

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Helen Joseph

RESOURCES





Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Helen Joseph RESOURCES



Helen Joseph - A Woman of Courage

AAM Women's Newsletter, March-April 1984

Interviewer (JC): Helen Joseph, you are known in many parts of the world now as a champion of the oppressed people of South Africa. You've been a long campaigner against apartheid. Perhaps the earliest time the world heard of you was during the treason trial way back in the mid 1950s. Do you remember much about those days?

Helen Joseph: I remember a great deal about it. Today there's such an interest in the 1950s. They call it the decade of defiance. That was when I came into the political field, in the most exciting times. When we were still

able to organise great demonstrations and hold our conferences. We could still do a lot. The first major trial then was the treason trial where 155 of us were arrested. Those were the years when we organised the big demonstrations of women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The first one in 1955 was 2,000; The second one in 1956 was 20,000. That's one of the peaks, absolutely. They were the most exciting years for me, particularly because I only came into the political world when I was already nearly fifty.

Interviewer: The people at the treason trial where from all races when those the days when things were still pretty well mixed?

Helen Joseph: Oh absolutely. You see we had formed the Congress Alliance, which was composed of the African National Congress,

the South African Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats - which was the white organisation, my organisation, which was later banned-and then also the South African Coloured People's Organisation. We didn't have one multiracial organisation: we had a multiracial alliance. Where the feeling at the time, and it was very strong in the ANC, was that it was the place of each racial group to work amongst its own people. Lots of young whites particularly would have been very happy to join the ANC, but their leader said 'no, our job is to work amongst the whites.' And a very hard job it was too. But we were very proud to belong to this alliance.

Interviewer: Were you at Kliptown in 1955 when the Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter?

Helen Joseph: Yes, I was there. I've been working for it before and through my own organisation which is not only the Congress of Democrats but the Federation of South African Women, which was a multiracial organisation. It went on for two days, that great Congress with 3,000 delegates there. They come from all over South Africa. The spirit was so high. The Freedom Charter that we adopted them was not something that was thought of at the top. For two years the congresses have been working at the grassroots all over the country asking people 'what do you want? what are your grievances? What do you want for South Africa?' people sent these demands in on little bits of paper for their work over 2,000 come in from all over South Africa and out of that came in amalgam which is now the Freedom Charter, which can never die because it expresses the hopes and heartaches of the people...

Interviewer: The next year 150 plus of you arrested and charged with high treason. Was the result of the trial a major setback?

Helen Joseph: That's a very difficult question to answer. It certainly was a major setback. The trial went on for four and a quarter years. The main leaders of the organisation were all brought together and to some extent were immobilised, and that was a terrible feeling of frustration. I will never forget the day of Sharpeville when we sat in court knowing that we could not do anything. That was agony. But against that you must realise that the trial brought us together in a way that had never happened before, all the leaders of the different organisations, so you became one body of people. Especially when we got down to the last thirty we really were just one strong family of people. My impression- this is a very personal thing but it's I hold it very strongly- is that the treason trial did not hold back the struggle for liberation. Anything but. It strengthened it. Perhaps some of our campaigns were more difficult to organise and didn't go ahead with the same momentum as before. But the other campaigns did. The leaders delegated their leadership to others in the congresses and the unity was enormously strong. We were all together in this. I would say now that we actually went further forward.

DOWNLOAD THE PDF



Helen Joseph



Extract from We Make Freedom

By Beata Lipman,
(1984, Pandora Press)

Helen Joseph sits in her small house in Norwood, Johannesburg, surrounded by the mementoes of thirty years of hard work and struggle for human rights in South Africa - those mementoes, it needs to be said, that have not somehow found their way into the back of a police van during a raid or a search for banned or incriminatory material. She has been gaoled, banned, confined to her home for years on end, arrested, charged with treason... it has never stopped her from organising, boycotting, demonstrating, speaking and writing in support of her beliefs. Today at 79, she is a bit more frail than she was in the past but as buoyantly full of her passionate belief in freedom and justice for all, in the country of her adoption, as she was during the march to Pretoria in 1956 to protest against the imposition of passes for black women; and as she was in 1960 as one of the thousands detained for months after the shooting down of peaceful demonstrators in another anti-pass campaign at Sharpeville. Her work as a national organiser of the Federation of South African Women, as well as that in the trade union movement - among garment workers - has brought her in contact with thousands who have never forgotten her warmth and vitality, as well as the egalitarianism that has informed it. Over

