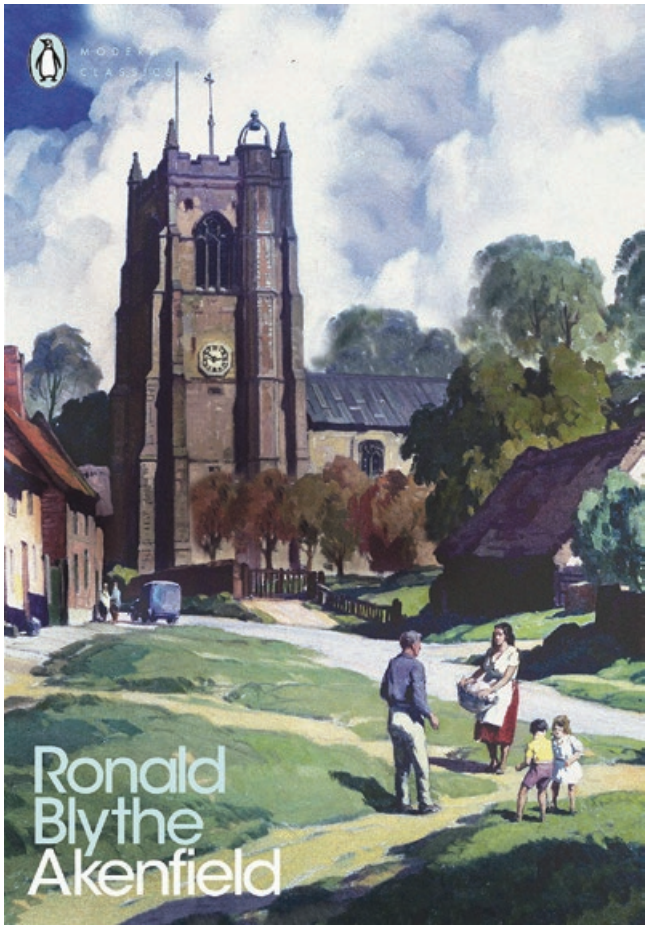
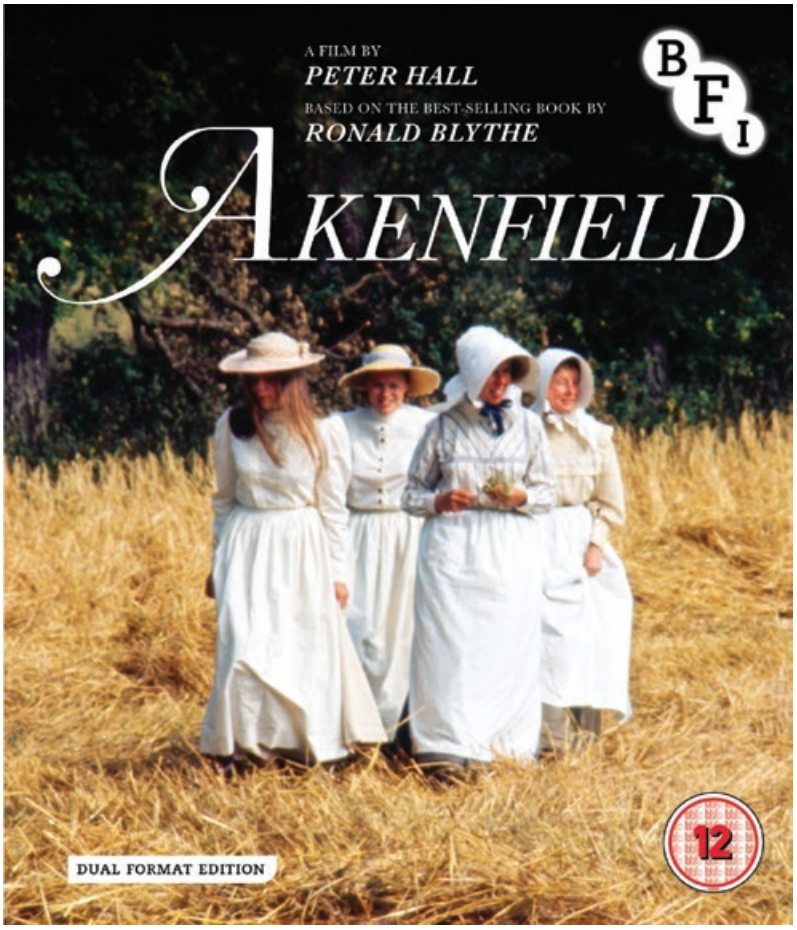




