



THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES

# Histories of Childhood

Uncovering New Heritage  
Narratives



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# Histories of Childhood: Uncovering New Heritage Narratives

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# Histories of Childhood: Uncovering New Heritage Narratives

## Summary

This report has been written to highlight how histories of childhood offer fresh perspectives on collections and properties now in the care of heritage organisations.

Over the last twenty years both heritage professionals and academics have developed expertise in researching, understanding and communicating histories of children's experiences. Yet there have been few spaces to reflect on or share these insights.

The report offers a range of tools to inspire and support others to develop this work. It is structured around six main approaches to examining children's lives as part of British history. Each section introduces the latest academic research into the history of childhood and combines this with detailed case studies of heritage sites that have pioneered these approaches to children's narratives.

Six insights for best practice emerge from the eleven case studies:

## Summary

### Recommendations

1) Children are essential to understanding the past. Children were at the heart of historic landscapes across Britain and their narratives need to be included in accurate accounts of past societies.

2) These histories are most powerful when told through the lives of real children. Individual stories invite people to engage with the complexity of the past, to listen to other people's experiences, and to challenge today's assumptions.

3) Weaving children's histories throughout heritage sites helps to reflect the ways that children themselves moved through and used these spaces.

4) Histories of childhood enable more diverse stories to be told. Youth made children relatively powerless in all societies,

but not all children were equally marginalised. As the wayward objects of adult efforts to mould the future, the lives of the young offer unique insights into power relations and intersectional inequalities.

5) Creative and collaborative work helps to uncover and communicate marginalised and diverse stories. But, it is essential to acknowledge how much we do not – and will never – know about children's lives in the past. This offers valuable scope to engage visitors in the practice and ethics of research and story-telling.

6) Histories of childhood help to make heritage relevant and appealing for young visitors. But, childhood is a shared experience. Vivid stories of children's lives speak to visitors of any age. By inspiring thought and engaging our emotions, histories of childhood connect us to a complex and memorable past.



## INTRODUCTION

**Histories of childhood enhance heritage sites and museums in many different ways. This toolkit is designed to help by providing information, examples, tips, and resources that will assist researchers and heritage professionals with researching and interpreting histories of childhood. It brings together the expertise of historians of childhood from the University of Oxford and that of heritage professionals around Britain who have generously shared their experiences in a series of case studies.**

### **What this toolkit offers**

Most discussions of childhood and heritage are about children as present-day visitors. This toolkit has a different focus. It asks how heritage organisations tell the stories of past children who inhabited the landscapes and engaged with the collections that organisations care for today.

The toolkit explores British history across almost 2000 years, ranging from castles to country houses and from forts to workhouses. Children were essential to the places we preserve and an accurate account

A survey of heritage professionals in 2023 revealed that 100% of respondents would find it useful or extremely useful to learn more about:

- displaying children's spaces.
- interpreting children's objects.
- listening to children's voices.
- recording childhood memories.
- telling diverse stories through histories of childhood.

of the past depends on including their diverse stories.

Demand from heritage professionals shapes the contents and format of this toolkit. We identified six main approaches to understanding children's lives in the past. These form the sections in the toolkit, each of which combines the latest academic research with detailed case studies of heritage sites that have pioneered these approaches to uncovering children's narratives.

Heritage professionals were asked to identify barriers that discouraged the use of collections and narratives relating to the history of childhood. The most common barriers were resources (identified by 71% of respondents) and lack of time (identified by 57%). These constraints on staff also shaped the toolkit; small and local heritage organisations were less likely to be able to contribute a case study. 43% of survey respondents felt that they lacked knowledge of the latest research while 29% felt they did not know enough about sources. Importantly, no respondents thought the history of childhood lacked appeal or that there was a shortage of potential material in their collections.

The toolkit has been written collaboratively by heritage professionals and researchers. Case studies are diverse in their time period, location, and scale, a feature that all surveyed heritage professionals considered to be important. Most heritage sites combine multiple approaches and could have featured in several sections. Tips, pitfalls, photographs, and recommendations for finding out more are provided to encourage others to develop this work further.

In the 2023 survey, 100% of respondents reported that they would find case studies of best practice useful. When asked what they would like the toolkit to include, respondents reported:

- "real examples of best practice"
- "I would really value something talking about 'how' to curate for children, with case studies"
- "one heritage narrative should be looking at 'how we tell stories'"
- "case studies of other successful childhood interpretation"

# Methodology

## What did we do as part of this project?

*In July 2022, the University of Oxford held a wide-ranging colloquium on 'Children and Heritage'. The call for papers prompted more than 70 submissions from around the world and the programme attracted over 160 attendees. This revealed the appetite for further collaboration between historians of childhood and heritage professionals.*

Participants' responses to the 'Children and Heritage' colloquium, July 2022:

"Considering Children & Heritage from wide range of viewpoints and perspectives made this valuable colloquium particularly thought-provoking."

"It was so helpful to bring both academics and heritage professionals together to provide different perspectives and practices."

"I found the Colloquium inspiring, interesting and informative."

"the greatest opportunity for sharing and learning about youth engagement in heritage education... it was such an enlightening moment."

Presentations given as part of the colloquium on 'Children and Heritage' can be watched online here:

<https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/children-0>

We also conducted a comprehensive literature review to establish key themes and absences within the existing scholarship on heritage and childhood. We searched multiple database (Google Scholar, the Bibliography of British and Irish History, Search Oxford Libraries Online, and Google), using terms including:



The colloquium and literature review revealed that, despite over 20 years of research and expertise, we have seldom reflected on the place of histories of childhood within heritage practice. To respond to this, we conducted a focus group and an online survey with heritage professionals to better understand the content and format that would make the toolkit useful.

All this research allowed us to identify historic sites that had pioneered the inclusion of histories of childhood. When inviting authors to write case studies, we sought to ensure that a range of approaches, time periods, locations, and organisations were represented in the toolkit.



# Literature Review



## What do we already know about the history of childhood and heritage?

Over the last 70 years, museums and historic sites across Britain have told two principal stories about the history of childhood.

The first narrative presents a positive and nostalgic vision of children's lives in the past. This story was pioneered in the 1950s by toy museums. These multiplied across Britain from the 1970s and contained collections of predominantly elite or modern commercial toy collections. When, in the 1980s, historic houses sought to appeal to families, many of these properties introduced an elite nursery, often using collections and a location that were not authentic to the property. Like toy museums, these country houses typically presented an idealised vision of generic childhoods centred on play.

This contrasts with a second negative and condemnatory narrative of poor childhoods in the past. As industries closed from the 1970s, industrial landscapes that had employed children began to be saved for the nation, followed by, from the 1990s, institutional buildings that had housed children.

Additionally, the cruel and monotonous Victorian school-room became common in museums, designed to appeal to school-groups and families, as well as to contrast to a progressive present. Interpretation of these sites typically presents the generic poor child as the victim of an industrial economy and moralising society, oppressed by adults who demanded their labour and regulated their lives.

Both of these narratives illuminate important aspects of modern childhood and have entertained generations of young visitors. Yet, they can also become simplistic and undemanding visions of the past. Stereotyped images not only leave the centuries before the 19th century unexamined, but also overlook the diversity and complexity of real children's lives.

Find out more:

Sharon Roberts, 'Minor concerns: representations of children and childhood in British museums', *Museum and Society*, 4/3 (2006), pp. 152-165.

Kate Darian-Smith and Carla Leahy Pascoe (eds), *Children, childhood and cultural heritage* (2013).



## The history of childhood

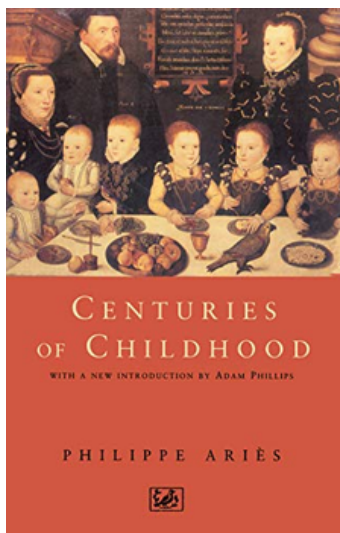
Across the last 65 years, academic research into the history of childhood in Britain has developed in parallel to heritage practice.

Coinciding with a wider growth in social history, scholars began to study the history of childhood in the 1960s and 1970s. This pioneering historical research had three main foundations.

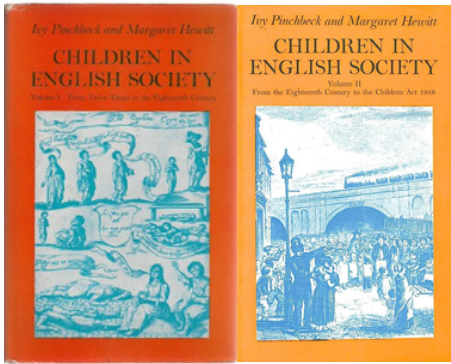
In his *Centuries of childhood: a social history of family life* (1960, translated 1962 and 2005), Philippe Ariès argued that childhood was unknown in medieval European societies where the iconography and roles of children

were indistinguishable from those of adults. By the 17th century, the child had become the focus of the elite family, an intensifying obsession that trickled down social hierarchies and made 19th century private life increasingly insular. Later research showed that Ariès' pessimistic narrative was often inaccurate and formed from flimsy evidence. His work did, however, pioneer a new way of thinking about childhood that approaches childhood as a cultural construct, which changes over time and that can effect – not merely reflect – wider social change.

In Britain, Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt's two-volume study *Children in English Society* (1969 and 1972) also offered an ambitious narrative that stretched over five centuries. Yet, in contrast to Ariès, they charted an optimistic story of progress towards increasing modern protection. This offered a very partial account of children's lives, but showed how children's experiences offer important insights into the changing economic conditions, policies and values of society.



# The history of childhood



In the 1970s, histories of childhood were further energised by movements to uncover marginalised voices, influenced by feminist and radical politics. In 1972 a workshop at Ruskin College Oxford examined ‘Childhood in history: Children’s liberation’ as part of a collaborative movement to capture and communicate ‘histories

Presentations as part of a conference on ‘Trajectories of Youth History’, organised by the Society for History of Childhood and Youth and the Children’s History Society in 2022, include reflections on the 1972 workshop by pioneering historian of childhood Anna Davin:

<https://www.histchild.org/articles/upcoming-trajectories-of-youth-history>

from below’. These researchers argued that histories of childhood offered a window into wider oppressive structures of power and of people’s agency to resist, even when young.

Over the last 20 years, the history of childhood has grown into a much larger and more diverse field, coinciding with the flourishing of heritage practice. Insights from the foundational studies continue to influence this scholarship, though in-depth research that charts the diversity of experience has tended to replace the early sweeping chronological narratives. Importantly, historians have drawn on a wider range of sources, including evidence that offers insights into the experiences, perspectives, and voices of young people themselves.

All of this research has revealed how conceptualisations of childhood and adulthood changed over time, but also how the boundaries of childhood were incoherent and unequal within societies, never solely defined through chronological age. The toolkit explores the lives of people who were aged less than 21 years old, but the case studies also reveal age to be a thought-provoking and contested category that illuminates the past.

Spaces, Objects, Voices,  
Memories, Contexts,  
Diversity



HOW CAN WE USE  
HISTORIES OF  
CHILDHOOD?



# DISPLAYING CHILDREN'S SPACES

*WHAT DO HERITAGE SPACES REVEAL (AND CONCEAL) ABOUT CHILDREN'S LIVES?*

We normally know about children's spaces when an elite adult assigned a room or building to the young.

For the wealthiest children, this space was the nursery, which in the 19th century typically developed into a suite of rooms with specially designed lay-out, furniture and décor. The case studies of two country houses that have meticulously re-created these authentic spaces – Audley End in the 1830-40s and

Lanhydrock in the 1880s – reveal the care that parents took to craft these spaces.

Children made their bedrooms their own, as the Audley End girls' watercolour paintings of their cluttered nursery suite suggest. And from the mid-20th century, working-class children also began to enjoy the privacy and comfort of their own bedrooms. The Beatles' Childhood Homes show how these spaces enabled teenage boys to express their own identities.

