

Private owners and public access; using the web to provide access to historic properties and their contents

Michael Hiley^(*)

^(*)Centre for Technology and the Arts, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

E-mail: mrh@dmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Museums and Galleries are the public repositories of national and regional collections of paintings, furniture, ceramics, silverware and other heritage items of great cultural significance. However in the United Kingdom there remain very extensive collections which remain largely intact located in more than a thousand historic houses which are privately owned. Many of these properties are open to the general public at least part of the year. The world wide web offers the opportunity to provide more extensive access, opening up collections for educational and academic purposes as well as encouraging tourist visits and thereby revenue generation. However changes in organisation and attitude are necessary to bring these rich resources together and to exploit to the full these new opportunities on-line.

KEYWORDS: web gateway, private collections, public access, historic houses, tourism

INTRODUCTION

The old church hymn refers to 'The rich man in his castle / The poor man at his gate.' This paper deals with historic houses and great estates in private ownership. In particular it looks at the way in which the development of web sites has begun to solve some of the

problems of making public access to these private treasures possible.

From Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead* the great country houses – imagined and real – have had a central part to play in British cultural history. The contents of these historic properties are often of staggeringly high quality. The house used as *Brideshead* in the BBC television series – Castle Howard in Yorkshire – is reported to need several millions of pounds of work carrying out on the stonework of its mausoleum. However an album of drawings in the library has just been found to contain an early work by Michelangelo, worth perhaps eight million pounds. *The Guardian* newspaper reported:

Castle Howard has a renowned art collection including several Holbeins and works by Rubens, Gainsborough and Reynolds. Simon Howard, who lives in one wing of the house, which featured in the television version of *Brideshead Revisited*, said the discovery came as a surprise – but meant the immediate loss of the drawing to the house. The cost of insuring it would be prohibitive, he said. "It

should be on display in a national gallery or museum where everyone can enjoy it." James Millery, deputy chairman of Sotheby's, said: "It's like finding part of the Holy Grail. Everyone is extremely excited. It is the most significant Michelangelo work to be discovered in living memory." [1]

The drawing of a heavily draped woman is reported to be in superb condition, despite having been glued into the album almost 200 years ago.

How many public galleries in either the United Kingdom or in the United States have a work by Michelangelo in its collection? Very few. Yet it is still possible to see works by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci on public display in the United Kingdom in *private* collections.

PUBLIC ACCESS VIA THE WEB

The growth of the World Wide Web has led to developments supporting public access to private collections which could not have been anticipated a decade ago. In 1844 the Duke of Devonshire allowed 'all persons whatsoever' to see Chatsworth every day in the year, Sundays not excepted, from 10 in the morning till 5 in the afternoon. In 2001 on-line visitors can see at least a part of some historic houses all day, every day of the year.

There are more than a thousand historic houses across the United Kingdom, many of them privately owned and lived in by families whose pedigree goes back for centuries. Unlike houses in some European countries they have not, for the most part, lost their

treasures in the form of paintings, furniture, silverware and so on. Five years ago a consortium was formed called *Heritage on the Web* at an early stage in the development of the World Wide Web. This brought together myself as Project Manager, based at De Montfort University in Leicester, The Glass Page, a Leicester multimedia and web design company, and The Living Landscape Trust, a trust set up to provide access to Boughton House and its estate. Boughton is the Northamptonshire home of the Duke of Buccleuch, one of the largest landowners in Europe. His collection of art works includes paintings by Rembrandt, Canaletto, Van Dyck (forty of his paintings hang in one room alone at Boughton), El Greco, Reynolds and Leonardo da Vinci.

With the Duke's active support and encouragement *Heritage on the Web* was given a project award by the Department of Trade and Industry to develop a demonstrator web site for Boughton House. This went live in 1997 and is still under development. It is the largest and most advanced site for any historic property anywhere in the world. [2]

THE WEB SITE FOR BOUGHTON HOUSE

The project team built a site which uses a great variety of techniques to display hundreds of objects and items of information. It has been used by the British Government as a showcase of what is possible, demonstrating to others in the historic houses sector the benefits of going on-line. It has been to our great advantage that we have had the support of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry, who is a very senior and respected member of the British aristocracy. This association has led to

a growth in confidence amongst those who, without his example, would have been very reluctant to become involved with computer-based technology. As project manager I have had to act as the link and facilitator between the rapidly developing technology of the web and the world of the country house owner, which moves at quite a different pace and often with a very different perspective on the world.

