

Eighth Exeter Arts and Therapies Conference:



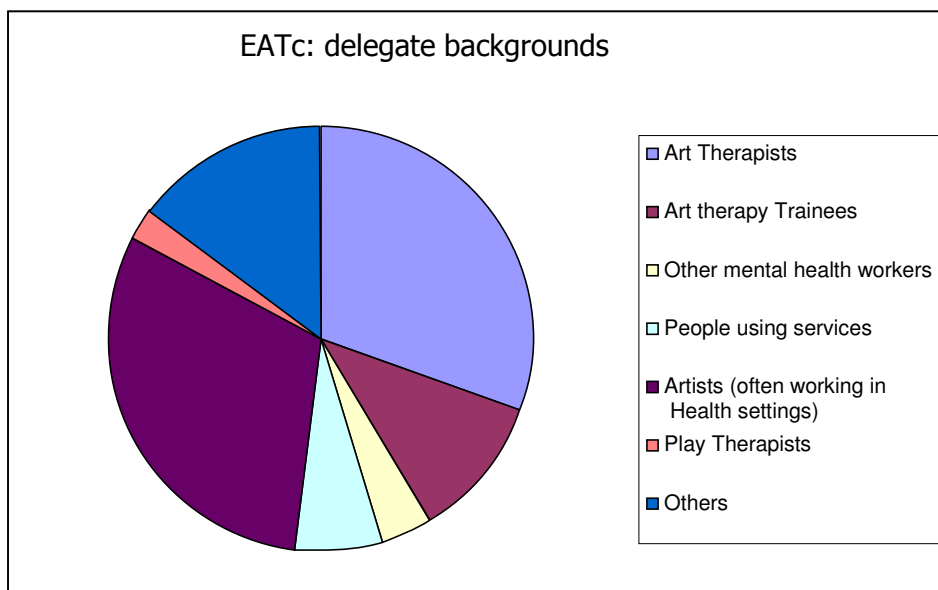
histories

Conference Report.

Our thanks to the people and organisations who made this event possible: Devon Partnership NHS Trust, Self Heal Association, MIND, British Association of Art Therapists and Exeter City Council. Shellee Chisholm helped a lot with admin and organisation, Daniel Learmonth provided technical back up on the day. Mace Sergeant Bill Oliver, custodian of the Guildhall, was helpful at all points, and tolerant of what must have looked like eccentricities. All of our contributors, Neil Springham, Vanessa Newcombe, Alise Ojay, Karen Brett and Camilla Carr delivered. Thank you all.

While every EATc event is designed to stand alone as a self contained experience, for the steady proportion of people who are returning, (about 25 % on this occasion), and for the organisers, there is a pattern to the themes and venues that we use.

It's worth starting with a breakdown of participants by background, as test of whether we are meeting our aims of bringing together the arts and therapies worlds. It's worth bearing in mind that many people identified themselves as belonging to different worlds, for example as therapist/ artists, and person using services/artist. This breakdown is by first term chosen. Many of the artists were working in health contexts. These included families and child and adolescent services (8), palliative care (2), and so on.



Art Therapists: 23
Art therapy Trainees: 8
Other mental health workers: 3
People using services: 5
Artists (often working in health settings): 23
Play Therapists: 2.

Others : Museums, RNIB, Researcher, Psychiatrist, Counsellor, Teacher, Clinical psychologist, Clinical psychology trainee, Lecturer: 11

Total Conference attendance: 75 (including speakers and organisers).

Total Feedbacks received: 48.

Usually the theme is determined first. This year's 'Histories' came from thinking about the very welcome changes that are taking place in the psychological therapies towards a greater understanding of the ways that the individual stories that emerge in therapy work are located within, and shaped by, wider social, cultural and power structures. The same is true of arts practice. 'Histories' embraces all these contexts. We were very fortunate that this year we were able to use a venue, The Guildhall in Exeter, which is both beautiful and very ancient, in fact said to be the oldest continuously used municipal building in England. The fit of theme and venue was perfect.

Each event has offered different balances between the arts and therapies input. The central point of the events is to explore cross fertilisations between these areas. This year, alongside the conference itself, we took part in presenting three art exhibitions at two venues in Exeter. Both of these venues are primarily mental health resources: Devon Partnership Trust's Wonford House Hospital, the Trust Headquarters, and MIND's Promoting Health and Emotional Wellbeing (PHEW) centre. This was our first attempt at co-ordinating events informing and informed by the EATc conference. While it was certainly a success, the logistics and workload were very significantly tougher on the organisers.

'The Healing Mind' was an exhibition of work made by people in art therapy facing life threatening and changing situations, often round physical health issues, and, uniquely, so art work by the therapist who have worked alongside them. 'Library of Dust' is the extraordinary work of David Maisel whose stunning beautiful, but unsettling images of the canisters containing the unclaimed remains of psychiatric patients from an American hospital are the closest thing one could see to photographic images of human souls, and 'fragments', art works by Carol Harvey, documenting the increasingly derelict site of Langdon Hospital. Both the latter are moving testimonies, memorials almost, to the past horrors of institutionalised mental health treatment.

