outdoor space with their families, which I think was really, really well appreciated and really important. [...] I can't imagine how difficult it would have been for those [sites] that didn't have much in the way of outdoor spaces, and had to open a lot later, and the impact of that.<sup>12</sup>

The experience at Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust was a curiously mixed one. For what must surely have been the first time ever, the Birthplace itself does not seem to have been the most popular attraction in Stratford-upon-Avon:

People wanted outdoors. They wanted spaces – that [...] impacted us [at] Shakespeare's Birthplace, which is a tiny little house, and our capacity is tiny really. And people didn't want – it was very difficult [...] when people wanted to roam around country estates and keep away from everyone else.  
(Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust interview)

Luckily for the Trust, they were able to promote 'Anne Hathaway's Cottage – a relatively small building surrounded by larger outdoor spaces', 'New Place, which is predominantly outdoors', as well as Mary Arden's farm. These helped meet the demand for outdoor spaces and activities.

Even where writer's houses lack gardens, they could still serve as a conduit for connecting people with the outdoors. For example, Ted Hughes's birthplace has no outdoor space whatsoever, but nevertheless, the Elmet Trust collaborated with a range of community organizations to produce a series of beautifully hand-drawn maps of walks that guided people through

the landscapes and landmarks that had influenced Hughes's work.<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney HomePlace – which, as a purpose-built museum, does not have a quaint garden or extensive grounds, launched 'an outdoor part of our experience called Open Ground' – five site-specific interpretations of places in the local landscape that Heaney knew and celebrated in his poems, with an accompanying app that uses augmented reality to deliver an enhanced interpretation of them.<sup>14</sup> (It can be seen from this that the 'outdoors turn' and the 'digital turn' are not necessarily mutually exclusive.)

Literary heritage sites with gardens recorded high levels of visitors: for example, over 1,000 paying visitors came to Shandy Hall while the house was still closed, 'because of the fact the garden could still operate'.<sup>15</sup> This is a substantial proportion of the normal volume of visitor traffic.

In many cases, gardens and grounds were put to innovative use. For instance, the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum offered outdoor yoga sessions (a brand new departure), as well as bug hunts, crafting activities in a marquee, and a Scots language animal trail through the woodland. At Hill Top, the gardens became a destination in their own right, long before the farmhouse itself was allowed to reopen:

I think that was a really positive experience for the staff here to show that people still wanted to come and visit the gardens. They didn't charge and they put in new temporary labels and things in the garden to create a visitor route with Beatrix Potter's quotes and writings about her garden. [...] And that was a new thing that they'd never done: there'd never been an interpretation in the garden, so that was a real opportunity to think about the outside offer. So this year we've had those labels professionally printed [...]. We've made them big, high quality, and we've kept that on for this summer and it's been really positive. [...] It's opened up new ways of thinking about interpretation which I'm really pleased about. And opened up the garden as a place to visit distinct from the house.

(Hill Top interview)

Given that Potter is best known for her illustrated stories about the animals in and around her garden, it is quite remarkable to think that her words appeared in her own garden for the very first time in response to the conditions created by the Covid pandemic.

For many people, those conditions created a slower pace of life, a premium value placed on time spent outdoors, and an interest in local ecosystems. This presented an opportunity for some writer's house museums and gardens. Like Beatrix Potter, Gilbert White is known primarily for writing about nature:

We realized a few months into the pandemic that the way of life that everybody was leading in those spring/summer months of peak lockdown was

very close to Gilbert White's life. The very local walks, the engaging with the natural world and the getting stuck into gardening was very Gilbert White-esque. And so we did try and start the hashtag 'Be More Gilbert' and really try and promote the benefits of people going out and going for walks in their local area and really noticing the natural world around them, which was really beneficial.

(Gilbert White's House interview)

Again, it is worth noting the overlap between the digital turn and the outdoors turn here.

In some cases, outdoor spaces became a vital part of literary museums' education programmes, because school groups were more willing to visit outdoor spaces than indoor museums. At Jarrow Hall, it was felt that in-person educational sessions offered a far more positive experience than online digital educational sessions:

Having outdoor space available, it meant that teachers were feeling a bit more confident about using that space in terms of coming to the actual museum. But prior to that [...] we had to adapt those sessions and [...] they had to go online [...] So it was quite a pleasant surprise – but it was definitely a surprise – that school groups were like, 'No, we'd like to come back out'. And I think that was probably reflective of us having outdoor space and the fact that they just wanted to bring the kids somewhere nice after everything that had went on.

(Jarrow Hall interview)

Similarly, Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust observed that outdoor spaces helped them continue the educational aspect of their work safely, at a time when indoor educational sessions would have been problematic, and potentially even illegal in some parts of the UK:

We took Mary Arden's Farm, which we weren't able to reopen to the general public, and turned that into a hub for all of our primary learning activity – made it a Covid-safe space. Schools could come in their bubbles and have exclusive access to the site, and the feedback from that was really, really positive.

(Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust interview)

This educational dimension suggests that using the outdoors in literary heritage can deliver a more rounded, more immersive, more authentic visit than is possible inside the walls of the museum itself. Thus, the potential of the outdoors extends to more than giving a literary enhancement to its well-being, nature, and exercise dimensions.

