



Site Collections Development Policy

Name of Museum:

English Heritage, Wrest Park

Name of Governing Body:

English Heritage Trust

Date on which this policy was approved by the Acquisitions, Loans and Disposals Committee:

December 2021

Policy review procedure:

The Site Collections Development Policy is owned by the Senior Curator for the geographical area. It will be reviewed at least once every five years as part of a cyclical process managed through Registry.

Date at which this policy is due for review:

December 2026

Arts Council England will be notified of any changes to the Site Collections Development Policy, and the implications of any such changes for the future of the collections.

1. Management Arrangements and scope

- 1.1. This policy covers all the museum artefacts managed by English Heritage from, or associated with the site whether they are held on site, at another English Heritage site or store, or on loan to a third party. This policy does not cover artefacts associated with other English Heritage sites which are stored or displayed at this site.
- 1.2. The site and its collections form part of the National Collection of English Heritage.

2. Relationships to other relevant policies/plans of the organization

- 2.1. The national *Collections Development Policy* approved by the Board of Trustees on 9 November 2016, (together with any amendments to, or replacements for, the policy approved by Trustees), apply to the site. In the event of any disagreement between this site policy and the national policy the national policy will apply.
- 2.2. Without limitation to the above all the procedures, all ethical and legal considerations set out in the national policy apply to acquisitions, disposals and loans from or to the sites collection.
- 2.2. Acquisitions outside the current stated policy will only be made in exceptional circumstances.



3. History of the collections

- 3.1. Although the manor of Wrest was first recorded during the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), the earliest known household inventories date from 1573, 1667 and 1740. More detailed accounts of collections were produced during the period 1684-1702, when Wrest Park was in the ownership of Anthony Grey, 11th Earl of Kent (1645-1702). The Earl made a name for himself as one of the foremost collectors of paintings of the age, amassing a significant collection of old masters during his lifetime. His first acquisitions date from 1682, when he purchased 10 pictures at the posthumous sale of the collection of the artist Sir Peter Lely – the first documented public art auction in Britain. Henry Grey, 12th Earl and 1st Duke of Kent, developed the collection with further acquisitions of old master paintings and family portraits. He also began to improve the gardens, introducing a number of sculptures which remain in situ today.

The collection was added to by subsequent generations, and when the new house at Wrest was completed in 1839, it was largely filled with the paintings from the demolished old house. Some furniture and other decorative items came from the old house, supplemented by the introduction of new pieces to harmonise with the 19th century French style of the new interiors. The most comprehensive record of the furniture, decorative arts, tapestries, carpets and other objects which filled the new house is the catalogue for the 'Contents of the Mansion' sale, held by Foster's auctioneers from 10-14 September 1917.

When Wrest Park was sold in 1917 by Nan Ino Cooper, 10th Baroness Lucas (1880-1958), the majority of the collections were dispersed through a series of auction sales. Some objects (predominantly paintings, furniture and archival materials) were retained by Lady Lucas.

A collection of 4651 prints and drawings from Wrest Park were donated to the British Museum by Lady Lucas in 1917, the collection having been begun by Amabel Hume-Campbell, Countess de Grey before being expanded by her nephew Thomas Philip Robinson, 2nd Earl de Grey; a further 98 prints and drawings from Wrest Park were acquired by the British Museum at Sotheby's sales in 1922 and 1936. Prints and drawings from the Wrest Park collection also appeared for sale at Sotheby's in 1918, 1919, and 1926. Other lots were occasionally sold in later years via Sotheby's.

Many of the paintings originally from Wrest are now in private collections, although some are known to be in public museum and galleries across the world. Paintings with Wrest Park provenance occasionally appear for sale on the open market. The extensive collection of books from the Library has dispersed widely. The shelves are now filled exclusively with 'Prop' books, acquired after English Heritage gained responsibility for the house in 2006 and embarked on a project to re-present and



open some of the interiors to visitors.

A large body of archival material from the Wrest Park Library, retained by Lady Lucas, was deposited with the Bedfordshire Record Office in 1959, a year after her death. This material has become central to the study of Wrest Park. Additional deposits of archival material have been made to the Bedfordshire Record Office, most recently in 2024.

Some collections considered 'fixtures' were left in the house after its sale in 1917 and remain there today. Most notably, these include: eleven full-length portraits set into panels in the Staircase Hall; ceiling paintings by John Wood; the 'Chinese' and 'Zuber' wallpaper rooms; and the sculpture collections – located inside the main house, in the Dairy, and throughout the gardens.

4. An overview of the collections

- 4.1 The historic collection is primarily comprised of oil paintings (21) and sculptures (55). There are various architectural and decorative fragments held in store, recovered from the interiors. In 2024, a group of 19 historically associated paintings were returned on long term loan to English Heritage for display at Wrest Park.

96% of the sculptures are on display in the gardens (including those in the Dairy gallery). The majority are figurative and classical in subject matter and style. They predominantly date from the 18th and 19th century, coinciding with the early development of the gardens by Henry Grey 1st Duke of Kent (1671-1740) and his heirs, and the later additions made by Thomas de Grey, 2nd Earl de Grey (1781-1859).

