

New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

PODCAST TITLE: *Challenging Histories – How are we tackling the problematic collections and histories in our national heritage?*

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HOST INSTITUTION: *Polesden Lacey – National Trust*

SCRIPT

NMS INTRO STING

LINK 1

For the past five months, I've sat on a bench outside during my lunch break - no matter wind, rain or shine - because it looks over Ranmore Common. From here I can see miles of countryside and rolling lawns and huge statues. It's a beautiful location and this landscape has remained pretty much untouched for the past one hundred years. It's easy to feel a sense of connection to past visitors who have sat here and visitors to come in the future.

Hi, I'm Molly Joyce. I'm the Conservation and Interpretation Trainee at Polesden Lacey, a large Edwardian house, garden and estate just outside Dorking, owned and run by the National Trust.

LINK 2

Polesden Lacey is best known as the country retreat of the Edwardian society hostess Margaret Greville. A self-coined 'beeress', Margaret was ridiculously wealthy. She used Polesden Lacey and her weekend parties there to befriend and 'collect' the top politicians, writers and royalty from around the world. No money was spared when entertaining – guests were treated to live performances from the leading performers of the day, French cooking and games of croquet. When Mrs Greville passed away in 1942, she was worth £65 million in today's money and left her vast collection and Polesden Lacey to the National Trust.

LINK 3

Walking through the House, you reach the Gold Saloon. A pair of Louis the Sixteenth bronze candelabra stand above the fireplace. These candelabra have three black men kneeling, chained to the plinth they are supporting on their backs by handcuffs made of gold. On the plinth, stand two nymphs holding classical vases with flowers tumbling out of them.

LINK 4

This blatant depiction of slavery, and the wealth created through slavery, is shocking today. This opens the question of when and how Mrs Greville came to own this item and why she wanted to have it on display. There's no information about the candelabra or its importance to the collection on the mantelpiece. Nor is there any information about the candelabra specifically in the showroom guide, although there is a reference to slavery: *'Such an overt celebration of African slavery is shocking to modern eyes'* and mention that some people in Mrs Greville's time would also have found it shocking: *'This confidence in the rightness of slavery was not universal however at this time'*. So, it gives historic background on the abolition of slavery in England in the showroom guide, but it doesn't provide any information on why this item has been kept on display or Mrs Greville's connection to it.

LINK 5

The relationship between countryside houses previously owned by the most privileged in society and slavery is something that the National Trust is trying to slowly explore through different conversations, exhibitions and research.

The *Colonial Countryside* project, launched in 2018, is exploring how many of these countryside houses – and their collections – were built on the profits, either directly or indirectly, of slavery. The project is run by the University of Leicester and the National Trust. What's interesting about this project is that 10 National Trust houses will be working with 10 schools to explore this. The project's website says that children will be encouraged and supported in '*communicating their discoveries and personal responses through personal essays, creative writing, and social media campaigns*'. I think that involving the next generation of heritage workers in this project is a pretty new and creative way of starting to fill a gap in how the history of the countryside is perceived and presented.

LINK 6

Talking to the team at Polesden Lacey, I discovered that the candelabra had been reviewed recently. It was decided to keep it on display because, arguably, putting it in a storeroom could be perceived as hiding it in order to protect Mrs Greville's memory and legacy and her as a character. I don't entirely agree that this is enough of a reason to keep the candelabra on display, but I think it's important and necessary that this decision is explained to visitors in the labels about the objects in the house.

The main problem the team is facing with problematic items in their collection, when providing information for visitors, is that there is a lack of information about the objects. Lots of research has been done by the team, but they don't have original documents for almost all the collection items nor do they have Mrs Greville's personal papers. After her death in 1942, Mrs Greville's House Steward, Francis Bole, destroyed Mrs Greville's documents, in line with her instructions. This puts the team at a

disadvantage: without these documents, they cannot say with certainty what motivation Mrs Greville had for owning and displaying items like the candelabra.

LINK 7

This lack of primary sources, such as letters or personal papers, also affects the history that the team can tell. A focus is placed on Mrs Greville's charity - she lent Polesden Lacey to the war effort during the First World War, resulting in it becoming a convalescent home for soldiers. But how patriotic was she? There are a few documents recording several key trips that she made in her lifetime – in particular, to Nazi Germany in the 1930s. This 'Hidden History' can also be found in letters and novels of writers of the time.

From these, the team knows that in 1933 Mrs Greville toured Germany for 17 days; that in 1934 she attended the Nuremberg Rally – there's a photograph of her at the Rally in the Polesden Lacey archive; and that in the same year she requested and obtained an audience with Hitler himself. In 1936 she attended the Olympic Games in Berlin, and she continued to invite pro-Nazi German friends to dine with her in London throughout 1936 and 1937, which was the year of her final visit to Germany. Barbara Cartland writes that Mrs Greville often referred to Nazi soldiers as '*my dear little brown shirts*' and many others have written of Mrs Greville's pro-Nazi sympathies and admiration for Hitler during this period.

LINK 8

Each year, Polesden Lacey commemorates the House's use as a convalescent home for soldiers during the First World War with its *Society Soldiers* tours and by laying a wreath on Remembrance Sunday. Talking to volunteer Room Guides, I found that some were very aware of Mrs Greville's pro-Nazi opinions and friendships and

communicated this to visitors. But many are unaware of this Hidden History, or unsure how to discuss such a sensitive subject.

LINK 9

This Hidden History, that lies just below the surface at Polesden Lacey, can be seen in the Visitors' Book. This is the only record the team has of who visited Polesden Lacey in Mrs Greville's time and is full of the biggest names of the 20th century. I found that, as late as November 1941, the pro-Hitler journalist and close friend of Oswald Mosley, George Ward Price, had visited Polesden Lacey.

LINK 10

Like many of the aristocracy at this time, Mrs Greville feared the rise of Communism and was attracted to Hitler and the power and glamour of the Nazi regime, as a way of solving Europe's problems. However, once the Second World War began, she appeared to change her mind. She became distinctly and publicly anti-Nazi and supported the Allied Forces, even buying a Spitfire for the Army. Whether this was just a PR stunt to restore her name in society circles, we will never know. At the same time as visiting Nazi Germany and hosting high-profile Nazis and pro-Nazi supporters, she was also hosting high-profile anti-Nazi politicians - such as John Anderson, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1943 to 1945. We can see that first and foremost Mrs Greville was a society hostess, but without her personal documents, it's impossible to know definitively what her politics were - another barrier the team faces when trying to tell this 'Hidden History'.

LINK 11

Polesden Lacey is not the only one facing the issue of problematic items within its collection or as a part of its history. Across the heritage sector, every institution needs to face and respond to their collections and ‘Hidden Histories’.

I spoke with Michael Parsons, General Manager at **Morden Hall Park**, a National Trust property in south London. The team there is just about to start research into the tobacco plantation in Virginia that belonged to its previous owner, Mr Hatfeild, and the social history of the tobacco industry during the 19th century. Mr Hatfeild’s plantation supplied the snuff mill at Morden Hall Park. Michael said that, although the team did not have a set goal for this research project as it was still in the very early stages, he hoped that the research would lead to uncovering more about this little explored and more challenging part of Morden Hall Park’s history.

LINK 12

The National Trust is aware of the importance of highlighting the ‘Hidden Histories’ that are part of their properties, and their multi-layered stories. In 2017, 50 years after the part-decriminalisation of homosexuality in Great Britain, the National Trust ran a year-long programme to highlight the LGBTQ+ histories of many of its spaces. This programme made a point of highlighting not only some of the queer people who had lived at properties now owned by the National Trust, but also the Trust’s own shortcomings in understanding and communicating its queer history.

LINK 13

Making reparations with marginalised communities can be seen at the National Trust property, Clandon Park in Surrey. In 2019, the Trust announced that the traditional Hinemihi [*Pronunciation: ‘Hine-ne-me-he’*] carvings were being returned to the Maori community in New Zealand, and that the Trust would work with Maori carving specialists to create new carvings to continue the tradition of the Maori meeting house

at Clandon. I think this is a great example of how to work collaboratively with marginalised communities, tackling the issues of the collections they own, while making a tangible connection with that community. A similar approach could be taken with the Louis XVI candelabra, highlighting the history of this item and why it was part of Mrs Greville's collection – but also explaining the systematic oppression this item represents and how the Trust has previously failed to recognise this.

LINK 14

In his essay *Whose Heritage*, Stuart Hall says about the national heritage '*that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly belong*'. We can see this in examples at Polesden Lacey.

The National Trust was set up in 1895 to protect beautiful landscapes and places of national heritage for future generations, and one of its core values is for everyone to feel welcome. So, the conversation surrounding problematic collections, and being open and honest about the history of its properties, is an important step in helping the National Trust make '*Everyone Welcome*'.

My thanks to Michael Parsons, Elodie Fillon and Roshan Gibson for their help and feedback – and to you for listening.

NMS OUTRO STING

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