

“A Sense of Presence”

The Significance of Spirituality in an English Heritage Regime

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Introduction

In 2012 archaeologists found the physical remains of Richard III—the last Plantagenet king of England, immortalized by Shakespeare—under a parking lot in Leicester (Buckley et al. 2013). The publicity surrounding this spectacular find, the identification of the bones, and their subsequent reburial in a purpose-built monument in Leicester Cathedral rekindled a rumor in Bury St Edmunds that the remains of Saint Edmund might be buried under some derelict tennis courts situated in the ruins of the town’s former Benedictine abbey (see figure 2.1). Shortly after a surge in interest in the rumor, several stakeholders set up the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership. Since 2016, the St Edmundsbury Heritage Partnership has worked toward the conservation and interpretation of the ruins of the St Edmundsbury Abbey and the public gardens in which they are situated.

The Heritage Partnership promotes and cares for this religious heritage in the context of a secular, national heritage legislation. This raises the question how this religious heritage is validated in a society in which different forms of religiosity coexist within an immanent frame of the secular (Taylor 2007). This coexistence of the sacred and the secular has been subject to considerable academic debate since religion regained its prominence in the public sphere of countries that were thought to be secularized. In this debate Talal Asad (2003) argued that secularism should be understood not as mere absence of religion, but as shaping religion in a secular frame. This led Craig Calhoun (2010: 35) to observe that secular orientations may shape

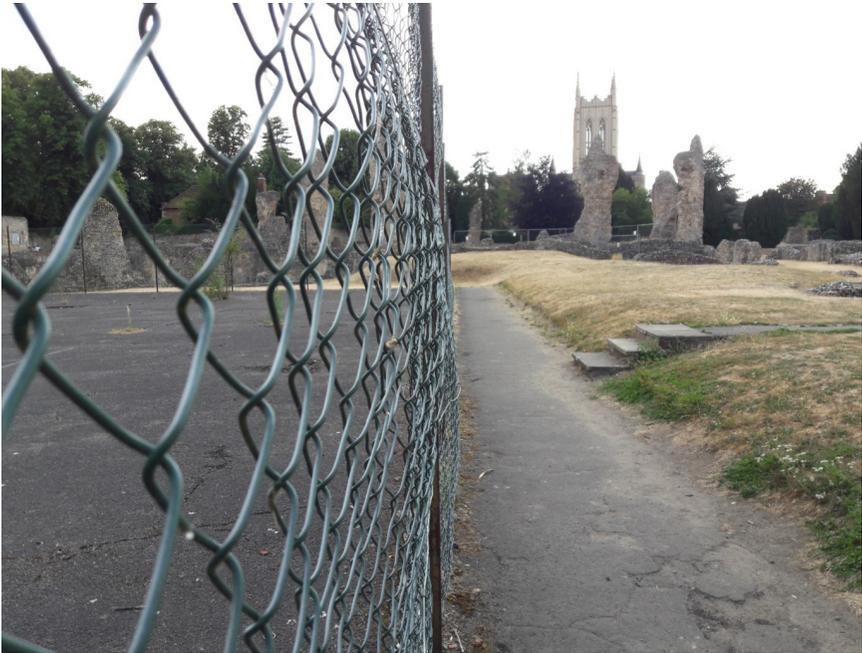


Figure 2.1. View of the ruins of the Abbey of St Edmund, with the fenced tennis courts on the left, 2018. © Ferdinand de Jong.

the sacred or transcendent. The subsequent debate around secularism has examined the different ways in which secularism shapes religion and religion shapes secularism (Mapril et al. 2017). Hence, in the immanent frame of secularity, “the question becomes whether or not belief—in transcendence in particular—is any longer what it once was” (Rectenwald and Almeida 2017: 5). For our case, this raises the following questions: When the remains of a monastic infrastructure are presented as cultural heritage, what significance is attributed to belief? In the current secular heritage regime in England, what forms of belief are considered appropriate and legitimate in an assessment of monastic heritage? These questions take on added relevance in a context in which the grounds of religiosity are shifting and established forms of belief are giving way to new forms of spirituality (Davie 1994; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Engelke 2012; Woodhead and Catto 2012).

With the global recognition of intangible cultural heritage, the range of values associated with heritage has significantly expanded.¹ Although the United Kingdom has not ratified the 2013 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, national heritage organizations such as English Heritage, Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund do acknowledge spirituality as a heritage value.² This raises

the question how religious referents associated with the Abbey of St Edmund—bones, monuments, spirituality—are valued in its heritage assessment. In the first instance, the process of “heritagization” of the Abbey of St Edmund focused on the material remains of its historic fabric. It entailed an assessment of the heritage value of the abbey ruins by heritage experts commissioned for this purpose. But in subsequent discussions about heritage values, the Heritage Partnership was quite willing to involve representatives of different forms of spirituality. Building on recent discussions of processes of authentication and authorization of heritage (Meyer and van de Port 2018), this chapter examines how the Heritage Partnership has authorized (and de-authorized) different aspects of religious heritage in a wider context of changing religiosities and an increasing acknowledgment of spirituality in England’s secular heritage regime.

The Heritage Partnership

Monastic sites have been the object of a monarchical suppression, known as the Suppression of the Monasteries, that haunts England’s religious imagination to this day. In 1534, King Henry VIII became the Supreme Head of the Church in England, thus separating England from papal authority. In a bid to appropriate the income of religious houses in England and Ireland, through a set of legal and administrative procedures adopted between 1536 and 1541, Henry VIII initiated the so-called Dissolution of the Monasteries. It took place in the political context of other attacks on the ecclesiastical institutions of Western Roman Catholicism, which had been under way for some time. In a complex fashion the Dissolution was part of the wider European Reformation, but with distinct national inflections and consequences.

Throughout the history of the Church of England, several movements have called for the restoration of pre-Reformation architecture, liturgy, and music. These movements have not made the Reformation undone, but they have rendered the Catholic legacy itself a project of restoration, resulting in a peculiar national heritage complex in which religion and heritage are entangled (cf. Isnart and Cerezales 2020). It need not surprise us, then, that the heritagization of religious sites results in conversations that recall and resonate with earlier conversations on religious pluralism, entangling the heritagization of monastic remains in ongoing processes of religious transformation, secularization, and re-sacralization. In order to assess how religion and heritage intersect in our case study, it is imperative to recognize that the relationship between religion and heritage is very much determined by the national historical context (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017).

