

BLOOMSBURY FESTIVAL

NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release



***Strange Doings in London* project to explore 1000 years of the city's history through ballad, song and exhibitions**

A new year-long musical heritage project set to explore the history of the London area of St Giles – once notorious for having the worst living conditions in the country - will launch at Bloomsbury Festival '24 later this month thanks to a £39,750 grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Strange Doings in London - The Songs and Ballads of St Giles will bring together local communities and choirs through the history of ballad, song, news-sheets and illustrations. The project, which will be unveiled at the '[Sing Ballads of Bloomsbury](#)' event at the Bloomsbury Festival on the 25th October, explores the 1000-year history of the St-Giles-in-the-Fields parish from Drury Lane to Tottenham Court Road and reveals a dark and dramatic past far removed from the glittering lights of the West End we see today.

Prompted by the launch of a new history book (St Giles-in-the-Fields, The History of a London Parish by Rebecca Preston and Andrew Saint – Browndog Books) and other recently published histories*, *Strange Doings* will be led by Bloomsbury Festival and musician Vivien Ellis in partnership with St Giles-in-the-Fields Church, the Dragon Café Singers, the Charles Dickens Museum, the British Library, UCL, Camden Tour Guides and Camden Archives.

The project aims to bring together local communities and volunteers to unearth the stories of the streets we walk every day through song - streets which once saw leprosy, plague, beheadings, social deprivation, slums, and the first social housing – and research, record and share new versions of found songs and stories for today's audiences, to be presented as part of the Bloomsbury Festival '25 programme.

From the country's first leprosy hospital, founded by Queen Mathilda in c.1120 in fields outside the city where the Church now stands; to a notorious site of public execution in the 1400s; to the origins of the Great Plague in 1665 and the Victorian 'Rookeries' described as having "the worst living conditions in all of London's history" ^[1] (Peter Ackroyd), all these tales, and more, will be researched and brought to life through the history of ballad and song.

By delving into the archives using news-sheets, literature and illustrations, *Strange Doings* will offer new skills and opportunities to volunteers and participants including singers from all backgrounds as they explore the long-forgotten histories of London streets now buzzing with visitors and tourists. They will research historical ballads and sung histories, rewrite lost melodies, hold oral singing workshops, develop new songs, curate exhibitions in the St Giles area, deliver workshops exploring the Charles Dickens era and host talks and walks - including an audio ballad walk recreating the

unique sounds and atmosphere of Victorian England. The project will also involve local communities of global heritage to research and record their own traditions of sharing news through song.

Rosemary Richards, Director of Bloomsbury Festival said:

“Peeling back layers of history, over one thousand years, this wonderful musical heritage project reveals intriguing stories largely lost to the current residents and visitors of this area. Prompted by new written histories revealing the details of centuries past in St Giles, *Strange Doings in London* offers a programme of events and activities which involve the community and numerous partners in helping us lift these stories off the page, share them and bring the heritage of these London streets to a wider public audience.”

Vivien Ellis, Musical Director, Dragon Café Singers, said:

“This is a great opportunity for singers, local historians and researchers of all backgrounds to take part in a fascinating heritage project which will showcase some of the St Giles stories in a ballad walk next year. We’re looking forward to including new volunteers and above all, it will be great fun!”

Stuart McLeod, Director of England - London & South at The National Lottery Heritage Fund, said:

“We are delighted to support this project, which thanks to money raised by National Lottery players, will mean that more people will be able to get involved with, protect, and learn about the exciting heritage right on their doorstep. Heritage has a huge role to play in instilling pride in communities and boosting local economies, and this project is a fantastic example of achieving those aims.”

LISITINGS INFORMATION

EVENTS TO BE PRESENTED AS PART OF BLOOMSBURY FESTIVAL 2024

[Open Singing Workshop](#)

WORKSHOP: Saturday 19 October, 2.00-3.30pm

Holy Cross Church

FREE – Just turn up

CALLING ALL SINGERS – Individuals, Choirs and Groups! An open rehearsal/workshop for our [SING BALLADS OF BLOOMSBURY](#) event on Friday 25 October, suitable for all adult ages and 12+ (under 18's must be accompanied by an adult). No specific singing level is required to join in but it helps if you have had a little bit of singing experience at some stage.

[Sing Ballads of Bloomsbury](#)

PERFORMANCE: Friday 25 October, 6.30-8.30pm

St-Giles-in-the-Fields

FREE – Just turn up/donations welcome

From Dickens to Pepys, Sing Ballads of Bloomsbury will take you on a time-travel tour through the area's rich history, uncovering stories about local notorious characters to explore the hidden history of St Giles-in-the-Fields parish. Featuring family favourites from the musical Oliver! alongside

traditional ballads, this musical performance will have you singing about “The Streets of London” long after you’ve left!

Produced and directed by Bloomsbury Festival, in partnership with Vivien Ellis, Musical Director, Dragon Café Singers, St Giles-in-the-Fields Church and supported by Chestertons.

Dickens and St Giles - a lifelong fascination

TALK: Saturday 26 October, 11.20-12.30pm

St-Giles-in-the-Fields

An illustrated talk presented by Cindy Sughrue, Director of the Charles Dickens Museum and Lucinda Hawksley, art historian, biographer, award-winning travel writer and great-great-great granddaughter of Charles Dickens. Exploring Dickens’s lifelong fascination with the St Giles neighbourhood and how it inspired his work as a writer, journalist and social reform campaigner, from his childhood recollections through to the final years of his life.

St Giles: The Hidden Heart of London

TALK: Saturday 26 October, 1.30-2.30pm

St-Giles-in-the-Fields

FREE – Just turn up

The district of St Giles is not widely recognised today, but it has a dense and tangled history that tells us a great deal about the experience of living in London from the 12th Century to today. This history has rarely been glamorous, but it is packed with the stories of lives touched by many of the most momentous events in British history. Research conducted by Rebecca Preston and Andrew Saint sheds new light on the history of this fascinating area that has become the heart of London. Join Rebecca for an informal talk about their research.

Creators of St Giles

WALK: Saturday 26 October, 2.45-4.15pm

St-Giles-in-the-Fields

FREE – Just turn up

The history of St Giles is one of extraordinary human perseverance and ingenuity. The streets of this part of central London have played host to some of our country’s greatest artists, thinkers and innovators. Join us for a walking tour exploring the stories and places associated with a diverse range of creators from a wide variety of trades and movements – from printers, to cartoonists, portrait painters to philosophers. Encounter Mary Wollstonecraft, Augustus Pugin and other, lesser known names, as we walk the streets of the West End.

Heritage events supported by Chestertons.

ENDS

Further information, images and interviews

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Notes to Editors

Strange Doings in London - The Songs and Ballads of St Giles

Strange Doings in London - The Songs and Ballads of St Giles is a musical heritage project led by Bloomsbury Festival, involving partners across the communities and institutions of Bloomsbury and St Giles, and surrounding areas, supported by a £39,750 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Partners include the Dragon Cafe Singers, St Giles-in-the-Fields Church, the Charles Dickens Museum, the British Library, UCL, Camden Tour Guides and Camden Archives.

Bloomsbury Festival

Bloomsbury Festival 2024 has a programme of over one hundred events: music, theatre, films, artworks, talks and walks, exhibitions, workshops and activities, linked together through the theme of *Human.Kind*.

The festival takes place in over 30 venues across Bloomsbury with multi-event hubs at City Lit, Conway Hall, Holy Cross Church, Holborn Library, St Giles-in-the-Fields Church, The Music Room and Westminster Kingsway College.

Vivien Ellis and the Dragon Café Singers

Vivien is a champion of community singing and a professional musician. She has led the The Dragon Café singers since 2014 as part of the activities of the Mental Fight Club charity. She researches ballads and leads ballad walks with the Dragon Café Singers and groups around the country.

***Recently published history books**

St Giles-in-the-Fields, The History of a London Parish by Rebecca Preston and Andrew Saint – Browndog Books (2024)

Camden District Alliance, Hidden Histories, Dave Hill and Vic Keegan (2024)

The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Our vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future. That's why as the largest funder for the UK's heritage we are dedicated to supporting projects that connect people and communities to heritage, as set out in our strategic plan, Heritage 2033. Heritage can be anything from the past that people value and want to pass on to future generations. We believe in the power of heritage to ignite the imagination, offer joy and inspiration, and to build pride in place and connection to the past. Over the next 10 years, we aim to invest £3.6billion raised for good causes by National Lottery players to make a decisive difference for people, places and communities.

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