National Literacy Trust

Change your story

Place-themed literacy

Using local assets to support literacy engagement

Edited by Kyle Turakhia and Christina Clark

What is place-themed literacy?

Kyle Turakhia with Vedika Puri, National Literacy Trust

Introduction

Take a moment to consider: what connects you to the place you call home?

Is it the people?

The distinctive buildings, parks, or social spaces?

Personal memories of your family's lives here – or knowledge of the wider local heritage?

Now I invite you to reflect on the literacy skills you have used to build such connections.

The speaking and listening skills needed to forge sustainable relationships with the people in your community.

The writing skills required to observe local spaces – and describe them with poetry and meaning.

The reading skills for discovering and remembering local history – and the life stories of the people around you.

We each have a 'sense' of place, a web of psychological connections to aspects of our local area. Underlying this feeling is a 'literacy' of place: a linguistic ability to connect to the world around you. This pamphlet explores how embedding place within literacy projects can strengthen engagement, drawing on local places, histories and languages to create meaningful connections.

The pamphlet is published as part of a longstanding partnership between the National Literacy Trust and University of Birmingham (UoB). It features essays by six UoB academics who have collaborated with the National Literacy Trust to deliver a literacy project in Birmingham, working with – and specifically aiming to engage – the local community.

Our shared Birmingham hub was founded in 2019 with the aim of raising literacy levels and changing life stories all over the city. It is one of more than 20 literacy hubs delivered by the National Literacy Trust, all of which are in vulnerable areas with particular literacy needs.

Birmingham is the only National Literacy Trust hub delivered in partnership with a university, and it is a collaboration that has enabled us to research and improve our place-based literacy practice. Through delivering a range of bespoke projects for Birmingham, such as those listed in this pamphlet, we have developed a shared vision of **place-themed** literacy work. While they have been designed for – and with – Birmingham's communities, we believe the principles of this approach are applicable across other local areas.

Place-themed literacy work calls for schools and community organisations to create literacy projects that celebrate either:

- Local people
- Local environment
- Local heritage

Through the essays published here, we hope to show how we have designed and delivered projects themed by these local assets and suggest how you might do the same.

Why place-themed, and why now?

Literacy-engagement work is vital. Our UK-wide literacy survey revealed that only 1 in 3 (32.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said in 2025 that they enjoyed reading in their free time (Clark et al., 2025), and only 1 in 4 (26.6%) said they enjoyed writing (Bonafede et al., 2025). Meanwhile, The Reading Agency (2024) reports that half of all adults in the UK don't read regularly, and over 1 in 10 (11%) find reading difficult. The projects detailed in this pamphlet can therefore be read as locally focused responses to a deepening national crisis.

The National Literacy Trust has been developing place-based solutions to low literacy for over 20 years through its hubs across the UK. Our 2022 literature review, which reflects extensively on place-based working in improving outcomes for children and families, as well as our own work, made 12 recommendations for place-based work, including the need to focus on 'local assets' as our thematic focus on people, environment and heritage has attempted to do.

The report recommends:

"Factoring [local assets] into your planning alongside a consideration of an area's needs to avoid a deficit-led approach to working with your local community. Identifying existing networks that could be strengthened or more closely aligned behind a shared goal is important in this."

(National Literacy Trust, 2022, p.35).

Our hub projects draw heavily on this advice, using Birmingham's remarkable assets as tools to build and promote literacy work. This style of delivery is positively energising and, it is increasingly clear, impactful. In the last two years, we have evaluated 12 of our place-themed projects and found notable effects on participants' sense of connection to place, as well as their enjoyment of reading.

Insight collected from 298 participants, as analysed by our evaluation manager, Vedika Puri, is summarised below.

Sense of connection to place

Our place-themed projects deepened participants' connection to Birmingham and its cultural heritage:

- 3 in 4 (73.7%) felt more connected to the history and culture of Birmingham.
- 4 in 5 (78.7%) also felt that the project connected them to cultures from around the world.

The events were hugely successful in promoting social linkages, an important facet of community:

- Over 3 in 5 (63.7%) agreed that the events connected them to people they already knew in the local area.
- 3 in 5 (58.7%) agreed that the events also connected them to people they didn't know in the local area.

Lastly, the events also succeeded in promoting exploration and improving perceptions of the local area:

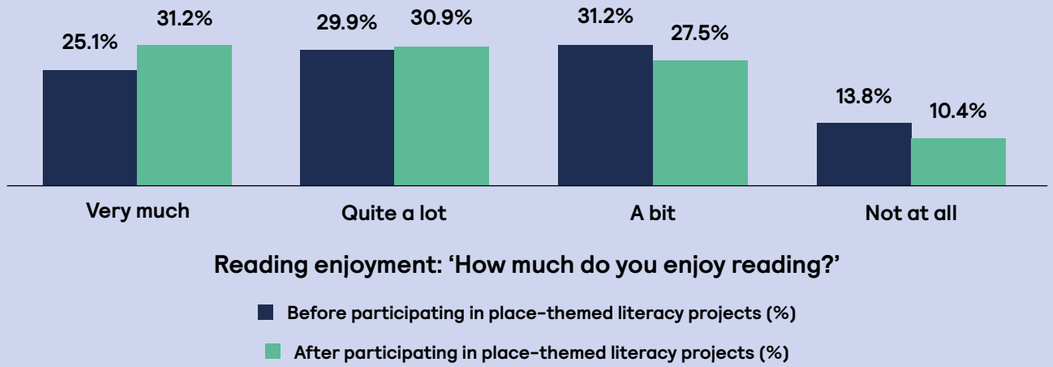
- 2 in 3 (65.4%) felt the project represented their heritage and identity.
- 2 in 3 (65.8%) were encouraged by the project delivery to visit places in their local area.
- 7 in 10 (68.7%) agreed that the project helped them to view their local area in a more positive way.

Reading enjoyment

Post-programme surveys also invited participants (n = 298) to reflect on their reading attitudes and behaviours before and after taking part in our place-themed projects. Notably, our projects illustrated that a place-themed approach can be used to engage participants with reading.

Insights collected indicated a notable increase in reading enjoyment. While 55% of participants told us that they enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot before taking part, this increased to 62.1% after taking part (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Participants' reading enjoyment before and after the place-themed project.



Conclusion

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my role as hub manager in Birmingham is the opportunity to connect with local people and local organisations. Packing my beaten-up car full of books and resources, I regularly visit community centres, youth clubs, sports teams, faith buildings, schools and learning centres: any place in which people gather and communicate.

Though I have done the job for a number of years, I remain consistently inspired by the exuberance and commitment of the teachers and practitioners delivering in these settings, and the profundity of their knowledge of their area and community. By theming literacy work by place, we can celebrate and benefit from this local energy, enhancing community pride alongside literacy skills.

I am so grateful to the academics at the University of Birmingham – the writers of this pamphlet – for developing our understanding of place-themed literacy work by delivering their diverse, innovative, carefully designed and community-focused projects. Our collaborative hub has now been operating for six years, and I hope we can continue to work together and attract more academic collaborators over many years to come.

For teachers and community workers reading this pamphlet, both within and outside Birmingham, I hope that you find useful principles for using a place-themed approach in your own setting. What's special about the people, places and heritage near you? May the answers to these questions inspire your own literacy work.

References

Bonafede, F; Clark, C; Picton, I; Cole, A; and Young, R. (2025) *Children and young people's writing in 2025*. London: National Literacy Trust. Available at: https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-writing-in-2025/ (Accessed 18/08/2025).

Clark, C; Picton, I; and Cole, A. (2025) *Children and young people's reading in 2025*. London: National Literacy Trust. Available at: https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2025/ (Accessed 18/08/2025)

National Literacy Trust. (2022) *The Effectiveness of place-based programmes and campaigns in improving outcomes for children: A literature review*. London: National Literacy Trust. Available at: https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/effectiveness-place-based-programmes-and-campaigns-improving-outcomes-children/ (Accessed 18/08/2025).

The Reading Agency. (2024) *The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Report*. London: The Reading Agency. Available at: https://readingagency.org.uk/adult-reading-research-report-2024/ (Accessed 18/08/2025).

Digest of Contents

Dr Emily Wingfield, University of Birmingham

As academic lead for the University of Birmingham (UoB) partnership with the National Literacy Trust, it's a pleasure and privilege to round off this introduction with a few additional reflections, and an overview of my colleagues' work.

The questions Kyle posed at the start of his introduction prompt me to ask two more, namely:

What in your reading has evoked the strongest sense of place?

and

Do you associate certain texts with certain places?

I certainly do. The biggest - and most unfortunate - challenge I face as a Professor of English Literature is my inability to remember pretty much everything about anything I've ever read (!), but I can recall much more readily when, where, and alongside whom I read them. To take just my younger years: Enid Blyton curled up by the window of our dining room in an old brown armchair, or snuggled up alongside my grandma on much-loved sleepovers in her low-ceilinged cottage; the whole *Anne of Green Gables* series and *His Dark Materials* trilogy in bed, or on the floor next to the radiator, in my own tween-age bedroom; Melvin Burgess's *Junk* on a family holiday to Newquay; *Bleak House* on a beach in Brittany; and *Oliver Twist* holidaying with a friend in Majorca as I diligently and desperately sought to get through my pre-university reading list.

Texts evoking a really strong sense of place for me include many of those above, as well as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Secret Garden*, Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (aptly beginning 'Well, this is the place'), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, anything by Anne Tyler or Mary Lawson, and – I'm bound to say as a specialist in medieval literature – the magnificent *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

I recently attended a talk by the renowned biographer, Jenny Uglow, about the 18th-century parson-naturalist, Gilbert White, and I was particularly struck by one of her opening statements: 'we write life in place and places in our lives'. It's fair to say that we also read books in specific places and spaces (sofas, beds, sun-loungers, coffee shops, libraries, trains...), and both read – in the sense of look and interpret – and tell stories about the places in our lives.

