

Cabmen’s shelter in St George’s Square, Pimlico

Only 13 of the original 61 Cabmen’s Shelters survive and their role has been largely overlooked, in fact most passers-by are completely unaware of their function. Now the Creative Intelligence Agency, a non-profit arts and design organisation, will raise public awareness of their history, help set up a friends group and promote conservation and maintenance to preserve them for the future. It will work with the Cabmen’s Shelter Fund and London Transport Museum.

All the remaining shelters, dotted around central London, are Grade II listed and are still looked after by the Cabmen’s Shelter Fund that built them between 1875 and 1914. Now, as then, they provide the city’s black cab drivers with a place to rest and buy refreshments.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “These examples of living history, dotted about London’s streets, would continue to disappear were it not for such a project. This will not only help to conserve them but also give former cabbies a voice bringing their heritage to life.”

The Cabbies’ Shelters Project will interview present and former cabbies to build up a picture of life in the London taxi trade since the Second World War. Also interviewed will be some of the people who have run the tiny cafés that operate in each of the shelters.

The recollections gathered, as well as a selection of cabbie memorabilia plus a full map of all the shelters (surviving and missing), will be donated to The London Transport Museum. In addition, this material will be the inspiration for lively and engaging artist commissions by Kathy Prendergast and Emma Smith.

The public will get the chance, during Heritage Open House days, to see inside some of the shelters, normally the exclusive preserve of the cabbies themselves. Local volunteers, including young people, will be encouraged to get involved to record the interviews and help gather the background information for the project.

Alongside commissioned artworks, oral histories, and visual documentation of the shelters, the project's legacy will include a friends group that will help the Cabmen's Shelter Fund to ensure ongoing support for the structures so as to keep them maintained and in use.

The shelters were originally built at existing taxi ranks during the day of the horse-drawn cab because cabbies were not allowed to leave their vehicle unattended in order to go for refreshment in a local pub. Their aim was to provide wholesome food and shelter. Because they were to be sighted on the highway the police stipulated that the shelters should take up no more room than a horse cab, which explains their diminutive size into which crammed up to a dozen cabbies round a central bench with just room for a stove and a counter for preparing and serving food and mugs of tea. Etiquette was controlled for those using the shelters with an absolute prohibition on gambling, drinking and swearing.

Jimmy Jenkins, Trustee of the Cabmen's Shelter Fund, said: "These shelters were built in the nineteenth century to provide cabbies with 'good and wholesome refreshments at moderate prices, which is what they've been doing ever since. We're proud to be looking after them now. Passers-by are always curious about the shelters. We're looking forward to collaborating with the Creative Intelligence Agency to share this unique bit of London's heritage."

Martin Harrison-Putnam, Senior Curator, London Transport Museum, said: "There is a gap in our collection when it comes to material relating to London's cabbie community so we are delighted to be collaborating on this original and exciting project. We also welcome the way it will work with London cabbies, contemporary artists, local schools and community groups to create, collect and interpret this material."

Danielle Olsen, curator for the Creative Intelligence Agency, said: "These seemingly modest buildings belie the fact that they are sites of navigational expertise. The cabbies that use them today are experts at getting around London. The shelters are also conversation hubs, alive with the exchange of anecdotes told and stories overheard as cabbies go about their business of transporting Londoners and visitors from place to place. The Cabbies' Shelters Project will tap into this rich vein of London's life and heritage. We are thrilled to be commissioning artists to produce work inspired by these distinctive buildings and the knowledgeable cabbies that use them."

Notes to editors

Emma Smith is an artist based in London, UK. She has a performative and participatory art practice that is both research and production based. Her work explores the interrelation of people and place. Exhibitions include Camden Arts Centre (2006), Whitechapel Gallery (2007 & 2008), Wysing Arts Centre (2010, 2011 & 2012), Grizedale Arts (2010-12), Artsadmin (2011 & 2012), The Showroom (2011), Tate Modern (2011), Tate Modern Tanks (2012), Arnolfini (2013), UK, with international projects in Canada, the Canadian Arctic, China, Italy, Kenya, Latvia, Lebanon, Mauritius and Spain. Smith was artist fellow of The Showroom (2010-2011) and Artsadmin Bursary Artist 2010-2011). Smith is currently resident in the ACME Fire Station Residency Programme (2010-2015) and Associate Artist of Artsadmin.To find out more visit the Emma Smith website.

Kathy Prendergast was born in Dublin and is based in London. Her work has persistently revolved around a potent cluster of issues chief among which are sexuality, identity, landscape , mapping and power. She came to widespread attention for her monumental project, ‘City Drawings’ in 1994. She works in many media but drawing is at the forefront of her practice. Prendergast has exhibited widely in various venues including Camden Arts Centre, Tate Britain, Venice Biennale (Best Young Artist Award) 1994, Sydney Biennale, the ICA, Boston, the Drawing Center, New York, , Peer, London, 2010, Kerlin Gallery, Douglas Hyde Gallery, and IMMA Dublin and Berardo Museum, Lisbon. She is represented in the collections of the Tate Gallery, London, the British Government Collection, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Arts Council of Ireland, the Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo, New York, the Santa Barbara University Museum, the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville , the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery Dublin and numerous private collections in Ireland, Great Britain, Europe and the USA.

The 13 surviving cabmen’s shelters can be found at: Chelsea Embankment SW3; Embankment Place WC2; Grosvenor Gardens SW1; Hanover Square W1; Kensington Park Road, W11; Kensington Road W8; Pont Street SW1; Russell Square WC1; St George’s Square, Pimlico SW1; Temple Place WC2; Thurloe Place, Kensington SW7; Warwick Avenue W9; and Wellington Place NW8.

You can watch a BBC report about The Cabmen's Shelters: Inside London's secret 'green sheds'.

Further information

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