

The Beaney House of Art and Knowledge

The Beaney House of Art and Knowledge is a museum, gallery and library in the heart of historic Canterbury, Kent. Since reopening in 2012 the museum has embedded health and wellbeing across all its activities.

The museum uses the varied collection as a part of a diverse Health and Wellbeing programme that encourages everyone to get involved. With a carefully designed programme and working in partnership with health and social care organisations in the region to design accessible, relevant and enjoyable activities, the museum is able to support everyone to engage with culture and experience the positive impact it can have on wellbeing.

A Place of Safety

Throughout 2021 the museum partnered with Kent and Medway Partnership NHS Trust, one of the biggest mental health trusts in the UK. Using loan boxes of handling objects, patients from 6 wards were engaged in object handling sessions, delivered by the psychology and therapies teams. The Beaney provided these loan boxes for free to the ward in recognition of the fact that mental health inpatients are unable to access cultural activities during their stay. Boxes were changed every few months, based on the interests of the patient population at the time. Over the course of the year 864 patients were able to engage with object handling sessions on the ward.

For our 2022 exhibition “A Place of Safety” it was important that the patient voice was present in the exhibition. The exhibition explored themes of how mental illness has been conceptualised through time, and the places it has been treated, exploring the concept of “asylums” as a place of safety, and inquiring what makes a place feel safe?

A new object loan box was developed featuring objects from Kent’s Chartham asylum, later known as St Augustines Hospital. Objects including a teapot, asylum rule books, nurse badges and photographs were used in handling sessions on the ward, which were followed by creative sessions exploring the theme of “A Place of Safety”.

Patients and staff participated in the sessions, with both groups reminiscing about their time spent at St Augustines Hospital before its closure in 1993. In the safe space held by therapeutic staff, patients were able to share their memories, good and bad, of staying in traditional asylum style hospitals and compare it to their current experience of a mental health ward.

Staff and patients were invited to participate in a variety of creative activities including poetry, painting and lantern making. Their work was included in the exhibition alongside works from previous asylum inpatients such as Louis Wain and Richard Dadd, and contemporary artists with experience of mental illness including Dolly Sen and Liz Atkin.

Working in partnership with staff from Kent and Medway Museums Partnership, patients from every ward that participated were supported to visit the exhibition with staff to see their work and spend some time in the museum. Feedback from staff and patients was overwhelmingly positive;

Quotes from patients

“To be here today, and see my work...it feels so special”

“ I am overwhelmed to be honest with you, it’s wonderful”

“It feels nice to be part of something”

Participation in the object handling sessions was documented by psychology staff using quantitative data and thematic analysis which demonstrated that:

- 90% of ward patients engaged with the ward based activity
- 88% of patients felt that it gave them an opportunity to connect with other patients and staff on the ward
- 96% of patients reported that they felt positive about their work being exhibited in The Beaney
- 92% of patients reported that engaging with object handling and creative activities was a positive experience.

Since the exhibition has closed, The Beaney and Kent and Medway Partnership Trust are now exploring ways to continue the relationship including developing object handling sessions in new environments including Neuropsychology and Early Intervention in Psychosis.

Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance - South East Steering Group

In 2021, the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance South East representatives (Jemma Channing - Museums, Jo White - Arts) set up a South East Steering Group. This was to help ensure that the reach of the alliance was wider, and that more groups and practitioners could help shape the strategy for developing culture for wellbeing in the South East region.

One of the key issues flagged by the group was the need for the steering group, and the sector, to be reflective of the society we live in. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a key focus for both the National and regional groups.

It is known that one of the barriers to inclusion is a lack of representation in cultural organisations, and so half of the funding allocated to the South East was used to fund “Clarence's Workshop”. This was created as a development role which allowed Natalie Mbunga of Ethnic Minorities in Canterbury CIC to use museum space, funding and support to run a series of workshops to explore ways to engage different communities in and around Canterbury.

These workshops were designed to be intergenerational and connect with the national curriculum. Using the museum's collection and environment to support people to visit the museum, who may never have visited before.

A total of 88 participants attended 6 workshops which included activities such as singing, african head wrapping and bookmark making. Feedback from participants was positive:

Quotes from participants:

“The experience that we had at the museum was exceptional, i wasn’t expecting anything like it, we did crafts and the grandchildren had great fun”

“My son and I both loved the workshop at the Beaney. It was lovely to see him engaged and focused on crafting something that he was proud of. It was a lovely moment”

Since the workshops, The Beaney has developed an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan which makes further commitments to embedding EDI including creating opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to develop their skills and gain experience in the museum.

Be Connected Panel

The Beaney is committed to ensuring that our work is relevant and accessible to all parts of our community. To do this we understand the importance of integrating principles of diversity and inclusion across our organisation, collections and programming. We understand that change won’t happen overnight and most importantly that we can’t do this alone so as part of our ongoing commitment to reflect *who we were, who we are and who we want to be* we are introducing the Beaney Museum & Galleries Associate Organisations Programme - Known as the “Be Connected Panel”.

Using the equalities characteristics as a framework we are building our relationships with organisations within the Canterbury District who are dedicated to supporting underrepresented communities. Through conversations and collaborations we are developing a programme of work that builds understanding and connections across our society and is reflected in our visitor experiences, programming and collections.

Research shows that active engagement with the arts, culture and creativity is beneficial for health and wellbeing. Lack of access to cultural and creative opportunities too often mirrors other inequalities. People already experiencing deprivation have less cultural capital and so miss out on the wellbeing benefits of engaging with culture and heritage activities. Working in partnership with communities, to develop culturally specific activities and opportunities is key to challenging inequalities in both health and in culture.

The panel is composed of representatives from local organisations including Canterbury Pride, Ethnic Minorities in Canterbury, Canterbury Mosque, Canterbury Cathedral, University of Kent and people with disabilities. The group meets quarterly, where they are invited to participate in museum activities and make suggestions for the programme.

Some key successes of the panel so far include:

- Placing more culturally diverse books in the library which is in the museum building
- The group has contributed to call out documents for new commissions
- The group have given their feedback and input into the first draft of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion action plan.

The group continues to meet quarterly and future plans including a face to face meeting with a cultural food exchanges, and involving the group in installation of our upcoming exhibition “Mirror Mirror” being delivered in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery which includes

3 brand new commissioned portraits of people in the district who are currently under represented in the museums collection.

Sensing Culture

Sensing Culture is our monthly group for people with sight loss. The group meets in the museum Learning Lab for a two hour workshop facilitated by artist Wendy Daws, in partnership with Kent Association for the Blind.

The group uses objects from the museum handling collection which they explore by touch, to learn about different topics including Roman history, natural history and local items of significance. The workshops also include gallery visits to exhibitions in the museum. Our changing programme of temporary exhibitions alongside our permanent collection means there is always something new for the group to explore.

Using this experience as inspiration, the group are then supported to make a creative response. Recently the group visited the front room gallery in the museum, to explore 3D layered works by John Horne. These works created with layers of card and paint inspired the group to make their own artworks in a similar way, using touch to create their shapes and layering up materials to make 3D touchable artworks.

The group has also contributed to making the museum more accessible for people with sight loss. By designing a "Touchable Beaney" tour through the galleries. In each gallery is an artwork that can be touched including sculptures and a specially commissioned 3D version of a painting. Braille interpretation is also available in the galleries alongside large print.

The group has over 200 engagements a year and participants are also supported by the social networks they develop in the group. Friendships have developed between participants who all understand each other's experiences and are able to support each other to engage in sessions.

Participants' well being is measured using the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). A measure is taken every 6 months and the results demonstrate that attending the group has a positive impact on participants' mental wellbeing.

Feedback from the group:

Wendy Daws "This special relationship with The Beaney encapsulates my dissertation 'Value of Touch and Museum Approaches to Visually Impaired Visitors' and is central to my art practice. Leading on Sensing Culture enables a circular involvement between museum, creative practitioner and participants. All feeding into the programme and informing developing best practice."

Hazel Groves, participant "At school I was told I couldn't do art as I couldn't access it in the conventional way but through Sensing Culture and The Beaney I have discovered that art and culture is accessible to everyone it just needs the right opportunity to explore it in a different way."

