

Epworth Old Rectory 2025

Our most recent year at Epworth Old Rectory has been marked by steady progress, renewed ambition and a continued commitment to welcoming a broad and inclusive range of visitors to both house and gardens.

Out of the Box – National Lottery Heritage Fund Project



Our central focus in 2025 has been our National Lottery Heritage Fund project, 'Out of the Box'. This transformative initiative has enabled us to begin refurbishing a disused outbuilding to create a dedicated collections store, while also attracting a significant number of new volunteers to assist with repackaging and caring for our historic objects.

As a result, 50% of our core collection of 1,859 objects has now been professionally repackaged, with work continuing into the coming year. In 2025, we were also delighted to acquire an additional John Wesley letter which had been sent to Duncan McAllum on 4th August 1779. Once conservation work is complete, all four letters will go on display together for the first time in the Parlour. We also continue to care for 3,501 items within the Methodist Women in Britain 'Women's Collection', all of which have now been fully accessioned onto our MODEs digital collections database. Increasingly, items from this collection are displayed within the Old Rectory, enabling us to extend exploration of the role of women within Methodism - a story already told through the portraits of Susanna Wesley and Caroline Wiseman, the latter of which we were pleased to recently renew the loan of.

Living History and Public Engagement

The c£200,000 Out of the Box grant has also enabled us to introduce living history interpretation and enhanced self-guided tours at the Rectory in 2025. New events included:

- Archaeology at the Rectory, where participants explored the Croft and uncovered traces of a prehistoric trackway alongside objects discarded by former residents.
- Games in the Garden, inviting visitors to enjoy historic outdoor games while picnicking or exploring the spaces.
- A varied programme of historic crafts during school holidays, including willow weaving, soap ball making, drop spinning and needlecraft, led by our newly established team of costumed volunteers.



Reaching New Audiences

Pilgrimage visits from Methodists around the world continue to be a core audience for the Old Rectory, and we were pleased to support visits by a number of large international groups this past year, including the United Methodist Church's annual Pilgrimage to Wesleyan sites in the UK. Alongside this, however, greater engagement with those who live more locally to the Old Rectory remains one of the primary areas of work for us, as does our role as a provider of lifelong learning in a non-formal setting.

A key achievement this year has been our work with new communities. We welcomed groups of women from local migrant communities on three occasions for historic craft sessions and shared conversations about faith, culture and tradition. Three groups of 12 women from Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Turkey and Iran joined us through North Lincolnshire Sanctuary in Scunthorpe, working alongside our costumed volunteers under the leadership of our Outreach, Learning and Engagement Manager, Lois Albans.



Lois also established a monthly dementia-friendly Reminiscence Café, funded through the NLHF project. These sessions proved highly successful, welcoming up to 12 participants per session — 102 engagements across the year. This work led to a further £850 grant from Epworth Town Council to develop a Memory Garden in 2026. Three raised beds have already been created with participants sharing meaningful poetry and stories and, assisted by our garden volunteers planted some flowers and herbs sown from seed; signage and seating will complete the space ahead of its formal launch in 2026.



New Cultural Heritage Projects

Two additional cultural heritage initiatives began in 2025:

- A partnership with The Way Community who seek to improve the holistic wellbeing of SEND families in Scunthorpe and Dancing Tiger Scrap Store, a community driven initiative based on creativity, sustainability and inclusivity. The project is exploring the life of Salim C. Wilson, a freed slave and an influential early twentieth-century Methodist preacher in the town.
- The development of a new pilgrimage trail linking Upper Wincobank Chapel, Epworth and Wilberforce House in Hull. This trail highlights the life of Olaudah Equiano, another former

slave who travelled to England and whose influence on John Wesley and William Wilberforce contributed to the abolitionist movement. John Wesley was reading his memoir on his deathbed and wrote to Wilberforce as a result, urging him to persevere in his campaign to abolish the slave trade, writing *“Go on, in the name of God, and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.”*

Both projects will continue to develop in 2026, with a focus on engaging pilgrims and care home communities.

Formal Education and Schools



Significant advances have been made in our formal education provision, supported by funding from Westminster College Oxford Trust. Although this funding concluded in December 2025, we have secured further support from the Lincolnshire District Advance Fund to sustain Lois’s work for a further three years (subject to match funding).

In 2025, our learning programme delivered:

- 1,447 learning interactions
- Nine distinct school workshops (on-site and in classrooms)
- Three week-long school learning events
- A dedicated home education programme and monthly SEND sessions
- 20 school assemblies reaching 625 children and teachers
- Three new loan boxes and four community discovery boxes

A particular highlight was our new three-day Wesley Week (19–21 May), welcoming three local schools visiting the Rectory for the first time. This three-day event was scheduled to teach young people about the Wesley family through immersive activities, and culminated on the anniversary of Charles’ evangelical conversion (21 May). Pupils encountered John, Charles, Susanna and Hetty Wesley through immersive activities:

- Meeting Susanna in the kitchen to explore prayer, scripture and Latin.

- Creating plant-based remedies in the Physick Garden inspired by John Wesley's Primitive Physick.
- Rewriting and performing hymns with Charles.
- Taking part in a Wesley-themed 'escape room' challenge with Hetty in Samuel's study.

Feedback from Wroot Travis CofE School described the experience as engaging, informative and inspiring across all age groups.

Creative Connections and Future Funding

We have also secured £8,750 from four additional funders — Methodist Women in Britain Social and Community Grant / Heritage Fund, the National Archives Engagement Fund, the Royal Society Places of Science Fund and Epworth Town Council — to deliver '*Creative Connections*', an intergenerational project involving migrant women, people living with dementia and home-educated young people with SEND.

This project will result in co-created exhibitions using the Methodist Women's Collection and other Wesley memorabilia. It will also support the development of new garden spaces, including a sensory garden, a learning garden focused on environmental themes and an enhanced Physick Garden exploring shared traditions of plant-based medicine.

Visitors, Gardens and Volunteers

Access improvements, enhanced interpretation and new interactive features — including 'talking portraits' — have contributed to a 12% increase in paying visitors to the Old Rectory. Our gardens have also seen major progress. A £3,500 grant from the Royal Society supported improvements to the John Wesley Physick Garden, delivered by a new team of seven garden volunteers working alongside our Strategic Manager during a year-long absence of our gardener.

In total, 44 active volunteers supported our work in 2025, alongside five part-time staff members. Their commitment and generosity have made this a pivotal year for the Old Rectory and the community we serve. We look ahead to the coming year with confidence, determined to continue developing inclusive, ambitious and inspiring work at Epworth Old Rectory.



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