# DISPLAYING CHILDREN'S SPACES

These interiors contrast with the spaces that elite adults designated for institutionalised children from the 19th century. The case study of Southwell Workhouse reveals the specialist but sparse dormitories that housed poor children, whose uniformity denied children any space that they could make their own. In 19th and 20th century Britain, these specially designed spaces reveal a great deal about adults' efforts to shape childhood and the inequalities that these investments maintained.

But even when these specialist spaces existed, children spent a great deal of time in spaces that they shared with adults. In wealthy homes, letters and memoirs suggest that older children were seldom confined to the nursery that parents had designed for them. Rather, girls and boys alike spent a great deal of time roaming across the country house and its estate, making homes for themselves in libraries, kitchens, stables or parkland. Similarly, institutions such as workhouses or prisons were not required to house children in specialist spaces until the late 19th or early 20th century.

This meant that the vast majority of children experienced institutional confinement crowded into spaces where they were surrounded by unknown adults.

## Find out more

Sites such as Oxford Castle and Prison ([www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk/](http://www.oxfordcastleandprison.co.uk/)) successfully integrate children's narratives into stories of adult institutionalised spaces.

19th century spaces designed for children reveal ideas about the meaning of home and childhood:

Lydia Murdoch, 'From Barrack Schools to Family Cottages: Creating Domestic Space for Late Victorian Poor Children' in Jon Lawrence and Pat Starkey (eds) *Child Welfare and Social Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: International Perspectives* (2001), pp. 147-167.

The case study of Warkworth Castle reveals how a medieval landscape can be displayed imaginatively to place children's spatial mobility at its heart. If we re-imagine historic environments to include active and mobile children, their movement suggests new narratives about interactions between generations and across classes, as well as children's agency to shape the environments in which they lived.



ENGLISH  
HERITAGE

# AUDLEY END



Credit: Andrew Hann

## By Andrew Hann

Narratives of children and childhood are rarely presented at heritage sites, though most country houses have the spaces, particularly nursery suites, where these stories could be told. This omission is all the more surprising given the emphasis of heritage organisations on attracting a family audience. This case study looks at some of the challenges and opportunities of presenting the stories of children in a country house setting, through looking at the re-presentation of the nursery suite at Audley End in Essex, a project delivered in 2014.

Audley End near Saffron Walden, Essex is English Heritage's flagship property in the East of England. It was a Jacobean prodigy house, perhaps the largest of its day, that was much reduced in size during the 18th century, then revived under the ownership

of Sir John Griffin Griffin (1762-97) who employed the celebrated architect Robert Adam to modernise the house.

During the 19th century it was owned by the Neville family, known as the Barons Braybrooke who restored its original Jacobean character. It was requisitioned during the Second World War for use

as the headquarters of the Polish Section of the Special Operations Executive and following the war was bought for the nation.

The development of the nursery formed part of a wider strategy to improve interpretation at Audley End that was implemented in stages from 2007-8. The service wing was completed in 2008, the stable yard in 2010 and the kitchen garden in 2011.



Credit: Andrew Hann



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# AUDLEY END

The aim of the strategy was to refresh the rather tired presentation, open up new areas of the site, and broaden audience appeal.

The driver for the development of the nursery was to increase our family audiences. Audience research in 2013 revealed that only 45% of visitors to Audley End were going into the house which was seen as rather staid and passive. And only 17% of visitors came from the 'Child Pleasing' audience segment.

Before the start of the project the nursery was in a poor state of repair. It had last been used as a nursery in the 1920s, then as sitting room for the butler in the 1930s whilst children slept elsewhere.



Credit: Historic England/Patricia Payne



Credit: Historic England/Patricia Payne

As a training base during the Second World War, the day nursery was used as an orderly room, while other rooms in the suite were bedrooms for the British soldiers stationed there.

Since the 1940s the rooms had lain abandoned, only used for occasional behind-the-scenes tours or education visits.

As these images illustrate, water ingress from the leaky roof caused damage to wallpapers.





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# AUDLEY END



Credit: Historic England Archive

The proposal was to recreate the nursery created by Richard, 3rd Lord Braybrooke for his young family in the 1820s.

Richard and his wife, Jane Cornwallis married in 1819 and moved to Audley End in 1820 shortly after their first child Richard was born. They began construction work on the nursery suite on 30 April 1822.

The nursery is located on the second floor, on the north side of the house, in a space that was formerly a single room used during the Jacobean period as a summer great chamber, with access over the leads to a similar chamber in the south wing of the house. In trying to piece together what the rooms originally looked like we were greatly assisted by the survival of a number

of watercolours painted by the children showing some of the interiors. This has been combined with building accounts and physical evidence from scraps of surviving wallpaper and fabric and paint analysis which revealed several different decorative schemes – initially quite plain, but showing more use later of fashionable floral wallpaper as the children grew older.



Credit: Historic England Archive



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# AUDLEY END

None of the children's diaries or letters survive so we have had to piece together details of their personalities and day-to-day activities from a variety of other sources.

Louisa, for instance, was a keen botanist, and we have samples that she collected and which are now in the collection of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh with which she corresponded.



Credit: Historic England Archive

The boys, particularly Charles, Henry and Latimer, were keen cricketers, playing both at Eton where they went to school from the age of 9 or 10 and at Audley End where matches were regularly played, as this watercolour by one of their sisters shows.

We even have a glimpse of the governess, the 'amiable sensible' Miss Dormer, from this watercolour by the eldest of the girls, Mirabel. She became the governess in the early 1830s and must have been very good at her job as she remained with the family long after the children had left home.



Credit: Historic England Archive

The nursery suite has been restored as closely as possible to resemble how it would have looked in the 1830s and '40s, but using primarily props and replica objects. The only original item is the historic dolls house, which is kept behind glass.

This means it can be a hands-on experience. Visitors can sit in the chairs, read the books and ride on the rocking horse. During peak periods costumed interpreters and volunteers engage with visitors encouraging them to play with the traditional games or the replica dolls house.



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# AUDLEY END

Three rooms within the suite are dressed to reflect how they would have looked in the late 1830s when only the three girls, Mirabel, Louisa and Lucy, and the youngest boy, Grey, remained in the nursery. For two of these rooms, the day nursery and Lucy's bedroom, we have evidence from watercolours that the girls themselves painted.

Two rooms, however, are set aside as exhibition spaces, one focusing on the boys, the other on the girls and the nursery staff who looked after them. In the boys' room visitors learn about their interests and activities, their time at Eton and what they grew up to be. In the girls' room the emphasis is on life in the nursery, focusing particularly on their schooling and relationship with the governess Miss Dormer, and the nursery staff. In another room there is an audio-visual presentation setting out the history of the nursery suite from its earliest use as servants' lodgings to the current programme of restoration.



Credit: Historic England Archive

The response from visitors has been very positive. The popularity of the nursery has meant we have had to introduce timed ticketing to cope with visitor volumes at the busiest times.



Credit: English Heritage



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HERITAGE

# AUDLEY END



Credit: English Heritage

The nursery has also been very effective in bringing families into the house, and dwell times have been high as children enjoy playing with the traditional toys and dressing up. Its success demonstrates how a hands-on immersive experience can attract visitors from a range of audience segments, and shows that the stories of children are of interest to our visitors.

But in a sense the nursery has been a victim of its own success, and has highlighted the shortcoming of other areas of the house where a more traditional country house visit remains. There is now a need to spread visitors more evenly across the site to prevent all our visitors concentrating in one particular spot.



## Pitfalls

- **Be aware** that the popularity of your immersive experiences can lead to higher wear and tear.
- Making one part of your site too popular **can lead to** other areas being **overlooked**.



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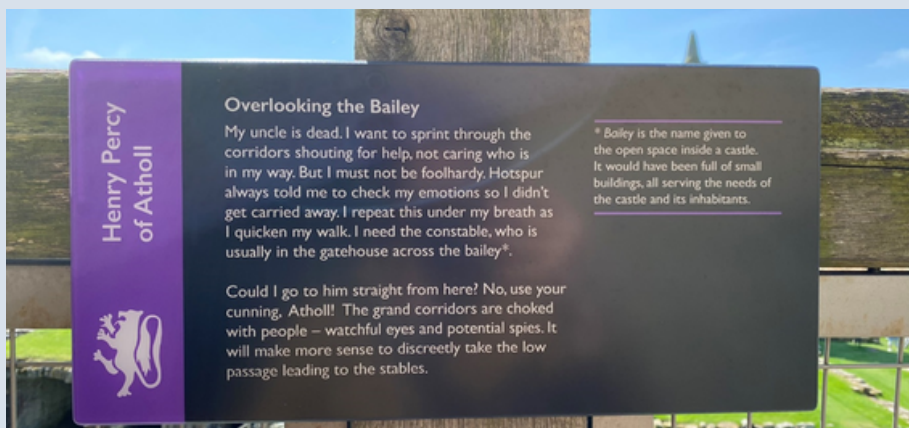
# WARKWORTH CASTLE

By William Wyeth

While historians have long recognised that castles were not just grim fortresses but also bustling communities, the public history of medieval castles has until recently neglected the stories of the individuals who dwelled within their walls. This is beginning to change but it is still unusual to find sites that explore the inner mental and emotional worlds of castle inhabitants. At Warkworth Castle, a ruined medieval site in coastal Northumberland, a new and innovative interpretation is addressing this gap by introducing individual stories. Why do individual stories matter? To be able to talk about a person in the past is to invite a person in the present to participate in self and collective reflection, recollection and dialogue. These effects are what heritage and public history can offer. That is their power.

Often there is little evidence to frame the inner world of a medieval person: how did someone feel about daily life or a recent bereavement? For curators, there are two options. The first is to stick with the status quo and leave the inner world unexplored. The second is to explore it proactively, by 'filling the blanks'.

This can be done through a variety of approaches. These include: 1) inference (i.e. common sense); 2) generalising supplementation (i.e. prosopography); 3) creative endeavour (i.e. facts-as-inspiration). Each presents its own risks. There is no safe or neutral position. This includes maintaining the status quo. One solution is to step back and understand the ambition of the heritage interpretation.



Credit: William Wyeth



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# WARKWORTH CASTLE

Why are we doing what we are doing? Here, the power of public history is important: to facilitate reflection, recollection and dialogue. At Warkworth Castle, a recent interpretation project, completed Spring 2023, combined all three proactive solutions.

The vision was to encourage people to continue enjoying the castle, with its hidden stairs, dark corners and imposing ruins. It was also to give visitors a sense of how the castle was: full of life, colour, emotions, people – and children, which research tells us numbered in the dozens in households like Warkworth. The castle is most famous in the minds of visitors for its association with the Percy family. Using the Percy connection as a point of departure, we identified five documented individuals of varying social standing and relationship with the castle. All were associated with it within a generation of c.1400. Their stories were the means of telling the story of the past in a relatable and dynamic way.

One of these stories was the tale of Henry Percy of Atholl (hereafter Atholl), a nephew of the most famous Percy, Harry Hotspur. Little is known about Atholl's early life. Hotspur died at Shrewsbury in 1403, fighting a royal army as part of a failed attempt to oust Henry IV. At the time, Atholl was a teenager no more than fourteen years old. Soon after Shrewsbury, Atholl was involved in a somewhat farcical

exchange with royal officials at the castle gates, who demanded Warkworth's surrender. Atholl demurred, claiming he lacked the proper ceremonial equipment to hand over the castle. The officials left empty-handed.

From this incident and the other things we know about the castle and medieval life, we can infer some information about Atholl. We know that he was at Warkworth around the time of Hotspur's death and probably resided there as part of the larger Percy household. Though still young, he was perceived to be capable of acting as a representative of the family in albeit unusual circumstances. He was not yet a man in medieval eyes, but nor was he a child. As a male child from an aristocratic house, Atholl would have been educated in the masculine world of England's elite. Social manners, equestrianism, training in arms, playing instruments, singing, and dancing, and perhaps some facility in Latin alongside speaking French and English, were all skills learned at the castle. We can presume that he may well have been upset by news of Hotspur's death – not only personally but also in the context of the panic surrounding the potential effect on the family's fortunes of Hotspur's defeat. He was probably also partisan: Percy propaganda had positioned their rebellion as an act of



ENGLISH  
HERITAGE

# WARKWORTH CASTLE

loyalty to the previous king. In our portrayal of him, all this was part of Atholl's inner world, it comprised who he was. In interpreting Atholl's life at Warkworth we have considered how he would have used the physical space. His role involved him in many parts of the complex, from the great hall to the chapel, the stables to the gatehouse. In telling his story, we wanted to see him moving through that space.

