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## IMPROVING ACCESS TO HISTORIC BUILDINGS: SOME ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

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WALTER Nigel<sup>1</sup>

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1 Nigel Walter Department of Archaeology, University of York, The King's Manor, York YO1 7EP UK  
e-mail: nhw502@york.ac.uk; nigelesque@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-1152-522X

**ABSTRACT:** In England, accessibility to historic buildings falls under the Equality Act 2010, for which a key concept is the making of “reasonable adjustments” to physical features of a building; this acknowledges that a blanket application of technical requirements would be detrimental to some historic buildings, and that equal access may not be achievable in every case. This chapter approaches accessibility in historic buildings in England from two angles. The first is a consideration of two separate guidance documents, from Historic England and from the Church of England respectively; each document is outlined, offering points of comparison with guidance in other jurisdictions. One consistent theme in these documents is the positive framing of accessibility as of benefit not only for those with disabilities, but also for all users and potentially for the heritage itself. The second aspect of the paper comprises three case study projects from my own practice, spread across a range of building types, ages, and grades of protection, which together demonstrate by example some of what is currently considered possible in England, and illustrate how practice relates to policy and guidance. The contribution ends by briefly reflecting on what light accessibility policy might shed on some broader questions of heritage concern.

**KEYWORDS:** accessibility; heritage; Historic England; Church of England

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## Introduction

The first legislation in England to address disability discrimination was the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. This has now been replaced by the broader Equality Act 2010, which places a duty on those who manage historic buildings not to discriminate against people with “protected characteristics,” which includes those with disabilities (the Act also covers gender and racial discrimination). Central to this legislation is the concept of “reasonable adjustments” to the physical features of a building, something carried over from the previous Act (Kent 2012).

Expected standards for disability access to and use of all buildings are set out in Part M of the Building Regulations which covers, for example, the dimensions and gradient of ramps. However, for existing buildings (including historic ones) there is a “reasonableness” test, which implicitly acknowledges that a blanket application of technical requirements will be detrimental to some historic buildings, and that equal access may not be achievable in every case. In practice, modifications to the physical structure of historic buildings to improve access are now widespread, not least because improved accessibility is argued for on heritage and accessibility grounds.

This chapter approaches accessibility in historic buildings from two angles. The first is a consideration of two separate guidance documents, from Historic England and from the Church of England, respectively; each document is outlined, offering points of comparison for those from other jurisdictions. The second aspect comprises three case study projects from my own practice, which illustrate by example some of what is currently considered possible, and how it relates to policy and guidance; these three examples are spread across a range of building types, ages, and grades of protection. This contribution then concludes with some comments on how accessibility relates to broader concerns within heritage, including the place of communal value and how expertise is understood.

## Historic England Guidance

Historic England is the central government’s expert advisor on England’s heritage and has a statutory role in the planning system. Part of that role involves the publication of guidance for heritage professionals and others. Apart from setting down overall principles – the key document being *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance* (Historic England 2008) – other documents address specific sectors (e.g. churches, houses, transport, industry) and issues (e.g. energy efficiency, particular materials, accessibility). The accessibility guidance currently comprises two documents – *Easy Access to Historic Buildings*, and *Easy Access to Historic Landscapes* (Historic England 2015a; 2015b), the former being discussed in this chapter.

The current guidance on buildings dates back to 2004; a second edition (2012) was issued in response to the Equality Act 2010, and the current edition (2015) refreshed and reformatted the guidance, with minimal changes to the earlier versions. The document begins with an initial framing summary, which states that while “many people think of the historic environment as being inaccessible,” there are good reasons for seeing universal access as a priority: “On the contrary, we know that good quality access can enhance our understanding of the historic environment and ensure its sustainability” (Historic England 2015a, ii). In this way, accessibility is framed within a broader and positive context; we are encouraged to see it as having two significant benefits that

affect us all – first, that we will understand our heritage better, and second, presumably partly in consequence, that this will help it to endure. These benefits are stated but not explored further. This opening summary is followed by a quote from the Code of Practice that accompanies the Equality Act, which insists that

[t]he policy of the Equality Act is not a minimalist policy of simply ensuring that some access is available to disabled people; it is, so far as is reasonably practicable, to approximate the access enjoyed by disabled people to that enjoyed by the rest of the public. The purpose of the duty to make reasonable adjustments is to provide access to a service as close as it is reasonably possible to get to the standard normally offered to the public at large... (Historic England 2015a, 1)

Implied by this ambition is that access facilities should be independently usable by those whom they are intended to benefit. It is not sufficient, for example, simply to provide a ramp; rather, it must be of an acceptably shallow gradient, with sufficient landings, handrails etc.

