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Custodian entrepreneurship: an examination of entrepreneurial activities in English country houses

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ABSTRACT

English country houses are unique institutions that form an essential fabric in the country's landscape. They highlight British history and are a significant element in the country heritage sector. The literature on country houses has examined various facets of them but there is a scarcity of literature about the type of entrepreneurial activities that are being undertaken at the houses. By examining 68 English country houses, this paper explores their entrepreneurial activities and determines that they can be organized according to physical areas, products and services, users, stakeholders and tactics. A typology depicting the entrepreneurial activities of these houses has been developed. This study makes an original contribution to both theory and practice by introducing the innovative concept of "custodian entrepreneurship" and opening discussion about entrepreneurship in this distinctive part of the UK's heritage sector.



KEYWORDS

Custodian entrepreneurs; typology; English country houses; succession; heritage; tourism

Introduction

According to Waterfield (2007), the country house is a national "icon." It is a crucial part of national heritage (Mandler 1997), a British identity and a distinctive element of UK's heritage sector (Corner and Harvey 1991). Prior to COVID-19, heritage tourism was worth £20.2 billion a year (Oxford Economics 2016), with country houses being a major draw for tourists from the UK and abroad (Du Cros and McKercher 2020). The country houses were built by wealthy merchants, politicians, aristocrats and professionals for periods of leisure and as a substitute for full-time life in towns (Connell, 2005). Their significance today is evidenced by the fact that the Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DMS) chose to use an image of a country house on the front cover of its post-pandemic "Tourism Recovery Plan" in June 2021 (DCMS (Department for Culture and Media and Sport) 2021).

The academic literature on country houses as business entities focuses on areas such as authenticity (Peirce et al. 2020; Wood 2020), marketing (Young 2007), ghost tourism (Carruthers and Krisjanous 2014), gardens and landscapes (Connell, 2005; Inglis 1987), their use as wedding and conference venues (Worsley 2005), and the effect of visitor numbers to screened "locations" (Tooke and Baker 1996). More recently, research by Haşim and Soppe (2023) noted the role of entrepreneurs turning into custodians in regions of conflict. Apart from these works, there has

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been a lack of research from the perspective of the country house as a business enterprise. This is a context where custodians are forced to become entrepreneurs to safeguard heritage. The gap is surprising because English country houses are seen as the lynchpin of heritage tourism but also as a fixture of the national consciousness and a mainstay of factual and fictional worlds.

Country houses are passed down from one generation to the next through primogeniture, whereby the eldest son (or in some cases, a daughter or another member of the family) inherits a title and estate and has to maintain all the buildings, land, staff and tenants. This is a substantial responsibility and an expensive undertaking, as one family explained in the 2022 television series “Keeping Up with the Aristocrats”: “It costs £130,000 a year for gas and electricity ‘alone’ to run Carlton Towers in North Yorkshire” (ITV 2022). The fact that a television series such as this and similar ones are broadcasted about country house owners and their entrepreneurial endeavors confirms the intense public interest in these people and places. The popularity of “Downton Abbey,” for instance, has catapulted interest in country houses and led to a dedicated following on the future and fate of these houses (Tamny 2015; Xuerui and Pratt 2019). Furthermore, country house estates employ a significant number of staff, trainees and apprentices and provide opportunities for (and rely on) volunteers, so they are an integral part of their localities, landscapes and economies (Xuerui and Pratt 2019).

Many people who inherit country estates have no prior experience or training in running a business but feel a familial obligation to keep it going and hand it down to the next generation. As the Duchess of Devonshire wrote in her memoirs regarding her home Chatsworth House, “I do not want to be the one to let it go” (Devonshire 2011, p. 189). The custodians are under pressure to continue the tradition but they are limited in terms of opportunities to ensure continuity. Developing an enterprise based on country houses and estates has been the common method of not only ensuring continuity but also generating a revenue stream that can be invested back into the houses. Evidence of enterprise activities in country houses has been visible in activities such as opening the house or gardens to paying visitors or running a café on the grounds (Connell, 2005). However, the literature has not been rich in the comprehensive outlook of the type of entrepreneurial endeavors country house owners carry out. In addressing this lacuna, this paper aims to answer two research questions: “What entrepreneurial activities do owners of country houses pursue?” and “Can these activities be categorized?”

The paper introduces a new category of entrepreneurship-custodian entrepreneurship to highlight the changing role of owners of these houses (i.e., custodians to entrepreneurs) and opens debate about entrepreneurship in this significant part of the UK’s heritage sector. The paper begins with a background and a definition of the key concepts, and then it explains the methodology used in the research. The third section reports the results of the data analysis and discusses the developed typology. The last section concludes with the contributions of this research along with limitations and avenues for further research.

