

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Nottingham		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 27 (English Language and Literature)		
Title of case study: <i>Citizen Scholarship: transforming organisational culture, practice and volunteer and audience engagement with cultural heritage in the East Midlands</i>		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2003 – 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Jo Robinson	Professor in Drama and Performance	01/09/1998 – 31/01/2021
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – end 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Robinson's research underpins an innovative approach to heritage at the Theatre Royal Nottingham and other cultural institutions in the East Midlands, addressing historic underfunding in the regional arts with a new model of 'Citizen Scholarship'. This model has transformed organisational culture, practice and capacity at the Theatre Royal through upskilling 60 volunteers to co-research and co-curate analogue and digital collections, and has inspired new routes to share the Theatre's 150-year history with new local audiences and digital audiences worldwide. 'Citizen Scholarship' projects have been adopted at Bromley House Library, Southwell Workhouse and Derby Theatre, with Robinson's model used as exemplary practice. The project has: i) changed organisational culture, practice, and capacity at the Theatre Royal to enhance cultural heritage preservation; ii) changed cultural engagement strategies and embedded sustainable practices across the city and region; iii) empowered volunteers and their communities by enhancing volunteer skills, knowledge and wellbeing, and increasing audience engagement and public understanding of cultural history.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Robinson's research on regional theatres demonstrates the importance of local/regional theatre histories in addressing a 'gap' in British theatre research, where London is often a stand in for 'British' theatre (1, 5, 6). Her development of innovative and collaborative digital humanities approaches enables both cutting edge research <i>and</i> participatory engagement with theatre histories by wider public audiences (2, 3, 4), and is addressing both a current and historical lack in capacity and funding in the East Midlands heritage sector (3).</p> <p>The underpinning research began in 2003, with AHRC funding in 2006-09 for 'Mapping Performance Culture: Nottingham 1857-67' (PI Robinson, English; Co-I Priestnall, Geography) (F1). This project involved the collaborative development of an open-source interactive digital map that enabled users to explore and analyse the performance culture of mid-nineteenth-century Nottingham (4). The theory and scope of the project is set out in a foundational article published in 2004 (5). Here Robinson argues that mapping as an approach enables the innovative linking of historical data on performance culture to produce an 'intertheatrical' (Bratton, 2001) perspective on performance and spectatorship, illuminating audience experience across the cultural landscape of Nottingham. 'Mapping Performance Culture' pioneered this methodology by combining a large data set collected from local archives, museums, and libraries with GIS (geographical information systems) technology: an analysis of the technical innovations of the project appeared in 2011 (2). Robinson argues (2) that open-source digital mapping offers a way to address patterns of connectivity and change across both time and space, capturing and representing the interlinked stories mobilised in the making and reception of theatrical performance (4); she also highlights the site's ability to connect and make accessible to audiences resources from different archives and sources.</p> <p>The period covered by 'Mapping Performance Culture' included the construction and opening of Nottingham's Theatre Royal in 1865; an article on the history of pantomime at the venue (6) used the mapping approach of the project to draw together evidence from playbills, transport schedules, adverts and reviews in order to synthesise new understandings of local relationships between theatre and audiences.</p> <p>In 2015, the Theatre proposed a research collaboration focused on developing new ways of using digital and participatory methods to explore and share the Theatre's heritage (b). Robinson (with Carletti (UoN Horizon)) developed a new 'Citizen Scholarship' strategy for preserving, curating and sharing the Theatre's heritage. This strategy underpinned a successful</p>		

Heritage Lottery Fund bid for a two-year collaborative 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' project (Feb 2017 – Apr 2019) (F2). The researchers worked alongside and supported skills development of 'Citizen Scholar' volunteers to co-research and co-curate the Theatre Royal's history through: i) the sorting and cataloguing of the analogue archive of materials held by the Theatre and not currently accessible to the public; ii) collection and editing of oral histories from key figures in the venue's story; iii) research across different repositories in the city; iv) the creation and curation of a freely accessible digital collection that links together objects from these various elements to enable users to make their own connections and narratives; v) development of talks and exhibitions to share the findings with the local public. This research approach and its outcomes are published in Robinson and Carletti's 2019 article (3), which highlights the transferability of the approach to other organisations for enhanced and sustainable cultural heritage preservation and engagement.

