

**Durham Cathedral
Blue Sky Idea
Artist's Brief**



Image © Durham Cathedral

Introduction

This **Blue Sky Ideas** project is led by a group of volunteers from four important heritage sites located in the north east of England – Hadrian's Wall, Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens, Belsay Hall Castle and Gardens, and Durham Cathedral. Funded by Newcastle University working in partnership with commissioning agency Arts&Heritage, the **Blue Sky Ideas** project invites artists working in all disciplines to respond to these sites with extraordinary, impossible and ambitious Ideas for **projects that cannot, in reality, be realised**. This is an unusual opportunity for artists to think imaginatively, fantastically, without the usual limitations of a commissioning brief. From initial Expressions of Interest, one idea per site will be selected to appear on the Arts&Heritage website and a fee of £500 be paid to the selected artists as well as profiling by Arts&Heritage.

Each site brief invites you to think ambitiously and present the Contemporary Art Volunteer Ambassadors with visionary, unorthodox transformations of the extraordinary sites they have chosen to support by volunteering. We hope that you enjoy considering these fantastic heritage sites and look forward to seeing what you might do with them!

Durham Cathedral – a short history and introduction

Over 1,000 years ago in what is now County Durham in the North-East of England, on a highly defensive promontory of land surrounded on three sides by the River Wear, a cart pulled by some monks stuck fast. The cart contained a coffin in which lay the sacred body of St Cuthbert, alongside the head of St Oswald. The religious community had journeyed for over 100 years from Lindisfarne to find the perfect place to house their precious relics. Durham, Saint Cuthbert told them in a vision, was to be the place.

Durham Cathedral, where building was begun in 1093 and completed just 40 years later in 1133, impressively stands on the bedrock that makes this site. In 1020 the bones of the Venerable Bede had been brought to the site which continues to be a focus of pilgrimage and spirituality in North-East England. The Cathedral we see today was built by the Norman invaders as a sure sign to the local population, who had strongly resisted the aggressor, that they were owned body and soul. The Cathedral along with the Norman castle, built to defend the fourth side of the site, still sits impressively above the bustling university city of Durham and dominates the skyline for miles. Durham Cathedral and its monastic buildings along with Durham castle and the riverside environs now form part of a UNESCO world heritage site.

With such a rich history there is much to inspire the artist: the world renowned library is full of medieval manuscripts; the Saxon items from the coffin of St Cuthbert, displayed in the museum, are priceless treasures speaking of the quality of craftsmanship of the past; the very stones of the building tell their own story, from their fossils and geological markings to the intricate carvings around the tenth century doors, from the war memorials to numerous stone masons marks, from the spiralling patterns sending prayers up to heaven to the apprentice column; from monastic devotion to great wealth, from daily offices to iconoclasm, from a place of sanctuary to a prisoner of war camp. Wherever you look or pause to contemplate there is so much to excite and intrigue.

Each aspect, each item, each action linked to the Cathedral has a rich and symbolic tradition. On the north door the famous sanctuary ring has innumerable tales to tell. When those seeking sanctuary for crimes committed arrived at the Cathedral, the Galilee Bell was rung to inform the monks (and the city) that sanctuary was being claimed. Dressed in a penitential back robe with the yellow cross of St Cuthbert upon it the fugitive was taken to a room in the Southwest Tower enclosed by a grille and could remain safe in the cathedral for 37 days. If no pardon was secured in that time and the sanctuary seeker did not wish to face his accusers then he was escorted to the nearest port and put on the first ship leaving England, never to return. Many names of those who chose this path are recorded in the Cathedral archives.

The history of art, craft and design within the cathedral is a complex one as befits the religious context of the place. For the 11 years of the Commonwealth period the Cathedral lay silent but for the rest of its 900-year-life bells have rung, organs played, choirs raised their voices and religious services been held. For over 300 years the cathedral had a stark, white-washed interior but visual delight has now returned; candles once again burn; coloured glass once again adorns the window spaces; modern and contemporary artistic

statements enhance and raise questions. We invite you to be a part of this unique site, to seek, explore, question and respond.

The cathedral is a glorious paradox, it tells the power of prelates and kings but also of the power of goodness, faith and holiness. It is open for all to explore and to return to again and again. It is a very special place to many people and offers a modern form of sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Key words or phrases

- **Massive, imposing, solid, impressive, stonework**
- **Community, monastery, pilgrimage, spirituality, chant**
- **Narrative, learning, illumination, craftsmanship**
- **Sanctuary, bells, faith, saints**
- **Cloister, choir, altar, shrine, resting place**

Further research

There are many websites which discuss the history of Durham Cathedral however we recommend these two as a starting point:

<https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk>

<https://www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/learn/architecture/cathedral>

Who can apply

Professional visual artists, writers, performers, architects, designers, musicians, who are working in all artistic mediums are encouraged to consider the briefs for Hadrian's Wall, Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens, Belsay Hall and Gardens and Durham Cathedral, and respond by describing what they would like to make at these sites if they had unlimited funds and **no restraints** set upon them (such as not touching the fabric of the building/landscape, planning issues etc.). Think big and outside of the box – these ideas are truly Blue Sky and invite you to use your own individual creativity! We welcome responses from professional artists at different stages of their career.

What to do next

Send us your Idea. This needs to be a clear description of it (written or visual/sound etc) and why you have chosen to respond to a particular site. We are looking for Ideas that are site specific and we encourage you to seek out the unusual, the overlooked, the hidden and develop a project Idea that is ambitious yet rooted in the site's location and context.

As this stage is not funded, we are not expecting detailed proposals.

The details that we require from you are:

- Your name, contact details and website address if you have one
- A short paragraph about your practice (up to 250 words)

- Why you have chosen your site and what it is about it that interests you as an artist (up to 250 words)
- Your response outlining what you would do. This can include written word and/ or images, drawings, an audio file or a short film clip etc (up to 500 words; don't worry if you don't use the 500!)
- Please send all of the above as one document / PDF when applying (with a second attachment if your application includes an audio / film file).

How we will select and present your work online

A steering group of nine volunteers who have completed a Newcastle University / Arts&Heritage project called *Volunteer Voices* will be considering all the responses, together with contemporary art curator and senior research associate Judith King. From the initial Ideas, four will be selected (one per historic site) and we will ask those artists for a little more information about themselves so that we can promote them via Arts&Heritage website and through social media. Each selected artist will receive £500. For previous examples of Blue Sky artistic Ideas please visit <https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/blue-sky-museums/>

It is important to note that you don't have to have had experience of working within a heritage context; we are more interested in showcasing your ambitious and creative responses to the history and location of each of our historic sites. As the Ideas will be presented on the Arts&Heritage website, they should be able to be presented in a digital form. If selected, it is important that you agree to the proposal appearing on the website: this will mean we may not necessarily be able to protect your intellectual copyright, although Arts&Heritage respects that IP and copyright remains with the artist.

We hope that this project will allow the volunteers who have committed themselves enthusiastically to continuing their foray into the contemporary art world to experience the pleasure of seeing how artists can change the way of looking at history.

Deadline

Please email all responses to Becky Orwin at becky@artsandheritage.org.uk by 5pm, Friday 13 May 2022.

We will endeavour to let you know whether your Idea has been selected by 20 June 2022.