

Collaborative Doctoral Award: Paving a Way for Deaf Heritage

Research area: Under-represented Heritage

Supports: NHPP Supporting Actions - Community Engagement in Protection

University Partner

University of Bristol

Project Summary

Projects such as English Heritage's ['Disability in Time and Place'](#) highlight the way that specific historical environments were shaped by and for their users. This is particularly the case for environments used by deaf people, whose reliance upon visual communication or auditory augmentation necessitates either substantial adaptations to buildings or, in some cases, buildings (or parts of buildings) designed and built bespoke.

Recent research has uncovered many of these historical deaf adaptations. The 1851 Great Exhibition demonstrated a 'deaf pew', complete with tubular system to pipe the voice of the clergy directly from pulpit to ear-trumpet. At least one church went further; St Saviour's Church for the Deaf and Dumb (Oxford St. 1870 - 1923) was rotated through 90 degrees to ensure better access to sunlight and its interior designed to preserve sightlines, furnished with two (signing and speaking) pulpits and decorated with artwork communicating deaf people's hope of celestial hearing.

Wherever they occur, environments adjusted to foreground vision or amplify hearing challenge our assumptions of a 'normal' sensorium and speak of the creativity of humanity in overcoming difference. Yet this rich heritage remains underexplored and the learning that it offers, untapped. Indeed, it is positively under threat. In the last 12 months, changes in Deaf community cultures, finances and owner-decisions have resulted in at least one Deaf church being put on the market (Acton), and two Deaf centres (Bristol, Wolverhampton) being sold. Urgent intervention by English Heritage to list the Acton church has preserved it for the future, but much more is needed if other Deaf heritage environments, and knowledge of their histories, are to be identified, preserved and enjoyed by future generations.

This project will identify and assess Deaf heritage in England, describe its significance in the widest terms and work to devise and test negotiated plans for its future sustainable management and promotion. It will do this by bringing together experts from the University of Bristol and English Heritage, to support a PhD student who will be tasked with the following general research focuses (RF):

- RF1: Identification and Cataloguing. The development of an authoritative, central catalogue of Deaf heritage environments must be the student's first priority.
- RF2: After identification, the student will engage with diverse groups (users, owners, experts) to assess the significance and value of different characters of Deaf heritage; architectural innovation, community history, financial, academic and wider social value. This will inform their ongoing work.
- RF3: The student will work with historical and heritage experts to develop strategies and processes for the ongoing protection, preservation, understanding, and promotion of Deaf heritage to both hearing and Deaf audiences.
- RF4: The project will devise, conduct and assess pilot projects, which will involve historical research on one or more Deaf heritage spaces and the exploration of strategies to manage

and publicise the value of these spaces, to further inform understanding of managing a Deaf-specific heritage portfolio.

In addition to the research thesis, each of these Research Focuses produces a carefully and critically constructed output that is a staging point in paving the way towards a more sustainable understanding and management of Deaf heritage. The project will also contribute to the priorities and objective of English Heritage by bringing the expertise of researchers in Deaf history at the University of Bristol to develop English heritage's implementation of the National Heritage Protection Plan with regards to Deaf heritage, and will create significant impact for the Deaf community, for owners of Deaf heritage sites, for academics within the field and related fields, and for government and wider society.

Contact Details

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