



National  
Trust

Case Study

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# Croome Court

Sky café erected during  
refurbishment works

November 2015

Croome,  
Worcestershire



# Background

Croome comprises a mid-18th century Palladian mansion remodelled by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown from an earlier building with three interiors by Robert Adam. The landscape was also designed by Brown and both the house and park are Grade I listed. Croome was 'Capability' Brown's first major commission and there is perhaps no other estate where the mansion is so inextricably linked with its setting in the landscape.

Since its acquisition in 2006 only two floors of Croome Court have been open to the general public due to structural deterioration and asbestos in parts of the building which had made it unsafe. The services in the building such as heating and electricity were also not fit for purpose and required complete new systems to be installed.

The £6.3 million Croome Redefined project was thus born as a structural necessity and to enable an increase in the visitor offer at the property. The structural repairs and re-servicing would allow the whole of the mansion to be used for a wide range of visitor experiences and creative programmes and to house the Croome collection which would return once building work has been completed.

During these works a variety of visitor engagement concepts were incorporated to allow visitors and volunteers to have a unique and enjoyable experience and consequently to avoid a drop in visitor numbers. One of the ideas to create this unique experience was to provide visitor access to the scaffold erected as part of the works and incorporate a cafe where visitors could enjoy refreshments along with spectacular views.

# The project



**Above View of scaffolding and entrance hub**

Croome Redefined is a five-year project where the house is to undergo repair and reserving as well as involving creative practitioners of all disciplines to work and respond to the heritage of the site. This will ultimately improve the experience for the visitors and relaunch the property in a stimulating contemporary way.

The project started in 2013 and should be completed by December 2017. The majority of the building works were carried out in 2015 which features the sky café visitor engagement element of the project.

# Design

## Sky café

As part of the tender process the property asked prospective contractors to show how they would engage with visitors. The chosen contractor, Croft Building and Conservation Ltd, suggested creating a sky café as part of the scaffolding erected to carry out the works.

The scaffolding around the house was designed with public access in mind. The team worked very closely with the Operations Risk Business Partner to meet all Health & Safety considerations. Using Layher, a system scaffold, was a huge help as elements of the system are designed for public access so made it much easier for the design to meet current legislation.

The scaffold was erected by a team of five people in 10 weeks, in September 2014. 12,500 pieces of scaffold were used, weighing a total of 106,300kg. For five months the visitors had access to a scaffold platform and could tour approximately half of the perimeter of the building. However, the original design had incorporated the scaffold walkway to encompass the entire perimeter of the building, but this was revised to bring the project costs within budget.

Access to the sky café for the visitors was via 3.5 flights of scaffold stairs (79 steps) from just outside the hub (a portacabin manned by volunteers with info on the project) at the entrance. A tower room on the upper floor of the court was used as the catering operation. Once in the sky café, the access to the catering in the tower room was through a window converted to a door.



Above Aerial view of the sky café

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The café was designed to hold a maximum capacity of 120 people and seating for 60. Throughout peak visiting times the property had to ensure this capacity was not exceeded and tried to maintain the free-flow style of the café. Volunteers monitored numbers with headcounts and it seemed the capacity naturally did not exceed about 70-80 people at a time and thus capacity was not an issue. Free flow was a desirable element of the design criteria to have easy management and also provide an easily accessible offer (ie. no need to queue or pre-book).

Although the scaffold was erected in September 2014, the café did not open until March 2015 because it was not deemed financially viable to open through the winter. It opened six days a week until the scaffold came down at the end of September 2015.

At the café visitors could enjoy drinks and snacks and were provided with an exclusive panoramic view of the property, 12 metres above the ground.

A minimum of two volunteers were needed at all times on the scaffolding, although more were needed on busy days, ideally three. Many of the existing property volunteers offered more time and also helped out on the sky café.

## Duration

### Inception

Croome Redefined started in January 2013  
Sky café installed September 2014

### Completion

Croome Redefined 2017  
Sky café end September 2015

# Cost

The overall Croome Redefined project cost was £6.3 million.

