How artists can uncover hidden histories and fill

Ancestral Futures by Eelyn Lee and collaborators, commissioned by Dig Where You Stand. Photo: Anh Do.

South Yorkshire project Dig Where You Stand invited creatives to explore the often overlooked and poorly documented evidence of people from diverse ethnic communities across the area's history.

The breadth of archives depends on who's doing the recording and what they consider worth keeping. Historically, people of colour have not figured at the top of the priority list.

But, as Alex Rajinder Mason says: "With an artistic sensibility, there's a lot of potential in the archival gaps. You can draw out a story and speculate what a person's life might be like through artistic expression."

Alex is the project manager of Dig Where You Stand, which we awarded £112,000 in 2023. It was conceived by creative director Désirée Reynolds in 2021 during a stint as writer in residence at Sheffield City Archives, born from her frustration at the lack of evidence of black working-class people she found.

Our funding has helped them bring 14 artists into the archives to explore and expand upon the fragments of records and fleeting mentions of African, Caribbean, East Asian and South Asian people who made Sheffield their home.

“We wanted to bring as many people of colour into the archive as possible, have each person bring their own sensibility, cultura nd the diff in South

A Dig Where You Stand archive event. Photo: Ai Narapol.

Taking archival stories to the streets

One of those artists was Eelyn Lee, who is of Hong Kong and English heritage. It was her first time exploring an archive.

“Once you start digging, there’s so much richness there and it takes you on really unexpected journeys. What I discovered was quite a revelation,” she says.

It started with the 1855 entry in a parish register for ‘A. Chow’, a British-born Chinese baby buried in St Paul’s churchyard (which no longer exists). She obtained the child’s death certificate, which featured the father’s name, ?? [Teh Kwei aka Tuck Guy] and listed his occupation as magician.

“It was amazing, a line in a register led me to a man’s name written by his own hand, and on to the story of Chinese magicians who toured across this country, Ireland, France. I ended up connecting with an academic in Canada who’s done a lot of research on the topic, and we’ve been sharing information that neither of us previously knew. It’s really exciting.”

Eelyn's artistic response was a street procession in collaboration with other East and South East Asian creatives. They develo
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Ancestral Futures by Eelyn Lee and collaborators. After waking from a long celestial sleep, the mythological character is consumed by the memory of the dead child. The procession explores grief and passion which moves from rage to something more joyful. Eelyn says the physical movement and the emotions reflect experiences of the diaspora. Photo: Anh Do.

The procession embodied the emotion Alex says is one of the aims of Dig Where You Stand.

"We want to connect with audiences in an emotive way, to make them feel the personhood of the individuals we're finding out about and show these were normal yet complex people with full lives. What we're doing is really impactful."

Attracting new audiences to heritage

The response to the artistic outputs – which range from poetry, portraiture and puppetry, to music, film and textiles – has been as positive as the interest from people wanting to take part in other ways. Dig Where You Stand is also providing archive training for women of colour (the second cohort of trainees start at the end of the year), practical workshops, discussions and educational resources (which will be available online soon on the Dig Where You Stand website).

Alex says: “Historically, archives haven’t got much engagement from racially marginalised groups. Part of our job is to make the archives feel more accessible to people of colour, allow people to feel a bit more comfortable in those spaces and be able to navigate them.”

And it’s working.

“We’re seeing a greater interest from people wanting to learn how to access the archives, and a lot of artists wanting to be part of this work. But the thing I’ve noticed most is the interest from schools and community groups who want to engage with the work, want us to come and give talks and run workshops so they can learn about heritage,” he says.

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The project held an exhibition at Persistence Works this summer. Photo: Smart Banda.

Tips for other archive projects

Alex and Eelyn both agree that the key to the project’s success has been openness.

“Sheffield City Archives really bought into, became part of, Dig Where You Stand. Without their openness, this project wouldn’t work. They hold so much information, they have the expertise to help guide us through it,” Alex says.

Offering advice to other archives considering a similar project, he says: “There has to be a will from the archives, and they have to value those marginalised voices. Archives should seek out people in the community who have an expertise around this area and provide the resource that allows them to explore and run with it. That’s what’s allowed us to grow so quickly in the space of a few years.”

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Fourteen artists came into the archives to explore and expand upon the fleeting mentions of African, Caribbean, East Asian and South Asian people who made Sheffield their home. Photo: Alicia Barrett.

Got an idea?

Explore more heritage projects we’ve funded in archives and other collecting institutions and see how we might be able to support your idea.

A Dig Where You Stand event

erse ethnic communities in South Yorkshire

Making kimchi. Credit: Korean British Cultural Exchange.

ge: sharing memories, stories and even kimchi

An event at Newham Chinese Association. Photo: Newham Chinese Association.

Malaysian Angels of the NHS