



AIRSHIP DREAMS: ESCAPING GRAVITY



**A HERITAGE-LED ARTISTIC ENQUIRY INTO BEDFORD'S IDENTITY
AS THE HISTORICAL CENTRE OF THE UK'S AIRSHIP INDUSTRY**

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
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**BEDFORD
CREATIVE** ARTS



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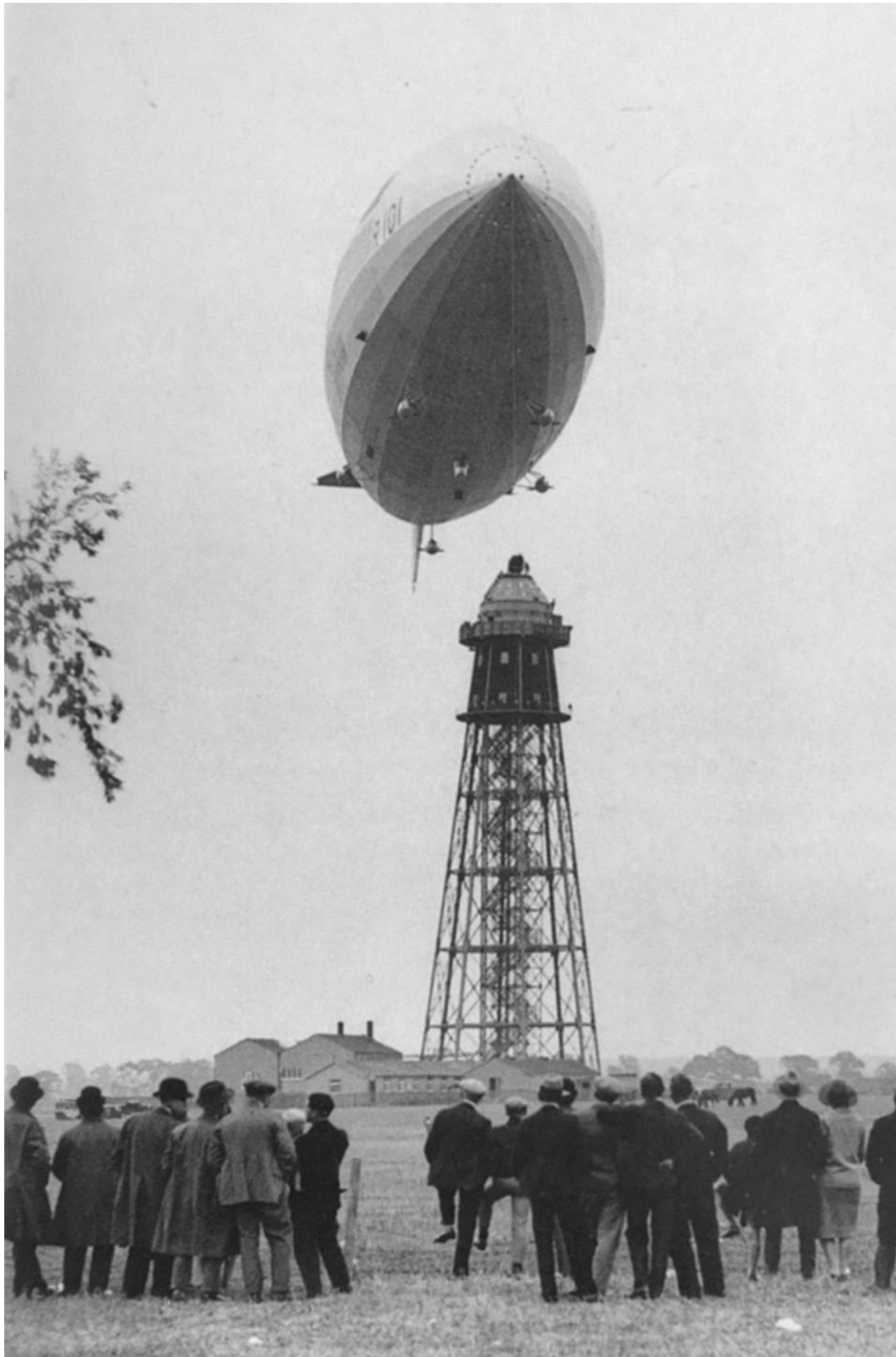
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Front cover: Images courtesy of
Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity lead
artist Mike Stubbs and project creative
team and Bedfordshire Archives
Collection.



INTRODUCTION

Airship Dreams was a heritage-led artistic enquiry into Bedford's identity as the historical centre of the UK's airship industry.

Bedford Creative Arts (BCA) and The Higgins Bedford (THB) collaborated with artist Mike Stubbs and The Airship Heritage Trust to develop a new artwork and community co-created exhibition inspired by Bedford's airship heritage.

The project ran from April 2020 to March 2022.

It was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council England, Gale Family Trust, The Harpur Trust, Bedford College, Airship Heritage Trust and was supported by Bedford Borough Council: www.airshipdreams.com

Despite the inevitable impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the project succeeded in reaching audiences of 29,197 through a combination of physical and virtual means, including:

- A new immersive audio-visual artistic installation
- A community co-curated exhibition of airship memory & artefacts
- A permanent 360 degree 'virtual' version of the exhibition
- A new publication documenting the project & the heritage behind it
- An online community engagement programme complemented by physical workshops, talks and a symposium
- An in-depth educational programme engaging an entire school of primary aged children and resulting in share-able legacy resources
- Targeted engagement of groups of secondary school students, University students and multiple virtual work placements for Bedford College students

The vision for this project has reignited enthusiasm and interest in an ongoing legacy in Airship Heritage but also in contemporary arts application to heritage in a new and exciting way.

The Higgins Bedford

Left: Image of R.101 on the mooring mast courtesy of Airship Heritage Trust. Following spread: Images courtesy of *Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity* lead artist Mike Stubbs and project creative team.

SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS

29,197

TOTAL AUDIENCE REACH

7,508

EXHIBITION VISITORS

20

WORKSHOPS & TALKS

974

ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS

844

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED

10

PROJECT PARTNERS

40

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES PRODUCED

12

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTORS ENGAGED IN CO-CURATION

29

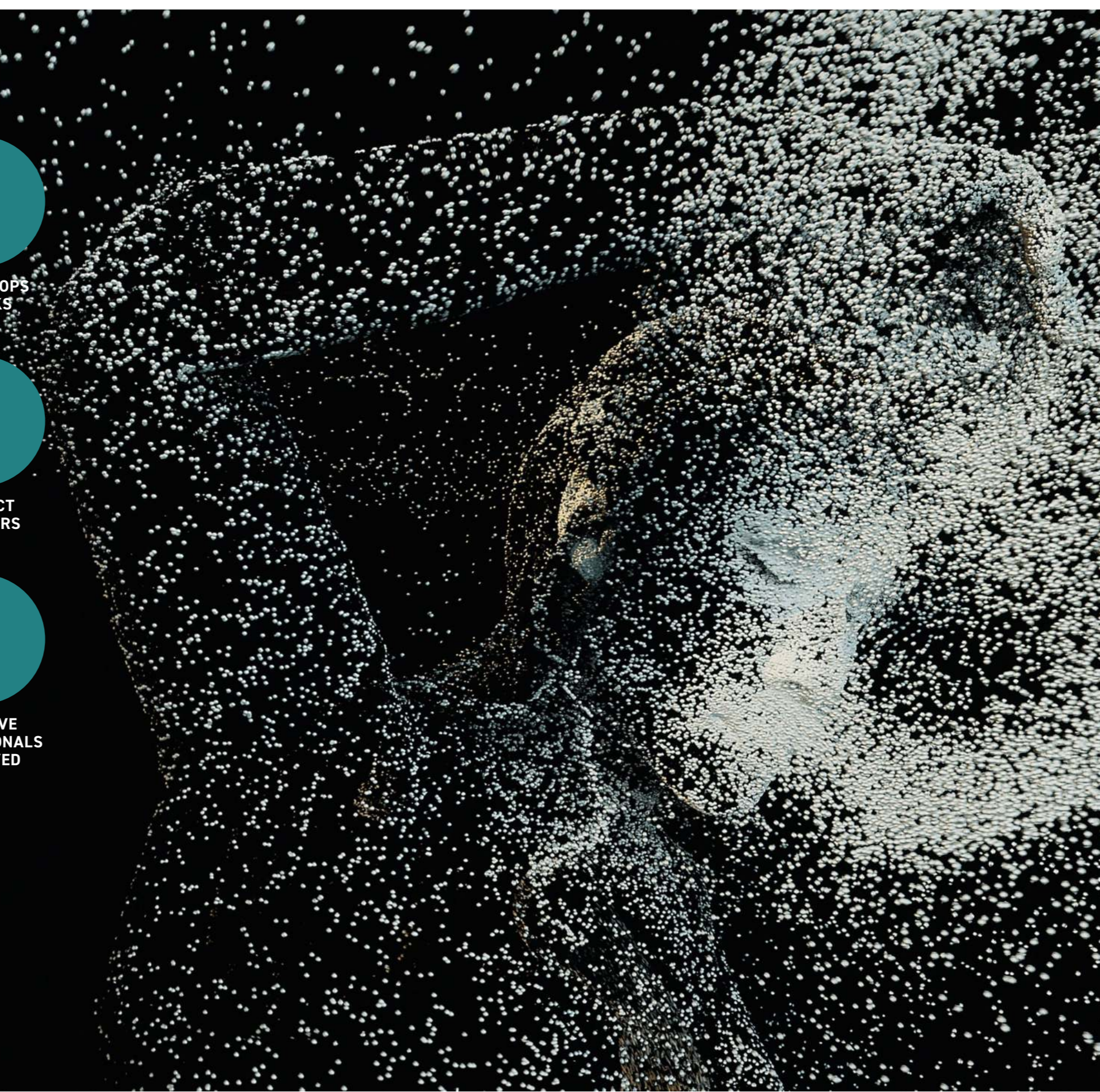
CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS EMPLOYED

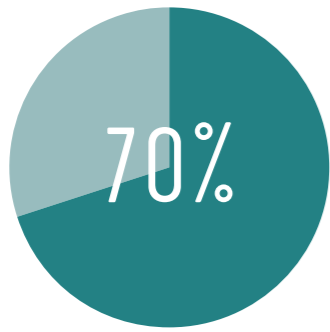
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PODCASTS

20,995

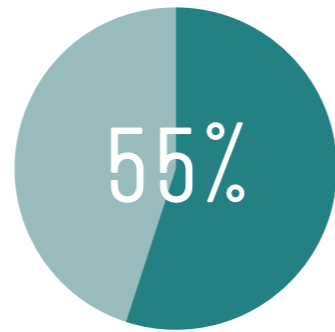
DIGITAL ENGAGEMENTS





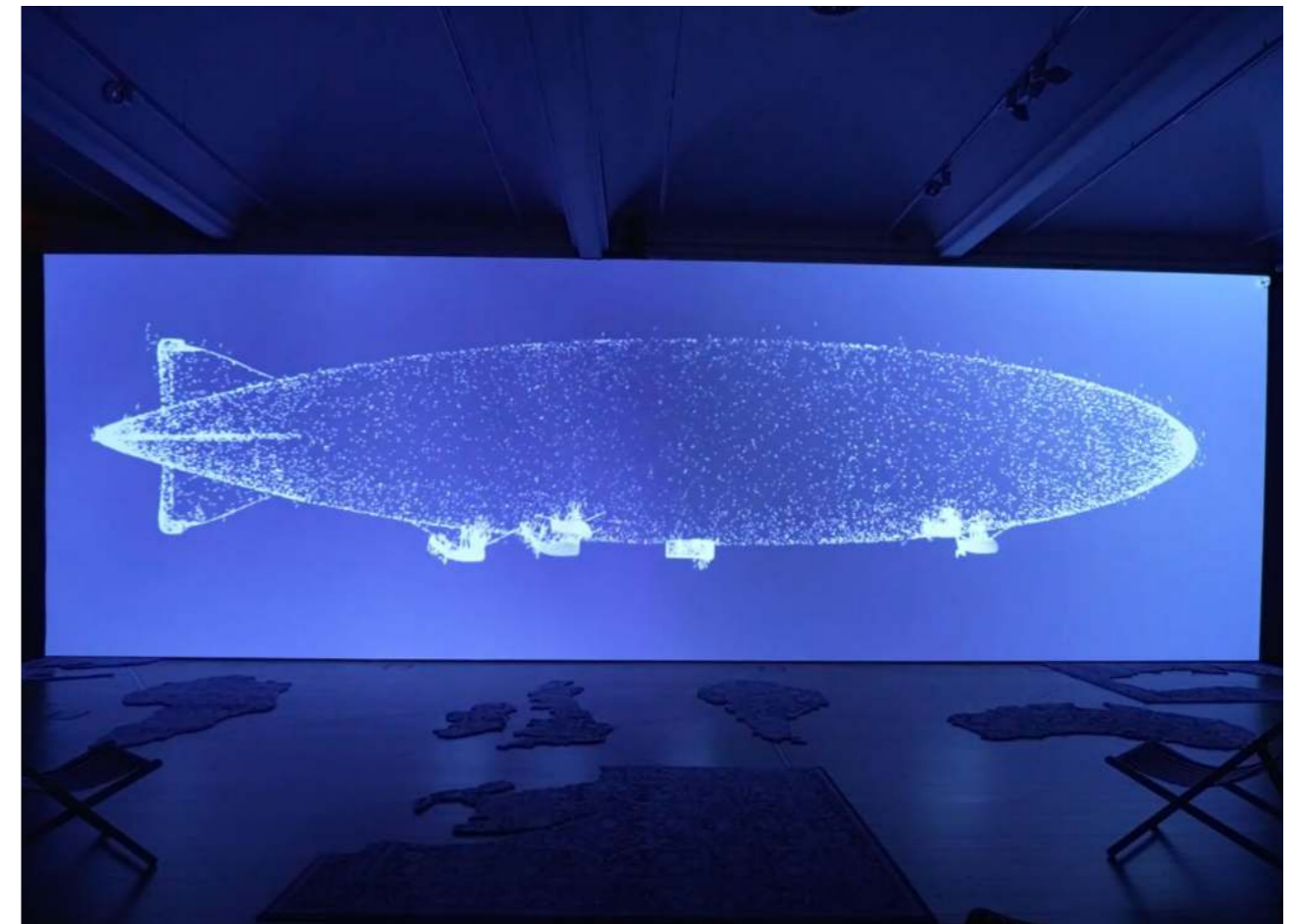
OVER TWO-THIRDS OF EXHIBITION VISITORS (70%) SAID THEY HAD LEARNED SOMETHING NEW ABOUT THE HERITAGE.

[I] got a sense of the human element and emotion involved in building, operating, flying in, and observing airships.

