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Heritage

VOLUNTEERING IN HERITAGE

Work Placement Report

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Summary

This report is a reflection on my several volunteering experiences within two different institutions in the heritage sector, undertaken as part of my Heritage Masters. My interest in heritage and art started with the 2018 fire at the National Museum of Brazil. This was not only a personal cultural tragedy but also for the whole of humanity, highlighting the vulnerability of heritage. It inspired my curiosity about its management and upkeep. Recognising the highly competitive nature of the field and the almost non-existence of roles, I pursued two volunteer placements to gain practical experience. My first was at the Norfolk Record Office from 2021, where I supported digitisation, repackaging, cataloguing, and conservation tasks. This role reinforced my understanding of archival care and the importance of making historical materials accessible. In 2024, I joined the annual Winter Clean at Strangers' Hall Museum, where I assisted conservators and other volunteers in the preparation of the historic house for public reopening. This highly practical placement allowed me to get in touch with preventive conservation and the seasonal maintenance routines of historic sites. These experiences highlighted the essential role volunteers play in supporting heritage institutions, often working to professional standards. However, it has also shown the sector's over-reliance on unpaid work. It raises important questions about equity, access and devaluation of professionals. Overall, volunteering has been a formative part of my professional development, linking academic learning with real-world practice. It has also encouraged my critical reflection on the challenges facing the heritage sector and strengthened my wish to contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable future for the field.

Introduction

This report is my submission as part of the Work Placement module for the MA in Heritage. The purpose of this module is to make a bridge between academia and professional practice. It gives students the skills, insights, and critical awareness necessary to understand the heritage job market. Through placements and reflective analysis, it encourages students to engage with the realities of working in museums, archives, and other heritage institutions. However, my experience of the module has been shaped by a unique context. As a remote student, I was unable to participate in a traditional university-arranged placement. In recognition of this, and given my prior volunteering across multiple heritage organisations, I was permitted to complete this report retrospectively.

The heritage sector plays a vital role in the preservation and interpretation of cultural memory. Yet it is also a field plagued with at-risk structures, very limited funding, and a seemingly over-reliance on unpaid work. Volunteering has become a foundation of heritage work, particularly in museums and archives, where volunteers often do the skilled tasks that support essential institutional functions. According to Historic England's Heritage data (2025), the number of volunteers supporting heritage organisations has significantly increased since 2018/19, while employment in the sector, particularly within local authority historic environment teams has declined. This contrast highlights a growing reliance on unpaid work to support heritage services. However, it is important to note that not all organisations follow this trend. For instance, the National Trust has reported a decrease in volunteer numbers over the same period, suggesting a more complex and varied picture across the sector. The purpose of this report is to reflect critically on two contrasting volunteering experiences: a long-term placement (not through an official university-based module, but of my own initiative) at the Norfolk Record Office in 2021, and a short-term conservation project at Strangers' Hall Museum in 2023. These experiences provided valuable insights into archival care, preventive conservation, and the broader dynamics of heritage work. They also raised important questions about the ethics of unpaid labour, the accessibility of the heritage job market, and the sustainability of volunteer-dependent institutions.

In addition to reflecting on my personal and professional development, this report will examine the form and ethical aspects of volunteering in the heritage sector. It will

consider the motivations, benefits, and challenges of volunteering, drawing on academic literature and sector reports. It will also explore the pressures between inclusivity and exploitation and the implications of volunteer reliance for the future of heritage.

The report is structured as follows:

- Context about volunteering in the heritage sector, with a focus on archives and museums.
- Two case studies analysed, covering my placements at the Norfolk Record Office and Strangers' Hall Museum.
- A discussion of the two experiences, comparing key differences, transferable skills, and field insights.
- A concluding reflection on the purpose of volunteering and its role in providing a more inclusive and sustainable heritage sector.

In order to fully understand the significance of these placements and the wide involvement of volunteering in heritage, it is important to first explore the part that volunteers play within the sector. The next section will add a context on volunteering in archives and museums, examining its motivations, benefits, and ethical complexities through both personal experience and academic literature.

