

## Conservation principles for nature, beauty and history

*Imogen Wood MCIfA (5040), National Trust*

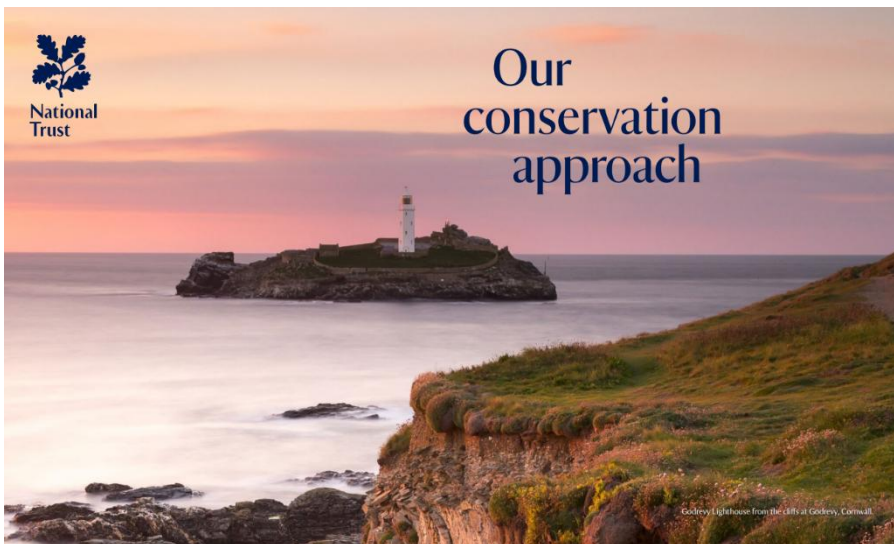
In December 2025 the National Trust shared its refreshed Conservation Approach; an update to our conservation principles with an underpinning philosophy guiding our conservation work and priorities. Why? To enable us to deliver our core purpose: permanent preservation of places of historic interest or natural beauty...for the benefit of the nation, in service of our **strategy**.

*Our People and Nature Thriving strategy focuses on restoring nature, increasing access to the natural and historic environment, and inspiring millions to take action in delivering our core purpose. The shifts in ways of working comprise a more outward-looking process that operates in a more collaborative and active learning environment, motivated to prioritise partnerships and act beyond our own boundaries, but we also recognise that we must differentiate our approach to conservation management proportionate to relative significance, public benefit and with an understanding of threats.*



As archaeologists, we have a really clear understanding of change and layers of evidence and meaning wrapped up in places, land, spaces and the built environment. We also have a good understanding of the nature–culture dynamic and recognise that all of our land has a story, writ deep and shallow, across the hills, freshwater, coast, lowlands and settlements that comprise our islands. Most archaeologists also recognise and sympathise with the state of nature in this bleak landscape and know that we need to turn that decline around in order to prevent irrevocable losses in our ecosystems and biodiversity (clue to urgency – for some species it is already too late; some habitats are already lost and will take millennia to recover).

Since 1895 our approach has evolved in response to the need of the time: access to countryside, clean air



*National Trust conservation approach, released 1 December 2025*

and beauty; architecturally significant country houses and designed landscapes being carved up and blown up; coastal connectivity and access so that people can be free to embrace our island-maritime connection, as well as protection of important habitats such as dune systems and salt marsh. Now we face a climate and nature crisis and the need to hone our conservation focus; creating the change needed to meet our enacted objects – delivering goals for people and nature – requires a shift in approach once more.

As successors of these estates, custodians of coast, and as landlord, partner and funder of so much conservation work, we have developed new tools for applying a conservation approach to the management of our places. We recognise that sometimes – for a period of time – we will focus on maintaining, but at other times understand that it is important to renew and to innovate, to be bolder with our decision-making to deliver the goals for conservation that we seek, or indeed take no action in order to focus on other priorities. Different places, artefacts, processes, stories, and habitats all have inherently different life cycles,

with different trajectories and differing fragility and vulnerability. It is therefore essential to differentiate our approach