Akenfield Now

Intertextual explorations of place, voice and identity

Investigating the culture and language of local communities offers students creative opportunities to develop reading, writing and oracy skills across a range of literary non-fiction and media texts, suggests **John Gordon**. Here he describes an oral history and media project in Suffolk, inspired by Ronald Blythe's Akenfield, which provides a template for rich learning in English at KS3 and KS4.

Introduction: literary non-fiction, identity and culture

The text category 'literary non-fiction' entered KS4 National Curriculum requirements after the 2012 reforms, attributing literary value to some texts and diminishing opportunity to share 'non-literary' examples with students. Even within this problematic frame, teaching non-fiction texts invites professional judgement over which texts to introduce to students and for what purpose. It remains possible to meet National Curriculum requirements for reading, 'to understand and critically evaluate texts', exploit scope for selection, and determine readerly orientation to texts for broader educational aims.

The introduction of literary non-fiction to curriculum details reminded me of my earliest teaching experiences in a Suffolk school, considering Ronald Bythe's 1969 book *Akenfield* with two GCSE classes. *Akenfield* collects first person accounts of life in rural Suffolk, detailing the impact of change on village communities across the twentieth century. The book has been the subject of scholarly argument over its

credentials as reliable history ever since publication, in part a consequence of the beautiful vernacular expression of its many participating voices and Blythe's dialogue with them, which frames the collection and gently shapes readers' reactions to voices of an imagined village. If you visit Suffolk to find 'Akenfield' you will be disappointed: it does not exist as a single place, but as several neighbouring settlements.

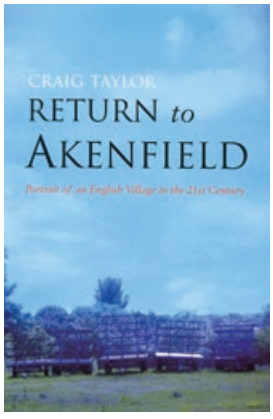
> *The village lies folded away in one of the shallow valleys which dip into the East Anglian coastal plain. It is not a particularly striking place and says little at first meeting. It occupies a little isthmus of London (Eocene) clay jutting from Suffolk's famous shelly sands, the Coralline and Red crags, and is approached by a spidery lane running off from the 'bit of straight', as they call it, meaning a handsome stretch of Roman road, apparently going nowhere.*
>
> Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield*, 1969, p.13

The English department where I taught engaged students with *Akenfield* precisely because of its ambiguous status and for the opportunity it offers to explore literariness and textual representations of the world. The book approaches the genre territory Thomas Keneally named 'faction', coined to explain his treatment of Oskar Schindler's actions during the Holocaust in *Schindler's Ark*, later adapted by Steven Spielberg as *Schindler's List*. In school, Blythe's book of Suffolk life afforded consideration of regional identity, especially the distance between modern media's stereotypical representations of rural communities and students' experience of them as contemporary worlds. In 2007, the Ajegbo Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review carefully identified these issues relative to crude political and popular expressions of unitary British identity. The same issues remain live against a landscape of policy asserting but reluctant to explain 'fundamental British values', and of English content ministers contend represents 'the best of our island heritage'.

> *You're bored with it, you're just British.* White female, Year 10. (p.31)
>
> *There is clear scope in the English curriculum to develop concepts of identity and diversity, for instance through reading literature from a range of cultures, by studying dialect and accent, analysing multimodal forms, looking at the history of the English language, through personal/creative writing and through language histories. It is argued that effective teaching within the English curriculum should enable pupils to examine issues of cultural identity, challenge stereotypes and think critically. (p.49)*
>
> Ajegbo Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review, 2007

This article describes a new schools' project based on *Akenfield* and invites readers to extend its principles and vision in any locality, for teaching and learning in English, and for cross-curricular interdisciplinary innovation. It proposes a community-oriented line from intent, through implementation, to curriculum impact. It promotes a localised and situated cultural literacy (Gordon, 2018) and, unequivocally, is no off-the-peg mastery curriculum.

"This article describes a new schools' project based on *Akenfield* and invites readers to extend its principles and vision in any locality."



Literary non-fiction and intertextuality: Akenfield and a vernacular canon

Voices in Akenfield

Blythe's *Akenfield* presents forty-nine village voices organised to headings such as 'God', 'To be a farmer's boy?', 'The School' and 'The Craftsmen'.

> *I worked with horses. I came from the West. Have you been to Chedburgh – Wickhambrook way? I came from that direction. I lived there two years. Then I lived at Whepstead – have you been to Whepstead? I had a few years along of a farmer there – horseman, machinery man and most everything else. The farmer was a big chapel man from Clare. Do you know Clare?*
>
> Fred Mitchell, ages 85, horseman. In Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, 1969, p.46

A Suffolk villager himself, Blythe made recordings of local residents on a portable analogue recorder and transcribed the accounts for presentation in the book. The original recordings were not kept, so it is difficult for anyone to know how closely the book represents the words each speaker shared with him, or how complete the selected accounts might be. Blythe chose not to adopt the specialised transcription methods familiar to teachers of linguistics, nor those sometimes adopted by oral or life historians. In the book, we see villagers' voices in standard orthography. We do not hear their accents, intonation, melodies or volume. We do have access to their dialects, though visitors to the pages of *Akenfield* might be surprised how many accounts appear in Standard English.

These voices teem with rich experience, while speakers describe their immediate lives or biographies, many continuing traditions of oral transmission as they share stories of their ancestors. Across these voices and in its structure the book points up some striking juxtapositions: of the modern commute to Ipswich and flint-picking Victorian child labour, of bell-ringers and teachers, and of agricultural unionisation and ambivalence to institutional education. The accounts span the late nineteenth century, from fields where essentially medieval ploughing techniques were still in use, to the year of the first moon landing, capturing the history of the community inbetween. Blythe's choice of title, *Akenfield*, pulls the experiences together as the story of a single village community, this synthesis of several Suffolk villages the book's most obvious gesture to Keneally's 'faction'.

Akenfield revisited

Our project traces a vibrant vernacular canon travelling on from Blythe's *Akenfield*, first to Peter Hall's glorious film adaptation (1974). Blythe provided the film treatment, in which the vocal chorus of the village in print is mediated anew through a single narrative voice. Several real voices become one in the words of the film's young male protagonist. Hall's film was pioneering as

the first simultaneous broadcast across television and cinema, as an innovative form of documentary film, and for the involvement of residents of the 'Akenfield' area rather than actors in all roles.

Author Craig Taylor visited the area at the turn of the millennium for his book *Return to Akenfield*, reprising Blythe's format to report the reliance of the local agrarian economy on immigrant labour, and the impact of the internet and home-working on rural businesses. Taylor witnesses increasingly mechanised farming: tractor-ploughing Suffolk fields to the beat of drum'n'bass is one of his juxtapositions.