Context: Volunteering in the Heritage Sector

Volunteering plays multiple roles in the heritage sector, particularly within archives and museums where finances and staff are commonly limited. Volunteers contribute across a broad spectrum of activities, including front-of-house roles, educational outreach, and behind-the-scenes work such as conservation, cataloguing, and collections care. Their involvement is not just supplementary; it is integral to the running and sustainability of heritage institutions (Goodland and McIvor, 1998; Holmes, 2006). In my own experience, volunteering at the Norfolk Record Office involved digitisation, repackaging, and cataloguing, tasks that directly supported the preservation and accessibility of archival materials. At Strangers' Hall Museum, I participated in the annual winter clean, assisting with preventive conservation under the guidance of professional staff. These placements

demonstrated that volunteers are frequently entrusted with skilled and meaningful responsibilities, contributing to both the operational and interpretive dimensions of heritage work. As Løkka and Hjemdahl argue, volunteers often embody a “heritage from within,” bringing personal investment and community insight into institutional spaces. They argue:

“The volunteers regularly draw upon childhood memories, former food traditions, professional life, past cultural experiences, local historical events, and more. These personal memories serve as the foundation for their heritage activities, exerting a profound influence on heritage itself and the knowledge attached to it. Through sharing personal memories or the memories of others, volunteers assume a crucial role in shaping collective memories.” (Løkka and Hjemdahl, 2025, p. 222)

This is a very interesting idea, and one I tend to agree with. Heritage is something completely malleable, constantly fed by different experiences and narratives. In this sense, having a diverse pool of volunteers is incredibly important. The variety of backgrounds adds depth and allows a wider demographic to connect with a heritage site. It also makes it more accessible, playing with emotions, as it becomes personal. A visitor is more likely to engage with the space and become interested if it’s grounded in personal feeling. One could argue that this emotional connection could be achieved with a staff of paid professionals. However, as there are fewer of them, this emotional aspect of community engagement becomes less of a priority. The work remains the same, but with fewer hands to do it, professionals are often overwhelmed with work. These gaps are then filled by volunteers, who bring their own memories, perspectives, and emotional investment. Their involvement helps maintain the human side of heritage, which might otherwise be lost in the pressure of institutional demands.

Historical Roots and Cultural Framing

The integration of volunteering into the heritage sector has historical roots, particularly in the UK, where civic engagement and local history movements have long been involved with museums and archives. More than for heritage, it is also referred to as “social glue.” Britain has a long record of being socially active for one’s community (Anheier and

Salamon, 1999, p. 47). There is, however, a gap in the literature as to when *heritage* volunteering began in the form that I have experienced. But because of its range, extent, and organization, I believe it is the result of several volunteering forms evolving to what is known today. We do know about the “serious leisure” perspective (Stebbins, 2013), which helped frame volunteering not only as altruistic but also as a form of identity-building and personal progression. It is important to note that Stebbins discusses all kinds of volunteering as part of leisure studies and not in a specific heritage framework. Therefore, while his idea of “serious leisure” is applicable, it is only a small part of heritage volunteering. This historical context, while vague, helps explain how volunteering remains both culturally valued and structurally embedded in heritage work.

Motivations, Benefits, and Challenges

Volunteers are driven by a range of motivations, including personal interest, a desire to contribute to cultural preservation, professional development, and community engagement. For example, Orr describes one very important part of volunteering: “The practice of volunteering as a substitute for paid work has been recognised, and heritage volunteers have explained their volunteering as a replacement for work and as a way of keeping their minds active.” (Orr, 2006, p. 198). This idea is true for a wide range of people. From retired people who want to keep in touch, asylum seekers that are prohibited from participating in the work force and for students like me, who crave an entry into the heritage sector and fear that not keeping up with the heritage experiences will make them less employable. For many, including myself, volunteering serves as a gateway into the sector, an opportunity to gain practical experience and build networks in a competitive job market. These motivations are linked with a genuine passion for heritage and a commitment to its care. There are several benefits to volunteering. Individuals gain hands-on experience, develop transferable skills, and engage with heritage in a deeply personal way. Even more than that, it is a place where people connect, and friendships are made. Institutions, in turn, benefit from the labour, enthusiasm, and community connections that volunteers bring. Păceșilă similarly agrees, but adds: “They (students in Bucharest universities) are oriented towards knowledge accumulation, and are characterised by an increase need to learn new things related to history and other fields.

They are involved in many activities within the museum such as guided tours, educational workshops, processing of ceramic material, arranging exhibitions. Moreover, their answers show that they are intrinsically, cognitively and emotionally motivated because they are interested in history, knowledge, socialisation and acquisition of certain skills.” (Păceșilă, 2020, p. 103). This research understand specifically the situation of many students trying to build on skills and experience for the heritage sector. By working alongside professionals, they gain important insight and start building networks. However, the issue remains that often it traps students into remaining in voluntary positions, which does not allow them to progress into paid positions. Moreover, the increasing reliance on volunteers risks blurring the lines between professional and unpaid labor, potentially undermining job security and professional standards (Fredheim, 2018, p. 623).

