

Her Story

Opera Film

LINK TO FILM:

<https://vimeo.com/814907497>

Evaluation for
Arts Council England
April 2023

COHERE

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Executive Summary

The *HerStory* opera is an operatic work by Suffolk composer Amy Mallett, incorporating material created by and with members of the UK Parkinson's community. *HerStory* began its journey in an artist residency and workshop performance at Snape Maltings in 2019, after which its cast of community performers expressed their aspirations to use the piece to "show the world what people with Parkinson's can do".

During the pandemic, a series of online projects led by Cohere Arts offered a valuable way of keeping cast members connected and active, whilst developing additional material for the opera. The *HerStory* community continued to grow as this activity reached more participants living across the UK.

In 2022, supported by Arts Council England and partners Britten Pears Arts, English National Opera, Trinity Laban and MuMo Creative, *HerStory* was developed into a 30 minute film. Over the course of the project:

- 17 artist professionals contributed their expertise
- 40 singing, dance and visual art workshops were held in Suffolk, London, Sussex, Oxford and online
- 120 members of the UK Parkinson's community developed and learned repertoire from the opera
- 9 filming and recording sessions were held in 8 different venues across the UK
- The creative talents of 85 people living with Parkinson's are featured in the finished film
- Over 120 participants and supporters attended an online preview of the film in March 2023

The [HerStory Opera film](#) was launched on Vimeo on 11th April 2023, World Parkinson's Day, with an [audio-described version](#) released one week later. A version with hearing-impaired access is also currently in production. At time of writing (14 days after release) there have been 1035 viewings of the film (825 full version, 210 audio-described version) on Vimeo.

Participants reported many positive impacts of taking part in the project, including:

- Increase in confidence that has spilled over into other areas of their lives and inspired them to try other new things/activities
- Improved mental/physical wellbeing, sense of agency
- Reduced isolation, anxiety and feelings of negativity associated with living with a health challenge

The film is being screened as part of the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival at Snape Maltings in June 2021 and has been accepted for presentation at the 6th World Parkinson's Congress in Barcelona in July 2023.

INTRODUCTION

Cohere Arts CIC

Cohere Arts is a Suffolk-based community interest company providing opportunities for communities to engage with arts, culture and heritage through:

- Original performance works
- Creative health activities
- Knowledge sharing

The company was founded in Feb 2021 by Artistic Director Dr Amy Mallett, who has spent her career harnessing the transformative power of the arts to benefit communities.

Our flagship performance projects *Witchfinder* and *HerStory* have not only received national and international recognition as high quality, artistic works, but engaged community performers and audiences through an inclusive and collaborative approach. We have taken this learning into partnerships with health and education, designing and delivering targeted activities that address particular health priorities within our local community. We are now a go-to provider of participatory arts activities for East Anglia, as well as regular contributors to national initiatives around creative health and community arts.

***HerStory* - Background**

2019 HerStory: The Catchpole Chronicles

HerStory began as a collaboration between composer Amy Mallett, soprano and singing leader Nicola Wydenbach, and dance artists & Danielle Teale Sarah Lewis. Having delivered regular therapeutic dance and singing classes for the Parkinson's community for a number of years, the artists shared an aspiration to take their practice beyond 'regular class' activity, extending participant experience into performative work and celebrating the artistry and quality of community arts practice. In 2019, with funding from ACE and support from Snape Maltings, the artists worked with members of the Parkinson's community in Suffolk and London to co-create an operatic work inspired by the remarkable life story of British historical heroine, Margaret Catchpole. Margaret had been a hard-working country girl who fell in love with a local smuggler, and ended up being transported to Australia in 1801 for a number of crimes. Her story is documented in letters she wrote back to England still held in museums today. In a series of workshops with participants we co-created music, libretto and dance material to form our opera, which we entitled '*HerStory: The Catchpole Chronicles*'.



