

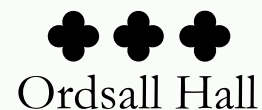
SLEEPING WELL

at Ordsall Hall

Phase Two: AHRC Summary Evaluation Report

Eleanor Shaw, Sasha Handley, Anna Fielding

29.04.26





Introduction

Sleeping Well at Ordsall Hall was a collaborative project between the University of Manchester and heritage property Ordsall Hall (part of Salford Community Leisure) that delivered workshops based on historical research about sleep and healthcare practices. The project aimed to contribute to reducing health inequities in Salford, by providing an opportunity to improve participant wellbeing, and connecting Ordsall Hall more deeply to its community, establishing the Hall as a health and wellbeing hub. The workshops were designed for people with a mental health need, who were recruited with the help of project partner Wellbeing Matters. The project ran from October 2024 to October 2025 and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The project used historical research from *Sleeping Well in the Early Modern World*, led by Professor Sasha Handley at the University of Manchester, which explored how early modern communities (c. 1500-1750) engaged with their gardens and surrounding landscapes to grow, harvest and process plants for use in homemade sleep therapies and soporific foodstuffs.¹

Participants engaged with this knowledge through a wide range of creative activities, like book making, remaking historical recipes, and gardening. The project worked with 18 participants across 5 different workshop groups. Participants were introduced to the Five Ways to Wellbeing, and the project provided opportunities to enact the Five Ways through each session, for example being active or learning.

Key findings

100% of participants said that taking part in the project had improved their wellbeing in some way.

- Participants said taking part in the project had increased their sense of agency and ability to implement strategies in their wider lives that improved wellbeing.

The heritage location of Ordsall Hall was very important to participants, as was the opportunity to engage with the green space in the gardens.

- The project made Ordsall Hall available to its community as a resource for health and wellbeing.
- The project shows both the historical and cultural value of Ordsall Hall and its role in addressing key social issues in Salford such as social isolation or mental health. This helps Ordsall Hall both access new funding and justify their existing funding.

The project demonstrated the potential for historical academic research to form the basis of creative health interventions to improve wellbeing.

- Learning something new through accessible creative approaches was widely appreciated by participants. It changed their opinions about learning history and creative activities and their own capacity in these areas.

Project Design

The project defined wellbeing as:

*'Wellbeing means different things to different people. Our project thinks there are two main parts to wellbeing: feeling good and functioning well. For you feeling good might mean feeling happy, feeling content, enjoying life, or feeling curious and engaged. Functioning well can mean that you have positive relationships, feel in control of your life, or have a sense of purpose.'*²

The project shared with people how people in the past thought about and took care of their health. We wanted to understand if learning through creative activities would help people improve their wellbeing.

Each workshop was designed to recreate an aspect of historical healthcare practice and included a focus activity.

Week 1	Introduction to early modern health and wellbeing knowledge and practices	Bookmaking
Week 2	Gardens and landscapes	Willow weaving and planting
Week 3	Herbals, medical books and botanical ingredients	Botanical illustrations and printing
Week 4	Bedchambers and textiles	Embroidery/wet felting
Week 5	Sleep remedies	Remaking recipes
Week 6	Lighting	Candle making

The project was designed for participants who self-identified as being in a prevention or recovery phase for poor mental health or wellbeing.

While each week had a specific focus, there was always a choice of activities and the environment was low-pressure, to meet the various accessibility needs of the participants.

Evaluation Findings

The project used group focus interviews to evaluate the success of the project. Below we explore some of the key findings that emerged from this evaluation.

Improved wellbeing

Participants shared an improved sense of wellbeing as a result of participating in the workshop activities. The form improved wellbeing took varied between people, including feeling happier, a sense of healing, and an increased sense of confidence and self-worth. Others highlighted more concrete indicators of wellbeing, such as sleeping better, participating in more activities, or being more sociable. For participants with families or caring responsibilities, the opportunity to take time for themselves for their own wellbeing was a frequently mentioned highlight.

'I would say 'it really works.' Remaking improves your wellbeing. It gives you energy to do life for the rest of the week. Or at least that is how it was for me.'

