Historic England

Volunteering in Archives

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Four case studies to show how Historic England can expand
volunteer opportunities through wellbeing-centred,
hybrid ways of working in photographic archives

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1 Introduction

Historic England Archive, the archive of England's historic environment, curates a dynamic collection that tells the story of the shared memories and lived histories of places in England.

In 2022 the Archive will launch a new strategy to grow and nurture a diverse range of engagement and volunteer activities, including expanding the variety of volunteer opportunities to reach and engage new audiences. Laura Elson Consulting Ltd was engaged as Researcher in November 2021 to carry out supporting desk-based research into the volunteer experience and opportunities in photography archives across the heritage sector and present the findings. Through this research, Historic England Archive sought to identify four case studies to give useful insights into:

- Transferable ways of expanding a volunteer community
- Embracing digital opportunities
- Benefits and best practice in the wellbeing of volunteering in archives, both digital volunteering and onsite opportunities.

The research also sought to capture insights into:

- Hybrid ways of volunteering in archives which embrace digital tasks done remotely, whilst also retaining a connection to the physical archive and space
- Building a sense of community between volunteers that is centred around individual wellbeing and encourages sharing of experiences across different volunteer tasks, whether digital or in-person
- Digital tools for managing volunteer data and effective communication
- Volunteer project planning, delivery and evaluation when working with historic photographs that demonstrate benefits to the archives and volunteers
- Ways that volunteer engagement has been measured
- Pitfalls to avoid and preventative methods
- Showcasing how a sense of volunteer community can be generated while identifying any barriers to inclusion, across digital volunteering with onsite opportunities.

The research explored four different volunteering projects focusing on photography as the main media, engaging volunteers with photographs and ideas of place, through a range of onsite and online engagement. Historic England Archive were interested in examples of how the inclusion of volunteers and citizen scientists can add layered value to archive materials rather than seeking to replace professional archive roles with unpaid labour.

The four case studies considered in this report represent a range of organisations with different degrees of resources. The two larger projects were affiliated with research institutions and benefitted from a core team of specialist staff within a defined project timeframe. These case studies provide useful insights into how archives which are hosted in organisations that have paid roles to deliver volunteer management and communications can build hybrid volunteer communities. Two further archives are showcased within this report that are part of Local Authorities and as such have had to adapt and evolve volunteer engagement as funding has reduced over time. Since many archives involving historic photographs in England are managed with little resources, or entirely volunteer -run, these further case studies offer comparative insights into how volunteer involvement can sustain and grow archive collections in ways that can offer a rich and rewarding experience for the volunteers, rather than simply to replace paid employees.

Historic England Archive and the Researcher wish to sincerely thank the four research participants, and all involved in the respective image archives for their insights and permission to share these findings together with a selection of the images.

These projects were:
- **Layers of London** developed by the Institute of Historical Research
- The Courtauld Institute of Art's **Digitisation Volunteer Project** and **World Architecture Unlocked** Project
- Leeds Libraries' **Leodis**
- Blackburn with Darwen Libraries' **Cotton Town**.

2 Methodology and approach

Historic England Archive identified several examples of image-based archives involving volunteers across England and worked with the Researcher to identify four which together represented a range of geographies, archive types, budgets, and approaches.

The first case study, **Layers of London**, has previously collaborated with Historic England Archive to map Black Histories of 31 Places in England and the RAF Aerial Collection. Layers of London demonstrates how map-based citizen science volunteering opportunities can add layers of rich social history to digital archives.

Second the **Courtauld Institute's case study** shows how an organisation which holds similar collections to Historic England Archive, has embraced crowdsourcing volunteering through the platform Zooniverse while taking an effective and wellbeing focused approach to engaging a diverse range of onsite volunteers.

Next, **Leodis** offers a practical example of a digital archive collating several collections grouped around place, with a hybrid team of onsite volunteers and digital activities, as a popular resource offered by a Council.

The final case study, **Cotton Town**, showcases how a place-based archive with fewer resources not only supports a hybrid volunteer community, but ensures this community leads and steers the development of the archive. These later two case studies offer valuable insights as to how Historic England Archive could potentially collaborate with existing volunteer communities across the country. Research questions were developed based on the key learning insights Historic England Archive were interested in exploring, in order to inform their future expansion of digital and onsite opportunities in ways that could build a sense of belonging and community, foster volunteer wellbeing and remove barriers to volunteering for people from non traditional heritage volunteer backgrounds.

Interviews were supported by desk-based research into each of the four case studies and a literature review of relevant research and insights into the themes to be explored. Interview questions to inform the research process included:

- How have heritage organisations successfully expanded an archive-based volunteer community?
- How have archives which curate historic photographs embraced digital opportunities, particularly in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social restrictions?
- What are some benefits and best practice in fostering the wellbeing of volunteers in archives, both in digital volunteering and onsite opportunities?
- How can hybrid models of volunteering in archives, which embrace digital tasks done remotely, also retain a connection to the physical archive and space?
- How can a sense of community between volunteers be built which encourages sharing of experiences across different volunteer tasks, whether digital or in-person?

- What digital tools for managing volunteer data and communication are effective?
- How can volunteer projects be planned, delivered, and evaluated when working with historic photographs that demonstrate benefits to the archives and volunteers?
- How can volunteer engagement be measured?
- What are the pitfalls to avoid and preventative methods?
- How can a volunteering community be inclusive and barriers to non traditional volunteer groups removed?

Semi structured interviews were completed with staff representatives from each participating archive in November 2021 by the Researcher using Zoom. Participants had the opportunity to read the questions ahead of the interview. Following the interview, participants were also given the opportunity to review and clarify the transcript of their interview, in addition to the option to select some of the images showcased in this report. Interview transcripts were captured using the transcription software Otter AI.

3 Data collected – four case studies

Layers of London

[Layers of London](#) is a map-based history website developed by the Institute of Historical Research.

Layers of London is an online collection of digitised historic maps, photos and crowd-sourced histories provided by the public and key partners across London. Users can access free historic maps of London and contribute stories, memories, and histories to create a social history resource about their area. The Institute of Historical Research,

part of the University of London, received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to enable the public to engage with history in innovative and forward-thinking ways. Traditionally the Institute had used local specialist historians to contribute information about the geographical areas they have expertise in, as has been the case with the Victoria County History project, begun in 1899.

With Layers of London, the Institute was keen to use technology to crowdsource historical information and personal memories. This encourages public historical discourse whilst

Figure 1: Image taken from the Layers of London website showing workmen excavating the land where a house burnt down in a 2nd-century fire, at 10 Gresham Street in the City of London.

"Volunteers tend to like the experience of meeting other like-minded people and interacting and discussing, and so with a digital project in a way that's naturally diminished because you can do it at home. And so, we have to make sure that the social element of volunteering was also embedded in what we did."

capturing a broad range of images and stories which otherwise would never have been recorded. Partners include Historic England Archive, the British Library, The London Metropolitan Archives, Historic England, The National Archives, Museum of London Archaeology and a wide range of national and local archives, institutions, community groups and individuals.

The website allows Londoners to interact with and contribute to many different 'layers' of London's history from the Romans to the present day. Anyone can be a volunteer through contributing materials such as old photographs, letters, videos, and local research findings relating to the history of any place in London. Content is contributed to Layers of London under a Creative Commons Licence, encouraging respectful collaboration, and sharing.

