

## Best Practice Guide 14

# Challenging perceptions Interpretation for diversity & inclusion

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November 2020 (revised 2025)

*Designed for screens – no need to print*



# Introduction

Whatever your background and working practice, there is probably more you could do to improve diversity and inclusion in your interpretation. These could be simple but thoughtful improvements, like ensuring that your visitor materials actively reflect and welcome diverse audiences, or perhaps they are larger endeavours such as commissioning new working groups to help diverse stories shine.

## What is this guide for?

This guide hopes to whet your appetite for the subject. It will support you by looking at **what** other interpreters have done, ask you to consider **why** diversity is important and help you think about **how** to bring it into your work.

One of the *Desire, love, identity* trail stops at the British Museum during 2017. © British Museum



# Overview

In this brief guide we'll look at the questions you might want to consider, and showcase best practice case studies with exemplar approaches to developing inclusive interpretation.

We've selected studies which champion a range of voices; some are led by passionate and driven individuals, whilst others highlight institutions with innovative approaches to regional and national museum collaborations.

We've also selected an annual multi-site campaign. So whatever the scale of your project, this guide offers good examples to draw from. All the case studies have been written or presented by one or more of the project leads. It was important that a broad range of voices permeated the guide, to reflect its recommendations.

Studies focus on projects which support diversity and inclusion. They communicate the challenges and working practices that have yielded success. Whilst our case studies only represent some of the nine protected characteristics from the **Equality Act 2010**, the strong methodologies within can be adapted to support the development of interpretation with any community.

## What are protected characteristics?

Protected characteristics are a set of qualities protected by the Equality Act 2010. They protect everyone in Britain from discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

The nine\* protected characteristics are:



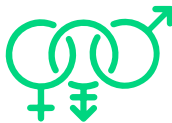
Sex



Pregnancy and maternity

LGBTQ+

Sexual orientation



Gender reassignment



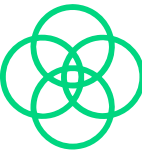
Age



Marriage and civil partnership



Race



Religion or belief



Disability

\*A further protected characteristic is **Socio-economic duty** – which seeks to address the inequalities that result from differences in occupation, education, place of residence or social class.

### Top tip

If you are embarking on an interpretation project which seeks to tell the stories of people with protected characteristics, then significant engagement with representatives of that group will support best outcomes in the work.

# The what, how and where bit: making diversity matter

## What is diversity and inclusion?

Diversity is the recognition, respect and celebration of what it is that makes people different. And inclusion is about redressing and counterbalancing the marginalisation of people due to their differences. Diversity and inclusion together seek to celebrate and welcome difference, particularly for people who may face discrimination due to their protected characteristics.

## Why is diversity and inclusion essential to interpretation?

Every interpretive story communicates a specific perspective; often the dominant narrative of the nation. By improving diversity and inclusion in your working practice you will be able to share a richer range of stories and reach more diverse audiences. Consider how institutional racism, or prejudice towards people listed in the Equality Act, could be dismantled through your interpretive work and commissions.

## How do you support diversity and inclusion?

Start off by thinking about the diversity of your teams. Consider barriers that may make it difficult for people with protected characteristics to work in the sector. To you these may be invisible if they don't directly impact you, but our case studies, reading list and website links can support deeper insight.

Seek to actively advocate for diversity in new job roles and contracts. Celebrate the perspective and unique insight offered by more diverse interpretation teams. Think about working with a wider collective of contributors. Remunerate people fairly for their work. This is really important – pay for and acknowledge the work of your contributors!

Diversity and inclusion together seek to celebrate and welcome difference

## Considering your audiences

Reach out to audiences whose perspectives may be excluded or marginalised. The voices of Global Ethnic Majority (GEM), LGBTQ+ and disabled people are often underrepresented. Likewise, the stories of women, the elderly or young, as well as people from socio-economic inequality may be less celebrated. Use engagement activities to assess how you can create space for greater diversity. Build connectivity into the fabric of your process, so that audience and authorship are integrated wherever possible.

## Top tip

Consider how each contributor has huge capacity to reach new visitor communities from their own networks. If you want interpretation to speak to a specific audience, ensure you employ or contract interpreters who can represent or reflect the values of that group well.

## Questions to ask

- 1 Are there ways that you could support greater inclusion? Who controls the heritage narrative?
- 2 What stories are recorded and celebrated?
- 3 How might my view be framed by mainstream perspectives?



# What are contested histories?

Contested histories are historical mainstream narratives.

They are contested because they need to be redressed to reflect diverse or modern viewpoints; they may feature events or historical figures associated with the enslavement of people, wars, atrocities or laws that have caused deep injustice, oppression or trauma. Through careful work, with people for whom the stories are significant, contested histories can be re-examined and re-exhibited.

