

Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

An update for the Barbara and Philip Denny Trust– April 2025

In October 2024, works to transform New River Head began. Atmospheric and steeped in stories, New River Head's long-abandoned buildings and cobbled courtyards are being attentively restored to become galleries, learning and project spaces, and gardens.

Transforming New River Head

Work started on the transformation of New River Head on 28 October and we have handed over the site to Rise Contracts for the duration of the works. Following a competitive tender process Rise Contracts delivered the most complete and strongest tender at the lowest price.

Rise are scheduled to finish work between December 2025 – January 2026. We will have two months of installation and testing before we open to the public in the first quarter of 2026.

Some of the highlights of the work so far include:

- The creation of a second storey in the Engine House with the concrete slab now poured and set. This will become the Quentin Blake Gallery.
- Windmill Base floor has been refurbished using reclaimed paving stones to match the pre-existing sandstone floors. This space will welcome our community projects and illustrator-in-residence programme.
- Roofing works have been completed on the North Stores building, which will be home to our Learning Studio and Art Store.
- The external café terrace has its steelwork and concrete slab in place.

The newly transformed buildings and gardens will provide the perfect setting for the illustration commissions supported by the Barbara and Philip Denny Trust which we are pleased to provide an update on.



Works on the Engine House, second floor gallery and external terrace © Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Illustrating New River Head

With construction underway, in 2025 we are planning our opening programme and filling New River Head with illustration. With the generous support of the Barbara and Philip Denny Trust, several commissions will be created this year to embed illustration on site and to share its unique heritage with our visitors from 2026.



(L-R) An example of Laura Carlin's sculptural work and a clay workshop led by Laura Carlin © Such Stories

A majestic horse

For hundreds of years, New River Head was powered by working horses. A large-scale sculpture of a horse will commemorate these animals, provide context to the surrounding industrial buildings and surprise visitors with the breadth of illustration. Once we are open, we expect to welcome up to 100,000 visitors a year. A monumental three-dimensional 7.5 x 1.5 m sculpture, the horse will be our landmark – every visitor from 2026 will have the opportunity to look at, touch and gather around the sculpture.

We have commissioned Such Stories to co-design the horse with local families. Sculptor and illustrator Laura Carlin – previously one of our illustrator commissions at House of Illustration in 2017 – and creative director Jo Briggs are Such Stories.

The opportunity to collaborate with Such Stories is being targeted towards foster parents and children from Islington Fostering Families as well as welcoming families and young people from Newington Green Primary School, Lift Islington Youth Hub and Parent House, an organisation supporting parents in Islington to participate.

These families will will make and sculpt their own representations of horses and be invited to participate in contributing the sculpture's mould, surface and casting. They will also build bonds and relationships with the other families taking part and will create a lasting connection to the Centre and their local area.

The UK's charity for illustration
Registered charity number: 1095210

Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration



Artists Laura Carlin and Jo Briggs are making a sculpture for a new garden in Islington, and they would love your help!

Next year, a new arts space called Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration will open in Islington. It will be located in a historic waterworks that was once a busy workplace where people and horses worked together. Laura and Jo are planning to make a horse sculpture to tell this story and bring people together once again. They are hoping to make the garden and its horse a place to visit with pride for years to come.

