

An update for The Barbara and Philip Denny Trust: April 2024

Illustration as a tool for understanding: Creating a visual response to heritage research, with thanks to The Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust



New River Adventurers © Cat O'Neil

At the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration, we are working to transform New River Head, a derelict heritage site in Islington, into a new national centre for illustration.

The former waterworks once pumped 50% of London's clean water supply and acted as the headquarters of the New River Company - one of the three wealthiest companies in 17th-century London, along with the Bank of England and the East India Company.

We have embarked on a programme of research to help us to uncover and understand the history of our future home, which spans over 400 years. The stories that we find will be shared with visitors to the Centre when we open our doors in late 2025.

We commissioned historian and writer Dr Angelina Osborne MBE to research the 29 founding investors of the New River Company, with her report *New River Adventurers* being published in January 2024. Her research found that around half of the founding investors, known as the 'Adventurers', were major figures in the City of London's elite social, political and mercantile circles, and that their involvement in burgeoning colonial projects enabled them to invest in the New River Company.

Thanks to a generous grant from The Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust, we were able to commission award-winning illustrator Cat O'Neil to bring this research to life.

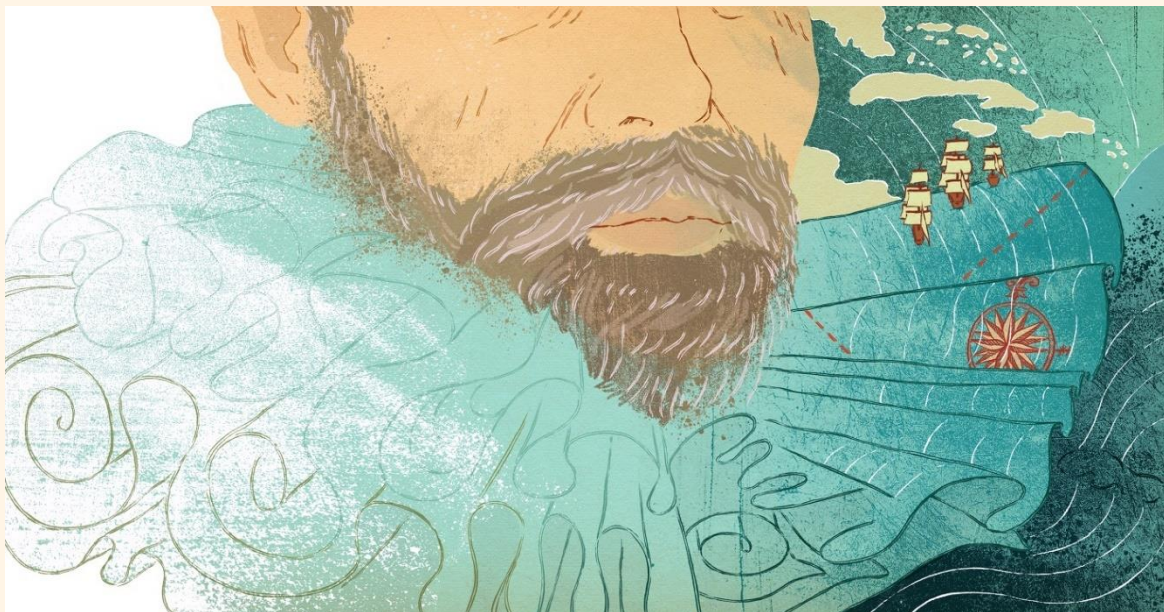
Cat created a collection of interpretive images to accompany the report and tell the story of the Adventurers, informed by Dr Osborne's research and collaborative conversations throughout the project. Reflecting on her creative process, Cat said:

"Talking to Angelina was so important, for many reasons. As an illustrator my role is to communicate ideas visually; for me to do that, I have to fully understand what it is I'm communicating, but also what the writer is intending to communicate.

Although the report is about the founders of New River Company, Angelina and I wanted to take the emphasis away from individual founders and their stories. We were more interested in visualising the actual legacy and implications of their actions."

Cat's illustrations capture the complex web of social, political and business connections that enabled the Adventurers to invest in the New River Company. She was inspired by the time-period, utilising clothing and iconography that would have indicated wealth and status to create visual metaphors and motifs:

"I looked at a lot of ruffs! There was something visually poetic about having the ripples of the fabric flowing into waves of the sea and alluding to the future of colonialism and wealth extraction, with the West Indies seen in the distance."



