THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

A Study into the Relationship Between Conservators and the Public Sphere

Anna Presland, Icon Intern

Introduction

In Summer 2020 a research study was undertaken to explore the apparent division between the public and the conservation profession.

The basis of the research was an online public survey which ran from 6 to 24 August 2020 on Google Forms. The aim of the survey was to highlight the key differences between the three identified groups: those who know nothing, little and much of the conservation profession.

The survey was promoted by:

- Institute of Conservation (Icon)- social media platforms and website news item
- Association of Independent Museums (AIM)- social media platforms, email to members and website
- Project researcher- personal and community social media platforms

It was also important to include the voices of Accredited Conservators, whose stories are conveyed through mini profiles.

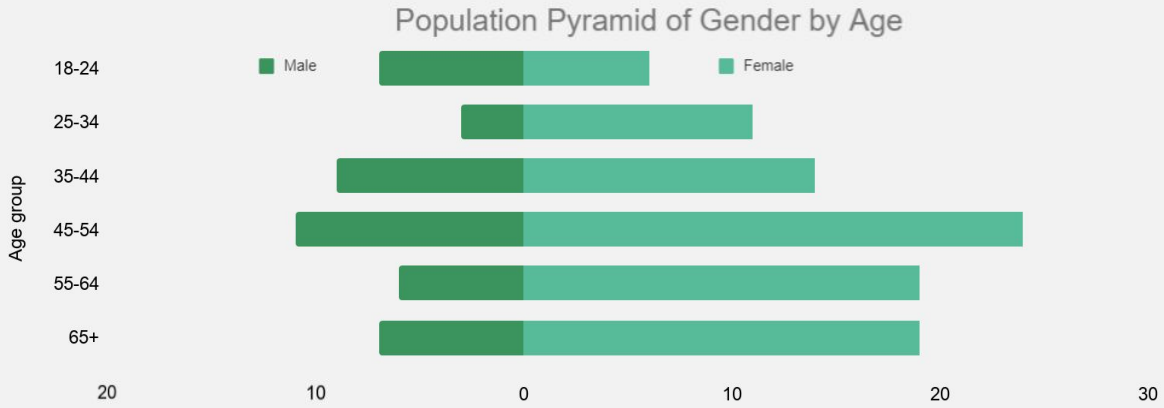
Survey dataset

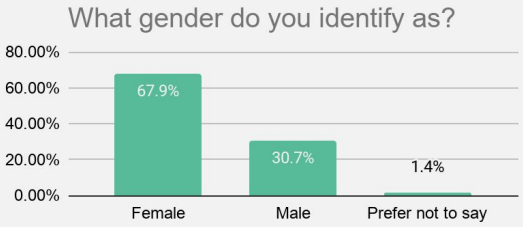
THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

The survey received 140 responses- over ⅔ of respondents were female and the majority were over the age of 35.

Those aged 45-54 responded in the greatest numbers, accounting for 26.43% of participants. These results are consistent with the 2019 Icon Membership Survey, that found 26.53% of their members to be between 45 and 55.[1]

Icon's Conservation Labour Market Intelligence 2012–13 found that 65% of professional conservators were women, which accounts for a similar demographic in this survey.[2]

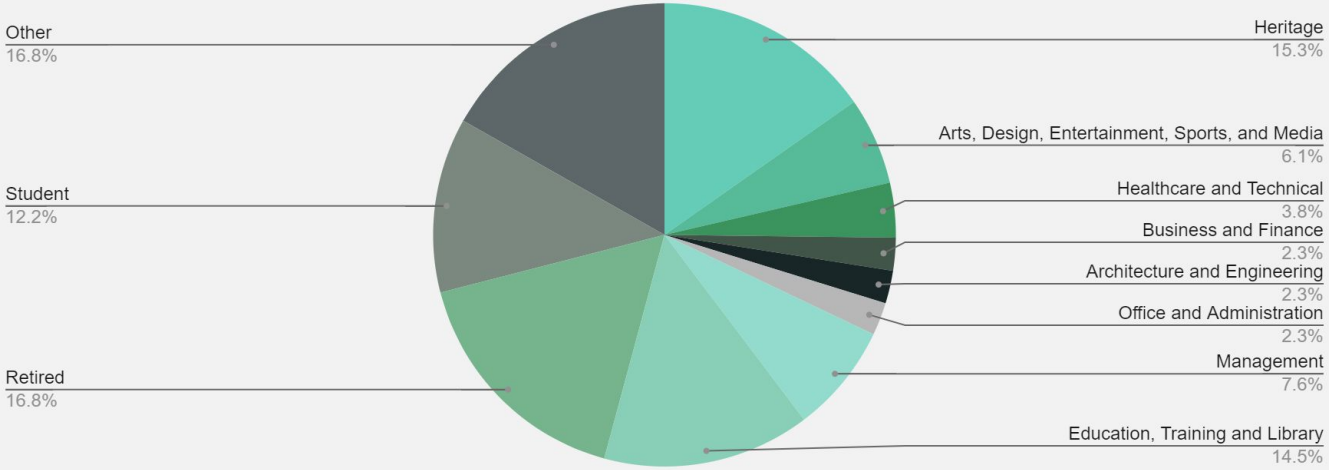




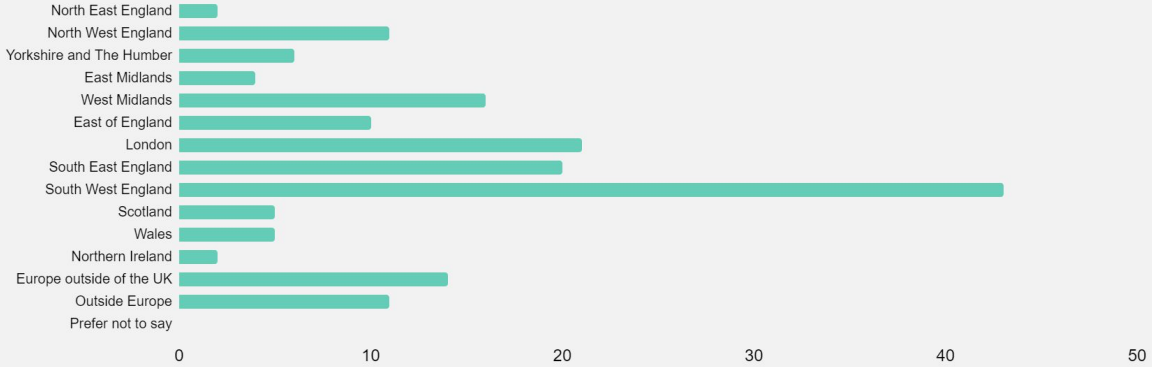
Survey dataset

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Which of the following best describes your current occupation?



