

GARDEN CITY COLLECTION

Title of project/activity

Who lived at my house (Hidden Histories)

Partners

Hillshott Infant and Pixmore Junior Schools, Letchworth Garden City

Background

To build a broader audience for the history of Letchworth and the Museum Service. This sits in a wider organisational context that seeks to improve life chances for the Letchworth Garden City community and make the town a great place to live in. We have acquired evidence that shows significant levels of deprivation in the town and our Learning Strategy focuses on actions that will help engender a greater sense of civic pride. The project is based on an assumption that people have undervalued the role played by working people in the development of Letchworth, the world's first Garden City, without whom the town would have remained an experiment rather than a socio-economic success that was duplicated globally. By highlighting the history of people's homes we hoped that this would help them to feel a greater sense of ownership of their part in the 'Garden City Story'.

Key Objectives

To work with a school(s)

To broaden awareness of the museum service and the easy access of the Garden City Collection online

To highlight the history of working people in Letchworth Garden City

Which of the CCD evidence areas does the activity address

- Integrating diversity in the museum's programme
- Engaging a diverse range of people in developing/delivering programmes
- Collections are viewed from diverse perspectives and tell untold stories
- Self-evaluation & sharing best practice

Process

We established a relationship with the schools

Started the process by the schools visiting our study centre and museum

Further support took place in school by the lead teacher and on a facilitated visit from the museum and a local tour

A community event following a mailshot to specifically identified housing areas reached a wider audience

An exhibition opened on the 7 December (till the 11 January) displaying childrens work and panels about the information found on houses

An online 'story' tour was launched on 19th December where people could view the houses and their history with images from the Garden City Collection

There were challenges around finding time as there were only two/three key individuals running the project. The idea of the school being a conduit to families that might become familiar with our cultural offer through the project was a good one but relied quite heavily on time commitment from the school to contact parents and arrange visits etc.

Outcome

- 22 schoolchildren and their families and 12 further families were involved in the project
- 111 people visited the Museum at One Garden City (a new venue) for an event to discover who lived at their house
- The Garden City Collection can draw on the stories of over 30 working families in the past that builds a

more inclusive picture of the town's history

- There are vinyl plaques on houses so that there is a visible link to the project to promote the idea to anyone passing by. One potential issue is that this relies on participants to display the plaque.
- An online tour of the plaques and their stories can continue to be used by the public and the school to re-explore the history found. This seemed to be a good solution to the fact that the houses are too far apart for a walking tour and is perhaps more accessible to younger families who will be familiar with using google maps but might not feel comfortable with a realtime 'expert tour'.

Key points for effective practice

The school squeezed this into their time because they valued the 'cultural capital' it gave. However, this meant that there was often little time for planning and communication and many decisions changed or were decided upon at short notice. Museums need to be prepared to be flexible and support the school where they can.

Reviewing how we might re-visit this idea in the future – it might work better as a weekly after-school club for a term so that there is a regularity to the work achieved rather than adhoc visits over two terms. This will help parents to be aware of the project and will help build up a larger amount of examples of work made by pupils to contribute to a larger exhibition and celebration event. We could still build in a transition project by continuing our visit to the infant school coupled with a presentation by the year 6 junior school pupils. One of the more unexpected discoveries was that we could build a lot of history around homes and the history of town – perhaps more than having details of exactly who lived their required. Children had lots of fun learning about all things around the early life of new settlers to the town from earth closets to transport.



Conclusions/recommendations

We have built a great working partnership with both schools and have seen increased visits from teachers from those schools. Both heads now attend our Creative Network which is a newly-formed bi-monthly meeting between teaching staff and ourselves. As a newly formed 'department' and strategy, we now have a proven project to use as an exemplar when approaching new schools or schools that haven't worked with us. One example of this is that the project has been identified by the local housing association who would like to work with us on a project to combat loneliness.

Plans are in place to revisit the project next year – particularly in time for the next census release. Through our school Creative Network the project will be promoted in the next schools newsletter that we produce with a view engaging new schools to work on the project. Although not all areas are going to be included in the census, in later estates we can borrow from some of the lessons and visits that took place and build in a 'reminiscence' aspect where we connect older and younger residents together.

Both families and pupils involved have been encouraged to visit 3 of our cultural venues as part of the project which we hope has broken down a barrier with them. They will also now be aware of our website as an easy medium to Letchworth Garden City history.

Further to this, there was so much positive feedback about our 'Who Lived at my House' event that we are planning on holding these regularly throughout the year as a great way to introduce people to the museum service.

Each home that took part in the project received a blue plaque that they could keep and printed information on what was found such as newspaper articles and census returns.

Additional information

Event coverage: <https://bit.ly/2lcfgq1>

Plaque trail: <https://bit.ly/3aofxT1>

'The Hidden History Project or 'Who Lived in My House' gave a chance for pupils to use the Letchworth Collection and become real history detectives using censuses, newspapers and street directories to find out who lived in their home. The children have a greater understanding about how Letchworth has changed over their years and indeed how their homes have been modified to fit 21st century living standards! Working with our feeder infant school meant that siblings could work together and our new pupils met and worked with some of our older pupils which we think aided their transition into their new junior school. The families are very excited about getting their special plaques too!'

Alex Evans, Head of Pixmore Junior School:

