Pagans\(^1\) take their interest in the past, and the past in the present, seriously. Heritage, both tangible and intangible, is important to a wide and ever-broadening range of interest groups, and of these pagans are significant stakeholders. While focus on such honey-pot prehistoric sites as Stonehenge and Avebury stone circles and their associated monuments in Wiltshire, is inevitable, pagans engage with a great variety of archaeological monuments and other remains, from the burial site of the Anglo-Saxon ‘prince’ at Prittlewell in Essex threatened by road building, and rock art sites on Ilkley Moor in Yorkshire and the Kilmartin Valley in Argyll, Scotland, to small, local bronze age burial mounds in both highly accessible and remote locations visited by few others than specialist archaeologists—and pagans. Pagans tend not to see themselves as simply ‘visitors’ to these sites, but as religious pilgrims of sorts, often returning again and again to ‘sacred’ places in which they feel ‘at home’. Access to sites may be straightforward when, for instance, Castlerigg

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\(^1\) We choose to capitalise the various pagan paths and their practitioners (e.g. Druidry and Druid, Heathenry and Heathen) since this is nomenclature that pagans use to identify themselves (much as a Christian or Muslim would do). In turn, this aids distinction between, for example, contemporary Druids and ancient ‘druids’. We use ‘pagan’ and ‘paganism’ in lower case, indicating a generic term, the meaning of which is contested by different pagans, but also capitalise ‘Pagan’ and ‘Paganism’ in instances where the pagans in question identify their path as specifically ‘Pagan’ rather than Druid, Wiccan, etc. Where we discuss ancient paganism, we qualify the distinction in the text (e.g. using ‘ancient paganism’ rather than ‘paganism’), but avoid the term ‘neo-pagan’ (mostly a US usage) in order to avoid devaluing contemporary practice: the ancient and contemporary forms are not the same but the latter is not inauthentic as ‘neo-’ might imply.
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Stone circle in Cumbria is accessible at any hour of the day; entrance to other sites on the other hand, Stonehenge most obviously, is controlled. Calls for wider freedom of access and the logistics of access involving ritual and celebration, bring pagans into negotiation with heritage managers. The excavated remains from such sites are also significant to pagans, who make ‘pilgrimages’ to museum collection displays in order to make connections with ‘ancestral remains’; for example, the Anglo-Saxon Sutton Hoo ship burial finds held at the British Museum in London, Neolithic artefacts in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and the skeletal remains of ‘Charlie’ displayed at the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury. Pagan interests in archaeological sites and material culture provide connections with ‘ancestors’ and ancestor ‘welfare’ is a burgeoning issue, with calls for the ‘return to the earth’ of certain human remains being taken seriously by museum professionals. Issues raised by these pagan interactions with archaeology, and the representation of the past, provide the focus for our research: the ‘Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights’ project (www.sacredsites.org.uk) has examined these engagements and evaluated the implications for interest groups ranging from heritage managers and the tourist industry to local communities and, of course, pagans themselves.

As the variety of examples we cited above indicate, the study of paganism must engage with pagans at ‘sacred sites’ as a matter of course; and, vice versa, heritage studies cannot ignore pagans. Yet despite the formulation of pagan studies (or the scholarly study of paganisms [Harvey 2004]) (e.g. Blain 2002; Blain et al. 2004a; Blain & Wallis 2006a; Greenwood 2000, 2005; Harvey 1997; Harvey & Hardman 1995; Hutton 1999; Pearson 2003; Wallis 2003, 2004) as a sub-discipline (with attention from anthropologists and religious studies most notably) academic examination of this topic is relatively new. Key works by the archaeologist Chris Chippindale (et al. 1990) and anthropologist Barbara Bender (1998) focus on the iconic Stonehenge, but attention to this site eclipses an extensive range of pagan engagements elsewhere. Our own work (e.g. Blain & Wallis 2002, 2004a, 2006b, 2007, 2008; Blain et al. 2004b; Letcher, Blain & Wallis forthcoming; Wallis & Blain 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005; Wallis & Lymer 2001) redresses this imbalance, examining a range of sites and pagan perspectives, across Britain. Our interests are academic, as an archaeologist (Wallis) and an anthropologist (Blain), and we are also pagan (Heathen): as such, this is autoethnographic, ‘insider’ research (e.g. Reed-Danahay 1997; Blain 2002; Blain et al. 2004a; Wallis 2000, 2001, 2004). We do not