

Great Interpretations

EVALUATION REPORT MAY 2019



BrightCulture



National
Churches
Trust



HERITAGE
FUND

Executive Summary

This report provides an external evaluative review by Bright Culture of activity undertaken as part of the Great Interpretations Project 2018 – 2019; led by the National Churches Trust and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The project ambitions were to use digital engagement and improved interpretation to transform the way people access, engage and learn about 36 churches that form the core of the Horncastle Churches Festival.

The project supported and encouraged church volunteer teams to open their doors and tell the stories of the built and social heritage of the churches, chapels and meeting houses of Lincolnshire.

The project aimed to widen and improve knowledge of the heritage through improved interpretation of the buildings and their stories and increased promotion of the heritage, recording key treasures and features and developing the skills and ability of volunteers to make historic churches more sustainable.

IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS THE PROJECT HAS:

- Engaged 53 historic churches, chapels and meeting Houses to take part in the project.
- Delivered training sessions in Tourism, Photography, Interpretation, Promotion and video to 110 church representatives.
- Opened up 4 churches which were previously completely closed outside of services.
- Created a new portfolio of high quality professional photographs for 20 churches.
- Created short professional films for 5 churches, which centre around 5 visitor types.
- Created 20 professional trailer style film of a combination of 20 of the churches.
- Installed digital people counters into 10 churches to begin to collect visitor numbers and establish baseline data.
- Delivered a guided walk for 17 people.
- Delivered a coach trip for 39 people.
- Given all 54 churches an online presence with their own webpage.
- Distributed 10,000 leaflets dedicated to the churches in and around Lincolnshire.
- Produced 8000 flyers, along with adverts, radio interviews and articles across the local press to promote the project.

The project provided support, enthusiasm and care, giving the volunteers who look after churches confidence to open their doors and allow people to freely explore and enjoy the spaces. Some churches now have self-service tea & coffee facilities encouraging people to visit and spend time there.

The project has opened up a new dialogue about churches, encouraging teams to think about them differently. Teams are now examining their access, their offer and their welcome, thinking about how their church is presented and how it might become more inviting. Volunteers who felt isolated and at the end of their road, caring for churches they thought no-one was interested in have felt, valued, appreciated and empowered to make change.

On completion of the project in April 2019 the large majority of churches who took part have increased their visitor numbers, some considerably, but most importantly are now armed with the resources, information and a new confidence to make them more resilient in the future.

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‘The Project has worked well because it was about getting community churches involved. These churches were asked to take part and that made them feel valued. In the past a lot of the churches have been focusing on church buildings, previously a lot of the churches have been closed. The project has been about opening doors.’

PARTICIPANT, 2019

1. Introduction

Churches represent the single largest group of heritage buildings in the UK. Lincolnshire has a wonderful collection of churches, chapels and meeting houses peppered across the county.

The churches are amongst the most important local buildings, yet their stories and their significance are not well told.

The Great Interpretation Project was supported by the National Churches Trust (registered charity number 1119845) and managed by NCT Heritage Services Ltd (company registration number 11194504). It aimed to work with 36 churches in Lincolnshire to improve access, interpretation and tourist information to encourage more people to engage with and understand them.

The project employed a part time Church Support Officer, supported by the existing Church Tourism Manager and worked with local volunteers and the Diocese of Lincoln.

The project was about widening and improving knowledge of the heritage of the buildings, recording key features and developing the skills and ability of volunteers managing historic churches. For the long term, making churches future proof by equipping volunteer teams with knowledge, skills and expertise to interpret and promote their church's heritage and begin to collect visitor information.

The key aims of the project were to:

- Improve the interpretation of the buildings and share their stories.
- Widen & improve knowledge of the buildings and their heritage.
- Support the promotion of the buildings & increase visitor numbers.
- Develop skills and abilities of volunteers.
- Support teams in making churches more resilient.



2. Methodology

Lisa Davenport of Bright Culture was commissioned to deliver a summative evaluation of the project using the data and information collected by the Church Support Officer over the 12 month delivery period of the project.

