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'It makes me feel happy that we did it and what came out of it': Recent research into the association of heritage participation with wellbeing

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This paper explores insights from recent Historic England-funded research (Lewis *et al.* 2022; Pattinson *et al.* 2023) into how and why heritage participation is associated with wellbeing. The research involved thematic analyses of in-depth post-participation interviews with 35 adults who had volunteered on activities funded to support heritage sites previously deemed to be 'at risk'. This paper reviews the six overarching key themes identified as characterising the wellbeing associations in volunteers' responses and then considers in more detail the role of heritage *specifically* in wellbeing. Analysis shows that activities funded to benefit heritage can also benefit wellbeing, and indicates that the aspects of wellbeing most often or strongly associated with heritage are those relating to purpose, being, knowledge gain, sharing, psychological benefit and self-actualisation; and that the 'USP' of heritage for wellbeing appears to lie in the force-multiplying interaction of eight cross-cutting characteristics (temporality, discovery, authenticity, continuity, rescue, nostalgia, transformation and legacy) present in the time-focussed eco-system of heritage volunteering.

1. Introduction: Current understanding and remaining questions

The 2005 Faro Convention recognises that '*everyone, alone or collectively, has the right to benefit from the cultural heritage and to contribute towards its enrichment*' (Council of Europe 2005): it is increasingly widely recognised that cultural heritage (hereafter 'heritage') offers many benefits to communities, economies and the environment (e.g. Historic England 2023; Maeer *et al.* 2016). Over the last few years, interest has grown in identifying and understanding the *health* benefits of heritage, including to wellbeing (e.g. Chatterjee and Camic 2015; Darvill *et al.* 2019; Pennington *et al.* 2018; Heritage Alliance 2020; Gallou 2022; Sayer 2024). This has been motivated by heritage sector needs to understand, extend and promote the societal value of heritage (Holmes-Skelton 2019), and health sector needs for more holistic approaches to wellness (Chatterjee *et al.* 2017; NHS *n.d.*).

Growing awareness of the links between heritage and wellbeing (e.g. Reilly *et al.* 2018; Darvill *et al.* 2019; Heritage Alliance 2020) has impacted on heritage funders and policymakers. The UK National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) has, since 2019, included greater wellbeing as one of their required outcomes for funded projects (Heritage Fund 2023), while Historic England aims to ensure the wellbeing benefits of heritage can be experienced as widely as possible (Historic England 2019), supported by its 2022 *Strategy for Wellbeing and Heritage* (Historic England 2022; Monckton 2021).

Extensive research and increasingly wide practice have advanced our understanding of *how* these wellbeing benefits can be achieved. Historic England in 2018 elicited six



'routes' to wellbeing through heritage (volunteering, visiting, sharing, therapy, belonging and experiencing) (Reilly *et al.* [2018](#)) and identified some key enabling characteristics of the historic environment specifically (such as the combination of physical activity with cultural heritage). Recognising that much previous work had focussed on passive activities (such as visiting sites or attending events) rather than more active participatory engagement such as volunteering or participating in fieldwork, Burnell and Woodhouse identified six mechanisms through which more active heritage participation can improve wellbeing (by enhancing belonging and identity, social interaction, active participation, mindfulness, cognitive stimulation and emotional expression) (Burnell and Woodhouse [2022](#)). They noted that the effectiveness of these mechanisms depended on contextual factors such as the specific needs of the participants, the kind of heritage activity and the support provided.

However, despite a large and growing volume of work, there remains a more limited understanding of the ways in which participation in *heritage specifically* is associated with wellbeing, in ways which other activities providing similar opportunities (such as exercising or meeting new people) are not - that is, the 'heritage USP' (Unique Selling Point). Sara Perry has suggested that heritage offers an uplifting emotional connection characterised as 'enchantment' that engenders wonder, transformation, attachment, and community bonding amongst diverse individuals (Perry [2019](#)). Claire Nolan suggested that heritage supports 'existential wellbeing' because the continued presence of the historic built environment provides reassurance about the continued existence of individuals and groups (Nolan [2019a](#), 20). Brizi, Rabinovich and Lewis's quantitative study indicated that activities exploring a group's connection to its past increased wellbeing because they added extra meaning to what it meant to be a member of that community (Brizi *et al.* [2023](#), 857).

Few surveys have directly compared heritage volunteering with other forms of volunteering, but a 2010 large-scale review of volunteers on 134 projects funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (precursor to the NLHF) (Rosemberg *et al.* [2010](#)), while identifying a wide range of benefits, concluded 'there is little evidence to show that the positive social outcomes that HLF volunteers report can be attributed to a distinctive HLF or heritage-based experience... the positive outcomes experienced by HLF volunteers are driven principally by volunteering per se, and by context-independent variables such as the time intensity of the volunteering' (Rosemberg *et al.* [2010](#), 4). In 2018, Historic England concluded that heritage volunteering was beneficial 'not necessarily because it is heritage-based, but because the activity creates wellbeing by leading to benefits such as a sense of worth or belonging< ... A key issue for Historic England will be whether any volunteering produces the same results or whether there are distinctive aspects of the historic environment of which we should be aware as we develop our USP in this area' (Reilly *et al.* [2018](#), 30).

