

Strandlines

Clare Brant, Stuart Dunn, David Green, Patricia Methven and Hope Wolf

1. Introduction

By most measures, Central London is one of the wealthiest areas on the planet. Popular imagination, including many national and international media representations, populates it with professionals, theatre-goers, office workers, high-maintenance shoppers and hard-partying bankers. Most, if not all, members of these groups are deeply connected to the digital sphere, whether by social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, corporate networks hosted by their institutions and businesses, email, IM services, and so on. Most if not all of these people also have ready access to the internet from the homes, mobile devices and offices. However there are multiple other communities and groups who are not digitally engaged to this, or in many cases to any, extent; and who do not have access to the technology or resources, or the need or the motivation, to become so. The purpose of the Strandlines project was to work with communities such as these in the Strand area, to look at what barriers to 'the digital' they faced. It sought to explore how they can be empowered to make use of technology, and how that use could benefit them, but also to identify areas where technology could not help them, and if possible, why. A key means of building communities from this base was creativity: perhaps unlike many users of 'mainstream' social networks, people such as this have deeper and far more complex relationships with their immediate environment (in this case the Strand), and as well as seeking to record stories, memories and anecdotes, the project sought to encourage the people it worked with to create various things inspired by that environment in various ways, and to capture the things thus created.

The central challenge of the Strandlines project thus lay in the fact that it sought to build both digital and non digital communities on The Strand from scratch. It focused on engaging with the communities that live in and around The Strand, and sought to turn their stories and their voices into a digital collection at www.strandlines.net; and also to produce a set of related materials and engagement activities. This report describes the complex set of processes that this involved.

2. Outcomes and achievements

2.1 Community building

Strandlines achieved valuable work in creating both real and digital communities, and establishing an active relationship between them. One distinctive achievement was to integrate history with creativity, for instance the events at Westminster Archives and 18th Century Strand day; one main challenge has been how to organize the website so as to encourage this integration to grow. We were helped by an unexpected challenge – that the Poor Law union workhouse, where poor Strand parishioners were sent, was under threat of demolition. The Strandlines website offered a platform for information related to the petition to save it, and we invited one of the principals of that campaign to speak at two events. Creating and sharing a real world success partly enabled by digital community was an unexpected positive outcome.

2.2 Integrating creativity

The historical dimension of Strandlines has been a success in sharing knowledge and in catalysing creativity. A distinctive and unusual element of the project, it has provided new ground, some of it challenging. It has given academics a clear form of impact, and it has also contributed to confidence-building among community participants, as they have expertise to share too.

The Strand as a place and a theme provided a useful focal point for integrating different forms of creativity as the basis on which individuals and groups could engage with and contribute to the website. This creativity took several forms: constructing a walk, creative writing, engaging in public workshops. Building a Cabinet of Artists proved a good idea: the artists brought experience of community engagement in inventive ways, and used a variety of arts to connect with communities – and to help connect community groups with each other. This element of Strandlines also has also proved attractive to future funders. The Museum of London took a proposal through several committee stages (before deciding it was not for them now); LCACE gave a 5K grant to support the artists' element. The KCL Development Office is also using the Cabinet to entice donors.

2.3 Selection of community groups

The project focussed its attentions on three main local groups in the Strand area: elderly users of the Age Concern Day Centre at Odhams Walk (<http://strandlines.org/age-uk-westminster-odhams-walk-day-centre>); homeless people supported by The Connection at St Martins-in-the-Fields (<http://www.connection-at-stmartins.org.uk/>); and residents of the Peabody Wild Street Estate/users of Peabody's cultural hub, Bruce House. With the support of Rosy Fairhurst, a priest at St Martins-in-the-Fields, we met with the Older Congregation at St Martin's-in-the-Fields. Our partnership with Westminster City Archives culminated in a Strand-themed Open Day at the Archives, attracting individuals with an interest in the Strand's history and local history groups. Additionally to organising events and workshops for these groups, we also involved individuals in the project through conducting interviews: we met with Big Issue sellers, homeless guides working for the walking tours enterprise Sock Mob, former King's College service staff, and a Twinings international tea consultant. In the last few months we have organized meetings with representatives of different occupational groups in the Strand area: introducing Strandlines to a Savoy Hotel engineer and a local police officer.

