

RURAL CULTURE CASE STUDY

Rural Culture was a project which ran from September 2019 to March 2022, supported by Arts Council England and Craven District Council.



SKIPTON
TOWN HALL

RURAL CULTURE PROJECT



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



CRAVEN DISTRICT

Craven is a District Council in North Yorkshire and about to become part of the new North Yorkshire unitary authority in March 2023.

It has a population of around 55,000 in one of the least densely populated districts in England.

Like many rural areas, we struggle with out-migration of young people, an ageing population and a large number of second homes and holiday lets.

Public transport (particularly bus transport) is virtually non-existent and where it is available, is expensive.



SKIPTON TOWN HALL

Skipton is the largest market town in Craven and functions as the administrative centre for the district. The Skipton Town Hall cultural hub is owned by Craven District Council and managed by the Council's Cultural Services team. During 2018 – 2021 the building went through a major redevelopment project thanks to funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England, Arts Council England and Craven District Council. The transformative work included a heritage-focussed project to involve the local community in the development of Craven Museum and its educational offer. A 'Town Hall on Tour' programme of performances and cultural events was rolled out across the district during the temporary closure.

It became clear that we needed to look at the arts engagement opportunities that we could link with the reopening of Skipton Town Hall. Our aim was to become a cultural hub for the whole of Craven district. We wanted to consolidate what we had already achieved and work with people with disabilities, young people, village halls, charities, NPOs and others to pilot arts activities which are co-produced by, for and with local people. We were delighted when our funding application to Arts Council England was successful.

The first part of the project was to research what already existed in the area, looking at the possibility of all-staff training in

co-production methodology particularly if there were any rural examples of co-production.

The second section of the project was to be a series of consultation exercises with village halls and local people, working out what people wanted in their locality and how Skipton Town Hall could support them.

The third part was to provide opportunities to pilot a range of activity, including live streaming from Skipton Town Hall, followed by a period of project evaluation and developing legacy.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 Pandemic happened before we finished even the first part of the project, and it changed everything

in terms of delivery. We continued to consolidate relationships but we couldn't do a lot of the consultation work we wanted and the village venues themselves had different priorities and were either shut, operating as Covid community centres, or struggling to reopen because of the constantly changing legislation. Our village halls have very few paid members of staff, so this burden fell almost completely onto volunteers.

Despite all this, we did pilot some really useful elements and we have a great deal of legacy to work with.

WHAT WE LEARNT FROM THE PROJECT:

All of our partner organisations, including Skipton Town Hall itself, changed capacity and priorities as a result of Covid

Covid forced us to be more inventive whilst team members were all dispersed and working from home.

1

All of our partner organisations, including Skipton Town Hall itself, changed capacity and priorities as a result of Covid

2

Forging strong links with community organisations is essential to our success as a cultural hub and it takes time

3

We knew less about catering for a wide range of audiences than we thought

4

Marketing in rural areas takes longer and has to be more multifaceted than in market towns

5

People who attend events in village halls may not participate in cultural activities elsewhere

6

Light installations are better in the dark! (Unexpected sunny weather can ruin a projection)

7

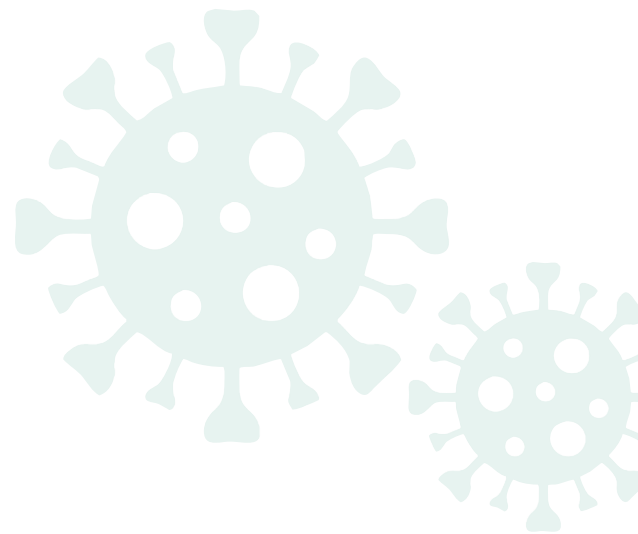
Our Village halls are happy to try new events if they do not have to shoulder the financial risk

