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LEEDS CASTLE
KENT ENGLAND

RIBA 1 Interpretation and Exhibition Consultant Brief

November 2026



Project	Unlocking Leeds Castle
Client	Leeds Castle Foundation
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Tender Return Date	Monday 23rd November 2026 - 9am
Anticipated Project Start Date	January 2027

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1. Introduction and Context

This brief sets out the requirements for producing an outline interpretation strategy to guide future improvements in how we manage and share our heritage, informed by meaningful community consultation (to RIBA Work Stage 1).

2. Background

Leeds Castle is a 900-year-old estate with a Grade I listed moated castle and 990 acres of parkland, located near Maidstone. The estate has been owned by the Leeds Castle Charitable Foundation since 1974.

Leeds is a very unusual kind of castle; never used as a military site, the Castle has been used for 900 years as a glamorous retreat, a place of luxury, entertainment, relaxation and enchanting beauty. Leeds is also unusual for its long tradition of female ownership, with six medieval queens owning the Castle in their own right and, latterly, the last private owner, Lady Olive Baillie, an Anglo-American heiress.

The earliest part of Leeds Castle, the Gloriette on the second island in the moat, was originally created by Queen Eleanor of Castile, wife of King Edward I, in 1278. Partially rebuilt in Tudor times, then mainly destroyed in a fire in the 1600s, it was rebuilt into its current external form in 1822. Internally, the Gloriette was completely gutted and rebuilt in the late 1920s by Lady Baillie to create her own 'fairytale, medieval castle', but with all mod cons, like plumbing and heating.

There have been multiple versions of the main Castle on the first island in the moat, with the current external form dating from 1822. Again, Lady Baillie gutted and rebuilt the interior on several occasions during her ownership.

The Maidens Tower on the first island was built in 1522 during King Henry VIII's ownership and was completely refurbished into a hospitality venue 15 years ago.

Today, the estate is a popular visitor attraction with 400,000 annual visitors, a luxurious accommodation & hospitality venue, and a location for major, high-profile events, such as Christmas Lights at the Castle, Fireworks and Medieval Queens Joust.

The day visitor offer includes four gardens, three adventure playgrounds, a Bird of Prey Centre, an adventure golf course, a Land Train and the Black Swan Ferry, which traverses the Great Water, as well as the Castle itself.

3. Context

Leeds Castle is in the process of scoping a major project on the theme of 'Unlocking Leeds Castle'. Our project will reveal untold stories and share unseen collections, along with undertaking major stonework restorations to our Grade I listed, 900-yearold Castle. This project will unlock Leeds Castle to new audiences, opening our doors to our local community through new activities and ways of working and welcoming mid-week adult audiences to share our new and improved heritage spaces and programming.

This is a unique opportunity to draw together the interpretative narrative across the whole Castle estate and to unlock new spaces for telling heritage stories.

Currently, visitors encounter the heritage narrative only once they enter the Castle at the heart of the estate. With the aid of a multimedia guide, visitors are guided by the most recent owner of the Castle, Lady Baillie, and are invited to see the space as decorated by her in the early twentieth century. On Lady Baillie's death in 1979, the Leeds Castle Foundation was established to care for the Leeds Castle estate forever, for public benefit. A condition of that bequest is that the Castle continues to be enjoyed for hospitality and is not a museum. As such, Leeds Castle is unique in that the core heritage spaces are also used for functions, with museum-style interpretation deliberately minimal.

We are currently undertaking Audience Development research to better understand our existing audiences and identify opportunities to engage new audiences. This research will be shared on appointment.

4. Objectives

This project aims to:

- Ensure that our heritage story is embedded throughout the visitor journey, including pre-visit, arrival, welcome and entrance spaces, the journey across the estate to the Castle, Stable Courtyard, gardens and beyond.
- Provide visitors with the interpretative tools to enable them to understand the Castle's architectural development over 900 years so that on arrival at the Castle, they understand what they are walking into.
- Enable visitors to understand the heritage landscape and its development over 900 years.
- Provide additional spaces for museum display to enable lesser-known stories and collections to be shared and to draw repeat visitors through temporary exhibitions.
- Review under-utilised spaces in the Castle, such as the Baillie Room, to consider how more stories can be shared alongside the Lady Baillie narrative, whilst ensuring a compelling and cohesive visitor experience.
- Provide innovative solutions for hospitality-led spaces within the Castle, such as The Salon, to enliven them for day visitors when not in use for functions.
- Encourage mid-week adult visitors seeking a heritage experience.
- Provide heritage experiences for our existing family fun audiences.
- Establish a connection with our local audience through our social history stories.