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

the years her refusal to budge, to leave her chosen cause and go into exile, has brought her support, and love, and help from men and women in every group in a diverse South African society. Her long and close friendship with Winnie Mandela (whom she calls her adopted daughter) is a good indication that Ms Mandela's conviction that she could shoot whites, if necessary, has more to do with oppression and exploitation than skin colour. Helen Joseph has spent time in gaol for refusing to answer questions about a supposed visit to her banished friend. She was born in Sussex and has lived in South Africa since 1931.

'I'm not as concerned with people's political labels as with the struggle, and with people... I came back to the church in 1966, and shortly after I'd been unbanned the Dean of Johannesburg came to my Christmas party. He sat on the ledge of the wall over there, and he looked at the thirty or forty people who were here, and he said, "Hmmp - Christians, Communists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews" - he summed it all up...

'I came here from India in 1931... I'd lived there three years... and the shock of apartheid nearly destroyed me initially, because I'd been in Indian India, not British India, and I couldn't bear it. But let me tell the truth, it wore off; I got used to it, and I enjoyed my social life; I married a dentist here. I always wanted to be friends with Indians, but Africans I saw as a strange sort of people. Then the war came, and I joined the Information Service... that's where I learnt, because we had to lecture on current affairs and on politics; and in order to be able to lecture I had to learn first. Then

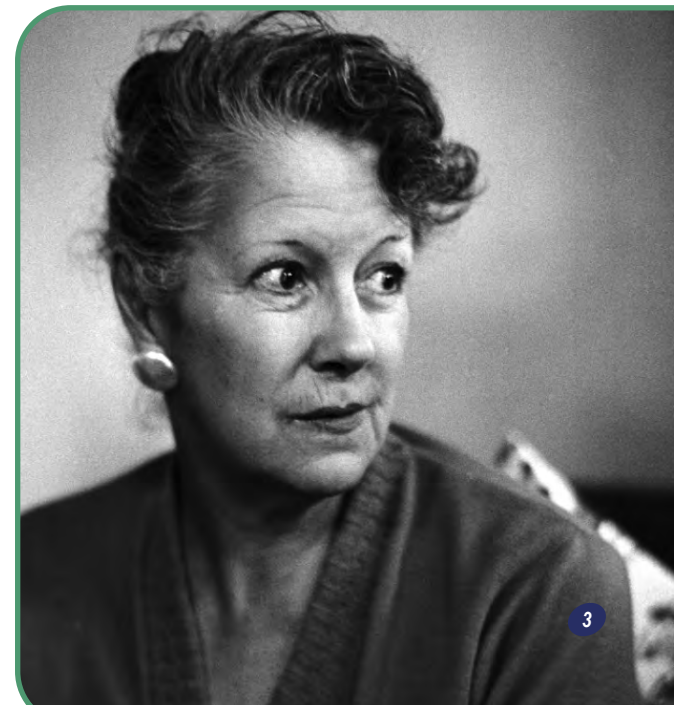
I began to see the facts - you know, the facts about bantu education; the facts of the discrimination; the facts of housing - and that began to worry me. I always had a bit of a social worker's conscience... that's where I started, but then, when the war was over I went to work in the Fordsburg Community Centre, among whites, and I began to think a bit more.

'Then I went to Cape Town, and went to work among coloureds, also in community centre work, and that was when I really began to get the message. I worked hand in glove with them, building from the grass roots, creating a centre; and it dawned on me that all I was doing was giving an aspirin for a toothache - and that lots of people could do that: that's what social workers are for, to give aspirins for toothache.