DATA AND INFORMATION INCLUDES:

- Visitor numbers (via service records & visitor books)
- Digital counter visitor numbers
- Participant feedback forms
- Visitor book feedback
- Training session feedback forms

In addition to this information Lisa has undertaken 1:1 interviews with 6 participants and the Church Support Officer.

3. Church Support Officer

In March 2018 a Church Support Officer (CSO) was recruited to deliver the project with the support of the Church Tourism Manager (CTM).

The CSO began by promoting the project amongst the tourism networks across Lincolnshire and raising the profile of the project. Work ensured that future press releases, images and events would be considered by local organisations by giving the project a real presence on the Lincolnshire Tourism scene.

This networking and promotion aspect continued throughout the project with the CSO frequently attending events, activities conferences and meetings to continue to share news and information about the churches.

The CSO went on to recruit the participating churches and with the CTM develop and deliver the training sessions, the guided walks and tours.

The CSO role has been crucial to the success of the project and vital in two areas. First, was having a central person to invest time in promoting the churches, going beyond what small volunteer teams could achieve. Second was providing the group of churches and their teams with encouragement, support and knowledge so they felt confident and able to take part in and deliver the project.

The team exceeded their target to engage 36 churches and actually recruited 53 churches to take part in the project, a notable 17 more. The team found church volunteers keen to take part and eager to learn despite sometimes being the only person taking care of their church.

One of the CSO's highlights was turning things around for churches and making a real, significant change:

'The benefit was having a central person giving support and linking to council/tourism etc. The help and support with promotion and publicity. When we've tried to do things ourselves in the past it has always been a massive chore, so capacity to do this has been really helpful.'

PARTICIPANT, 2019

'We can't do our own tourism/promotion work individually, we are too small, we need someone to coordinate, also this makes economies of scale.'

PARTICIPANT, 2019

'I was invited to a group PCC. One church volunteer informed me that her and a colleague on the PCC felt that they could not open their church. No one was visiting it. No one in the village was bothered about the church so what was the point in opening it if no-one cared? They had come to the end of the road. I said ok, how about you just leave it open then? If no one cares, just leave it open – what have you got to lose? What I had said was bold and perhaps too much. But it must have sparked something with the volunteer. They called me after the session and asked to meet. We met and discussed the church. I supported them with ways to open the church safely. The church is now permanently open at weekends and the visitor book tells us that people are visiting. One of the problems is that because churches are closed we cannot tell if people are visiting and wanting to enter the church. But they are. With digital counters we can track this and prove it.'

CSO, 2019

4. Promotion

The project was launched in May 2018 at the Deanery Synod and since then benefitted from a huge amount of publicity, including being featured on the following websites:

www.explorechurches.org

www.nationalchurchestrust.org

www.visitlincolnshire.com

www.horncastlechurchesfestival.co.uk

www.lincoln.anglican.org

www.lovelincolnshirewolds.com

www.lincswolds.org.uk

It has also been featured on Radio Lincolnshire, the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance newsletter and several times in the Horncastle News.

The CSO and CTM have presented about the project at several events including the Ecclesiastical Architects Conference and the West Lindsey Churches Festival Conference.

Marketing material

The project produced a suite of marketing materials including a pull-up banner which was used to promote the project at The Lincolnshire Show, Horncastle Festival Conference and Horncastle Churches Festival weekend. 8000 flyers and 600 posters were produced by the Horncastle Churches Festival committee and distributed across Lincolnshire and within a 1.5 hour drive time of the county advertising the churches Festival weekend. In addition, 10,000 leaflets dedicated to the project churches have been distributed in and around Lincolnshire.

ExploreChurches website

By the end of June 2018 all of the 54 churches taking part had their own page on the ExploreChurches website which covers all of the UK and is managed by the National Churches Trust.

A generic Lincolnshire landing page was placed on the website in October 2018 and then a specific Horncastle landing page in February 2019.

Looking at the Google analytics for the ExploreChurches website, specific to the Horncastle page it shows that it received 449 hits from 1/2/19 – 8/4/19 (just over 2 months) and during that time was the 11th highest visited page on the website.