The following short essays describe six community-facing academic projects run in partnership with the National Literacy Trust's Birmingham hub, and each illustrates that close relationship between literature, locale and life.

Three projects are themed by local people. Ruth Gilligan (page 12) reflects on her embedding within the hub and wider charity of Story Exchanges, a methodology pioneered by the organisation Narrative 4, which brings people together, either from within a setting or from different communities. Working in pairs, individuals share significant stories from their lives and retell their partner's story in the first person, as if it were their own. The process of capturing the life of oneself and others 'pivots our attention on the local and the personal' and fosters a crucial sense of empathy. Bohdan Piasecki (page 18) describes his involvement in the hub's 2025 Home Words project, which invited local people to submit their most cherished words. These words were then turned into poems that celebrated our city's rich multilingual diversity. Bohdan's poem offers a quite literal bird's-eye view from one spot in Birmingham's city centre, but zooms out to demonstrate how those speaking foreign tongues nevertheless share a common language and experience. That said, we know that many young people struggle to find their lives and experiences reflected in the pages of what they read, often leading to a decline in engagement with – and enthusiasm for – literature (Picton and Clark, 2022). Amy Burge and Zeb Arif (page 26) tell of a project that successfully fostered reading for pleasure by introducing texts into a local classroom that were more reflective of the lives and experiences of the children reading them.

If the Home Words project revealed the extent to which words 'carry memory', Jimmy Packham's Haunted Birmingham project (page 34), which focused precisely on the local lived environment, revealed how ghost stories similarly function as a 'repository of regional knowledge and cultures'. Local writers – young and adult – imagined nightmarish visions of local heritage sites, schools, parks, restaurants and more, proving how writing has the power to connect us to the city and to each other.

Such local heritage is key to the two final projects. Karen Harvey and Emma Marshall (page 44) reflect on the success of introducing school children of all ages to a rich treasure trove of 18th-century local correspondence: letters that act as vessels for memory and emotion. Once again, empathy and engagement blossomed as children 'imagined being in the olden days', and the project fostered moving reflections on how we use reading and writing to communicate and build relationships with family and friends. The building of relationships and empathy is key, too, to Kate Rumbold's Shakespeare and Me programme (page 50), which invited adult learners in different settings across Birmingham to use quotations from Shakespeare as springboards to discuss their own life experiences. In addition to deepening English skills and fostering connections within communities, the sessions have allowed individuals to share powerful stories of challenging experiences, in many cases for the first time.

The University of Birmingham was founded on the principle of civic engagement and remains committed to supporting all local communities. Our partnership with the National Literacy Trust plays a crucial part in this endeavour and, as it continues, we look forward to working closely with local young people, businesses and cultural organisations on a series of engaging activities to spread awareness of the importance of storytelling and literacy at every stage of life. I'm sure that you will be as inspired as I am by the essays that follow, and, if you'd like to get involved with our work, we'd be delighted to hear from you. Please get in touch by emailing us at **birmingham@literacytrust.org.uk.**

Projects themed by local people

Bohdan Piasecki reads his multilingual poem as part of the 'Home Words' project. (Birmingham Rep, 21 March 2025)

Story Exchange: A ‘Place-Themed’ Literacy Intervention

Professor Ruth Gilligan, University of Birmingham

I believe, first and foremost, in the power of stories.

I published my debut novel at the age of 18, a coming-of-age story set in Dublin, born in part out of my frustration at the dearth of novels and stories that seemed to accurately depict the lives and emotions of Irish teenagers – that is, the lives and emotions of my peers and me. Praised for its authenticity, the novel topped the bestsellers’ list, and I went on to write two more books based almost entirely on personal experience.

Over time, however, I started to discover how stories can also allow us to step outside of our own experience, offering insights into communities and cultures and histories we otherwise wouldn’t know. So I began writing novels that required years of research, travelling to new places and rummaging through dusty archives, interviewing interesting individuals, and then finding ways to – carefully, ethically – translate it all into a work of fiction so that other people could encounter these lives, these stories, these other ways of being.

So much of this, I realised, had to do with empathy – that process of stepping into somebody else’s shoes and seeing the world through their eyes. As the Irish author Colum McCann puts it:

“Don’t write about what you know, but towards what you want to know… The only true way to expand your world is to think about others… There is one simple word for this: empathy.” (McCann, 2023).

As well as his exceptional novels, McCann’s commitment to the power of empathy led to him founding, in 2012, the global storytelling charity Narrative 4. Bringing together diverse groups of young people from around the world to engage in something called the ‘story exchange’, Narrative 4 has now reached hundreds of thousands of individuals in 35 different countries across the globe (Narrative 4, 2025 [1]).

The story exchange is a deceptively simple process; in essence it involves bringing together two groups – maybe from different schools or different faiths or different parts of the same city. Everyone gets divided into pairs, whereupon they share with their partner a story from their life – something that means something to them; something that somehow defines them – before the whole group comes back together and each person is invited to tell their partner’s story, *in the first person*, imagining it happened to them, figuratively stepping, for a moment, into their shoes.

Hearing this, it sounds kind of cool; seeing it in action is a different thing altogether. The first story exchange I was part of took place in 2014 between a girls’ Catholic school and a girls’ Protestant school in Belfast. To witness the care those young women took with each other’s stories – and the difference between the way they interacted with one another at the start of the day as compared with the end of the day – was nothing short of remarkable, and convinced me just how special, just how powerful this methodology could be.

In 2019, then, when the University of Birmingham – where I work as a Professor of Creative Writing – announced it was partnering with the National Literacy Trust to launch a regional literacy hub, I realised this was a perfect chance to bring the story exchange to the West Midlands. What's more – and most pertinent to this pamphlet's focus on 'place-themed literacy' – here was a prime opportunity to draw on local people and communities to improve speaking and listening skills, and to inspire a real love of stories and an appreciation of their power. Where literature can seem abstract and distant to some, the story exchange pivots our attention to the local and personal, revealing how real-life stories are equally valuable and can in fact be the very thing that defines a community, a neighbourhood, a place.

Our first story exchange took place in early 2020, working with two very different Birmingham schools – namely Aston University Engineering Academy (a co-ed technical sixth form college) and Nishkam High School (which takes a 'virtues-led' approach to education). I ran preparatory sessions with each of the cohorts (10 students each), introducing them to the story exchange, inviting discussions around empathy and storytelling, and probing the students' expectations and perceptions of the other school. On 11 March, we all came together at the Edgbaston Cricket Ground for the story exchange itself. The students began the day full of anxiety – about the process itself, as well as about the growing rumours concerning a certain virus... They proceeded to share some hugely powerful stories about themselves and their families, really bonding as a group and breaking down all those anxieties and pre-conceptions to find common ground. However, I was unable to follow-up with the reflective sessions in the subsequent weeks as, by then, the country – indeed, the entire world – was on lockdown.

We retreated into ourselves. We didn't step anywhere in our own shoes, let alone in somebody else's.

It wasn't until 2022, then, that the National Literacy Trust and I were able to resume our story exchange adventures in Birmingham. This time instead of schools, we decided to start by focusing on different community groups as part of a wider programme of work building up to the Commonwealth Games. We collaborated with a range of partners from across the region including the Black British Book Festival, the Active Wellbeing Society,

Age Concern Birmingham, FOLIO Sutton Coldfield and the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council, running a series of exchanges wherein the prompts were all themed around ideas of home and belonging. For example, we asked participants to 'share a story about what the Commonwealth means to you and your family' or to 'tell your partner a story about a time you felt proud (or ashamed) to be British'.

The responses to these prompts were as rich and varied as the participants themselves and often elicited strong emotions as people leaned into the shared space of memory and vulnerability that had been created by us, the facilitators (Narrative 4, 2025 [2]). As a whole, then, the process brought people together and generated some fascinating reflections on Birmingham as a super-diverse British city and the communities that make it what it is today. In the words of one feedback form:

"The first thing I noticed was the breadth of diversity within the room and this city. People hailed from all over the world, and yet there were many similarities across the stories we shared. I learned that the world isn't always a kind and safe place to be. I also learned that there is a great deal of adversity that people have overcome in their lives, often with the help of others, who begin as strangers and become friends and supporters. Indeed, in the short space of time we spent together, I felt very supported by everyone in the room and surrounded by care and respect."

The third stand-alone story exchange I ran in partnership with the National Literacy Trust was an intergenerational project to mark the 75th anniversary of Windrush. Bringing together the 'Ageing Well' group in Aston and a group of Year 10s from Aston Manor Academy, the exchange took place on 21 June 2023 and invited participants to share stories in response to the prompt: 'What does the word "Windrush" mean to you?' It was fascinating to discover how this one term held such different resonances – across the generations, yes, but even across the peer groups, depending on the individuals and their family's history. As ever, by the end of the exchange there was a sense of the innumerable complexities and nuances that make up every human life, but also a sense of common ground; of the universal struggles – and joys – we all face. Stories allow us to recognise these things, to put a shape on them we can understand and share and, I have little doubt, remember for a very long time.

To conclude, I want to focus more directly on the impact of the story exchange as a people and place-themed project, and suggest ways in which teachers and community leaders themselves might facilitate similar projects.

Each of the story exchanges described above convinced me of the potential of the approach to serve as a community-building methodology, empowering participants to explore their own life stories and the stories of the people around them. Our evidence of this, and our offering

to communities, however, was rather situational and anecdotal; so, in 2025, I began working with Kyle from the National Literacy Trust to develop a more scaled-up offering – one that was more achievable and consistent for schools and community partners.