'I came back to Johannesburg and worked in the Garment Workers' Union - I learnt an enormous amount from Solly Sachs... I kept feeling, "I must get into the political field; but what was there?" There was nothing... Solly used to talk to me about the Labour Party, and I used to shout at him and say, "Well, the Labour Party's only concerned with white workers." Then one day he said to me, "Stop moaning about it - get into it and do something about it." I did, but only slid through - I really couldn't find a political home in the Labour Party. And then came the Congress of Democrats... the Liberal Association, at the time, wouldn't accept the universal franchise, and here was a body that would. I was

invited to be on the provisional committee; by that time my convictions were there - that the only thing to do was to change the system.

'So it was a process; not one dramatic event but a ten-year process. But the attempt to recruit whites into the Congress of Democrats wasn't all that successful: we were faced with a bloody impossible task. We were the only ones who could do it: it wasn't for us to take the easy path and go recruiting blacks... so it was very small, but very real - a potent ginger group. I firmly believe that the Liberal Party would never have got as far as it did, if it hadn't been for us. We were always one step ahead of the Liberal Party. When it came to the Congress of the People they didn't want to come in because they hadn't been consulted at the beginning; we were in - we pushed them into adopting the universal





Helen Joseph

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

franchise: they couldn't rule it out, because we were there. I think as a ginger group we were very effective... and we did have a symbolic value too. Here was one group of whites standing foursquare with the African National Congress, the Indian Congress and the coloureds. The congress alliance itself was tremendously important; and weren't we privileged to be a part of it? I think so.

'I've had nine years of total house arrest since the early 1950s - twelve-hour house arrest; then I've had nine years of freedom, but

I'm still listed, so it's only partial freedom. But even so, I've addressed sixty meetings in nine years, and that's not bad... what meetings! I've had the most wonderful reception... it seems to be something that's appealed to everyone - the sight of an old woman saying, "Bugger the government!" And then they slapped this last ban on me. I admit I earned it... treat it as an accolade anyway, an award of merit. I haven't been wasting these nine years. I think they were scared to do it before because they always hoped I wouldn't live that long. And I'm

sure that's why it's only two years... we needn't put a five-year ban on her; she won't last that long! And it'll look better if she's not actually under a ban. [In 1971 Helen Joseph had treatment for cancer.]

'But I know what brought that ban on - they had a meeting in Durban; the Natal Indian Congress called a protest meeting to protest against the detention of their leaders. They were all scooped up and detained in June last year; they called me down to Durban to address the meeting: and there were 5,000