The whole operation involved many partnerships: with MIND, DPT, the British Association of Art Therapists (who loaned us one of the exhibitions), Exeter City council, the Self Heal Association who helped with funding, as did DPT.

We would like to thank these partners, who were universally as helpful as they could have been.

We were delighted that we were helped with opening the day by a City and County Councillor, **Vanessa Newcombe**, herself a psychotherapist. We hope that this may signal an ongoing relationship with these councils, and awareness that in terms of 'Histories', the political never very far away. As chair, it was one of my aims that the historical was never very far away either, and this would seem to have been achieved.

Our first speaker, **Neil Springham** brought the recent and highly innovative work he has been part of developing with the Tate Britain about use of the gallery as a mental health resource. Several participants were particularly struck by the broadening out of what might be seen as legitimate areas of practice for the arts therapies: our sphere of action is not restricted by any means to our own therapy spaces. It was the opposite of the horrifying image a colleague recently uncovered when she asked NHS colleagues to draw an image of how they saw art therapy, and one of them drew a closed door: the 'secret' world of therapy, with all its very necessary considerations of confidentiality and safe space, can easily become an off-putting one, which easily excludes. Neil was clear in framing the work that he was doing as 'giving people a voice'. It was an additional richness that Neil included a common sense account of how neurology is now absolutely confirming what psychotherapists have pragmatically grasped for many years: that clear thinking, and being able to make choices, and highly aroused feelings are mutually inconsistent. We literally cannot access both areas of our minds simultaneously. EATc events have always attracted art therapists. This year the ratio was definitely higher, and we think that this was at least practically due to having the chair of BAAT presenting this innovative work.

When we started the EATc events nine years ago, they were at that time fairly unique in joining the up social, arts and psychotherapy approaches. This idea has now mainstreamed, and we are proud if the conferences have contributed to this process, as we believe that they have.

Our second speaker, **Karen Brett**, while she was a health professional herself for many years, is now a full time practicing artist, photographer and film maker. Her presentation, 'Memory Clinic' about her work as an artist in residence in north Wales working with stroke and dementia sufferers and their families was striking both for the complete integrity that she brought to it, and the deeply moving nature of the work produced. Her gift is to take us right to the realities of the human condition without ever becoming maudlin, patronising or self pitying. Her films were another object lesson in the arts as a means of letting unheard voices be heard. I don't think anyone who saw the work, or heard her talk about it will ever forget it. It was a perfect example of what an artist with the right skills and sensitivities has to offer to a health setting.

Because the Guildhall would not lend itself to exhibitions or art activities, we need to find another way to bring live, directly experienced art making into the space. Aware that the day was both quite dense and intense, we elected to ask **Alise Ojay**, a drama-therapist by training but a singer and singer teacher by vocation, to lead us into voice and sound. Many people (like me!) found that a frightening prospect, and in a possible slightly underhand way we did not warn people what was about to happen until the last minute! The risk seems to have paid off handsomely: the feedback is almost universally amazed and delighted that Alise was able not only to get us singing, but rejoicing in it! It was an enormously skilled and enthusiastic proof of just what a good arts facilitator can do, and undoubtedly raised our energies at exactly the point when they are often flagging on a day like this.

Our final main presentation, from **Camilla Carr** was apparently fated to happen: we had initially asked her to contribute in the very early stages of planning the day, and it had not been possible. At the last minute space opened up in the day schedule and in Camilla's diary, to make it possible. Camilla brought as much warmth, humour and compassion as can be imagined to a dark personal tale of her kidnapping Chechnya. It was an extraordinary tribute to the resilience and creativity of the human spirit, that Camilla and her partner Jon, who had gone to Chechnya to work creatively with war traumatised children, themselves endured and survived such terror and abuse. One or two people found the story hard to bear, but a large majority were not just moved, but inspired.

We often ask a conference participants to come from the floor and give their own 'digest' of the day. This year the job fell to **Sara Hurley**, dramatist, storyteller and arts worker. Her responses were warm, accurate and succinct, and helpful start on the processing of the experience.

We are publishing the full conference feedback on the Insider Art website. But I will close this report on the day with a few that are not untypical, but hit particular points well. Overall, the word 'moving' and 'inspirational' were used a great deal.

'Stimulating on lots of levels: intellectual, emotional physical. A lot to digest and process'

'Thought provoking, exciting, fascinating, stunning, incredibly moving'.

'Enjoyed all the speakers, felt the pace of the day was excellent and mix of presentations was good. Felt all the speakers had very interesting and encouraging positive tales to tell and felt this was the best conference I have been to for years!'

'As a service user I felt very refreshed by the respectful and relaxed atmosphere. Although I am not a professional I felt very at ease in this conference; I wish more service users could come next time!'

'This is the first of these events I have been to. I will definitely want to come again! Brilliant.'

Breakdown of delegate backgrounds

With speakers and organisers (8), and delegates (68) total number was 76 people. (There were two delegates booked in who weren't able to make it on the day.)

Employer funded: 6

Self funded: 14

Discount rate (AHSW members / staff of registered charities/ or former Art Therapy Foundation or Arts & Health students): 11

Concessionary places: 32

Service Users 3

Trustees of sponsoring charity 2

Organisers and speakers 8

EATc: Breakdown of delegate backgrounds