## Funding

The project was partly funded by the National Trust with 44% being met from grants and other fundraising and 22% being contributed in volunteer time.

Right Scaffold stairs



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# Impact

## Sky café

Overall the sky café was a resounding success. By September 2015, 55,000 people had visited the café (equates to about 1,000 people per week).

Visitor numbers at Croome have been growing year on year and were 165,000 in 2014. In 2015, during building works, the target was 180,000 and this was exceeded with 197,000 people visiting during that year. The sky café, as one aspect of visitor engagement during the works, contributed to this increase in visitor numbers.

Headline visitor experience (VE) scores for the period dropped very slightly from the previous year but it is hard to attribute scores directly to one element of the visit. General visitor comments in the survey and comment cards were overwhelmingly positive about the scaffold access and sky café and the property team believe it was a hugely positive element of the overall VE at the property.

Due to the café's success, the property team will apply some of the principles which made it successful in future projects at the property, particularly in how we provide access and interpret different areas of the building such as the top two floors that opened in spring 2016 following repair works.

# Review

## Performance

### Sky café

Generally visitors were delighted by their discovery of the sky café. The wow factor they experienced was not limited to seeing the building works, but also from being able to see the garden and property with an amazing panoramic view. Visitors described the whole experience as very unique.

Moreover, the visitors enjoyed the sky café so much they did not want it to be removed and many asked if the scaffold could stay up even after the building works were complete or if it could be re-erected the next year! On the last weekend of opening many visitors said they were visiting just to see the sky café or to visit it one last time before it came down.

On the whole, visitors showed up at the café rain or shine, however the visitor numbers were a bit lower during rainy weather. The café had to close due to high winds only twice during opening, and that was only during the first couple of months.

A member of staff working at the sky café also mentioned thoroughly enjoying the experience. Although the work was harder than usual (making 5 – 10 trips each morning up all the house stairs to carry the café supplies each day) they also did not want the experience to end.

The contractors were also immensely helpful with the operation of the café. They assisted the staff members in carrying the load up to the café as well as answering any questions from curious visitors.



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## Maintenance

The scaffold had to be inspected every morning before opening by a qualified member of staff and inspected by the contractor every week, and after high winds. There were a few minor repairs required during its time, but nothing of any significance.

## Engagement

During the works other engagement features were also incorporated:

- A programme of ‘conservation in action’ engagement was implemented alongside the building works.
- A scaffold wrap on the front elevation of the house was erected and painted by local street artists.
- Creative programming (working with a range of different partners) was also a key part of the overall project. A range of different visitor experiences telling the stories of Croome were being tested throughout the project life with a view to making this sustainable as part of the future property operations.

Top left Sky café

Bottom left Entrance to catering on sky café

# Review

## Lessons learnt

Hold on to the vision and be clear on priorities when tough decisions are to be made on the allocation of funds for conservation and VE work. This project could easily have been stopped due to budget constraints but the priority on VE made the team strive to find a way to deliver it.

The property staff and volunteers need to be excited about the project to make it work, particularly when doing something out of the ordinary.

Most Health & Safety and practical issues can be resolved with good team work and involving the right people at each stage.

Challenge professional advisors and consultants if they are not offering a solution that fits your vision as there is often a solution if they are clear on what's important to you.

Celebrate the success and learn from it.

Take advantage of opportunities to provide 'once in a lifetime' access and experiences at the property.

Experiences that have a limited time period can build the interest and generate visits.

Above right **Inside the tower room for the catering operation of the sky café**



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## Recommendations

Look for opportunities to involve visitors and volunteers in conservation work in a fun and exciting way.

Budget to provide a visitor experience as part of conservation work, rather than seeing this as an optional extra.

Visitors love to eat and drink as part of their visit and if this can be combined with the experience it is a bonus.

Involve your contractors at the concept stage as they often have great ideas that you may not think of.

# Further information

## Contact

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## Further information

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### Case study information

This case study was compiled by Natasha Rozanski with assistance from Richard Higgs.

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Above Entrance to the sky café through the window