



# Inspired by Nature

'Nature Group' Case Study

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**Babylon  
ARTS**



**RNIB**  
See differently

In 2023/24, Babylon ARTS worked in partnership with Ely Museum, RNIB, CamSight, Fenland Association of the Blind and the National Trust's Wicken Fen Nature Reserve to deliver The National Lottery Heritage Fund project '**Inspired by Nature**'.

The 18-month programme developed creative approaches to facilitate connection and engagement with nature for people with low vision, children, young people and the wider public.

This case study focuses on the engagement of people with low vision or blindness and their experiences. It is informed by interviews, observations, surveys and group discussions that took place throughout the project.

The intention was for participants with low vision or blindness to be recruited to form a creative '**Nature Group**'. This group would explore nature and learn about the history and significance of the Fenland landscape through accessible, playful and engaging art activities.

There would be ten sessions that included interactive visits to Ely Museum and Wicken Fen and creative workshops at the Babylon Gallery.

The opportunity to participate was publicly advertised and 29 people attended promotional workshops with CamSight and Vision Norfolk. 14 of these went on to form the Nature Group.

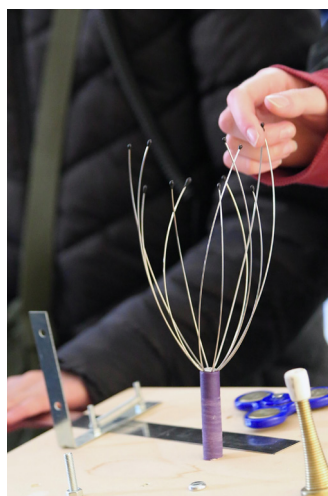
A lead artist was sought to accompany the group and empower them to co-create a sound artwork that could feature in '**Sensing Nature**'; a public art exhibition at Ely's Babylon Gallery to take place six months into the project. This role was awarded to composer, performer and experienced workshop leader, **Tom Adams**. Tom proposed working with the participants to create a sound piece entitled '**The Lantern Men**' inspired by local folklore:

'Wandering around Wicken Fen, watery spirits called The Lantern Men lure unsuspecting travellers into the reed beds. Attracted by whistling, a Lantern Man's pursuit can be evaded if you and a friend stand on either side of a field and whistle in turn, which discombobulates The Lantern Man, giving you time to escape.'

Tom planned to form the group into a song-writing circle and whistling choir; writing and performing songs inspired by objects explored in Ely Museum and their own personal experiences of the local landscape. Lead-in workshops would include mimicking birds and sounds from nature.

The songs, whistling and bird noises would be recorded in Wicken Fen with a binaural microphone. This would create three-dimensional sounds perfect for bringing atmosphere to 'The Lantern Men' tale. The recording would incorporate gentle, choreographed movement around the microphone. The creations of the Nature Group would be combined with a narration of the Lantern Men story by project volunteer Bill Walston to create the finished sound piece.





As the project unfolded, Tom adjusted his plan to adapt to how the group were responding, and to ensure their collaboration in the process:

‘My initial idea was to use all the group’s creations. There was so much good material, but for reasons of content, I unfortunately had to edit it down from about eight song lyrics to two. I perhaps could have morphed all eight songs together, but I wanted to stick with two at the time. With The Whistling Choir, I adapted the recording format as I felt like I had not taken into account how it might feel for someone with sight loss to move around a microphone with a sighted guide, so I adapted it to be recorded in the boat. I realised that simplicity can be best when it comes to recording.’ – **Tom Adams**

Tom created a number of sound-making exercises. These included the use of technology to make sounds from vegetables. Another was a box with assorted attachments that could be hit, plucked and shaken to produce a myriad of noises.

‘Brilliant. I didn’t know how to create different sounds. We had to make all these different noises of nature. I loved playing with the vegetables - when you touch it, and it makes a noise! And the box with all

the parts you can touch to make sounds. I love the practical side of things.’

– **Nature Group member**

‘The creativity of it - so interesting and so exciting - the potato and the celery with all these wires - absolutely fascinating. So inspirational and a wonderful experience.’

– **Nature Group member**

At Wicken Fen the group took part in listening exercises and experienced underwater sounds using a special microphone and headphones. Tom also developed a ‘Keepsake’ exercise to inspire the participants to talk about objects that were precious to them. All these activities met the brief of being accessible, playful and engaging and they produced powerful results.

