REF2021

Institution: University of Reading
Unit of Assessment: 15 Archaeology
Title of case study: Glastonbury Abbey: Transforming Policy and Practice and Shaping Innovation at a Sacred Heritage Site
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006-20

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Roberta Gilchrist	Professor of Archaeology	01/01/96 - present

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1st August 2013 – 31st December 2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact

Glastonbury Abbey is internationally renowned as the earliest church in England and the legendary burial place of King Arthur. It is distinctive among heritage sites in attracting a diverse range of spiritual seekers (Christian, 'New Age', Neo-pagan). But it was poorly served by previous archaeologists – 36 seasons of excavations remained unpublished – presenting a major barrier to visitor interpretation and new development. Through sustained co-creation over 14 years, Roberta Gilchrist's research has transformed understanding of the archaeology of Glastonbury Abbey, profoundly influencing the behaviours and experience of staff, trustees, professional advisors, volunteers and visitors. The collaborative research process has reformed the institutional culture; impacted policy and practice in conservation, collections, education and visitor experience; and raised ambition in immersive heritage interpretation. The research has secured an optimistic future for Glastonbury Abbey and is influencing other heritage and cultural organisations.

2. Underpinning research

Gilchrist led three successive phases of collaborative research with the staff, trustees, volunteers and professional advisors of Glastonbury Abbey (GA). The partnership was initiated when GA contacted Gilchrist in 2005, asking her to lead on resolving the long-standing problem of the unpublished archive of 36 seasons of archaeological excavations (1904–79).

Stage 1 (2006–14): The Glastonbury Abbey Archaeological Archive Project, began with a pilot to evaluate the archive and refine the methodology for analysis (2007–8, British Academy grant £47,000, LRG-44973). The main project (2009–14, AHRC grant £340,000 AH/G010269/1) reassessed and interpreted all known archaeological records and made the complete dataset publicly available through a digital archive hosted by the Archaeology Data Service (ADS). GA contributed £137,000 in-kind. Volunteers from the 1960s excavation donated photographs, helped to decipher field-notes and one volunteer personally funded the monograph subvention (Witherill Foundation, USA, £30,000).

The principal research aim was to set aside previous assumptions based on the historical and legendary traditions and to provide the first rigorous assessment of the archaeological archive. The antiquarian records were digitised and analysed using an integrated archaeological database; archaeological assemblages were reassessed, including chemical and petrological analyses; and a comprehensive geophysical survey was completed. The research provided new evidence for the scale, significance and dating of the Anglo-Saxon monastery and the medieval abbey. Among the most important findings is new evidence for occupation dating to the 5th–6th centuries. The research refutes previous claims for an early British cemetery pre-dating GA, a pre-Conquest cloister that was allegedly the earliest in England, and the reputed exhumation site of the grave of King Arthur. It also revealed distinctive features associated with Glastonbury's legends, notably a

sustained ritual focus on the site of the "old church", believed to have been founded by Joseph of Arimathea, and the first evidence for occupation dating to the so-called Arthurian period. This attracted national and international media attention (c.75 media features, including documentaries for the American Smithsonian Channel and German Deutsche Welle (E1)). The findings demanded urgent changes to how the heritage site is interpreted to the public.

Stage 2 (2015–16) Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeology, Legend & Public Engagement involved co-creating resources with GA to communicate the research to non-academic audiences (AHRC £100,000 AH/N002865/1 FOF). Gilchrist produced digital reconstructions based on the research, in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture (University of York), and piloted them at workshops with spiritual and educational stakeholders.

This spurred Gilchrist's research on *Sacred Heritage* (2016–18), including studies of spiritual multi-vocality in relation to the GA digital reconstructions (Rhind Lectures 2017; output 2).

Stage 3 (2018–20) developed from the Sacred Heritage research and involved collaboration with GA, Architectural Thread (specialist conservation and design architects) and Glastonbury Festival (leading international festival of contemporary arts), to pilot approaches to digital immersive heritage at Glastonbury Abbey (Higher Education Innovation Fund £16,200).

3. References to the research

Evidence for meeting 2* threshold: the research resulted from competitive, peer-reviewed funding applications; it was published in peer-reviewed, academic monograph series; it meets or exceeds 2* quality level definitions: it provides and applies important knowledge; contributes to advances in knowledge; professionally applies a thorough and appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis.

