

Doctoral Training Partnership: Placement Opportunity

'Awakened to their preservation as a national duty'¹; heritage conservation, activism and community in Tintagel 1890 – 1925

Background

The north Cornish coast around Tintagel is the site of two of the National Trust's earliest acquisitions (Barras Nose and Tintagel Old Post Office). This full-time, three-month research placement is designed to support the scoping, development and delivery of the anniversary programming by supplying the necessary research to underpin our public outputs for local communities and visitors.

Barras Nose, a coastal headland of 14 acres to the north of Tintagel village, was acquired by public subscription in February of 1897, less than two calendar years after the Trust was formally registered as a charity. As such, we believe it is both the second coastal land acquisition ever made by the Trust, and the first one funded by public subscription in the UK².

Tintagel Old Post Office (TOPO) will mark the 125th anniversary of its acquisition by the National Trust in July of 2028. It currently receives around 35,000 visits per annum, making it a key touchpoint for the Trust in the North Cornwall area. The TOPO was saved at auction by a woman called Catherine Johns, who later sold it to the Trust at a considerable loss in 1903. After the acquisition of the National Trust's first building, Alfriston Clergy House in 1896 and then Kanturk Castle in 1900, the TOPO is (we believe) the third built structure to be acquired by the charity.³

Both Cornish acquisitions happen in the dawn of the UK's history of charitable conservation, and both appear to have had an activist element. What was it about this landscape and its vernacular buildings that was so valued by those who felt compelled to 'save' them? Against what specific threats did they believe they were fighting? How and when did local, regional and national networks of conservation activists come together to secure the sites? Who was in those networks? This placement is tasked with answering those questions (and more), so that we can share a fuller story of these places and inspire the next generation of people to act for nature, history and beauty.

Introduction

In the late 19th century, a combination of the coming of the railways and an explosion of interest in the legend of King Arthur, almost swept away Tintagel Old Post Office,

¹ Mr James Bryce MP, as quoted in '*The National Trust. Barras Point Saved.*' London Daily Chronical, 10 July 1897, p.8.

² The first coastal land to be acquired was 5 acres Dinas Oleu in Wales, acquired in 1895. [The history of the National Trust | National Trust](#)

³ [The history of the National Trust | National Trust](#)

which has stood for 700 years on the village's main road. As the infrastructure of hotels, boarding houses, inns and shops grew to accommodate a rising tide of visitors, so too did pressure on the existing vernacular buildings in the village and its surrounding land.

Simultaneously, Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley were making plans to formulate the National Trust as a means to protect and preserve places of natural beauty and national heritage across the UK. They felt keenly the importance of such places in national life as a means to recreation, reflection and social reform.

In September of 1895, just as the National Trust was being registered as a charity, 14 acres of coastal headland to the north of Tintagel Haven was put up for auction. The parcel of land, which directly faced Tintagel Castle (now owned and operated by English Heritage), was purchased by local landowner the Earl of Wharncliffe.

Wharncliffe offered the land to the embryonic National Trust at cost price 'for the purpose of preserving it from being built upon'⁴, and so a public subscription was launched.⁵ By the summer of Queen Victoria's Jubilee year in 1897, the Trust was able to confirm in its annual report 'the most satisfactory results', including acquisition of Barras Nose.⁶

The partially derelict TOPO was likewise put up for sale by auction in 1895, in expectation of demolition and development. Enter Catherine Johns, who had moved to nearby St. Nectan's Glen not long before the auction took place.

Johns was evidently motivated to save the property from its fate and acquired it for £300 – whether at auction or private sale, is yet to be confirmed. After making the purchase, Johns initiated a phase of renovation and 'improvement' and placed the property in the care of the Arts & Crafts Movement architect Detmar Blow, then a peripatetic architect heavily associated with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB).

Around 1900 the National Trust began a public fundraising campaign to acquire TOPO, indicating that Johns was minded to transfer it into their care swiftly following completion of the works.

After a sluggish start to the campaign, the Trust secured purchase of the property from Johns in 1903 for £200. This resulted in a financial loss to Johns, who had by that point expended both the purchase price and the cost of Blow's renovations. Johns also donated the building adjacent to TOPO to the Women's Institute of Tintagel, where it continues today to be a valued community asset to the women of the village.