We began Atholl's journey around the castle in the Great Tower. A plinth with a fictional portrait hosts an audio interactive, wherein Atholl tells us a letter has arrived with grim tidings: Hotspur is dead. In a room of bewildered household men, young Atholl cannily realises that this news must be kept secret, lest panic and chaos engulf the castle. He tells us that the castle's constable must be informed, but alas – they're in the Gatehouse, at the other end of the site! Atholl asks visitors to follow him. Over the course of several panels in his voice along the route, we hear his inner

thoughts and emotions: fear, panic, duty, sadness, as well as his struggle to balance the masculine ideals of his education and society with the devastating loss of Hotspur.

The culmination of the five characters' journeys through the castle, on radically different arcs (preparing for a siege; returning from church; finding a lost robe; delivering fish), is a creative sculpture which captures the essence of the character, the major event at the time, and their emotional journey. Atholl's sculpture draws inspiration from medieval signet rings he would recognise. Its symbolism appears straightforward: the Percy lion is downcast, and the ring snapped. But, as with Atholl himself, placing oneself in a vantage point close to the ring reveals a secret: the snapped arms frame the medieval stone sculpture of the Percy lion on a building below. The Percy lion survives.



## Tips

- **Think about what you want** your audience to take away. What is the most compelling way to make that happen?
- **Don't be afraid** to be low tech. Well-crafted narrative matters the most.
- **Be faithful** to your evidence and materials, but do not take this as a restriction.
- **Maintain** an ethical duty to the lives you are portraying.



Credit: William Wyeth



# INTERPRETING CHILDREN'S OBJECTS

*WHAT DO OBJECTS FOUND IN  
COLLECTIONS REVEAL (AND CONCEAL)  
ABOUT CHILDREN'S LIVES?*

Children's objects have been central to heritage practice and research on the history of childhood.

The UK's first museum dedicated to displaying children's toys and games was founded in Edinburgh in 1955. Researchers have also predominantly studied the history of childhood through the specialist books, games, toys, clothes, and childcare paraphernalia that adults created for the young. These objects offer

important insights into changing attitudes to childhood as a life-course stage, as well as the future adults that societies hoped children would grow up to become.

Objects can also reveal children in unexpected places. In the case study of [Corbridge](#), archaeological evidence of a specialist material culture uncovers the presence of children in a settlement at the northern edge of the Roman Empire. This material culture has



# INTERPRETING CHILDREN'S OBJECTS

survived disproportionately for wealthier childhoods, as the case study of the nearby Roman fort of Vindolanda demonstrates.

Archaeological evidence also offers fresh perspectives on the more recent past by uncovering objects designed for children but never valued enough to be preserved in museums.

Children's play was not, however, confined to the objects that adults designed for them. Children engaged with objects that were never designated as theirs and gave unintended meanings to objects through their play. Contemporary children's engagement with historic toys at the Museum at the Children's Country House at Sudbury

provides a powerful example of how objects can be creatively re-connected to these diverse individual interpretations.

Imaginative play in the past left frustratingly few material traces. Homemade playthings and those that were most loved by children seldom survive. Researchers turn to other sources to reveal the objects that were important within children's imaginative worlds, such as through children's paintings at Audley End, diaries at Lanhydrock, oral histories at the Foundling Museum, or contemporary newspaper articles at Southwell Workhouse.



## Find out more

The objects made by children offer important insights into older children's lives, including the experiences of children who left few other archival traces. Embroidered samplers have been the subject of most attention because they commonly display their creators' names, as well as symbolic images and text. Samplers became increasingly central to girls' education from the 17th century. Many samplers were preserved by later collectors, so that the needlework that girls stitched offer rich and rare insights into girls' lives.

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/embroidery-a-history-of-needlework-samplers>

<https://www.nms.ac.uk/exhibitions-events/past-exhibitions/embroidered-stories/>



ENGLISH  
HERITAGE

# CORBRIDGE ROMAN TOWN

By Frances McIntosh

Roman Corbridge, *Coria*, was occupied for almost 350 years. It was first a fort, then became a town, the most northerly in the Roman Empire. Families lived at Corbridge in Northumberland from the early 2nd century AD but it can be difficult to include them in a display or site history as children often leave few traces in the archaeological record. Tombstones show them playing with toys, and occasionally, toys, shoes or clothing survive. In Corbridge we are lucky to have rare evidence for the lives, and deaths, of children. Our collection contains two children's tombstones, a leg from an articulated doll and two feeding bottles (see image below). Although not very much, it is still more than many Roman collections have.



Credit: English Heritage.

The museum at Corbridge was re-designed in 2018 and gave us a chance to get new items out of the store. Our aim with the re-display was to tell the stories of the people living at Corbridge over the 350 years of occupation and the collection was key.

Children were part of everyday life in the Roman world, so they are just one part of the story we tell about life in Roman Corbridge.

The exhibition has a mixed thematic and chronological approach with a concept that tries to capture the lived experiences of the residents of Corbridge throughout the full Roman period. The evidence for children was highlighted within the broader themed sections on *Everyday Life* and *Death and Burial*. The survival of the evidence is rare and exciting, but we did not want to over-emphasise the importance of the objects, so have treated them similarly to other significant items in the gallery. The feeding bottle and the doll's leg are discussed in a highlight label, in the same format as other important items. As in any museum, our space for text is limited. There is never enough scope to get across the complexities of the stories we would like to tell. However, we hope that by displaying these items it will remind people that, despite the lack of direct evidence, children did live on the frontier of the Roman Empire.



## Tips

- **Link the item to a specific child** that really connects with visitors.
- Children are just one part of the past, **connect their stories** to the other occupants of your site.
- **Use digital content** to support physical site interpretation.



VINDOLANDA  
FORT & MUSEUM

# VINDOLANDA

**By Elizabeth Greene and Barbara Birley**

Roman military forts in Britain were not just home to officers and soldiers. They were thriving communities where women, children, shop keepers, merchants and craftspeople lived on the dynamic frontier of the Roman empire. Vindolanda, located near Hadrian's Wall in northern England, has revealed some of the most extraordinary and unique objects that illuminate the lives of children growing up with the Roman army. The collection holds a variety of objects that tell us about the day-to-day activities of children, such as wooden toy swords that might suggest the sons of soldiers mimicked their fathers with military play, or a small leather mouse that could have been a comforting soft toy for any child.

Some of the most telling and emotive material is the hundreds of leather shoes worn by children. These offer a glimpse of the expectations that were placed upon the children living at Vindolanda in the first and second centuries AD. The house of the commanding officer (the *praetorium*) was the most elite residence in a military settlement. It contained a range of footwear that indicates his family resided in the fort. There were a number of shoes belonging to children of different ages, from the tiniest baby's boot to shoes of older children and perhaps young adolescents. This provides clear evidence that women and children lived inside this military fort, or at least in the elite space of the commanding officer's home.



Credit: Vindolanda Trust

We rarely imagine children playing in the streets of a Roman military fort and they are infrequently incorporated into our view of life in the army. This evidence inserts children into our reckoning of life in the past in unambiguous fashion. The type of shoes found here is also illuminating. Even the smallest shoe, such as this one on the right – worn by a child perhaps not even yet walking—is of a ‘fishnet’ style, with hundreds of small perforations in the leather to create a decorative pattern. These up-market shoes are typically found associated with elite residences such as the *praetorium*. Importantly and interestingly, their style mimics the footwear found in this space worn by adult males, perhaps the commanding officer himself. They may have been used to present the children, or at least the sons, of this elite family as young versions of their father, being held to similar standards of dress and adornment. When we think about the lives of these children, therefore, we can imagine a regimented lifestyle that held them to expectations of military pomp and circumstance and perhaps a life of public display as the family of the highest-ranking officer of the unit.



Credit: Vindolanda Trust

In comparison, many children’s shoes also reveal that they were wearing standard military style boots that were also ubiquitous in adult sizes. Were these the shoes worn by the children of regular foot soldiers, also practising for their future, yet very different, roles in the Roman army? We can’t always know the details, but ancient shoes, perhaps a mundane object at first glance, illuminate the lives of children in a unique way and present us with their stories from nearly two-thousand years ago.



## Pitfalls

- **Do not assume**, because we cannot always see children’s objects on archaeological sites, that they were not there. For example, organic objects like shoes and clothes do not often survive. As we build a better picture of children’s lives in the past, the review of old collections of artefacts can help us to infer further instances of family life.



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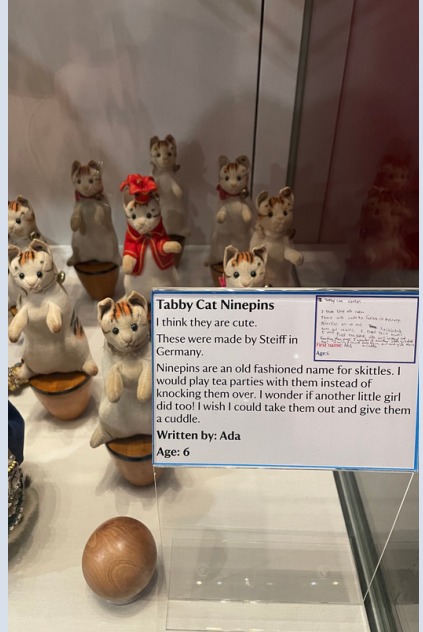
# THE MUSEUM AT THE CHILDREN'S COUNTRY HOUSE AT SUDBURY

By Edith Parkinson

From 2019, Sudbury Hall and the Museum of Childhood started a project to become the world's first Children's Country House: a heritage offer designed with children and their families as the primary audience.

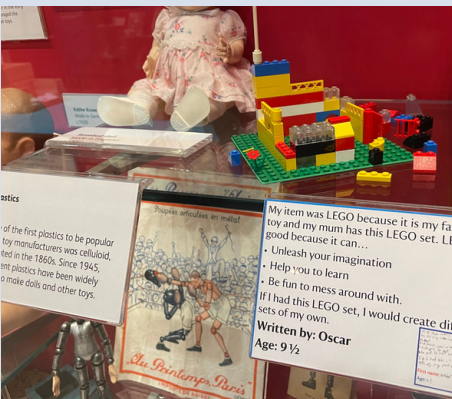
The collections in the Museum of Childhood already appealed to this audience, but there was still work to do to engage children with the cased collection by making it relevant to them and bringing their voices into the space.

As part of the development of the Children's Country House at Sudbury, we recruited over 100 children under 12 years old to be our 'Children's Country House Ambassadors'. These children worked with the property team to suggest ideas for the development of the hall and museum by attending workshops and giving feedback



**Tabby Cat Ninepins**  
I think they are cute.  
These were made by Steiff in Germany.  
Ninepins are an old fashioned name for skittles. I would play tea parties with them instead of knocking them over. I wonder if another little girl did too! I wish I could take them out and give them a cuddle.  
**Written by: Ada**  
**Age: 6**

Credit: Edith Parkinson



My item was LEGO because it is my favourite toy and my mum has this LEGO set. It is fun because it can...  

- Unleash your imagination
- Help you to learn
- Be fun to mess around with.