Kyle helped devise a simple format whereby schools would have to commit to either just an 'internal' exchange – i.e. amongst a single class or group of peers – or an 'internal' exchange followed by an 'external' exchange with another year group or class. Of course, what this roll-out also required was a greater number of story exchange facilitators beyond just Kyle and me. Fortunately, Narrative 4 offer a brilliant online facilitator training that everyone can access (Narrative 4, 2025, [2]). Kyle and I also ran an online story exchange for the participating teachers and hub managers to introduce them to the concept and illustrate its power, as well as Q&A sessions to talk through any concerns or complications.

Across 2024/25, then, the story exchange was rolled out to 10 schools across the country. To strengthen the emphasis on 'place-themed work', the story prompts for these exchanges were all linked to the local area or ideas of home and belonging, such as 'a time you felt proud to be from this town' or 'a time you felt a strong sense of community'. Usefully, this time the National Literacy Trust evaluated the exchanges involving 54 participants so that we could collect some actual data and show, in black and white, the efficacy of this work. I was thus delighted – though unsurprised – to discover 73% of participants felt the story exchange had made them feel more confident talking about their own experiences; 88% said the story exchange helped them see things from a new point of view; and 90% said the story exchange taught them about other people's experiences.

In this age of teenage loneliness (e.g. Arsenault, 2022), where so much time is spent in our online echo chambers, this work – and these results – are no small thing. They reveal, once again, the power of stories and the undeniable value of bringing local communities and local people together. With this in mind, I wholeheartedly recommend all teachers and community leaders who are reading this essay to consider bringing the story exchange to their local context within a single classroom or group or maybe across markedly different groups. The possibilities are endless. As described above, the facilitator training is available via the Narrative 4 website, and the impact – and potential – for this work is vast.

Indeed, it has been an honour and a real highlight of my career to date to spread – through Narrative 4 and now the National Literacy Trust – this work for the last decade. It has allowed me to step away from my writing desk and remind myself that empathy can happen, maybe even more powerfully, when we stand face to face, look one another in the eye and say 'Hey, do you want hear a story?'

References

Arsenault, L. (2022). 'Loneliness in adolescence: how can we support young people?', *KCL Health Stories*, 8 February. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/loneliness-in-adolescence-how-can-we-support-young-people (Accessed 18/08/2025).

McCann, C. (2023). 'Don't Write What You Know', *Letters to Young Writers*. Available at: https://columnccann.com/dont-write-what-you-know/ (Accessed 18/08/2025).

Narrative 4. (2025 [1]). *One world, many stories – let's share both*. Available at: https://narrative4.com/our-reach/ (Accessed 18/08/2025).

Narrative 4. (2025 [2]). *Share stories, build bridges, change lives*. Available at: https://narrative4.com/story-exchange/ (Accessed 18/08/2025).

Home Words

Dr Bohdan Piasecki,
University of Birmingham

Introduction

Birmingham's soundscape is multilingual. It is a city where greetings are heard in Polish, Punjabi and Patois; where terms of endearment are expressed in Somali and Urdu; and where 'home' is articulated in myriad ways in a vocabulary drawn from across the globe.

This linguistic diversity provided the foundation for the Home Words campaign, an initiative delivered by the University of Birmingham (UoB) and the National Literacy Trust in Birmingham between January and April 2025. The project's premise was to invite the people of Birmingham to share words that held special meaning for them from their home languages, family histories, personal passions and local dialects.

My role was to receive this collection of words and, alongside fellow poets, compose new creative works that would reflect the city back to itself. This essay documents that process, exploring how a collaborative place-themed approach to literacy can celebrate multiple cultural backgrounds and forge new connections between them.

Background research

My creative practice has long been informed by the intersection of language, place and identity. There is a strong connection between our languages and our emotional lives. The specific words we choose to use are rooted in the geographies of our lives. They carry the memory of a grandparent's kitchen, of a playground, or the shared shorthand of a community.

Multilingualism is an academic interest but it is also a component of my lived experience. I am Polish. I moved to the UK in 2006. I teach creative writing at the University of Birmingham, often to students who write and think in more than one language. Translation and translingual writing have long been important areas of my work, academic and creative. My children were born in Birmingham; I speak to them in Polish, they usually answer in English, and we combine the languages in the dynamic, fluid manner of multilingual families. I was keen to contribute to a project so closely aligned both with my personal life and my creative and professional practice.

The National Literacy Trust's campaign brief provided an impressively rich framework to transform this interest into writing. By collecting over 400 words from 75 different languages via its extensive network of schools and community partners, the charity was crowdsourcing a Brummie lexicon. My task was to honour the generosity of each submission and work as many as possible into a poem that could speak to a collective urban experience.

The project in practice

When I received the list of words, I was struck by the project's reach and the depth of participant engagement. Submissions included not just words, but definitions and use cases that were almost poems in themselves. One submission that has remained with me was the term "Sarkk Phul – سرخ پھول". The definition read: "Red Flower – I speak about the red flower all day to my daughter. My daughter is the red flower." The emotion in that simple statement was compelling. The list was full of humanity, of small glimpses into other people's lives. There were also many sonically rich words I could not fit into the final poem, such as squinny, paagul, pareshan, chobble and many others.

My creative process began with compiling a list of words that I found compelling, initially without looking for patterns. The submissions were so clearly rooted in lived experience that I soon decided the resulting poem would be grounded in the city itself and not – as I first thought – a more abstract piece about language.

I looked for a central unifying image for these disparate words. In the end I chose the seagull: a sea bird common in this landlocked city, a fitting metaphor for the generations of migrants who have made Birmingham their home. I placed this bird in the middle of town, in Victoria Square, and wrote a series of scenes based on my own observations of that space. The goal was to reflect Birmingham's familiar reality as a place full of people from everywhere, communicating in a chaotic and shifting mix of languages. I described 10 short scenes, each vignette a short prose poem, using as many words from the list as I could organically integrate.

A place-themed poem: 'Say'

The Home Words project was an exercise in place-themed literacy. My poem, entitled *Say*, aimed to demonstrate this directly by embedding these global words in the hyperlocal context of Victoria Square. The poem asks readers of *Say* to imagine each scene as it unfolds. Here are two scenes from the poem that illustrate this approach:

7.

Say a girl stands beneath the statue, arms crossed. A boy beside her nudges her shoulder. "Kya kar rahe ho, słońce moje?" he asks. She doesn't answer. "Teeko?" She nods. She has been plotting a route, and now she is off, up towards the fountain, taking the steps two at a time. The seagull's wings extend. "Tumi ze shundur," the boy whispers. The girl does not hear. The boy starts to run, too. Soon it is like the whole square is flying.

9.

Say a delivery cyclist stops near the statue, checking his phone. The seagull shifts. "Mane oong aave chhe," he says, to no-one in particular. He needs a rest. His bag feels full of armed concrete and potholed tarmac. He cannot get his left arm through the strap. He tries to find it, like a breakdancer who forgot his routine. A passerby stops to help him, ends up holding him like a bebelus, silly, close, they hold each other laughing, they lean into this awkward cutch. A tiny two-headed earthquake. "All right, me duck." "All right, mucka." The cyclist rides off. The seagull stays.

By juxtaposing a Polish term of endearment (*słońce moje*) with a Hindi-Urdu question (*Kya kar rahe ho?*) or a Gujarati complaint (*Mane oong aave chhe*) with a Welsh hug (*cutch*) and Brummie dialect, I tried to capture the fluid multilingual reality of a Birmingham afternoon. The survey suggests it worked: the project connected people to the heritage of the city – 73.2% of participants agreed with this statement in their responses.

Impact and celebration

The campaign culminated in a celebration event on March 21, 2025 that was attended by over 50 participants. There were a series of readings and chances for attendees to share their own words and poems. After the performances, several audience members approached me, some, admittedly, to offer feedback on pronunciation, others to confirm that they recognised their Birmingham in the poem. A Bangladeshi audience member remarked that they were impressed that so many languages made it into the poem and yet it remained easy to understand: a particularly gratifying piece of feedback.

A significant feature of the project was the commissioning of three poets to work from the same word list. My fellow poets were Ayan Aden (Birmingham Poet Laureate 2024-26) and Japmeh Kaur Gujral (Birmingham Young Poet Laureate 2024-26). We each produced very different pieces: Ayan wrote a rousing manifesto, while Japmeh created a piece focused on her personal multilingual experience. This variety was noted by the audience, with one person commenting it was “fascinating to hear the different ways the poets integrated the same concept”.

The life of the poems extended beyond the event. Filmed versions were distributed to the schools, community groups and individuals who had participated. To accompany these films, Kyle, the hub manager at the National Literacy Trust, developed resources that supported participants not only in reading and analysing the poems but also in writing their own work using the crowdsourced Brummie lexicon. The project came full circle: the community’s language, offered as source material, was transformed into a tool that encouraged further local reading and writing.

The project’s impact, measured by the National Literacy Trust’s survey, was considerable:

- 92.5% of respondents said the campaign made them feel more proud of the languages they speak.
- 87.5% felt the project represented their own identity and heritage.
- 76.9% reported that the poems made them feel more interested in poetry.

The act of hearing one’s own language celebrated in public art was evidently a powerful experience for many. As one participant shared: “The way the different words from different cultures intertwined... brought a smile to our faces when we heard the words read out loud within the poem.”

Home Words beyond Birmingham

While this project was rooted in the specific linguistic landscape of Birmingham, using local language and stories to create unmistakably Brummie poems, the underlying approach is highly adaptable. A key part of its success was that we began with no preconceptions about the languages or types of words people would share, allowing the lexicon to emerge organically from the community itself. This open approach means the Home Words model could be applied elsewhere. By tapping into a community’s specific vocabulary and the personal connotations of their words, educators and artists in other places could create their own responses to local languages and foster local literacy.

Conclusion

The Home Words campaign was a demonstration of an effective model for place-themed literacy engagement and cultural celebration. It showed that providing a creative framework for a community to share its own stories can help foster pride, connection and a shared identity.