Ethical Considerations and Sectoral Implications

The ethical sides of volunteering in heritage are complicated and often disputed. While volunteers make valuable contributions, the field’s dependence on unpaid work raises questions about sustainability, fairness, and inclusivity. Is it ethical to rely on volunteers for work that requires professional knowledge? Are institutions doing enough to ensure that volunteering is accessible and meaningful for all? Inclusivity is a pressing concern. Without the appropriate support structures, such as stipends, flexible scheduling, remote opportunities, and transport compensations, volunteering excludes individuals from underrepresented or lower socio-economic backgrounds. This not only perpetuates inequality but also highlights the lack of diversity of voices and perspectives within heritage institutions (Lockstone-Binney *et al.*, 2020, p. 16–17). In spite of these challenges, volunteering can have a changing effect on the promoting of heritage sustainability and community engagement. When properly managed, volunteers act as representatives of cultural memory, helping to preserve and interpret heritage for future generations. They also strengthen the links between institutions and their communities,

creating a sense of shared ownership and responsibility. Because they are, as previously described, a representative of heritage and consumer alike (Holmes, 2006; Deery, Jago and Mair, 2011; Stebbins, 2013). Therefore, they might just be the strongest bridge between heritage and community. Reflecting on my own journey, I found that volunteering not only helped me develop practical skills but also expanded my understanding of the ethical and emotional aspects of heritage work. The sense of responsibility I felt when handling fragile maps or cleaning historic dollhouses and books marked the trust placed in volunteers and the care required in such roles.

Case Study 1: Norfolk Record Office

Brief Description of the Placement and Projects

My placement at the Norfolk Record Office (NRO) in 2021 involved a series of short-term projects across three areas: cataloguing, digitisation, and conservation. These projects were part of a larger initiative led by both the NRO and external heritage organisations, including the Norfolk Churches Trust and the Norfolk Archaeological Trust. The work was varied and manual, offering knowledge into the management and preservation practices of a regional archive.

Description

The placement began with a meeting and orientation session, in which I was briefed on how some of the projects would run and the expectations for volunteers. At first, I had applied to different roles and was waitlisted for some but ultimately secured a position that allowed me to rotate between different tasks. It is important to note that this process happened for the NRO (Norfolk Records Office) and the NAT (Norfolk Archaeological

Trust) simultaneously, although all the projects were held within the NRO (Figure 1), being from different organisations required different trainings and orientation. For example, the NRO is run by the Norfolk County Council, and is therefore held by different expectations and responsibilities than a standard heritage organisation. Training was given for each area of work.



Figure 1 Norfolk Records Office

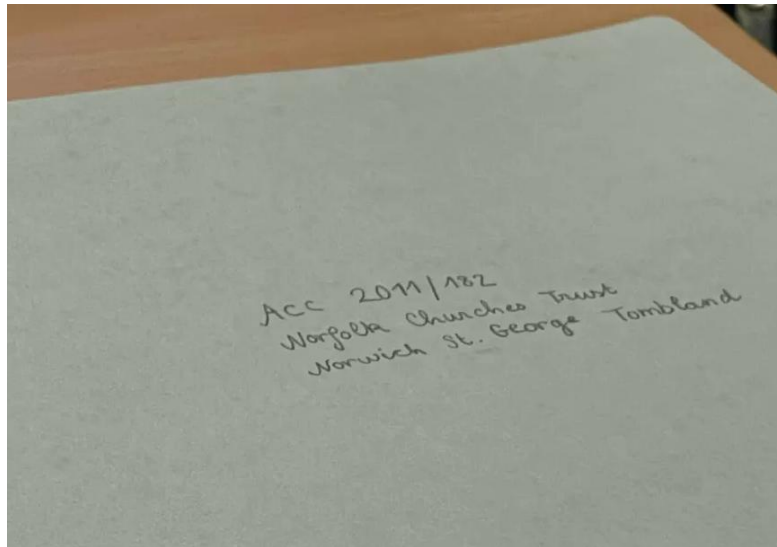


Figure 2 Cataloguing Document-Repackaging Project

For cataloguing, I was involved in the transcription and organisation of archival materials, making sure that records were precisely described and accessible. Repackaging tasks required a middle ground between conservation knowledge and cataloguing practice, with the removal of metal clips and securing documents with archival-safe materials such as brass clips, cotton ribbons and acid-free paper and boxes (Figure 2). This project was part of a big project by the Norfolk Churches Trust to preserve parish records. The digitisation project was held at the NRO and co-ordinated by the archivists. For the NAT project, I worked with a professional camera and lighting setup to photograph minute books, followed by basic photo editing to prepare the images for digital archiving. This process required precision and care, as the materials were often fragile and historically significant. The conservation project involved object handling training and the cleaning of historical maps, some dating back to the early 1800s. Using foam sponges, similar to those used by fire services to clean soot, I carefully removed surface dirt. While the work was repetitive, it was also fun and interesting, offering a tactile connection to the materials and a sense of direct involvement to their preservation.