‘I am glad the ‘keepsake’ activity went well. It helped each participant to talk about themselves and share something that was precious to them in a safe space. This helped me create song lyrics for the piece and also gave me a better understanding of why each person answered the advert.’

– **Tom Adams**

Tom became very aware of the importance of developing the social aspects of the project to allow the participants to bond and feel comfortable creating. The social aspects of Tom’s delivery model helped bring about positive changes in wellbeing and stimulated creative engagement.

‘It felt good having tea and biscuits with everyone, giving space to just talk and get to know each other. I feel each time we meet now, we have a shared history of the fun we had before. Time allowed was perfect. I wanted the participants to be relaxed and take their time over the activities, not feel rushed. I always want the group to have a good time with plenty of play, and I am pleased that I could achieve this.’ – **Tom Adams**



The final piece was presented in the Babylon Gallery in a specially built installation resembling a Wicken Fen bird hide. Visitors could sit in the hide and enjoy listening to and reflecting on the sound piece. After The Lantern Men story finished, visitors could listen to an additional '**Wicken Fen Audio Postcard**'. This had been created with the participants and provided the opportunity to share additional sounds and stories recorded during the project.

'The postcard of Wicken Fen enabled the voices of the people who've been contributing to the project to be heard in highly individualistic ways and worked brilliantly.' — **Nature Group member**

Before the piece was shared with the public, it was debuted at a Listening Party for the Nature Group at the gallery. Tom augmented



the experience by adding live drums and guitar. The vibrations of the live instruments added to the sensory impact of the piece and made it a special experience unique to those present that day.

The Lantern Men piece became a key part of the Sensing Nature exhibition at the Babylon Gallery. As part of the wider Inspired by Nature project, the exhibition was co-curated by the **Basecoat Collective** (young people aged 18 to 25). These young people were trained to lead on the selection of work and the creation of accessibility aids. These included audio descriptions, raised drawings and works that could be touched and smelt.

1,622 visitors experienced the exhibition across 22 days. There was widespread praise for its accessibility, and the artistic and emotive impact of the content was widely acknowledged.

'I feel disconnected from nature and forget it's all around me. This exhibition helped remind me.' — **Gallery visitor**

'I liked that this was accessible to people with sight disabilities. Having a sound installation was brilliant!' — **Gallery visitor**

'The bird hide was inspirational.' — **Gallery visitor**

'There was a blind lady who stayed from start to finish. When it was closing time, she was still touching everything and so involved with every bit of it. You could see how happy she was. She had never had that level of an exhibition being accessible to her. When we saw her, it was like everything we did had a purpose.' — **Basecoat Collective member**

'As a professional accessibility coordinator, you're doing an amazing job! No suggestions, you're 5\*!' — **Gallery visitor**



The show's accessibility was not just appreciated by those who directly benefited. Many visitors felt it created a more relaxed, interactive and stimulating gallery experience. There are many creative and engagement reasons why the features implemented in this show should be adopted more widely - they should not just be viewed as accessibility measures.

## Reflections of the Nature Group

Below are extracts from discussions with the Nature Group, grouped into three topics. Their detailed and candid words vividly capture the content and atmosphere of the sessions. They provide an example of effective engagement practice and illustrate firsthand how successful the project was in providing new creative experiences and building connectivity with local nature and heritage. The social and wellbeing benefits were considerable. The group's enthusiasm, commitment, good humour and animated conversation pervaded every session.

### 1. Visiting Wicken Fen:

'It was like a new life. With my rambling group we just walk, we don't take notice of the birds, the water, the wind. It was a wakeup call for me. Very special.'

'Nice to jump up and down on the peat and play with the reeds and make noises with them.'

'I've learnt loads about Wicken Fen. My first visit. Being able to touch the eel trap and stilts was fascinating. The boat trip was amazing. Listening to the reeds as we brushed passed at a gentle pace. And being surrounded by them above and to the side as we travelled at water level.'

'The Wicken staff were fantastic, and they made friends with us. It's the people who are organising and supporting that has made it. That magic worked.'

'Babylon ARTS managed all of our needs without questioning them. This has been as special as the creative side of the project.'

### 2. Creativity / Working with Tom

'It was amazing to see how it was pulled together to sound like you were actually in the fens. I learnt about the creative process from the inside.'

'What was magical was Tom giving us the space to talk without cutting us off and I was amazed that we managed to keep within the session times. It wasn't just getting the music together; it was getting us at ease, allowing that creative process.'

'Not only was everybody included but everybody was contributing. Absolutely brilliant.'

### 3. Wellbeing, confidence development and emotional response to the project:

‘This project has opened my eyes much more to the Fens. I feel that I have come back home.’

‘I’ve been treated absolutely equally. Lovely guide and lovely people.’

‘We would not have chosen to go to Wicken if it was not for the project. There are times when you feel awful. It’s just been nice to have some days out for change.’

‘This past winter I was really sad thinking how bad I had become. You are the first group I have felt comfortable with. My life has changed. My attitude has changed, and I’ve been able to talk about my blindness. Being with you makes me stop crying at nighttime. Thank you very, very much.’

### Key Learning Points:

**It is not just about what you deliver, but how you deliver it.**

**Allowing time and space for participants to bond and settle in can enrich the experience and enhance the outcomes.**

**Wicken Fen proved that with the right approach, a site has the potential to offer a stimulating experience for those with limited vision or blindness.**

**Have interactive opportunities that use all the senses.**

**Make provision for guide dogs both on site and when planning transport.**

**Keep the same structure for return visits and use the same familiar spaces to help participants feel more comfortable and confident.**

**Be aware of other potential activity on site when planning a trip (e.g. on-site noises distracted from the boat trip).**

**Having a range of voices – artists, staff & volunteers – enriches the experience.**

**Have items for participants to take home. (e.g. - the large-print leaflet from the windpump).**

### Project Legacy in Action

In July 2024, Babylon ARTS used remaining project funding to enable 9 additional CamSight service users the opportunity to enjoy the Wicken Fen boat trip that had proved so popular with the Nature Group. The successful evening trip further reinforced the value of such activities. It also enabled Wicken Fen staff to implement their learning from earlier in the project.

‘An excellent event. We enjoyed it so much that we all agreed that we would do it again.’ – **Participant**







‘The trip was a huge success, we had plenty of quiet times with the motor off that allowed us to be serenaded by Song Thrushes, Black Caps, Reed Warblers. I thoroughly enjoyed creating an audio description of what the fen is like now and how it used to be.’

– **Wicken Fen boat driver**

‘It felt we were close with nature... peaceful away from everyday life.’

– **Participant**

‘Truly magical.’ – **Participant**

‘It has been great to be included in this project. Wicken Fen Nature Reserve is working on new guided walks and boat trips for people with low vision. We also have audio guides awaiting funding. It has been a joy getting to know the participants. Several have visited again and have a deeper connection to Wicken Fen.’ – **Senior Programming and Partnerships Officer Wicken Fen**

In September 2024, other remaining funding enabled CamSight service users the opportunity to enjoy a visit to Ely Museum. The museum space proved very accessible, and there was a wealth of tactile objects that the group could touch. It was also an opportunity for them to try out the raised drawings created as part of the Inspired by Nature project.

‘Absolutely amazing!’

‘I loved touching the replicas and having my hand guided round the contour map.’

‘We need to come back!’

## Conclusion

The Inspired by Nature project was short enough to enable all partners and participants to commit to it fully; but long enough for people to reap the benefits and see the future potential.

The experiences embraced by the **Nature Group** were for many life changing, and the activities proved how much Wicken Fen, The Babylon Gallery and Ely Museum has to offer them. Their joy at visiting places, meeting people and being creative was infectious.

There is widespread hope that the momentum generated through this project can be maintained and inspire further opportunities to explore heritage and creativity that have accessibility at their heart. The project content, and an appreciation of the way it was delivered, have stimulated a clear appetite for further activities that mirror the format used. I believe that the management and delivery methods of the Nature Group and the Sensing Nature exhibition format can both act as effective templates for future work and collaborations.

‘A brilliant, shared experience. I don’t want it to end. I hope another will follow.’

– **Nature Group member**

‘The project has surpassed our expectations. We have discovered a new audience for whom some modest changes can have a major impact.’ – **Babylon ARTS**

‘I had the best time – absolute joy.’

– **Lead artist Tom Adams**





Scan to hear  
The Lantern Men  
and the Wicken Fen  
Audio Postcard

**Babylon ARTS**

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