8

Relaxed performances are equally good for parents and babies as for children from special schools

9

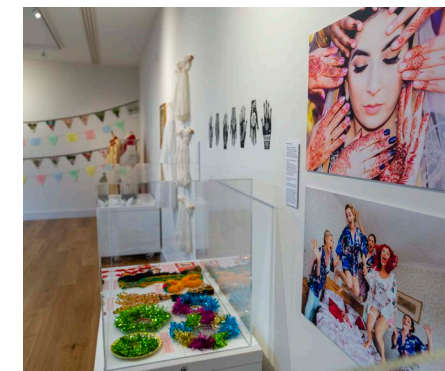
Online training opportunities are fantastic for cultural professionals in rural areas



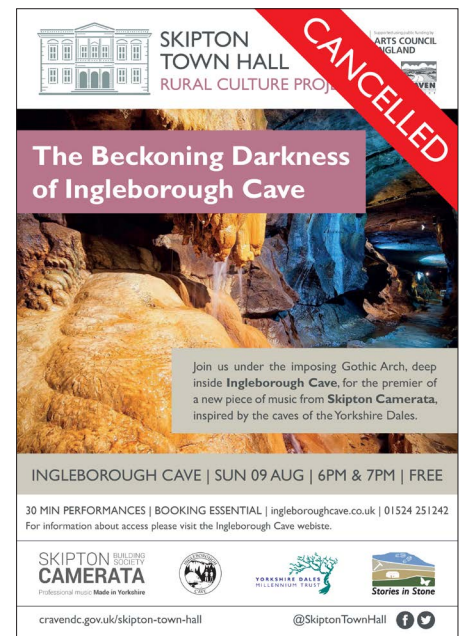
CULTURE AT HOME

Creative and inspiring things to do if you're isolating, distancing or working from home.

We set up a Culture at Home page on the Craven District Council website and pulled together all the best examples of arts activities we could find, nationally and internationally.



We worked with a local freelance artist who had good links with an ethnic minority group in our community in Skipton to encourage participation in the inaugural exhibition to be held at Skipton Town Hall after its reopening.



We attempted many iterations of different projects but had to keep changing them as Covid regulations changed. Even when it was legal to reopen there was a great deal of hesitation on the part of public to engage, especially in rural areas with large numbers of older people.

During this period new or deeper relationships were forged with:

SAY APHASIA SKIPTON
<https://www.sayaphasia.org/skipton>

SELFA (especially in North Craven)
<https://www.selfa.org.uk/>

EXCLUSIVELY INCLUSIVE
<https://www.facebook.com/exclusivelyinclusivecraven/>

ROTARY CLUB SKIPTON
<https://www.facebook.com/skiptonrotary/>

BROOKLANDS COMMUNITY SPECIAL SCHOOL
<https://www.brooklands.n-yorks.sch.uk/>

PARKINSON'S SKIPTON AND DISTRICT SUPPORT GROUP
<https://localsupport.parkinsons.org.uk/provider/skipton-and-district-support-group>

PIONEER PROJECTS
<https://pioneerprojects.org.uk/>

GREAT PLACE: LAKES AND DALES
<https://www.lakesanddales.org/>

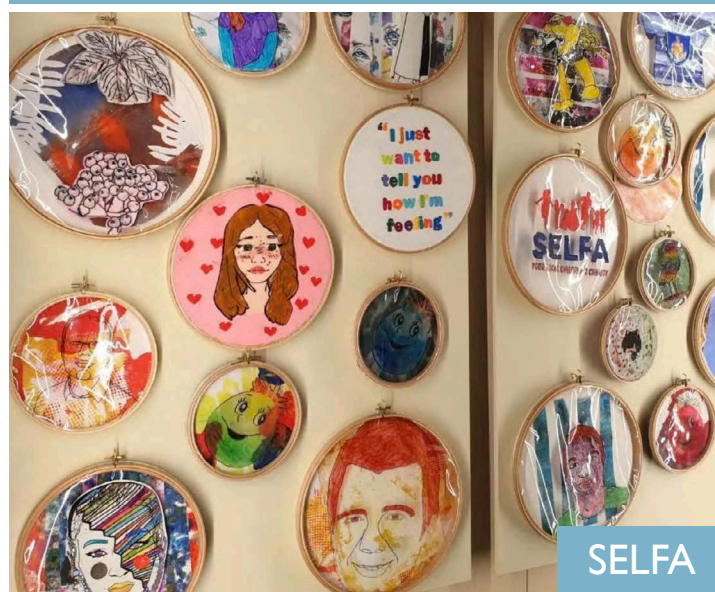
VILLAGE HALLS
<https://www.cravenc.gov.uk/community-living/village-venues/>