How volunteers are involved

Anyone can volunteer by creating an account on the Layers of London website, logging in and contributing their own materials. Since Layers of London was an innovative and new approach, the small team managing the project have learned and adapted the project over time, including how volunteers are fundamentally involved. Initially they planned to divide the city geographically and appoint volunteer coordinators in each borough. These volunteer coordinators would then deliver sessions in a physical hub such as a community building, providing a space for volunteers to get together, learn how to use the website and upload materials, in a much more traditional model of onsite volunteering, albeit devolved by borough.

This approach enabled volunteers to socialise and meet like minded people, but ultimately the team found this did not result in the volume of contributions expected. Since what was innovative about Layers of London was the crowdsourcing, using a traditional onsite model to capture information also seemed at odds with the new approach. The focus became solely on the crowdsourcing element; however, project staff ran outreach sessions at community buildings to offer surgeries and question and answer sessions to help interested volunteers get started before getting involved online. The team also engaged community groups and heritage groups to use their map for their work. For example, a heritage group studying conscientious objectors in Harringay were able to use Layers of London to map the homes of conscientious objectors, finding that they often were neighbours and likely to have influenced each other.

Layers of London also includes specific volunteering initiatives that citizen scientists can help with. One opportunity was to georeference aerial photos taken by the RAF after World War Two, in conjunction with Historic England, and another was the verification of colour coded sections on Booth's Poverty Map. There was also an active programme engaging children and young people through running sessions in schools and youth groups, where young people could try georeferencing and colour in sections of Booth's Poverty Map.

Unlike the other case studies in this report, Layers of London is a purely digital volunteer opportunity and there are no traditional onsite volunteers. When the pandemic and lockdowns began, Layers of London did not need to be adapted.
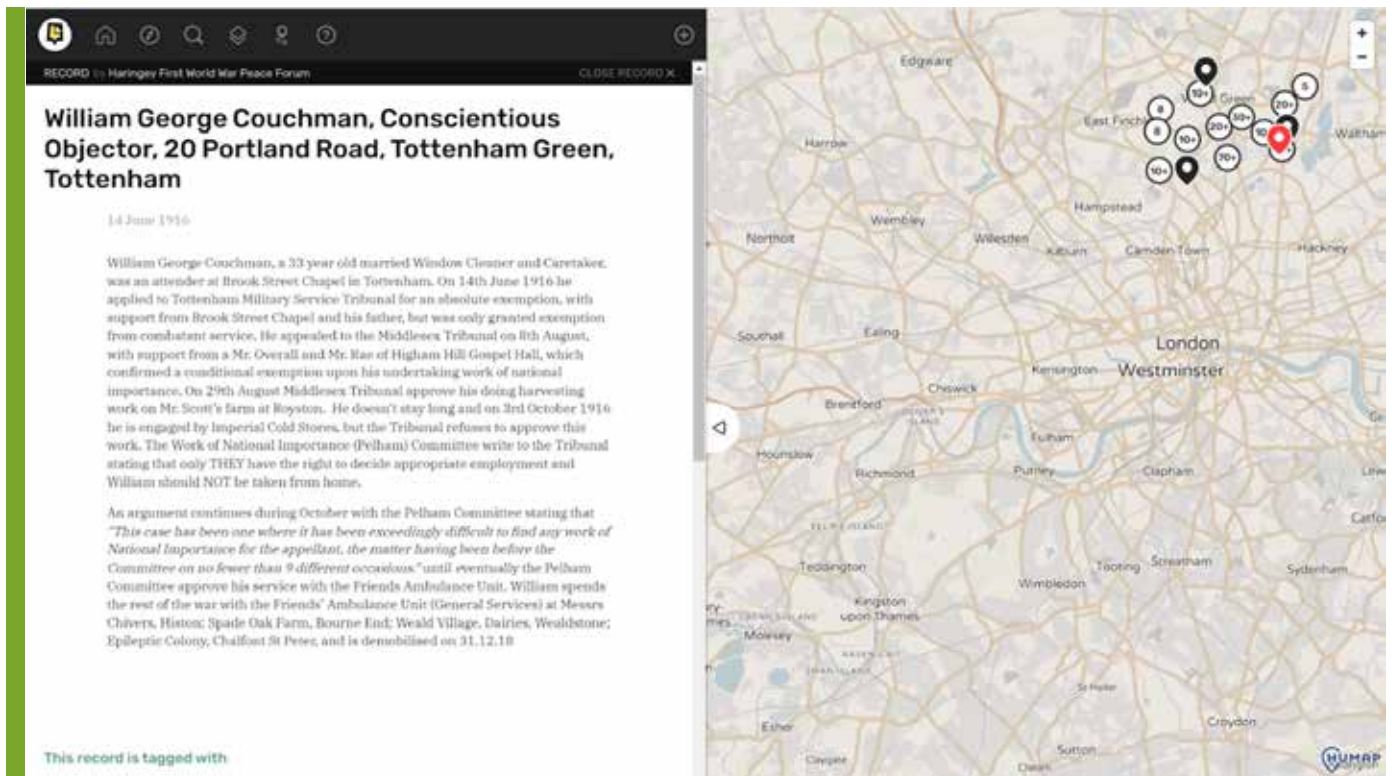
Figure 2: By searching for a key term on the Layers of London website, relevant materials are shown on the map. In this example the map is showing that the homes of conscientious objectors were closely located.

The team found that there are advantages and disadvantages to involving volunteers through crowdsourcing. The team found it to be a brilliant way to involve geographically dispersed volunteers and ensure a consistent volunteer experience. The personal photographs and materials constantly added to the site were incredibly valuable and unlikely to be discovered in any other way. Crowdsourcing naturally engages a more diverse and non-traditional volunteer base, however managing an amorphous body of online volunteers is harder to manage and unpredictable. In a traditional volunteer project, where an existing collection is waiting to be digitised, it is possible to calculate the number of volunteer hours needed to upload the collection, which gives clarity for resourcing, time frames and volunteer numbers. The quantity of potential materials and users was unknown, and there is less control over what materials are contributed by the public. The team found that volunteer contribution was less predictable too, with some volunteers dedicating a great deal of time and materials to the website and others interacting only once. Volunteers need to be comfortable using technology, and the flexible, ad hoc nature of the experience creates a risk that volunteers could lose interest or forget processes. In order to mitigate this and make the process less daunting the team worked iteratively to simplify processes and make the website easier to understand and to access.

Expanding the volunteer community

Layers of London was advertised as an opportunity through community groups, heritage projects and schools. Since there is no physical building and all engagement was virtual, volunteer recruitment was thought to be more challenging than, for example, a project based in a well-known building such as a cathedral. The outreach sessions were targeted at communities representing a range of age, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and different boroughs. To take part in Layers of London users need to create an account with an email address. A staff member was hired to the team at the Institute of Historical Research to be specifically responsible for all communications to volunteers, which included regular newsletters, social media posts to share interesting stories volunteers had added, funny anecdotes and let volunteers know their work mattered and was valued. The communication was critically important in sustaining interest and sharing the message that contributors were part of a valued community. The team also arranged talks and events focusing on different areas of heritage to show volunteers how their work was part of a bigger and deeper picture of work of the Institute of Historical Research.

The newsletters showcased volunteers' personal stories and their family history stimulating people to want their story to be shared too.

Figure 3: An image taken from Layers of London showing Holloway Prison, in 1852. Holloway Prison was open from 1852 to 2016. It is famous for being a female only prison from 1903 and for being the place where the suffragettes were imprisoned.

