

ROMANY REAGAN

## Unlocking Heritage Stories

### How the Use of Audio Walks as Creative Public Engagement Expands Access to Site-Based Heritage to a Diverse and Globalised Audience

#### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present an analysis of both the process and the outputs of crafting digital moments of interaction as part of a public engagement plan within heritage sites. For my case study, I use the four audio walks I created as the project element of my practice-based PhD thesis, 'Abney Rambles: Performing Heritage as an Audio Walking Practice in Abney Park Cemetery', alongside the subsequent audio walks I have created since the completion of that project.<sup>1</sup>

Abney Park cemetery is located in the north London community of Stoke Newington in the United Kingdom. I created my Abney Rambles series of audio walks with the aim of facilitating community engagement with Abney Park cemetery by offering audio walking journeys presented as four different perspectives on the space. My audio walking practice is presented as one part of the Abney Park Trust's various community engagement initiatives. Abney Park is not a typical cemetery – it is both a site housing grief monuments as well as a community space. The park exists between and within these two definitions. Members of the public who are not familiar with Abney Park, the complex heritage that it holds, or the year-round events calendar organised by the Abney Park Trust, might not think of the cemetery as their local nature reserve and heritage site. I created my audio walks with the aim to widen public perception of this important community space.

I will begin this chapter with background context on my site of research and my methodology for researching and creating these audio walks. After completion of my PhD project, I continued to make four more audio walks in other locations around London: for the LIFT Theatre Festival, the Museum of the Home,<sup>2</sup> and the Bloomsbury Festival. These additional four audio walks, alongside the original four, are included in my demographic data presented towards the end of this chapter. I conclude with my analysis of this case study, reviewing the successes and the

- 1 My research methodology is grounded in psychogeography with a focus on a constructivist view of heritage spaces and stories. Due to the subjective nature of both my research and audio practice, I will often be presenting a first-person perspective and using 'I' narration throughout this chapter.
- 2 'Meditation on Mourning' was recorded in 2018 before the Geffrye Museum rebranded as the Museum of the Home. For clarity, I reference its current name.

shortcomings of this kind of audience interaction, in the end hopefully offering a helpful resource for practitioners wishing to engage in digital heritage interactions.

## Why Digital?

The short answer to the question “why digital?” is greater audience reach. In addition to creating digital audio experiences, I also lead live-guided tours. When I am leading a tour through a cemetery, I can comfortably lead up to 25 visitors. When leading an urban tour, this comfortability cap drops to 15 visitors. The ability to lead more visitors through a cemetery space is much the same as it would be for any controlled heritage space. Whether a cemetery or a stately home, the environment is fairly predictable, controlled by site management, and usually with few distractions. By contrast, an urban tour has motor traffic and public roads to contend with, as well as other pedestrians and noise distractions, all of which contribute to a reduced ability to convey information to visitors who are more than a few feet away from you. With audio, the potential reach has no set cap of participants.

The other benefits with the audio walk format are that digital visitors can take the walk on their own schedule, have the information right in their ear, and can rewind or pause when necessary. In addition to this, once a walk is recorded, it can continue to offer public engagement opportunities long after the practitioner has moved on to other projects. As an investment, after the initial outlay of time and resources, the audio walk can continue to offer engagement exponentially with no further investment needed. This is in contrast to in-person talks and tours, which require time and resources with every engagement event.

The motivation for my use of technology with my practice was not one of driving distancing intermediaries between visitors and the space of the cemetery, but rather the opposite – an effort towards increasing the numbers of potential visitors to the Abney Park, and increased personal engagement with the space when they get there. Phil Smith has found that many contemporary psychogeographers have been doing their work online, rarely (or sometimes never) visiting the site themselves and working on the ground and within the space for their craft. Whereas, as he notes, the ‘romantic occultists’, with their love of history, have kept ‘true’ to the psychogeographic ethos of needing the ‘geo’ with the ‘psycho’ (SMITH 2015). This is what I have done with Abney Rambles. Geoff Nicholson laments the distancing that some contemporary technologies place between the walkers and taking a walk (NICHOLSON 2008). This form of mediation appears to take the place of actual interactions in space, as opposed to sitting alongside these interactions. I use technology as a tool with my walking practice, however everything available online is to further the experience of walking within the space of Abney Park cemetery.

One drawback to my method of practice lies within the disembodied audio format, which does not allow for a give and take between myself and visitors. If they

have questions, I am not there to answer them or engage in debate with contrary viewpoints on my readings of the space. In this way, live performance interactions with heritage sites can offer a platform for dialogue and more fruitful relationship building than through an audio format. However, the way in which an audio format succeeds where a live performance cannot is the personal, intimate nature of the experience that is designed to be taken alone. As my audio walks are offered as a solo practice to visitors, they are not at the discretion of a facilitator's calendar and timetable, and the psychological barrier to entry is low, as there is no fear of embarrassment from interactive performers, which could make some visitors shy away from live heritage performances. The audio walks are free to download, so anyone with access to a device that can play audio can take them, so there is no entrance fee. All of these aspects of an independent audio walking practice, I hope, create a comfortable and inclusive method of interacting with heritage space for people who might otherwise feel heritage events are not for them.