In which of these geographic areas do you operate?



The survey captured a good occupation and geographical spread with responses from every part of the UK.

The most common answer to the question of occupation was ‘Retired’.

25 respondents were based outside of the UK.

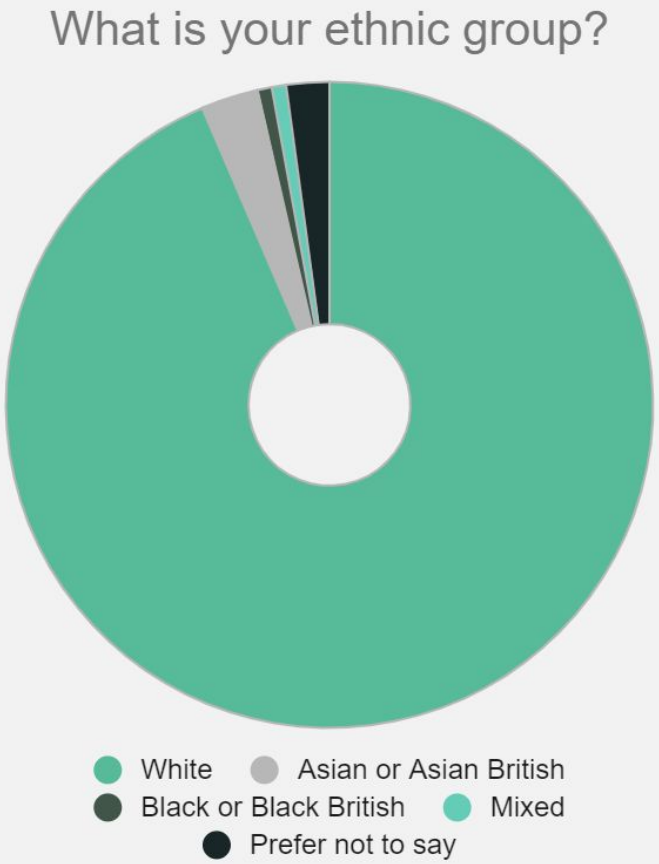
A significant number of respondents were from South West England where the research was conducted.

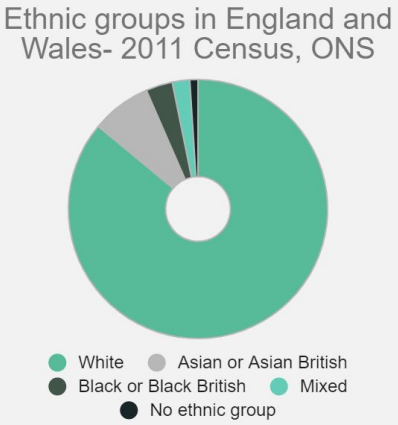
THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

The results indicate a significant underrepresentation of those from BAME or Mixed ethnic groups.

Icon's Membership Survey in 2019 found that only 6.3% of respondents identified as an ethnic group which was not white, demonstrating that "Icon remains a homogeneously white organisation, with only the slightest upward trend visible in the results."[1]

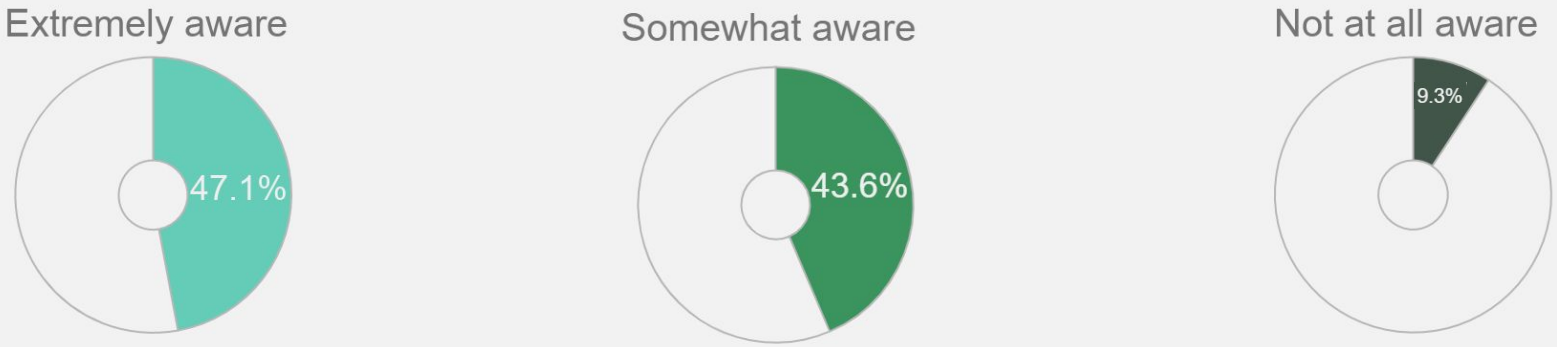
Compared to the 2011 Census, respondents of this survey overrepresent the white ethnic group. [3]





THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Within the heritage sector are you aware of the "conservation" profession?



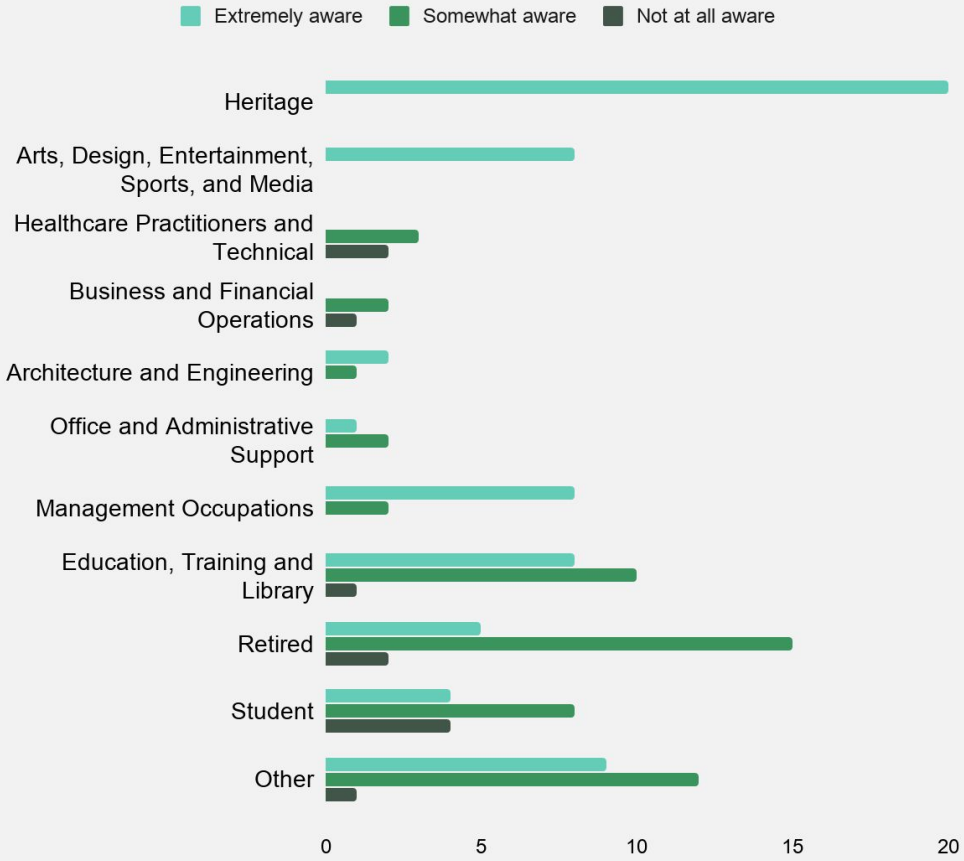
Over 90% of respondents were at least somewhat aware of the conservation profession.