> *"The more it feels like a job, the more the volunteer feels that there's a lot of paperwork involved in actual volunteering, the less attractive it is. It's not to say they don't like structure. I think people like clarity and structure and instructions. The more you provide material that's clear, the more people will like it. For many people, the simpler it is to record what they've done, the better. If you have to fumble with a website and remember what your password is it takes very little to dissuade people from doing things, anything that's slightly cumbersome. You just can't be bothered; it takes the joy out of it"*

Embracing digital

After initial web development and system set-up, involving volunteers through crowdsourcing requires less investment in human resources than a traditional project. The funding for the development of Layers of London recently ended, but the site will continue to be hosted by the Institute and operate with minimum resourcing going forward. The Layers of London team also organised webinars and talks online, finding that they were much better attended than physical events in London and offered a great opportunity to promote volunteering. Layers of London saw an increase in users and contributions in the pandemic.

The Layers of London team considered a wide range of volunteer management solutions but found them too complicated and structured. Instead, a simple, secure Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to record volunteer data, and another spreadsheet was accessible for volunteers to record their hours and tasks completed.

Fostering wellbeing

The team felt that heritage volunteering in itself is a powerful means to improve wellbeing, but that digital volunteering projects do not provide the same opportunities for human connection as a regular group volunteering opportunity in a physical archive would do. Efforts were made to embed a social element to ensure volunteers felt part of a team. This included offering in person outreach sessions to help new people get involved initially, offering online talks and events, and crucially making sure there were regular, friendly email newsletter communications that showcased volunteers' contributions and stories, sparking conversations. The wellbeing benefits of volunteering, collected anecdotally, were seen as an important measure of the success of a project and a more useful measure of successful volunteer engagement than volunteer hours.

Figure 4: The Volunteer Digitisation Project page on the Courtauld Institute of Art's Website. The main image shows some of the volunteers and staff who supported them.

The Volunteer Digitisation Project and World Architecture Unlocked

The Volunteer Digitisation Project and **World Architecture Unlocked** are two projects run by the Courtauld Institute of Art, using volunteer support to showcase photographic collections to the public.

The Volunteer Digitisation Project is part of Courtauld Connects, a wider project opening the Courtauld Institute of Art's photographic collections to the public. World Architecture Unlocked uses crowdsourcing to digitise the Conway Library, one of the world's largest collections of over one million historic architectural photographs. Initially the digitisation of the collections was intended to be contracted to paid archivists, however when funding was secured for the project from the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2017, the funder encouraged the Courtauld to be

ambitious about public engagement, particularly in involving new audiences, and the decision was taken to digitise the collection using volunteer power for the first time.

> *"We had a tray with six coffee cups on it, and a half a packet of biscuits and I thought that was it.*
>
> *Over the course of that afternoon and evening, 154 people came in and at that moment, we just thought, we've got loads of potential volunteers, all over the building, the place is packed with them. This is going to work!"*

How volunteers are involved

Initially the Courtauld staff team supporting the project expected to involve a small number of volunteers, the equivalent of around two or three full time workers in the digitisation. A key principle embedded early on was that there would be no minimum hours or minimum skills required of volunteers. As an educational institution, the team wanted the experience to be educational.

It was important to be able to ensure that anyone could volunteer, and that limited time or having no previous experience would not be barriers to involvement. The volunteering opportunity was advertised as widely as possible via local volunteering groups across London, volunteer recruitment websites such as Do-It, volunteer centres, and the Courtauld held a successful open day.

Since January 2017 over 1100 volunteers have donated over 32,000 hours to the project. Volunteer days are run at the Courtauld where 12–18 volunteers are on site at any one time. The project has been highly successful in engaging volunteers from non-traditional audiences – over one third had not heard of the Courtauld before volunteering. Volunteers are supported by a team of seven full time and part time staff, including a Volunteer Coordinator.

During the lockdowns when it was not possible for volunteers to access the archive physically, it was critical not to lose the engagement of the large and diverse community of volunteers. Volunteers were asked to research the biographies of the photographers whose names appeared in the collection remotely from home using their own equipment. Over the period of the first two national lockdowns 89 volunteers researched 720 photographers, created 95 Wikipedia pages, and edited existing pages. Volunteers were encouraged to write almost 70 blog posts and recorded transcripts of the blogs which are now available on Spotify. Staff also provided weekly online sessions to check in with volunteers and offer the chance to keep in touch and socialise, technical sessions where volunteers could ask questions related to tasks they were working on, and ran an art club, film club, and events virtually on Zoom.
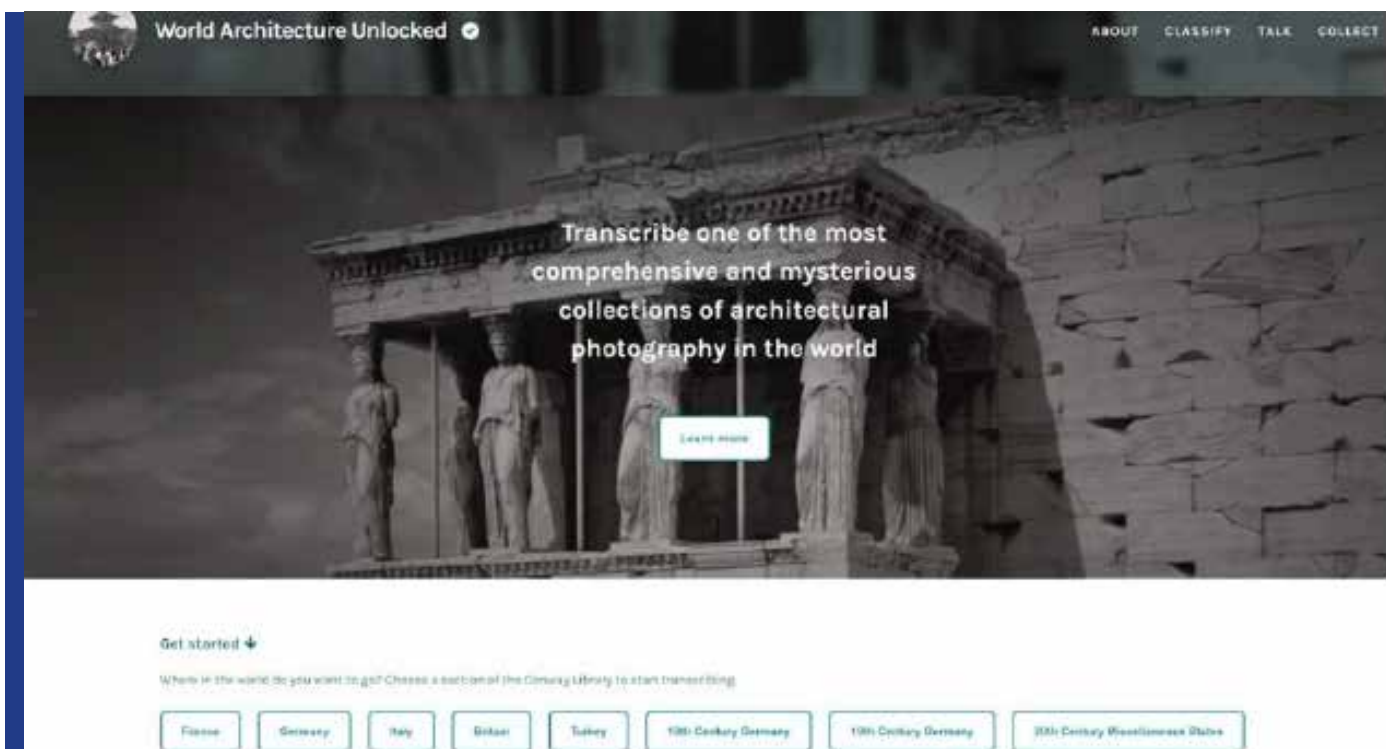
Figure 5: The World Architecture Unlocked webpage on the Zooniverse website.
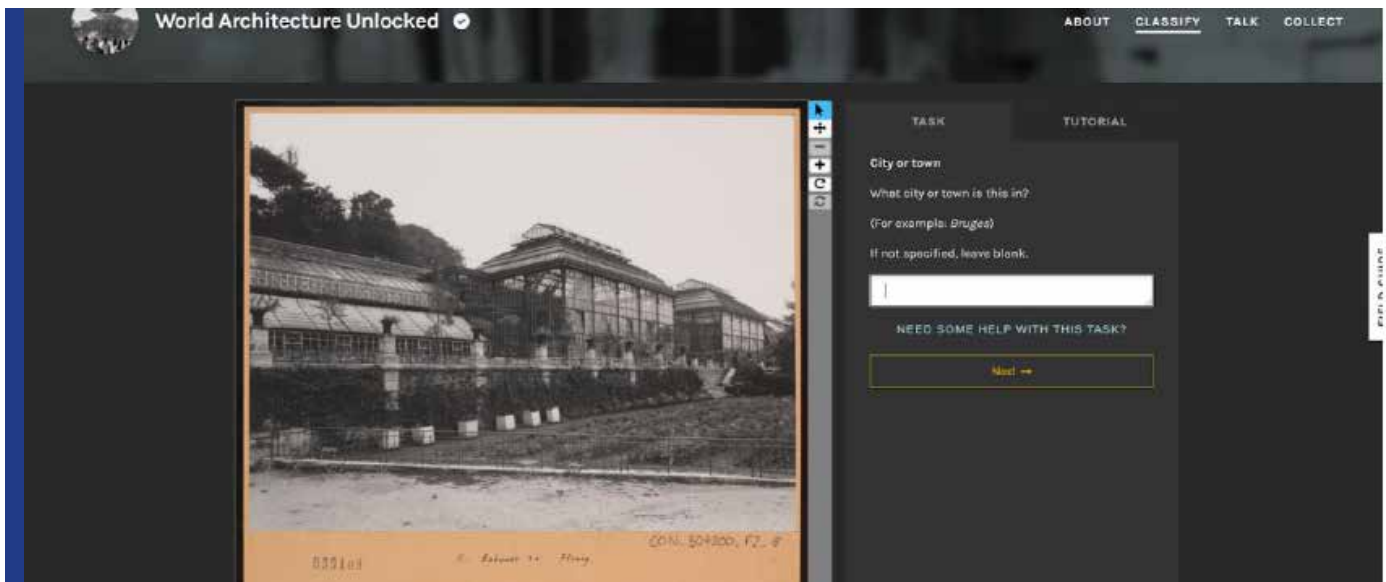
Figure 6: Image taken from the World Architecture Unlocked webpage on the Zooniverse website, showing an image from the Conway Collection ready to be researched and transcribed by a volunteer.

