

British Film and High-End Television

Culture, Media and Sport Committee Inquiry October 2023

About Us

The [Heritage Alliance](#) is the national umbrella body for heritage. We unite more than 200 organisations, which together have over seven million members, volunteers, trustees and staff. The Heritage Alliance has consulted members including the National Trust, Historic Houses, the Old Royal Naval College to formulate our response to this inquiry.

Our heritage is one of our greatest national assets. It creates vibrant places and defines our towns, cities, countryside, and coasts, encouraging inbound tourism, uniting and levelling up communities, and enhancing our nation's soft power internationally. It tells our stories as a nation, supporting social cohesion, rootedness and identity.

Historic buildings and landscapes underpin the success of many of our creative industries and are integral to the cultural identity of our nation. Our heritage attracts millions of visitors each year, with heritage sites representing 7 of the top 10 UK visitor attractions.¹ Many visitors flock to our historic sites because they are intrinsically linked to our cultural exports – there's no *Peaky Blinders* without Birmingham's industrial heritage, no *Poldark* without the mines, and no *Ghosts* without West Horsley Place. To sustain Britain's soft power as a cultural icon on the world stage we must invest in our historic environment as well as our TV and Film industries.

How attractive is the UK as a global destination for the production of film and high-end television?

The UK's heritage sites are a pivotal point of interest for many film and TV production companies. Britain's castles, cliffs, forests, canals, stately homes, and many other forms of heritage are a

¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/heritage-counts/pub/2020/heritage-and-the-economy-2020/>

magnet for filming crews. The breadth of the UK's heritage enables it to be utilised for a variety of media, including British period pieces, media set in Europe, dramatic landscape settings, and more.

The National Trust reports that in any given month they have two to three different television series or movies being filmed on their sets, with up to 3 crews filming anywhere from a week to a day at any given time. Historic Houses boasts a long record of popular television series from Downtown Abbey to Ted Lasso, and from Bridgerton to Sex Education.^{2,3} Meanwhile, the Old Royal Naval College's timeless Wren architecture has attracted over 100 films since 1925, leading to its title as the "most filmed location in Europe."⁴

From the natural environment to historic buildings and places, the UK's unique heritage sites make it uniquely attractive to film and television producers across the world. The viability of British heritage sites as filming locations is bolstered by rigorous processes to ensure filming doesn't harm natural and historic environments. For the National Trust, for instance, it is within the remit of the local heritage site to decide if filming is feasible or not, with conservation experts carefully outlining safe practices in any contracts with producers. This additional income feeds back into local sites, enabling projects to be undertaken, creating a powerful, if irregular, source of income for conservation projects.

What are the barriers to maintaining and increasing overseas investment in the sector?

Both the film and television sector and the heritage sector require high-skilled labour but are facing bottlenecks due in part to the limitations of the Migration Advisory Committee's Shortage Occupation List, which if expanded could enable migrants with the skills needed to fill vacancies in our sectors. As per our MAC Shortage Occupation List response, "the hardest jobs to fill are those involving highly specialist skills or those which require a significant training and certification period."⁵ These skill shortages, both in production crews and among the heritage organisations which provide filming locations, are a significant risk. They threaten one of the UK's chief advantages, namely having highly skilled local production crews and conservation expertise.

In addition, our members reported that the ongoing writers' strikes in the US threaten to reduce the amount of overseas film investment as studios grind to a halt. Furthermore, they mentioned the weakness of the pound against the dollar, which strengthens the purchasing power of US studios against British production crews, thus detracting from local production profits and local

² https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/InspiringCreativity_THAreport.pdf

³ <https://www.historichouses.org/app/uploads/2023/10/changing-times-valuing-history-embargoed-17-oct.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/greenwich-popular-film-location/>

⁵ <https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Heritage-Alliance-MAC-Shortage-Occupation-Lists-Response.docx.pdf>

business with heritage sites. Finally, the ongoing cost of living crisis presents a substantial threat to the operation of both production crews and heritage sites.

What are the current challenges facing the UK's independent film production sector?

As our member Historic Houses has noted, the prominence of highways and public transportation around London and the general M25 area has led to a more substantial concentration of filming production in the southeast region to the extent that this region is 'oversaturated' with filming crews and the associated goods and services required to support film and TV production. There are many other excellent contenders for filming locations throughout the UK, and Historic Houses rightly notes that there must be greater geographical spread. They suggest that this can be encouraged through the creation of regional screen agencies, pointing to the success of Screen Yorkshire in attracting local production.

What more can be done to incentivise film and high-end television production in the UK?

Due to the significance of heritage to the UK's film and television sector, it is critical that the government takes steps to ensure the preservation of heritage, be it built, natural, cultural, or any other form. As per our [Heritage Manifesto](#)⁶, a wide range of steps can be taken to protect and empower the historic environment, from removing permitted development for demolition, to equalising VAT on repair and maintenance with new build, to investing in a National Retrofit Strategy, among other critical policies.