Voices and communities

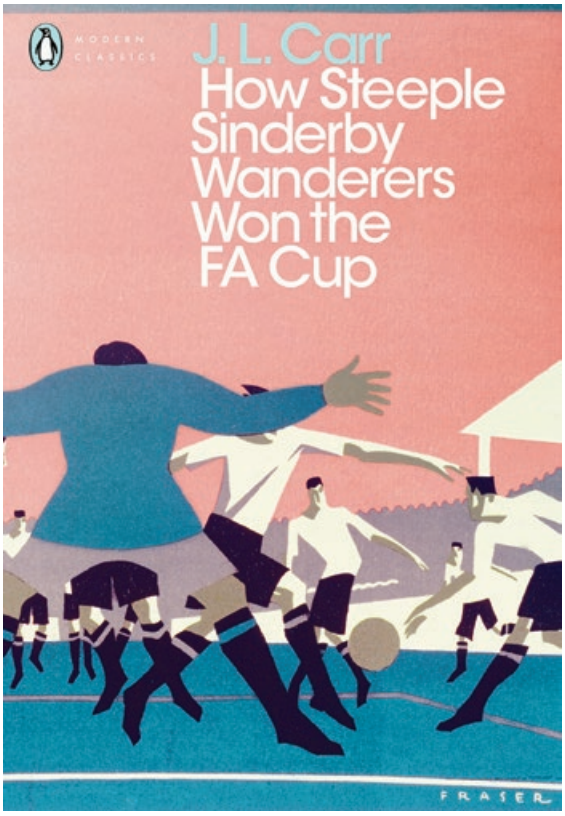
This intertextual *Akenfield* canon is relatively well known, but in our project we have made new connections, some surprising, mapping the book with other communities and text forms. In the early 1980s, African author Bessie Head adapted Blythe's format to document change in a Botswanan community in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Blythe contributed the preface. We have chanced upon work roughly contemporary to *Akenfield*, some pre-dating it such as Clancy Sigal's *Weekend in Dinlock* (1961), describing a South Yorkshire mining community, and Berger and Moir's *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* (1967), mixing first-person narrative with photo-journalism to convey the subtle influence of rural change on the work of a GP.

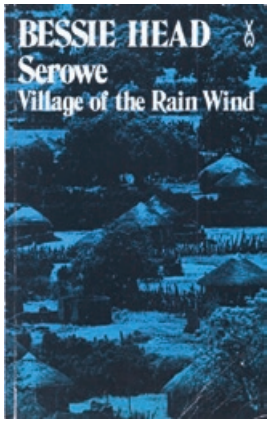
> *I renamed Serowe the village of rain-wind ... Before the first rains fall, it gets so hot that you cannot breathe. Then one day the sky just empties itself in a terrible downpour. After this, the earth and sky heave alive and there is magic everywhere.*
>
> Bessie Head, Serowe: *Village of the Rain Wind*, p.X

With a different tone, J L Carr's comical *How Steeple Sinderby Won the Cup* describes the unlikely progress of a fenland village football team. Published in 1975, its passages evoke village history in pastiche social-historian voice, where echoes seem to resonate with more than coincidence.

> *Our village plan is simple: there are two streets, one called Front Street and the other Back Lane ... Beyond that, there is a cart-track to Mr Fangfoss's farm, known locally as Towlers End but renamed Howards End by Mrs Fangfoss ... Beyond that there are just fields, and I once asked our Chairman what lay beyond those fields, and he said, 'More'.*
>
> J L Carr, *How Steeple Sinderby Wanderers Won the FA Cup*, 1975, p.37

The works of George Ewart Evans, such as *Ask The Fellows Who Cut The Hay* (1956) and *The Farm and the Village* (1969), present oral accounts of Suffolk life, published either side of Blythe's *Akenfield*. Combined, these texts offer fertile ground for any scheme of work exploring diverse representations of a single place, representations across media and how texts document different lives in related forms. The collection invites language study too, a resource for identifying the





affective power of different voices, dialects and registers, and their translation to the page. It foregrounds the dilemma of hybrid genres and invites us to wonder where the boundaries of literary non-fiction may be found. Place, culture and identity are unifying themes, but never once relative to a remote or readymade national narrative. Often, these are stories of and by the grassroots.

Akenfield Now: A Suffolk village fifty years after Ronald Blythe

Recording the interviews

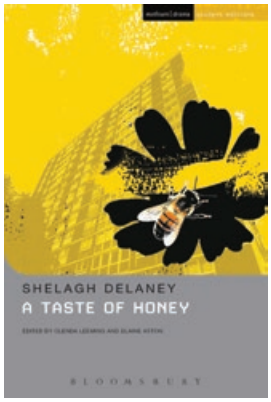
In our project, positioned first as an opportunity for young adults in Suffolk to explore local heritage and *Akenfield*'s legacy outside the school curriculum, we invited A Level students to follow in Blythe's footsteps and then those of Peter Hall.

