

Overview

This case study describes a pilot project that Beckford's Tower, part of Bath Preservation Trust, carried out with an award of Small Grant funding from South West Museum Development (SWMD) in 2022-23 to increase the inclusivity and relevance of our programming.

They worked with State of Trust to create and perform a dance interpretation that reflected on the work of Samuel Coleridge and placed it within the context of the slave rebellions on plantations in Jamaica, including those owned by Alderman, and then William Beckford.

Working with dancers for the first time, they brought a new medium to the Tower and engaged new audiences with the space and collections in new ways, making a very emotional connection to this narrative. This project brought inclusive storytelling from multiple perspectives, enabling everybody to begin to feel safe and welcome in this space.

The tower's community advisory panel shared their thoughts, ideas and feedback prior to the final rehearsals and performance, so that State of Trust could create a performance that, whilst building on previous work, was site specific and linked to the Tower and its collections.

Through four school workshops in Bath and Bristol they were able to engage pupils with the Tower, the story of William Beckford and the connection between him and enslaved people, contrasting his position with that of his peer, Samuel Coleridge.

Background

Built between 1826 and 1827, Beckford's Tower was once home to a great collection of books, furniture and art in Georgian England and now stands as the only surviving example of William Beckford's architectural achievements. William Beckford's ability to build, and to collect, was made possible by the wealth he inherited and continued to accumulate as an owner of Jamaican sugar plantations and enslaved people, and through the compensation he received from the government following the abolition of slavery.

Beckford's Tower was awarded National Lottery Heritage funding for the Our Tower project which aims to reconnect people with the building and the landscape. This involved working with partners to develop a museum programme that addressed all aspects of the Beckford story and the experiences of enslaved people on plantations owned by Beckford and his family.

While they were fundraising to redevelop the Tower, Bath Preservation Trust was enabled by South West Museum Development to take part in the Equity and Inclusion in Museums programme, to learn and reflect alongside other museums about barriers to inclusion and participation and make organisation-wide plans to overcome these.

Top tips:

"We committed time to meeting our partner on site and walking the Tower and its landscape together. The dancers connected with the place, addressed their own discomfort at being in this particular space and considered how to draw on that through the dance".

Objectives

1. To carry out this pilot activity to inform future planning of live performances and other creative programming in the Our Tower project.
2. To understand the personal impact of the performance on those who created and performed it and on those who saw it
3. To understand the impact that this performance had in attracting more diverse audiences to the Museum
4. To capture changes in attitudes to the museum and its themes, changes in attitudes to engaging with museums/museum programming and changes in attitudes to engaging with creative activity of those who engaged with this performance.

How this work supports inclusivity and relevance

Working in partnership with a creative practitioner ensured they could actively reach out to an under-represented audience and start to build a meaningful relationship with this audience. It was central to building trust and understanding with a more diverse audience and increasing engagement with Beckford's Tower. This pilot started the process of enabling a sense of belonging and so paved the way for potential deeper participation and involvement in their work over the longer term.

Claire Dixon, Head of Museums and Deputy CEO, at Beckford's Tower: *"Many of those that came to the performance have been working with us on the project and they brought with them representatives from diverse groups and networks that would not otherwise have visited. This provides confidence that continuing this work and building these networks will encourage those from diverse communities to visit the Tower and feel confident that it is a safe and welcoming space."*

In the creation of 'Coleridge Unbound', State of Trust delved into the history of Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's life in the West Country, in particular his role as an abolitionist. As a lay preacher, Coleridge spoke out against the transatlantic slave trade from the pulpit of the Unitarian Chapel in Taunton. 'Coleridge Unbound' celebrates Coleridge and raises the ghosts of the past through original dance, film, and music performance.

Using Coleridge's abolitionist text as a stimulus, State of Trust delivered a new dance interpretation that responded directly to William Beckford's story, particularly the experiences of enslaved people. The performance also drew on theme of the Somerset landscape, important to both Coleridge and Beckford, who as contemporaries and Somerset residents, represented very different perspectives on England's relationship with transatlantic slave trade.

Process

Beckford's Tower committed time to meeting their partner on site and walking the Tower and its landscape together (three on site meetings and four online meetings). The dancers connected with the place, addressed their own discomfort at being in that particular space and considered how to draw on that through the dance. These visits enabled the museum to provide context, connect the narratives of Coleridge, Beckford, and the rebellions on the plantations, as well as consider how best to use the available space. This involved their Senior Curator as well as the Activities Officer for the Our Tower project.

They developed an evaluation framework for this pilot project so that they could gather evidence to help them understand the impact overall, against their desired outcomes. Their contact at SWMD was a critical friend through parts of this process.

Another way in which they received feedback on the developing project was by working with their already established community advisory panel. Sharing the project approach with these key stakeholders ensured that the museum gathered their feedback and views on this kind of creative programming, also encouraging them to advocate for the project amongst their networks and encourage a diverse audience to participate in the event.

Beckford's Tower brought the dancers together to rehearse twice in the location and prior to that, twice in the studio, building on rehearsal time they committed to development of the dance at other venues. This took place over a period of three months.

Beckford's Tower worked with four schools/colleges and scheduled workshops on site with them, delivered by a freelance practitioner who they reached through State of Trust.

The project funding meant that they were able to make the performance free and they advertised it via their and their partners' social media channels. It was fully booked very quickly. The next stage involved arranging the performance space, accommodating equipment for the performance, and carrying out risk assessments.

After talking together and to stakeholders including their funder, Beckford's Tower decided to incorporate a 'Q and A' session after the performances to make sure that audiences could have the opportunity to further explore the performance themes with the performers, facilitated by the Museum's Curator.

The performances for both the school and public were very successful. In a very small space, this was emotive and powerful, and they know that both audiences connected well with the content, due to the high-quality engagement in the post dance Q&A sessions. The school pupils and public asked lots of questions and shared how the performances had impacted them and were keen to take the opportunity to work through what they had seen and felt. The dancers also valued this opportunity to talk about their dance and for some, it was quite an emotionally challenging part of the event.

Outcomes

A new, more diverse audience reached:

Respondents to the survey after public performance were 30% white and 70% other ethnicities. This provides evidence that broadening the programme will enable the museum to diversify their audiences - many that came to the dance had not been to the museum before this project.

Reasons for attending included: to experience the Tower in a new way; to see how a Bath museum engages with slavery legacies; to enjoy dance and learn something new. All attendees said they would attend another event.

Themes not previously explored in the museum were explored in creative ways:

Audiences at the events commented on how beautiful the performance was. The average score given for enjoyment of the public performance by respondents was 9.1 on a sliding scale of 1-10; respondents rated the quality of the performance highly, with an average score of 8.7.

Confidence and skills built in our team:

Prior to this project the museum programming had been very traditional and the staff lacked confidence to create more diverse programmes. Working with an established organisation like State of Trust has helped them to understand more about the process behind creative programming and the staff are now more confident to take this forward.

Longer term engagement in the dance piece and project made possible:

A film has been made of the performance and schools have suggested they will be a good resource for them to enable more pupils to engage emotionally with the subject, so the museum are confident it will be well used and provide significant additional levels of engagement and learning. There's potential for online and onsite screenings too.

Extract from the Q and A:

The Tower was built as an escape for Beckford, it is what he used it for, now other people are escaping here. Are we changing the way we want people to see the space and use it?

Museum Curator: We are talking to a range of different people and everyone we talk to we understand and learn from. We recognise it is uncomfortable here for some and we need discussions about how we can address that. We are listening and learning from other voices - particularly when it is not our story to tell.

Key points for effective practice

The museum underestimated the time it would take to engage schools with the workshop programme so they would recommend allowing more time for this than usual. As it is not a traditional learning approach for schools, it can take time to bring them on board.

For those new to creative arts and performance, ensure you engage with established organisations. Working with State of Trust provided a very high standard of dance but also a professional installation of light and sound that completely transformed the space beyond what the museum would have achieved in house.

State of Trust is also an organisation already embedded in diverse communities. Working with an organisation already highly regarded by the diverse communities it serves, encourages a more diverse audience, and enables diverse representation on stage.

Beckford's Tower would recommend working with professionals to develop the project and seek the funding, to ensure you can be confident that the space you have available, and the narrative you are keen to explore, will work for the medium that you choose to develop.

The Tower rooms are very small and more space was required for the dancers and equipment than they had anticipated, so the audience for the public event was smaller than hoped. The timing of the performance was partly set by the timing of the grant funding and so the weather constrained them; but they will consider using the landscape and bringing in a marquee to enable wider participation for future projects.

The project was highly emotive and powerful. It affected staff, the creative performers, and the audiences. Beckford's Tower would recommend allowing everyone time to reflect. The Q&A did this well for audiences and interviews with the creative team enabled the museum to help them reflect and confront their emotions, including those of anger and resentment created by being in the Tower and surrounded by collections which were funded by the plantations and those who were enslaved. The staff team also stayed after the event and this provided an opportunity for them to reflect and talk through the impact of the event and ensure staff were supported to manage the emotional effects of the performance and project.

The Tower will now close for a year and they are developing the museum programme. This project directly contributed to a successful bid for further funding, to create a Tower specific dance that tells the complete story of Tacky's Rebellion, as portrayed by Alex Wheatle in his book 'Cane Warriors'. Working with State of Trust, this dance will be performed when the Tower re-opens.

Beckford's Tower are committed to a long-term programme that is more diverse, working with dancers, artists, and other creatives to connect audiences with our stories and collections in new ways. As well as live events, they will use film and recorded content to engage more audiences that visit the Tower with this creative method of interpretation.

Additional information

Beckford's Tower:

- beckfordstower.org.uk/coleridge-unbound-new-dance-interpretation-performed-at-beckfords-tower/

State of Trust:

- [Registered Charity | State Of Trust](#)
- [CANE WARRIORS | State of Trust](#)

Historical texts:

- Brown, Vincent, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020

Websites:

- [Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-1761 \(axismaps.com\)](#)
- [Cane Warriors by Alex Wheatle](#)

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Supported using public funding by
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