The document is then structured into three main chapters, after which it lists sources of more information and names of organisations to approach for further advice. The first chapter, “Why Access Matters,” sets access in the broader context of Historic England’s *Conservation Principles* (Historic England 2008), and points out that in most cases the survival of a historic building depends upon its continued, beneficial use, and that this itself may require access improvements. It then discusses the legislative and administrative context, including The Equality Act 2010, planning permissions, access requirements under Part M of the Building Regulations, and listed building consent. Reference is also made to the “ecclesiastical exemption” – the parallel system for listed building consent that is operated by six Christian denominations in England and Wales, and which is discussed below.

With respect to the interface between the Building Regulations and heritage concerns, according to the guidance, Part M recognises that full compliance will not always be possible in historic settings, and that “the aim should be to improve accessibility where practically possible, provided that the work does not prejudice the character of the building” or risk its deterioration (Historic England 2015a, 7). Consultation with relevant heritage professionals, local authority access officers and local access groups is recommended. The way the interface between the Building Regulations and heritage is negotiated is critical. To what extent alterations to a historic building prejudices its character is in part a question of judgement and the interpretation of heritage significance. Where there is a clash between accessibility and heritage priorities, a determination is made on the basis of the reasonableness of a given proposal.

The second chapter, “Planning Better Access,” considers the practicalities involved in developing proposals and achieving permission. The first section considers “What is reasonable?” and outlines how specific proposals should be developed from an overall access strategy (including objectives, framework and budget) via access audit and conservation assessment, which together feed into an access plan; this is intended to be reviewed regularly in relation to the access strategy. The second section, “Barriers to Access,” discusses the way the Equality Act 2010 outlines four options for overcoming barriers caused by physical features.

These are:

- removal of the feature;
- alterations to the feature;
- providing reasonable means of avoiding it;
- providing the service by a reasonable alternative method if none of the preceding options is viable (Historic England 2015a, 19).

While these are not ordered by preference, this is how they effectively function, from the top downwards. The implication is that heritage professionals should not focus on the bottom of the list with the least invasive measures, but should work from the top down; it is interesting to note that this is an example of not following the doctrine of minimal intervention, which is not discussed at all within the guidance.

The third chapter, “Making Access a Reality,” provides examples of situations where difficult decisions had to be made. It is pointed out that not all of the examples shown in the document conform in every detail to the guidance contained in Part M of the Building Regulations but are presented as successfully balancing reasonable adjustment with heritage priorities (Historic England 2015a, 23). Examples are given of level access at entrances and within buildings, and the potential for wheelchairs to damage sensitive historic fabric is discussed. The text then considers vertical movement, including ramps, stairs and landings, handrails and lifts. A further section discusses lighting, signs and information, while the chapter concludes with brief comments on landscape and on street furniture and seating.

The key phrase from the legislation is “reasonable adjustments.” This, of course, raises the question “Reasonable for whom?” Historic England is clear that the views of disabled people themselves are key to deciding this: “In determining reasonableness consideration should be given to the dignity of disabled people and the extent to which they are caused inconvenience or anxiety” (Historic England 2015a, 19). At the same time, there is a general recognition that the very purpose of some types of historic building makes them more resistant to the provision of equal access – the most obvious example being castles (Lynch and Proverbs 2019, 5).

The Historic England document is illustrated with multiple examples, providing a good indication of a range of possible solutions. These include the Ypres Tower at Rye, a scheduled monument, where an original medieval doorway was reopened, providing level access to the ground floor, and the Ripon Town Hall, where level access was provided to the main entrance by ramping the entire pavement up over the original steps. At Brougham Castle near Penrith in Cumbria, the main approach, paved with uneven cobbles, was replaced with a smooth surface to improve access for both ambulant and wheelchair disabled, and at the Christopher Wren-designed St James’s Church, Piccadilly, London, level access was achieved by converting a window opening in a less sensitive nineteenth-century addition to form a doorway. These examples serve well to flesh out the principles promoted by the guidance.



## Ridley Hall Cambridge

Ridley Hall is a nineteenth-century Cambridge theological training college. The initial phase of construction, supervised by the architect Charles Luck, was taken place in 1879–81 (fig. 1); this phase forms the east range of the main court of the College, and comprises the Principal's Lodge (now used for a mix of teaching and administrative spaces), the three-storey east range, including a double-height lecture hall and a four-storey gatehouse tower, and the College dining room and kitchens. As is traditional in Cambridge, all accommodation is accessed via staircases, with the eastern range having four (Stairs A–D), in addition to the Principal's Lodge. These buildings, along with most of others subsequently added to the main court, are listed grade II – the lowest of the three grades of statutory protection.



Fig. 1. Ridley Hall, Cambridge – east range, before the project.

Together with a number of student rooms, this east range also accommodates most of the communal spaces of the College, yet until recent works not one of them had level access. To overcome this, an overall strategy was developed that addressed access in three ways:

- The main floor level of the path along the eastern range was regraded, raising this level by a step to match the tiled floor of the gatehouse, which forms the main entrance to the College;
- ramps were created to access the Principal's Lodge, the Lecture Hall, and Stair C, where two rooms had previously been combined to create an accessible room;
- two external platform lifts were installed.

As is typical for buildings of this era, every one of the main entrances had multiple steps leading to its threshold. The worst example was Stair D, which houses the dining room and common room, both key communal spaces; the original design provided access via an external flight of eight steps, with a further flight of steps inside, creating a series of difficult and interrelated challenges. An earlier strategy had proposed alterations to create level access into the building through a side door and service area, together with the addition of a lift from there to the main level. However, this strategy was rejected since it failed to address the concern that directing those with disabilities to a secondary entrance effectively treated them as second-class citizens, and was thus contrary to prevailing guidance and best practice.



Fig. 2. Ridley Hall, Cambridge – Stair D, completed (photo: Lina and Tom Ltd).

The strategy adopted for Stair D comprised four interventions (fig. 2). First, the external steps were rebuilt further away from the building to create a landing in front of the entrance doors, matching the historic stonework detailing but adding railings at each side. Second, a platform lift was installed to raise wheelchairs from ground level to this new landing at the level of the entrance doors. Third, the internal change of level was addressed with a wheelchair stair lift from the entrance level to the first floor dining room and common room.

Finally, that left the entrance doors themselves. Each leaf of these was too narrow for wheelchair use, and the doors could not be automated; still, the doors themselves were an important part of the original design and it would not have been appropriate to replace them. The solution was to install a fully glazed internal lobby with a single accessibility-compliant door, enabling the outer doors to stand open when this part of the building is in use; in this way, the historic doors are retained but no longer present an obstacle to access.





Fig. 3. Ridley Hall, Cambridge – Library, completed (photo: Lina and Tom Ltd).

Another significant problem that the College had with its communal facilities was that the library was on the second floor, having been created many years before by combining together a series of smaller residential spaces. There was no sensible possibility of installing a lift, and even had this been achieved, the widths of corridors and door openings would have prevented wheelchair users from accessing the facility once up at second floor. The College considered a new single-storey building, but what was proposed would have compromised the setting of the listed buildings. However, beneath the Lecture Hall was a basement used only for storage due to headroom of 1.8 m. The decision was taken to relocate the library from the second floor to this area. The building was underpinned and the basement dug out, lowering the finished floor by some 600 mm; extensive excavations also took place externally to install new access stairs and a platform lift. The new library (fig. 3) includes not only book stacks and study desks but also a disabled WC, enabling those with disabilities to use the library for extended periods of study. With the relocation of the library and other accessibility changes, the College for the first time has level access to all of its principal communal spaces.