A further dimension in which the outdoors proved its usefulness to literary heritage was with community engagement. The interviewee from Milton's Cottage spoke for many organizations in saying:

I do think the whole issue around green spaces during Covid has highlighted their value to society. [...] From an environmental point of view and from a community-based point of view, there's a lot I think we could be doing with it, and I think that this has now been an opportunity for us to talk in more concrete terms about what the future [...] could be.

(Milton's Cottage interview)

A similar point was made by an interviewee from Abbotsford:

We have a free access wider Estate – so woodland walks and things – and [...] so the whole local community pivoted to look on us as their green space. And the challenge now and as we go forward is capturing that interest [...]. And I think a lot of people discovered Abbotsford that didn't know – even neighbours here – that didn't know how beautiful the Estate was, or they didn't know how you can access it at least from the outside. So, yeah, I think we've captured a new and maybe different audience during that time.

(Abbotsford interview)

Perhaps the most striking example of its kind – in which literary heritage, outdoor space, well-being, and community engagement all came together – was recounted by the interviewee from Strawberry Hill House:

We had a few community programmes where we do quite a lot of work with some vulnerable adults with either learning difficulties or people living with dementia. They have [...] a community garden, where they come [...]. And again, not wishing to overstate it, but that connection and that programme is a very important part in these people's lives. [...] So I think it made us perhaps as an organization more aware of that and, hopefully, a little bit more empathetic in terms of the importance with which Strawberry Hill House is part of their well-being. [...] So we did, throughout lockdown, open our grounds and garden [...]. And it was used a lot by local people who could take a bit of exercise. Strawberry Hill grounds was a little bit of a haven in amongst all the madness and it was hugely valued by the local community. We had a lot of feedback and [...] it's something that we've consciously, sort of, factored into our thinking going forward.

(Strawberry Hill House interview)

The importance of community engagement, and the challenges and opportunities that came with it, will be discussed more fully in the next section.

Projects and initiatives where literature and culture intersect with nature and the environment, with exercise and fitness, and with well-being and mental health, may well have the potential to secure a brighter future for literary heritage organizations in the post-pandemic world. After all, no digital intervention managed to rival the 400% surge in footfall that was recorded in the grounds of Abbotsford. Moreover, the outdoors is a site where different agendas and objectives can intersect in the simplest of activities. As one interviewee put it: ‘quite apart from the physical exercise there’s cultural elements of it as well’ (Robert Burns Birthplace interview). Thus, there are encouraging prospects for literary heritage organizations in harnessing the power of the outdoors:

People were turning to green spaces much more, and so much of the literary canon here in the UK is inextricably bound up with that. Burns is a classic example but I’m thinking of anybody within the broader of confines the Romantic movement and we do have a lot of lit[erary] houses associated with them. So as people go out and about and engage in that way, will they think of engaging with the literature that’s attached to it? I like to think that they might and I hope so – I genuinely hope so.

(Robert Burns Birthplace interview).

Interestingly, we also found evidence to suggest that the turn towards nature and the outdoors might well have predated the onset of Covid-19: a number of organizations, from the smallest (the Elmet Trust) to the biggest (Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust) began work on ambitious outdoors-themed projects in 2019, which fortuitously came to fruition the following year, when demand for locally based outdoors activities hit an all-time peak.

These pre-Covid projects may have been a response to the 2019 publication of *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: a how-to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners*,<sup>16</sup> and perhaps to the AHRC-funded ‘Museums for Climate Action’ project, which ran in the build-up to the COP26 United Nations conference on climate change, and launched at about the same time.<sup>17</sup> The observations and recommendations of *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals* would prove to be, at least in some respects, a prescient blueprint for the response to Covid-19.

For example, its suggestion that ‘Museums preserve cultural and natural heritage’ (p. 32) was being acted on before the pandemic, but nevertheless, as this section has foregrounded, the pandemic prompted literary heritage sites to do just that. It further recommended that museums should ‘support sustainable tourism’ and ‘enable cultural participation for all’ (p. 42). Literary heritage sites achieved the former by shifting away from tourism based on long-distance travel, and by engaging visitors online instead; they achieved the latter (as we will see in the next section) by reaching out to local communities, and by developing new forms of outreach and collaboration. These

developments take us beyond the simple pleasures of gardening or walking in nature, pointing to some of the biggest issues confronting our world and our society. But, through writers' connections with the natural world, literary heritage sites are better placed than most cultural organizations to highlight the linkage between the bigger picture set out in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the simple and microcosmic importance of nature in our everyday lives.

Finally, a cautionary tale about the power of nature. Throughout the lockdowns, there were news stories about wildlife reclaiming manmade spaces now emptied of their human presence. One literary heritage site recalled the following incident, which shows that nature is not always a welcome break from the everyday grind:

At Hardy's Cottage the chimney is lit almost every day with a fire. The moment it wasn't all the jackdaws started coming down the chimney and caused absolute chaos within the cottage. They broke things, it was terrible, and it was almost immediately that nature took over, you know, the moment the fire wasn't lit for two days, that was it, they were in.