Aim

⁴ 'The National Trust and Tintagel Castle' The Morning Post, June 16 1896, p. 8

⁵ 'The National Trust and Tintagel Castle' The Morning Post, June 16 1896, p. 8

⁶ Sir Robert Hunter, quoted in 'The National Trust. Barras Point Saved.' London Daily Chronical, 10 July 1897, p.8.

This placement will identify, analyse and synthesise into one fully referenced discussion the surviving evidence for the acquisition of Barras Nose and TOPO.

It will consider the individuals involved in these acquisitions, including their biographies, motivations and networks, such that a solid context for each acquisition event can be understood.

It will also unravel the acquisitions and situate them into local, regional and national contexts. In so doing, it will enable the NT to accurately and holistically share the story of the sites' acquisition and their place in the national story of conservation and community.

Outcomes & Applications of this Research

- Comprehensive understanding of the context and extent of the connections between the acquisition of Barras Nose, the Women's Institute and TOPO so that we can link the three and grow community relationships and partnership opportunities around them.
- An accurate and more detailed understanding of the acquisition of Barras Nose, such that we can maximise the public benefit of its commemoration in 2027.
- A greater and more comprehensive understanding of the acquisition of the TOPO and Catherine Johns' agency within it, in order that we can communicate it more effectively and thereby maximise the public benefit of its commemoration in 2028.
- A reclamation of Catherine Johns' story, her personality, agency and activism in heritage conservation.

Key Research Tasks

Individual and Local Context

1. Earl of Wharncliffe: Biography, Landholding, and Conservation Activity

Develop a comprehensive understanding of the Earl of Wharncliffe's life, wealth, land ownership, and role in the conservation history of North Cornwall.

- What was the Earl of Wharncliffe's biography, and from what sources did his wealth derive?
- How extensive were his landholdings during the 1890s, within and beyond Cornwall?
- What was his precise connection to the two acquisitions under consideration, and how did that involvement develop?
- What motivations may have influenced his conservation activities in North Cornwall? Was there a recognition of the value of green space in public health ini

common with that espoused by the founders of the National Trust, or was the threat of development Wharncliffe's primary motivation to act?

2. Catherine Johns: Biography, Networks, and Conservation Activism

Develop a fuller understanding of Catherine Johns' life, social networks, and contribution to conservation and heritage protection in Tintagel.

Key research questions:

- What was the nature of Johns' relationship with the Earl of Wharncliffe and his estate interests?
- Can the exact location and address of her residence at St Nectan's Glen (Lot 49) be established?
- What was her relationship with Anne Saunders, her housekeeper, and can further evidence be identified through wills, probate, census, burial, or parish records?
- To what extent was Johns involved in artistic, heritage, or conservation activities, including fundraising through postcards and the promotion of an alternative vision of Tintagel's future development?
- Were similar campaigns being undertaken by others in the locality, and was Johns part of a wider network or movement concerned with landscape preservation?
- How, if at all, did Johns' conservation activity contribute to or influence the National Trust's acquisition of Barras Nose?
- What factors may have motivated Johns' acquisition and subsequent gift of the Women's House to the local Women's Institute?
 - Was this an unusual action in the context of the Women's Institute locally, regionally, or nationally?
 - What might this decision reveal about Johns' social values, interests, and philanthropic priorities?

3. Threats to Barras Nose and Tintagel Old Post Office

Strengthen our understanding of the perceived threats that prompted intervention and acquisition.

Key research questions:

- What specific threats faced Barras Nose and the Tintagel Old Post Office during this period?
- Were there identifiable proposals for railway expansion, commercial development, tourist infrastructure, or hospitality schemes that prompted concern? A proposed railway terminus in the area, and the building of King Arthurs Hotel (now Camelot Castle Hotel) are key subjects for investigation. Alternatively, were perceived threats more diffuse, reflecting broader anxieties about landscape change and increasing visitor numbers?
- How did growing public interest in the Arthurian associations of Tintagel influence these developments?
- To what extent did Arthurian tourism drive commercial investment, development pressures, and landscape transformation in the area?

