

Institution: Staffordshire University		
Unit of Assessment: 34 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies		
Title of case study: The Philip Astley Project – Using heritage for town regeneration		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Names: Dr Carmel Thomason Janet Hetherington Nicola Gratton	Roles: Senior Lecturer Senior Lecturer Academic Lead for Civic Engagement & Evaluation	Period employed by HEI: April 2016 to January 2020 January 2007-September 2017 2011-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact The Philip Astley Project (2017-2018) increased local knowledge and awareness of Newcastle-under-Lyme's historical link to circus. Public engagement and co-production, at the heart of the research strategy, delivered social, cultural and, economic benefits: almost 29,000 people were involved in 47 events, including an exhibition based on co-produced research attended by 16,700 people as visitors. This benefited the town with a visitor figure increase of 41.5% on the previous year (June-August 2017/18). At the project's completion, awareness of Astley and his link to Newcastle-under-Lyme increased from 11% to 56% in the town's residents. The research insights were curated into a publicly available Resource Pack so future generations can enjoy learning about Astley.		
2. Underpinning research Problem and potential Philip Astley (1742-1814) is known internationally as the 'father of the modern-day circus', but his roots in Newcastle-under-Lyme (N-u-L) are less recognised, both in the circus world and in his hometown, where only 11% of 2,800 people surveyed in 2015 had heard his name [3.1]. Previous efforts to harness this connection to anchor tourism and business development in N-u-L were difficult to sustain. In preparing for the 250 th anniversary of the modern circus in 2018, efforts redoubled. A Steering Group, led by Staffordshire University, and including a range of local partners initiated the Heritage Lottery (HLF) funded Philip Astley Project. Baseline/development phase In 2015-2016, Hetherington led research for a baseline report [3.1] which provided evidence about existing interest in and knowledge about Philip Astley in the region. The study identified potential for facilitating community pride in N-u-L's heritage. It informed the activities and evaluation framework for the second stage HLF application. Research utilised the 'Get Talking' approach developed at Staffordshire University Creative Communities Unit. This is a version of Participatory Action Research emphasising the importance of community researchers' interests. 'Get Talking' has been used in multiple projects since 2004 and continues to be widely used by Staffordshire University for building stronger community partnerships [3.2]. The baseline report: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provided evidence about individuals' and organisations' preferences, e.g., activities outside in addition to those inside a museum; identified creative possibilities for projects rooted in heritage and delivered using contemporary artistic approaches; involved diverse groups and identified new routes to engagement that those leading the Philip Astley Project would not otherwise have seen [5.1]; e.g., encouraging 30 local businesses to support regional heritage work [3.1]. The heritage project Thomason was the academic lead of the main HLF-funded project (GBP167,045) (May 2017-December 2018). The Philip Astley Project built public interaction and co-creation into a research process where the researcher acted as curator, enabling, overseeing, and presenting public research in a way that was accessible to a wide audience. This enabled strong engagement from diverse groups including volunteers, circus professionals, arts organisations, business groups, and local schools and colleges. Enabling project partners and members of the public to engage directly in the research process helped to develop community ownership of the research outcomes [3.3]. Thomason worked with museum officers and volunteers from Brampton Museum to research primary sources from English and French archives, including Window Tax Assessments,		

Apprenticeship Records, Parish Records, Wills, archived letters, newspaper cuttings, playbills and contemporary published secondary sources. This led to new insights into Astley's connection to N-u-L and his family history. Previously, research on Astley's life had focused on his later time in London and Paris. Little was known about his earlier life. The community research revealed previously unknown details of his home and lifestyle, his contribution to military horse training, and the role of his theatrical performances in shaping recreational life of the period [3.3].

The research identified the town's circus heritage and connections to the Astley family history. It then engaged a wide-ranging, modern audience by presenting this information in a publicly accessible way [3.6]. Findings were curated in an exhibition at Brampton Museum [3.5; 5.7], bringing together archive materials relating to Astley for the first time. Accompanying this exhibition and ensuring that people would be able to make further use of the research, Thomason compiled a 17-page Resource Pack for a general audience, enabling people to understand Astley in the social and political context of his time [3.4].

