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The heritage industry is one of the most important sectors in Britain. Cultural heritage tourism has exploded over the past decade. Our built heritage is at the privileged and unique position of providing us with a glimpse of our past and allowing us to link up with our forebears.

Its importance rests upon the fact that it is an unparalleled resource, which has strong cultural value. Buildings in particular can be valued upon historic associations, typology, age and rarity. Some buildings have taken centuries to evolve into their current state.

Taking into account the finite nature of our heritage, even the smallest change can adversely affect the significance of a buildings interior or exterior. It is natural, therefore, to understand that any decision to alter or change the character of such buildings has to be taken very seriously; especially when access has to be considered for those with permanent or temporary disabilities.

The recent extension of the **Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)** requires that equal opportunity for access is provided for those with disabilities within the realms of the public and private sectors. Not only does it encompass new buildings, but it also applies to our historic environment too. The **DDA** also includes for access to the wider site, facilities and information belonging to a property.

eca lifts is a company dedicated to providing access solutions for all eventualities. Its impassioned approach belies a company which is at the cutting edge of innovation. Director, Ken Lewcock sums up their philosophy:

" I have been driven by a compulsion to enable others to connect with their past through our heritage, but the age-old problem has been that the terms 'minimum intervention' and 'maximum access' have not been easily interchangeable with older buildings."

What Ken has noticed is that current and conventional access solutions have relied upon methods of access which can be clumsy, cluttered and ultimately interfere with the heritage experience.

As many people are beginning to realise, the significance of a building isn't just about "what you can see" - it is also about the 'intangible': that special mix of fabric, atmosphere and mystery. Many of today's conventional access solutions are liable to interfere with such significance.

eca lifts have had a considerable amount of experience with historic buildings, both listed and unlisted. One notable example is **eca's** provision of access to the award winning 'Out of The Hat' Heritage and Visitor Centre in Tewkesbury, which involved the painstaking conservation of a C17th grade II listed timber framed building. Ken continues:

"Underpinned with such knowledge and experience, we have been constantly researching our market to spot any innovative designs which might provide real life solutions to real life situations. Enabling diversity of access with little visual impact has remained our holy grail, and we are very excited to announce that we have finally found such a solution."

What **eca lifts** is now able to provide represents a considerable revolution, especially in situations where 'low-rise' access is an absolute must, and nothing in terms of the standing building fabric can be sacrificed.

The **Low Rise Transfer Lift (LRTL)** is designed to overcome changes in both the horizontal and vertical planes. It's raison d'etre is its ability (when not in use) to lie flush with the floor surface. The **LRTL** can also optionally incorporate the existing surface onto its platform face, thus reducing considerably visual impact, and retaining the maximum amount of historic fabric.

The **LRTL** only requires a depth of 100 - 130mm (depending upon which model) and can take a maximum load of upto 300kg. Additional safety features are incorporated to stop wheel movement when in motion.

It is rare to come across an access device which is 'virtually' invisible, but it is just as rare for such a device to add to the significance of the building in terms of enabling access without impairing character.

The benefits of minimum intervention are plain to see, and it means that Planning and Conservation Officers have a game-changing option to consider when carrying out Impact Assessments and Conservation Plans. Equally, historic property owners may also be able to consider the **LRTL** for access when other access solutions have not been possible in the past.

When taking into account the above factors the **LRTL** can make a life-changing difference for people with disabilities, who genuinely want to connect with their historic environment. It can provide a real variety of access possibilities.

eca lifts are at the forefront of such technology and offer free advice and information to help inform the conservation process and ultimately provide freedom of access for all.