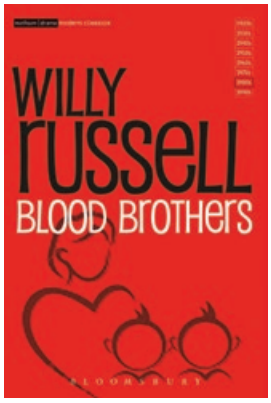
We introduced students to Blythe's *Akenfield*, and sought expert training for them from professional oral historians at Norfolk Record Office. Equipped with the skills to conduct oral history interviews and to make best use of available recording technology, our students met with residents of the *Akenfield* locality and mirrored Blythe's interviews to find out about village life today and across recent decades. Their conversations echoed *Akenfield*'s original themes – school, religion, work – seen through the eyes of successive generations.

Making the films

Next, students listened closely to the recorded interviews, selecting and transcribing extracts they found intriguing. With guidance from Duncan Joseph, of Empty Vessel Theatre Company, they prepared a screenplay for their own short film about the area. Like Hall's picture, these new patchwork narratives adopt unifying voices, comprising words and experiences

"Our students met with residents of the *Akenfield* locality to find out about village life today and across recent decades. Their conversations echoed *Akenfield*'s original themes – school, religion, work – seen through the eyes of successive generations."





the students gleaned from residents, inflected with their own fictionalised colour. These scripts guided location filming around the *Akenfield* area with the help of a team from BBC Voices, students taking roles in their own films alongside residents of the *Akenfield* villages.

Each film moves between past and present, inspired not only by Hall's work but also by amateur films depicting the region. Some archive footage makes its way into the films, demonstrating students' creative engagement with representations of the area screened for them during a visit to the East Anglian Film Archive (EAFA), where we also introduced principles of film archiving, accessioning and 'mash-up' film-making.

Students completed two industry-standard films, each a new 'faction' narrative representing life in Suffolk and offering their interpretation of what residents' shared in conversation. Jake Doyle's film takes the voice of a young male protagonist about to leave the village for university, a contemporary take on the poignant tension felt by the lead character in Hall's film as he struggles with the idea of leaving for a life in Australia. The Kesgrave High School film weaves many voices, fleetly traversing the decades to convey an enduring community spirit and optimism as '*Akenfield* Unites' in its response to adversity and change.

Presenting the films

In July 2019 we presented both films at Woodbridge Riverside Cinema, inviting members of the *Akenfield* community and all participants who contributed to the project interviews and films. Additionally, our film programme included Hall's 1974 film and a bespoke anthology of East Anglian archive material, setting students' achievements in this regional tradition. Their films refresh representations of Suffolk identity and offer the perspective of a new generation responding to its regional heritage in a global context.

Young Helen

We didn't have no flushed toilet, we had an outside coal shed that we made into a toilet. But that was in such a bad state, my husband just pushed it and it went. That was so rotten. I looked at it and thought, I can't live in a hole like this.

We had a little window in our bedroom, and that was- we hadn't quite, we'd done the whole house up but that hadn't shut properly, I think the man who put it in, that wasn't proper. It was only a little tiny thing, but that was half open, and when I woke up in the morning, I had got frost on my head, I was so cold.

Young Alan

But it's a wonderful little home; You wake up in the morning and open the door and there'd be 2 cabbages on your doorstep and you never knew who left them. Or a bunch of carrots or something like that. And it turned out afterwards that was my neighbor up the road who was a farmer, just his, sort of, terms of friendship really. Lovely people.

Extract, students' screenplay derived from interview transcripts

The *Akenfield Now* template and learning in English

Akenfield Now provided rich opportunities for learning in English across the programmes of study for Reading, Writing and Spoken Language. The project's strands can be easily adapted to classroom English in different regions and across phases around different texts, and tailored according to the level of resourcing to hand. We realise we were extremely privileged in that respect.

Reading non-fiction

The Reading component of such work simply requires a focal text - fiction, non-fiction or in-between - offering a distinctive portrayal of regional identity and potential for students to explore their own experience of the locality relative to it. It helps if the text evokes place and captures a local voice in direct speech or narratorial expression. In project workshops, we selected *Akenfield* extracts capturing markedly different voices: the contrast between The Bell-Ringer and The Headmistress, for example, provided opportunity to consider how words on the page gave us a sense of unique individuals, further investigated through drama activities demanding close reading to inform students' physical embodiment of these voices and personalities.

