



ARE REMOTE, DISTANT SHOWPIECES.
THE ITEMS DISPLAYED HERE, ON
THE OTHER HAND, WERE REAL
MEMORIES,

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A World of Stories: A case study in museum representation and diversity in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Museum Services are responsible for collections and programming at five exhibition venues, including Ballycastle Museum, Ballymoney Museum, Coleraine Town Hall, Green Lane Museum, and Limavady Museum.

This article discusses the Services' 2022–2023 *A World of Stories* engagement and exhibition programme that sought to highlight the stories of twentieth and twenty-first century migrants to the borough. Drawing on the perspectives of people who have recently moved to the area, and using historical records, the initiative sought to include multiple narratives, move beyond political binaries and celebrate the growing diversity of the borough.

Demographic and Political Context

The Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area is a largely rural local government district extending across the north coast of Northern Ireland, from Lough Foyle to the Glens of Antrim. The most recent Northern Ireland Census (2021) shows its population to be 141,748.

Within the borough, people born in the United Kingdom (including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) make up 95.2% (134,952) of this population: of all residents, people born in Northern Ireland make up 89.7% (127,171). Of the remaining 10.3% (14,577), residents born in other parts of Europe constitute only 0.04% of the total (4,813). Amongst non-UK Europeans, people born in the Republic of Ireland make up 0.01% of all residents, as do residents born in Poland. After Europe, the next largest source region defined by the Northern Ireland Census is the Middle East and Asia, in which 0.58% (824) of residents were born.^{1,2}

Of the 141,746 people for whom ethnic group census categories are available, 98.5% (139,696) are White, followed by Mixed ethnic group (0.5% / 721) and Chinese (0.2% / 313).³

National identity data is available for all 141,748 residents. Of these, 38.4% declared as British only, 23% as Northern Irish only, 21.5% as Irish only, 8.7% as British and Northern Irish only, 1.5% as Irish and Northern Irish only, 1.5% as British, Irish and Northern Irish only, and 1.3% as Polish.⁴ Of the 141,746 people whose religious background is available, 51% grew up as Protestant and Other, 40% Catholic, 8% with no religion, and 0.8% are



Fig. 1.(above)
Graffiti at the Salvation Army community church,
Coleraine, 2015



Fig. 2. (right)
Graffiti in the West Strand area, Portrush, 2019.

Credit: Steven McAuley/McAuley Multimedia

from Other Religions.⁵

In 2019, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough received people through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.⁶ Since then, it has also received asylum seekers,⁷ and refugees from Ukraine.⁸ No official figures for any of these groups are available at the time of writing.

Whereas Overseas (outside UK) net migration to Northern Ireland overall increased by 5,020 in 2021–2022, in Causeway Coast and Glens it fell by –79.⁹

These statistics demonstrate why fault lines between Catholic / Republican / Nationalist and Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist communities continue to dominate relations in the borough. They also show that local resistance to immigration (see Fig. s 1–2) is not supported by statistics. Despite this, some residents regularly experience racism: Ahmed, a project contributor who is originally from India, highlighted the persistence of an all too familiar joke: ‘...when you are stopped in the street and asked are you a Protestant or a Catholic, you say no, ‘I am a Muslim.’ Are you a Protestant Muslim or a Catholic Muslim?’

A World of Stories

A World of Stories (2022–2023) was a two-year Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services community engagement programme. It was the first conscious move by Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services to give a voice to the borough’s

minority communities. It was born of conflicting social messaging in both local and UK-wide social and mainstream media that was expressing welcome for some migrant groups while creating a negative environment for others.¹⁰

A World of Stories aimed to tackle the fear and prejudice that appeared to be growing in the borough, by showing that every story is important; and by providing a public platform for self-expression in collaboration with contributors who have arrived due to wars and persecution in their home countries, and in order to study, work and follow their hearts.