The piece was successfully showcased in a workshop performance at Snape Maltings concert hall in August 2019 and as a result the company was invited to further develop the piece via a community residency at London's Royal Opera House in 2020. With in-person activities suddenly made impossible due to lockdown,

unfortunately this residency was cancelled, and instead we embarked on a series of digital projects, each exploring a different theme from the opera.

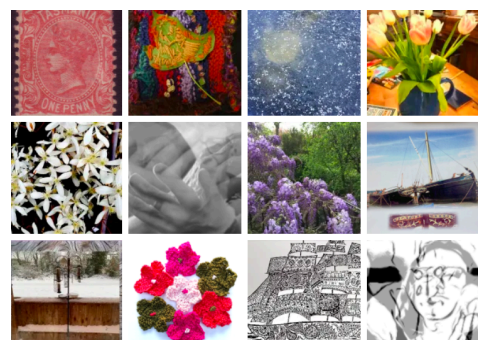
2020 HerStory: The Covid Chronicles

Our first digital project saw all involved getting to grips with new technology; Zoom, film, and digital photography. With the support of the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies, a series of creative workshops were delivered on Zoom, exploring the theme of the seasons in a variety of music and dance activities. With remote delivery allowing a wider geographical reach, the pool of participants was expanded, uniting people living with Parkinson's from further afield across the UK.



2021 HerStory: Ev'ry stitch in the quilt

Now under the umbrella of newly established CIC Cohere Arts, our second online project in 2021 was HerStory: Ev'ry stitch in the quilt; inspired by one of the scenes from the opera where a character sits sewing a quilt. For this project, supported by Community Lottery and Aviva Community Fund, horizons were broadened to also include visual art, textiles,



poetry and written word activities actioned in online workshops and 'homework' tasks. The outcome was a digital quilt; an online exhibition that showcased the blossoming creative talents of a growing online community. Behind each square lies complementary artworks created by the group; a poem, a recording, creative writing, a dance.

To view the quilt visit <https://coherearts.org/herstory-evry-stitch-in-the-quilt/>

2021 *HerStory: Turning the Tide*

In late 2021 with additional funding from The National Community Lottery Fund, Cohere Arts created a short film: *HerStory; Turning the Tide*, exploring Margaret Catchpole's journey as she was transported on a prison ship from Britain to Australia. During this online workshop series lead artists saw participants' confidence soar even further. They were now recording themselves singing and sending us the files; composing melodies; making props; doing experimental photography and making the most beautiful artworks.

To view the film visit <https://youtu.be/ZOH2nAcJiU>.

2022 *HerStory* Film Soundtrack

In 2022 Cohere Arts was awarded an ACE project grant to support a professional recording of the soundtrack for a film of the *HerStory* opera. The project engaged 10 professional artists in the rehearsal and capture of high quality live studio recordings made at Potton Studios in Suffolk in April 2022. 24 mixed and mastered instrumental and vocal tracks were captured and shared with a focus group of previous project participants for their feedback and input.



HerStory Opera Film

The purpose of this project was to create a film of the opera featuring performances and artwork by Parkinson's singing and dance groups from across the UK. Over 6 months we planned to engage 17 artists and 100 members of the UK Parkinson's community in the following project activities:

- 40 UK-wide music, dance and art workshops
- 5 residencies in regional venues to capture audio/film
- Development of animation footage using participant artwork
- Video/audio editing
- A 'soft' online launch of the HerStory Opera Film
- Submission of the film to the World Parkinson's Congress 2023.

Our aim was to create a filmed performance work that would:

- Engage and connect people living with Parkinson's across the UK, reducing isolation and improving physical and mental wellbeing
- Extend the artistic experience of people living with Parkinson's beyond weekly therapeutic sessions into artistic co-creation
- Showcase the artistry and quality of Dance and Singing for Parkinson's nationally and globally