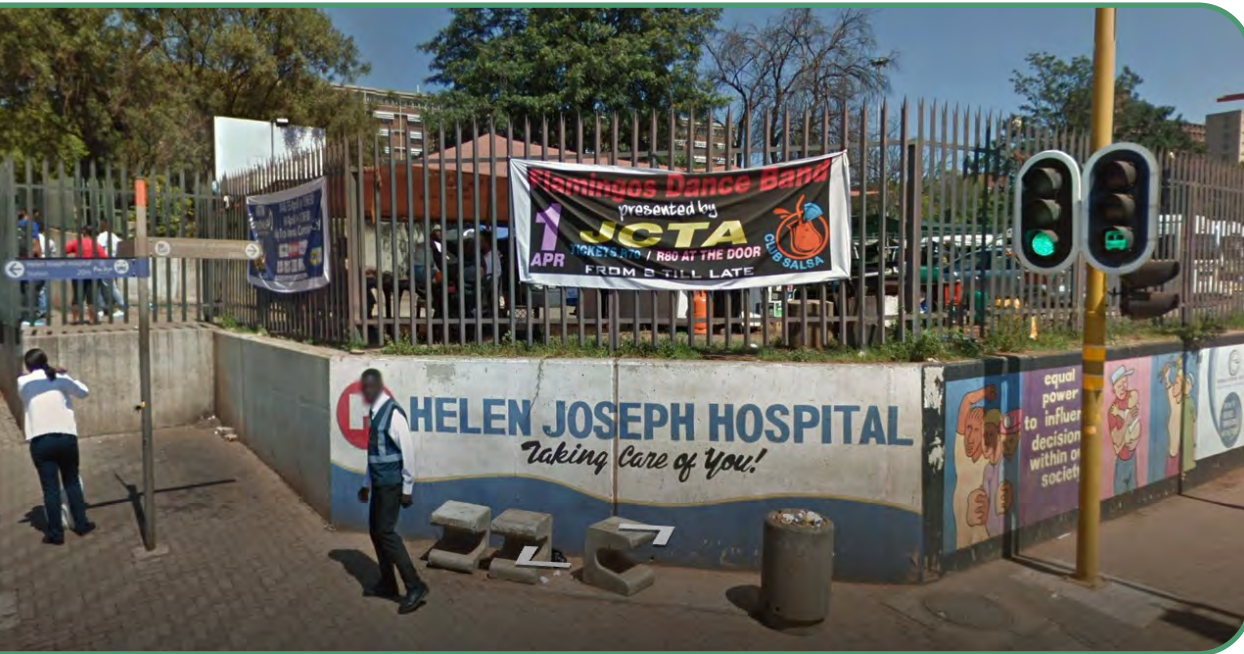
people there! Mostly young, and I was the last speaker... by the time I got to them they were already in a highly excitable mood; I could have said anything... I did, I said all the things I wanted to say. And I ended up by saying my message to the detained is, "We shall overcome - will you sing it with me? I can't sing"; and they did - 5,000 voices sang "We shall overcome". I think they sang 5,000 verses, as far as I can remember... and that nine years of freedom was full of this: the young are such a wonderful audience, they really are. They give you their hearts. I was never much of a public speaker before... I think it was the four years on the treason trial, the months in detention in the sixties, then the nine years under house arrest. I suppose all this is deep in my own experience, and it has given me, in some unexplainable way, the power

to hand it on to others from the platform.

'My speeches are not ideological at all; rather highly emotional... real rabble-rousing! I've got my own ideas, but I've never been an ideologue.'

Then she spoke of the work undertaken over many years to try and keep a record and help the hundreds sent into exile - banished - by the government. Banishment is an especially fiendish form of punishment for those unpopular with the apartheid regime because, like imprisonment, it can - and does - go on 'for ever'. But - and in this it is like a banning order - decisions on banishment are not made in a court of law according to known and established criteria; they are made administratively: decisions made in secret against which the recipient has no legal or any other weapon. With a banning order normal life is disrupted by restrictions on work, on where a person is allowed to go, whom they may see, when they can be away from home and how often they have to report to a police station. With banishment the system of control is compounded by sending people - and they have usually been black - as far as possible from their home, their piece of land and their family.

'Banishment under the old Native Administration Act of 1927... there was an uncle and his nephew living up in Bushbuckridge, Acornhoek, way up in the Northern Transvaal - and they were both banished, because they were involved in disputes with the government about the Shangaans. These are Southern Sotho people, and the Shangaans have come in from the east, and there are tremendous disputes



Above: In 1992, Helen was given the Isitwalandwe/Seaparankwe Medal by the ANC, and the Order of Simon of Cyrene by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. Several roads and buildings are named after her, including the Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg.

Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/GqVRtyjLRjqZLw>



Helen Joseph

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

about the land that was given to them. These two men were leaders of their community, and they were saying the Shangaans had taken their land: it was a tribal thing. So these two men were banished; the uncle was Laynas Mqshile - they were taken to the Transkei, 1000 miles away, where the language was strange. One was taken to one Trust farm, one was taken to another. All right, after about ten years Wineas was allowed to go home; he was the less rebellious of the two; but Laynas wasn't - he remained seventeen years in the Transkei. Laynas was at Lady Frere. Now when the Transkei got "independence" you got the most ridiculous, absurd comic opera situation. Here is a man, who is not legally allowed to put his foot anywhere in South Africa, who has been banished to Lady Frere, but Lady Frere is now part of an independent state. It was the most absurd situation: he tried to get it clarified; he wrote letters and letters but never got any satisfactory answers. Finally he said, "I'm going home." So he went home at the end of seventeen years; the Transkei people said, "You can stay here if you want to," but he went home. In the meantime his people at Acornhoek had built him a beautiful new house, against the time they believed he would come home. It was a big house, and he had sent them all sorts of timber from the Transkei, and they'd built the house and his wife and his children had moved into it. They had never moved to the Transkei, but had visited him occasionally. They had to stay behind... I interviewed his wife; she had to remain to look after the lands, otherwise they would have lost their lands. All the wives of the banished men stayed behind - people don't seem to understand this.