(Hardy's Cottage interview)

### **5.3 Community Engagement**

When asked what were the most important lessons learned as a result of the pandemic, one interviewee responded: 'The importance of our local community' (Gilbert White's House interview). Similar assessments were common. In response to the same question, another respondent said: 'we had to learn a lot more about our different forms of audiences and think about how we engaged with them' (Jarrow Hall interview) – and local audiences featured most prominently in their ensuing thinking. Asked if any of these lessons might be transferable to future closures (e.g. refurbishment or restoration-related), another interviewee replied 'that would be the biggest thing, to keep engaged with people' (Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview). At the same time, the restrictions associated with the pandemic meant this was far from easy: when asked about the biggest challenges faced during this period, one interviewee stated: 'another challenge was meeting our community responsibilities' (Wordsworth Grasmere interview) – a challenge that was clearly seen as positively essential to the museum's work during this time of difficulty.

Community engagement work has often posed particular challenges at literary heritage sites. We have already seen the interviewee from Wordsworth Grasmere mentioning a perceived gulf between 'academic strange types here [in the museum], and the rest of the village'; similarly, another interviewee mentioned 'this notion of being very highbrow and very dusty and a bit academic, that's something that we're constantly having to deal with, locally as

well' (Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview). One newspaper article from a few years before the pandemic quoted the unsympathetic chairman of the local parish council referring to those in charge of the Brontë Parsonage museum in Haworth as 'the snobs on top of the hill'.<sup>18</sup>

One of the reasons why literary heritage sites might struggle with community engagement is that, unlike other museums, engaging with a writer's house museum in any kind of depth would typically require reading the writer's works. This may well create a barrier to participation, and a perception of elitism. Though it is seldom anything more than a perception, it remains an obstacle that other museums do not face. The popularity of 'lockdown reading' may have helped remove this obstacle, or at least downsized it.

Another reason, suggested by Laing and Frost, could be that literary heritage sites are visited more by long-distance and international travellers, especially in comparison with other museums.<sup>19</sup> For instance, at Shakespeare's Birthplace, '40% of our customers come from overseas and they were gone overnight' (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview). Extrapolating from this, comparatively fewer visitors come from the local community, which might create an impression of literary heritage as a space apart. As an interviewee from Hardy's Cottage put it

I feel like I've seen more local people since COVID. Before, you wouldn't. Everyone you spoke to, they're on holiday, they've come from wherever, Kent or Birmingham. But now I'm having a lot more, 'Oh, we live in Dorchester, we've never been'. I think people are starting to really find roots in their local heritage more and feel proud of that.

(Hardy's Cottage interview)

Indeed, one of the reasons why this study was undertaken was because we feared that Covid-related travel restrictions might have had a ruinous impact on the UK's literary heritage sites. However, what we found mostly suggested the very opposite.<sup>20</sup>

Only 25% of the organizations we interviewed commented on the absence of international tourists. All of them saw it in a positive light: we heard time and time again that Covid had provided a unique opportunity to work with local communities and to develop local audiences. Fifty percent of organizations identified this opportunity as one of the most important 'silver linings' of the Covid pandemic. The following observations were fairly typical, and summarize much of the qualitative data on this point:

On community engagement, we actually had time to work with communities that we hadn't perhaps. And particularly, I think for us, we had a slight anomaly in that we have visitors coming from all over the world and we don't really deal that well with visitors on our doorstep. And so actually the pandemic was an opportunity for us to just really focus on people who live

in the village, people who live in the surrounding villages and also to talk to people that don't visit us [...]. We never have time to, because we're always focusing on the visitors who are visiting. So actually it was an opportunity to have conversations with community groups and people who don't visit, to talk about what might make it a bit more welcoming and a more welcoming experience. So I think we did a lot of quieter projects that, for us, I think have been much needed, much neglected and now it was an opportunity to catch up on some of that work. So I do feel quite happy.

We're doing a project at the moment with local refugee and community groups exploring the idea of Paradise as part of the 350th celebration of *Paradise Regained*. So pre-pandemic it was, we were talking to the British Library and the Bodleian and Christ's College, Cambridge to do a multi-partner collaboration, and actually it ended up being something really different and I think [...] it was an opportunity to work in a slightly different way that's been really useful. [...] I think we just need to be clear there's a lot more to be done and it's not like something that you do and now we're back to normal and we shelve that community engagement work. [...] We don't want to undo the work that we've done during the pandemic to work with much more local residents. We also want to make sure that the digital events help us keep in touch with overseas visitors.

(Milton's Cottage interview)

There are clear benefits to working with local communities: they can improve diversity and inclusiveness (inasmuch as overseas visitors tend to be older, more affluent, and typically white). They are good for environmental sustainability, too. Furthermore, they are likelier to yield ongoing, deeper, more invested engagement, including return visits. The two interviewees from Shakespeare's Birthplace trust concurred on the importance of this:

*First interviewee:* There's been a shift, I think, to very much focus on a regional audience whereas before we always had this tension between tourists versus locals and repeat visits which we weren't very good at. We didn't get many. And actually trying to realign that relationship with our audience is what the future holds, I think, for us.