### **Site of Research: Abney Park as a Community Space**

Abney Park is a 32-acre nature reserve located in the north London community of Stoke Newington. Founded in 1840, it is one of London's 'Magnificent Seven' Victorian garden cemeteries. As the twentieth-century progressed, Abney Park fell into increasing disrepair, culminating in almost complete ruin due to rampant vandalism in the 1970s. Abney Park has since been sensitively restored back to a stabilised heritage site. The Abney Park Trust celebrates Abney Park's important history, while opening up the park to contemporary uses. As the grounds on which Abney Park cemetery now stand, as well as the surrounding community of Stoke Newington, were firmly established as Dissenter<sup>3</sup>, Abney Park cemetery was originally created as non-conformist and non-denominational in keeping with the community whom it would serve. Abney Park is the only cemetery in the Magnificent Seven family of Victorian garden cemeteries to be unconsecrated and non-denominational. The centre chapel in Abney Park is Grade II listed as the oldest non-denominational chapel in Europe. There are no demarcated regions within the cemetery for different faiths, therefore the interred are buried with no separation. While the vast majority of graves in Abney Park are those of non-Anglican Protestants, there are also Jewish, Catholic, Unitarian, and atheist burials all housed within the cemetery. Due to the Dissenter history of the original grounds, the surrounding community, and Abney Park cemetery itself, the burials within Abney Park reflect this diversity and inclusivity, and the Abney Park Trust's community outreach efforts further this inclusive feel and ambition. Taking into account Abney

3 'Dissenters' are people whose religious beliefs or practises do not conform to the Church of England.

Park's Dissenter ethos, I crafted my audio walks with a secular focus and avoidance of religious explorations.

Abney Park does still occasionally perform new burials, but today the dead can only be interred in plots that were purchased, or inherited, long ago. It is not officially a working cemetery, having closed for purchase of plots for new burial in 1974. Demographic data sourced from a visitor use survey conducted by Hackney Council, who own and care for the property, in 2017 revealed that of the visitors who come to Abney Park, only 9 % reported they were there to visit a grave.<sup>4</sup> This presents a different picture of visitor engagement with the space than one might expect from its designation as a 'cemetery' and should be taken into account when crafting public engagement initiatives.

### **Research Methodology: Occult Psychogeography and 'Doors of Perception' into 'Borderland Worlds'**

My audio walks were created as an invitation to expand perceptions of what a Victorian garden cemetery can mean to visitors on a personal level, and to the community as a public space. Through the course of my time spent in Abney Park, I discovered four layers of heritage that coexist within the space: nature reserve, 'earth mystery', outdoor archive, and mourning heritage. I created the series of Abney Rambles audio walks with the aim of facilitating community engagement with the cemetery by offering audio walking journeys presented as four different perspectives on how to view the space. I found my method of framing these disparate layers in Abney Park through my research into the literary heritage of Stoke Newington. Through this research, I discovered the work of the British Decadence author and avid London walker Arthur Machen, whose short story *N* most informed the method by which I frame my discoveries of layered meanings in Abney Park and conceive of these layers as operating within the same 'space' as one another, but not the same 'place'. Borrowing a conceptual framework from Machen, each layer of heritage that I discovered through my research into Abney Park I conceived of as a 'borderland world', with each audio walk I created positioned as a 'door of perception' to access these various borderland worlds.

Machen's novels and his nonfiction works are comprised of stream-of-consciousness notes on walking within London intermixed with autobiography, Machen writes of a hidden world behind the commonplace world we walk through day to day. The very accessibility of wonder behind and within the commonplace was his recurring area of philosophical study:

4 <https://consultation.hackney.gov.uk/parks-green-spaces/abney-park-improvements/results/abneyparkusersurveyreport.pdf> (accessed 23/8/2023).

If we are to see the vision of the Grail, however dimly, it must no longer be in some vaulted chamber in a high tower of Carbonnek, over dreadful rocks and the foam of a faery sea. For us, the odour of the rarest spiceries must be blown in through the Venetian blinds in some grey, forgotten square in Islington (MACHEN 1924, 77–78).

Machen wrote the above in *The London Adventure or the Art of Wandering* in 1924 – eleven years before he would further develop the concept of a hidden ‘magical’ world in the ordinary suburb of Stoke Newington in his story *N*. After reading *N*, I began to investigate the space of Abney Park as a series of otherworldly, coexisting borderlands, with each layer of meaning within the cemetery sitting right on top of and next to each other, identifiable with a simple shift in perception, opening a ‘door of perception’ to these other layers of meaning. My audio walking practice is an endeavour to engender in the listening walker a prepared eye with which to see hidden worlds and to open different doors of perception. With regards to these hidden worlds existing in the commonplace, it is the very seeming ‘normality’ of Stoke Newington that lends Machen’s *N* its secret garden aspect. To discover hidden layers in an ordinary suburb suggests that magical worlds are not the sole purview of Gothic towers or enchanted forests – that ‘magick’<sup>5</sup> could be everywhere.