### **Huntingdon Town Hall**

Huntingdon Town Hall is a three-storey, eighteenth-century civic building, listed grade II\*, the middle grade of statutory protection (fig. 4). The appointment was made in competition in 2010 on the basis of an accessibility strategy for creating level access to all principal spaces, with the aim that the building would become self-sustaining through rental income. The adopted strategy centred on the internal incorporation of a passenger lift in a location that would not impact the building's major spaces or fittings, crucially restoring the building's original pattern of circulation. This was in contrast to an alternative proposal to place the lift externally to the building in a

location that was very much “round the back” and separated from the main entrance, with all the associated negative connotations. As with Ridley Hall, accessibility was therefore key not only to the alterations themselves, but also to the broader purpose of the project.



Fig. 4. Huntingdon Town Hall.

The Town Hall was built in 1745 and significantly altered in 1817. It has come to symbolise the civic identity of Huntingdon. After over a hundred years of the ground and first floors serving as court, the building was no longer required for that purpose, and it was natural that the Town Council should move its offices back in. However, this iconic building was much larger than the Council administration required; thus, planning for its future has always depended on accommodating a variety of activities, with all its major spaces being put to good use.



Fig. 5. Huntingdon Town Hall – Assembly Room (photo: Huntingdon Town Council).



The ground floor comprises an entrance with two double-height courtrooms and some single storey ancillary spaces, including three holding cells, one of which was retained for its historical interest. At first floor there are some smaller connected rooms, which is where the administrative offices of the Town Council are now located, together with the reopened galleries providing view onto the courts below. At second floor, the principal spaces are the Council Chamber, still used for its original purpose of Council meetings, and the Assembly Room (fig. 5), a glorious space capable of hosting large-scale events (20 m x 7 m). Because it is now accessible, it once again plays its intended role as the premium indoor venue in the town. A catering kitchen on first floor has been created to service these spaces on the second floor.

Together with other minor alterations and an extensive programme of repairs, which addressed years of neglect, accessibility works have helped to secure the long-term future of the building by opening up the principal spaces at each of the three levels to a wider variety of uses. This establishes revenue opportunities for ongoing repairs and maintenance of the building for generations to come, and provides an example of how improved access can deliver significant heritage benefits.

### **Church of England Guidance**

The Church of England is one of six denominations that operates its own system of listed building consent parallel to the secular system, under what is known as the “ecclesiastical exemption” (Morrice 2009; Walter 2020a). This system represents a longstanding recognition of the distinctive nature of living heritage (Walter 2020b); it should be noted that external changes to the appearance of church buildings – such as an access ramp – still also require planning permission from the local authority.

With so many historic buildings in its care, the Church of England produces an extensive range of guidance for buildings-related issues; for accessibility, this is contained within the recently published *Equal Access to Church Buildings* (Church Buildings Council 2021). This document is structured into two principal chapters intended to be read together. First, the Introduction sets out a theological position on what is meant by disability, and the importance of inclusivity as enabling all people, whatever their mental or physical capacities, to participate fully in the life of the Church. The focus should be on mutuality, implying that those with disabilities should not be seen as solely in need of ministry, but as also offering ministry to others. This has significant implications for how decisions, not least about accessibility improvements, are made: “The voice, the experience, the wisdom of disabled people (of all sorts) needs to be at the centre of our approach” (Church Buildings Council 2021, 9). Further, it is essential to acknowledge that those living with disabilities have particular expertise the the rest of us lack. In the section “Learning from the experts,” the guidance argues that “[w]hen it comes to understanding living with a disability, the people who know best are those with lived experience” (10).

The Introduction ends with a section on the challenges of providing equal access in historic buildings. Churches are encouraged not to see accessibility as a process of finding an expert to fix a problem, but as a journey made together in which the church becomes a “community

of discovery”; and this orientation towards community, it is suggested, will lead to better outcomes. This motivation then shapes both policy and casework guidance:

- The *law* merely asks for “reasonable adjustments” to make a building accessible. The journey of community asks deeper questions.
- The Church Buildings Council [CBC] has found that quite significant interventions to enable access can be reasonable in the right context. (CBC 2021, 11; emphasis preserved)

The document then states that the CBC will consistently encourage, for example, a shared point of entry for all users of a building, and the provision of an accessible toilet rather than a separate or external one. The Introduction aims to encourage appropriate adaptation of historic buildings, and the theological framing serves to underline that improving access is not just for the benefit of those with disabilities, but for the benefit of the whole community: “A Church without disabled people is a disabled Church. [...] Whenever we deny someone the opportunity to belong, the whole Church is diminished” (CBC 2021, 8).