Background literature

In this article, the term “country house” is used to indicate an “estate,” “castle,” “abbey,” “stately home,” “manor house” and any other large historic house or mansion in the countryside. The study focuses on country estates which have a home at their center, were established in the past and are owned by a private family that is often – but not exclusively – aristocratic. The literature on the entrepreneurial activities of country houses is sparse. In the study of gardens, Connell (2005) highlights the role of visitors in the continuity and change in country houses, while McElwee and Smith (2014) touch upon the contribution of country houses from a rural entrepreneurship perspective. While mainstream entrepreneurship literature has focussed on various themes (for example, lifestyle entrepreneurship; Ivanycheva et al. 2024), the closest one comes to the study of entrepreneurial activities in country houses is place-based enterprise and themes in

rural entrepreneurship (for example, Thomas and Tobelem 2024; Tian and Xu 2022). Research calls for theorization of the phenomenon taking place, especially toward understanding the type of entrepreneurial activities occurring and whether they can be categorized.

Categorization is important because organizational researchers have used categorization to understand similarities or collective identities (Vergne and Wry 2014). For example, Navis and Glynn (2010) note that like-minded “entrepreneurs” group together to create a collective identity that may legitimate their actions (markets or products). In entrepreneurship, a collective identity provides “an intangible commons that binds all entrepreneurs who share it” (Hiatt and Park 2022, 4). Being a part of a collective provides legitimacy, changes the perception of the external stakeholders and lends credibility to products and services offered by entrepreneurs (Navis and Glynn 2010). Haşim and Soppe (2023) further note that much of the categorization literature is context-specific and localism is essential in developing themes and categories.

In the context of country houses and the entrepreneurial activities that take place, we lack theorization of location and identity-based activities, including implications on what those activities may entail (Haşim and Soppe 2023). The concept of “custodian entrepreneurship” differs from other kinds of entrepreneurship, such as “opportunity entrepreneurship” (Rae 2007), “necessity entrepreneurship” (Serviere 2010) or the “entrepreneurial family” (Riar et al. 2022), because it has specific boundaries and restrictions on certain factors, such as (a) who can be the custodian; (b) from what date; (c) what kinds of entrepreneurship can be carried out; (d) the type and extent of changes that can be made to the enterprise; and (e) the themes, stories and characters which must be built upon, and in some cases, deferred to by the business. With regards to a country house, this entails retaining the house, and as far as possible, the surrounding grounds and estate in its current form, not selling off all the land, family paintings or heirlooms, not removing the antique furniture and not dividing the entire house up into self-contained dwellings¹ (i.e., relating to the concept of business not as usual; Tavella 2022).

In custodian entrepreneurship, no complete break from the past can be made, and no total change in function can be contemplated. For example, a country house can be repurposed as a place that welcomes visitors, guests, event participants, students of all ages, artists from various fields, domestic, grounds and estate workers and people engaged in traditional and contemporary country pursuits like hunting, shooting, fishing or competing in a triathlon, because all such activities are in some way aligned to, and built on, the reasons why country houses were built in the first place. They were constructed “for socializing and leisure,” not only as residences but as centers of political and economic power and social prestige and influence’ (Flower 1982, 8). The houses cannot be changed into entirely different entities such as factories, prisons or shopping malls, and they cannot be knocked down to make way for car parks or uprooted from their environments and reconstructed as attractions in a theme park elsewhere. Being a custodian means understanding that you do not own the country house: you merely look after it before passing it on to the next generation.

The essence of being a successful custodian is to keep things running along more or less as they were in the past but taking the necessary steps to update the enterprise and make it viable in today’s circumstances. This innovative concept is particularly relevant to entities within the heritage sector and to family businesses, which involve “strategic persistence” (Fang, Chrisman, and Holt 2021). An important aspect of this custodian entrepreneurship is knowing which part of the past to take forward and which part to leave behind and which stories to tell to which audiences and which others to leave out to maintain a coherent, enduring and convincing narrative (see Dalpiaz, Tracey, and Phillips 2014; Erdogan, Rondi, and De Massis 2020; Ge, De Massis, and Kotlar 2022; Littler 2005).