The programme was part-funded by the Council’s Good Relations programme, supported by The Northern Ireland Executive Office’s Together: Building a United Community Strategy.¹¹ The project objectives were:

- To explore the historical conditions which have led to modern demographics in Northern Ireland.
- To explore the diverse drivers of modern migration to Northern Ireland with a focus on the Causeway Coast and Glens.
- To celebrate the growing diversity of our communities beyond the traditional dichotomies of green and orange, or us and them.
- To be cognisant that when people are othered it is much easier to imply they do not belong, to dehumanise them, and discriminate against them. The project would give a platform for migrants to share their own stories.¹²

The remainder of this article describes how *A World of Stories* fulfilled these objectives.

Methods

The primary methods of *A World of Stories* were oral history gathering combined with secondary research, resulting in an historically



Fig. 3 & fig. 4
 Bonny's Story and Mohamed's Story; case study panels from the 'A World of Stories' exhibition.

Credit: Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services

contextualised and diverse range of case studies that were presented through the outputs as detailed below.

Oral and Public History Ethics

In planning the interviews and throughout the project, we actively avoided dehumanising, discriminatory, homogenising and othering language and behaviours, emphasising the values of empathy and respect for contributors; and allocating time to building rapport and trust, before, during, and after each interview. The interviewers were cognisant of trauma-informed oral history methods, approaching each participant as an individual and with due consideration for their needs.¹³

The oral history process has the inherent potential, regardless of topic, to touch on difficult or traumatic memories which can be distressing for the interviewee.¹⁴ Given the subject of the interviews for this project, exploring the drivers of migration and the reception experiences of newcomers, the interviewer was sensitive and responsive to this with the aim of causing no additional anguish.

Prior to the interviews, the range of subjects to be explored was discussed with each interviewee. The participants were reminded that they could

pause or halt the interview at any time, and need only give as much information as they were comfortable providing. Interviews were conducted in an environment chosen by the interviewee, where they felt comfortable, and external support bodies were signposted for participants where requested, or where a potential need was observed.

We anticipated that the interviews might contain sensitive and personal content and assessed potential risks to participants including the potential that their stories might be misconstrued, or that they might feel misrepresented or otherwise exploited. For this reason, and in line with good ethical practice, we sought their informed consent at each stage of the process: at recruitment, immediately before and after their interview, after the interview was transcribed, during the process of abridgement, ahead of portrait photography and at the final exhibition design stage. Where needed, we appointed language interpreters to support contributors.

The fact that some exhibition visitors might find content upsetting was quickly realised, and a warning was incorporated.

Outputs

What had begun as a staff discussion around the growing diversity of the borough evolved over time into a programmatic reflection on and celebration of migrant experiences. By its completion, the project generated an oral history archive documenting the experiences of migrants to Northern Ireland; an exhibition for Coleraine Museum at Coleraine Town Hall, accompanied by an exhibition booklet in printed and digital formats; and an extensive engagement programme. All of these materials remain available on the project's webpage on the Northern Ireland Community Archive.¹⁵

Quantitatively, the project involved collaboration with 29 interviewees, generating 22 hours 17 minutes' worth of oral histories. The exhibition comprises 36 panels, and the accompanying booklet is 70 pages. 1,780 visitors attended the exhibition – a figure on a par with other Coleraine Museum exhibitions in Coleraine Town Hall. A further 420 participants engaged with 14 public events.

Oral History Archive

As explained above, *A World of Stories* centred on inviting people to share their personal stories



Fig. 5.
Participants at 'A World of Stories' exhibition launch.
Credit: Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services

through oral history interviews.

We sought participants by word of mouth, through community networks, and through Facebook. We focused on contributors who had been born outside Northern Ireland, who were currently resident in the borough, and whose stories might collectively reflect a diversity of lived experiences and countries of origin.

Whereas we had initially hoped to find 6-12 participants, 29 people got in contact. Several participated in family groups. They had lived in Northern Ireland for periods ranging from under a year to over six decades.

We adopted a semi-structured approach to the interviews, and recorded them using digital audio recorders. Through a consistent set of questions, we asked each contributor where they had grown up, what life had been like there, what had brought them to Northern Ireland, and what their experiences had been like since arriving.

The resulting recordings varied in length from under 30 minutes to over two hours. In consultation with the interviewees, we abridged the recordings in order to create case studies that could be presented in both audio and text formats.