The legend of Saint Edmund that is celebrated in Bury St Edmund also has distinct national resonance and revolves around his martyrdom. Born in 841 AD, Edmund succeeded to the throne of East Anglia in 856. A Christian from birth, he fought alongside King Alfred of Wessex against the pagan Viking invaders until 869, when his forces were defeated and Edmund was captured by the Vikings. They ordered him to renounce his faith and share power with the pagan Vikings, but the Christian king refused. According to a tenth-century account of the saint's life, the *Passio Sancti Eadmundii* (*The Passion of Saint Edmund*) by Abbo of Fleury (2018), Edmund was then bound to a tree, shot through by arrows, and beheaded. To prevent a Christian burial of Edmund's body, his killers threw his head in the undergrowth. Searching for his head, Edmund's followers were guided by the king's words as his head called, "Here, here, here." They found the head lying between the paws of a wolf, who protected it against other wild animals. Once they returned the head to the body, the head and body miraculously reunited.

Initially kept at the place of his martyrdom, Edmund's body was subsequently taken to Beodricesworth, a town later renamed Bury St Edmunds in his honor. In the tenth century, the secular monks who cared for the body were replaced by Benedictine monks, who built the Romanesque abbey church, one of the largest in the country. This church became a major medieval pilgrimage destination focused on Edmund's "incorrupt" body, until Henry VIII dissolved the abbey in 1539 and the townspeople wrought its destruction.³ This destruction did not mean the end of the Catholic faith in Bury St Edmund, and for a short spell Jesuits erected a school in the Abbot's Palace (Young 2016: 162), but while Catholics maintained a presence in a church in town, the monastic site nonetheless fell into ruin. An antiquarian interest in the ruins emerged in the eighteenth century. The process of heritagization of the ruins, resulting in a site with multiple heritage designations, took effect in the nineteenth century.⁴ Today several elements of the abbey church, such as the crypt, the nave, and the crossing, are still recognizable in the ruins, while much of the remaining demolition rubble now makes up a thick layer of unexplored archaeology.

Bury St Edmunds is a small market town that prospered due to the Benedictine abbey. Although a small settlement already existed when the Benedictine monastery was founded, the town was effectively designed, laid out, and tightly controlled by the abbey until the Dissolution, at which point it effectively broke free.⁵ Today, many of its inhabitants remember the town's historical relations with the abbey in terms of domination and exploitation of the townspeople by the wealthy abbots and monks. Nonetheless, after the discovery of the remains of King Richard III under a parking lot in Leicester in 2012, the rumor that the bones of St Edmund might be buried in the abbey ruins has reanimated the public imagination of the town's patron saint.

The rumor set the context for the contemporary title holders of the large abbey precinct to join forces in a partnership comprising St Edmundsbury Cathedral, St Edmundsbury Borough Council (later subsumed in West Suffolk Council), the Town Council, the University of East Anglia, and the Bury Society. The partnership enjoys the support of respected local architects, planners, historians, and archaeologists.⁶ As reported in the *East Anglian Daily Times*, the Heritage Partnership was formally established on 13 September 2016.⁷ The official mission of the partnership was formulated to “deepen public understanding of the life and times of St Edmund and the medieval abbey at Bury St Edmunds and to encourage people of all ages, beliefs and interests to experience the spiritual, historical and environmental significance of the abbey ruins and the abbey gardens in the modern world.”⁸

It is important to signal that the Heritage Partnership includes both the religious and temporal custodians of the abbey ruins situated in the former precinct: St Edmundsbury Cathedral and St Edmundsbury Borough Council (now part of West Suffolk Council). The latter is the sole owner of the vast abbey gardens, which the borough council had purchased in 1951 (Richard Hoggett Heritage 2018: 237–41). The abbey gardens are managed by the West Suffolk Council, and they constitute the principal attraction of Bury St Edmunds, competing annually for the Britain in Bloom award and attracting more than one million visitors per year. As owner of the gardens in which the ruins of the abbey are situated, the council has also been responsible for the management of the ruins, jointly with English Heritage, under whose guardianship the abbey ruins are placed.⁹ In the Heritage Partnership, the council acknowledges St Edmundsbury Cathedral as its counterpart even though it does not own the ruins. This Anglican cathedral, housed in what was once one of three parish churches in the precinct of the abbey, was originally dedicated to Saint James and has recently been dedicated to Saint Edmund as well, thereby assuming the legacy of the saint. Hence, the establishment of the Heritage Partnership signals a shift in the custodianship of the town’s heritage, whereby West Suffolk Council has agreed to share custodianship of the abbey ruins with the cathedral, and the cathedral has reclaimed the saint’s legacy. This latter move should be understood as part of a wider trend within the Church of England to reclaim its pre-Reformation legacies.

Within the Heritage Partnership, West Suffolk Council and St Edmundsbury Cathedral constitute the most important landowners, whose mission it is to formulate a joint vision for the management of the ruins and the wider precinct. At my first meeting with the cathedral’s canon pastor, who is chair of the Heritage Partnership, and the Heritage Partnership’s co-ordinator, a retired town planner and member of the Anglican Church, they made it very clear that the different authorities had different visions. They informed me that West Suffolk Borough Council perceives the ruins as a secular feature in a public park, which it manages in a nondenominational manner. In contrast,

the cathedral perceives the ruins as a sacred site and would like the religious significance of the site to be acknowledged. It was remarkable how outspoken the canon was about the site as a "sacred" place. The co-ordinator also held strong views on the significance of the site and conveyed the seniority of St Edmund's claims to the site by stating, "St Edmund was here before the Borough Council." The canon and the co-ordinator agreed that any dissonant views on the future interpretation of the site should not be addressed in the early stages of the collaboration and expected that any differences of opinion between the cathedral and the council could be resolved in due course. Questions about the secular or sacred significance of the Abbey of St Edmund area have indeed come up during the preparation of the *Heritage Assessment* and the *Conservation Plan* but have not been a cause of conflict.

