

Give them a hand

As the Coronation weekend celebrates the nation's volunteers, we meet some of those who donate their time to guide visitors round the UK's historic buildings

The Coronation weekend will not only mark the first time we've seen a British monarch crowned in 70 years, it will also seek to highlight the invaluable work carried out by Britain's volunteers. The additional Bank Holiday Monday on 8 May – added to calendars to mark the Coronation of King Charles III – has been dubbed 'The Big Help Out' as it will see the UK's largest ever one-day effort to encourage more people to lend a hand. Charities, including the Royal Voluntary Service, have organised the day to showcase the benefits of volunteering – something eight million in the UK participate in at least once a month.

Around 600,000 of those work in the highly popular area of heritage and most volunteers in this sector are over 50. In fact, the vast majority of the 44,000 working for the National Trust are actually over 60 with some in their 80s and 90s. Almost 70% of English Heritage's 3,500 helpers are over 50. Heritage volunteers study the history of a house or location in depth so they can guide visitors round while imparting a wealth of insight into all the drama of its past. From retired vets and office workers to ex-engineers and nurses, like taxi drivers learning 'The Knowledge', this brigade of volunteer 'professors' master a brief bursting with dates, context and anecdotes.

Sonia Heywood, 79, is one such volunteer. She's now an authority on Stonehenge having worked as a guide at the English Heritage site for the past 17 years. She handles the diverse theories proposed to her by visitors about who built Stonehenge – and how – with diplomatic care. Her task, she says, is to lay down the evidence that the early bluestones came from Wales and that the site was built and rebuilt over a thousand years beginning in 3,000 BC – then let people decide for themselves. But she assures visitors that the medieval account by Geoffrey of Monmouth ascribing the arrival of these megaliths to the wizard Merlin probably isn't true.

by
ANDREW
SOUTHAM

Before tourists arrive in the morning, Sonia helps to weed around each 25-30-ton stone by hand. 'Working in this ancient arena as the sun rises gives me a sense of connection to people who once worshipped here,' she says.

Sonia couldn't have imagined starting a new career as a volunteer neolithic expert when retiring at 62. She managed a social services department in Essex, then moved to Wiltshire after retirement, having raised two children. She became one of the site's first volunteers in 2005 – and has stayed ever since. Now every day is different in her role as education volunteer.

Her work includes escorting groups of adults or school classes of up to 30 children around the stones. She's developed extensive knowledge of the site thanks to great training, which ranges from voice projection to neolithic cookery (which is 'really rather good'). She's even graduated from a part-time archaeology degree at the University of Bristol. 'It's brilliant, simply brilliant,' she says. 'I love the outdoor life, meeting new visitors and making new friends.'

Every experience is a delight. 'My favourite question was being asked by a tourist from Japan, where sheep are a novelty, how I had managed to place the ewes so carefully around the stones,' she smiles. She resisted saying she'd spent all morning on the task.

Sonia works as much or as little as she wants, from one to several days a week using an online rota to check available slots. 'The social life has no comparison,' she says. 'There are bacon butty breaks, lots of treats like the end-of-year party and you're always learning new things.'

Volunteers like Sonia love the sense of purpose the role gives them. That's exactly what organisations like the National Trust and English Heritage strive to achieve for their helpers, whose support they depend on.

'Volunteers are at the heart of what we do,' says Mukith Miah, the national lead for volunteering at the trust, which thanks its helpers with social events including summer barbecues and mince pie parties as well as long-service awards. 'Their passion and

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Rock-solid knowledge
For Sonia Heywood, volunteering at Stonehenge has taught her lots of new things



illustration
MICHAEL DRIVER