*Second interviewee:* [...] I think that last point's really vital. And, again, it goes back to that unsustainable model previously of tourists coming round [...] in huge numbers, ticking it off a list and not coming back again. We need to build relationships with our audiences – whether they're people that visit on site or people that look at our website – that aren't transactional, that are ongoing, [so] people see us an organization that they want to come back to and chat to and look at our content. (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview)

Three other organizations agreed that community engagement yielded more return visits; most agreed that community audiences were qualitatively different from long-distance literary tourists undertaking a pilgrimage, and that the Covid pandemic had helped them appreciate this difference more clearly. As one interviewee remarked: ‘It gave us the time to get to know [...] our audience better’ (Elizabeth Gaskell’s House interview).

We have already seen how digital projects and outdoor spaces facilitated certain forms of community engagement and co-production. However, several literary heritage sites went much further than this. Of all the stories to have emerged from the interviews during the course of this project, the most inspiring ones came from this aspect of the literary heritage sector’s response to Covid-19. Here are some examples.

2020 was to have seen the celebration of Gilbert White’s tercentenary. He lived in the isolated village of Selborne in rural southern England. This village is so small that it has only one shop, whose owners were both elderly. Classed as medically vulnerable, they had no choice but to close their business before the pandemic began, in order to shield themselves from Covid-19. This left the village with nowhere to buy essential supplies. So Gilbert White’s House stepped in to fill the gap:

We are fairly remote – our next biggest town is about five miles away – so as a, sort of, act of kindness to the village we agreed to sell milk, bread, eggs, that sort of thing, from our café, and sell newspapers from the café. Which we did gladly, although it was very much seen as a temporary thing while there’s no one in the village shop, and then when the village shop reopened we’d go back to not selling papers and eggs and stuff like that. But it really was our saving grace, because it meant that when the peak pandemic hit the café was able to stay open as an essential business. And we essentially moved all the tables and chairs out of the café and into storage, and went full-on shop. So we sold everything: vegetables, takeaway meals, microwave meals, chocolate, you name it we sold it. And we also delivered for those who were isolating and things like that. And there was a challenge in getting that staffed [...] Some people weren’t happy to work through the pandemic – they would rather be furloughed – so there was a bit of a staffing thing. But the village really pulled through with providing volunteers and things like that to help us run the service that we were running.

(Gilbert White’s House interview)

That a writer’s house museum found itself officially designated as an ‘essential business’ – authorized to remain open for trading even in the most stringent of lockdown regimes, because it provided a vital service to the local community – is perhaps the most remarkable, unexpected, and uplifting aspect of any of the accounts we heard of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a literary heritage site. The interviewee from Gilbert White’s House observed that ‘because we’re

in the middle of a tiny village we've always been fairly community-focused' but added that this had been transformatively positive in their relationship with the local public, and that it was something to build upon as the pandemic receded: 'I really hope we don't lose that community hub feel' (Gilbert White's House interview). It certainly seems likely that running the village shop – and later an outdoor café in their grounds – would have won them more local supporters than the events they had planned for White's 300th birthday.

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney HomePlace is also in a very rural setting, where there are few restaurants or pubs offering delivered meals. So the manager of their café decided to keep it open and run it as a delivery service, supplying cooked food and picnic boxes to their local community. This turned out to be a new and effective form of public engagement

people think of poetry and they may well think of their English exam classes at school and having poems forced upon them in unimaginative ways. The café doing a delivery service enabled us to reach new audiences [...] The guy that runs the café, he's a very personable bloke and was arriving with his box of treats and people were glad to see him at the door and [...] that allowed us to get a presence within the community.

(Seamus Heaney HomePlace interview)

Elsewhere, the catering aspect became a critical challenge, because of the cultural importance of food, drink, and dining in commemorating the legacy of Robert Burns:

Myself and [...] our Events Manager, we felt, 'What are we going to do if we don't get to do Burns Suppers and things like that?' That's a hugely important thing in the Burns world and Covid struck right at the heart of it because fraternalism, communal eating and – it's the most Burnsian of notions, I can't emphasize this enough – handshaking is part of his most well-known work. Auld Lang Syne – linking of hands [...]: 'And there's a hand my trusty fiere, And gie's a hand o thine' and stuff like that. So there was that whole aspect that was missing and we thought, 'Well how can we replicate the Burns Supper in a safe, Covid-friendly way?' So we actually waited until – we decided to have a supper in summer [...]. Originally, the first ever Burns Supper actually took place on July 21st 1801, which was actually the anniversary of his death. And in subsequent years they thought, 'Well that's a tad morose', so they shifted it to his birthday. So we thought, 'Well it's actually 200 years to the day if we do that this year in 2021'. So we had a supper outside in a marquee.

(Robert Burns Birthplace interview)

Here, a clear connection with literary heritage helped restore a sense of conviviality and community that had been sorely missed for a long time owing to the lockdowns.

