

# Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

## Illustrators-in-Residence Programme Report

**The Barbara and Philip Denny Trust**  
**February 2023**



Visitors exploring *New River Folk*, an exhibition comprised of the work of 2021 Illustrators in Residence Laura Copsy and Philip Crewe, part of *Centre in Progress* (September 2022) © Paul Grover

# Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Through the generous support of a grant in 2021 from The Barbara and Philip Denny Trust, Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration have been able to support two residencies, which took place across Autumn 2021, carrying into 2022. Owing to the organisation's transition to become an organisation with a permanent home in Clerkenwell, these residencies differed from those of previous years. As part of these residencies, Illustrators-in-Residence have worked at New River Head, the site of the future Quentin Blake Centre, to create illustration that responds and speaks to the heritage and history of this fascinating place, which will become the national centre for illustration.

Following an additional grant of £2,500 in 2022, the work of the 2021 Residents was exhibited in September 2022 as part of our *Centre in Progress* events. Over 1,850 people visited the Illustrators-in-Residence's exhibitions.

## Engine House Illustrators-in-Residence

**Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe**



Laura and Philip researching and gathering material from the New River for their residency work.





For their residency, Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe delved into the past and present of the New River with a mixture of serious research and irreverent playfulness. Here's what Laura and Philip had to say about their work as Illustrators-in-Residence.

## **How did you get started on the residency? Where did you begin your research?**

Laura: We wanted to approach our research as a kind of narrative excavation or quest – we joked that our biggest inspiration was the TV show *Time Team!* We hoped to bring a playful spirit to research and look underneath things, behind things or in the margins for any 'clues' that might spark ideas.

Philip: We started the residency talking to Laura's brother, Alex, an archaeologist. He told us about stratigraphy, coding and various fieldwork methods that we hoped to adapt in our search for stories.

L: We were looking for snippets that related to lesser known aspects of the New River's history, particularly about the workers who built it, the people who were affected by its construction, and anything that linked to the medieval water culture that preceded it.

We set ourselves up as Copsey and Crewe Narrative Extraction Services and began our research.



Archaeology Kit by Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe © photo Justin Piperger

## **You did a lot of different kinds of research as part of the residency. What did you come across that most surprised you?**

P: As a woodworker, I was most fascinated by the elm pipes. When reading about woodworking one always bumps into the triumvirate of oak, ash and elm. They were the mainstay of much wooden material culture.

The New River Company made their water pipes out of elm rather than clay, which I find fascinating. They must have known how to make clay pipes given that there were probably still a fair few Roman ones in use. And, as raw materials go clay would have been much more accessible in London than elm.

And yet, even for something as radical as a *new river* they were more comfortable leaning on their tacit knowledge of hardwoods. There are a few contemporary etchings showing the pipes all laid out above ground from the New River Head down into the City. They look like strings of sausages.

I hope that the elm woodwind instrument I made goes some way towards reinjecting the materiality of elm.



*William 'Molletrap' Smith Elm Woodwind Instrument* by Laura Copsy and Philip Crewe © photo Justin Piperger

L: For me, it was Sadler's Wells Theatre that was most surprising. The name is a giveaway, but I was blown away to learn that there is still a well under the main stage today, and another in the corridor.

Wells were a place of culture: musicians, actors and poets flocked to wells for a captive audience of people making a daily trip to collect water before taps and pipes existed. It's remarkable that the site continues to be a place of culture, a theatre, today.



*Black Mary's Ritual Cards and Joan Starkey Woodblock Stamps by Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe ©  
photo Justin Piperger*

**Why did you decide to create a 'fictional museum' for this residency?**

L: Given we were looking at less well-documented histories, and given that history can only ever be interpreted from the perspective of the present, we felt there was an inherent fiction we needed to acknowledge.

We knew we wanted to make work inspired by historic craft and use experimental methods to make imagery directly with the site (like cameraless photography) that could be repurposed as speculative 'replicas'.

We were making a collection of 'artefacts' so the framework of a 'museum' made sense. And we both wanted to draw attention to the idea that histories are stories to be interpreted.



*Steel Saw Blade and detail by Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe © photo Justin Piperger*

P: Like many institutions, museums can feel like permanent, unchangeable things. However, they are constantly evolving in response to new ideas or trends. By creating an explicitly fictional museum, we're highlighting the idea that *anything* made can be remade.

## **What kind of 'storied objects' did you think you would make, and did the project work out as you expected?**

L: I honestly had no idea what we'd end up with! We followed our noses and used our research and process to guide the outcomes. There was a fair amount of trust involved, hoping we would find something. But I think we've both dabbled in this kind of work long enough to develop confidence that ideas always come, and they did. The outcome feels very much what Philip and I would do! I'm proud of it and it was amazing to work with Philip again.

P: We let the New River dictate what we made. The happenstance of Laura's photography experiments or the objects we found and reinterpreted reflect this.

This project existed most vividly during the conversations Laura and I had at a small café by New River Head. This residency allowed us the privilege of creatively exploring those conversations, unpacking traditional narratives and questioned linear history. I hope the outcomes reflect those conversations.



*Joan Starkey Tankard and Black Mary's Mummer's Mask* by Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe © photo Justin Piperger



## **Engine House Graduate Illustrator-in-Residence**

**Sharpay Chenyuè Yuán**



Residency work in progress © Sharpay Chenyuè Yuán

Like Laura and Philip, Sharpay spent time at New River Head, using illustration to investigate the past. Here is what Sharpay had to say about her time as the first Quentin Blake Centre Graduate Illustrator-in-Residence.

### **How can illustration tell us about history?**

Illustration can be a bridge between the past and the present. I am really attracted to stories about the past, especially when they have continuity with what I see at the moment.