 If I had this LEGO set, I would create different sets of my own.  
**Written by: Oscar**  
**Age: 9 1/2**

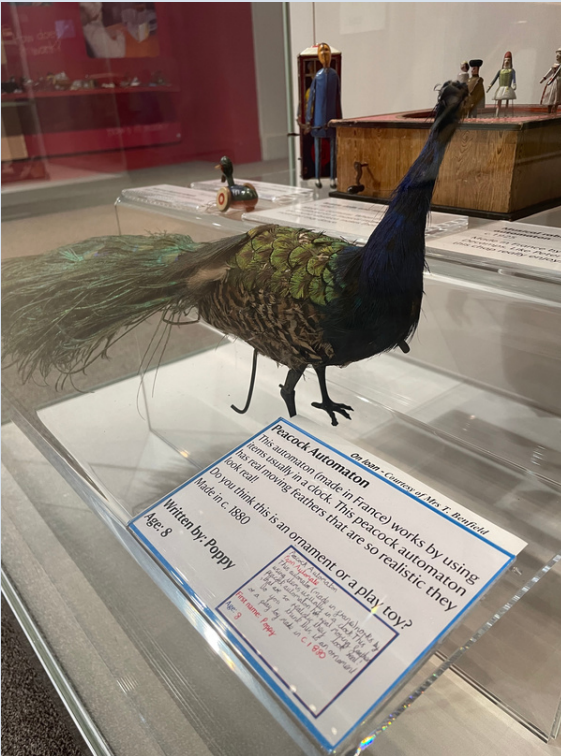
Credit: Edith Parkinson

on taster sessions for the new offer. One of these workshops was to create object labels for the museum with the aim of bringing children's voices and opinions into the cased displays. The workshop took place in the Toy Gallery in small groups and started with the children exploring the objects in the cases, as well as some handling items. We led short tours around the spaces, highlighting old objects and new objects, objects that had a story and objects that were unfamiliar.



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# THE MUSEUM AT THE CHILDREN'S COUNTRY HOUSE AT SUBBURY



Credit: Edith Parkinson

From here, the children had a chance to explore at their own pace, asking questions and finding things that interested them. We spoke about all the different stories that objects can tell and what matters the most when talking to other people about them. Was the date important? Was it significant where it was made and how it was used?

The children were given their blank object label and were prompted to write about

anything in the cases that inspired them. We asked them to focus on something they had found interesting and wanted to share. The outcome was fantastic! We have since used the children's object labels when redisplaying cases, with some sitting alongside the old interpretation and others replacing it entirely.

It was really encouraging to see how engaged children became with the cased collection. They were looking at objects in new ways and asking questions that had not occurred to us. The connections that the children made between objects and how they used their imagination to interpret information was really inspiring when thinking about the potential next steps

for this project. There was one child so inspired by her chosen object, a peacock automaton, that she then used this as inspiration when contributing to some artwork in the gardens.

This work has informed the development of our Child Curator Programme where we are moving beyond consultation and towards real involvement. Our next steps are to work with the Curator Programme to expand this work across the other



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# THE MUSEUM AT THE CHILDREN'S COUNTRY HOUSE IN SUDBURY

## Chloe [not on display]

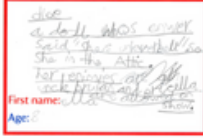
A doll whose owner said "she's unlovable" so she is in the attic.

Her enemies Uncle Bruin and Pricella are allowed on show.

Written by: Ella

Age: 8

Chloe is a doll who was donated with Uncle Bruin and Pricella, both on display here. It is true her owner referred to her as "stiff and not very lovable"!



Credit: Edith Parkinson

galleries in the museum by creating object labels written by children. We want to ensure the inclusion of children's voices is a standard practice in all our museum cases, to sit alongside and contribute to the traditional object interpretation. We hope that by doing this, children and their families will gain



## Tips

- **Have information on hand** about the objects, whether that is stories, dates, or how it was made.
- **Let the children lead** with what interests them, try not to restrict what they want to explore.
- **Create a space** where questions are encouraged, and they can use their imagination.
- Think about the role **handling items** can play in this kind of exercise.



## Pitfalls

- **Timing is everything.** Ensure you have plenty of time to spend with the group, but also make sure children can duck out if they're finished before others.
- **Help children feel confident.** Think about pre-session activities you could run or create a relationship with different groups to ensure you get the best out of the children.
- **Preconceptions are difficult to break.** It was challenging for some children to move away from what they thought a museum label should look like, so perhaps have different examples on hand to help.

new enjoyment from the cased collections with children especially feeling a sense of ownership and inclusion during their visit.

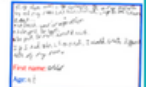
My item was LEGO because it is my favourite toy and my mum has this LEGO set. LEGO is good because it can...

- Unleash your imagination
- Help you to learn
- Be fun to mess around with.

If I had this LEGO set, I would create different sets of my own.

Written by: Oscar

Age: 9 ½



Credit: Edith Parkinson



# LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES

*WHAT DO SOURCES CREATED BY  
CHILDREN REVEAL (AND CONCEAL)  
ABOUT CHILDREN'S LIVES?*

Over the last twenty years, scholars of childhood have been preoccupied by uncovering sources that allow us to listen to children's voices.

The writings and drawings of children who grew up to become adults famous for their creativity have received a great deal of attention. Much of this surviving juvenilia dates from the late-18th to mid-20th centuries, including manuscripts by Jane Austen, the Brontë siblings, Beatrix Potter,

Virginia Woolf or – as the case study of the [Beatles' Childhood Homes](#) reveals – John Lennon.

Research has shown that these creative cultures were not, however, peculiar to children who later became celebrated writers, artists or musicians. As the case studies of [Lanyhdrock](#) and [Audley End](#) reveal, surviving family papers of middle- and upper-class families commonly contain diaries, letters, scrapbooks, drawings, newspapers, poems, and stories by



# LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES



Find out more

The manuscripts created by Charlotte, Branwell, Anne, and Emily Brontë are amongst the most famous example of children's juvenilia. Some of their miniature writings and drawings have been digitised by the British Library:

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/earliest-known-writings-of-charlotte-bronte>  
<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-emily-brontes-gondal-poetry>  
<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/bront-juvenilia-the-history-of-the-young-men>

children. The meanings of these texts changed over time. Since the early 20th century, adolescent diaries and personal letters have been considered private, but these texts were commonly shared and read aloud in earlier centuries.

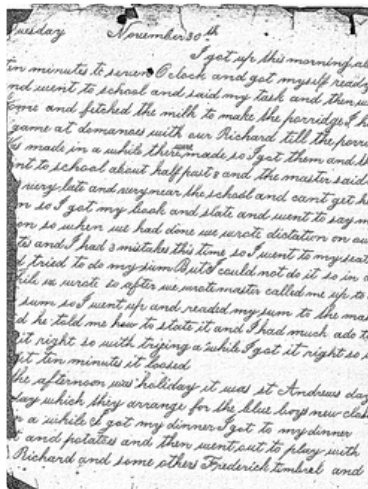
Children's voices can also be found in unexpected places, including through their annotations to books intended for adults, scribblings in parents' letters, and graffiti on furniture and buildings. But, the catalogues of collections and archives seldom record these marginal traces of children's lives.

The voices of less wealthy and



Credit: Brontë Parsonage Museum

literate children are even harder to uncover, especially before mass elementary schooling and near-universal childhood literacy in the later 19th century. But, the diary of 10-year-old John Thomas Kenyon, the son of a tailor growing up in rural Lancashire, reveals how diary writing had become part of the education even of some working-class children who attended elementary and Sunday school in the 1870s.



Credit: Lancashire Record Office . P/151/I. Diary of John Thomas Kenyon (1876)

# LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES

In the absence of surviving manuscripts created by the young, the voices of children can be found in mediated and fragmentary forms. Parents' diaries or letters are often filled with the speech and actions of their children, especially in times of crisis such as illness or death. Separation - whether due to schooling, work or war - also forced parents to record feelings that normally left no archival trace in their letters. But, all of these sources depend on parents' literacy

Even when no personal sources survive, institutional and government records can be read

'against the grain' to reveal insights into children's lives that their authors never intended. For instance, children's everyday experiences were documented by adults when children were witnesses in court cases, as employees in account books, or when interviewed by state officials or social investigators. Children were of course aware of who they were talking to and will have left a great deal unsaid. But, absences and silences in these accounts also reveal a great deal about the societies to which children were central.

## Find out more

Katherine V. Huntley, 'Children's Graffiti in Roman Pompeii and Herculaneum', in Sally Crawford, Dawn M. Hadley, and Gillian Shepherd (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Childhood* (2018), pp. 376-86.

Hannah Newton, *The Sick Child in Early Modern England, 1580-1720* (2012).

Edel Lamb, 'The Riddles of Early Modern Children's Worlds', in Philippa Maddern and Stephanie Tarbin (eds), *Material Worlds of Childhood in North-western Europe c. 1350-1800* (2024).

## Find out more

Kathryn Gleadle and Beth Rodgers, 'A Library of Our Own Compositions': The Minervian Library and Children's Social Authorship in Victorian Orkney', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 27/3 (2022), pp. 477-492.

Siân Pooley, 'Children's writing and the popular press in England, 1876-1914', *History Workshop Journal*, 80/1 (2015), pp. 75-98.

Lois Burke and Kathryn Simpson, 'Neither literature nor object: children's writings in the digital public realm', *Magazén*, 1/2 (2020), pp. 249-270.

# LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES

## Quarry Bank Mill, Cheshire

Now in the care of the National Trust, Quarry Bank Mill uses institutional records to reveal the stories of children whose labour powered the the industrial revolution. Built in 1784 by Samuel Greg, the mill expanded to meet growing demand for cotton cloth and employed over 300 workers operating 1000 spindles. Alongside the mill, Greg built an Apprentice House to house his child workers. They were given board and food in return for their labour. As many as 90 children lived inside a relatively small house, sleeping in dorms and eating together. Children were a popular choice as workers in the early industrial revolution and were more than half the mill's workforce until the 1840s. Their small size, nimble hands and agile movements made them very effective and, importantly, they were cheap. Children were apprenticed from workhouses or poor families from as young as 8 years old and indentured themselves until 18. Surviving apprentice forms displayed in the Mill show that many who signed the forms did so with an X instead of their name, demonstrating that they may have not been able to read what they were signing.

Children's voices were captured through the records of magistrates' courts. Testimony from children who ran away from their apprenticeships detail the hard work involved in mill life and also children's longing for family. In 1806 13-year-old Thomas Priestley was brought before magistrates in London to explain why he had absconded. He explained that after having trapped his finger in the mill badly enough to be prescribed six weeks off, he had wanted to see his mother in London. Having now seen her, he expressed his willingness to return to work.

Other records kept by the mill-owners have allowed the National Trust to piece together children's experiences. There are account books revealing the food they ate and the rhythm of their day. The mill's physician Peter Holland kept detailed prescription books that detail children's illnesses and remedies. Through these we can see the impact of mill work on their lives; eye infections and coughs were common. A letter from the mill manager to the parish authority provides insight into the clothing requirements for girls, while court records offer the information that children received clean shirts every Sunday. Replicas of these clothes are contained in apprentice boxes displayed in the Apprentice House for visitors while individual stories of children's lives are told by costumed guides.

### Useful websites

Oral testimony by children is also captured by court records, such as those digitised within 'The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913' ([www.https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/](http://www.https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/)). Yet, like many catalogues, it is not possible to search this collection by age:

Iona and Peter Opie pioneered the study of childhood culture in the mid-20th century, especially play. Their survey of games recorded by children across Britain has been digitised, while audio recordings and essays written by children are preserved by the British Library and Oxford's Bodleian Library: <https://www.opiearchive.org/>  
<https://www.bl.uk/collections/opie-collection-of-childrens-games-and-songs>  
<https://archives.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repositories/2/resources/2631>



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# LANHYDROCK



Credit: Faye Rason, National Trust

## By Charlotte Newman and Ruth Lewis

The magnificent Victorian country house of Lanhydrock, Cornwall, is the site of a space dedicated to 'hearing children'. The former home of the large Robartes family, the property contains a newly refurbished nursery suite that brings the children who used to live there into focus.

In 1990 Lanhydrock's nursery opened to visitors for the first time. Previously a tenanted apartment, work to open it focused on removing partition walls, re-creating the original Robert Kerr inspired Victorian nursery plan. Rooms were then filled with donations and some collection items. A traditional route along a red carpet, with rope/stanchions separating visitors from the display, created an uninviting experience. In 2019, the team felt that the project was unfinished – the

interiors had not been investigated and the collection was hidden amongst donations, some of which were inappropriate. Above all the voices of the children that had inhabited this space were absent – the sound of laughter, snoring and learning. The project's key aim was to remove the National Trust carpets

and ropes and create an inviting space that family audiences would want to explore – creating a lasting legacy of memory and connecting audiences with our place.

