

# Global Stories in Domestic Spaces

## Overview and Context

'Global Stories in Domestic Spaces' was a public engagement project with the community local to Osterley Park, London, to create a series of videos, photographs and oral histories that would link the Park's eighteenth and nineteenth-century history to life in contemporary Britain. The resulting materials were exhibited as part of the Trappings of Trade: A Domestic Story of the East India Company exhibition. 'Global Stories in Domestic Spaces' was part of a larger research programme entitled *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*, which is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and is based in the Department of History at University College London. This project was funded under the UCL Public Engagement Unit Beacon Bursary funding scheme. This case study identifies key findings from the project and highlights learning for any similar projects of this nature.

### The aims of Global Stories in Domestic Spaces were:

1. To increase awareness of *The East India Company at Home* project research within a specific London community.
2. To empower participants by working with them to test out and discuss current research and by offering up tools and strategies for undertaking further research independently.
3. To change attitudes about what academic research is and what it can be, by working closely with a small group of project participants and other organisations.
4. To establish a good relationship with Osterley Park, and other key partners, with the hope of completing future projects with them.
5. To increase public engagement skills at UCL through discussing, recording and then presenting issues around best practice that arise during the project.
6. To create the groundwork for a possible subsequent exhibition.

### What happened?

Between March-July 2013, a number of activities took place in order to develop material for an exhibition held at Osterley Park and House, the project involved:

- An information evening about the Global Stories project attended by members of the Tamil Community Centre and Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, as well as the National Trust;
- An Osterley Park and House tour, encouraging participants to offer their own interpretations of the objects which were planned to be featured in the Trappings of Trade display. Each participant was photographed with the object they had brought along;
- A session responding to the objects found in Osterley through dancing within its internal spaces. A photographer Stuart Howat took portraits of the adult participants who had brought objects and were keen to record oral histories;
- A return visit to Osterley Park to view (and approve) the portraits for exhibition and listen to (and approve) the oral histories we were hoping to include;
- The launch of the Trappings of Trade exhibition.



## Facts and Figures

The public engagement project is part of larger research programme entitled *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*, lead by Professor Margot Finn, UCL History.

**13** people took part in the photography and oral history project.

The project involved **3** key partners: The National Trust, Gurdwara, Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Hounslow, and the Tamil Community Centre.

Osterley Park and House have had their best visitor numbers during the period of the exhibition.

## Emerging themes from the evaluation

The project had six specific aims which structured the evaluation undertaken. The findings and learning from the project were:

Aim 1) To increase awareness of *The East India Company at Home* project. The project team felt that communicating the research of the project and raising awareness of it worked well with the project participants. One participant noted: 'I feel proud to be part of this project. This event has raised my awareness regarding the relationship of the East India Company with China and India. We have a rich heritage in our local area, that is amazing to know.'

Aim 2) To empower participants by working with them to test out and discuss current research. The project team found that some participants were particularly interested in their family histories and the ways in which those histories were stretched across geographical locations. Nevertheless, during the project the team did not specifically focus on providing research training to the project participants and if trying to include this aim in future engagement projects it would be important to think about the ways in which such training could be given and the relevance it might have.

Aim 3) To change attitudes about what academic research is and what it can be. Through working collaboratively with the UCL team, the project participants were able to learn more about the researchers' roles, the work they do and the research undertaken. Two of the project participant respondents specifically noted that they had enjoyed working with the UCL team. As illustrated by this quote: 'We need more such events and projects. UCL has done a great job in bringing the heritage to local communities.'

Aim 4) To establish a good relationship with partners the hope of completing future projects with them. The team continue to work closely with the team at Osterley Park and House. The team have created a strong relationship with the Gurdwara, Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Hounslow and have worked with them to travel part of the display to the Gurdwara after it closed at Osterley.

Aim 5) To increase public engagement skills at UCL. This project and the learning from it have been shared within the History Department.

Aim 6) To create the groundwork for a possible subsequent exhibition. Gurdwara, Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Hounslow were particularly keen to exhibit the photographic portraits and oral history recordings that were central to the Global Stories project. The exhibition was on show at the Gurdwara from December 2013 to March 2014.

Further information about the project is available at *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857* website: [www.ucl.ac.uk/eicah](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/eicah)

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## Learning from the Process

### What worked well?

- Engaging with broader histories through specific objects. Objects provided a compelling point of focus through which wider stories of trade, migration, cultural encounter, production, consumption and identity were told. The project team found that dealing in material specifics grounded the discussions they had with participants. At the same time, by asking participants to talk about specific objects the team gained oral histories.

- Listening to others voices and interweaving those within the historical narrative. The display produced as a result of the Global Stories project, enabled the audience to hear voices from their local community and their reflections on the Osterley objects. At the same time, having to include these voices encouraged the curatorial team to continually consider just how complicated the links between Asia and Europe have been and still are.

### What could be done differently?

- Recruitment of participants. Without links in the Hounslow area the team had to use a number of strategies to recruit participants to be involved in the project.

- Budget. Having completed little video or audio work before the team were unaware of the costs of editing. This problem was consolidated by working with a company principally formed of UCL undergraduates, who only had limited experience.

- Planning. When working with different groups, planned timings need to be flexible and endlessly fluid.