Feelings

My first feelings were a mix of excitement and curiosity. I was particularly attracted to the conservation project, which was more aligned with my personal interests in material culture and heritage work. Some tasks, such as transcription and digitisation, were less fulfilling, they still provided valuable experience and insight into archival processes. There were moments of loneliness, particularly during the digitisation process, where the repetitive nature of photographing and editing minute books became mentally tiring. However, I know the importance of this work in making historical records more accessible to researchers and the public. The cataloguing tasks, though solitary, gave me a sense of quiet satisfaction. There was something meditative about bringing order to historical chaos. The conservation work, despite being the most repetitive, was unexpectedly my favourite. Handling physical objects and contributing to their care has given me a sense of purpose and connection to the heritage I was helping to preserve. It also revealed a deeper inclination toward working with objects rather than information. I believe that could be a reflection of my background in art history and material culture.



Figure 3 Conservation Work Desk

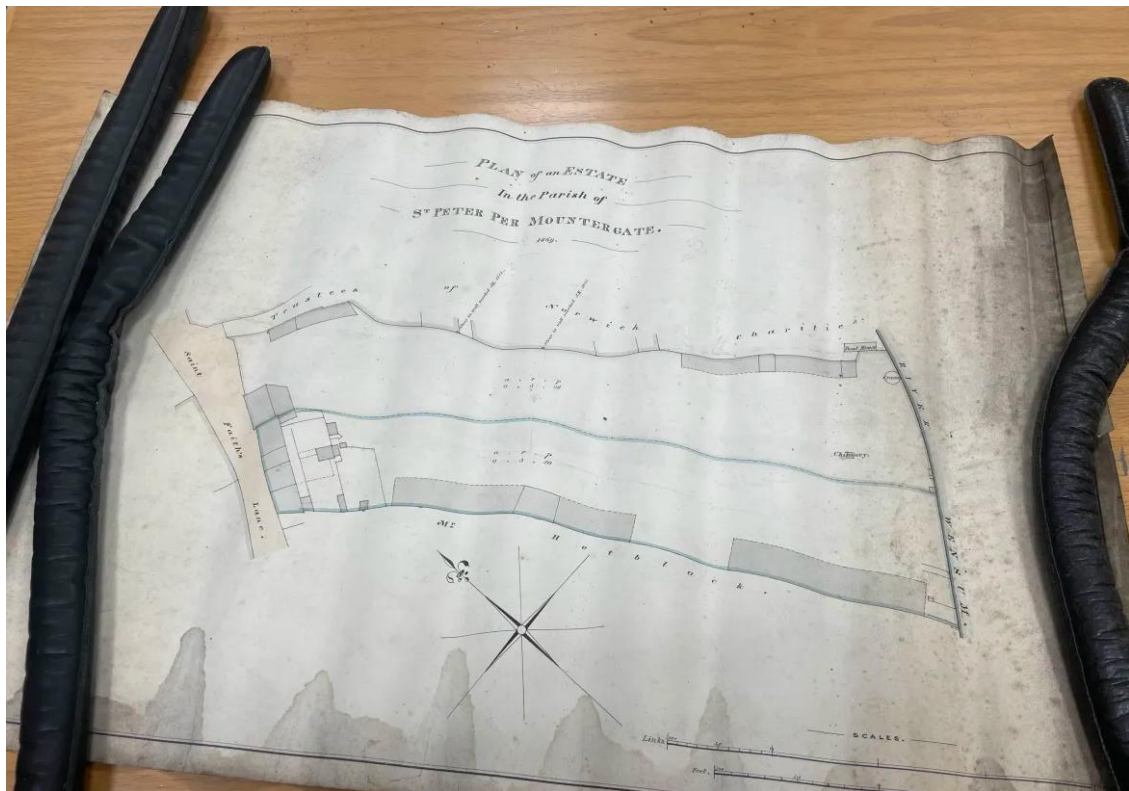


Figure 4 Map



Figure 5 Digitisation Camera Set Up

Evaluation

The projects were well-organised and professionally managed. Training was clear and effective, and the staff watching volunteers were knowledgeable and supportive. Their availability for feedback and guidance contributed to a positive experience. However, the lonely nature of many tasks, particularly cataloguing and digitisation, made the experience feel isolating at times. Unlike the conservation sessions, which encouraged volunteers to work in pairs (to manipulate larger maps), the other projects lacked opportunities for conversation. This highlighted the importance of social engagement in volunteer work and the potential for institutions to organise groups in ways that engage community and shared learning. The conservation project is a highlight for its immediacy and unpredictability. Paper and parchment are very fragile, and urgent issues often came up that required immediate attention. The NRO's conservation lab is staffed by experienced professional and includes a head conservator who had previously worked as a bookbinder, which provided a even richer learning environment. I have learnt immensely from his guidance.

