

Reading detectives unearth some of England's hidden literary gems

Project discovers secrets of country's written past

Teams of sleuths from across England have spent the summer spent hot on the trail of their literary heritage and have uncovered some real gems in the process, from information on the lives of little known authors, to stories of family life and murder.

'Reading Detectives' from Cumbria, Derbyshire, Lancashire, Hampshire and Kent have been busy uncovering the literary secrets of their local area and events during October will celebrate their discoveries.

The Reading Detectives project is part of Made in England - a national partnership initiative between the BBC and Arts Council England. The project is managed by The Reading Agency, the independent charity working to inspire more people to read more. Reading Detectives explores England through its people and its art and celebrates how the landscapes where they live, play and work can inspire creativity.

The project was launched to find undiscovered and forgotten writers, discover little known facts about the county's written past and encourage a wider range of people to get involved with local book groups and libraries.

The Lancashire team's greatest find has been about life of the artist and author Leonora Carrington, who was born at Clayton Green (just a few miles from Chorley Library) and is relatively unknown in the UK. While studying art in London she left for Paris with the Surrealist artist Max Ernst and is best know today as an artist however, as the team discovered, she also wrote short stories, poetry and novels.

The Cumbrian detectives discovered literature as diverse as traditional fairy tales written in West Cumbrian dialect, and 12 poems carved into stone and incorporated into walls and stiles along the Route of Poetry Walk in Kirkby Stephen.

Meanwhile the Hampshire team uncovered letters, poems, observations and historical fiction spanning the last two hundred years including literature written about Deadman's Plack, which commemorates the murder of Earl Athelwold by King Edgar in 963.

Kent Reading Detectives have also been looking at Jane Austen's Kent connections and celebrating the Austen family's Tonbridge roots. Their favourite discoveries include letters from Austen to her favourite niece, Fanny Knight, and information on how Kent inspired three Great War poets.

Meanwhile the Derbyshire team, made up of young people from Buxton, uncovered local links with CS Lewis and discovered old ballads, tales and modern poetry related to the mysterious Mermaid's Pool.

The teams will celebrate their favourite reads arising from their detective work, during events throughout October. Experts who helped them, such as librarians, historians and local literature specialists will also be invited. Many of the contemporary authors whose work they have looked into will also attend, including well-known crime writer Stephen Booth, who worked closely with the Derbyshire team.

Student Sarah Jane Salter, 20, one of Kent's Reading Detectives, said: "I joined the Kent Reading Detectives team because I was really excited by the idea of finding out more about Jane Austen's connections with Kent, but it's also been interesting to be part of the reading group. I've met different people from different backgrounds and it has been great to hear their ideas and different outlooks on what we have read."

Helen Towers, Reading Promotions and Stock Co-ordinator for Cumbria Libraries, said: "This has been a truly fascinating project to work on. We have all read books that otherwise we may not have even picked up, and in doing so we have discovered some real delights. The books have given us a deeper sense of place and understanding, and have made us look at our county with new eyes."

Debbie Hicks, Director of Research at the Reading Agency, said: "Reading Detectives has been a hugely successful project, which has unearthed some real gems of information about the rich literary heritage of local communities. Most importantly Reading Detectives has helped to create a completely new type of reading group. The project has attracted people who wouldn't necessarily join a conventional group, giving them the chance to develop or reconnect with their passion for reading, while working alongside people from different backgrounds within their community."

See more about the finds and read the blogs of the Reading Detectives at www.readingdetectives.org

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Notes to Editors

- **Reading Detectives events currently confirmed during October:**

WINCHESTER, HANTS:

Friday 23 October 6.30 - 8pm at the Jane Austen House, Chawton.

BUXTON, DERBYSHIRE:

Saturday, 31 Oct – 1400-1600. Author Stephen Booth attending.

The Reading Agency

- The Reading Agency is an independent charity whose mission is to inspire more people to read more. The Reading Agency believes that reading changes lives and is at the forefront of innovation and cutting-edge creative projects designed to encourage reading. It runs a number of high profile, national initiatives that reach out to and inspire readers of all kinds – children, teenagers, families, adult learners and general book lovers. It specialises in spreading reading by working with public libraries, and also teams up with prisons, publishers, unions, businesses, broadcasters, and others. It is supported by the Arts Council and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (www.readingagency.org.uk)

Made in England

- Since its launch in April 2008, Made in England has been building a range of projects involving BBC local radio stations, artists and arts organisations and members of the public across the country, which aim to be as rich in diversity as they are strong in creativity.

Its Creative Development Fund was launched on 23 April 2008 to support projects that met the Made in England brief, which offered a lasting legacy for our regions. Its ambition was to involve artists, listeners, viewers and communities more widely, inspiring them to be creative, to collaborate, and to make new works of art. These could be anything from 'sound sculpture' to a poetry residency, from dance to music to on-line activity (www.bbc.co.uk/madeinengland)

Arts Council England

- Arts Council England recognises the value of broadcast and digital platforms for achieving its ambition to get great art to everyone by championing, developing and investing in artistic experiences that enrich people's lives. As the national development agency for the arts, we support a range of artistic activities from theatre to music, literature to dance, photography to digital art, and carnival to crafts. Great art inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves, and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2008 and 2011, we will invest £1.3 billion of public money from government and a further £0.3 billion from the National Lottery to create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country (www.artscouncil.org.uk)