

Report on Pilot Engagement for

DNAire ‘Focus Points’:

“This Island’s Mine”

Author: Professor Stephen Scott-Bottoms
(University of Manchester)



Introduction:

In collaboration with the Environment Agency, the Aire Rivers Trust is developing the ‘DNAire’ project as a Heritage Lottery-funded initiative with two major aims:

1. The first is to build **fish passes** on four former industrial weirs along the River Aire through Leeds and Bradford, in order to facilitate the access of salmon, eels and other species to the upper areas of the catchment – thereby restoring the river’s “natural heritage”.
2. The second is to **engage communities** living along the Aire with this ‘Salmon to Skipton’ programme, in ten Focus Point locations. These will include Leeds/Bradford locations, in proximity of the affected weirs, but also communities in the upper Aire where the eventual ‘restoration’ benefits of

the work downstream will become apparent.

The precise nature of the community engagement programme in the main project phase is still to be determined. It is proposed, though, that the public might best be engaged with the **natural heritage** dimensions of the project if these are effectively interwoven with:

- **industrial heritage** narratives, so important to the historical identity of West Yorkshire communities;
- **community heritage** narratives, i.e. the personal memories and lived experiences of those living near the Aire. The ‘everyday life’ aspects of community heritage are not always valued in ‘official’ heritage discourse, but are just as important in understanding the “sense of place” experienced by local residents.

The way in which these three strands of heritage intertwine with each other, along the river valley, can be thought of – visually – as akin to the strands of a DNA molecule (hence, ‘DNAire’). This report concerns a pilot engagement project which has sought to ‘test the water’ in various community settings in the upper Aire valley, through the performance of a short play concerned with these same three strands of place-making. After each performance, spectators responded by engaging in detailed conversations about their own relationships with the river and valley.



1.1 The play: *This Island's Mine*

The short play, *This Island's Mine*, was originally written and staged in 2017 as part of the interdisciplinary action research project, 'Towards Hydro-Citizenship' (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, or AHRC). One of the case study areas for that project was the Aire valley, with work being undertaken particularly in the Shipley area (www.multi-story-shipley.co.uk).

This Island's Mine (TIM) was devised and written by this report's author (as the Hydro-Citizenship case study lead in Shipley), in collaboration with actor **Kat Martin** and director **Simon Brewis**, both of whom returned for this revival. The play explores the story of one Aire valley community -- the Dockfield area of Shipley -- through the eyes and experience of local residents who were interviewed during the research phase. The piece was specifically designed to further extend this dialogue with residents by engaging its audiences in conversation, during and/or after the show. It was thus made for performance in relaxed, intimate settings such as pubs, clubs and homes, with small audiences seated around a long table.

A 'living map' detailing the geography of the local area (including river, canal, railway etc.) is created during the performance, using ordinary household objects. This engages spectators with ideas of place in a fun and accessible way. The scripted play of around 30 minutes is followed by open conversation which typically goes on quite a bit longer.

1.2 Rationale for revival:

It was proposed that *TIM* might usefully be revived for presentation in other Aire valley locations – i.e. some of DNAire's potential Focus Point areas – as a '**conversation starter**' around the river's role in each community's history and identity. That is, by telling the detailed story of one place, we hoped to encourage spectators to respond with ideas about their own, by 'comparing and

contrasting': how is *this place* and *this community* similar to, or different from, Dockfield?



The DNAire project has a number of stated criteria for key outcomes, and it was proposed that presenting this play might resonate well with criteria (a), (b) and (d):

(a) 'developing interpretation of the Focus Point to enable visitors to appreciate the key features of the river and its environs'

TIM offers a model example of how the river, its environs, and the local community in a given place can be creatively interpreted. The play's emphasis on storytelling and on the value of ordinary people's memories and perspectives helps audiences to engage with these themes. The facilitated conversation following the play also provides a context for participants to respond on their own terms, with initial thoughts about how the project might relate to them. If appropriate, they can also be encouraged to sketch their own area onto a fresh 'tabletop map', using markers and available objects.