I have created my audio walking practice to be an embodied experience of a selection of layered meanings within Abney Park, which are reflective of the tapestry-like nature of interwoven spatial and temporal layers within the cemetery space. My audio walks are not put forward as ‘heritage walks’ because they are creative interpretations, not a recorded history. The type of engagement I offer is a constructivist rather than a positivist heritage experience (COPELAND 2006).

The starting point for selecting which ‘borderland worlds’ I wished to interrogate in my walking practice began with walking through the cemetery and noting what different aspects were important definitions of the space – what differentiated Abney Park cemetery from its surrounding streets or other nearby parks? Three distinct aspects of the cemetery were initially apparent: the diverse ecosystem of the woodland makes up its nature reserve; the information on the gravestones creates an outdoor archive; and the existence of buried bodies, gravestones, and centre chapel all provide evidence of a heritage of mourning. With these three distinct aspects of Abney Park in mind, I began my research, which then revealed other aspects of Abney Park that could not be uncovered by a casual visit to the cemetery: that of its literary heritage through its location in Stoke Newington, and that the northern boundary of the cemetery follows the course of a buried river, the Hackney Brook.

My methodology for crafting my audio walking practice is rooted in psycho-geography. Through my research into the buried Hackney Brook river, Iain Sinclair’s

5 Magick spelled with a ‘k’ is a term used to differentiate occult concepts from performance magic.

investigations into London's buried rivers, and literary allusions to a mysterious 'otherworldly' aspect to Stoke Newington, my psychogeographical research led me to a literary heritage which links Stoke Newington and North London back through Arthur Machen, William Blake, and Thomas De Quincey. Stoke Newington's earth mystery/occult description by Iain Sinclair and Geoff Nicholson (themselves referencing Arthur Machen and Edgar Allan Poe) informed how I would structure these walks – as 'borderland worlds'. It is through this psychogeographical research into this literary heritage that my audio walking practice became grounded in occult psychogeography (COVERLEY 2008; NICHOLSON 2013; SINCLAIR 2013; SMITH 2010).

Occult psychogeography, as an area of study, grew out of a literary analysis of the ley-lines and hidden patterns of a reimagined mysticism – which is a very different ideological heritage than that of the anti-capitalist political interventions of the Situationist International brand of urban psychogeography. The occult method of psychogeographic practice is an internal process of discovery and analysis of space, rather than an external movement towards social change. The patterns studied and the worlds behind our everyday world that are explored are hidden, rather than the overt social ubiquity of oppressive pro-consumerist images ('spectacles') of capitalist culture (MCDONOUGH 2009; TRACEY 2014).

Occult psychogeography is personal in its analysis, and the artistic works it pays homage to can border on madness (or a flirtation with the appearance of madness). Perhaps it was the manifestations of drug use, in the case of Thomas De Quincey in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, and solitary wanderings, as with Arthur Machen, that created a fracture of perception and the feeling of existing in a liminal space between two worlds that defines their walking practices. Situationist psychogeography is first predicated on its communal participation, whereas occult psychogeography is predicated on a solitary practice.

## Space, Place, and Time

With my audio walks, I guide the listening walker through the various aspects that comprise the whole of Abney Park cemetery through an exploration of the many temporal and spatial layers that make up its unique diversity. Researching multiple meanings within space, I became interested in Tim Cresswell's theories of layers of memory, and how this might be applied to the ways in which life and death are sedimented in the cemetery and can be explored through moments of pause. Yi-Fu Tuan's theories on space and symbolisation offered an analysis of the symbolic complexities that illuminate the ways in which Abney Park carries symbolic meanings for mourners and community groups alike (CRESSWELL 2004; TUAN 1977).

Time features prominently throughout my walking practice. The concept of temporality is a recurring theme that I revisit with each layer of meaning that I investigate with my audio walks. A Victorian cemetery with current alternative uses

creates an experience that at once contains traces of the past and is also constantly moving towards the future. In this context, the anachronistic space of Abney Park is rooted in its time capsule nature in the midst of modern life. The invitation here is to widen our perception of the meaning of a particular place. Rather than restricting observations to the physical and tangible, the imagination is invited to engage in viewing the timeline of experience that Abney Park cemetery embodies: a date-stamped museum of grief, which doubles as a public community space. Cemetery spaces are socially produced places, where meanings are negotiated through social action. To interpret the symbols within the cemetery space, we need to understand it as a special place, separate from the ordinary or domestic sphere.

The walks I have crafted through Abney Park offer doors into possible borderland worlds, each weaving together a possible trajectory within the space and forming a narrative based on a nexus of throwntogetherness offered by specific points along the walk. The concepts of symbolisation, layers of memory, ‘contemporaneous multiple becomings’ (MASSEY 2005), and anachronistic space form the foundation on which I have built my walks. Woven together, each of these concepts has contributed to building a depth of understanding regarding the tapestry of perceptual possibilities within a cemetery space. With the disembodied audio format, I aim for the listening walker to experience a fragmentation of temporal awareness. Listening to a voice already from the past (whether that be a remove of weeks, or years) brings to the fore thoughts of the cemetery at once moving forward and backward through time. Audio journeys through the past, that are explored in the midst of present-day sights alongside anachronistic gravestones, are an artistic culmination of Abney Park’s multiple becoming – the full richness of which I have endeavoured to offer the listening walker as they move through the space.

