

Arts&Heritage

Blue Sky Museums

Blue Sky Museums is an Arts&Heritage project established in 2020 during the Covid-19 crisis, which invites artists to create unusual and ambitious project responses for some of the Meeting Point museums that A&H has worked with since 2016. The project is an opportunity for artists to engage in untethered idea development, without the restrictions of practical delivery or limitation of a budget.

Museum: The Lion Salt Works



Short History

Part of West Cheshire Museums, the Lion Salt Works is a museum and restored industrial heritage site in the village of Marston, near Northwich, and is located beside the Trent and Mersey Canal. It is the last open-pan salt works in Cheshire and one of the only four in the world.

The Lion Salt Works was built and run by a local family, the Thompsons, from the end of the 19th century until 1986, when it closed. The museum opened in June 2015, following a four year restoration project and was voted the UK's Best Heritage project in the 2016 National Lottery Awards.

Lion Salt Works tells the story of the Thompson family as well as the local men and women who worked there. When visiting our site, people not only discover how salt was made, but also the impact of salt on the people, economy and landscape of Mid-Cheshire. The museum's collection, as well as Cheshire archives and census

records, show that most people from the area have a connection with the salt industry, either directly or indirectly.

Working at the Salt Works was hard physical labour, with workers typically working a 12 hour shift in sweltering temperatures. As an industrial heritage site, buildings on the site, as well as the remnants of equipment and machinery, are on a striking large scale. The former working areas of this site are dark and atmospheric, uneven wooden floors are propped up by steel girders and the buildings possess an impressive physicality. Old steel columns lie rusted or twisted, and original machinery has aged due to the destructive nature of the heat, salt and moisture which has surrounded it for many years.

Whilst the salt industry was important to both the local economy and local community, it also had a global impact. At peak production Lion Salt Works made 3 million tonnes of salt per year, which was shipped all over the world. The Salt Works' proximity to the canal was vital and enabled the Works to ship salt to Liverpool docks and onto the rest of the world. In fact, salt from Lion Salt Works was exported to: New York, Canada, Denmark and parts of West Africa. This small business in Cheshire had global reach and it is testament to the importance of the international trade routes associated with the industrial revolution.

It's undeniable that the salt industry has also had a dramatic, and in many cases destructive, impact upon the surrounding landscape. The tons of brine and salt removed from underground has resulted in subsidence on a massive scale. In Northwich, homes cracked and sank, due to the land below the foundations shifting. The land around Lion Salt Works has also changed dramatically. Where there was once other Salt Works, there are now flashes – put simply, a hole in the ground which has filled with water. These flashes are now a flourishing natural environment and a wildlife haven for birds and plants, hiding the lands industrial past.



Current Situation and Audience

Having opened in June 2015, Lion Salt Works is a relatively new museum. Since opening (and during the preceding 4 year restoration project) the Salt Works has had great ownership by locals. This is something encouraged at the museum and



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staff operate a successful volunteering programme, as well as working on various projects to engage members of the local community.

The museum is one of four sites owned and operated by Cheshire West and Chester Council, who have an impressive track record of commissioning artists. Lion Salt Works has a strong relationship with the Council's Arts Team and has already delivered a wide range of arts projects, including: a site-specific dance piece by Cheshire Dance and Cheshire Young Carers and is a host for Cheshire Rural Touring Art performances. The Lion Salt Works also hosts a wide range of events and activities throughout the year. This ranges from our family crafts, to specialist talks as well large scale events.

Having only stopped producing salt in 1986, Lion Salt Works is rooted in the memory of many within the local community. As a result, community engagement is a central aim of the museum and we have run multiple projects with the local community since opening, including: an oral history project, specialist projects with local schools and colleges as well as hosting a WW1 roadshow, which recorded objects and stories from local people.

Location

The Lion Salt Works is a restored historic open-pan salt making site, in the village of Marston, close to Northwich. The site lies adjacent to the Trent and Mersey Canal, close to Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse, and the historic Anderton Boat Lift. This £10.23 million project opened in June 2015 offering a fascinating journey through the life of the country's last open-pan salt making site.

When exploring the site and its restored buildings, you will discover how the salt works operated and the impact of salt on mid-Cheshire's people, economy and landscape. A visit will also set the scene for a wider exploration of the footpaths, waterways and attractions of the adjacent Northwich Woodlands (a 350 hectare area of vibrant and accessible parkland) and the wider Weaver Valley including the Anderton Boat Lift.

Key Words & Phrases:

- Unusual industrial heritage site about salt making
- Physicality of the building, machinery and labour
- Tells the story of one family and the local workers
- Interesting language particular to salt making – Lumpers, Lofters, etc
- A local/global industry – canal adjacent
- A garden established to encourage butterflies
- Sensory site – sound, textures, smell

Other Resources

Museum website: <http://lionsaltworks.westcheshiremuseums.co.uk/>

Original Meeting Point commission:



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<https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/projects/lion-salt-works/>



Salt by Martin Hylton at Lion Salt Works © Jonathan Turner, Meeting Point
A Meeting Point commission for 2017, choreographed dance , virtual experience

Blue Sky Museum response

The Lion Salt works presents an exciting opportunity for artists working in all disciplines to respond to an industry that was global, lucrative, and provided employment. The conditions within which salt was sifted and compressed at Lion Salt Works was physically demanding.

Some of the earliest evidence of salt processing dates to around 6,000 BC, when people living in the area of present-day Romania boiled spring water to extract salts; a salt-works in China dates to approximately the same period. Salt was also prized by the ancient Hebrews, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Hittites, Egyptians, and the Indians. Salt became an important article of trade and was transported by boat across the Mediterranean Sea, along specially built salt roads, and across the Sahara on camel caravans. The scarcity and universal need for salt have led nations to go to war over it and use it to raise tax revenues. Salt is used in religious ceremonies and has other cultural and traditional significance.

Arts&Heritage looks forward to reading your ideas for this unusual museum, located within the rural landscape of Cheshire.



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