Facebook

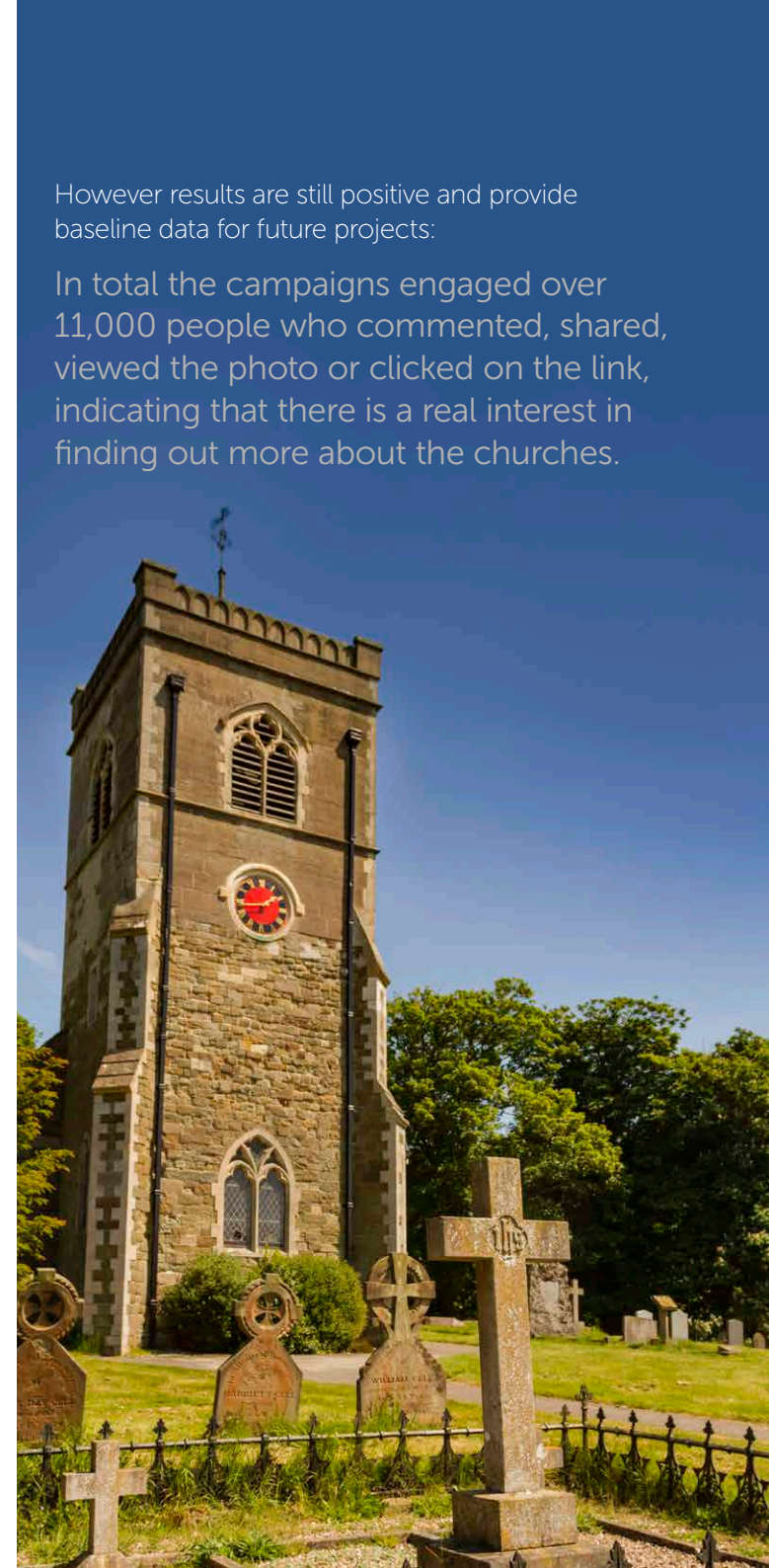
One of the reasons the Horncastle landing page had such a large number of views is down to the Facebook campaigns.

CAMPAIGN	CLICK THROUGHS	REACH	IMPRESSIONS
Horncastle Churches Festival	564	21,412	32,872
Christmas in Churches	740	16,544	24,865
Get Out this Spring & Explore a Church	1284	26,894	55,567

The series of paid-for campaigns using Facebook have proved worthwhile and a good way of using a tight marketing budget. Targets for the campaigns were not met but were ambitious (2500 'click-throughs' per campaign) especially for a new project.