We are seeking an outline interpretation strategy to steer improvements in sharing our heritage story across the Leeds Castle estate, including consultation to ensure that we do so in a meaningful way (to RIBA Work Stage 1).

5. Scope of Services

The scope of services for the Interpretation Strategy is outlined below. This should fully comply with current National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) guidelines: https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance/interpretation.

- Review existing interpretation methods and identify gaps and opportunities for development, including untold stories relating to the Leeds Castle estate.
- Work with the Castle Curatorial Team to understand the current collections and heritage assets available to the project.
- Review the visitor journey from arrival to the Castle, identifying key points for sharing heritage narratives and preparing visitors to understand the Castle and its development over 900 years.
- Review the spaces in the Stable Courtyard currently housing the Dog Collar Collection, and make recommendations for their future use as interpretative spaces.
- Review the Whole Estate Plan and advise on strategies to integrate wider estate narratives within the proposed interpretation plan.
- Advise on interpretative options for hospitality-led spaces within the Castle that support heritage storytelling for our day visitors.
- Benchmark and review relevant sectoral best practice at comparator sites, in collaboration with the Client and Project Teams.
- Review existing audience research and evaluation and undertake consultation with existing and potential visitors about storyline ideas and development (to consult with at least 100 people/local organisations).
- Identify clear interpretative and audience development aims and objectives for proposed interpretive displays.
- Produce an Interpretation Strategy that will:
    - ✦ Support Leeds Castle's audience development ambitions to engage with local communities and to grow a mid-week heritage audience.
    - ✦ Identify ways of ensuring that the interpretation is engaging, enjoyable, accessible and inclusive to a diverse audience, supporting inclusive design principles, ensuring the heritage story is accessible to a wide range of people.
    - ✦ Include an interpretation hierarchy listing outline storylines under themes/locations.
    - ✦ Provide indicative locations for each interpretative element.
    - ✦ Identify the target audiences for each location/theme and storyline, ensuring that the overall plan meets our audience development objectives and the interests of audiences and communities.
    - ✦ Identify key objects and images for each theme and location.
    - ✦ Include a brief description of interpretation tools and techniques appropriate for the target audiences.

  - Include concept design-level interpretation planning for the new interpretative spaces. This will feed into the design brief for the development stage of the project and give an initial sense of what the visitor experience will look and feel like.
  - Include display and interpretation guidelines covering display standards and a description of interpretation strategies to be deployed in the development stage.
  - Make recommendations for shaping interpretation through some coproduction and community-led activity which can be incorporated within later stages of the project.
- Provide a clear, practical report with recommendations for achieving the above and action plans to continue to evaluate and develop interpretation. All documents produced will be the intellectual property of Leeds Castle.
- Present the final Interpretation Strategy to the Client team.

6. Consultant Selection Criteria

We require demonstrable understanding and experience in:

- Interpretation planning in a relevant heritage organisation
- Previous NLHF-funded projects
- Working with curatorial and visitor experience teams
- Experience of consulting on interpretation with prospective audiences
- Setting realistic targets and methods of project evaluation
- Strong report-writing skills

7. Timetable

- The closing date for applications is 9:00 am on 23/11/2026
- The candidates will be shortlisted by the Director of Heritage and Engagement.
- Interviews will take place between 30/11/2026 and 04/12/2026
- The work should ideally begin by 04/01/2027
- The report should be presented to Leeds Castle by 31/03/2027

8. Budget

The total amount available is up to £20,000 (including VAT).

The tender costs should include travel and all other costs associated with the work. Suggested payment will be 25% upon appointment, 50% for the first draft and 25% on receiving the final report and presentation.

9. Proposal

Your proposal to undertake this project should include:

- Credentials for the consultant/company and all those who will have input into the work.
- At least two examples of similar projects undertaken.
- A methodology outlining how you propose to meet the requirements of the brief.
- A programme indicating how you would deliver the project and key dates for tasks.
- A costing breakdown.
- Details of two referees for whom you have done similar work.

Please email applications to Jo Wiltcher, Director of Heritage and Engagement, at JoWiltcher@leeds-castle.co.uk

10. Tender Evaluation Criteria

Tenders will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- Cost: 40%
- Methodology: 30%
- Relevant experience of working at similar heritage organisations: 30%

Leeds Castle reserves the right not to accept the lowest-priced tender.