The membership of the Heritage Partnership comprises representatives of different institutions. They are mainly male, middle-class, and over fifty years old, if not retired. In fact, the composition of the membership is interesting for what it tells us about the heritage sector in the United Kingdom. Although some of the members are professionals who represent their institutional employer, quite a few of the members are volunteers, including the co-ordinator, who spends a substantial amount of his time on the Heritage Partnership. Indeed, most of the volunteers are quite busy people. Although one of them joked to me that his volunteer work served "to stave off dementia," the volunteers take their volunteer jobs very seriously indeed and prepare accordingly for the regular meetings. Their membership in the Heritage Partnership is the result of a discreet selection process by which prospective members with promising capacities and contacts are invited to get involved. Most of the volunteers have had impressive careers as archaeologists, heritage architects, town planners, or financial advisers and have spent their working lives in London before retiring to Bury St Edmunds. Currently, about a third of the members of the Heritage Partnership are practicing Christians, while the rest wear their agnosticism on their sleeves. Several members of the Heritage Partnership meet each other in church, but their shared interest in the work of the Heritage Partnership is not so much in religion as in the archaeological, historical, and architectural heritage of the abbey. All members of the Heritage Partnership display a keen interest in civic matters; that the Heritage Partnership works so well is indeed indicative of the thriving civic culture of this English market town.

The Heritage Assessment and the Conservation Plan

At the launch of the Heritage Partnership, the council received a development grant of £40,000 from Historic England and the St Edmundsbury Borough Council to carry out heritage research and conservation planning.

In a formal tender process, briefs stipulated the aims and objectives for the Heritage Assessment and the Conservation Plan. These briefs clearly set out that the *Heritage Assessment* (HA) was to provide an inventory of the historical and archaeological information available on the site and to serve as “baseline” for the preparation of a *Conservation Management Plan* (CMP, later renamed *Conservation Plan*): “The HA should include sufficient historical information to understand the background and relevance of the project area and provide the context upon which its heritage values and their significance can be assessed in the CMP” (ibid., 4). Clearly, the two documents were meant to accomplish different tasks, but the *Conservation Plan* would be based on the *Heritage Assessment*. Through transparent selection procedures, a freelance archaeologist and heritage consultant was commissioned to write the *Heritage Assessment*, while the international heritage consultants firm Purcell was commissioned to produce the *Conservation Plan*. In this section, I examine how these two research documents were produced and what place they accorded to spiritual values.

As might be expected from a research report that provides an inventory of the historical and archaeological research conducted on the site, the *Heritage Assessment* does not include an assessment of its current religious significance, although it does at various points establish how historically the abbey precinct was divided into a “secular” part, including a court for temporal transactions, and a “sacred” part including the abbey church, cloister, and great churchyard. Through a series of presentations, the archaeologist in charge of the *Heritage Assessment*, in consultation with the members of the Heritage Partnership, established the principal lines of inquiry of the assessment (Richard Hoggett Heritage 2018). At a presentation of the *Heritage Assessment* to the members of the Heritage Partnership, the consultant took the members out on a walk through the precinct, leading them to a scale model of the abbey complex that stands near the ruins. Speaking, gesturing, and pointing at the model, he reiterated the distinction between the sacred and secular realms in the historical abbey. The diminutive scale of the model facilitated a spatial understanding of the ruins scattered and strewn across the precinct.

Although this was not part of the remit of the *Heritage Assessment*, during one of its progress meetings the chairman of the committee had raised the subject of the site’s significance. As this was the first occasion for the members of the Heritage Partnership to speak up and articulate their points of view on what for many of them constitutes the heart of the town, the members of the Heritage Partnership responded immediately, and their views differed markedly. One person explicitly addressed the sacredness of the site, when she confessed that it hurt her to see kids kicking around footballs in the remains of the crypt. While most members empathized with her ven-

eration of the sacred site, the idea that kids should be forbidden to play in the ruins—in spite of the damage to the ruins they could cause—was one that nobody was prepared to articulate. That the site was sacred went undisputed—although some members of the Heritage Partnership might have different views on that—but that its protection might require a policy to set it apart and make it inaccessible was a sacrifice most members of the Heritage Partnership seemed not prepared to make. Some people remembered that the ruins had once been fenced off, and they regretted that policy. Clearly, the debate veered toward the greater good of public accessibility, a value most members seemed to hold above the sacred significance the site might have for those for whom its sacredness required protection.

The results of this debate were not related in the *Heritage Assessment*, but the subject was raised again in several meetings held in the preparation of the *Conservation Plan*, for which the brief stated the following rationality:

This CMP is being commissioned to demonstrate the heritage value and significance of the project area and to develop a strategic approach to the sustainable conservation management of the heritage assets it contains. It should provide objective background material to inform conservation, management and the assessment of any future proposals for change to the historic assets. (Consultancy Brief for a Conservation Management Plan, 2)

As the *Conservation Plan* and the *Heritage Assessment* were commissioned at the same time, the Purcell heritage consultant who had been contracted to draft the *Conservation Management Plan* had attended most of the progress meetings on the *Heritage Assessment* and was well prepared to start the work on the *Conservation Plan* once the assessment was completed. As stipulated in the brief, she drew on the archaeological and historical information presented in the *Heritage Assessment* but also conducted considerable research of her own, consulting numerous documents, property owners, and stakeholders. To determine the heritage significance of the site, the consultant worked within the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England guidelines to establish the historical, communal, aesthetic, and evidential value of each subarea of the site (Wood 2018: 59–76, 94–128). The consultant received ample assistance from members of the Heritage Partnership, paid staff of the St Edmundsbury Borough Council, and other institutions on site.¹⁰

In its introduction, the *Conservation Plan* acknowledges that the abbey of St Edmund “is valued locally and regionally as a green space and a spiritual place” (Wood 2018: 8). In its criteria for the assessment of heritage significance, it acknowledges the “spiritual value” as a part of the “communal value” of the heritage asset (Wood 2018: 60). The “Summary Statement of Significance” states:

The area as a whole encompasses spaces that are valued by the community as a place of leisure, a place for community events and a place for quiet and reflection. The spiritual value extends beyond that associated with the places of worship to encompass the wider spiritual value of the green, open space of the Abbey Gardens as a place of inward renewal. The Abbey ruins also remain a place of spiritual value for some Christians whilst the site is also valued as part of other spiritual beliefs. (Wood 2018: 61)