The second chapter – “What Can We Do?” – applies the principles identified earlier to specific types of improvement, guides the reader through the permissions process, and provides practical examples of successful adaptations. The aim is to encourage churches to think through how one arrives and enters the building, how one takes part in activities, and how one departs. The recommendation is to begin the process with an access audit, either by a professional consultant, or less formally in cooperation with local disabled parishioners, thus potentially opening the process to the community.

The scope of possible accessibility-related alterations is shown in a list of “core considerations,” which include (but are not limited to) toilets, audiovisual aids, kitchens, ramps, lighting, pews/seating, signage, and parking (CBC 2021, 15). Churches are encouraged to grow their “reputation for welcome,” for example by offering accessible parking free for those who need it, and keeping accessible toilets clear of storage. The process of obtaining permission for changes to the building, known as a faculty, is framed in positive terms as beneficial for the church and as a means of improving proposals; the faculty process requires consultation with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), which may well have an access adviser able to give advice. As with all faculty applications, the proposals will need to demonstrate that the public benefits outweigh any impact on the character of the building; those benefits very much include accessibility, understood both as a benefit in its own right and as part of the mission of the church.

The document concludes with the third chapter, which lists additional resources and sources of further advice.



### **All Saints' Church, Cottenham**

All Saints' Church in Cottenham, Cambridge (fig. 6) offers an example of modest accessibility works that were achieved as part of a re-ordering project. The earliest parts of the building, including the bottom stage of the west tower, date from the thirteenth century; much of the church was rebuilt in the fifteenth century, the upper stages of the tower were added in 1617, and the interior was altered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The building is listed grade I.



Fig. 6. All Saints' Church, Cottenham – view from south east.

As is not uncommon in English churches, the main floor level of the church is lower than the outside, in this case by a single step. The previous scheme allowed for a ramp immediately inside the main entrance door, which would have achieved level access, but at the cost of a significant intrusion into the south aisle, just at the point where visitors are being welcomed. Instead of this somewhat inelegant solution, level access has been achieved by gently ramping the floor of the south porch. A slot drain was incorporated at the top of the ramp to prevent surface water entering the church, and the nineteenth-century south doors were altered to suit the new floor level. The result achieves step-free access through the main entrance, but in an understated manner; as the guidance suggests, understated solutions such as this are more genuinely equal, because they do not draw special attention to the user (CBC 2021, 16).



Fig. 7. All Saints' Church, Cottenham – interior from east, before the project

The second aspect of the scheme was the re-ordering of the interior. Since the nineteenth century, the interior had been fitted with bench pews on raised timber bases (fig. 7). One of these timber pew bases become rotten – the voids beneath rarely have adequate ventilation – and this presented an opportunity to improve accessibility in the interior. The two front pew bases were removed and replaced with areas of solid floor with an Ancaster stone finish at the same level as the rest of the floor. Where the pews from the front half of the church were removed, these were shortened and made movable, retaining all of the attractively carved “poppyhead” pew ends. This now allows for a newfound flexibility (fig. 8), both for liturgical arrangement and to accommodate people in wheelchairs more naturally as part of the worshipping community, rather than according them a different status by placing them right at the front or right at the back, as previously (see: CBC 2021, 18).





Fig. 8. All Saints' Church, Cottenham – interior from south door, completed

### **Accessibility and Heritage**

The accessibility guidance documents reviewed above raise some interesting broad issues for heritage. Notwithstanding Historic England's definition of conservation as the management of change (2008, 71), modern conservation processes typically treat historic buildings as completed art objects, which means that further change is negatively characterised as harm. By contrast, the two pieces of guidance explored above suggest that physical changes associated with access improvements are seen, by some at least, as an *enhancement*, not only in terms of accessibility but also more broadly with regard to heritage. To the extent that these are "living buildings," we should not be surprised that they continue to undergo a degree of change, as they typically have throughout their existence; as the nineteenth-century theologian John Henry Newman said, "here below to live is to change" (Newman [1845] 2001, 40). However, the changes brought by accessibility seem to be treated in these documents in a more positive light; as Newman concluded the above sentence, "to be perfect is to have changed often." While clearly not all change is good, the generally positive assessment of change for improved access is noteworthy for those involved in the care and adaptation of living buildings.

