

Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	How heritage is cared for and managed at the local level
Name of project/group:	Norton Conyers
Location:	Yorkshire, near Ripon
Duration (if applicable):	2006-2015

Short description of project:

Sir James and Lady Graham, a former museum curator, began the restoration of Norton Conyers – a late medieval house, extensively rebuilt in the 17th century – in 2006. Their sensitive and painstaking work over the past twenty-nine years has revealed fascinating layers of history, which visitors are now able to discover and enjoy; Norton Conyers re-opened to the public in July 2015.

The Grade II* listed house – one of the most complex timber-framed houses in the North of England – has been the home of the Graham family since 1624. The exterior has distinctive Dutch-style gables and the interior contains fine 18th century plaster ceilings. It is well known for being an inspiration for Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*. Brontë is believed to have visited Norton Conyers in 1839 and the family legend of a 'mad' ancestor confined to an attic room might have given her the idea for the character of Mrs Rochester.



The exterior (Photo: Sir James Graham).

What would have happened without this project/group?

During the extensive restoration project, Sir James and Lady Graham battled a significant death watch beetle explosion – as well as dry and wet rot – to restore the house. Their dedication and great attention to detail has brought the house to the point where it is now

able to open its doors to day visitors, host weddings in the gardens and welcome volunteers from the local community.

Without the Grahams' dedication to the restoration project, the unique historic features of Norton Conyers – especially those that formed the inspiration for one of the great British novels, *Jane Eyre* – could have fallen into irreversible disrepair. Thanks to Sir James and Lady Graham's vision for Norton Conyers, the public is now able to discover and enjoy this important part of Yorkshire's heritage.

How did the project achieve its objectives? What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

The project fulfilled its objectives by securing the future of the historic fabric of Norton Conyers, and by opening the house to day visitors, weddings and volunteers from the local community.

The restoration works enhanced many features of Norton Conyers that Brontë mentioned in her description of Thornfield Hall: the rookery, the broad oak staircase lit by a high latticed window, the high square hall covered in family portraits and 'the Mad Woman's room' in the third storey attic.



The staircase following restoration (Photo: Sir James Graham).



The hall following restoration (Photo: Sir James Graham).



Interior following restoration (Photo: Sir James Graham).

Following the discovery of a staircase leading to the attic, a 'secret' door has been created in the 19th century panelling, opening the space to the public for the first time. The library has also been restored and furnished to resemble Mr Rochester's study in Brontë's novel. Further finds made during the restoration process included rare Tudor painted boards hidden behind 18th century plaster and 1760s wallpaper – a rare survival – discovered in the main staircase passage.

Norton Conyers won the HHA/Sotheby's Restoration Award in 2014.

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

The sheer scale of the project was the greatest challenge, with one problem leading to another. Houses like Norton Conyers are a fragile palimpsest of historical layers, which can present unique restoration challenges.

The Grahams worked closely with English Heritage and their local council, and pay tribute to the wide circle of dedicated and highly-skilled volunteers and professionals who supported the restoration project, without whom they would not have been able to complete the restoration to the standard it has achieved today. These include an eminent architect, a former national museum curator, archaeologists, landscape historians, geologists, brick experts and an entomologist.

What is the future for the case study?

Norton Conyers is now open to the public for day visits and pre-booked private tours. The garden also hosts regular weddings, and the gardens can be booked for children's parties and teddy bears' picnics. The gardens are also enjoyed by the local community for regular charity open days. In the summer of 2015, fundraisers were held for Amnesty International and St Michael's Hospice.

The Grahams are committed to developing the educational offer at Norton Conyers, and have established an ongoing and growing learning programme, including a successful education day on plant history.

The Grahams are currently working with the wide circle of volunteers and professionals who supported the restoration of Norton Conyers to edit a film charting the project, produce academic journal articles and put together a book about the house. They are keen to make the extensive research available to the public and academic community as widely as possible.

Having won the HHA/Sotheby's Restoration Award in 2014, the restoration of Norton Conyers is recognised as a remarkable achievement by passionate and dedicated owners.

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