

Northamptonshire Record Office 'Sticks and Stones' Project. Funded with an HLF 'Young Roots' grant. 2007.

Q&A with Jenny Moran, Public Services Manager, Northamptonshire Record Office.

What is the main aim of the project?

The aim of the project was to explore slavery in the past and present: to see if slavery was actually abolished 200 years ago or whether it still exists today. Also to look at the legacy of slavery: was racism a cause of slavery or slavery the reason for racism?

As part of the project the students visited the Record Office to see the historical records and the Houses of Parliament to investigate the political process that led to a change in the law.

They produced an exhibition and a short film. These will be shown in libraries, community venues and schools.

Why did you decide to apply to the 'Young Roots' grant scheme (rather than other funding schemes)?

We were advised to use this source by staff at East Midlands MLA. It seemed to deliver the funding we wanted and our project met the criteria. I asked for advice about the best way to fund the project (developed by me at the Record Office) and this was suggested as a good way forward.

How did you find the application process worked? (e.g. the role of the Young Roots co-ordinator)

The application process was probably the most difficult part of the project – we were sent the wrong form to complete and the wrong one was on the website which caused delays. Some of the questions were difficult for a local authority to answer – e.g. requirement for copy of constitution and 3 years of audited accounts.

However, the process was relatively quick and we did have support from the HLF. We have in-house experience of bidding for funds so probably did not use all the sources of support that we could have. The application might be daunting for someone just starting out and I would recommend seeking guidance as soon as possible.

How did you go about getting partners involved?

We were lucky in that we had already worked with the Northamptonshire Black History Association who knew of the school and brokered that initial contact. In addition we had good links with Northampton University tutors.

We did two school assemblies to years 8 and 9 to see which, if any, students would be interested. Of these to about 400 pupils – 60 expressed an interest and 20 became the core group.

What are the benefits of working with this age group?

I found the benefits to be huge - both personally and professionally. The young people were aged 14-16 and were very lively and engaged. They were very interested in the old documents as well as the modern slavery aspect and the idea of fair trade and the choices we make now prolonging slavery. They were old enough to have an idea of the kind of world they wanted to see and young enough to want to make that happen.

Young people under 25 are traditional non-users of archives – we felt that the project engaged them. Whilst they may not become regular archive users they are more aware of what archives are and how they influence our lives.

What are the issues about working with this age group?

The group were very lively and it could sometimes be hard to get them to focus on the topic in hand, especially after school. The aim of the project (and a condition of the grant) was that it should be led by the young people themselves. This was sometimes a fine line – to remain true to the project plan whilst allowing the young people the freedom to develop and explore the theme.

There were some issues to be aware of when working with the students – especially for the graphic designer and film-maker who had to be supervised when interacting with them. There were no problems and there was a generally relaxed atmosphere; however, safety and security are important to consider.

Please add any other points that you think might be useful to potential applicants from the archive sector

My perception is that many people working in the sector think that engaging young people is difficult, if not actively dangerous! I was very nervous about working with a group of teenagers – although I have had positive experiences with this age group before this was usually in short sessions delivered in school. I am very happy to report that working with them was much easier than I thought it would be. The young people were very easy to get to know and mature in outlook (although most were not academic). The sessions were lively, thought provoking and sometimes inspirational.

The logistical difficulties in planning the trip to the Houses of Parliament were minimal – there were a lot of risk assessments to do, but if you work in local government this will be normal! The reaction of the students to the debating chamber and meeting their MP to discuss modern slavery was well worth it.