

Escape was on Everyone's Mind  
*The Tale of  
Jack Sheppard*

Paper theatre by Otherstory

A playful, political tale  
of daring and resistance



# TOUR REPORT



LOTTERY FUNDED



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ENGLAND**

## About Otherstory

**Otherstory** is a coming together of puppeteers, musicians, activists and artists – storytellers of all kinds, in the recognition that we are all storytellers. We want to tell stories that feed and sustain our movements, that connect us to each other across place and time. Stories that run counter to the narratives of the powerful and their project of erasing other histories – other ways of thinking, living and being. Our work reflects a tradition of storytelling which belongs to everyone, that is a continuing conversation between us about our imaginings and realities.

We are a collective of independent artists based in Bristol and have been working together since February 2010.

The following people contributed to the 2016 tour of 'Escape was on Everyone's Mind':

**Puppetry, devising & design:** Sarah Green, Trevor Houghton, Emma Byron

**Narration, live music & sound:** Heather Summers (first 8 performances), Paul Walker (Last 5 performances)

**Song lyrics:** Emma Byron    **Soundscape design:** Paul Walker

**Recorded music:** Jimmy Aldridge & Sid Goldsmith (Jack's song), Heather Summers (mandolin), Anna Riggs (fiddle), Jack Humphreys (bagpipes), Jane Milo (Guitar and vocals)

**Post show discussions** We are very grateful to Steve Wright and Roger Ball of Bristol Radical History Group, Stuart Butler of Radical Stroud and Alex Hodson of Past Tense (London) for their contributions.

**Puppetry workshops.** We had the pleasure of doing workshops with: the Windmill Hill (Bristol), Stroud, Stoke Newington and Hackney Woodcraft Folk Groups, the Barton Hill Summer Playscheme, and Urban Escape in Knowle (Bristol).

**Artistic Advisor:** Dr Hilary Ramsden    **History Advisor:** Dr Roger Ball

**We also want to thank:** Arts Council England for funding the tour, John Bassett for his encouragement, support and invitation to the Stroud Theatre Festival, The London Borough of Tower Hamlets for their support in providing venues and promoting performances in East London, Bristol Radical History Group for their support in developing the show and promoting the tour.

Finally we want to thank all the individuals who made donations to help fund the tour and all of those who came to see the show.



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## Escape was on Everyone's Mind – The Tale of Jack Sheppard

Otherstory is a puppetry collective from Bristol. We devised and constructed the table top paper theatre show *Escape was on Everyone's Mind – The Tale of Jack Sheppard*

It tells the story of the notorious 18<sup>th</sup> Century jailbreaker and hero of the people, Jack Sheppard, who was born in Spitalfields in the East End of London.

Between May and October 2016 we took this paper theatre show on tour; staging 13 performances in the South West, London and Yorkshire. Alongside these performances we put on post-show discussions with input from members of local radical history groups. We also ran 7 puppetry workshops in conjunction with the national youth organisation the Woodcraft Folk and other youth groups, using puppetry to explore issues related to the show. We were supported in doing this by Arts Council England.

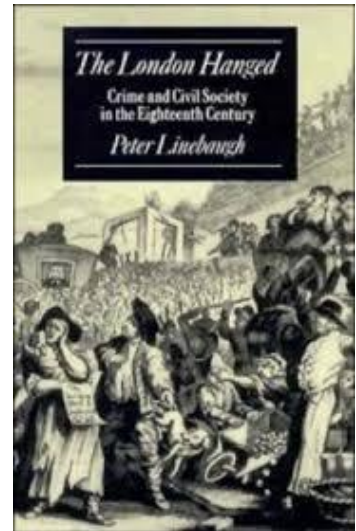
This report sets out our experience of doing the tour.





## Development of the show

This show was sparked by our conversations with Bristol Radical History Group, who first suggested the story to us, and gave us a copy of Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged*. Linebaugh's account of Jack's life - and analysis of the political and economic times he lived through - has been a major inspiration. Another is the work of William Hogarth, whose faces are used on many of our puppets. We are excited by his picture-storytelling: his vibrant detail, sly satire, the way he uses one character's story to map and critique a society on many levels. We are also inspired by the work of political paper (and cardboard) theatre-makers such as Great Small Works, & Bread and Puppet.



An embryonic version of the show was performed at the Tolpuddle Festival in 2011 as part of the Bristol Radical History Group's programme of events.



We later embarked on a reimagining of the story. This included a new set, many new puppets and a recorded soundtrack to complement the live sound. Through a collaborative process this evolved into a full length show, embracing paper theatre as a medium. We called on various friends to record the songs for the show and they generously gave us some of their time and talent.