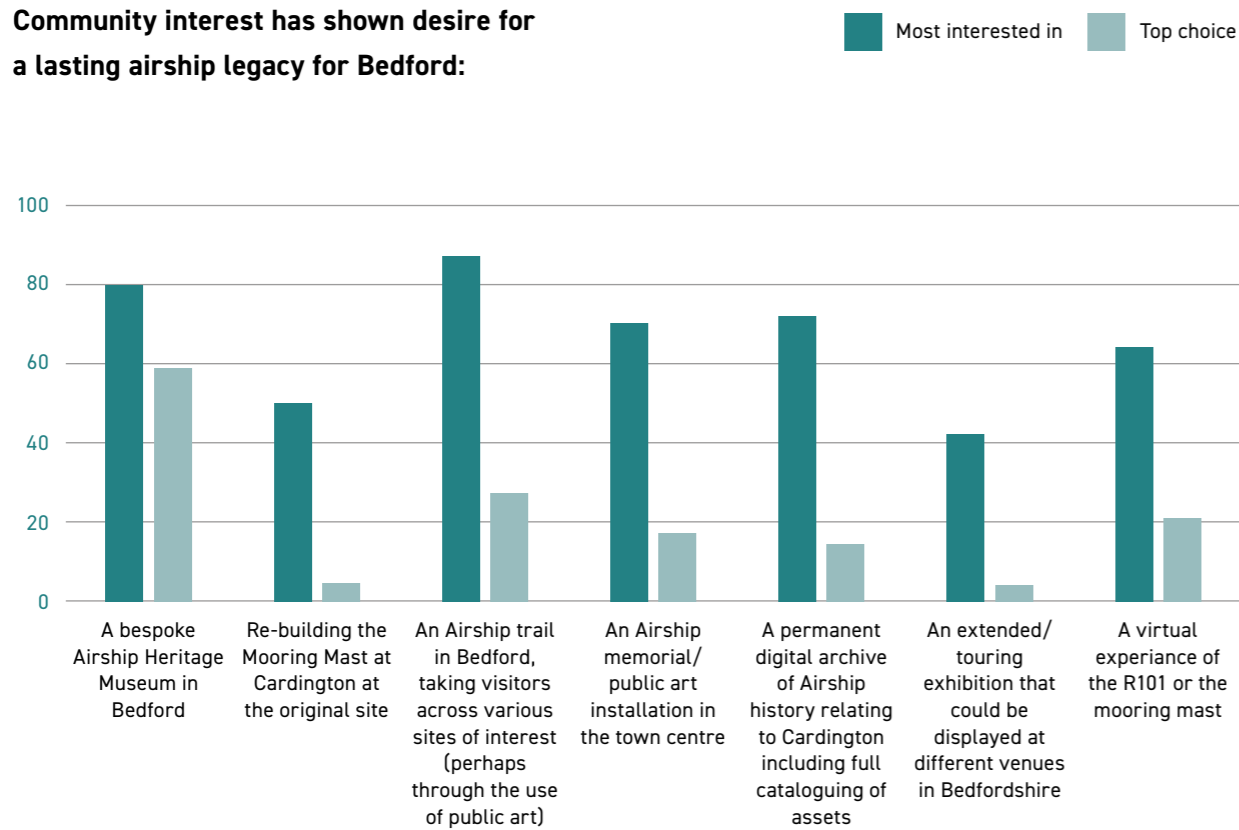


55% POSITIVELY CHANGED THEIR PERCEPTION OF BEDFORD TO SOME DEGREE.

It gave me a much greater appreciation of the role of the town in the history of airship development and therefore a greater sense of pride.



Community interest has shown desire for a lasting airship legacy for Bedford:





THE HISTORY

Bedford and the Airship

In the 1920s Bedford was poised to be the “Heathrow” of the airship. The Cardington Sheds were built to house the Imperial Airship programme that would connect Bedford to global locations such as India, Canada and Australia. A commercially built airship, the R.100 successfully flew to Montreal in July 1930 and an airship dream was born. However, its government funded sister ship, the R.101, crashed in October 1930 on its first international flight killing nearly all on board. The government scrapped the Imperial Airship programme virtually overnight. The Cardington Sheds continued to house smaller blimps and airships of various forms for many years such as providing pleasure rides on Skyships in the 1990s, however eventually the sheds’ ownership transferred to film studios and are now home to Hollywood stars filming major motion pictures.

Background to the Project

Bedford’s place in the history of airship aviation remains relatively uncelebrated in the town itself, reduced to traces found in its architecture and collective memory. *Airship Dreams* aimed to

Previous page, top: *Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity* installation.
 Previous page, bottom: Airship Dreamer’s Workshop. Image by Andy Willsher.
 Above: R.101 and mooring mast courtesy of Airship Heritage Trust.
 Right: Mike Stubbs. Image by Jamie Bubb.

reinvigorate this memory, with a view to establishing community desire for a permanent memorial or archive by 2030.

The project was conceived in 2017 when Mike Stubbs was invited by BCA to examine the creative possibilities for exploring Bedford’s airship heritage and the Cardington Sheds in preparation for the 90th anniversary of the fatal crash of the R.101 in 2020.

Several brief periods of research and development were held, which resulted in a week of public workshops in Bedford Central Library in 2019. These were successful and therefore funding was secured for this ambitious project.

BCA & THB, supported by the Airship Heritage Trust, commissioned Mike Stubbs as the Lead Artist to work with people of all ages in Bedford to explore, collect and curate archival and newly sourced airship heritage material & memories and deliver an ambitious artistic response to what the community shared.

The impact of Covid

Originally the project was proposed to have several parts including an in-depth community engagement and education programme, a



six-month long exhibition of art & community memory, and a major outdoor event on Castle Mound. The impact of Covid-19 led to the project being delivered over twice the length originally intended, without an outdoor event, and with much of the concept development and community interaction delivered online. However, the result was a no-less rich and varied programme of community engagement, artistic works and educational programming.

Project Aims

- a) engage wide numbers of the community in the airship heritage of Bedford & create pride and ownership of their local history,
- b) capture community stories and memories in a creative and innovative way with powerful emotive impact and a lasting digital legacy,
- c) explore the community's response and imagination for how flight and travel may be in the future and consider forgotten, lost and possible airship futures,
- d) enliven archive material through engagement with contemporary arts practice rooted in a community context,
- e) set the bar for creative commissions in the town through delivering a high-quality creative output with exceptional and nationally renowned artists that is well received through critical review.

Key Outcomes

- a) local residents feel a greater connection to Bedford's airship history,
- b) external perceptions of Bedford as a heritage destination and a town of innovation and vision are strengthened,
- c) Bedford's creatives are inspired to greater artistic ambition,
- d) the project team better understand community desire for continued commemoration and remembrance of Airship heritage in Bedford and use this to inform future work,
- e) BCA & THB are recognised regionally and beyond as producers of high-quality contemporary art,
- f) BCA and THB attract positive PR attention from national & arts industry publications,
- g) the project reaches wide audiences including local residents, school children, heritage enthusiasts, artistic and heritage peers, and critics,
- h) artists (especially Mike Stubbs as a Bedford-raised re-emerging artist) are recognised as high-quality practitioners who work in socially-engaged artistic practise.

WHAT WE DELIVERED

Community Co-curated Exhibition

(Connections Gallery, July 2021 – March 2022)

In the Higgins' Connections Gallery was an exhibition of community co-curated artefacts and memories.

Curation was led by The Higgins' Keeper of Social History and the Airship Heritage Trust (AHT) alongside the vision of the Lead Artist. It invited local people to discover stories associated with Bedford and the airship as seen through the community's eyes.

The exhibition included a re-creation of Shed 3; the garden shed and private airship heritage collection of former AHT Curator, Den Burchmore, exhibited with audio of his oral history. Den was a huge inspiration to Mike Stubbs and the team in initiating this project.

Below: Community exhibition.
Image by Andy Willsher.





I was astounded at the recreation of Den's study, in its accuracy and design was simply amazing ... I was really moved, and it reminded me of many years of sitting beside Den and having him explaining things and sharing his knowledge.

Project partner

Much of the human archive was gathered through months of community engagement work including:

- Open call-outs for contributions promoted online and via local TV & radio.
- "Unboxing" videos where people were filmed unboxing their artefacts and sharing their stories to camera.
- The Airships Dreamers' Club – where children & young people were invited to explore airships through art, science and storytelling.
- An intensive creative workshop programme at Shortstown Primary School engaging all their pupils in curriculum-mapped activities.
- Work placements for 60 Bedford College students working across graphic design, animation and textiles pathways.

Stories were permanently archived onto the virtual platform HistoryPin, where 66 new pins were created by volunteers at The Higgins.

Contemporary Art Installation: Escaping Gravity

(Sir William Harpur Gallery, July – November 2021)

Mike Stubbs worked in collaboration with new media artists Roland Denning, Roger Illingworth, Dave Lynch, Rob Strachan and Sam Wiehl, to present an audio-visual immersive artwork and newly composed symphony that rises and falls as a metaphor for the life of the R.101 airship, Cardington Sheds and the themes of birth, death and rebirth echoing the lifecycle of the airship entitled Escaping Gravity.

Above: Den's shed. Image by Andy Willsher.

Right: Stills from *Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity*, courtesy of lead artist Mike Stubbs and project creative team.



The hangers have always been iconic to me and to see what you have made visual and immersive is so amazing ... the 36 minutes still haunt me now. I wish that I could be immersed again in this beautiful creation. Visitor

The whole concept was very different and an interesting take on history. The airship dreams video was fantastic, I never expected to see something like this in Bedford. Visitor

Working in an entirely new collective formed remotely during Covid lockdown, the artistic team produced the 36-minute immersive experience featuring visuals created in Unreal Engine, the gaming software that Fortnite is built on, accompanied by a 5.1 audio composition made up of local voices, heritage recordings and digitally created sounds.

Recreating a drifty and dreamy sensation like sailing through space, *Escaping Gravity* explores our fascination with airships and the human desire for progress, adventure and the unknown.

It was exhibited using video projection filling one wall of the gallery. Choral voices featuring community representatives combined with audio reminiscent of airship engines and wind, creating a mythical and meditative journey.

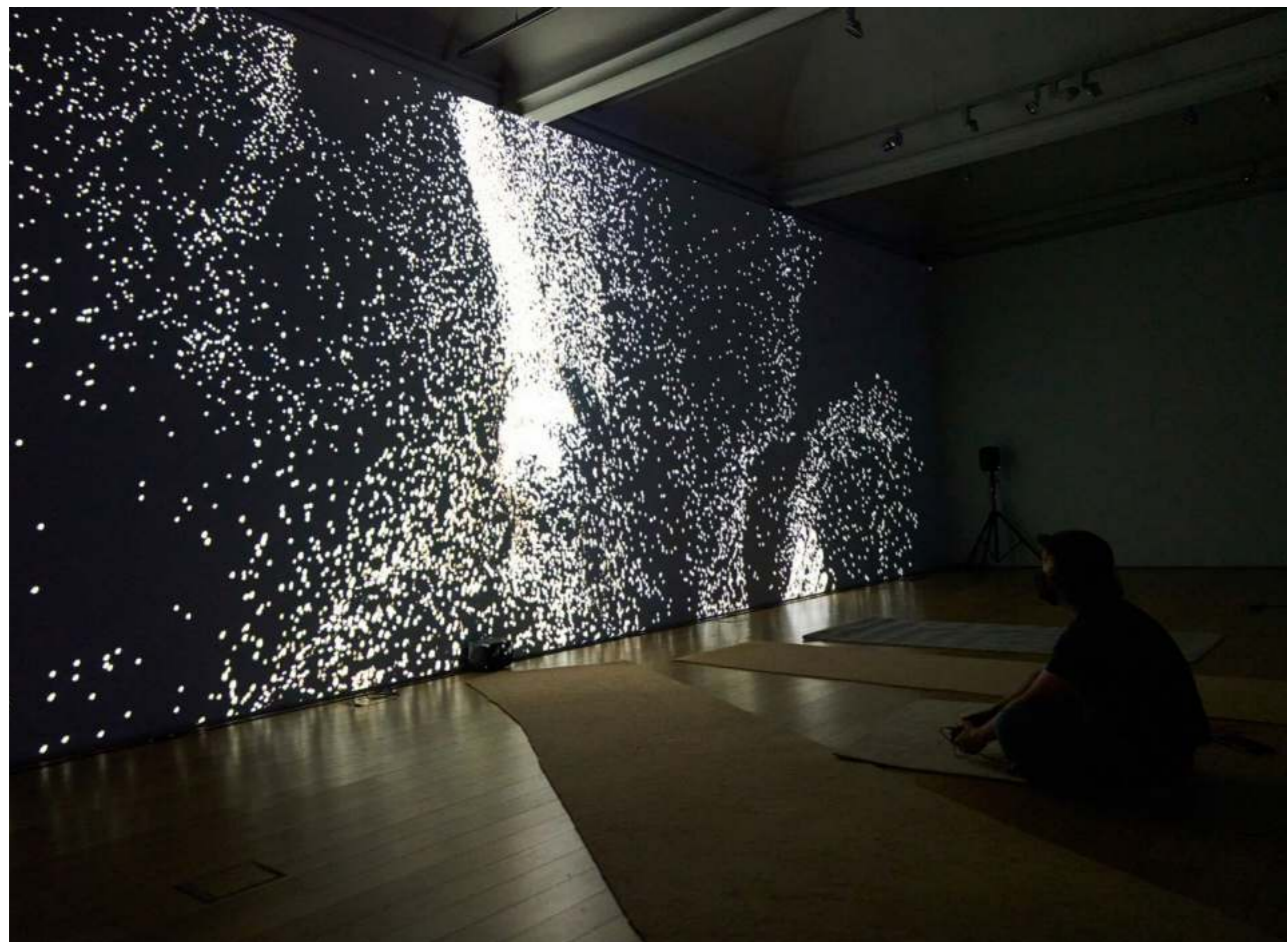
In making this work, the artists interrogated the tension that existed between the optimism of pioneering endeavour and the consequences of hubris, ambition and folly behind the Imperial Airship Scheme of the 1920s, as a reflection on our contemporary political and cultural landscape.

Escaping Gravity was an installation unlike anything I've seen before. It was a very visceral experience. My senses were stimulated. It was inspiring and harrowing. The song at the end was beautiful.

Exhibition visitor

Was such a beautiful thought-provoking tribute to the R101! With the many themes of life, death, planet, throwaway society, spiritually and the circle of life! AMAZING!!!

Exhibition visitor



Virtual Exhibition

The exhibition spaces within The Higgins were captured using 360 virtual reality technology so that audiences could experience the exhibition online from their own homes.

This ensured that anyone who felt, especially due to the Covid-19 pandemic, that they could not visit the exhibition was still able to experience it virtually. The VR technology also enabled signposting to the wealth of digital resources online including videos, resource packs and the publication. The VR exhibition is a lasting digital legacy for the project and enabled both the museum and BCA to learn how to use new VR capture.

Publications

Throughout the lengthy development process, the creative team encountered many fascinating individuals including residents, historians, academic and artists. Connections were made nationally and internationally drawing opinion and memory across the many themes of the airship and human endeavour.

Former BCA Creative Producer Annie Bacon was invited to edit a publication with Mike Stubbs that documented the project's creation and the hidden histories revealed. The result is a downloadable publication featuring contributions from Martin Mahoney (University of East Anglia), Jürgen Bleibler & Felix Banzhaf (The Zeppelin Museum), Alastair Lawson (AHT) and the creative team.