We started by finding out about the family who lived in the nursery. Ten children, the eldest Maye, born 1879 and the youngest Alec, born 1890, grew up there. Research revealed an eclectic mix of personalities and relationships from a rich array of primary source material (rediscovered in the attics) including letters, school reports, and theatre programmes – all of which inspired our interpretation. The letters reveal relationships between the children. 13-year-old Gerald's letter to Constance, aged 4, contains delightful pictures alongside his words. With the traditional portrait photographs are more informal 'snaps' of children



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# LANHYDROCK NURSERY

playing in the gardens. A key source is Constance's diary, which she wrote for 2 years from the age of 10. This tells us about her daily activities revealing the girls were best at cricket, her older sister Maye read her *Little Women*, and that she was completely horse obsessed.



Credit: Faye Rason, National Trust

These stories are peppered through the rooms. Instead of using our own words, Constance's voice is used where possible by integrating quotations into the interior, on blinds, integrated Perspex, on the bedspread and in the bathtub. For audiences who want to know more, instead of information panels, longer text is printed onto wooden blocks inspired by children's

toys seeking to ensure a consistently playful approach, which focuses on children.

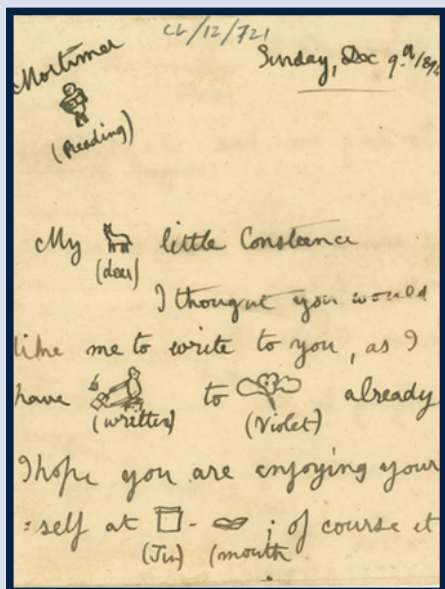
To decorate the nursery we drew on a careful selection of appropriate internal and external specialists, and a student work placement. We also sought advice from historic houses with similar nurseries. Working with the right designer was key to achieving the desired aesthetic. The architectural paint analysis shaped our choices. While rediscovering the 1880's colour schemes of purple, pink, salmon pink and terracotta, we also learnt of a varnished layer over distemper used to make 'washable walls' practical in a nursery context. Working with paint specialists, we created a new paint with an exact colour match and glossy finish to achieve an authentic appearance. Immediately this colour scheme began to create a genuine, inviting feel.

Our approach to textiles added to this baseline. Drawing on collections databases, historic inventories, internal textile consultants and external comparisons, we devised a scheme. Whilst seeking a faithful aesthetic, modern textiles were introduced to create a robust space for use by children.



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# LANHYDROCK NURSERY



Credit: Faye Rason, National Trust

Balancing budget, authenticity and longevity was a challenge. For example, based on design research, four Axminster carpets were acquired, that looked authentic but allowed for high wear and tear. In this instance, we compromised on carpet sizes to reduce costs. We replaced curtains due to their vulnerability and, given their location directly next to window seats, we chose a washable synthetic chenille to ease cleaning. There were no clues for the window-seat covers, which were inspired by inventory records at a comparative nursery that mentions birds. Inspired by the William Morris used elsewhere at Lanhydrock, the Strawberry Thief was selected – a bright, playful design.

Modern cushion fills were used, so they are reversible and washable. The textiles chosen for the nursery add considerably to the inviting atmosphere. They encourage families to sit on the floor and linger by resting on the window seats, but they are robust and not costly to maintain.

The nursery rooms now tell their stories through the way they look, feel and are laid out. While the interior speaks of Victorian ingenuity and taste, the interpretation delivers a child centric narrative for children visiting today. Continuing to provide this was key to ensuring its success. The designers have created integrated techniques to protect collections that



Credit: Faye Rason, National Trust



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# LANHYDROCK NURSERY



Credit: Faye Rason, National Trust

do not detract from the inviting feeling and encouragement to play. For example, attractively lit Perspex boxes for the dolls

house and for the toy soldiers allow them to be displayed at child height as they would have been used. This ensures small pieces are not lost or broken. All objects on open display are there to be handled and are considered sacrificial.

The only rope remains in Nannie's bedroom where the number of collection items is high, but the rope colour, size and stanchion were carefully chosen to tie in and, instead of a chime intruder alarm, the 'alarm' forms part of the interpretation sounding 'why are you in here? this is my private room, now run along to the nursery'. Visitor feedback has been positive. One commented: 'Our daughter loved playing with the toys & nearly made away with the doves! Great idea to let little ones play'.



## Tips

- Know
  - your stories – who's telling them and how?
  - your collections – what's exciting, what tells a story – what does not?
  - your audience – who's visiting, when, what do they think about your place?
- Think
  - how does your space look and feel?
  - how does your source material inspire an engaging visit?
  - what is relevant for today's visitors?



# RECORDING CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

*WHAT DO ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES REVEAL (AND CONCEAL) ABOUT CHILDREN'S LIVES?*

Adults' memories offer unique insights into childhood experiences. These individual recollections bring objects and places alive by narrating their personal meaning and emotional impact.

From the late 18th century, autobiographical writing increasingly explored childhood experiences. Many memoirs were written by elite men who thought their story mattered to public life,

but across the 19th and 20th centuries more and more working-class and female writers also penned their autobiographies. These life-stories were shaped by the people that children grew up to become, as well as the audience for whom they were writing. For instance, the published memoirs of politicians tended to emphasise their precocious childhood political engagement or their experiences of injustices that inspired their campaigns.



# RECORDING CHILDHOOD MEMORIES



## Find out more

Research using autobiographies has changed historians' understanding of 19th century working-class childhood:

Jane Humphries, *Childhood and child labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (2010)  
Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (2020)

Nevertheless, these narratives also provide, often unintentionally, rich accounts of ordinary family life and diverse everyday experiences, as well as their emotional impact on children.

As part of the movement to write 'history from below', from the 1970s oral history projects recorded

and preserved many more people's accounts of their everyday lives. Designed to be collaborative and inclusive, interviewers prioritised the testimonies of people and communities who would never normally have recorded their life-histories on paper. These earliest collections include memories of childhoods in the 1880s. The case study from [The Foundling Museum](#) reveals both the challenges and the value of collecting and archiving people's childhood memories.

Older adults' narratives of their childhoods are unavoidably shaped by the life they went on to live, as well as their own and the interviewer's present-day concerns. Silences, contradictions, and incoherence can be as revealing as detailed and fluent stories that have been recounted many times. As the example of [Southwell Workhouse's](#) bedsits



## Find out more

In the 1980s, historians compiled an invaluable guide to working-class autobiographies which can be searched by theme and place. Many of the unpublished autobiographies they identified are available at Brunel University.

John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall (eds), *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (3 volumes 1984-89)

Burnett archive of working-class autobiographies, Brunel University:  
<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb1975-burn>.

# RECORDING CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

demonstrates, these testimonies offer vivid and moving insights into childhood experiences that had a life-long impact.

Oral history directs a spotlight on vital questions about the practice and ethics of telling stories of people's lives. But as the case study of Scipio Kennedy at [Culzean Castle](#) underlines, we need to ask these questions of all time periods and sources, especially where these histories are uncomfortable or distressing.

The practice of how we do oral history has changed considerably. If we wish to collect oral history testimonies today we should undertake training in the ethics and practice of oral history.

## Find out more

This useful toolkit from Manchester Histories provides information on how to set up and operate an oral history project:  
<https://manchesterhistories.co.uk/learn/toolkit-2/>

These books also provide useful guides to changing approaches to oral history.

Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the past : Oral History*, 3rd ed. (2000)

Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd ed. (2016)

[The Oral History Society](#) provides a useful starting point for thinking about oral history projects and provides training courses and advice.

## Useful websites



Thousands of oral history recordings are catalogued on the British Library website at: [www.bl.uk/oralhistory/collections](http://www.bl.uk/oralhistory/collections). Many can be listened to at <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oralhistory>.

The University of Essex has a useful guide to oral history collections on different themes and held in collections around the world: <https://library.essex.ac.uk/history/oralhistory>.

The Scottish Oral History Centre at Strathclyde University also holds an extensive Scottish oral history collection. Oral histories include histories of rural schools, children's services workers' experiences with residential childcare in the 1960s and 1970s and histories of immigrant groups to Scotland. <https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofhumanities/history/scottishoralhistorycentre/>



Foundling  
Museum

# THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM

By Alison Duke

The Foundling Museum is the place that often springs to mind when we think about the history of children in heritage sites. But as this case study shows, even a site centred almost exclusively on children faces challenges when trying to tell the stories of their lives.

What do you do when you tell a history which covers over 200 years but you can't access any of records for a quarter of this period?



Credit: Coram

Established in 1739 as a home for children and in continuous existence as a charity ever since, the Foundling Hospital has rich and plentiful archives of the 25,000 children it cared for from 1741 until 1953. Yet many of those records are sealed for data protection purposes. Soon after opening in 2004, it became clear to the Museum that the few remaining individuals of those 25,000 had a right for their stories to be told in their own voices and that as the years went by there would be fewer people here to tell those stories.

The Foundling Museum's response was to establish *Foundling Voices* an oral history project, which ran from 2009-2013. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (as it was known until 2019), the project interviewed 76 people who had been under the care of the Foundling Hospital from 1912 until 1953 when it stopped providing institutional care and a further 16 people who were connected to the story in a different way.

Establishing a large-scale oral history project like this was a complex procedure. It involved setting up and equipping a new office, making contacts with partners, establishing protocols for interviewing as well as follow-up support and storage of the digital files, recruiting a professional interviewer and a group of volunteers, and reaching out to potential interviewees via a group of former pupils.

Interviews took place over 18 months, with most taking place in people's homes and a small number at the Museum, wherever people felt more comfortable. A team of volunteers transcribed these interviews. This made it much easier to pull out extracts we wanted to use. A 2-hour interview takes 2 hours to listen to but a 2-hour transcript can be read in a fraction of the time.



Foundling  
Museum

# THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM

The project outcomes had been agreed with the Heritage Lottery Fund in advance. These included a 6-month exhibition at the Museum, as well as a smaller-scale touring exhibition, a youth theatre piece, a project website, a poetry competition, educational resources and an audio tour of the only remaining Foundling Hospital site at Berkhamsted (now a state secondary school).

For both exhibitions we chose themes that had become apparent from reading and listening to the interviews – *Early Life, Arrival, Life at School, Into the World, Search for Birth Families* and *Reflections*. It was important that every person's voice appeared in the exhibition in some form to recognise their contribution. It was also essential that visitors could hear them speak in their own voices.

Our exhibition gallery is small which meant we had to be clever with our use of the space to avoid sound bleed but also to ensure visitors got a sense of sound while in the gallery. We used a mixture of headphones for more intimate listening,

hanging ear-pieces to allow for communal listening and some ambient sound for the central piece – a 30-minute film in the Life at School section. The museum was limited in terms of 3-D objects but had lots of photographs, so a representative object was selected for each section and as many images used as possible.

Since the project has formally finished the Museum has used some of the material in its permanent displays and exhibitions. Selected quotes are displayed in the Introductory Gallery. The Museum has also made the interviews available to external researchers.