In 2017, Robinson obtained AHRC funding for 'Citizen Scholarship in Nottingham' (follow on project from 'Mapping Performance Culture') in order to test, develop, and implement this 'Citizen Scholarship' model of cultural heritage in the wider region. Robinson has set up pilot projects at Bromley House Library, Southwell Workhouse, and Derby Theatre (F3).

3. References to the research

Outputs:

- 1) **Robinson, J.**, (2007). Becoming more Provincial?: The Global and the Local in Theatre History. *New Theatre Quarterly*. 23(3), 229–40. DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X07000139.
- 2) **Robinson, J.**, Priestnall, G., Tyler-Jones, R. and Burgess, R., (2011). Mapping the Moment: A Spatio-Temporal Interface for Studying Performance Culture, Nottingham, 1857–1867. *International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing*, 5(2), 103–26. DOI: 10.3366/ijhac.2011.0027.
- 3) **Robinson, J.** and Carletti, L., (2019). *Our Theatre Royal Nottingham: Co-Creation and Co-Curation of a Digital Performance Collection with Citizen Scholars*. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*. 15(2), 128–48. DOI: 10.1080/14794713.2019.1633106.
- 4) **Robinson, J.** and Priestnall, G., (operational 2009-2012). Mapping the Moment: Performance Culture in Nottingham, 1857-67. An open-source interactive digital map. Accompanying Nottingham Central Library exhibition, 2009. Explanatory project video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eqblpb8YEg.
- 5) **Robinson, J.**, (2004). Mapping Performance Culture: Locating the Spectator in Theatre History. *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*. 31(1), 3–17. DOI: 10.7227/NCTF.31.1.2.
- 6) **Robinson, J.**, (2010). Mapping the Place of Pantomime in a Victorian Town. In: J. Davis, ed. *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 137–54. ISBN 978-0-230-29178-2 (eBook), 978-0-230-22159-8 (Hardcover).

Grants:

- F1) AHRC, 'Mapping Performance Culture: Nottingham 1857-67' (2006-2009), £289,045, **Robinson PI**, Priestnall Co-I, AR119173. Final report graded Outstanding by AHRC.
- F2) Heritage Lottery Fund, 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham: Its Stories, People and Heritage' (2017-2019), £17,000, **Robinson academic lead**, OH-16-03808.
- F3) AHRC Follow-on Fund for Impact (Cultural Value Highlight Notice), 'Citizen Scholarship in Nottingham: Understanding the Value of Engaging Users with Heritage and Culture' (2017-2018), £37,181.60, **Robinson PI**, AH/R00983X/1.
- F4) Heritage Fund, 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham – Heritage Co-ordinator & Enhanced Engagement Programme' (2020-2023), £70,400, **Robinson academic partner**, OM-19-02567.

4. Details of the impact

The East Midlands is rich in cultural heritage, but is a region that has had to contend with historic underfunding in the arts (a). In Nottingham, the Theatre Royal, built in 1865, is a keystone of the city's living heritage, but as a council-run performance venue it has '*had limited resources, in terms of both time and capacity*' (c, p. 4) for managing and understanding its archive and heritage. Building on 'Mapping Performance Culture' (2, 4-6), praised by AHRC reviewers as demonstrating '*how new technology can be used to make research available to the local community, while at the same time integrating local resources and exploiting their holdings*', Robinson has worked with the Theatre to develop methodologically innovative ways to better understand, manage, and promote their history and increase audience participation with their

cultural heritage (3) (b). That success underpinned the development of a sustainable model of 'Citizen Scholarship' for cultural engagement, which has changed strategy and practice across the city and region (g-j). The project produced the following key impacts:

i) Changing organisational culture, practice, and capacity at the Theatre Royal to enhance cultural heritage preservation