3. References to the research

[3.1] HETHERINGTON, Janet (2016) Evaluation Report - Development Phase - The Philip Astley Project. Link: <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6559>

[3.2] GRATTON, Nicola (2020) *From Engagement to Strategy: The Journey Towards a Civic University*. In: *Civil Society and Social Responsibility in Higher Education: International Perspectives on University-Community Partnerships*. Emerald Publishing.
Link: <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6073>

[3.3] THOMASON, Carmel (2019) *Extending possibilities for widening participation: a circus arts and heritage case study*. *Innovative Practice in Higher Education*, 4 (1) pp.57-77 ISSN 2044-3315
Link: <http://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6125>

[3.4] THOMASON, Carmel (2018) The life and legacy of Philip Astley, father of the modern circus. [Artefact] Link: <http://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/5026>

[3.5] THOMASON, Carmel (2018) Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy. [Show/Exhibition]
Link: <http://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/4943>

[3.6] THOMASON, Carmel (2019) The Philip Astley Project – Celebrating the father of modern-day circus. Project Report. Staffordshire University.
Link: <http://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/5559>

Funding Total: GBP195,645, including GBP167,045 Heritage Lottery, 2017-2018, awarded to Staffordshire University for 'Celebrating the father of modern-day circus', HG-15-05207.

4. Details of the impact

The 250th anniversary of the first circus, celebrated nationally in 2018 under the banner of Circus250, provided the opportunity to raise awareness of Astley's family connections to N-u-L, a town [Arts Council England's Active People Survey](#) (2010) identifies as being in the lowest 33% for cultural engagement in the UK. The Philip Astley Project was based on both research strands: specific insights about how to engage the target audience [3.1] and new facts about Astley [3.4]. The project boosted the local economy, developed skills in the people involved, and contributed to wider heritage work.

1) Realising potential: the benefits of heritage in placemaking

Previous efforts to leverage Philip Astley's connection to N-u-L in 1982 and 1992 proved difficult to sustain [5.1]. Staffordshire University's involvement from 2015 and development of the Heritage Lottery fund bid brought the skills, expertise, and experience to co-ordinate the work. It also established a strong collaborative model of partnership working and built up the capacity of the Philip Astley Steering Group [5.2]. In addition to Hetherington and Thomason's academic leadership, Katherine Evans (Project Manager, Staffordshire University) worked with the Steering Group (until September 2018) to co-ordinate the project's public engagement activities. As well as the baseline research findings [3.1] shaping the Philip Astley Project, they informed urban regeneration initiatives. Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council used them as evidence of how treating Philip Astley as a cultural icon could provide new economic benefits. This includes developing a vibrant town centre and supporting tourism in the region [5.3a].

2) Impact on Economy and tourism in Newcastle-under-Lyme

Over an 18-month period almost 29,000 people were involved in more than 47 separate related events and activities on the circus heritage theme as part of the Philip Astley Project [3.3, p.70; 5.4, pp.16-17]. These included a family festival, quizzes, exhibitions, a town trail, community performances, children's library activities and competitions, film screenings, talks, and workshops.

An independent evaluation of the project reported visitor figures for the town between June and August increased from 616,389 in 2017 to 872,060 in 2018 [5.4 p.92]. This is a total increase of 41.5%. This impact is in keeping with the changing nature of high streets, which according to the Manager of the Business Improvement District, *'have become far less about retail and much more about experience and destinations. The events and projects we have supported in the town have been a direct link to the increase in footfall'*. [5.4, p. 91]. Over half of those attending one of the events indicated that this had changed their perception of N-u-L [5.4, p.93], and 75% of those coming to an event from outside of N-u-L had planned the trip particularly to visit the event [5.4, p. 113]. Some of the main events and initiatives included:

(i) AstleyFest 2018: a free family fun day at Lyme Valley Park, attracting an estimated 8,000 people as attendees. It included circus performances, horse shows, military displays, hands-on activities, and a performance by a community company cast of a new play by the New Vic theatre, 'Roll up, Roll up' [5.4, p.31].

(ii) The Homecoming: an annual one-day event that had existed since 2014, showing circus-inspired performance in celebration of Philip Astley's legacy [5.3a]. However, the event only became sustainable after local arts organisation Appetite worked to improve artistic quality [5.2] with the help of Hetherington's audience research [3.1; 5.3a]. For the circus anniversary in 2018, circus projects that recognised the contributions of Philip Astley were identified as a key strategic priority for the event [5.2]. It was also extended into the evening for the first time. 'Homecoming at Night' delivered heritage events in bars and pubs in N-u-L town centre, sharing facts about Philip Astley through bespoke beer mats and social media. These Homecoming evening events were attended by 159 people as participants. [5.4, pp. 24, 31-2].

(iii) N-u-L BID and Creative Art North Staffordshire were commissioned to create a **Philip Astley Town Trail Map** to tell visitors about Astley's life. The trail used window vinyl placed at specific locations around the town and combined art from Creative Art North Staffs with artwork by local Newcastle College students. The town trail was downloaded from the Philip Astley website 227 times [5.4, p.71].

Linked Initiative: Circus Past, Present and Future

The baseline research [3.1] also contributed to the development of a successful funding bid to Arts Council England by the New Vic Theatre and Appetite (March 2017) for a related project called Circus Past, Present and Future [5.2]. It was used as evidence for how placing exhibitions into new, outdoors settings can improve public accessibility. As a result, Appetite worked with the Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum to create an outdoor exhibition in N-u-L town centre, featuring items from the V&A circus collection. The exhibition was in place for three months, seen by all shoppers/visitors in a key part of the town centre [5.2].

