

# Sustainable heritage

## *An Oxford academic helps reveal the hidden stories of Britain's country houses through the Thames Valley Country House Partnership*



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Heritage and history make for good box office. Witness the popularity of period dramas on celluloid, not least ITV's worldwide hit series *Downton Abbey*. And thanks to an initiative by Dr Oliver Cox, historian and Knowledge Exchange Fellow in the Humanities Division at the University of Oxford, it is becoming clear that it's more than just the architecture and design of the great country houses of yesteryear that explains their enduring appeal. It's also the individual stories of those who lived in them, both upstairs and downstairs.

In January 2013, Dr Cox inaugurated the Thames Valley Country House Partnership, a Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF)-supported initiative that creates sustainable relationships between country houses and the University of Oxford. The partnership formally came into being in October 2013. Based at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH), the partnership links researchers in the University of Oxford with external partners from the heritage sector in the Thames Valley.

Dr Cox has already, through research in the Bodleian Library, revealed that 'Rule Britannia' was written as a song of opposition to King George II. Having unearthed letters written by audience members who, in 1740, heard the first performance of *Rule Britannia*, Dr Cox was able to argue that it was "a very potent attack on the king – an opposition call to arms by politicians who had pinned their loyalty to Frederick, the Prince of Wales."

No less potent are the stories that Dr Cox and his team of researchers are discovering amid the archives of the Thames Valley country houses and through further

research at the Bodleian Library. As Dr Cox puts it, "We're engaging local communities, country house owners and managers, volunteers and academics, and finding a wonderful array of intriguing and inspirational stories. The intention is to examine the social, economic, political and cultural lives of the people who lived in the houses, to bring them to light and give contemporary meaning to the houses."

Among the houses which have signed up to the programme – which will make them all the more attractive to visitors and thereby help safeguard their future – are Blenheim Palace, Broughton Castle, Compton Verney, Highclere Castle and Kelmescott Manor. Taking inspiration from the successful Yorkshire Country House Partnership, a deeper wellspring for the Thames Valley initiative is Dr Cox's doctoral research, which explored how and why King Alfred the Great became a national hero in England and America between 1640 and 1800. This project developed out of Dr Cox's interest in the political meanings of country house and landscape architecture in the eighteenth century.

The Thames Valley Country House Partnership works closely with Oxford Inspires, Visit Oxfordshire, Oxford Aspire and the Historic Houses Association. A number of events will be publicised and open to the public as the Partnership develops its work.

***'The Thames Valley initiative offers some exciting collaboration between Blenheim, Waddesdon, Kelmescott and Oxford University and its museums, and between larger and smaller historic houses, with the prospect of greater public enjoyment and understanding of these different places, as well as scholarship that may bring benefits more widely, in arts, economics and social sciences disciplines.'***

**Nick Way, Director General at Historic Houses Association**

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