There are around 3,000 country houses in the UK (Historic Houses 2022b). Some are still owned by families, others by organizations like the National Trust and English Heritage (which own approximately 200 and 400 properties, respectively) and still others are owned by organizations like local authorities, charitable bodies and hotel chains (Historic Houses 2022b). Country

houses engage in diverse types of entrepreneurial initiatives ranging from opening gardens for visitors to offering exclusive hires for wedding events or acting as learning centers. While country houses as an entity have been given considerable attention (see for example, country houses and architecture; Clemenson 2021; and slavery and British country houses; Donington 2019), the literature remains deficient in the theorization of activities that take place in country houses given the constraints, including the safeguarding of heritage. Custodians are entrepreneurs who have yet to benefit from research and the categorization process. Context plays a key role in categorization, and yet, entrepreneurship in country houses has been devoid of studies that can bring about collective identity and legitimization. Our paper explores this area and aims to contribute toward knowledge around this domain. To accomplish this, we employ a pragmatic approach involving online document analysis.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, we conducted a web scraping of websites of country houses in England. Our approach was informed by the need to not only explore the entrepreneurial initiatives but also to develop a typology for the type of enterprise activities taking place. A sizeable proportion of people choosing to engage with income-generation activities at country houses will search for them, explore the details of the offer and make decisions about whether to visit or use their products, services and experiences online. Therefore, the websites are equivalent to a business's shop window and serve functions including advertising, branding, marketing and sales. To conduct the study, we selected a sample of country house websites using the following criteria from the Historic Houses website² (Historic Houses 2022a, 2022c):

- The country house is owned by a private family who uses the property as their home (solely or along with other homes elsewhere).
- The owners conduct entrepreneurial activities to generate income and keep the estate in their family.
- The country house has a functioning website that lists the entrepreneurial initiatives.

As our initial results yielded more than a thousand historic English houses, we set an additional criterion to narrow down the sample:

- The country house is located in southwest England.

This initial list comprised 352 houses, so next we selected one of the association's regions, "Southwest and Channel Islands," bringing the sample number down to 79 houses in Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire, Somerset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Dorset, Devon, Cornwall and the Channel Islands. Finally, we omitted the single property in the Channel Islands, Sausmarez Manor on Guernsey, to focus on 78 country houses in southwest England. These were further reviewed to remove any houses that did not meet the above criteria (the absence of either Business 2 Consumer (B2C) or Business 2 Business (B2B) activities through their website). This left us with a final selection of 68 properties that were reviewed for all income-generation activities on both their websites and the Historic Houses website³. Although the sample obviously does not represent all British country houses, this initial enquiry provides a starting point from which to create a typology of country house custodian entrepreneurial activities.

The websites of the 68 houses were accessed several times between 25 June and 28 August 2022. The data was downloaded and copied into Word documents to search for themes and extract examples that highlight the entrepreneurial activities taking place in the English historic houses. We used inductive thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) as the main

method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). In this analysis technique, codes and themes emerge from the data that are used to theorize the study. A total of 120 pages of data was obtained from the country house websites and analyzed using NVivo software. The first step was to derive codes attributable to data and then to perform the clustering of codes to second-order categories and further categorization into aggregate themes. Table 1 illustrates the coding and the aggregation of the themes. The five key themes of visitors, venue, estate, schemes and channels were developed, and the analysis was iteratively and individually verified by the authors.

Results and discussion

Data analysis revealed the breadth of activities going on in the country houses in southwest England. In searching for themes and patterns, it emerged that the entrepreneurial efforts can be organized by (1) different physical areas – e.g., houses, gardens and estate; (2) products and services – e.g., visits, accommodation, venue hire, retail, workshops and training and children’s playgrounds; (3) users – e.g., wedding parties, filmmakers, hikers and dog walkers, theater audiences and classic car rally participants; (4) stakeholders – e.g., family, staff, volunteers, friends, members and patrons; and (5) entrepreneurial innovation – e.g., adding a new feature, attracting a specific audience, providing tiered options and offering a patrons’ subscription scheme. Scrutinizing and analyzing the data enabled us to further determine the diverse services, products, experiences and interactions that were developed and delivered. These were thematically derived into five aggregate themes or main facets (Table 1): visitors, venue, estate, schemes and channels.

Visits to country houses form the core income generation activity in custodian entrepreneurship. Visitors are only given access to certain designated parts of the house, garden, other buildings and facilities on specific days and times to enjoy the experiences offered by country houses. For example, in 1947, the Longleat estate in Wiltshire was the first English country house to open to the paying public in the 20th century. Prior to this, people had frequently been shown around country houses for a small donation, but not on a professional or commercial basis. Built between 1568 and 1580, the Longleat estate has always been in the Thynn family and is the family seat of the Marquess of Bath. Its current custodian entrepreneur is Ceawlin Thynn, 8th Marquess of Bath, who took over the huge and many-faceted enterprise when he succeeded his father in 2020.

Longleat has many well-known attractions, including a safari park, children’s adventure playgrounds, a railway, a maze, a family farmyard, ten outside food and drink outlets, five shops, an education center and corporate events spaces. In addition, the estates advertises visits to the house and grounds, weddings venue hire, filming, accommodations, exhibitions, festivals and events and fishing and forestry on the estate. What is notable about Longleat’s business endeavors is how they are tiered – giving their clients many options to upgrade and add on to their experiences. For example, an adult (16+) ticket on the website costs £36.95 and a child ticket (3–15yrs) is listed at £27.70. This includes driving through the safari park and also ‘on-foot animal attractions including Koala Creek, Jungle Cruise and Family Farmyard, Main Square adventure attractions including Adventure Castle, “Rockin” Rhino, Jungle Cruise and the Hedge Maze, Longleat grounds and gardens, Special seasonal events across the estate (for example easter) (**Estate**, theme) (Longleat 2022a).

Longleat also offers prospective buyers “VIP Tours.” The first to pop up on the Longleat website is the “Bronze VIP Safari Tour,” which leads the viewer to wonder whether there is a silver or gold VIP Safari Tour and then prompts them to click through to view “All VIP Experiences” (Longleat 2022b). Of the 17 experiences available for purchase, 15 are animal-related and involve animals ranging from aardvarks to big cats, otters, gorillas and giraffes. Two experiences happen inside the house itself – “The Longleat Library VIP Experience” and “Treasures of Longleat House VIP Experience: A guided tour through the House focusing on the highlights of the Longleat Collection.” The experiences range in price from £80 to £360 per person. Alternatively,

Table 1. The entrepreneurial activities of country houses.

Illustrative first order codes	Second order categories	Aggregate Themes
Visits to houses and/ or gardens Group visits School/educational visits Guided tours Season tickets Gift vouchers	Admission	Visitors
In the house Separate hotel building Cottages Converted outbuildings like barns and stables. B&B Resort Holiday lets "Shepherds" huts Camping, caravanning and glamping. Specialist holidays, e.g., gardening, writing, photography and fishing	Accommodation	
Café/kiosk/restaurant Plant shop Gift shop Collections (permanent display) Sports facilities, e.g., golf course, tennis court, swimming pool Playground Parking	Facilities	
<i>Public events:</i> Exhibitions (temporary) Country shows Craft/seasonal fairs. Music, art, dance and theater, outdoor cinema Displays, e.g., jousting, historical re-enactments, birds of prey. Ghost tours/hunts Charity/fundraising events <i>Bespoke events:</i> Country pursuits – hunting, shooting, fishing Sports – e.g., horse trials, cycling, runs, triathlons, marathons, yoga, Nordic walking. Spiritual and wellness events Classic car meets. Private house and garden tours, e.g., behind the scenes with the owner or chief gardener, parkland tours Corporate awaydays and events Afternoon tea Talks and dinners	Events	
Professional training and CPD Leisure/sports/hobby workshops and courses, e.g., painting, floristry, tai chi, forest bathing Professional training and apprenticeships, e.g., masonry, carpentry, conservation	Workshops and Training	
Weddings Private hire – functions, parties, festivals, conferences, public and private events Film and photography location. Add-ons, e.g., catering, marquees, photography, flowers	Space Use	Venue
Farms, including agricultural rents, access to farms for visitors, education and training, farming produce, pick your fruit. Animals – deer park, petting zoo, goat walking experience, safari park. Forests and woodlands Vineyard, including wine production, wine tours and tastings. Watermill, including visits and flour sales. Horse stud Pottery, sculptures, garden ornaments, furniture making. Spa	Income from experience	Estate

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Illustrative first order codes	Second order categories	Aggregate Themes
Commercial lettings Residential lettings Storage units Fees from boat mooring, fishing licenses Quarry licenses	Lets and Licenses	
Working in partnerships, e.g., Bath Spa University uses some of Corsham Court's rooms as classrooms. Sponsorship Membership	Partnerships	Schemes
Friends Volunteers (in-kind contributions) Patrons Appeals and donations	Friends and family	
Website Online shop	Products and Information	Digital Reach
Media appearances, e.g., "Keeping Up with the Aristocrats." Media production, e.g., YouTube channel, video content for "Mapperton Live" patrons scheme	Channels	

customers can book the "Big Cat Photographic VIP Experience exclusively (max of 5 people)" for £775. The next tier then comes into view on the website – the opportunity to "Extend the Adventure by staying overnight" (Longleat 2022c). There are a variety of cottages on the estate that sleep between two and six people, at prices ranging from £375 to more than £750, which covers one night's accommodation, a continental breakfast and a day ticket to Longleat. Customers can buy a gift voucher for someone else if they do not want to visit or stay at Longleat themselves.