In November 2020 a wholly new online volunteering experience was launched through partnering with Zooniverse, the world's largest platform for volunteer powered research. Volunteers anywhere in the world are given the opportunity to transcribe the Conway Collection. Since November 2020, 8037 online volunteers have catalogued 351,364 photographs.

Expanding the volunteer community

The Volunteer Digitisation project remains open to new volunteers, recruitment being closed to applications twice previously due to high demand. Volunteers receive an interview, and induction and are partnered up with experienced volunteers on their first shift to learn tasks. The tasks themselves have been simplified over time so anyone can start a particular task within 30 minutes of arriving.

Zooniverse hosts a wide range of citizen science opportunities, with a ready-made community of volunteers registered on the site ready to engage with World Architecture Unlocked. Digitisation volunteers who usually volunteer onsite at the Courtauld are encouraged to take part in World Architecture Unlocked and engage and interact with those participating via Zooniverse including moderating and answering questions:

The Volunteer Digitisation Project has been specifically designed to engage with diverse audiences. The project funding was contingent on meeting volunteer recruitment targets for young adults and people from BAME and C2DE socio-economic backgrounds, captured using the volunteer management platforms described later in this report. These targets were exceeded within twelve weeks of opening the project. The successful approach has been to proactively approach specific communities

"You don't have to suddenly have this big drive to recruit online volunteers because they're already there on Zooniverse counting bacteria or measuring stars or things like that. And so, we say, "hey, take a break, do a few cathedrals as well". Rather wonderfully we recruited some of our existing onsite volunteers to be moderators for Zooniverse. So, these are people who, by that time, had had several years of interacting with the collections and knew them as well as we do, if not better."
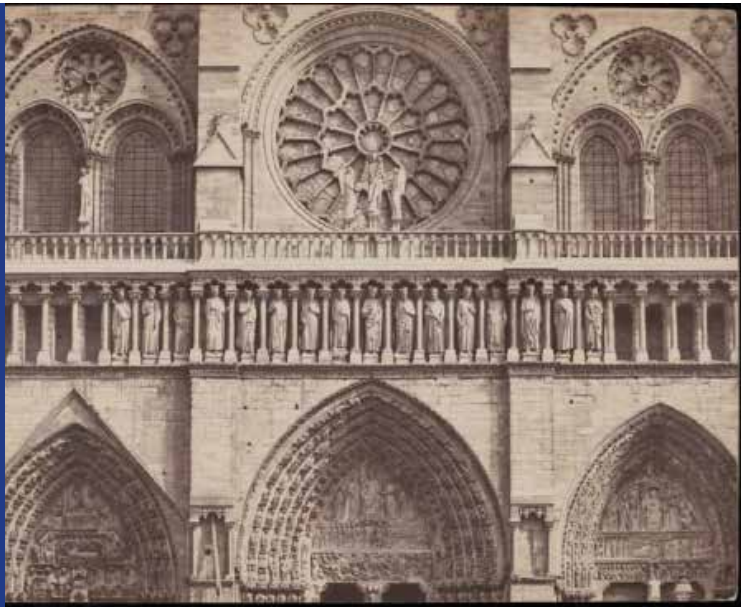
through partnerships with organisations. This relationship goes beyond volunteer managers creating professional relationships with partner organisation staff and arranging volunteer brokerage. Courtauld staff regularly delivered in person outreach sessions, taking boxes of photographs to meet service users at their host organisations to be passed around and discussed. Volunteer adverts focussed on the volunteer role, rather than the organisation deliberately. This resulted in attracting new volunteers who were not from the traditional history of art or heritage backgrounds, volunteers were motivated by the opportunity to use interesting equipment, to work inside a famous building or to feel part of a community, rather than by the brand and reputation of the Courtauld itself.

Figure 7: Image taken from The World Architecture Unlocked webpage on the Zooniverse website, showing an image from the Conway Collection of Notre-Dame, Paris by an unknown photographer, taken in the late 1850s.

Embracing digital

The partnership with Zooniverse has proven to be a highly successful way of digitally engaging new volunteers, who could be based anywhere in the world. The Courtauld tested two different volunteer management systems to support the delivery of the Volunteer Digitisation Project, Better Impact and Time Counts. The team found that Time Counts was a great fit for their volunteer management needs.

Time Counts allows volunteers to log in and see hours contributed, upload a profile picture, indicate availability, upload documents, add preferred gender pronouns and details about next of kin, and has an easy-to-use volunteer shift calendar where volunteers can book or cancel shifts in real time. This feature helps volunteer managers to manage numbers well for in person archive sessions. Time Counts also lets volunteer managers know special dates such as a volunteer's birthday, and reports on the number of volunteers involved and volunteer hours given. The team of volunteer managers can contact volunteers directly through the system, which allows the task of contacting and talking to volunteers online to be devolved within the team as one contact point rather than volunteers having different relationships with different staff email addresses. Zooniverse provides a similar function enabling staff supporting volunteers to communicate securely and consistently to all contributors online. The Courtauld also used social media including Twitter and Instagram to showcase the contributions of volunteers.

