

Human Henge Online was a test and learn project exploring stakeholder learning and participant experience of remote online engagement with the ancient landscape of Stonehenge during COVID-19.

Participants described their experience of taking part as instrumental in reducing loneliness and isolation and increasing enjoyment and connection.

The evaluation identified a number of key criteria to successful online delivery and concluded that the Human Henge Online model might be developed and applied to other heritage sites across the UK as part of social prescribing.



Zoom still showing Yvette Staelens inside the Stonehenge stone circle sharing a piece of Bluestone

Partners: Restoration Trust; Richmond Fellowship; English Heritage; Centre for Archaeology and Anthropology Bournemouth University

Funders: Cultural Recovery Fund

Evaluation: Jane Willis, Willis Newson
[Human Henge Online Evaluation Report](#)

Tags: Mental health; archaeology; heritage; landscape; creativity; cross-sector partnerships; culture therapy; digital; remote; online; loneliness; isolation; COVID-19; creative evaluation

Introduction

The Restoration Trust has a long history of delivering ‘culture therapy’ projects to support those living with mental ill health. One of their flagship projects, Human Henge, worked with English Heritage and the Centre for Archaeology and Anthropology at Bournemouth University to creatively engage Richmond Fellowship clients in immersive, face-to-face experiences of the ancient and natural heritage of Stonehenge.

The experience of connecting creatively with the landscape, with ancient history and with each other through Human Henge was, for many, transformative. The impact of the original Human Henge project was explored through research carried out by the University of Bournemouth¹ and has been documented on television, in film and in many newspaper articles².



Zoom still showing Professor Tim Darvill approaching the stone circle at Stonehenge

The Challenge

When COVID-19 hit, face-to-face groups like Human Henge had to stop. Alongside the distress of living with a mental health condition, many were left grappling with increased fear, misery, isolation and loss suffered through the pandemic:

It's a miserable time. Lockdown's miserable. X died last year and to be able to be taken away from the bereavement and misery and the horribleness and the fear of everything that's going on at the moment in this world.

¹ Bournemouth University were commissioned to carry out research addressing the question: “Does a creative exploration of historic landscape achieve sustained, measurable mental health and wellbeing outcomes for people with mental health conditions?” <https://humanhenge.org/2019/01/30/human-henge-evaluation-report>

² <https://humanhenge.org/press/>

Supported by Cultural Recovery Funds, the Human Henge partners therefore developed Human Henge Online to explore whether the original model would translate to a remote format and whether the therapeutic benefits of engaging with the ancient landscape of Stonehenge would translate to an online experience.

Evaluation

The evaluation of Human Henge Online delivered by Willis Newson aimed to explore participants' experience of taking part and identify partner and stakeholder learning to inform the development of future online and remote programmes.

It used a range of qualitative tools including online stakeholder debriefs after each session, as well as online participant and stakeholder focus groups in which reflection and discussion was facilitated through images and creative prompts.

The Approach

During Human Henge Online, participants met on Zoom to engage remotely with the ancient landscape and archaeology of Stonehenge, ending with an exclusive experience of virtual access to the Stone Circle close to the Spring Equinox. The online meetings were supplemented by posted Culture Parcels and a private Facebook Group.

A digital support package - including equipment, data and training - enabled all participants to join online sessions regardless of digital skills or resources.

The online sessions were co-facilitated by Professor Tim Darvill of the University of Bournemouth, creative facilitator Yvette Staelens, English Heritage Curator Martin Allfrey and mental health support workers from the Richmond Fellowship.

Careful planning and preparation created a safe framework within which there was space for spontaneity and improvisation. Ethics and safety were considered at the outset as well as throughout the project.

Structure and pacing played a crucial role in creating an engaging and immersive experience. The overall arc of the project as well as the structure of each session was planned with space for freedom, spontaneity and engagement.

Connection with participants, maintained through Facebook and 'in between' meetings, was critical in keeping the group connected.



Zoom still showing Professor Tim Darvill in the stone circle



Zoom still showing Yvette Staelens sharing a feeling of connection

Participants' Experience

Bringing people together in a safe, inclusive online space to engage creatively with the ancient landscape of Stonehenge provided much needed light during the dark times of COVID-19.

So, I've been ill and, um, I've been shielding since a year ago. Wow. So yes, this was the light out of the darkness.

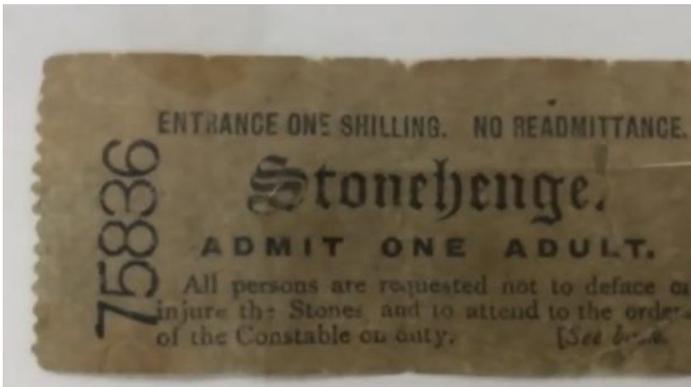
A lack of physical and mental energy made it hard for people to engage at the start. However, the friendship and connection found in the group provided comfort, support and inspiration to carry on during times of difficulty.

Fun, laughter and the joy experienced through the project were instrumental in bringing people together, lifting low mood and activating hope. The enjoyment of taking part in the project reminded people of past joys and helped them to re-connect with their 'old self'.

Engaging with ancient history and landscape widened people's perspectives.

By appealing to all the senses, the project delivered an immersive, embodied experience that engaged mind, body and spirit and created a lasting experience.

Sadness was expressed at the project ending, however, there was a strong sense that the project's legacy would live on in the connections formed, the memories made and the encouragement to continue.



Zoom still showing Stonehenge admission ticket from the English Heritage Stores



Culture Parcel contents included hot chocolate and biscuits, English Heritage cards and books, as well as charcoal, flint, twine

The evaluation captured the experience of participants in the form of a Pantoum - a Malaysian poetic form consisting of a pattern of repeating lines - compiled from words shared during the Human Henge Online Evaluation Focus Group:

A Human Henge Online Pantoum

Stuck indoors during lockdown, there isn't much joy,
So, yes, this was the light out of the darkness.
Those packages were worth so much. Hugs in the post.
I felt like I was in the room with all of you.

So, yes, this was the light out of the darkness,
That beautiful connection that we had every week,
I felt like I was in the room with all of you.
I noticed how much other people were hurting.

That beautiful connection that we had every week.
I feel so small in the history of the world.
I noticed how much other people were hurting.
I won't ever forget this.

I feel so small in the history of the world.
Those packages were worth so much. Hugs in the post.
I won't ever forget this,
Stuck indoors during lockdown, there isn't much joy.

Lessons Learned

A broad range of skills were identified as necessary to the success of the project, including facilitation skills, archaeological expertise, knowledge and experience of mental health, IT support skills and planning and organisation skills.

The ability of the facilitators to creatively engage participants' senses and imagination was critical in delivering a rich, immersive online experience.

The mental health support worker played a critical role in enabling people to access the programme.

A number of challenges to working online were identified, including the ability to gauge the reactions of participants and manage distress at a distance. Several technical challenges came to light, which the IT support role was crucial in resolving.

Benefits to working online were noted by the team, including the ability to reach participants who may not have come to a face-to-face group and increased access to places such as the Stone Circle.

The Legacy

Human Henge Online has been successful in adapting Human Henge, a face-to-face programme that took place in the ancient landscape of Stonehenge, to remote online delivery.

The remit of the evaluation was not to measure outcomes. However, qualitative accounts of participants' experience suggest that the project increased participants' knowledge and engagement with ancient heritage, led to a reduction in loneliness and isolation, and an increase in wellbeing.

The online format demonstrated benefits around access and reach which makes it a potential delivery method beyond the Pandemic.

While Stonehenge was a particular draw, what appeared to make the project a success was the combination of group process and engagement with archaeology and ancient landscape facilitated through creative engagement. This suggests that the model might be applied to other heritage sites across the UK.

As a cross-sectoral organisation working across heritage, the arts and mental health, the Restoration Trust is well placed to broker local partnerships to deliver such projects across the UK.

If you are interested in finding out more, please contact Jane@willisnewson.co.uk

Web links	Human Henge	www.humanhenge.org
	Human Henge Online	www.humanhenge.org/2020/12/04/human-henge-online
	Restoration Trust	www.restorationtrust.org.uk
	Richmond Fellowship	www.richmondfellowship.org.uk



Zoom still Yvette Staelens as she takes participants on a tour of Woodhenge