(b) 'researching and capturing the natural/cultural/industrial heritage of their local river'

TIM demonstrates some of the ways in which natural, industrial and community heritage are interwoven in a selected Aire valley

location. This ‘weave’ is achieved by telling the story of Dockfield over both longer and shorter time-frames: i.e. from the process of 19th Century industrialisation through to the current ‘post-industrial’ period, while also recounting living memories of people who grew up in the area from the mid-20th Century. The play also demonstrates how such information can be gathered from local libraries/archives and from conversations with neighbours – approaches which can readily be replicated elsewhere.

(d) ‘taking “moral ownership” of their local rivers....’

The play encourages a sense of ‘moral ownership’ of the river and environment, by demonstrating how integral they are to the personal stories and well-being of the individual characters and their community. The play also emphasises themes of ‘taking responsibility’ for environmental conditions. (This is in line with the ‘Hydro-Citizenship’ aims of the previous project.)

Note: the first-stage engagement approach of presenting *TIM* does not involve community participants directly in riverside activities of the sorts mentioned under criteria (c) and (d): ‘developing attractions based on the Focus Point such as walks, canoe trails’; ‘committing to: bankside maintenance [and] a citizen science programme.’ However, we take as read that early stage engagement with groups and communities is a necessary pre-requisite to further ‘buy-in’. That is, by going to people where they are, and inviting them to participate in discussions on their own terms, we are more likely to ‘warm them up’ toward potential involvement in further activities. Participants who have first been encouraged to perceive the river as a central element in their local environment and community may subsequently involve themselves in more physically challenging activities such as river walks or litter-picks.



(Kat Martin as ‘Barbara’)

1.3 Script Revision and Rehearsal:

The process of reviving *This Island’s Mine* involved carefully targeted script revisions, which took place both before and during rehearsals. These changes were designed to incorporate and emphasise DNAire’s ‘Key Messages’:

- **‘Returning salmon to Skipton’:**
Explicit mention is made in the revised script of the DNAire project and of plans to build fish passes on former industrial weirs in the Leeds and Bradford area in order to facilitate access upstream towards Gargrave, Skipton, etc.
- **Themes of migration, ‘returning home’ or ‘finding a home’** – which are key to the messaging around DNAire – were further developed in the revised script, in relation to the play’s human characters. It was hoped that this might make the theme of fish journeys more ‘relatable’ at a personal and community level.

1.4 Performances and Locations:

During initial discussions around reviving the play, it was suggested that we take *This Island's Mine* out to a single 'Focus Point' in the upper Aire valley, where there had been no previous contact with the community – i.e. the village of Cononley. Plans were made to present the play several times in different settings in the village, to initiate engagement.

In practice, however, this approach had to be revised. Cultivating initial contacts within Cononley proved challenging in the time available. Yet we also realised that a tight focus in one location might be unwise – given that we were not in a position, at this pilot stage, to promise further activities that would follow up on the initial engagement.

Our approach was thus revised to embrace more of a 'sampling' process, whereby the play was presented in a number of different communities in the upper Aire valley, and in a number of contrasting venue types. This allowed us to test the hypothesis that a play set in one community might be useful in approaching audiences in more rural areas. In no single location, however, did we promise any specific follow-up to the presentation.

Performances were eventually presented in the following locations, in February 2019:

- **Q20 Theatre, Shipley**, for the 'Cactus Crew' young people's group facilitated by Spongetree Arts. This 'preview' performance, in the Dockfield area where the play itself is set, allowed cross-over with 'Ignite Yorkshire', another Heritage Lottery-funded project, focused on 'Connecting Young People with Yorkshire's Industrial Heritage'.

"Thanks for tonight, it was fab. The parents and kids were chatting about it after. It started a lot of reminiscing which was lovely."
(Texted feedback from Spongetree facilitator.)

- **Bethel Chapel, Lothersdale** – this is a private home (converted from a Methodist Chapel) in a village community just uphill from Cononley. The audience was invited by the homeowner. A very active post-show discussion led to us making a fresh map of the local area.