Widely taught and current GCSE specification texts affording similar approaches include Russell's *Blood Brothers*, for Liverpool, or *A Taste of Honey* for Salford, Manchester. Where curricular flexibility at KS3 allows, studying *Weekend in Dinlock*, mentioned above, would enable consideration of South Yorkshire's representation counterpointed with its protagonist's forays into London life.

If an obvious literary text does not come to mind, the British Library oral history archive shares an abundance of written transcripts linked with audio material, facilitating close attention to dialect on the page and affording a bridge with Spoken Language.

Film has similar potential, in full or through clips. The British cinema of the 60s adapts novels and stage plays to represent Yorkshire and the Midlands, in famous examples such as *Billy Liar*, *This Sporting Life*, *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* and, conveniently, *A Taste of Honey*. *Britain on Film*, a teachers' guide by the British Film Institute offers other ideas. Drawing close parallels between page and screen is possible in any English classroom.

Developing oracy

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this work is its capacity to support students' oracy development and confidence in speaking with others. The *Oral History Society* website provides an excellent introduction to these skills. Our oral history training guided students in shaping questions, conducting interviews and eliciting response from interviewees; pausing and holding back were also signficant.

Students' interview technique improved significantly across four or five interviews. One student identified this aspect as one of the project's most formative impacts for her. Speaking with members of older generations in contexts beyond the family yielded insights she found intriguing. The interview format was central, requiring discipline and distance, leading students to reflect on the nature of conversation and the importance of listening.

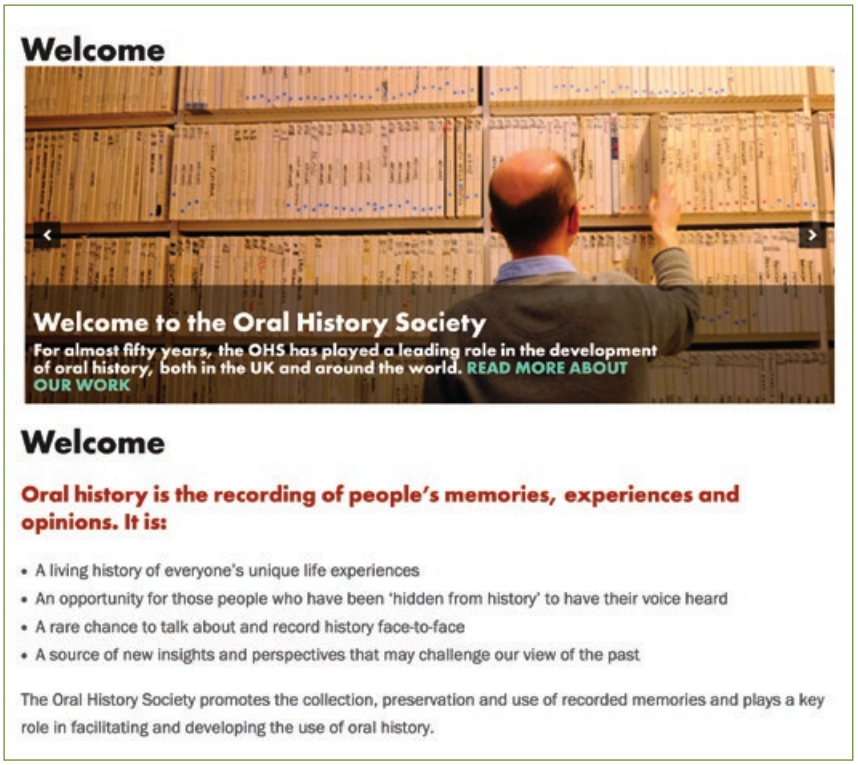
Elsewhere in East Anglia, English teacher Dena Eden has guided students of Old Buckenham High in research following similar principles at KS3, interviewing alumni to celebrate the school's 80th anniversary and making their own commemorative film. The general principle of students interviewing friends, family and members of a school community is cost-free, and audio recording – if approved by the school – is easy on mobiles.