As with the developments of digital and outdoors activities, the extent to which the importance of community engagement is something new is debatable, and will obviously vary from organization to organization. For example: Jarrow Hall reported developing some craft projects and exhibitions in co-production with the local community, asking the public for ideas, suggestions, and input, as well as involving them in crafting; Strawberry Hill House, on the premise that Horace Walpole was a prolific letter writer, put together a ‘Write To Horace’ exhibition, in which the public were invited to write about their own experiences, generally of the pandemic. Commendable initiatives such as these had existed before the emergence of Covid-19: in 2019, the International Committee of Literary and Composers Museums published a series of papers exploring how literary museums around the world serve as ‘cultural hubs’ for the community.<sup>21</sup> However, it is clear that this role took on a vaster and more fundamental importance during, and as a direct result of, the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Notes

- 1 The literature on this topic is too expansive to summarize in any detail. Strictly speaking, the shift to online patterns of cultural consumption and engagement could include straightforward things like the increase in subscriptions to streaming services such as Netflix, or sharing photos and videos of life under lockdown via Twitter or Instagram – in short, things not that qualitatively different from online cultural consumption pre-and post-pandemic. It would also include, more pertinently, creative ways of using technology to engage or consume culture that is normally experienced in person, though even this too is a capacious category, including live-streamed theatrical performances and concerts as well as online curator’s talks or virtual tours. As regards the museums and heritage sectors, some of the discussions we have found to be thought-provoking would include Tula Giannini and Jonathan P. Bowen, ‘Museums and digital culture: From reality to digitality in the age of COVID-19’, *Heritage* 5, no. 1 (2022): 192–214; Zoe-Charis Belenioti, ‘COVID-19 resilience via digital cultural heritage: Digital life in museums and festivals during the anthropause’, *International Journal of Technology Marketing* 16, no. 4 (2022): 403–420; Manal Ginzarly and F. Jordan Srour, ‘Cultural heritage through the lens of COVID-19’, *Poetics* 92, Part A (2022): n.p.
- 2 Watson, *The Literary Tourist*, 5.
- 3 See Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Macmillan, 1976), 43–45.
- 4 Interview with Milton’s Cottage, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 16 November 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Milton’s Cottage interview’.
- 5 For a wide-ranging discussion of the concept of shared reading and the social practices it involves, see Danielle Fuller and Denel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (Routledge, 2013).
- 6 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2006). Our analysis refers in particular to Smith’s discussion of intangibility on p. 307.
- 7 Interview with the Elmet Trust, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 17 August 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Elmet Trust interview’.
- 8 Interview with Dylan Thomas Birthplace, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 3 December 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Dylan Thomas Birthplace interview’.

- 9 Interview with Robert Burns Birthplace Museum (NTS), by David Rudrum, digital recording, 5 November 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Robert Burns Birthplace interview’.
- 10 Interview with Thomas Hardy’s Cottage (NT), by David Rudrum, digital recording, 11 October 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Hardy’s Cottage interview’.
- 11 Kate Marsh, *Writers and Their Houses* (Hamish Hamilton, 1993), xi, xv.
- 12 Interview with Jarrow Hall (formerly Bede’s World), by David Rudrum, digital recording, 17 November 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Jarrow Hall interview’.
- 13 Available at: <https://discoveringtedhughesyorkshire.co.uk/>.
- 14 See <https://seamusheaneyhome.com/open-ground/>.
- 15 Interview with Shandy Hall, by David Rudrum, digital recording, 29 September 2021. Hereafter referenced as ‘Shandy Hall interview’.
- 16 Henry A. McGhie, *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: A How-to Guide for Museums, Galleries, the Cultural Sector and Their Partners* (Curating Tomorrow, 2019). Available at [www.curatingtomorrow.co.uk](http://www.curatingtomorrow.co.uk)
- 17 See <https://www.museumsforclimateaction.org/>.
- 18 Alison Flood, ‘Bonnie Greer resigns from floundering Brontë Society after months of infighting’, *Guardian*, 9 June, 2015.
- 19 See Laing and Frost, *Books and Travel*.
- 20 Among the 16 organizations we spoke to, only two reported a notably different pattern. One exception was Dylan Thomas Birthplace: the interviewee concurred that ‘the people that come are generally people who are [from far away] and you don’t get that many people locally. I think it’s [...] that you don’t go and visit your local castle or stately home. [...] And very often we’ll get people who will come bringing visitors with them and say, “Oh I’ve never been, I didn’t even know this was here”.’ Thus, the interviewee felt that travel restrictions had indeed been damaging: ‘So I suppose that was the real thing that happened was that people didn’t travel so then [...] you didn’t get the people turning up’. However, the interviewee from Strawberry Hill described the very opposite situation, in which restrictions on long-distance tourism did not present a problem because the museum had not attracted long-distance visitors in the first place: ‘We were reasonably lucky in as much as we’re not geared up as an international tourist destination so it’s not as if historically the house has relied on international tourism’ (Strawberry Hill House interview).
- 21 International Committee of Literary and Composers Museums, *Literary and Composers Museums as Cultural Hubs: Proceedings of the ICLCM Annual Conference* (ICOM, 2019).



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## 6 Facing the Future

We have already seen that several of the strategies that evolved in response to the Covid-19 pandemic will probably have a role to play in shaping the longer-term future of literary heritage sites in the UK: from lowering visitor capacities to engaging local communities, from outdoor activities to digital outreach, and so on. However, the pandemic resulted in some less tangible changes for the better.