LEAD CREATIVES

Artistic Director & Composer - Amy Mallett

Musical Director - Nicola Wydenbach

Dramaturgy - Emma Bernard

Videographer - John Fensom

Movement Director - Sarah Lewis

Animation - Simon Wild

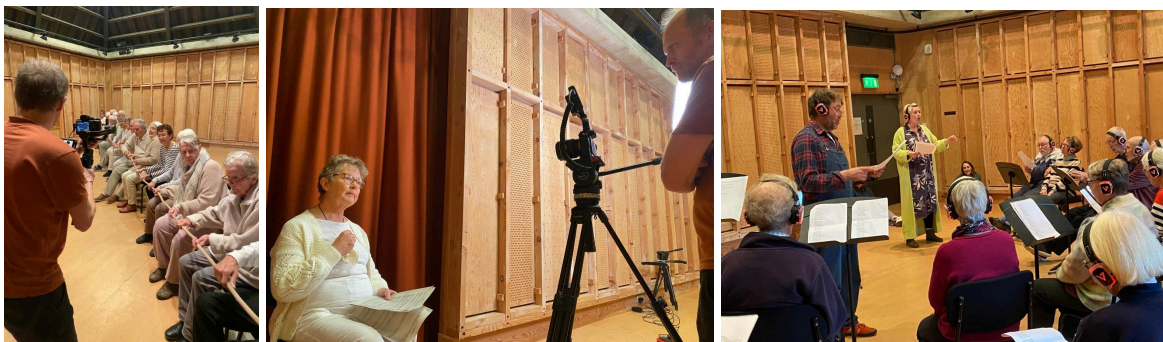


PROJECT ACTIVITY

Workshops, audio and video capture

Suffolk

Supported by Britten Pears Arts, in Sept-Nov 2022 11 singing and dance workshops were delivered in Snape and Ipswich with vocal leaders Rob Gildon & Steph Wakeman and movement director Sarah Lewis. In November 2022 we spent two days recording & filming members of the East Suffolk Skylarks at the Kiln in Snape Maltings, led by film-maker John Fensom.



London

In London we were fortunate to have the support of both Trinity Laban & English National Opera. Project Director and Parkinson's singing leader Nicola Wydenbach and dance artist Maria da Luz Ghoumrassi led 10 singing workshops both in person and online. We used locations at Trinity Laban and ENO to film and capture audio with our London-based cast.



Oxford

In Oxford we worked with MuMo Creative artists Nia Williams, Louisa Dalton & Roosa Leimu-Brown, who delivered 4 workshops for their Oxford-based participants. In November 2022 the project team visited the town to record and film the group at Oxford Town Hall courtroom and Wesley Memorial Hall.



