



Building Bridges:

The Trowbridge Song Project

Summary of Evaluation Findings

Building Bridges: The Trowbridge Song Project was a 2 year oral history and song project which collected traditional songs and stories from people who had migrated to Trowbridge, the county town of Wiltshire. The project aimed to increase intercultural understanding and to strengthen ties between different ethnic communities in Trowbridge, including white British communities.

Building Bridges was initiated by Sounding It Out Community Choir and their choir leader, Candy Verney, and was supported by Wiltshire Music Centre, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, West Wiltshire Community Club and West Wiltshire Multi Faith Forum.

The project involved 413 participants, 27 sharing events, 3 concerts, provided training for 9 volunteers in oral history, trained 8 community choir leaders, and reached an audience of 1,000 at live events and thousands more through online listening. People who shared their stories originated from more than 30 different countries. The project culminated with an exhibition by Penney Ellis in Trowbridge Town Hall and the Atrium of County Hall. Recordings of 42 stories are now archived in Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre.



The aims and objectives of Building Bridges

The over-arching aim of the Building Bridges project was to increase intercultural understanding and strengthen ties between different communities in Trowbridge, through collecting, sharing and celebrating traditional song and story. The project had 9 objectives:

1. To facilitate the collecting of traditional songs, using digital recording equipment, from the key ethnic groups and cultures in Trowbridge, including white British communities.
2. To facilitate the collecting of stories, using digital recording equipment, associated with the songs and of how and why people have migrated to Trowbridge.
3. To create new choral arrangements of traditional world music songs, inspired by Trowbridge's unique community, which are sympathetic to the original musical styles yet enable singing together, therefore increasing the community choir repertoire. To share this new music through distribution online as MP3 recordings and written scores.

4. To co-ordinate a series of informal events which enable different ethnic groups to share their stories and songs.
5. To organise a series of rehearsals and concerts that showcase these songs to a wider public, including a high profile Finale musical concert in the Trowbridge Civic Centre, performed by experienced singers from Sounding It Out and new singers who have joined in with this project.
6. To strengthen partnerships and increase dialogue between community groups of different cultures.
7. To document the current cultural and social heritage of our community and create a resource of oral history and traditional multicultural song which could be archived in Trowbridge Museum and the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre.
8. To provide training for new community choir leaders from the communities involved in the project eg. work place choirs, schools, nursing homes and ethnic clubs.
9. To initiate Phase 2 of the project: the funding and relationships for a high profile Exhibition in Trowbridge town centre of photographs of song participants and audio of songs and stories.

Assessing the project's achievements

It was important to the project committee and the Artistic Director, Candy Verney, to have the input of an evaluation specialist to support the evaluation of the project. The evaluator created an evaluation framework which identified indicators for each of the project objectives and methods of data collection. Additionally, she created data collection tools and undertook part of the data collection, some of which is presented here. The evaluation evidence which was collected includes:

- Structured interviews with participants and audiences (video or audio recorded)
- Written feedback from participants and audiences (using comments cards and comments books)
- Documented verbal comments from participants
- Quantitative data regarding the reach of social media and online listening
- Questionnaires for arts, heritage and community development professionals
- Questionnaires for choir leader trainees.

At the first large performance, 25 people were interviewed – a mixture of audience and participants. 16 interviewees felt that the project had so far been successful at bringing together people from different community groups and cultures. One of the participants in the scratch choir said:



It's been really enjoyable to see the different performances. I think it brings it home how diverse every community is these days and how small the world is becoming. Everyone has their own story and they're all coming from different places, whether it's another town like Birmingham... or whether they've come from the other side of the world. You never know until you start talking to someone and find out.

At the final concert, comments cards were placed on the audience seats during the interval. 132 out of 260 cards were completed (a 51% response rate) which asked 3 direct questions:

Another Case Study asked Clara about her experience.

The project has opened my eyes to the extent of different cultures living in Trowbridge. I knew there was a huge Polish community, but I had no idea about all the other communities. I've met people from all over the world and that's been really interesting.... In addition, this project made me realise that I just love singing!