Strategies for wellbeing

Participants shared that they had implemented strategies learned in the workshops, such as doing crafts or spending time outside, in their wider lives. For some participants taking part in the workshops provided motivation and a sense of agency, encouraging participants to engage in wider wellbeing promoting activities, or addressing long standing problems.

'We've started going for walks now. So we've basically took it from here [the idea from the workshops]. Thinking positive and saying let's go for a walk. And we feel the benefit of it.'



Taking the first step to do something for their wellbeing validated their sense that taking time for themselves and their own wellbeing was worthwhile.

'It's helped me shift my mindset into I do need to look after myself more and do the things that I enjoy because you only get one life don't you? I've signed up to salsa dancing classes. Because I've always wanted to do it and I'm going to do that.'

Healing through creativity

Participants identified the creative activities, and the accessing of creative flow, as healing or therapeutic. Giving themselves permission to play and be creative as adults was important and was associated with increased self-knowledge. Making physical objects to take away with them gave participants a sense of achievement and pride in their work.

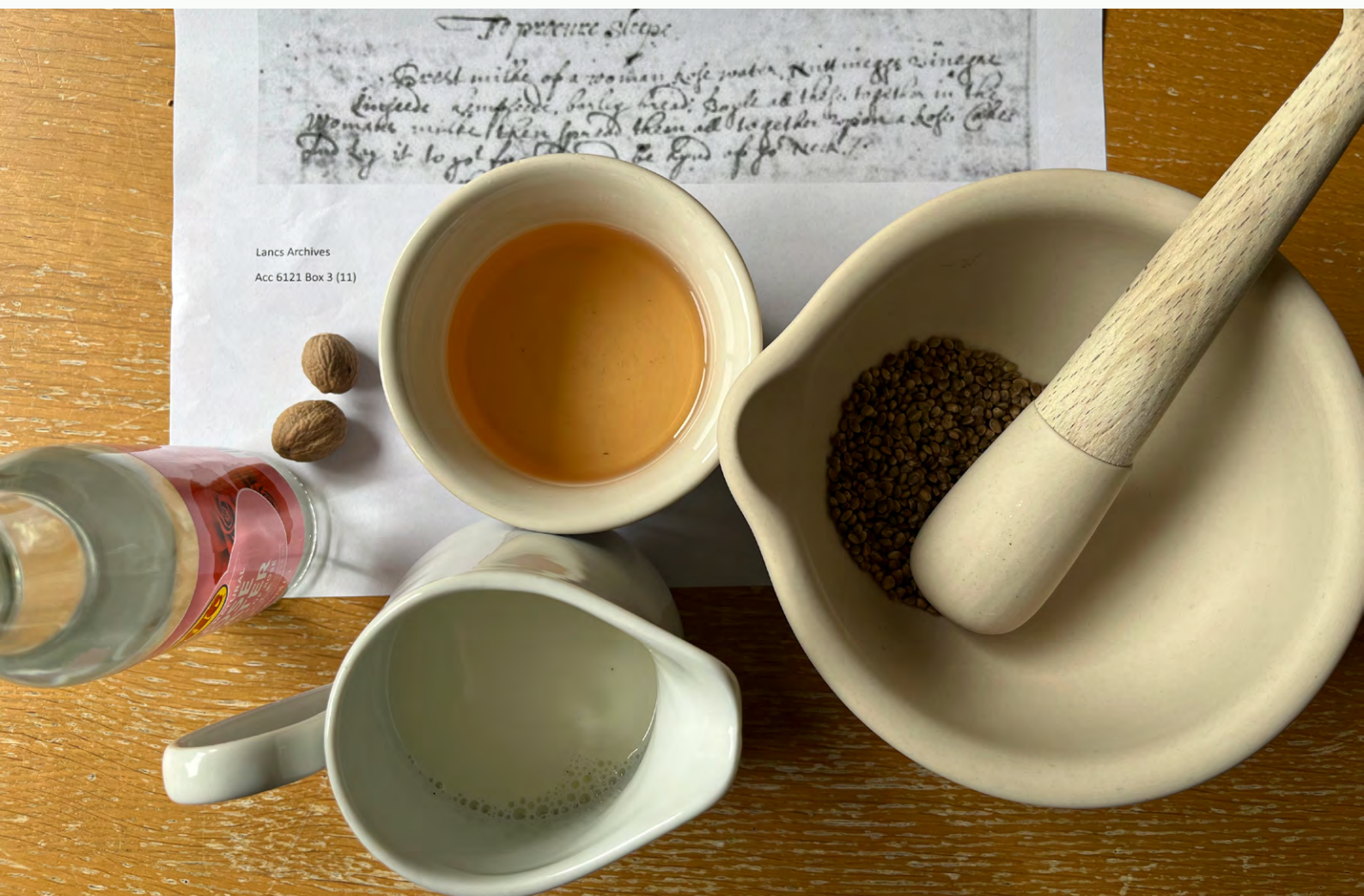
Activities that involved the participants' senses were regularly identified as engaging, relaxing and the most enjoyable. The academic research highlighted the role of the senses in sleep and wellbeing in the early modern period and emphasised a remaking approach which values the physical skills and sensory experiences of engaging with the past.