"Some great feedback from tonight. Somebody said they were surprised by their emotional response in respect to the idea of a sense of belonging somewhere. Sparked interesting discussion from people who don't 'do' theatre and were reluctant to come! Great that people can see theatre as a tool for community discussion, not just entertainment but thoughtful, insightful, and allowing an opportunity for responding. Thanks again."
(Texted feedback from host in Lothersdale)



(Steve Scott-Bottoms as 'Danny')

- **The Albion pub, Skipton** – in which we tested the hypothesis that *This Island's Mine* might work on an impromptu basis, by gathering an audience simply from those who happened to be present in the pub at the time ('have you got half an hour for us to show you something?'). Proof of concept was provided by the fact that the post-show conversation

lasted well over an hour, until we said we had to leave! (Note: there were other pubs in the area where landlords expressed interest in the project. This is an area for further investigation.)

- **South Craven Baptist Church, Sutton-in-Craven** (near Steeton). Here we were invited by the church's ministers, and presented to an audience drawn from its congregation. Again the response during the post-show discussion was positive and detailed. Suggestions were made to us afterwards about other churches in the area where the piece would be of interest. (Another area for potential investigation.)

"I found it really interesting to think about how our lives are continually influenced by the river and development along it, even when we don't think about it. Through the history of Barbara and Danny [characters in play], we got an easy to understand, engaging presentation, and the use of simple props like biscuits and Duplo people was both funny and relatable." (Texted response from associate minister.)

- **Gargrave Heritage Group** (at St. Andrews Church). Here, an initial contact with the group had been cultivated by DNAire project officer Simon Watts, so they had some prior understanding of the project's key messages. The performance brought these to life for the group, and afterwards they seemed enthused to engage further with us in future. Again, a fresh map of the area was sketched on the tabletop.

"Just to say thankyou very much for an extremely enjoyable play last Tuesday. You really brought the scene of your childhood and growing up to life and it was interesting how much it reminded the 'true' Gargravians among us of their life growing up in Gargrave. We look forward to the next one please?? Thankyou again from us all." (email from Gargrave Heritage Group secretary)



2.1 Key Outcomes:

As this was a limited-duration pilot, it was recognised in advance that the outcomes might only be indicative. It was specified, however, that these should be:

- a) **adequate to demonstrate the potential of the approach for continued engagement in the pilot area and engaging other groups.**

The performances undertaken confirmed this potential. Despite being presented in a diversity of contexts, we found that all our audiences were very engaged with the play and wanted to discuss the themes arising in some detail (see 'Discussion Themes' section below). After every showing, the conversation ran considerably longer than the play itself. We were also approached, after each presentation, with suggestions for other places to take the play, and potential contacts to follow up on.

- b) **sufficient to identify a small number of key individuals in the community who are interested in following up on the pilot.**

Although we were not in a position to propose immediate follow-up to any group or individual, it was clear that there were people

at each performance who could be engaged with further, and might act as catalysts or champions for the project within their own communities, *if a respectful and mutually beneficial relationship can be developed*. Email or telephone contacts were gathered at each performance from those wishing to hear more about DNAire going forward.

- c) ***documented through (for example) a video and still photographs illustrating the approach (subject to participant consent).***

One performance (Gargrave) was attended by a professional photographer engaged by the University of Manchester to document the event, with the consent of the group involved. Some of the resulting pictures illustrate this report, and this documentation is available for further use by DNAire. At another performance (Lothersdale), one spectator spontaneously photographed proceedings and then shared the images with us. (See image to right, and others similar.) We would need to check back for consent with those pictured before making public use of these.

- d) ***an exploration, including costs, of how, if at all, the approach could be expanded to other Focus Points and how it could be adapted to allow for ART staff/locals/volunteers to facilitate the whole process.***

All those involved in presenting *TIM* were pleased to discover that it seemed to ‘work’ equally well (although slightly differently) with audiences in each of the contrasting performance contexts. This suggests that further performances of the play could well be a good tool for starting to engage Focus Point communities during the full DNAire project phase. That said, there might also be other good ways to engage people with the relevant themes. (See Section 3 below for full discussion.)

One note of caution here is around the idea of ‘ART staff/locals/volunteers facilitating the

whole process’. Clearly there is central value in local, voluntary participation in a project like this, but such involvement has to be inculcated somehow, and there is really no substitute for using experienced facilitators (preferably skilled in creative methods) to ‘prime the pump’ when initiating a participatory process. It would be a false economy to scrim on the costs of initial engagement, because to do so risks losing your audience (of potential participants) at an early stage.