But notwithstanding these studies, understanding of the unique characteristics that heritage offers, that other activities do not, remains limited: it is still the case that 'the role played by the historic environment [specifically] is less well articulated' (Reilly *et al.* [2018](#), 9).

2. The HARAW (Heritage at Risk and Wellbeing) project

In 2020-21 Historic England commissioned the [Heritage at Risk and Wellbeing \(HARAW\)](#) project. This aimed to explore the relationship between wellbeing and volunteering on interventions funded with the primary aim of mitigating threats to 'at risk' tangible heritage assets whose condition had been identified as sufficiently concerning for them to be formally included on the [Heritage at Risk \(HAR\) Register](#). This register is maintained by Historic England through a regular process of identifying and monitoring sites and monuments most at risk of loss and/or neglect and most in need of support (Darvill and Fulton [1998](#)). The aim of HARAW was to establish whether volunteering on these projects was associated with



wellbeing in volunteers, and to generate insights that could encourage and enable heritage projects with potential for public participation to support wellbeing more widely and effectively. The full report was published by Historic England in 2022 (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#)) and a shorter paper in *Health Expectations* in 2023 (Pattinson *et al.* [2023](#)).

2.1 HARAW methodology

HARAW used a qualitative mixed-methods approach carried out by an interdisciplinary team of University of Lincoln researchers from the School of Humanities and Heritage, the Community and Health Research Unit and Lincoln Business School. This paper focusses on insights from the thematic analysis of semi-structured post-participation interviews (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#), Appendix 2) with 35 volunteers on ten completed HAR projects across England (Figure 1) (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#), Appendix 1). The interviews were recorded online during lockdown in 2020 and generated transcribed texts extending to 180,000 words. Researchers coded the transcripts using a grounded theory approach to identify comments relating to wellbeing, allocated comments to categories based on relatedness or similarities in the sentiments being expressed, creating new categories for any comment that could not be allocated to an existing category, and grouped the categories into themes. This process continued until new categories ceased to be found. Thus the complete set of categories and themes (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#), Appendix 4), each composed of coded comments (*ibid.*, Appendix 5) *emerged from* the data analysis, rather than being preconceived. Categories and comments in each theme were then analysed and reviewed for the insights they offered into the impact of different project attributes (e.g. site type) (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#), 60-77), the relationship between themes and the five NHS 'Steps' to wellbeing (NHS [2022](#); Lewis *et al.* [2022](#), 79-90), and the unique value of *heritage* volunteering (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#), 91-101).

This approach had its limitations. The interviewee cohort was self-selecting, as participants had chosen to volunteer AND subsequently agreed to be interviewed. We could not attribute causality because our methodology did not capture data at more than one time point or from a control group (of non-participants or participants in another form of activity) with which we could compare the HARAW data. But our approach did provide a large corpus of rich, nuanced, in-depth insights whose categorisation into themes showed *how* and *in what ways* wellbeing was associated with HAR volunteering.

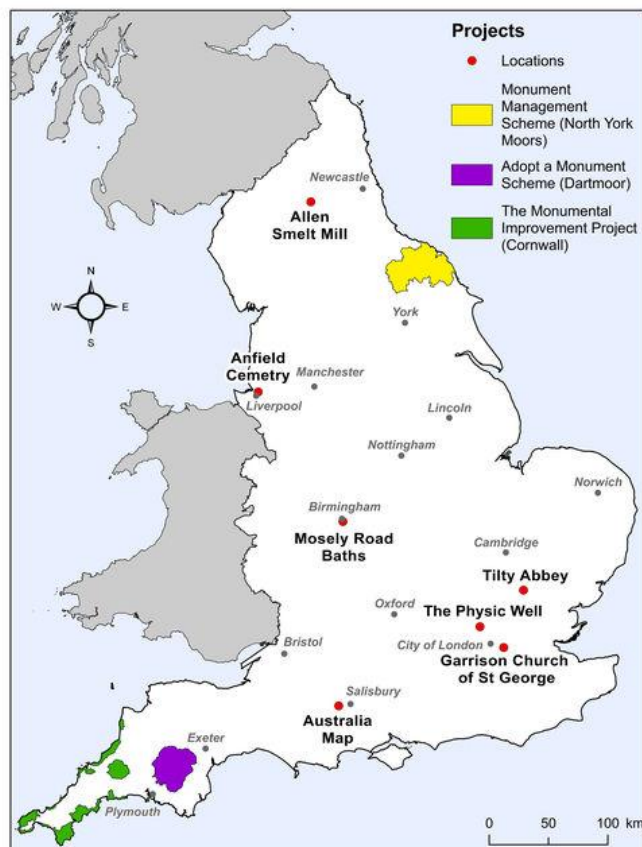


Figure 1: Map of England showing the location of HAR projects included in the HARAW research which included three landscape projects (coloured to indicate area covered) and seven site-based projects (bold text).

2.2 HARAW cohort

Of the 35 interviewees, similar numbers self-identified as male as female and the majority were married (24/35). 80% identified as white, 6% as Black or Minority Ethnic. Ages ranged from 20 to 80 years with an average of 59.7. Just under half of participants reported being in full-time employment, a similar number were retired, and the remainder were students. Four participants had formerly been teachers, and three had been in the armed forces. Participants' length of involvement in their most recent HAR project ranged from two months to 13 years. The HARAW cohort was thus not representative of the general UK population in some respects (being older than average and more likely to be married/civilly partnered) but was broadly representative of the heritage volunteering population.