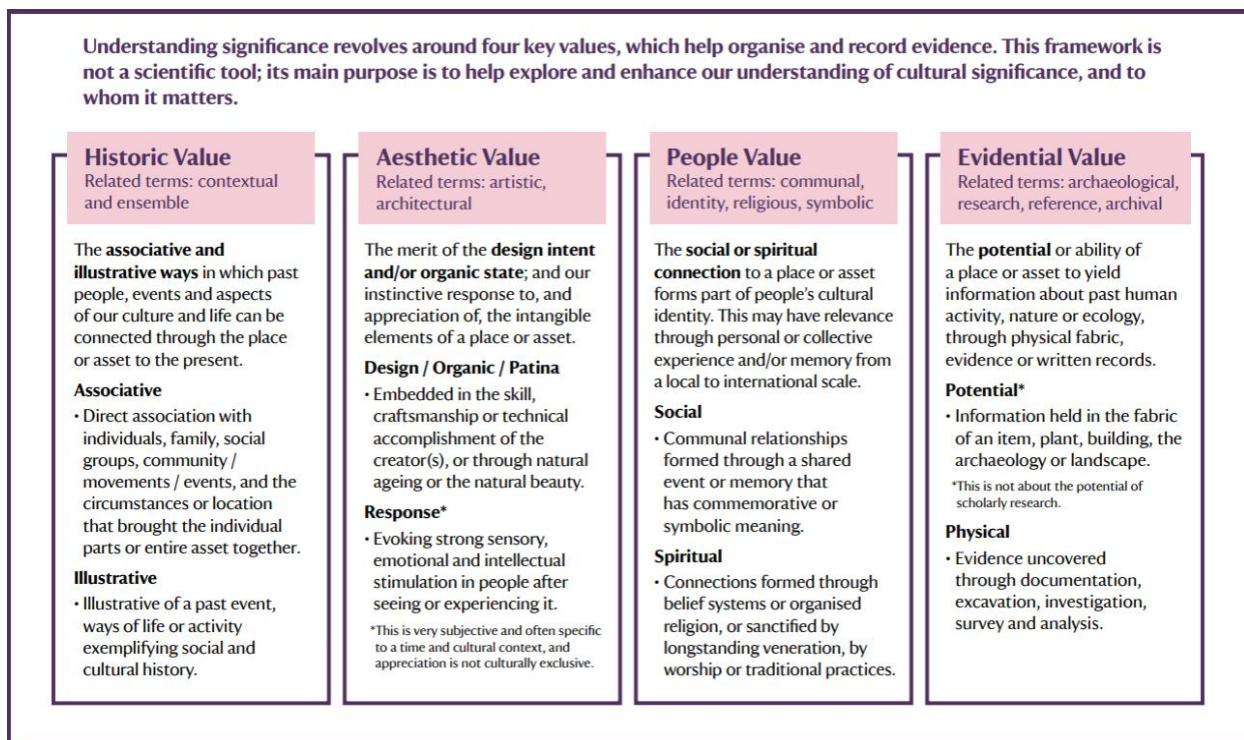
- **maintaining** – attempting to fight the agents of decay and sustain heritage and nature values.
- **renewing** – recognising the need to find new uses, adapt to economic shifts, incentives and the climate.
- **innovating** – things end, new opportunities begin; we build, demolish, plant, repurpose and collaborate to explore new ideas across our own estate and beyond.

As archaeologists we recognise these can all happen together – woven into the fabric of a place, helping it to thrive. We're conscious that our places are loved deeply by staff, volunteers and visitors, on behalf of everyone, so our conservation principles are intended to support decision-making across all the diverse properties we manage.

Maximising public benefit means retaining high standards of care but ensuring that our approach is appropriate to each object and the different parts of each place. We will be more open to the creative use of places, think actively about how we can enable others to take part in conservation and be willing to embrace change where threats make this inevitable.

It is our duty as a charity to spend our funds wisely. Our live and **cyclical approach to conservation management planning** helps us prioritise conservation work based on multiple asset management systems and their data, curating knowledge on property significance that grows and yields an important well of information on which our teams can draw to collaborate in agreeing conservation priorities, in service of our strategy and a property vision.

Our principles are underpinned by a revised set of **heritage values** and scale of **relative significance** that we can use across collections, landscapes and the historic environment, and a new approach to exploring **nature significance**, not just *existing* significance (using a proxy of designation), but what *potential* nature significance could be if the latent potential in a natural system could be released and certain land management regimes changed to facilitate the reinstatement of dynamic processes.



