

## Creating Digital Interpretation with Young People

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I'm from [Sheffield Industrial Museums Trust](#), an organisation that cares for three Industrial museums and heritage sites in Sheffield, Kelham Island Museum, Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet and the Shepherd Wheel Workshop.

### THE CONTEXT

Digital technology is part of the backdrop to our lives. For teenagers the increasing digitisation of their lives appears to be teamed with a reduction in opportunities for creativity in formal education.

I am going to share with you a case study that is one response to this scenario.

In February this year I arranged for a 3 day workshop to take place to enable a small group of LGBT 13 - 17 year olds create new interpretations of one of our sites, Kelham Island Museum, for a new app.

The workshop was funded in two ways:

I already had a live project to develop a new App for Kelham Island Museum funded by Arts Council England's Resilience scheme. This project which is now drawing to a close, aimed to increase the sustainability of our sites through better access provision and more inclusive practice.

Secondly, the trust recently became part of a consortium of organisations given lottery funding to engage young people in industrial heritage along the waterways of Yorkshire. The project is called "Ignite Yorkshire: an industrial revolution for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" more information can be found on lead partner, [IVE's website](#).

As an organisation with little prior experience of working with young people and delivering digital interpretation - building partnerships with those that do was our first step.

## THE PROJECT

Through Ignite Yorkshire, we were introduced to [The Writing Squad](#), a group that nurtures young writers and through them we were teamed up with two of their graduates Lenni and Harry who have set up their own company called [Curious Things](#), specialising in working with young people in heritage contexts.

We also needed a group to work with, so aiming to present new and inclusive perspectives on industrial history, we contacted [SAYIT](#) an organisation that supports young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. They recruited thirteen young people from their youth group, “Fruitbowl” to take part in the workshop.

Additionally, we had technical support throughout from the app developers, [Audio Trails](#), and later on we recruited the support of a professional musician.

Face to face meetings with Steve from the Writing Squad and Anne the youth worker from Fruitbowl were crucial from early in the planning stage to work out the practicalities, expectations and agree outcomes.

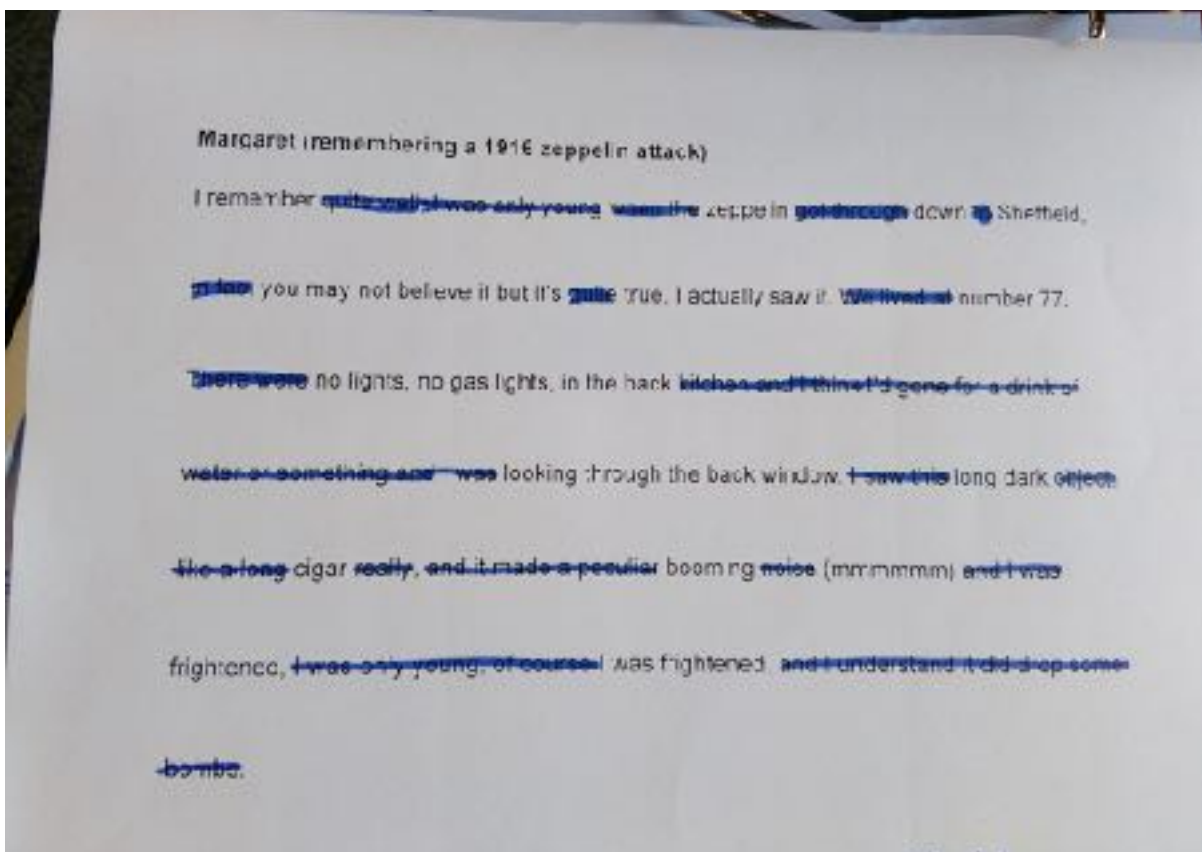
The agreed task was to create multimedia content for a new tour that would be available on the museum’s new App and to do this through creative, meaningful workshops.