3. Results

3.1 The association between participation in HAR programmes and wellbeing in volunteers: Six themes elicited by coding post-participation interview data

Coding the interview data elicited 19 categories which could be grouped into six overarching themes which articulated how wellbeing was associated with volunteering on HAR sites/projects. These are described in detail in the full report (Lewis *et al.* 2022) and summarised very briefly here to allow space for the subsequent more detailed discussion of the role of heritage specifically.



The first theme, called 'Purpose', was that HAR volunteering met a need for purposeful activity which enabled volunteers to altruistically nurture their personal interest in history and/or archaeology. The second theme, 'Being', was that HAR projects enabled volunteers to express and develop their identity, including as individuals who cared about place and community. The third theme, 'Capacity' was that volunteers gained skills, knowledge and/or experience. The fourth theme, 'Sharing', was that volunteers connected in a meaningful way with others. The fifth theme, 'Self-nurture', was that volunteers benefitted their physical, psychological and social health. The sixth theme, 'Self-actualisation' was that volunteers fulfilled aspirations and created a legacy.

Comment: Analysis clearly showed that HAR projects, which (as noted above) are *primarily funded to benefit heritage* can also benefit participants' wellbeing. This is important because most previous studies of the links between heritage and wellbeing have involved programmes primarily intended to deliver social benefit. However, the vast majority of heritage interventions that take place in the UK are, like HAR interventions, *not* intended primarily to benefit wellbeing (including archaeological fieldwork, more than 90% of which is driven by development needs (Fredheim and Watson [2023](#)). By showing that wellbeing is associated with volunteering on HAR projects, HARAW indicates there is potential for delivering wellbeing benefits through participation in a much greater range of heritage projects than is currently the case. The potential - and challenges - of realising this potential are being widely discussed (Watson [2021](#) and articles in [Internet Archaeology 57](#)).

HARAW analysis also showed *how* HAR projects impact wellbeing. This is important because if we know heritage participation *can* benefit people's wellbeing (even when this is not the primary intention), there is a moral imperative to try and achieve this as widely as possible. Furthermore, knowing *how* participation benefits wellbeing enables a wider range of activities to be better designed, targeted and managed to support wellbeing. In very brief summary, we can for example say the HARAW themes indicate that heritage activities suitable for public participation (whether or not they are *primarily* funded to support wellbeing) include those which can offer a range of achievable, valued goals whose importance is explicitly articulated; where the significance of the site/activity is clear; which provide opportunities to gain new knowledge and engage with other people; can be clear about the potential benefits to volunteers; and can ensure volunteers appreciated the impact of their contribution.

3.2. The positivity and prevalence of heritage association in elicited wellbeing themes

The six themes elicited by the HARAW analysis resonate with other studies (e.g. Burnell and Woodhouse [2022](#); Gallou [2022](#)), with some similar themes apparent. However, HARAW's large corpus of interview data also offered scope for drilling more deeply into the question of the 'heritage USP', as we could see from the coding that some of the categorised wellbeing associations in the HARAW data were more directly associated with heritage than others. Some (e.g. wellbeing associated with 'emotional attachment to historic asset') were self-evidently intrinsically connected with the heritage character of the activity, but others (e.g. wellbeing associated with 'making a difference to a local place') could potentially have been achieved by another activity such as community gardening. Accordingly, we reviewed *all* coded wellbeing-associated comments *theme by theme* to identify which were most and least positively and/or frequently associated with heritage.

3.2.1 Theme 1: Purpose

Comments coded to the first theme (that volunteers felt motivated by having a socially valuable purpose that felt right for them personally) featured heritage frequently and strongly:



'My particular motive is primarily architectural. It's a magnificent piece of architecture. And so I approached it... as an architectural conservationist wanting to keep the building going' (HAR08). Heritage was particularly evident in respondents who were aware that the site needed 'help': ' I like the values of the project ... the feeling that you were doing something that is noble and it has a value to social value and impact. It's a very good motivation' (HAR01). Conversely, some volunteers' wellbeing, although enabled by HAR projects, could potentially have been achieved through other forms of volunteering: ' whatever I could do to help some of the wider community, then I'll do it' (HAR28). We inferred that for people with interests in history and archaeology, their volunteering would have been less associated with wellbeing had it not been related to heritage.

Comment: Participants' sense that the activity gave them a meaningful, moral purpose that felt right for them personally was strongly associated with *wellbeing* AND with the *heritage* character of the projects.

3.2.2 Theme 2: Being

In Theme 2 (volunteers could express their identity and attachment to place and community) heritage was strongly associated with coded wellbeing comments: 'I'm from Wolverhampton, which is also in the West Midlands, so I'm so proud of being part of the area, this area of the UK and the kind of industrial heritage' (HAR23). Wellbeing was also associated with belonging or having 'found one's tribe': 'we are a gang of like-minded people which is trying to do something difficult and we're doing it against opposition' (HAR08). Place attachment was also frequently grounded in history and heritage: 'I can't say it's my heritage because obviously I wasn't born in this country. And all the archaeology I have done has been in this country. But I suppose I've, you know, it's become my place' (HAR17). Many volunteers felt positive that their volunteering would add value to somewhere they loved by preserving its heritage: 'I like to think that we're doing something for Barnett and for people' (HAR18). Here, we could infer that other forms of volunteering would not offer the same association with wellbeing.