You can change whose stories are told and reframe history. Work on contested histories can help to redress inequalities and offer fresh perspectives on status quo narratives.

## How to work with contested histories: mainstream or minority perspectives.

Think about ways you can respect people above objects. Consider the items that you are exhibiting.

- Do they have historical significance to a range of audiences?
- Pay particular attention to how the exhibits are labelled
- Does displaying the object reinforce or challenge mainstream values?
- Is the item displayed subjectively or objectively through its labelling narrative?
- Whose viewpoint does it reflect?

In recent years, some really valuable exhibitions have worked trialling the display of objects and their labels; utilising the support of communities to respond to and review the process. This is a really rich and deep way of supporting communities to share their insight on historic objects, which may be imbued with trauma. It offers a way to carefully reframe the narrative on display.

# Why might the Bechdel test be helpful?

The *Bechdel test*, also known as the *Bechdel-Wallace test*, is a measure of representation of women in fiction.

The test asks whether the work features at least two named women who talk to each other about something other than a man. It is named after Alison Bechdel (and her friend Wallace) who came up with the test which first featured in a comic strip in 1985 called *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The test seeks to highlight inequality of representation for women in fiction. It is worth noting that fiction which passes the test, financially outperforms works that fail it.

Thinking abstractly about the *Bechdel test* could help you develop more diverse heritage stories. Interpretation may be predominantly documentary, but it is valuable to consider whose stories you are choosing to tell and how much narrative space you are giving to a broad range of people.

# Evaluating your project

Ideally, the development of your project will be augmented by front-end, formative and summative evaluation, so that everyone gets to experience the best possible outcome from the work.

- Front end evaluation involves exploring possibilities with audiences to shape your project from its earliest inception.
- Formative evaluation can help shape your project at crucial early stages, to ensure that the content and approach are tested as audience appropriate.
- Summative evaluation monitors the impact of the work following its launch. It will help you record how successfully the project meets the expectations of your target audience. It can also be a valuable tool to inform future work, support funding and allow for ongoing adaptations and improvements.



# Top Tips

- Accept that you are most likely not the expert
- Know you might get it wrong and be humble enough to apologise and make-good
- Reach out to people who can support the work
- Immerse yourself in different perspectives and read relevant books
- Commission diverse interpreters who understand the people you wish to reflect
- Work with diverse professionals and communities to build brave and careful work
- Pay contributors and participants and acknowledge their time and contribution
- Use your position to create uplift amongst others who need their voices elevating
- Keep up to date with current and outmoded language and be open to corrections
- Be open-minded and open-hearted in your interpretive approach
- Enjoy and celebrate diversity
- Listen

# Diversity terms explained

## What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality is the impact a person suffers when they are struck by discrimination across more than one protected characteristic. For example a Black woman with a disability may be impacted by racism, sexism and ableism. It is important to consider how intersectionality might impact both your workplace and your audience when creating interpretation.

## What is Black Lives Matter (BLM)?

Black Lives Matter is a social movement advocating non-violent civil disobedience in protest against incidents of police brutality and all racially motivated violence against Black people. It is an international movement founded in the USA by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. Some people misunderstand the meaning of the name and hashtag, making statements like All Lives Matter. This is seen as diminutive to the cause. Everyone understands that all lives matter, but it is Black lives which urgently need protection and allyship.

## What does LGBTQ or LGBTQIA+ stand for? (revised 2025)

LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (trans). The Q reclaims the previously pejorative term queer, while at the same time some people see the Q as a way of openly 'questioning' sexuality and gender identities. LGBTQ and LGBTQIA+ may describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. It includes I for intersex and A for asexual identities, and the + may be added to reflect the breadth of the LGBTQIA+ community.

For further guidance see the LGBTQIA+ heritage interpretation best practice guide.

## What is ablism?

Ablism is a term used to describe discrimination against disabled people. Rather than acknowledging and welcoming the range of different abilities, skills and insights offered by all people, it is premise is that non-disabled people are more able.

## Global Ethnic Majority (revised 2025)

Rosemary Campbell-Stephens coined the term GEM (Global Ethnic Majority) during her London Challenge Initiative leadership work (2003–2011). Co-authors and case study contributors have updated the guide to incorporate GEM, as it places emphasis on these groups as a majority — the 80% of people in the world who are non-white or non-western.

## What are access needs?

Access needs are a specific set of requirements needed to communicate, learn and take part in an activity. Many people have access needs but most often the term refers to a set of requirements for disabled people.

# Case study

## The Bristol Black History Project

### Contributor.

Finn White, Engagement Officer  
(Communities) at Bristol Culture.

Image: © Bristol Black History/  
Jasmine Thompson.