*National Trust heritage values, used to break down and define significance, alongside understanding of the contribution made by setting*

Relative Significance Criteria	Rating Scale
<p><b>The place, asset, or elements of, are of exceptional significance because they:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the best or unique examples of their class.</li> <li>• Stand alone in relation to the overall significance of the place or asset.</li> <li>• Transcend international and national boundaries as influential social or cultural phenomena.</li> </ul>	Exceptional
<p><b>The place, asset, or elements of, are of considerable significance because they:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are rare or very good representative examples of their class.</li> <li>• Are major contributors to the overall significance of the place or asset.</li> <li>• Contribute to important national social or cultural phenomena.</li> </ul>	Considerable
<p><b>The place, asset, or elements of, are of moderate significance because they:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are unusual, distinctive or good examples of their class, although surviving examples are common</li> <li>• Provide important context to the character and understanding of the place.</li> <li>• Contribute to important regional social or cultural phenomena.</li> </ul>	Moderate
<p><b>The place, asset, or elements of, have some significance because they:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are commonplace, may be unexceptional, or have been altered without being visually intrusive.</li> <li>• Provide context and may have potential to be more significant with better understanding / evidence.</li> <li>• Contribute to local social or cultural phenomena.</li> </ul>	Some
<p><b>The place, asset, or elements of, are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potentially significant but it is not possible to assess based on the information / research currently available.</li> </ul>	Unknown
<p><b>The asset, or elements of, are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visually intrusive to the overall place.</li> <li>• Obscure or alter understanding of other significant assets and elements.</li> <li>• Irrelevant to meaning of an individual site.</li> </ul>	Detrimental

RGB colour codes for maps, plans and drawings

R162, G59, B60	R249, G161, B36	R255, G240, B0	R195, G248, B138	R136, G204, B238	R51, G34, B136
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National Trust relative heritage significance criteria and scale

We need to sustain a holistic and collaborative approach but this needs to be done alongside a need for knowledge and evidence that informs our decisions. We utilise **Climate Impact Assessments** to consider risk and help us to develop new **adaptive pathways** to manage change in uncertain climate futures.

We need to recognise change and respond to it, building **resilience** into our plans and responding to societal needs, values and changing requirements that are more **inclusive** and **accessible** to the public, while still holding on to professional expertise and evidence-based understanding.

### National Trust conservation principles

The following are an abridged version of our seven refreshed principles. We are better than the sum of our nature and heritage parts, and while there are external best practice conservation principles to consider when making changes and applying for consents from planning authorities and regulators, we found ourselves in need of a bespoke set of principles to help us think about the conservation of these things together and in a place-based context.

## Re-framing our conservation practice: seven principles

### Future facing

The choices we make play an active part in creating the future. We value and learn from the past to make thoughtful choices in support of a resilient and sustainable future for our shared cultural and natural heritage.

### Informed

We put people and nature at the heart of our conservation practice. We value evidence and understanding, research and innovation to differentiate and support good decisions based on relative significance and our commitment to maximise public benefit.

### Dynamic

Our conservation practice is dynamic and adaptive. We seek to understand and respond to a changing world, caring for the fragile and finite, managing loss where necessary and embracing evolution where appropriate, recognising that new opportunities will emerge.

### Inclusive

We conserve with and for everyone. By embracing diverse voices and needs, we ensure that conservation reflects shared values and delivers access, engagement, and well-being for the changing communities and nations we serve.

### Connected

We collaborate and celebrate the bigger picture. Our places are part of wider systems – ecological, cultural and social. We work across boundaries and disciplines to deliver joined-up, lasting outcomes.

### Creative

Conservation can be creative and bold. We embrace good design and imagination to enhance places, making space for new ideas and meaningful experiences.

### Rooted in story

We conserve not just things and places but the intangible heritage they embody – the stories, skills and identities that shape places. Through the decisions we take, they too are conserved, and the National Trust itself becomes part of the story.

National Trust conservation principles covering nature and heritage at our places, carried out for the benefit of the nation

## **The seven principles**

### **Future facing**

The choices we make play an active part in creating the future. We value and learn from the past to make thoughtful choices in support of a resilient and sustainable future for our shared cultural and natural heritage. We also understand that our actions must be viable today and sustainable tomorrow. Our choices are therefore proportionate.

### **Informed**

We put people and nature at the heart of our conservation practice. We value evidence and understanding, research and innovation to differentiate and support good decisions based on relative significance and our commitment to maximise public benefit. We value professional expertise, and our conservation practice is evidence based, relying on good data and sound research. We take the time to record, document and publish our actions to support future understanding.

### **Dynamic**

Our conservation practice is dynamic and adaptive. We seek to understand and respond to a changing world, caring for the fragile and finite, managing loss where necessary and embracing evolution where appropriate, recognising that new opportunities will emerge. We understand that not acting is a choice that will impact assets in our care. Where we face loss, we seek to make as good a record as possible so we can transfer knowledge and understanding to future generations.