Another important source of income for country houses is hiring out the venue. By hiring out the venues, customers have access to wider areas and more leeway to negotiate spaces, dates, timings, etc. St Giles House in Dorset is available to hire for weddings, but in contrast to the beaming, white-gowned brides shown in most country house wedding photos, it features images that are dark and more akin to photo spreads in high-end fashion magazines (St Giles House, 2022b). This portrays a distinctive feel that will appeal to specific target customers – those who are young, affluent, creative and cosmopolitan⁴. Outreach to this demographic is extended by partnering with appropriate companies, as explained on their website (**scheme**, theme): "BrideLux's elegantly curated wedding shows are renowned across the world, and we were honored to be a part of the showcase" (St Giles House, 2022c).

In addition to a venue for weddings, St Giles House can be booked for corporate and private events, film and photography and workshops. The website states, "At St Giles House we love working with creative people and specialize in hosting various workshops from Floristry to Photography" (St Giles House, 2022d). Accommodation is available in the seventeenth-century stables now called the Riding House, two "Pepperpot" Lodges, a nineteenth-century Grooms Cottage or on the estate's glamping site. There is also an award-winning nightclub in the basement, "Designed with state-of-the-art light and sound system, speakeasy style bar and no neighbors to tell you to turn the music down. Can accommodate up to two hundred guests with a license until 2am" (St Giles House, 2022e). St Giles House runs events including art shows and marathons in the grounds, and the Realization Festival, which is aligned to the owner's ethos:

... a journey of individual and shared encounter focused on the theme of reconsidering our relationship with nature... Participants will be inspired by conversations with leading thinkers and economists, artists and activists... The aim is to have the chance of engaging with unsettling difficulties and tremendous possibilities at the level of mind, body and spirit... (St Giles House, 2022f)

Thus, all the income-generation efforts being made at St Giles House are aimed to attract an audience, and a particular kind of audience the owner enjoys mixing with.

The **estate** facet entails numerous permanent, temporary, short, medium and long-term ventures run by the owners and their tenants, as well as comprising part of the visitor and venue hire offer. For example, Stanway Watermill in Stanway House was restored and re-opened in 2009 “to produce stoneground Cotswold flour from wheat grown less than one mile from the mill on the Stanway Estate” (Stanway 2022). Rather than including admission to the mill with the house or fountain admission tickets, people are required to pay an extra fee to look around the mill – Adults £3, Children £2. “Visitors may, during opening times, see the mill working, view the idyllic millpond, walk along the nearby Cotswold Way and buy a bag of wholemeal Cotswold flour” (Stanway 2022).

This estate is believed to date back to the year 715 CE, and it has been in the same family for five hundred years. During recent restorations of the 18th-century water garden, the current owner, James Charteris, the 13th Earl of Wemyss, decided to add a single-jet fountain. Not just any old fountain, but “the tallest gravity fountain in the world.” The fountain is now the focus of all their marketing and branding efforts (**Channel**, theme). Even the website and the logo of the house is a fountain design rather than the Wemyss family coat of arms. This gives Stanway a strong unique selling point (USP) in a crowded field, as it is situated in the heart of the Cotswolds near many other picturesque buildings and gardens. It also gives people a specific reason to go there – as it is only open from 2 to 5 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays in June, July and August, and from 10 am-12 pm on Thursdays all other months of the year. Thus, people need to plan their visit in advance.

Visitors to the house or fountain can also pay to visit the mill and then pay more to buy some flour. The website lists other local stockists of Stanway flour to support sales of the product when people are elsewhere or when the estate is not open to visitors. The flour mill provides income to the estate outside the summer season through sales of its product, by offering year-round educational visits to schools and organized parties and by providing in-depth information on the website about how the mill relates to the school curriculum for key stage 1 to 4 students on subjects ranging from art to history, math, science and design and technology (**Visitors**, theme).

Another example of a multi-faceted entrepreneurial approach by custodian entrepreneurs is Mapperton House. Mapperton was listed in the Domesday Book in 1086 as Malperetone, and from then on, it belonged to four families linked by descent in the female line – the Bretts, Morgans, Brodrepps and Comptons – until it was bought by Mrs Ethel Labouchere in 1919. Since her death in 1955, it has been the home of the family of the Earl of Sandwich. The current 11th Earl is almost 80 years old, and the estate is now run by his son and heir, Luke Montagu, Viscount Hinchinbrooke, and his American wife, Julie Montagu. They carry out diverse entrepreneurial activities to generate money in several ways – selling tickets for visits and events, running a shop and café, operating a wedding venue, offering a rewilding project with glamping accommodation and wilderness tours as well as engaging in additional endeavors that do not require a visit to the estate. These off-site endeavors include appearing in reality TV shows and on programmes about the Royals and British aristocracy, as well as offering patrons online memberships to “Mapperton Live” (YouTube channel) (**Digital reach**, theme). Mapperton Live is a subscription scheme for patrons and a way of creating a community of supporters. Membership levels, named after famous painters whose works hang in the house, range from “Lely Patrons” at £4 + VAT per month to “Gainsborough Patrons,” which costs £77 + VAT per month and is only open to a limited number of purchasers. It is similar to the Friends schemes which are evident in many country houses, but it offers updated benefits, including advert-free episodes of their own programme about life at Mapperton a week before they are available to the public on YouTube, additional weekly videos and behind-the-scenes short videos only for patrons, an invitation to “Behind Mapperton Live” and online Q&A sessions once a month where the Viscount and