# Case study

## The Bristol Black History Project

Pages from the  
Bristol Black History  
Project website.

The **Bristol Black History Project**, launched in 2018, was a collaboration between the Bristol Culture's participation and digital teams. It stemmed from the need to address a problem – the lack of narratives around Bristol's Black history, on site and online.

Various Black community partners in Bristol had commented that the service's online content wasn't representative and people didn't feel like their stories were told at the museums' and therefore didn't visit, perhaps because they felt that this history had been 'whitewashed'.

There was also a huge online demand for content relating to Bristol's Black history, such as the bus boycott and the Transatlantic slave trade. The service acknowledged that their in-house teams were not representative of the communities whose stories they wanted to tell.

They were keen to try out a new way of working involving letting go of their control over the museums' narratives and devolving this power.

The project, led by the participation and digital teams at Bristol Culture, set out to address these issues, starting by creating a steering group of internal and external experts of Black Bristolians, both historians and activists.

There was also a huge online demand for content relating to Bristol's Black history, such as the bus boycott and the Transatlantic slave trade

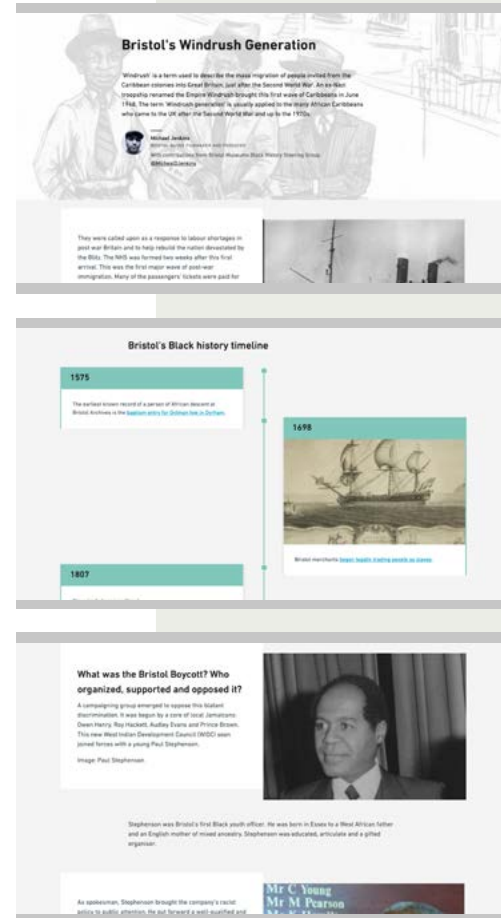
On the digital side, the team commissioned a web developer to build a template for a website which could be easily updated in-house. They co-produced an online survey to find out what the public wanted to know about Bristol's Black history, what they understood by Black history, and whether they identified as Black. This provided the data about which types of stories to research further.

Writers were commissioned to write the stories, which were checked by the panel and then tested for readability. This is important not only for accessibility but also to enable search engines to find the stories easily. It was core to the values to pay all contributors a fee to recognise the value of their input.

Finn White, Communities Engagement Officer, hopes this project contributes to the process of institutional change. There is a need to diversify the service's permanent staff and to give communities more ownership of the museums' and the stories they tell.

**Project contributors:** Michael Jenkins, Ros Martin, Caine Lewin Turner, Abdi Mohammed, Kofo Ajala, Nasra Ayub, Sue Giles, Madge Dresser, Allie Dillon, Antonette Clarke, Imogen Clarke, Caroline James. The group was set up and run internally by Fay Curtis, Jackie Winchester and Finn White.

[View Bristol Black History website](#)





# Case study

## The Bristol Black History Project

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# 84,000

visits to the website with  
average read time of 4 minutes.

- 
- The project has helped change perceptions among Bristol's Black communities – people are increasingly more trusting of the service.

- 
- The existence of the Black History pages enabled the service to react quickly to the Colston and BLM events.

- 
- The stories were shared widely – not only by the readers but also by the contributors.

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# 35,000

hits on the website in June 2020 alone following the toppling of the Colston statue.

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- The Steering Group have started to help with wider, non-digital projects. For example; this process could be used for interpretation and object display in museum galleries.

### Supporters:

The Bristol Black History Project is supported by Sankofa, Esmée Fairbairn, National Museums Liverpool and Bristol Museums Equality and Diversity sponsor, University of the West of England Bristol.

### Key learning points

- Working with source communities and experts is fundamental
- It is important to pay people for their time and contributions
- People want to hear about the positive stories of Black people's lives in this country – not just the well-known negative stories, such as the slave trade
- It was also important to tell recent history, such as the Somali immigration to Bristol (now the biggest population of Black people in the city)
- Keep reassessing representation – communities are changing all the time. There isn't only one 'Black history'
- This model could be used for other under-represented groups, such as LGBTQ+ and disabled people in interpretation planning.