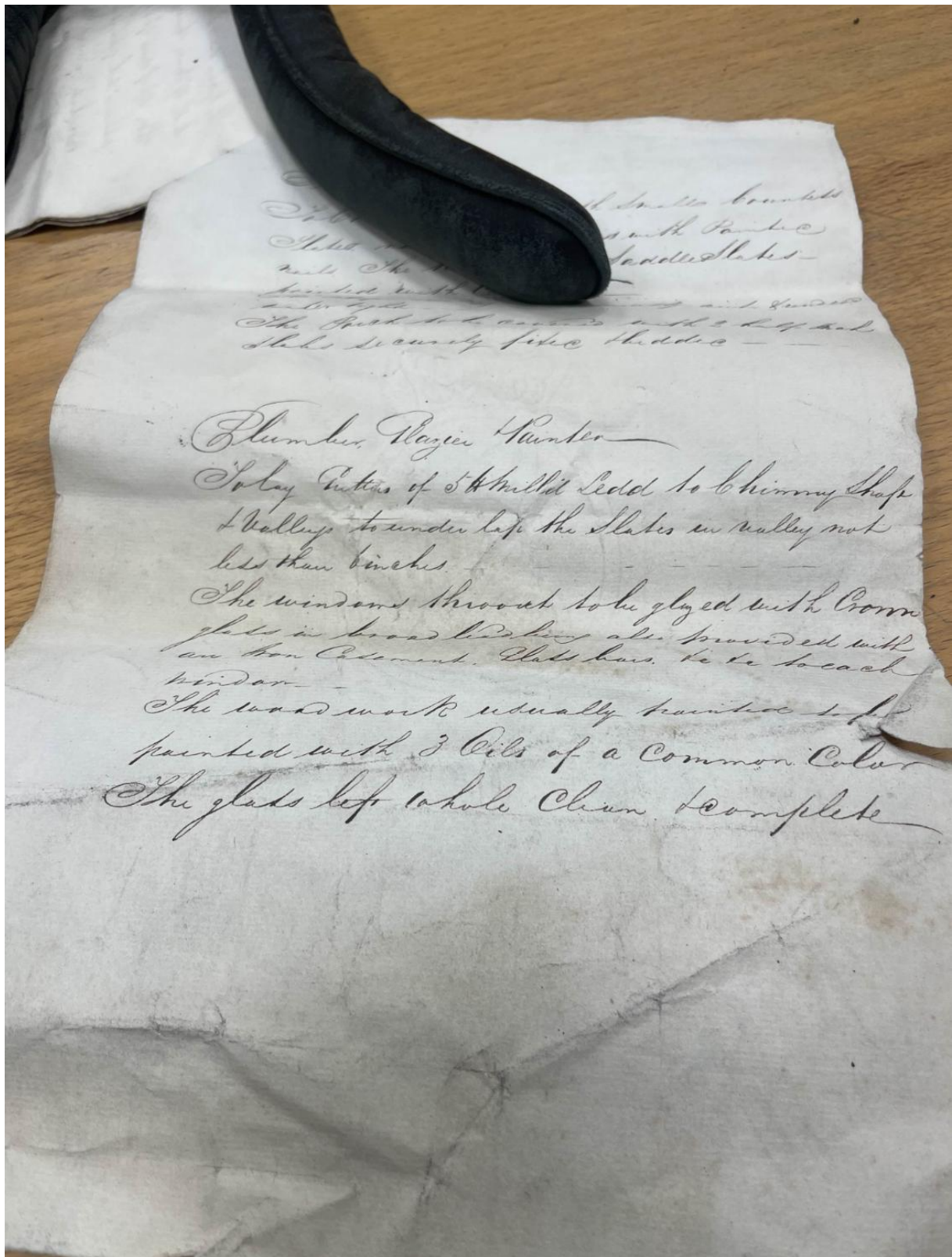


Figure 6 Letter Covered in Soot

Analysis

Fredheim (2018) discusses the concept of “endangerment-driven heritage volunteering,” where volunteers are made to watch threats to cultural materials. The conservation work I participated in seems to fit this idea, as it involved direct intervention to fix and clean vulnerable documents. This form of volunteering not only contributes to heritage preservation but also creates a sense of urgency and responsibility among participants. However, those are tasks that should be done under the guidance of a conservator or experienced collection staff, as it is their professional responsibility. As much as I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, I felt that sometimes the conservation project at hand should not have been handled by occasional volunteers. Fredheim also mentions: “efforts to increase public participation in heritage cannot hope to avoid exploiting volunteers, devaluing professionals and marginalising traditionally underrepresented demographics unless they also let go of the perceived need to protect the materiality of the past.” (Fredheim, 2018, p. 619). Unfortunately, at times, the work asked from volunteers succeeds reason and travels on boundaries. This was my experience at the NRO.