Establishing or strengthening these links made us see how much more we could offer and how much more we could benefit from engaging with our local communities at a deeper level. As an immediate result of these partnerships we:

Hosted Say Aphasia, SELFA and Exclusively Inclusive exhibitions in Skipton Town Hall



Say Aphasia



SELFA



Exclusively Inclusive

Talked to Parkinson's Skipton and District Support Group about what would make their life better in Skipton Town Hall:

If money was no object what would it be good to have in place to make sure Skipton Town Hall is accessible for all?

"Since the renovation I think that the town hall is excellent...[but] even if you have a disabled badge there is a long walk from the disabled parking bays to the entrance."

"The Museum is wonderful and accessible"

"The Concert Hall is excellent for music and I think we are very lucky to have a space like this"

"For lectures you do need a microphone"

"With the raked seating you have to make sure you have a floor seat and it can be very difficult to get up the stairs. It is good that you have floor seats though."

"Before it used to be very difficult to get upstairs but I have been around the museum now and it is great."

"I think that it is lovely that you have a lot of things coming up."

"I think the town hall is excellent and very accessible. Since we have started booking this space I haven't had any problems."

Arranged a day trip

For pupils from Brooklands Community Special School to pilot a day of activities for young people with learning and physical disabilities - visiting the exhibition gallery, a museum handling session and a relaxed showing of a film.

From this we learnt:

We needed a designated space for the whole day to enable students and carers to leave things in one place should they need them unexpectedly.

We needed pillows and bean bags as well as the floor mats we had already bought through the Rural Culture project.

We recorded evaluation from the young people at the end of their visit. We could improve on this by checking the questions with the teaching staff in advance of the visit.

Having picked out a variety of objects, mostly for their interesting colour or texture, we found that by far the most popular was the hat, which could be worn. We will use this feedback in our current volunteer project focussed around creating object handling boxes for the museum. We will ensure that an item of replica clothing is in as many of the boxes as possible, now that we can see how popular they are.

That of the two boxes we used with Brooklands, the one where objects were removed and more visible on the table seemed to be the most popular. We have continued to take this approach since, when conducting object handling sessions on gallery due to this reaction.

Working in partnership with Skipton Rotary we exhibited over 70 young people's art work.



Colours of Nature

Working with our community groups and our audiences was very valuable in highlighting what we needed in terms of equipment, approach and online on our website.

Combined with excellent all-staff Autism Awareness training from Specialist Autism Services and our pilot event with Brooklands Community Special School, we realised to be genuinely inclusive we needed more equipment: floor mats, bean bags, pillows, fidget spinners, stress balls, weighted blankets, which we have now bought as part of the Rural Culture project.

We needed not just very clear access information on the website, but also statements saying it's fine with us to wear hoodies, dark glasses, gloves and noise cancelling headphones to make people with autism feel genuinely welcome.


We found our staff needed to be visibly approachable, so staff lanyards now have pronoun, Pride progress and autism awareness badges.


We had a very positive interaction with a hard of hearing audience member solving the problems we had with our hearing loop system. She has written an article about it for the RNID magazine called 'That's How to do It', which finishes with:

“Which venue gets my accolade for the most perfect response to a hearing loop problem I have ever encountered? Take a bow, Skipton Town Hall.”


CRAVEN MUSEUM RELAXED SESSIONS


On the first Monday of the month9:30 - 10:30am & 15:30 - 16:30pm


Lighting levels will be raised.