It was exceptionally important for the project to work with Strand institutions, organisations, and groups that had formed prior to the beginning of the project. Considerable *trust* between tellers and listeners, readers and writers, is required for the relation of personal stories and memories; even more so to upload them to a website that bears the name of a relatively unfamiliar, and for some rather intimidating, academic institution. It was far easier to develop this kind of trust with the support of staff in the existing groups; projects such as Strandlines require 'champions'. But 'champions' are hard to come by: at the beginning of the project considerable time and energy was devoted to discussions with group leaders about how best Strandlines might be embedded into the existing structures of groups; about how to make the project appeal to users of support and cultural centres.

2.4 Engaging the unengaged

One of the strengths of Strandlines is that it gave voice to underrepresented and underprivileged individuals and communities. However, this very characteristic of the groups also presented the Strandlines team with considerable difficulties. Many local

residents did not have regular access to computers. As a precursor to digital interaction, we had to use analogue modes of communication: writing letters and making phone calls. The Age Concern group in particular preferred this mode of communication. More than this, some groups, at the start of the project, had very negative ideas about the 'digital': it was not so much that they could not use computers; rather they did not want to use them. Some saw computers as 'something for young people'; others emphasised issues of property and theft (if they put their stories on-line, others might 'steal' them); some had limited access to computers.

Meeting the groups every week, we were able to surmount some of these difficulties. Individuals often needed the Strandlines team to create an email address for them before even using the site; many needed the team to set up a Strandlines account for them. Because the project has limited staff attached to it – with only the Research Associate working full-time – it was difficult to give people the intensive one-to-one support they needed in order for them to become digitally fluent. However, it was possible to encourage groups to view digital storytelling more positively. Tasks that emphasised the creative aspects of the digital – using free internet programmes and software - proved very successful: for instance, helping people to make their own digital blue plaques (using <http://www.blueplaque.com/>), and showing them how to make a digital map using Google MyMaps. This helped us to challenge many of the assumptions often made about Web 2.0: in the context of building communities, especially outside academia, it is not enough simply to make software free and/or Open Source: often the 'human factor' means that various community engagement activities are needed alongside them.

[View](#) [Edit](#) [Track](#) [Convert](#)

Blitz Blue Plaque

Submitted by [Admin](#) on Mon, 2011-01-31 15:08



Click [here](#) to learn more about this blue plaque.

[Add new comment](#) 224 reads [Thumbnail](#) [report to Mod](#)
[Image](#)

Fig 1. 'Blue Plaque'

Some individuals, of course, were digitally literate before we met with them. Some, who were looking for a forum in which to publish their creative writing and artwork, uploaded their stories without any encouragement. These people were absolutely essential to the success of Strandlines; to helping build trust between communities and the Strandlines team. Once less digitally confident individuals saw that other people in the group had started using the site, they were happier to visit it. We have particularly found this to be the case with the Peabody Life Writing group set up in January. The Research Associate led weekly classes there (ten in total), and the group gradually became happier to see their work online. Whilst some uploaded work themselves, others preferred the Assistant to upload their stories for them. This is a more general trend: frequently individuals prefer to send the Research Associate stories by email or even post rather than putting them online themselves. This is not simply an issue of ability; some wanted to check that their story is acceptable or 'good enough' before it was uploaded.

This leads to an important issue that needs to be emphasised. Even before communities are encouraged to upload their work, there is an initial hurdle to be surmounted. Many of the groups we worked with were, quite understandably, under-confident; some do not feel that their voices are 'worthy' of being heard. The Strandlines team needed to spend a great deal of time convincing them that their stories are important, and that others want to hear them. The Life Writing classes at Peabody Estate have helped people to edit their stories; getting them to a stage where they are happy to share them with others. Interestingly, this has not been the case for the Creative Writing Group at the Connection, with which the Research Associate led four classes. Many were very happy to have their work published online. This is partly because the group leader often sends off their work for publication, in the Big Issue for instance. They do not seem to share the Peabody group's worries about intellectual and creative property rights. With little time to edit their writing, the Connection group were also less concerned to 'perfect' their writing before it was published. Exploring this further, the Research Associate led a couple of classes on 'editing' with this particular group.