Through the interviews, contributors voiced and described a range of emotions and experiences. Although many stories were joyous, several were heartbreaking, mentioning discrimination, and containing accounts of war, persecution, and in one case, attempted suicide.

Mohamed's story offers one example. Mohamed came to Northern Ireland from Syria in 2019 on the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. Supported by an interpreter, he spoke for 1 hour

and 23 minutes. Mohamed approved an abridged version lasting 6 minutes for release online, and a transcript extract for use on an exhibition panel (see Fig. 3).

I was born in in Syria, in a town called Homs ... I had my own business, money, and a good house. Everything was fine until the revolution started. As soon as the revolution started everything was destroyed ... [The regime] gave [militias] permission, they can kill, they can rape women, they can steal everything, they can burn. They can do anything they want ...

One year after the revolution I told [my family] they should go ... As soon as they left to go to Lebanon, twenty days and we got surrounded by army, and I couldn't leave for four years. I had to stay there in the same area ... Sometimes we'd be eating the trees because there'd be no food or no electricity. When we were surrounded, there were snipers, and they targeted the kids, or maybe pregnant women ... I lost lots of friends and family members, and I can still remember how the women were crying, and all the kids were hungry. The situation was terrible at this time, I still remember it, and I still feel it even now.

After four years they started to negotiate with the UN about this area, they would transfer most of the wounded people and civilians to Idlib, beside Turkey ... I went to the UN in Turkey and I told them the situation. They said we will try to apply for family reunion for you in the UK, and after seven years I came here. The first day I came here my family came from Lebanon, and we met here in Belfast one hour after each other, after seven years ... when I left



Fig. 6. Pupils from Portrush Primary School taking part in the 'A World of Stories' schools' programme.

Credit: Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services

them, they were really young, really small. When I saw them at the airport they were almost my height.

My [eldest] son is called Abdul; he is in Lebanon. When he left Syria, Abdul was fifteen, sixteen years old, now he is 27. He has three kids; I haven't met them ... That's the only thing we suffer from, except that, everything is good now for us ... There are no words to explain how much love we have seen here, and everyone was helping us. There are no words to explain how much we appreciate it ... We feel this is our country. We will live here until we die, this is our country now. Your country is not the ground you are living in, it's the place you feel safe, and you feel happy.'

Exhibition Programme

Shown from May – August 2023 in Coleraine Museum's accredited exhibition space at Coleraine Town Hall, the exhibition drew on 28 migrants' stories across 24 panels with accompanying audio. Each panel included an interview extract, and was decorated at the bottom with a text vignette using a script design incorporating text translated into their heart language by the relevant participant. Each participant therefore voiced and authored their own story, which was also graphically presented as part of a continuous flow around the exhibition of script elements in diverse languages.

Contributors were also invited to suggest additional photos or objects that held meaning for them or helped to tell their story. Displayed with co-written labels, the items included photos of family members, samples of script from their first language, religious statues, a beer tap, and a house

key belonging to a participant's late mother.

These interview materials and objects were contextualised by interpretation panels explaining migration trends in the north of Ireland since 1900, alongside additional, historic, case studies drawn from archives and newspaper research. These contextual panels included historical cases of racism, racially motivated violence and intimidation.

Accompanying panel text also signposted numerous organisations and community groups that support migrants of diverse faiths and backgrounds.

Accompanying Exhibitions

The main exhibition was accompanied by two thematically related exhibitions.

Firstly, *Conflict Textiles*, curated by Roberta Bacic, focused on conflict and human rights through six textiles reflecting their creators' experiences of displacement and resettlement. Most were *arpilleras*, a form of three-dimensional appliquéd tapestry originating in Chile, which had been made in Chile, Germany, England, Catalonia and Syria.

There was also a small accompanying exhibition, 'Global Voices, Local Choices', which showcased a partnership project with National Museums NI, the Northern Ireland Museums Council, and the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland. 'Global Voices, Local Choices' sought to bring diverse cultures and perspectives into Northern Irish local and national museums.

The Causeway Coast and Glens Museum



Fig. 7. Participants in the Connection Café event held as part of 'A World of Stories', in partnership with Building Communities Resource Centre.