However results are still positive and provide baseline data for future projects:

In total the campaigns engaged over 11,000 people who commented, shared, viewed the photo or clicked on the link, indicating that there is a real interest in finding out more about the churches.



5. Training

A clear success of the project has been the training aspect and building confidence in the church teams to increase access and develop their interpretation skills.

The training programme delivered 6 training workshops across the year open to all the participating churches, each session was delivered twice and lasted two hours. The final Filming session was delivered as a drop-in workshop where participants could come along and discuss their progress and any issues they may have.

THEME	WORKSHOP #1	WORKSHOP #2
Church Tourism	21/08/18 24 participants	29/10/18 18 participants
Heritage Interpretation	26/11/18 5 participants	12/2/19 5 participants
Publicity	20/11/18 8 participants	19/04/19 20 participants
Photography	28/08/18 16 participants	24/02/19 7 participants
Filming	19/09/18 10 participants	19/02/19 5 participants
Total	63	55

Successes

The target was for 108 church volunteers to attend the training sessions; this was exceeded with 118 volunteers attending.

Feedback from the sessions is positive and of the 118 people that attended the sessions, 65 completed a feedback form. The feedback forms in summary suggest that all participants either rated 'The Day as a Whole' as *EXCELLENT* or *GOOD* with 45 people choosing *EXCELLENT*. 56 of respondents ticked that the speakers on the day were *EXCELLENT*.

COMMENTS FROM FEEDBACK FORMS INCLUDE:

'I have learned a lot about photography, excellent all round.'

'Format and content spot on, excellent.'

'Went to the workshops, financial, church tourism, interpretation & promotion. Have learnt lots. Presentation by church insurance people very good. Gave lots of info. Tricks for promoting, using apps and increasing online presence.'

'Friendly, welcoming and proactive. Sometimes when you help with a church you feel isolated.'

'Insurance section really useful, our church needs to be open.'

The workshops also enabled members of the church to network and share experiences.

Although the Diocese provides opportunities for church volunteers to come together and share ideas and best practice, it is a first for the focus to be on tourism and interpretation.

Volunteers share that this is an aspect they highly valued and the opportunity to hear from others about how they have opened up their church gave them the confidence to try it at their churches.

'Taking part gave confidence that other people are doing things that work.'

'This sort of activity is not focused on by anyone else in the diocese. Their focus is on other things. Tourism and heritage no one else is doing other than this project. Would welcome future projects with this focus.'

'A realisation that the buildings are not dead spaces. People are looking at churches from a different perspective. There is a vibrancy in the Wolds that the project has brought about.'

5. Training (cont.d)

Case Study – Church PCC member

Attended the first training session, 'Church Tourism' and off the back of that session was inspired and had the confidence to write an email to the rest of the team. The Church was closed most of the time, hidden by hedges and neglected. The email was hard-hitting but things needed to change.

As a result of that email and that training session, the team had a clean-up, both outside and inside. They organised a rota of people to open up the church at weekends. They have put a self-service coffee bar in a mouse-proof box inside the church for visitors. They are working towards putting out historic documents at special events for visitors to come and learn about the history.

To start with the team were sceptical of the suggestions at the training.

'I was sceptical but interested and well aware that if we didn't do something the church would close.'

The participant found the leaders of the training encouraging and supportive, providing answers to the questions and stumbling blocks the team would need to overcome. They felt empowered to go back to those who say 'you can't do that' with answers, solutions and examples of other churches that did do it.

The training has helped this church make significant change, inspired them, built their confidence and helped them move forward.

Training resources

The photo training session has been filmed and made into 4 x 15 minute training videos for churches and their teams who were unable to attend.

So far the films have been shown to the team at Southwell Minster, 100 delegates at the West Lindsey Churches Festival and 20 delegates from the Cumbria Churches Trust. They have had 763 views on YouTube. They have also been shared on social media by ExploreChurches, NCT, Church of England (national), Diocese of Lincolnshire, HRBA and more.