2.2 Emerging Discussion Themes

Conversations with audiences following these ‘pilot’ performances were somewhat different in tone and direction, depending on the individuals involved. However, there were a number of identifiable threads running through the discussions:

- i. ***More similarities than differences between communities.***

This was summed up most pithily by the chair of the Gargrave group, who responded to our story of Dockfield by saying ‘it’s exactly like Gargrave!’ This might seem an odd reaction, given that Dockfield is a heavily built-up urban area of Bradford, while Gargrave retains the classic feel of a rural English village. Yet spectators at several performances made similar points about a sense of connectivity

more than contrast between the story of Dockfield and that of their own communities. Further discussion revealed that these connections were invariably indicative of the shared 'DNA' of the Aire valley itself – including memories of growing up near river and canal, of local industry and mill complexes, etc. Some of these points are further expanded on below.

ii. Living with water in the valley.

Our play's emphasis on growing up in the vicinity of the river and canal prompted many similar reflections from spectators, taking various forms. In Lothersdale, for example, uphill from main river, there was a strong sense of the geography and behaviour of local becks as they find their way downhill to the Aire. Downhill in Sutton, conversely, there was much discussion of the frequency of local surface water flooding, given that the local confluence of tributary channels. In Gargrave, several participants responded to the fish migration theme by emphasising that the once plentiful trout population in the river has all but disappeared within the last decade or two. The reasons for this were unclear, but there was no dispute about the phenomenon itself (this is something DNAire colleagues may wish to look into).

iii. The river valley as a 'connecting corridor' between communities.

As a play, *This Island's Mine* emphasises the Dockfield community's sense of its upstream-downstream connections along river, canal and railway line. This theme found clear resonance among audiences in the upper Aire valley: it became clear that residents have a strong sense of 'gravitational pull' along the valley towards Bradford and Leeds. Locals are drawn downstream to find work, while outsiders with jobs in the cities move up the valley to find commuter accommodation. This corridor relationship also applies to leisure behaviour, as well as work and home-making. One Skipton participant provided a detailed account of just how far down the valley you

might go when 'popping out'; while anything past that point would be 'a day out'.



iv. Fish migration as a relatable theme for humans.

One of the play's key themes is the question of whether you can 'go home again' to the place you originally hail from. It is clear that audiences understood the intersection of this human concern with the DNAire theme of fish migration (salmon getting back upstream to spawn). In Lothersdale, during a particularly engaged discussion on these themes, two young mothers contradicted an older woman (who felt 'you can't go home again') by arguing that they had returned to the village to start their own families, because they wanted their children to experience something of what they had, growing up. Pointing out that internet technology now allows people to maintain professional positions from more remote locations, these women drew a direct connection with the idea of fish pass engineering overcoming previous obstacles to migrating home.

v. Industrial heritage as an organising narrative for communities.

TIM's discussion of Dockfield's industrial heritage, and the changes in its economic profile over time, prompted discussion of the comparable state of industry in other

locations. Mills had been a feature at even the most rural of the places we visited, with the river and canal serving, respectively, as a water supply for engines and as a key transport artery. In Sutton, we were treated to a detailed account of the local 19th century mill owner, who (like Titus Salt in Saltaire) still has semi-mythic status in the village.

Conversely, in Lothersdale/Cononley, the closure of local industry and downscaling of agricultural production was presented as a source of regret, rather than of heritage nostalgia. These are no longer 'working villages', we were told (although they were, within living memory), and were in danger of becoming commuter 'dormitories'. Skipton, however, was presented to us as a market town whose more traditional status as a local crossroads has enabled it to ride out industrial changes more or less unscathed.

vi. Concerns about community fragmentation.

In the Dockfield area discussed in *TIM*, new-build housing is one of the things that has replaced industrial mills on 'brownfield sites' adjacent to river and canal. This theme, too, found strong resonance further up the valley, where there has been much recent development (e.g. mill conversions), which again capitalises on the proximity of the Aire valley railway for easy access to Leeds. A particular concern has been the way that house prices in these areas have thus been pushed up by 'offcumben' (incomers), making it harder for local young people to afford to stay in the places they grew up. There were also concerns about whether wealthier incomers are interested to integrate with the existing communities, or whether there will be further fragmentation along economic lines. In Sutton and Skipton, there was discussion of how micro-communities and 'cliques' can tend to fragment the cohesiveness of local relations.