The Boughton web site is designed to inform visitors how to find the house, what they will see when they visit, and much more. The nearest town is Kettering, which is unlikely to be known to many outside the English Midlands. Tourists tend to stick to the 'honey-pots' of British tourism such as London, Oxford, Stratford-upon-Avon, and so on. Boughton is in the middle of the countryside, off the main road and approached through villages. Maps giving accurate guidance and travel information are important for intending visitors, as are details of facilities such as tea rooms and children's playgrounds. It is significant that the Department of Trade and Industry and not the Department of Culture, Media and Sport set the project in motion. From the beginning one important objective was to establish a web site which would attract tourists and therefore business to the area. Coming from an academic background, the problem has been to reconcile these tourist concerns with the web presentation of the collections contained in the houses.

THE WEB AS AN AID TO SECURITY AND CONSERVATION

Boughton House is still used as a family home, but except for the private apartments, many rooms are open to visitors. The web site allows access to

the Drawing Room, the Morning Room, the Rainbow Room, the Armoury and so on. Security considerations have meant that we have not provided a floor-plan of the house, nor have we gone out of our way to indicate which room leads to another. These decisions were made after consultation with specialist police advisers at New Scotland Yard in London, and with others familiar with security problems at stately homes.

Actual visitors to the house are kept back from valuable items by security barriers from items which are protected by alarms. Their extremely high value – a painting or piece of furniture might well be worth millions of pounds – has meant that visitors are not allowed to touch or handle items. To a limited extent this problem can be solved on the web, with virtual handling being provided in some instances. A more mundane problem which can be solved by web technology is to get the viewer closer to objects. A small painting on a far wall or an object in shadow on the other side of a room can be very difficult to see in detail at a distance. The web can help to overcome these practical difficulties.

Take, for example, the Drawing Room, where the rug on the floor is over four hundred years old and there are forty small paintings by Van Dyck on the walls. On the web site the on-line visitor can survey the room using an interactive QuickTime panorama taken from a point behind the safety barrier. The rug can be selected and examined, and each of the Van Dyke paintings can be chosen and viewed individually in close-up with accompanying details in a related frame of the web page. In other rooms we have experimented with animation of furniture and in one case a

perspective effect in a ceiling painting. This is in the Third State Room, one of a sequence of rooms built in the late seventeenth century to entertain King William III. The State Rooms are only open occasionally to special parties of visitors and the light levels are always kept low for conservation reasons. The bed hangings, original upholstery on the chairs and the tapestries are very rare, valuable and vulnerable. But despite the real-world restrictions, all the State Rooms can be seen at any time on the Boughton web site. Handled with understanding and care, on-line access can provide new solutions to the concerns of private owners regarding security and conservation.

CHOICE OF WEB TECHNIQUES FOR DISPLAY

I will use the web pages covering the Great Hall at Boughton to describe some of the features of the techniques used on this site. The Great Hall page is accessed as part of the Tour of the House.

A variety of presentational techniques are used, including interactive image maps and links which provide both selected images and related information. The Hall was in the past lit by candles mounted on solid silver sconces attached to the walls. We have provided a QuickTime 3D object presentation of a candle sconce which can be 'handled' and turned on screen. This is a technique which could be used extensively in this type of situation. The two factors which restrict this approach are the time employed to take the large number of photographs required and to process them, and the fragility of objects which would have to be handled. It was on this second ground that we decided not to risk the beautiful and detailed porcelain swans

at Boughton which had belonged to Madame de Pompadour. Instead they are shown as a still image.

It is difficult to feel confident when you are handling a fragile item of great value and in addition to this natural concern it is a fact that to photograph a VR object requires potentially hundreds of photographs taken under hot lights. Our experience has taught us that this process is very time consuming and full of issues relating to security and conservation. It is by no means easy to prepare images of the turning object against a neutral background at a consistent angle and distance from the camera lens. However, if these problems can be overcome, the results can be spectacular and justify the description of 'virtual handling' of objects which the public would not otherwise get near.

One of my favourite paintings at Boughton is the portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, the Countess of Southampton, which hangs next to that of her husband, the Earl. She was a great beauty of her day, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth. The Countess is painted in the act of dressing, her fine clothes and her jewels laid out ready, in a work which both displays her beauty and wealth and at the same time points to human vanity in the Elizabethan tradition.

The detail in this painting is of particular interest; the jewels and the embroidery of her clothes can only be fully appreciated close-up. I had seen the ImagePump technology used by the Uffizi Gallery in Florence for some of their paintings and managed to arrange for a link to be made to the experimental display site of the Xippix company in California so that their

zoom technology can be used to show the fine detail of the Countess portrait and of other objects at Boughton.

Many of these techniques are used on web pages for other rooms at Boughton and also for the grounds and estate. The initial support of the British Government and the backing of the Duke of Buccleuch have enabled us to make considerable advance in employing web display techniques to show priceless objects of great cultural importance.