"I think having that space that volunteers can think of as their home or space that they own within the organisation and that they're not sitting slightly frightened, thinking "should I really be here?" Or "am I sitting in someone else's chair?" or "will someone come along and tell me that I should be somewhere else?" is super, super important. You don't want any of that kind of stuff. We've done a lot of work to make sure that volunteers are a very loved and cherished part of our community, not some sort of add on, that has no relevance or is somehow disconnected or operates at a different level."

Fostering wellbeing

When designing the Volunteer Digitisation Project, a great deal of thought was put into ensuring that volunteers would feel comfortable, supported, and welcome at the Courtauld, particularly as the project was designed to engage volunteers from communities who may not have experienced being in a similar environment before. A designated volunteer space where volunteers could have a base which included refreshments proved instrumental in ensuring volunteers had a welcoming base once they entered Somerset House. The project lead made sure from the beginning that Institute staff would know that a new group of people would be coming to use that space and encouraged staff to make volunteers feel as welcome as possible and engage with them. Throughout the project there has been a commitment from staff interacting with volunteers to ensuring every person is valued and has an active, stimulating fun experience.

The onsite volunteer community have access to the Courtauld staff wellbeing programme and can access sessions such as yoga and meditation. As part of ensuring volunteers feel like a valued part of the institution and its academic community, volunteer managers also worked to ensure volunteers could access a wide range of additional opportunities. This included arranging visits to artists' studios, to archives, walking tours around London, lectures, special events and access to reciprocal visiting arrangements with other organisations such as galleries and gardens, all for free. Volunteers are also supported to lead their own sessions such as volunteer storytelling events online, where volunteers pick images from the collection, and those have been embraced by the whole research culture of the Courtauld. For example, one of many volunteer-produced blog posts available via the website and on Spotify as audio recordings, takes the reader through a yoga flow inspired by the fine art photographer Paul Laib's collection of images of Barbara Hepworth's sculpture. This approach has ensured that there is no sense of otherness or additionality to the contribution of volunteers, and volunteers' work and events are given the same importance as that of a distinguished academic.

Figure 8: Photograph of ruins featured in a volunteer guest blog where volunteers describe their favourite images from the Conway Library.

Figure 9: Photograph taken on 25th October 1943, uploaded, and described by volunteers. J. W. Roberts, asbestos factory, on Canal Road. To the left of the photo can just be seen the end of Old Row.

Leodis

[Leodis](#) is a photographic archive with over 62,000 images of Leeds, old and new, managed by the Local and Family History team at Leeds Libraries.

Leodis was developed with National Lottery New Opportunities funding in 2001 to showcase over 40,000 images of the city through time, along with images from local libraries and heritage partners including Leeds Civic Trust, The Thoresby Society, Leeds Museums & Galleries and West Yorkshire Archives. The largest collection of photographs on Leodis comes from the City Engineers, taken for the City Council from 1890 to the 1960s, relating to 'slum' clearances and road alterations. There has been a hugely positive public response to Leodis since its launch, resulting in Leeds City Council committing to hosting the site despite facing public sector funding cuts over the past two decades.

How volunteers are involved

In 2014 volunteers were involved formally in Leodis as part of the Local and Family History Service at Leeds Central Library. Volunteers are

Figure 10: Image taken from the Leodis website showing the comments function related to the previous photograph. The comments provide invaluable first-person narratives that reveal the enduring human impact of the asbestos factory on the workers and the residents of the surrounding area.

supported by a librarian who provides volunteer management as part of a wider role. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic around eight volunteers worked onsite in the Central Library and were able to access the full range of historical maps, images and records available. Volunteers research images, create useful descriptions, assign keywords, check data and classmarks are accurate and provide the information via an excel spreadsheet to a librarian to be uploaded to the website. These volunteers were also supported by Leeds Museum and Galleries placements volunteers, also part of Leeds City Council. From March 2020 the approach was adapted, and volunteers received digital packages of images to be researched and described remotely using online resources.

Leodis also enables any member of the public to volunteer digitally through the comments function. Users can add comments underneath images adding valuable personal histories. The website also features a "can you help us?" function, where unknown images can be identified through crowdsourcing local people's connection to the people and places shown. To date over 40,000 comments have been made which add rich social history to images, which onsite volunteers and staff can moderate, interacting with citizen scientists and occasionally amending, only censoring comments if absolutely necessary.

Expanding the volunteer community

Onsite volunteers are recruited on a rolling basis using the wider Libraries and Leeds City Council recruitment processes and new volunteers receive a supportive interview and induction process

Figure 11: Image from Leodis showing Brunswick Street, taken from a postcard first produced about 1902. Photograph from the David Atkinson Archive.

Figure 12: Image from Leodis which was taken on 29 March 2020 by a volunteer. The image shows the Corn Exchange, a historic building in Leeds City Centre closed during a national lockdown to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The signs on the closed gates encourage shoppers to visit the online websites of the many small shops that had their premises inside the building.

before being trained by a librarian. Leodis is well promoted by the City Council to encourage both volunteer applications and engagement with the website. This promotion includes giving volunteers the opportunity to talk about their experience and the images they have worked on through the Secret Library Leeds Blog. Relationships with local volunteer infrastructure services such as Volunteer Centre Leeds enable roles to be promoted via Do IT. Librarians also regularly deliver outreach sessions to community groups and promote volunteering opportunities at events and via partnership relationships with local community groups.

When the country first went into lockdown in 2020 volunteering could no longer be based in a physical building with access to archives and materials and needed to function online as possible. The digital nature of Leodis enabled this to work well, and whilst volunteers could not access physical resources, staff supported the majority of them to volunteer from home, using digital resources such as Google Maps and the National Library of Scotland's Ordnance Survey maps.

Embracing digital

The Leeds City Council website and social media channels are used to advertise Leodis volunteer roles and promote the site to new people who might contribute or comment online. The Library Services also promotes roles on their own digital newsletters and social media and online via local volunteering organisations such as Volunteer Centre Leeds. Volunteer data and activity is stored on spreadsheets kept on a secure drive, with updates on projects to contacts in a database being shared via email. Staff and volunteers keep in touch through Zoom in addition to email and phone calls.

During national lockdowns volunteers were also supported to take and upload their own images documenting the empty streets of Leeds.

Fostering wellbeing

Fostering the wellbeing of volunteers is built into the volunteer management approach taken by staff supporting volunteers. This includes regular check-ins with volunteers, especially since the start of the pandemic, and designated staff who are personable, approachable, and supportive. Where check-ins with volunteers were previously face to face, during the pandemic these shifted to being held by Zoom, phone and email, increasing in regularity and with a bigger focus on volunteer wellbeing. Before the pandemic moved volunteering to be more online, staff would invite volunteers into the Central Library and have tea and biscuits together whilst on shift.

"I think it all comes down to having the right person as your volunteer coordinator. When it comes to them being at home, she keeps in touch with them quite a lot."

Figure 13: The Cotton Town Home Page.

Cotton Town

Cotton Town is Blackburn with Darwen Library and Information Services' digital history website.

Blackburn with Darwen Library and Information service, part of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, secured National Lottery New Opportunities funding for the digitisation of local history resources in 2002, resulting in the creation of Cotton Town. Cotton Town aims to demonstrate how the social and economic development of two Lancashire towns have been affected by the rise and decline of the cotton industry through images, print resources, maps and broadsheets digitised from the historical archives held in the borough council library and museum. From the beginning Cotton Town has proved to be a popular and well used resource.