# Project impact

# Case study

## Prejudice and Pride

### Contributor.

Rachael Lennon, Public  
Programmes Curator,  
The National Trust.

Image: Kingston Lacy. © National Trust.



# Case study

## Prejudice and Pride

In 2017, the National Trust marked the 50-year anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of same-sex acts with **Prejudice and Pride**, a year-long programme of LGBTQ+ heritage.



*Prejudice and Pride* drew together LGBTQ+ histories from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland into new publications and a podcast hosted by Clare Balding, downloaded over 17,000 times. Two artists in residence undertook new research and created films. The National Trust recreated a 1930s queer club in London in partnership with the National Archives and installed an exhibition of National Portrait Gallery works at Sissinghurst in Kent, the home of Vita Sackville West and Harold Nicolson. 12 Trust places programmed new exhibitions and events showcasing LGBTQ+ experiences, visited by over 350,000 people.

Throughout the programme, a partnership with the Research Centre of Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester enabled the organisation to stretch its ambitions and share learning. In 2018, the partnership led a two day conference and launched a publication reflecting on LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications. The **publication** is available to download for free from the RCMG website.

One of the most moving installations of *Prejudice and Pride* took place in Dorset, at Kingston Lacy, an estate inherited by William John Banks in 1834. Seven years after inheriting Kingston Lacy, Banks was caught with a soldier in 'an indecent act'. It was the second time and he decided that he had no choice but to leave his beloved home for exile in France and Italy. The punishment for intimate relationships between men at this time was death by hanging. Kingston Lacy was transformed by Banks from his exile. He sent back excruciatingly detailed notes and designs for its renovation and a collection that visitors enjoy today from his residency abroad. It is not known whether he returned to see the transformation he created.

*Prejudice and Pride* provided the Trust with an opportunity to share Banks' story for the first time. The team at Kingston Lacy worked closely with a small team of researchers, designers and artists to also go further, and to explore LGBTQ+ issues of exile and legal persecution today.



Three installations were created throughout the house, connected by a series of new interpretation interventions:

■ **In Memoriam** 51 large knotted ropes were suspended in the entrance hall to Kingston Lacy. Each rope represented a man who was hanged in the UK under laws that criminalised same-sex acts within Banks' lifetime. Their names were read out in an immersive soundscape and the height of the remembrance knots corresponded to the ages of the men: from 17 to 71 years old.

■ **Displaced** A film projection drew connection between Banks' story and ongoing prejudice and persecution today. It shared brief insights into the lives of LGBTQ+ people forced to leave their homes in recent years, from London and Glasgow, Uganda and Chechnya.

■ **Prejudice, Persecution, Pride** A six-meter-long timeline highlighted the complex histories of LGBTQ+ communities and the law. Copies of Acts from the Parliamentary Archives were displayed and a video interview with Ruth Hunt, Chief Executive of Stonewall UK.

12 National Trust places programmed new exhibitions and events showcasing LGBTQ+ experiences, visited by over 350,000 people

## Case study

### Prejudice and Pride

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# 19,000

people visited *Exile* at Kingston Lacy.

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# 71%

of visitor feedback was positive.

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- The programme won a number of awards and the National Trust won the third sector equalities award at the Pink News Awards in 2018.

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# 353,553

visitors engaged over 12 properties

## Project impact

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"The exhibition has opened my eyes to how much progress has been made in LGBT rights in the last 50 years but I am also very aware of how much discrimination still exists. I hope in my lifetime I will see this eradicated."

Kingston Lacy visitor comment:

"Our heritage is for us all, whether lesbian, gay, straight, trans, bisexual. It's fantastic that the National Trust has created this programme to help us all take pride and share in this heritage."

*Prejudice and Pride*  
visitor comment.

### Key learning points

- Find partners who both support and challenge you
- Where are the authentic and creative voices? Give them space to be heard
- Question the contemporary relevance of your histories
- Don't underestimate the potential impact of inclusive histories work to people and their lives
- Understand and articulate your values as an organisation. And hold to them
- Don't be ground down by resistance to change



# Case study

## The Seven Saints of St. Pauls Art, Culture & Heritage Project

### Contributor.

**Michele Curtis**, Founder,  
Artist, Researcher and  
Project Manager.

Image: Mural of civil rights campaigner,  
Barbara Detering. Part of the  
Seven Saints of St Pauls project.

© Michele Curtis/Bhagesh  
Sachania Photography



# Case study

## The Seven Saints of St. Pauls

*The Seven Saints of St Pauls* is an arts and heritage project in Bristol led by Artist and Iconic Black Britons Founder Michele Curtis. The project has been shaped by the values and insight of Curtis and has grown to meet the needs of the local and international community.

