

Connecting Histories

The history of the West Midlands in the twentieth century is central to the story of the development of a multicultural nation. It is a history of the emergence of multicultural, multilingual and multifaith communities, of Black, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, Irish, refugee and travelling peoples. The stories that make up this history remained largely hidden in archival and library collections; stories of common experiences, shared struggles and aspirations.

Connecting Histories sought to make these collections accessible and realise their potential so that connections could be made between the past and the present, and thereby encourage local and national debate about our shared identities, our common sense of belonging and our multiple heritages. It also aims to provide users with the skills to engage with these multiple histories.

Over 30 months the project carried out the following activities:

- Cataloguing and providing onsite and electronic access to significant and culturally diverse archive collections;
- Training two positive action trainees who will qualify as archivists at the end of the project;
- Digitising sound and photographic archives to ensure preservation and access;
- Developing five web-based learning packages on a series of linked themes including research skills, Black British History, migration and settlement, campaigning for social justice, and how performance has been used as a form of resistance and a means to bring about change;
- Supporting a range of community and volunteer groups to undertake their own community archives and heritage projects;
- Providing a model of working for the archives and heritage sectors, which can be disseminated regionally and nationally.

Target Audience

Local communities within the City of Birmingham, in particular people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and/or those who were non-users of the City's Library and Archive service. There was also an emphasis on generating cross-community contact between different kinds of Black and Minority Ethnic groups, between those groups and other Brummies and between older and younger residents.

Aim

The aims of the project were:

- Increase access to culturally diverse archive collections;
- Preserve at-risk sound and photographic archives;
- Expand the heritage knowledge and skills of local communities through user participation, particularly non-traditional users;
- Increase the number and diversity of users of archive collections;
- Provide e-learning environments aimed at a broad range of users;
- Embed and sustain regional partnerships;
- Give users and volunteers the opportunity to influence archive policies and practices;
- Increase the diversity of the workforce in the archive and specialist heritage and library sectors;
- Develop a model of working transferable to other contexts.

Process

The project was heavily influenced and guided by previous work carried by Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures. Connecting Histories evolved within an established partnership between Birmingham City Archives, the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures group. Together, these groups began to promote awareness of culturally diverse histories within the city over seven years prior to the project.

The project was set up to allow for flexibility in working with different communities and individuals, in recognition from previous experience of working with diverse groups.

The project established a multi-disciplinary team (archivists, outreach, researchers, and academics) with a wide range of complementary skills. Overseen by a management board from Birmingham Libraries and an Advisory Board, the project had a deliberately flat management structure, which aided collaborative decision-making.

Project processes concentrated on high quality research and consultation, always based upon the richness of the archival collections and the interaction between these and the life stories and experiences of participants.

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Number of participants

Number of volunteers: 70

Number of primary users: 50,000

Number of users of website: 26,388 individual visitors and 664,336 hits in six months post launch

Number of events: 5

Number of people at events: 520 (e)

Number of outreach activities: 3 to 4 a day

Number of outreach enquiries received: 2 to 3 a day (e)

Number of contacts on database: Started at 150. Now over 1,000.

Impact and outcome

All those consulted as on the outcomes of Connecting Histories believed that it showed the potential to support community cohesion and engagement and there is evidence that this has already happened through the sharing of experiences and histories as a means of developing cross-community contacts and activities.

The project has very clearly demonstrated the role heritage and identity agenda have in animating the interest of community groups within the BAME communities. The project has far exceeded targets for the number of 'hard to reach' community groups engaged.

The feedback from events and activities indicates the need and demand for people to express their heritage. People appear grateful for the opportunity to link with other communities in terms of similarities and differences between their own heritages. The relationships created between communities and archives are models of good practice and demonstrate the opportunities to inspire communities to engage with their heritage.

The significance of Connecting Histories has been the accessibility of the archives and resources for everyone and it is now easier for anyone to find out about their

own community and those of others.

The potential of the Connecting Histories project to have an impact on important social agendas such as; development of learning and skills, cultural diversity, community cohesion and social inclusion was demonstrated through in depth evaluation, using Generic Social Outcomes (GSOs), of four mini-projects within the overall programme of activities. This demonstrated that the project has helped to develop 'stronger and safer communities' and 'strengthened public life'.

Some of those involved commented on the wider impact of Connecting Histories:

'Connecting Histories that allowed discussion and the development of questions regarding identity and culture that form a better understanding of 'who we are'. Once people have identified that they are 'complex individuals' and not just 'black or white' then this can develop into mutual understanding and learning' Youth Development Worker, Smethwick Bangladeshi Youth Forum

'The recognition of the communities' contribution has to have some impact on social change.' Rachel Hasted, Head of Social Inclusion and Diversity, English Heritage

It does a 'social good', enabling 'disparate groups to express themselves... It is a 'powerful social tool' – not just an archive project' Dr Gerry Slater, CEO Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

'Without a shadow of a doubt'. Connecting Histories is a 'huge instrument' of social change, because it makes people aware of who they are and why they belong' Gillian Reynolds Journalist, Chairman Charles Parker Archive Trust

The project also had wider impact in acting as an exemplar model for engaging BAME communities with archives, which is transferable to other contexts and in producing 2 positive action traineeships in archival practice.