The project transformed over 400 words from 75 languages into a collective statement about Birmingham: traditionally a city of industry but also, as multiple participants declared, a “city of poets”. It left behind a series of poems but, perhaps more importantly, a series of experiences validating every language, dialect and story that contributes to the soundscape of our home.

SAY

By Bohdan Piasecki

1.
Say you are in Victoria Square, watching the Iron Man. A seagull lands on him and preens. The sun flashes on tram windows. Reflections dance on the rust. The city is a held breath, a forming word. The seagull blinks.

2.
Say a boy runs through the square, arms like seagull wings. “Ayyo!” he shouts, tripping over his shoelace. The seagull watches from the Iron Man’s head. Say the boy gets up unscathed. “Yalla!” the boy’s mother calls, light with relief. Another tram screeches past. The seagull shifts its weight. “Waan ku xiisay,” the mother says to herself. She pulls the boy close for a hug.

3.
Say a football bounces past the Iron Man’s feet. “Jamani!” someone yells. A child races past. The ball rolls down Hill Street. The seagull lifts one deliberate foot and sets it down again. A man in an angry tracksuit can’t stop himself from laughing, “Puh-teh-Kam.” “Acha,” the child shrugs. The seagull tilts its head toward the statue’s face. A tram clangs by. None of them flinch.

4.
Say a woman sits on the edge of the fountain, peeling an orange. A little girl feeds crumbs to the pigeons. “You’re a mess, chinchara,” the woman says, brushing the girl’s hair from her face. The seagull glides down from the Iron Man. The girl’s eyes widen. “Koosi!” she attempts, throwing a piece of orange peel. The seagull doesn’t react. “Khushi,” the woman murmurs, smiling.

5.
Say a teenager leans against the statue, tickling his phone. The seagull looms above. “We’re liming at mine tonight,” his friend says. He hands over a can of pop. The teenager shrugs, does not meet his friend’s eye. “Habnafsak awala, yeah?” the friend reminds him. “Yeah.” The fountain flows. A tram roars past. When it’s gone so are the boys. The seagull stretches its neck and closes its eyes. It settles in.

6.
Say two old men sit on a bench, talking in low voices. The seagull flaps its wings, makes a fuss, pretends it’s time to go. “Traabit,” the one in a hat says with a smile. The bird cocks its head. “Ajeeb,” the other man says, shaking his head to say sorry. The seagull fluffs its feathers and looks toward the tramlines. Like it was ever really going to leave! Its gaze is steady, fixed on the tracks.

7.
Say a girl stands beneath the statue, arms crossed. A boy beside her nudges her shoulder. “Kya kar rahe ho, słońce moje?” he asks. She doesn’t answer. “Teeko?” She nods. She has been plotting a route, and now she is off, up towards the fountain, taking the steps two at a time. The seagull’s wings extend. “Tumi ze shundur,” the boy whispers. The girl does not hear. The boy starts to run, too. Soon it is like the whole square is flying.

8.
Say a busker strums a guitar. “Here comes the sun,” he sings. You almost believe him. The seagull watches. “Mehr, look,” someone whispers from the crowd. A woman hums along. “Is this what apapacho feels like?” her child asks, tugging at her sleeve. The seagull ruffles its feathers, lifts its beak toward the song. “Abshir,” the woman says, her voice warm sandstone.

9.
Say a delivery cyclist stops near the statue, checking his phone. The seagull shifts. “Mane oong aave chhe,” he says, to no-one in particular. He needs a rest. His bag carries armed concrete and potholed tarmac. He can’t get his left arm through the strap. He tries to find it, like a breakdancer who forgot his routine. A passerby stops to help him, ends up holding him like a bebelus, silly, close, they hold each other laughing, they lean into this awkward cutch. A tiny two-headed earthquake. “All right, me duck.” “All right, mucka.” The cyclist rides off. The seagull stays.

10.
The city breathes out. Light flickers across the Iron Man. A tram slows. The seagull lifts its head. Opens its beak. A sound rises — not one voice, but many. The city hums but the gull’s voice soars above it all. Whatever it means, it sounds like home.

Relatable Reads: Tackling Literacy Engagement in Birmingham

Dr Amy Burge, University of Birmingham, with Zeb Arif, Washwood Heath Academy

Since 2024, we (a local Birmingham school, Washwood Heath Academy, and the University of Birmingham) have been working together to consider how genre fiction by Muslim women authors might affect young readers' literacy and reading habits. The school's diverse student body includes a significant number of Muslim students, presenting an opportunity to explore how culturally relevant texts might enhance engagement and literacy. We are interested in whether student literacy can be increased by giving students more diverse reading material, specifically genre fiction texts by Muslim women, and if reading genre fiction by Muslim women authors can increase student engagement with literature and re-engage students with reading for pleasure.

A place-themed approach to literacy

The project took a hyper-local approach by focusing on one school. This enabled us to identify the needs of the school's pupils, and to tailor our activities to the pre-existing structures and practices in place. We feel that this has been beneficial in terms of impact on students at Washwood, and it has allowed us to test out ideas and activities before expanding those that are successful.

Birmingham is a super-diverse city, with residents from minority ethnic backgrounds representing more than half of its population. It is very likely that students will encounter stories and individuals in their daily lives that reflect the city's diversity. But in literary terms, the texts students encounter – especially in school classrooms – tend to be less diverse: the Year 9 students we worked with on the 'Love to Read' programme reported that they had studied *An Inspector Calls*, *Macbeth* and *A Christmas Carol* that year. By introducing students to texts that reflect the diversity of their city, a stronger connection is forged between their reading and their lives.

In line with the principles of this pamphlet, our project was, at its core, place-themed: asking whether and how literature that represents local people can promote literacy engagement. While our focus was on popular and genre fiction written by Muslim women, the project has resonance more broadly with conversations about representation of all local demographics in literacy work. Our hope is that readers across the UK might be interested in this project, or in trialling a similar activity.

Why Muslim women's fiction?

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of popular and genre fiction works being published in English by Muslim women authors. From the detective novels of Ausma Zehanat Khan to G. Willow Wilson's fantasy fiction, and from Ayisha Malik's romantic fiction to graphic novels by Marjane Satrapi, Muslim women authors have broken free from the model of the 'misery memoir' (Morey, 2018) and 'alterity industry' (Whitlock, 2006) to offer more holistic representations of Muslim culture and identity (Burge, 2024; Burge and Folie, 2021). Muslim women authors are embracing popular fiction forms and genres and being published and read in ever greater numbers.

At the same time, across the UK, schools are reporting a decline in student engagement with (and enthusiasm for) English literature studies. UK students studying A-Level English dropped by 35% from 2012 to 2023 and only 32.7% of 8 to 18-year-olds enjoyed reading in 2024 (Clark, Picton, et al., 2025). This is more pronounced in Birmingham, where 50% of wards rank in the top 10% of literacy need in England (National Literacy Trust and Experian, 2017). Hodge Hill constituency, where Washwood Heath Academy is located, ranks fifth in terms of greatest literacy need in Birmingham and 38th (out of 533 constituencies) nationally. Hodge Hill also has a higher-than-average Muslim population: 37.5% compared with a UK national average of 6.5%. In the ward in which the school is located, 74.9% of residents identify as Muslim (Zayed, 2024).

Research has shown that students are more likely to engage with books reflecting their own experiences and identities (Bishop, 1990). But few texts on the English curriculum represent diverse identities, particularly Muslim identities. These texts often explore themes and experiences such as school life, bullying, racism, Islamophobia, diaspora and migration, making them potentially relatable for younger readers. By introducing students to texts that represent Muslim identity in a genre that they find more familiar or accessible (e.g. romance, Young Adult, graphic novels, comics), this project aimed to re-engage students with reading for pleasure and explore how connected they feel to the literature they read in and outside the classroom.

Project delivery

In July 2024, this collaboration developed into a pilot scheme of work at Washwood Heath Academy. Co-designed by Dr Amy Burge and English teacher Zeb Arif, with support from the National Literacy Trust, the project involved 50 Year 8 students. The chosen text was Ayaan Mohamud's *You Think You Know Me* (2023), which was selected for its resonance with Amy's research into Muslim women's genre fiction and its potential to provide students with a more diverse and relatable reading experience.

Over a three-week period, pupils read extracts from the book, exploring concepts and ideas like diaspora, code-switching, Islamophobia and bullying. The pilot demonstrated positive results: students appreciated the diversity and relatability of the text, with 60% expressing interest in reading similar books in the future. When asked how this book differed from the 'normal' reading that students undertake, they commented that the text "related to us and our backgrounds" and was "about race and religion". This suggests students were alert to the lack of diversity in the texts they currently read as part of the curriculum.

In 2025, the English Department expanded the pilot scheme of work into a full half-term (six weeks) and 101 pupils. The new scheme expanded the themes of the pilot, adding additional topics relating to identity and the integration of Muslim minorities. The expanded scheme of work was successful overall. Zeb Arif said:

"Our greatest success was launching this scheme of work alongside a new range of books in the school library from diverse authors, with a particular focus on books authored by Muslim women. Our school librarian has noted there has been a marked increase in the number of books by Muslim women authors being checked out by Year 8 students, which is directly related to their classroom study of *You Think You Know Me*. During classroom study, the students themselves have commented how different it feels to read a book with a protagonist from a similar background to them. Students have also appreciated learning about cultures new to them: the Somali language was introduced to students through this text, a facet greatly appreciated by students, the majority of whom are not from a Somali background. Many students have begun to comprehend that literature is a vehicle through which they can understand wider social issues such as Islamophobia, and this has been a powerful realisation for some of them."

From 2026 onwards, *You Think You Know Me* will be incorporated into the curriculum for Year 8, and a scheme of work for SEND students is also being developed, ensuring the widest range of students are able to engage with the text and its themes.