In 2015, following months of research, collation of archive material and compiling of intangible cultural heritage, Curtis held her second exhibition titled '*The Seven Saints of St. Pauls*'. The exhibition was a celebration of the founders of the first St. Pauls Festival in 1968. Curtis identified the need to highlight the cultural heritage of St. Pauls Carnival, the Windrush Generation and their great legacy. What developed was an innovative, creative and digital placemaking project that has changed the landscape of the city and positively impacted the lives of those living in Bristol and across the Atlantic Ocean.

Through the project Curtis was inspired to contribute to an ongoing conversation regarding a perceived lack of positive role models for Black boys. This was a narrative which she knew was untrue. Curtis, who was born and raised in Bristol and is a mother of two boys, understood the importance of positive representation for Black boys and girls, but also for wider British society. Her intention was to showcase grass roots members of the African Caribbean

community who, through adversity, have contributed significantly to the city. Several of the community elders had passed away and Curtis realised the importance of capturing and documenting their stories before it was too late. She believed the time had come to not only change but also control the narrative of the Black experience and celebrate the culture and contributions made by the African Caribbean community in Britain.

As someone who had grown up in Bristol and who was educated in the UK, she was aware that all British children are taught a bias narrative that is not an accurate reflection of British history. Black British history was virtually nonexistent in the curriculum and the focus was on the Transatlantic enslavement of African people and the American Civil Rights Movement. Curtis believed this caused complex feelings and questions around a sense of belonging and identity amongst the African Caribbean diaspora. This contributed to an on-going stigmatization and 'othering' of ethnic minorities in Britain.

Curtis sought to rebalance the narrative of the status quo with positive stories and historical accounts of Black Bristolians. During Black History Month 2014 she held her debut exhibition; Iconic Black Bristolians. It was an exhibition of six portraits with accompanying biographies that highlighted some of the most respected Black Bristolians. The exhibition

was innovative, ground breaking and a roaring success. It became the template for *The Seven Saints of St. Pauls*. Like the Iconic Black Bristolians exhibition, *The Seven Saints of St. Pauls* initiative was initially met with resistance from key funders and arts, culture and heritage organisations in the city. They failed to recognise the importance of inclusion and integration to diversify the heritage sector. There was an assumption that a Black artist, whose practice was not viewed as 'contemporary art' and who's subject matter was Black people and their heritage, would appeal exclusively to Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) audiences and not white audiences.

With a firm belief in her vision, Curtis pursued her project independently. She researched and contacted community members to establish the origins of the 1968 St. Pauls Festival and her insight led to the date of the 50th Anniversary being corrected so that celebrations could be made in 2018.

*The Seven Saints of St. Pauls* was exhibited at a further six locations throughout the city and Curtis also found herself teaching workshops, writing articles and providing talks and presentations to local schools, universities and corporate businesses. It quickly became apparent that more was required.

The project sought to rebalance the narrative of the status quo with positive stories and historical accounts of Black Bristolians



# Case study

## The Seven Saints of St. Pauls

In December 2016, Curtis, in partnership with United Communities Housing Association and a team of local muralists, created the first mural. It portrayed The Honourable Owen Henry painted on the end of City Road. Curtis' vision was for her project to be a legacy for the local community and Bristol as a whole. It was important that all the murals formed a permanent outdoor exhibition, to increase a sense of pride and ownership in a marginalised community that was undergoing the effects of gentrification. She also wanted to encourage people, from all over the city as well as tourists, to visit St. Pauls. It was crucial to make the associated narratives for each 'Saint' accessible.

By 2019 all seven murals were complete and *The Seven Saints of St. Pauls Art & Heritage Trail* app was launched. Three years of research provided additional content for the app, in addition to the biographies for each 'Saint'. That year Curtis designed and delivered the first Art, Culture and Heritage Guided Tours for Black History Month. Throughout 2020, Curtis in partnership with Boomsatsuma, has worked to develop a new guided tour to include AR (Augmented Reality) technology; to enhance the cultural aspects of the guided tour. It will include spatial audio design, animations and culturally specific content to enhance the art and narratives of each mural.

Although, it was always Curtis' intention to produce an interactive VR (Virtual Reality) tour, this has now become a priority due Covid-19 and the ongoing demand to access information and experiences virtually.