The Community co-curated exhibition helped to uncover some hidden histories of the many women involved in airship construction. One such individual was the mystery "Girl in the Deckchair" – a reference to a woman shown in a photograph of the R.101 interior. BCA and THB commissioned Dr Nina Baker to research this individual and discovered that the woman pictured, D C Forster, was on the senior staff of the Royal Airship Works. A publication of Dr Baker's research was produced and is also available for free online.



Left: Setting up in The Higgins. Image by Andy Willsher. Above: Airship publication image by BCA.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The challenge of Covid-19 meant that the team were unable to engage the community through face to face events prior to the exhibition launch, however a digital campaign delivered in collaboration with children's TV presenter Dr Sita Thomas enabled them to reach people virtually.

They created the "Unboxing" videos programme, inviting the community to share artefacts and memories by unboxing their treasures on camera over a video-conferencing call and this led to documentary outputs explaining the history.

To engage families they created the Airship Dreamers Club, whereby children were encouraged to try out professionally demonstrated airship themed crafts, science experiments and story-telling.

Once the exhibition opened the team held a family craft workshop, a symposium exploring the heritage and artwork creation, a publication launch and a community sharing event.

The community curated gallery brought forward some wonderful items never seen or shared before. Let's hope it can stay and tell the story of airships and their connection with Bedford.

Visitor

Above: Airship Dreamers badged.
Image by Andy Willsher.
Right: Airship Dreamer's Shortstown workshop. Image by Anne Marie Abbate.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Schools STEAM Programme at Shortstown Primary

Shortstown was a community built to house the airship workers in the 1920s. The Shortstown Primary School worked with BCA to create a curriculum map to establish all the ways in which the heritage and themes could be explored by every year group.

Supported by a team of local artists across visual arts, science, storytelling, literature and performance, the school benefitted from an intense participatory experience whilst supporting BCA to create a legacy of permanent resources for all local teachers and parents to continue to use to learn about Bedford's association with the airship. Local sculptor, Paul Pibworth, worked with the children to create a permanent artwork at the school in tribute to the R.101.

A mini-museum was developed to enable other schools in the area to borrow materials to enable teachers to use the online videos and PDF resources.

I think it's (that) the learning that happened on their doorstep and the idea of working together so they are solving these mysteries with these curious boxes ... the idea that the school is working together in a combined effort to create something ... even the 3-year-olds were involved in it and up to age 11, that's pretty special. Shortstown Teacher





Despite the setbacks with the pandemic, everybody has been fantastic and so flexible, meaning that the children were still able to have all of the different opportunities. We've all learnt ... and it has really brought our school community together.

Teacher

The children learnt a lot and 'are definitely proud of where they live now as they are aware of Shortstown's history.' The teachers learnt a lot with their pupils too: 'it's been really nice; we've learnt together, and the children have liked that as well, the history of the children's families are in Shortstown and they have links to it so they've been able to teach us some things which has encouraged them even more.'

- 75% children learned something new
- Over 50% learned a new skill
- **"Learning about it made me happy."**
- It was **"good to learn something new."**
- **"The project made me feel excited about science."**

Children at Risk of Exclusion

Mark Rutherford School received a tailored experience for 9 male students at risk of exclusion. These students received a visit from the Lead Artist to explore his artistic practise and experience some of his recent artworks.

They were given a private exhibition tour of The Higgins Bedford and a practical workshop with the artistic team to explore the creative process for the immersive artwork.

The focus of the project was to develop self-esteem and aspiration. Some of the group had never been to the Higgins, those that had been were not initially enthused. Meeting with the artists and seeing different forms of art really opened their eyes.

Teacher

Bedford College Work Placements

BCA invited 60 students to take on the challenge of delivering a creative response to the project that could be exhibited within the Higgins gallery space.

Students were recruited across pathways for textiles, graphic design and animation and they experienced information & feedback sessions with the Lead Artist & creative team before coming up with a creative response.

Graphic Design students contributed posters providing either a historic viewpoint of Bedford's airship heritage or an imagined future in the form of travel posters promoting airship flights from Cardington.

Animation students listened to the oral history of Den Burchmore before finding unusual ways to animate his thoughts on screen.

Textile students design exhibition merchandise including an enamel pin badge and Tote bag provided to volunteers and evaluation participants.

It is absolutely wonderful to see James's work, from Graphic Design, printed on the front cover of the Higgins leaflets. The confidence this has given him, and all the students involved, and experience for CVs and those important links made, will no doubt continue to aid the students through their continued education and chosen career paths.

Teacher



Far left: Artist Paul Pibworth with the Shortstown school sculpture. Image by Andy Willsher.

Left: Airship Dreams poster. Image courtesy of James Knight, a student at Bedford College.



THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Mike Stubbs recruited Dave Lynch and Roland Denning as early collaborators involved in research & development phases of the project.

Audio-visual specialists Roger Illingworth, Rob Strachan and Sam Wiehl were recruited through an open call with more than 200 respondents.

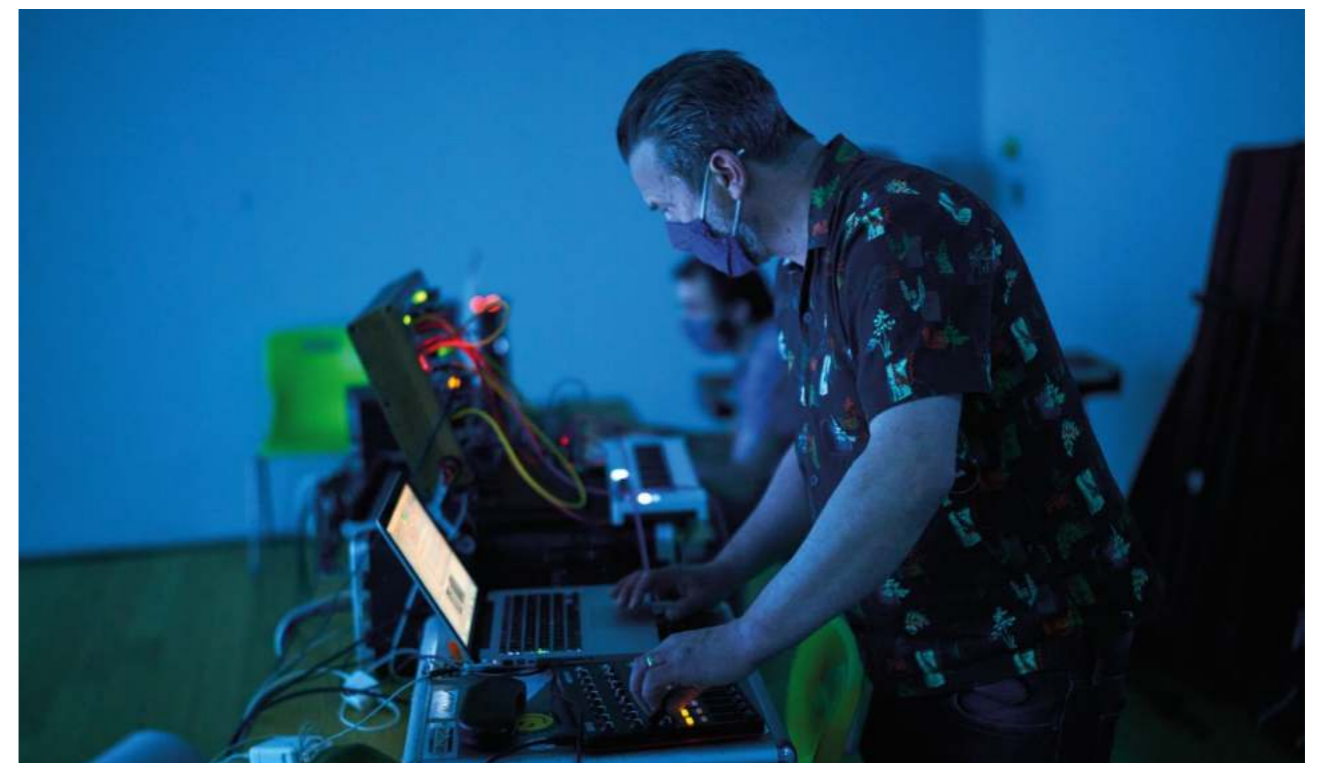
The artists, spread out nationally from Bedford to Doncaster and Leeds to Liverpool, worked together through remote digital working and over two intensive physical Bedford lab weeks.