The diversity is further brought out by the audio diaries that have been created both through interviews with the homeless and also through self recorded audio blogs which have been uploaded to the Strandlines website. These audio diaries and blogs are amongst the most visited pages on the site and provide a platform from which the homeless can explain their position to an anonymous audience. This form of digital engagement is particularly powerful since it allows these individuals to speak with their own voice without any editorial intervention other than to ensure compliance with the normal terms of broadcasting on the internet.



Fig 2. Sketch postcard

2.5 Digital storytelling

We generally found that different groups and individuals prefer different kinds of activities. Creative storytelling has proved successful, especially when first meeting groups: people understandably find it very difficult to share their memories with strangers, and often preferred to convey their thoughts through the screen of a fictional character (using a selection of photos of gargoyles uploaded to the Strandlines website, the Research Associate led a very successful class, asking 'what does the gargoyle see?'); or via drawing (the Age Concern group enjoyed 'drawing their day', for instance). Trust with other groups was developed through sharing historical anecdotes about the area. Whilst many came to sessions hoping the Strandlines team would teach them about the history of the road in which they lived, for instance, the exchange was not only one-way. The homeless group taking part in the digital walking tour sessions (led by the

Co-Investigator, Research Associate, and a member of staff at the Connection), for instance, enjoyed relating obscure or previously unknown 'facts' about the area. They used the internet and local libraries to research certain walking tour points, and enjoyed three historical events the Strandlines team either hosted or co-hosted: the Archives Afternoon at King's, Westminster Archives Open Day, and 18th Century Day. Many also took part in Oral History Day on April 11th; this gave them a chance to develop their interviewing skills. These have now been put into practice, as have their practical skills in leading groups around the area. The Rags and Riches walking tour (the name was suggested by participants at the Connection; see <http://www.strandlines.net/maps/walking-tour>) was led by homeless guides and will involve public engagements and corporate events.

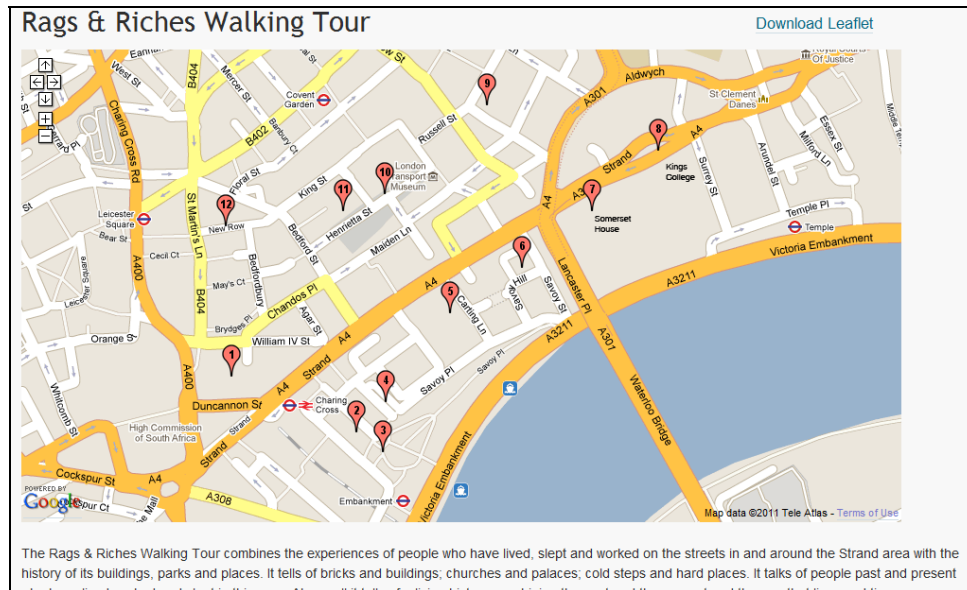


Fig 3. Walking tour

2.6 Sustainability

One of the biggest problems with the project remains that of sustainability. All of the groups asked what will happen to Strandlines at the end of the funding period; the Peabody group have asked if the Research Associate can keep running Life Writing classes after April. The Connection is keen to develop more walking tours, traversing slightly different parts of the Strand area. Whilst trust has developed between Strand groups the Strandlines team, it will be interesting to see whether the trust remains if the make-up of the team changes. The website will remain, but it is important to emphasise that throughout the project physical community has been a necessary precursor to digital community; with complementary approaches to both needed. Participants enjoy seeing their work online if they know who will be reading their stories; if they can see stories written by their friends online too. Whilst this might not have been the case had we targeted different kinds of groups (people regularly online, business workers, etc.) those who live in the area, who know it most intimately, require face-to-face contact before committing their creative efforts, and intimate memories, to a web resource. They like to know too that, as with sending a letter, they might 'get something back': if they know who

their readers are they can be more sure of this – that they might get ‘feedback’, comments, or even stories in return.

