

# *Changing Times, Valuing History:*

Historic houses for the twenty-first century



Lionel Richie performing at Holkham Hall

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## Introduction

The UK's heritage is unique. Our historic houses, castles, and gardens are emblematic components of the nation's richly layered and much-admired landscape. Nearly half of all visitors to the UK say that the chance to see places like these is one of their main motivations for coming here, and historic houses and gardens are hugely important to home-grown audiences too. In 2022, houses and gardens open to the public collectively received over sixty million visits: in comparison, live league football matches saw around thirty-two million spectators in the 2021-2 season. Visiting historic houses and gardens remains one of the UK's most popular pastimes.

Historic Houses is a membership association representing 1,450 independently owned historic houses, castles, and gardens across the UK, from famous names like Blenheim and Chatsworth to local gems like Brynkinalt and Traquair. Between them, Historic Houses places welcomed over 21 million visits in 2022, supported over

32,500 full-time equivalent jobs, and generated £1.3 billion for the UK economy, two-thirds of which was spent locally. Britain's historic houses and gardens remain one of our best examples of 'soft power'.

Our association was founded fifty years ago, in 1973. Back then, the future for historic houses and gardens looked bleak. Many were in such a poor state of repair that they were torn down in the decades after the Second World War: their owners could no longer keep them going.

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*Most historic houses and gardens in the UK are independently owned*  
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Much has changed since then, in large part due to the energy, drive, and passion of owners themselves. Most historic houses open to the public are maintained and funded by independent owners in the private sector, rather than by charities or government, and independent ownership remains by far the most cost-effective way to look after the nation's heritage.

To safeguard our unique and world-renowned historic houses for centuries to come, independent owners need the support of a fiscal and regulatory framework that ensures these precious buildings and landscapes are fit for the future. This report sets out why independent heritage matters — and what can be done to safeguard it for future generations.

FLY Open Air Festival at Hopetoun House



### IN 2022, HISTORIC HOUSES PLACES:

- ◇ Attracted over **21 million** visits
- ◇ Supported over **32,500** full-time equivalent jobs
- ◇ Generated **£1.3 billion** for the UK economy
- ◇ Welcomed over **141,000** educational visits
- ◇ Hosted over **26,000** cultural events
- ◇ Appeared in **4,100** days of filming
- ◇ Provided over **54,000** days of volunteering opportunities
- ◇ Sponsored **330** apprentices
- ◇ Spent more than **£156 million** on repairs and maintenance
- ◇ Created nearly **£4 billion** of well-being benefits through visits to gardens

# I. Our places matter

## Inspiring a passion for our past

Every one of the houses and gardens we represent is unique: they are not static museums, but ever-evolving, lived-in spaces where new stories are created every day. The histories of these homes and collections reflect the local, national, and global conditions in which they were created. From open-cast coal mining at Wentworth Woodhouse to the Dissolution of the Monasteries at Beaulieu, the slave plantations of the West Indies at Harewood House to the American War of Independence at Benjamin Franklin's House, Historic Houses places provide astonishing insights into the histories that continue to inform our present and our future.

Learning is at the heart of what many Historic Houses places do: in 2022, they welcomed over 141,000 educational visits, from primary school children to U3A groups, facilitating learning about everything from history and architecture to foraging and film-making.

Bringing history to life in the place it happened is one of the joys of heritage sites. Historic Houses runs seminars, study days, and webinars to help our members share best practice. We celebrate their achievements with our Frances Garnham Award for innovation and engagement in heritage education.

**Government and the public sector can support Historic Houses places to do more of this crucial learning and engagement work by broadening access to funding for education projects at independently owned historic houses. In particular, the National Lottery Heritage Fund should lift its cap on grants to the private sector to ensure all heritage sites that provide public access and public benefit — whatever their ownership structure — are able to apply for funding on a level playing field.**

Schoolchildren enjoying dressing up at Fulham Palace's summer explorers event



## Culture and creativity

Historic Houses places continue to bring culture and creativity to their communities today, hosting contemporary art exhibitions, electronic music festivals, open-air theatre, and winter light trails. In 2022, our places hosted over 26,000 cultural events between them, ensuring that wherever they live, people can be inspired by the UK's vibrant creative industries.