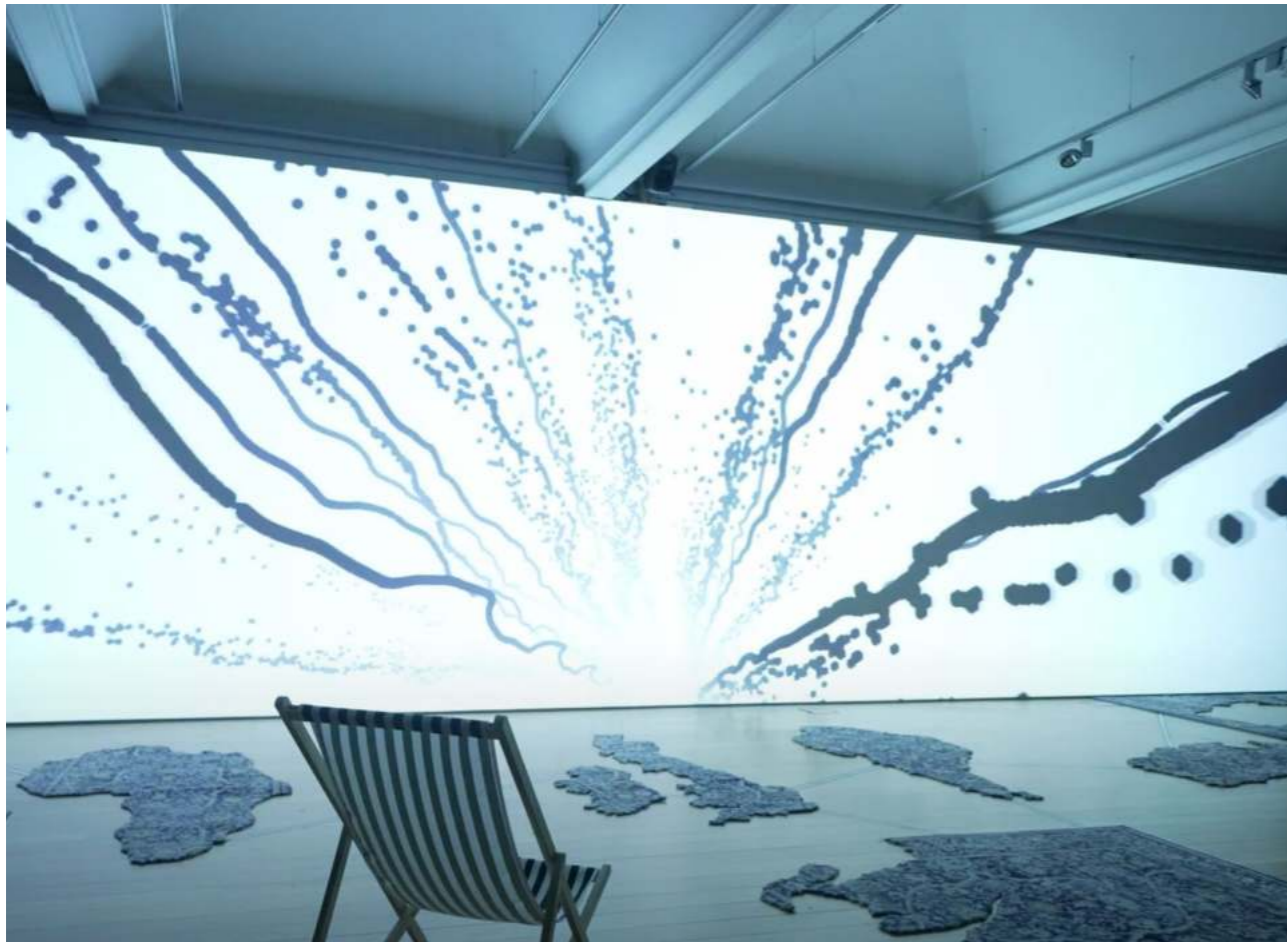
The creative team had to grapple with the technology, both in understanding the abilities of each other and the software available, alongside the experience of working on a shared project over video-conferencing and cloud-based systems.

Above: Lab at The Higgins Bedford, May 2021. Left to right: Roland Denning, Dave Lynch, Mike Stubbs, Sam Wiehl. Photo: Andy Willsher. Right, top: *Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity*, 2021. Mike Stubbs with Roland Denning, Roger Illingworth, Dave Lynch, Rob Strachan, Sam Wiehl. Right, bottom: Lab at The Higgins Bedford, May 2021. Rob Strachan (foreground) and Roger Illingworth (background). Photo: Andy Willsher.

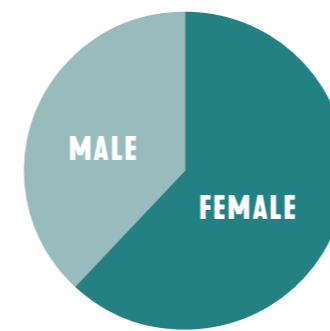
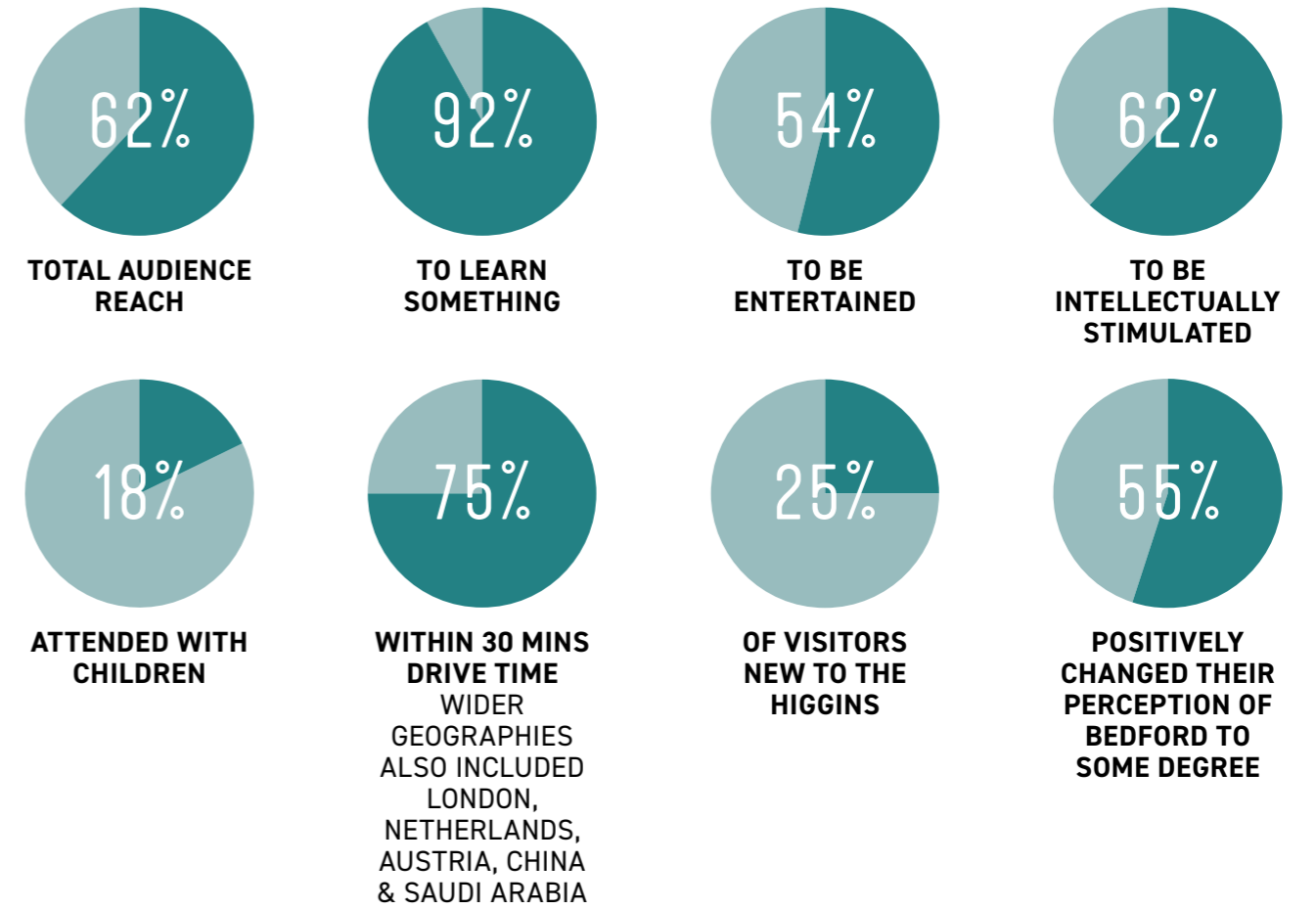
The Lead Artist engaged with the community co-curation, education programme and the artwork development in parallel. Virtual community choir rehearsals, green-screen filming, voice recordings and archive footage editing happened across an extensive period.

