Unfolding Origins
A Chrysalis Arts and North Yorkshire County Record Office Project
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Unleashing the creative potential of North Yorkshire’s archives has long been an ambition of the County Record Office so we were delighted to have the opportunity to work with Chrysalis Arts to develop the Unfolding Origins project. The project takes inspiration from North Yorkshire’s historic archives to create innovative art works and harnesses that creativity to develop non-traditional routes through which to open up North Yorkshire’s archives to new audiences.

Sharing the archive with four, highly talented, creative artists has revolutionised the way we, as archivists, view the archive and its potential. The artistic vision and new approaches brought by the artists have inspired both young and old. They have demonstrated how archives can be explored creatively, bringing a deeper understanding of heritage and place, and have inspired and encouraged that creativity in the responses of both adults and children through their passion and skill.

North Yorkshire’s archives chronicle the fascinating story of the county’s people and places over the last 800 years but have long been seen by many as the sole domain of serious researchers and academics. This project has shown that it does not have to be so and that archives are for all!

Margaret Boustead, Head of Archives & Records Management, NYCRO
Unfolding Origins was a Slow Art project managed by Chrysalis Arts Development in partnership with North Yorkshire County Record Office (NYCRO). The project supported the creation of new artworks inspired by North Yorkshire’s archival collections and aimed to develop ways for the public to engage with this resource.

The project was funded by Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund, ArtUK and Richmondshire, Ryedale and Selby District Councils. It began in 2019 with the recruitment of artists who would undertake residencies in each district. The artists included; Carolyn Thompson in Ryedale, Lynn Setterington in Selby and Nick Jordan and Jacob Cartwright who collaborated in Richmondshire.

Each artist began their research with visits to the North Yorkshire County Record Office (NYCRO) in Northallerton. Here they explored archival materials focusing on their area of North Yorkshire, beginning with personal interest and seeing where that journey led them. For Nick and Jacob this interest began with the natural landscape, maps and waterways and how they have developed over time. For Lynn, her childhood memories of a place were the spark. For Carolyn, it was the stories of people.

Unfolding Origins embodied the Slow Art approach adopted by Chrysalis as a central aspect of the company’s work. It was designed to take place over an extended period to allow the artists time to evolve their creative response to their archival finds, spend time in each area and to evolve a more considered approach to community engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns meant the project took a year longer than first planned. The artists were unable to travel or visit the archive for some months, although this created more time for ideas to develop.

Local engagement was also constrained due to the pandemic, however, the additional time this allotted to the project was also highly productive. For example, the oral histories that were collected while the exhibition was taking place in Selby created a particularly rich addition to the final artwork.
Carolyn Thompson is a visual artist, based in York. Her research and practice are grounded in the materiality of printed matter. Using books, found texts, images and archival documents as source material, she explores the narrative of such matter and develops it into new renderings. The resulting adaptations are visual versions that reflect the stories, in the form of drawings, altered books, prints, collages, installations and/or textile pieces.

Carolyn Thompson, the artist for Ryedale, became fascinated with the World War I Appeals Papers held within the North Yorkshire archive. These papers are some of the few remaining of their kind in the country. Within these documents Carolyn identified men who worked on the land, in specific parts of the North York Moors, who were sent to war after unsuccessfully appealing against conscription. Using this information, she began a series of walks between the places where they were recorded as living or working before they left for war and the rolls of honour or memorials that now hold their names.
These walks took place on the anniversary of the men’s deaths. During the walks, Carolyn recorded the flora she passed and the sounds she heard. Drawings of these plants and flowers were combined into layered drawings and the sound recordings became spoken word sound art.

The drawings and sound recordings were exhibited at Pickering Library in Ryedale in October 2021.
Nick Jordan and Jacob Cartwright are based in Manchester. Their collaborative practice is cross-disciplinary, encompassing film, drawing, painting, photography, objects, publications and events. From invasive species and ancient oaks to ornithologist explorers and marginal communities, the artists utilise an improvised working method, seeking out the unusual, poetic or absurd interrelations between cultural and natural histories.