New River Adventurers © Cat O'Neil

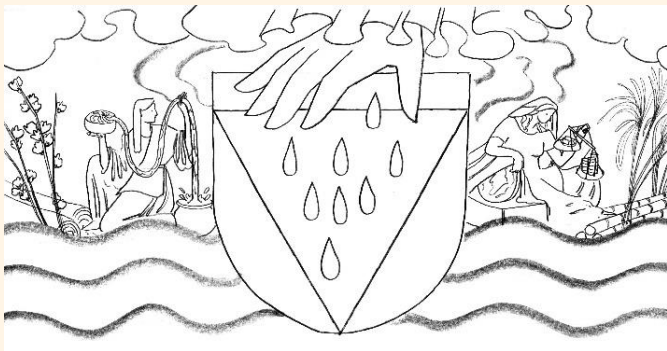
Cat not only brought extensive professional experience of visualising colonial histories to this project, but also her unique personal perspective:

“I care a lot about doing justice to the emotional gravity of these projects, so I spent a good amount of time with the source material and reading around the subject. But an important aspect of this work is that I’m of mixed heritage myself, being Hong Kong Chinese and British. I spend a lot of time reflecting on race, nationality and what ‘home’ and being British means, so the subject of colonialism is ever present.”

Working to decolonise history is challenging as it involves recognising exploitative practices that have had negative effects on people, while taking care to avoid further exploitation and highlighting only the perspectives of those who benefitted.

Research like this helps us to bring depth to New River Head's story and a new understanding of how it fits into a bigger national and international picture. Cat's illustrations work to communicate the complex themes in an engaging and accessible way, drawing people into narratives and making them memorable.

The Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust's support of this project has united illustration and research, making important findings accessible to a broader audience. Thank you.



New River Adventurers final illustrations, and progress images © Cat O'Neil

Illustration residencies and heritage interpretation:

Projects made possible by The Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust feature in new publication, *Illustration and Heritage*.

Since 2014, your support of our Illustrator-in-Residency programme has enabled eight practitioners to embark on research and exploration projects that differ from commercial illustration briefs. Many of these have explored illustration as a heritage storytelling device, with the outcomes of two residencies now featuring in a new academic publication, *Illustration and Heritage*.

Published by Bloomsbury and written by Rachel Emily Taylor, *Illustration and Heritage* explores how illustrative practice can be used to communicate lost and invisible stories in cultural heritage. Included in the book are Sharpay Chenyuè Yuán's *Lost Springs, Coming Spring* from 2022, and Laura Copsey and Philip Crewe's *New River Folk Museum* from 2021 – both residency projects that were made possible by a grant from the Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust.

Rachel describes heritage as a process by which we imagine the future through preserving the past in specific ways. In her book, she uses case studies and interviews with illustrators, lecturers, and practitioners - including Laura Copsey, Philip Crewe and the Centre's Artistic Director Olivia Ahmad - to explore how their work can contribute to, reveal and reconstruct heritage stories.



Illustration and Heritage photographed by Rachel Emily Taylor, 2024

When speaking about Laura and Philip's residency, Rachel said:

“What struck me about the project, was that they were researching and uncovering stories about the people who had lived and worked at New River Head in the past, which then led me to wonder about the current stories taking place during the contemporary building project – would there be any similarities or overlaps? **Could our understanding of the past help us to shine a new light on what is happening today?**”

Reflecting on the same project, Olivia Ahmad said:

“Illustration and heritage interpretation are closely aligned practices. Both involve a process of research, translation and, most frequently, dialogue with an audience – often progress through these steps is cyclical rather than linear. **For me, Laura and Philip’s residency perfectly encapsulates the valuable and maybe even vital role that illustration can play in heritage.**”

We are incredibly grateful for your long-standing support of our Illustrator-in-Residency programme, which demonstrates an amazing commitment to contemporary illustration practice. As Rachel Lillie said back in 2014 when reflecting on her time as an Illustrator-in-Residence:

“As an illustrator, it's not often you get the privilege of time post education; time to dig deeper, to explore and expand, to take risks and to experiment. I was able to do all this in a supported and exciting environment where I felt the work I was making had a purpose, where there was a story to be told.”

We have now paused our Illustrator-in-Residency programme whilst we work towards our new home. At this time, we very much appreciate the Trust’s continuing support of three exciting new illustration commissions, which are being developed in its place for display at the Centre when we open.

Drawing on the past to visualise and preserve it, the commissions will each capture unique strands of New River Head’s heritage and bring them to a modern audience, representing voices and stories that are currently lost or invisible - as Rachel Emily Taylor describes in her book. These commissions will be shaped by the illustrators who work on them, following the ethos of experimentation and discovery that has always underpinned the Illustrator-in-Residency programme.

We will encourage the same process of creative investigation and rigorous research, providing a collaborative space for exploration and practice development. The commissions will be free to access at the Centre when we open, representing a unique opportunity to showcase innovative illustration practice on a large public scale, which will provide inspiration for visitors, students, and illustrators for many years to come.

We are incredibly grateful to the Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust for your ongoing support, which makes projects like these possible. We very much look forward to sharing updates on the three ongoing commissions as they develop and take shape, with our thanks once again.