My illustration has a kind of softness that means I can combine things from different times and make unexpected connections between them. I bring together people's memories, things I observe, archival sources and a little bit of imagination. This could be seen as less precise than written 'facts', but to me the ambiguity of my images corresponds to the complexity of history itself.

### **Have there been any particular places that have inspired you?**

Before the pandemic, I spent a lot of time at Shepherd's Bush Market in West London. Besides buying my regular groceries, talking to merchants who were working there became my routine. I began collecting stories: one slender grocery store owner was once an arms trader in his home country, the spice store was once a cover for secret trade and under the shops lay a network of tunnels.

These stories inspired me to find out more about the market, and I found stories from the distant past with connections to those the traders had told me. I created a series of illustrations about these connections. One of my favourite links scattered fish heads from a 1920s archival account of the market with complaints about the smell of fish in the market today and my own observations of the work of the fishmongers.



*Continuity 1 - Fish Stink* © Sharpay Chenyuè Yuán

## **Have you worked with archives on any other projects?**

My recent project *Pearl's Daughters* is based on the region where I was born and raised, the Pearl River Delta in China. Using archives, I followed the lives of migrant women who lived and worked in factories during the 1980s. They had left their hometowns and families for opportunities, yet most of the time they were seen as a collective workforce rather than individuals. These women were integral to change in a fast-developing region yet their voices have been overlooked.

Through research I found archive records as well as personal blogs and diaries, and I combined these different sources into one story. I created an



illustrated book that acts as a literary collage or group portrait that responds to the shared experiences of this community of women. My intention isn't to try to give an authoritative account of this time, but more to create an open conversation between past experiences, my work and the people looking at it.



*Pearl's Daughters* © Sharpay Chenyuè Yuán

## **What interested you about New River Head when you were starting your residency with Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration?**

I was attracted to the complexity of the social history: I wanted to excavate stories from the past. For more than 300 years it was a busy industrial site supplying most of London's drinking water. It was also a target during periods of rioting and war. But it has been silent for seven decades.

I was lucky to record its derelict state just before its restoration. I walked alone among its different buildings, looking for evidence of past activity and links to archived photographs and documents. Many of these documents tell conflicting stories, and I absorbed all of these when creating *Lost Springs*, *Coming Spring*, a large scale drawing that combines my direct observations and research.



Lost Spring, Coming Spring (which would become a 25-metre mural for *Centre in Progress*) © Sharpay  
Chenyuè Yuán

During the residency, Sharpay also was Runner Up in the Student Illustrator category at the V & A Illustration Awards 2022. She also contributed

<https://chenyueyuan.com/>

## Centre in Progress

September 2022

With New River Head providing the inspiration for Laura and Philip's and Sharpay's work as Illustrators-in-Residence, we thought there was no better place to exhibit their residency work than here.

New River Head has 400 years of history as a busy industrial site, but it has been lying empty behind locked gates for more than 70 years. With the additional grant from the Trust, that changed in September 2022, when we opened for Open House and London Design Festival, welcoming over 1,850 people. We invited them to engage with Laura and Philip's and Sharpay's work and explore the site's fascinating history, and tell us what they want to see there in future.



*Centre in Progress* © photo Paul Grover

With the help of Quentin Blake Centre Artistic Director Olivia Ahmad's curatorial team, the site's 18th- and 19th-century buildings were turned into installations featuring our resident illustrators that offered new ways into



New River Head's stories. Sharpay's *Lost Springs, Coming Spring* mixed observational drawings of past and present. Laura and Philip's fictional museum, *New River Folk*, displayed beautifully-crafted artefacts said to belong to a mole-catcher, water-carrier and well-owner whose lives were intertwined with the New River in the early 17th-century. Laura and Philip's *New River: Immersions* installation included cameraless photography that captured the beauty of light through New River water.

Installing artwork in the derelict buildings was not without its challenges. Leaky roofs, crumbly wall sand and a curious resident robin! But this became part of the displays: an abandoned rusty pipe became a table for an animation. A fallen branch was used to suspend a wicker scold's bridle.

Visitors explored the spaces and joined guided tours. Many had their own stories to share. We learned that in the 1980s the site's Windmill Base was filled with smoke for Thames Water workers to train to deal with accidents in confined spaces. We heard rumours that New River Head had a secret military use in the 1940s.



Visitors responding to the exhibits and the site in front of Sharpay's residency work, transformed into a 25-metre mural *Lost Springs, Coming Spring* © photo Paul Grover

*"I was fascinated by the exhibition and fell in love with the space. Everything was so well staged including the creative feedback task: all the helpers gave a lovely warm welcome as well as providing helpful background information."*



*"I live close by the New River, and often walk along its banks. It's a wonderful green corridor. The engineering skills used to construct the New River always hold me in awe of humanity's ancient knowledge. It is a story that should be more widely known."*

*"Everything was new and unexpected."*

Many visitors also responded to Sharpay and Laura and Philip's work by telling us what they would like to experience at the new Centre when it opens in 2024. It was fantastic to welcome visitors to see the work in its 'natural habitat'; Sharpay's and Laura and Philip's took on new meaning as visitors explored and reacted to their exhibits. We are extremely grateful for the Trust's support, especially through this transition phase of the Centre's development. With the Trust's backing we have been able to shape our the residency programme, with resulting benefits for the Illustrators-in-

# Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Residents, our team and our future home. We are now working to see how the next residency programme can best serve emerging illustrators as we continue to make progress towards opening the Quentin Blake Centre at New River Head. We will be in touch shortly to share and seek feedback on our plans for this next year of the programme.



Visitors were encouraged to make their own creations, inspired by the surroundings and the Illustrators-in-Residence's work © photo Paul Grover