Nick and Jacob were artists in residence for Richmondshire and began their exploration of the records by engaging with the archivists themselves who shared their knowledge and enthusiasm for the local area in relation to maps, documents, books and a range of fascinating archival material stored on microfiche. This ‘human archive’, aligned with the physical material and collection, was key for the artists, helping them to demarcate and identify specific places, landscapes, histories and people.

Combining ecological, cultural and social history, their final film focuses on an area of Swaledale, close to Keld and the source of the Swale River. Thanks to discoveries made in the archives, they found it was also the birthplace of Neddy Dick, an eccentric 19th century musician who was infamous for his homemade instruments, including a ‘lithophone’ made of rocks from the River Swale. It was also the home of the Kearton brothers, who pioneered wildlife photography, being the first people to photograph birds nesting in the wild, thanks to their innovative hides and cunning techniques.
These places and people formed the basis for their documentary film project. Made with an exploratory, responsive approach, the film was shot on location. The result is a sonic and visual exploration of Swaledale, a remote river valley in England’s North Yorkshire Dales. The film layers together place, people, history and nature, with the River Swale as a leitmotif. The film’s score was created by musician Sam McLoughlin (samandtheplants), who played and recorded his river harp in the current of the Swale. The soundtrack also includes historic audio interviews with local people who remember Neddy Dick.

The final film was showcased at the Dales Countryside Museum in Hawes in March 2022.
Lynn Setterington

Lynn Setterington is a British textile artist and academic known for her hand-stitched textiles and collaborative arts initiatives. She completed her embroidery-based doctoral study at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham in January 2019. Lynn’s work celebrates and acknowledges the overlooked and the everyday, referencing popular culture and folk art. She has undertaken projects with community groups, public sector organisations and archival collections.

During Lynn’s initial visit to NYCRO, she found the immensity of the archive hard to grasp. Her residency was focused on Selby, close to where she grew up, so she began her research with areas of local interest, including the workhouse, Brayton Barff, Selby bypass and Eggborough Power Station. However, it was the story of the Toll Bridge which particularly attracted Lynn. As a child, she remembered the queues and driving miles to avoid the traffic on summer days. In the archive, she explored old maps, discovering the owner of the land on one side of the bridge was a Lord Petre of Essex.

Her journey took an intriguing turn when, by chance, the week after her initial visit to NYCRO, she met with a childhood friend, now working as a social worker in the south of England. Lynn discovered her friend’s office was in the ancestral home of the same Lord Petre of Essex.

Selby Toll Bridge
When lockdown rules allowed, Lynn visited Selby and found it inspiring to see the bridge and the old toll booth again, which is still standing, but no longer in use. She also travelled to Essex and met with the current Lord Petre. In both locations she collected sloes, later making Sloe gin, which was included in the exhibition. Lynn’s work also includes a series of stitched artefacts and sensory memorials. These pay homage to the toll bridge, the booth and all those who have crossed it over it in the past two hundred and thirty years - what EP Thompson calls a ‘History from Below’.

‘Taking a Toll’ was exhibited at Selby Library in February and March 2022.
Each of the residencies culminated in a local exhibition. Carolyn Thompson’s, The Last Walk Home was hosted by Pickering Library in Ryedale. Nick and Jacob’s Swalesong was presented alongside film and photography by Hawes Youth Group at The Dales Countryside Museum in Hawes. Lynn Setterington’s work and work by the two primary schools was exhibited at Selby Library.

"Carolyn has brought this remarkable archive to life with her drawings and soundscapes. Great to see the NYCRO collection being used to inspire creative response in this way."

Audience comment from Pickering Library
After the local exhibitions had taken place, all the work was brought together in an exhibition at the North Yorkshire County Record Office. This included the oral history recordings which were made while Taking a Toll was on display in Selby Library. It was subsequently decided that the complete exhibition would be returned to Selby, this time to the Abbey where a larger collection could be accommodated, and the oral history recordings could be included. The final exhibition took place in September 2022.
As a place-based project, engaging with local communities was a central and fundamental part of Unfolding Origins. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions presented challenges to overcome.

Selby

**Sculpture Trails and Tutorials**
ArtUK funded a specific element of the project, to engage local people with public sculpture in the town of Selby. This focused on Selby Abbey, and was led by artist Alun Kirkby. Originally planned to be a series of in-person workshops, the engagement was redesigned so local people could still participate regardless of local restrictions and whether or not the Abbey was open.