Alongside this scheme of work, Amy Burge collaborated with Washwood Heath's librarian and literacy team (Roger Morris, Librarian, and Laura Parker, Head of Literacy) to incorporate a graphic novel written by a Muslim author – *Huda F Are You?* by Huda Fahmy (2021) – into the school's 'Love to Read' initiative. This initiative is a key strand in Washwood Heath's aim to create a culture of reading for pleasure. Students are provided with books and read with their form tutor for 20 minutes twice a week. As the story unfolds, the students and their tutor discuss the book.

We replicated this structure over two months (May to July 2025) with a group of the most reluctant readers in Year 9 and two researchers from the University of Birmingham. We had a group of roughly 20 readers, which we divided into single-gender groups at the suggestion of the teacher. Of these readers, almost half reported that they never read outside of school, with some of them finding reading "boring". We chose a graphic novel because the school librarian identified that comics and graphic novels were popular with Washwood Heath students.

Initial findings suggest that the intervention has had some positive impact. Readers of *Huda F Are You?* were engaged with the reading sessions, reporting weekly that they found the text to be "interesting" (a notable change from finding reading "boring"). The experience seemed to be one that students wanted to replicate: while 40% had not read a graphic novel or comic before reading *Huda F Are You?*, almost 70% said that they would (or might) read "a similar book again" after our reading sessions.

Relatability came up for readers. In our final survey data, one reader said, "This book was fantastic because it shared a story that everyone can relate to." Yet we found that it was less the book's representation of Muslim characters that was engaging for these students, and more the book's format – "there were good pictures"; "I loved the pictures on every page" – and tone: "it was funny". They also found reading about a younger protagonist who was dealing with similar problems to them – getting on with siblings, doing homework – to be "relatable". The school librarian remarked that *Huda F* "gave a lot of [pupils] an interest in reading, because I guess they can relate to it. It's about their own culture … [and] it's given me an idea of the type of books we could be getting into the library".

The lessons we have learned from these activities can productively be implemented elsewhere, whether that is integration into the classroom (as we did with *You Think You Know Me*), reading for pleasure provision, or in community settings or reading hubs.

- When choosing texts, consider the demographics of both your students and the local area in which they live; stories that connect with the everyday lives of your students are likely to be more impactful.
    - These won't map fully on to every student: *Huda F Are You?* has a female protagonist and many of our readers were boys. However, as our intervention showed, students find texts relatable for a range of reasons, including age, ethnicity, gender and nationality.
- Think also about the format of reading; we chose a graphic novel because the school librarian reported that these were very popular with school readers.
- Ask your readers what kind of books they like to read. If you are looking for books by Muslim authors, you can search by format and genre in the Muslim Women's Popular Fiction Database: https://mwpfdb.co.uk

References

Bishop, R. S. (1990) 'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors'. *Perspectives*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. Ix-xi.

Burge, A. *Muslim Women's Popular Fiction Database*. Available at: https://mwpfdb.co.uk. (Accessed 01/03/2024).

Burge, A. and Folie, S. (2021). 'Girls of Riyadh and Desperate in Dubai: Reading and Writing Romance in the Middle East'. *Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, edited by Ann Brooks, Routledge, pp. 323-33.

Clark, C., Picton, I. et al. (2025). *Children and Young People's Reading in 2025*. National Literacy Trust. Available at: https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Children_and_young_peoples_reading_in_2025_bqtGfls.pdf. (Accessed 27/08/2025).

Morey, P (2018). *Islamophobia and the Novel*. Columbia University Press.

National Literacy Trust and Experian (2017). *Identifying the Places with the Greatest Literacy Need*. National Literacy Trust. Available at: https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/all-party-parliamentary-group-literacy/literacy-score-mapping-literacy-need-across-england/. (Accessed 27/08/2025).

Whitlock, G. (2006). *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. University of Chicago Press, University of Chicago Press, Available at: https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3750610.html. (Accessed 27/08/2025).

Zayed, Y. (2024). *Constituency Data: Religion. Jul. 2024. commonslibrary.parliament.uk*. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/constituency-data-religion/. (Accessed 27/08/2025).

Projects themed by the local environment

Haunted Birmingham by Dr Jimmy Packham – p. 34

A young person reads their scary story aloud as part of the 'Haunted Birmingham' project. (Library of Birmingham, 14 December 2024)

Haunted Birmingham: a brief and ghostly history

Dr Jimmy Packham, University of Birmingham

Summer 2025 in Birmingham might reasonably be described as the summer of Black Sabbath – and, more to the point, of their much-loved singer, the Prince of Darkness, Ozzy Osbourne. The gothic-infused culture of heavy metal descended on, and was celebrated widely across, the city in anticipation of Osbourne's farewell concert, which was held at Villa Park in Aston on 5 July. Following Osbourne's sad and sudden death a few weeks later on 22 July, the city witnessed a further outpouring of grief over the loss of this beloved individual: Birmingham city centre, and Black Sabbath Bridge in particular, became something of a pilgrimage site for devotees of heavy metal wishing to pay their last respects to a person so instrumental in the development of the genre and its gothic aesthetics. But there was, of course, more than just sadness at work here. As these events in July demonstrated, amid the apparent gloominess and darkness of gothic and heavy metal cultures, there is a tremendous amount of joy and a profound feeling of community and sense of belonging. Osbourne's obituaries also often noted how closely the singer was associated with Birmingham despite having lived rather far from the city for much of his life.

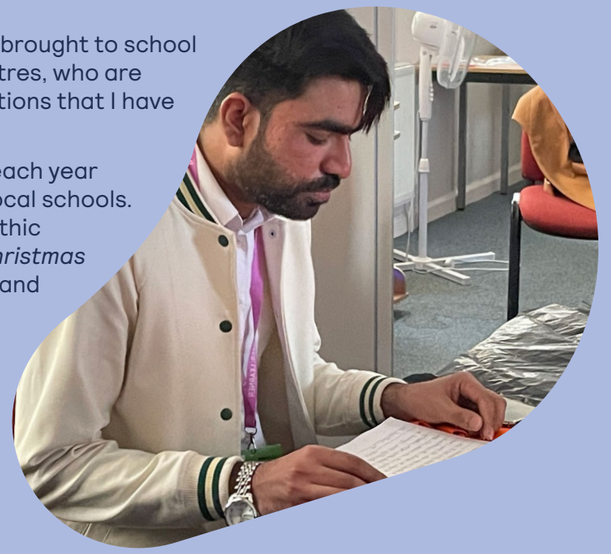
I begin with these reflections on Osbourne and Birmingham for several reasons. First, they go a little way towards showing how important a genre or a culture like the gothic is to the Midlands: indeed, if heavy metal was born, as it is often suggested, out of the Midlands' industrial heritage, then we can also trace a longer historical relationship between the Midlands and the gothic that underscores an abiding affinity in this region for ghosts and ghouls – a longstanding embracing of the dark heart of popular culture. We might look back, for instance, to Christmas 1853 when, to help raise funds for the Birmingham and Midlands Institute, Charles Dickens gave a public reading (the first of many) of *A Christmas Carol* (1843), a tale that remains a staple on secondary school English literature courses, and which surely ranks among the nation's most beloved ghost stories. The other reason I begin with Osbourne is to affirm how important locality and the local is to gothic and its related media, and how the regional variations of this mode can be read and analysed in such a way that enable us better to understand the history and culture of a specific area or community. Turning our attention towards literary material specifically, we might go so far as to say that gothic literature – especially in the form of the ghost story – is a kind of local history writing. And by treating it as such – as a source of history or repository of regional knowledge and cultures – we can appreciate the important place of ghosts and the ghostly within localised or national imaginaries. It is this understanding of the ghost story that provides the backdrop for much of the recent work that I and others (most notably Kyle Turakhia) have done for a project known as 'Haunted Birmingham' – extending occasionally to the 'Haunted Midlands' more broadly.

As an academic and writer, my original research specialism was in 19th-century US literature: in the work of authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Many of these writers have an obvious fascination with the gothic and the ghostly,

and with what it might mean to be (or to feel) haunted. And over the years the range of my research expanded to include British gothic literature from the 18th to the 21st century, with a specific interest in regional variations of the gothic and the ghost story (much of my work in this area is focused on coastal regions and the oceans). Having worked at the University of Birmingham for the best part of a decade, the city's rich gothic heritage was clear in one respect: in the wonderful gothic architecture that can be found throughout Birmingham. But what I was continuously struck by was how infrequently a major city like Birmingham – and the (West) Midlands more broadly – featured in regionally oriented literary and cultural histories of Britain. What does 'literary Birmingham' look like? More specifically, given my specialism in gothic writing, what does the literature of a haunted Birmingham and a haunted Midlands look like? These were the sorts of questions that shaped my initial research in the 'Haunted Birmingham' project: and alongside my professional interest in this material, there is also a clear personal interest in it, as my mum is from Birmingham and my daughter was born in the city (I find myself caught between Brummies, and it's perhaps telling that my interest in the project began not long after my daughter was born in 2020).

To date, the academic publications that have been generated by this research project include, most notably, a special issue of the *Midland History* journal, entitled 'Haunted Midlands', published in 2024. This was a collaborative effort with colleagues from across several different Midlands' universities, seeking to bring the Midlands more firmly into view within the field of gothic literary studies. (A real highlight of this issue is Kyle Turakhia's closing reflections on the National Literacy Trust workshops discussed in more detail below. Many of the articles are free to access online.) The issue does not only seek to illuminate the specific ghosts and other spectres haunting the literature of the Midlands, but it also aims to explore how attending to the Midlands in particular can help us rethink some of the ideas and theories that shape regional literary studies as a whole. While this publication is largely a traditional piece of academic work, the 'Haunted Birmingham' project has always been, first and foremost, a means of fostering a love of literature, literary study and storytelling, and for community engagement, especially via the National Literacy Trust, with whom the first 'Haunted Birmingham' workshops were devised in 2023.

