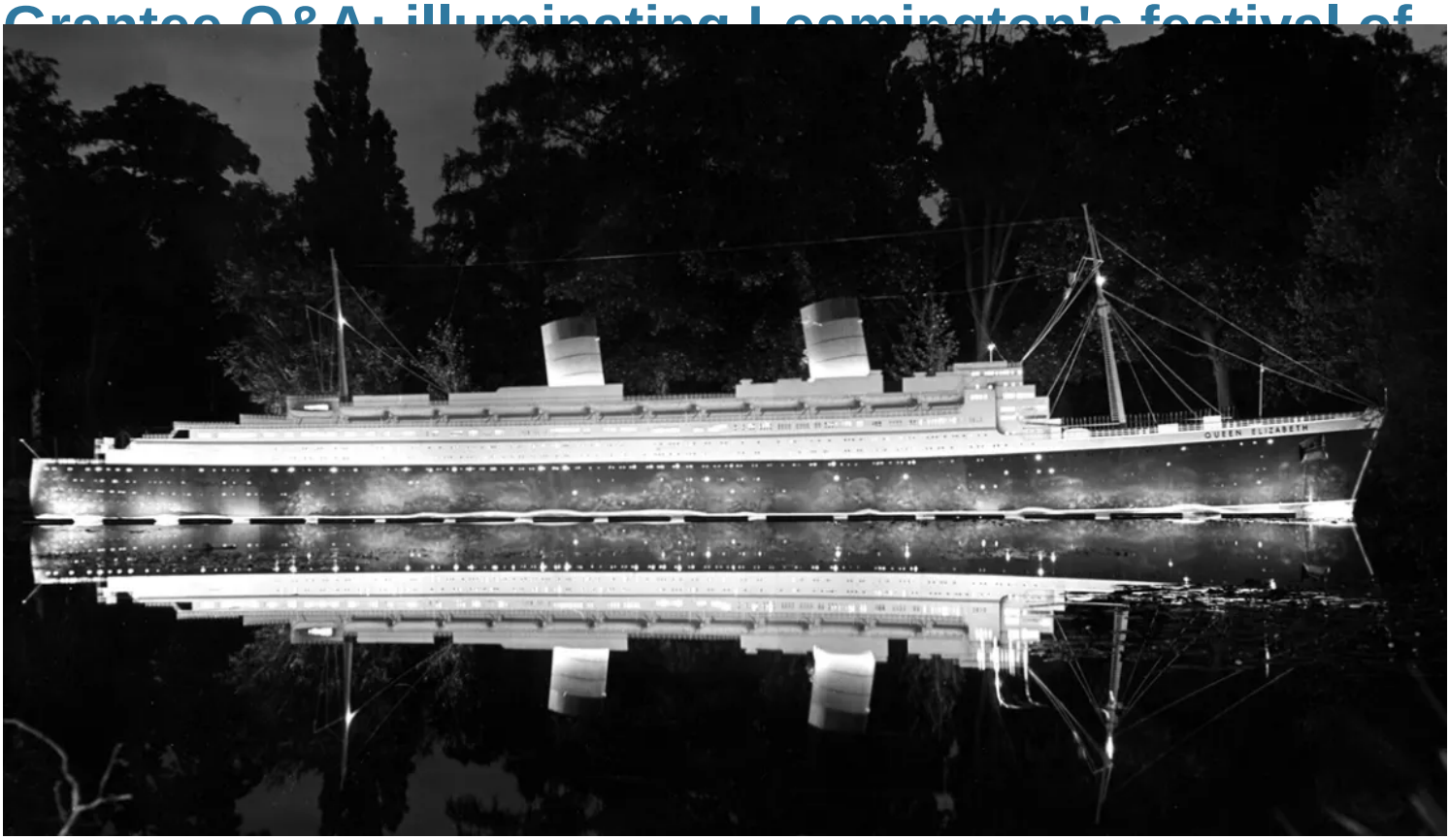
Grantee Q&A: illuminating Leamington's festival of



The original illuminations captured the imaginations of local people and visitors from around the UK. Photo: Whittle Productions.

We asked Carole Sleight and David Clargo, co-directors of Whittle Productions, to share what they learned from delivering a unique oral history project in their local community.

About the project

Lights of Leamington: Switched On Stories researched and preserved the heritage of a cultural festival that took place annually in Leamington Spa, from 1951 to 1961. It attracted millions of visitors and rivalled the Blackpool Illuminations.

In February 2025, the project reconnected the town with its legacy through a multimedia exhibition and programme, shaped by community events, that uncovered and shared memories of the original festival.

David Clargo and Carole Sleight, who led the project.

Meanwhile, a new light festival, Spotlight, brought fresh sparkle to the town with a memorable show in Jephson Gardens and across the town centre.

What did you find most challenging about your application and how did you overcome these challenges?

"As we were best placed to lead the work, we weren't just the applicant, but also responsible for project management and much of delivery. Due to the volume of work, we found it challenging to budget and account for our time, particularly given the limits on paying ourselves without going out to tender.

"To navigate this, we brought in a freelance consultant with experience of working with The National Lottery Heritage Fund to guide us through the process and ensure compliance."

What would you recommend future applicants spend more time on when developing their application?

"Researching and developing your project idea before you apply. Immerse yourself in the questions and requirements of the application – work out your outcomes, budget, partners and supporters before you start to write anything. When building your timetable, be realistic about how long things will take, particularly when you're working with other organisations."

Local people shared their memories of the town's celebrated light shows, which were showcased in an exhibition. Photo: Whittle Productions.

What one piece of advice would you give to someone applying for funding for the first time?

"Submit a project enquiry form before submitting the main application. This was invaluable, as the feedback highlighted and recommended some areas that we hadn't considered."

When delivering your project, what surprised you?

"The massive impact the Lights of Leamington festival had on so many local people. Some of our storytellers were only three years of age when they attended the festival. The magical impact of the experience was so significant that they could recount in detail what they saw, despite only visiting once and now being in their late 70s. It really must have been a powerful event."

Jephson Gardens in Leamington, illuminated for one of the original festivals. Photo: Whittle Productions.

What one thing do you know now that you wish you'd known before you began?

"That we'd understood the budgeting process more in advance of our application, as we spent more time on this element than anticipated. In the end, we probably put too much information into our budget, but thankfully there is flexibility to make tweaks through your Investment Manager."

What's been the most rewarding thing to come out of your project?

"We feel we have honoured, recorded and shared the magic of a truly unique local festival, capturing memories that might otherwise have been lost. It has been deeply rewarding to see how the project resonated with those who experienced the original Lights of Leamington and to introduce its rich history to new audiences.

"The sense of pride, joy and connection it sparked, both in our storytellers and the wider community, has been remarkable. Most of all, we're proud to have created a legacy that will continue to inform, inspire and illuminate for years to come."

This is part of a series of Q&As with successful grantees – helping to demystify the project application and delivery process and share experience across the sector.

Hedge planting at Culgaith. Photo: Eden Rivers Trust.

planning

Karen and the project team gather to celebrate the launch of the Maroon Mile at the Heart of Midlothian Memorial Clock, in the city's Haymarket.

the heart of Edinburgh

RAF veterans (L-R) Bryan Hughes-Scott, Donald Campbell and John Winston Clarke gather to share their testimony at RAF Museum Cosford.

Sharing the stories of the RAF’s black servicemen and women