

## Case Study - National Trust for Scotland

### 1. The organisation

The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) is a third sector charity and is Scotland's largest membership organisation with over 310,000 members. It cares for properties which straddle a timeframe stretching from the earliest geological processes to the Mesolithic Period and on into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The NTS has a presence in every corner of Scotland, from the most northerly tip of Shetland to the south coast of Dumfries and Galloway; from the eastern shore of the country at St Abb's Head to the most westerly islands of St Kilda in the Atlantic Ocean.

Within the context of the historic environment, the Trust's responsibilities encompass:

- 10,000 archaeological sites
- 35 major gardens
- St Kilda, Britain's only dual World Heritage Site
- Battlefields such as Culloden, the site of the last pitched battle on British soil
- Collections of fine art and more than 100,000 precious artefacts representing both the highest levels of craftsmanship and the prosaic needs of lives once lived.

Together these places and objects tell the stories of Scotland and the Scots; how our people travelled and interacted with the wider world, taking with them their energy and values returning with new ideas and valuable artefacts.

### 2. Types of Volunteering

**Overview** – NTS is the largest engager of volunteers in Scotland's historic environment. Each year it engages over 3,000 volunteers, including historic house guides, garden assistants, countryside rangers, outdoor conservation volunteers, collections care and administrative assistants. Length of service ranges from the very new to over 40 years of volunteering. NTS has a very high retention rate for volunteers. Their profile is generally from either end of the demographic spectrum: those who are retired and who are looking for something to replace work; and engagement with the youth cohort through ProjectScotland, Scotland's national youth volunteering charity.

**Classification of historic environment volunteering** – given the wide-ranging remit of NTS across both the historic and natural environments, the NTS People Department was asked to advise on how they would classify their volunteers who operate within the natural environment. They came back with a clear-cut answer:

*"All of our volunteers are directly or indirectly involved with the 'historic environment'. This includes outdoor conservation volunteers given that they are helping to support designed gardens and our landholdings with significant historic interest."* Head of People, NTS

**Focus of the case study** – given the scale and breadth of volunteering across NTS, it was agreed that rather than trying to document all aspects of volunteering the case study should focus in one particular area. 'Innovative and unusual volunteering roles' was selected as the theme to be explored. This is profiled at the end of the case study.

### 3. Benefits of volunteering

**Benefits to NTS** – volunteering is the lifeblood of the organisation:

*“Volunteers bring enthusiasm, skills, knowledge and ideas; they help us engage more effectively with the communities we serve; they help raise the profile of the Trust and support fundraising; and last but not least they improve our visitor experience through their knowledge and passion.”* Volunteer Coordinator, NTS

**Benefits to volunteers** – volunteering supports the health and wellbeing of the volunteers. NTS research demonstrated that their volunteers are 7% happier than the average person<sup>1</sup>. The volunteers also benefit from access to the properties and collections about which they are passionate. This includes access to NTS and external specialists, which help them develop their own skills and knowledge. Volunteers also have the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills with others: both inside NTS and with the public visiting their sites.

### 4. Challenges to volunteering

The most significant challenge is the ongoing supply of individuals who wish to engage with NTS and its work. As noted, there is a heavy reliance on an older cohort and this has risks going forward. Perhaps more significant is the increasing level of competition for volunteers. The NTS finds the volunteer engagement process most challenging in its more remote rural areas, such as Inverewe Gardens in North West Scotland, as well as in their rural properties in the North East of Scotland.

There is also an ongoing challenge to NTS to be a leading organisation in the recruitment, management and resourcing of its volunteering function. It must ensure that it remains an attractive organisation to volunteer with, as it does not necessarily have as strong a ‘charity appeal’ as Oxfam or Save the Children.

### 5. External policy & influences

The most important external influences for NTS are:

- Its relationships with key partners and funders such as Scottish Natural Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund. Their engagement and support is often dependent upon effective volunteer engagement and support; and
- The requirements to comply with legislation, such as the PVG Scheme, places constraints on the management of volunteering at NTS events. Recruitment must be done far enough in advance to allow for these checks to take place. This can compromise volunteer engagement for one-off events.