Conclusion

This placement provided a full and complete introduction to archival work and conservation practice. I gained practical skills in cataloguing, digitisation, and object handling, and developed a large understanding of the ethical and challenging dimensions of heritage preservation. The experience also helped me understand what I wanted my professional interests to be, revealing my penchant toward material engagement and conservation.

It also made me reflect on the nature of heritage work itself. While archives are often associated with information and documentation, my experience showed the hands-on and fragile nature of the materials involved. The act of cleaning a centuries-old map or removing a rusted paperclip became a form of care, both for the object and for the history it represents. This connection to the past was moving and reinforced my ambition to work in areas that prioritise the material and sensory aspects of heritage.

Case Study 2: Stranger's Hall Museum – Winter Clean Project

Brief Description of the Project

In early 2025, I participated in the Winter Clean project at Strangers' Hall Museum in Norwich, a month-long preventive conservation project led by the Norfolk County Council's senior conservator. The project aims to prepare the museum's collections and interiors for public reopening through deep cleaning and preventive conservation care. It was supported by a freelance conservator, a collections assistant, and the museum's learning educator, with a rotating team of volunteers, me included. Due to its popularity, the project has been requiring (for the last two years) a formal application and references, with many participants returned annually, some even taking time off work to join.

Description

Volunteers came for full-day sessions a few times a week when they made themselves available on the rota system, allowing a range of participants to participate meaningfully.

The tasks included cleaning smaller furniture, textiles, ceramics, and architectural features using museum-grade tools and materials. We also made condition checks and handled fragile objects under professional supervision. The work was careful and required a high level of care, but it was also deeply rewarding. As volunteers, we were not expected to handle the most precarious objects, at risk of breakage or contaminated by pests. We were also notified that under no circumstances we would be required to do any work we were uncomfortable with, advice I have followed as I stood clear of any ladders and high step stools. We were also deeply encouraged to ask whatever we wanted from all staff, and to take as many break as we wanted. This was the first time I felt fully immersed in a professional conservation setting. Volunteers were treated as integral members of the team, and the atmosphere was one of respect and shared purpose. The presence of the conservators and structured guidance created a learning environment that was both organised and supportive.



Figure 7 Conservator Presenting A Mini Book With Watercolor

Feelings

I attended this placement with enthusiasm and curiosity. Unlike my previous experiences at the NRO, the Winter Clean felt more immersive. I looked forward to each session, not only for the hands-on work but also for the sense of community and collaboration. The structured rota and the professionalism of the staff contributed to a feeling of being part of something meaningful. I was also encouraged by the presence of a slightly more diverse group of volunteers. While the majority still demonstrated the typical demographic, retired, white, middle-class women, there were, unlike at my NRO experiences, younger participants and individuals from different backgrounds. This change in the represented volunteers made me think on the importance of accessibility and outreach in heritage volunteering.