Comment: Opportunities for participants to express their identity and increase their attachment to place and community were strongly associated with *wellbeing* AND with *heritage*.

3.2.3 Theme 3: Capacity

Many Theme 3 wellbeing associations rooted in gaining new skills, knowledge or experience were specifically associated with heritage: ' I know a great deal more about archaeology than I did, because you're never far from an expert' (HAR03), as was experience such as learning new ways of using historic buildings: ' We did the performances at the baths, worked with different people... they were new skills and a different experience that I would never have done before' (HAR23). These wellbeing associations could not have been made through other volunteering. However, a wide range of other skills (ranging from (but not limited to) sound engineering to lifesaving!) could have been gained from non-heritage-related volunteering: '...the skills are more life skills. Keeping yourself fit. Keeping yourself interested. Keeping yourself alive. Keeping yourself. Keeping your mind engaged' (HAR04).

Comment: Gaining skills, knowledge and experience were all strongly associated with *wellbeing* but not exclusively derived from the *heritage* character of the projects; knowledge gain was most closely related to heritage, while skills gained included many not related to heritage.

3.2.4 Theme 4: Sharing



Heritage was *strongly* associated with coded wellbeing comments in Theme 4 (connecting with others). Happiness and satisfaction associated with rendering sites more visible or sharing little-known 'guild' knowledge were intrinsically associated with heritage: 'I've taken ... a lot of people who've been into it for the first time, which is always lovely because generally people have a kind of 'wow', and they didn't realise this existed in Woolwich' (HAR06). Heritage was strongly associated with wellbeing related to atoning for past wrongs, such as de-colonising historical narratives '... the Garrison Church is all about the war. But often a war doesn't reflect ... that a lot of people from the Caribbean and Africa and India were also part of that war. So if I could actually add those flavours to the truth, then it gives people a more holistic idea (HAR14). So was contemporary social inclusion: '... that's the oldest Chinese community in Europe. Hundred and fifty odd years. And we had a couple of events with them. And that's lovely' (HAR02). These associations with wellbeing could not have been achieved in non-heritage volunteering. In contrast, categories relating to contemporary interpersonal connectedness could have been achieved through other volunteering.

Comment: Opportunities to share knowledge, widen access and increase diversity and inclusion were strongly associated with *wellbeing* AND with the *heritage* character of the projects, while connecting with others was strongly associated with *wellbeing* but not always related to *heritage*.

3.2.5 Theme 5: Self-nurture

Wellbeing in Theme 5 (volunteers benefitting physically, psychologically, and socially) was less strongly associated with the specific heritage context of HAR volunteering. Many *physical* benefits, although enabled by the HAR project, could have been achieved through other sorts of activity: '... it's great for physical and mental health. I think just getting out there in the great outdoors' (HAR07). Likewise, many *social* benefits identified by HAR volunteers would also be achievable in non-heritage volunteering: '...it was fun to do because you're doing it with a group of like-minded people that you know. So, it wasn't an effort or a chore to do the hard work. (HAR20). In contrast, however, psychological benefits had a stronger heritage association: 'Little bit of a buzz out of the success of that. Yes.' (HAR18). Improved mood 'Doing these things is very good for your own well-being... Lifts depression, lifts the mood' (HAR15), and strengthened emotional attachment: 'Every time I go back there, I still go wander ... in sort of amazement, really, at, you know, how could this structure have been in this, what seems like a small field' (HAR35) frequently relied on historic character of the asset.

Comment: Volunteers' awareness that they had benefitted physically and socially was strongly associated with *wellbeing* but less strongly associated with the *heritage* character of the projects. Psychological benefits were more closely related to heritage.

3.2.6 Theme 6: Self-actualisation

Heritage was generally strongly associated with wellbeing relating to achieving change, feeling valued or delivering a legacy for the future: '... it's been hugely rewarding for us as a Trust because, you know, we started with, you know, a derelict building, a private developer coming in, threatening to build lots of houses, so loss of a huge community asset, really. And, you know, the HAR grant has enabled us to turn that around' (HAR34). Gratification in changing attitudes (in volunteers and others) were strongly associated with the historic character of the site: 'lots of people have more appreciation, I think, of the history of it, and it's always been a nice place for a walk and it's a more interesting place now' (HAR11). Satisfaction at achievements such as turning a historic site into a visitor asset or giving a



community something to feel proud about, were strongly rooted in heritage: 'I felt I helped, you know, helped the project in whatever small way... locally, a lot of people have commented that they are very pleased to see that something was done about it... all the extra information on the site, the ruins as well, is now available for people to see and read.' (HAR19). Pleasure at feeling supported and appreciated by the local community was strongly dependent on the value the community placed on the heritage asset: 'in the local community, the site is hugely important. So, you know, a lot of my friends know about that... you get a lot of support locally for what you're doing, really.' (HAR34). In both positivity and frequency, wellbeing related to saving something is strongly associated with heritage: '... we will have aided the interpretation of lots of these sites, many of which have the whole reason why they're at risk is because they've been rather off the radar' (HAR07). Aspirations for the future were also strongly related to heritage: 'The map of Australia still needs to have much greater visibility, for both visitors, tourists, for local schools, for education. And this is what we, I think is the next step... to make a plan for the future...' (HAR04).

