

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: Ripon Museum Trust



Short History

Ripon Museums (the Yorkshire Law and Order Museums) comprise three sites within walking distance from each other. Together they present an important historic legal, judicial and social narrative told within their original buildings. This is a significant tourist attraction asset for Yorkshire and one that presents an interesting opportunity for artists working within a range of disciplines. This opportunity and brief focuses on one of the three museums: **Ripon Workhouse**.

The **Ripon Workhouse** was built in 1854 and covers a large area including gardens and ancillary buildings. The museum itself occupies the male 'vagrant's block' and parts of the Main Workhouse.

The museum provides a sombre experience, revealing how impoverished people were catered and provided for during the latter part of the 19th century. This is a poignant narrative; one of families split apart, of stigma and the impact of this rigid and de-humanising environment on people and society.

A Workhouse has stood on this site since 1776. By 1832 there was national concern at the expense of maintaining impoverished people and a Commission of Enquiry was appointed. Ripon was found to have 33 inmates, 11 men, 11 boys, 9 women and 2 girls. Only one of the men was not 'able bodied' at 68 years of age, but those able spent 8 hours a day breaking stones to mend roads.

The present workhouse building was completed in January, 1855. The Workhouse was almost a self sufficient world of its own with its own teacher, chaplain and doctors, chopping its own fire wood, doing its own laundry, growing its own vegetables, having its own infirmary and its own van to transport those who became 'unduly violent' to other institutions.

A feeling of doom or at best hopeless resignation must have fallen on many passing through the Gatehouse arch and hearing the door shut behind them. They knew they would leave only in the regulation coffin, 'with two handles, name of the person with the year of their decease inscribed'. Coffins were ordered in bulk.

Nor was it only labourers who entered. In 1861 the 'former master wheelwright', 'former gentleman's servant', 'master shoe-maker', butcher, farmer and many who had known better times found themselves in old age, or when widowed, in a similar predicament; as did the 24 children under the age of 12, the youngest inmate being Matthew Colby aged two weeks.

Past Ordnance Survey plans and original accounting documents provide some insight into workhouse history.

'Vagrants' presented a special situation and in 1877 a separate block of buildings was provided where they could have an evening meal, a bed for the night and leave the next day after completing a designated task.

With the coming of the Welfare State, the building was renamed Sharow View and an astonishing change took place. Locked doors were opened, warm fires and bowls of flowers, chintz covers and hangings did everything possible to disguise the high bare rooms and staircases of the Institute.

In 2017, Ripon Museum Trust purchased the main Workhouse buildings and began to interpret the way that inmates lived, took their meals and cooked produce from the garden. The rooms occupied by the Master and Matron of the Workhouse were brought back to life to illustrate the contrast between their way of life, and those of the poor.

Key words/phrases

- **Significant asset for the town** – although Ripon is known mostly for its Cathedral, these three museums present a compelling story of social class, human liberty, justice, law and order. They show how English society functioned and how the poor and impoverished were treated, and they

provide comment on social conditions including health, nutrition, education and welfare.

- **Relevance** – the story of Workhouse inmates is relevant to today. Dehumanising, desperate, stigma and lack of power are all words that can also be applied to the impoverished and refugees/migrants escaping conflict.
- **Emotional engagement** – the Workhouse in particular presents an unusual and interesting opportunity for an artist to make a new work/body of work.
- **Societal** – the three museums tell the story of social justice, poverty, community and class. They tell us how we regard and organise our communities.
- **Legality** – the Ripon Museums present an historical record of law, justice and order in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- **Civil Liberty** – the three museums provide a poignant reflection on civil liberty: ‘a person's right to be subject only to laws established for the good of the community’.

Other Resources

Museum website: <https://riponmuseums.co.uk/>

Original Meeting Point commission:

<https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/projects/ripon-museums/>



All in a Day's Work by Catherine Bertola at Ripon Workhouse Museum

© Jonathan Turner, Meeting Point

Blue Sky Museum response

Ripon Workhouse considers that there is strong contemporary relevance to its history today and looks forward to receiving ideas from artists working in all disciplines.



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