Viscountess interact personally with patrons. The starting times of these sessions are given in both BST, British Summer Time and EDT, the Eastern Daylight Time used in North America (Mapperton 2022a), reflecting Julie Hinchingsbrooke's nationality, which she uses further in her own branding and PR activities, like her YouTube channel, "American Viscountess" (Mapperton 2022b).

Higher-level patrons receive tangible benefits as well as online benefits, such as these given to Gainsborough Patrons:

After 6 months of membership, a Mapperton tea towel, bookmark and postcards; After 6 months, free access for you and up to 6 guests to visit Mapperton House & Gardens; Invitation to a live virtual tea party once a year; 20% off your stay at our Garden Cottage or Mapperton Camps (once a year); Annual signed Christmas card from Julie and Luke; Your name in our weekly episode credits; After 3 months, your name in our Mapperton Patrons journal; After 12 months, a limited edition print of Mapperton House; Exclusive Lens Access. (Mapperton 2022c)

In addition, patrons of all levels, along with other general viewers, are invited to become invested in the estate – personally, even if not financially– by playing along with quizzes and games based on the video content (Mapperton 2022d).

The examples above illustrate some of the entrepreneurial efforts being undertaken at country houses and demonstrate the diversity of this business sector. Figure 1 depicts these main entrepreneurial themes in a synergetic sense. Historic houses in this study undertake multiple entrepreneurial initiatives to secure income. Some houses focus on the existing offerings of the estate, while others go beyond the estate itself and innovate to build products and services that are unique and sought after.

The examination of entrepreneurial activities indicates that many initiatives were started to fulfill the obligation of saving and supporting traditional houses for future generations. The custodians/owners were forced to function as entrepreneurs to support and safeguard the legacy that

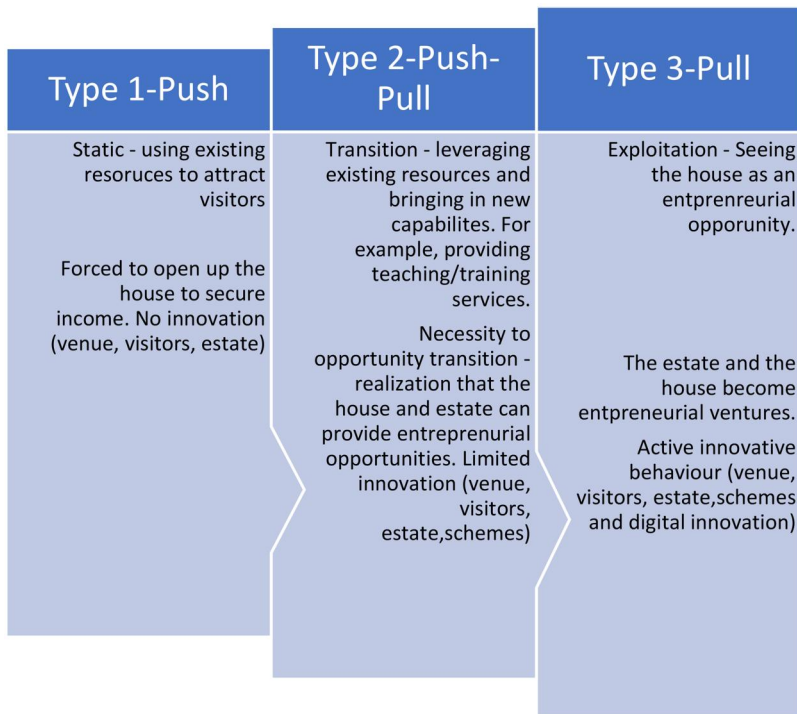


Figure 1. The typology of entrepreneurial country house businesses.