Before Robinson's project, the Theatre's archive was '*poorly managed with no systems in place for cataloguing material*'; its holdings were inaccessible to the public, grew through '*[o]ccasional archive donations*' only, and were not connected to other archival holdings in the city (c, p. 6). Because '*the use of volunteers was not deemed [worth] pursuing or even necessary*' by the Theatre (c, p. 5), the venue '*had no experience of working with volunteers*' (b) and thus lacked capacity to explore and utilise its heritage. Robinson's 'Citizen Scholarship' model of heritage engagement (3) overcame these weaknesses in the following key ways.

First, Robinson's 'Citizen Scholarship' model (3) transformed the venue's operational capacity and ethos '*to embrace volunteer-led heritage and engagement practices*' (b). At the start of the HLF project in February 2017, 60 volunteers were recruited (against a target of 30), trained and supported by Robinson and experts from UoN and the East Midlands Oral History Archive to develop skills in areas from archival practice to archive research and oral history, as well as curating and hosting foyer exhibitions and sell-out events to disseminate findings to the wider public. To date, volunteer work has enabled organisation and cataloguing of over 4,500 items, 39 interviews have been recorded (with 45 participants) (c, pp. 6, 9), and 1,316 archival items and 241 oral history clips have been uploaded to the digital archive (b). According to the Theatre, this undertaking '*would not have been possible without the Citizen Scholarship model*', which has provided the Theatre with a '*skilled archive team*' and '*a professional heritage management system*' (b). Volunteers are now integral to the organisation and are building capacity beyond the archive; some have received further training to assist with backstage tours and outreach talks, and others are countering short-staffing at large public events (b). The Theatre describes this organisational change as a '*fantastic outcome [that] was not anticipated and is a direct result of implementing Professor Robinson's Citizen Scholarship model*', emphasising that Robinson's '*expert advice*' and specialist connections '*made the management and training of these volunteers possible*' (b).

Second, Robinson's digital humanities approach to performance culture (2-4) drew together resources from across the city and beyond, encouraging volunteer researchers – empowered as co-curators – to develop their own research interests and tell their own stories about the objects and images chosen for sharing on a new digital platform developed with support from Robinson and UoN (ourtheatroyal.org). This story-based approach developed by Robinson (3) is acknowledged as being '*[k]ey to the platform's success*' as '*an accessible resource shaped by collaborative storytelling*' (b). Other volunteers worked with Robinson's colleagues from UoN Horizon to develop and test the user interface of this new site. The Theatre describes Robinson's '*research on theatre performance history, her experience of running heritage projects, her expertise in "citizen scholarship", and her ability to put us into conversation with groups with digital skills*' as being '*core*' to the development of the heritage project and in turn the Theatre's ability to manage and preserve its heritage collections (b).

Robinson's model (3) has directly informed the Theatre's '*strategic plans to restructure the venue and improve the sustainability of [its] heritage practices*' (b). Robinson is academic partner on the Theatre's successful follow-on Heritage Fund bid (Feb 2020 – present) (F4), which has enabled '*a brand new post of TRCH Heritage Coordinator*', with responsibility for leading on, developing and delivering all aspects of the venue's heritage work, and playing a key role in embedding heritage and archival work across the organisation (e, p. 12) (appointment delayed due to Covid-19). Other decisions enabled by this successful bid include transforming the current archive room into a fully functional '*heritage workspace*', with the archive moving to UoN Manuscripts and Special Collections (e, p. 15), and delivering on focused ambitions to engage more diverse audiences with its heritage, including children, young people under 25 and minority groups in Nottingham (e, pp. 5, 14-16; b). According to the Theatre, these are '*exciting opportunities that have come directly out of embedding Professor Robinson's model of Citizen Scholarship at the Theatre*' (b).