Only 13 participants were not at all aware of conservation and almost 50% answered that they were extremely aware.

This question separates the surveyed population into three key groups which have been used to categorise responses in following questions.

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Which of the following best describes your current occupation?



All respondents who worked in Heritage, Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media were extremely aware of the conservation profession.

Those who worked in Management and Education also had high rates of participants who were extremely aware of conservation.

Healthcare, Business and Finance occupations demonstrated the lowest awareness.

Survey findings

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

If at all aware of the profession, what first words come to mind that you feel best describe heritage conservation?

“protecting items for the future”

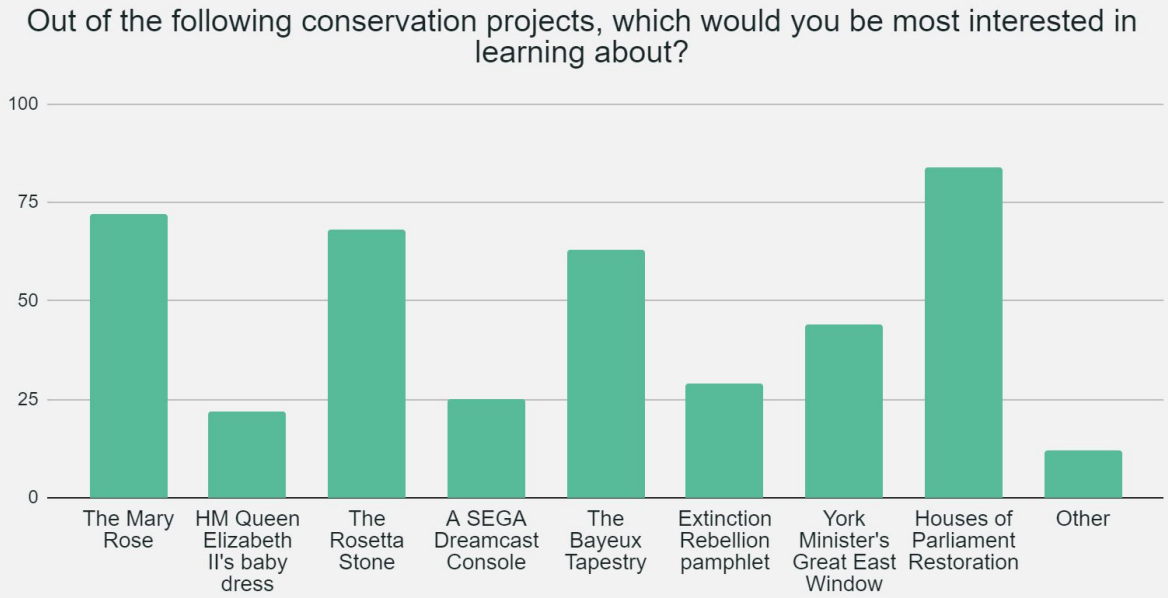
“preventing further degradation of artefacts”

“protecting something that is of cultural or historical importance”

“restoration of old things”

The word sizes correspond to their frequency amongst the survey answers

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION



Over half of respondents answered that they would be interested in learning about the Houses of Parliament Restoration.

A link to the Icon Annual Lecture 2020 was featured at the end of the survey, which is focussing on the Houses of Parliament Restoration.

Other conservation projects that participants added included “locally based”, “wrought iron”, “book and archival”, “any historic vessel” and specific examples such as “Stonehenge”.

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

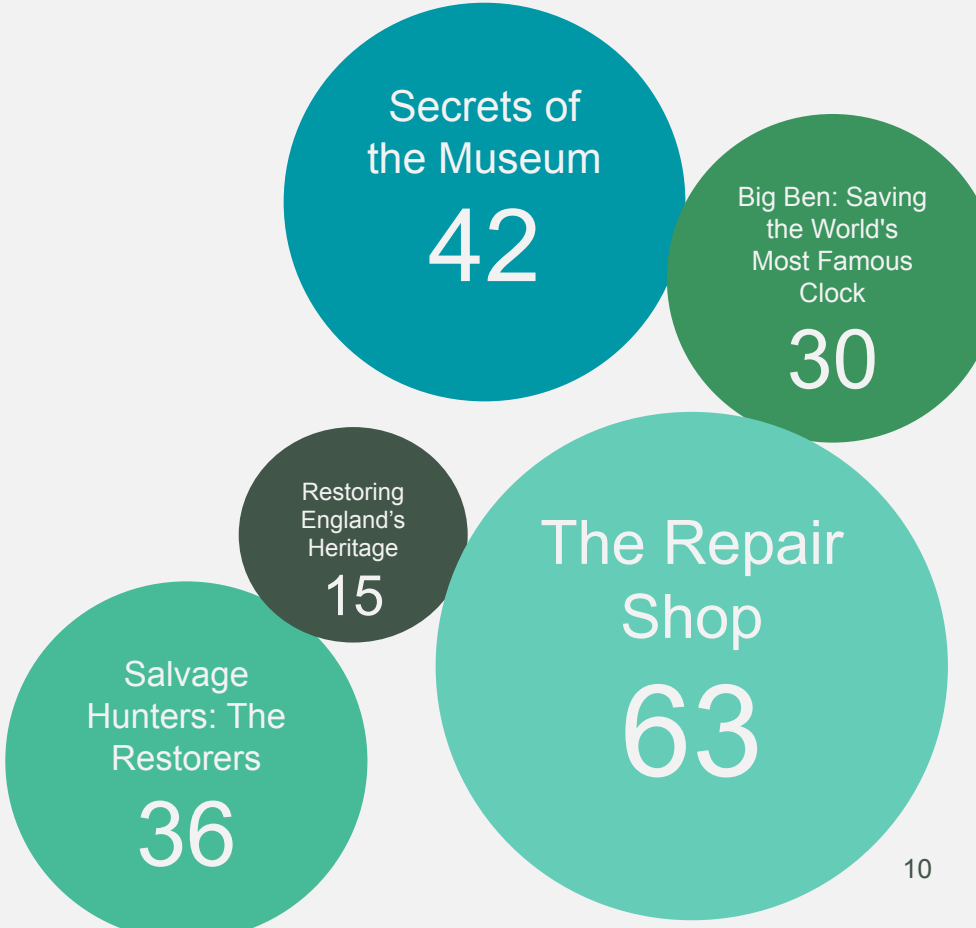
Over two thirds of respondents had watched at least one of the TV programmes listed.