Filming remains a key income generator for many historic houses, and the soft power of the UK's fantastic built heritage has helped bolster our world-class film and TV industry. The benefits of this are felt across the UK, beyond just London and the southeast. In 2022, Historic Houses places hosted over 4,100 days of filming across the country, as the setting for programmes as varied as Apple's *Ted Lasso*, to Netflix smash hits *Bridgerton* and *Sex Education*.

A still from Netflix's *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga* (2020), filmed in the Great Hall at Knebworth House



Harry Potter: A Forbidden Forest Experience at Arley Hall & Gardens



A tour group explores Gosford House in East Lothian © Zoe Brunner



Children learning about emotional intelligence through Grayson Perry's *The Vanity of Small Differences* exhibition at Wentworth Woodhouse



Historic Houses places support the UK's dynamic creative industries sector, and offer their local communities diverse opportunities to engage with creativity on their doorsteps. **Their ability to do so, however, relies on a supportive fiscal and regulatory framework across a variety of policy areas. Government must ensure it analyses the potential impact on heritage and consults with the sector when considering changes to the fiscal and regulatory framework.**



Joris Laarman's work at *Mirror: Reflections on Design* at Chatsworth exhibition © Chatsworth House Trust

Garden writer and historian Advolly Richmond visited the team at the Japanese Garden at Cowden for the filming of *Gardeners World*



Historic Houses places support over  
**32,500 FTE jobs**  
in every part of the country

### Jobs, jobs, jobs

A great variety of skilled people are needed to keep historic houses alive: from curators and wedding planners to heat pump technicians and stonemasons. The properties we represent supported over 32,500 FTE jobs in 2022, including many in some of the UK's most disadvantaged rural communities.

In addition to paid employment, over 7,700 volunteers contributed over 54,000 days of volunteering at Historic Houses places in 2022, doing everything from gardening, conservation, or acting as guides and stewards, to organising community and charity events.

Historic Houses places are also committed to training up new generations — working with 330 apprentices, participating in horticultural traineeships, and hosting interns working on everything from archives to biodiversity studies. **Apprenticeship schemes, however, are sometimes difficult for small businesses to participate in. Opening up such schemes would allow thousands more to learn new trades and help power our national economic recovery.**

Lancashire-raised apprentice Esme Walker took part in The Prince's Foundation's *Building Craft* programme, based at Dumfries House



# II. Firm foundations

## Repairs and maintenance

The Covid pandemic highlighted the risks to long-term sustainability for any business dependent on customer footfall and commercial incomes. The UK Government's Culture Recovery Fund threw a lifeline to independent heritage in England. But it could not help everyone. Nearly half (47%) of Historic Houses member properties reported delaying or cancelling urgent repairs and maintenance projects due to the Covid lockdowns.

The backlog of repairs and maintenance projects facing Historic Houses places is now estimated to be in the region of £2 billion, despite an annual average spend of £156.2 million on repairs and maintenance every year across our members' properties.

The backlog of repairs at  
Historic Houses places is  
now estimated to be at  
**£2 billion**

Repair and restoration works on the north tower of Levens Hall



Working on the restoration of screen walls at Woburn Abbey



Full VAT continues to be charged for the repair of listed buildings, even though a zero rate applies to the construction of new homes. Applying a reduced or even zero rate to repairs would incentivise the re-use of older properties. This would represent a significant carbon saving, as well as help owners keep our shared heritage in good repair, extend economic stimulus through additional repair work and allow the public to continue to explore and enjoy these special places.

Using the model of the Culture Recovery Fund, **a cost-effective VAT relief scheme for heritage repairs should be made available to heritage businesses operating in listed buildings open to public access.** This would provide a secular equivalent to the long-running Listed Places of Worship scheme.

Fifteenth-century Sinai Park House was so derelict in the 1980s it was used as a pigshed. Today, it is being completely restored so that it can be brought back into use for wellbeing, learning, and access by the local community.



Restoration works on the ceiling at Thirlestane Castle



ABOVE: In the autumn of 2020, Powderham Castle received a grant towards essential restoration work on the roofs and parapets of its iconic castellated towers as part of the government's Culture Recovery Fund

## The importance of the fiscal framework

Independent ownership remains the most cost-effective solution for looking after historic houses and gardens. Simply put, the public purse would not be able to take on responsibility for this heritage. It is far better for these houses and gardens to remain in independent hands, with owners supported to look after the heritage in their care and open it to the public. This principle remains as true today as when it was first articulated in the Gowers Report on country house heritage, prepared for the post-War Labour Government in 1950.

The fiscal framework continues to be an essential consideration for any independent owner. Fifty years ago, the threat of new forms of taxation on heritage was one of the reasons our association was brought into being. Since then, we have encouraged improvements in the fiscal policies of successive Governments of all political persuasions.

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Today, the heritage reliefs within the capital taxation system remain vital to the ongoing economic viability of thousands of heritage sites across the country. These crucial reliefs must be protected and enhanced to safeguard public access, and ensure a bright future for independent heritage.

There remains much room for improvement. **Creating a Rural Business Unit to help simplify and streamline aspects of taxation for diversified rural businesses** would be a show of support for the vital economic activities of these businesses in their local communities. **Improving the way Heritage Maintenance Funds are taxed** would also ensure that these are used in the way in which they were intended.

## Smarter heritage protection

The principles of heritage protection are now widely accepted. But **aspects of today's planning system are badly in need of reform**. Too often, our under-resourced and slow-moving planning system threatens to condemn historic buildings to irrelevance and obsolescence by not allowing them to adapt and change. The climate crisis is already having a devastating effect on the UK's heritage: from prolonged heatwaves and droughts to flash flooding and plummeting temperatures in winter, our heritage, and in particular historic buildings, are already being put under immense strain. Heritage must be enabled — through policy change and funding support — to adapt and become more sustainable in the long term.

A survey we conducted with The Country Land and Business Association in 2022 showed that 87% of respondents believed that the planning system was a block to their efforts to decarbonise the buildings in their care. Historic Houses members constantly report issues with their local planning and conservation officers delaying or blocking energy efficiency and decarbonisation works.

The climate emergency requires decisive action, but the dither and delays of the planning system represent the antithesis of this. We believe that greater use of Listed Building Consent Orders (which were made possible through the Enterprise & Regulatory Reform Act in 2013 but remain barely used) for solar PV, window works, and heat pumps for Grade II listed buildings would be an effective way of speeding up the planning process without putting the historic fabric of these buildings at risk.

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The UK's planning system is badly in need of reform  
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Leighton Hall's conservatory being restored using sustainable materials

# III. A green grounding

## Reducing our carbon footprint

Our members take their responsibilities as custodians of our shared past (and future) incredibly seriously: they want to do right by the landscapes and communities in which they are so deeply embedded. The existential threat of climate change is alarming: 97% of Historic Houses places are keen to play their part in reaching net zero, and many want to begin this urgent work as soon as possible.

Enhancing the energy efficiency of historic buildings can be part of the solution to today's climate crisis. To do it properly, we will not only need to upskill thousands of workers, but also empower and incentivise owners to make the right choices for their own home. Reform to the planning system would go a long way to making a difference. At the same time, owners need up-to-date and relevant information and resources, in order to make informed decisions.

**97%**  
of Historic Houses  
member places support  
net-zero aspirations



Longhorn cattle roaming at Knepp, home of one of the UK's pioneering rewilding projects

RIGHT: Solar panels on the roof of the Meadowvole Maze at Muncaster Castle. The electricity generated powers the castle's day to day needs.