Our interviews with professionals working in literary heritage asked them to evaluate their organization's overall success in dealing with the pandemic, and (an important distinction) their overall satisfaction with how their organization had dealt with the pandemic. Specific questions were also posed about lessons learned from the pandemic, and about future plans in moving on from it. This produced a range of responses that were not as material or measurable as those listed above, but are worth enumerating nonetheless.

One widely reported experience, mentioned by five of the sixteen organizations interviewed, was that the long periods of enforced closure had provided them with one of the most precious commodities of all: time. This presented the opportunity 'to look and reflect on things' (Dylan Thomas Birthplace interview), as well as 'time for research' (Jarrow Hall interview), 'time to focus' (Jane Austen's House interview), and 'time to plan and properly think about what you want the future to be' (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview). These were among the unexpected positives that came from these difficult circumstances.

Besides this, the key lessons – intangible yet important – that were learnt during the Covid-19 pandemic are set out in this section.

### 6.1 From Communication to Collaboration

Interviewees from several organizations observed that the pandemic had made them aware of the importance of communication as never before. The interviewee from Jane Austen's House went so far as to say that: 'communication was also absolutely vital; we talked all the time. [...] Yes, communication is the most important thing – and knowing when the communication goes wrong,

which it does' (Jane Austen's House interview). Similarly, at Shakespeare's Birthplace, one of the key lessons of the pandemic was 'around really thinking about our information flow, our ways of communicating' (Shakespeare's Birthplace interview).

Other organizations shared the view that communication was paramount:

I suppose it made us much more aware of how we communicate, [...] we have kept contact with the volunteers and staff and that has been good. [...] The key things have been being able to maintain or keep in contact with particularly the volunteers and our local audience.

(Strawberry Hill House interview)

In connection with these remarks, the interviewee added: 'there's more of a trust and appetite for working collaboratively'. It seems likely that enhanced communication had the further advantage of helping to facilitate newer, more collaborative ways of working.

That was certainly the experience at Abbotsford. One of the interviewees shared the view that 'we've certainly improved our communications with everyone', adding that 'the biggest change is how staff interact and how we work', which suggests that improved communication leads to different working practices. The other interviewee concurred: 'I don't think our management team have ever worked so well and so collaboratively together', adding that the Covid-19 pandemic had been 'a strange force in pushing us to develop ideas [...] So it – in a strange way – has also proved to be quite an interesting catalyst' (Abbotsford interview). Furthermore, the interviewees added that working under these conditions had made the organization much more creative.

The link between communication and more creative ways of working was also made by the interviewee from Jane Austen's House. When asked what were the most important lessons learnt from the pandemic, the response was: 'Communication. And being really open to new ideas: "Shall we do this? Yes, let's do it, let's try it, let's see what happens". [It] was brilliant, that level of talking'. (Jane Austen's House interview).

## 6.2 Flexibility, Versatility, Adaptability

In most workplaces, the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated changes in working conditions and practices that inevitably led to changes in institutional cultures. The importance of a flexible, versatile, adaptable organization became very clear very quickly. Literary heritage sites were no exception to this. Thus, the interviewee from Jane Austen's House felt that the most important lesson learnt from the pandemic was: 'Be really flexible' (Jane Austen's House interview). Similarly, at Strawberry Hill House, it was: 'flexibility and common sense', and 'that whilst planning is important one needs to have a degree of flexibility about

how you approach life' (Strawberry Hill House interview). In response to the same question, the interviewee from Gilbert White's House was 'just proud of our versatility and how we've adapted and changed things and then changed things again when the rules changed' (Gilbert White's House interview).

Many interviewees described a fundamental change in their organization's outlook. This, for example, was the key lesson learnt at Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust:

I think what we've learned is we can actually be a very dynamic and fast-moving organization. We just need to do it. Whereas I think before it would be, 'Oh well, we can't – we've got to think that through a bit more'. It's shown what we can achieve relative to cost and relatively quickly, which is perhaps a bit of an eye-opener for the organization.

(Shakespeare's Birthplace interview)

Similarly, at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, the key lesson was:

That we can always find a solution to something. There's something that happens and you think, 'God, how do we deal with that?' And I think, between us, we can work through a solution that's practical and can suit what we need to do. So I think it's being agile, having the confidence to make that decision and to know that we can do whatever we need to do.

(Robert Burns Birthplace interview)

Other literary heritage sites reported a comparably transformative, if salutary, change to their institutional culture.

There were few exceptions. Though the interviewee from Gilbert White's House praised the museum's versatility and ability to adapt, they added: 'because we're a tiny team we're quite used to thinking on our feet and being quite flexible' (Gilbert White's House interview) – so flexibility and versatility were certainly important but perhaps not transformative. Another writer's house museum with a very small staff – Strawberry Hill House – attached great importance to flexibility but seemed to regard this more as axiomatic than as a discovery brought about by the pandemic:

You have to accept that the likelihood is that things will change and you've then got to be adaptable and see the opportunities and all the rest of it. So I think in that respect it's a lesson for us all that we mustn't lose that ability to respond to situations as and when they occur, and not beat yourself up about it, frankly.

(Strawberry Hill House interview)

Interestingly, Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust and the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum are the two most-visited sites we spoke with; Strawberry Hill House

and Gilbert White's House were among the less-visited sites. It is possible that smaller organizations were more versatile and were, of necessity, used to thinking and working more flexibly.