Call out to participate in workshops to design the horse © Such Stories

qbcentre.org.uk
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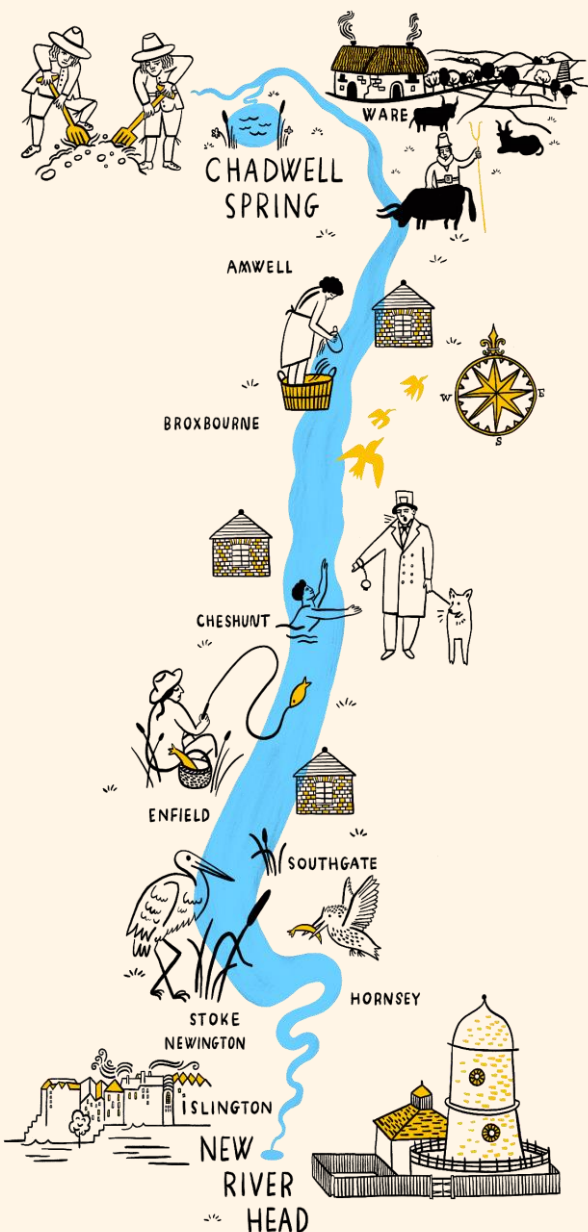
Illustration will be integral to the process of designing the horse and will influence its final form. The iconic horse will demonstrate expanded illustration practice building on the tradition of illustrations working with ceramics and cast materials to create murals and works in relief for public spaces. The sculpture will also appeal to increasing academic interest in using illustration to propose and make visible alternative heritage narratives.

The first workshop took place on the 9 April and the final workshop will take place in National Fostering Week (12-15 May) as part of celebration activities. A brief will then be written for produce of the horse and we will tender the fabrication in July.

Heritage Interpretation Panels

We have commissioned Nina Chakrabarti to illustrate heritage panels. Nina's illustrations will support interpretive text providing an overview of New River Head's history, showing lost structures and revealing human interaction over time with the New River site. Nina previously illustrated temporary panels on a viewing platform at New River Head before construction began.

Beautifully illustrated, informative site-wide interpretation will welcome visitors and help them navigate the site. The panels will foreground stories from a range of underrepresented communities in the cultural sector. Bringing hidden heritage stories, fresh perspectives and less represented voices to the fore will ensure the Centre is appealing to visitors and relevant to their lives.



New River Panel © Nina Chakrabarti



Temporary heritage panels © Valentina Zunino

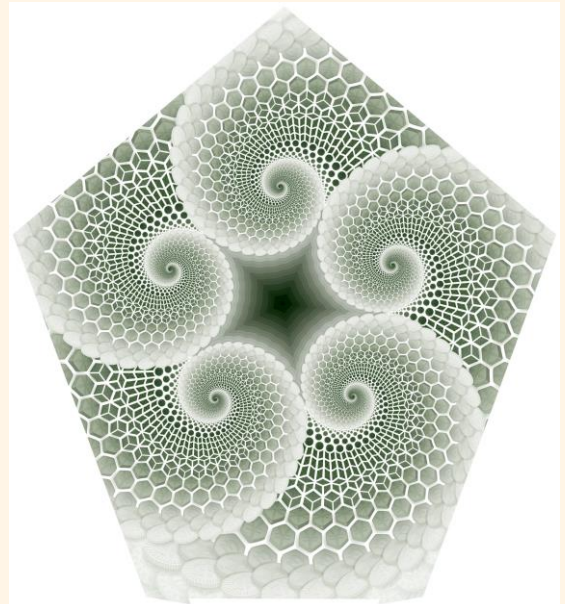
Visualising the history of water

New River Head's landmark building is its Engine House, a tall building that housed steam engines that pumped water across London from the 18th to the 20th century.

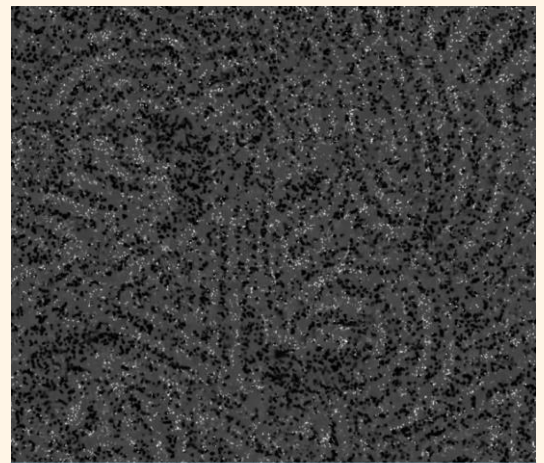
We have commissioned Tekja studio and illustrator Yehrin Tong to create a new digital artwork that connects our audience to the global water cycle, their local area and the history of the building they will be viewing it in through visual language and patterns. Currently Yehrin and Tekja are working together to combine scientific data with mythological figures associated with water to reference the different ways in which the movement of water is represented and understood.