[Re]connection with creativity

It was important to cultivate an environment where activities pitched at a wide range of skill and confidence levels were available, to ensure physical accessibility and for people who had little creative experience in adulthood and were uncertain about unfamiliar activities.

For example, for activities which require fine motor skills, such as embroidery, some participants had success with felting instead, and two book binding techniques were offered, a simpler ribbon tying and a more complex stitching version, which helped reduce barriers. Once participants adapted to a more creative, process-centred outlook, they shared that this was one of the real advantages of the workshops, finding a sense of self and reconnection to a creative identity.

'Doing this has been really lovely. I actually feel like I'm finding who I haven't been for a very, very long time. You made me reignite my passion for things I didn't even remember I could do. I'd forgotten that part of my brain even existed.'



Lancs Archives
Acc 6121 Box 3 (11)

Social connection

Many participants highlighted the importance of the social aspect of the workshops in contributing to their improved wellbeing. Several participants reported loneliness and social isolation and found that taking part in the workshops helped relieve this. The opportunity to meet people with a shared interest and within the local community was also important.

'It calms me down, it really does. It's the talking and being in a group that I need.'

Participants also reported improved self-esteem from leaving the house and joining the group, being able to help and support other group members, and seeking support from their peers.

'I come and focus on helping others, so it still helps me. My initial worry was that I was not going to be able to help with anything really. But it turns out I do know more than I think.'

Ordsall Hall as a transformative location

Participants responded very positively to the location of the workshops at Ordsall Hall. For some it was a completely new location, and for some engaging with museums or heritage locations was also a new experience.

'I've only ever been in a museum when I was young, at Buille Park (Salford). But I have to admit I have not been to any since. So this has all been an eye-opener for me.'

For participants who do not regularly engage with heritage or culture sector organisations, who may have limited formal education, feeling accepted and belonging is crucial to engagement. 53% of participants reported having a disability of some kind, and many participants reported feeling safe and that Ordsall Hall and the workshops were accessible to them. Ordsall Hall is embedded in its community and is free to access. Staff have embraced education about making the Hall welcoming for visitors with a wide range of access needs.

The location of the Hall in the busy environment of Salford and the discontinuity between the outside world and the environment of the Hall helped participants feel removed from their everyday lives.



This may have helped participants lean into new activities and relationships and break free of unhelpful patterns. Some participants integrated the Hall into their wider wellbeing and mental health activities. One participant arranged to meet with Wellbeing Matters Connectors and Angel Centre mental health supporters at the Hall. This participant's experiences demonstrate the importance of accessible non-clinical therapeutic spaces.

'This is nicer. Doctors don't even come into your mind when you're here. I don't think about the doctor at all. It just goes away doesn't it, as soon as you walk through that front door everything goes.'

A crucial component of the engagement with the Hall was the grounds, which provided the benefits of green space to participants. Activities that prompted engagement with the grounds and gardens were particularly valued by participants.

'I think by coming here as well because your mind changes doesn't it. You're thinking about different things, for me, it's like happy things like flowers and herbs and that, that is a happy place to be, wherever they are.'

The connection between the learning material, the physical activities and the heritage location was very important to participants.

'I've really enjoyed being here at the Hall. It's different if you were in some like random building, you can connect to it in a different way.'