The project comes most vividly alive when it is brought to school children, youth groups, and adult learning centres, who are invited to grapple with the same kinds of questions that I have been wrangling with for several years.



At the University of Birmingham, I spend time each year providing workshops and taster lectures for local schools. Often these schools are reading a piece of gothic literature with their pupils (as it happens, *A Christmas Carol* has been particularly prominent lately), and I am asked to speak about the wider context of the story and the gothic genre. One way I have found of sparking interest in this respect is less by reaching more *widely* in space and time, and more by approaching the topic in more localised ways. Again, the example of *A Christmas Carol* is instructive on this point: while the text addresses a wide range of issues of national concern, and its most obvious 'regional' setting is London, the tale's important place in Birmingham's literary history – and Birmingham's important place in the development of Dickens's career as a public storyteller – helps us to approach the text with local pupils in ways that might speak more readily to frames of reference with which they are already familiar.

The National Literacy Trust's 'Haunted Birmingham' workshops operate along a similar logic. Designed to be taken out into the community, these workshops would introduce the topic via the reading of a short story with a Birmingham or West Midlands setting: the tales of L.T.C. Rolt do well in this regard (if there were more time, the work of Rolt's sometime friends and collaborators, Robert Aickman and Elizabeth Jane Howard, would also be wonderful to explore in the workshops, as would the contemporary queer gothic of Joel Lane). The sessions would then invite attendees to develop their own ghost story rooted in an area with which they are particularly familiar or of which they are especially fond. As I suggested above, because the ghost story opens itself up so readily as a form of local history, as a way of measuring our knowledge of a place, these ghost-story-writing workshops are an invitation not only to develop literacy and critical-thinking skills via creative responses to an initial prompt, but to reflect on the ways we find ourselves tied to and imbricated in places (perhaps even haunted by them). The ghost story tells us about place: to read a ghost story sympathetically, we should ask '*Why does this ghost haunt this place?*'; further, we can think about how a ghost

is shaped by the place that it haunts and how, in turn, the place haunted is shaped by the ghost(s) we might find there. The ghost story is also a rather ubiquitous cultural form – and, certainly in the British ghost-story tradition, adheres to well-known tropes and conventions – thus making the tales a relatively straightforward prospect for hyper-local adaptation.

The response to these workshops has been remarkable. They ran in the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years, generating a total of 450 stories from participants. I provided a Hallowe'en lecture and launch for the latest iteration of the project on 16 October 2024 for 50 local teachers and community practitioners who joined us on the University of Birmingham campus after taking a canal trip from the city centre and hearing spooky tales of the canal *en route*. Moreover, 100 of our participants met at the Library of Birmingham on 14 December 2024 to read their stories aloud to an audience. The range of places, and variety of ghosts, given careful attention across these stories is tremendous, and it is to be hoped that those who have written a tale of terror for us have found these pieces as a means of bridging the gap between literature and the places they live, work and play. Admirable, too, has been the way in which our writers have brought their own cultural backgrounds to bear on the ghost stories: Birmingham has long been culturally diverse and these tales reflect that diversity. By so doing, they highlight the breadth of vocabularies and cultural and historical reference points informing the Midlands' ghost-story tradition. It has been a real privilege to have had a part to play in these 'Haunted Birmingham' workshops and to speak with enthused teachers and community leaders about what the project might do for them.

The project is of course endlessly adaptable and can be made to fit any given region: teachers and community workers reading this piece, please do consider what a project asking for spooky stories written in your local settings might look like. However, the paucity of critical reflections on the rich and substantial literary tradition of Birmingham and the Midlands (especially as stories of Birmingham and the Midlands) means that these workshops have a particular poignancy and significance within their Birmingham context.

The motto of the City of Birmingham is 'Forward': the city is, as Black Sabbath might have it, always going through changes, and this may seem inimical to the production and long-habitation of ghosts, as the city looks always towards the future and not backwards into its richly haunted past. Yet as our workshop participants have continuously shown us, it is impossible in the end to turn away from the past, to banish our ghosts: these spectres are, as the 'Haunted Birmingham' stories show, essential and thriving members of our communities; they are vital markers and makers of place, just as the workshop participants are; and by embracing these localised ghosts, we encounter ways of telling and re-telling the stories of our homes and neighbourhoods, especially those that may otherwise remain invisible, unseen, spectral.

Notes and references

A range of 'Haunted Birmingham' resources can be accessed on the 'Haunted Birmingham' webpage, where you can also find a map hosting all the stories written to date, and indicating where they are set: https://literacytrust.org.uk/communities/birmingham/haunted-birmingham/. The map may also be accessed directly here: https://maphub.net/nltwebmaster/map-2.

If you have any questions for Jimmy, please do send an email to: j.packham@bham.ac.uk

Packham, J. (ed.) (2024). Midland History, 49(3). Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ymdh20/49/3?nav=tocList (Accessed 18/08/2025).

Projects themed by local heritage

Birmingham Adult Education Service learners visit Stratford-upon-Avon. (17 April 2024)

A Time for Letters: Reading, Writing and Talking with Historical Letters

Professor Karen Harvey, University of Birmingham, and Dr Emma Marshall, University of York

Handwritten letters are more than relics of the past: they capture voices, emotions and everyday experiences that still resonate today. 'A Time for Letters' is an educational project run by the University of Birmingham that uses 18th-century correspondence to spark literacy, creativity and reflection among children, young people and adult learners. This essay explains the project's aims and activities, showing how historical letters can enrich the curriculum, foster emotional literacy, and connect learners with local heritage and the lives of ordinary people in the past.

'A Time for Letters' was based on research for the project: 'Material Identities, Social Bodies: Embodiment in British Letters, c.1680–1820', which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust (Harvey et al., 2021–2025). This recovers thousands of unique and unpublished letters written by ordinary men, women and children. It uses them to explore the body, emotions and wellbeing, as well as the role that these topics played in communities of family, faith and kin. Some research from the project has been published with open access. In one article (Harvey and Fox, 2025), we discuss letters by older people and show that although ageing posed physical challenges, many older people enjoyed active and happy lives (not least by exchanging letters with young relatives). A second article (Harvey and Vine, 2024) shows that faith and religion were important aspects of the consolation and care that these letters provided to family and friends.

Health and the body were very common topics in historical letters between family and friends, allowing people to consolidate strong bonds between one another. Letters also provide an important record of a wide range of embodied experiences, including medical treatment and care within families, as well as details about many other aspects of everyday lives in this period. Parties, education, travel and holidays are all discussed frequently and in detail.

But letters did more than communicate information. They had a powerful impact on people's body and emotions; individuals longed for letters to be delivered and were thrilled to receive them. Conversely, they were anxious when letters took too long to arrive. Letters were essential for helping people feel connected to those from whom they were separated. In this context, letters provide a rich resource to explore how we might communicate and build relationships with friends and family, especially those who are physically distant from us. At the same time, because the letters are written in a particular form, they also create opportunities to develop skills in literacy. This is especially true for historical letters between children and adults, as parent-children correspondence often explicitly discusses the transmission and improvement of letter-writing skills. Even rarer are letters between children, which provide unique windows into the relationships children developed with one another.

Harnessing these rich materials, our outreach and impact project used letter-writing and letter-reading to catalyse literacy, conversation and reflection for children, young people and adult learners. We also worked in partnership with members of the public in local archives and

users of AgeUK. The project, 'A Time for Letters: Reading, Writing and Talking with Historical Letters', was funded by the Impact Acceleration Account from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Across the spring of 2025, we ran a total of 43 workshops involving around 800 participants: 16 of these were held in primary and secondary schools and involved around 480 children. Researchers from the University of Birmingham's Department of History co-designed these schools' workshops, which ranged in length from 50 to 90 minutes, with Kyle Turakhia from the National Literacy Trust. We invited expressions of interest from the National Literacy Trust and UoB schools' networks and then delivered 16 workshops for children aged 7–19 across both primary and secondary schools in Birmingham. The workshops took place in the context of either the English or history curriculum, although the content relating to communication, friendship and relationships would also be relevant for PSHE (personal social, health and economic education). Our aims included: developing skills in speaking, reading, handwriting, letter-writing and creative writing; the interpretation of historical materials and critical thinking; introducing new resources and place-themed content to teachers; enhancing pupils' understanding of local heritage and this period of history more broadly; and providing an opportunity to develop emotional literacy and character by thinking about interpersonal communication and relationships.

The workshops had a common structure. We began with ice-breaker questions ('Who here has ever written a letter? Who to?'; 'How do you usually communicate with your family and friends? How often?'). This was followed by five minutes of context from the workshop facilitator, which situated the workshop in a moment from history (18th-century Britain), as well as a discussion about literacy rates and the other resources required to write letters. The substantive content of each workshop was then tailored to the year group. For example, our workshop with primary students (aged 7–9) combined exercises in critically assessing a letter, reading an original manuscript letter and folding a photocopy of an original letter. This workshop used the letters to reflect on relationships between parents and children, to assess handwriting and to consider the relationship between vocabulary and emotions. It concluded with a creative-writing exercise in which the pupils were invited to write a response to a letter used in the workshop.

Using the place-themed principles described in this pamphlet, we focused on local letters to make our workshops relevant to the pupils and engage their connection to local heritage. In particular, we highlighted letters written by children and young people, such as one by a young girl describing blackberry picking, going for walks and the health of her doll; or letters from the schoolboy James Watt Junior to his famous father James Watt, inventor of the steam engine, describing how he was looking forward to the Christmas holidays and apologising for mistakes in his previous letter (figure 1). Our workshop with secondary students likewise focused on a young person's voice, using correspondence between James Watt Senior and his teenage daughter regarding her strained relationship with her stepmother; and a letter in which a young man worries about his sister's imprudent behaviour with a potential suitor. These letters prompted rich discussions about complex family dynamics in the 18th century – and how these might relate to pupils' lives today.