Ear defenders are available.

Sound levels will be reduced.

Quiet spaces are available.

Visitors can make as much noise as they like.

Object handling sessions are running.

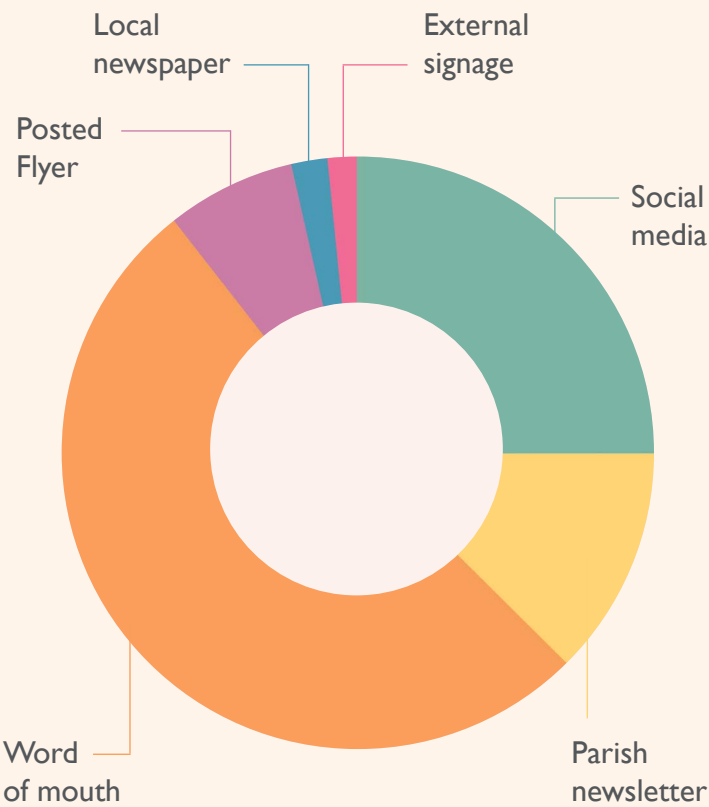
We're also Dementia Friends and an LGBTQ+ Safe Space

I'm a Dementia Friend

You can join me at dementiafriends.org.uk



Rural audiences said that they received information about events through:



- Word of mouth 52%
- Social media 25%
- Parish newsletter 12.5%
- Flyer posted through village residents' letter boxes 7%
- Local newspaper 2%
- External signage 1.5%

We need to do more liaising with parish newsletters. Grizedale Arts, operating in rural Cumbria, finds that this is the most effective way of reaching the largest number of local people. It's an area we haven't developed before. Interestingly a short film we made for Mother's Day for village halls wasn't taken up by the venues, but the link was distributed by two vicars to their parishioners, reaching people in some of the most isolated parts of Craven.

The structure of arts workshops in rural areas also needed revision. Originally participants were meant to attend for 2 hours or up to a whole day but it became clear (and workshop artists adapted to this very rapidly) that drop-in workshops worked better, with projects that could be completed quickly. Perhaps a mix of provision would work best in future with artists who have a public following having timed, booked in workshops, as well as pop-up drop in workshops.

External signposting of the events was also important to grab the attention of passers by and prompted village halls to think about more prominent signage for events in future.

Daytime workshop participant numbers were disappointing in the rural areas partly because we didn't give ourselves enough lead in time to do effective marketing.

Our small sample of 6 village-based events showed that 70% of people attending these events hadn't been to anything like it before and that 100% would like more of the same.

81% of those who completed evaluation forms lived less than 5 miles from the village venue.

100% of the participants in Stainforth, 18 miles away from Skipton, had never been to a workshop before, or a Skipton Town Hall event or been to Skipton Town Hall since its reopening. Reasons included "Just haven't got round to it; seldom visit Skipton; not heard about any; not really thought to go but will now; don't go (to Skipton)!"

Given that Craven is over 30 miles long, and Skipton is in the south of the district, significant areas of the district will not be interacting with Skipton Town Hall unless via village halls, which is why it is so important to foster and service this network.