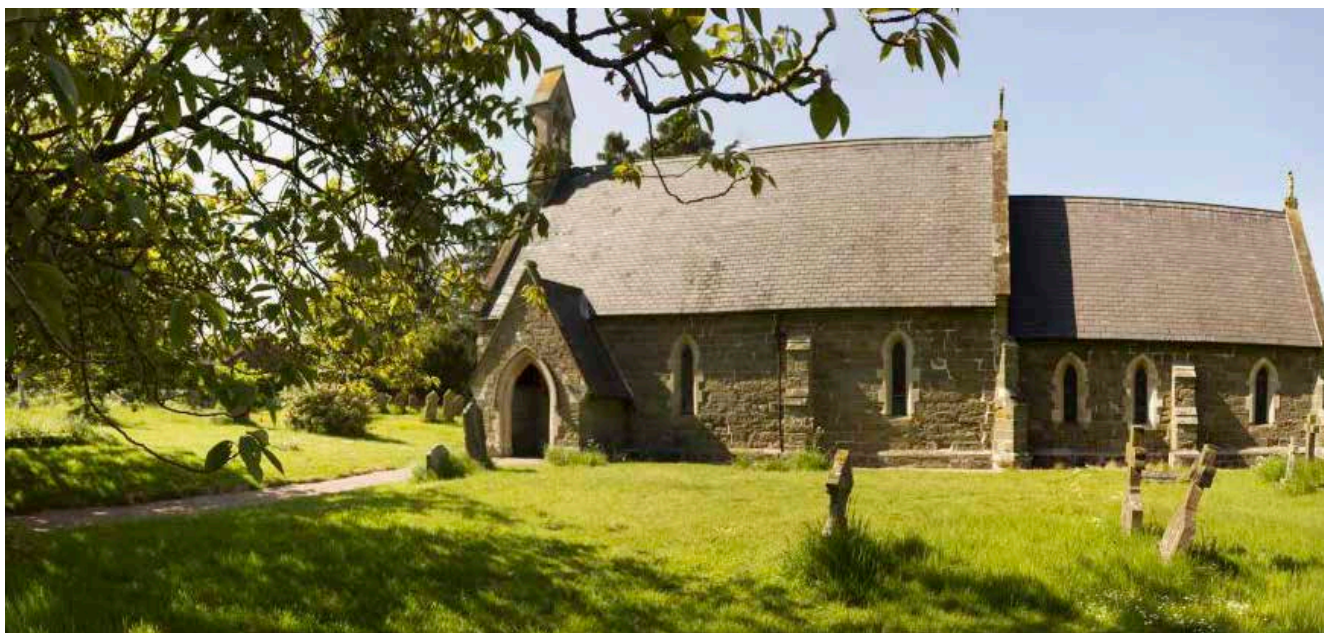
Through the networks and contacts of the churches the NCT support, the training videos will continue to be shared. The Church Tourism Training session is currently also being created in video format.

Challenges

On reflection the CSO feels more people would have attended the training sessions if they had been spread out over the year and if they had not all taken place over the winter.

Despite holding the sessions at different times, volunteers were reluctant to drive in the evenings, in the dark. Delivering the project over a 12 month period was a challenge as it took time to develop the sessions, promote them and deliver.

In hindsight the CSO thinks one training session for each subject followed later by a drop-in workshop to discuss and support volunteers with their progress would have worked well.



6. Interpretation

Creating a portfolio of images & film

Central to the project was to provide the churches involved with much needed interpretation which would enable potential visitors to see the variety of historic buildings on offer in the county.

The project has been able to provide 20 of the participating churches with a portfolio of high quality professional photographs which showcase their building, architecture, features and history.

These images have been uploaded onto the ExploreChurches website and the Horncastle Churches Festival website. These images are and will continue to be a valuable resource not only for the individual churches but also for national and international tourism marketing.

They have been used in numerous facebook and twitter postings, attached to press releases and promotional material aimed at promoting church tourism to overseas travellers.

There have been 20 professional videos created promoting 22 churches. These videos vary in length from short 20 second bursts to longer 1-2 minutes in length. A variety of themes were used to appeal to different market segments. These videos are on Youtube and available for use not only by the churches involved but also by any organisation wishing to promote visiting churches. They have already been viewed 358 times directly from YouTube and have also been shared on ExploreChurches and NCT social media and by our partners.

