

Volunteering for Heritage: Study visit to England



The last study visit in the framework of the Erasmus+ project "Volunteering for Heritage" took place in England (Ipswich, Colchester and other towns and villages nearby), from 9th to 16th of May 2022. The delegates from Croatia, Poland and Finland, were hosted by the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT). The Trust takes care of hundreds of historical churches that are no longer used for worship but remain relevant for the local communities that are making sure the buildings remain open and used depending on the contemporary needs. On the arrival day, the group gathered for dinner, welcomed by Mark Lead, Local Community Officer from CCT. It was the start of a wonderful week filled with discussions, experience exchange and everyday trips.

Our real journey started the second day, when the participants had a training at the Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich on the topic of managing volunteers led by Felicity Dwyer (Stepping Up Training Center). After the general presentation of each team, everyone had a chance to talk about their own experiences when it comes to volunteering. We presented the CHC platform and explained how we engage people into the Hub's activities. The other two teams shared their stories which were quite diverse, ranging from the work with both elderly and youth, but in very different contexts.

The main focus of discussion were the challenges the managers encounter in their efforts to recruit and maintain volunteers. Even though the participants, including the trainer herself, come from different backgrounds (not only countries and culture but also the type of organisations), the process of discussing and comparing experiences lead to a conclusion that everyone shares similar problems and that we could use similar methods to improve our practices. We talked about ways to motivate different groups of people, to raise awareness about volunteering and create long-term relationships.

The following day we had our first trip, starting with Sudbury. We visited St. Peter's church, where we had an organized tour. We discovered the restoration plans and all the events that are taking place in the church that is no longer used for worship. This beautiful church actually became a cultural venue and is being used for wide variety of events, such as concerts and even Christmas markets.



We proceeded with a history of Sudbury tour, guided by a senior volunteer. The town is notable for its art in the 18th century, being the birthplace of Thomas Gainsborough, whose landscapes offered inspiration to John Constable, another Suffolk painter of the surrounding Stour Valley area. Before heading back to Ipswich, we had another volunteer tour in Saint Mary's Chilton church.



We spent the fourth day in Bury St. Edmund, starting with a guided tour of magnificent St. Edmund Cathedral. We learnt about the King Edmund, the original Patron Saint of England and king of East Anglia. Behind the Cathedral are the remains of the large Abbey surrounded by beautiful gardens. After the tour, Sarah Friswell, the Head of volunteering at St. Edmund Cathedral gave a talk about the ways she manages about 300 of volunteers, finding a place for everyone according to their abilities and preferences. Some of them volunteer inside the Cathedral, others in the gardens, while some do guided tours. The most important lesson that she shared is to always take time to say thank you to the volunteers, not only to show appreciation but also to emphasise the fact that without the volunteers, it would be very hard to manage such a huge site. They do this by organizing yearly gatherings and special events for the people who invest their time in the Cathedral.



Our next stop was Colchester, a charming town in Essex. The sightseeing started with a trip to the Castle Museum, the largest Norman keep in Europe. The Museum offers interactive tablets with games, photos and augmented reality showing how some of the Castle spaces might have originally looked like. Some of the most important findings in Britain are exposed in the Colchester Castle, from Celtic coin hoards, Roman statues and mosaics, medieval paintings to Civil War armour. After the visit, we discussed volunteering at the Castle Museum with the Project Coordinator. According to her experience, the key for successful recruitment lies in the way one presents the options to potential volunteers. They let people choose the time and the project they want to be involved in, some of them working from home, engaging on social media etc. This was particularly developed during the pandemic.





The sixth day we went to see another beautiful cathedral in Ely, one of finest examples of Romanesque architecture in Britain. Its most notable feature is the central octagonal tower, with lantern above, which provides a unique internal space. Its nave is the fourth longest in the United Kingdom and the Lady Chapel built in the 14th century is the largest chapel in England. We had the meeting with the Volunteers' Manager to discuss their volunteering system and programs at the Ely Cathedral. They currently have more than 400 volunteers who take care of wide variety of tasks. The lesson-learnt he shared is that in order to make sure the volunteering experience is useful for both parties, the organisation and the volunteer, there must be mutual commitment and clear expected outcome.



The last day before heading back home, we visited three more local churches – St Leonard at the Hythe in Colchester; St Mary the Virgin and St. Mary's Old Church in the surrounding villages. We were impressed by the commitment of the local volunteers who are dedicated to preserve the heritage, but also to keep using these buildings addressing the lack of cultural content and shared spaces in their communities.