2.7 Communities and location

As a project, Strandlines developed an understanding of place at the centre of many of its activities, not least the digital walking tour being developed with homeless persons who attend the Connection, as well as the writing groups there and at the Peabody Trust. For residents, and those who use the area on a regular basis, this understanding is developed both through their daily practices and through their engagement with the project. For the homeless, knowledge of place has a real, practical significance since it consists of an intimate awareness of safe places to sleep, the location and timing of food handouts and, most importantly perhaps, contact with friends and acquaintances in the area who provide informal support. This knowledge has been deepened through engagement with Strandlines, particularly in relation to the gathering of historical information about the area and the valuing of their own personal knowledge. The giving and exchanging of historical information has allowed people who have little by way of other resources to cooperate on an equal footing with researchers and participants helping to create a digital project. Giving their time to carry out research in libraries and using the internet was a valued resource, as is their specialist knowledge of particular spaces in and around the Strand which have been incorporated into the digital walking tour. External validation of this resource in turn encourages individuals to develop more positive views of their own self worth.

2.8 Empowerment of individuals

Evidence of these changing attitudes to self is the fact that several of the individuals who are homeless and who, in some cases, lead fairly chaotic lives, nevertheless have attended regular weekly sessions during which we have explored both the immediate locality as well as on line resources for the creation of the walk. Several of the participants have, since their initial involvement with the walking tour, become settled or have accepted work placements. Some attended sessions in Westminster and King’s College archives, as well as other events organised by Strandlines. Some also engaged with the Strandlines website and posted their own stories. Operating as an anonymous way of contributing to a wider understanding of the area can transform the way that others who do not have an intimate knowledge of life on the streets become aware of the diversity of homelessness in the area. Skills gained in creating the walking tour have developed in different ways: from recording oral histories themselves to practical skills in leading groups around the area. As noted above, the Rags and Riches walking tour will be led by homeless guides and will involve public engagements and corporate events.

As a place-based project, Strandlines has begun a process whereby different sorts of communities can engage in a virtual space to understand and contribute to an understanding of the physical spaces of the city. The distinction between virtual and real is, however, an illusory one. The representation of place, people and communities digitally profoundly alters personal experiences of that place, and the deeper immersion in the particularities of place that emerges in turn affects how that space is created and maintained. The fact that academics, local archivists, the homeless, residents and workers have all shared in a joint enterprise that has both a virtual existence as well as a real one, demonstrates the importance of providing a platform for that to take place. In that sense, the digital community being created on the Strand can act as a role model for other places where disparate sets of individuals and groups inhabit but do not interact.

2.9 KCL Archives

2.9.1 Background

From the perspective of King's College London Archives Service (see <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iss/archivespec>), Strandlines offered a different opportunity from the norm to think through how the College Archives reflected life beyond the university gate. Specifically it provided a prompt to seek out a way to combine the selection of material to reflect everyday life that also had validity for academic research and teaching. Unlike other outreach activity, it was not thematically driven.

2.9.2 Content selection

The initial very clear focus of Strandlines on the everyday in the Strand was both a new departure and a challenge in context of the partnership. Whilst the College Archives are immensely rich for research into College history, its research and teaching interests, and the King's international family of staff and students over time, it does not include images of peace celebrations in Trafalgar Square at the end of the Second World War, pictures of all the shops in the Strand, much about hotels and nothing about the homeless, as requested by academic colleagues. The breadth of this original vision undoubtedly slowed the surfacing of relevant content for use in prompt boxes used with communities and the subsequent population of the Archives part of the website. *Everything* was in scope.

Equally, developing an understanding of the concept of life writing and which material might have potential use as a creative stimulus and/or for research was necessarily iterative. Examples of life writing as such, diaries and memoirs were not abundant, and letters about the everyday seemed to lack substance or require significant runs of items to develop themes. Better evidence of daily life was also embedded in a variety of archival sources not necessarily foregrounded in early discussions. Medical records, for example, of cholera patients offered rich reflections of patients' histories and were eventually included because of their wealth of detail but would not have been understood by the Archives team at the outset of the project to constitute life writing.

The level of specificity in relation to the Strand also prompted questioning. Is this about the Strand as a place or the people in it? What about the people whose connections were very short lived as indeed were the majority of the student population? Where does one draw the lines? Eventually we decided to keep the selection sharply focused on the Strand and chose to include descriptions of study, work and daily life, and evidence of interrelationship with our neighbours, such as menus for formal dinners at local hotels, evidence of the publishing industry and collateral damage around the building by the underground railway. Items were deliberately selected for their immediate appeal and accessibility.

2.9.3 Archives event

The eventual King's Archives afternoon with the various community groups with which academic colleagues had been working, proved to be a good deal more straightforward with a simple brief of inviting the neighbours to get to know us a little better. Here Archives staff selected mixed images, text and physical items reflecting stunningly important scientific breakthroughs such as DNA alongside material about how the College evolved to support education from secondary schools upwards including vocational training and accounts of Strand daily life...the sacking of a porter for drunkenness, shopkeepers concerned about windows broken by students etc. Some items chosen were deliberately entertaining; others reflected the harshness of poverty

such as that observed by midwifery students in the slums north of the Strand. The event stimulated lively discussion and a full exploration of sources as well as a genuine sense of neighbourliness among all participants. We have subsequently received a number of follow up visits. What this event also confirmed was the visceral pull for many in the audience of the original archives. To place your hand over something written over a hundred years ago by somebody like you or somebody that's made a difference in the world continues to have an undeniable impact.

Within the wider Strandlines team the project overall has also undoubtedly promoted understanding of the availability and potential uses of a wider variety of different archives for life writing and social engagement.

2.10 Website development

The Strandlines website was based in the Drupal content management system (CMS). The approach adopted provided for the formation and refinement of a taxonomy of terms which described the great variety of content gathered in the course of the community engagement activities (see above). This starts at a basic object level, describing the different types of digital content within the site: sound, video, image and audio, as well as the stories which comprise of text. Below that is a set of terms which describe different themes, which correspond to different aspects of life on the Strand, both past and present, e.g. Wartime, Transport, Friendship and so on.

The use of a set of controlled vocabularies has both benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, it enabled us to easily adapt and readapt the information structure as the content has grown, using a set of core terms.

Reviewing the digital content in the later stages of the project, it became clear that a relatively rudimentary faceted browsing approach was most appropriate for the content gathered. The basis for this follows the 'what', 'where' and 'when' model, as recommended by several JISC projects for other types of content (such as Archeotools: <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/project/archaeotools>). However, it became clear that applying these principles, however well established in the cataloguing world, hints at the depth and complexity of the community content we have gathered, and exposes the need for significant adaptation for projects such as this, which deal with specific localized communities. For example the 'what' facet is our concept map; the list of thematic taxa which define different groups of story (see <http://strandlines.org/tagadelic/chunk/9>). By identifying particular groups of stories that share a single tag (e.g. 'Homelessness: <http://strandlines.org/category/themes/homelessness>); we can explore the other associations with this group. This allows the user to navigate their way through the data via thematic 'strands', that would not be visible otherwise. The project is also engaging with OpenStreetMap to provide geographic associations between themes, and also a bespoke timeline has been developed, which treats the twentieth century decadally, treats the large amount of 'Contemporary' data as being post-2007; and deals with historic data as 1700-1799, and anything earlier. This reflects the granularity of the timespans of the data that has been gathered.

It should be noted of course that many of the individuals that the project engaged with were, for various reasons, unable or unwilling to access the website: these issues are discussed in more detail in the next section.

3. Lessons Learned

The key lesson of the project is that free, Open Source software is not by itself enough: targeted and well-conceived community engagement activities that have a clear focus, such as the walking tour, are essential if interest is to be generated and sustained. This also ensured that we undertook a process of engagement rather than evangelizing.