They have been used in facebook campaigns as well as promoted on ExploreChurches, Visit Lincolnshire and Lincs Wolds websites.

Also 4 professional videos focussing on 4 visitor profiles have also been made and these are now on the ExploreChurches website as well as Youtube. The fifth and last video is currently being created, focussing on 'what a blind person 'sees' in a church.'

Up skilling volunteers to create photography & film

In addition to the professional photography, participating church volunteers were invited to take part in a training session on photography and filming.

The workshop provided volunteers with training on how to capture photographs and film using their own mobile devices. 23 volunteers attended the photography session and 15 volunteers attended the filming session.

One of the aims of the project was to create 20 photo portfolios of 20 of the different churches, produced by volunteers who attended the training sessions. Several volunteers have really taken on this challenge and have spent time on building their portfolio, thinking about features of the church which may interest others.

Currently, 31 out of the 54 churches have a portfolio of images and 20 of the churches have a film which has been made about the church.

This new digital interpretation has and is being used as content for the partner websites and the ExploreChurches facebook page. It also provides an important record of the churches and their features useful for improving church inventories, which could aid future conservation work.

Guided walk & coach trip

The guided walk was developed and promoted with Brackenbury's Britain and delivered in February 2019 with 17 people attending.

As a result of the walk, a new downloadable guide had been developed and will be made available on the ExploreChurches website. Two of the churches on the guided walk are now open and have tea & coffee making facilities which will be highlighted on the map. Another outcome is that the CSO is in the process of putting all the Wolds walking routes on the ExploreChurches website, which will take in the participating churches in the Lincolnshire Wolds and encourage people to visit.

The team also created a coach trip touring some of the churches. There were 39 people who came on the visit, including a presenter from Radio Lincolnshire who broadcast throughout the morning. Four churches were involved and opened their doors to the visitors. Feedback from the session was positive and the 30 people who completed feedback forms rated the session as either *EXCELLENT* or *GOOD*.

COMMENTS INCLUDED:

'All very interesting – great mixture of heritage.'

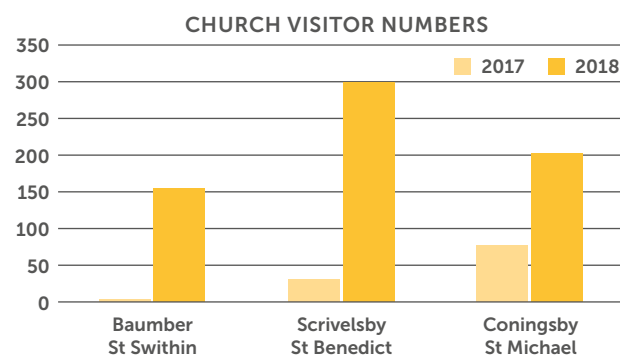
'Very well organised. Liked the "themed" approach. Good interesting speakers. Thank you for a great day out.'

Due to the success of the trip, the tour is now offered on the ExploreChurches website as a bookable group tour and specifically aimed at the American and Australian market.

7. Visitor data

The project aimed to increase visitor numbers and has successfully done so. Visitor data from church visitor books was collected at the end of 2017 and again at the end of 2018.

Out of the 53 churches that took part in the project, 38 churches provided visitor data, 31 have seen an increase in their visitor numbers from 2017 to 2018. Significant increases were at Baumber, Scrivelsby and Coningsby:



Church returns for the number of visitors attending the Churches Festival in 2018 were also collected, 75% of churches sent in returns which indicated that 2755 people were recorded as visiting with 257 volunteers taking part. If the numbers were prorated up it could be assumed that 100% returns could give a visitor figure of 3673. This is down on the target of 5000 but there are several reasons which could account for this, heavy rain on the first day, volunteers not always being at the door to count visitors and the dates coinciding with Heritage Open Days Weekend, some feedback stated that there were too many places to visit. The dates of the festival in 2019 will be on a different weekend as a result.

