

# SELLEY MANOR



## Case Study

### Selly Manor Museum - The Black Tudors

*'It highlighted things which are missing from the narrative of Tudor history. It made me question things I've been taught previously and to look at historic records in a different way.'*

## About Selly Manor

Selly Manor Museum is made up of two of Birmingham's oldest buildings: Selly Manor, a Tudor yeoman's house, and Minworth Greaves, a medieval hall house. The buildings were rebuilt and restored in the garden village of Bournville, and are managed by Bournville Village Trust, which works to promote the history of the buildings and their surroundings.

Selly Manor Museum is open all year round to the public and welcomes approximately 20,000 visitors each year through events, school visits and normal opening. The museum aims to share its heritage with local and wider audiences, make accessible the museum collection and buildings, provide enrichment and enjoyment for all visitors through learning, as well as identify new ways to be inclusive.

## Summary of Activity

In 2023 Selly Manor Museum commissioned four young black artists (18–25) to create artworks representing black figures from the Tudor period. These artworks were displayed within Selly Manor accompanied by interpretation panels and QR codes which linked to recordings of the artists talking about their creative process.

The young artists were Nina-Simone Brown, Annie Pearson, Jade Eynon, and Nompumelelo Ncube. They received a development session supported by Selly Manor's partner, the Black Arts Forum, and an established artist, Dr Pogus Caesar, during which they reflected on their developing practice.

The funding from Museum Development enabled the museum to work with young people who have traditionally not been the core audience. The funding meant the artists' commission fee could be based on Arts Union England's rates of pay, creating opportunities for a greater economic range of young and emerging artists to develop their skills. This resulted in Selly Manor engaging audiences from under-represented communities and celebrating Birmingham for its diversity.

## Challenges and Opportunities

After participating in Audience Champions 2022, and surveying 400+ visitors, evidence showed a low proportion of visitors are black and ethnic minority. Whilst this is representative of the communities immediately surrounding the museum, it isn't representative of Birmingham city as a whole. The project enabled the museum to diversify and engage new audiences, and work with unrepresented voices and communities.

The museum wanted to experiment with new ways of presenting collections information and displays. Much of the internal space is taken up with the permanent, static display of the Lawrence Cadbury Furniture Collection. By creating artworks for temporary display which explore other aspects of Tudor life and experience, the museum was able to add new layers of interest to the stories it tells and introduce new ideas and themes to visitors and participants.

Poet Amanda Hemmings contacted the museum to offer to write a poem celebrating the project. Her poem 'Meeting the Black Tudors', forms part of the exhibition and she performed it during the launch.

The museum holds a weekly Memory Café for people with Dementia. During a Tudor history session, the facilitator shared the story of salvage diver and Black Tudor, Jacques Francis. The museum had not originally planned to engage this audience specifically with the artwork.

Most people were very supportive of the project, which has helped the museum build stronger relationships and networks with Arts and Heritage organisations. Many individuals and organisations were enthusiastic about sharing it and interested in learning about Black Tudors and how African culture has been part of British history for a long time. However, there were some negative and racist comments on social media and over the phone.

## Key Outcomes

Before the exhibition, the museum was not well connected with Arts organisations, nor strongly connected with black communities. It can now strengthen its work by further developing relationships and networks. Partnering with the Black Arts Forum was the start of the process.

During the exhibition a more diverse audience visited the museum – 26% more people of colour compared to visitor records from the same period in 2022/2023.

Digital audiences became more aware of the existence and lives of Black Tudors, with over 3,700 impressions on social media posts and blogs.

Visitor feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

*'Beautiful work, thoughtful and thought provoking. Poses questions about how we see black people through history.'*

*'It's incredible how much is known about Black Tudors. The artists have produced amazing responses to this period in history and their works create a very different and insightful experience when visiting the Manor.'*

*'Great exhibition, wonderful to see this aspect of history being presented through art. The artists have done such a great job, love their work.'*

*'An amazing project- brilliantly integrated into the displays! Beautiful work and poetry. Really enjoyed it.'*

It can be exciting working with artists - how differently they interpret history, how a new perspective brought an exciting new element to the museum.

The four artists reflected on the value of the project on their own practice and development:

*'Participating in this project is an honour as I can play a part in increasing public knowledge of the role black Britons have played. Having studied art history at college and uni, I'm aware of how little representation there is of black people in Tudor art and how this erases them from history, so I am excited about helping people to visualise Black Tudors, especially as I get to represent Mary Fillis.'*

*'Being part of this project is an opportunity to get stuck in the things I love, storytelling, fashion and bringing visibility to a historical figure that has been forgotten. The Reasonable Blackman's story is rich with cultural heritage that speaks to present day facets about narrating British history which is interwoven with African history. I'm elated and honoured to be part of the project especially having met Pogus Caesar. The advice he gave us will stay with me throughout my career! I can't wait to see what I produce now that I'm not scared of being misunderstood.'*

*'I'm so honoured to be involved in something so monumental for my local community. As a young girl walking around Selly Manor I could never have imagined that I would one day be working with the museum, especially in such a progressive capacity.'*

*"Being involved in this project has meant a lot to me. I've been able to combine my two passions in life, art and history. I think that part of what makes the Black Tudors particularly interesting is that they were everyday people. They had jobs and worked to support themselves and their families. Relatability makes history more engaging and accessible to people. I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to learn more about the Black Tudors and represent black history and culture in my own creative way."*

A children's trail, storytelling session, and 'Zine workshop was created for February half-term, to compliment the artists' work. A young volunteer of African heritage designed the children's trail. They used the individual Tudors' lives as inspiration for activities children could take part in. From discussions with the volunteer, some of the budget was used to purchase items for children to interact with. These items – butter pats and a loom, represented professions of two of the Black Tudors. Another volunteer made a puppet of Black Tudor, Jaques Francis for half-term storytelling. These resources have been added to the museum and children's discovery station permanently.

## **Legacy of the project**

A resource pack was created based on the project and is available to schools on the Selly Manor website. It is designed to engage children in black history. The histories of the Black Tudors has been incorporated permanently in the museum, as part of the stories of everyday Tudors. They are mentioned during education sessions and tours.

The museum's priority continues to be diversifying and engaging audiences who currently do not visit, and this project has helped build the foundations of collaboration with groups and individuals from marginalised communities. Co-production has helped the museum to consider new ways of developing the interpretation and narrative.