Comment: Self-actualisation was strongly associated with *wellbeing* AND with the *heritage* character of the projects.

3.2.7 Summary: The strength of heritage association in identified wellbeing themes

Analysis of the *heritage-specific* associations with wellbeing show the themes most strongly or often associated with heritage specifically were those relating to purpose, being, knowledge gain, sharing, psychological benefit and self-actualisation. This suggests that the particular value of heritage lies in meeting the intellectual and emotional needs of people who are interested in the past (as heritage volunteers mostly are) and who want to connect with and help historic assets. They want to be able to indulge their interests, think about the meaning and significance of their activity, relish a challenge, feel purposeful and valued, and give something of value to the community that leaves a tangible legacy. Noting that wellbeing is 'derived from two general perspectives: the hedonic approach, which focuses on happiness and defines well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance; and the eudaimonic approach, which focuses on meaning and self-realization and defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning' (Ryan and Deci [2001](#)), the HARAW data indicate that heritage volunteering offers both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing.

It was also noted that wellbeing associations were present in respondents who had not initially been interested in heritage but found this developed through their participation 'I didn't know any of this. I was a nurse. I didn't know anything about any of this at all. Archaeology - nothing. And now, 18 years later, I feel very involved' (HAR15). This reflects research which has shown that engagement with heritage, even simply thinking about it, can increase 'past temporal focus' which in turn increases personal interest in and valuing of heritage (Guo *et al.* [2012](#); Lewis *et al.* [2019](#), 42-44). This indicates that even people without a pre-existing conscious interest in heritage may be able to gain wellbeing benefits from engaging with heritage (Figure 2), suggesting the number of potential beneficiaries is much greater than previously supposed.

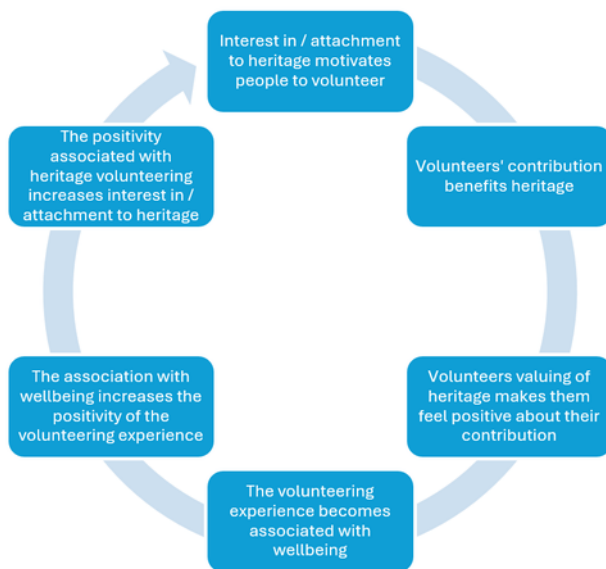


Figure 2: The heritage wellbeing cycle, articulating how heritage volunteering which is associated with wellbeing increases heritage valuation which in turn impacts on motivation to volunteer

3.3 The unique contribution of heritage to wellbeing in HAR volunteers: eight cross-cutting foundational characteristics eliciting the heritage 'USP'

We were aware that identifying which wellbeing associations are *specifically* associated with heritage does not necessarily demonstrate that these associations are *uniquely* offered by heritage. Because the review discussed above showed that some of the coded wellbeing associations in HAR volunteers *would* have been achievable from *other* forms of volunteering, we re-coded the sub-set of *heritage-specific* wellbeing-related comments to see if this might reveal any special or unique value of *heritage* for wellbeing. This elicited eight characteristics that cut across the six wellbeing themes. We inferred that, while the six wellbeing themes tell us about the *wellbeing* associations generally of heritage participation, the cross-cutting heritage characteristics tell us what *heritage* specifically offers that is special, different and in some cases unique. These eight characteristics are detailed in the full report (Lewis *et al.* [2022](#)) and summarised more briefly here as follows.

Temporality: Heritage volunteering is unique in offering a relationship with *time*, and temporality emerged strongly as a wellbeing-related theme: 'I'm so interested in history... And then local history is very different from national history' (HAR18). Time-connectedness was associated with happiness: '... it's just been it's just been an absolute joy to me. I've loved every minute. I've loved the historical research part of it. I've loved the human stories' (HAR13), and enchantment: 'That this was an amazing place ... and I'm trying to imagine what it was like to be living up there 3000, 4000 years ago. It's quite something. I think it just helps with your imagination. It just makes me smile. I just think it just makes you feel good' (HAR09). These contribute to hedonic wellbeing that focuses on the presence of positive emotions (Ryan and Deci [2001](#)) and reflects other studies exploring wellbeing of associations with time (e.g. Nolan [2019a](#), Nolan [2019b](#); Perry [2019](#)).