Alun was able to spend time at the Abbey exploring the sculptural and architectural elements of the ancient monument. This led him to create two sculptural trails, one inside and one outside, that people could discover independently. Free sculpture kits were made available for families to pick from the abbey, supported by online tutorials to teach people how to create their own mini sculptures using origami.

“We’re engaging new people who are coming just for the project, ...it’s going down amazingly well and we’re getting people staying longer and visiting our coffee shop too because of the boxes.”
Community Engagement Officer at Selby Abbey
Celebrating Together
In Selby, 2021 saw the 30th anniversary of the bridge being toll free, the last toll crossing having occurred on 19th September 1991. Coincidentally, this occurred during Lynn’s residency and was commemorated via workshops with two local primary schools, Barwic Parade and Barlby Bridge, positioned on opposite sides of the bridge.

The schools worked with Artist Haley Mills-Styles to create celebratory banners, in parallel with Lynn creating her own textile-based work. The children’s banners were displayed alongside Lynn’s artwork in the final exhibition.

Discovering Memories
During the exhibition at Selby Library, Oral Historian Virginia Arrowsmith, collected stories and memories of the toll bridge from local residents, creating a new archive of oral histories. A selection of these recordings were available to hear at the final exhibition and via the Chrysalis Arts website.
Ryedale

**Artist Led Walks**
Carolyn’s residency occurred throughout the most challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning workshops were not possible. However, as restrictions began to lift, meeting outside whilst social distancing was allowed and so Carolyn conducted a series of artist led walks. These walks gave people an insight into Carolyn’s creative process and a new perspective on their local area.

**Botanical Drawing**
At the time the exhibition took place at Pickering Library, venues were tentatively beginning to open up again. With social distancing measures in place, Rosie Liddle of Make More Arts ran family workshops in Botanical Illustration, inspired by Carolyn’s drawings.

"Really fun, helped to build my skills even more and forced me to come out of my comfort zone"
Participant at Botanical Illustration workshop

Photo credit: Rosie Liddle
Hawes

A Modern Archive

In parallel with Nick and Jacob’s response to the archival material at the County Record Office, filmmaker John Kirkbride worked with Hawes Youth Group, encouraging them to tell their own story and create a ‘modern archive’ about how they feel about where they live.

Collectively the young people decided on fifteen words that depicted Hawes and explored these words through photography and film. They used an Ilford XP2 35mm film camera to take photographs and mobile phones to film landscapes and interviews.

These photographs and films formed part of the Richmondshire exhibition alongside ‘Swalesong’ and are available to see via Instagram @hawesyouthgroup

Hawes Youth Group - 'Farming'

Hawes Youth Group - 'Food'
Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, Unfolding Origins has been a highly successful collaboration between Chrysalis Arts and the North Yorkshire County Record Office. It has highlighted the importance of the archive as a rich and inspirational resource for artists, arts organisations and communities in exploring, interpreting and celebrating place in a myriad of different ways. This experience is already impacting on future Chrysalis projects and planning is underway to continue the partnership and, in particular, to extend the creative engagement opportunities for more young people. The project also owed its success to additional partnerships with North Yorkshire Youth, North Yorkshire Library Service and Selby, Richmondshire and Ryedale District Councils.

Both Alun Kirby and Carolyn Thompson have continued working with Chrysalis Arts. Alun participated in Five Hectares, another place-based project, during which he again drew extensively upon the archive, and Carolyn has become a member of the core Chrysalis team.

“This project was a pleasure to be part of”
Alun Kirby, Artist

The continued partnership development during Unfolding Origins is a key outcome for Chrysalis Arts. Partnership opportunities continue to be explored with North Yorkshire Youth, North Yorkshire Library Service and with NYCRO itself. Chrysalis Arts also plans to continue embedded community development work in Selby following the success and interest in oral history and story collection.

“Unfolding Origins has given me the desire and confidence to move forward with research projects based on archival materials, and I hope to work with NYCRO again in the future. Additionally, the residency enabled me to experiment with walking as a vehicle by which to make work and has cemented this activity into my practice.”
Carolyn Thompson, Artist