The written publication and 30 minute evaluation video explore in depth the process of the creation of the work.

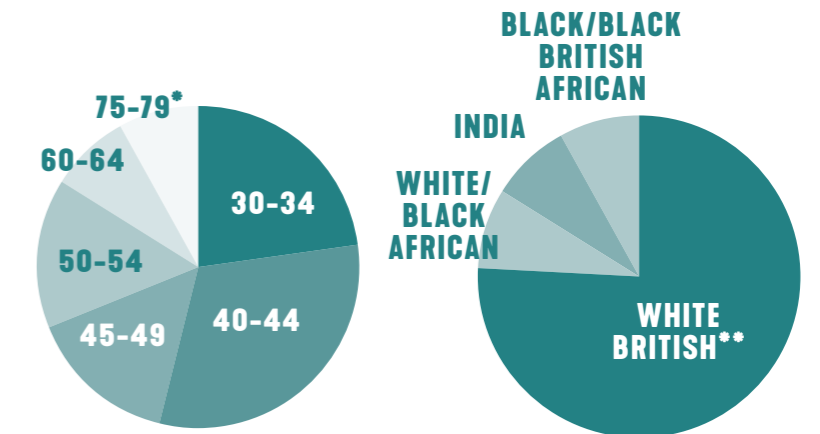




AUDIENCES & IMPACT



62% FEMALE vs 38% MALE
Double BCA's usual male audience and an increase of 9% for The Higgins



AGES (YRS)
23% 30-34
31% 40-44
15% 45-49
15% 50-54
8% 60-64
8% 75-79*

* 20% less than The Higgins' previous average

DEMOGRAPHICS
77% WHITE BRITISH**
8% WHITE/BLACK AFRICAN
8% INDIA
8% BLACK/BLACK BRITISH AFRICAN
** 11% less than The Higgins' previous average and closer to the Bedford average of 72%

Left, top: *Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity* installation.
Left, bottom: *Airship Dreamers* workshop. Image by Andy Willsher.

Many visitors reflected on their personal experience of the installation. This ranged from loving it, being inspired by it, to feeling confused and inevitably some not liking it.

I can't say I understood it, but I loved it.

I felt weirdly tired and relaxed.

It told the story in a new way.

Not seen anything like this before.

Concept of beginning life, the need to escape.

An original and all-encompassing piece.

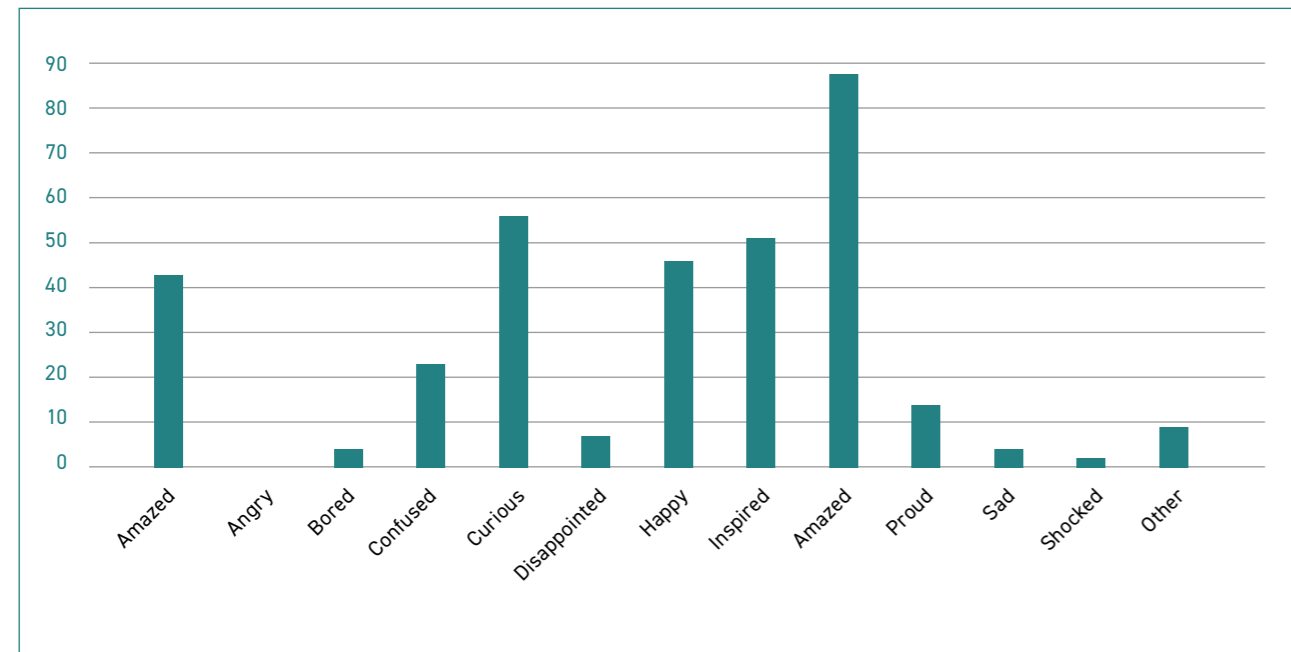
The way the installation captured the balance between hope and tragedy, disintegration and floating.

Original and powerful storytelling.

Stunning visual effects.

Video extremely poor and uninspired.

I had not visited the Higgins Art Gallery in maybe 30 years ... what an incredible experience to discover the video installation! I really cannot get it out of my mind, I thought it was so beautiful! The hangers have always been iconic to me and to see what you have made visual and immersive is so amazing ... the 36 minutes still haunt me now. I wish that I could be immersed again in this beautiful creation.



The Higgins identified a positive desire for audiences to see more contemporary artworks in Bedford:

The whole concept was very different and an interesting take on history.