The most watched TV programme was The Repair Shop, the BBC show that is currently broadcasting it's fifth season. The Repair Shop Christmas Special 2019 reached 5.5 million views.

The number of TV programmes that respondents had watched correlated with their awareness of the conservation profession.

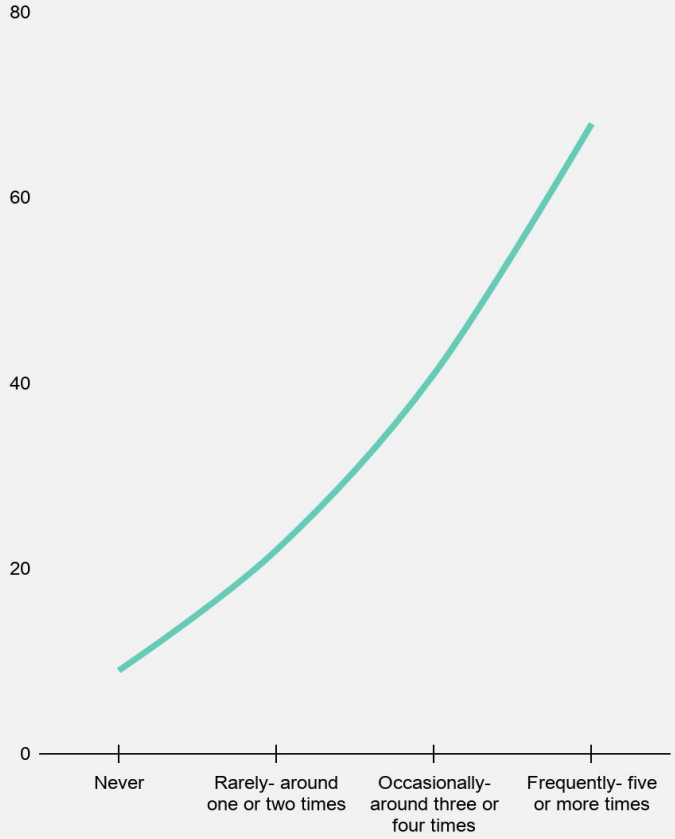
On average 1.9 TV programmes were watched per respondent in the 'extremely aware' group compared to only 1.3 programmes in the 'not at all aware' of conservation.

46 participants had not watched any of the five programmes listed.



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

In the year 2019, how frequently did you attend sites of heritage?



93.6% of respondents attended a heritage site at least once in 2019.

Half of respondents answered that they frequently attended sites of heritage in 2019.

The line graph illustrates how frequently groups of respondents attended sites of heritage in 2019, only taking into account respondents who were extremely aware of conservation.

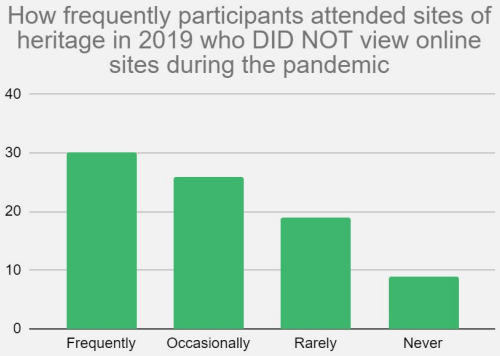
The majority of those who were extremely aware of conservation identified that they attended heritage sites frequently.

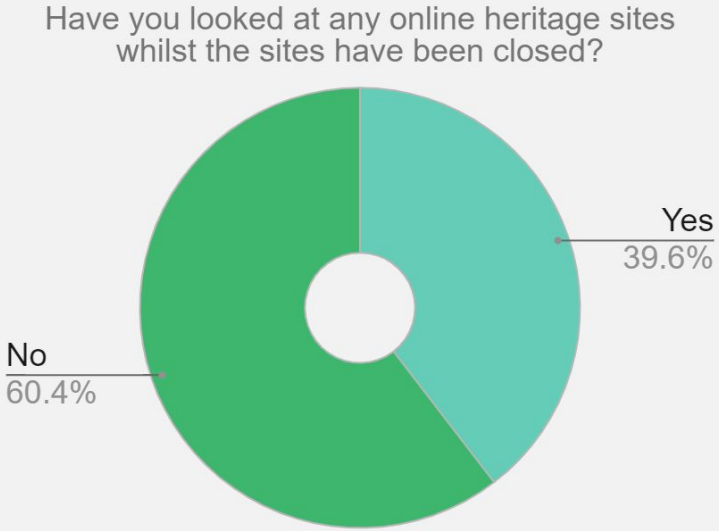
THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

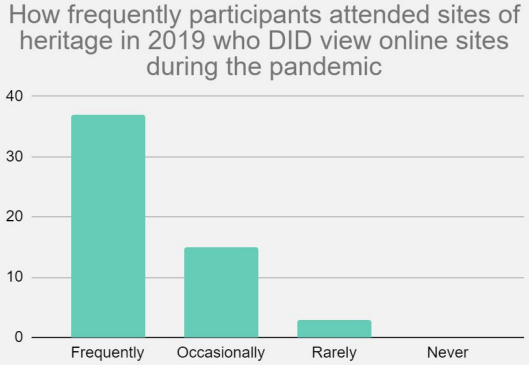
39.6% of respondents looked at online heritage sites which have been closed during the Coronavirus pandemic.

However more participants answered that they had not visited online heritage sites.

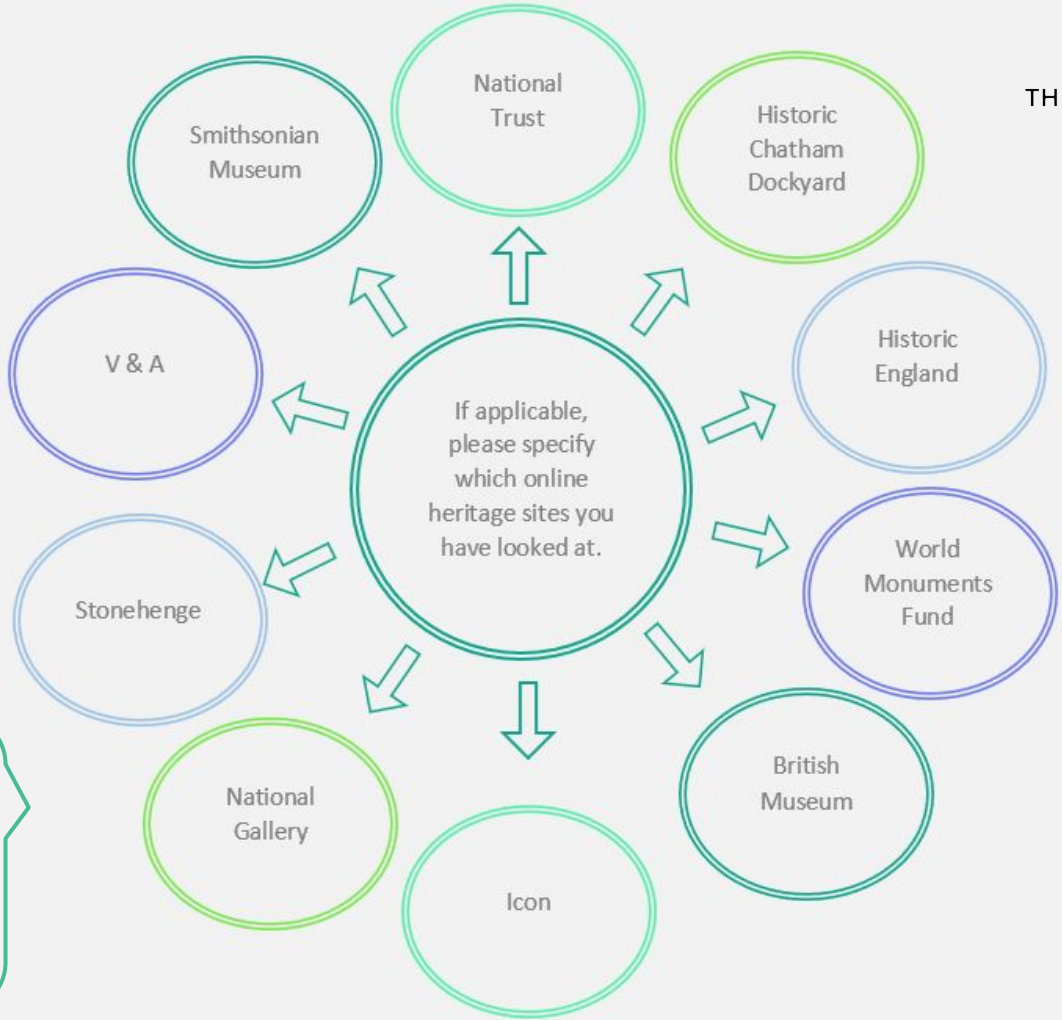
Those who had looked at any online heritage sites during the pandemic tended to be those who frequently visited heritage sites in the previous year.





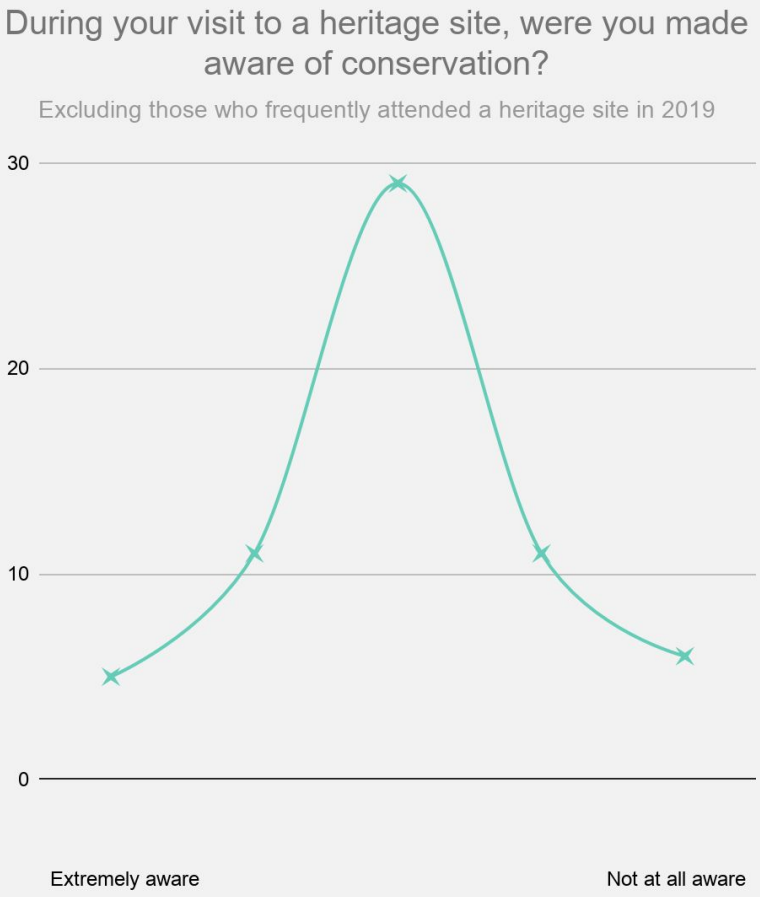


THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION



These were the online heritage sites that were listed by two or more participants