Evaluation

Independent evaluation once the project was completed revealed the following success factors:

- It is a project: The team was able to focus all their concentration and time on achieving the vision and aims of the project;
- The project's title: Connecting Histories as a brand is easily remembered;
- The project looks 'outside the traditional archive box': Connecting Histories has been a pioneering project in terms of its work towards increasing access to culturally diverse collections and its success with engaging BAME communities with archive and heritage projects. The project has also prioritised workforce diversification to a position of prominence in the sector which has been ground-breaking;
- Its 'in-depth' approach The project has helped to broaden the public's knowledge of the diverse communities through 'in-depth' research and consultation, using the archive material as a starting point. The richness of the collections has facilitated the production of resources and the organisation of outreach activities;
- The project team: The multidisciplinary composition of the team worked well in support of projects, with all members bringing their own strengths to the work. The individual convictions, enthusiasm and hard work of the team are major success factors;
- Project management: The flat management system encouraged discussion within the team and a flexible working approach;
- Flexibility: Working with communities and individuals and supporting their projects has

been an organic process, each project growing in its own way and at its own rate;

- User participation has been at all levels: User groups and individuals have been able to engage with the project at all levels, from the cataloguing processes, to the actual delivery of events and activities. This has empowered those involved, giving them confidence to move forward with their own plans.
- Richness of the learning packages: The success of the learning packages has been due, in part, to the archive material within the culturally diverse collections catalogued. The resources are unique in that they uncover and raise awareness of many histories of the city and people of Birmingham that have been hidden until now.
- The importance of cataloguing: The project showed what cataloguing can achieve and has highlighted it as a core activity that needs to be sustained.

From the opposite perspective, the evaluation highlighted the following challenges:

- Engaging voluntary support: The difficulty has been getting people to participate; after presenting the aims and support that Connecting Histories can give, the reaction has often been 'well, what else is there?' As it requires voluntary support, people have had difficulty in understanding the benefits of working with Connecting Histories. However, with time and resources it has been possible to establish strong and trusting relationships with community groups and individuals which, in time, have created successful outreach;
- It is a project: There is an inherent weakness because there is an inevitable end to the work which is dangerous as contacts made need to be nurtured;
- Flexibility Occasionally, when working with external organisations, the flexibility of the project was restricted when met with the structured and strict deliverables of another organisation;
- Too outward-looking: The project was not strategic enough internally, it has tended to be too outward-looking to the detriment of internal and political support and increasing the chances of readily engaging in the City;
- Time and staff resources There is so much more that can be done with the learning, cataloguing and outreach aspects of the project but time and resources are limited. The demand for outreach resulted in an additional member of staff. There needed to be a Web Editor position within the team and the timescale for the completion of the PAT has been very tight (2 years). years.

Tips

- The quality of outputs are dependent upon the quality of the collections that can be revealed;
- Consider the project team skills required and allow for flat management structure to aid cross-disciplinary working;
- Build in sufficient flexibility in timetable and processes to allow for organic growth within project aims and objectives;
- However ambitious within the project is within mla sector, ensure it is embedded and well supported within local political structures.

Future development

With funding from the Arts and Humanities Research council, the success of Connecting Histories is being built on through The Birmingham Stories project, which is intended to extend an awareness of the diverse histories of the city, in its many voices and cultures, by making research on archive collections available to the public through a series of free downloadable guides and worksheets based on recent research.

Birmingham Stories has organised an informative series of presentations and workshops in local community libraries aimed at those who would like to know more about the history of

Birmingham and its many communities. It also provides follow-on support with key learning to enable further research into Birmingham's diverse archive collections. The results of the project are uploaded and integrated into the Connecting Histories website.

This extension work has served to ensure that valuable relationships built up with individuals and community groups did not dissipate and have been taken in new directions.

Project website :

<http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/>

Case study record created on:

07/06/2010

MLA funded:

No

Institution:

Birmingham City Archives

Key partners:

School of Education at the University of Birmingham
Sociology Department at the University of Warwick
Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures Group

Team members:

The project was delivered by a team of 13 people:

Project Manager: Sian Roberts

Academic Advisors: Dr Robert Carter, University of Warwick and
Professor Ian Grosvenor, University of Birmingham

Archivists: Helen Fisher, Jim Ranahan and Anna Riggs

Community Access Officer: Izzy Mohammed

Digitisation Officer: Brigitte Winsor

Outreach Support Officer: Adisa Folarin

Research and Learning Officers: Sarah Dar and Dr Andy Green

Trainee Archivists: Aishling Fox and Arike Oke

Start date:

February 2005

End date:

July 2007

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Domains:

Archives

Sector developing role:

Evaluation
Partnerships

Social groups:

Children and young people
Older people
Ethnic minority groups

Social outcomes:

Community cohesion & inclusion
Learning & skills
Community empowerment & active citizenship
Raising participation

Geographical Coverage:

West Midlands
(West Midlands) Birmingham