

VOLUNTEERING

‘dedication always shine through.’ It’s the same at English Heritage. ‘It’s all about making the roles fun, valued, exciting and stimulating,’ adds its volunteering and participation advisor Anneka Coleman.

For Charles Webster, who volunteers at the National Trust’s Blickling Hall in Norfolk, his role is all of those things – and more. In 2012, Charles – known as Chuck – was so captivated by a visit to the hall, which is Anne Boleyn’s first home in the county, that he enquired the same day about volunteering. He was enthralled by the 4,600-acre estate where the land was first owned by King Harold before being bought by the Boleyn family in the early 1400s. ‘Blickling tapped me on the shoulders and said now it’s your turn,’ he says. He loves unearthing layers of history in the house, which was remodelled into a 1600s redbrick estate by the Hobart family. Anne’s father, Thomas Boleyn, took possession of Blickling in 1499 and Anne was born there soon after. Her birth date has remained a matter of debate: historians had placed it somewhere between 1500 and 1507, which means they didn’t confidently know her age when she married Henry VIII in 1533. But, Chuck says, ‘We’ve now proved using secondary sources, which most historians agree with, that Anne was born at Blickling around 1500-1501.’

At 77, he is an expert guide and respected authority on the house, although his life today contrasts starkly with a background growing up in Brooklyn, New York, to a mother who fled

Nazi Germany. His German émigré father died in the Second World War shortly before Chuck was born.

Chuck (left), who has three daughters and five grandchildren, joined the US navy at 17 and was stationed in Scotland before moving to Yorkshire while working for the US National Security Agency. On retiring and settling in Norfolk, he became a volunteer history expert aged 67 and has written numerous articles on the Boleyn family, which are now used to train other guides at the estate.

He loves his volunteering so much that each Wednesday

and Friday he drives the 72-mile round trip from his home in Great Yarmouth to Blickling. So what does his partner think of him disappearing for such long periods? ‘Well, Dianne is actually very happy that I have something I thoroughly enjoy to keep me busy – and out of the house for a bit,’ he laughs. ‘She’s a guide in Norwich Cathedral, which keeps her equally as busy.’

Chuck thrives on his role. ‘I love, with wonderful and dedicated, like-minded people, contributing to the preservation of Blickling and educating visitors from around the world,’ he says.

In fact, he says, it is this camaraderie, plus the research that has allowed him to explore his passion in Tudor history, which has ‘kept him alive’. You can’t

have a better recommendation than that. ✪

To read more case studies and apply to volunteer, see nationaltrust.org.uk/support-us/volunteer and english-heritage.org.uk/support-us/volunteer/ In Scotland, visit nts.org.uk/volunteering-jobs And in Wales, go to cadw.gov.wales/about-us/careers/volunteering



‘I love, with wonderful and dedicated, like-minded people, contributing to the preservation of the estate and educating visitors’

Discover more in a new six-part series, *Hidden Treasures of the National Trust*, which starts on BBC Two in mid-May



THE BIG HELP OUT

The Big Help Out is one of the official Coronation weekend events. Its aim is to encourage people to try volunteering and celebrate the work of existing helpers. You can find out about the activities available on the day in your local area by downloading the Big Help Out app. Opportunities available range from working at food banks and teaching computer skills to gardening, running scouts activities and helping with charity shop collections. See thebighelpout.org.uk.



BECOME A HERITAGE VOLUNTEER

You don’t need any prior knowledge or skills to become a heritage volunteer as the National Trust and English Heritage will help you with inductions and training. If you’re unsure about guiding, there are abundant volunteer roles in gardening, property administration, book cleaning, flower arranging, buggy driving and sewing – one is even a seal ranger at Blakeney National Nature Reserve, Norfolk, while others care for donkeys at Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight.

XXXXXX