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION



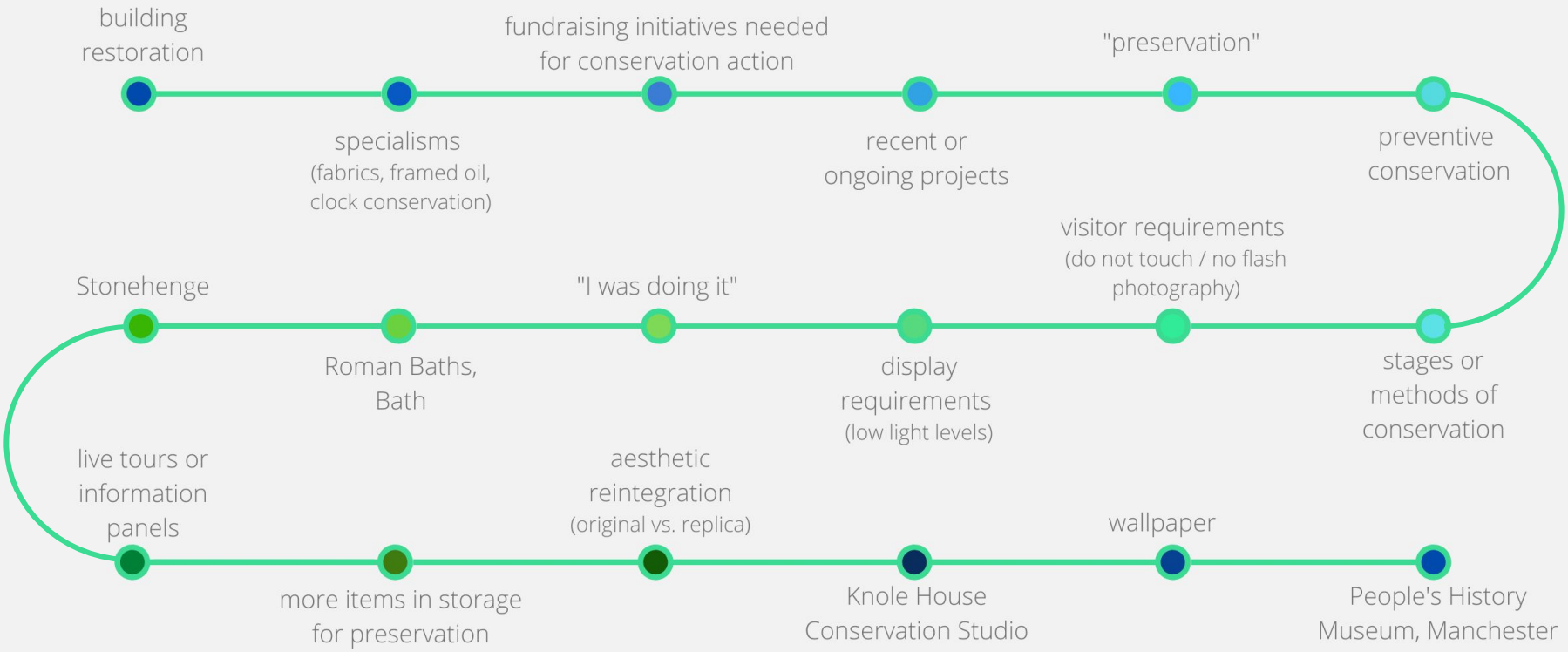
Respondents answered in a normal distribution when asked whether they were made aware of conservation when they had attended heritage sites.

The graph shows a bell curve, meaning that the most common answer was ‘somewhat aware’ of conservation on their visit to a heritage site.

This line graph excludes those who previously answered that they frequently attended heritage sites, giving a more public-oriented graph rather than those heavily involved in the heritage sector.

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

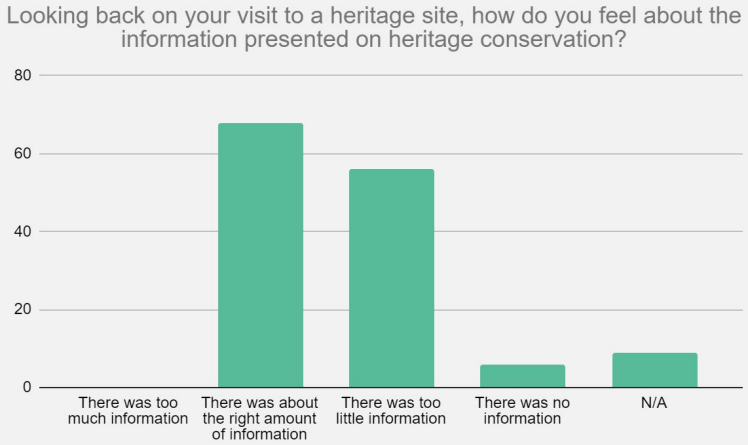
If you were made aware of conservation, please specify what you were made aware of.

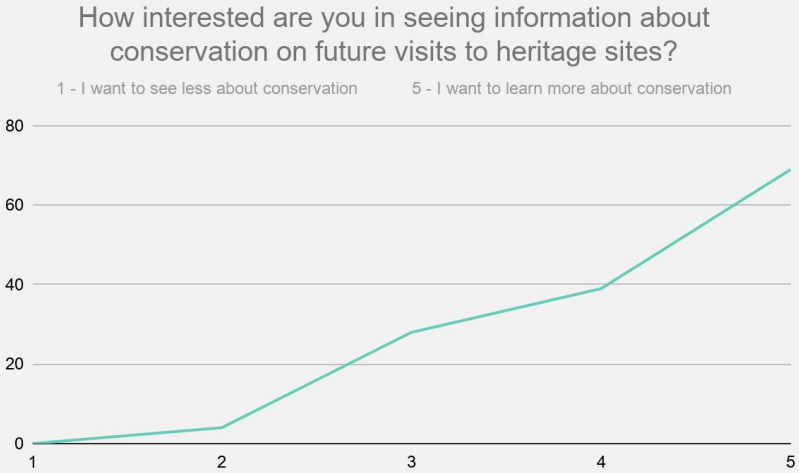


THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

No respondents felt that there was too much information presented on heritage conservation on their previous visit to a heritage site.

More than half answered that there was about the right amount of information presented.