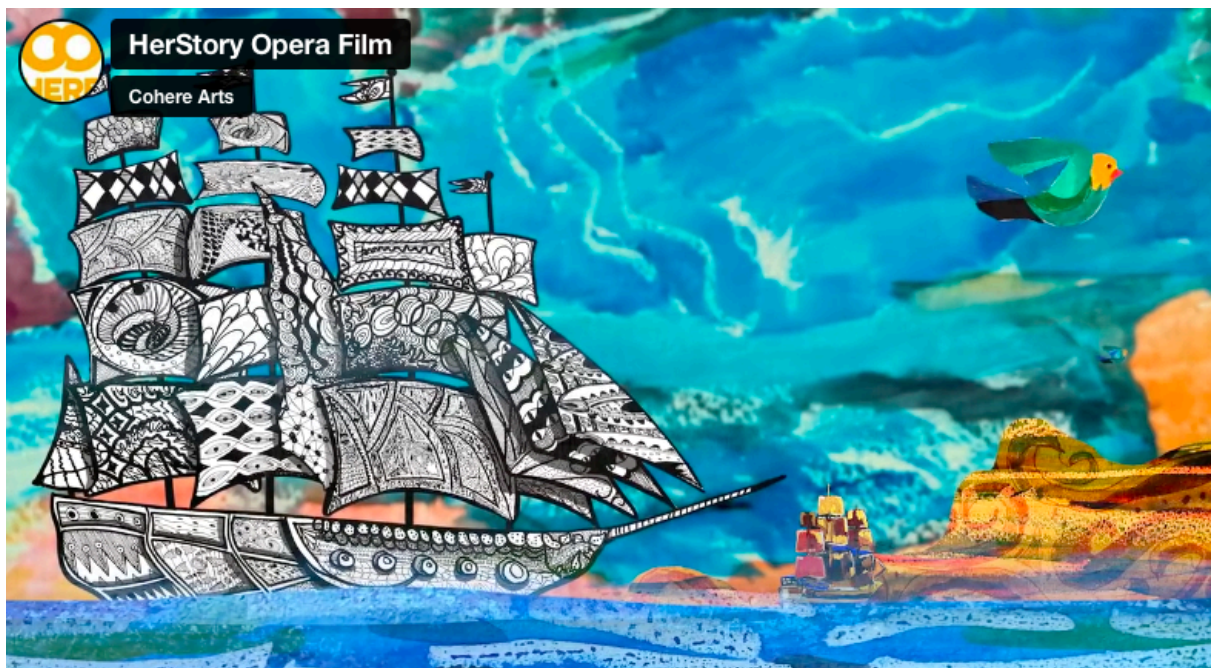
Sussex

In Sussex, 10 workshops were delivered to two singing groups run by singing leader Debra Skeen; the Tremorlos and Cuckoos. The project team visited to film the opera's drinking song in the dining room of The Dorset pub in Lewes, and audio was later captured in 2 additional sessions.



Visual Art

In addition, artist and printmaker Matt Moseley led 3 online workshops for UK-wide participants to develop visual art. Participants were sent art materials that they used to create ship sails, sea, sky and birds for the animated sections of the film. Their finished pieces were posted to animator Simon Wild who combined and brought them to life to stunning effect.



Technical approach

To keep each region's remit manageable, the opera was carved into sections, with each group being charged to learn repertoire particular scenes, songs and dances, as well as the finale of the piece. Under the guidance of dramaturg Emma Bernard, Artistic Director Amy Mallett and film-maker John Fensom put together storyboards and shot lists for each filming location. Unifying props, overarching aesthetics, movement language and motifs were used to provide cohesion and keep narrative flow. At the same time, our creative approach was kept fluid and organic to allow us to work with the diverse range of capabilities, energy levels, site specific aesthetics and creative input of individual participants in each location. Accessibility, safety and the comfort of participants was the utmost priority in every aspect of project delivery.

During our tour to each filming location, audio recordings of ambient vocal performances were also captured via use of 'silent disco' headsets and a Zoom recorder. Participants could listen and sing along to the backing tracks without this bleeding into onsite recordings. Recordings from each group were edited and 'layered' on top of the professional soundtrack captured in 2022 project activity by audio engineer Richie Bingham. The result was a soundtrack 'pieced' together so that multiple participants in various locations could sing as one unified operatic chorus.



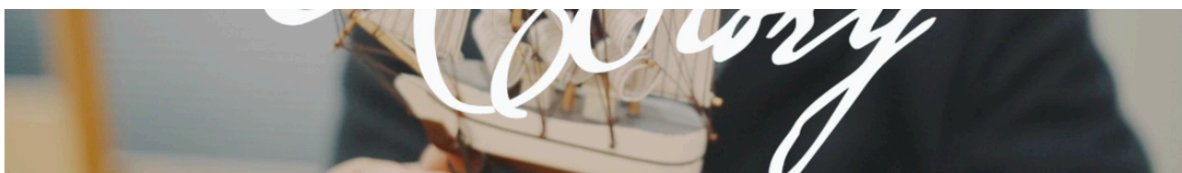
Sharing and engagement

On Tuesday 28th March a preview of the completed 30 minute film on zoom with over 120 participants and their supporters. The film includes singing and dance performances and animated artworks made by 85 members of the Parkinson's community. The preview sharing event included a Q & A and opportunities to submit feedback. The film was well received, with much excitement for the launch. The preview version of the film was viewed 267 on YouTube following this event.

The finished [HerStory Opera film](#) was launched on 11th April 2023, World Parkinson's Day, hosted on Vimeo. The film featured programme notes and optional captioned subtitles. A social media campaign (using Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook) ensured strong engagement and promotion of the release by project partners and other organisations including Parkinson's UK, Traction and DanceEast. In addition, Britten Pears Arts published an [online article](#) about the project, also on World Parkinson's Day.