The workshops also prompted a reconsideration of the Hall by participants, and a deeper sense of engagement with place. This engagement with place is key to the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

'It's just been great. The history of it. It's like being at home years ago, centuries ago. It is a beautiful place to be a part of, because we are now, aren't we.'

Historical learning through practical approaches

The opportunity to learn in a creative way, and a broader approach to history, was appealing to many of the participants. Participants felt that the opportunity to make a connection to the past through practical activities made it come alive. The opportunity to learn about early modern people was also widely appreciated. The idea that people in the past cared about and took care of their wellbeing and sleep, and the role of social interactions in maintaining wellbeing, were regularly commented on.

'I've never thought about that before. I was quite surprised about how they took care of their wellbeing and like balance and things.'

For some participants, the workshop changed their self-perception, including ideas developed about themselves in formal education. It also encouraged a re-engagement with historical learning for some participants.



'I think this has re-written a lot of those things from school, when you're under so much pressure to get it right and not get in trouble. Whereas here I'm learning new things and it doesn't matter and I can ask you. And I'm unlearning all those nervous things about coming and sitting with other people you don't know. I think it's kind of helped with school trauma.'

Encouraging Future Engagement

The project helped to integrate participants into existing wellbeing resources and organisations. It was essential for the team to cultivate community connections, to make sense of the wider context in terms of health and wellbeing providers, and to support participants in engaging in creative activities beyond the life of the project. Several participants gained confidence during this project to engage in other opportunities, some of which they had found too intimidating previously.

Ordsall Hall Impact

The project saw the Sleeping Well team work with Ordsall Hall staff to:

- Develop understanding of the early modern period more generally, and health, wellbeing and sleep practices specifically.
- Develop a new visitor offer focused on wellbeing and enrich the existing visitor offers, such as the schools offer, using historical insight from the academic team.
- Invest in the environment and interpretation of Ordsall Hall, providing and developing new resources, including improving the links between the interpretation inside and in the garden.
- Train staff in creative skills, such as book making and flax growing and processing, and creative health and trauma-informed practice.
- Provide on-going instructional materials for staff, to ensure skill maintenance long-term.



The evaluation found that as a result of these activities:

- Ordsall Hall staff appreciated the value of working with academic historians. The SCL team felt that the access to research done according to historical methodologies and with rigour was immensely valuable.
- The project brought non-museum goers into the Hall, introducing a new audience and giving it a new purpose, helping the Hall connect to new people in its community.
- The project helped Ordsall Hall showcase both the historical and cultural value of the Hall and its social value as a community asset which can be leveraged to improve health and wellbeing, addressing social concerns in Salford such as poor mental health and social isolation. This helps the Hall to both access new funding and justify its existing funding, and has raised the profile of the Hall as a health and wellbeing hub within the sector.
- The investments made by the project in the environment of Ordsall Hall, including new interpretation, made the Hall more interactive, and promoted connection to the Hall through visitors' own lived experience. It has made the historical interpretation of the Hall more connected to people's own human stories.

- Being involved in the project has also begun to change staff's perception of the Hall, seeing it as a resource for the community that can address social needs.

Ongoing Impact

The Ordsall Hall team hope to both continue the work to embed Ordsall Hall as a health and wellbeing hub, and to promote the use of Ordsall Hall as a non-clinical therapeutic space, for example as an available place for meeting peer supporters, and have applied for funding to support this. The project created a self-led wellbeing trail, based on the activities developed during the project in the form of a paper leaflet.

Aimed at adults and older children, this is now ongoing interpretation which will be available for free to all 22,000 of Ordsall Hall's annual visitors. The team trialled an initial version of the trail with the project participants on location in the Hall which

Endnotes

1. See published outputs from the project such as Holly Fletcher, 'Making Beds in Early Modern England: Sleep, Matter and Environmental Change', *Historical Research* 97, no. 277 (July 2024): 307-28; Holly Fletcher and Sasha Handley, 'Sleep, Scent, and Household Medical Care in Early Modern England', *History Workshop Journal*, 25 March 2026.

2. Jody Aked, Nic Marks, and Corrina Cordon, *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008).



Ordsall Hall

Sleeping Well

For more information about the project please click or scan the QR codes above for the University of Manchester website and the Ordsall Hall website.