The project would have benefited from a more formal user requirements analysis, designed and embedded at an early stage. If running the project again, we would have worked more closely with individuals within the community groups who already more digitally literate (and therefore more likely to be interested in such questions) at this stage; and sought specific guidance from them on design and functionality. This would have augmented, but certainly not replaced, the reflective requirements gathered from general observance of how all those who participated interacted with the site.

One unanticipated failure was of engaging students at KCL with the project. Some individuals were delightfully keen and were encouraged to integrate their interests – for instance, joining up the Gilbert & Sullivan Society, who have a long history on the Strand and who may yet contribute performance-related material. Students in the English Department were invited to contribute in two particular ways – first year students take a compulsory course Writing London for which they can write creatively and critically; it seemed a natural fit for them to try out materials through Strandlines. Not a single one did, in spite of full support from English Department teaching staff. Likewise, a previously flourishing poetry competition went completely silent when invited to submit poems on the theme of The Strand, with a promise of online publication for all entries. This silence is simply mystifying. One explanation however may be that many students are already well-connected to digital communities via mainstream social networks, so a different kind of engagement would have been needed to capture this demographic.

4. Conclusion

The Strandlines project has allowed KCL to engage with a plethora of individuals and groups in the context of a deeply nuanced understanding of space and location; and a new engagement with digital content creation methods. New methods of engaging different communities, including the underprivileged and those who would not otherwise find themselves online, have been explored, as have new ways of engaging the institution with local people. This has led to new forms of engagement above and beyond what is normally understood by the term 'knowledge transfer'. The project has also made possible demonstrably valuable 'impact'.

KCL was not only uniquely placed to undertake this project, but also uniquely placed to benefit. Firstly, as a Russell Group institution physically located on the Strand, it has an interest in engaging with the communities around it. As noted below, the project gave us the opportunity to conduct such engagement. Secondly, at a time when the role of universities as agents of regional regeneration in the age of the 'digital economy' is seen as increasingly important, the ability of universities to help local communities in not necessarily material ways is frequently overlooked. Strandlines has demonstrably helped KCL to redress that balance by interacting with local groups as equals who share a conceptual and geographical interest in the Strand. KCL was able to bring elements of its intellectual capital to the project (e.g. the Archive materials, the expertise of the Research Associate in designing creative engagement events, academic staff with specialist knowledge of London), others were able to bring their experiences, creativity and personal inspirations. The partnership could not have worked without both.

5. Strandlines and the Future

If participation, creative output and digital confidence are measures of success, then Strandlines has been successful: we have built digital community and real community. The pilot aspect of JISC funding has also made it possible to learn important lessons about the factors for success, from both a community and an academic point of view. We are grateful to JISC for the opportunity to trial new ideas and methods. The JISC pilot also enabled members of the Strandlines team to learn new skills and take up the diverse challenges of digital community engagement to effect by exporting Strandlines to the wider academic community

One important effect of the JISC pilot is that Strandlines is now on the map as a digital community project, and with a potentially leading role. The AHRC Connected Communities programme led to several invitations to Strandlines to participate in bids. We are part of a successful network with a nine-month grant in 2011 focusing on participation in the creative economy, a bid in which Strandlines acquires 'twins' in Teesside, Sheffield and Oxford to explore community issues through exchange visits and workshops. We are also part of an invitation-only group, including established partners with eminent records in technological innovations and community activism. This group is bidding for major funding for a proposal centred on digital storytelling and cultural heritage; Strandlines has secured one of the project component slots. The recognition of Strandlines's success by KCL has been acknowledged in two ways, albeit slowly: one is the project's increasing reputation as a model of best practice; the other is by granting Future Fund money for 2011-12 to extend community engagement to specific business sectors of the Strand. We have also put in bids for funding to work with King's staff, alumni and students and to run a Strand Lives public lecture series.

Finally, one vindication of value is that our external partners are all keen to continue to their association with Strandlines and contribute to it in active ways. They are all offering to write letters of support for future funding bids, and to participate in Strandlines' future.

Professor Clare Brant

Project Director

Dr Stuart Dunn

Research Fellow, Strandlines Project Manager, Centre for e-Research

Dr David Green

Department of Geography, KCL

Patricia Methven

Director of Archives and Information Management, KCL

Dr Hope Wolf

Research Associate