An [audio-described version](#) of the film was released one week later on 18th April 2023. A version with hearing-impaired access is also currently in production. At time of writing (14 days after release) there have been 1035 viewings of the film (825 full version, 210 audio-described version) on Vimeo.

In terms of future engagement, the film is being screened as part of the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival at Snape Maltings in June 2023 and has been accepted for presentation at the 6th World Parkinson's Congress in Barcelona in July 2023. There has also been interest from Opera Holland Park, Trinity Laban and Garsington for further screenings. Our participants are keen to organise more screenings to enable them to experience the work on a big screen and share with family and supporters in their local area.



Festival Musical Walk: HerStory

[Book Now](#)

Wednesday 21 June | 9:30am

Duration: **5 hours 30 minutes**

Venue: **Meet at Snape Maltings Concert Hall, Snape, Suffolk, IP17 1SP**

Price: **£12 Under 30s half price**

Lunch & Coach included in ticket price.

Join us on an immersive musical journey along the Sailors' Path to Snape Maltings, learning and singing songs from new opera HerStory along the way. A film of HerStory will be screened in the Peter Pears Recital Room, Snape Maltings at 2pm.

HerStory documents the extraordinary exploits of Suffolk heroine Margaret Catchpole, who achieved notoriety when she stole a horse and rode it from Ipswich to London in 1797. Written by Suffolk-born composer **Amy Mallett**, the piece incorporates music, libretto, choreography and visual art co-created with members of the Parkinson's community.

The coach, walk, film screening and lunch are all included in the ticket price.

Schedule

9.30am Meet the coach outside Snape Maltings Concert Hall. The coach will take walkers to the start of the Sailors' Path.

10am – 1pm Walk back to Snape, singing along the way.

EVALUATION

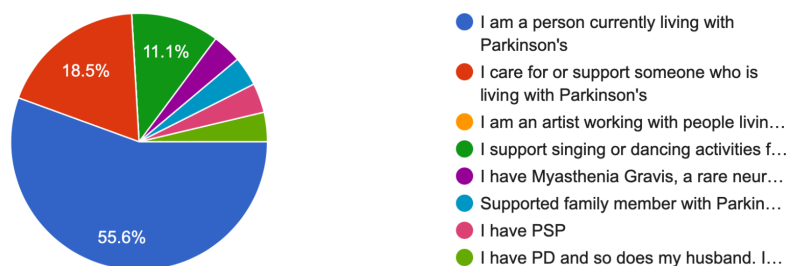
Evaluation data was gathered throughout the project in a number of formats including:

- Group discussion
- Electronic survey
- Email

The demographics of the 28 s-survey respondents was as follows:

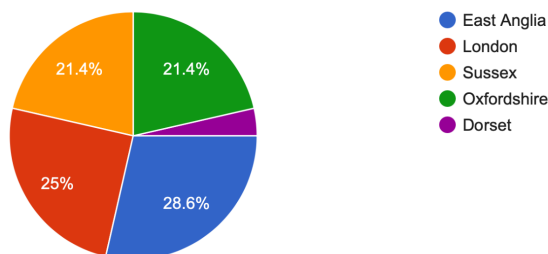
1. Please select the option that best describes you:

27 responses



2. In which area of the country do you currently live?

28 responses



Project highlights were viewed to be:

- Meeting and connecting with new people, working as part of a team
- Taking part in filming sessions
- The kindness and professionalism of the project team

“I’d never been involved in anything like this before and to be led by such professionals was an eye opener. The creative team never pushed us beyond our capabilities but gave us confidence to do our best and it was a lot of fun. Something very different from our usual day to day challenges.” - participant

Participants viewed the **biggest challenges** to be:

- Energy/mobility requirements - activities were physically demanding which could be tiring
- Facing the reality of Parkinson's reflected on the 'big screen'
- Worrying about being good enough

“For me, the most challenging aspect was the emotional effect of watching the end product. Especially seeing illness grab hold of someone, when it's captured on film the decline can stare you in the face.” - participant

Overall, the **key impacts** participants observed in themselves were:

- Increased confidence, which spilled over into other areas of their lives
- Feeling part of 'something bigger' - a sense of purpose and achievement
- Feeling more positive about sharing aspects of Parkinson's to friends and family

“I definitely came out of my comfort zone and this has given me much more confidence in myself. Our group was very supportive and it was great to feel part of something big.” - participant

In terms of **artistic quality**, the film was also well received.