Importantly, the digital medium was not to lead the content, but support and provide a means of presenting the finished work. The only constraint that the technology presented was that the app had nine, preselected zones in the museum and the content needed to relate to these zones.

The workshop itself was led by Lenni and Harry from Curious Things, both excellent facilitators they created a safe, supportive and inclusive atmosphere. Anne, the youth worker, also helped by setting some ground rules and ensuring we knew everyone's names and pronouns. Gentle encouragement along with supportive feedback built the confidence of the young people over the three days.

Throughout the workshops, Harry and Lenni used games and activities that encouraged imaginative, free responses and fostered a sense of playfulness and fun. The examples on the screen are some of the activities that used museum objects, stories and oral histories.



Here's an example of my erasure poem using an oral history transcript - you might like to have a go yourself using text from the conference.



After a morning of introductory games, the young people were then invited to explore the museum and find something that appealed to them to base their work around. The only limit to this was that it needed to be within one of those nine zones.

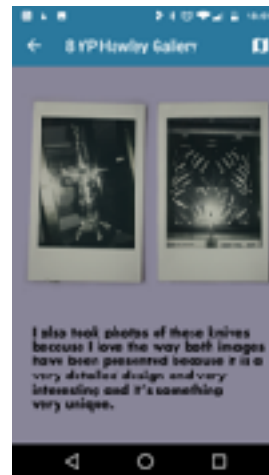
This was followed by two days of creative energy, focus and drive. Full of inspiration and excitement, the young people brought in their own equipment, instruments, art materials and one even brought in a friend to help!

I must admit I was surprised and delighted by the variety of work produced: a murder ballad, gruesome flash fiction, mixed media art work, heavy metal guitar composition...

Everyone found something that interested them, with very little input required from the museum staff.

Thoughtful connections were made between “then” and “now” looking at our razor blade collection for example and considering modern sustainable practices or the changes in car design since the 1920s.





## OUTCOMES AND LESSON LEARNT

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Such a variety of responses resulted in certain challenges from getting to know the individuals involved in super fast time to bringing in specialist expertise and equipment to support the variety.

In spite of the challenges, the outcomes for all stakeholders were fantastic:

The museum now has a new tour on our app written by young people, for young people.

Every young person that took part in the full workshop produced something that was used in the app tour and this work shows that they all engaged with Sheffield's industrial heritage.

A final celebration event a couple of months later allowed the young people to share their achievement with their friends and families and gave the museum the opportunity to test the beta version of the app with one of our target age groups.

The writers appreciated the freedom the museum gave to them and the young people to be irreverent in their interpretations. Giving them “Permission to be Playful” was valued.

The youth worker said that we had reached a group that was at risk of being disengaged and we engaged them in heritage and literacy.

Museum staff gained valuable experience and learning in working with young people, in using the app software and in interpreting collections.

Young people valued being able to spend time with friends and others, having time set aside to be creative and felt motivated by having their own project to work on.

## CONCLUSION

The future of digital technology is exciting and for some, scary. The potential for museums is only just being explored, Sheffield Industrial Museums have dipped our toes with a virtual reality behind-the-scenes tour and a 3D printed model of our steam engine but there is lots more to explore. This technology is out there and accessible to even small museums but it is the creative ideas to use it that we need ... as this case study shows, involving young people in your next digital project can create interpretation beyond your wildest imagination!

Please take some time now to think about this in relation to your context. How could you use digital technology and co-curation in your museum? Who would you work with? What would be your target audience? Would you encourage an irreverent/playful approach to your collection?

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