



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## Vanessa Toulmin National Fairground Archive

**Duration:** 0:04:35

START AUDIO

Prof. Toulmin: The AHRC funded 'Admission All Classes' started in Blackpool in 2007. It was a partnership between the University of Sheffield, the National Fairground Archive and Blackpool Council.

It had many aims but one of the most interesting things is that we wanted to do is to revitalise the tourism industry of Blackpool through using its heritage – its amazing heritage as the first working class seaside resort in the United Kingdom.

Now Blackpool has 27,000 theatre seats to fill a night. It has more Grade 1 and Grade 2 Listed buildings in a small area than any other place in the country outside London. And it has this incredible heritage that I would say even the people of Blackpool didn't realise that they had.

So when I first came to Blackpool with funding from the AHRC we planned a series of 10 events and these were looking at the whole of a range of the history of popular entertainments, illegitimate theatre, travelling fairs, circus, music hall, variety. And we worked with modern components on modern performers in the history of variety and popular entertainment and companies and brought them to Blackpool.

So really we were bringing the metropolitan cabaret art-house audience to Blackpool – a working class seaside resort in the north of Lancashire. It was quite an amazing series of events that we did over the 18 months.

As a result of that partnership with Blackpool Council we are now running – or I am now creative advisor to the annual Shazam! festival. We're working on a heritage project for the whole of Blackpool in terms of its entertainment history. And we're also doing similar events in Sheffield and south Yorkshire.

But really what it is is bringing out our search to a wider audience, disseminating it to the general public and showing that academics are not in their ivory towers and that we want to work with institutions and public bodies beyond our usual remit.

So some of the projects that we worked on for example – we worked with a wonderful artist called Amy Saunders who's a sword swallower and she's called 'Miss Behave'. And she's obsessed with the history of variety and entertainment. So we worked with her on different projects but she was my host for the variety show. And Amy's the only female sword swallower in the world. So she worked with me in the National Fairground Archive looking at the history of performance and then she was the compare for the variety show.

We wanted to twist things round a bit so we didn't just have ballroom dancing we had same sex dancing – so we had two men who were the same sex dance champions of the world who were my partners for the ball.

We worked with contortionists and street performers, and one of the interesting things that we got is that the people that came to the events were actually more dressed up than the performers in many ways. So we got- We had lots of the drag queens from Blackpool, we had lots of members of the gay community. But we had a huge proportion of members of the Blackpool Civic Trust – all the old landladies who just dressed up and showed us how to ballroom dance. And that was quite incredible.

So some of the stories were amazing and over the course of the project we had 17,000 people that came to our events. Thousands upon thousands of people downloaded the heritage podcasts.

And I think that we showed that research can be fun, dynamic, interesting and innovative and it wasn't just about engaging with our fellow peers in an academic community.

What's underpinning the whole of the project in terms of its dissemination, its outreach, its public engagement is high class research. That everything that we do is based on original research done by the staff of the National Fairground Archive, fellow academics and collaborators, local historians, people who are interested in the history of cinema, theatre, popular entertainment – all of which is what I call 'illegitimate entertainment', it's mainstream entertainment in many ways.

So we're not trying to be 'Britain's Got Talent' but we're trying to show that cabaret, art, performance is something that has always been part of the popular entertainment history of the United Kingdom and our research demonstrates that.

END AUDIO