

# Case Study

## Ditchling Museum: Environmental Summer

### Background

Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft in East Sussex had planned an 'Environmental Summer' for 2020 – a programme of activity including an exhibition by the pioneering artist John Newling and the award winning designer and maker Sebastian Cox, both of whom explore the natural world through their work.

Sadly, the exhibition, along with the accompanying learning programme, were significantly impacted by Covid-19 and the associated national lockdowns.

Despite this setback, Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft redesigned the exhibition 'Tillage', co-curated with John Newling, to facilitate a Covid-19 safe visitor experience.

In addition, the Museum mobilised resources to create an innovative programme of digital activities based on the exhibition content. This received national recognition through its nomination for Best Social Media Activity for the 'Kids in Museums From Home Award', receiving the 'Highly Commended' Award.

Holding fast to the original vision for 'Environmental Summer', the new digital programme, entitled 'Create to Relate', sought to connect people to nature and traditional craft by providing a series of activities that could be achieved at home.

<https://www.ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk/learning/learning-resources/>



### The project

The project delivered high quality outputs during a time of unprecedented impacts to the cultural heritage sector.

Although visitor numbers were low due to the Museum's closure during the pandemic (and cautious public confidence in returning to indoor venues during lockdown easing), 'Tillage' was extremely well received by visitors.

The digital activity, delivered under the #Create2Relate hashtag, included 'Virtual Museum Club', which launched on IGTV (the Instagram video app). This offered easy making activities for families and home schoolers. With new content and activities released weekly, it was extremely successful and in turn increased engagement with the Museum's wider social media platforms.

Family nature activities were also included, comprising simple activities - printing with leaves and 'looking at nature like an artist'. Activity sheets and guidance were available free from the Museum or by download from the Museum's website.

To provide support for the Museum's volunteers, weekly 'show and tell' social sessions particularly helped those volunteers who were shielding and had little other social contact.

The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) contributed £17,800 to the project, which in total came to £41,330. In addition to the SDNPA, funding was awarded from The Art Fund and the Chalk Cliff Trust, with additional in kind support from Brighton Festival.

“Thank you so much! I did some of the more nature-inspired tutorials with my mom (Alzheimer’s). She really liked it! They were simple and yet a perfect base to start from! Her favourite was the printing with leaves workshop.”

**A Twitter comment by a participant in Ditchling Museum’s ‘Create to Relate’ programme**

## The outcome

- The John Newling exhibition, *Tillage*, was only open between 17 July to 20 December 2020 due to national lockdowns. It welcomed 2,217 visitors (17% of normal visitor numbers), however, the majority of these visitors were new to the Museum, creating a positive opportunity for growth. YouTube hosts an introduction to *Tillage*: <https://youtu.be/ObSp0jjXAa4>
- *So Sorry*, a new commission by the artist John Newling, is now a permanent feature on Ditchling village green.
- *Ditchling Leaves*, a new commission by the artist John Newling, is now part of the Museum’s collection. Smaller related pieces by John were gifted to the families who participated in conversation sessions with the artist on growing and gardening.
- The Museum has developed informal and formal learning programmes for KS3 English and KS3 Art + Design, which will become part of the Museum’s main learning offer.
- Social media engagement has increased, with growth evidenced across all the Museum’s digital platforms.

Steph Fuller, Director of Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, commented:

“The exhibition and linked participation programme has increased awareness amongst visitors and digital engagers of the connections between landscape, nature, environment and art and craft, building on the ideas of the original Ditchling artists and expressed in a very direct way by John Newling in the work he made and curated from our collection for the exhibition.”

## The future

The project was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed and limited the exhibition opening, the planned accompanying programme of school and community engagement, and the delivery of live events.

The revised programme responded sensitively to the challenges faced by people enduring the pandemic – from juggling home schooling to the very real risks of loneliness and isolation. The quality of the programmes delivered by the Museum is a testament to its resilience, and focus on community and social impact. Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft - all its staff and volunteers, and the makers and artists who supported its programmes - should be hugely commended for the delivery of high quality, meaningful programming at such a critical time.

SDNPA also operated with flexibility, and sought additional opportunities to support the Museum. This is a lesson for the Authority in growing our partnerships and connections, particularly during crisis.

**For further information, please contact:**

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SDNPA Cultural Heritage Lead

**The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2020–25** sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 10 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

**This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:**

**Outcome 4:** Cultural heritage of the National Park is enhanced and widely understood and enjoyed.

**Outcome 6:** There is widespread understanding of the special qualities of the National Park and the benefits it provides.

**Outcome 7:** The South Downs National Park is a well-used and recognised asset for sustaining mental and physical health and wellbeing.

[southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/](https://southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/)

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