There was also a huge online demand for content relating to Bristol's Black history, such as the bus boycott and the Transatlantic slave trade

Images: Roy Hackett and Carmen Beckford murals from The Seven Saints of St Pauls project. © Michele Curtis/Bhagesh Sachania Photography

This project has clearly demonstrated a need for greater diversity within the heritage sector. It highlights the important role intangible cultural heritage can play when sharing historical accounts and experiences from diverse cultures. The project also shows that predominantly white led organisations do not have the experience or knowledge to effectively interpret stories which speak to specific demographics. Neither do some of these organisations understand the value and interest associated with this heritage and culture; especially when it occurs without the involvement of grassroots community members. Curtis hopes this project will help to shift the way in which arts, culture and heritage organisations value diversity in the sector. She continues to encourage an open discourse on the important role of art and intangible cultural heritage on positive representation, identity, belonging and well-being amongst marginalised communities.

**Project contributors:** Roy Hackett, Barbara Dettering, Carmen Beckford MBE, Enid Drummond, Judith Evans, Family of Owen Henry, Family of Dolores Campbell, Boomsatsuma, Ra Shaolin Curtis, BBC Points West Bristol, Jon Rolf Cactus Apps, Paintsmiths, United Communities Housing Association, Bristol Archives, Vanessa Smith, Cashan Campbell

[View Iconic Black Britons website](#)



# Case study

## The Seven Saints of St. Pauls

# 3,237,894

engagements in 2019.  
Approximation from tracked social media activity, press coverage, in-person engagement, website hits and educational outreach programme.

- Education impacted the way in which local diverse histories are viewed and taught in local Bristol schools and universities.

- Positive Representation adds validity to cultural heritage projects and highlights the positive impact of a shared British history and heritage.

# First

Diverse art, culture and heritage tourist attraction in the city to feature the African Caribbean Community.

# Project impact

## Key learning points

- Whilst autonomy is great for freedom of vision, strong partnerships are vital to the success of delivery.
- Working and consulting with grass root community members and organisations is important to the success of heritage projects. It is important that the community feels a sense of ownership of the project and that 'something' is left behind. Historically, far too often, marginalised communities have been exploited for the personal gain of individuals and organisations from outside their communities. In turn, nothing tangible is left behind for the communities to benefit from.
- It is important, where possible to include intangible cultural heritage within heritage projects. The traditions, personal experiences and the amplification of individual voices makes for an authentic representation and interpretation of diverse heritage projects.
- Increased diversity in the arts and heritage sectors lends itself to the ongoing learning and understanding of what constitutes heritage, including the value of cultural experiences and spaces or buildings. This ensures heritage is not only accepted from a 'traditional' privileged white washed perspective. Heritage institutions need to recognise and trust that people know their culture, history and heritage and how to tell their own stories.
- Project versatility is crucial. *The Seven Saints of St. Pauls* project was designed to be versatile and can be applied to any community narrative.
- It is important to pay and credit all contributors to projects. Frequently people from the African Caribbean community are not paid fairly for their contributions or direct influence when larger organisations have received funding to specifically work with and within communities.

## Supporters:

Jamaican High Commission, Arts Council England, Originators Fund, University of Bristol, United Communities Housing Association, Live West Housing Association, Places for People Housing Association, Bristol City Council Housing (Ashley Ward), BBC Points West, St. Barnabas C.E Primary School, Fairlawn Primary School, Glenfrome Primary School, Dolphin Primary School, Colston's Girls School, St. Werburghs Primary School, St. Nicholas of Tolentine Primary School, Fairfield High School



# Case study

## Touch Tours at the British Museum

### Contributors.

Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation & Volunteers, British Museum; Fiona Slater, Equality and Diversity Manager, British Museum .

Image: © Trustees of the British Museum.



# Case study

## Touch Tours at the British Museum

The British Museum, like most museums and heritage sites, has historically privileged sight over other senses. Staff and volunteers are striving to make the building and collection more accessible for blind and visually impaired audiences, and making a visit more 'hands-on' is central to the Museum's approach. There are eight Hands On desks across the Museum where everyone can handle objects from the collection.

During 2016 a new touch tour was launched for blind and visually impaired audiences focussed on Egyptian sculpture in one of the Museum's most spectacular and popular displays. The tour focusses on nine large, sometimes monumental, ancient Egyptian statues that are visited in chronological order. These sculptures are made from stone that can withstand repeating touching. The Touch Tour is available in different formats to support people making a self-guided visit, including:

- A large print guide
- Tactile drawings of the nine objects with Braille descriptions and information (developed with RNIB)
- Audio-descriptive content that visitors download or stream on their own mobile device

Some of the Museum's most experienced volunteers were involved in developing a guided touch tour for visitors on a day and time of their choosing. These tours need to

be booked in advance, and have proved to be a particularly popular option. They offer a more conversational and social experience, one that last around 90 minutes. The development of these popular tours required numerous training sessions, many led by the Equality & Diversity Manager. A series of pilots identified areas where improvements could be made.