Encouragingly, the National Trust recently praised the work of the British Film Commission and its efforts in successfully advocating a strong and attractive image of Britain's strengths as a filming location. They also noted that the COVID pandemic provided certain opportunities as well as challenges. Travel restrictions encouraged more local filming locations for some television series, such as the Witcher filming in the UK as opposed to Eastern Europe which has brought new audiences to featured sites like Fountains Abbey.

What more can be done to protect and promote the UK's screen heritage?

As the 2021 Screen Business report notes, in 2019 film-related tourism accrued nearly £1 billion in economic activity, while tv-related tourism resulted in nearly half a billion in economic activity⁷. Television series such as Game of Thrones, Poldark (filmed on Historic Houses property), and Peaky Blinders (filmed with Canal and River Trust properties) are all cited, with the report indicating that these series had attracted tourists to visit their destinations. Furthermore, as our own Creativity, Heritage & The Creative Industries (2020) Report notes, the history and heritage of the

⁶ <https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Heritage-Manifesto-2023.pdf>

⁷ <https://core-cms.bfi.org.uk/media/15417/download>

UK is the strongest “pull factor” for most tourists visiting our country.⁸ This is all indicative of the real importance, value, and power of our screen heritage, with the consequential tourism providing a substantial economic boon. It is equally vital that historic theatres and cinemas are supported and preserved, and that adequate funding and support is in place for cinema archives to ensure that such valuable screen heritage is not lost.

What can the industry and Government do to ensure British film and high-end television can adapt for the future?

The rise of screen tourism has been a boost for both the heritage and film & tv sector, providing income and attention to some of the incredible heritage sites used as backdrops in our films and television. However, with this increase in filming and tourism comes increased pressure upon the historic sites, both from producers and tourists.

The National Trust notes that heritage organisations take great care when permitting filming upon their sites. All contracts include provisions as to which parts of the site must not be touched, where the company must take liability, what materials may be used and which may not. Looking to the future, we need to remember that period film and TV is likely to be enduringly popular and the locations they rely on must be preserved. This does not just apply to stately homes - industrial and 20th century heritage are equally important characteristic British backdrops that are also under threat and are often unlisted, lacking statutory protection. As previously discussed, our Heritage Manifesto⁹ illustrates the many steps that can and should be taken to ensure these sites’ preservation, thus boosting the TV and film industry in the process.

Furthermore, Historic Houses suggests that a requirement be put in place for production companies to bring local young people into the production process, as our member Wentworth Woodhouse does in South Yorkshire. This would bring about new talent into the film and TV sector, provide opportunities in the creative industries for young people outside of London and the South East, and help address some of the skills gaps that currently exist.

What are the risks and benefits of artificial intelligence to the sector?

The National Trust has concerns regarding the use of AI for StageCraft, wherein a filming backdrop is recorded and digitally replicated in a studio known as ‘The Volume’. This cutting-edge technology has been used to brilliantly replicate backdrops in-house for shows such as The Mandalorian. However, the National Trust notes that there are substantial IP issues to consider. There is a need to ensure that, should they permit the recording and utilisation of their heritage sites for this StageCraft, the same fees would apply, and their IP would be protected. This

⁸ https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/InspiringCreativity_THAreport.pdf

⁹ <https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Heritage-Manifesto-2023.pdf>

especially might affect their marketing should these unique sites have their association with the National Trust muddled by visual use. Any digital recording and utilisation of AI StageCraft must therefore have robust regulatory frameworks in place to protect the branding and IP of heritage sites that are so important for the film and television industry.

What needs to change to ensure the industry is supporting inclusivity and sustainability?

Positively, the National Trust reports that the film and industry is “lurching towards” environmental sustainability. Steps are being taken such as not photocopying scripts, reducing the amount of vehicles used for filming, using reusable water bottles over plastic water bottles, and actors sharing trailers. While it isn’t where it yet needs to be, positive steps are so far being taken. Here, heritage organisations have provided critical guidance, discouraging the unsustainable use of fake snow where possible and encouraging production crews to take sustainable steps to protect heritage sites.

Inclusivity-wise, there are more issues. Efforts are being made to improve the diversity of the industry, bring in younger people and reduce the London-centrism of the industry. As previously mentioned, encouraging production companies to bring in local youth would provide a much-needed talent boost for this industry. The National Trust also suggests that more practical courses and qualifications be provided to teach young people important skills for production, as opposed to the more abstract film courses that currently dominate academic study in film and television.

For more information please contact:

Lydia Gibson
Head of Policy and Communications
policy@theheritagealliance.org.uk