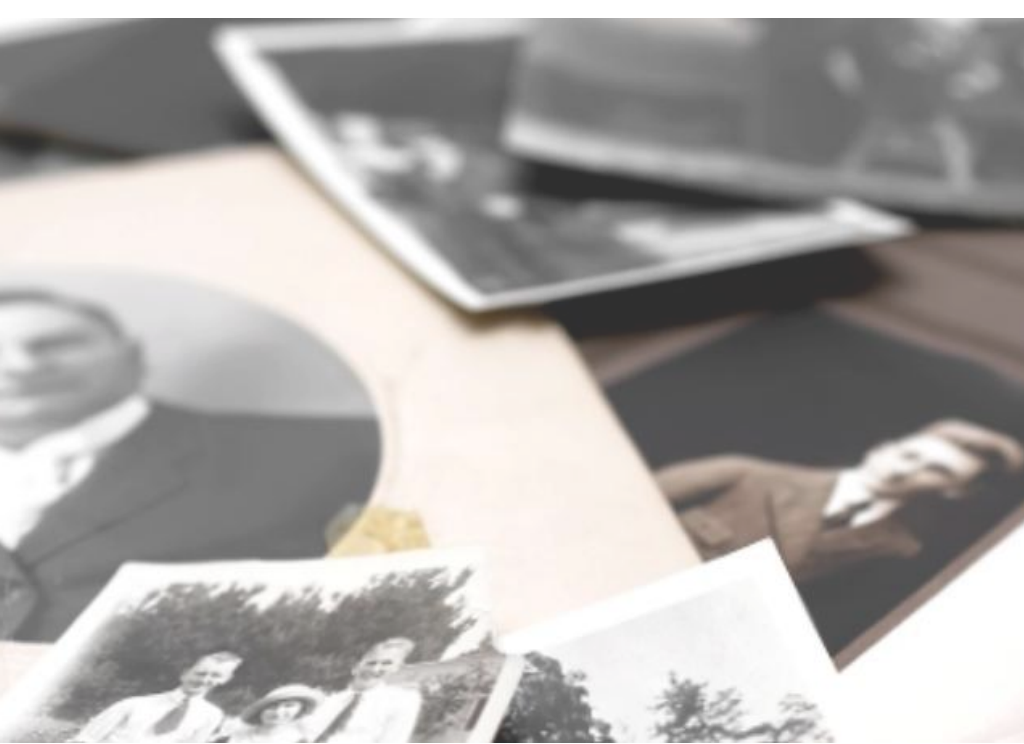


Credit: Coram



## Tips

- **Be aware** that people's stories may be difficult and they may need support in the oral history process but **don't assume** people will need that support.
- Transcriptions are incredibly useful but **don't forget to listen** to the audio. There is so much more in the spoken word than can ever appear on a page.
- Try to **ensure** that people visiting your exhibition **can listen to the audio**. There is a much stronger emotional punch being able to hear an individual tell their story in their own voice.



# CONTEXTUALISING CHILDREN'S LIVES

*WHAT DO SOURCES BEYOND HERITAGE COLLECTIONS REVEAL (AND CONCEAL) ABOUT CHILDREN'S LIVES?*

Many historic buildings survive without an archive. One method to start to understand the children who inhabited these spaces is to piece together sources from public archives.

County record offices and local archives contain a wide variety of sources that illuminate the context in which children lived: parish records of baptism, marriage, and burial; wills and inventories; court records;

newspapers; censuses; school and welfare records. Although source survival is patchy especially prior to the mid-19th century, for the modern period increasingly standardised records allow complex portraits of children's lives to be painted from fragments. The case study of [Southwell Workhouse](#) reveals the rich insights that these sources can reveal.

# CONTEXTUALISING CHILDREN'S LIVES

## Find out more

Peter Higginbotham's websites demonstrate how much can be learnt about children's experiences in institutions across the United Kingdom from sources held in public archives:

Peter Higginbotham, 'The Children's Homes Website': <http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/>  
Peter Higginbotham, 'The Workhouse': <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/>

Many commonly used sources can be accessed online via family history websites and in local libraries and archives. The digitisation of records has enabled significant new insights into children's lives, especially for children living in the English-speaking world between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century.

By searching millions of sources for a particular name, it is now possible to trace an individual across the course of their life, even if they moved across Britain or overseas. We know that adults sought to mould children's futures through their upbringing and education, but these sources reveal the impact of these investments and how children's lives turned out.

## Find out more

The National Archive catalogue and research guide  
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/>

'A vision of Britain through time'. Great Britain Historical GIS Project, University of Portsmouth (2017)  
<https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/>

Discover your family history  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/discover-your-family-history/discover-your-family-history-accessible-version>



## Useful websites

The websites below all offer access to genealogical records. Some sites are free, others charge fees.

[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)  
[www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)  
[www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)  
[www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)  
[www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk)  
[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)  
[www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/](http://www.irishgenealogy.ie/en/)  
[www.nrscotland.gov.uk](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)  
[www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)  
[www.newspapers.library.wales](http://www.newspapers.library.wales)



National  
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# SOUTHWELL WORKHOUSE



Credit: National Trust/Chris Lacey

## By Nancy Wilson

The Workhouse in Southwell in Nottinghamshire tells the history of social care through the 19th and 20th centuries. Despite limited archival sources, childhood is woven throughout the history of the site. Children were viewed as the 'blameless poor' but that did not mean they were excluded from the harsh regime of workhouse life. For some children, their time at the workhouse was a fleeting challenge and they grew up to have successful careers and relationships. For others, their experience at the site has haunted their lives, even up to the present day.

As social care developed, so did the use of the site, which began with the main Workhouse building in 1824 and expanded with the addition of the 1871 Infirmary Block (Firbeck). This was extended in 1914 with a maternity wing, in 1928 with a Hospital Block (Minster View) and in 1938 with a Children's Home (Caudwell House).

The Workhouse and Infirmary buildings closed in the late 1980s, Minster View closed in 2023 and Caudwell House is still used by the local council as residential care for children with physical disabilities. The Workhouse was bought by the National Trust in 1997 and it opened to the public in

2002. Since then the interpretation and visitor experience has grown as research has developed. After the latest re-imagining project was completed in 2019, both the Workhouse building and Firbeck Infirmary re-opened with rooms furnished with replica furniture with new and updated interpretation.

But putting children back into the site has been difficult. Surviving archival sources are limited and it is not straightforward to research life within the Workhouse. Most surviving records are official minutes, reports and correspondence from the Poor Law Inspectors and Guardians. There are no 19th-century written records by adult inmates, let alone children. The first-person accounts from children who lived on site in the 20th century are mainly oral histories that the National Trust collected over a 20-year period from 1997.

# SOUTHWELL WORKHOUSE

We have pieced together information from various sources to allow us to 'see' children's presence in the site. There are three primary texts that are in the Workhouse collection. The Birth and Death register (1914-40), the Account Ledger (1890-1892) and Matron's Rough Store Book (1931-1935). But we have also drawn on sources from outside our collection to contextualise the information we do have.

We have been using sources held at Nottinghamshire Archives and The National Archives. The Minutes of the Guardians' Meetings running from 1836 to 1930 are some of the best resources to piece together life in the Workhouse and are held in Nottingham. Research volunteers have been transcribing these documents so that we can place them in the Workhouse library. We are also using catalogue MH12 – Local Government Board Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities, 1834-1900 at The National Archives which contains a wide range of archival evidence. In addition to inspection reports, articles have been uncovered in the *Nottingham Guardian* newspaper.

All of these create a picture of life for children. The reports detail inspectors' findings from their visits and give a brief glimpse into daily life, mentioning the lessons given and capabilities of the children. The Minutes from 1840 recommend fall-down tables to be used in

the schoolroom, replicas of which are now in situ. In response to the information about what sleeping arrangements might have been, we added new 'top and tail' beds. The newspaper articles from the mid-1800s show a lighter side of childhood, describing day trips, including a trip to the circus and a visit to Nottingham's Great Exhibition at the Mechanics Institute paid by private subscription.

We also draw on correspondence that offers glimpses of the experiences of children, such as a letter from Southwell Workhouse clerk about the lives of two of the children who were inmates. Surviving sources were often the product of adult concern, such as a letter from Southwell's first female Guardian Lady Laura Ridding about the clothing the children were given and a letter from an 1870 inspection noting that Southwell Workhouse was unusual in allowing children to sleep three or four to a bed.



Credit: National Trust/Nancy Wilson





National  
Trust

# SOUTHWELL WORKHOUSE

Letters, located in MH12 at The National Archives, from Thomas Marriot, the clerk at Southwell, detail the story of Charlotte and Samuel Lawson who had to enter the Workhouse after their older sister Ann was denied out-relief. Using census data, volunteers have researched the lives of Samuel and Charlotte tracing them after they left the Workhouse. Their story along with others is printed on the bedding and beds of the children's dorm.

Throughout the site we are able to include children in diverse ways. We use information gleaned from external archival sources for our written interpretation. This is used to build a picture of childhood, particularly in the schoolroom and children's dormitory.

As we have seen, external archives as well as in-house archives are excellent resources for fleshing out the detail of the lives of children in historic heritage environments. It is a time-consuming exercise. Often multiple pieces of research are required, and key pieces of information are not available. Written records that have survived are usually factual, written by adults and predominantly adults with power over the children. The stories told are not from the perspective of the children and provide only one version of history but by incorporating more of their stories we are able to bring them out of the shadows.

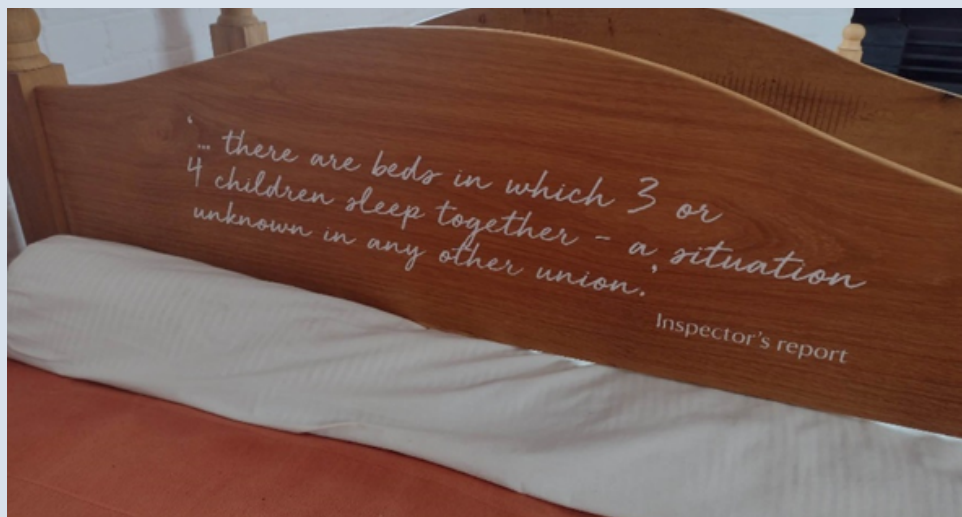
Many visitors are surprised to learn that



Credit: National Trust/Nancy Wilson

the Workhouse building was used as a bedsit for mothers and children between the 1940s and the 1970s. Several rooms have their original 1970s decoration, with one room set up as a bedsit. For some visitors, these areas create a sense of nostalgia. For others, the oral history testimonies of children who had to make the workhouse their home are profoundly moving. Two oral history recordings tell the lives of two children who lived in the bedsits from their own perspectives, creating a tangible link between the rooms, their previous occupants, and the visitors to the site. The post-1930s records in Nottingham Archives are still closed so ongoing research into the later periods will continue when the records become available.

# SOUTHWELL WORKHOUSE



Credit: National Trust/Nancy Wilson



## Tips

- **Use a variety of sources** to piece together information to add more depth and understanding to stories.
- For **sites with smaller collections** of records on site, external archives can be an invaluable resource.



## Pitfalls

- **Be careful when piecing together** the jigsaw not to end up with composite stories that do not feel 'real'.
- **Look beyond the obvious sources** to make sure you are not missing other important stories.
- **Recognise** that the sources you are working with are written by adults, in **some form of authority**.
- **Many valuable 20th century records** that would help to tell the later story of the site **are closed**, because they contain confidential personal data. They will not be available until 100 years after they were created.



# DIVERSIFYING HISTORIES OF CHILDHOOD

*HOW CAN HISTORIES OF CHILDHOOD HELP US TO TELL DIVERSE STORIES?*

Most of the stories that we learn from historic collections and buildings are – explicitly or implicitly – about adults. All histories of childhood thus contribute to a goal of telling more diverse stories about the past. Youth made all children relatively powerless compared to employers or officials or their parents or grandparents.