90% of the paintings are family portraits, dating from c. 1680-c. 1750. Most are recorded as having been hung in the present mansion at Wrest Park after its completion in 1839. Some had previously been displayed in the old house, which was demolished in the 1830s. Others appear to have been moved periodically between Wrest Park and other houses in the family's possession – most notably St James' Square, London.

Since taking over the property in 2006, English Heritage has periodically added to the collection, in many cases repatriating objects (in particular, paintings) which are historically associated with the property or the family. However, some of the collections present in the house today are a combination of historic props (chiefly books), supplemented with some furnishings in the Countess' Sitting Room and Wallpaper Rooms which were formerly in the collection at Heveningham Hall.



5. Themes and priorities for future collecting

5.1 Interior collections

Priority should be given to objects and art works which are known to have an historical association with Wrest Park and its inhabitants. This may be through former display in the present mansion, or in the 'old house' at Wrest which previously occupied the site. Objects which were in the family's wider collection and were intermittently circulated between the properties in their possession should also be considered a priority – for example, paintings recorded as hanging at the London town house in St James' Square. Smaller possessions, for example jewellery or personal effects, which help to tell the stories of individuals' lives at Wrest Park, should be included within this category. However, it should be taken into consideration that there is currently no infrastructure to display these kinds of items, so they would need to be considered on a case-by-case basis and with a view to future planning and re-display projects.

Specific details of an object's display history or use (for example historic inventories, drawings or photographs) may help to strengthen a case for acquisition; however, objects without such supporting information should not be precluded.

Works of art, craft or ephemera created by family members may also be categorised as high priority: such objects demonstrate a significant intergenerational interest in amateur creative practices, and help us to better understand and appreciate the character of those who have lived at Wrest Park and shaped its history.

Historical material relating to the development of the Wrest Park collection, including illustrated catalogues compiled by Nan Ino Cooper upon the sale of Wrest Park in 1917, should also be considered. Such items illuminate the preoccupation of a former owner, forced to sell their family home in the interwar years, but evidently committed to retaining a family archive for posterity. This is part of a wider story of decline in the history of English country houses, which warrants more public attention and understanding.

Auctions and other private sales should also be monitored closely, as historically associated items have been known to unexpectedly appear on the open market, and the development of the collection in recent years has relied largely on this kind of acquisition.

Up-to-date records of objects with Wrest Park provenance in museum and gallery collections should be maintained, and acquisitions considered if works are de-accessioned by their present owners.



On a practical level, objects which can be displayed safely on the walls (paintings, or historically associated tapestries), or in display cabinets, present fewer challenges than large items such as furniture. The current use of the property for hospitality and events makes the introduction of historic furniture into the interiors problematic. A collecting emphasis should therefore be placed on paintings, which have the potential to be hung in rooms in which events take place, and smaller objects which could form the basis for future temporary displays or permanent installations in the exhibition rooms.

It is not anticipated that we would attempt to repatriate or recreate the extensive collection of books in the Library, which have been widely dispersed; however, it would be desirable to research this collection further with a view to producing a virtual/digital recreation.

5.2 External statuary and sculpture

Statues and sculptures with a known provenance to Wrest Park should be considered for acquisition as and when they appear on the open market. Collecting in this area would enhance the long-term work to restore the character and appearance of the gardens. The risk of vandalism or theft must be taken seriously as there is no secure perimeter at Wrest to prevent unauthorised access to the site and intruders are a regular occurrence. There is also a history of sculptures being vandalised by youths. The possibility of damage through weathering and exposure to the elements must also be taken into consideration with any possible acquisitions in this area.

5.3 Archaeology

Any archaeological material found within the Grade I listed area of garden and parkland (see Appendix A), which relates to the history of the occupation and use of the area managed by English Heritage Trust, should be assessed for acquisition on a case-by-case basis. This process should involve archaeological colleagues in English Heritage Trust and may require consultation with the Bedfordshire Museum Service. If acquired, such material should be deposited in the Wrest Park Collections Store, as agreed with the Collections Manager.

5.4 Acquisition of newly detached architectural material will take place where it has:

Potential to inform future research on the house.

Potential for future display.

Realistic potential for reinstatement that would enhance the significance of the building(s).

5.4 Considerations



A clearer long-term vision and/or Masterplan for Wrest Park would allow the Collections Development Policy to be developed further. At present, the scope of acquisitions is limited by the space available to display them. Restoring and re-opening more historic interiors would enable us to consider future acquisitions that we could not accommodate in the suite of rooms currently open to visitors.

Further research into departed collections, including the identification of key items for repatriation, would enable us to identify priority acquisitions and implement an orderly strategic approach for future augmentation.

An inter-departmental discussion of how we want to develop the site, and in particular the Mansion, is needed, and a shared vision agreed.

6. Themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal

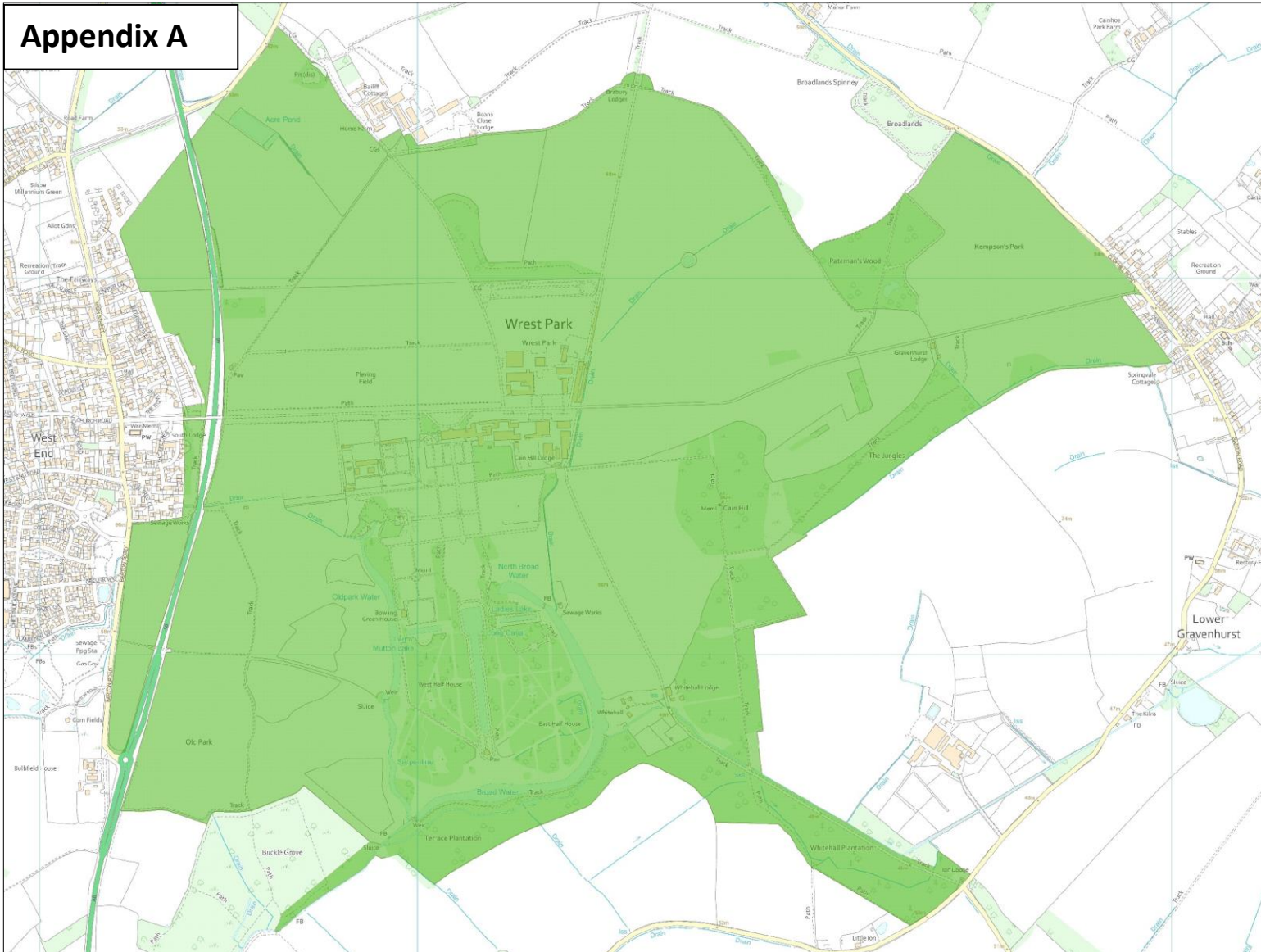
- 6.1 The Wrest Park store and Orangery undercroft contain architectural fragments and salvaged materials, some of which have been accessioned. Where there is little research potential, or no likelihood of restoration/reinstatement, disposal should be considered.

7. Collecting policies of other museums

- 7.1. English Heritage will take account of the collecting policies of other museums and other organisations collecting in the same or related subject areas or fields. It will consult with these organisations where conflicts of interest may arise or to define areas of specialism in order to avoid unnecessary duplication and waste of resources.
- 7.2. **Specific reference is made to the following museums and organisations:**
 - 7.2.1 The Historic England Archives, with reference to archive material which includes plans and photographs of the site.
 - 7.2.2 The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, regarding local history, art, culture, archaeology.
 - 7.2.3 Bedfordshire Archives, who already hold a significant amount of material relating to Wrest Park on deposit from Lord Lucas., and who collect archives from the area of the historic county of Bedfordshire.



Appendix A



Heritage Category:

Park and Garden

List Entry No: 1000113

Grade: I

County:

District: Central Bedfordshire

Parish: Silsoe, Gravenhurst

Each official record of a registered garden or other land contains a map. The map here has been translated from the official map and that process may have introduced inaccuracies. Copies of maps that form part of the official record can be obtained from Historic England.

This map was delivered electronically and when printed may not be to scale and may be subject to distortions. The map and grid references are for identification purposes only and must be read in conjunction with other information in the record.

List Entry NGR: TL0958935466

Map Scale: 1:10000

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