'Then, about two years ago, when he got back to Acornhoek, by that time there had been a dispute about the house that had been built for him, and his wife - she's a tiny little woman - had been ordered to demolish the house. She refused, and at the end of a month the officials came and demolished it for her... I've got a picture, just bits of wood left of the beautiful house that had been built for his return... that's what he went back to.

'And when he got back he went straight to the Commissioner and said, "Look, I'm here, I want my position sorted out; my banishment order says I may not be here, I may only be in Lady Frere - but Lady Frere does not belong to South Africa. So where can I set my foot in South Africa?" He was allowed to stay there for a year, and then he was rebanished to somewhere in the Pietersburg area... can you believe it? After seventeen years away, his home demolished, he gets back for a year, has another child - the letter he wrote to me, "We've got such joy, we've got a little daughter" - and then he's banished again.

'I must pay tribute to Helen Suzman - she took up the case in Parliament, and finally got them to agree that he could go home and not be harassed any longer... but it's a dreadful story. A dreadful story... but what a man; what dignity. He was an ANC man, he served a turn on Robben Island in the very early sixties for his support of the ANC, and his courage has never left him. His wife, a gentle, sweet person - she doesn't speak English; I had to do all this with an interpreter.

But he's still on probation, a year at a time: his banishment order has not been rescinded - it still exists on paper.

'I think Chief Mopedi had the longest banishment order: he was one of the very early ones - in 1952 he was banished; he died eventually in about 1973.

'I suppose we've managed to help about seventy to eighty banished people... they showed such courage. Only a couple of women were banished. Rita Mopedi, the wife of the chief; they were from Witzieshoek. The other one was Mokwena Matlala, who was banished to Kingwilliamstown: she was the chieftainess of the Matlalas. There was a third woman... Seopa... I can't remember her first name... we tried to visit them all and maintained a massive correspondence. The sad story of the Matlala chieftainess was that she eventually went back to the Matlala reserve in the Northern Transvaal, and succumbed to government pressure. Mrs Seopa wasn't so politically minded herself, but oh! how she suffered... I don't know if I'd be able to hold out against all those years of loneliness, waiting, waiting, waiting. Because there is no end to it; it's totally at the state president's discretion - the minister claims that all these cases are reviewed every year. And certainly, when Helen Suzman was trying to get some satisfaction on Laynas Mashile, certainly she did get his case reviewed every year; and every time it comes back with the same answer: "Seeing that the circumstances that led to his removal still prevail, it is not possible to consider his being allowed to go home again." Isn't it incredible? This is part of South Africa's unknown history.'





Helen Joseph

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

1955 Anti-Pass Campaign

On August 9, 20,000 women of all races, some with babies on their backs, from the cities and towns, from the reserves and villages, took a petition addressed to the Prime Minister to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The petition demanded that the pass laws be abolished.

Below: Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Sophie Williams and Radima Moosa – the delegates to deliver the petition to the office of the Prime Minister in front of the Union Buildings).

Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/women-s-march-1956/zgF6vyR4UQJPjg>



Above: Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Sophie Williams and others march up the steps of the Union Buildings to hand over hundreds of petitions protesting against the extension of pass laws to women.

Source: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/hamba-kahle-helen-joseph-speak-march-1993-johannesburg>





**Helen
Joseph**

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement



Treason Trial Halts - Treason Trialist Helen Joseph outside the court

October 13, 1958 - the mild, cloudy Pretoria morning on which the most sensational of things happened for the 91 men and women of all races facing a charge of high treason. Mr Pirow, leader of the Crown team at the trial, rose to his feet, touched a colleague who was still addressing the court, and brought the microphone to his mouth. 'Your Lordship, I withdraw the indictment against the accused,' he said in his hoarse voice. The height of the trial's drama had come. Up in the packed non-white gallery, black faces lit up and swung round to take swift looks at the judges, still wondering if they had heard right. Out in the street, where spectators and photographers were pressing on the accused, shouts of 'Africa' rang high and firm, victory handshakes spelled the day's relief.

Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/GqVRtyjLRjqZLw>



Helen Joseph

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Extract from Barbara Caine 'A South African Revolutionary, but a Lady of the British Empire.'

Journal of Southern Africa Studies, 34 (3), pp. 575-590

Helen Joseph was a prominent anti-apartheid activist in South Africa from the 1950s until her death in 1992. The period of greatest activity was undoubtedly that prior to her being placed under house arrest in 1962, but she re-emerged in the 1970s as a public figure who sought to keep the spirit of the 1950s of position movement alive. She was, as Hilda Bernstein noted, 'a tremendous organiser weather formidable capacity for sheer hard work, who played a key role in organising the democratic protests South African women against apartheid and against passes for women.' Sshe was also the only white woman amongst the final group of 30 to be tried in the treason trial from 1958-1961, and the first person to be placed under house arrest in South Africa (in October 1962, under the provisions of the recently enacted sabotage act). In the speech he made at the unveiling of her tombstone, Nelson Mandela included her in the same category of the great veteran leaders of the liberation struggle as Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Moses Kotane, making special mention of her decision to remain in South Africa until her death, despite constant persecution, when she could easily have returned to England...

...Almost alone amongst the white South African anti-apartheid activists, many of whom were Jewish and of central or Eastern European origin, and who either belonged or were sympathetic to the Communist Party,

Joseph was born in England to a conservative family that was both racist and anti-Semitic... Nor was Joseph close to many of the other white activists: her background, social manner and political outlook precluded this possibility. Although rejecting her families' racism and anti-Semitism, Joseph was never able entirely to discard their social manner or assumptions. She was always something of a grande dame. Imperious in manner, impatient with the weaknesses of others and sometimes inclined to speak in a highly peremptory manner. As Nelson Mandela indicated in his funeral oration in January 1993- from which the title of this article is drawn- Joseph was something of a paradox. During the treason trial, Mandela noted, most defendants condemned all forms of imperialism, but not Joseph. "When Helen was cast examined and asked what she thought about British imperialism, she answered that there was no such thing, because the British had spread out to bring civilisation to all the countries they went to. Helen was a South African revolutionary, but the lady of the British Empire forced up a contradiction in the eyes of many, but to Helen her own reality."

Below: Sound recording - Oct. 13, 1962 - Helen Joseph Speaks on House Arrest for Anti-Apartheid

Activists in South Africa
Source: Time 1960s
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Di2nM198iQc>



realtime1960s.com

Oct. 13, 1962 - Anti-Apartheid Activist Helen Joseph's Remarks on House Arrest

You can be forced to stay in your house all over the weekend.

About this resource...

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

This presentation is part of a resource collaboratively developed by **The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML)** and **UEA**. It is part of the CML's work to promote the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in)justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation

Many of the images and linked documents are supplied with kind permission of project partners, **The Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives**. Other sources are referred to at the relevant places in the packs.

The development of the resources has been made possible with generous support from the **National Lottery Heritage Fund** and UEA's **Impact Fund**.



University of East Anglia

The University of East Anglia

UEA is a globally significant centre of research that drives global change. We bring fresh thinking to the major challenges facing society, helping to create a better future for all.

UEA's world-leading research covers science, health and medicine, social sciences and the humanities.



The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory & Learning

The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML) promotes the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle and the UK's central role within this world-changing history, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in) justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation.



AAM ARCHIVES

Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives

Forward to Freedom tells the story of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and its campaigns to support the people of South Africa in their fight against apartheid. The AAM also campaigned for freedom for Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, and against South Africa's attacks on its neighbours.



The National Lottery Heritage Fund

As the largest dedicated funder of the UK's heritage, The National Lottery Heritage Fund's vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future.