AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Landscape Award
Historic England and English Heritage
Priority Research Areas 2026

CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST
SUBMISSION DEADLINE – 4.00pm on THURSDAY 15TH OCTOBER 2026

Background

The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England (HBMCE) was established by the National Heritage Act 1983, and until 31 March 2015 was known commonly as English Heritage.

On 1 April 2015 English Heritage separated into two organisations:

- Historic England, the public body that champions and protects England's historic environment
- The English Heritage Trust, a charity that, under license from HBMCE, looks after the National Heritage Collection consisting of 400 historic sites, such as Stonehenge and Dover Castle

Together, Historic England and English Heritage were recognised as an Independent Research Organisation in 2017. HBMCE's Collaborative Doctoral Landscape Award programme, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, will allow us to identify and co-supervise 4 collaborative PhD studentships commencing in 2027.

Call for Expressions of Interest

We are now issuing a Call for Expressions of Interest for co-supervised PhD studentship projects to commence in October 2027, based on one of the Priority Research Areas identified below. These have been selected to align with Historic England or English Heritage strategic plans and strategies.

Proposals for studentship projects should be made by a university (HEI)-based researcher in collaboration with a named member of staff from Historic England or English Heritage, who will act as first non-HEI co-supervisor. Two second co-supervisors - one from the university and one from Historic England or English Heritage – must also be named in the proposal, making a supervisory team of four. **We are not looking for project ideas directly from potential students.**

Studentship funding is available for four years and includes support for career development opportunities (lasting three to six months) that are additional to the main research.

Please note that we may not support every approach for collaboration. Our ability to progress co-supervised PhD proposals depends upon their alignment with our priorities and match with organisational expertise. This will be determined following initial discussion. Projects reaching full submission stage will be assessed via a peer review panel.

All EOIs submitted by the October deadline will be assessed by a panel comprising research leads and other experienced staff from Historic England and English Heritage. Panel members will have expertise relevant to the assessment of doctoral research proposals and will declare any conflicts of interest. Individuals named as HBMCE supervisors on any proposal will not take part in the assessment.

EOIs will be assessed against six equally weighted criteria: the strength of the collaboration; quality and originality of the research; the student experience and development opportunities offered; strategic relevance to Historic England and/or English Heritage priorities; feasibility and supervisory capacity; and the project's contribution to equality, diversity and inclusion. Following individual assessment and panel discussion, proposals will be ranked and up to eight EOIs will be invited to submit a full proposal.

In making its final decisions, the panel will also seek to ensure an appropriate spread of projects across the Historic England and English Heritage Priority Research Areas, provided that proposals meet the required quality threshold. This helps to support a diverse doctoral research portfolio and ensures that adequate supervisory capacity is available for successful projects.

To submit a studentship project please carefully read the EOI Form. Completed forms must be submitted by the closing time/date of 4.00pm on Thursday 15th October 2026.

To discuss please contact: Research Development Team: cdla@historicengland.org.uk (Historic England) or Research-EH@english-heritage.org.uk (English Heritage)

Priority Research Areas 2026

Priority Research Area 1 (Historic England)

Evaluating the value, impact and future potential of aerial investigation and mapping in England.

Context and Further Details

For almost four decades, Historic England and its predecessor organisations have undertaken and commissioned aerial investigation and mapping projects across large areas of England. These have generated a substantial body of evidence for multi-period archaeological landscapes through the interpretation of aerial photographs and, more recently, lidar data. When integrated into local Historic Environment Records (HERs), these datasets support the identification, protection and management of heritage assets and guide sustainable policy, planning and decision-making. In the wider sector, analysis and mapping from aerial sources is also a valuable part of non-invasive archaeological evaluation in advance of development.

Although aerial investigation and mapping techniques are widely recognised as an efficient and cost-effective method of creating baseline data about the historic environment, their cumulative impacts, value and longer-term benefits have never been systematically evaluated at a national scale. As the sector faces increasing pressure to manage change, support sustainable growth and manage risks, understanding the return on investment has become increasingly important. Furthermore, emerging technologies offer significant potential to improve efficiency, increase rates of site identification and strengthen our ability to effectively address threats.

We are seeking proposals that will help us understand how aerial investigation and mapping has generated public value through evidence-based decision-making, economic growth and risk reduction, and how new technologies and innovation can maximise that value in the future.

