

Case Study

Chawton House Library: In Jane Austen's Footsteps

Background

In 2020, the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) set up a Recovery Fund of £375,000 to help support partner organisations and local communities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cultural heritage grants, totalling £81,272.59 were awarded to twelve organisations through an open application process. One of the beneficiaries of the grant was Chawton House.

The site had been hit hard by the pandemic and needed to diversify its offering in order to generate a new income stream. Chawton House wanted to enhance its outdoor space to attract local interest as it could no longer rely on income from visits to the historic house and gardens from further afield.

At the time, funding assistance provided by the creative and cultural sector targeted only accredited museums and galleries, so Chawton House had limited options available for access to financial support.

The grant from the SDNPA Covid Recovery Fund to Chawton House centred around three activities – the creation of parkland trails, beautifying the parkland through the planting of spring bulbs and the establishment of a 'tea shed' to offer refreshment to guests whilst generating income for the site.



The project

The project proposals had been thoroughly researched and evidenced - the tea shed proposal, for example, was subject to a full business plan based on conservative sales figures. This background work enabled SDNPA to confidently award funding in recognition of just how critical these small changes could be to Chawton House. The project delivered the following:

- The creation of safe, waymarked, parkland walks (focused on the historically significant Church Meadow and Farringdon path). Tree maintenance and fence repairs enabled visitors to 'walk in Jane Austen's footsteps'.
- Free downloadable trails aimed at families also supported a 'Weekend Brunches' initiative to encourage visitors to spend more time on site exploring the estate.
- A temporary tea shed enabled the organisation to provide a 'lockdown-proof' takeaway catering offer to villagers and walkers, raising income from visitors to its gardens and parkland.
- 16,000 spring flowering bulbs were planted in the Grade II* gardens to create a stunning and attractive visitor offer, extending the garden interest for visitors from February until the end of April. The original plan to have visitors and families take part in planting (through advertised bulb planting events) had to be scrapped due to pandemic restrictions, but pupils at Chawton House School and Chawton House volunteers were able to take part.

The project was awarded £9,200 from the SDNPA Covid-19 Recovery Fund.

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“I am struggling to remember a grant that has been so transformative. It might not be the largest we received, but the flexibility and the fact we could invest in something that generated income whilst helping keep the gardens and estate available to local people during the lockdown, was the difference between us surviving and not....”

Katie Childs, CEO, Chawton House Library

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The outcome

The project initiatives were a resounding success. Over 600 new Annual Tickets were sold to visit the gardens in February and March 2021. The popularity of the gardens are also evident by the 30% increase in followers to Chawton House’s social media accounts, where the gardens feature in the majority of content.

Since it opened (and up until the 30th April 2021) the Tea Shed has turned a net income of £23,752, of which £15,575 was earned between 4th January and 11th April 2021.

Katie Childs, CEO, Chawton House Library added:

“Opening up the Parkland and creating low season interest in the gardens has been overwhelmingly positive and enjoyed by a hyper-local audience who could take their Lockdown exercise in the Parkland and Gardens, and purchase takeaway drinks and food as they did.

For the first time, Chawton House has developed a repeat local visitor base and we intend to continue to build in future.”

The future

Chawton House were inspiring throughout the pandemic. Its leadership and wider team of staff and volunteers showed a resilience and flexibility that was astounding in its approach – with relatively little resource, the organisation capitalised on every opportunity and adapted to change.

The investment made has provided long term additional income generating capacity and an enhanced visitor offer. It has also supported closer ties between SDNPA and Chawton House, demonstrating our recognition of their role as a critical element of the cultural heritage, economic and tourism infrastructure of the National Park.

For more information regarding Cultural Heritage in the South Downs National Park, please contact:

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The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2020–25 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 10 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 4.1: Increase conservation, awareness, access to and understanding of South Downs cultural heritage

Outcome 10.2: Increase awareness and desirability of the South Downs as a special place to visit

southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/

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