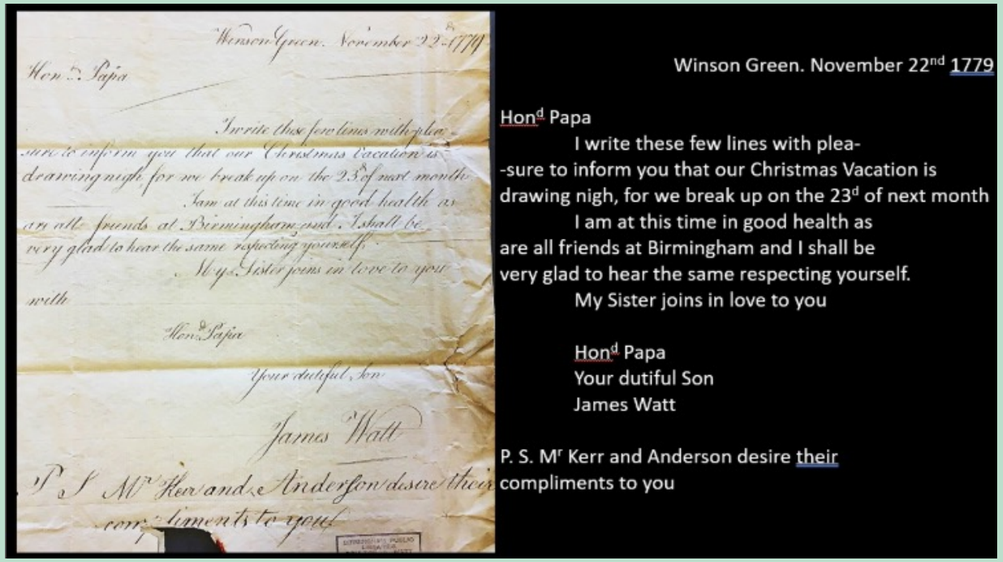


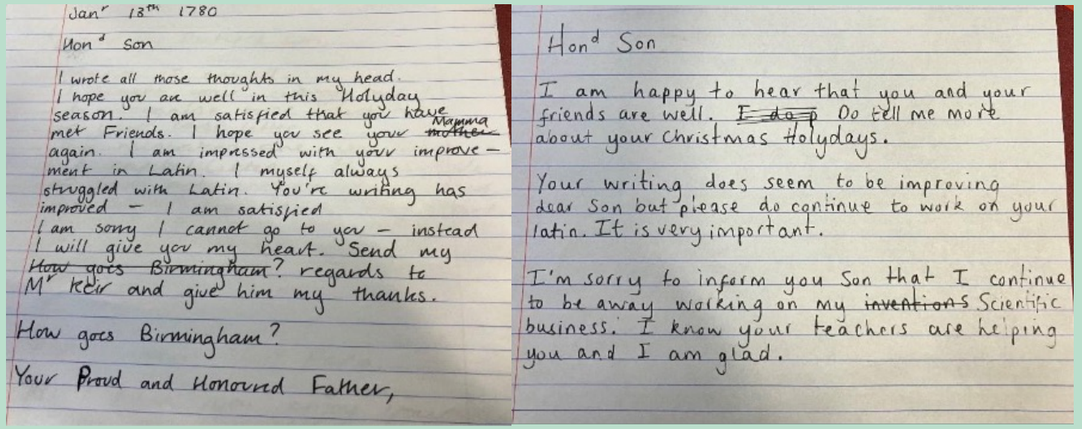
Figure 1: Slide showing a letter from James Watt (Junior) to his father

Some classes (a total of 200 pupils across the spectrum of year groups) completed brief surveys at the start and end of the workshop. These measured their engagement and learning in certain areas. 78 pupils (39%) said that, following the workshops, they felt more interested in history or had a better understanding of people's lives in the past. Specific responses included "it was interesting imagining being in the olden days", "the most interesting thing I have learnt is how people communicated with their family in the past", and "I learned how people acted towards their children".

Moreover, of the 102 secondary pupils who answered this question, 39 (38%) felt more interested in local history after the workshop, evidencing the impact of a place-themed approach. We showed pupils an image of the pre-industrial city (figure 2) at the start of the workshop and asked them to compare it with the present day. This prompted a discussion about Birmingham's industrial heritage, which complemented the history curriculum in many cases. Pupils and teachers also valued our use of letters written by and to James Watt, a leading Birmingham-based inventor during the Industrial Revolution and a man now honoured with a famous statue in the city centre. In feedback, one teacher commented: "I loved the fact it was a local hero and a statue we all recognise". Similarly, one pupil enjoyed Watt's letters because he is "someone from our home – a true Brummie!". This inclusion of local materials seemed unusual in history lessons: when asked if they had read historical sources before, pupils mentioned Samuel Pepys's diary, plays and poems by Shakespeare, and Scott's diary from the ill-fated Terra Nova expedition to the Antarctic, but no local texts. Using local letters meant pupils approached unfamiliar historical sources with a natural curiosity and, to some extent, a shared sense of identity with the letter writer. This in turn helped develop emotional literacy as pupils imagined, and sympathised with, the lives and relationships of the Watt family.

Figure 2. Slide showing 'The East Prospect of Birmingham', an engraving by William Westley (1732). Source: Wikimedia Commons (public domain)

The workshops developed pupils' reading, comprehension and discussion skills in ways that they recognised. Increased confidence in the verbal sharing of ideas was an important takeaway: 90 out of 200 pupils (45%) reported feeling happier when speaking aloud in class after the workshop, while 71 pupils (36%) felt more comfortable and confident working in groups. In a vox pop, a pupil said a highlight was "hearing everyone's ideas, and people expressing them differently [...] everyone contributed". 59 pupils (30%) felt their reading skills had improved during the workshop. Considering that these letters contain some archaic spelling, grammar and syntax ("they were different from other kinds of writing we're used to"), this is a significant outcome. But pupils also learned about communication and writing more generally and in ways that extended beyond the genre of the letter. In feedback comments, pupils stated that they liked writing their own letters in response to an 18th-century example: "the most enjoyable thing was writing our own letter using different techniques"; "I learnt that to structure a letter it has to be fluent and link to the purpose"; "I learned that a letter can convey tone". Several pupils were proud of their efforts and volunteered to read their letter aloud (figures 3 and 4).


Jan^{r} 18th 1780

Hon^{d} Son

I wrote all those thoughts in my head.
I hope you are well in this Holyday
season. I am satisfied that you have
met Friends. I hope you see your ~~mother~~ Mamma
again. I am impressed with your improve-
ment in Latin. I myself always
struggled with Latin. You're writing has
improved – I am satisfied
I am sorry I cannot go to you – instead
I will give you my heart. Send my
~~How goes Birmingham?~~ regards to
M^{r} Keir and give him my thanks.

How goes Birmingham?

Your Proud and Honoured Father,

Hon^{d} Son

I am happy to hear that you and your
friends are well. ~~I do~~ Do tell me more
about your Christmas Holydays.

Your writing does seem to be improving
dear Son but please do continue to work on your
latin. It is very important.

I'm sorry to inform you Son that I continue
to be away working on my ~~inventions~~ Scientific
business. I know your teachers are helping
you and I am glad.

Figures 3 and 4. Two letters produced by pupils aged 17–19.

Finally, the workshop's plenary encouraged comparison of handwritten letters with digital forms of communication. Pupils responded enthusiastically, with many preferring the speed, ease and reliability of communicating via social media or instant messaging. However, others recognised the emotional and social value of handwritten letters: "I think that letters can give an atmosphere that social media cannot"; "letters have more meaning and more affection because you wrote it by hand"; "letters are monumental – we use them for memories. Waiting for a letter builds up suspense, which I like. They're also good for showing emotions".

We hope that the teaching resources provided on the project's website will enable the continuation and development of this valuable work. Template workshop outlines can be implemented but teachers can adapt these using the letters they find with the website's full-text keyword-search function (by place, for example) or the filtering options (by illness or activity, for example). Pupils in older age groups can be encouraged to find their own letters using the website.

https://socialbodies.bham.ac.uk

References

Harvey, K.; Esfandiary, H.; Fox, S.; and Vine, E. *Material Identities, Social Bodies: Embodiment in British Letters c.1680-1820*. Project funded by the Leverhulme Trust (2021-2025, Ref. RPG-2020-163). Available at: https://socialbodies.bham.ac.uk (Accessed 21/08/2025).

Harvey, K. and Fox, S. (2025) 'Feeling Old in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 64 (e2), pp.1-23. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-british-studies/article/feeling-old-in-eighteenthcentury-britain/F17C04DAE29547E45D43A3983C4C82B0 (Accessed 21/08/2025).

Harvey, K. and Vine, E. (2024) 'Prayer for Family and Friends: The Body and Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 67 (3), pp. 406-429. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/historical-journal/article/prayer-for-family-and-friends-the-body-and-religion-in-eighteenthcentury-britain/57031176A7EB7D0081C758E24FADE8EE (Accessed 21/08/2025).

Telling your story, inspired by Shakespeare: the Shakespeare and Me project

Dr Kate Rumbold, University of Birmingham

This essay is about using place – and specifically local heritage – to deepen students' feelings of personal connection to their education in literacy. It shows how meaningful places and histories can spark an emotional connection to a subject that provides a real imperative to speak and write – and to tell your own story.

For the 'Shakespeare and Me' project, founded in Birmingham, the local heritage is William Shakespeare himself, born and raised 'just down the road' in Stratford-upon-Avon. Yet for the participants in the project, Shakespeare isn't the subject per se. These students are adult learners, pursuing entry-level English courses with Birmingham Adult Education Service (BAES). Some have struggled in the UK education system and have returned to education in adult life; some have completed courses of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and are strengthening their skills.