The second aspect is the doctrine of minimal intervention, which has deep roots in conservation; in a UK context, it goes back to John Ruskin, and appears prominently in William Morris's SPAB Manifesto, with its call "to stave off decay by daily care [...] and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands" (Morris [1877] 2018). Rather than accepting change as a characteristic of living historic buildings, the doctrine of

minimal intervention treats change as an exception that should only be allowed once all other options have been exhausted. On that view, the expectation would be that accessibility measures should begin at the non-invasive, interpretative or virtual end of Historic England's structure discussed above. Still, that is not the thrust of either guidance document; indeed, the prominent quote in the Historic England guidance from the Code of Practice to the Equality Act that its policy is not minimalist signals a quite different approach. Elsewhere, I have argued at length for a narrative approach to conservation, which offers a framework for understanding living buildings as developing personalities rather than as completed biographies (Walter 2020a). I have suggested that contemporary accessibility policy and practice is more compatible with that approach than with a historic conservation orthodoxy oriented towards preservation.

Since the legislation requires "reasonable adjustments" by service providers, the extent of change permitted to historic buildings hinges on the determination of what is reasonable. The key question of who has say in that determination highlights the third notable aspect of the guidance: how expertise is understood. Conservation practice remains dominated by professionals and experts; as John Schofield's (2014) edited book *Who Needs Experts?* explores, the role of the expert has become contested, and is intimately connected with our understanding of the relative importance of communal or social value. Siân Jones (2017: 22) notes that the conventional "expert-driven" methodology often fails "to capture the dynamic, iterative and embodied nature of people's relationships with the historic environment in the present" that constitute its social value. However difficult it may be for heritage professionals such as myself to acknowledge, our expertise can in practice serve to exclude non-professional voices, whatever our intentions. In this context, it is significant that both documents strongly recommend consultation with those with disabilities, and the Church of England guidance specifically acknowledges that they have distinct expertise which must be listened to. This recognition and celebration of what we could term a form of "communal (or social) expertise" is highly significant for a more general renegotiation of the balance of power between experts and non-professionals.

## **Conclusion**

Underlying both the guidance discussed above and the case study examples is the belief that equal access means that those with disabilities should, wherever possible, be able to access heritage buildings on their own terms, and with as little distinction from other building users as possible. A common theme running through all three case studies has thus been the incorporation of accessibility improvements at the principal points of entry or use; each example has avoided the use of secondary entrances, even where this might have required fewer alterations to the building. Clearly this will not be achievable in every case, but it is an important aim, since it avoids the sense of "otherness" that those with disabilities may experience. Further, the achievement of these changes reflects the acknowledgement on the part of permission givers that equal access is a high priority, both for those with physical disabilities but also, as indicated in both the Historic England and the Church of England guidance, for all users and for heritage itself. As discussed, central to the Equality Act is the idea of "reasonable adjustments." It is not



enough for heritage professionals alone to be the judges of what is reasonable; those with disabilities must also be given a say and allowed to be central to the decision making process. That said, the UK has avoided the approach, adopted in some jurisdictions, where historic buildings are treated as no different from new buildings, with the expectation that level access *must* be achieved, whatever the cost to the historic fabric. In the English system, each case is judged on its merits, which encourages creative problem solving and the exploration of a wide range of solutions. In terms of process, all of the guidance in England recommends that, before proposals are developed, an access audit is carried out, including input from local disability groups or individuals. The discovery of creative solutions is seen as a communal responsibility. The approach adopted in England is thus marked by pragmatism, reflecting the overriding principle in English heritage law that when change is proposed, harm to the significance of a historic building must be balanced against the public benefits that would be achieved. The Church of England guidance, which is aimed at those responsible for the day-to-day use and care of church buildings, specifically encourages church communities to be imaginative in pushing for accessibility improvements in order to make these buildings as open and welcoming as they can be, and to as diverse a range of people as possible.

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