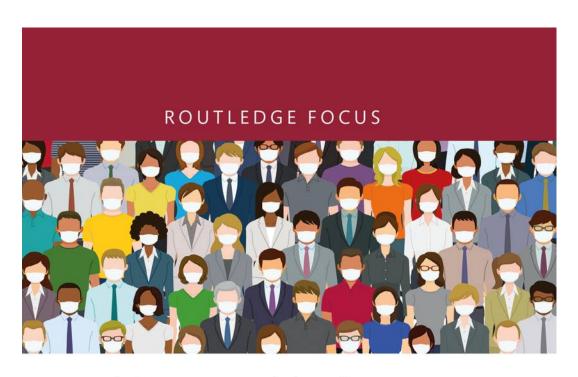# Literary Heritage

Lessons from the Coronavirus Pandemic

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

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

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

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1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

In museums such as these, the object of interpretation is often a text. Thus, traditional text-based interpretations, such as captions or other printed material, are less widely used than in other museums or historic houses: after all, adding an extra layer of texts about texts risks overloading the visitor's appetite for reading. Instead, many literary heritage sites are

interpreted through (for example) guides or room stewards, technological aids (whether handheld or touch-screen), or object handling (sometimes books themselves) – all of which were prohibited by Covid-related restrictions. Hence, many sites required complete reinterpretation, often at very short notice.

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

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

Given the scale and scope of these challenges and questions – some amounting to nothing less than existential threats – an ambitious, large-scale study of the impact of Covid-19 on the UK's literary heritage was undertaken, investigating the nature and specificity of the challenges and obstacles faced, the extent of the ensuing costs (not just financial), the lessons that can be learned from the response to the pandemic, and the prospects for the future of literary heritage sites in building back after Covid-19. This book presents key findings from the study, which was funded by UK

Notes

1. For an eclectic range of reflections on the impact of the pandemic across society, culture, and industry, see Manchester University Press's remarkable book series *The Pandemic and Beyond* (series eds. Pascale Aebischer, Fred Cooper, Des Fitzgerald, Karen Gray, Caroline Redhead, Melanie Smallman and Victoria Tischler). https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/series/the-pandemic-and-beyond/. ↵

2. Ian Jenkins and Katrin Anna Lund (eds), *Literary Tourism: Theories, Practice and Case Studies* (CABI, 2019). ↵

3. See, for example, Nicola Watson, *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain* (Palgrave, 2006); Marion Harney, *Place-Making for the Imagination: Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill* (Ashgate, 2013); Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost, *Books and Travel: Inspiration, Quests, and Transformation* (Channel View, 2012); Hans Christian Anderson and Mike Robinson, *Literature and Tourism* (Continuum, 2002). ↵

4. See, for example, Alison Flood, 'Research finds reading books has surged in lockdown', *Guardian*, 15 May, 2020; Jonty Bloom, 'Booksellers hope soaring sales will continue as we read more', *BBC*, 7 October, 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58802805; Abigail Boucher, Chloe Harrison and Marcello Giovanelli, 'How reading habits have changed during the COVID-19 lockdown', *The Conversation*, 5 October, 2020, https://theconversation.com/how-reading-habits-have-changed-during-the-covid-19-lockdown-146894. For empirical evidence and data, see the surveys by the Reading

Agency, https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/new-survey-says-reading-connects-a-nation-in-lockdown.html; The Scottish Book Trust, 'Reading in Scotland: Reading over Lockdown (2020)', https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/our-impact/reading-in-scotland-reading-over-lockdown; and Nielsen, 'The Record-Breaking Year that was 2021', https://nielsenbook.co.uk/research/2021-record-breaking/ (Not accessible as of May 05, 2025). ↵

5. See Laing and Frost, *Books and Travel.* ↵

6. The analogy is a commonplace, but is most clearly explored by Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford University Press, 2016). ↵

2 Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quantitative data – pertaining to changes in visitor numbers, website traffic, staffing levels (both voluntary and paid), memberships and friends/supporters organizations, income levels and income sources, reduction of capacity due to social distancing regulations, additional Covid-related costs, and additional Covid-related financial support – were gathered by questionnaire. Several of the organizations we worked with were unable to provide us with some of these data. (For example, a surprisingly low number of literary heritage websites were monitoring website traffic.) Hence, some of the statistics presented in what follows were based on a very small dataset. Where needed, further methodological details on statistics are given below. Unless otherwise stated, numbers pertain either to the calendar year 2020, or the tax year 2020–21.

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

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

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

Note

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