## The Audio Walks

Before beginning my research into Abney Park cemetery, I did not know there was the buried Hackney Brook river along its north boundary. I had been a frequent visitor to Abney Park for four years, however I had never seen any indication of the Hackney Brook’s existence. This important feature of its formation is not advertised to visitors. There are no signs or posted information that there is a buried river there. It is a completely ignored and forgotten feature. This discovery of the buried Hackney Brook forming the north boundary of Abney Park brought my literary uncanny investigations of Stoke Newington full circle into the space of the cemetery itself.

Taking inspiration from Iain Sinclair’s walking practice methodology for crafting his literary explorations of space, I began walking in Abney Park looking for layers of meaning to be found there. Discovering that a buried river forms the north boundary of the cemetery, and reading Iain Sinclair’s earth mystery provocations

that this subverted waterway could be infusing the neighbourhood of Stoke Newington with thwarted energies, inspired me to write *Woodland Magick*, which takes a visitor to Abney Park through a door of perception into this Machenesque borderland world of unseen forces creating a sense of unease. This unease is borne of darkness: literal in the sense of subterranean, but figurative in terms of theme.

Learning about the hidden rivers of London fascinated me. I began to wonder about the Hackney Brook, what it looked like underground, I began to anthropomorphise its struggle and unfair treatment – from a beautiful river flowing in the open air, at times called ‘bucolic’, inspiring Isaac Watts to write his hymns upon its banks and city workers to escape the crowded city centre to build villas overlooking it – to then be buried ‘alive’ and turned into a sewer. I was filled with a rather strange level of sadness and empathy for a river so unappreciated and ruined. This emotional response towards the buried Hackney Brook, and descriptions of an otherworldly Stoke Newington by Poe, Machen, and Sinclair, coupled with my research into animistic folklore, led me to create a dark animistic folktale about the Hackney Brook river, which is the story told in *Woodland Magick*.<sup>6</sup> Exploration of possibilities within nonhuman agency and mindfulness led me to research animism for its possible artistic applications within my practice. This audio walk is my endeavour to give an imagined voice to the buried river, and offer new perspectives on the space of Abney Park cemetery as a place that was partially built over it. The Hackney Brook is where my study of occult literary heritage meets my site of practice.

My second audio walk that focuses on Abney Park as a nature reserve is *Woodland Networks*. While on the surface this audio walk appears to be a more traditional nature walk than *Woodland Magick*, *Woodland Networks* still guides the listening walker through a door of perception to see this ‘hidden’ borderland world. Although, as I explore in this audio walk, the agency of the natural world is not hidden at all, to those who would but see. Each nonhuman actant within Abney Park cemetery is living a hidden life that, through closer human observation, flowers into view. By way of visiting selected veteran trees mapped throughout the cemetery, *Woodland Networks* introduces underground mycorrhizal fungal networks, deadwood habitats, a history of fires, and various interactions between trees, stones, and humans in Abney Park as an invitation to reconceive mindfulness and agency within nature. Together, *Woodland Networks* and *Woodland Magick* offer visitors to Abney Park two different ways to approach and appreciate the intricate nonhuman ecosystem that is Abney Park as a nature reserve.

The motivation for writing *Thoughts on Mourning* came from what I first experience when I enter Abney Park. While the nature reserve is the most prominent physical feature encountered, my attention is first drawn to its gravestones. They offer clues into its history as a Victorian garden cemetery and the history of mourning

6 After completion of my thesis, I have since expanded the short story I wrote for *Woodland Magick* into a full-length play titled ‘Borderland’.



rituals that have taken place within its gates. My aim with *Thoughts on Mourning* was to introduce the ethos behind the structured practices of Victorian mourning to listening walkers by guiding them through the Victorian garden cemetery as an experience of a cultural site that embodies this Victorian concept of 'beauty in loss'. This audio walk is intended to explore the respect and care that went into creating Abney Park's monuments and its importance as a repository for cultural memory. The door of perception that *Thoughts on Mourning* opens for visitors is into the borderland world of Abney Park's Victorian garden cemetery beginnings. The audio walk addresses difficult death themes in the space of a garden cemetery to emphasise the Victorian approach to the fear of death – creating a peaceful space for remembrance through the longevity of stone and beauty of gardens.

