

Jeanette Wilmer sketch over photo

We discover how exploring the history and landscapes of Burgh Castle in Great Yarmouth is helping people's mental health.

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>
> *Laura Drysdale, Director of the Restoration Trust*

Exploring Burgh Castle

The Restoration Trust uses heritage, arts and culture to support people who experience mental illness.

As part of the National Lottery-funded Water Mills and Marshes Landscape Partnership project, a Restoration Trust group are exploring the history and landscapes of Burgh Castle Roman Fort in Great Yarmouth.



At Burgh Castle Fort. Credit: Laura Drysdale

Before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, the group enjoyed mindfulness walks, talks with experts and creating artwork inspired by what they saw

We asked the Restoration Trust’s director, Laura Drysdale, why they use heritage in their work – and how they are continuing to support people during lockdown.

A feeling of belonging

“Heritage is about that feeling of belonging, knowing that this is your place and understanding how your history fits within wider history," Laura says. “It is a part of being human.



Having fun at Burgh Castle. Credit: Robert Fairclough

“We are often in unbeautiful environments, particularly those who live with mental illness who regularly have to visit places like health centres and benefits offices. Access to heritage gives people a chance to be somewhere beautiful, forge connections with other people and explore their own creativity.

“It can be a hard shell to crack and even harder for some members of the group to gain that feeling of entitlement – the feeling that yes this heritage does belong to us. For many it would be much easier to hide away. It takes a lot of courage, but once people do get that feeling, the benefits can be extraordinary.”

> “I’ve lived nearby Burgh Castle for so many years and had never been. Now I don’t think I will ever stop going.”
>
> *Burgh Castle Almanac participant John Durrant – read about his experience on the project.*

Breaking down barriers

How does the Restoration Trust create that sense of belonging?

“Crucially we listen," Laura explains. “Mental illness attacks ordinary human experiences and pushes people to the margins. As a result, we work with very excluded people.

“We talk and find out what will help – it might be access to the site via minibus or the language used to promote events.



Walking across the fort. Credit: Robert Fairclough

“Listening has to become action. You don't want people to feel that their time and thought has been wasted. When people are listened to they feel more confident to tell you things, so it is a virtuous circle.

“We involve people with lived experience of mental illness in planning the project, for example through running trial sessions. We have scheduled opportunities for listening, and people with lived experience sit on the Project Board to monitor progress.

“Listening helps us to tackle our own organisational attitudes. Ultimately, we, our partners and the participants are in it together. Everyone is learning, it's always an experiment, things are always changing. It can be demanding, but it offers the best outcomes.”

Staying connected during lockdown

Of course, coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the way the project can operate. Laura tells us how they have been managing: “Our IT team have been working hard to get laptops set up for participants who want to stay in touch in our weekly Zoom meetings and Facebook group.”

“While that digital connection is very important, we are still maintaining contact with those who it doesn’t suit by sending creative activities to them.”

> “Not being able to be in the heritage landscape is certainly being felt. Having lost that connection has made the group realise how important it is to them and their mental wellbeing."

Kindness is the theme of Mental Health Awareness Week this year and it is fundamental to the group’s activities. “Kindness is a big one for us,” says Laura, “especially during this time of high risk.

"The group have been really supportive of each other, even dropping food off for each other. People will remember those acts of kindness.”

Valuing the heritage landscape

The group are looking forward to getting back together when they can. “Not being able to be in the heritage landscape is certainly being felt. Having lost that connection has made the group realise how important it is to them and their mental wellbeing.



The World as Nature Intended sculpture. Credit: Robert Fairclough

“During the pandemic, The National Lottery Heritage Fund has been fantastic in helping us reshape the project and be flexible on its timescale. The group is most definitely hoping to meet up again once we can, to continue the project – maybe not quite as we planned but it is going to be great!”

More information

We also heard from Burgh Castle Almanac participant, John Durrant, who told us how the project had supported his mental health.

Burgh Castle Almanac is a partnership between the Restoration Trust, Norfolk Archaeological Trust, Access Community Trust and Norfolk Museums Service. Find out more about the Restoration Trust's "culture therapy" on their website.

For Creativity and Wellbeing Week Liz Ellis, Policy Project Manager at The National Lottery Heritage Fund, discussed the role of kindness in the Burgh Castle Almanac project with Victoria Hume, Director of the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance.

Every project The National Lottery Heritage Fund supports must achieve our inclusion outcome: **a wider range of people will be involved with heritage.** Read our inclusion advice to find out more.

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John Durrant

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