Discovery: Heritage volunteering offers unique chances to make *discoveries* about the past, whether these are new finds or new knowledge. This contributes to hedonic wellbeing (pleasure, excitement, anticipation) 'finding out such a lot more about something that I thought I knew... that I wanted to find out more about like this. I'm still doing research'



(HAR11), and eudaimonic wellbeing (learning, achievement, satisfaction): 'It means that you can find out about your history' (HAR11) (Ryan and Deci [2001](#)). This joy associated with heritage discovery has been noted before (e.g. Lewis [2014](#), 315). Discovery, and the possibility of discovery, were associated with good mood and place attachment rooted in connecting historical narratives with places (Pennington *et al.* [2019](#); Sayer [2024](#)) '... it connects all these different villages together because of course, it had sister abbeys and a mother abbey, I didn't know that until that time' (HAR26).

Authenticity: One unique aspect of heritage volunteering is the offer of tangible connections with *physical* 'stuff' from the past: 'it's connecting people with their history and somehow preserving these sites that connect them to their history' (HAR01). This conferred wellbeing rooted in happiness and feeling attached '...there is an ambience there which the architecture and the history of the building creates. And it gives them a certain pleasure, swimming inside that Edwardian atmosphere, which they don't get at other baths. So I think in many cases, it's not simply swimming at a sort of functional, material level. It's more than that, it's a kind of I wouldn't say it's spiritual, but it but it's a sensory experience of swimming, which is special at MRB' (HAR08). The physical reality offers a counter to the artifice of digital and virtual technology that helps people feel grounded: '...the actual ruins are stabilised and are all much, you know, hopefully will survive for another few hundred years...' (HAR19). Aspects of eudaimonic wellbeing include authenticity (Ryan and Deci [2001](#)), and in HAR volunteers this is associated with wellbeing related to trust, connectedness, empathy and purposefulness. The value of authenticity might be expected to increase in the future as digital technology becomes more pervasive and less trusted: 'I'm interested in history that tells the truth. Not history that only tells half a truth' (HAR14).

Continuity: Heritage volunteering offers the chance to link past to present which added to volunteers' sense of continuity: '... my great grandfather... his name's outside on a plaque with the names of the people... my parents are dead and I've got a brother who lives abroad ... makes me feel so quite, connected' (HAR23). This extended beyond volunteers themselves: 'the local community would be much poorer because they wouldn't be aware of their heritage and their history, and even more than it is now it would be just a suburb of London' (HAR10). A temporal (past-present-future) sense of continuity is important to wellbeing, offering connection and reassurance (Nolan [2019b](#); Brizi *et al.* [2023](#); Sofaer *et al.* [2021](#)): 'when you walk through Abbey Field ... it takes just take you back in time and it's lovely ... it's sort of timeless in a way when you're in the middle of the field with that, you know' (HAR31).

Rescuing: Heritage participation offers a particular sense of achievement through saving something that, being from the past, is irreplaceable and would otherwise have been lost forever: 'I kept asking people, why are we letting this map disappear?' (HAR04). A perception of triumph in the face of adversity: '[the site] came under threat from a developer who bought part of the site (HAR34) was associated with wellbeing related to satisfaction and pride: 'we are ... trying to do something difficult and we're doing it against opposition. It's no longer active opposition from people who are trying to stop us. But it's an opposition, I guess, to forces of inertia.' (HAR08). This contributes to eudaimonic wellbeing based in self-fulfilment and contributing to a greater good.

Nostalgia: Nostalgia relates to affection or longing for something from the past. In the context of HAR volunteering this emotional connection was experienced positively, including in volunteers pleased they had been able to help: 'it's kind of sad. Sometimes you have to just say, I think we're going to lose this one, but we're really lucky in this case that we were able to save so much of it' (HAR26). Some nostalgia was associated with family



connections: '... it is our family, grave location..., that was always in the background, because I was brought up in Liverpool. Anyone died, anyone in the area, people that we knew, they all went into Anfield Cemetery' (HAR02). But even without family connections, emotional connection increased mindfulness and empathy: '... the date, 1919, which is after the war is finished. And these poor Australian soldiers dying to get home. The Australian government wouldn't let them come home because there was, they'd closed the border on anyone was coming from Europe who might bring Spanish flu to Australia. So these poor guys, having served their country, died of flu in a churchyard in the camp just underneath the downs. Five miles from where I'm sitting.... Terrible' (HAR04). The association of nostalgia with wellbeing reflects other research showing positive impacts of nostalgia to include healthier and more optimistic aging, reduced loneliness, boredom and anxiety, and increased tolerance of outsiders (Sedikides *et al.* [2016](#); Hepper *et al.* [2021](#)).

Transformation: A key aspect of heritage is that it relates to time, and time (however long or short) is required for any change: 'it's about learning. Where we're from and how things have evolved. How things have changed. You know, what things we we've gotten from that and from there' (HAR01). Much wellbeing in HAR volunteers was associated with thinking about or generating change: 'I see our church as a catalyst for that kind of transformation of Woolwich into a much more established historical hub and tourist hub' (HAR06). This could include transforming the historic asset itself: '...for the community and the tenants of the building, you know, the positive effect ... is that they've seen something that could have been taken away from them start to be repaired, when it'd been neglected for years' (HAR34), or its use: 'and now it's got a very interesting role today. It's still a consecrated ground, so we can still have a church service, but it also a community place. So we have summer parties, and there's nothing religious and people are playing cricket, drinking, eating, and listening to music, having a good time. And that place is alive and full of people, which is good' (HAR14). Wellbeing associated with transformation was also derived from observed changes in attitudes: 'we were expecting about a dozen people or so ... we had ninety-nine people in two hours. And some guy came rushing up 'am I too late?' and we said, well, no.' (HAR25). The experience that something can be transformed provides a positive empowering message increasing perceptions of optimism and self-efficacy.