In summary: While one might have expected audiences in the more rural, upper Aire catchment to express a clear sense of distance

from Shipley, it became clear that there were strong connections between these communities' experiences. Thanks to the river's presence, they have been similarly impacted in the past by industry, and in the present by commuter developments. Viewed positively, though, connectivity along the valley seems to allow both ready mobility and a shared sense of home. This could be a key theme to develop in the next stages of DNAire engagement.



3. Key Recommendations / Next Stages

3.1 Extending 'moral ownership'.

Responses to these pilot presentations suggest that there is potentially a strong interest, across a variety of social contexts, in engaging with DNAire's 'weave' of heritage concerns. It seems clear that Aire valley residents often have strong feelings about the river, the valley corridor, and the movement of fish and people up and down them both. The question is how best to capitalise on these latent, but often unexpressed interests, in the design of DNAire's main phase.

The project's ultimate objectives include encouraging participants to develop a more active engagement with the river than they might currently have – eg. to 'get their feet wet and their hands dirty' in river-based

DNAire – Developing the Natural Aire

A project by The Environment Agency and The Aire Rivers Trust

activities from litter-picking to water-sampling. These are laudable goals, but potential pitfalls to guard against include:

-- once again reinforcing the artificial separation of 'environmental' and 'cultural' activities (or even of 'nature' and 'society'), which the 3-pronged heritage weave of DNAire seeks to counter-act;

-- moving too quickly toward asking people to engage actively in river stewardship. For one thing, this might alienate older and/or less able-bodied participants from engaging further. For another, it risks making people feel they are merely being 'instrumentalised' as unpaid assistants to pre-existing clean-up objectives.

A key concept here, then, is the stated goal of developing participants' sense of '**moral ownership**' – both of their local river environs and of the project itself. When people feel motivated *for their own reasons* to participate in activities, their engagement will be longer lasting and more sustainable. People who already have an active interest in the river or in environmental issues will already have this sense of agency, and will thus readily engage with DNAire's end objectives. But if we want to expand engagement beyond these 'usual suspects', then a more *progressive* engagement strategy may be necessary – one which allows participants to respond to the project's woven heritage themes *on their own terms*, and in ways which cannot necessarily be anticipated in advance. To put this another way: in order for others to 'own' the process, we may need first to 'give away' some degree of control. Again, this is in order to increase, not decrease, the possibility of the project meeting its end objectives.

3.2 Progressive engagement: networks

By 'progressive' engagement we mean both a gradual temporal process, over the three years of the project's life (see 3.3 below) and a gradual process of identifying participants to begin with. It is important to recognise that

finding the most responsive groups or individuals to work with on the project may take some time. Key principles in this regard include:

i) Meeting people where they are. Just as we did with this pilot, it is important to take the project out to others. Meeting people 'where they are' (both literally and figuratively) is a necessary precursor to asking them to come on a journey with us. People are always more willing to engage with new ideas or material when approached on their own territory (home, pub, church hall, mosque, etc.) and in terms that matter to them. This is in part about showing respect to their existing group identity, and is especially important if we want to engage faith groups or minority ethnic communities that do not necessarily feel part of the cultural 'mainstream'. Such respect will, in turn, be reciprocated (e.g. the minister at Sutton Baptist was highly complimentary about *TIM* as a novel means for communicating with a group -- a challenge that ministers grapple with weekly!).



ii) Following 'ambassadorial' links as they present themselves. Following most of the pilot presentations, we received suggestions from spectators about other groups or individuals who would be interested in *This Island's Mine*. At Sutton Baptist, for example, we were pointed toward the local Anglican church as another 'hot lead' – and introductions could have been made had we pursued this at the time. At Lothersdale, the home-owner who invited us had gathered an

