

Lincoln Arts
Centre

IMPACT

**OUR
FREEDOM:
THEN & NOW**



Photo Credit: Rejwan Gareb

REPORT

Celebrating the 80th
anniversary of VE/VJ Day



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The Lincoln Project

Our proposal was to connect Lincolnshire's communities with the diverse stories of the bombing war, drawn from the International Bomber Command Centre's 40,000-item digital archive hosted by the University of Lincoln.

Led by Lincoln Arts Centre, the project engaged RAF bases, schools, volunteers, students and local residents to explore historical and contemporary ideas of freedom. Through structured archive sessions and community-commissioning workshops, participants co-designed and selected a major new artwork, an approach that reshaped how we commission artists.

The final public artwork brought together wide-ranging voices and experiences, celebrating recognition, remembrance and reconciliation across the county. It resulted in The Lincolnshire Mosaic Of Freedom, a digital and physical mosaic of thousands of community contributed images which represented freedom.

The National Project

Our Freedom: Then and Now is a new UK-wide, locally-led arts and creative programme which will produce 60 new pieces of work reflecting on what 'Our Freedom' means to local people and their communities, following the 80th anniversary of VE/VJ Day.

Future Arts Centres will lead the programme, working with 60 arts centres and libraries, their communities and artists to create special cultural events, exhibitions and performances that are meaningful to people living in these places and across the UK.

Community-facing activities will run from May 2025, with most public events from July to November.

The programme is delivered in partnership with Libraries Connected and Open Eye Gallery, supported using public funding by UK Government through Arts Council England.

Phase 1

What Does Freedom mean to you?

Summer 2025 took us from RAF bases to libraries, community groups and schools with one question: What does freedom mean to you?

Community-led commissioning workshops and research in the International Bomber Command Centre's Digital Archive shaped the work, leading us to commission an artist through a new, community-first process. As Lincoln Arts Centre Director reflects: **"It's completely re-framed how we approach commissioning artists, taking the time to do this process with community members."**



"I've never felt so supported on a commission. The trust in my vision and the care behind the process changed how I'll approach every project going forward."

"I walked in unsure if I had anything to offer, and walked out knowing I was part of something bigger. This process made every one of us feel genuinely valued." - Community Commissioner

"I've never seen a project give volunteers so much trust. We weren't just consulted - we were co-creators." - Community Commissioner





The Lincolnshire Mosaic of Freedom

The chosen project was developed by digital artist **Allan Levy** and was selected for its clarity of thought, strong track record, and clear methodology for engaging large numbers of people. His proposal was unanimously chosen by both the community commissioner and the professional panel, who felt confident in his ability to deliver a high-quality, participatory artwork at scale.

The project consisted of four mosaic artworks, each constructed from thousands of images contributed by local communities, RAF youth groups, local schools, and the International Bomber Command Centre Digital Archive. Viewed up close, each individual image measured approximately one inch square; from a distance of around five feet, the mosaics revealed larger archival images drawn from the IBC Digital Archive's collection and two other contemporary images of freedom. The final artworks were printed on aluminium - a material closely associated with aircraft construction - symbolising resilience and the enduring spirit of freedom and were complimented by audio recordings of archival materials, like prisoner of water letters and news articles from VE Day.



Phase 2
The
Lincolnshire
Mosaic of
Freedom

In phase two we started to gather thousands of images from schools, volunteers, and local residents to create the four Mosaics of Freedom, blending historical stories, personal memories, and contemporary reflections on freedom. During phase two we made new discoveries including connections with Ukrainian film maker.



"I wanted to champion the views of children and young people who bring great insight when tackling big issues... I had no idea about the process of commissioning an artist and was in awe of how such a project could be achieved"
Trish, Community Commissioner

"Our discussions about the meaning of freedom chimed with the IBCC's ethos of remembrance, recognition and reconciliation... I'm glad I had the freedom to say yes to the project!"
Dan, International Bomber Command Digital Archivist



In total, over 2,000 individual and archived images were collected, documenting a range of perspectives on freedom across Lincolnshire.

4 new 'Mosaics of Freedom' created, blending community stories with contemporary art.

1 unexpected international contribution; a new film from a Ukrainian filmmaker responding to the theme of freedom today.

4 live musical performances, animating the celebration with intergenerational sound and talent.

1 new project borne out of the unsuccessful original artistic proposals.

2 original archive items revived through new creative responses including a POW letter, wartime photographs and a rediscovered newspaper clipping projected on buildings or delivered as soundscapes.

Young peoples audio recordings of what freedom means.

1 celebration event showcasing all creative outcomes.

1 Legacy Website

2 powerful youth reflections performed aloud, bringing young people's voices to the centre of the celebration event.

1 new enquiry to replicate our model, demonstrating demand and wider sector interest.

Reflections From Alastair, Community Commissioner

This reflection has been edited for length while keeping the author's original tone and intent.

I joined the Freedom Then And Now project out of curiosity, but freedom has always been woven through my life. My Grandpa Paterson, a Royal Naval Gunner in the Battle of the Atlantic, fought for the freedoms we now take for granted. As a Scots Highlander who admires Robert Burns, I'm also mindful of the difficult parts of our history that shaped his work.

Freedom also means being able to love who we love and be who we are - things often twisted by stereotypes. King Ludwig II of Bavaria, one of my heroes, lived and died under such misconceptions, only now being understood more truthfully.

What concerns me today is our freedom to contribute meaningfully to society. Many people have so much potential, yet bureaucracy often gets in the way. I hope our community chooses inclusion and compassion over division. Lincoln welcomed me 26 years ago, and its warm spirit - from pubs to football to bakeries - still makes me never want to leave. Let's protect that spirit and hold tight to the freedoms my Grandpa fought for: the simple freedom to feel at home.

Reflections From Emily, Headteacher

The school's involvement in the Freedom: Then and Now project has been an inspiring and enriching experience for everyone involved.

For a school within an area of high deprivation, this was an aspirational opportunity that broadened horizons and helped children see what they are capable of achieving.

Through exploring the theme of freedom, the pupils deepened their thinking and developed a more meaningful understanding of what freedom means both historically and in their own lives.

The project encouraged creativity across the expressive arts, giving them opportunities to experiment, perform, and refine their ideas through oral rehearsal, drama and recorded pieces.

Being selected as one of the final contributions was a wonderful celebration for the children and the whole school community, and working alongside such highly skilled specialists in their fields made the experience even more memorable and empowering.

Reflections From Andy, Community Commissioner

This reflection has been edited for length while keeping the author's original tone and intent.

I've been fascinated by the men who flew bombers in the war ever since reading Cheshire VC as a schoolboy. Now, as a volunteer in the Bomber Command Archive and a tour guide at the International Bomber Command Centre, I love discovering and sharing their stories. So the chance to take part in an art project centred on these brave men was too good to miss.

At first, I had no idea what would be asked of me or whether I had anything to offer, but Simon and Ben's inclusive approach quickly put me at ease. Their respect for everyone's ideas made the whole experience relaxed and enjoyable, and I soon stopped feeling like a fish out of water.

The balance between free expression and artistic direction felt just right. I never felt lost or pushed down a particular path. Watching Simon and Ben give us freedom to explore while still keeping us on track - on a tight schedule, no less - was impressive. I didn't always fully grasp every group exercise, and the time felt short, but I trusted the process.

Taking part in the final selection confirmed that we, the public, were genuinely central to the project - not just a source of ideas.

Reflections From Haydn, Community Commissioner

I have always believed in the value of our young people in Lincolnshire and my responsibility to them by adding what little I can to their future. I find that now, more than ever, we need to find new ways to engage with them and help them understand the past and the effect it has on the 'now'. We have lived through the Covid period and have moved into uncertain economic and political times. We need to engage our young people to enable them to understand that there are always ways forward, that their role in the future is important and that they can deliver on that through involving themselves, communicating with each other and being bold and confident. This need also applies to the young adults and the communities that they belong to.

When I first read about the project I thought it would offer that opportunity if delivered in the right way, and I am pleased to say that feeling has been justified.

Legacy The Lincolnshire Mosaic of Freedom

The project leaves a lasting creative and community legacy across Lincolnshire. Our four Mosaics of Freedom and a new film by a Ukrainian filmmaker showcase how archive materials can be reimagined as public artworks, setting a precedent for future commissions. All outputs are housed on a dedicated website. New collections have been brought to the IBC Digital Archive. We've strengthened connections with thousands of people, and our commissioning model has already inspired a new enquiry to replicate it. Even ideas from an unsuccessful artist application have found life, demonstrating the project's ongoing ripple effect in art, community engagement, and archival practice.

THE LINCOLNSHIRE MOSAIC OF FREEDOM

Thousands of images from across Lincolnshire came together as a giant mosaic, created with schools, families and community groups to mark 80 years since VE Day and displayed at Lincoln Arts Centre. Freedom: Then and Now is part of a £2 million UK-wide creative programme marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, supported by the UK Government through Arts Council England and delivered with 60 arts centres and libraries across Britain, each leading community projects that explore the legacy of VE Day and VJ Day and ask what freedom means today.



nowandthenfreedom.com



This project was led locally by Lincoln Arts Centre at the University of Lincoln.

With thanks to Project Manager Simon Hollingworth and Lead Archivist Dan Ellin; our community commissioners Haydn Beeken, Dudley Blanchard, Andy Evans, Andy Fitter, Alastair Mainland, John Holliday, and Patricia Rudd; and all the schools and community groups that submitted images, in particular St Peter at Gowts Primary School, St Mary's Primary School, and Airplay at RAF Digby.

Special thanks to Allan Levy, the selected artist, and to all the artists who applied; to Veronika Provozin, the filmmaker; and to photographers Rejwan Gareb and Karina Lax. Finally, thank you to everyone at Future Arts Centres, in particular Christine Lee for their coordination, and to our cluster coordinator Annabel Weeden for their encouragement.

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Supported using public funding by
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**Funded by
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