

THE PILGRIM TRUST

95th Anniversary Reception 23 September 2025

Speech by Sue Bowers, Director of the Pilgrim Trust

Since I joined the Pilgrim Trust five years ago, the two questions I am most frequently asked are:

Why are you called the Pilgrim Trust? - and
Heritage Conservation and Social Causes seem odd bed fellows – can you explain?

So let me start by briefly addressing those two points.

Our founder, Edward Harkness was an American philanthropist whose ancestors had emigrated from Scotland in 18th century. In the setting up of the Trust he specified that he did not want it to be named after him. It is worth pausing to reflect on how extremely unusual that was - at the time nearly all foundations perpetuated the founder's name. But by all accounts, he was a modest, and unassuming gentleman who had learnt the art of philanthropy from his mother.

So, after the idea of a philanthropic endowment had taken shape, a name had to be found. The archives show various titles were considered including the St George's Trust, the New Atlantis Trust (an allusion to Francis Bacon's utopian novel) and the Concord Trust. But it was Mary Harkness, Edward's wife, who proposed the Pilgrim Trust – a word that causes confusion to this day and even at the time was considered 'fraught' as there were several Anglo-American organisations that use the word 'pilgrim',

But I think it is an apt name - embodying the spirit of a purposeful journey, the courage to venture forward, and recognition that small acts can have large consequences.

As to the second question, Edward Harkness wanted the Trust to help Britain with some of its urgent needs and to promote the wellbeing of its people. Our first chairman Stanley Baldwin refined this as a 'reawakening of the nation', which at the time was experiencing great social unrest. He aspired to do this through restoring Britain's national inherited treasures and also its spiritual and intellectual heritage in the character and wellbeing of its people.

And so, with name and remit in place, the scene was set! Following what was described as 'an eventful evening' at Claridge's, John Buchan (founding Trustee) was asked to draw up the preamble to the Trust deed which was signed on the 5 September 1930, and a letter to the Times issued on 29 September formally announcing the gift. There was great press publicity and the Harknesses earned an audience with Their Majesties at Buckingham Palace. The Trust's first Secretary was Thomas Jones who had just retired as Cabinet Secretary. Work began on 1 October and within a matter of weeks, fifteen awards were made.

I haven't been able to ascertain how many other UK grant giving trusts were in existence in 1930 but certainly few enough for Edward Harkness to arrange for Thomas Jones to spend several weeks in the States to learn how systematic philanthropy (which is the actual term Edward Harkness used) should be done. Thomas Jones reported back that he just needed to have membership of Athenaeum and a small staff team – both of which he got!

The modus operandi of our founder and those founding Trustees still characterizes how we like to work today.

Edward Harkness stated that he wished 'everything to be as simple as possible': The Trustees took great pride in the Trust's independence and embraced the idea that philanthropy should be pioneering and experimental (Baldwin's words). The Trustees were also keen to keep the Trust 'elastic' responding to changing needs.

It would be unwise to try and summarise the Trust's work over the last 95 years as the range of its support has been so diverse. A highlight for me is the action it took in its first decades to help preservation societies to purchase and thus safeguard from development swathes of the countryside. This included the Malvern Hills, Dovedale, Grantchester Meadows and the hills around Oxford. And alongside that it supported the Open Spaces Society in its campaigning work to protect public rights of way. At a time when our connection with nature is more important than ever, it is a very special legacy.

Also notable has been its work in helping to set up seminal organisations. This includes the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts in the 1940s – the predecessor of the Arts Council; the formation of the Historic Churches Preservation Trust in 1952 (now the National Churches Trust); and the York Glaziers Trust.

In the 1970s it provided start up core funding for the UK's first neighbourhood law centre in North Kensington. More recently in 2015 we were one of the original trusts and foundations helping to set up Agenda Alliance to advocate for a holistic approach to women and girls at risk.

A common thread in its work across the decades has been to explore strategic issues or new lines of approach alongside supporting front line services. In 1934, the Trust appointed a high-profile committee to understand and address the social problems of unemployment, resulting in the seminal Men Without Work report (which does have a section on Women entitled 'The Women's Problem!'). Alongside that research, the Trust gave out numerous grants to support the salaries of local club organisers running educational and social services in the distressed areas of Wales and the north of England.

Roll forward to today, and we are shining a light on the mental health of young women, the group at the highest risk of developing a mental health disorder and exploring the benefits of age and gender specific approaches to mental health provision. The Trust has committed an initial £5m in grants over five years through which we have supported to date a diverse group of 43 remarkable charities in Northern Ireland and the north of England (delighted to see some of them here this evening) who are providing safe spaces, therapeutic support and practical help to the young women. We look forward to the publication of our first learning report commissioned from the Centre for Mental Health later this year, sharing our findings on what works, and developing new partnerships to take its recommendations forward.

Before I hand over to James – a few concluding thoughts.

The Pilgrim Trust is now a small player in diverse funding ecology that is facing huge demands. How do we respond to that and stay relevant? I think part of the answer is in collaborations, partnerships and connections.

It has been a real delight over the past year to collaborate with five other trusts alongside ICON on our pooled fund to support internships in conservation skills at risk. It is proving to be an effective way to increase our collective impact and the first interns in books and archival materials and musical instruments are now in post. I am delighted that the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust, and the Anna Plowden, Julia Rausing, Idlewild and Radcliffe Trusts are here this evening.

Over the years, partnerships with strategic sector bodies have enabled us to extend the reach of our grant giving across the UK particularly to the smallest charities. We were pleased recently to renew our commitment to Archives Revealed with the Wolfson Foundation, The National Archives and the Heritage Fund and to Museum Fundamentals with the Association of Independent Museums and Julia Rausing Trust.

And finally, over the last five years one of the most enjoyable parts of my job has been the daily connections with the small charities, fueled by the time, expertise and passion of the volunteers, meeting local needs. I know that I speak on behalf of my colleagues in the Pilgrim Trust team that we will continue to be approachable and encouraging in helping these charities in their work in delivering services, strengthening communities and building a more connected society.

Sue Bowers
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