

Case study

Lancashire Witches 400

Rural regeneration through the visual arts

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Background

The Lancashire Witches 400 project (LW400) is a diverse creative programme initiated by Green Close Studios, who are based in Melling, rural Lancashire. The programme explored the heritage of the Lancashire Witches, the 400th anniversary of their trial and execution, and the enduring theme of persecution today.

Throughout 2012 and 2013, hundreds of people have participated in free workshops, talks and exhibitions featuring work from schools and the local community. There have been original creative responses from a range of artists including Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, and a new walking trail has been established across Lancashire featuring work by Sue Flowers, sculptor Stephen Raw and members of the local community.

Objectives

- To commemorate and remember the Lancashire Witches and issues surrounding their persecution 400 years on
- To allow people to understand more about their local history through a creative commissioning project
- To look into current issues that were present 400 years ago, such as persecution, scapegoating and religious intolerance
- To create a project legacy by creating a walking route and project booklets.
- To raise awareness of the work of local charity Stepping Stones Nigeria with children accused of witch craft today

Target audience

- Lancashire residents: getting them involved in community art projects (such as the community quilt) and thinking about their local history.
- Walkers: encouraging them to use the route for years to come and allowing them to access visual art along the way through the way markers inscribed by artist Stephen Raw with the poem 'Lancashire Witches' by Carol Anne Duffy.
- Those with an interest in history or the witches' trial.

Process

We focused our educational work on a core group of young people from the junior classes of three primary schools: Quernmore, Padiham Green and Slaidburn. Artists Sue Flowers, Pete Flowers and Kate Eggleston-Wirst helped them explore the issues raised by the persecution of the witches through creative activities.

Artists engaged each school class in four accompanied site visits, ten full-day creative workshops and a celebratory final event.

We wanted the young people to develop a deeper understanding about their relationship with local history and the relevance of the history of the Lancashire Witches to contemporary society. They would become new creative historians, using historical and creative research with 'core' history as a starting point and creating artworks which express this history.

As well as generating artwork created by school children, artists working on the project produced new artworks themselves in response to this history developed in partnership with the young people they worked with.

These works and a selection of the artwork created by children were exhibited at Lancaster City Museum; Judges Lodgings Museum, Lancaster; Gawthorpe Hall, Padiham and Clitheroe Castle.

Outcomes

- An established and marked out route for members of the public commemorating the history of the Lancashire Witches with thirty community-made waymarkers and a walking guidebook including maps, route descriptions and images created during the project. Wrights & Sites staged a series of walking performances and interventions in the landscape.
- The Community Quilt and an audio story featuring local community participants and project partners talking about the witches
- Artwork and associated books available for schools to borrow and an online resource for teachers
- Increased historic and social understanding and creative skills in teachers, local children and members of the public. Local people became more aware of Stepping Stones Nigeria

- New relationships between local schools, museums and other heritage sites
- We improved our understanding of teachers' needs in developing arts-based history projects, and expertise about how to develop teachers' resources to support them

The artists felt that the projects gave them the opportunity to expand or develop their own practice:

- Wrights & Sites were able to work with an artist who was new to them and added a visual dimension to their predominantly performance-based art. They also tested ways of engaging with a broader range of public, creating a market-stall-cum-art-gallery that gave them an accessible platform for engaging with members of the public.
- Louise Ann Wilson used the opportunity to test out the creation of a self-directed walk for members of the public, where previously her walks have been led.
- Stephen Raw developed his metal work expertise by learning about casting iron, in contrast to the bronze he is more used to working with.
- Helen Saunders felt the subject matter of her photographs need a different viewpoint and her images were taken from a lower perspective. This has now become embedded in her usual working practice.
- Pete Flowers' work was directly inspired by his work with the school children: previously his engagement work and own practice followed separate paths.
- Kate Eggleston-Wirtz took her assemblage work into new directions by using it to create an educational object loan. In addition, she created a film hosted on YouTube, a new departure which has since led to new collaborations and partnerships.
- Sue Flowers' felt her work was enriched by the quantity and quality of engagement with schools and communities and her approach changed significantly.

Recommendations

Communication:

- Be clear within the team who is responsible for what, and communicate that to partners
- Ask partners what they need
- Plan regular face-to-face meetings to keep trust and communication building
- Provide updates

- Agree issues around finance, marketing, evaluation and creative content and review them regularly
- Make sure everyone gets relevant information in good time
- Be clear about priorities

Collaboration:

- Be flexible
- Build trust
- Give clear curatorial direction or vision: freedom is welcomed by artists and partners but too much freedom can lead to uncertainty, isolation and misunderstanding
- Be ready to revise applications or re-negotiate contracts if necessary

Timescale:

- Establish schedules with deadlines and milestones and share them with collaborators
- Make sure you ask people for things with enough notice for them to respond. Remember that partners will be working on other projects and priorities and so will have limited flexibility
- Build contingency time into projects

Identity:

- Capitalise on success by consolidating your organisation's brand
- Create a couple of sentences about your organisation's unique offer that the team can use in the first line of funding applications and press releases and to start conversations.