“Radical, original, inspiring, beautiful and moving (I made it to about the third minute before I began snivelling)! I love the music and the choreography - a really effective interpretation of the story I think. And as someone with the dreaded Parkinson's thing, it's brilliant to see inclusion at work without a hint of patronising or demeaning.” audience member, living with Parkinson's

“A really exceptional piece of work.” -cultural partner

“I loved the way the film fell into such different and disparate 'chapters' from the completely naturalistic to the strange and surreal but with threads binding it together, particularly the little horse and its voyage along the rope and the travels of the exotic ship.” -audience member

Some participants fed back that they found that the sometimes conceptual interpretation of the operatic form made it difficult to follow the narrative. In response to this, we created programme notes to accompany the film.

CONCLUSION

Project successes

This project met and exceeded ambitions, engaging 17 artist professionals and 120 members of the UK Parkinson's community in 40 singing, dance and visual art workshops in Suffolk, London, Sussex, Oxford and online. A further 9 filming and recording sessions were held in 8 different venues across the UK, resulting in the creation of a high quality 30 minute opera film featuring the creative talents of 85 people living with Parkinson's.

The [HerStory Opera film](#) was launched on Vimeo on 11th April 2023, World Parkinson's Day, with an [audio-described version](#) released one week later. A version with hearing-impaired access is also currently in production. At time of writing (14 days after release) there have been 1035 viewings of the film (825 full version, 210 audio-described version) on Vimeo.

Particular successes of the project include:

- Innovative use of audio recording technology, film-making and dramaturgy to seamlessly combine contributions from performers across a range of locations into one cohesive cast
- Application of a combination of in-person and online delivery to enable people with complex health and mobility needs to participate
- Implementation of an effective multi-platform social media strategy and collaboration with a wide range of project partners to raise awareness of the film
- Inclusion of the film in the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival and World Parkinson's Congress

Participants report many positive impacts of taking part in the project, including:

- Increase in confidence that has spilled over into other areas of their lives and inspired them to try other new things/activities
- Improved mental/physical wellbeing, sense of agency
- Reduced isolation, anxiety and feelings of negativity associated with living with a health challenge

Learning & Next Steps

Cohere Arts will now seek funding to support further screenings of the HerStory opera film, develop a plan for the film's wider distribution, and consider how it may be used as a vehicle to raise awareness of Parkinson's and the value of this type of work. We will begin this work at the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival, where as well as producing a screening of the film, we will run an intergenerational workshop with film participants and local school children.

This project has allowed us to consolidate a collaborative and co-productive approach keeping project participants at the heart of creative and logistical decision-making. We have learned that hybrid approaches to project delivery developed during lockdown are still a vital way to enable marginalised communities to access creative opportunities.

As a company, the project has provided us with invaluable partnership building opportunities with cultural partners, helping to elevate participatory work as a high quality art form, and increase our profile as a model of innovative and aspirational creative health practice.

Evaluative feedback from project stakeholders has further developed our understanding of the health and wellbeing impacts of engaging with arts and heritage, and helped us as a company develop a [Theory of Change and Impact Framework](#).

We are thrilled to be able to share this learning at the World Parkinson's Congress, where it will be received by an international audience of over 2000 clinicians, academics and practitioners. Above all, we are proud to have kept our promise to the original 2019 cast members from the first ever workshop performance of HerStory, who told us they want to use the piece to **“show the world what people with Parkinson’s can do”**.