The Egyptian sculpture touch tour won an AHI Discover Heritage Award in 2017. This encouraged the expansion of the touch tour approach to another of the Museum's most popular displays, the Parthenon sculptures (Room 18)

Unlike the Egyptian sculpture tour, visitors on the Parthenon touch tour cannot handle the real sculptures on display for conservation reasons. Instead, the tour makes use of a series of modern casts derived from historic moulds displayed in Room 18b. The final part of the tour ends in the main Parthenon displays, but audio-description is used there, rather than touch. As with the Egyptian sculpture tour information is available in large print, as a book with tactile drawings and Braille information, and as an audio-descriptive audio tour. Again, there is also a volunteer-led touch tour for people who prefer a more social or supported visit.



These resources and tours were developed in partnership with consultants from RNIB and VocalEyes, a charity that provides blind and visually impaired people with opportunities to experience and enjoy arts and heritage. The touch tours have attracted overwhelmingly high praise from visitors, and the volunteers find them extremely enjoyable and rewarding to deliver.

This approach is one that the Museum is continuing to develop with a view to applying it elsewhere in the building.

**Project contributors:** The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and VocalEyes.

The Touch Tour is available in different formats to support people making a self-guided visit

[View the Touch Tours webpage](#)

[Listen to the Touch Tour](#)

# Case study

## Touch Tours at the British Museum

**"It was an excellent, fulfilling and mind blowing experience. It is as good as being able to visualise what is in the gallery."**

Touch Tour attendee.

**"I just wanted to let you know that the tour was fabulous. The guide was engaging and knowledgeable and we had a great time. It's certainly meant a lot to me that you organize this and I really appreciate it."**

Touch Tour attendee.

**"Wow! I cannot tell you what an incredible experience I had with your team yesterday... outstanding! The touch tour exceeded any expectation I had. Because the guides took time to describe each item in great detail, I still felt like I could "see" each statue. The story that accompanied each item... put them into context."**

Touch Tour attendee.

### Key learning points

- Organisations such as the RNIB and VocalEyes have an incredible depth of knowledge and experience. It would have been impossible to successfully deliver the project without them.
- Consulting with a wide range of staff – curatorial, conservation and front-of-house – at an early stage was key. The approach depends on support from across the institution.
- Running pilot sessions with blind and partially sighted people was invaluable, helping us refine the tour script and build volunteers' confidence.
- Providing the touch tour in different formats is appreciated by visitors as it helps them to access the tour in the way that is most appropriate and convenient for them.
- Scripts provide a useful starting point for training tour volunteers, but an informal and conversational approach works best during the tour. Each guide finds their own way to make the tour work for them.
- Front of house teams have a vital role in ensuring visitors have a positive touch tour experience. It is important to ensure that everyone is fully briefed about the tour offer so that they can fully support it.

### Supporters:

The Parthenon Touch Tour, and increasing accessibility more broadly in the Parthenon Galleries, has been supported by the Band Trust.

# Project impact



## Case study

### Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories

#### Contributor.

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Image: The *Desire, love, identity*  
exhibition at Bolton Museum and  
Art Gallery. © British Museum





# Case study

## Desire, love, identity

*Desire, love, identity*: exploring LGBTQ histories was the first exhibition at the British Museum to focus on same-sex love and desire and gender diversity. It coincided with the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in July 2017. The exhibition included an LGBTQ trail through the permanent collection which highlighted fifteen objects already on display with expanded temporary interpretation.

This exhibition had a wide chronological and geographical scope, thanks to its inspiration, Professor Richard Parkinson's award-winning book, *A Little Gay History – Desire and Diversity Around the World*. Richard's book highlighted 40 objects in the museum's collection, from 11,000 years ago to the present day and from around the world. The exhibition demonstrated that same-sex desire and gender diversity have always been an integral part of human experience, although the way they have been expressed has varied widely.

The exhibition was shaped by a cross-departmental staff network, a range of community partners with whom the British Museum had worked before, external advisors and curators from almost every department. The involvement of a wider group of motivated people with different lived experience and expertise was key to the project; a traditional model with one lead curator with a typical subject specialism would have been far less effective.

The involvement of a wider group of motivated people with different lived experience and expertise was key to the project;

One of the *Desire, love, identity* trail stops at the British Museum during 2017. © British Museum

Thanks to the generous support of the Dorset Foundation a revised and expanded touring version of the exhibition was developed, eventually visiting five cities around the UK. The exhibition was adapted brilliantly by each venue so that it connected to local histories and communities.

LGBTQ programming tends to be temporary and precarious, so the project team developed ways to embed these histories and perspectives at the British Museum in a more permanent way. The trail created for the 2017 British Museum exhibition was converted into a permanent self-guided audio tour focussing on 15 objects, narrated by actors Simon Russell Beale and Fiona Shaw.