My audio walk *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions* offers visitors to Abney Park cemetery one story that aims to animate the outdoor archive of the space. This audio walk shares the tumultuous love story of Frank and Susannah Bostock, by way of actor portrayal in the form of an audio play, ending at the couple's white marble sleeping lion headstone. In her analysis on the use of archives as a resource for piecing together the possible narratives of people who lived long ago, Carolyn Steedman gives a warning regarding what she terms 'the seductions of the archive', and the 'entrancing stories' that they contain, which do the work of the seducer. An entrancing story crafted by the researcher's imagination, from snippets found within an archive, is quite a different thing from the historical analysis that inspires it (STEEDMAN 2001). It is easy to be swept up in crafting an emotional, or at least meaningful, story from the information that is found. Viewed in that light, the audio walk that I have crafted from the archives is a product of this seduction, which is the seduction to flesh out the Bostocks' narrative from the frustratingly spare accounts available in the archive. The documents I had to work with (the ships logs of dates and names of trips to New York City; birth and death records; census reports; and the stark listing of grievances of physical abuse accounted by Susannah in her petition for judicial separation) all left me with many gaps to fill in order to craft a coherent narrative for my audio walk. Imagination is a key ingredient in both the crafting, and the experiencing, of my audio walks; and the interaction of imagination with the archive is what I have endeavoured to navigate with *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions* in particular. Crafting a narrative out of the archive is an act of imagination. Herein lies the difficult negotiation between the archive and the researcher; especially a researcher for whom the research becomes a creative project – here Steedman's reference to 'process' taking precedence over 'stuff' is most apparent. Most of the work of crafting *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions* was undertaken when the archive work was completed. The ideation and imagining become the bulk of the project.

There is a difference between writing 'historical fiction' and 'history writing'. This difference is highlighted by historian Arlette Farge, who asserts that the idea that a novelist (or, in my case, a performed audio story writer) resurrects the archive is actually a mistaken assumption. Farge describes this work (i.e., working

with archives to craft characters from people who actually lived, and working from details of their lives that have been actually recorded) as inevitably, despite the collection of all of these ‘facts’, a work of fiction (FARGE 2013). When researching people’s lives, there is a burden felt to do them justice, to tell their story fairly, even if it is indeed a ‘story’, and not ‘history writing’. The names, dates, steamer passage ledgers, and census records are ‘history’, but that is not what I wished to capture for *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions*. I did not wish to merely ‘write history’. The benefit and beauty of the opportunity presented by the medium of an audio walk, brought to ‘life’ by way of actor portrayal, lies in its possibility for emotional resonance.

I have crafted all four of my audio walks from disparate emotional worlds, all of which are, inevitably, personal. This infusion of my personal interpretation of facts within an emotional landscape is what transforms the work from a transcript of ‘history’ into an artistic mediation between the listening walker and the grave-stone archive in the cemetery. While I foreground my walk as an historical journey through the complicated love story of the Bostocks, it is, ultimately, as much my creative story as their life story. As Steedman points out, history does not have ‘ends’. Researchers can read the snippets of a life, and craft an arc and meaning from these traces, but from the lived point of view of the real historical persons at the time, there is just ‘life’. Things happen in succession, but not necessarily in any identifiable plot arc. To tell a story from a selection of facts and events is to sort the available information flotsam into a somewhat artificial construct and impose meaning. The goal of an historical writer is to fill the gaps in the archive, to tell the story of what isn’t there. With *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions*, I have crafted an audio journey of a possible history. As the Bostocks were real people who were fairly well known, there came with this particular audio walk a feeling of personal accountability to be as accurate as possible within my artistic interpretation.

Each of my audio walks *Thoughts on Mourning*, *Woodland Magick*, and *Woodland Networks* dip in and out of historical references, with the majority of the walking experience based on my artistic interpretations of their respective themes within the space of the cemetery and were made with a feeling of autonomy whilst crafting them. For *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions*, I scrupulously researched as much documentation of the lives of the Bostocks that was available to complete their story. Historical record is not an objective representation of the past, but rather a selection of objects that have been preserved for a variety of reasons. Gale and Featherstone echo this assessment in their research, stating that not only is no archive free of either ideology or the fluctuations of economics in its formation and operation, but that archives are also not stable in content (GALE/FEATHERSTONE 2011). Out of these many-layered mediations between a researcher and the original ‘truth’ of a story that the researcher struggles to uncover, the resulting interpretation can be nothing more substantial than that – a possible history. Conquering the ‘seduction of the archive’ lies in the blank spaces our imagination leaps to fill, and acknowledging these desires. Crafting *Love, Wrath, Death, Lions* was an exercise in navigating

between storytelling and restraint. It is with this audio walk that I manifest most fully Copeland's idea that in our endeavours to become heritage experts, at best we are 'heritage interpreters'.

## Heritage Engagement Applications

Visits to heritage sites over the last several decades have involved a more interpretive and interactive way of engaging with the past than simply a didactic single narrative of history. Visits have become less about the *object* and more about the *experience*: an encounter with a past that is brought to life (JACKSON/KIDD 2011). In an effort to engage visitors to Abney Park with the cemetery as a multidimensional community space, I offer my audio walks as a unique embodied experience of the space that invites a diverse reading of Abney Park's layered meanings and history, as opposed to reading it as only a repository of the dead. Through this mode of interaction, the *experience* of the space of the cemetery takes precedence over the *objects* of dead bodies and headstones. In this way, I position myself as a 'heritage interpreter', finding the layered meanings for possible readings of the space and offering my audio walks as stories of both the site of the cemetery in the past, but also as a selection of the meanings that it could hold for the community today and beyond. The choice of which stories to tell, and which meanings to research, crafts a subjective practice that takes a constructivist approach to community engagement. A constructivist approach to heritage interpretation, according to Copeland, simply suggests that we construct our own understandings of the world in which we live. This is positioned in contrast to a positivist approach that provides only one view of complex issues and presumes that there is a fixed place that the visitor must come to know (COPELAND 2006).