The report thus acknowledges that spiritual value may exist in places not associated with the abbey church, a sacred place for Christians. It also acknowledges that the place may have spiritual value for non-Christians. Interestingly, while the Heritage Assessment conceptualized the space of the abbey precinct as composed of sacred and secular components, presenting the southern section comprising the abbey church and great churchyard as “sacred” while designating the northern section for temporal transactions as “secular,” the *Conservation Plan* takes a very different approach by not employing the terms “sacred” or “secular,” but designating relatively diffuse spaces as “spiritual.” In her assessment of the spiritual significance of the site, the heritage consultant had followed the recent Historic England guidelines but had also been informed by a meeting to discuss the site’s spirituality that had been convened by the chair of the Heritage Partnership.¹¹

The Spiritual Significance Consultation

To provide the heritage consultant with a view on the spiritual significance of the site, the chairman and the co-ordinator of the Heritage Partnership convened a meeting to which they invited ten people for whom the site holds spiritual significance. As the meeting minutes state, the participants included “people of faith, multi-faith and no faith, people from different religious denominations and spiritual traditions and people with parallel interests such as *feng shui*, *tai chi*, earth energies and geomancy.”¹² All participants were white, English, and most over fifty years old. There was equal distribution in terms of gender. The meeting enabled people to speak about their privately held views on the site’s spiritual significance. As observer I was allowed to attend and record the meeting, which was a privilege, for the widely held view that religious beliefs should be held private is routinely observed with much discretion in the United Kingdom. The discussion was organized around a questionnaire previously circulated by email, including questions such as the following: Why do people value the abbey site? What is the religious significance of the abbey site today? What is the spiritual significance of the abbey site today? Are people aware of the religious history and layout of the abbey site? Does that affect their sense of its spiritual sig-

nificance? The resulting conversation was structured and did not veer off into discussions on the meaning of spirituality. The participants were free in the expression of their convictions, but it is important to acknowledge that the meeting had an instrumental purpose, and the exchange of views that took place was carefully chaired so that alternative views could be articulated without inhibition. The meeting resulted in minutes that the heritage consultant could translate in statements on spiritual significance in the *Conservation Plan*.

It is interesting that the coordination of this spiritual significance consultation was undertaken by the Heritage Partnership. As one of its constituent members, the cathedral thus helped create the conditions for a conversation among people with spiritual interests in the ruins. This confirms the view that the Church of England assumes the authority to lead conversations in matters of spirituality and extends this authority to debates about religious heritage (cf. Lehmann 2013). The institutional framing of this debate was aimed at consultations, but not entirely without interests. For one, it turned out that all participants were aware of the challenges of preservation. One speaker with an important function in the Heritage Partnership pointed out, "The concept of significance is almost *hallowed* by the heritage sector as the thing that everything, all of their work, revolves around" [my emphasis]. Framing the conversation on significance as contributing to the sacralization of heritage, the speaker went on to note that the Quebec Declaration of ICOMOS spoke about the "spirit of place" and that this notion had unfortunately been removed from any guidelines produced by Historic England and the National Planning and Policy Framework. Regretting the loss of this acknowledgment of the spirituality of place, he hoped to get this notion back on the agenda. This confirms that some of the participants were well versed in the discourse of heritage management and willing to engage with its terminology in critical ways. This also appeared from an intervention by the tourism manager of the council, who argued that the site—whatever one wished to do with it—"should not become an archive of religion, it should be a continuation." Another heritage specialist concurred by referencing John Berger's influential *Ways of Seeing* (1973), which accompanied the popular eponymous BBC series, stating that without understanding of the historical context, one would slide into becoming a mere specialist of relics. Rather than preserve the site for antiquarian purposes, these speakers proposed to maintain it as a site of living religion. Clearly, these participants were familiar with the risks of the reification of religion into an object of antiquarian interest: they spoke out in favor of new and renewed forms of spirituality.

In a recent contribution on debates on contemporary religion, Huss (2014) has argued that spirituality has displaced the modern opposition of the sacred and the secular with an opposition of spirituality to the reli-

gious. This position is widely popularized in the phrase “spiritual, but not religious,” a phrase that was explicitly used by some of the participants in the spiritual significance group meeting. Huss’s observation was largely corroborated within the context of this discussion, but his opposition between religion and spirituality acquired quite specific semantic connotations. The opposition seemed to surface in some discussions but ignored in others, suggesting that context-specific code switching was taking place. One question discussed at the meeting was “Are people aware of the religious history and layout of the abbey site and does that affect their sense of spiritual significance?” One Catholic attendant reminded everyone that this was the site of a Benedictine abbey and—referencing the text of the *Heritage Assessment*—that monasticism was not very well understood these days. She held the site sacred because of the many prayers said there—which, indeed, constitutes a conventional understanding of the sacredness of a site. Interestingly, by referencing both the history of monasticism and the prayers said in this monastic site, this speaker made both a secular and a religious argument to frame the site as essentially monastic. In response to this, and echoing an argument made earlier, someone else argued that monasticism should not be preserved as a relic. In another muted reference to the *Heritage Assessment* that had acknowledged the site’s pre-Christian history, it was suggested that the site should be understood as layered; had this place not been a Pagan site before it was Christian?¹³ This turn of phrase enabled another participant to compare the site to Avebury and Glastonbury and to speak of earth and dragon energies. Concluding that this was once a “Pagan place of worship,” this speaker took the conversation about the significance of the Benedictine abbey to an argument about energy lines that he believed had been in existence since prehistoric times.

In these discussions “the sacred” and “the spiritual” were often conflated and used without distinction. As all participants seemed well attuned to their different connotations, their employment supported subtle distinctions between utterances without causing confusion. The extent to which the denotations and connotations of different terms were stretched and appropriated without any offense given or taken was striking evidence of a shared sense of idiom in spite of obvious religious differences among the participants. The terms “sacred” and “spiritual” could be conflated as long as they served to articulate a common sense of spirituality. But this shared sense of spirituality was fragile. When the discussion focused on the question whether the site is “sacred” and someone answered that question in the affirmative, this immediately provoked a response from a speaker who confessed to being “uneasy with the term ‘sacred,’” preferring the term “magnetism” instead. Others chimed in to claim that the site afforded health and well-being, even harmony. This suggests that in this meeting the concept of “spirituality” was

open-ended and served the purpose of creating a coherent majority because the term covered a wide semantic field *and* could be mobilized against "the sacred"—the concept used to claim ownership of the site by established religions. Interestingly, the Church of England, represented at the meeting by the chair and the coordinator, did not oppose the preference of the majority for the concept of spirituality.