Credit: Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services

Services input to the 'Global Voices, Local Choices' programme took the form of a three-panel exhibit based on a community engagement programme carried out in partnership with the Causeway Multicultural Forum. Participants selected a Muslim prayer mat from the National Museums NI collection to be exhibited in 'A World of Stories' accompanied by reflections on the object from members of the forum, most of whom were from non-Muslim backgrounds.¹⁶

Engagement Programme

In order to engage with as wide an audience as possible the *A World of Stories* exhibition was animated by a varied public programme. Following a formal launch, local primary schools explored themes of diversity and citizenship using the exhibition (Fig. 5). Later, the programme was extended to allow young people from Global Majority communities in Belfast to travel to visit and to participate in workshops in Coleraine.

An online public talk delivered by Naomi Green, Programmes Manager for the *Hidden History* project at the North West Migrants' Forum, investigated the history of migration in Ireland over 400 years, and examined the stories of migrants she had found buried in historical records.¹⁷

The Building Communities Resource Centre, an organisation that provides ethnic minority support within the borough, ran a Connection Café in the exhibition, inviting people from different

communities to come together to learn about each other's cultures (fig. 6). Four further public talks were presented themed around culinary culture, with expert speakers exploring food traditions from China, Turkey, Thailand and Poland with the help of smell and taste tests (fig. 7). The finale event brought together storytellers from Ireland, Japan and South Africa to share family-friendly tales from around the world, followed by a traditional Ukrainian lunch.

Evaluation

Through both *A World of Stories* and *Global Voices, Local Choices*, Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services built new partnerships, including with the Causeway Multicultural Forum and African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland. In addition, existing relationships with the Building Communities Resource Centre, Conflict Textiles, Northern Ireland Museums Council and National Museums NI were strengthened.

Without a longitudinal evaluation, it is difficult to tell how the project performed in relation to its foremost aim of tackling fear and prejudice. However, it is heartening that the exhibition did not attract negative feedback, given its opening in May 2023, which followed shortly after the April announcement – one that attracted significant negative comment as well as local support – that a second local hotel would be used to host asylum seekers awaiting the verification of their claims.¹⁸



Fig. 8. Participants at one of the Taste of the World sessions held during the 'A World of Stories' Exhibition.

Credit: Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services

Evaluation feedback from visitors to the exhibition showed that 31% of respondents came from countries outside of Northern Ireland; a figure that, as shown in the introduction, is ten times higher than the population of the borough that was born outside Northern Ireland.

These visitors came from England, Australia, France, Sri Lanka, Canada, Indonesia, Spain, Ukraine and the USA. Some were likely to have been tourists, but this figure does suggest that the exhibition appealed to a diverse audience.

100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed their visit to the exhibition; and 100% that they had learned or discovered something new. 93% felt that the exhibition had improved their understanding of local history.

Anecdotally, staff frequently came across visitors engaging with strangers from different backgrounds, asking them about, or offering up, their own stories.

Written feedback comments also suggested an overwhelmingly positive audience response. These included:

Not the first exhibition I've visited here, but one of the most impactful content-wise.

Thank you. It is wonderful the efforts made to promote local culture and history by Museum Services. This exhibition on the diverse ethnicities in this part of Northern Ireland is very important at improving understanding and tolerance of visitors to

this part of the world and hopefully make Northern Ireland more welcoming to those starting new lives here.

A wonderful project. So valuable to have this information and the stories brought together.

J'ai adoré l'idée de cette exposition. Chacun son histoire. [I love the idea of this exhibition. Everyone has a story].

Congratulations again on the successful programme of A World of Stories, I really enjoyed it and it has made a real difference for our community.¹⁹

In conclusion, *A World of Stories* provided an open and welcoming environment in which people felt safe to talk and ask questions. By collaborating with people to humanise and individualise their stories, the project helped to help break down community barriers and encouraged dialogue.

Nicholas Wright, Community Engagement Officer, Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services, was the project lead for *A World of Stories*. With a background exploring social history through archaeology, he has been increasingly drawn into the world of oral histories and their use in recording intangible cultural heritage.

Notes

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