My goal has been to share my subjective reading of Abney Park as a selection of possible layers of meaning within a multitude of possible layers, which visitors can discover for themselves once the prompt towards imaginative reading of the cemetery has been provoked. Visitors to Abney Park will hopefully feel empowered to find their own creative readings of the space, once the formal 'cemetery' label has been subverted and 'permission' has been granted to enjoy a creative experience outside of socially scripted cemetery behaviours. From a constructivist perspective, the various layers of heritage I present should form a scaffolding to enable visitors to make their own constructions.

## Analysis of Data

After completion of the Abney Rambles audio walk project, I continued to make four more audio walks in other locations around London: in Tower Hamlets Cemetery for the LIFT Theatre Festival; through the Geffrye Almshouse gardens at the

Museum of the Home for London Craft Week; through St George's Gardens for the Bloomsbury Festival 2019; and a walking tour on the history of Spiritualism through Bloomsbury for Bloomsbury Festival 2020.

When I first started my PhD project, I created a Wordpress website where I documented my research, kept a photography blog, and hosted the audio walks all in one place. This was convenient for me, and helpful for the Abney Park Trust, but in hindsight it was not the best way to offer my content to a wider audience outside of direct linkbacks. When I began to create audio walks for other projects, I then discovered SoundCloud in 2019, which is where all of my audio walks are now available to the public for free all in one place.<sup>7</sup>

Because my audio walks were already available to the public for four years before I joined SoundCloud, the following demographic data is not a complete analysis of every listen. I have also received data from the Abney Park Trust that my audio walks page on their website has attracted 306 listens (as of writing). In addition, my audio walks were hosted on creative partners' SoundCloud pages during the Bloomsbury Festival.

The total number of listens for all of my audio walks combined is 1,246.

- 404 listens came from my personal SoundCloud page
- 306 listens came from the Abney Park Trust website
- 459 listens came from Bloomsbury Festival's SoundCloud page
- 77 listens came from Bloomsbury Radio's SoundCloud page

The way that both the SoundCloud platform and the Abney Park Trust website's backend analytics work, they only offer demographic data in aggregate. This means they cannot offer me location demographic data specifically for my audio walks on their pages, they only have this data for their entire page interaction. However, since the only content hosted on my SoundCloud page is my audio walks, all the location demographic data on my own page can offer these insights.

Due to these limitations, I cannot present a full picture here of every moment of engagement, but I am treating the listens that can be analysed as a likely representative sample of the whole. This does bring the data I am able to analyse down from 1,246 to 404, however this is still a large enough sample set for me to draw some working conclusions.

Not surprisingly, the top country for listens is the UK and the top city for listens is London. However, of the total listens, 256 were in the UK and only 49 were in London (Fig. 1).

Only 13 % of listens (53) were in areas of London where the audio walks are located. If we are to believe the accuracy of Soundcloud regional tracking data (which admittedly is a big leap of trust) that shows a very low interaction of the audio

<sup>7</sup> As of writing in 2022, the link to my SoundCloud page is <https://soundcloud.com/romany-reagan>.

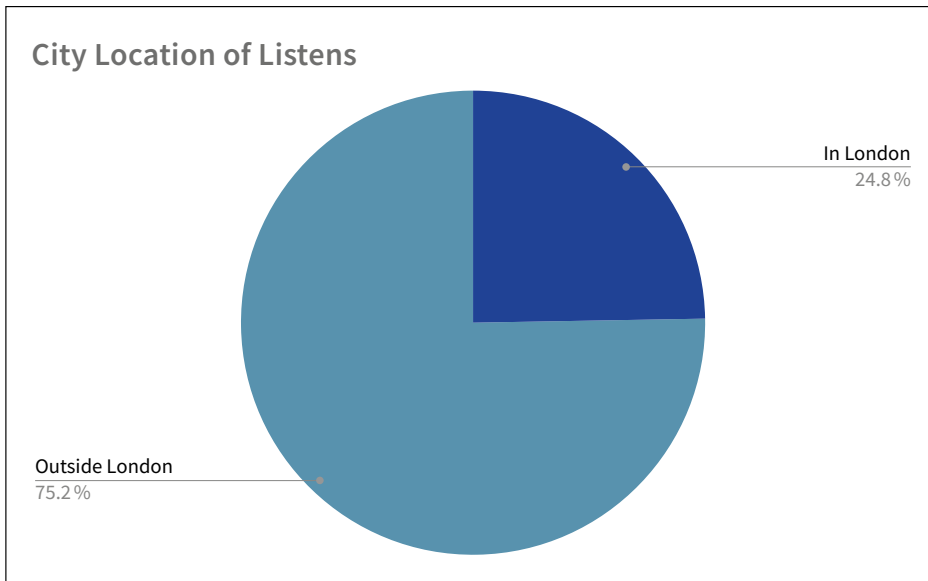


Fig. 1: Percentage of listens by city location.

