

More Than Oliver Twist: Project Introduction

Project Context

In April 2014, a group of British workhouse history sites and interested academics and archivists - among them, The Workhouse Museum, Ripon, The Workhouse, Southwell, Red House Museum, Hampshire and Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow - visited Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse in Norfolk for an exploratory meeting. It was suggested that these sites form a group, where they could learn, support and engage with each other, share resources and problems and develop joint projects.

Encouraged by the ideas generated, the group met again at The Workhouse, Southwell in November 2015 bringing together further partners including Thackray Museum, Leeds and Llanfyllin Workhouse, Powys, Wales. Following this second annual meeting, recognising the true benefits of forming a Subject Specialist Network, the concept of a formalised "Workhouse Network" came into existence.

The Norfolk Museums Service 5-year plan (2013-2018) includes the establishment of Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse as a national centre for workhouse research. During the 'Voices from the Workhouse' Heritage Lottery Fund project the Workhouse Network has met regularly to share advice and collections knowledge alongside examples of best practice. As such the 'More than Oliver Twist' project was initiated as an opportunity to grow the network and establish Gressenhall as a major player within the organisation.

Funding was approved by Arts Council England as they believe Subject Specialist Networks have a significant role to play in relation to meeting their own aims around dynamic collections curation and management, particularly when museum staff need to make complex curatorial decisions around collections management and require the back-up of peer expertise. They recognise the huge responsibility that collections management and engagement represents, and the necessity of having access to expert knowledge for curatorial work, which is not always available in-house. They believe that sharing of ideas and techniques learnt by experience of practice and study makes a crucial contribution to this work.

The Arts Council England aim to support Subject Specialist Networks to:

- Build confidence in the museum sector in relation to dynamic collections management and increased public engagement by sharing subject specialist knowledge
- Contribute towards ensuring that staff working with collections have the opportunity to develop and improve specialist subject knowledge
- Support the museum sector to develop and share curatorial knowledge around given subject areas
- Enable the museums sector as a whole to develop new curatorial knowledge around specialist subject areas

These aims are born from Arts Council England's wider strategy plan, which stipulates 5 main goals. All goals are important, but the Subject Specialist Network Fund will prioritise applications that respond to Goal 3 and Goal 4:

Goal 3: The arts, museums and libraries are resilient and environmentally sustainable.

Goal 4: The leadership and workforce in the arts, museums and libraries are diverse and appropriately skilled.

The 'More Than Oliver Twist' project will use the 1881 census as a starting point and will investigate pauper family histories from various workhouses across the UK, looking at individuals and their lives before, during and after their time in the workhouse. The project will look at what role the workhouse played in their lives, going beyond this to paint a broader picture of these paupers as individuals, finally exploring how these narratives resonate within contemporary social contexts.

Through a series of training days and skills sessions, the museum workforce will have their historical enquiry and family history skills enhanced to enable them to research and create pauper narratives confidently. A second phase of the project sees these histories then used to create a powerful and emotive physical and digital temporary exhibition – the experience of which will further equip the workforce with the skills and confidence to produce creative and inspiring content.

Project Aims:

- To build confidence in the museum sector in relation to developing and disseminating historic welfare research;
- To increase public engagement with this subject specialist knowledge;
- To enable museums to be confident in celebrating and displaying their welfare collections;
- To build relationships between previously unrelated museums and with academics, archivists, librarians and historians;
- To enable the museums sector as a whole to develop new curatorial knowledge by forging links outside of the sector;
- To enable dynamic collections curation and management;
- To enhance museum workforce ability to take complex curatorial decisions;
- To build confidence and knowledge throughout the network and across the wider reach of the digital audience.

Project Benefits:

- Cross sector relationships development;
- Outreach benefits for academic partners; particularly with respect to Research Excellence Framework assessments;
- Access to welfare collections resources for academics, creative practitioners and historians;
- Pooled knowledge and skills resources on the network website;
- Exhibition available for loan for non-members;
- Access to professional welfare expertise across a range of sectors;
- Public access to knowledge, ideas and expertise for welfare collections.

Project Outcomes:

- Comprehensive training for all Regional Mentors to guide research groups successfully, including access to training materials and plans;
- New leadership for the network through the creation of Regional Mentors to lead local skills sessions and oversee the development of a temporary pauper histories exhibition;

- Training at a national networking event for a diverse workforce to engage with welfare collections and pauper histories;
- A physical and online pauper histories exhibition linking historical and contemporary welfare stories;
- A Workhouse Network website – hosting welfare resource toolkits, best practice case studies and the digital pauper histories exhibition;
- Full evaluation including the development of a 5 year forward plan to create a sustainable, diverse organisation bringing together museum professionals, academics, historians, archivists and librarians.

Important Dates

July 2019	August/September 2019	September 2019	January 2019
22nd July - Mentor Training Day (mentors only) Nottingham Trent University	Skills Sessions led by mentors for research volunteers Respective workhouse sites	11th September – Networking Event (all to attend) Nottingham Trent University	All research complete – Pauper stories drafted