The current spiritual significance of religious heritage is perhaps less opposed to materiality than spirituality historically was (cf. Huss 2014, 2018), but also less prescriptively mediated by the materiality of places conventionally associated with the sacred—such as the crypt, the nave, or the crossing, features of the abbey church still recognizable in the ruins and highlighted in discourses on the site's sacredness. But even when such conventional forms of materiality mediate different forms of spirituality, during the meeting the site was clearly appropriated for spiritual and sacred uses in opposition to "the secular." One multi-faith participant considered the placement of the tennis courts so close to the shrine of St Edmund—which has been defunct for almost five hundred years—"an incredible affront to any sense of spirituality." Defining the shrine as pivotal to the "spirituality" of the site, this speaker mobilized the term "spirituality" in opposition to the secular. Indeed, although Huss (2014: 50) argues that "in contemporary definitions and uses of the term, the dichotomy between spirituality and corporality/materiality is much less distinct," the meeting on spiritual significance suggested that materiality still matters a great deal in the spiritual experience of the ruins today. In fact, no matter how divergent or convergent current persuasions in relation to spirituality in other regards, different attitudes toward the material seemed to (re)produce ancient bones of contention. Quite deliberately speaking as the devil's advocate, one speaker claimed that as houses in the old town are built with stones taken from the rubble of the abbey, some citizens of Bury St Edmunds happily enjoy the benefits of the Dissolution to this day. Throughout my fieldwork, I had observed that the legacy of the Dissolution indeed produces in the inhabitants of Bury an embodied historical sensation, rather than a detached historical understanding. Affects vis-à-vis the building blocks of one's house convey one's position with regard to the Dissolution, even today. When addressing the occasional and relatively minor vandalism on the site of the abbey church, one speaker put it like this: "It seems like a continuous and ongoing violation of a sacred place."¹⁴ Such feelings toward the enduring material legacy of the Dissolution are not so easily effaced by the recent trend toward spirituality and signal that ancient affects for the sacred can be compatible with relatively new forms of spirituality—and even support new sensibilities (see De Jong 2023).

Participants in the meeting felt that a spiritual counterpart to a secular experience of the site was needed and that heritage interpretation was the

way to achieve this. If the people attending the meeting credited the site with a rather diffuse spirituality, they were unexpectedly united on how the site should be interpreted. The minutes stated:

There was general agreement that heritage interpretation and education programmes should all be multi-cultural and appeal to schools and young people as well as to growing families, adults and the elderly. They should make use of a variety of conventional and technological presentation media and offer a focal point for the heritage story of the town. They should provide a spiritual counterpart to various mass events in the Abbey Gardens such as popular concerts and firework displays. There was general unease about the retention of caged birds in the aviary although it was recognised that they are part of the attraction to children.¹⁵

This quotation conveys how the discussion on spirituality fed into the information gathered for and communicated to the author of the *Conservation Plan*. Indeed, the secular heritage regime enabled discussions about religiosity and spirituality but in its official documentation suppressed the divergence of views in relation to faith and spirituality. During the spirituality meeting, the chairman intervened and moved the discussion along whenever it invoked the Dissolution. Conflicts of interpretation of the sacred and the spiritual were successfully circumvented, and consensus revolved around a shared belief in middle-class values. Speaking about the general public in the abbey ruins, someone said, “They don’t understand, they just do not understand that area, and I think that is where interpretation and information would be crucial to respect.” Time and again, the irreverential behavior of visitors to the abbey ruins was attributed to a “lack of understanding,” and “interpretation” and “information” were presented as the panacea.¹⁶ One cannot escape the impression that the shared stance on education of the public simultaneously concealed conflicting views on the sacred and spiritual. Indeed, such conflicting views were disavowed in the diplomatic formulas on the “spiritual significance” of the site in the *Conservation Plan*. The heritagization of the site and the public discussions it afforded on the sacred and the spiritual seemed to overcome such conflicting views by creating a shared focus on an ambient sense of spirituality and on heritage interpretation as an instrument to realize the conditions of its experience.

“A Sense of Presence”

In the spirituality meeting, we observed a constant slippage between the terms “sacred” and “spirituality,” which, according to Huss (2014), are incompatible concepts. Nonetheless, various speakers derived from the generic concept of spirituality the authority to speak and used the concept

to rank places or practices. The meeting on spirituality was instrumental in establishing the "significance" of spirituality and attributed value to certain forms of spirituality while disavowing others. Remarkably, during the entire meeting St Edmund was mentioned only twice. At the start, a prominent member of the Heritage Partnership said he experienced "a sense of presence of Edmund in the abbey." And toward the end of the meeting another speaker suggested, "It's easy to dismiss the public frenzy about the location of Edmund's remains as frenzy newspapers going mad and all the rest of it," but he believed that through their interest in Edmund's remains the public might express a *spiritual* interest. The speaker was aware that others might not recognize the interest in "the bones" as a form of spirituality worthy of attention, and indeed, the discussion moved on to other matters.

It is not surprising that Edmund's remains were not considered as an item at the spirituality meeting. Ever since the Heritage Partnership was set up, it treated the rumor on Edmund's remains with caution—acknowledging the uncertainty surrounding their location under the tennis courts. One reason for this was that most members of the Heritage Partnership do not believe in rumors based on scanty evidence, and the rumor of the bones certainly lacked robust evidence. Moreover, the members of the Heritage Partnership who are practicing Anglicans have little affinity with relics. Since the Dissolution, the status of miracles, saints, and their relics has been an issue of complex sensibilities in the Anglican Church, although the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement, which aimed to restore Catholic liturgy within the Anglican Church, succeeded in making the worship of saints acceptable again (Cunningham 2005: 96–101). The interest in the remains of St Edmund cannot be ignored by the Heritage Partnership, as the rumor causes the public interest in the ruins to thrive, and an attempt to dismiss the rumor would not be received positively (see De Jong 2023).

