

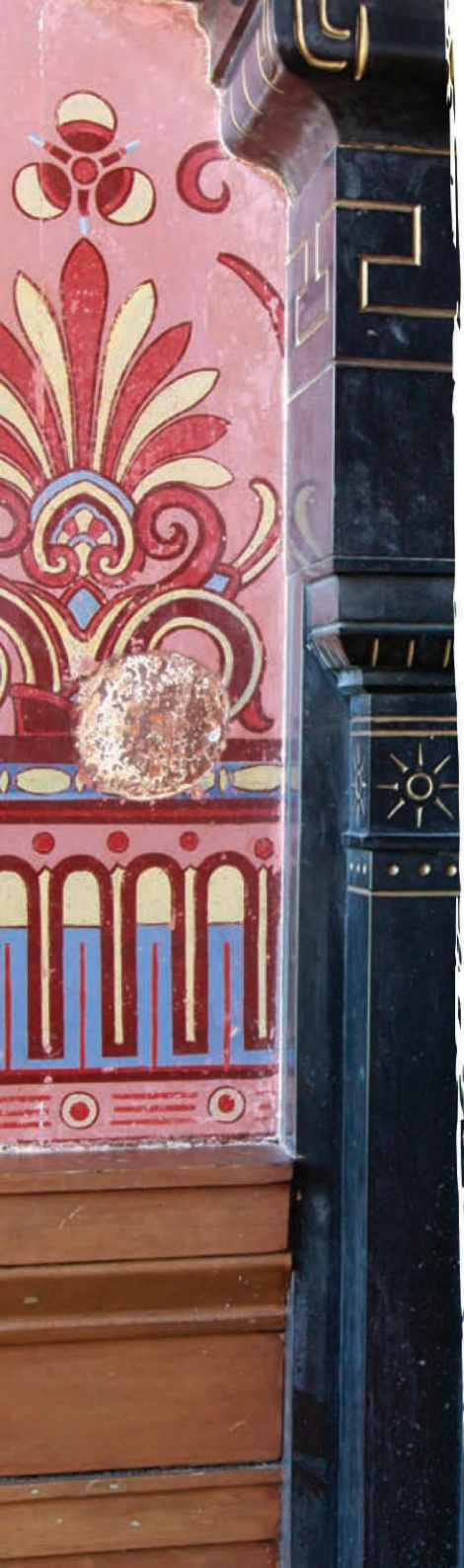


EXPERIENCING THINGS

10 tips to inspire visitors
using collections and interiors



**NATIONAL
TRUST** *for*
SCOTLAND



HOW TO USE OUR COLLECTIONS AND INTERIORS TO CREATE UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES AND ENCOURAGE REPEAT VISITS

Everything we have in our properties tells a story – from clothes to candlesticks and teapots to oil paintings.

Our collections and interiors are awe-inspiring. They act as a draw to our properties and are responsible for raising at least £7 million annually.

But we often give visitors what they expect from the way we present our things. This is unlikely to provoke interest at the time and we know that many visitors don't come back. We have unique things but are we providing unique experiences?

We need to change the way we show our collections and this means valuing people as much as places and things.

We should ask ourselves: how is what we're offering different from last year? In what way will visitors returning to the property be surprised?

These guidelines are based around ten tips to share and care for things that will excite and inform visitors and, importantly, attract them back to your property.



"My biggest pet peeve with historic houses is the predictability of the visitor experience. I yearn for the element of surprise during these visits."

SHARING THINGS

1. **LESS IS MORE:** Why display everything at once and then expect people to come back? Display less and change it more often.
2. **VARIETY AND CHOICE:** Are some things that visitors experience better appreciated at particular times of the day or year? Can visitors enjoy different tours of your property? Our visitors are all different, so provide different ways of learning about a room or an object. Changing how things are interpreted is the easiest way of providing variety for visitors.
3. **PROGRAMMES NOT DISPLAYS:** We wouldn't go to the cinema to see the same film over and over again, so why do we keep our properties the same? What stories do your visitors most enjoy? Put your collections at the service of your stories, not the other way around. Think of compelling storylines that could be spread over several seasons to entice people back. This might involve closing off rooms, giving them a much-needed rest. Don't give everything away at once.
4. **MOVING VISITORS:** What can visitors DO at your property? We need to move from passive experiences (just looking and admiring) to **activities** in each room so that we engage visitors with their mind and body. Can anything in your collection be touched or smelled or listened to? What makes your property feel like a home and how could this be enhanced? Everyone likes hearing personal stories, while fewer people like just dates and 'expert' opinions. Warm stories stick, not cold facts.
5. **BEING 'CUTE':** Good guiding can really enhance a visit to a property.

"What matters is the house's story. Houses are stages on which lives are lived. The action is what matters."





"The best guides tell the story of the property in ways that connect with how visitors live their lives or draw on material that is familiar to them."

Encourage anyone interacting with visitors or giving tours to be **CUTE**:

CONVERSATIONAL: How much scope is there for listening to visitors during tours? Are objects ever used as conversation pieces? What can you learn from your visitors and how could this be shared and used by others?

UNORTHODOX: How will the delivery of a guided tour or even the welcome to your property stand out in people's memories? Are you open to new ways of engaging with visitors?

TAILORED: Guides should be able to adapt tours to different audiences, but be disciplined enough to stick to time and theme. How do you get feedback on tours and how is this used to refine them? This should be a continual process.

EXPERIMENTAL: There is no 'right' way of guiding and to break the mould we need to try new things. Encourage guides to try something different and memorable, such as speaking from a bed, dressing up or inviting visitors to sit and have tea while telling them part of the story.

Transforming the visitor experience at our properties will mean being **creative** and **pushing the boundaries**. This will often mean taking risks and involving others. However, changes needn't be large scale and expensive: small changes can make a big impression!



"A little background is fine – enough to get you oriented. What I want to know is basically 'who were these people? What drove them? Why did they do the thing they did?' "



CARING FOR THINGS

Whatever we do to improve the visitor experience should not harm what makes our treasured things special. But it is important that we balance the risk of using our collections with the risk of them becoming forgotten. Tell people how their visit will make the condition of the collection BETTER.

6. **GET THE MESSAGE RIGHT:** Positive communication is more likely to make visitors feel included in caring for our heritage. Rather than say 'don't sit', say 'if you'd like to sit, please ask'. If a room is closed for conservation work, explain what is happening and encourage visitors to come back to see the results.
7. **INVOLVE VISITORS:** People find the work to care for collections fascinating, so make this part of the visitor experience rather than something that's done behind closed doors. Conservation in action projects might cost more to undertake, but they are real winners with the public and strengthen the message to support the Trust by becoming a member or making a donation.
8. **FIND DIFFERENT WAYS TO USE THINGS:** Some objects are so vulnerable that they can't be used in the way they were originally intended, otherwise we'd lose them forever. However, most of our things **can** be used in a variety of ways. Rather than assume something can't be used, carry out a risk assessment to consider what degree of risk is deemed appropriate. Like interpretation, conservation is a creative act so just because, for example, a chair might not be strong enough to be sat upon repeatedly, doesn't mean that visitors can't sit beside it or interact with it in another way.
9. **PREVENTING NOT REPAIRING:** The greatest risk to our collections comes from physical damage or theft. Regular monitoring of what is where, training staff and volunteers to identify and reduce risks, and ensuring housekeeping standards are maintained are all essential to avoid the need to repair or replace (which often isn't possible).
10. **PLAYING GOD:** Light levels, temperature, the dryness or dampness of the air, and the presence of pests all affect the health of our treasured things. You are in control of the internal 'weather' for our collections, so please make sure that conditions are monitored and managed.



WORKING TOGETHER

This transformation will need a team effort to identify what experiences (not things) make our properties and collections unique. Good ideas will be underpinned by thorough research and supported by our excellent team of curators and conservators, but these ideas can come from anyone. Encourage everyone in your team, staff and volunteers, to be creative and take ownership of what they care for.

Remember, if you'd like to make any changes which involve moving or using any items please get in touch with the Collections Team so they can advise on how best to do this. We need to record anything that is moved so we can find it in the future, and to carry out risk assessments where necessary.

Here are some of the people who'll be able to help you:

CONSERVATOR – to move objects and advise on new ways of using rooms

CURATOR – to think of good stories and programmes, and how to redisplay rooms

ARCHAEOLOGIST – to discover the hidden histories of your property

POLICYTEAM – to advise on NTS policies and approaches to access, interpretation, conservation, etc

COLLECTIONS INFORMATION OFFICER – to give object information and keep track of collections being moved

LOANS REGISTRAR – to give guidance on any restrictions on photography or handling objects, and to liaise with lenders if you'd like to move or redisplay a loan

We'd love to hear about any changes you make. Get in touch with David Hopes, Head of Collections and Interiors (Policy), at dhopes@nts.org.uk, or share your stories via the intranet or with an article on the website.



"All too often people think of conservation as what you can't do rather than what you can."

