What the Dickens! Southwark marks novelist’s bicentenary

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Southwark Council and Cool Tan Arts will be running the projects that present aspects of Dickens’ early life, the local places that featured in several of his books, and the experiences that helped create some of his best-loved characters.

The results will include an exhibition at Cuming Museum and a special edition of a newspaper, inspired by The Pickwick Papers, charting the novelist’s life and times in and around the borough.

Born on February 7th 1812 in Portsmouth, by the age of 12 the young Dickens was living with his sister, Fanny, in Lant Street, Southwark, while his father, John, was imprisoned in Marshalsea debtor’s prison. Dickens would later use the prison for the opening sequence of Little Dorrit. Meanwhile, his experience of having to fend for himself and his feeling of abandonment comes through in a number of his stories, not least David Copperfield. Other parts of the local area, including the Mint Street workhouse, crop up in Oliver Twist.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “Many parts of Southwark, such as Borough High Street and Walworth, evoke the early 19th century London immortalised in Dickens’ novels. These two projects will enable locals and visitors alike to enjoy his bicentenary in imaginative and truly memorable ways.”

The grant of £48,300 to Southwark Council’s Cuming Museum will be used to create an exhibition, opening in May, that looks at Southwark in the time of Dickens’ childhood, explores social issues of the early 1800s, and how the novelist’s experiences of poverty and social injustice shaped his work. The Museum, working in partnership with the Council’s arts and archive teams, will use its collection of illustrations and historic artefacts to bring the exhibition to life, alongside a programme of events and activities for all ages. Objects on show will include the original Marshalsea prison pump which will also undergo some conservation work. In addition, a heritage trail will be created opening in August this year.

Councillor Veronica Ward, Southwark Council’s Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure, Sport and the Olympics, said: "I am delighted that we have been awarded this money from the Heritage Lottery Fund to help celebrate the work of one the country's greatest novelists and literary figures.

"Charles Dickens has a long and deep association with Southwark and the exhibition at the Cuming Museum is a great way to celebrate his bicentenary and to introduce more people to his work and the history of the borough."

Meanwhile CoolTan Arts will use its £37,400 grant to create The Dickens News, an original publication inspired by Dickens’ first novel The Pickwick Papers. The Walworth-based organisation specialises in working with people suffering from mental health issues, and its project will train participants and volunteers in the legacy of Charles Dickens, his mental health and his road to fame. The finished product will be distributed locally and an exhibition will be held at Southwark Cathedral later this year.

For CoolTan Arts, Michelle Baharier, Chief Executive Officer, said: ”We are so excited to be part of celebrating Dickens’ bicentenary and delighted to receive this grant to produce The Dickens News. This is a fantastic opportunity for our participants and volunteers to work together with the local community, learning about the history and life of Dickens in

Southwark while gaining valuable and transferable skills - developing their knowledge and understanding of heritage and its relevance to society today."

Further information

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