As part of a small Local Authority, the Library and Information Service has been impacted by funding cuts in recent years, reducing the staff resource available to maintain and develop Cotton Town. Today volunteers are supported to be responsible for the maintenance and development of the website, taking lead roles in preparing and uploading images, and shaping the direction of the archive; these Community History Volunteers are highly valued by the Library service. The Library and Information Service aims to develop the website as the digital archive for the whole borough, involving local groups, historians, and residents in collectively building, shaping, and developing this unique community resource.

Figure 14: Community History Volunteer, David Hughes, donated all his father's (John Ceriog Hughes) colour slides to Blackburn Library. This image depicts students from Blackburn College taking part in the annual Mayoral Procession in 1965 along King William Street, Blackburn.

How volunteers are involved

In around 2007 the first volunteer was engaged, and he has stayed with the Library and Information Service through many iterations of the website, playing a leading role in helping to develop Cotton Town. In 2014, there was a drive to increase the volunteer base initially to support the development of the Cotton Town website and deliver a Heritage Lottery Funded project Reveille.

Today, twelve Community History Volunteers research, scan, upload and publish images to Cotton Town, while compiling and creating articles and other content. Four work directly on the website, whilst others focus on research and developing content. One long standing volunteer works remotely and uses his expertise to assist staff and volunteers with mentoring and support. In addition to the twelve archive-based volunteers, members of the public interact with the website as volunteer citizen scientists? and are invited to send images and content. A number of the people who have engaged with Cotton Town in this informal style of opportunity have become informal volunteers over the years, increasing their involvement.

A website steering group made of Cotton Town volunteers and current and former Library staff, are at the heart of strategic planning.

Figure 15: 35 Church St, Salford, Blackburn is from a collection of negatives bequeathed to Blackburn Library after John Eddleston's death.

Figure 16: Queen Victoria's statue on Blackburn Boulevard is from a collection of glass negatives by local photographer A. E. Shaw.

Expanding the volunteer community

> *"Since 2013, the volunteer base has grown because we couldn't deliver the projects that we're trying to deliver without that invaluable volunteer help."*

Blackburn with Darwen Library & Information Service have adopted the Lancashire Volunteer Partnership (LVP), and Better Impact which are used to promote roles. The LVP was established in 2016 between public services who wanted to provide one central gateway into public service volunteering in Lancashire. When potential volunteers have registered through the LVP website they are then contacted by the volunteer manager for Cotton Town, who is the Librarian

for Community History & ICT Customer Services. Following an informal chat to gauge the volunteers' interest in local history and skills, volunteers receive a robust induction in line with Borough Council staff onboarding. This includes virtual learning and enables volunteers to access necessary systems and work safely. The volunteer manager then delivers specific training on how to use Cotton Town.

Several projects are hosted on Cotton Town with different heritage focuses which appeal to different volunteer audiences. One of these projects, Reveille, is a digital archive remembering the 4,000 men from Blackburn and Darwen who lost their lives in the service of their country during the First World War. This National Lottery Heritage Fund project was successful in attracting young volunteers and volunteers from BAME backgrounds to research men from Blackburn with Darwen who were recorded on the Thiepval memorial in France.

> *"I hope it's a warm and welcoming environment. And that's what I've been led to believe from some of the comments I've received."*

Embracing digital

The LVP is the mechanism used for the recruitment of all Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council volunteers and uses the volunteer management system Better Impact for recruitment and the management of volunteer data. Volunteer managers also use a local database to record volunteer hours. Library social media accounts are also used to promote volunteer opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to technology being adopted in new ways, including loaning Council owned lap tops to 'shielding' volunteers to enable remote working and steering group meetings to be held as hybrid or wholly remote on Microsoft Teams.

Fostering wellbeing

Volunteer wellbeing is supported through a meaningful volunteer management approach, with staff dedicating time during volunteer shifts to have conversations, taking a personal interest in volunteers' lives providing coffee, tea, and biscuits for those on site.

Staff talked about the importance of learning from volunteers' expertise and taking the time to empower them through seeking their knowledge and expertise. The Borough Council offers access to the same wellbeing offer that staff are entitled to including a wide range of learning opportunities, exercise sessions and health and wellbeing advice.

Figure 17: Darwen Street Bridge, Blackburn, mid 1960s. John Shorrock is an informal volunteer. He donated his negative collection to Blackburn Library and gave full permission for the library to publish the images on Cotton Town.

4 Analysis

The case studies explored in this report showcase a range of ways archives involving historic photographs can expand hybrid volunteer communities through embracing digital approaches and fostering volunteer wellbeing. The case studies highlight that the key elements explored in the research are intrinsically interconnected. This means that embracing digital approaches can build a sense of community amongst hybrid volunteering communities and nurture volunteer wellbeing, while driving engagement, particularly amongst non traditional audiences.

Transferable ways of expanding a volunteer community

The archives involved used a wide range of practical and digital approaches to volunteer recruitment and expanding volunteer communities. These included advertising volunteer opportunities via volunteer centres, local volunteer partnerships, national volunteer recruitment websites such as Do IT and via the organisation's website and social media channels. Some organisations delivered outreach sessions where materials were brought directly to, and handled by, groups of potential volunteers which was found to be an effective way to recruit volunteers from underserved groups to both onsite and digital roles. Partner relationships with other heritage organisations and existing community-based interest groups was helpful in promoting opportunities and enabling layers of rich social history and personal stories to archive interpretations. One organisation found partnering with Zooniverse and holding an onsite volunteer open day were effective routes to recruit digital and onsite volunteers respectively.

Embracing digital opportunities

Platforms which support digital volunteering in archives can sustain large scale volunteer involvement over time and can potentially be maintained on a small budget after initial set up and development has been paid for. Digital volunteering opportunities in archives are more resilient to social restrictions and lockdowns, and digital volunteering increased during lockdowns. Delivering volunteer events, socials, training, wellbeing activities, lectures and talks online using platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and YouTube can lead to increased volunteer engagement, wellbeing and foster a sense of belonging and community across hybrid volunteer teams. Volunteer management platforms such as Better Impact and Time Counts can be effective in volunteer recruitment and data management, however not all the case study organisations had found them to be useful, with some preferring to use secure spreadsheets instead. This choice was not impacted by the size of the volunteer base.

Map based digital archives enable users to see how the location of historic material may add further layers of social history to historic photographs. Crowdsourcing platforms such as Zooniverse can open volunteering up to new audiences across the country and around the world. Existing onsite volunteers can be successfully supported to transition from physical archives with support to access to materials and resources to digital volunteering by signposting to online research resources such as the National Library of Scotland's Ordnance Survey Maps.

Benefits and best practice in wellbeing

Organisations who spent time considering early on how volunteers could be made to feel comfortable, supported, and welcome noticed good volunteer retention and engagement. Ensuring all staff that volunteers will come into contact with virtually or onsite are trained in how to interact with volunteers in a friendly and welcoming manner helps to foster a positive sense of belonging. Whether in person or online, the volunteer manager's role is key in supporting volunteer wellbeing and enabling an equity of access to volunteer opportunities and is a role that should be prioritised and resourced. Good practice volunteer management means providing a friendly, approachable point of contact and clear routes of support, training, and information.

For in person volunteering, offering a space to have tea, coffee and biscuits was important to all our case studies. Offering plenty of social breaks and a designated physical space where volunteers feel comfortable and able to relax and socialise has a positive impact on belonging and wellbeing.