PUBLIC ACCESS TO PRIVATE PROPERTY

We have given many demonstrations of the Boughton House web site to the owners of private houses, their curators and their archivists. In 1997 there had been almost no moves made to build web sites for privately owned historic houses in Britain. With no central funding available, a very patchwork, incomplete and often amateurish pattern of web sites has grown up on the web. Some sites branched off from local government web pages, others linked to hotel chains.

From the moment the Boughton web site went live it immediately began receiving visits on-line, and we received expressions of interest from all over the world. In the season following the setting up of the web site visitor numbers to the house were up by over ten per cent, and in particular American visitors we have spoken to in person describe how they have already visited Boughton in cyberspace, touring the house, opening cupboards and handling the silverware as the site allows, before they fly across the Atlantic.

Scholars visit the site. The portrait shown above of Elizabeth, Countess of

Southampton hangs in the Great Hall, next to that of her husband, who was the patron of William Shakespeare. When recently it was claimed that Elizabeth was the Dark Lady of the Sonnets it was possible to refer queries to the relevant web page which provided details and also a colour image (at low resolution) to download. There were many queries both from academics and from the press worldwide.

UK TAX LAWS AND 'CONDITIONAL EXEMPTION'

A very important influence on patterns of opening historic houses has been the United Kingdom tax laws relating to what is known as conditional exemption. Under these arrangements works of art, buildings and land of outstanding historical interest can be exempted from Inheritance Tax. As the current rate of Inheritance Tax is forty per cent, and as it starts at just under a quarter of a million pounds, the impact of such a tax is enormous. The eight million pound Michelangelo could attract inheritance tax of over three million pounds. And that's just one drawing. The conditions placed on the tax exemption include arrangements for the maintenance and preservation of the heritage property and – of particular importance to anyone interested in communication over the web – a strong enforcement of making provision for public access.

All the works of art which over the years have been granted conditional exemption – paintings, furniture, ceramics, silverware and so on – are listed on the web by the Inland Revenue. [3] There are around twenty thousand tax-exempt items spread in private collections all over the country together worth an estimated total of one *billion* pounds on the list.

Unfortunately the web site only gives basic details and no pictures. Potentially these items could be presented on the web and provide a virtual national museum of immense importance and quality. So far my discussions with the Inland Revenue and the government have not yet led to the necessary changes in the tax regulations to make this possible, although my ideas have been discussed by a Parliamentary Select Committee. Eventually the creaking system of negotiating actual access to individual items will, I'm sure, give way to access on-line for everyone, and this is something which I think will be of immense benefit to the general public.

Heritage on the Web has to be very aware of the security fears of private owners – probably the most important reason for not putting more details of heritage assets on-line. The owner of a priceless piece of cultural heritage may well be a little old lady isolated in the middle of a deer park at considerable risk as she shares a huge house with millions of pounds worth of art treasures.

Many private owners are strongly opposed to having any information provided on-line about their property or their tax affairs. Our task is to gain the confidence of owners and to build web sites which deliver what they wish to present to the public. Our rôle is not to force anyone on-line.

HERITAGE ON THE WEB

The Boughton web site was the first stage in a much more extensive plan. Heritage on the Web established itself as a commercial company and set out to persuade historic properties to commission web sites for houses across the United Kingdom. This process has now been going on for over three years

and over a dozen web sites are now live or under construction. No other company has built more than one web site for an historic house.

In more than one instance we have found that in order to 'get the house on line' the owner of an historic property, not sure how to proceed, turned to the bright offspring of one of his estate staff to build a simple web site. It's certainly true that people working on the estate know a great deal about these great houses and their grounds. But as the web continues to develop the basic sites they produce are revealed as elementary in terms of both design and function. Enthusiastic amateurs also produce their own unofficial sites for houses, sometimes linked to universities or to local tourist sites. Occasionally owners who, perhaps, have business connections in London commission web sites at great expense from new media studios working in the field of dot.com. These are the only historic house sites which even begin to display the sophistication to match the quality of the best museum and gallery web sites.

Many owners and their agents have little idea of what is possible over the web and have no more experience of presenting their properties and their contents than commissioning a local graphic design company to prepare and print a guide book. Even then they may be concerned that if they show too much of the property they may not be able to attract visitors in sufficient numbers. These are private houses and private collections, not public institutions with public funding and an obligation to provide public access. The result is often web sites of poor quality carrying little more than basic visitor information – individual, limited and isolated sites.