Many others who had been involved in the project were asked to reflect on the extent to which the project aims had been achieved through written questionnaires or structured interviews. Glenys, who co-ordinates the West Wiltshire Community Club, a social club which is largely attended by Afro-Caribbean people who arrived in Britain as part of the 'Windrush generation', wrote:

Many of the members of WWCC stated that they had never seen anything like this in Trowbridge, some said that they wanted a CD of the event so that they can show it to their families and friends. This is something they are proud of. They also stated that often they are consulted or interviewed but they never see the end product or get recognised or affirmed for this. Trowbridge is not often represented so powerfully and on a day when the whole world was shocked and dismayed by what had happened in Paris this was a fitting tribute to humanity. This is my town and where I want to live, a place where people know each other, greet each other, respect each other and build the community they live in. These may all seem like very small achievements but please take it from me that they are paradigm shifts that will help communities build further friendships.



Photo by Penney Ellis

Candy, the Artistic Director, stated that the project had increased intercultural understanding and strengthened ties between different communities:

...beyond what I could have anticipated. Especially the final concert. It took 2 years to get some of the groups on board. It took up to 7 visits, talks, meetings to really build trust. That is what I didn't know at the beginning. People are very reticent. It takes building relationships – constantly. And we did that. I'm most proud of how much work we did and how much we did achieve our aims.

Members of the committee who were interviewed also felt that the project had been successful at meeting the aims.

Professionals who work within arts, heritage or community development were asked to give their thoughts. Tracy Sullivan, Director of Trowbridge Arts, said:

I think it's been outstanding what it's achieved. There's been a lot of ambition to bring cultures together in Trowbridge, and people have had a go at building those bridges, but it's been only with this really focussed energy that it's been made to happen. It's absolutely astounding that so many different people from so many different backgrounds have got involved with this project over its lifetime. Really, really impressive.

Tracy also commented on how the project had benefitted Trowbridge Arts Festival. The Festival aimed to bring together different cultures, but with such limited resources hadn't yet achieved that. The Trowbridge Song Project had given the Festival 'a way in and connections which we didn't have before'. Clare Jack, Executive Director of Wiltshire Music Centre, similarly felt that the project had benefitted her organisation.

Yes. Definitely! A, because it's brought people to this building who wouldn't otherwise have known that we existed. B, because it's enabled us to establish some links with other communities which we want to try to maintain over time.

Terry Bracher (Archives and Local Studies Manager, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre) said, in a structured interview with the evaluator:

It's one of the largest oral history collections we hold at the centre. I couldn't say if it is THE largest – it depends how you're measuring: number of stories, length of stories, number of people involved. But it is certainly the most diverse. It fills a gap in our collection because we don't have much about diverse communities.

What is interesting from our point of view, is the long view. The Alfred Williams collection of folk songs from a hundred years ago tells us a lot about the growing urbanisation that was taking place at the time as he collected a lot from the GWR engineering works. This project is about migration – how and why people migrate. In time people will be looking back at this collection to understand about migration.

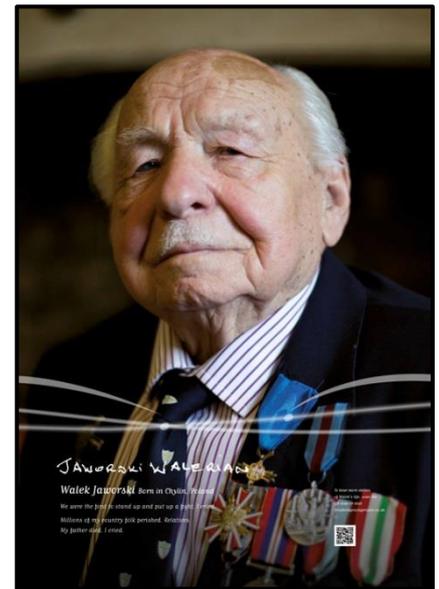


Photo by Penney Ellis

Reflections on the challenges

The team understood that involving people from different communities was critical to the project's success, and was not an easy task. The amount of time which was necessary to establish relationships was considerable. Candy spoke about the Women's group at the Multi Faith Forum.