Spoken Language and Writing

Recording technology and audio resources extend the Spoken Language potential of this work beyond talk. For some students in our project, transcribing selected interviews helped them notice features of spoken language that surprised them, causing them to reflect on how to capture accent and dialect in print. Repeated listening also made them aware of the power of the spoken voice to shape memory: individual rhythms became earworms, unshakeable. Whether or not you choose to engage your own students in interviewing activity, the British Library's audio collection or local archives offer recordings to stimulate transcription activity and hone students' alertness to the features of speech.

The very act of transcription leads students to consider the relationship between spoken language and writing, and the distinctive affordance of each. *Akenfield Now*'s most substantial written output was the screenplay. The process of composing them developed students' understanding how words relate to speech, and to the moving image. Students negotiated a recursive creative process, moving between filming, film editing and writing – the messy, provisional and cyclical process of drafting to real purposes.

Around this, we found further opportunities to write: oral historians, for instance, work to a convention of summarising interviews before transcribing selected extracts, a form of precis easily introduced to English. Had we opted to focus on written outcomes rather than the films, we could have exploited any of the genres in our own *Akenfield* canon. Students might transcribe, edit and frame new entries for *Akenfield Revisited*, shape newspaper or online articles on village life, develop monologues or scripts based on residents' memories of place or time, or create new fiction in narrative voices embodying the vernacular of their home territory.



Voice, place and film: teaching across media

We oriented our project around oral history practices, film archiving and filmmaking. For any teacher of English maintaining a commitment to teaching textual practices *across* media, enriching curricular detail that emphasises verbal texts, this project work can easily incorporate reading and making audio-visual texts to varying extents.

Our regional resource, the East Anglian Film Archive (EAFA), was an important stimulus with equivalents across the country, most with free online access to collections. We worked closely with film archive colleagues who advised us on technical and licencing costs so we could re-use their archive material creatively in the students' new films. EAFA's films include amateur reels documenting family holidays across the twentieth century, records of country fairs and village fetes, and local news clips celebrating the regional experience relative to national and global change. We found 1950s footage of an irritated cinema owner, aggrieved at the impact of upstart ITV programming on attendance, and beautiful 1920s shorts describing Suffolk ploughing in the deep snows of winter.

For our group these hinted at the many facets of East Anglian culture, but the archive's contents also offer rich material to stimulate writing, whether to bring startling images of the region into the classroom or to prompt narrative composition about family and community events. In one of the completed films, students aligned utterance and image, weaving quotations drawn from the speech of 'Akenfield' residents with judiciously selected and sequenced archive clips. Like Peter Hall, they formed their own cohesive, composite narratives as they worked across media.

"*Akenfield Now* provided rich opportunities for learning in English across the programmes of study for Reading, Writing and Spoken Language."

Cross-curricular links

As project leads, our focus was on providing the resources and opportunities for students to make these films, though work of this nature has immense cross-curricular potential. We merely suggested the links across subjects to students, drawing on the expertise of a team including a theatre director and drama education specialist, student teachers of Geography, and a post-graduate landscape historian. During our filming week, teachers with A Level specialisms in Sociology and Film Studies also prompted students' reflection. The project generated links across each of these domains, each discipline connected to the aims of researching and producing films to represent the community and students' responses to it.

Had we wished, we could have made more deliberate and systematic connections with subject specifications, for example around population change in Geography, about the mechanisation of agricultural in History, or around film language and production for Film Studies. On filmmaking, the project's volunteer staff enjoyed the generous expert advice of Rex Pyke, producer of the original *Akenfield*. His advice supported our understanding of how *Akenfield* was made, and enriched our gently guiding conversations with students as they made their own films in the same community.

Community relationships

In some respects, to forge overtly stated cross-curricular connections would be counter to the spirit of the project, which has educational value on its own terms. Some of its most valuable impacts arose from its relationship with the local community. Students articulated the confidence it gave them in speaking with adults and members of other generations, and the insights the experience gave them to their own communities.

