

## Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	Maintaining the viability of a historic estate – an owner's story
Name of project/group:	Langley Priory
Location:	East Midlands
Duration (if applicable):	

Short description of project:

Langley Priory is a Grade II\* listed house, dating from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century set in a 210 hectare estate. In 2004 Tim Wagstaff's parents handed over the management to him and his wife Teri-Lee. It was clear that if Langley Priory was to remain a family home, and be handed on to future generations in good repair, the estate itself would have to be put to work to generate the income necessary.



The front of Langley Priory (© Langley Priory).



The Wagstaffs in front of the Langley Priory (© Jason Senior).

Over the years that followed the couple set their minds to transforming Langley Priory into a self-supporting enterprise. Meeting with both frustration and success, they gained valuable experience to share both with planners and fellow owners of historic houses.

This case study does not describe a simple one-off project. It traces the development of a lifelong vocation to care for the historic home they had taken on. On the way they have had to discover what kinds of enterprise are suited to Langley Priory and how to engage their local planning authority in their endeavours to realise their aspirations.

What would have happened without this project/group?

Once they had taken on Langley Priory the Wagstaffs' lives were never going to be the same again. The house and park demanded full-time care, and they accepted that their previous careers, in London's financial sector, were over. Moreover they recognised that to maintain its viability, let alone feed the family, they would, as Teri-Lee put it, have 'no alternative but to become entrepreneurs'.

The alternative would have been to hand the house over to a completely different use, such as hotel or conference centre, or for the estate to fall gradually into disrepair, staved off by piecemeal sales of assets.

The Wagstaffs considered that succumbing to selling land would be the start of a 'slippery slope' putting the integrity of the estate at risk. Fragmentation would be too high a price to pay to protect the parts that remained.

How did the project achieve its objectives?

The Wagstaffs made numerous planning applications in the search for a viable future for Langley Priory's.

In 2002 permission was granted to convert outbuildings on the edge of the estate to office use. The 'Walnut Yard' is now a significant local employment site.



The Walnut Yard (© Historic England).

The first setback came shortly afterwards, when applying for planning permission to use the house as a wedding venue. After residents of three houses on the estate raised objections, the local planning authority granted only a year's temporary permission, with stipulations that there should be no more than 10 weddings, limited to two in a six-week period and with two clear weekends between each.

The Council had imposed the conditions with the aim of satisfying both the applicant and objectors. However for the Wagstaffs they caused the business to become unworkable. They had planned, once permission was granted, to build a marketing campaign to reach potential customers, who in turn could be planning their wedding day a year or more ahead. They felt testing the viability of a wedding business in such a short timescale would be next to impossible, and their plans for the future of Langley Priory and their own livelihoods were cast in doubt.

In the end four weddings were able to go ahead during the year of temporary permission. An application for permanent permission was then successful, but the restrictions remained. The conditions were finally lifted by another separate application in 2010.

As a result of subsequent planning applications the family have opened a spa in former derelict farm buildings, and erected a solar farm on the edge of the estate, plus a successful

storage business at the Walnut Yard. None of these was without challenges, but two factors have helped ensure positive outcomes. There is a deeper mutual understanding between the Wagstaffs and the Council's planners, leading to a stronger spirit of dialogue and partnership; and by learning from their encounters with the planning system, albeit often the hard way, they have found themselves becoming more 'planning-literate'.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges? Would anything be done differently?

For the Wagstaffs the first application to offer wedding ceremonies had been a difficult and sobering experience. It was clear that finding a viable future for Langley Priory would require building a relationship with the Council. So they invited the chief executive and senior planning managers to Langley Priory.

According to Teri-Lee Wagstaff the meeting 'changed everything'. The couple showed their visitors the heritage of Langley Priory and the integrity of the estate – something that, at the time, not many people had the opportunity to see. They explained the economics of maintaining the estate and investing in its future, and demonstrated the contribution the estate made to the local economy through employment at the house and Walnut Yard. However, perhaps the greatest benefit was simply that they and the Council's staff met and got to know each other.

The Wagstaffs no longer felt that they and the Council were cast in the role of adversaries in the planning process. Whilst they remain concerned that much can depend on the approach of the individual planning officer dealing with their case, they have enjoyed good working relationships with planning officers responsible for their recent cases. They are confident that their situation is understood at the highest level within the Council, and that together they can work in partnership to conserve the estate and release its economic value so that it can be enjoyed by future generations.

That is not to say they always get what they first ask for – far from it. However they find that the best solutions emerge when they and the Planning Officers work as a team, and planners have the confidence to give constructive advice in a shared search for solutions.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

As well as 'putting food on the table' and keeping the fabric of Langley Priory in good shape, the Wagstaffs have enabled Langley Priory to make a major contribution to the local economy; eight full- and part-time staff are employed in managing the house and grounds, including some who have been working with the family for over 20 years; the spa employs some 40 full- and part-time staff; and a further 20 jobs – many of them at graduate level – are provided by businesses at the Walnut Yard. The neighbouring storage facility also provides secure space for numerous local businesses such as gardeners, renewable energy companies, set designers, Ebay traders and an accountancy firm.

Furthermore, Langley Priory provides a wealth of charitable and community events, such as open-air theatre, parish meetings, charity dinners and group tours.

What is the future for the case study?

The Wagstaffs will continue search for new opportunities to secure the future of Langley Priory, in dialogue with the local authority. They have ambitions to expand the spa and build new floorspace at the Walnut Yard. It will call on their insights into the planning system, their innate entrepreneurship, their experience of what works at Langley Priory, their excellent location close to East Midlands Airport, and the sheer historic and natural beauty of the estate.

If you require an alternative accessible version of this document (for instance in audio, Braille or large print) please contact our Customer Services Department:  
Telephone: 0370 333 0607  
Fax: 01793 414926  
Textphone: 0800 015 0516  
E-mail: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk)