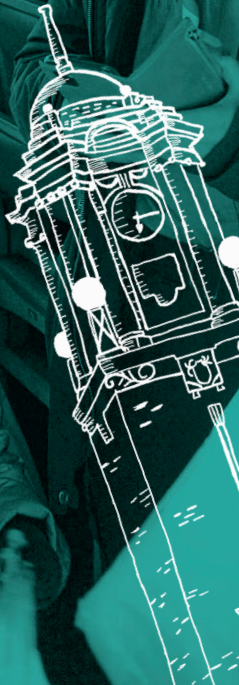


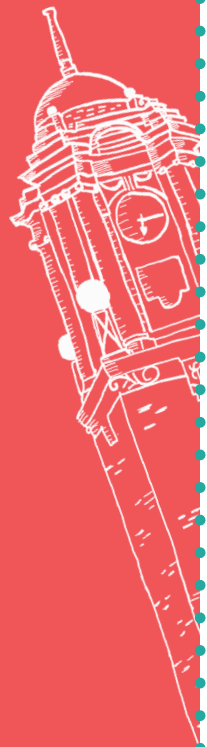
Issue 2, 2023

We Are

Wednesbury

Magazine





We welcome you

...to the second, annual edition of the We Are Wednesbury community magazine. It's been another fantastic year for the Cultural Programme and we want to share with you what we've been up to!

The We Are Wednesbury Cultural Programme is part of the Wednesbury High Street Heritage Action Zone initiative, funded by Sandwell Council and Historic England, to re-establish the historic character of the area and create a vibrant, welcoming space. It has been produced by local arts organisation, Multistory, who are working with local residents, groups, communities and artists who are members of the We Are Wednesbury working group.

Wednesbury is a market town, with a vibrant array of independent shops that are well loved and supported by local people. There are wonderful stories that lie behind the colourful displays in shops such as Sue's Traditional Sweet Shop and Allsorts Knitting. This year's fantastic collective of young writers – Aliza, Hafizaah, Jasandeep, Joi and Shazeda – took to the streets to interview shopkeepers and community organisers to hear their stories. They have written pieces about the spaces and people that make up the beating heart of the town: the libraries, shops and cafes and the role they play in bringing together and supporting the community.

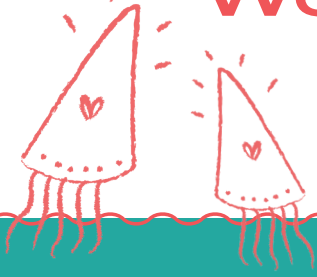
For this edition, our writers have also written pieces that respond to highlights in the 2022-23 Cultural Programme. Wednesbury residents were invited to participate in a range of activities, including: co-producing a community lantern procession, where local groups made lanterns, in a series of workshops, that represented their activities and stories; the Wednesbury Literature Festival, organised by Wednesbury Library; What's In Store, a two-day festival of performances along the high street produced by Black Country Touring; and artist-led sensory workshops at Barlow Road Community Gardens, where people explored their relationship with the natural world and showcased the work they'd made at a celebratory event. As we look ahead to the final year of activity, we invite you to pause and reflect with us on the wonderful times we have shared.

You can send an email to the address below if you want to know more about We Are Wednesbury and how to get involved, sign up to the newsletter, or simply want to say hello!
wearewednesbury@multistory.org.uk

Visit multistory.org.uk to see films, photographs and more from the activities that have taken place so far and follow us @multistory on social media.

wearewednesbury@multistory.org.uk
 Visit multistory.org.uk to see films, photographs and more from the activities that have taken place so far and follow us @multistory on social media.

We Are Wednesbury



On Saturday 26 November 2022

the We Are Wednesbury Lantern procession took place following weeks of preparation. Over 200 people came together to showcase their lanterns and celebrate the community life in Wednesbury. I had the honour of witnessing the procession first-hand. The lantern procession was one of many activities organised by Multistory as part of the three-year long We Are Wednesbury Cultural Programme that aims to support the local residents, communities and creatives of Wednesbury.

The day of the procession began with preparations at the local Methodist Church, a beautiful and well-maintained building with crafted wooden accents. The team was getting ready for the procession: lanterns were being prepared; stewards were being instructed; and people were slowly making their way inside. It was a chilly and windy November afternoon with predictions of rain but that didn't dampen the mood of everyone involved. The lantern procession was part of a much larger event, Sandwell Council's annual Christmas lights switch-on. Deciding to conquer the cold wind, I explored the town of Wednesbury.



Photo by Phillip Parnell

Lantern Procession

By Shazeda Begum



Photo by David Rowan



Photo by David Rowan

There was a buzz of excitement in the air as families watched the entertainment, ate good food from travelling vans and children were kept occupied by the craft activities that were taking place on the street. I made my way inside a local café to enjoy a warm drink and observe the festivities from afar. It was lovely to see everyone with a smile on their face as they greeted one another.

During this time, I interviewed a local Wednesbury resident, Julie, who said that "she remembered Wednesbury as a child and it was absolutely thriving". I saw how this event brought back the charm and community which was put on hold as a result of the pandemic. Due to the ever-changing nature of the fast-paced modern world and the cities engulfing smaller communities, there's a danger that small towns can lose their sense of connection. However, events like this encourage people to band together and bring life back into small towns. Retailers selling their wares; amazing street food freshly made for the locals; independent stores busy with people; and most of all, people talking to one another like old friends.

As the time neared 3:30pm, the procession began: lanterns were gathered; children were lined up; and instructions were called out over the hubbub. The eagerness and enthusiasm was contagious; there was happiness in the air that the dreary British weather couldn't diminish. A number of local community groups took part including The Place of Welcome Craft Group, Friar Park Youth Club, Wednesbury Museum Community Art Group, 617 Sandwell Air Scouts, The Way to Wellbeing group, The Crafternoon Group, the Knights of Wednesbury, Wednesbury Rainbows, Guides and Brownies, Wednesbury Neighbourhood Police and Ideal for All.

The lanterns came in various shapes and sizes each decorated by these local groups or by individuals who had taken part in workshops during the Autumn and each lantern had its own story to tell.

One by one, the procession made its way through Wednesbury. Led by the brilliant Bostin' Brass Band and the dazzling Helter Skelter stilt-walkers, it was greeted by a crowd of people along the streets and around every

corner. Shop owners came out with their hot drinks with huge smiles on their faces and people enjoying the street markets stood aside to watch and let the procession go by. Whilst the rain held off, the wind made it quite challenging for those holding lanterns but everyone worked together to keep everything in place.

The procession ended with a performance by the Bostin' Brass Band which left everyone in high spirits. People danced, people sang and people laughed. I was able to speak to the band following the parade and it was interesting to hear what they thought about the connection between their instruments and the community. "Brass instruments are quite cheap

to make. They also have a big link to working communities and municipal kind of activities. The instruments themselves have really strong roots to community engagement. It's nice as a musician to still be involved in this kind of thing."

As the afternoon drew to a close, a lot of people chose to continue their celebrations by taking their lanterns back to the streets of Wednesbury to watch the Christmas Lights switch-on. An atmosphere of happiness and joy filled the cold evening air. There were many emotions fluttering around following the procession: pride, enjoyment and giddiness felt by people of all ages. I spoke to Debbie and Neil who took part in the procession.



"It's exactly what Wednesbury needed after so long, to see the place and people's faces lit up. It's so good and we're hoping it's something that can be repeated next year. Everybody worked hard on the lanterns, putting lots of time and effort into it. The results have been fantastic!

When you first make the lanterns you never realised the effect they would have. You started with a few sticks and some sheets and you're thinking, this isn't going amount to anything – and when you see them when they're finished, and all together, they're absolutely brilliant. We met new friends through doing the workshop as well. It's quite emotional really! Seeing everybody come together, it's such a nice thing to be part of. The community is amazing."



Understandably, one would get emotional seeing the final results of this three-month long project. And this event shows that community spirit will always find its way back. In the end, it's the people, their stories and their memories which make this town special.

Wednesbury's

Ah, sweet shops. How we all enjoy a little confectionery here and there. Whether it be jelly babies, wine gums, liquorice, we all have a specific favourite. These sweets help to reconcile a memory of a notable moment in one's life. Sweets hold so much history; so much we don't realise. Under the industrial revolution, sweets were seen as a luxury and only the wealthiest of families were able to afford them. Nowadays, they are available at a range of different prices.

The Victorian era was essential to the development of sweets when there was a rise in technology, factories and trade. On top of this, the price of refined sugar had fallen. This then made it easier to produce and afford, and they greatly increased in popularity. Sweets have always been known to cause a feeling of happiness when eaten. Even during the hunter-gatherer times, wild berries were favoured, packed with sweetness and energy.

Sweet



Our very own Wednesbury has been known for a few sweet shops that pack a punch of joy and bring gleaming smiles to people's faces. Sue's Traditional Sweet Shop will ring a bell to many people. It was originally a joint business between John Wilkinson and his wife Sue, selling sweets since 2008, but interestingly they used to make their sweets in their own factory. The factory has been closed for a while now and now John has been running the shop solo. Sue's Traditional Sweet Shop offers a wide variety of options and there is something for everyone. During our interview, John said that one of the perks of owning a sweetshop is socialising with people and meeting new faces as well as catching up with the old. This motivates him and shows that he is persistent and committed to what he does.

Shop

The pandemic and lockdown has affected many independent shops, including Sue's. John can't get stock as easily and the prices have increased. However, he doesn't let this affect him in any way and perseveres to ensure his customers are catered for to the best standard.

By Hafizaah Uddin



Photo by Phillip Parnell



Photo by Phillip Parnell



Photo by Phillip Parnell

In September 2022, I went to the What's In Store event which was held in Wednesbury and introduced the residents and visitors of Wednesbury to the independent shops and their long histories.

The first activity that I participated in was the walking tour which invited people to visit shops along the high street. Our guide was Vimal Korpall and the tour, simply put, was amazing. He explained the backstory of each store, whilst music played in the background, without forgetting anything, as if he knew the stories like the back of his hand. Everyone wanted to listen because the way he narrated them was like a comedy and everyone enjoys a good comedy. The music that accompanied the tour was great and matched well with each story.

What's In Store

By
Jasandeep Kaur

For example, in one of the stores Vimal talked about religion and the melody that accompanied it was slow and had a tone to match the story. Vimal would pause during his narration to let us hear the music. Another great thing was how, in almost each shop, you would receive a token. For example, from a food shop everyone got a biscuit; from a flower shop everyone got a rose. From a furniture store we got a small candle; from Sue's Traditional Sweet Shop we got a small bag of candies; and from a cake shop we got, you guessed it, a small piece of cake! So the tour was a great experience and, if it takes place again, I definitely recommend it to everyone.



Photo by Phillip Parnell

The second activity was at Mamma's L Cakes, Lower High Street with Suzan Spence who is a writer, poet and actor. Her performance was a stunning experience. She had written and performed a story that responded to the store and included things that are sold in it. She expressed the feelings from the story clearly and explained it simply which meant that the activity was accessible for all ages.

The third activity I went to was at Allsorts Knitting Shop, with the performer Lorna Meehan who was inspired by stories told by the owners of the shop and her own experience of crafting. It took her about two weeks to learn to perform the piece to perfection. As she performed she would start knitting, making the story come to life, and explained to the audience how knitting can help people cope with grief and that was really touching; it made me want to cry. She also used pre-recordings in her performance. These recordings were captured in the store by Lorna, and were of the owners of Allsorts and other artists that were involved in What's In Store. Some of my favourite lines from the performance were:



Photo by Phillip Parnell

“Let the world see what you’ve made.”

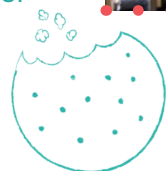
“Some people get up, knit, go to bed, crafting is their life.”



“Over lockdown customers would say, ‘you’re an essential service for us’.”



Photo by Phillip Parnell



Luckily, I had the opportunity to interview Lorna through email and she told me that she was

“struck by memories; they came to mind when I walked in the shop for the first time”.

Later on, as I was waiting at the market place for the next activity, three guys on stilts came by who were called the Top Bananas. They sang songs but not just any songs; they sang children's songs in their own style. They would change the lyrics of well-known children's songs to make everyone laugh. It was very nice how they would ask the audience to suggest songs for them to sing and then they'd change the lyrics on the spot. When they first appeared, they pretended that only one side of the audience could hear them while the other side couldn't. Another cool thing they did was always pointing out things that the audience did in a comedic manner so that no one would be offended or feel upset in any way.

There were a lot more things going on in What's In Store. There was a gentleman by the name of Brendan Hawthorne who helped people write poems on postcards to send to friends and family and then, in his performance, he recited some of those poems. There was face painting; a theatre performance for families of the show 'Is that a Yeti, Hetty?'; Ben Cornish who is a juggler; and the lollipop ladies patrol by Curious Cargo!

So to sum up my experience, the whole event was just fantastic and a lot of bystanders participated in the activities too. Everyone had a lot of fun and I'm sure we all wish that more events like What's In Store would take place in Wednesbury.



Photo by Phillip Pannell



Art in the

Community Gardeners

Alex Vann and Gary O'Dowd (Real Arts Workshops) and Vik Chandla and Shaun Hill worked with groups who attend the Barlow Road Community Gardens (an allotment initiative run by Ideal for All*) to explore the fascinating history of the site, using painting, drawing and making. The land was originally owned by the famous Cadbury family and, later on, the Patent Shaft Company and was once known as the 'cow field'.

Together, Alex and Gary and the participants created a series of bright and bold inter-connected bark wood panels to tell this story which will be hung at the Barlow Road site. Many of the materials used in the artwork were natural items found on site and their process focused on participatory and accessible art making. Along the way, the group also designed and created individual artworks on ceramic tiles and slate coasters which they were able to take home.

Vik and Shaun's workshops explored mindfulness, movement and grounding through the senses. They invited the participants to come together as hunter-gatherers to explore the garden in new ways. The group tested the edges of their comfort zones and empowered each other to play with collaborative poetry and story. They made a mandala out of foraged materials and discussed the connections between the natural world, their own lives and ephemeral art and, together, created a poem which can be read on the next page.

The workshops resulted in a celebration event on 15 December 2022, where the participants joined together to showcase their work.

*Ideal for All is a user-led charity and social enterprise working to make life better for disabled, elderly and vulnerable people and their carers.



Photo by Phillip Pannell

The place where time

stands still

Co-written by Vik Chandla and Shaun Hill with the participants Leanne, Liam and Tom

A castle of sticks built by a man pushing a muddy wheelbarrow on his way to an inferno of terror

– poor little twigs.

The protective netting of a coop slashed by the shadow of a cat.
A squawking, scurrying Spartan formation jutting out the spears of their beaks.

A feather balanced on a powerline that makes you want to tiptoe up and touch it...

But beware.

A wooden marker you can write anything on stabbed in the tomato heart of a vampire sleeping in a raised bed.

That's what you get for terrorising Wednesday!

A furry caterpillar, so small it's nearly invisible, so full it's in a food coma, munching on a fat leaf.

One 300kg blue tub of mango chutney that's impossible to move because there's someone in it:

stealthy rascal of a fox having a rest and a drink.

Rubber archways over the plants like a cathedral for ants praying to the gods of the allotment.



Photo by Phillip Pannell



Photo by Phillip Pannell



Allsorts:

Knitting Together Communities

By Jasandeep Kaur

I was walking through Wednesbury high street, when I stumbled upon Allsorts, a small and cute knitting shop. I went inside and found out that it is a real treasure because it's one of the very few independent knitting shops in Sandwell. I had the wonderful chance to ask Graham, the owner of the store, a few questions regarding the store which he very kindly answered.

Graham inherited the shop from his mother who had opened it. Before Allsorts, Graham's mom had some other little shops here and there which she would run but those stores were not going as well so she closed them and started Allsorts, which is still thriving today.

Jeanninne, Graham's partner, stays in the upstairs room to do her knitting peacefully. That room is Jeanninne's space where she does knitting jobs. Graham told me how her knitting skills are really good, which is a big reason why people keep going to their shop and it keeps the shop running.

Everything you knit is made using different patterns. In AllSorts, there is a big binder full of knitting patterns to make blankets, baby clothes, scarves... the knitting patterns are the most popular items they sell at the store.



Photo by Vik Chandra and Shaun Hill



Photo by Phillip Parnell

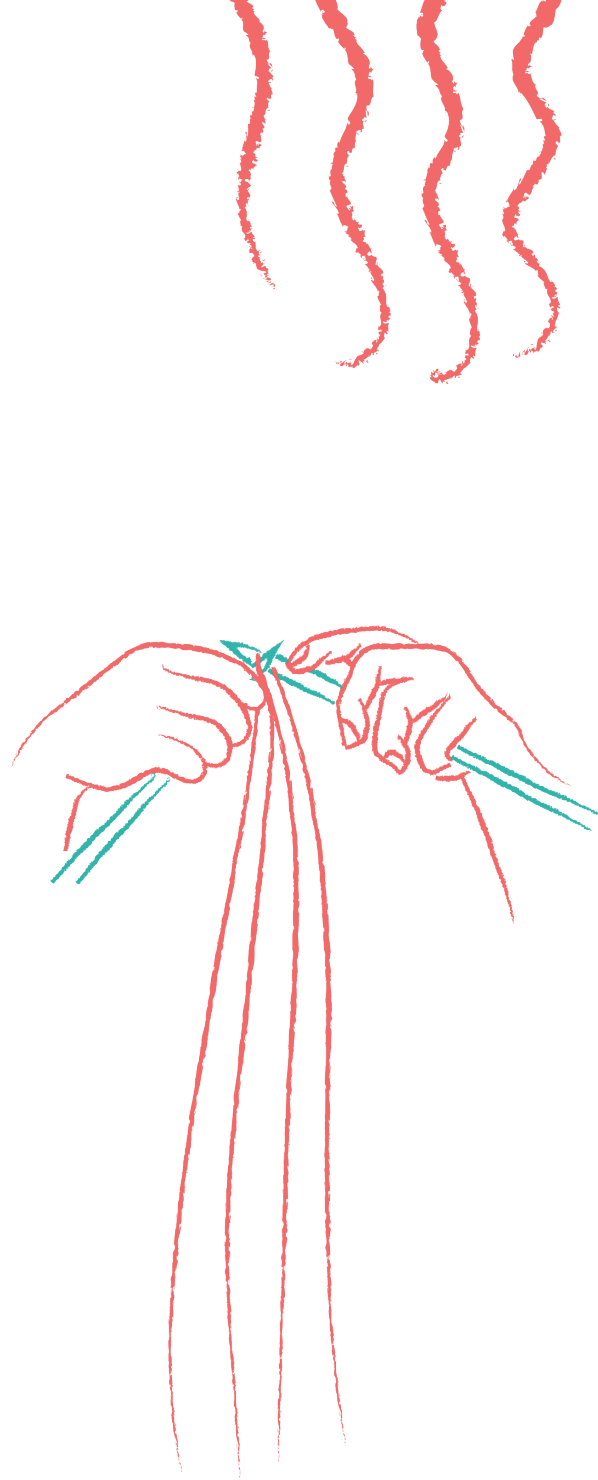


Photo by Phillip Parnell

The customers come in to look at the album and then buy the ones they want. Graham says there are a lot of funny stories that go around regarding the strange things people enjoy knitting, for example, the mythical 'willy warmer'! Another thing he has seen knitted is a dolls' house. He said that you can knit anything you like from something standard like a blanket to something that no one would think of, like funny undergarments.

The shop has managed to survive so many years and is still going strong for many reasons. Graham is very kind and patient, which makes the shop feel very inviting to the customers. He treats everyone the same, so no one feels left out when they visit. Graham's friendliness was very clear when I was interviewing him. Whenever he got a bit busy with customers, his colleagues started talking to me about Graham being a kind man; they praised him with compliments showing how much they love spending time in the shop with him. Thanks to the bonds that Graham has built, he manages to help keep the community connected and himself connected to the customers. Also, Graham and his colleagues listen to customers and make sure to sell things from specific brands, so that customers can come in and find what they like.

It was clear from my interview that Graham, Jeanninne and their colleagues love working at the store. The relationship they have built with each other and with the community is so strong that each one of them is ready to shower the other in praise whenever they get the opportunity, which is very beautiful to see.



The New Free Library

By Aliza Uddin

When asked what comes to mind when we hear the term 'library', too often we picture a crumbling ruin of columns and a wealth of archaic history with nothing modern to offer. In reality, they are the vital institutions that preserve our human fondness for learning. From plays written by William Shakespeare to poems by the Romantic, Percy Shelley, comedy by David Walliams to novels by Jacqueline Wilson, libraries across the country cater to all ages and interests. However, despite the quality of information and intellectual community they provide, they continue to diminish in popularity among younger generations. This issue has encouraged Wednesbury Library's pragmatic scheme to tackle the dwindling interest in visiting your nearest library, whether you're an enthusiast of the classics or an inspector of the future. With a 20-million pound drop in public funding from March of 2020, libraries in the UK have restricted opportunities to modernise. If public services don't have the resources to cater to the changing population, it is only reasonable that this audience would slowly falter. Lockdown provoked by Covid-19 has reduced the physical influx of all generations in national libraries; in the recovery that we are now in it is essential to keep our communities connected through preserving our historic buildings. Let's start in Wednesbury.

One element that distinguishes Wednesbury Library from those across the country is its outstanding efforts of preservation. From its opening in 1878, under the inconspicuous name of the 'New Free Library', the building has withstood over a century of weathering, with evidence of its longevity being visible in its architecture and interior balustrade. Its importance to the community was as relevant throughout the 20th century as it is today, acting as Wednesbury's centerpoint of both academic and social discussion.

The Library's youth club – held on Mondays and Wednesdays weekly – provides a space of relaxation for Wednesbury's teens; play, talk and reading sessions appeal to an even younger age range, with parents and toddlers gathering to develop language skills and share the simple joys of reading. As I had the opportunity to interact with one of these sessions, it was exciting to hear children – whether they be reading on the lap of a parent, knocking over towers of building blocks or talking earnestly to the child beside them – immersing themselves in a community whose strength of unity was something like a blanket on that cold day.

But the Library doesn't solely encourage reading: it offers arts and crafts clubs for those among the community with a more creative flair. To appeal to the constituents of its community, the

Library is now hosting a mehndi group on Thursday mornings, where people can gather to try their hand at the complex art with the guidance of professionals. Ethnicity and age may be barriers which can divide a community in other areas; in Wednesbury it is these wondrous differences that keep us thriving. Something extraordinary to note here is the Library's ability to adapt with the changing nature of the people that it is surrounded by, with plans to implement more activities to its diverse schedule being discussed.

Gaps in the teenage age group was a matter which I discussed with Rob, an employee of six years at Wednesbury Library. Clubs and activities have been designed by the Library in the form of mental health groups and youth groups, both appealing to Wednesbury's younger generation and the 28.3% of adults in the West Midlands who struggle with their mental health. Regular reading groups are welcome to all ages, where discussions can be held on book preferences, plots and themes. Rob discussed the benefits of Wednesbury Library's interactive approach to the community, stating the importance of "somewhere to go" and "meeting new people" through "stimulating experiences", all of which are essential to supporting teens' development as well as that of the elderly.



But what can the Library do better? Though it is already hosting a wealth of activities for the Wednesbury community, one thing that might enhance its presence is a book fair.

Celebrating emerging voices within Wednesbury and praising pre-existing ones is an effective way to provoke interaction from the community; all ages and backgrounds could gather and honour a unified passion for literature. Inviting more local authors and artists, as they have done for the Wednesbury Literature Festival, would inspire an emerging generation and open a space for discussion, as well as insight into the largely opaque and seemingly unattainable creative industries. Holding more evening events may appeal to a younger demographic who are otherwise occupied with studies and/or work during the day. These are just a few ways in which the Library might reach new audiences.

From my visits to the Library it is clear to see that it prioritises the comfort of its visitors. Staff offer hot teas and coffees and computers and TVs are available, crafting an environment of warmth and embodying the compassion of the community. The Library is indeed an institution of learning, but it also supports the lesser appreciated job searches, citizen's advice and ultimately supports local lives. These factors – and their importance to a cohesive community – are often understated in libraries in large cities but are key to Sandwell's libraries. With this knowledge, it is safe to say that Wednesbury Library distinguishes itself as a place that deserves credit for its brilliant work in supporting the town's literary and social welfare.



Photo by Phillip Parnell

Wednesbury Literature Festival



It was great to see so many faces at Wednesbury Library's Literature festival, which ran from 1-14 October 2022. Over two weeks, there were 14 events and a total of 477 people from all ages attended. We celebrated the rich literary scene of Wednesbury with talks from incredible authors, storytelling events, local history, comedy theatre and music. Workshops were also available for aspiring writers, led by Suzan Spence and Rachel Sambrooks, providing development opportunities for the next generation of writers. The atmosphere throughout the Festival was full of excitement and warmth; events invited participation from audiences, making people feel welcome.

Talks were given by the authors Gina Maddison, David Tristram, Phillipa Ashley and Mike Gayle. Gina Maddison spoke about her books 'The Girl from Guildford Street' (2018), and 'Tales of Guildford Street' (2020), which share her experiences of growing up in Birmingham council houses and back-to-backs and the journey that led her to writing. Writer, journalist and former agony uncle Mike Gayle, whose book 'All The Lonely People' (2020) was shortlisted for the British Book Awards Book of the Year, spoke about his work and gave some insight into his books through moving readings.



Photo by Phillip Parnell

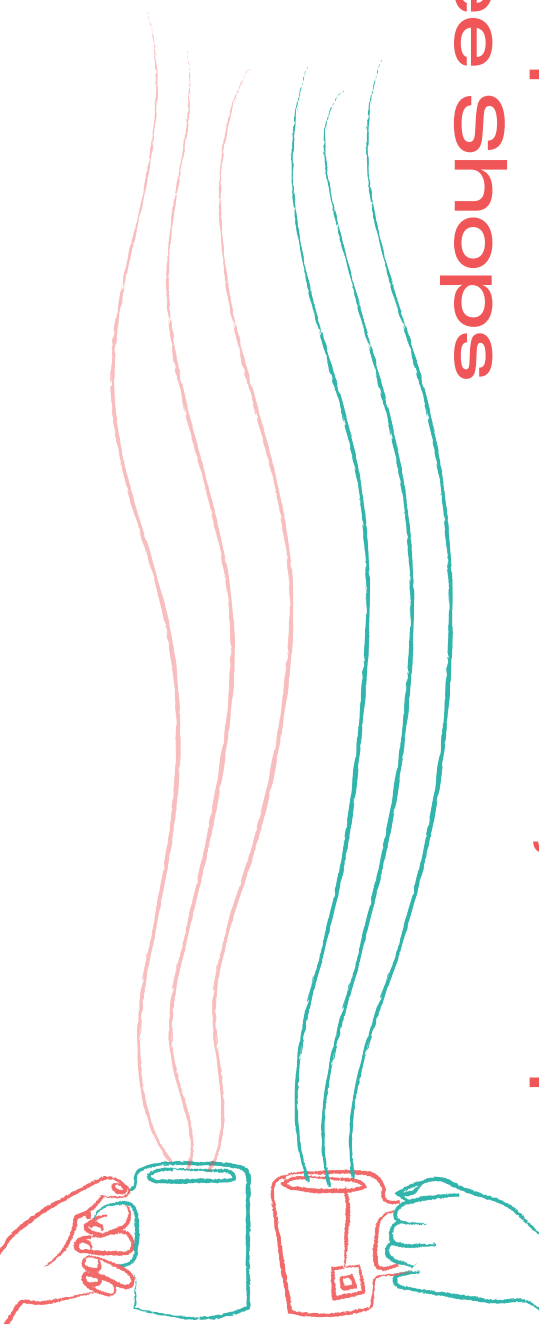
Performers drew on the lively song and oral storytelling history of the area, animating long forgotten tales for audiences young and old. Singer and storyteller Billy Spakemon performed songs from the Black Country, sharing his interest in the links between voice and lived histories. Local historian Ian Bott explored Olden Wednesbury through a performative talk, as well as entertaining audiences with gruesome tales of Black Country murders. Dialect poet Brendan Hawthorne shared spoken word and song that engaged with Wednesbury's myths and legends. Teachers from the schools who attended reported: "Local History is only touched on in schools so we all learnt lots today"; "Our first visit to a theatre as usually prices are out of our reach"; "Brilliant to bring culture to our doorstep and it's free!"

Thanks to all the participating venues, the library staff and to everyone who attended. Venues were: Wednesbury Library, Wednesbury Town Hall, The Wesley Centre and St Bartholomew's Church. Organisers Jackie and Pauline reflected that hosting the Festival across different venues in Wednesbury helped them reach audiences that wouldn't have normally attended these activities in the Library, and that it was a great opportunity for the Library to collaborate with other organisations in the town. Collaborative and joyful events such as this strengthen the networks between the integral community spaces and venues that have so long supported our communities. We can't wait to see what the Festival will bring next time round in 2023!



Photo by Phillip Parnell

The Importance of local, independent Coffee Shops



Over the past couple of years, we have witnessed the rise of large corporations, often at the expense of small high street businesses. Huge retailers, selling everything under one roof and undercutting the prices of local stores, markets, and businesses. We can also see a similar trajectory when it comes to local, independent coffee stores and cafes. Chains like Starbucks, Costa and Café Nero are just a few that come to mind that are dominating the industry. However, can these stores ever replace the need for local and independently run businesses?

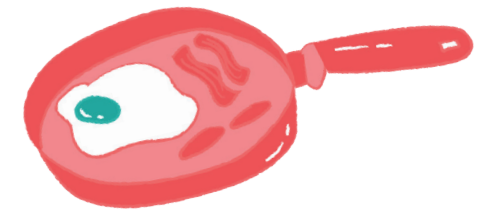
Local eating spots serve as important spaces within communities. Hubs to interact with your fellow neighbour and establish communal bonds. This community-feel that local stores provide is central to the small, quaint town of Wednesbury. Located within the borough of Sandwell that borders Birmingham, Wednesbury remains one of the few towns that has still managed to retain a host of independent stores, cafés and coffee shops, amongst which The Vintage Tea Room & Cafe is a key spot, with its fresh home-cooked meals and friendly atmosphere.

Another cafe it is home to is Junction 9 ¾, the Wizard themed coffee house that draws its inspiration from the Harry Potter series. Coincidentally, located near Junction 9 off the M6, around three quarters of a mile up Wood Green Road. Harry Potter fans Jennie Bentley and Ashley Hodgkins opened the doors of their coffee house in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the difficult timing, the community of Wednesbury welcomed the family-run business with open arms. Whilst they were initially unable to provide eat-in services due to the lockdown restrictions, the first couple of weeks saw an influx of customers.

Daily queues of people wanting to order, as well as selling out on pre-order boxes. They currently hold a 4.5 star rating on Tripadvisor with one customer describing it as 'An absolute gem. Brilliantly decorated, great lunches, amazing cakes and superb drinks'.

To add to this, Wednesbury has recently welcomed a new café, Monas. A name inspired by the owner's Nan who used to moan a lot! This place is described by the locals as a 'classic greasy café, so you know what to expect'. Despite only being open for six months, the business has picked up quickly. Many of the current customers are construction workers working on extending the tram line, with their most popular item on the menu being a fry-up.

The places where we eat breakfast and stop to rest are really important. Without our support it could be not too long until independent local cafes are unable to cope with the competition large chains pose. The town of Wednesbury is a classic example of a community who supports independents. However, it extends beyond this; they actually prefer them, which is why these cafes have managed to stay open and thrive unlike some other small businesses.



The Victorian Fortune-Telling Doll

By Shazeda Begum

Lilia, a nervous young journalist goes to Wednesbury to find inspiration for a journal piece she's writing. In this small town, she finds inspiration in its local museum and becomes fascinated with a Victorian Fortune Telling Doll. After learning about rumours that the fortunes of this doll came true, including the tragic death of the museum's old caretaker, Lilia is determined to find out more. But will her curiosity take her down a dangerous path?

Lilia stepped onto her platform at the tram stop and looked around. She'd never been to the town of Wednesbury before and the idea of exploring a new place by herself made her anxious. Pulling out her phone, she searched 'places to go to in Wednesbury'. "There's got to be something around here", she muttered to herself. After a few minutes of scrolling, she saw a museum six minutes away from the tram stop. "Yes!" Lilia loved museums: they were quiet, you could walk through them alone and people didn't bother you.

She began to make her way to the museum and pulled up a document on her phone. The reason she was exploring this new town was because she was doing some research for a local publication. Lilia had been writing for as long as she could remember and was beginning her journey as a journalist so, when this opportunity came up to write for a local magazine, she decided to take it. There was one slight issue: she didn't like talking to people. The idea of speaking to people brought up anxiety, stress and overthinking. Irrational thoughts arose to the surface and she would freeze. But if she was going to continue down this path, she needed to overcome this gnawing anxiety.