Ingleborough Community Centre



Stainforth



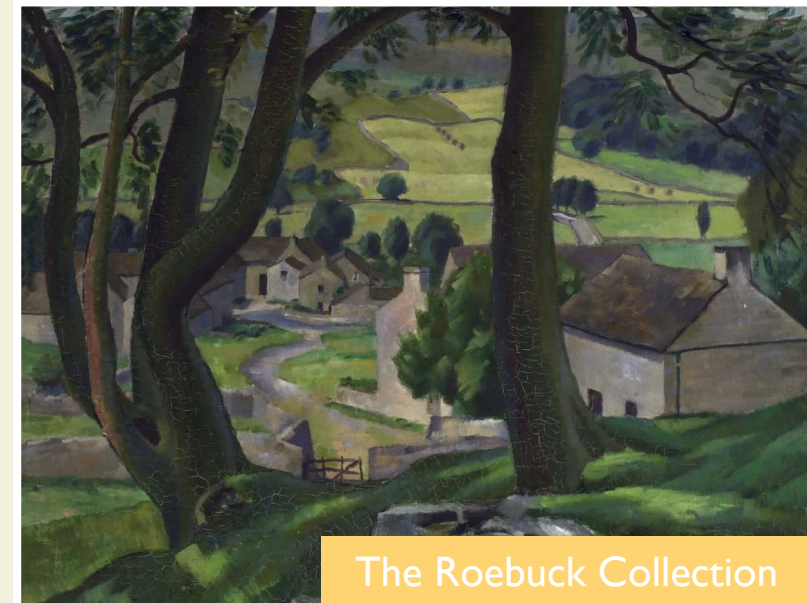
Ingleton

We had had months of dark, rainy, overcast weather and the one week we decided to pilot outside light installations, it was glorious sunshine! Next time we will programme light installations in the autumn/winter evenings but we wanted to pilot the idea as part of the Rural Culture project. We learnt a lot from the pilot:

- For light projections outside it was better to project the images from the inside because of Ensuring the safety of equipment from theft and environmental damage
- Consideration of power and data cable routing
- Financial cost.
- Ideally having access to the spaces earlier for site reconnaissance may have been helpful and would have flagged up any dynamic issues.
- It would have made more sense to fit these installations up so that they ran for a longer period of time, which might have yielded more social media coverage and dialogue.
- We discovered a transparent projection screen medium (on a roll) that could be cut to size and adhered to each window to allow it to be backlit, a much more cost-effective solution than procuring large free standing projection screens and conducting extensive video mapping (conforming the image to the window).
- It was a helpful pilot to iron out technical difficulties but also showed us how to reach wider rural audiences relatively simply and inexpensively.

For future installations we would need a longer lead in time to build up excitement, possibly it would be good to collaborate with another event going on to get a wider audience, we would stage it in autumn/winter and we would need to work out how to capture visitor numbers and devise evaluation methodology.

As a whole, the final product looked great when visible and made a feature of areas of the community hubs that would normally go unnoticed. Playing with the formula in the future to coincide with Skipton Town Hall's future exhibitions and workshops could have really interesting outcomes moving forward.



The Roebuck Collection

For some time before the Rural Culture project began, the Cultural Services team had made regular contact with the district's village halls. We recognised that everyday creativity was spread across the district but we had little or no knowledge of what was taking place, or the aspirations of the venues themselves.

It became clear that the venues did largely look after themselves but they had little contact with each other and no opportunity to share expertise. We worked with them on developing a central space on the Craven District Council website to post information about their venues and provided some guidance sheets. The Council pays for membership of Community First Yorkshire enabling every village hall to have access to guidance and support from CFY's village hall experts, and pays for subsidised live performances via Rural Arts On Tour.

In September 2019 we set up a Craven village hall conference with Community First Yorkshire and paid for 64 Million Artists to do a presentation about how to encourage everyday creativity at a rural level, which was well received and thought provoking.

Throughout Covid, that initial work proved invaluable as the Cultural Services team continued to facilitate regular engagement with village halls. These enabled the team to know where and when it was appropriate to pilot arts activities in the village venues. Unfortunately for the project, this was at the end of the project period but we learnt a lot from the pilots.