As was the case with communication, some organizations reported that the more flexible and versatile institutional outlook forced upon them by the Covid-19 pandemic had made them more creative. An interviewee from Abbotsford opined that 'we're definitely more inventive when it comes to how can we deliver something', and praised:

the imagination with which we've tackled some of these big issues. I think we are fleetier of foot, we're thinking in a more dynamic way about how to fix some of our issues than ever before and that's all really, really good. [...] This experience, for all its miseries, has been so, so useful in finding more robust and adaptable ways to manage the site.

(Abbotsford interview)

More specifically, the interviewee from Jane Austen's House mentioned that 'it has allowed us to experiment and innovate, particularly in digital areas' (Jane Austen's House interview). All told, most interviewees reported positive changes of some kind in institutional culture that were directly attributable to their responses to the pandemic.

Admittedly, much of this could be said for almost any organization in almost any sector of the economy, society, or the community. So could one of the most widely reported ways in which this adaptability expressed itself – namely, the versatility with which museum professionals up-skilled themselves and their museums in digital terms. Nevertheless, there were tangible ways in which the importance of flexibility, versatility, and adaptability manifested themselves that were perhaps more specific to the running of literary heritage sites.

Interviewees at Thomas Hardy's Cottage reported that responding to the pandemic 'pulled everyone together'. As one of the interviewees put it:

We're just such a strong, tight-knit team, and I think it was just teamwork and we just all came together. We helped out in every area that wasn't necessarily our own. So we had welcome assistants who'd normally just work on a welcome desk welcoming visitors in – they were doing conservative cleaning, they were doing gardening. Everyone was doing everything to get the places ready [...] People didn't just say, 'Well, this is my silo, I don't do anything to do with that'. Everyone just came together. It was really very brilliant.

(Hardy's Cottage interview)

Another interviewee from the same organization concurred, adding that:

it then has left us six months down the line with a much more flexible team [...] Because if someone's finding that their work has got a bit quieter in

another area of the team, they now have got the skills to be able to come and help [other colleagues].

(Hardy's Cottage interview)

Interviewees from the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum described a similar transformation in the versatility of the organization:

What it's forced us to do is to re-examine how we address the day-to-day functioning of the site and [...] I think in some ways it's actually served to integrate us more as a workforce, because I absolutely understand now what my junior colleagues out front have to face on a daily basis; especially if there's suddenly three buses come in and it's all hands to the pump. [...] And I think it's actually made us a stronger team as a consequence.

(Robert Burns Birthplace interview)

Those in managerial positions diversified their skills to take on front-line duties, both in front-of-house and back-of-house roles:

I'm happy to say I can now work a till and a dishwasher [laughs] [...]. And I think actually I look back on it and I'm quite proud of us as a team – the way that we managed to adapt and do things and now it's second nature. If I'm walking through the foyer and it's busy, I jump on a till, start serving customers and doing those things, [...] these very pragmatic things. So in some ways it's kind of refashioned us. [...] It's actually bred a bit of resilience into us which we didn't have before. [...] What's come out of it has been beneficial in terms of the resilience of the staff and our greater – our enhanced ability – to do more than we could do previously. We have a tougher, more multi-skilled workforce here now. It really is.

(Robert Burns Birthplace interview)

Another interviewee from the same museum agreed that because the team 'just mucked in and got on with it', the organization was in a much stronger position than before the pandemic, because:

everybody can pretty much do almost everything in the property. So yesterday we had a situation with a power cut. I was tied up on a course and [...] other colleagues [...] basically were able to get the teams organized, get all the tills cashed up, manage all the visitors, get the place closed down safely. Whereas pre-Covid, they wouldn't have done that.

(Robert Burns Birthplace interview)

The effects of this newfound versatility and resilience were so deep-seated that one interviewee from this museum went so far as to say 'we've been reborn – we're stronger'.

Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic occasioned deep-seated changes in institutional cultures that were salutary, albeit challenging to undergo. Interviewees from many literary heritage sites reported a more positive, upbeat outlook as they emerged from the pandemic than had existed before it. For example, an interviewee from Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust observed: 'Probably the single biggest thing post-Covid is that I think we're much more ambitious as an organization', while an interviewee from Abbotsford felt that the biggest lesson of the pandemic was: 'Never say no [...] I think that is the take away for me – that there is no such thing as a no. It will happen'.

## 7 Conclusions

There can be little doubt that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the UK's many literary heritage sites was nothing short of seismic. Visitor numbers evaporated; finances were plunged into turmoil; jobs and livelihoods were lost to redundancies; the mental health of professionals working in this field plummeted. However, there was some evidence to suggest that the impact of the pandemic in terms of finances and job losses was experienced less drastically at museums with medium-sized visitor numbers. Perhaps as a reaction to this trend, several larger organizations, such as the National Trust and Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust, began to question their pursuit of ever greater visitor numbers, and the authors concur that writer's house museums would do well to reflect on what an optimum level of visitor numbers might be.