Legacy: Heritage volunteering encourages volunteers to think about time including the future as well as the past: '...we are excavating at the invitation of the farmer ... we're reliant on him being interested himself in his, in the heritage that he has inherited from his predecessors, and he will be passing on to his sons' (HAR07). Wellbeing in HAR volunteers was associated with creating something for the future, such as enabling a historic building to be used in new ways that would sustain it: 'And we realised that... we needed to pull our socks up and protect them and restore them and make them, you know, financially sustainable, really and viable. (HAR34). This was associated with wellbeing related to giving, self-esteem, self-actualisation, feeling valued and achieving something meaningful: 'As part of a team, I feel that that we've ... put something in Barnett on the map. And it's a historical thing' (HAR18). The opportunity to make a lasting difference was one of the most important attributes in the association of HAR volunteering with wellbeing: 'It makes me feel quite proud, I still, you know, every time I go back there, I still go wander and have a look at these boards... it makes me feel happy that we did it and what came out of it' (HAR35). This echoes previous identification of 'being part of something lasting' as a distinctive feature of HLF volunteers' experience when compared with Oxfam volunteers (Rosemberg *et al.* [2010](#)).

Summary: What heritage offers to volunteers that is unique



These eight cross-cutting characteristics of heritage activities appear to represent at least some of the 'USP' of heritage: that is, what makes heritage unique is its offer of opportunities to experience or achieve temporality, discovery, authenticity, continuity, rescue, nostalgia, transformation and legacy. These all relate directly or indirectly to the time-related focus of heritage programmes. Some of these characteristics can be encountered in non-heritage types of activity, but heritage activities are unique in offering many or all of these together. This is important, because the wellbeing impacts of each of the individual characteristics are frequently related to those of the others, each characteristic having the potential to enhance, and be enhanced by, the others - discovery helps achieve transformation; authenticity enhances continuity; rescuing generates legacy and so on. Thus the eight foundational 'heritage USP' characteristics together constitute a complex ecosystem in which all characteristics act as force multipliers for each other's wellbeing impacts. It appears that it is this interrelatedness that lies at the heart of the 'heritage USP' for wellbeing. This chimes with previous reviews which have repeatedly demonstrated the myriad interconnected ways in which heritage engagement is associated with wellbeing (e.g. Heritage Alliance [2020](#), Burnell and Woodhouse [2022](#); Gallou [2022](#)).

4. Conclusions

HARAW demonstrated an association between wellbeing and volunteering on [Heritage at Risk](#) projects, which are not primarily funded as wellbeing programmes. The six themes which emerged from in-depth interviews indicated it does this because HAR volunteering offers **purpose, being, capacity, sharing, self-nurture** and **self-actualisation**. Of these, the aspects most often or strongly associated with heritage are those relating to purpose, being, knowledge gain, knowledge sharing, psychological benefit and self-actualisation. Finally, HARAW explored the vexed question whether heritage projects offer *unique* routes to wellbeing. Analysis identified eight cross-cutting characteristics which appear to represent (some, at least) of the heritage 'USP' ('unique selling point'): **temporality, discovery, authenticity, continuity, rescue, nostalgia, transformation** and **legacy**. Analysis also indicated that, crucially, their impacts are interconnected, with the impacts of any one characteristic acting as a force multiplier for the others. This is a vital point, because it provides a clue to the nature of the 'heritage USP': this is to be found not in the *individual* characteristics of heritage activities, but in the *interaction* of multiple characteristics together. The heritage wellbeing USP is a dynamic interconnected whole that is the greater than the sum of its parts.

This complex array of insights was articulated in a new logic model (Figure 3). At the bottom are the **eight cross-cutting 'Heritage USP' characteristics**, which are made available to participants through **inputs and opportunities** provided by HAR funding, which generate **wellbeing outcomes** grouped within the six HARAW themes. This model is of wide relevance because the 'inputs and opportunities' can be provided by many heritage initiatives.