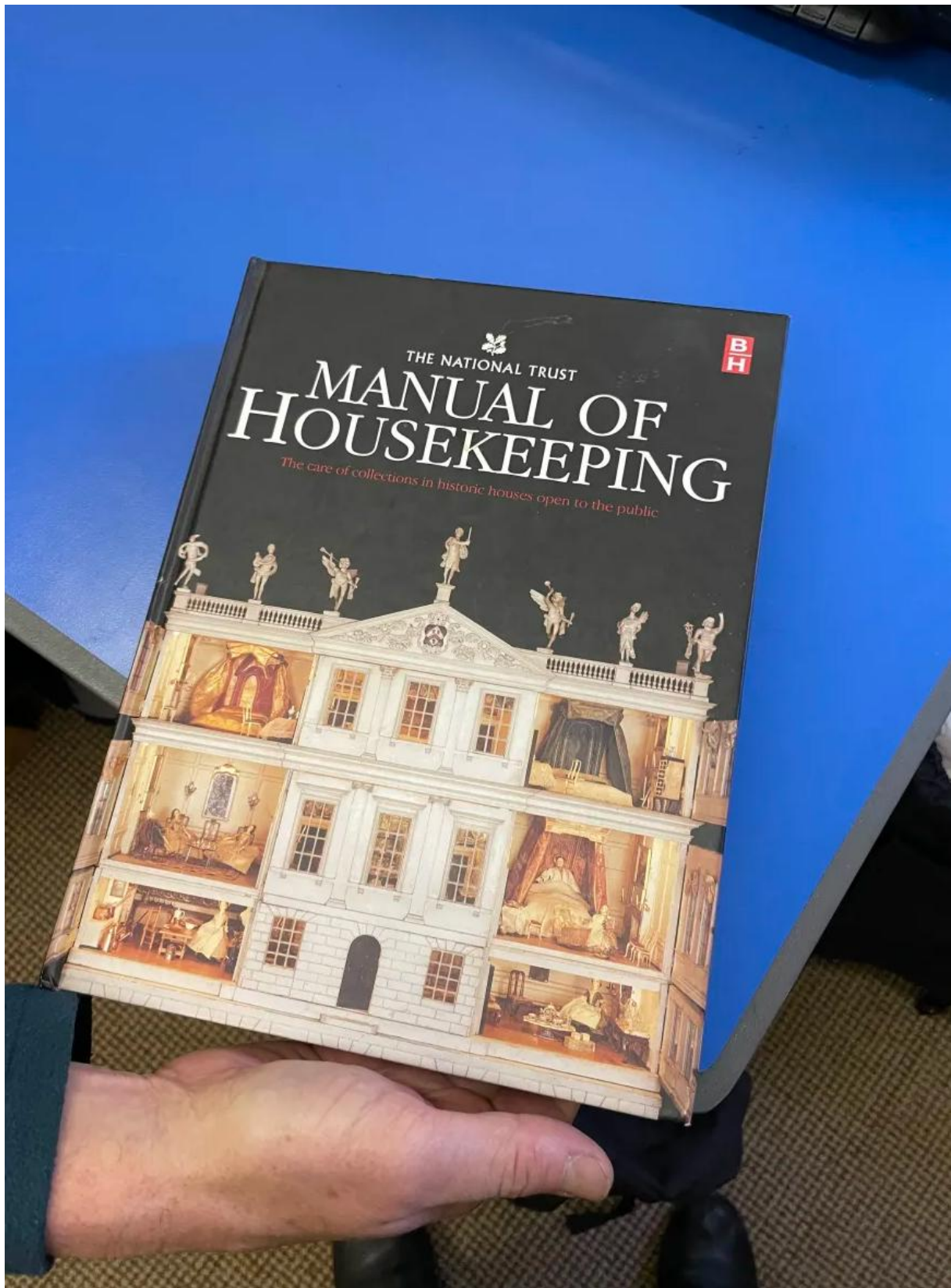


Figure 8 Conservator Showing The Housekeeping Manual



Figure 9 Mini-Bookshelf In Museum Storage

Evaluation

The Winter Clean was one of the best volunteer experiences I've had. The project was well-organised, with clear communication, structured training, and ongoing support. The conservators were generous with their knowledge, and the collections assistant and learning educator was welcoming and made sure the museum remained an inclusive environment. One of the most appreciated aspects was the balance between independent tasks and supervision. Volunteers were trusted with delicate tasks but still also supported when needed. However, the project also shows what could be improved. Despite its strengths, it still operated within a system that relies heavily on unpaid work, as explained above. The application process, while necessary for quality control, may unintentionally exclude those without prior experience or professional references. Additionally, while the diversity was better than in previous placements, it remained limited, suggesting a need for more inclusive recruitment strategies.



Figure 10 Museum Grade Hoover

Analysis

This experience aligns with literature on preventive conservation and volunteer engagement. Comparing this to my placement at the Norfolk Record Office, the Winter Clean avoided many of the structural issues identified by Fredheim (2018). At the NRO, the imbalance between volunteers and professionals, the lack of diversity, and the very strange hierarchy reflected Fredheim's critique of "endangerment-driven heritage volunteering". There is also the project's reliance on unpaid work, a form of gatekeeping in the application process and need for references, and the limited diversity pointing to ongoing challenges. Goodland and McIvor (1998) also discusses the responsibilities of museums when engaging volunteers. They argue: "Before a museum deploys volunteers it is essential to consider carefully the priorities of the museum and subsequently to manage volunteers to support those priorities. All of the less productive and even destructive activities of volunteers that have occurred can be explained by the museum not taking due care to consider: 1. which areas of the museum could benefit from volunteer assistance; 2. how volunteers could benefit from the opportunity of working in a museum; 3. which methods should be used to ensure that the volunteers are managed and work effectively to support the museum's objectives, and gain from the experience." (pp. 9–10) This statement reflects necessary way to consider volunteer management. While volunteers are not staff and do not carry the same responsibilities, they must be supported, trained, and placed in roles that are appropriate. In my experience at Strangers' Hall, this balance was maintained. Volunteers were not expected to take on complicated conservation tasks, such as manipulating pest-infested or highly fragile objects. Instead, we were trained in object handling and given tasks that were important but manageable. Goodland and McIvor also caution against viewing volunteers as simply