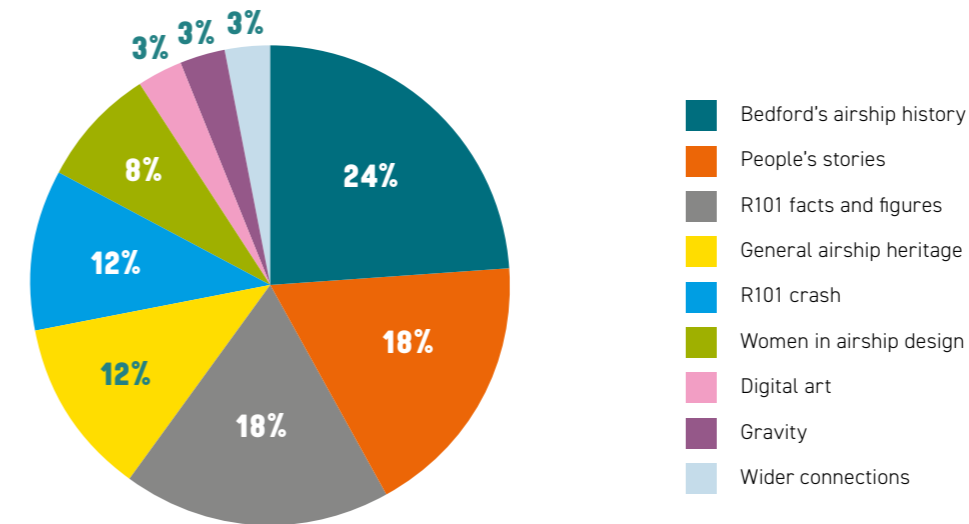
The airship dreams video was fantastic, I never expected to see something like this in Bedford.

This is the kind of installation that I would normally travel into London to see.

Very poetic immersive installation. The modern audio-visual piece worked very well together with the 'shed' exhibition that provided a bit more background.

(I learnt) increased appreciation for contemporary video art, and hopefully less of a tendency to dismiss it before experiencing it.

70% of visitors learned something new:



Lasting digital legacy:

- 36 minute digital artwork
- 360 Virtual Exhibition
- 66 History Pin pins
- 40 educational resources
- 4 Podcasts
- 2 downloadable digital publications

Evidence of impact was secured from a sample of 258 exhibition visitors, teachers, pupils from Shortstown Primary and Mark Rutherford Secondary School, 11 peers, seven individuals who had shared objects and memories, four councillors and the whole project team.

LESSONS LEARNED

Successes

- Working in a 'very new and different way' with artists resulted in a 'totally different interpretation of the Airship story.'
- Target audiences had strong, mainly positive, reactions to the digital installation:

"...people you would have thought might not have engaged with it have really engaged with it. And then other people, maybe not quite so much. But everyone's had a reaction."

"I'm proud and overwhelmed by the positivity ... I kind of thought a lot of people would be like, "what is that?!" and not like it, and actually, I'm so stunned by the sway towards the other perspective..."

"I think there's lots of people who have maybe not felt entirely comfortable with it. But it's ... pushed them to a new perspective."

- The project was a successful 'marriage between the heritage and contemporary.'
- The Higgins has shown it can be a venue for contemporary art.

"Having people come in that often live in Bedford, but were commuting into London, but obviously working from home now, and then coming to the Higgins going, "Well this is as good as the stuff we can get in London". I have heard that from more than one person."

- The project was multifaceted and engaged a wide range of target audiences.
- The flexibility of the project and partners and the perseverance of the whole team, especially during a difficult and challenging time.

"People were trying to keep hold of this idea and this concept, and I think everyone managed to do that really well. And it was really difficult at times."

"I think those collaborations and that strength of being, as you say, persevering, collaborating, and being open, has been really positive."



Challenges

- Covid-19 had an inevitable impact: *"I think over time that just grinds you and gets a bit exhausting. And as we said, a project that was supposed to last six months lasted three years."*
- The team weren't able to push the boundaries as much as they wanted to in the heritage space with the community groups.
- Integrated skill sharing and development didn't happen as much as intended, partly because of Covid-19.
- Developing personal relationships was tricky in digital meetings.
- Marketing was a challenge with staff turnover, a budget stretching longer than imagined & more reliance on digital.

Above: Image courtesy of Bedfordshire Archives Collection.

Following page: *Airship Dreams: Escaping Gravity*, 2021. Mike Stubbs with Roland Denning, Roger Illingworth, Dave Lynch, Rob Strachan, Sam Wiehl.



Bedford Creative Arts is fuelling this new revolution of a creative economy & [Bedford] could well be the silicon-valley of art, technology, faith & community ... there is a sense we are in 2121 in this work.

Skinder Hundal, Director of Art, British Council.

This is a great piece of art with wide appeal. I very much hope to see it tour to other venues when its run ends.

Rachel Drury, Collusion

LEGACY

This project has raised the bar for ambition for BCA and its partners.

It has proved an appetite for ambitious contemporary artworks in Bedford and a sense of pride and passion for the town's airship heritage.

When we delivered such an unusual, new creative work in Bedford using new technology and a new collaboration we expected some people to be surprised, confused and perhaps even disappointed. We were overwhelmed with how many people responded in a strongly positive manner, many appreciating the professionalism of the outcome and the immersive nature that evoked emotion and question.

It has challenged conceptions about the type of programming that visitors expect to experience at The Higgins Bedford, and helped develop confidence for approaching contemporary art programming in the future, in particular how it can intersect with Bedford's heritage.

It has provided a long-standing legacy in the form of educational materials, virtual exhibitions, documentaries, archived stories, a publication and an artwork that can be re-exhibited and toured internationally.

It has successfully developed audiences for all parties including reaching new male and national audiences.

The community desire for an airship museum is strong, alongside a suggestion that all celebration and memory of airships is valuable and worthy of consideration.

It leaves us with excellent community partnerships, tremendous skills, a raised digital following, and relationships with many collaborators that can be built on for the future.

CREDITS

Produced by Bedford Creative Arts in partnership with The Higgins Bedford

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Clare Rogers, Learning & Outreach Officer
Gallery invigilators: Priya Gill, Peggy Banks, Reba Ali, Peter Dean
Volunteers: Charles Leslie, Malcolm Rosier (in memory of), Cathy Moorhouse, Vicki Blair, Chris Temple, Tim Coles, Geoff Collins

Airship Heritage Trust

Alastair Lawson, Chair
Dr Giles Camplin, Dirigible Editor

Escaping Gravity Creative Team

Lead Artist: Mike Stubbs
Visual Artists: Roland Denning, Dave Lynch & Sam Wiehl
Sound Artists: Roger Illingworth & Rob Strachan
Voice Artists: Raj Gatak & Sunetra Sarkar
Additional room decoration: Anne-Marie Abbate
Contributing singers: Emily Alleyne (granddaughter of Den Burchmore), Bridget Peirson-Davis, Bex Foskett, Parvati Rajamani, Alex (Basil) Wazir, Ava Rose Xu-Giles and Mike Stubbs
"101" song written by Jack Sharp

Community Curators

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ArtAV & Epson UK Ltd
Lee Ferguson from CaptureVR
Tin Shed Scenery
Bedfordshire Archives & Records Service
RAF Museum, Hendon
Invisible Folk Club
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Swan Hotel Bedford

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Funders

Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council England, The Gale Family Trust, Bedford College, The Harpur Trust, Airship Heritage Trust and Bedford Borough Council.

Thanks are given to players of the National Lottery for supporting the creation of new works of art and heritage.

For access to additional videos, documentaries, audio descriptions, a full written evaluation report and a virtual version of the exhibition visit www.airshipdreams.com

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