Although we are inviting proposals that address the following themes, we welcome different emphases and weighting across these areas, reflecting the individual researcher's specific research questions, methods, and objectives.

We are inviting proposals that:

1. Evaluate the impacts of aerial investigation and mapping methods and project results at a national scale. This could include management of change (both within and outside the planning system) and responses to threats affecting the historic environment.
2. Evaluate the economic and public value of aerial mapping data (including the impact of open data) in supporting local planning, national infrastructure and the government's growth agenda. This could include exploring the potential use of data by other sectors such as the natural environment.

3. Assess the pattern of uptake and use of aerial mapping across local authorities, HERs, the planning process, commercial archaeology and other sectors, and identify factors that influence successful adoption and impact.
4. Assess current and future opportunities presented by emerging technologies – such as artificial intelligence, lidar visualisations, multi/ hyperspectral imagery satellite imagery, digital photogrammetry and data-fusion – to enhance current methods and outcomes with limited resources. This could include case studies trialling new approaches.

Priority Research Area 2 (Historic England)

Recording and sharing marine heritage: how the Marine HER can benefit coastal communities

Context and Further Details

We are inviting proposals that explore how the Marine Historic Environment Record can enhance understanding of the relationship between marine heritage, coastal places and coastal communities, and how this understanding can in turn improve the Marine HER as an evidence base, engagement platform and service.

Marine heritage contributes to people's sense of place, identity, belonging and wellbeing, yet the values associated with marine and coastal heritage are not always fully visible within existing records. This research will examine what the Marine HER can currently reveal about relationships between marine heritage and coastal communities, including historic, social, cultural, environmental and economic values. It will also consider which communities, stories, values and forms of heritage are currently underrepresented, and how greater participation could shape future records, interpretation and services.

Harbours are encouraged as a focus or case-study theme, because they provide tangible places through which to examine the interaction between marine heritage and coastal communities. Harbours connect diverse communities, including fishing, commercial, recreational, visitor and resident groups, and provide routes into wider themes such as maritime work, leisure, migration, shipbuilding, wrecks, coastal change, local identity and public memory. However, proposals may also consider other marine and coastal heritage contexts where these questions can also be effectively explored.

The research may combine Marine HER data with other sources, including the National Heritage List for England, local HERs, local history resources, community-generated material, environmental data and social or demographic datasets. It may also examine the role of citizen contributions and participatory approaches in revealing different values and perspectives.

Climate change should be considered as a cross-cutting theme. Coastal places, heritage assets and communities are changing, affecting what survives, what is valued, what is recorded and how people relate to marine heritage.

The expected outcome is a PhD that advances understanding of marine heritage and coastal communities, while producing creative and practical recommendations for enhancing the Marine HER's records, partnerships, public value, accessibility and future development as part of Historic England's wider evidence and digital services.

Priority Research Area 3 (Historic England and English Heritage)

Open Space: Enabling Inclusion

Context and Further Details

Inclusion and equality are at the heart of a vision where England's heritage is for everyone, and where a diverse range of people can connect with, enjoy and benefit from the historic environment. Delivering historic environment advice, policies, projects and narratives that are inclusive, participatory and collaborative involves actively seeking new ways to engage with diverse researchers, audiences and pasts. Inclusive practice means working to ensure that no-one feels excluded. It also means adjusting the balance where the experience and values of several groups and demographics are not visible or represented within celebrated heritage.

For our current programme, Historic England and English Heritage have committed to including an open space within our annual CDP call with the proactive aim of attracting PhD supervisors and applicants from different backgrounds. In this space, and in a spirit of co-creation, we are seeking new ideas and perspectives that address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to the historic environment and which are driven by those impacted by these issues. Our aim is to enable deeper understandings of what matters to a more diverse range of people through a broader portfolio of PhD research.

Research may explore inclusive methodologies or tackle subjects that will enhance the value and benefit of the historic environment for marginalised or historically under-represented communities. For example, projects may focus on 'missing pieces' within historic environment knowledge or historic property storytelling; investigate the barriers to inclusive practice; examine the consequences when people feel excluded from heritage spaces; or consider how new approaches to interpretation, including digital technologies, may embrace multiple heritage narratives. Associated impacts may be policy, guidance, interpretation, or practice based. The key requirement is that the research a) addresses the priorities and outcomes within Historic England and/or English Heritage current corporate/strategic plans (please see the links at the bottom of this document); and b) is specifically aligned with the principles contained within our strategies for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (again, see links below).