unpaid staff: “We would argue that the volunteers should not be seen simply as an extension of personnel service... the benefits received by volunteers are different; therefore, the motivations behind volunteering are different; therefore, the types of work that volunteers could and would sustain are often different.” (p. 18). This distinction is important. Volunteers are members of the public, motivated by curiosity and passion. Their engagement should be encouraged, but their roles must be clearly defined to avoid undermining professional standards. In my own experience, the lines between volunteer and professional responsibilities were clearly traced, and the respect for both roles was evident.

Conclusion

The Winter Clean at Strangers’ Hall was a formative experience that deepened my understanding of conservation practice and the role of volunteers in heritage care. It confirmed my interest in preventive conservation and collections management, and it gave me a good sense of the expectations within professional heritage environments. It also allowed reflection on the ethics of volunteering. While the project was inclusive and well-managed, it still operated within a system that depends on unpaid work to help in the functioning of public heritage. This tension between passion and precarity is one I continue to hold as I consider my future in the museum.

Discussion

Comparative Reflection

Reflecting on my two volunteer placements, at the Norfolk Record Office (NRO) and Strangers’ Hall Museum, it demonstrates not only different environments and structures

but also contrasting institutional cultures. These experiences have shaped my understanding of the heritage sector, specifically in relation to working structures, inclusivity, and the role of volunteers in public heritage sustainability.

Different Environments: Archive vs. Museum

The NRO offered a highly structured environment focused on the preservation and accessibility of local historical records. The work was largely lonely and repetitive, involving digitisation, cataloguing, and conservation. The physical space was quiet with no outside public interaction. Volunteers worked independently and the atmosphere was more administrative than interpretive. Oppositely, Strangers' Hall Museum provided a more complete and hands on environment. The Winter Clean project involved conservation of objects and historic interiors, with volunteers working in pairs or small groups under the supervision of professional conservators. The museum space was more joyful, with a stress on material culture and public engagement. The collaborative nature of the work created a sense of shared purpose and community. This contrast highlighted the diversity of heritage work. Archives preserve the intangible records, data, and documentation, while museums preserve the tangible, offering a more physical and immediate connection to history. The NRO taught me the importance of precision and documentation, while Strangers' Hall revealed the emotional and physical dimensions of heritage care.

Different Types of Volunteering: Long-Term vs. Short-Term

The NRO placement was long-term and intermittent, with tasks given over several months. This format allowed for slow skill development but lacked social engagement.

Volunteers were often left to work independently, which did allow for autonomy, also led to isolation. The Winter Clean, on the other hand, was a short-term, high-intensity project. Volunteers participated in full-day sessions multiple times a week over the course of a month. This structure created a sense of cohesion, with volunteers forming informal networks and returning annually. The project's popularity and formal application process, including references, reflected its reputation as a serious and rewarding opportunity. This difference in structure had a direct impact on my involvement.

Skills Developed and Challenges Faced

At the NRO, I developed technical skills in digitisation, transcription, cataloguing, and basic conservation. I learned to follow archival standards, handle fragile documents, and work independently. However, the lack of interaction and limited feedback made the experience feel isolating at times. The tasks, while important, were repetitive and lacked the immediacy of object-based conservation. At Strangers' Hall, I gained hands-on experience in preventive conservation, condition checking, and collaborative cleaning of museum objects. I received object handling training and learned to use conservation-grade materials. The presence of professional conservators created a rich learning environment, and the opportunity to ask questions and receive feedback enhanced my understanding of conservation practice. The difference between the two placements helped clarify my professional interests. While I appreciated the intellectual side of archival work, I found myself more drawn to the materiality and immediacy of conservation. The tactile engagement with objects and the collaborative nature of museum work impacted more strongly with my background in art history and material culture.

Conclusion

Together, these placements offered a multifaceted view of the heritage sector. The NRO highlighted the importance of archival care and the invisible work that supports historical records. It also exposed the over reliance on volunteers and the demographic limitations of heritage engagement. Strangers' Hall, meanwhile, demonstrated how conservation can be both inclusive and professionally strict. It showed that with right training and supervision, volunteers can contribute truly to heritage preservation without undermining professional roles. These experiences have shaped my understanding of the sector as one that is both inspiring and precarious, rich in opportunity but challenged by issues of access, labour equity, and sustainability.

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