1. Gilchrist, R. and Green, C. (2015). *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-79*. Society of Antiquaries of London, London, pp504. ISBN 9780854313006. Open Access DOI: http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=619339

2. Gilchrist, R. (2020). *Sacred Heritage: Monastic Archaeology, Identities, Beliefs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 256pp. ISBN 9781108678087. Open Access DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108678087.003

3. Details of the impact

Glastonbury Abbey (GA) holds a unique place in English cultural identity. It draws 125,000 visitors annually (51% international). Visitor demographics and motivation differ from many other UK heritage sites, attracting a high proportion of spiritual seekers (possibly up to 25% of visitors, E2, p. 1). Prior to the research, the Conservation Plan commissioned from Keystone Historical Consultants concluded the abbey was "uniquely disadvantaged" as a medieval heritage site by not understanding its archaeology (2004). The failure by earlier generations to publish the excavations "shut the door" on statutory permissions for new developments and fuelled "contested opinions about date, legend and historical fact" (E3, E4).

1. Policy and Practice: Conservation, Collections and Sustainable Development

This impasse was resolved by Gilchrist's publication of the full analysis of the archaeological archive (2015, output 1). The revised Conservation Plan (2018) describes the impact as "far-reaching", providing "important foundations for future management and presentation… leading to follow-through change" (E3). Understanding "has been transformed" and the archaeological gazetteer has expanded from 40 pages (2004) to 300 pages (2018) (E3, E4).

The GA charity comprises 13 trustees, 55 staff, 45 volunteers and 2,500 members. GA's director, Janet Bell, states there was previously "no understanding" of the archaeology. The research enabled strategic planning and a culture change in which archaeology now "shapes GA's collective vision": "it has given us a tangible history, a roadmap, a structure and story that is based

on evidence specific to the abbey". Trustees, staff and volunteers were involved in all stages of the research, "breaking down barriers and building confidence and motivation to work together" (E5). The research has "raised the profile of the collections and changed perceptions of their importance" (E3), resulting in the conservation of artefacts; the re-ordering of the collections by artefact-type; better storage of the collections to increase accessibility; updating of permanent displays with new labels; and informing temporary exhibitions (E3, E5).

GA's architect emphasises the "huge significance" of the monograph (output 1) (referring to it as "the bible"), in "unlocking" an architectural approach that "integrates interpretation and understanding of archaeology". She explains that archaeological insight to spatial relationships provoked a radical change in policy for management of the abbey precinct – "to take down fences and reunite Abbey House, the lost (eastern) part of the site." (E5). This 19th-century gentleman's residence served as a diocesan retreat centre, 1920–2018. Gilchrist's research informed the decision to reclaim it for abbey use securing a route to sustainable development for GA, while protecting vulnerable archaeology. The refurbished house will provide much-needed (roofed) visitor facilities, previously planned as new-build structures adjacent to the ruins.

Beyond Glastonbury Abbey, the research is influencing other heritage organisations. Historic England funded a Heritage Assessment and Conservation Plan for the Bury St Edmunds Heritage Partnership (2018), with the resulting recommendation to "assess the feasibility of a large-scale research and interpretation project modelled on the Glastonbury Abbey project" (E6). Bury's trustees sought advice from GA and Gilchrist advised them on grant applications. The model is also being taken up for Reading Abbey: Gilchrist co-designed a CDA PhD project with Reading Museum and Berkshire Archaeology (funded by AHRC SWWC DTP 2020) to improve understanding of archaeological records and to inform conservation policy for local government planning (E6).

2. Enhanced Understanding: Visitor Experience, Education and Spiritual Heritage

The abbey director states that the research has had a "massive impact" on staff and volunteers by "raising their level of ambition" and making "interpretation fundamental to everything we do". The AHRC FoF project co-created digital reconstructions, educational resources and a new guidebook that is "fantastic" for adult learners seeking "a higher level of knowledge" (E5) (over 2,500 copies sold). 125,000 annual visitors are able to access the digital reconstructions through a touch-screen interface; they are used in "tablet tours" by GA's Living History Team and in graphics at view-spots on-site (E3).

GA's Learning Team confirm the transformative impact on visitor experience: the digital reconstructions enhance spatial and chronological understanding of the ruins, "showing people how the abbey looked in the past"; they help to overcome language barriers for European school visitors (approximately 5,000 per year); and have proven effective in engaging autistic children (E5). Gilchrist created a website in 2018 to make the digital reconstructions publicly available and to provide the only remote online introduction to the abbey's heritage.

