

History That Concerns Us All – Uncovering and Curating the Sensitive History of English Country Houses

By Eddie Hutchence

Sensitive Histories Workshop 3 (23 June 2025)

Today's talk event was presented by Dr Peter Moore, and Eleanor Matthews, two curators of collections at English Heritage. Peter is based at Audley End House and Gardens in Essex, whilst Eleanor is based at Brodsworth Hall and Gardens just northwest of Doncaster, South Yorkshire. After a refreshing spot of lunch, Dr Jo Cormac opened with some questions for Peter and Eleanor so as to give us a better picture of their work for English Heritage.

The long and short of it is that, as curators, both Peter and Eleanor interact daily with material objects of historic significance and heritage. These objects range from small tea sets and children's storybooks, to family portraits and lavish decorated furniture, even scarred suits of armour, weathered horse-drawn carriages, and entire buildings and properties – there is no end to the shape, size, or significance of these objects. In dealing with these objects, Peter and Eleanor are primarily concerned with uncovering and understanding their histories, and presenting this important information as exhibitions that are publicly accessible and educational.

The focus shifted to Peter's and Eleanor's work on the histories of Audley End and Brodsworth Hall. In the case of these properties, these histories pertain to people involved in and impacted by the slave trade, racial oppression, conquests of empire, and the general uprooting of both people and objects from their cultures by the agents and processes of Colonialism. It is history that is sensitive and double-edged, for it concerns both the slave traders and enslaved workers, exponential financial gain and regrettable cultural loss, colonial domination and indigenous rebellion against domination. The history of Audley End and Brodsworth Hall is not unique to these properties, for similar stories inextricably underpin much of Western civilisation and its being known, understood, and taught is vital.

Peter kicked off with a presentation on his work involving indigenous North American items at the estate of Audley End. Following the death in 2017 of 10th Baron Braybrooke, Robin Neville of the family that owns the property, a renewed inventory was required. In the process of completing this inventory a fabulous Native American smock was discovered (Peter noted here that the language of the outdated inventory reflects our colonial past—'smock' is likely not the correct descriptor for this object). Much of its history was unknown, including how it was acquired by the Braybrooke family.

By partnering with Michael Galban, a specialist in Native American material culture and the curator at the Seneca Art and Culture Centre and Ganondagan State Historic Site, Peter was able to piece together the origins of the 'smock' as having been acquired around the time of the American Revolutionary War, alongside two Native American war clubs that had been hung as doorway decorations in the hall at Audley End. These clubs were adorned with various carvings, all of which Galban was immediately able to identify as telling the story of these clubs before they were removed from their indigenous setting and displayed at Audley End around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Peter's work revealed two opposing perspectives of these intriguing objects: one that sees them as useful, valuable objects to be decorated with achievements of war and rebellion, and

another that misunderstands them and is ignorant of their cultural significance, instead repurposing them as simple wall hangings. His work with these objects—the ‘smock’ and the clubs—alongside his partnering with Michael Galban revealed their fascinating and important histories, histories that deserve to be known.

Eleanor then took over and talked about the task of producing an exhibition, using pre-existing research, on Brodsworth Hall’s connection to the slave trade. The aim was to show that many of Britain’s stately homes grew out of the slave trade, for many of their owners made their wealth in this industry; Brodsworth is no exception. The Thellusson family, headed by Peter Thellusson, part-owned two slave ships in the eighteenth century, the Liberty and the Lottery, aboard which many enslaved workers were transported across the Atlantic to sugar plantations, to the great financial benefit of Peter Thellusson. Eleanor pointed out the cynical names of these two ships that are now completely revolting considering the type of passengers aboard.

A series of five fantastic wire sculptures inspired by various aspects of the slave trade was produced by Trinidadian artist Carl Gabriel who used sugar cane as a motif to link each of the sculptures together. These sculptures were placed around the garden at Brodsworth alongside information panels conveying the research pertaining to the ties with the slave trade in the hopes of educating the public on this sensitive history of Brodsworth. Additionally, Eleanor partnered with poet Malika Booker to display her poem ‘Songs of Mahogany’ in Brodsworth’s dining room. Many members of the public, Eleanor noted, found this particularly moving. As previously mentioned, the research on Brodsworth’s ties to slavery had already been done, so Eleanor’s focus here was on curating an exhibition that made this information accessible, engaging, and educational. The artworks of Gabriel and Booker in partnership with Eleanor, certainly helped in achieving this.

Through the careful work of both Dr Peter Moore, and Eleanor Matthews, the sensitive histories of these two magnificent English homes were exhumed from the shadows. In Eleanor’s case, she noted that some members of the public complained about the exhibit, claiming that it had nothing to do with Brodsworth (this person likely wanted to know about the Thellusson family’s life surrounded by fancy silverware, hunting weekends, and general gaiety rather than the harrowing existence of the enslaved workers that made the lavish life lived at Brodsworth possible). However, it is clear that slavery is very much to do with Brodsworth, and perspectives that say otherwise reflect the degree to which these sensitive histories are still unknown and misunderstood, though change is possible through continuing research and education, and the work of curators such as Peter and Eleanor.