Since the Dissolution, the whereabouts of the body of St Edmund have been an enigma, replicating the original legend of the "loss" of his head in an enduring absence and promise of his return. After the Reformation, the great basilica Saint-Sernin in Toulouse claimed to possess the relics after their successful theft from the Abbey of St Edmund in 1216, a claim disputed by several English historians. In response to the actions of a Catholic priest in Bury, the bones were allegedly returned to the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, but on close inspection they turned out to be inauthentic (Young 2018: 132–39). In the subsequent search for Edmund's remains, adepts have had recourse to mediums, ghosts, and psychic archaeology, a whole range of spiritual methods to locate the bones in the ruins or elsewhere in the county (Young 2014). Since 2012, rumors have circulated that the remains of St Edmund may be found under the tennis courts in the abbey ruins. The local press has a keen interest in the matter and always as-

sociates the work of the Heritage Partnership with the possibility of archaeological excavations of the bones.

Because the rumor generated popular interest in the archaeology of the abbey, it contributed to the making of the Heritage Partnership. From its inception, Francis Young was a member of the Heritage Partnership. Young is a historian with an interest in Counter-Reformation culture and popular religion in England. Born in Bury St Edmunds and educated at the University of Cambridge, Young is a prolific author. He has published more than ten books, many of them on Catholicism and more specifically on St Edmund. Without formal university position, he publishes his works with an eye toward the popular market. But it is not just with commercial motivation that he published several books on St Edmund; as an Anglican with leanings toward Catholicism, he is driven by devotion. His *Edmund: In Search of England's Lost King* (2018) makes the case that St Edmund was England's first patron saint. Local pressure groups have made this argument for some time, and it has some credibility. As an excellent public speaker, Young has been invited to speak on the subject on numerous occasions. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that his thesis on St Edmund's status as first English patron saint will be validated by his peers.

Young's 2018 book also suggests that the bones can be found under the tennis courts, a claim supported by an oral tradition that alleged a secret burial of the saint's body in an iron chest. The evidence is slight, as the source of the oral tradition appeared to suffer from amnesia and did not recollect the story when pressed to recall it again in 1710 by a monk of St Edmund's who reported that the man's memory was "quite lost and gone" (the monk Hugh Frankland, quoted in Young 2018: 146). But avid readers of Young's work have found in this a firm indication that an "iron chest" containing the saint's body might indeed have been buried in the monks' cemetery. As a hypothesis, Young argues, it requires testing. While the Heritage Partnership has always entertained the possibility of noninvasive archaeology, the leaders of the local dowsing group Dowsing Anglia claim they have already tested the hypothesis and established the evidence. On 6 May 2018, the *East Anglian Daily Press* published an online article in which it reported on an International Dowsing Day in the abbey gardens. The newspaper presented the group's claim that St Edmund's remains are located under the tennis courts and that "they have known this for more than 20 years." The newspaper goes on to quote Steve Dawson, cofounder of the group, as stating, "We're confident he's there."¹⁷

To find out more about the dowsing group, I contacted Steve Dawson. He and his wife, Ann Dawson, agreed to meet me at the abbey gardens. We first talked extensively about their practices and beliefs. It turned out that Steve Dawson had learned dowsing while working for the British army in

Yemen, from the "Arabs," who he claimed dowse with their feet. "Dowsing is a technology that enables us to feel energies to which we were once more sensitive," Dawson explained, "but today we need technological aids such as rods."¹⁸ I learned that there are different energy lines, which can be classified in different categories. Steve and Ann used various idioms to speak about the energy lines. Sometimes they anthropomorphized the energy lines, or they presented them in mechanical terms such as "cables" or "infrastructure"; at other times they referred to them in spiritual terms. Whichever way the lines were denoted, they were understood to be material, to have volume, to grow and shrink, to connect and be entangled in nodes, and to extend across the world. They respond to human engagement, and whenever one sings on a line, it expands. Moreover, the lines can be mapped, and much of the work of the dowsing group seemed to consist of mapping these energy lines. Where lines meet at nodes, good energy can be tapped. Incidentally, at the site of the Benedictine monastery in Bury St Edmunds, the Michael and Mary lines that run through Britain meet and "kiss" just a few meters from the site where St Edmund's shrine used to be. The Dawsons presented a theory that explained why the crossing of the lines has historically determined the site of the Benedictine abbey.

After I had been introduced to the basics of dowsing, the Dawsons demonstrated how they dowsed for Edmund. In fact, they brought with them a laminated A4 sheet on which the letter *E* was printed, which they were going to place at the very location of Edmund's remains (see figure 2.2). Unfortunately, that day the park rangers did not show up, and we could not get the key to unlock the fence that surrounds the tennis courts. This turned out not to be as much of a problem as I thought it would be. Steve explained that one could also "dowse by transit." Standing at the fence, his rods pointed in the direction of the location they had previously identified as the place where Edmund's bones rest. He then walked around the corner and pointed his rods in the same direction, but from another angle. I was told that the lines crossed at the resting place of Edmund's bones.¹⁹

Dowsing is about the identification of lines and the tracing of their trajectories; it is an exercise in which spiritual energies can be mapped on the land. This exercise is not merely imaginative but communicative, and the communication of shared understandings is facilitated by the plotting of lines on maps. The Dawsons keep a Dropbox with numerous files that document the results of their dowsing exercises. But although their work on the abbey site was recognized in the news item in the *East Anglian Daily Times*, they were not invited to attend the spirituality meeting. Although one of the invited attendants of the spiritual significance meeting was a dowser himself, he did not mention his dowsing practice. Likewise, although the *Conservation Plan* acknowledges the "kiss" of the Michael and Mary lines, the report