The primary thing I learnt was that you can't get individuals to work in this way, it's mostly groups – and you have to go to the groups. I went 7 times to the Women's English group and joined in and said 'please sing me a song'. After the 7th week, someone said 'I'll sing you a song' and then suddenly, it all came out! You have to put in the time to go and meet people. It's all about relationships.

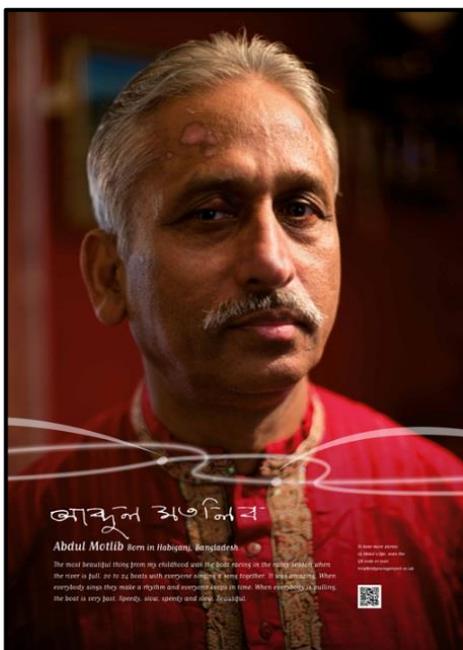


Photo by Penney Ellis

The project was successful at involving a few people of Italian origin who shared stories, but it was not so easy, as they were participating as individuals rather than as a collective. Many people who were invited to be involved worked in catering and, therefore, were not able to join in events which took place in the evenings. Some groups who the team hoped would take part didn't respond in spite of repeated invitations.

The team reflected on these challenges throughout the project, both with the committee and the evaluator. The Scratch Choir was one method of addressing how to involve individuals, which worked well.

Some participants were happy to share their stories but did not want to perform at a concert. The team responded flexibly to involve people in ways they were comfortable. The Women's group from the Multi Faith Forum choose to cook for a 'Taste the World' buffet at the final concert, rather than perform. This added another dimension to the event.

Summarising the extent to which the aims and objectives were met

Not all the 9 objectives were fully met. It was planned that a partnership with Trowbridge Museum would mean the songs and stories would be accepted as part of their collection, but this didn't happen within the time-frame of the project. Objective 9, to initiate a phase 2 of the project with an exhibition in the Town Centre, has not happened as planned, although this may yet take place as elements of the project continue (discussed in Legacy below).

The involvement of some partners, and the awareness and participation in the project of some professionals who could have supported the work, was limited, compared to what the Artistic Director and committee had expected. There is evidence from interviews and written questionnaires that professionals valued the project and had an awareness of the aims and activities, however other interview and documentary evidence shows that the project team were disappointed with this aspect of the project.



The structure and content of the project adapted to address some of the challenges. The commitment, sensitivity and respect on the part of the project team, towards engaging and involving participants, was evident in a number of data sources.

Additional activities took place which contributed to the aims, which were not planned at the outset. In particular, the 2 films, *Journey* and *Legacy*, by Samiha Abdeldjebar have been an effective vehicle to share information about the project more widely.

There is a wealth of evidence, from a variety of perspectives, that Building Bridges was effective at achieving the overall aim and the majority of the project's objectives.

Legacy

There are a number of ways that elements of the project are continuing. The choir leaders' training was successful at giving 8 people the skills and confidence to initiate new choirs. They are now setting up: 2 community choirs, a children's choir, a family choir, a choir for vulnerable older people, a well-being choir at the community hospital and a workplace choir at a food processing company. Many people who've taken part in Building Bridges are continuing to sing through taking part in these new choirs.

A group of people who've been involved in the project are working together to continue some of the activities with support and advice from Candy. There are plans for a one-off Scratch Choir in autumn 2016. The songs and stories will remain on the SoundCloud page for more people to hear and will remain in the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre's archive in perpetuity.

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