tracks actually taken in situ. If we choose to doubt the accuracy of specific location data and instead take all listens across London into account as possible walks taken in situ, then that brings the number up to 133, which is still only 24 % of listens. For other cities, 10 % of listens (40) were from other cities within the UK, with the top three being Edinburgh, Nottingham, and Bristol.

As you can see in Fig. 2, the largest country location of listens is the UK, which is as expected, with 63 % of listens (256). The second largest country of listens, probably not surprisingly, is the United States<sup>8</sup>. I have found with the demographic data available for my blog on legends and lore of the British Isles<sup>9</sup>, that right behind the UK, the top country reading my research into these legends is the United States. There is a large interest in British history in the United States, so finding that the U.S. was the second-largest demographic group was a continuation of this trend and was not surprising to me. What was surprising was that there was such a large percentage of international listeners at all. These listens can be counted with certainty as not having taken place in situ.

After discovering these rather surprising demographic trends for these audio walk listens, there might be some validity in retitling these projects as ‘audio experiences’ rather than ‘audio walks’. The demographic data bears out that this type

<sup>8</sup> 70 listeners were from the United States, representing 17 % of the listening audience, with the top three cities being Albany, in New York state; Goleta, in California; and Washington D.C.

<sup>9</sup> As of writing in 2022, the link to my blog Blackthorn & Stone is <https://blackthornandstone.com/>.

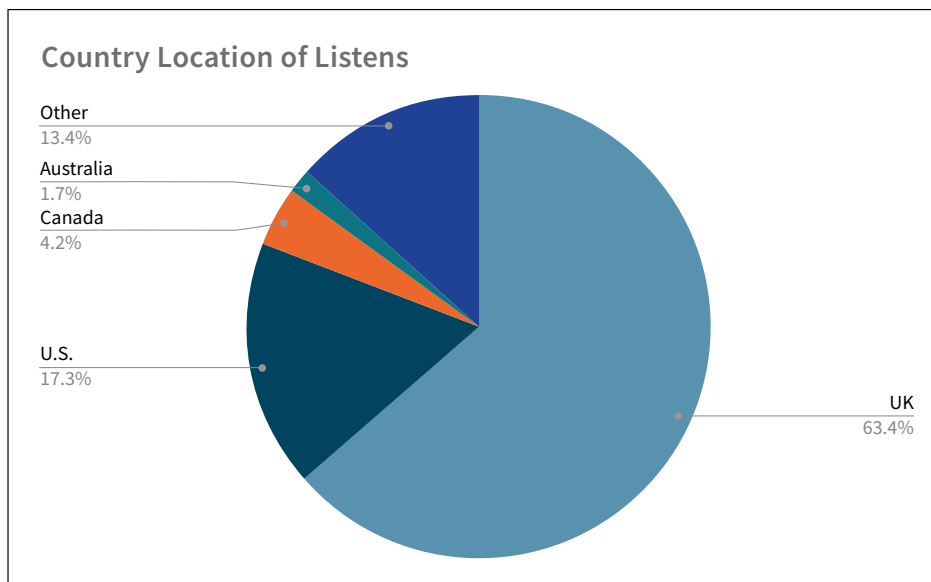


Fig. 2: Percentage of listens by country location.

of public engagement content is not always engaged with by taking the walks as guided within the track, but rather as experiences of the space engaged with elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> It is important not to take this data at face value. One solitary listener in Japan could be a bot, not a person. With this kind of demographic data, it is not possible to view the source and therefore legitimise the data. In an academic context, I can only view this data as showing general trends, not reliable enough to be analysed in a granular way. In spite of this, the overwhelming trend appears to be that listeners engage with this type of content completely differently than I was expecting. I have crafted these experiences with full expectation that listeners will be walking through the space – and this has proven not to be the case.

### Case Study Key Takeaways and Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have chosen not to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This choice was made to keep focus on the task of digital engagement itself and to not have this study overshadowed by the omnipresence of COVID-19. The motivations for this omission were twofold: first, I felt that any study of COVID-19 and its impacts should be done in-depth or not at all; and second, I have been

<sup>10</sup> Seventy-eight listeners came from all other countries, with the top three being Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands. In total, 25 countries other than the UK engaged with the audio walks.

working with audio public engagement long before – and hopefully long after – the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope the insights that I have shared here will be useful for other practitioners in the years to come, long after COVID-19 recedes from its high-water mark. I did not wish for this study to be in future filed under ‘COVID-19 public engagement efforts’. However, the effects of our global pandemic crisis will ripple throughout every sector for years to come; and it would be remiss of me not to mention its impacts on my practice here.

