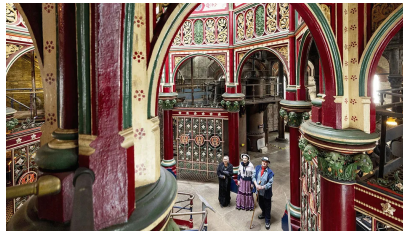


Volunteering has big benefits for the elderly



But those Britons who would most benefit are least likely to do it

THE CROSSNESS Pumping Station is not what you'd expect of a sewage works. With its spiral staircases, colourful tiling and intricate cast-iron latticing, it is a monument to the brilliance of Victorian engineering. Built in 1865 under the direction of Joseph Bazalgette, its four giant, steam-powered pumps (Prince Consort, Victoria, Albert Edward and Alexandra) were the beating heart of a system that eradicated cholera in London and established a model for urban sanitation.

Steam has not been needed to pump London's effluent in more than a century. But on the day your correspondent visits, the Prince Consort and Victoria are humming once again. "What other country would name its shit pumps after the royal family?" asks Ray Fleming, a volunteer in a team that has lovingly restored the engines and spruced up the surrounding site over the past four decades.

The Crossness Engines Trust has a stated mission of recovering part of "Britain's industrial heritage". But it is also testament to the value of volunteering. To almost 100 regular volunteers, many getting on a bit, it offers purpose and community. Working there "keeps you fully occupied and gives you something to look forward to", says Bob Tovey. On open days he and Mr Fleming don bowler hats, neckties and waistcoats to field questions about the pumps' capacity (around 250 tonnes per minute).

If that sounds like a strange way to spend a Sunday, studies back up the idea that volunteering has big benefits for well-being (so long as people are not bored). Younger do-gooders can find it easier to move into work. But the biggest gains are found among the elderly. Those volunteers in the "advanced stages of life" exhibit "better working memory and verbal fluency", according to one meta-analysis. Experts think the social interactions it entails can help stave off dementia.

There are two problems, however. First, those who would benefit most from volunteering—because, say, they are lonely, isolated or unhappy—are least likely to do it, says Jurgen Grotz of the Institute for Volunteering Research at the University of East Anglia. The Crossness site, many of whose volunteers are former manual workers, is unusual; volunteering is more often the preserve of the affluent. That should not be surprising, says John Mohan of the University of Birmingham: the biggest determinant of whether people volunteer is how economically secure they feel. Stress, unpredictable shifts or simply not having a car—all these things count.

That may help explain the second problem: volunteering is in decline. A decade ago 27% of adults in England volunteered once a month. Now it is just 16%. The fall has been steepest among the young. Some culture warriors blame fecklessness. Insecure work and housing are likelier culprits.

Politicians have a long and patchy record of trying to boost volunteering. The last tilt—the "Big Society" touted by Lord Cameron when he was prime minister to offset deep cuts in public spending—went nowhere. But it was "a great idea, in principle", according to Sir Keir Starmer, the current prime minister. A tour of Bazalgette's masterpiece suggests that is right.

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