In order to locate web sites together and therefore increase traffic through them we have established a web gateway - Heritage on the Web. [4] This acts as a gateway leading to the sites which we have built for historic houses across the region. The gateway acts as an easy access point for visitors interested in historic houses and it also allows us to guarantee quality control and regularly updated information on sites reached through the gateway. In this section of Heritage on the Web are grouped houses including Boughton, Kelmscott Manor, Grimsthorpe Castle and so on. Each design is suited to the property which has commissioned the site. For example the house reconstructed at 78 Dergate in Northampton by the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh reflects his design and style of lettering.

Each house has different demands. Renishaw Hall, near Sheffield, is particularly proud of the Italianate gardens facing to the South. It is the family home of the Sitwell family, famous as writers and poets. Often the cultural content of a house is potentially very extensive and important and I hope to be able to use money from academic research funds to enrich and develop the on-line resources to which houses are beginning to give us access.

We have developed a web site for Drumlanrig Castle, one of the homes in the Scottish Borders of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry. It is reached through the Scottish section of the Heritage on the Web gateway, but it can, of course, also be accessed directly. Here the Leonardo painting *The Madonna of the Yarnwinder* is on display in the Staircase Hall. In the same room hangs a fine Rembrandt and

a Holbein. At present these are not shown on the Drumlanrig web site. Part of the reason for this is security. Although the Duke recognises the importance of paintings such as these and the desirability of making them available them to the general public practical reasons mean that some items of his impressive collections are not on show. For example the collection of miniature paintings belonging to the Duke used to be on exhibition at Bowhill House, near Selkirk but concerns about security after a series of thefts in the Scottish Lowlands led to them being withdrawn from display.

At present we are receiving requests from commercial organisations that wish to draw on the traffic flowing through the web gateway in order to offer specialist services or goods for sale. Provided that developments of this kind are handled with care I see no objection to providing links between the commercial and the cultural worlds. Heritage on the Web has built a web site for Cottesbrooke Hall, one possible model for Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. In the garden there is a statue of Homer by Peter Scheemakers, which was originally in the Temple of Ancient Virtue at Stowe. Many visitors take as much pleasure from the gardens as the houses. Other estates have; for example, garden sculptures by Jan Van Nost the Elder. To me it seems only to add to the pleasure to know that it is possible to buy modern casts in lead taken from these originals and now cast by Bulbeck Foundry in Cambridgeshire. A planned section leading from the Heritage on the Web gateway will provide e-commerce services for historic houses.

Already many objects can be bought on-line, and we are developing this

section of the web site to provide a service for houses and companies. The houses themselves have to employ teams of craftsmen and women to maintain the buildings and their contents. At Burghley House in Lincolnshire the courtyard buildings are full of small firms specialising in conservation and restoration. Perhaps it is in the very nature of these privately owned and maintained properties, requiring entrance fees from visitors to keep the place going, which makes an unforced linkage between commerce and culture.

THE FUTURE FOR HISTORIC HOUSES ON THE WEB

One disadvantage which historic houses face is that they are usually unable to draw on public funding to any great extent, despite the fact that they are repositories of enormously important cultural artefacts. Beyond their park gates the museums and galleries receive financial and technical support. Yet the private and public collections inhabit the same world and false divisions between them should not be made, particularly where this affects access to cultural heritage on-line. At present I am dealing with a request to make a web link directly from the on-line portraits of the Dukes of Buccleuch held by the National Portrait Gallery to the web site which we have built for Bowhill House, one of the Scottish homes of the Duke of Buccleuch.

I would like to go further and experiment with deep linking between sites so that the portraits which I mentioned which are in the Great Hall at Boughton of the Earl and Countess of Southampton can link directly to National Portrait Gallery paintings of them in later life. Perhaps it would also be possible to build a VR presentation

of the Earl's ceremonial, engraved armour, which is in the Royal Armouries in Leeds in the North of England. Clearly the web can function very well to bring together items which are physically dispersed.

In many cases there are already close links between private collections of painting and furniture in the United Kingdom and public galleries such as the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum. It makes little sense to set up false divisions separating items in public and in private ownership - with the 'conditionally exempt' items holding the middle ground.

CONCLUSIONS

The web gateway which we have built is itself only a stage in the continuing evolution of the web and the way in which it can provide access to sites and objects of cultural interest. The way forward will involve interlinked databases and hopefully links between privately owned items and those in the great national museums and galleries, many of which originally came out of private houses.

One interesting development is the web site set up by the UEHHA (Union of European Historic Houses Association). [5] This has been sponsored by Pirelli and Compagnia di San Paolo. Its first phase covers privately-owned historic houses across Europe from the Château de Roquetaillade in France to La Casa de Los Balcones in Tenerife, and from Fraelemaborg in the Netherlands to the Palazzo Agliardo in Italy. Boughton House also features, though only basic details are given. International initiatives such as this and detailed national gateways such as Heritage on the Web point the way forward.