It was that time of the year when the cold started to bite. Passers-by walked briskly with their hands in their pockets. Lilia was warm in her thick, brown teddy-bear coat. It was mildly busy but not crowded for a Saturday afternoon. When she finally reached her destination, she stood in front of a row of old, Victorian-style buildings side-by-side. The big, green oak doors of the museum were snuggled between a post office and a building with the words 'Wednesbury Art Gallery and Museum' written on the top. She made her way inside and was greeted by an elderly man at the front desk.



"Um hello, is there an admission fee?", Lilia asked.

"Come again?", the elderly man asked, cupping his right ear.

Rubbing her hands nervously, she repeated, "Do I need to pay?".

"No, not at all. The two rooms behind you are open and there's a gallery upstairs. There are another two rooms upstairs too so you can't get lost", he explained.

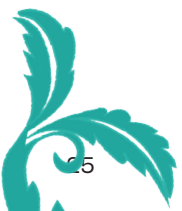
She tried to listen for other people in the museum but it seems she was their only visitor. The idea that she was the only one in this museum comforted her, like she was the main character in an abandoned mansion of curiosities.

"Yes, thank you", Lilia replied, feeling awkward and wanting this conversation to be done, "and when do you close?".

"We close at 2pm but it shouldn't take you long to see our rooms. I'd recommend that you start with our toys exhibition just behind you, people love that room."

She checked her phone and saw she only had forty minutes to look around. She hastily shuffled to the room behind her named, 'Toys through the Years'. Lilia grew up with toys in every corner of her house when she was younger so when she walked into this toy exhibition, nostalgia hit like a ton of bricks. The exhibition featured toys from as early as the 1600s. They were displayed in glass cabinets and each one was labelled with its respective time period. There were Nintendos, old teddy bears, rocking horses, card games, dolls and board games. She admired the old Teletubbies lined up next to each other, remembering her own Teletubby that she owned during simpler times.

She walked around the room looking at the other cabinets, eventually coming across a cabinet labelled '1800s' which was full of Victorian-style toys. Lilia hummed happily to herself enjoying this time on her own. Her eyes scurried over the details of a rocking horse and a dolls' house when, suddenly, they fell upon what looked like a small skirt. She crouched down for a better view and saw that it belonged to a doll. Lilia noticed her miniature, white head popping out from a red petticoat and two peach-coloured dots on her face showing blushing cheeks. She wore a little bonnet and, in one hand, she held a tweed basket whilst in the other, three broomsticks. But it was the skirt which caught Lilia's eye. She'd never seen a skirt in this style before. Each pleat was made out of individual papers in muted colours of reds, browns, blues and greens. Curiously, she read the description next to the doll:



'Victorian Fortune Telling Doll – the dress of pleated paper has a fortune written on each pleat. A pleat would be opened each day and that will tell the reader their fortune. This particular doll was donated to the museum by Sally Best.'

"Sally Best?", Lilia thought to herself.

The elderly man from the front desk walked in to check on her. "Get everything you needed?"

Lilia jumped in surprise, nearly tripping over her coat. "Yes, yes, I really like this exhibition", she replied as she stood up.

"Oh, didn't mean to scare you", he said, "I just wanted to tell you that I'll be locking up in around 5 minutes".

Lilia's eyes widened. "It's already been 40 minutes?" She fumbled for her phone and indeed, it was nearly 2pm.

"Lost track of time, eh?", the elderly man chuckled: "Well, don't blame you, I like to come in here and spend time looking, always find something new".

"Uh...", Lilia fumbled.

She wanted to know more about the doll but also wanted to leave as quickly as possible. She thought about the story and steeled her nerves,

"What can you tell me about this doll?"

His eyes followed to where she was pointing in the glass cabinet,

"Ah, a small thing, you could easily miss it. We don't know much about it but she's been in the museum for years, long before this exhibition was created".

"I've never seen one before", Lilia wondered aloud.

"Yes, because they're extremely rare. The fragility of the paper means they don't last very long so it's a miracle this one's survived."

"It almost looks brand new, as if it hasn't been touched? Who's Sally Best?"

"She was the wife of William Best, he was the caretaker of the museum for a long time. But he died in 1941. Suicide,"

"Oh. How tragic", Lilia solemnly replied. She nodded at the man and made her way towards the door.

"You know, there's rumours that the fortunes from this doll actually came true."

She stopped in her tracks and looked back at him, intrigued by his statement, "What do you mean, 'came true'?"

"Yes indeed. In fact, I can share something with you, to help you with your story. I'm not meant to give museum property to people but you seem trustworthy enough. You'll just need to return it when you're done – follow me", he says gesturing with his hands.

She follows the man to a room near the front of the museum. Curious, she wondered what he could possibly give to her.

"Ladies first", he gestures for her to enter.

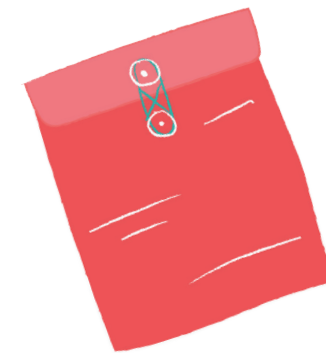
She enters, into a room covered with shelves of old books, papers and artefacts. Not knowing where to look, her eyes followed the elderly man who was looking for something amongst the mess.

"This is where we keep the rest of the stuff. We haven't sorted through it yet if you're wondering why it looks like a bomb exploded in here", he says walking towards her.