Village venues were very keen to try anything, providing they did not have to bear the financial costs. They were happy to do the marketing, look after the performer(s), arrange furniture and refreshments etc but they did not have the capacity to pay £200 for a performer when they may only sell a dozen tickets. Some village halls make use of the rural touring programme On Tour but they usually programme in pantomime and other events which they have evidence will definitely sell.

We tried to approach local creative groups like art clubs through the village halls during Covid but had little response. However, we do feel that there are opportunities to engage further with village halls and the pilots carried out through Rural Culture gave us pointers about how we might do this, including live streaming and broadcasting direct to village halls. There are also opportunities for us to collaborate with Yarnsdale, a wool craft festival held annually in Skipton, which we think could work well at village level. Plus there is the opportunity to continue to develop our own touring programme, in consultation with the village halls which, depending on our capacity, we may be able to develop for future years.



The Rural Culture project enabled us to pilot relaxed performances, something we had wanted to do since reopening. We first needed dialogue and training about how best to do this and we piloted two events:

Respect: a film-showing for carers and their babies under 12 months old

A day long event for Brooklands Community Special School for 8 children with 4 carers.

Both of these events provided really helpful feedback and ensured that we bought appropriate equipment for future relaxed events.

We also wanted to ensure that relaxed events looked like really good things to go to, not a 'second best' or in any way reduced option, so we wrote our description carefully on the website.

The museum now offers relaxed museum handling sessions on a regular basis too.

We promoted the relaxed event through socials and our website:

Take a break and watch award winning cinema at one of our special morning film screenings – and bring your baby along too! You and your little ones of twelve months and under can enjoy a relaxed environment without worrying about making too much noise. Enjoy the film in the company of other parents, carers and grandparents.

- Lighting will be slightly raised.
- Sound will be softer.
- Floor mats will be provided.
- There will be space for your pushchair next to your seat.
- Unisex baby changing facilities are available.
- You can order refreshments from your chair.

We were also fortunate that a local Health Visitor agreed to drop in and weigh the babies/discuss any issues parents had - this was really appreciated by those who attended.



"It was lovely to do something that I would have done pre-baby but adapted to fit in with my life as a parent."

"It was great having a playmat in front of your chair so that I could play with my son whilst watching the film. I loved that the drinks and snacks were taken at your seat and served to you so that you didn't have to try to juggle them whilst carrying your baby. A very thoughtful Health visitor popped in to see how parents and their babies were doing and to answer any questions."

"I thought it was really good, I had a positive experience from start to finish. It was a better baby cinema event than others I attended because of the mats on the floor so the babies could play."

The suggestions we received to make it even better were:

"Start the film or performance at 10.30. We're all up at the crack of dawn anyway."

Choose films which are 2 hours long maximum. Otherwise the babies get bored and/or it starts disrupting sleep routines."

Hold it every month all the way through the year so it's a regular event and everyone knows it's on."

Advertise through the NCT and all the mums groups on social media, and widely too, not just through the usual channels."

Also I know you had lots of No Shows on the day which is pretty standard for baby events as if they have a bad night people will cancel! So not an indication on the event, always happens with baby meet ups and classes."

The Brooklands Community Special School visit was really helpful in piloting our approaches in 3 different areas of Skipton Town Hall - the gallery, the museum and the concert hall, and led us to buy more equipment to make future trips work better.

Lessons learned in these two pilots have given us the confidence to make relaxed performances part of our regular programming and we will start to pilot other relaxed live performances now we have tried it out with films, as we have more confidence in what we can offer.





One of the huge pluses that all the Cultural Services team benefited from during the period of the pandemic, was being able to make the most of online training opportunities.

Normally training is very expensive for us. Train tickets and London (or other city accommodation) takes most training out of our financial reach (even without complications like childcare to arrange for an overnight trip away).

Having access to first class training, within office hours, was just wonderful.

Whilst you didn't get the networking benefits from In Real Life training, not everyone enjoys those coffee breaks where you don't know anyone, and everyone seems to be busy on their phones, so mixing in a degree of online training is really beneficial.