was passed on to them. From a theoretical viewpoint, dimensions of necessity and opportunity-based entrepreneurship can come into play in the shift from type 1 to type 3 categories. In type 1, custodians are pushed toward opening their country houses to generate income that can go into the maintenance of the property (at least partly). This is partially consistent with the literature relating to necessity entrepreneurship (O'Donnell et al. 2024), which is noted as “market-based trading activities that are performed outside the scope of salaried employment and that are undertaken primarily because of a lack of decent or desirable livelihood alternatives” (O'Donnell et al. 2024, 45). A lack of opportunities and means of earning a livelihood pushes individuals to become entrepreneurs. However, in the case of custodians, this is not the case. Instead, the push comes from the commitment to safeguard country houses and pass on legacy. The conditions of inheritance do not allow them to sell these properties, so they push for alternative uses for the venue either to support them or monetize the legacy (or both). It forms a form of necessity entrepreneurship that is not characterized by a lack of opportunities or means of earning a livelihood. The commonality with necessity entrepreneurship is the push toward entrepreneurial activities but it is not from the lack of other options but rather from other constraints.

Examining further, the data also reveals that once pushed into entrepreneurial activities, custodian entrepreneurs have also innovated in a true entrepreneurial fashion to exploit the opportunities that came with country houses and the estates that surround them. What started as an obligation and a necessity to safeguard heritage has been converted into opportunities by entrepreneurial custodians through innovation and synergistic thinking. Through the development of new products, services and partnerships, custodian entrepreneurs are ensuring that not only is the legacy of country houses maintained but they are also contributing to the development of institutions that are entrepreneurial, practical and baton holders of English history and heritage. After they are pushed into entrepreneurship, custodians are pulled into further entrepreneurial activities by various market opportunities. Innovation, effectuation and synergistic working, as defined by market expectations, shape their ventures. They are transformed into entrepreneurs who take full advantage of the heritage and legacy passed on to them. Opportunity entrepreneurship (Belda and Cabrer-Borrás 2018) is at play here: custodians pushed toward entrepreneurship fully embrace the opportunities afforded in the sector. They create further markets around the constraints they are under and use digital transformation as a source of innovation and competitive advantage (Slimane, Coeurderoy, and Mhenni 2022). What we see is a transformation from push toward pull under constraints. However, once established, the necessity is overshadowed by opportunities to capitalize on the ventures based on country houses and estates.

Implications

From a theoretical contribution, this study has introduced a new concept – custodian entrepreneurship. This type of entrepreneurship starts because owners of English country houses are limited in terms of what can be done with the house and estate. Entrepreneurship starts with an intention to safeguard the heritage and work within the constraints that come with ancestral inheritance, i.e., choices are limited. The owners are forced to use them for entrepreneurial ventures. In doing so, they create and identify further opportunities that lead to newer business models, growth and sustainability. Custodian entrepreneurship throws further light into the debate on necessity vs. opportunity entrepreneurship. Although the literature sometimes portrays necessity entrepreneurship as a “bad thing” (O'Donnell et al., 2024), we can observe from this study that this is not necessarily the case. Custodians enter entrepreneurship because of constraints about what can be done with their inheritance. By building on the constraints, they flourish and create markets that are new and working toward a collective identity. The study provides a concrete example for family commitment to entrepreneurial orientation (Arz 2021) and the further theorization of family businesses. This work nuances the family's role in developing entrepreneurially

minded heirs in the context of country houses and estates. The businesses that are started in the family's country houses are passed on to further generations where young individuals are exposed to entrepreneurial activities, thus cultivating mindsets that are trained for taking over family business and new venture creation.

The research also contributes to the understanding of country houses as organizations that balance commercial, social and heritage interests. Country houses are learning organizations, and our research has shown that, they constantly adapt through an active process of learning and knowledge creation. Country house entrepreneurs are in the constant process of learning and generate new knowledge that is shared within the industry. This aspect of management learning and knowledge creation resonates with previous research (for example, Pereira 2022) and further brings into the mainstream literature the unique aspects of country houses and their entrepreneurial activities leading to formation of clusters (Temouri et al. 2020) and regional development (Pereira et al. 2020).

The research has practical contributions. First, the developed typology can help in targeted interventions to help the growth of custodian entrepreneurs. Currently, there is no legitimacy to this collective, and the unique problems faced by them are not adequately addressed. For example, do the dynamics of acquisition of venture capital change because of family heritage and history? This research and the categorization developed can pave for bringing in mainstream enterprise interventions that can further support the growth of the businesses. This research provides distinctiveness, affiliation and the formation of a group (Mueller and Fuchs 2023) that supports the willingness of the individual country house owners to become entrepreneurial and excel in enterprise activities. Similarly, from a policy perspective, this research can help in informing policy development of the heritage sector. Currently, because of legal restrictions and conveyances, policies are restrictive (Li 2024) and not geared toward fulfilling the sector's full potential. With nearly 3000 houses and estates, this sector can contribute significantly toward local and regional development. With conducive policies and interventions, this sector can position UK as a model for revenue generation through the conservation of heritage.

