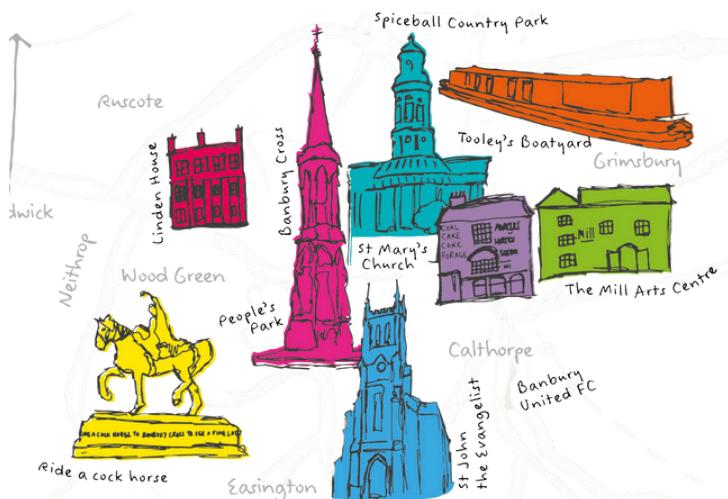


Banbury Heritage Project

Behind the Wellbeing Stories



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Introduction

This document provides background detail to eight Wellbeing stories from the Banbury Heritage Project. It forms part of the project's [online resource pack](#), where the stories can also be found. The evaluation practice behind these stories is still in development, with the Banbury Heritage Project playing an important role in that process. As such, the stories and the activity behind them are part of an ongoing inquiry into capturing wellbeing outcomes.

What was the Banbury Heritage Project and who participated?

The **Banbury Heritage Project** was a partnership between Historic England and Age UK Oxfordshire, running between June 2023 and December 2024. The project supported adults over 65 to engage with the material, social and cultural heritage of Banbury, focusing in particular on those experiencing age-related challenges or a reduced capacity to thrive where they live. Many of the group's members face complex and hard-to-address challenges such as physical or cognitive frailty and social isolation; many also have some degree of sight loss or visual impairment. Additional barriers to engaging with heritage have included issues around physical accessibility, socio-economic or other inequalities, and digital exclusion. Over the course of the project, participants took part in group sessions on themes selected by the group, the content of which ranged from presentations and discussions around topics of local interest to trips visiting local heritage sites. More can be found about the project through the online resource pack.

What does Heritage have to offer Wellbeing?

Research by Age UK shows that older people themselves believe ‘creative and cultural participation’ to be the number one positive influence on their own sense of wellbeing when ranked against other determinants such as physical activity, access to healthcare and social participation. Historic England also recognises the multiple ways that older people can benefit from a rich understanding of heritage: heritage as ***doing***, as ***participating***, as ***bringing-together***, as ***healing***, as ***place identity***, or as ***Nature and the Environment***. Poor wellbeing contributes to greater inequality, loss of opportunity and social disconnection; heritage can play a role in supporting people ‘where they are’, whether struggling, surviving or thriving.

What have we tried to understand?

As part of the Banbury Heritage Project, we have been exploring the contribution heritage engagement has made to the wellbeing of participants. This work is grounded in ongoing research to develop new evaluation practices around wellbeing that work better for participants, organisations and funders. Beginning with the three-year UKRI Healthy Ageing Challenge funded project – Connecting through Culture As We Age – at The University of Bristol, this research continues to engage with older adults through CADA’s (Creative Ageing Development Agency) Creative Later Life programme and other project partners.

This new evaluation practice under development focuses on helping people to structure and articulate the wellbeing stories they most want to tell. What our research shows is that there are key wellbeing themes and outcomes that can provide the right ‘hook’ for people to tell their stories. This can support not only personal reflection but also provide a bigger, clearer picture of wellbeing impact for a group. More on the emerging principles behind this work, and how the Banbury Heritage Project has helped shape them, can be found in the ‘Focus on Evaluation’ document in the Banbury Heritage Project’s online resource pack.

How is the storytelling structured?

We have continued develop, and then trial, a new, simple wellbeing reflection tool as part of the Banbury Heritage Project. The process of reflection is structured around the choice of a wellbeing theme, an outcome that serves as a hook to detail a wellbeing story and the choice to consider where your own story may lead next. The themes and outcomes have all been shaped through a co-design process with older adults as part of the wider research programme described.