Yet, not all children were equally marginalised within their societies. As earlier case studies revealed, children who were

wealthy, male, white, able-bodied, and older were generally more likely to have been named in written records, had personal resources that have survived, had skills including literacy to create extant sources, and indeed to have become responsible for preserving records for later generations. The inequalities that shaped children's lives were thus intersectional, but what force these categories had and how these structures of power interacted was historically specific.



# DIVERSIFYING HISTORIES OF CHILDHOOD

## Osborne House, Isle of Wight

When visitors think of English Heritage's Osborne House, they think of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and their children. In this Italianate villa built as a private family home, the Queen's children are everywhere, whether it is in Mary Thornycroft's marble sculptures, the photographs of the children enacting tableaux or in the nursery suite which still holds the children's toys.

Yet evidence for the lives of diverse children is interwoven throughout the site in various guises. The Durbar corridor constructed in 1890-91 is full of portraits of Victoria's imperial subjects. These include the 15-year-old Maharajah Duleep Singh who had been exiled to Britain following the seizure of his lands, as well as the bronze bust of Abyssinian prince Alamayu Tewodros created after his premature death aged 18. Other portraits commissioned by Victoria include over 40 of Indian artisans, several of which are of children. These include a portrait of 9-year-old Ramlal, a child carpet weaver, and 19-year-old Muslim widow Naslej.

The royal children's playhouse, the Swiss Cottage, has been open to visitors since 1916. Extensive works associated with a new interpretation took place in 2013. Fitted out as a mini 19th-century dwelling where the royal children could prepare their own food, make butter and cheese and play at selling groceries, it reveals the imaginative play of these elite children in tasks that their many servants and subjects were doing as labour. The rakes and tools the children used are still in the Royal Collection today. The story of 15-year-old maid Kathy Barter provides an alternative perspective. Kathy worked at Osborne in the 20th century during its incarnation as the King Edward VII convalescent home for Officers. Kathy's tales of life as the 15th and youngest housemaid stands in stark contrast to those of indulgent play experienced by the royal children.

The intersecting inequalities of race and class have been a particular focus of pioneering projects to tell more diverse stories about children's lives. Over the last 25 years, historians and heritage professionals have begun to acknowledge the centrality of imperial power and global migration to British history. Evidence for the lives of children of colour can be found in historic houses and institutions across Britain. Although children's own perspectives are seldom recorded, the case studies of [Culzean Castle](#) and [Kenwood](#) expose the diversity of their experiences.

The [Beatles' Childhood Homes](#) offer a fresh perspective on ordinary lives. These domestic spaces explore the lives of young people outside of the regulatory and elite gaze that shapes so much of our evidence for working-class lives, as the [Culzean Castle](#) and [Southwell Workhouse](#) case studies reveal. Yet, other aspects of diversity remain hidden across most historic collections and properties, including the experiences of disabled children. There are many more stories to be uncovered. As the wayward objects of adult efforts to mould the future, children's lives offer unique insights into power relations and intersectional inequalities.

# CULZEAN CASTLE



Credit: National Trust for Scotland

## By Christine Whyte and Hannah Lawrence

The National Trust for Scotland has worked with scraps of documents and the physical landscape to trace and display the life of Scipio Kennedy, an enslaved child brought to Culzean Castle in Ayrshire, in west Scotland sometime around 1700.

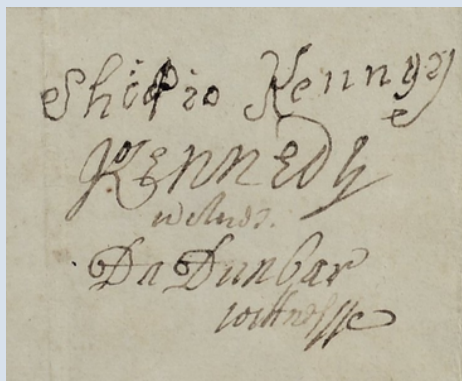
Scipio was born in West Africa and given the name Scipio by his enslavers to replace his original name. Scipio worked for the Kennedy family until he was manumitted in 1725, when he was around 28 or 30 years old and lived the rest of his long life in or around the Culzean estate. He went to live in an estate house with his wife, Margaret Gray, and numerous children.

Almost nothing is known about Scipio's life before he arrived in Scotland, and little more is known after his arrival. Scipio was one of many enslaved children brought to Britain in the 18th century who worked as pages, grooms or personal servants in British homes. Children of Indian origin and

Indigenous children from the Americas were also brought to Britain under various forms of duress. For many of these children, there is no extant documentary or material trace of their presence. Most children leave scant historical evidence, racialised children even less.

A key challenge for the historian or heritage professional is to identify children of colour, find their names and try to fill out the details of their lives. In the case of Scipio, the circumstances of his life at Culzean generated some rarely available documentation. The most detailed surviving record of his life is a 1725 document which confirmed his freedom. This deed, signed by Scipio himself, is an employment contract which obliged him to stay in the service of a John Kennedy for a wage of 12 Scots pounds a year. It included some telling details of his life to date. He was described as 'Scipio Kennedy from Guinea'. This was a contemporary generic term for West

Africa. Scipio was purchased in his 'infance' (infancy) by Captain Andrew Douglas, John Kennedy's father-in-law, in the 'West Indian Innes' (the Caribbean). Douglas then 'gifted' Scipio to his daughter Jean on the occasion of her marriage to John. At some point Scipio embraced Christianity. Baptism was often assumed to bestow freedom, though



Credit: National Records of Scotland

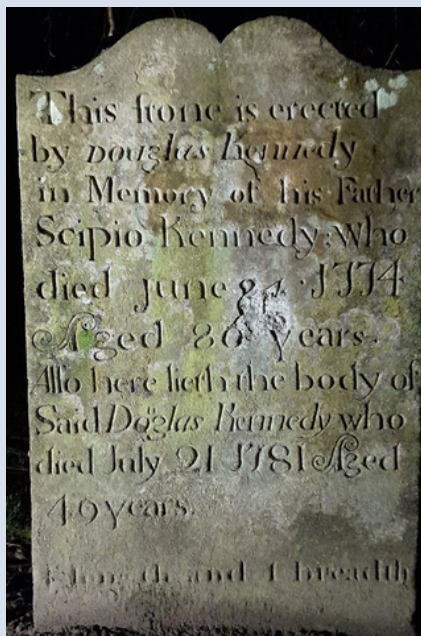
this was never legally established. After Scipio's manumission, he remained in service and lived on the estate. A few more extant documents attest to his life as a free man, such as the birth certificates of his children, his marriage certificate, and a brief mention in the Kirk court sessions for impregnating his future wife out of wedlock. He is also mentioned in Jean Kennedy's will as 'my old servant'. These traces provide us with the outline of his life but not his perspective. Instead, the events of his life were recorded by his enslavers or others in a position of legal authority. From a heritage standpoint, this makes telling his story challenging as we need to be careful not to reproduce and reinforce assumptions or biases of the past.

## Tips

- **Study first person narratives.** Use other autobiographies to get a sense of children's experiences. Olaudah Equiano, for example, was an enslaved man who lived in Britain and eventually went on to gain his freedom and become a writer - he wrote about his childhood experience of the Middle Passage.
- **Use descendants' stories, family histories and local histories.** There are incredible ancestry sleuths out there who are descendants of enslaved people. They may have family archives as well as knowledge of oral histories. These can be very valuable historically.
- **Use contextualising materials.** Depending on the historic space, if there are no traces of the children that lived there or were associated with the family, use other objects as a talking point. There are numerous portraits which feature children of colour in the background. Could one be reimaged to centre the image of the child? Are there books or letters that could show what people knew or imagined about West Africa, India, the Caribbean or Americas?

The National Trust for Scotland has taken on these challenges in the case of Scipio Kennedy. The ‘Scipio Trail’ allows visitors to follow landmarks associated with Scipio around the Culzean estate and Ayrshire. We have used the dearth of archival and physical remains of his life to our advantage. Instead of squeezing him onto a single exhibition display, or into a single room, we have spread his story across the Ayrshire landscape. We are demonstrating that his legacy spans the whole of the area while pointing to traces of him hiding in plain sight.

Our responsibility as a heritage institution is to carefully interpret the historical evidence about Scipio Kennedy. Part of that can be to acknowledge how little we know and why we know so little, while introducing new interpretations.



Credit:  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ScipioKennedygrave.jpg>



## Pitfalls

- **Remember their childhood.** Children of colour need to be explicitly recognised and discussed as children, first and foremost. Heritage organisations can play a key role in pushing back against the tendency for racialised children to be regarded as older or more adult.
- **Think carefully about language.** Some of the language used in heritage settings might obfuscate the reality of abduction, taking hostage, enslavement, forced labour, family separation or servitude. Sometimes visitors might presume that life was “better” in a country house for children of colour, so challenge these assumptions.
- **Consider the child’s life course.** Where were they and when? It is important to think about how children viewed time and the past – a three-month voyage would feel much longer to a younger child. Children would have a different relationship with their own past.



ENGLISH  
HERITAGE

# KENWOOD



Credit: Historic England Archive

## By Louise Cooling

Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761–1804) was 5 years old when she arrived at Kenwood. The mixed heritage child of a young enslaved black woman, Maria Bell and a Royal Naval officer, Sir John Lindsay, Dido was brought to Kenwood by her father, to be raised by her great-uncle Lord Chief Justice William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield. For the next 27 years, Dido resided with the Mansfields at Kenwood. As playmate and later companion to her aristocratic cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray, Dido was educated to the standards deemed appropriate for a genteel lady, and it seems occupied the challenging position of a much loved but poor relation.

Until the early 1980s, we knew almost nothing of Dido Belle and her life at Kenwood. At the point in 1986 when English Heritage took over running the site, her story was not featured in the villa's interpretation. For much of the 20th century Kenwood had been presented first and foremost as an art gallery. It was not until the 21st century that more meaningful research was begun to piece together Dido's history and to share her story, both with visitors to Kenwood on site and via a growing library of digital content.

The challenge to English Heritage in sharing Dido's story, particularly that of her early life, has been and remains the scarcity of available evidence. Very few contemporary archival sources are known and the few first-hand accounts present Dido through the often prejudiced lens of the period. With the greater part of original contents of Kenwood sold off in the 1920s before the villa passed into public ownership, there is virtually no tangible evidence of Dido's life at Kenwood.

There have been several key moments that have spurred concerted bouts of research into Dido and her life, notably the 'Slavery and Justice: The Legacies of Dido Belle and Lord Mansfield' exhibition that we staged in 2007, and the development of new interpretation and





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family resources as part of the 2012-13 'Caring for Kenwood' project. The former, a temporary exhibition marking the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, explored the relationship between Dido and Lord Mansfield, and the social dimensions of the British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, intertwined with the history of Kenwood. It marked a departure from earlier interpretations of Dido's life, which tended to draw almost exclusively on the published account of American loyalist Thomas Hutchinson, who met Dido while dining at Kenwood in 1779. While his account is still an important source on the life of Dido, who was then 15 years old, Hutchinson was by no means an unbiased observer and his offensive language was often repeated verbatim in early written interpretation. It was not until the 2007 exhibition that a more nuanced evaluation of his comments and descriptions was offered. The 'Slavery and Justice' exhibition was also an opportunity to present new research into Dido's life, including the discovery of her baptismal record by genealogist Sarah Minney. This document revealed Dido to have been 5 years old at the time of the baptism, which is believed to have coincided with her arrival at Kenwood. In it, we find the first written reference to her mother,

Maria Belle. It remains one of the very few sources on Dido's early childhood. The 'Slavery and Justice' exhibition was also the first occasion during which English Heritage engaged with the public in the interpretation of Dido Belle's story. This engagement has continued since. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to leave a creative literary response; these were then used to create 'The Wall of Words'. This was a temporary mural in the form of a poem, created by the multimedia artist and educator Beyonder in a series of live installations.

