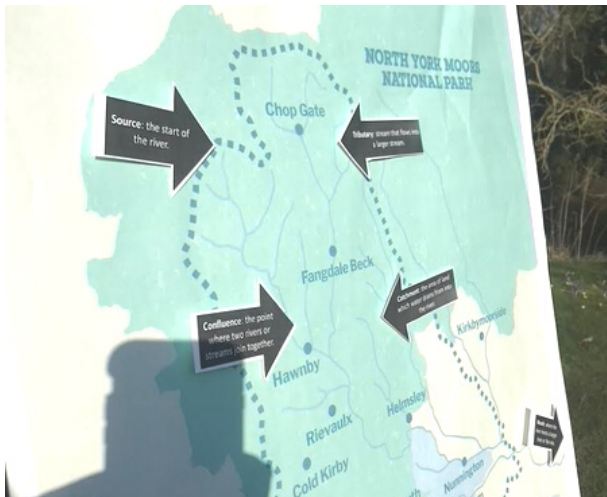


Evaluation

Report on Ryevitalise's creative engagement with schools in the Ryevitalise area 2021–2023



This report is designed to describe and evaluate the creative engagement work co-created and delivered by The Ryevitalise Landscape Partnership and artist-practitioners Katie Matthews and Kitty Greenbrown between 2021 and 2023.

Huge thanks goes to Ryevitalise's many brilliant volunteers and the National Trust staff at Nunnington Hall who supported this project from start to finish.

Project overview

Between October 2021 and March 2023, Katie and Kitty were commissioned by The Ryevitalise Landscape Partnership to help them develop and deliver a series of imaginative, engaging creative workshops for schools in the Ryevitalise catchment area.

The work was designed to be fun and support Ryevitalise's desire to 'conserve, enhance and restore the natural and cultural heritage of the area, enabling people to reconnect with the history, wildlife and landscapes of the River Rye and its tributaries'.

Ryedale School – October 2021

The initial phase of the work was with Year 8 at Ryedale School in October 2021.

After a series of initial meetings, it was agreed that the workshops with Ryedale School needed to do the following:

- Be fun and engaging for Year 8 (12 and 13 year olds)
- Share the rich archive material collected by the Rye Reflections Oral History Project
- Inspire the children to reflect on their own relationship with the local landscape and the river Rye
- Educate the children about the river Rye
- Help them produce some really exciting creative writing inspired by nature and the river.



We'd go picking rosehips in the autumn, the damp earthy smell in our nostrils. We'd also gather mushrooms, sweet blackberries and hazelnuts.

We all knew which tree was which. Larch, willow, hazel, sycamore, birch, apple, blackthorn, rowan. Their names were my first alphabet.

Mike Armitage,
Rye Reflections participant



Initial project design

One of the first tasks was to define a basic structure for the project. We needed to think about whether we'd like to deliver sessions indoors or outdoors, where we'd like to hold the sessions and how many interventions we felt we needed.

In close consultation with Chess and Amy at Ryevitalise, we decided to deliver an inspiring outdoor session first – half a day spent in the beautiful grounds of Nunnington Hall. The children would visit four different creative or educational stations dotted around the grounds and engage with a series of fun activities geared around the river and creative writing.

We felt this site-specific approach would give the children a deep sensory experience of being outside in nature and by the river. It would also enable Chess and Amy to deliver some experiential riverside learning and allow Katie and Kitty to get creative in nature.

The outdoor workshop would then be followed up by two indoor workshops based back in school to develop the themes we covered outdoors, and we could begin looking at creative writing responses. The indoor sessions would be delivered by Katie and Kitty.

To begin and end the project, the whole team would also go to the school and deliver an assembly to set the scene and then another to bring the project to a close.



Outdoor workshops

When it came to designing the content for each of the four outdoor stations, we wanted to give the children access to variety of different activities that would develop a range of skills and activate all of their senses.

We came up with the following stations:

Noting down

A station run by Chess, designed to introduce children to the idea of doing a geographical sketch of the river and its surroundings. The children would be based on the riverbank and would learn new vocabulary relating to the river. They would also have the chance to observe wildlife first-hand. Lots of children were treated to the sight of an otter playing in the shallows!

FISHING OUT

A station run by Amy, designed to introduce children to the lifecycle of the mayfly and to give the children the chance to observe first-hand some of the smaller residents of the river Rye – bullheads, crayfish etc. Before the children arrived in her courtyard location, Amy would fill the water trays with samples from the river and then they could observe the contents together, learning new river words and new bitesize portions of biology, geology and geography as they went along.