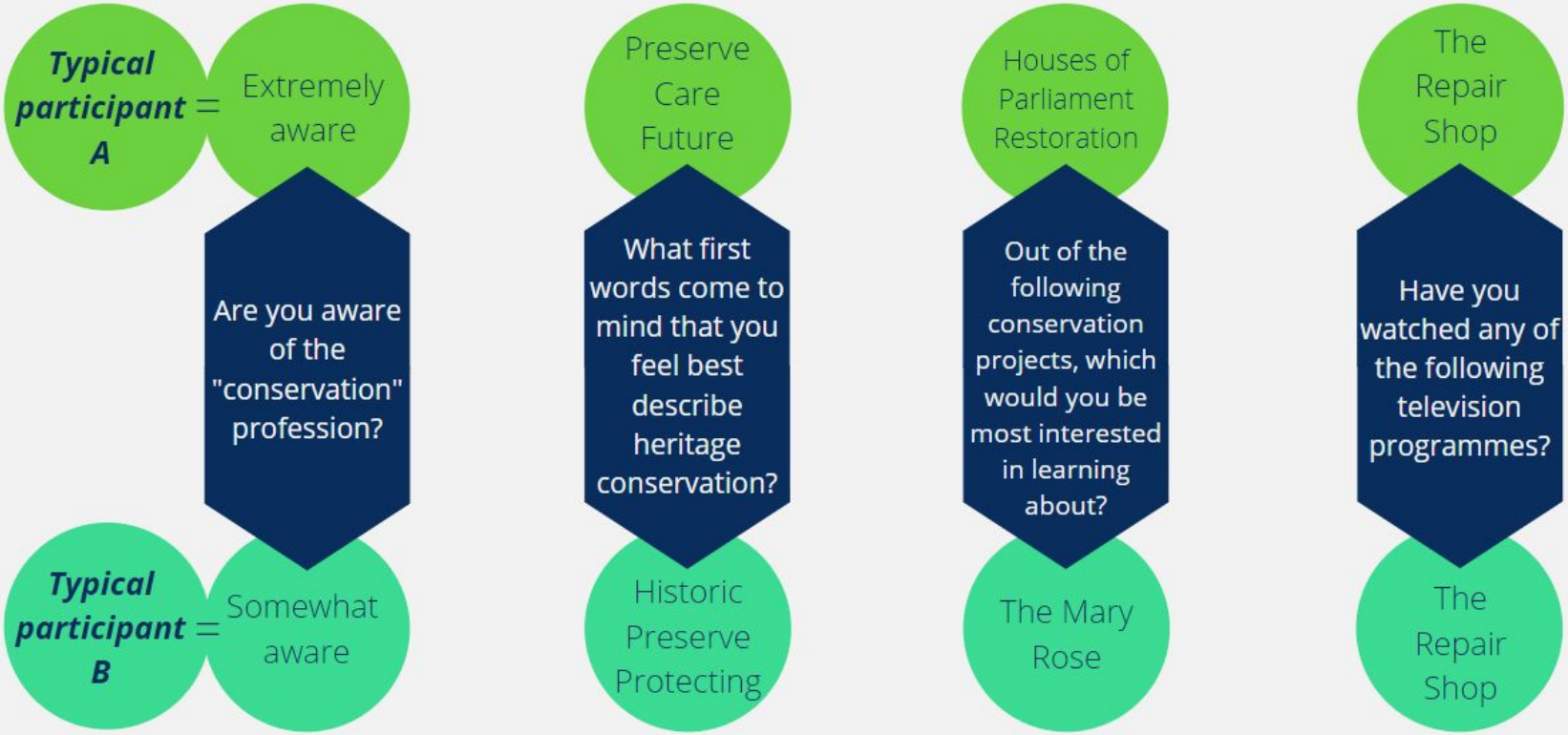




Most participants answered that they were interested in learning more about conservation on future visits to heritage sites.

No participants wanted to see less about conservation

Average survey response



Average survey response

Typical participant A =	Frequently	Yes	Very / Somewhat aware	There was too little information	5
	In the year 2019, how frequently did you attend sites of heritage?	During the current pandemic have you looked at any online heritage sites?	During your visit to a heritage site, were you made aware of conservation?	How do you feel about the information presented on heritage conservation on your past visit to a heritage site?	On a scale of 1-5, how interested are you in seeing information about conservation on future visits to heritage sites?*
Typical participant B =	Occasionally	No	Somewhat aware	There was the right amount of information	4

* 1 (I want to see less)
5 (I want to see more)

Is there anything else you would like to say?

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

People are interested

"I find conservation of historical things fascinating"

"I most definitely want to learn more about conservation"

Suggestions

"Conservation can be made much more attractive and user-friendly"

"It would be good to watch conservators at work."

The majority of answers to this question cited interest in conservation and hoped that conservation action would be made more visible on future visits to heritage sites.

As part of a survey on the Heritage Tourist, Kempiak et. al found that conservation was the most important aspect of the experience of a group of factors regarding heritage preservation. 'The fact that visitors are interested in personal stories shows that tourists want to learn about history.'[4]

Respondents gave a variety of suggestions on how to make conservation more accessible to the public.

Ideas included more financial support to conservation action, sharing photos before/after restoration work and more complex interpretations on information boards at heritage sites.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Interested in outreach	"Would love to see conservation become more visible to the public"
	"I very much would like to see conservation at the forefront"

Several respondents were very interested in how conservation fitted in with communities through effective outreach. There was hope from a conservator that conservation could be in line with educational and heritage offers.

Maintains heritage	"Conservation maintains heritage and should be seen to do so"
	"Our country has a rich and long history"

Respondents brought up the value that they held in conservation for maintaining heritage and expressed their interest in what goes on behind the scenes.

Helen Smith ACR

Personal profile

ACCREDITED MEMBER

Helen's career, like many other conservators, is characterised by major developments that have taken place in her profession.

Today Helen is a freelance preventive conservator, with a focus on filming in sensitive heritage locations. She has many experiences in this field including challenges she has had to overcome on film sets, such as a visual effects blunder that painted the ceiling of the Servants Hall of Osterly with fake blood. Unsurprisingly, the skill of problem-solving is highly tuned amongst preventive conservators and within no time Helen had organised the crew to stabilise and clean the ceiling of the hall, so filming could continue.

Helen Smith ACR

ICON ACCREDITED MEMBER

Helen first stepped into the conservation profession at Hampton Court Palace under the job title 'Conservation Housekeeping Supervisor'. During her ten years there Icon was founded and conservation became a recognised profession. The effects of the accreditation of the profession trickled down to working conservators, and Helen's team soon consisted of graduate conservators. By the time Helen left the Palace her job title was 'Preventive Conservation Supervisor'. Helen went onto work at Tate as their first Preventive Conservator across all of their galleries and she continues to work on jobs with Tate today.

Helen explained that the public understanding of conservation has progressed massively since she first entered the field, but some still ask what her job entails. She often finds herself explaining what conservation is in layman's terms and the name 'conservator' is a typical struggle. More generally, people have heard of conservation but not the range of specialisms, assuming she could answer questions that are specific to another field.

Helen Smith ACR

ICON ACCREDITED MEMBER

Helen feels that conservation is more valuable than people first realise as once given access to ‘conservation in action’ everyone is interested. Helen explained that public access to conservation is limited by two aspects: the conservators themselves and who they work for. Generalising wildly, conservators often want to hold onto their own expertise in fear of individuals going off and doing the ‘conservation action’ themselves. Then when conservators do want to share their work, they can be shackled by their organisation’s media policies.