Our five wellbeing themes are Enjoyment, Connection, Growth, Purpose and Direction: Enjoyment might come through a sense of excitement, escapism, or even surprise; Connection might mean a closeness with other people, a community, or even a place; Growth might mean learning something new, finding inspiration, or gaining confidence in yourself; Purpose might come through the contribution you make, a sense of achievement, or just being yourself; finally, Direction might mean a sense of where you’re heading, what you need now, or what has to change.

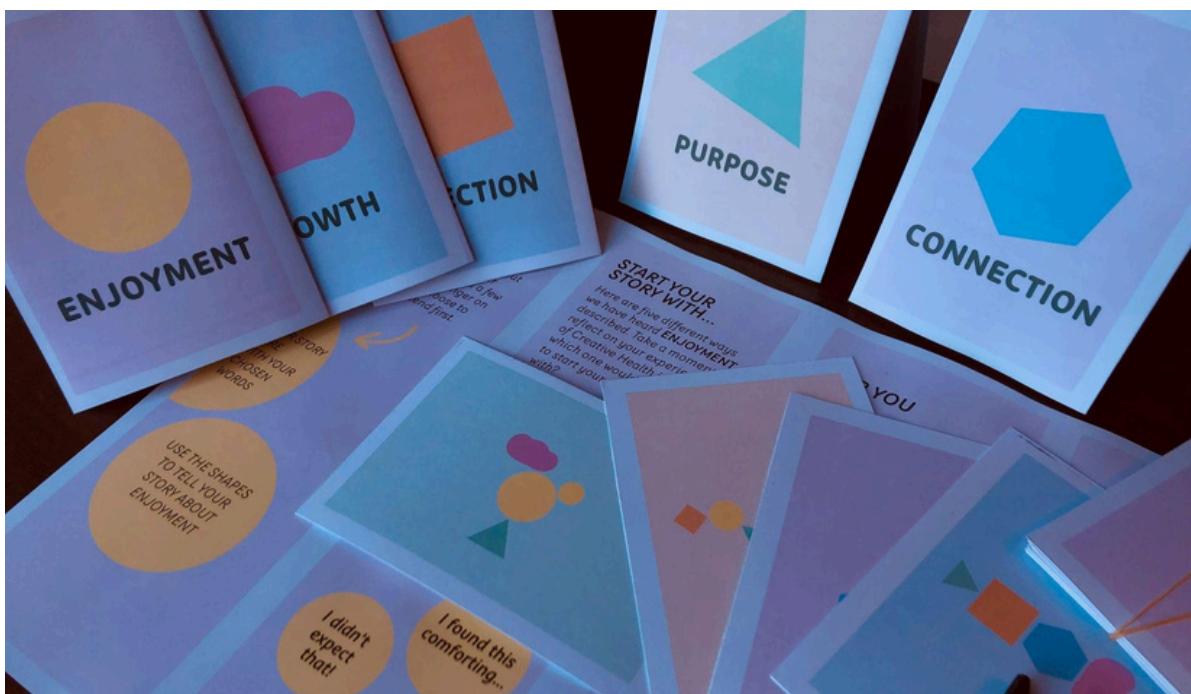
In this reflection activity, the choice of a theme, an outcome to help detail experiences and a consideration of what might come next provide the structure for a personal wellbeing story. For the Banbury Heritage Project, this story might capture the origins of a wellbeing need, the impact of heritage engagement and how it has opened up new directions for wellbeing.

What does this new evaluation practice look and feel like?

Seated in a small group around a table, participants are offered folded paper guides for different wellbeing themes (see below). The facilitator leads a discussion about each in turn, with everyone choosing a theme after a moment to consider the story they want to share.

Opening their themed guide reveals a number of wellbeing outcomes to choose from (or add to) as a 'hook' to start their wellbeing story. Opening up the guide once more reveals a lightly designed space where participants are encouraged to first write down their chosen outcome (in their own words) before giving a more detailed account of their wellbeing experiences. This may take the form of writing, drawing, quiet thought or even discussion, all supported by light facilitation and prompts designed to support structured reflection. A final step is to choose one of a number of postcards that help imagine a future beyond the programme. Whether participants have a new idea to explore, a message to share or a need for support, the postcards help capture, exchange and plan these next steps together.