Breathing in

A station run by Kitty, designed to deliver a mini, multisensory creative writing workshop in Nunnington Hall's orchard. Through a series of short writing prompts and inspiring technique-based activities, the children would begin to tune their sense in to their surroundings, and collect words, phrases and skills that they could use later on in their creative writing.

Folding up

A station run by Katie, designed to facilitate conversation and storytelling around the landscape and the river while teaching a simple handcraft – in this case, making origami boats. While teaching the children to fold and make their boats in lovely nature-inspired origami paper, Katie would lead conversation and prompt the sharing of stories about the surrounding area and the river Rye.

Outdoor workshops contd.

To add additional depth and connection to the history of the area and the river, we decided to share the memories of one participant of the Rye Reflections Oral History Project at each of the four activity stations. Brilliantly we were able to find a monologue to fit closely with each of our four themes.

To add a good dollop of fun and wonder to the event, we would also issue each group with treasure hunt style instructions to use to find their way between the stations.



Indoor workshops

When we met the children again back in Ryedale School, we wanted to build on everything they'd learned from being outside with us at Nunnington Hall and use that to help them create some nature-inspired creative writing.

We did this across two 1 hour sessions, through a mixture of multi-sensory activities using specially-selected nature-themed materials and fun props. We played some drama warm-up games, shared some more oral history monologues, did some mini writing prompts, led a guided river meditation, shared some performance poetry and explored how to write in different voices and find initial inspiration using a variety of sensory story starters.

Each activity was carefully created to include river words and to link back thematically to the work we'd begun at Nunnington Hall.

During the sessions, we also got the children to share their river memories with us so that Kitty could combine the memories to make a new 'collective' poem about the river Rye. These memories were also given to the York musician and playwright Bram Dave Jarman so he could create a song from them.

These two pieces would be shared back to the children at the closing assembly and would provide additional shareable material from the project.



Challenges & Successes

Challenges

One of the challenges of the project was engaging children of this age with the idea of creative writing. It's not something that appeals to everyone so we made it as fun as possible and tried to keep the time spent in sitting still and writing to a minimum, focusing instead on observing nature, generating energy, inspiration and excitement about the art of telling of stories.

We were also keen to demonstrate where a story can take you, showing how the children could journey from an initial observation to a finished piece – and that nothing was ever wrong.

Successes

The project was really successful and the feedback from the school and the children was really positive. We were really inspired by the children's interest, passion and knowledge about the river and the local area and their desire to share information with us.

They particularly enjoyed the change from typical learning, being outside and the variety of hands-on activities we did really worked well.



Outputs

The work with Ryedale School resulted in the fantastic poem Sentiments on Rye which was displayed by the river at Nunnington Hall in 2022 and is now on display at its new home at Sutton Bank National Park Centre.

The workshops also led to the creation of the wonderful song You and I, the River Rye by Bram David Jarman which will go on to be sung by community groups and other schools in the area.

As part of the initial preparation work we also created short, dramatic versions of a handful of the audio memories collected for Rye Reflections which were recorded for future use by the project.

We also wrote a short dramatic performance piece to introduce the children to the idea of the river and different ways of connecting with nature through the generations, led by two characters called Janet and Sue. This went down particularly well with the children.

The children themselves also produced river-inspired poetry for an anthology the school was putting together. The quality of the work was really fantastic. As a professional poet, Kitty provided feedback on each of the poems.



Malton School – March 2022

Based on the success of the initial phase of the project with Ryedale School in 2021, we went on to create and deliver a further programme of workshops for Year 7 at Malton School in March 2022.

Outdoor workshops

This project followed a similar pattern, with the same outdoor workshops run at Nunnington Hall. We each ran our four distinct stations in the grounds – Noting Down, Fishing Out, Breathing In and Folding Up.

We followed the outdoor workshops up with an indoor workshop delivered back in school. The contents of the indoor workshop was slightly different this time – tailored to the age of the children and the type of creative writing they were doing in their English lessons at school.



Indoor workshops

Year 7 at Malton School were writing 500 word stories for their creative writing portfolios in their English lessons at school. With this in mind, we tailored our indoor workshops to fit with their requirements, while also building on the idea of connecting with nature and the river that we'd set up at Nunnington Hall.

We devised a session that was about storytelling and gathering the inspiration to start a story. We shared another of the lovely memory monologues from the Rye Reflections Project, we asked the children to think about what makes a good story and then we gave them three different ways into a story – all of which would help them to gather inspiration ingredients to write one for themselves.

The first way into a story was an inspiration box full of intriguing nature-inspired objects, the second was nature-focused story starter phrases and the third was old photographs with a landscape focus. The children worked in pairs to gather ideas and play around with telling stories – making notes of words, phrases and ideas as they went along.