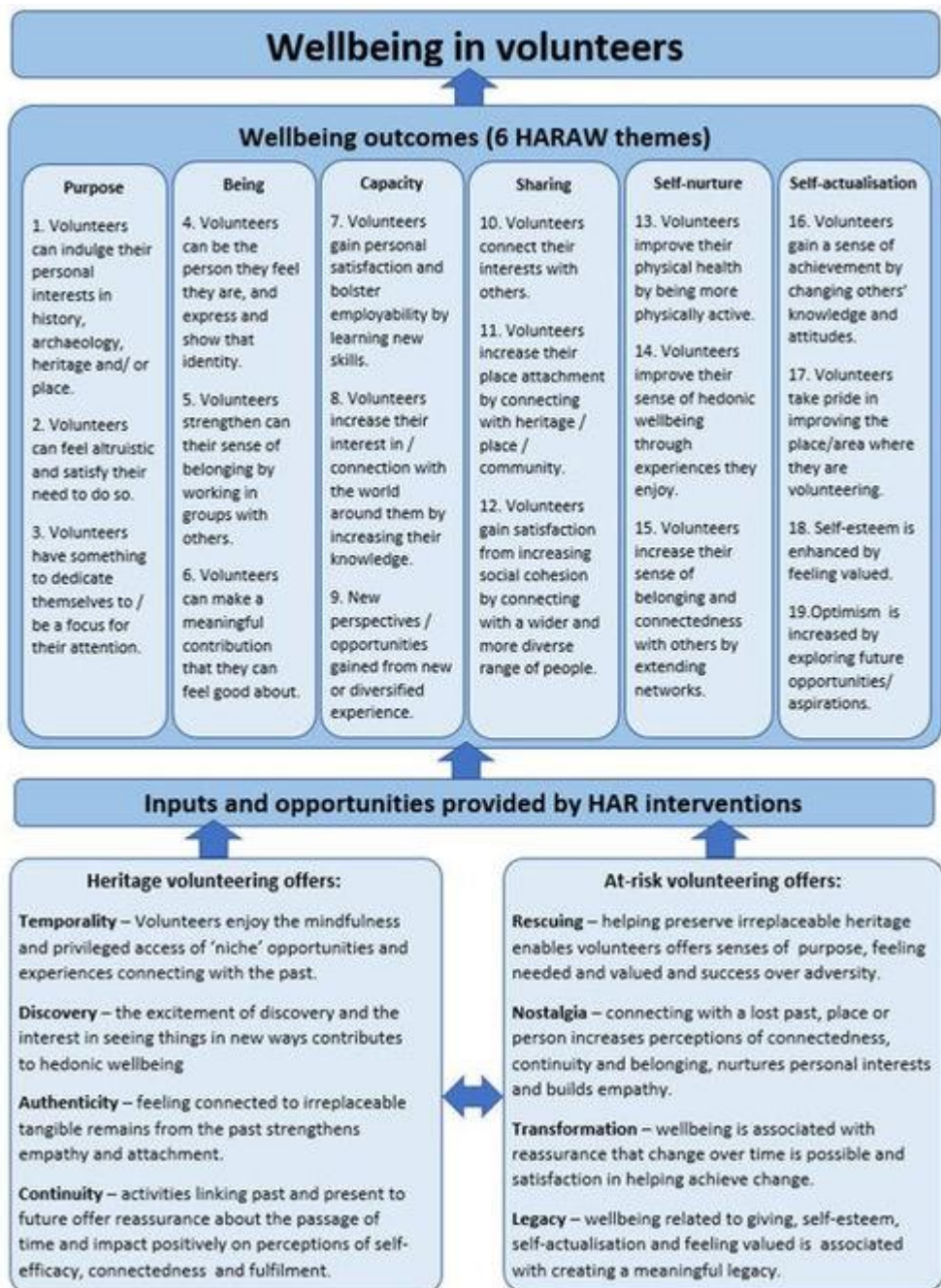


Figure 3: Model showing the relationship between the eight heritage-specific characteristics of heritage at risk volunteering (bottom) which are enabled by inputs and opportunities provided by activities to deliver wellbeing outcomes in 19 categories grouped into six themes

Demonstrating the *association* between HAR volunteering and wellbeing was important, as it shows that the public value of these sorts of heritage interventions can extend beyond their primary purpose of improving the condition of heritage assets. This should help make the case for future mitigatory heritage interventions to offer volunteering opportunities where possible (supporting aims to deliver greater 'public good' from heritage in private, public and third sectors) and to encourage members of the public to take up those opportunities, whether these have independently found or socially prescribed.

The HARAW insights could be used to match heritage opportunities with people who are looking for, or being recommended and/or prescribed, participatory social activities. This



could be done by developing the HARAW themes, categories and characteristics into questionnaires eliciting the importance to potential participants of purpose, being, capacity, sharing, self-nurture, self-actualisation, temporality, discovery, authenticity, continuity, rescuing, nostalgia, transformation and legacy. Responses would indicate not only *whether* or not a heritage-related activity was likely to suit the respondent, but also the *sort* of activity which they would be most likely to benefit from, and even provide a useful indication of their aspirations for their participation, knowledge of which is important for effective participant support.

Additionally, impact evaluation surveys that focus on participants' *experience* of these wellbeing-associated characteristics offers a way to evaluate wellbeing impacts that avoids enquiring directly about feelings which can be distressing for respondents, as do tools such as PANAS (Watson *et al.* 1988) and WEMWBS (Tennant *et al.* 2007). This chimes with recent research that has focussed on *experience* as a measure of wellbeing (Gallou 2022; Sayer 2024). In 2024 the use of measures derived from HARAW on a small group of armed service personnel and families participating in wellbeing-focussed archaeological excavation (Clack and Lewis *in prep*) suggested this method can provide a nuanced indicator of wellbeing aspirations and impacts. Given the demographics of the HARAW cohort (discussed above), it would be illuminating to test this approach with larger cohorts including people with a wider range of backgrounds and lived experience.

Finally, HARAW insights, demonstrating wellbeing benefits in programmes funded primarily to benefit heritage, and advancing understanding of the 'heritage USP' of public participation that can help improve the design, targeting and evaluation of participatory heritage programmes, should increase confidence in prospective participants, prescribers, funders and project staff alike that participatory heritage projects can and will meet stakeholders' wellbeing-related hopes and expectations.

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