Challenges

It is noted by the CSO that gathering visitor information from churches has been challenging, data on who and how many people visiting churches is poor and whilst numbers at services and events can be accurately recorded, using visitor books to estimate visitors outside of activities is not robust as not every visitor will sign it.

The project was keen to begin to capture visitor data in order to be able to create a robust baseline figure and prove how projects and investment like this one, can increase visitor numbers. The project has installed digital visitor counters at 10 churches. Digital counter numbers provide a picture of the footfall of people coming in and out of church buildings, both for services and outside of service times.

The table below helps us to show how visitor books far from give a true picture of actual visitor numbers:

CHURCH	DIGITAL VISITOR COUNTER 1/9/18 – 30/11/18 (3 MTHS)	DIGITAL VISITOR COUNTER 1/9/18 – 1/1/19 (4 MTHS)	VISITOR BOOK JAN – DEC 2018
Horncastle	10168	17611	378
Southrey	1282	1397	104
Fulletby	992	1154	285
Revesby	1690	1729	49
Woodhall Spa	6664	9019	52

However, visitor books are still crucial for churches to gather data and to understand why people are visiting. Ensuring that every church has a visitor book and encouraging teams to place the visitor book

in visible locations has helped the project collect important data about visitors and motivations for visiting. All churches in the project have received a visitor book.

VISITOR BOOK COMMENTS INCLUDE:

‘Thank you for your welcome and for the children’s activities.’

‘Wow 12th century church and still here today, truly amazing.’

‘A lovely welcoming feeling entering, thank you for being open.’

A pleasure to find this church open, thank you – but heartbreaking to see the church in neighbouring village Biscathorpe locked and seemingly abandoned.’

‘Thank you for your help in tracing my relatives and showing where the forge was.’

Information like the above can help churches provide activities and resources they know people will use and enjoy i.e. – children’s activities and village history information. Comments can also help to inform future projects i.e. – a project on ancestry could be considered. Furthermore the comments highlight how much people value the church being open and welcoming.

8. Conclusion

Whilst this project comes to an end the journey the churches who took part have embarked on is, in many cases, just beginning.

The project has inspired and enabled church volunteers to begin to open their doors and offer a whole range of events, activities, interpretation and facilities that will continue to attract more visitors to their buildings.

Church volunteers know that the NCT will continue to support them with advice, expertise, and promotion and in some cases even funding.

Learning from this Project

Key lessons learnt which will be used to inform future projects include:

- One year is a short turn-around time for a project, it was manageable but would have been easier to deliver within an 18-24 month timescale.
- Having a coordinator to facilitate this type of project is essential. Much of the work has been delivered on the ground, face-to-face.
- Often churches only have 1-2 people caring for them, particularly in rural areas when there is rarely a large team to support a project.
- Church volunteers were keen to take part and have benefited from the skills the training provided.
- Facebook is a worthwhile and good value tool to run targeted campaigns and increase traffic to websites.

Resilience

The project has taken substantial steps in making the churches who took part more resilient by:

- Training 118 church volunteers in church heritage, interpretation, tourism, promotion and photography.
- Encouraging churches to be open. Providing volunteers with information about how to open safely and how to provide a warm welcome.
- Equipping church teams with new interpretation and promotional material which can be used for future conservation projects and marketing.
- Increasing church visitor numbers and supporting churches with recording their visitor numbers.
- Promoting the churches through a central website.
- Signposting volunteers to where support and expertise is available to them.
- Recording and analysing church visitor numbers and visitor information.

Recommendations & next steps

On evaluation of the material and evidence collected as part of this report the following recommendations for next steps are suggested:

Short term:

- Create further evaluation opportunities in the churches, e.g. find out where visitors heard about the churches, to help understand which marketing methods work.

Medium-term:

- Utilise information gathered from the church visitor books to inform future projects.
- Provide a follow-up project workshop for volunteers to offer advice and support.

Long term:

- Explore the potential for clone projects to be delivered by others, NCT Heritage Services Ltd offering support and consultancy to enable projects to happen.
- Promote the project as a best practice example and a model which could be delivered across the country.
- Consider replicating the project and rolling it out to other Deaneries across Lincolnshire.
- Consider developing a project which focuses on building volunteer bases and increasing capacity at churches.