The loss of income across the organizations surveyed was such that the survival of many organizations can only be attributed to emergency funding, principally in the form of grants and loans from central or devolved governments, with the furlough scheme and museum-led fundraising initiatives also playing an important part. It is noteworthy that, in the first tranche of the government's emergency funding scheme for cultural organizations, the only museums that received more funding than Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust were national museums. The authors hope there is a reassuring message about the importance with which the UK's literary heritage is regarded in this fact.

Modifications and adaptations to the sites themselves, together with enforced re-interpretation and, in particular, the absence of the personal touches provided by guides and room stewards, often had a detrimental effect on the visitor experience of these spaces. Meanwhile, the rise of the virtual tour – though welcomed by most of the organizations we spoke to – could be seen to present both an opportunity and a challenge to the traditional way in which literary heritage sites are visited and experienced. Though there is the potential that the conventional in-person visit, with its emphasis on the power and uniqueness of place, might in future be undercut by the ease and accessibility of the virtual tour, most of the professionals we spoke to felt that, if anything, the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic had underscored and reinforced the value of visiting these sites in the flesh: one commented

‘I really do think the key thing for visitors is coming to the real place’ (Hill Top interview), while another said:

From my perspective, it was [...] a reminder that the spirit of the place – and just being in the place – how important that is, and actually the bells and whistles and everything don’t necessarily matter. I think the places can speak for themselves in lots of ways and we shouldn’t underestimate that for our audiences. I think that was a big reminder actually for me.

(Hardy’s Cottage interview)

Again, it is to be hoped that a reassuring message about the ongoing power and importance of literary heritage sites can be derived from this.

The pandemic necessitated several new ways of working. The most obvious of these was the ‘digital turn’. Virtual tours, online events, and, to an extent, digital education all proved so useful in terms of engaging with international or long-distance audiences that they are likely to remain part of the offer in most literary heritage sites and museums as they go forward. However, the extent to which this ‘digital turn’ was successful is debatable: it did not yield substantial financial returns, nor did it even seem to generate a clear increase in website visits.

Whereas digital forms of engagement were often seen as extending the outreach of these museums to overseas audiences, the pandemic also brought about a renewed focus on public engagement with local communities. This resulted in some remarkable success stories, and it is to be hoped that the attention paid to community work will also remain a key part of the work of literary museums for the foreseeable future, since local people who are invested in these sites will be better placed to safeguard their future than the one-off long-distance visitors who, prior to the pandemic, were the primary audience for many of these museums.

Of all the innovations brought about by the pandemic, those involving outdoor spaces such as gardens, grounds, and landscapes seem to have been the most popular. Though reliable numbers are hard to come by, literary heritage sites from Abbotsford to Shandy Hall recorded impressive numbers of visitors to their outdoor spaces. Outdoors- and nature-themed activities, in which the well-being powers of literature, nature, and gentle exercise are aligned and combined, amount to a promising new development in the field of literary heritage, with considerable potential to contribute to its future popularity in the years to come.

It should be noted that the lines between digital activities, community engagement, and outdoors activities, are by no means easy to draw: there was often a digital dimension to many outdoors projects, just as community participation might take place in an outdoors setting, and/or be facilitated by digital means. The authors fully expect that synergistic projects that combine these three approaches will become more common and more popular in literary heritage sites and museums.

In addition, it is to be hoped that the working conditions enforced upon museum professionals working with literary heritage will leave a lasting legacy of enhanced communication, creativity, and collaboration, as well as a certain flexibility, adaptability, versatility, and resilience across the workforce.

In terms of simpler, more concrete legacies, many of the organizations we spoke to felt that the pandemic's lockdowns had made them better equipped to deal with closure. After all, several of these museums have always shut down each year for periods of seasonal closure, and a number of them reflected that, thanks to trying to run a museum under lockdown conditions, they now understood better how to keep the museum active and engaged even while its doors are closed to the public. What was true of routine annual closures was also true of emergency closures: the roof of Jane Austen's House needed to be completely replaced, and the interviewee was confident that, should the museum have to close during the refurbishment, the digitally based activities they had pioneered during the Covid-19 pandemic could keep it going during a short-term closure. At Thomas Hardy's cottage, the checklist developed for closing down the house in the event of yet another lockdown was soon put to use during a storm, when high winds meant the building could not open to the public. And indeed, one of the museum directors we spoke to reflected that one of the most important lessons they had learnt during the pandemic was that 'it's OK to be closed'. Others disputed this view, however: 'being in a museum while it was empty [...] just feels so wrong. If you're not here to welcome the public really what are you there for?' That was the view of the interviewee from Milton's Cottage. Perhaps it is one of the ironies of this project that Milton fled to this cottage – the only one of his homes that still stands – to escape a deadly epidemic: the Great Plague of London.

In closing: this study has sought to identify some of the immediate and shorter-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on literary heritage sites in the UK. But the medium- to longer-term picture is just as important, if not more so. Whether visitor numbers reach a stable and sustainable equilibrium, whether financial recovery can be realized, and whether the many excellent kinds of initiatives and projects we have discussed herein can inspire audiences, deliver a valued visitor experience, and protect the future of the UK's literary heritage – these will remain unanswered questions for another three or four years. The authors hope that ongoing dialogue with professionals working in these museums, together with more research into how they are operating and with what success, will play a role of some kind in ensuring their survival.



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