The Shakespeare project creates a space in these intensive skills- and attainment-focused courses for a different kind of conversation, one in which learners share their life experiences and their hopes for the future. These conversations not only strengthen their speaking and writing skills, but also enrich their qualifications with a sense of self-belief and belonging.

The aim of the project is not to assert Shakespeare's timeless value, but rather to give adult learners the chance to respond to, explore and even challenge Shakespeare's words from the places where they stand. In doing so, the project models how educators might use aspects of their heritage, such as local writers, to spark an emotional connection to the subject, and engage their students in different kinds of conversations to those they might expect in the classroom.

Furthering its place-based approach, 'Shakespeare and Me' brought together local partners, namely BAES and the Library of Birmingham (LoB), to create spaces for these conversations. With the support of the National Literacy Trust, the project grew and reached new places. In the **library**, the **classroom** and **Stratford-upon-Avon**, Shakespeare's powerful words encouraged learners to share their experiences, whether in conversations, in performances, or by telling their life stories.

The library

The 'Shakespeare and Me' story began in a remarkable place: inside a golden rotunda on top of the largest public library in Europe. Below us, through floor-to-ceiling glass windows, spreads the city. Behind us, book-filled cabinets line the walls of a beautiful wood-panelled room.

The city is Birmingham, the building is the Library of Birmingham, and this is the Shakespeare Memorial Room. Designed in the 19th century to house a collection of 'every book connected to the life and works of our great poet', as a resource for the city of Birmingham, it was painstakingly relocated to the top of the new library when it opened in 2013.

I am standing with a group of adult English language learners and volunteers, and we are enjoying the view after our first pilot Shakespeare workshop in 2017.

As an academic, I had researched how Shakespeare's extraordinary global status was formed in the centuries after his lifetime. I had examined the huge range of books of quotations from Shakespeare's plays in the Birmingham Shakespeare Library, and written about how these selective collections helped to invest Shakespeare with a reputation for unusual insight into human nature.

Volunteering in a functional skills classroom alongside my HE teaching in English Literature had made me wonder what it might be like for adult learners to work with more imaginative texts that connected with their emotional lives (see Newbold, 2016). I had also led a research project about poetry in lifelong learning, and shown how encouraging affective responses to poetry in the classroom can deepen students' understanding (Rumbold and Simecek, 2016).

I felt that the emotional authority bound up in Shakespeare quotations could be harnessed to engage adult learners – so that by responding to them from their own experience, they could feel a sense of mastery. I therefore proposed to Tom Epps at LoB a pilot workshop for adult learners – an idea that resonated with the founding mission of the Shakespeare collection (Epps and Fernie, 2023) – and I invited BAES to get involved.

The Library of Birmingham is an exhilarating venue: we meet in the foyer, glide on escalators through the huge atrium, and climb to the ninth floor to see the view. Moving through the building enacts a change of perspective and elicits surprise that 'This is free? I can come here with my kids anytime!?'.

The library inspires awe; the workshop also makes it a place to feel heard. The Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, where the workshop itself takes place, feels like a formal study space. But it is soon clear that this is no ordinary lesson. We start with an ice-breaker: 'Do you think it is okay to show your feelings in public?' Then we share quotes from Shakespeare about love, grief and courage, and invite learners to decide if they think Shakespeare captures these emotions well.

This might not have been what learners expected of a Shakespeare workshop. But it is the core principle of the project. Rather than imparting knowledge, 'Shakespeare and Me' centres the learners' experiences and perspectives. The conversations are a two-way discovery process, underpinned by active listening.

Stories flowed instantly. The words

'Hear my soul speak.

The very instant that I saw thee did

my heart fly to your service.' (Shakespeare, 1988, *The Tempest*, 3.1.63–5)

prompted memories of falling in love, holding their child, or even meeting their pet for the first time.

'Give sorrow words…'

(Shakespeare, 1988, *Macbeth*, 4.3.210)

encouraged learners to speak of their losses, recent and long-ago.

And

'Cowards die many times before their deaths.

The valiant only taste of death but once…'

(Shakespeare, 1988, *Julius Caesar* 2.2.32–3)

elicited vivid memories of being in the army in a war zone, steeling oneself every day to lose one's best friends; or of spending a year in the Calais Jungle before arriving in the UK.

We also debated Shakespeare's oft-quoted wisdom: is 'To thine own self be true.' (Shakespeare, 1988, *Hamlet* 1.3.78) good advice? What about 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be'? (ibid. 1.3.75) or 'Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none.' (Shakespeare, 1988, *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.1.61–2)? What advice would you give to a friend, or to your younger self?

These stories brought the learners' whole selves to the classroom and gave them a powerful impetus to speak and write. As Lucy Ellenor, BAES programme manager for GCSE and then entry-level English, observed of the success of the Shakespeare workshops, "Tapping into the learners' lived experience offered them a platform from which to contribute. No one knows more about their own lives than they do."

The classroom

In the years that followed, we met groups of learners at LoB, online (during Covid) and, thanks to the National Literacy Trust's support, in classrooms all around Birmingham, expanding the one-off workshops into a series and bringing our approach to a whole cohort of entry-level English learners (around 100 per year).

Central to this development was theatre company Theatre(ish), led by Antonia Parker Paragpuri (a volunteer in the first pilot) and Marcus Paragpuri. With their support, learners were encouraged in our workshops not just to respond to Shakespeare's words from their own experiences, but to use their life experiences to direct how Shakespeare's words should be performed. This both defamiliarised the classroom space and underscored the message that the learners' lives give meaning to Shakespeare. We have developed and co-designed the project together ever since.

We often heard from learners that the classroom was a calm space outside the responsibilities of home and work. This led us to share the phrase 'All the world's a stage', and to invite learners to reflect on the multiple roles they played in their lives. So strongly did this resonate with learners that the whole 'Seven Ages of Man' speech from *As You Like It* became the spine of the workshop series. The stages of life described by Shakespeare's Jaques – from infancy and childhood to young adulthood, maturity and old age – became prompts for both performance and reflection. What did you love to do as a child? What were you like as a teenager and young adult? What does success mean to you? How do you feel about getting older? How do you hope to look back on your life?

Woven through the workshop series was the story of Shakespeare's own life. We recorded in Stratford-upon-Avon a series of videos about the places Shakespeare lived and studied. Shakespeare's story invited identification:

"If someone like Shakespeare can stop school at 14 and still be what he is today, who am I to finish school ... stopping at age of 14, so I have to be focused, and not afraid of greatness."

"When he moved from Stratford to London. Like I moved from my country to here so it's the same as my life! ... Yes, to make a renewed life, to become something in our futures, our dreams, so we have to change the place from one side to another side so it will be better."

"That's why I understand how William Shakespeare felt. His son died... I feel him."

The learners were telling their life stories, inspired by Shakespeare and his words.

Stratford-upon-Avon

In the process, the videos generated a sense of Stratford as a nearby place. The story of Shakespeare's life, wrapped up with the learners' emotions, invested Stratford with new meaning: it was place-making in action.

It created among learners a strong desire to visit Stratford, and, thanks to the National Literacy Trust, this became the culminating activity of the workshop series on several occasions. The town embodied his localness, his ordinariness, and the ways in which they could see themselves in him.

To make learners feel at home, we created a text-light map of the town that focused on Shakespeare's life story. But whether we visited the town or not, the idea of Stratford became a space for learners to project their own memories of childhood places and hopes for the future.

During the workshops, we saw paintings of childhood bedrooms, playgrounds and schools, all around the world, and vivid pictures of imagined futures. The project started with a strong imperative to show learners that this place where we met – and Shakespeare – belonged to the learners.

But as our project developed, it became clear that it is the cherished places in individual people's lives that are the most important of all. At every stage, the project disrupted the expectations of the formal spaces we were in, centring the stories of the learners and the places that truly matter to them.

'Shakespeare and Me' invited learners to connect on an emotional level with Shakespeare's words – about all stages of human life. By linking these words to the places of real personal significance in Shakespeare's life, we appealed to learners' deep sense of connection to their own homes, past and present, and to the stories of their own lives. This approach could readily be replicated by teachers in other areas, using local writers' words and biographies to change classroom dynamics, foster personal connections to the topic, and inspire students to tell their own stories.

We are grateful to the National Literacy Trust staff who championed the project and made all this possible: Hari Matharu, Mike Leyland, Gagan Basra, Laura Michelangeli and Kyle Turakhia, and to all the Literacy Champions who volunteered in our workshops.

References

Epps, T. and Fernie, E. eds. (2022). *Forgotten Treasures: The World's First Great Shakespeare Library* Alcester: West Midlands History Limited.

Hansen, C. (2023). *Shakespeare and Place-Based Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Newbold, M. (2016). 'Shakespeare for Literacy: Critical Pedagogy in Workplace Learning', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 21.3, pp. 291-300.

Rumbold, K. and Simecek, K. (2016). 'Affective and Cognitive Responses to Poetry in the University Classroom', *Changing English* 23.4, pp.335-350.

Shakespeare, W., Wells, S. and Taylor, G. (1988). *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

What makes your local area a great place to read, write, speak and listen?

The National Literacy Trust is a charity that empowers people with the literacy skills they need to succeed in life. We target work in the communities that need help most, working with local partners to deliver place-based solutions.

Since 2019, we have delivered a literacy hub in partnership with the University of Birmingham, running city-wide activities and campaigns, and deepening our research into the connections between literacy and place.

This pamphlet offers six essays about Birmingham-themed literacy projects, written by the academics who co-designed them. Each piece aims to provide inspiration and practical guidance for anyone considering place-themed approaches to literacy in their own local context.

In partnership with

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM