

Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	Positive local management: Are there any local authorities that have been especially proactive for the historic environment and deserve recognition?
Name of project/group:	Gunnersbury Park
Location:	London Borough of Ealing
Duration (if applicable):	Current (Dec 2014 – spring 2017)

Short description of project:

The Grade II* Gunnersbury Park, situated in the London Boroughs of Ealing and Hounslow, is one of the most important parks in the country, containing a number of listed buildings within its grounds (22 in total, including two mansion houses). In use since the C18, Gunnersbury has passed through a number of owners including Princess Amelia (a daughter of George II) and the Rothschild family. After the death of Leopold de Rothschild in 1917, the estate was broken up and gradually sold off, until in 1925, when the garden buildings, houses and 75 hectares were purchased for public use by the then boroughs of Acton and Ealing (the site is now jointly owned by Ealing and Hounslow Borough Councils).

Following years of under-investment, the Grade II* registered park and many of its buildings and structures are now in need of repair and are included on the London Heritage at Risk Register.

With funding from Historic England, urgent work has now been carried out to stabilise and repair a number of buildings. In summer 2014, the Heritage Lottery Fund committed a further £9 million towards the restoration of the park, with work starting in mid-September 2015. The improvements, which will be completed by spring 2017, include:

- repair of the external and internal fabric of the large mansion, including refurbishment of the drawing room, long gallery, dining room and historic kitchens
- creation of display rooms to showcase the museum collections and the building's history effectively, and to provide space for events and functions
- installation of a lift to open up the building to the public and re-establish views into and out of the building
- construction of learning spaces and a carriage display gallery adjacent to the new park café with improvements to the visitor reception, signage and gift shop

The Parks for People initiative from HLF focuses on regeneration and investment for parks like Gunnersbury, helping to conserve heritage, and ensuring the long-term future of parks.

What would have happened without this project/group?

Without the small grant from Historic England (£445,000) and the willingness of all partners to work together and find a solution, the initial condition survey may not have been prepared. Inevitably the condition of the buildings, and the park itself, would have continued to deteriorate and be at risk, potentially with the loss of some fabric from the Grade II and Grade II* listed buildings. The legibility of the designed landscape would have been further eroded, and there would have been a less strategic approach to managing the different interests in the park, including heritage, sport, and education. The survey enabled priorities to be identified, leading to the stabilisation of a number of buildings (such as the stables) and the development of a full conservation management plan for the site.

How did the project achieve its objectives?

The project team worked closely with Historic England from the outset and, as mentioned, modest grants from HE helped the boroughs better understand the condition of at risk assets and safeguard them whilst longer-term funding was sought (a total of £13 million from the HLF and match funding from both Ealing and Hounslow BC). Nigel Barker, Planning and Conservation Director at Historic England, was on the project board and was very supportive of the project.

The partnership between the boroughs of Ealing and Hounslow has been key in the development of a shared vision for the future of Gunnersbury, leading to the development of the conservation management plan providing clear priorities and objectives for the regeneration of the site over the next few years.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

The conservation management plan for Gunnersbury has been instrumental in guiding the vision at Gunnersbury and the additional funding from HLF has guaranteed the long-term future for the park in its entirety – the amenity facilities and the heritage assets. Many of the heritage assets have a new use identified and will be repaired, removing their at risk status.

An entirely new governance structure has been developed. The park is no longer managed by the Councils, but is now run by the Gunnesbury Estate 2026 Community Interest Company (CIC).

The project is on-going but public benefits created will include:

- An increase in number of visitors to the Park from 600,000 per year to £1m per year. The project in particular focusses on increasing the range of audiences.
- An increase in number of volunteers
- At least 3 new permanent posts

- 3 apprenticeships
- An increase in number of visitors, and wider range of audiences, to the museum from 30,000 to 50,000 per year

In addition various learning opportunities, estimated up to 25,000 during the life of the project will be created and it is expected that over 650 people will be trained, through curriculum based learning programs, CPD training, skills training, community learning, and through working with horticultural colleges, building crafts college and Kew Gardens.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges would anything be done differently?

In terms of challenges, the two main challenges were a) funding and b) the partnership between the two London boroughs. In terms of funding, without the HLF grant, the vision for Gunnersbury may not have been realised. There was also a challenge in terms of safeguarding the buildings whilst the HLF bid was prepared in order to prevent further loss of fabric, which is where the small grant from Historic England helped in order to stabilise those buildings most at risk. Alternative sources of funding, through enabling development and other initiatives, may have led to a very different outcome for Gunnersbury Park and the local community.

There was also a challenge in balancing the different interests in the park in terms of sport, heritage and other amenity uses. The aim was to ensure all these interests worked together (and not compromise the significance in terms of heritage), rather than in competition with each other.

The partnership between Ealing and Hounslow has been critical in the development of the conservation management plan and the application for HLF funding. Bringing two local authorities together, with different priorities, approaches and funding structures can be challenging, but by working together both boroughs have ensured the future success of Gunnersbury. The project management by Ealing enabled common ground between the boroughs to be found and ensured high-level decision makers were on the Project Board.

What is the future for the case study?

The project will address the at risk status of the park and many of its listed buildings, providing new amenity facilities, including improved sport facilities and a new café, creating an amazing place to visit and enjoy for all visitors.

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