**Reforming the current system of Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) is essential.** Given that EPCs measure financial rather than carbon costs, it is widely recognised that they are an imperfect means of assessing energy use. EPCs are not designed for traditionally constructed buildings and can incentivise the wrong sort of behaviour. Creating a system which takes a more individualised approach, and which reflects the diverse nature and styles of buildings across the UK, will be vital for the long-term success of any retrofit programme.

BELOW: Athelhampton in Dorset is a zero-carbon Grade I listed Elizabethan house. Electricity is generated by cleverly hidden solar arrays, which are virtually invisible from the house and gardens. A new site-wide electrical grid was dug with a 'mole' to limit disruption and to allow the generation and storage of electricity for use in the house's ground- and air-source heat pumps.



Garden festival stalls at The Bishop's Palace

Jay Robin's Rose Garden at Borde Hill by Emli Bendixen  
© Borde Hill Garden

## Keeping outdoor spaces alive

From Victorian walled gardens to croquet lawns, rolling Capability Brown landscapes to perfectly manicured topiary, Historic Houses members look after over 9,600 acres of the UK's most significant and best-loved gardens, each with their own unique story to tell.

English gardens are world-renowned for their romance, beauty and detail; however, the environmental risks facing these cherished green spaces must be taken seriously so that a concerted effort can be made to overcome and adapt to them. The role of gardens and designed landscapes as carbon sinks and floodplains is often overlooked. From storms to heatwaves, changing weather patterns and global warming pose a serious threat to historic gardens. New plant diseases mean that the custodians of these precious landscapes must remain ever vigilant.

Spending time in gardens has long been one of the UK's most popular hobbies: visiting gardens and gardening have both been proven to have benefits for mental wellbeing and help to reduce stress and depression: studies from the Universities of Exeter and Tokyo have shown gardening provides significant physical benefits too. Gardens provide essential growing spaces for local communities — places to sell

produce, run cultural activities, and volunteer. Our most recent data (2023) suggest that the wellbeing benefits of visits to Historic Houses gardens are worth nearly £4 billion. **Recognising landscape design as part of the UK's thriving creative industries sector would help reinforce the status and importance of gardens and landscapes in our national life.**

The wellbeing benefits of  
visits to Historic Houses  
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# Summary of proposals