Projects may be in partnership with Historic England or English Heritage, or both together (i.e. with one supervisor from each organisation).

Priority Research Area 4 (English Heritage)

The design, development, management and maintenance of historic path surface

Context and Further Details

English Heritage cares for some of the most significant historic gardens and landscapes in England, including some with particularly relevant stories such as the early use of 'tarmac' for the paths at Brodsworth Hall. Historic paths networks are fundamental to the exploration and enjoyment of these historic spaces, but their management and maintenance is often overlooked and underfunded. This is compounded by increasing visitor numbers which were never envisioned when these gardens were laid out for family use. There is also a lack of understanding of how these paths were created and maintained in the past, which can result in historic paths being damaged through lack of maintenance or the use of inappropriate materials and repair techniques.

This research could be taken in several directions and could consider their historic significance, local distinctiveness, the sustainability of materials, modern accessibility requirements, the impact of climate changes (particular extreme cold, heat and rain), increased public access and challenges (such as capacity limitations and increased wear), impact on nearby interiors and collections as well as ongoing maintenance needs.

The desired outcome would be an understanding of historic path surfaces and their development alongside guidelines for the management and maintenance of historic path surfaces today in consideration of the outlined requirements and challenges. This could include a typological classification of different historic path constructions and provide guidance on their individual construction (such as materials, camber and drainage) and ongoing maintenance requirements (frequency of resurfacing, rolling, weed control and reduction in herbicide use etc.). It could also provide guidance on suitable modern alternatives in areas where a historic surface is no longer feasible. We could provide sites with highly relevant case studies such as Kenwood, Audley End, Eltham Palace and Wrest Park.

The problems associated with poor path management and maintenance are becoming increasingly apparent, with areas of our gardens consistently having to be closed off to visitors due to path flooding (probably the result of climate change) as well as the increased wear and tear on paths and surrounding grass areas (due to the necessity of raising funds e.g. through large events). This can in turn impact on visitor satisfaction and visitor numbers if popular areas of gardens are unavailable. These impacts are only likely to increase in the future. This research would allow us to make proactive research driven decisions that could help mitigate these problems now and in the future.

Priority Research Area 5 (English Heritage)

The Impact of extreme summer heat on the performance of historic buildings and their adaption to climate change

Context and Further Details

Extreme weather, particularly heatwaves is a serious problem for several of our buildings, which is projected to increase as climate change progresses. This research will consider how this impacts EH holistically, and focus on low cost, light touch solutions. Further, the National Heritage Collection has evidence of historic solutions which could be bought back into use. The impact of heatwaves manifests differently, for people this can be overheating, and for collections/buildings it can result in deterioration.

Research would involve characterising historic building performance across selected EH buildings, using RICHeS funded equipment, including leakage paths, U-values and ventilation rates. Current guidance can be misleading and significantly over/underestimate ventilation rates for historic buildings, often causing overly complex solutions, that can result in maladaptation (changes that unintentionally worsen performance/cause damage).

Investigation of room cooling/visitor comfort solutions through managed ventilation (possibly using chimneys) and other historical approaches (improved thermal performance though Ivy at Down House, external window shading at Osborne) could be undertaken. Practical application of new promising low-impact technologies could be considered. Alterations to visitor management could result in a more enjoyable, safer, experience, ensuring financial resilience to climate change (altering opening hours, changing visitor routes). Visitors could be surveyed during heatwaves to understand behaviour drivers, and thermal comfort surveys could investigate solution effectiveness, i.e. does cooling one room provide sufficient respite.

For collections research could investigate passive showcase/near wall solutions (paintings/prints) for sensitive objects (especially Limoge enamels at Rangers House). The temperature response of very sensitive objects could be investigated to understand risk.

Key Strategies and Agendas

Historic England

- Historic England Strategic Plan 2026-2031: https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/he-strategic-plan-2026-31/he-strategy-2026/

English Heritage

- About us: About Us | English Heritage
- Our Policies and reports: Our Policies and Reports | English Heritage

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