DNAire – Developing the Natural Aire

A project by The Environment Agency and The Aire Rivers Trust

seeing/hearing the accounts of others should contribute strongly to a sense of ‘moral ownership’ of the river and its journey. (*‘What we do in our place makes a difference for people in other places.’*) They might then return home with a still stronger sense of identification with the Aire and with the valley’s other inhabitants.

v) Making river walks. Depending on the nature of the group, this stage might run concurrently with, or consecutive to, stages iii and iv above. Obviously it would be wise, at any early stage of any such engagement process, to encourage participants to go out and look at their local river environs, and investigate the features they are particularly interested in or concerned about. In terms of a progressive engagement process, though, making a guided river walk (e.g. a leaflet or downloadable audio guide) might come logically *after* the collective sharing of stage (iv). Experience suggests that it is easier to motivate people to make something for a shared ‘live’ event -- which has a clear deadline date and a clear audience – than to make something for an unknown future audience of hypothetical readers or listeners. If they have already met and engaged with groups from other Focus Points, participants are all the more likely to return home with a will to showcase their own ‘patch’ for potential visitors from other places. This might also lead, logically, toward:

vi) Active river stewardship. The process of exploring one’s own local riverbanks (perhaps with story-driven river walks in mind) is likely to highlight for participants the ways in which that local area could be further improved – through litter-picks, planting, repair works, etc. Hopefully, a collective sense of ‘moral ownership’ will by this stage encourage participants to take responsibility for making necessary improvements, going forward. Even at this stage, though, creative strategies could continue to be applied in order to make potentially onerous tasks seem more ‘fun’ (e.g. crafting junk sculptures from litter gathered from in/around the river).



3.4 Costs involved

Attached to this report is a **Budgetary Appendix** which presents a detailed budget for remounting *This Island’s Mine* again as a tool for initial engagement during the main project phase. There might, of course, be other ways to initiate the kinds of engagement the project is looking for. However, this budget may offer some useful pointers on certain types of cost. We are happy to be further consulted on specifics of other types of cost, when decisions are being made about specific option choices.

A key point to note about the appended is that the costs of paying actor-facilitators to present *TIM* amounts to a relatively small proportion of the overall. The more significant costs relate to *preparatory* factors:

e.g. the hours that would need to be spent by a ‘Production Manager’ in developing initial contacts with prospective participant groups. *Note:* the main problem we had in finding ‘bookings’ for the pilot presentations was that nobody was directly responsible for this quite specialised activity.

e.g. creating an online ‘video trailer’ for the presentation. The latter is optional, of course, but if done well is likely to help with ‘buy-in’ from the outset. Up-front investment of this

sort can really improve the quality and quantity of public response.

One option for the project would be to save on some of these ‘freelance’ costs by *employing* a project worker with some of the creative skills appropriate to these tasks. Indeed, if DNAire adopts a progressive engagement strategy of the type outlined in this report, it would be highly advantageous to retain a dedicated creative staff member who could perhaps be tasked with both the budgeted ‘Production Manager’ role and with the facilitation of ongoing workshop activities in Focus Point areas.

Without a clearer understanding of the budgetary parameters that the project is working within, it is difficult here to make more specific recommendations in terms of costs or staffing for the overall programme. We would simply reiterate that attempting to ‘scrimp’ on costs for creative engagement activities is a false economy. The quality of engagement is in large part dependent upon the quality of facilitation approaches.



4. Conclusion

The DNAire project represents an exciting and distinctive attempt to weave together the often separate ‘strands’ of natural heritage, industrial (built) heritage, and community (cultural) heritage, as a means of engaging and activating Aire valley communities. As a pilot engagement, *This Island’s Mine* demonstrated that it is possible to engage diverse audiences with these themes, and to prompt immediate participation in conversations about how they relate to particular places.

In developing the interlaced DNA of the project during the main phase, we recommend a central emphasis on the idea pioneered by this *TIM* pilot: i.e. finding ways for different communities along the river to share their stories with each other, in order to compare and contrast their experiences of place, and to celebrate their wider identity as Aire valley residents. Engagement of this sort should help to reveal participants’ existing, perhaps latent or unvoiced feelings about the river, and to develop their concerns toward a more active ‘moral ownership’ of the Aire and its environs.