Regional Context

Conservation and Heritage Protection in Cornwall

Establish the wider Cornish context for these acquisitions and identify emerging heritage and conservation networks operating within the county.

Key research questions:

- Were the circumstances surrounding heritage protection in Tintagel mirrored elsewhere in Cornwall during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?
- Were comparable campaigns, acquisitions, or preservation initiatives under discussion or undertaken elsewhere along the Cornish coastline?
- Who were the principal individuals, organisations, and networks active in landscape, archaeological, and built-heritage conservation in Cornwall during the period covered by this research?
- Can evidence be identified for developing county-wide conservation movements or informal preservation networks?

National Context

National Significance and Institutional Networks

Examine how these acquisitions achieved national prominence and became connected to wider heritage and conservation movements.

Key research questions:

- Who were the principal national actors involved in these acquisitions, and how did the relationship between Tintagel and the National Trust first emerge?

- What role did professional, philanthropic, and conservation networks play in facilitating acquisition and preservation efforts?
- Detmar Blow and William Weir, both prominent Arts and Crafts architects, are identified as architects associated with the Old Post Office. Their involvement appears to pre-date National Trust acquisition and may have originated through links with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB).
 - How might this connection have been established?
 - What motivated their involvement with the building?
 - What can be established about the scope and objectives of their work at the site?
- Recent scholarship, including Michael Hall's work on the early National Trust, suggests that concern for the survival of vernacular buildings was central to the organisation's formative years and that SPAB played an important role before and after acquisition through its network of architects.
 - To what extent does this interpretation apply to TOPO?
 - What role did SPAB play in its preservation?
 - How significant was Catherine Johns' contribution in identifying, advancing, and shaping the conservation agenda at the site?

Outputs

It is envisaged that the outcomes might take the form of:

1. Written report with full references and bibliography, to include an appended timeline of key events.
2. List of key assets that could help the NT share these stories in future eg: objects, images, archives, quotations.
3. Suggestions for follow up research questions and potential further sources of information.
4. Download Sessions (1 hour, online, x 2 minimum) to ensure NT staff and volunteers can understand and use the research content in their work.
5. Optional public talk to disseminate findings to the community in Tintagel.

Timescales

3 months' (full time) duration, commencing 7 December 2026, completing 12 March 2027.

Applicants should note that if they are successful, a DTP funding application will need to be made to cover research, travel and subsistence costs. Please note that some sites are challenging to reach by public transport. Site/archive visits are anticipated to:

- [Tintagel Old Post Office | Cornwall | National Trust](#)
- [Tintagel walk | Cornwall | National Trust](#)
- [Lanhedock | Cornwall | National Trust](#) (Site of Regional Office Archive)
- [Kresen Kernow](#), Redruth, Cornwall
- [SPAB](#), London

Existing Resources:

The following primary resources will be provided by the National Trust:

- Contemporary newspaper articles pertaining to both sites (supplied as pdfs)
- Personal account of the visit to Tintagel of Canon Rawnsley (a founder of the National Trust)
- Photograph of Catherine Johns, thought to be sitting in the conservatory of her home at St Nectan's Glan. Digital copy held in the property archive, currently lacking provenance or citation.

The following secondary sources will be provided by the National Trust:

- **The Old Post Office, Tintagel, Cornwall – Historic Building Analysis, Cornwall Archaeological Unit (2003).** In 2003, the National Trust commissioned a comprehensive Historic Building Analysis (HBA) from Cornwall Archaeological Unit. This report provides a high-level overview of Johns' involvement in the acquisition and conservation of the property; however, certain elements of the narrative appear to be inconsistent and warrant further scrutiny.
- **The Life and Legacy of Catherine Johns (1840 – 1925) Research report for the National Trust by Sofia J. Karliner (2025).** Produced as part of a week-long micro-internship with the National Trust, contains a family tree, chronology of John's biography.

Online information:

[Explore Tintagel coast | National Trust | National Trust](#)

[The Old Post Office, Tintagel - 1143438 | Historic England](#)

[Tintagel Old Post Office | National Trust Collections](#)

[Tintagel Old Post Office's history | National Trust](#)

[Tintagel Old Post Office | Cornwall | National Trust](#)

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