ii) Changing cultural engagement strategies and embedding sustainable practices across the city and region

The Theatre Royal project has directly influenced the development of Nottingham City Council's Heritage Strategy 2015-30, providing a pathway for achieving their aims to '*[b]roaden [...] understanding of the city's historic environment*' (f1, p. 19) through generating '*[h]ighly accessible information about the city's heritage, available in both traditional and technologically pioneering ways*' (f2, p. 3). In July 2018 Robinson became a strategic partner on the Council's successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid to support development of their Heritage Partnership project. The Council acknowledge that they '*lacked a digital strategy for promoting public participation in heritage*' prior to their collaboration with Robinson, and that Robinson's research '*helped shape our digital strategy for delivering the Partnership*' while the "*“storytelling” methodology (Robinson 2019: 133) used in the Theatre Royal digital archive has particularly inspired our strategic thinking on driving participation*' (g). Robinson leads on the 'Digital Aspirations' strand of the Partnership, embedding the use of technology to better engage and connect Nottingham's diverse communities (subject to Covid-19 delays) (g).

Robinson's AHRC-funded 'Citizen Scholarship in Nottingham' project (F3) built on the HLF-supported 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' project (F2) (3) to develop a sustainable model of archive development and volunteer engagement, with support from Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature. Following regional framework 'Citizen Scholarship' workshops, Robinson began trial projects at Bromley House Library and Southwell Workhouse (both paused due to Covid-19; evidence from Southwell Workhouse unobtainable due to staff furlough). According to Bromley House, '*Professor Robinson's Citizen Scholarship model has enabled us to evaluate our current volunteer practice and has transformed our understanding of how to manage our volunteers and produce relevant and engaging research content*' (i). The Library's staff and volunteers have also benefited from '*valuable digital skills and knowledge*' gained through workshops delivered by Robinson and UoN Horizon colleagues (Jun and Nov 2019), and digital technologies are now being used to bring the Library's heritage '*to wider audiences*': '*Users can now visit our website and take a 3D tour of the Library's attics prior to renovation, thereby gaining access to a part of our history that would otherwise have been lost forever*' (i). As Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature comments, '*the model has provided an important shared learning opportunity across our city's cultural organisations and has empowered them to design engagement activities to diversify their audiences and evaluate their impact. The research has led directly to better preservation, better presentation and increased capacity for management and utilisation of cultural and literary heritage in Nottingham at large*' (h).

While the AHRC Citizen Scholarship project (F3) targeted Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, Robinson also shared the model in the wider East Midlands, after a request from Derby Theatre to help develop a community-driven archive (j2). She co-delivered two workshops (Jan and Apr 2019) with the Theatre Royal, helping Derby Theatre to embed 'Citizen Scholarship' as '*a key mechanism [...] for community participation and knowledge exchange*' (j1). Derby Theatre emphasises that Robinson's 'storytelling' methodology is '*a key part of the theatre's strategy for increasing and diversifying community engagement*' as it enables people to take '*ownership of [...] their city's cultural heritage*' (j1). Robinson's model now underpins one of Derby Theatre's strategic objectives: '*To support a sustainable and accessible theatre archive through a co-curated, “citizen scholar” approach*', sustaining their mission to '*provide increased opportunities for currently underrepresented communities*' (j1).