"Flippantly I would say it's about high-quality biscuits, but there is a seriousness to that, you need to given people space and time to socialise"

Several organisations opened up access to the staff wellbeing offer to volunteers, including exercise classes and virtual learning about mental health. Digital volunteers' wellbeing can be fostered through regular, friendly email newsletter communications that show volunteers are valued, showcase volunteers' contributions and stories, sparking conversations. Many of the case study organisations talked about the wealth of professional and personal expertise volunteers bring, and how volunteers are keen to feel and be seen as capable. Offering opportunities both onsite and creating digital space for volunteers to train others, give talks, write blog posts, and arrange events is hugely empowering and has a positive impact on wellbeing

Hybrid ways of volunteering in archives

Digital tools can be invaluable in bridging the perceived gap between onsite and digital volunteers, through providing consistent communications and opportunities to share ideas, learning and interact, building a sense of community and wellbeing across the whole community. This could involve onsite volunteers moderating digital volunteer platforms or responding to online comments. Offering regular talks, events or lectures hosted at the physical archive, but shared virtually offer a great way for remote volunteers to see behind the scenes inside the building and feel part of a community. Adopting technology to support virtual meetings can enable onsite and virtual volunteers to work together and build a sense of community. Map based digital archives may not have a physical presence but create a strong sense of connection to place for volunteers.

Building a sense of community between volunteers

Volunteer communication was seen as crucial in fostering a sense of community amongst volunteers. Thoughtful email, newsletter, and social media communications to volunteers which showcase the impact volunteers make, highlight volunteer stories and contributions, and invite volunteers to engage in different ways such as creating blog posts, attending events, or engaging in online learning can build a great sense of community and belonging

If the volunteer project is part of a larger organisation or institution, volunteers can be supported to feel part of the wider community of the organisation as a whole. This could mean opening up staff benefits such as learning and development, wellbeing, and discounts to volunteers, showcasing volunteer impact alongside staff and inviting volunteers to organisation events, talks and exhibitions. Offering volunteer opportunities to showcase their work, by talking about an image or story that is important to them sparks conversations and stimulates other volunteers to share their own as a learning community.

Digital tools for managing volunteer data and effective communication

The case studies had all explored a range of digital tools for managing volunteer data and effective communication and were keen to stress there is no one tool which would be right for all organisations requirements, budget, and volunteer preferences. For some a digital tool such as Better Impact or Time Counts would be beneficial, for others a simple secure spreadsheet is sufficient. Digital newsletters and social media can be used to attract and maintain interest from volunteers by showcasing images and stories and the impact of volunteers. Time Counts allows a team of volunteer managers to log in and communicate consistently with volunteers, without volunteers receiving messages from multiple staff email addresses.

Volunteer project planning, delivery and evaluation

Approaches taken to planning, delivery and evaluation ranged from formal, multiphase project plans with funding dependent on the achievement of set targets through to completely organic approaches where volunteer managers simply adapted projects over time based on volunteer feedback. One organisation found that a project steering group made up of volunteers is a good way to ensure volunteers are involved in the strategic development of the project. For digital archives, taking an iterative approach of continuously evaluating and adapting the project in an agile manner was beneficial.

Measuring volunteer engagement

Typically, the hours a volunteer has spent, and the number of images or stories uploaded is recorded, and often required by funders. There was consensus that these outputs are not the most meaningful ways of measuring volunteer engagement and impact. It was noted that a volunteer might contribute less time than another but could make a deeper contribution in that time by mentoring others or creating a blog post which could have a wider social and emotional impact on other volunteers and the public who engage with it, which is difficult to quantify but incredibly valuable and meaningful. When projects have clear goals and an endpoint, completing each phase on time and ultimately completing the project were identified as a good measure of volunteer engagement, as was a successful legacy of volunteering continuing following the end of funding. Some projects measure engagement from nonstandard audiences that the organisation traditionally struggled to reach.

Pitfalls to avoid and preventative methods

Digital volunteering is a brilliant way to engage large numbers of new volunteers, but it can be isolating for volunteers who no longer feel part of the community when they shut their laptop. One organisation was planning to mitigate this by putting digital volunteers who lived in the same area to be put in touch, hoping this would lead to in person meet up groups. One organisation stressed the importance of allowing time and budget to iterate when working in innovative and new ways with volunteers. Time is needed to design, trial and test ways of working with volunteers and not be afraid to go back to the drawing board. It can be more difficult to adopt innovations in volunteering in large, traditional organisations, or those bound by the processes, procedures, and budgets of parent organisations. It is critical to ensure that innovation is not stifled by bureaucracy. It can be easy to spend all your project budget upfront in the kick-off phase, managing funds carefully over time allows for resources to be available later down the line for any amendments that are part of a reflective, and iterative process. One organisation discovered when delivering outreach sessions that individuals and organisations may not have up to date and fast functioning computer equipment. Being mindful that not everyone has access to cutting edge digital resources is important when involving people in digital volunteering.

Web development is a valuable skill and a complex process. Any extra feature added to the website could affect another part of the website and need time and resources to get functioning properly. Building good relationships with the web developers, being patient and learning about how the website works can help. Where organisations partnered with external volunteer platforms such as Zooniverse and Better Impact, there were benefits in outsourcing these functions to external systems, however this does mean archives have less influence of the functioning of these tools than if in house.

Targets to recruit certain numbers of volunteers from target audiences can ensure volunteering is inclusive, while being mindful to make volunteering welcoming and inclusive or there is a risk of tokenism.

Building in contingency funding into any new project was recommended to ensure any unexpected website development costs could be covered.

Showcasing how a sense of volunteer community can be generated while identifying any barriers to inclusion

> *"When you talk about local history everyone just imagines old white men with beards. And we need to do more at making people realise that we're a safe space for them."*

A thoughtful volunteer management approach and investing in volunteer management skills can ensure that volunteers feel welcome, safe, and supported. Providing onsite volunteers with refreshments and expenses can reduce barriers to participation for those from lower socioeconomic groups. One organisation whose archive is situated in a well known impressive historic building had made particular efforts to ensure that new onsite volunteers who could potentially feel daunted by the environment were welcomed and that they felt they had the same right to be in the building as staff and visitors. The knowledge and expertise of the passionate amateur historians who volunteered was acknowledged and celebrated by the case study organisations. Volunteer managers were keen to stress that volunteers must be treated with respect and not seen as inferior or additional to paid staff. Valuing the contribution that volunteers can make and enabling discourse amongst volunteers and staff helped volunteers to feel comfortable, part of a volunteer community,

part of the archive community and part of the wider heritage community. In order to engage underrepresented communities, archives must go to them, by proactively taking collections to groups, schools' charities to engage new audiences meaningfully. One organisation has begun working with local Black Lives Matter groups who took photographs from protests in 2020, which highlighted that the archive had not previously tagged images as part of Black History, only of the image location. Volunteers were able to easily amend this and now collections of images showing black communities can be accessed instantly. Another organisation reviewed public lists of recently published projects who work exclusively with a particular community. This has enabled the team to engage with a Ghanian heritage group and encourage them to share their stories. Timing here is key, if you contact a group early on in their own funded project, they are much more likely to contribute to visual media archives than if their project is nearly at an end.

> *"The first thing is don't assume people are going to find you. Spend time and invest in finding the groups that you want to find.*
>
> *And secondly, find them early and often. If they're people who are naturally interested. And Heritage Lottery Fund projects are a good example because of the fact that people have got their act together and got funding and done something.*
>
> *But the people that care are usually busy. The thing is to think how can I offer them something that enables them to get where they want to be?*
>
> *Volunteering has to be a mutual benefit."*

5 Evaluation

The four case studies have provided useful insights into practical and strategic approaches taken by organisations involving volunteers in digital archives of historic photographs. The case studies include locally focussed archives in the North West, North East and in London, with one archive physically hosted in London but involving digital volunteers globally. The number of volunteers involved by case study organisations ranged from less than ten, to 11,000 onsite volunteers, however all case studies involved thousands of digital volunteer citizen scientists through crowdsourcing platforms and interactive comments sections.