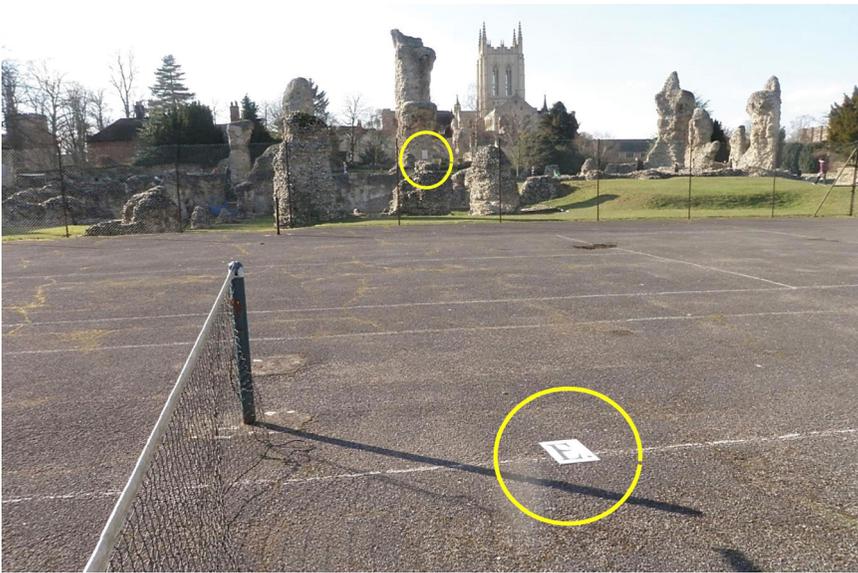


Figure 2.2. Tennis courts with the letter *E* for “Edmund” in the public gardens of Bury St Edmund. The second circle indicates the site of St Edmund’s former shrine, 2018. © Steve Dawson.

does not mention dowsing as a form of spirituality. This suggests that when it comes to the valuation of spirituality, the spiritualities that privilege forms of transcendence compatible with the secular heritage regime seemed to be recognized over, and to the detriment of, forms of spirituality that point to the existence of the bones. In the absence of archaeological evidence, spiritualities that claim to identify the location of the bones are not as likely to be recognized in the valuation process.

Of course, none of the forms of spirituality recognized in the process of establishing “spiritual” value was vetted for material evidence. This raises the question why the enigma of St Edmund’s remains, which generates so much interest in the town and is relevant to any archaeological inventory, should not be recognized. The local newspaper acknowledged the claim of the local dowsers as a form of knowledge about the location of the bones. Several members of the Heritage Partnership were as excited about the prospect of finding the bones as any other citizen in Bury, but many were skeptical of claims to the location of the bones and on the basis of secular calculations of probability did not expect the rumor of the bones to be confirmed. Such doubt did not affect the dowsers. The Dawsons told me that they had attended a lecture by Philippa Langley at Leicester University, the woman they claimed had been the first person to have “sensed” the presence of Rich-

ard III under the parking lot. When the Dawsons returned from Leicester, they decided that "we can do better than that." Of course, the competitive nature of their form of spirituality compromises their claim, as it can be discounted if the material evidence is found to be lacking. The energy that Edmund's remains radiate is too immaterial; it references a materiality that can be falsified when archaeological research finds no traces of the saint. Moreover, it presents a PR risk to the Heritage Partnership. It is most likely that the Heritage Partnership has calculated that rumors on the remains should be excluded from the *Conservation Plan* so as not to compromise its authority—and that of the Heritage Partnership.

Conclusion

In her article on relics in the post-Reformation era, Walsham (2010) shows that in this period—in spite of opposition to the localization and materialization of the holy by Reformation scholars—many relics and skeletons were reinterred in cemeteries in the hope of their resurrection. The "charisma" attributed to the relics that were preserved was spiritual and emotional, rather than material and miraculous. Subsequently subjected to secularization, relics migrated into the category of the historic artifact. Having lost their sacramental function, relics were increasingly seen and treated as souvenirs. But even though the sacrament and the souvenir seemed mutually exclusive categories, there were frequent slippages in the ways these categories were applied to the objects themselves. Likewise, the abbey ruins and the remains of St Edmund seem subject to shifting categorizations today. But irrespective of an acknowledgment of new forms of spirituality, the distaste for sacred immanence rooted in the Reformation is remembered in today's heritage regime that renders St Edmund as a spiritual and immaterial presence. Post-Reformation and post-secular heritage sensibilities seem to agree on the materiality of relics and are apprehensive regarding their spirituality.

The remains of Edmund's body—even if not venerated as relics—are on everyone's mind in today's Bury St Edmunds. However, because the presence of the bones is merely speculative and subject to archaeological verification, the spiritual significance of this sacred absence cannot be recognized and accorded a designated heritage "value." Even as a promise, the remains of Edmund cannot be accommodated in the current heritage regime that privileges an ambient spirituality over uncertified material remains. Likewise, ghost tours organized by the town guides that visit the charnel house in the great churchyard are not considered in the *Conservation Plan*. Only certain forms of spirituality are recognized and "valued," not the specters of the dark histories that haunt the ruins of the abbey. The heritage regime

dismisses the haunting specters of a history of violence in favor of a spirituality of repair focused on “peace” and “quiet.” Spirituality and heritage are different projects that attribute their own values to the abbey ruins, but this chapter demonstrates that heritage and spiritual projects do share some of these values.

That said, the current conceptualization of the spiritual in the *Conservation Plan* produced for the Heritage Partnership is as open as it could be given the demands and expectations placed on such documents for the identification and authorization of heritage “value.” By and large in line with Huss’s assertion that the concept of the sacred is giving way to the spiritual, the *Conservation Plan* recognizes the spiritual significance of the site. The document acknowledges that “the spiritual value extends beyond that associated with the places of worship” and that it affords different forms of “inward renewal.” The *Conservation Plan* thereby accepts a definition of “the spiritual” alongside the sacred, transforming the site of the former Benedictine abbey into a more inclusive space for spiritual renewal. Indeed, the spirituality associated with the abbey might well be conceived as the contemporary “intangible” heritage of the ruins as the heritage regime is conceived by all as a way of protecting the spirituality of the site. In this instance, heritage regime and believers in spiritual renewal really sing from the same hymn sheet.