GA's director states the research provided a "sure foundation" of understanding which has changed the culture of GA's Learning Team from entertainment to "authenticity and quality" (E5). Three knowledge transfer workshops run by the University of Reading embedded the learning resources (E7) and triggered GA's successful application to Arts Council England for funding to develop a tactile-handling collection (E5). The workshops inspired new ways to enhance the experience of approximately 10,000 educational visitors each year: an artefact loan scheme for schools; history days for families; and a tactile-learning project with Strode College. The educational resources incorporate feedback from four workshops with local teachers (E7) and led directly to GA's selection as a GCSE/OCR case study for four Somerset schools. This prompted use of the resources in a local project to enhance twelve boys' literacy (E5).

Reconstructed phase 3 Anglo-Saxon church, shown in ruins today.
© The Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture, University of York

GA was previously reluctant to engage with Glastonbury's myths and 'New Age' beliefs, assuming them to be modern inventions (E5). Gilchrist's research demonstrated that legends have shaped GA's archaeology for 800 years and are integral to the interpretation of both tangible and intangible heritage. GA now actively encourages "alternative" pilgrimage and offers "spiritual trails" that integrate archaeology with myth (E2). The revised Conservation Plan addresses "legendary" and "spiritual" significance in defining Glastonbury's singular heritage (E2). 'New Age' authors cite the research in narrating the history of their beliefs (E8).

3. Innovation: Collaboration in Immersive Heritage

Gilchrist facilitated GA and Glastonbury Festival's ambitious plans for digital immersive heritage to engage visitors with archaeology. She hosted workshops and provided storyboards to advise Michael Eavis on the commissioning of two immersive pilots at GA (2019: IPdesign.studio) (E9). Evaluation of the pilot projects informed the next stage of collaboration, in which Gilchrist, GA's director and Architectural Thread's Creative Director co-created concepts for multi-sensory, digital immersive installations (E10). These principles are guiding GA in developing new approaches to visitor experience post-Covid 19: Gilchrist is supporting the abbey to reinvent itself as an immersive open-air museum, emphasising self-exploration and safe social distancing in its 40-acre precinct.

The analysis and publication of the archaeological archive has formed the basis of vital new development at GA, enabling statutory permissions and improving understanding of its archaeology. The director reports that there is now shared understanding of the abbey's "international significance*",* instilling confidence to seek major funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund and other sources (E5). Interpretation has been enriched by a culture of co-creation and multi-vocality is now regarded as a strength rather than a problem (E2). The research has revitalised the trustees' 10-year vision: GA has embraced a forward plan inspired by immersive heritage interpretation and empowered by archaeological knowledge. In transforming understanding of Glastonbury Abbey's past, the research has ensured a hopeful future for this iconic sacred heritage site and its diverse range of visitors.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[E1] *Glastonbury Abbey Media Features 2015-20*: lists and links to 75 features and articles citing the research in newspapers, TV, radio, online and print magazines.

[E2] (CONFIDENTIAL) *Recognising the Alternative: a Study of Pilgrimage Phenomenology at Glastonbury Abbey,* Nic Phillips, Glastonbury Abbey.

[E3] Excerpts from *Revised Conservation and Management Plan for Glastonbury Abbey*, Keystone Historical Consultants (2018).

[E4] Excerpts from *Conservation and Management Plan for Glastonbury Abbey*, Keystone Historical Consultants (2004).

[E5] *Summary of Interview Transcripts with Glastonbury Abbey Staff* (Aug-Nov 2017).

[E6] Excerpts from *The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Assessment* (350pp), June 2018; and *The Abbey of St Edmund Conservation Plan* (214pp), November 2018; and Reading Abbey PhD Studentship Proposal, 2020.

[E7] *Evaluation Report of Knowledge Transfer Workshops and Stakeholder Workshops (Teachers and Spiritual Groups) at Glastonbury Abbey, July 2016*, University of Reading.

[E8] New Age Authors Citing Gilchrist & Greene 2015 (output 1).

[E9] (CONFIDENTIAL) *Evaluation of "Glastonbury 3000": Glastonbury Festival Digital Immersive Pilot at Glastonbury Abbey House*, Glastonbury Abbey, February 2019.

[E10] (CONFIDENTIAL) *HEIF Final Report: Innovation in Immersive Heritage Interpretation: Glastonbury Abbey* (July 2019).