Hopefully training organisations will continue to offer the option of online training for those in rural areas.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank Arts Council England and all our partners who were so supportive and flexible during the period of the project. Whilst its outcomes were not exactly as we had envisaged, the project has been a transformational one for us and Skipton Town Hall and its rural partners will undoubtedly benefit from it now and in the future.

INSIGHTS PODCASTS

Please take the time to listen to our podcasts on insights on the rural delivery of culture from our rurally based partners:



Skipton Building Society Camerata:
<https://tinyurl.com/2p99jm9t>



Settle Stories:
<https://tinyurl.com/3cxwr2sx>



Blue Moose Dance Company:
<https://tinyurl.com/2p8vb9ke>



Falling Stars Theatre Company:
<https://tinyurl.com/sm28xzuw>



Craven Arts:
<https://tinyurl.com/2p958a88>



Ingleton Community Centre:
<https://tinyurl.com/mr2745eh>

WELLBEING PODCASTS

We also hope you will savour our Wellbeing podcasts made with our orchestra in residence Skipton Building Society Camerata.

Each podcast features an introduction to an element of wellbeing, a new musical composition and sounds relating to a region of North Yorkshire:



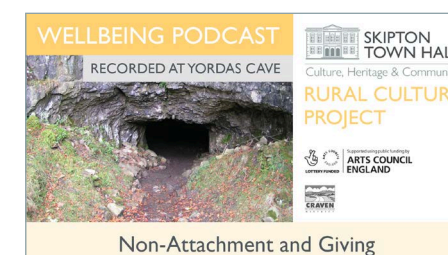
KEEP LEARNING, Harlow Carr Gardens:
<https://tinyurl.com/3pnymwr>



BE ACTIVE, Haworth:
<https://tinyurl.com/2rp9pvr7>



CONNECT, Whitby:
<https://tinyurl.com/43vnpd8b>



GIVE, Yordas Cave, Kingsdale:
<https://tinyurl.com/d3cb3fuj>



TAKE NOTICE, York:
<https://tinyurl.com/ykrx23pb>

Finally, our thanks to Sarah Bird from Wild Rumpus for their insights into rural delivery; Wild Rumpus exist in a space where arts and culture meet the natural environment, and launched Hinterlands Rural Film Festival in Skipton in 2019. They work with Great Place Lakes & Dales and Skipton Town Hall.

Working Rurally

Wild Rumpus deliver festivals, events and projects that explore the intersection of where arts and nature meet, as such a lot of our work takes place in locations and with communities away from heavily urbanised centres.

Our events encourage audiences to look at their environments in new ways and aim to create a sense of wonder, enhancing the connection to nature. We think the arts offer a unique opportunity to encourage audiences to dream up different ways of living more sustainably and in harmony with the planet.



Opportunities

Audiences in rural communities are often already more connected to nature than those in urban environments, so our work then becomes more about strengthening that depth of experience or surprising those audiences with different ways to connect to nature, often using different art forms. It's an exciting challenge, quite different from the approach for an urban audiences who have less opportunity to connect to nature or to be immersed in it.

Rural communities tend to have a really strong and interconnected ecosystem. The audiences, artists, contractors, funders and volunteers in a rural place feel more like a finely balanced matrix, relying on each other, offering support and resilience to one another. For us it feels like the pandemic has heightened this sense of community cohesion and encouraged stronger collaboration.

Working in a rural community with audiences that are less transient/concentrated than most urban audiences offers opportunities to build on shared experiences, with memories attached to a sense of place, held collectively and feeding into local aspirations and ambitions.



Challenges

For us the biggest challenges for working in a rural community is probably transport. This includes the really practical logistics of getting things and people to a place, the additional time and costs involved with that and also the impact of this on carbon emissions. Measuring and comparing that impact of taking culture to audiences (or audiences to culture) is, however, a difficult thing to navigate.

Fining down who the work is for and whether it's for the existing population or about attracting visitors into the community is vital. Some work can do both but choosing a primary audience is essential as it can influence times of performances, duration, venue, content and marketing.

Depending on whether the community are involved as co-creators/participants can influence the sense of ownership a community have over the project. Getting the balance right between locally produced work and bringing in artists and performers from further afield is important for us.