*The Desire, love, identity* exhibition trail was used as the starting point to develop new volunteer-led LGBTQ tours of the museum; a more social, personal and community-driven approach, something to be driven by the volunteers themselves. The first volunteer-led tours ran during July 2019 to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, New York and now run regularly as a permanent part of our public programme and are continuing to evolve.



More recently, as part of the redesign and relaunch of the Museum's website a *Desire, love, identity* themed section has been created. This provides an LGBTQ focussed portal and as collections-based research continues, more subjects are being added to this area of the website.

**Community partners, national partners and supporters:** Professor Richard Parkinson, currently Professor of Egyptology at Oxford University, acted as consultant for the exhibition. The exhibition was developed with representatives from Camden LGBT Forum, Gendered Intelligence, LGBT History Month, London Metropolitan Archives, the Network, Schools Out and Untold London. The exhibition at the British Museum was supported by Stephen and Julie Fitzgerald. The UK tour was supported by the Dorset Foundation.

[View Desire, love, identity webpage](#)

## Case study

### Desire, love, identity

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# 165,000

people visited the exhibition at the British Museum.

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# 260,000

people visited the exhibition at one of the five UK venues.

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# 4,000

listens of the audio tour in 12 months.

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**The different project strands have been very positively received:**

'It's absolutely fantastic to see the @britishmuseum highlighting #LGBTQ histories with their '*Desire, Love, Identity*' exhibition #LGBTQ\_BM.'

'I loved following the #lgbtq\_bm trail today. Well done @britishmuseum.'

**The project has helped change perceptions of the British Museum:**

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'The fact that you've got this exhibition on shows that the museum is willing to modernise... That made me see the Museum differently.'

'I liked the way it offered more questions than answers... I feel more included in what the museum has to offer... It is more of a conversation.'

### Key learning points

- Involving community partners and external advisors was of fundamental importance, bringing different perspectives to the table, providing reassurance and building confidence as the project developed.
- Involving staff and volunteers from across the whole organisation was also key to the project, ensuring the project had wide impact internally as well as externally.
- The process of developing the exhibition and tours was as important a part of the project as the final display, trail and public programme. We thought as hard about process and internal impact as the public facing outputs.
- Robust evaluation helped identify useful learning to inform ongoing and future work, as well as providing compelling insights for internal advocacy.
- Smaller scale projects can still have a significant impact and be effective catalysts as a way of making something happen that can then be developed iteratively.
- A long-term commitment is essential and it is important that projects create a lasting legacy. *Desire, love, identity* built on earlier work, and is on-going.

# Project impact

## Suggestions for further reading:

- Eddo-Lodge, Reni 2017. *Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race*: Bloomsbury Publishing
- Ferentinos, Susan 2014. *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*: Roman and Littlefield
- Hicks, Dan 2020. *The Brutish Museum: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*: Pluto Press
- MacKenzie, John M. 2009. *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities*: Manchester University Press
- Sandell, Richard; Dodd, Jocelyn; Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie 2010. *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*: Routledge

## Organisations & initiatives:

- **Autism in Museums** is an initiative to raise awareness of accessibility for all in museums and cultural venues
- **Museumand** is a museum without wall dedicated to commemorating and celebrating the Caribbean contribution to life in Nottingham and the UK
- **Museum Detox** is a membership organisation for people of colour who work in the museum and heritage sector; they work to deconstruct systems of inequality
- **QueerBritain** is a charity working to establish the UK's first national LGBTQ+ museum
- **Stonewall** work with institutions to create inclusive and accepting cultures, to ensure institutions understand and value the huge benefits brought to them by LGBT people
- **Space Invaders** is a campaign claiming equal space, power and influence for women working in museums and heritage
- **The Wonder House** offers a collection of podcasts on innovative contemporary approaches to decolonising museums
- **Museum as Muck** is an award-winning network of working class museum professionals working to affect change in the socio-economic diversity of the sector. **Twitter: @museumasmuck**

There are also a range of specialist diversity agencies, should you wish to commission support. Look online to find a company or practitioner who matches your needs.



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## Biographies

- **Beth Môrafon** is an AHI Trustee and Director of VisitMôr, a visitor experience consultancy that creates magical places for people to reconnect with nature and heritage.
- **Damon Mahoney** is an AHI Trustee and designer working across interpretation and brand identity for visitor experience.
- **Iona Keen** is an interpretation consultant working in museums and heritage. She is a trustee of the South West Federation of Museums and Art Galleries and a critical friend to the AHI.

Cover image: Mural of civil rights campaigner, Barbara Deterring. Part of the Seven Saints of St Pauls project.  
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