At the end of the session, we shared a story that Kitty had written in response to one of the old photographs, so we could model how a professional writer might use a prompt like this.



Challenges & successes

Challenges

We were keen to put inspiration at the heart of our sessions and to keep energy levels up in the room. We didn't want to create a heavy writing session where the children did a lot of solo writing work. We achieved this by keeping things light and fun and using oral storytelling to spark ideas.

We wanted to show how diverse writing can be and how there is no right and wrong in stories. We tried to model a whole variety of ways into writing and different types of responses to demonstrate this.

Successes

The little boxes of intriguing objects were really successful. There was something magical for the children about opening a mysterious box full of treasures. They also really enjoyed the presentation of the other props – the little scrolls with ribbons and quirky aged envelopes full of old photographs.

The children also really enjoyed hearing the monologues and the story that Kitty had written. By the end of the sessions, they were also very comfortable with folding origami boats and had clearly learned some new river vocabulary – riffle, catchment, confluence, spur, tributary.

Outputs

After the session, the children produced their own 500 word stories using some of the techniques and material we'd covered in the sessions. The school shared a beautiful story with us that one of the students had written about the horse in the orchard at Nunnington Hall.

Kitty also created a story based on one of the old photographs which we were able to share with the school at the closing assembly.



Slingsby Primary – March 2023

In March 2023 we were lucky enough to be able to deliver the project again to Years 5 & 6 at Slingsby Community Primary School.

This was exciting as it was our first opportunity to test the workshops with a slightly younger audience. We already knew that the format worked well for 11-13 year-olds and we had great confidence that 9-11 year-olds would find it just as engaging and informative.

Outdoor workshops

We delivered the same great outdoor workshops at Nunnington Hall for the children of Slingsby Primary. We tailored the contents of the Breathing In and Noting Down stations slightly to fit the younger age group. Essentially everything else was the same.

Indoor workshops

Following the outdoor workshops at Nunnington Hall, we met the children back in school for a classroom-based workshop on nature-focused creative writing. The children were all writing stories in their English lessons at school, so it was a great opportunity to feed our expertise into that piece of work.

We began by playing some drama games with the children. We followed this up some fun activities to stimulate thought and discussion around what makes a good story – what ingredients we need to create a rich story stew. Kitty then shared one of the really descriptive, visual monologues from the Rye Reflections Project to get the children inspired.

We then did two story starter activities, one using the inspiration boxes full of natural objects, and the other exploring the emotions that the river might have, and trying to write using its voice and its moods. Kitty shared a poem she'd created using an angry river voice to demonstrate how this might be done.



Outputs, challenges & successes

Outputs

During the session, the children made some brilliant notes of possible ideas and opening phrases for their piece of creative writing. Their teacher kept these for them to use in their English lesson later that week.

Challenges

The children were so enthusiastic and so full of ideas, it was sometimes difficult to fit in all the activities we'd planned. It was great to hear how much they loved being outdoors and all their stories however and we enjoyed giving them the space they needed to reflect and share.

Successes

By the end of the indoor session, we could see that the children had lots of material and ideas for their creative writing assignments. They had also learned and retained lots of brilliant river words and facts, and could easily fold origami boats for themselves.





Acknowledgements

This project was only possible thanks to the great energy, enthusiasm and knowledge of Chess Pert and Amy Carrick-Knowles at Ryevitalise. They have been a joy to work with and a real inspiration.

We're also incredibly grateful for the support and space offered to the project by The National Trust. It was a joy to deliver workshops in the glorious grounds of Nunnington Hall and the staff could not have been more helpful and supportive of our work.

Artist information & contacts

Katie Matthews



Katie has over twenty years' experience of acting, devising theatre and delivering community arts programmes.

She has toured extensively with various companies including Theatre Co Blah Blah Blah, Tell Tale Hearts, West Yorkshire Playhouse and Interplay. She worked in the devising team for new scripts with Mike Kenny, developing work for children in the Courtyard Theatre. She has also developed numerous outreach projects and workshops for organisations with a community focus.

Katie has been running Dandelion Arts since February 2019.

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Kitty Greenbrown



Kitty is a poet, writer and comms specialist with a keen interest in collaborating with other artists and working with young people. She won a York Culture Award for Best Performing Artist in 2017, and she has been subsequently commissioned to write for York Art Gallery, Visit York, North York Moors Steam Railway, York City Council and York Explore.

She writes for and devises a number of community arts programmes for Dandelion Arts with Katie Matthews and she also oversees Dandelion Arts' comms and marketing.

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