The case studies have explored:

- Transferable ways of expanding a volunteer community
- A range of approaches for embracing digital opportunities
- Benefits and best practice in fostering the wellbeing of volunteering in archives

The case studies have also explored:

- Hybrid ways of volunteering
- How a sense of community can be created
- Digital tools for managing volunteer data and effective communication
- Volunteer project planning, delivery, and evaluation
- Ways that volunteer engagement can be measured
- Pitfalls to avoid and preventative methods
- Showcasing how a sense of volunteer community can be generated whilst identifying any barriers to inclusion

Historic England commissioned this report in order to understand what tools and approaches could support the growth and development of a hybrid volunteer community as the national archive of England's places. The insights that are particularly beneficial to Historic England are the successful use of crowdsourcing platforms, volunteer database platforms and the value of a map-based approach in adding rich, place-based social history.

The archives explored operating in Local Authorities showcase the wider context of the volunteering landscape in photographic archives and can inform the approaches for future collaborations. These case studies show how local communities can be engaged in the interpretation of historic photographs and how Historic England could understand the needs of locally based archives run by organisations and volunteer groups in order to provide a national network of support.

The case studies show that successful approaches to expanding volunteer communities, build a sense of community and belonging, embrace digital tools and support volunteer wellbeing are intrinsically interconnected, and will be most effective if developed simultaneously.

This report is limited in that it explores four of potentially hundreds of digital archives in England. Further research is recommended to explore how a broader range of archives engage and support volunteers, particularly in different geographical areas.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

The case studies explored in this report showcase a range of ways archives that involve historic photographs can expand hybrid volunteer communities, through embracing digital approaches and fostering volunteer wellbeing. The case studies have shown that digital solutions, fostering wellbeing and creating a sense of community are complementary and inextricably interlinked approaches. For example, inviting volunteers to a virtual talk run by your organisation reduces barriers to participation, helps volunteers feel part of a valued community and increases volunteer wellbeing, belonging and retention.

There is no one digital solution that will suit all archives, and the case study organisations chose solutions that worked best for their particular requirements.

"You have to jump up and make every moment as special as possible, as if it's a visit to Father Christmas or something like that. I think you have to be aware that in every second, every hour that somebody decides to give to your organisation as a volunteer, you can't treat it in the same way as an hour or a second given by somebody who's on an employment contract. It's much more sacred, the time is far, far more special. And I really think that you have to push yourself out. To have that kind of smiley Disneyland face to be able to welcome and appreciate every gesture that somebody does for you as a volunteer."

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to Historic England Archive and any organisation which may be looking to expand a hybrid volunteering community in digital image archives.

In the archive:

- Archives based in an impressive or imposing historic building, can represent a barrier for volunteers. Ensure that volunteers are given a warm welcome and know they belong there as much as a staff member, visitor or academic. Provide training to colleagues who volunteers may interact with, so that any representatives of the organisation are able to interact with volunteers in a way which fosters a positive volunteer experience.

- Offer a dedicated space for volunteers to use as their base, with free refreshments and plenty of social breaks to connect to others and recharge.

- Hold volunteer open days in the archive to attract onsite volunteers.

- Offer talks, events or lectures hosted at the physical archive, but shared virtually to help remote volunteers see and feel a connection to the physical space.

In digital opportunities:

- Adopt virtual meetings, talks, socials, clubs, lectures, workshops, training, and events to enable digital volunteers to learn, interact, socialise, and feel part of the volunteer and organisation community. If your organisation offers digital opportunities to staff and the public, ensure that both onsite and remote volunteers are included and valued within this offer.

- Partner with existing crowdsourcing platforms such as Zooniverse to access a ready-made community of citizen scientists.

- Take an iterative approach to developing bespoke crowdsourcing platforms inhouse. Test and learn over time, saving contingency in budgets to make later adaptations. Developing this inhouse allows more control over how the platform works, including the branding and user interface. However, creating a bespoke platform can be resource intensive and requires time.

- There is no one size fits all when it comes to choosing a system to manage and record volunteer data, communication, and impact. Research and select the volunteer management platform that best meets your requirements, budget, and what interactivity your volunteers would prefer.

- Consider using map based digital platforms to enable users to see how the location of historic material may add further layers of social history.

- Use a Creative Commons Licence to ensure that volunteers can easily contribute images that can be shared freely by others, without the need for copyright processes.

- Build good working relationships with web developers who work on in house volunteer platforms and make work schedules iterative.

Across the hybrid community:

- Ensure onsite and digital volunteers have a brilliant experience through resourcing dedicated volunteer management support and expertise. The case study organisations were able to provide thoughtful, appreciative, and authentic support to volunteers through skilled staff.

- Gain cross organisational buy-in to the value of volunteering by communicating the impact volunteers made to key stakeholders at every level of the organisation.

- Advertise more generalist volunteer roles and allow volunteers to choose the tasks they want to do rather than breaking roles down into task elements such as Photography Volunteer, Transcribing Volunteer. This will attract volunteers from broader range of backgrounds.

- Build meaningful relationships with partner organisations that have relationships with your target volunteer audience. This must go beyond asking staff to signpost volunteers and use outreach, bringing materials, equipment, and tasks to groups to handle and experience what volunteering would be like.

- Experiment with shifting the focus of volunteer adverts away from the organisation name and brand, and towards the purpose of the role and wider goals of the project. Many organisations benefit from a strong brand and reputation, which are attractive to a traditional core volunteer audience. Potential volunteers from underrepresented groups may not know or identify with the brand, but could be motivated by the chance to use interesting equipment, contribute to a specific project, or access volunteer benefits.

- Advertise roles through volunteer centres, local partnerships, national websites such as Do-It, and Reach Volunteering, in additional to your organisations' website social media, newsletters and partners. Showcase the impact volunteers make in the volunteer adverts and in your archive's general promotional material.

- Engage with other heritage organisations to attract volunteers, particularly those on newly funded project announcements to build partnerships early on.

- Develop multiple different projects which appeal to different volunteer audiences.

- Open up your organisation's staff benefits to volunteers, including access to health and wellbeing opportunities, discounts in shops, access to exhibitions, talks, lectures, events, virtual learning, visits to studios, galleries, and opportunities to create content about their contributions via blogs, YouTube, and Spotify.

- Use regular digital newsletters to communicate with your volunteer community, to show volunteers are valued, showcase volunteer contributions and stories, offer opportunities and spark conversations.

- Offer opportunities to value and empower volunteers as experts, such as asking volunteers to train others, give talks, write blog posts, and arrange events. Offer volunteers opportunities to showcase their work, by talking about an image or story that is important to them sparks conversations and stimulates other volunteers to share their own as a learning community.

- Find ways to connect onsite and digital volunteers, this could involve onsite volunteers moderating digital volunteer platforms or responding to online comments or providing digital equipment which can be loaned and used remotely.

- Showcase the impact volunteers make in communications to encourage discourse and shared learning between volunteers.

- Set up a volunteer steering group to enable volunteers to lead on planning and shape the development of the project.

- Consider if there may be more meaningful measures of volunteer engagement than recording volunteer hours and activities, for example volunteer wellbeing, skills, confidence, number of online interactions.

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