

# opinion

## Critical time for heritage sites as survey suggests people want to revisit them

**Fiona Cairns**, of the Suffolk Preservation Society, says urgent action is needed if we are to keep the county's much-loved heritage sites open in the coming years



Slowly, cautiously, things are changing. As I write this column, England is about to enter the second phase of its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This easing of some of the previous lockdown provisions makes it possible for people to meet a limited number of others from outside their immediate family in open spaces and as long as two metre social distancing is observed.

Understandably, we have already seen very many of Suffolk's and the region's beaches inundated with people desperate to enjoy the mental and physical wellbeing benefits that comes with getting out of their immediate environs.

At the same time, the National Trust has announced that it will once again be possible for visitors to use the car parks and enjoy the grounds, if not the buildings, of a number of its properties.

It looks as if this pent-up demand will continue for some time. The May 27 BVA BDRC report into Travel & Mobility, Leisure & Hospitality Business Sentiment shows a recovery in the numbers of people intending to book staycations and hotel rooms and visit attractions sometime in the future.

The desire to visit attractions generally and in the next three months are both at their highest levels since the research started in late March. A total of 27% hope to do so in the next three to six months.

But the overriding worry of the Suffolk Preservation Society is that many of the heritage attractions, including dozens



Pakenham Watermill relies heavily on volunteers to keep it open

Picture: PAKENHAM WATER MILL

here in the county, may no longer be able to welcome such visitors when that time arrives.

Why?

Quite simply, because many have taken such a severe financial hit since the March lockdown that their chances of reopening this year – or in some extreme cases – ever – have been very much compromised.

We believe that this risk is at its most pronounced among those heritage attractions relying heavily on volunteers, such as the Suffolk Building Preservation Trust-run Little Hall in Lavenham and the Pakenham Watermill.

Lord Cormack initiated a

debate on this topic on parliament in late May – and the statistics are alarming.

A survey of 1,200 heritage sector organisations by the National Lottery Heritage Fund revealed that 46% believe that they cannot survive for another six months. Equally alarming, Historic England reports that 40% of smaller craft-based businesses and professional services such as architects, surveyors and engineers forecast business failure within three months.

Even the National Trust, Europe's largest conservation charity, is in trouble having just has announced that its income

will fall by £200 million this year. Already, it is seeing a decline in its five million membership, and its major conservation and restoration projects are on hold.

So what needs to be done to support our heritage sites that could play such an important role in supporting people's health and wellbeing in whatever 'new normal' emerges from the pandemic?

The society believes that what is needed is a joined-up and strategic response by government involving both targeted financial support and a communications message that extols the health and wellbeing benefits of visiting local

heritage sites.

Without wanting to re-open the old wounds of Brexit, I do think we could do worse than reflect on the EU Tourism Recovery Plan and Package

The EU has published a recovery plan for tourism as part of a package of guidance and recommendations to safely restart and rebuild the EU's tourism industry.

Unless the British government intervenes in a similar manner and works with organisations such as ours, the recovery from the effects of Covid-19 may take longer and some heritage sites may also be lost to the public forever.