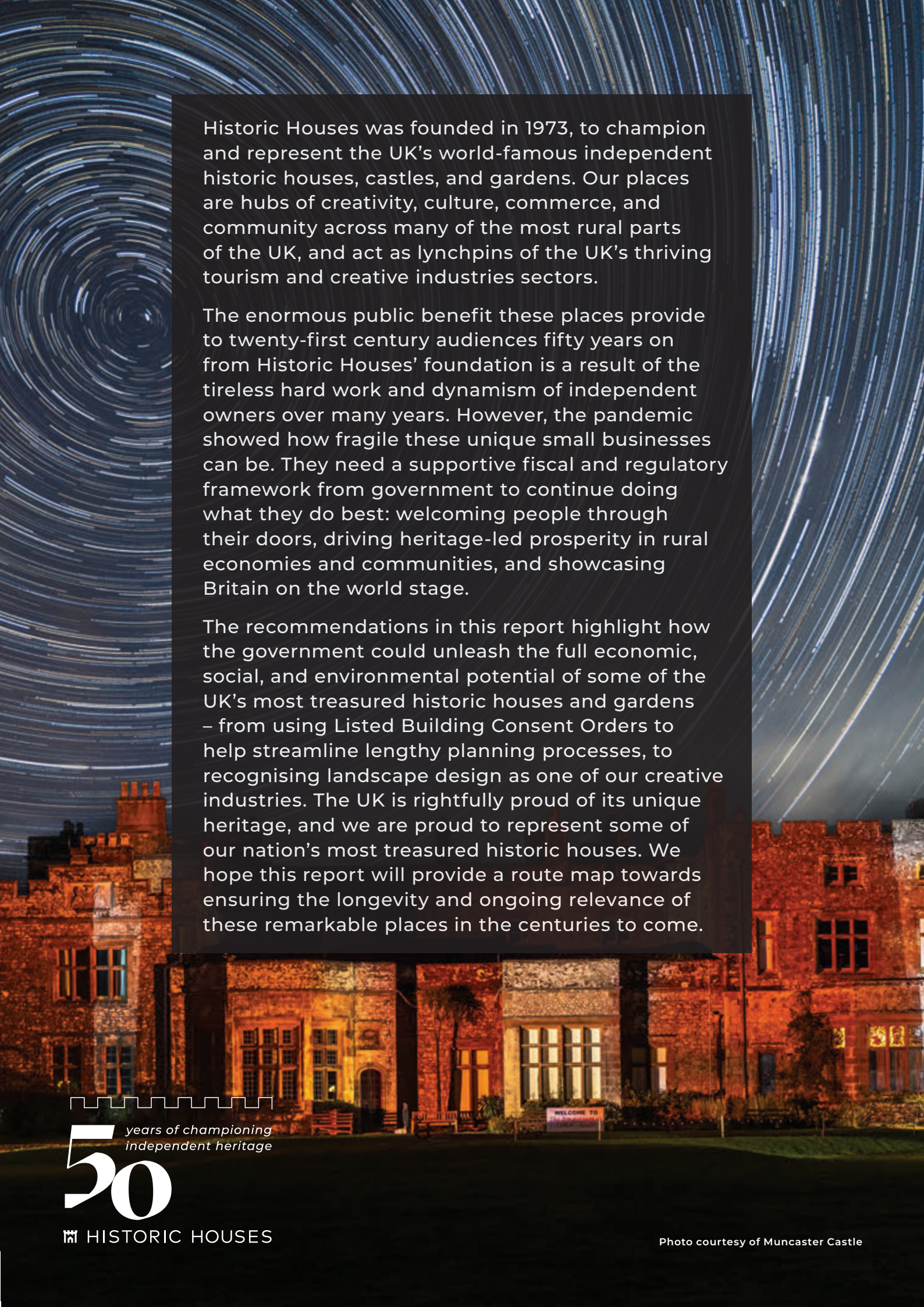
To make the UK's independent heritage fit for the future we propose the following:

- ◇ Existing fiscal reliefs are critical for saving heritage, and must be protected and enhanced.
- ◇ A cost-effective VAT-relief scheme should be made available to heritage businesses operating in listed buildings open to public access.
- ◇ Our planning system for heritage needs reform: a smarter system of heritage protection is needed.
- ◇ The use of Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) in relation to historic buildings needs urgent review.
- ◇ The National Lottery Heritage Fund should lift its cap on grants to publicly accessible heritage in the private sector.
- ◇ DCMS should recognise landscape design as one of the UK's thriving creative industries.



Pedal Norfolk Cycling Festival based at Holkham Hall





Historic Houses was founded in 1973, to champion and represent the UK's world-famous independent historic houses, castles, and gardens. Our places are hubs of creativity, culture, commerce, and community across many of the most rural parts of the UK, and act as lynchpins of the UK's thriving tourism and creative industries sectors.

The enormous public benefit these places provide to twenty-first century audiences fifty years on from Historic Houses' foundation is a result of the tireless hard work and dynamism of independent owners over many years. However, the pandemic showed how fragile these unique small businesses can be. They need a supportive fiscal and regulatory framework from government to continue doing what they do best: welcoming people through their doors, driving heritage-led prosperity in rural economies and communities, and showcasing Britain on the world stage.

The recommendations in this report highlight how the government could unleash the full economic, social, and environmental potential of some of the UK's most treasured historic houses and gardens – from using Listed Building Consent Orders to help streamline lengthy planning processes, to recognising landscape design as one of our creative industries. The UK is rightfully proud of its unique heritage, and we are proud to represent some of our nation's most treasured historic houses. We hope this report will provide a route map towards ensuring the longevity and ongoing relevance of these remarkable places in the centuries to come.

  
**50** years of championing  
independent heritage

 HISTORIC HOUSES

Photo courtesy of Muncaster Castle