With gentle facilitation, participants 'hold the reigns' in how they progress through this wellbeing reflection activity. Participants choose whether to structure and articulate their thoughts alone or reflect with others in a pair or the wider group. Being able to do both these things – leading on the expression of your own experiences but also facilitating others – has proven important in bringing the stories that matter most alive. By building the reflection activity into a session that also explored wider heritage offers in the region, wellbeing stories could be tied in more meaningfully with future avenues for support.



What have we learned?

As part of the project's [online resources](#), we are making available a number of short 'case stories' developed out of our reflection activity with participants. People chose for their story to either remain private or be made available for others to read in this way. Where stories have been shared, participants have helped shape and agree the final version.

For participants in the Banbury Heritage Project, heritage is as much about the doing, participating and bringing-together as it is about the historical materials that have informed their activities. But the two are interlinked – their engagement with heritage and their experience of wellbeing are woven together: one does not simply precede or drive the other.

We invite you to consider the following four observations while you read the stories.

- 1. Connection is a key to unlocking many doors to wellbeing:** We learned that the majority of participants chose to structure their reflection around the theme of Connection, although each chose a different outcome and way of articulating its value. The wellbeing stories showed us how the group and its activities have opened up opportunities for different kinds of connection. These each link into other wellbeing themes and reveal different scales or depths of impact. Each person's current wellbeing is a reflection of their past, present, and how they feel about the future and their place in it.
- 2. A resource for coping with the past, present and future:** We learned how different wellbeing themes capture people's strategies for surviving or thriving. For some, heritage engagement with the group has become part of managing change or loss and finding ways to take each day as it comes. For others, it has been a source of strength for continued personal resilience (or resistance); for others still, a way to think to the future in the face of continuing change – or perhaps to prepare for difficult times anticipated to lie ahead.
- 3. From confidence in me to confidence in us:** We learned how confidence was activated for our participants in a variety of ways. Engaging with heritage activities equipped some with the confidence they needed to simply be part of a group, and to do so on their own terms. For others, it helped in gathering the courage to reach out further than at present, connecting them to new social life beyond the group itself. For those with higher initial confidence, sharing their heritage knowledge and skills helped not only validate that understanding but support others to more fully participate themselves.
- 4. From individual experiences to 'heritage from the bottom':** We learned that participants value the heritage they encountered for a variety of reasons; each with the potential to lead to wellbeing outcomes. Whilst some found joy in-the-moment from unexpected stories and perspectives, others found value in being part of (and building) a shared experience, sometimes marking out 'common ground' where none was visible before. For some, this revealing of 'heritage from the bottom' opened up the potential for collaborations, relationships and more active project roles.

Resources

For more information on the Banbury Heritage Project, including Focus pieces on Co-creation and Evaluation, wellbeing case stories, and other project resources, visit:

<https://creativelaterlife.com/heritage-project/>

For more on Age UK's research in wellbeing:

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/wellbeing-research/index-of-wellbeing/>

To learn about the Connecting Through Culture project at The University of Bristol:

<https://connectingthroughcultureasweage.info/>

For information about CADA England: <https://cadaengland.org/>

For more on Historic England's position on wellbeing and the historic environment:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/research/back-issues/wellbeing-and-the-historic-environment/>

And on Historic England's Wellbeing and Heritage Strategy (2022 - 2025):

<https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/about/strategy-wellbeing-heritage-2022-25/>

The Authors

The authors of this short Focus piece are Dr Timothy J. Senior and Dr Karen Gray, commissioned through the non-profit Wicked Problems agency **supersum**. Supersum helps people work together in new ways around Wicked Problems, those that speak to different fields of expertise and so resist straightforward and easy answers.

Dr Timothy J. Senior is a multi-disciplinary researcher focusing on the field of Wicked Problems, Clumsy Solutions and Messy Institutions.

Dr Karen Gray is a researcher and evaluator with a particular interest in how we can better articulate and share the value of arts, cultural, and leisure activities that support people's wellbeing.

Work on the new wellbeing evaluation practice outlined will continue through 2025, with full details and toolkits published in due course. Please get in touch if you are interested in learning more about our approach or participating in its development.

If you want to learn more about this Focus piece, contact supersum at:

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