A 'Citizen Scholarship' website (citizenscholar.org.uk), with exemplar case studies, guidance on pilot projects, and advice on tools and resources, is available to support organisations.

iii) Empowering volunteers and their communities by i) enhancing volunteer skills, knowledge and wellbeing and ii) increasing audience engagement and public understanding of cultural history

Nottingham City Council note that Robinson's '*story-based approach offers us a practical way of bringing the city together and enabling people – members of the public and local communities, not just organisations or institutions – to take ownership of the city's heritage by connecting their own personal stories to wider stories in the city and region*' (g). Success in empowering citizens (3) is evidenced in the experiences of the original Theatre Royal project volunteers. The majority selected had little or no heritage experience, and therefore benefited from gaining new skills and

knowledge. As the Theatre Royal notes, *'as trained citizen scholars, our volunteers have grown into confident, skilled, and knowledgeable researchers and archivists'* (b), and *'have also become Theatre Royal experts gaining detailed knowledge of past shows, performers and other essential facts'* (c, p. 4). The volunteers cite the transformational benefits of being competent citizen scholars actively curating the city's heritage: *'We have a value, a role'; 'the satisfaction when you complete something'; 'pride not only in your own achievement, but pride in the products, the achievement of it, the fact that we are contributing to something which is positive about the place that we live in'* (d, pp. 11-12). The community-based element of the project also had positive effects on the volunteers' mental and social wellbeing; as the Theatre notes, *'[t]hrough working in their various project teams, volunteer well-being has come to the fore, with strong friendships being formed and other social activities taking place, such as volunteer lunches and theatre trips'* (c, p. 5).

The project has also generated increased audience engagement with the Theatre's new story-based approach to heritage (3). The project's public engagement programme in 2017-18 was hugely popular, with 96% take-up for the heritage talks and approximately 520 visitors to the Heritage Open Day (c, p. 14). Since its launch on 23 October 2018, the digital archive has had 8,500 visitors from 76 countries worldwide, with over 60% of users interacting with the newly discoverable archive collections (b). The digital archive is now central to the Theatre Royal's social media strategy, providing *'fresh images and stories'* to *'expand our audiences and help build our social media followers'*; with posts generating *'phenomenal statistics'* of engagement (e.g. 1,130 interactions and 12,000 views for a single post) (b).

According to Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature, Robinson's model of 'Citizen Scholarship' (3) has *'increased the understanding and appreciation of literary cultural heritage among the public in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire and has led to the creation of new audiences, fostering curiosity and engagement. Robinson's work has led to widening the literary and cultural offer in the city of Nottingham and provides strategies for increasing the demographic inclusivity of that offer, including the age range and ethnicity of the participants'* (h). In Derbyshire, Derby Theatre have already used the *"co-creation" and "co-curation" elements* of the model as a basis for involving the community *'from the early planning stages of the archive project'* (j1), and Nottingham City Council sum up Robinson's model as *'ground-breaking in terms of developing citizen participation within heritage and culture'* (g).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- a) *Arts Funding: Statistics*. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP 7655, April 2016.
- b) Letter from Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall regarding changes to organisational culture, practice, capacity, and strategic decisions.
- c) *'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham: Its Stories, People & Heritage: February 2017 to April 2019: Final Evaluation Report'*, compiled by Theatre Royal, May 2019.
- d) *'Assessing the Cultural Value of Volunteering: Opportunities and Challenges'*, report compiled by Robinson with Theatre Royal, December 2018.
- e) Theatre Royal Heritage Fund bid 2019, for follow-on project: *'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham: Heritage Co-ordinator & Enhanced Engagement Programme'*.
- f) Nottingham Heritage Strategy 2015-30 documents: **f1)** *'A Future Heritage for the City'*; **f2)** *'List of Potential Heritage Projects'*.
- g) Letter from Nottingham City Council regarding influence on Heritage Strategy 2015-30 and new digital strategy for Heritage Partnership.
- h) Letter from Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature regarding changes to volunteer-led heritage engagement practices, and increased audience engagement with/public understanding of literary/cultural heritage across the city and region.
- i) Letter from Bromley House Library regarding changes to volunteer management and digital strategies for heritage preservation and audience engagement.
- j) Two letters from Derby Theatre regarding new approaches to volunteer management and community engagement: **j1)** Letter 1; **j2)** Letter 2.