### Case Study Focus – Innovative and Unusual Volunteering

Volunteer Scotland’s interview with the NTS Volunteer Coordinator identified four innovative areas of volunteering: building interpretation, music, costume interpretation, and needlework and textile conservation. The distinguishing features of this volunteering contribution are:

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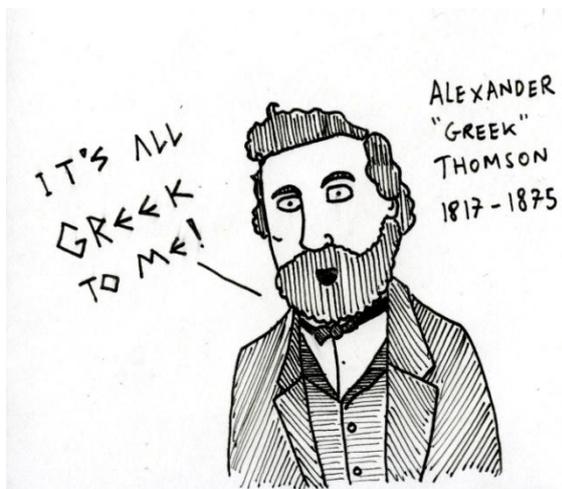
<sup>1</sup> [Volunteering and Happiness: a Study with National Trust for Scotland Volunteers; March 2015](#)

- *Specialist skills* – each role requires advanced skills and experience which are of a high order, requiring years of training and development;
- *Unique skills* – the volunteers bring skills into NTS which are often unique to the organisation. With the exception of building interpretation they are not supplementing existing skills; rather they are fronting specialist roles which otherwise would not be resourced
- *Nature of the skills* – two of the skill areas are focused on performing: music and costume; which contrast with the 'behind the scenes' technical skills of building interpretation and needlework and textile conservation.

### **Specialist Volunteering Role No. 1 - Building Interpretation**

Holmwood House is a unique 19<sup>th</sup> century villa located in Cathcart, a few miles outside Glasgow. It has been described as the architect Alexander 'Greek' Thomson's finest domestic design. Built in 1857-8 for local businessman James Couper, many of the rooms are richly ornamented in wood, plaster and marble.

One of the key challenges the NTS has faced has been the interpretation of the building as successive owners and varying uses have modified and hidden the original architecture and design. However, through restoration work, Thomson's original room decoration, based on themes from the classical world, is being uncovered. This, and the properties Year of Architecture celebrations, provided an opportunity for a volunteer to help the NTS Interpretation Team 'bring the building to life' and to help tell the story of the building's historic architecture.



Design © National Trust for Scotland

Joe, who has a strong background in visual communication, illustration and architectural history, as well as a keenness to further his skills and experience of heritage interpretation, has put forward various proposals for improving the visitor experience, and in particular is developing an illustrated activity booklet, including a caricature of Alexander Thomson, which will engage younger audiences (or anyone who wants to) in looking closely at and enjoying Greek Thomson's unique and inspiring designs and architecture. He has also been advising on interpretation at Tenement House, and is helping the team develop new internal communications materials.

### **Specialist Volunteering Role No. 2 – Music Outreach Group**

The NTS has a 12 member volunteer outreach group who specialise in traditional folk music. They play a variety of historic instruments including the fiddle and the chanter, a smaller version of the bagpipes. The volunteers all live in the Inverness area, with their hub venue being the Culloden Battlefield site. However, they tour around the area and play at a wide

variety of venues including retirement homes, shopping centres and schools, with up to 12 performances each year in addition to their monthly music sessions at Culloden.