We also wanted to help students understand the work of colleagues in heritage and cultural sectors, perhaps seeding interests and vocational aspirations. We framed the oral history training in an introduction to Norfolk Record Office, its remit and collections. Our day at the East Anglian Film Archive involved speaking with technical staff in the process of digitising analogue film, touring the physical archive and feeling the chill of rooms designed to preserve vintage reels and hardware. Producing films provided a unique chance to work with expert broadcasters and their crew, giving insight to practical dimensions of filming. Of course, students also collaborated with one another and determined their own pathways to completing the films, distributing or delegating responsibilities.

Using online archives for teaching

Online archives allow you to use films via the links that can be incorporated in any resource without clearing copyright or seeking permission.

Wherever you are based, you can find films according to location, decade and subject using this player provided by the British Film Institute:

https://player.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film/map

You can search films according to theme at the East Anglian Film Archive website:

http://www.eafa.org.uk/

These examples illustrate the rich variety of the archive linked to common themes explored in literary study (catalogue numbers bracketed):

Nature: We Grew a Frog (228984), The Loch (4049), Venture on the Wind (4234)

Family and relationships: Stasjonen/The Station (3885), Susan's birthday (970)

War and conflict: Captain Roswell's Norwich (1292), Ipswich Air Raid (1015)

Power and politics: The Prendergast File (4088), The New Councillor (6569)

"The project's strands can be easily adapted to classroom English in different regions and across phases around different texts, and tailored according to the level of resourcing to hand."

Finally, we screened students' films together with Peter Hall's film at a celebratory event at Woodbridge Riverside Cinema, the same venue where Rex Pyke viewed the original *Akenfield* rushes after daily filming in 1974. Residents of the 'Akenfield' villages joined us, and later participated in an *Archive on 4* feature about our UEA-led project and the *Akenfield* tradition, expertly presented by one of the students involved.

Conclusion: community, identity, diversity

Our *Akenfield Now* project explored regional identity and heritage, continuing an intertextual tradition notably spurred by Blythe's book, stretching back through the many voices he represented, to earlier generations. The many treasures of regional film archives and the connections we made with George Ewart Evans' pioneering work in oral history, presented online through the British Library, confirm the reach of those echoes through time. These are resources latent with possibility in English and beyond, for celebrating regional identities in all their diversity as they are embodied in speech and image. We will be exploring and celebrating that potential at our *Voice Place Film* event in Norwich, a collaboration with Into Film and complement to BFI's *Britain on Film* resources.

As 2020 has bound every one of us to immediate landscapes, whether in the UK or beyond, one consequence has been intense reflection on our surroundings and our place in them. From this year's vantage point, participants' memories of *Akenfield Now* and its seemingly endless days of July sun are of enviable freedom, movement and collective achievement. Our newly-circumscribed experience heightens the educational power and poignancy of oral history and film archives online, and our understanding of why they are important.

These are superb, versatile resources for bringing community, identity and heritage to blended learning and to the English classroom, and for enrichment of our lives through empathy and creativity. Wherever students or their teachers are, they can join in conversation with voicelines like these. Now, more than we ever expected when the year began, we are acutely aware of our place in history, and of the spoken word's power as witness.

Acknowledgements

'Akenfield Now' is funded by the Heritage Fund. The project runs until October 2022, with events for teachers scheduled across 2021 and 2022.

Many thanks to all the residents of the 'Akenfield' villages, whose support and generosity enabled our work. Special thanks go to those who joined us in securing venues for activity, in interviews and in filming: Jan, Martin, Pauline, Sheila, Emily, Ben, Peter, Stephen, Ernie, David, Peter, Graham, Sian, Stephen, Alex, Jack, Sheila, Jill and Valerie.

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Project partners: ***BBC Voices*** *– Wendy Witham, Gary Standley, Winnie Ngai, Dominic Thorby;* ***EAFA*** *– Angela Graham, Tim Snelson, Keith Johnston, Peter White, Mellissa Beeken, Jane Alvey;* ***NRO*** *– Jonathan Draper and Victoria Draper; Empty Vessel – Duncan Joseph.*

Project Ambassadors: *Sarah Clarke, Dena Eden, Emily Field, Adrian O'Dell.*

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"These are resources latent with possibility in English and beyond, for celebrating regional identities in all their diversity as they are embodied in speech and image."

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