Empirically, interest in my online content soared. I received multiple requests throughout 2020 to offer illustrated online lectures for various initiatives, which normally would have been held in person – or perhaps not commissioned at all. As a practitioner who had already been working in digital engagement for five years before the pandemic, suddenly my work felt vital and useful to a level that it had not achieved previously. Purely looking at the data that I have access to on my SoundCloud, engagement with the audio walks jumped significantly. In 2019, the audio walks received 216 listens. After the COVID-19 pandemic hit the following year in 2020, engagement jumped 275 % to 594 listens. This could be due to a variety of factors. As everyone was kept isolated and at home, not only the listeners but of course myself included, perhaps I dedicated more energy to promoting my work online? Perhaps the audio walk content itself was more appealing to a broader audience than previous work? This sample set is too small and the variables too broad to say for certain whether this is a COVID-19-driven engagement metric. However, when analysing the ongoing impact of a digital engagement project, COVID-19 cannot be ignored as a key shaping factor for how people engage with content across every sector. Having a digital engagement offering should be prioritised by heritage sites and museums going forward. The landscape has altered to such a degree, and for a long enough duration, that this kind of content should not be dropped from programming calendars, even after the world is ready for in-person engagement again.

Other than these COVID-19 factors that have shaped the way that we engage with content, what have I learned through this study? When writing my first audio walks for my thesis, my work was grounded in place in a very specific way. Not only were these walks written to be taken only in situ, but specifically at certain places within my site of research, and with a heavy reliance on the listener being in place to have the visual component to the experience right in front of them.

After my first audio walk that I wrote for the Bloomsbury Festival in 2019, for the first time my work broke out of the rather niche audience demographic of those interested in Abney Park cemetery. Creating pieces of audio engagement for the Bloomsbury Festival offered a platform to share my work with a much wider audience through their large group of community contacts alongside their comprehensive marketing initiatives they implemented to promote the festival. It was from this first contribution in 2019 that I began to get feedback that these walks were being listened to by people at home as well – and sometimes that home was very far away from the site being explored.

The audio walk that received the most positive feedback with listeners reporting “I felt like I was there” was my *Woodland Networks* audio walk through Abney Park cemetery. This audio walk is the only project that was recorded in situ in the cemetery; so, the crunching of leaves under my feet, birdsong, the odd dog bark, and even my laugh at being surprised by a large rat suddenly in my path, are all captured in this walk. If a listener is at home when experiencing this track, the background sounds will offer them a more immersive on-site type of experience with this method of recording.<sup>11</sup>

It was at this point that I also received several enquiries via social media if I had plans to offer a video component to be presented alongside the audio of these walks. I was intrigued by this idea and saw the curiosity sparked by these audio walks for listeners to engage even further with these heritage sites. However, offering a video component would alter the experience from an audio experience into instead a short film, almost a documentary-style offering; which, while valuable, is a different kind of engagement. If there continues to be interest in a video offering, I will consider what this might add; however this type of project is probably best undertaken as a group effort in collaboration with the given heritage site, to make sure the images captured are respectful to both the space and to any members of the public who perhaps are captured on camera during the course of the project. Video offers a very different production process than audio.

Every audio walk that I have created engages with space in its own unique way. As an artist and audio walk practitioner, I enjoy the control I can wield with offsite recording and editing. However, I also value the feedback and perspective of the joy and visceral engagement that listeners felt from the live recordings and spontaneous moments captured for the *Woodland Networks* walk. And while this type of content creation is the trickiest for the creator, it offers the audio visitor an experience of the sonic landscape of the space. A good way to begin the research process for any given project would be to define what the goals of the project should be – engaging visitors who are already onsite, or engaging visitors from afar? Live recording in situ would accomplish the goal of immersing listeners from far afield with the space, while still working within the bounds of the abilities of a solo practitioner and within privacy concerns that would come to bear of inadvertently capturing passersby that video inherently complicates. Scripting and recording walks at home offers complete control, but these types of walks are best taken when the visitor is onsite and has no need of any added audio atmosphere to ‘transport’ them there, because they are already onsite.

11 For other means of immersive experiences, see the discussion of exhibition practices in Paul Longley ARTHUR and Isabel SMITH: *Digital Representation of Slavery in Australia*, pp. 47–62 in this volume or the critical assessment of digital graphic novels in the narration of refugee stories by Victoria HERCHE: *Mediating Traumatic Memory*, pp. 139–153 in this volume.



My working method going forward is to ask these key questions at the beginning of the project: Who is the target visitor? Is this piece of audio engagement for a site-based visitor or a digital visitor? The second action on this path of questioning is to gather feedback after the project has been released. Every heritage site will have different visitor needs and goals, and it is important to keep analysing how visitors are engaging with heritage site initiatives; because how a visitor actually engages with any given public engagement initiative might be quite different than how it was initially programmed and expected. It is through these ongoing conversations and research that we can respond to the needs of both visitors and heritage site managers, and also grow as artists and practitioners.

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## Figure Credits

Fig. 1–2 Romany Reagan.