*“By providing regular musical sessions at Culloden they use traditional Scottish music to help to make the place much more than just a ‘visitor centre’ – they link music with the historic environment and show to the public what we mean by Scottish culture.”* Learning Manager, NTS Culloden Battlefield



Photo © National Trust for Scotland

### Specialist Volunteering Role No. 3 – Costume Interpretation

The NTS uses volunteers to interpret their period costumes in both the first and third person:

- First person interpretation – this is where the volunteer performs in a specific role (for example, the lady of the house). The volunteer will be dressed in a period-specific costume and the objective is to ‘inhabit the character of that individual’; and
- Third person interpretation – this is where the volunteer is in period costume, but engages with the audience as a modern individual, with an understanding of current terminology and using ‘show and tell’ to explain and discuss collections, including the costume etc.

The properties which use costume interpretation include:

1 <sup>st</sup> Person Interpretation	3 <sup>rd</sup> Person Interpretation
Culzean Castle, Ayrshire (being launched as a pilot)	Culloden Battlefield Visitor Centre c. 16 volunteers
Georgian House in Edinburgh – this has been running for over 10 years – c. 40 volunteers	Falkland Palace, Fife c. 10 volunteers

To illustrate the volunteering role the experience at the Georgian House is described. The first person interpretation is run during the off-season in November. There are two delivery models used:

- *Scripted tours* – this model is used during less busy periods, including November / December. A volunteer guides the tour group from room to room, where visitors meet real historic characters from the house such as Georgina Lamont, the daughter of the clan chief:
  - *Upstairs* – the clan chief and his family
  - *Downstairs* – the house-keeper, the butler, cook, etc.
- *Self-guided tours* – where the volunteers base themselves in different rooms and the public make their way through the building at their own pace.



Photo © National Trust for Scotland

It takes 20 volunteers to run a scripted tour. The Georgian House therefore has a 'cast' of 40 to enable the workload to be shared across two teams.

*"The volunteers bring the building and its history to life. Their impact can be measured by the quadrupling of visitor numbers during what is normally a very quiet period. We can get 160 visitors a day when the interpretation is being run during November. It is so popular that people come back again and again."* Property Manager, NTS Georgian House

#### **Specialist Volunteering Contribution No. 4 – Needlework and Textile Conservation**

*Textile Conservation Group* – based at the NTS Hill of Tarvit property in Cupar, the group meet once a fortnight to undertake their highly skilled textile conservation work. Their work includes:

- Conservation of the Falkland Palace 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish tapestries – one of the most prized possessions of the NTS.
- Working with valuable historic fabrics to create authentic items to furnish Trust properties. For example, they used Italian damask silk which was 300 years old to make the hangings for the state bed at Culzean Castle.
- Making protective covers for precious objects to protect them for the future

*“They are a highly skilled group, with some individuals who have been involved for over 30 years. They are driven by a keen interest in sewing and work away industriously ‘behind the scenes’, providing a vital contribution to the Trust.”* Volunteer Coordinator, NTS

*Needlework Group* – this group specialises in embroidery and is based at Culross Palace. There are 10 – 12 in the group working from October to March one morning each week. They also supplement this with additional work at home. Their focus is to create artwork for display in NTS properties, working with modern fabrics but using traditional technologies. Like the Textile Conservation Group, their work is highly skilled and they show the same level of dedication and commitment.



Photo © National Trust for Scotland

For both groups their involvement with the NTS provides an outlet for their passion and skills relating to textiles.

### **Contribution and Impact of Specialist Volunteering Roles**

As demonstrated above these specialist roles provide a significant additional contribution to the Trust. These can be summarised as follows:

- *Public engagement* – the music outreach group and interpretation interpretation roles have helped the NTS deliver an enriched and engaging visitor experience, bringing added value to a day out in a Trust property. The artwork produced by the Needlework Group helps to improve the public's engagement with NTS's historic buildings.
- *Conservation* – the protection and stabilisation of vital textiles such as the Falkland Tapestries;
- *Interpretation* – the work of the volunteer interpretation assistant at Holmwood House has been invaluable in improving the interpretation of this important interior design.
- *Recording* – the interpretation report produced for Holmwood House has contributed to the recording of the original interior design of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson.

This contribution ties in nicely with the three core themes of 'Our Place in Time': Record, Protect and Share.

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