Limitations and future directions

There are some limitations arising from this initial study in terms of the sample and the research methods used. First, many additional income-generation activities are going on in country houses across the UK outside this sample set. For instance, a natural woodland burial ground at Craufurdland Woods can lead to further expansion of the typology and new research avenues. Second, as information was collected from the websites of the historic houses, the study did not include country houses that are not engaged in an online presence and commerce. Overcoming this limitation, future research could scrutinize other information dissemination routes like social media and printed marketing material; enquire into other entrepreneurial endeavors that are not shared publicly, such as private fundraising efforts; and obtain information from other stakeholders or outsiders. Third, this research was undertaken in a two-month period in 2022, so it only provides a snapshot of that period of time. Research could be conducted to longitudinally to ascertain which activities are successful in the short, medium and long term and which initiatives fail.

This is an exploratory research study. Thus, further research needs to be done to develop theories that can explain custodian entrepreneurship through different lenses (for example, behavior, psychology or structuration theory). Based on the type of income-generation activities that are performed, an initial categorization is presented. This can be further improved by collecting data on the challenges, motivations and dilemmas of being entrepreneurial in a country house setting. Further research can also benefit from different data collection approaches, namely through field

observations and interviewing custodian entrepreneurs about the way they perceive and manage the enterprise activities.

Conclusion

This paper set out with the aim of examining the entrepreneurial activities of English country houses. In doing so, this research has proposed the novel concept of custodian entrepreneurship and shown how these activities can be organized according to different physical areas, products and services, users, stakeholders and tactics. Conducting an online review of 68 country house and Historic Houses websites revealed five facets – visitors, venue, estate, schemes and channels – which are presented as an original typology of custodian entrepreneurship. As in all frameworks, there are some areas of overlap, with certain efforts taking place across facets – e.g., visitors and venues, schemes and channels. The developed typology contributes to categorization of these entrepreneurs and their activities and helps in understanding the type of organizations they set up and how they scale them. The organizational strategies of these enterprises are understood through the lens of push and pull as dictated by continuum of necessity-opportunity entrepreneurship. To date, no specific research has been undertaken in the context of enterprise activities of country houses in the UK. This research is a first of its kind and its multi-layered understanding of the entrepreneurship allows an exploration of motivation, mindsets and actual realization of enterprise activities in constrained environments. The developed typology can be further developed to incorporate issues of family business, thus enabling a cyclic approach - one that can keep entrepreneurship alive for many generations to come.

Notes

1. This concept pertains to the business of English country houses, but it can also be used for any other business which is taken on or acquired with the explicit aim of preserving an existing building, asset, enterprise or location, retaining its essential character and purpose and maintaining and foregrounding its history.
2. The Historic Houses organisation offers several types of membership, including ‘next generation membership’ for people who are likely to inherit a country house and possibly become a custodian entrepreneur: ‘If you may find yourself running a historic house in the future, we are here to help you prepare to take up the reins’ (Historic Houses 2022b).
3. Nine houses are in the hands of owners other than families – Acton Court (the Rosehill Trust), Arundells (The Sir Edward Heath Charitable Foundation), Dr Jenner’s House, Museum and Garden (The Jenner Trust), Kelmscott Manor (The Society of Antiquaries of London), Lydiard House (Swindon Borough Council), Painswick Rococo Garden (Painswick Rococo Garden Trust), The Bishop’s Palace (The Palace Trust), The Merchant’s House (The Merchant’s House Trust) and Woodchester Mansion (the Stroud District Council owns Woodchester Mansion and the National Trust owns and manages its 23 acres of surrounding parkland separately as Woodchester Park). This diverges from the focus on family-owned custodian entrepreneurial activities. One country house had insufficient information online to make a meaningful contribution to this study – Sidbury Manor in Devon.
4. St Giles House in Dorset has been in the Ashley family since the sixteenth century. It is currently owned by Nicholas Ashley-Cooper, 12th Earl of Shaftesbury. Being the younger son, he did not anticipate inheriting it and had established a career in music and television in New York. Following the double tragedy of his father’s murder and his elder brother’s death from a heart attack at the age of 27 six weeks later, Ashley-Cooper moved back to England and took on the family estate, unexpectedly finding himself in the role of custodian in 2005. The ethos that is personal to him and which he has interwoven into his income-generation efforts is explicitly stated on the St Giles House website (St Giles House, 2022a).

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