### **Inclusive**

We conserve with and for everyone. By embracing diverse voices and needs, we ensure that conservation reflects shared values and delivers access, engagement and well-being for the changing communities and nations we serve. We accept that as we bring in more voices our understanding of what is valued will change. We take equality of access and engagement seriously and prioritise opportunities to deliver both physical and intellectual access to our places. We encourage public participation in conservation activity where possible, recognising the well-being benefits this brings.

### **Connected**

We collaborate and celebrate the bigger picture. Our places are part of wider systems – ecological, cultural and social. We work across boundaries and disciplines to deliver joined-up, lasting outcomes. We recognise that none of our assets exist in isolation but are all part of broader systems and places.

### **Creative**

Conservation can be creative and bold. We embrace good design and imagination to enhance places, making space for new ideas and meaningful experiences. We understand that it sets the scene for experiences and adventures, whether through exploring the lost worlds of the past or connecting with nature. We know that we care for living places and recognise the value of evolution and positive change.

### **Rooted in story**

We conserve not just things and places but the intangible heritage they embody – the stories, skills and identities that shape places. Through the decisions we take, they too are conserved, and the National Trust itself becomes part of the story. Culture keeps evolving and new stories will be written at places in our care by current and future generations.

## **Living our approach: Attingham unearthed**

The Attingham estate is a priority for woodland creation and is also recognised for exceptionally high archaeological potential because of nearby Wroxeter. Swathes of landscape were therefore excluded from woodland creation plans. Given the area's significance, we explored the true nature and extent of the

perceived conflict through geophysical survey. This enabled a considerable increase in the area identified as suitable for tree planting (from 388ha to 601ha).

The project also unearthed spectacular finds, with new Roman and pre-historic discoveries capturing national attention.

The shift in our conservation approach was the need for landscape evolution in response to the nature and climate crises, and front-loading a landscape-scale approach to archaeological survey in a sensitive landscape allowed us to proactively present the opportunity for change and inform and enable woodland design.

The amazing discoveries resulting from the survey (including several Roman villas) will now form part of the programming and interpretation, creating opportunities for funding and research partnerships.

### **Living our approach: Dinas Dinlle**

The coastal hillfort at Dinas Dinlle is a late prehistoric settlement that's gradually eroding. In 2017, we started work alongside CHERISH – who provided the funding for the project – to investigate the evolving landscape and get more people involved with the history that's buried here, before it's lost to the sea.

Thanks to volunteers, community excavations have explored hidden secrets and helped to record remains. Prehistoric roundhouses were unearthed in the interior, adjacent to the cliff. One is now consolidated and left exposed for visitors to experience for themselves, along with digital interpretation telling the story of the site. Instead of backfilling to preserve in situ, our perspective has shifted to think about how our conservation work can benefit people today, ensuring they can experience the historic environment more deeply here before it's lost.

*'Conservation work at Dinas Dinlle has really cemented our partnership working with Cadw and RCAHMW. I don't want to pretend that presenting the site in this way wasn't without its challenges, but the benefits far outweigh the issues. The exposed roundhouse and its interpretation provide a focus for public understanding of the site along with a contemplative space to sit and chat or think.'* – Kathryn Laws, NT Archaeologist



*Local volunteers carrying out excavations to save their heritage at the hillfort at Dinas Dinlle, Gwynedd. ©National Trust Images/Paul Harris*

## Applying our approach: Ironbridge Gorge, Ironbridge – 10 museums, 35 listed buildings and around 400,000 collection items

*'Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution and the Modern World – a legacy of creative human endeavour embedded in local communities that resonates globally. A World Heritage Site whose buildings and collections speak of the industrial working class, Quaker ironmasters, climate-changing consequences of fossil fuels and how industrial products powered Empire.'* – Sarah Kay, Cultural Heritage Curator

The National Trust recently helped to save the Ironbridge Gorge Museums, taking on ownership and visitor operations. The highly significant and diverse acquisition is a perfect example of where we need to make rationalisation choices and consider the appropriate conservation approach for this rich and complicated landscape, its buildings and its vast archaeological collection.

Our landscapes and places are the result of layers of natural and historical evolution of use, each layer a response to the ever-changing needs and stories of the times. Our conservation work today is our imprint on the landscape, our response to the nature crisis and to climate change. If we can make our conservation response as beautiful, creative, inspiring and accessible as that which has come before us, we will preserve the legacies both of our places and potentially even the land beyond our boundaries.

For more information about the National Trust's approach to conservation see - <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/our-approach-to-conservation>

### About the author

#### Imogen Wood

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