While the 'Slavery and Justice' exhibition was a turning point in English Heritage's approach to sharing the story of Dido, the outputs were largely temporary. It was not until the 2012-13 Caring for Kenwood project that the property offered any longer-term interpretation of Dido's life. Taking an interactive and storytelling approach, this interpretation primarily consists of family activities intended to



Credit: English Heritage Trust



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# KENWOOD

encourage enquiry-based learning and exploration. To create these, English Heritage drew on the limited surviving evidence pertaining to Dido's early life, as well as on wider research into the childhood norms of aristocratic families in the 18th century.

A decade on from Caring for Kenwood, the on-site interpretation has changed little; however, new information about Dido continues to emerge as an ever-growing number of international archives and historical publications are digitised and made available online. These new discoveries are incorporated into digital content offered via the English Heritage website and are shared through on-site volunteer-led storytelling and teaching resources. In recent years, Dido's story has also been the inspiration for several dynamic and innovative interpretation projects led by Shout Out Loud, English Heritage's national youth engagement programme. The 2021 'Stories, Sites and Sounds', project saw young performers from the Chineke! Junior Orchestra research the lives of three historical figures connected to English Heritage sites, including Dido Belle, before creating pieces of music inspired by their chosen historical figure. These musical pieces were then recorded and performed at Kenwood, with dedicated Google Arts and Culture content offering a lasting legacy for the project.

Research into Dido Belle has been largely



Credit: English Heritage Trust

driven by specific projects; however, in reality, it is never complete. Her story is subject to change and reinterpretation as new evidence is discovered and the wider discourse around the history of childhood, women and black and minority ethnic communities in 18th-century Britain continues to grow. The role of English Heritage in sharing Dido's story is to present the known facts through a range of resources, while leaving space for uncertainty, and to provide opportunities for diverse groups to engage with and share their own thoughts and feelings.



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# THE BEATLES' CHILDHOOD HOMES



Credit: National Trust Images/Annapurna Mellor

## By Katie Taylor

Many heritage sites tell the stories of elite children, but the former homes of the Beatles in Liverpool provide visitors with an insight into teenage life in ordinary homes in the 20th century.

Teens and teenage culture are an important part of our modern history. The idea of the teenager, as an identifiable life stage, began in the 1940s and, by the mid-1950s, it was part of the lexicon. The genesis of the welfare state liberated young people's spending power and that freedom, together with an explosion in the number of young people, led to the emergence of a teenage culture with which the Beatles are inextricably linked.

The Beatles are celebrated for their musical genius but are also representative of a generation. Through two ordinary houses that were homes to extraordinary people, we can see what teenage life was like in 1950's Britain. Their fame means that there is a wealth of material culture to research.

The National Trust site is across two locations. 20 Forthlin Road, Allerton was acquired in 1995. Built as part of a social housing boom following the Second World War, it is an exemplar of social housing design. A red brick terraced council house, it was the home of the McCartney family, Jim, Mary and their sons, Paul and Mike. Paul lived there from the age of 13 until he was 21 in 1963, by which point he was already famous as a Beatle. His mother Mary died shortly after the family moved in. Paul was 14. In 20 Forthlin, Paul and his friend, John Lennon, created some of the most iconic songs in music history.

The second site, 'Mendips' 251 Menlove Avenue, was gifted to the National Trust, by Yoko Ono Lennon in 2002. It was the childhood home of John Lennon, where he was raised by his Aunt Mimi and her husband, Uncle George Smith. The contrast between the two houses provides an insight into



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# THE BEATLES' CHILDHOOD HOMES



Credit: National Trust Images/Dennis Gilbert

the class differences between the two boys. Mendips was a much larger pebble dashed semi-detached house. Paul described it as 'one of the almost posh houses' in the Woolton area of Liverpool. Only a mile from Paul's much smaller terrace, its front door was kept for honoured visitors, such as the vicar. Paul, when he visited John, had to use the back door. The house has a porch area where John and Paul used to practise. The acoustics were great and Mimi didn't like the racket!

Both locations are centred on the lives of Paul and Mike McCartney and John Lennon rather than on Beatles history. The stories they tell largely stop in 1963-5 when the families moved out. Much of

what visitors see in the houses are recreated spaces, using photographs and oral histories combined with reminiscences from people who knew the families and the houses in the 1950s when the boys lived there. Both houses are full of period objects, from vacuum cleaners to record players. The familiarity of the domestic scale and the normality of the spaces are recognisable and yet evocative of a past generation. Many objects in the house may need to be interpreted for younger Beatles fans.

In recreating teenage life in these homes, the National Trust worked closely with Mike McCartney, using his own experiences of growing up at Forthlin Road. We have some unpublished photographs on loan. They place teenage boys in the house, showing their clothes, personal possessions, and hairstyles. Alongside them, in stark contrast are older family members, aunts in pinnies and dads and uncles smoking pipes. Of a different time, they serve to highlight the youth and opportunity of the teenagers.

The houses are visited together and are accessed by guided tour, with a minibus moving visitors from one to the other. Group sizes are small, with a maximum of 15 in the houses at a time. Just like in the 1950s, tour groups enter the



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# THE BEATLES' CHILDHOOD HOMES

houses through the back door and into the kitchens. The tour guides are paid interpreters, not volunteers. They are carefully selected and trained, but each has their own anecdotes and interests within the wider narrative of time and place that provide a unique and personal experience.

They tell stories about John and Paul as teenage boys in the 'smallest bedroom' of their respective houses, reading, writing, drawing, and listening to music.



Credit: National Trust Images/ Paul Harris

Visitors are able to contrast Paul's 'threadbare' bedroom in his small terrace with John's more comfortable room, which, while still the smallest, is comfortably furnished with 'classic 1930's bedroom furniture' and posters of Elvis Presley and Brigitte Bardot on the walls. Using copies of John's sketches, we see his playful, often satirical wit, his talent for art supported through his school life. A Pathé News reel film playing on a converted period set in Mendips gives context to the world in which John grew up.

The lives of these two boys are well studied with countless books, radio and television programmes, films and podcasts devoted to the history of the Beatles. The place that these two houses occupy in that narrative is to explain how it all started. These houses, carefully dressed and cared for, allow visitors to connect with these stories and to glimpse what an early 1950s childhood was like.

## Tips

- For person-led interpretation, **recruitment is key**.
- The tour is not scripted, but the guides are given content to convey, which they do as well as adding their own personal memories- it complements brilliantly the comfortable and domestic feeling of the houses.
- It is important to **be a stickler for the detail**, especially when the stories are so well known and the presentation is of a really recent period. Lots of visitors know a lot about the subjects we're talking about and it is essential to get it right.



## Additional Tips

### More practical guidance from heritage professionals

Louise Cooling @ Kenwood

- **Acknowledge uncertainty** where you find it.
- **In-person storytelling** is an effective and dynamic way to convey complex, potentially challenging histories.
- **High-quality training** for storytellers is key, followed up with regular refresher training.
- Make space for a **wide range of voices**.
- Be prepared to **take criticism and learn** from it.

Alison Duke @  
The Foundling Museum

- **Match your outcomes to your budget.** It is possible to do exciting things with a limited amount of money.
- **Get written consent** to use the interviews, ideally have the copyright assigned to your organisation, but make sure that consent is informed consent.
- Volunteers can provide great value to an oral history project. **Give them training and support.**
- Create a system to **back up your files** and make sure you keep up with changes to ensure your files don't become obsolete in the future.

Frances McIntosh @ Corbridge

- **Use digital content** to back up your physical interpretation- for instance our piece on the feeding bottles [The Mysteries of Corbridge | English Heritage \(english-heritage.org.uk\)](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/heritage/england/corbridge)



# How do we find out more?



## Useful websites

- The University of Oxford's Centre for the History of Childhood - organises regular online seminars, events and a blog. <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/centre-history-childhood>
- Children's History Society - an information source for historians, educators and members of the public fascinated by the rich and diverse global histories of children and young people. <https://www.histchild.org>
- Society for the History of Childhood and Youth - a society to promote the study of childhood and youth via conferences, book reviews, blogs and a journal. <https://www.shcy.org>
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children - provides a useful timeline of the history of child protection legislation in the UK. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-protection-system/history-of-child-protection-in-the-uk>
- The British Newspaper Archive, History of Childhood blog - interesting discussions with links to newspaper articles and comic pictures. <https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/tag/history-of-childhood/>



## Useful further reading

- Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (2006)
- Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (2001)
- Nicholas Orme, *Tudor Children* (2023)
- Janay Nugent and Elizabeth Ewan, *Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland* (2015)
- Ginger S. Frost, *Victorian Childhoods* (2009)
- Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (1996)
- Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880-1990* (1997)
- Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate* (2003)



# Notes on our contributors

- **Barbara Birley** is the Curator for the **Vindolanda Trust** and her work concentrates on conserving, cataloguing, interpreting and displaying the artefacts excavated from Roman **Vindolanda** as well as looking after the displays at the Roman Army Museum.
- **Louise Cooling** is Curator of Collection and Interiors at **Kenwood**. Louise specialises in British art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a particular interest in portrait miniatures, on which she has published and lectured.
- **Alison Duke** is the Collections Manager at the **Foundling Museum** where her responsibilities include looking after its collections and supporting the programme of temporary exhibitions and displays. Prior to this she co-managed the Museum's oral history project **Foundling Voices** from 2009-2013.
- **Elizabeth Greene** is Associate Professor of Roman Archaeology at the **University of Western Ontario** in Canada and a research specialist at **Vindolanda** working with the assemblage of leather and shoes.
- **Andrew Hann** is Head of the historians' team at **English Heritage**. He specialises in country houses and historic gardens and landscapes, with a focus on the 18th and 19th centuries.
- **Gillian Lamb** is a social historian, a historian of childhood, and an Early Career Researcher at the **University of Oxford** and the early career representative on the steering committee of the **University of Oxford's Centre for the History of Childhood**.
- **Hannah Lawrence** is a research assistant at the **University of Oxford** and researcher of Scipio Kennedy for the **National Trust for Scotland**. She is currently developing a Scipio Trail for **Culzean Castle**, which will allow visitors to visit important landmarks from his life.
- **Ruth Lewis** is an Experiences and Partnerships Curator for the **National Trust, South West**. Her responsibilities include advising properties on developing offers for families specialising in play and playful programming.
- **Frances McIntosh** is the Curator of **Hadrian's Wall and the North East** for Collections and Interiors at **English Heritage**. She specialises in Roman material culture and antiquarian study of the Roman period, though in her role involves caring for and researching collections right up to the 20th century.
- **Charlotte Newman** is a Senior Collections and House Manager for the **National Trust**. Her responsibilities include project management of **Lanhydrock's** Nursery Representation 2022.





# Notes on our contributors

- **Edith Parkinson** is a Senior Collections and House Officer working at **The Children's Country House at Sudbury**. Her responsibilities include looking after the Hall and Museum collections and working with colleagues on interpreting these collections for children and their families.
- **Siân Pooley** teaches modern British history at the **University of Oxford**. She is an associate professor in the Faculty of History, tutor and fellow at Magdalen College, and director of the **University of Oxford's Centre for the History of Childhood**.
- **Katie Taylor** is a Cultural Heritage Curator for the **National Trust in North West England**. Her role involves caring for buildings, gardens and landscapes in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and Cheshire.
- **Christine Whyte** is a Lecturer in Global History at the University of Glasgow and worked on the Scipio interpretation at the **National Trust for Scotland**. Her current research on the lives of emancipated children is funded by the British Academy / Wolfson Foundation.
- **Nancy Wilson** is the Collection and House Officer at **The National Trust's Southwell Workhouse and Infirmary**. Her responsibilities include the care of the collection, supporting the conservation of the historic buildings and being part of the day-to-day operational running of the site.
- **William Wyeth** is a Properties Historian at **English Heritage** specialising in castles. He undertakes research in history, archaeology and architecture to inform the interpretation of sites in the care of English Heritage.



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Image on front page: Credit: Unpacking treasures from the 18th century Doll's House at Nostell Priory, West Yorkshire. ©National Trust Images/Paul Harris.



If you would like to find out more about this project and future work in this area, visit our website ([www.torch.ox.ac.uk/u](http://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/u)). If you would like to get in touch about this project and future work relating to the history of childhood, please email [sian.pooley@magd.ox.ac.uk](mailto:sian.pooley@magd.ox.ac.uk)

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