Flowing data visualisations will blend seamlessly with patterns and illustrations which insert these mythical themes in the form of snakes, whales or deities, juxtaposing cultural belief systems and hard facts.

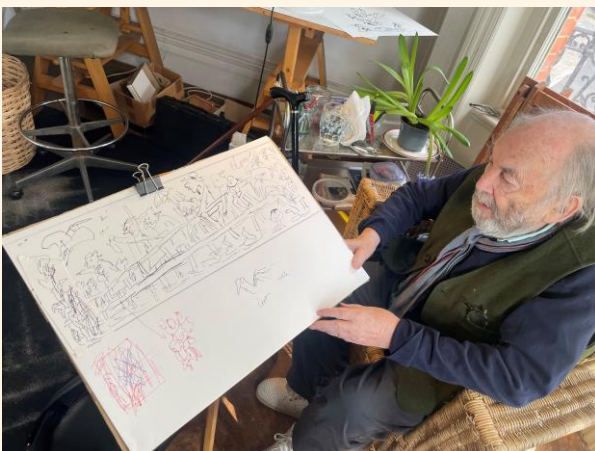
Yehrin is developing her practice by animating her illustrations for the first time, usually working with still, flat images. In response, Tekja will develop a visual representation style which compliments Yehrin's illustration style and easily communicates shifting and developing data.



Financial Fluidity © Yehrin Tong



Animation experiments © Yehrin Tong



Quentin's mural sketches in February 2025
© Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Playing with the history of water

The data visualisation commission will be in dialogue with a mural in the café by our founder Quentin Blake which will be a playful exploration of water.

Exploring the New River as a site of leisure, Quentin's 4.88 m long mural will highlight the river's illicit uses for fishing and bathing by the working classes. The original work has been inspired by 17th, 18th and 19th century etchings and watercolours but will also represent the flora and fauna of the New River's ecology today. Quentin has really been enjoying creating a succession of characters – human, as well as birds and animals – in a leafy wetland scene.

Decolonising New River Head

Dr Angelina Osborne has commenced work on her next phase of research as our Decolonising New River Head Researcher. New River Head was a vital part of the infrastructure of the New River Company which established in 1613 and fast became the UK's largest profit-making water company, becoming one of the three wealthiest companies in 17th-century London.



Dr Osborne is undertaking research on the New River Company's shareholders and their business interests from the mid-17th to late 19th centuries. Primarily working with materials from the London Archives, so far she has focused on mapping New River Company shareholders and their wider business interests, finding multiple instances of investment in colonial enterprises and plantation ownership. An illustrator will be commissioned to illuminate and interpret the research later in the year.



New River Adventurers © Cat O'Neil

Illustration and Heritage Research Conference

In our update last April, we were pleased to share that two projects your support of our Illustrator-in-Residencies made possible were featured in the academic publication *Illustration and Heritage*. Following the publication, its writer Rachel Emily Taylor organised the 14th International Illustration Research Symposium *Illustration & Heritage: Sharing Histories to Draw Out Futures* in November 2024.

The first two residents of the Illustrator-in-Residence programme, supported by the Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust, both spoke at the conference. The illustration practices of both Rachel Lillie (2014-15) and David Lemm (2015-16) have been grounded in self-led research since their residencies 10 years ago.

Rachel uses drawing as research, using illustration to initiate the poetic investigation of place. She teaches BA Illustration Animation at Kingston University. David's research considers relationships between image, meaning and material process. Both illustrators spoke on a panel on 'Materiality' at the research conference. He is a Lecturer in Graphic Design at Edinburgh College of Art.

We are delighted that thanks to opportunities provided by the Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable and fantastic illustrators like Rachel and David the potential of illustration is becoming better understood and better communicated.

We are incredibly grateful to the Barbara and Philip Denny Charitable Trust for your ongoing support and your generous grant which is supporting these illustration commissions and bringing the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration to life. Thank you for your continued commitment to supporting contemporary illustration practice.