Building on recommendations in the report about city-wide family events [3.1, p.31], one of the aims for the 2018 celebrations was for N-u-L to host a circus in the town centre. The Philip Astley Steering Group (including several representatives from the Borough Council) looked for suitable locations for such large-scale events [5.3a]. The Ryecroft ('Old Sainsbury's') site was the right size and in a central location. As it was the first time that the site was going to be used as event space, it was necessary to upskill the Council Planning Team to overcome logistical and administrative challenges involved in making the site ready for use. In the anniversary year of 2018, No Fit State Circus was set up at the site for three months (as part of Circus Past, Present and Future). In addition to the cultural benefit, the retail area next to the site felt the economic benefit of performers and visitors spending money there [5.3a].

3) Impact on Volunteers

As part of the Philip Astley Project, 265 people received formal adult training including heritage social media skills, storytelling and drama skills, research skills, and circus skills. 63 people volunteered time with 100% saying they had gained skills as a result [5.4, p. 17]. Approximately 200 people as staff and students at Staffordshire University were involved through content creation, workshops, and embedded curriculum activities [3.6, p. 4, 5.4 p.79]. The research approach allowed people without formal qualifications to gain new skills, contribute to academic research, and feel a positive connection to the University [3.3].

The New Vic Theatre recruited new members for the New Vic Community Theatre to perform in 'Roll Up, Roll Up', a new community performance shown as part of the 2018 AstleyFest. In total 448 people as participants took part across 16 sessions. The groups learned about Astley and were encouraged to try circus skills. Participants developed their skills and confidence: *'I also got*

to understand how to learn/read a script. It gave me the confidence to be able to do this again... I've since taken up professional acting classes. It's great for people who are lonely, and for people who want to make friends and build confidence.' (Melanie) *'As a foreigner who has lived in Newcastle for almost 3 years, I've met a lot of nice people and I've done things that I've never thought I would do (like a play in English or sing!)... Now I feel that I've done something for the city, for the people who live here. For me that is important and makes me feel very proud!'* (Yolanda) [5.4, pp.16, 83-4].

4) Impact on Heritage Awareness and Work

At the project's completion, the independent evaluation found that 56% of people in N-u-L had heard of Astley and are aware of his link to the town and of his invention. From a baseline of 11%, this greatly exceeded the initial aim of increasing awareness to 21% [5.4, p.18]. In addition to almost 29,000 people who were directly involved in activities, the project reached more than 1,000,000 people through mainstream media, social media, and a dedicated website. This includes coverage on BBC channels BBC 3 and BBC Midlands Today in broadcast media [5.4, p.90]. 17% of audience participants had day-to-day limiting activity, a health problem, or a disability and 23% were from a low engagement segment (using Audience Spectrum profiles) [5.4, p.79]. 93% of attendees agreed that the Philip Astley Project events made them 'Understand more about circus arts and heritage'. 85% agreed that the Philip Astley Project events made them 'Feel more proud of Philip Astley' [5.4, p.18].

Resource Pack and Exhibition

Thomason created a Resource Pack that made the research findings accessible for a general audience [3.4]. The pack was launched at an event on 28 November 2018, where 125 printed resource packs were distributed, and is publicly available digitally on the [Philip Astley Project website](#) [5.5]. The research was also curated into a free exhibition, Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy, [3.5] at Brampton Museum (05/06/2018 to 15/07/2018). The exhibition involved collaborations with the V&A Museum and Chetham's Library. In addition to bringing together Astley-related materials in one place for the first time, this exhibition provided Brampton Museum with valuable learning about borrowing material from a national museum [5.6]. The Resource Pack was also used to produce the information panels and central structure of the exhibition, which was visited by 16,700 people [5.4, pp. 16, 24, 25]. 60% of visitors had not taken part in other organised Astley activities before. Throughout the exhibition, there were circus-related trails and craft activities for children. Visitor comments included: *'The council should encourage people more with exhibitions like this one, especially about local people. I did not know about Philip Astley until now (I am 40!)'* [5.4, p. 26]. A permanent archive collection about Philip Astley now supports ongoing community projects [5.6].

Other activities that contributed further to increased awareness and pride included:

i) The schools and educational programme. These participatory sessions included a talk and activity or demonstration such as circus skills. They were delivered to a broad age range (primary school to FE/HE) and across abilities (30 schools across mainstream and SEN primary and secondary, 1 FE college, engaging with 1,454 people who were students) [5.4, p.60]. As part of a linked initiative to N-u-L's entry into the Britain in Bloom competition, the steering group supported a children's painting competition. More than 24 primary, secondary, and special schools took part, with 1,040 people making competition entries. The children's creations reflected their interpretation of Philip Astley [5.4, p.16].