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NOTES

This chapter is based on three years of research starting in September 2016 and a stint of six months of fieldwork in Bury St Edmunds in 2018. The research was conducted in the context of the HERILIGION: The Heritagization of Religion and the Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe project funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area, grant # 5087–00505A). Throughout my research I have enjoyed the hospitality and generosity of the Heritage Partnership, which has allowed me to conduct research on the process of its formation and operations. I have been able to attend meetings, record the proceedings, and access the meeting minutes and various other documents. Moreover, all members have allowed me to interview them. I am extremely grateful for the trust that the members of the Heritage Partnership have put in me and

would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to each and all of them for their collaboration. I would also like to thank Canon Pastor Matthew Vernon as chair of the Heritage Partnership and its coordinator Richard Summers, as well as Canon Librarian Peter Doll, Richard Hoggett, Oscar Salemin, Irene Stengs, and Steven Brindle (English Heritage Trust) for their constructive comments and helpful suggestions for improvement of this text. However, as its author I retain full responsibility for its contents.

1. The process of heritagization entails the discriminate placing of "value" on sites, objects, or performances. UNESCO arbitrates selection of proposals to its lists on the basis of outstanding universal value (Labadi 2013; Titchen 1996). Since valuation is critical to heritage discourse and increasingly contested, it has been subjected to conceptual debate and bureaucratic arbitration within UNESCO. Academic evaluations that critically examine values defined by different heritage organizations reveal a wide diversity and a lack of coherence, while signaling wide discrepancies between state and community valuations (De la Torre 2013; Fredheim and Khalaf 2016; Mydland and Grahn 2012).
2. See the Historic England document "Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Development of the Historic Environment," 2008, <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/constructive-conservation/conservation-principles> (accessed 15 July 2020). Although published by English Heritage in 2008, this document still expressed the views of its successor Historic England in 2015. This document informed the work by the firm Purcell that produced the Conservation Plan. In 2019, Historic England published a new document that substantially revises the earlier document: "Historic England 2019 Statement of Heritage Significance: Analysing Significance in Heritage Assets Historic England Advice Note 12," <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/statements-heritage-significance-advice-note-12/> (accessed 18 June 2022).
3. There are debates on the exact chronology of the foundation of a monastic community, the year of translation of the body of Saint Edmund to Beodricesworth, the building of a new or enlarged church by King Cnut, the motivations for a Danish king to facilitate the making of a cult for an English king martyred by the Danes, and the motivations of the Normans to accept a cult around an English saint. These matters pose a problem to historians because the documentation is scant and the available documents are often forgeries. See Gransden 1985; Gransden 2015; Licence 2014; Young 2014.
4. National legislation governs the preservation of these monuments and what changes can be undertaken in the built environment, irrespective of who owns them. The abbey gardens and the great churchyard are owned by West Suffolk Borough Council. The council also owns most of the ruins and the abbey gate, but these are managed by English Heritage Trust (Wood 2018: 28). The remains of the abbey and the chapel of the Charnel House are scheduled monuments. Alongside these, stand 21 Grade I listed buildings, 3 Grade II listed buildings and 115 Grade II listed structures, of which 100 are memorials in the great churchyard. See Wood (2018: 16–28).
5. I am indebted to Richard Hoggett for pointing this out to me.
6. In April 2019, the St Edmundsbury Borough Council was merged with Forest Heath District to form West Suffolk Council.
7. *East Anglian Daily Times*, 14 September 2016.

8. *East Anglian Daily Times*, 14 September 2016. This mission has since been reformulated as follows: “The mission of the Heritage Partnership is to encourage people to experience the international significance of St Edmund and the historic Abbey.”
9. The English Heritage Trust is a charity, which exercises responsibility for the care of around 420 historic sites on behalf of the Crown, represented by the secretary of state for culture, media, and sport. The abbey ruins at Bury St Edmunds were placed in guardianship by their owners, the local authority, in the 1950s. The placing of the ruins in guardianship was followed by a long campaign of excavation and consolidation of the ruins, by the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Works—the predecessors to the current trust. The Department of the Environment and (from 1984) English Heritage have carried out the archaeological excavation, consolidation, and presentation of the site in question. English Heritage remains the official guardian of the abbey ruins and has financial responsibility for their maintenance (email to author from Steven Brindle, senior properties historian, Curatorial Department, English Heritage Trust, 14 May 2022). English Heritage is currently designing new interpretation panels for the site in close collaboration with members of the Heritage Partnership. This work will be the subject of another paper.
10. The Purcell employee commissioned to draft the report allowed me to attend a day of her work, in which we visited the Norman tower, Saint Mary’s church, and the abbey gardens, where we spoke to the cathedral’s outreach officer, the volunteers running the church, the horticulturalists working in the gardens, and a retired gardens manager. I am grateful for her permission to second her for the day. The methodology followed the Historic England guidelines on the matter: “Historic England 2019 Statement of Heritage Significance: Analysing Significance in Heritage Assets Historic England Advice Note 12.” See <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/statements-heritage-significance-advice-note-12/> (accessed 18 June 2022).
11. The Historic England guidance still current at the moment of writing is clear on its inclusiveness: “Spiritual value attached to places can emanate from the beliefs and teachings of an organised religion, or reflect past or present-day perceptions of the spirit of place. It includes the sense of inspiration and wonder that can arise from personal contact with places long revered, or newly revealed.” See “Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Development of the Historic Environment,” 32, <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/conservation-principles-sustainable-management-historic-environment/conservation-principles-policies-and-guidance-april08web/> (accessed 18 June 2022).
12. Notes Spiritual Significance Group Discussion, 19 July 2018.
13. I should note that the *Heritage Assessment* does not state that the site’s pre-Christian history involved a Pagan site or Pagan worship. The intervention made at the meeting therefore already signaled an appropriation of its pre-Christian history.
14. On the interesting etymology of the term “vandalism” that references the violence employed by the Vandals in the early medieval period and its secular employment in the aftermath of the French Revolution, see Merrills (2009).
15. Notes Spiritual Significance Group Discussion, 19 July 2018.
16. These discussions echoed nineteenth-century discourses on the benefits of museum visits to the working classes (Bennett 1995), in which the museum operated as an instrument of disciplinary regimes.

17. "Dowsing Group Confident of St Edmund's Burial Ground Location," *East Anglian Daily Times*, 6 May 2018, <https://www.eadt.co.uk/news/xx-2451786> (accessed 18 May 2022).
18. For reasons of space, I refrain from contextualizing this primitivist allegation on Arab sensibility, but it goes without saying that it sits in a long history of Orientalism.
19. In an insightful article, Woolley (2018) examines how dowsing tools work as divinatory methodology to convey the dowser's environmental knowledge.

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