In his hands, he held two, brown with age, creased envelopes.

"A month ago, when we began sorting through this mess, I found these two letters written by Sally Best. One is addressed to her son, Edward, and another that wasn't addressed to anyone. Take them and see what you can find out. Just make sure to return them when you're finished. Quite frankly, I'm interested in what you take from them."

She found her hands reaching out to the letters



To read more of the story, visit: bit.ly/the-victorian-fortune-doll

Shazeda Begum

I've been surrounded by books for as long as I can remember. I've been reading books since she was young, writing is an area that I've only dabbled in a few times. It's only since graduating from University in 2021 with a Bachelor's degree in English that I have considered developing my writing skills to explore what it's like to be the author rather than the reader. I also love watching films in my spare time, journaling, going to the gym, and tuning into myself through yoga.

Joi Foote

I am an English and Philosophy student at the University of Birmingham. I love all things reading and writing and have recently had the opportunity to rediscover my passion for creative writing through a class I am taking at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago. Although I try to refrain from voicing a favourite anything, currently I would say my favourite book is Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin. Outside of my studies, I enjoy going on hikes, listening to music and travelling.

Jasandeep Kaur Gill

Hey! I'm Jasandeep, I'm from India but I was born and raised in Greece and came to the UK when I was 16. I am currently an IT student at Sandwell College. After I graduate from Sandwell College I will go to University and continue my studies. I started writing for the We Are Wednesbury magazine when I was 17. I enjoy reading books, playing video games, listening to music, and writing. I can also speak Greek, English and Punjab.

Aliza Uddin

Hi! My name is Aliza Uddin. I am a 16 year old aspiring author who also hopes to study Law in the future. Some of my all-time favourite books are Hamnet; (Maggie O Farrell), & The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (C.S. Lewis) and Unrest (Michelle Harrison). Besides writing I love to read historical fiction, play guitar, and cook; sometimes all at once!

Hafizaah Uddin

Hello, my name is Hafizaah Uddin, and I am currently 15 years old. I enjoy reading and writing and my favourite subject is English. My favourite genre to read is most definitely fiction and particularly romance. For me, I enjoy writing and reading as it feels like an escape from the world and truly a place where my imagination can run free. The experience of writing for the citizen journalist programme has been extraordinary and has helped to develop my inner writing skills and passion and also interacting with people who had similar interests to me.

Thank you to everyone for their wonderful, and valued, contributions to the 2022-23 We are Wednesbury Cultural Programme.

We are Wednesbury Working Group

Comprised of local residents, groups, organisations and businesses: Knights of Wednesbury; Morrisons Community Champion; Public Health Wednesbury; Riverside Housing Association; South Staffs Water Community Hub; Vintage Tea Rooms; Wednesbury Leisure Centre; Wednesbury Library; Wednesbury Museum & Art Gallery; Wednesbury Neighbourhood Partnership; Wednesbury Neighbourhood Police; The Albion Foundation; Ideal for All; Friends of Brunswick Park.

Citizen Journalists

Shazeda Begum, Joi Foote, Jasandeep Kaur, Aliza Uddin, Hafizaah Uddin and to Gaby Songui (Windswept Workshops) who mentored this year's cohort of young people.

We are Wednesbury Lantern Procession

Artists: Karl Lewis and Sam Hale
Performers: Bostin' Brass Band and Helter Skelter LED stilt-walkers
Lantern-makers: The Place of Welcome Craft Group, Friar Park Youth Club, Wednesbury Museum Community Art Group, 617 Sandwell Air Scouts, The Way to Wellbeing group, The Crafternoon Group, the Knights of Wednesbury, Wednesbury Rainbows, Guides and Brownies, Wednesbury Neighbourhood Police and Ideal for All

Art in the Community Gardens

Artists: Vik Chandla, Shaun Hill; and Gary O'Dowd, Alex Vann (Real Arts Workshops)
Participants: groups who attend the Barlow Road Community Gardens (an allotment initiative run by Ideal for All)

What's In Store

Creative Producers: Black Country Touring
Performers: Ben Cornish, Curious Cargo, Crows Nest Theatre, Brendan Hawthorne, Vimal Korpai, Lonna Meehan, Derek Nisbet, Rainbow Faces, Suzan Spence, Top Bananas

Wednesbury Literature Festival

Organisers: Pauline Hatton and Jacqueline Hawkins (Wednesbury Library)
Performers and speakers: Phillipa Ashley, Ian Bott, Roy Forbes, Mike Gayle, Brendan Hawthorne, Gina Maddison, Roald Dahl and the Imagination Seekers, Rachel Sambrooks, Billy Spakemon, Suzan Spence, David Tristram

Stewards

Keaton Barton, Amanveer Bath, Pally Bath, Grace Done, Kelly Hadley, Lynn Hawthorne, Katy Kilroy, Rosa Lewis, Ruby Lewis, Steve Vincent, Ash Walker, Herbert Walters, Abigail Wright

Photography

Phillip Parnell

Filming

Michael Ellis and his team

Magazine and graphic design

Sharonjit Kaur Sutton

Thank you to Sandwell Council and Historic England for funding the Cultural Programme and making We Are Wednesbury possible.

About Multistory

Multistory is a community arts organisation that has been based in Sandwell for 17 years and the people and place shape our work. We work with a wide range of communities, creatives and partners to reimagine the local area, platform under-represented voices and inspire creativity and social change. Our programme of participatory arts projects, workshops, talks and events takes place in libraries, community centres and indoor and outdoor public spaces.

www.multistory.org.uk

Follow us @multistory

www.multistory.org.uk