(ii) As part of the parallel project run by Appetite and the New Vic (funding drawing upon the audience engagement insights in Hetherington's report, [3.1]), a new play titled '**Astley's Astounding Adventures**' was performed over three weeks in July 2018. The script included details about Astley's early years that had been discovered through the community research [3.4], including his local background, which helped to embed the play in the Potteries [5.1].

(iii) A film programme was run from Stoke-on-Trent Film Theatre, which showed a special series of six circus-themed films. This was part of a well-established weekly free screening by Staffordshire Film Archive. 326 people attended the film screening programme [3.6, p.11].

5) On-going Legacy: continuing impact of the Philip Astley Project Strategy and Funding

i) The legacy of the project features in the Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council Economic Development Strategy 2019-2023: 'The Philip Astley Project, is at the heart of the area's cultural

tourism development. The project has raised the profile of Philip Astley and of the Borough. It has encouraged people to celebrate their local cultural heritage and learn more about this. Through the project, relationships have been built which will create exciting plans for future collaborations to promote Philip Astley and Newcastle-under-Lyme both nationally and internationally. The Philip Astley Project enabled Newcastle-under-Lyme to be named as one of only six towns/cities at the heart of Circus 250 celebrations in 2018' [5.7, p.21].

ii) In new funding bids for town regeneration, N-u-L is now introduced as the 'birthplace of the Father of the Modern Circus'. A bid to Future High Streets fund (provisionally awarded GBP11,048,260 in December 2020) references Astley and includes plans to build on his legacy. A GBP25,000,000 Town Deal Fund application prepared in 2020 (submitted January 2021) includes an International Circus Creation and Education Centre and other Astley-inspired elements [5.3a; 5.3b].

iii) The partnership with Staffordshire University gave Brampton Museum the skills, insights, and confidence to submit their own bid to HLF. They secured GBP248,700 for a capital building project in 2020 [5.6].

Cultural and Heritage Initiatives

i) Following the first use of the Ryecroft site to host a circus, ongoing use of the derelict site as event space has been secured through a block planning permission for several events per year taken out by the Council. This eases the administrative burden for event organisers [5.3a].

ii) Further Astley Fest events have been developed by the Philip Astley Project Community Interest Company, formed by members of the Philip Astley Steering Group. In 2019, AstleyFest Lite included a film show, guided town walk and, reading events. The 2020 Astley Fest was held online due to COVID-19 and plans are underway for the return of a live event in 2021 [5.1].

iii) Andrew Van Buren (Director, Philip Astley Project CIC) gave a series of historical walks and talks as part of the Philip Astley Project. These events use new research findings, such as the fact that Philip Astley's uncle was the postmaster of N-u-L. The talks continued beyond the project, including in March 2020 at Belong Village (nursing and dementia care facility in N-u-L) and in Bristol, for Equity (the actors' union) [5.1]. Van Buren also collaborated with film maker Marcelo Malaquias for Eletrizzante on a Brazilian short film 'A Day in the Circus' (released May 2020). The film explores the history of the circus. It includes animation that was developed for the Philip Astley Project and refers to both the project and the website [5.1; 5.8].

iv) The Philip Astley Project has built capacity for wider heritage initiatives. In 2019, to mark the 200th Anniversary of Queen Victoria's birth, partners who worked together on the Philip Astley Project created a two-week celebration by re-focusing and combining planned activities. This was achieved with little notice and no funding but building on mutual trust. Philip Astley will be an integral part of upcoming events celebrating the 850th Anniversary of the N-u-L Charter in 2023. The timeline created through the research process in the Philip Astley Project has provided a useful guideline for planning Anniversary events [5.3a].

v) The Philip Astley Project website [5.5] provides an extensive range of freely accessible materials, including films, images, and resources for schools and community groups.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Testimonial: Andrew Van Buren, Owner, Van Buren Organisation.

5.2 Testimonial: Director, Appetite (Arts Council England, Creative People and Places programme).

5.3a Testimonial: Business Development Officer in Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council Economic Regeneration Team. 5.3b Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council website.

5.4 The Philip Astley Evaluation Report (January 2019) – An independent evaluation produced by the Audience Agency. (Includes testimonial evidence, related tourism data for Newcastle-under-Lyme, exhibition visitor numbers, visitor, and participant feedback).

5.5 [Philip Astley Project website](#)

5.6 Testimonial: Culture and Arts Manager, Brampton Museum, Newcastle-under-Lyme.

5.7 Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council Economic Development Strategy: Growing our People and Places 2019-2023.

5.8 ['A Day in the Circus' documentary film](#). May 2020