When visiting old houses, Helen has always been more interested in the kitchens than the show rooms. She referred to a research study that found visitors were often more interested in behind-the-scenes than what was on show; a sign of public interest in conservation.

Conservation is more valuable than people realise and once given access to conservation action, everyone is interested.

Linda Ramsay ACR

Personal profile

ACCREDITED MEMBER

Linda has worked in Conservation for over 20 years, was formerly the chair of Icon Scotland and is currently an observer member. Today, Helen is the Head of Conservation at the National Records of Scotland and along with a team of professional conservators has responsibility for conservation of a wide-ranging national collection. She is also a trustee of the Scottish Council on Archives and Chair of the Preservation Committee.

Over the years Linda has developed specific 'favourites' of seals and photographs but also notable documents and historical personages from Kings and Queens. But sometimes more evocatively, she finds connections with ordinary people.

The more you look the more you see and can appreciate. Documents have secret lives and often key, well-known documents can reveal other facets by careful examination. Linda enjoys asking questions when on the surface there is nothing new to learn. Context and background to projects gives you an insight and appreciation, that also help you to make more appropriate decisions of what action to carry out or to leave.

Linda Ramsay ACR

ICON ACCREDITED MEMBER

You can catch a glimpse or a window into the past and realise that some things do not change, we do not know it all and will never know it all. Hopes and fears remain the same down the ages.

Since Linda has started working in conservation she has seen the status of conservators change, they often view the object in a very different way, a perspective that curators and archivists often greatly appreciate. Linda expressed that she finds this collaboration very satisfying.

There is also opportunity for discussion with researchers to ensure conservators can achieve a compromise of their different aims whilst maintaining a high standard. The sheer amount of required work can often make this difficult, but this dialogue is a satisfying journey for all parties. Often understanding why and what specifically is being sought from a collection allows a more innovative approach to the work. Ultimately, good preservation supports access.

Linda Ramsay ACR

ICON ACCREDITED MEMBER

Linda recalls looking at watermarks on documents that showed continued trade between Britain and France for paper during the Napoleonic wars. Dating using paper is complex but provides interesting and often intriguing information because the materials themselves are part of the record. They are rarely as simple as they may appear. Linda went on to say that she is sometimes disappointed when complexity is not seen as a strength as she believes audiences are capable of appreciating more complicated answers.

For example, bookbinding and book conservation is a discipline as well as a craft because the object has to operate and function on a 3-dimensional level. The viewing experience in museums and galleries can be more passive than archives because the user cannot interact with items as directly. Seeking the balance between access and preservation can be challenging but conservators enjoy the innovation and problem-solving required. Often on completion of a challenging project, conservators experience a little reluctance to let objects go back to store because they feel protective of the collections they have cared for and preserved. Conservators are connected to their objects.

Conclusions

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

- **Over two thirds of respondents had watched at least one TV programme about heritage conservation.**
  The most popular programme amongst participants was The Repair Shop which received 5.5 million views for it's 2019 Christmas Special episode. These figures suggest that television is a very effective method of outreach to present conservation action to the public.

- **A small number of respondents confused 'heritage conservation' with 'environmental conservation', made clear by mentions of garden sustainability and the RSPB.**
  But generally responses were familiar with heritage conservation as a separate profession to environmental conservation.

- **40% of participants had viewed an online heritage site during the coronavirus lockdown.**
  This implies that online heritage sites were well-used during the lockdown, but generally by those who frequently visited heritage sites in person the year before.

- **No participants responded that there was 'too much information about conservation' at their visit to a heritage site.**

- **When asked for further comments, almost all responses expressed interest in the profession and wanted to see more information about conservation at heritage sites.**

Recommendations on public interaction with conservation

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Heritage sites could make their conservation work more visible and readily available to visitors.

No respondents answered that there was ‘too much information’ about conservation at heritage sites, nor did anyone ‘want to see less about conservation’. When asked for any further comments, the majority of answers expressed interest in seeing more about conservation work at heritage sites. Both those identifiable as conservators and public visitors to heritage sites wanted to see more of what was going on behind-the-scenes during their visits in the future.

Heritage sites could place more emphasis on smaller and moveable objects when presenting conservation projects to the public.

Respondents had a very limited understanding of conservation relating to smaller and moveable objects as opposed to larger projects. When asked to specify what conservation respondents had been made aware of on past heritage visits, 22 answered ‘building restoration’, which was more than any other response. However conservation projects which were small enough to be moveable were rarely mentioned by respondents. This implies that heritage sites make visitors more aware of building restoration than conservation of moveable objects because it has a more invasive impact on visits by limiting access around the sites.

Further research

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

The language used by respondents to describe conservators in the heritage sector.

When asked what first words come to mind that best describe heritage conservation, the most popular responses changed very little when filtering respondents who identified themselves as ‘extremely aware’ of conservation compared to ‘somewhat aware’ or ‘not at all aware’. This reveals that most people already have at least a very basic understanding of conservation, so any deeper insight into division between conservation and the public could be revealed through greater analysis of chosen vocabulary.

Level of engagement of online heritage sites during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Over half of those who frequently attended heritage sites in 2019 also looked at online heritage sites during the pandemic. National Trust had the most reported views than any other heritage organisation according to this survey, almost double any other organisation with online activity. Further research could look at what was successful and what could be improved about the online heritage sites to ensure the best possible virtual access and engagement.

Kempiak and co. found that the pre-visit experience such as accessing websites, deeply influenced their satisfaction when they visited the site in person. The impact of the heritage experience is dependent on the pull-factors for visiting the site.[4] This also involves organisations finding more avenues to intrigue new visitors.

Notes

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

1 Nelles, Michael, *Icon 2019 Membership Survey: Final Report* (2019).

2 Aitchison, Kenneth, *Conservation Labour Market Intelligence 2012–13,* Icon: the Institute of Conservation (London, 2013).

3 Office for National Statistics ; National Records of Scotland ; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2016): 2011 Census aggregate data. UK Data Service (Edition: June 2016). DOI:http://dx.doi.org/10.5257/census/aggregate-2011-1

4 Kempiak, J., Hollywood, L., Bolan, P. & McMahon-Beattie, U, 'The Heritage Tourist: An Understanding of the Visitor Experience at Heritage Attractions' in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23:4, 375-392, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2016.1277776 (2017), 375-392.

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Anna Presland, Icon Intern

SEPTEMBER 2020