Prior to the tour, between October 2014 and November 2015 we performed "Escape was on Everyone's Mind" 14 times, mainly in Bristol in small venues including houses, pubs and social centre, to enthusiastic audiences.

In January 2016 we started the challenging process of applying for Arts Council funding and received notice in March that our application had been successful. The tour was on and we had just two months before the first performance.

Because of the Arts Council funding we could then rehearse in a spacious studio (previously we had been using a cramped room), which enabled us to practice and to refine our puppetry skills with space to move and think. We tweaked some areas and changed a few scenes and generally tightened up the performance before starting the tour.

*In my role as Artistic Advisor to the group I worked on developing their choreography and timing. I felt the period of rehearsal which was made possible with ACE funding enabled the performers to focus on the details of content and structure of the piece and on the details of the puppet's movements. They were able to make new discoveries that emerged from improvisational movements, developing more complex and nuanced characterisations and also developing their abilities to play with each other as performers and puppeteers.*

**Dr Hilary Ramsden** — Senior Lecturer, School of Music and Performance, The University of South Wales

## Experiences of touring and performing



### **Emma Byron** (deviser, maker, puppeteer and song lyrics)

It was exciting to feel the show come alive through the connection to audiences: the sense that they were really inhabiting the story. This came out in laughter, cheers, cries of indignation, singing and tankard-waving, the Woodcraft groups' drumming feet at moments of drama... LARC was one of the high points, where the atmosphere felt electric, and most of the audience stayed on for a lively discussion.

The post show discussions extended this sense of the show as a conversation. It was fascinating to hear the different thoughts and ideas people brought to these. The radical history speakers - from Roger who had been a mentor from early on, to brand new collaborations with Stuart, Steve and Alex - added depth and fresh insights.

### **Trevor Houghton** (deviser, maker, puppeteer and 'tour manager')

This show has been a big part of my life for several years, so it has been a great experience to be able to take it on tour. I spent several weeks at the beginning of the year putting the Arts Council application together with the aid of my colleagues. This was while I was doing a very full-time puppetry course so there were some very long days. Then there were a huge number of practical, organisational, financial and artistic matters that all had to come together to make the tour work. But it did work thanks to the support of friends, family and the many new contacts made on the tour.



The reward was the times when we as performers really worked well together to a responsive audience. Then our bodies and minds would be totally focussed on doing a closely choreographed dance in that narrow space behind our table and our flat paper and card puppets would come to life. I particularly remember the performance at Barton Hill where the younger members of the audience showed real anger at Jack's hanging – he was one of them.



### **Sarah Green** (deviser, maker, puppeteer)

Touring and performing our show to so many enthusiastic audiences was very rewarding and exciting. It made me realise that we had made created and performed something valuable; a show where people learned some history relevant to today's political climate and basically had a thoroughly enjoyable and interactive time. It boosted my confidence no end to be given funding to take the show on the road, to know that our show was worthy of being toured and valued as a creative endeavour by the Arts Council. My puppetry performing skills became much more refined, my vocalising of the sounds the puppets made took on new life. Working so closely together as a team honed our abilities in moving around each other, in improvising when a mistake was made and in staying alert and aware through out each performance.









**Paul (Mole) Walker** (soundscape design, sound and narration for last five performances)

Having worked on the show for a long time, and played to local audiences, it was exciting to take it further afield. The Beverley Puppet Festival in particular was a great opportunity to network and share best practice, seeing the work of our peers and talking with them about it. Taking the show to new places also helped me to take the work more seriously – I was not playing to a home crowd, but in a professional capacity, and pushed myself to match that.

Training Heather was a good experience which gave me a chance to see her perspective on my sound work in detail. This helped me learn how to streamline the technical processes behind my performance.

**Heather Summers** (sound and narration for first eight performances)

I love collaboration and although I have worked with dancers, storytellers and circus, I hadn't worked with a theatre company before. It was something I had wanted to do for a long time.

As musician and narrator, I was working with the narration of the story, the music script which consisted of live music – violin and mandolin - live sound effects from a variety of large and small percussion, and musical cues for the pre-recorded music and effects specific to the show for which I used two computer music players. I was in full view of the audience. This gave the show a very special feel having the sound track so public. It was occasionally a squeeze for my set up in some small theatre and community spaces in which we performed. It was a challenging role as there was a lot of multi tasking working with the script cues, computer and the live performance that was unfurling before me with its inevitable occasional diversions from the script. It was a fantastic experience for me to be musician and narrator for Otherstory's show, 'Escape was on Everyone's Mind'.





## Audience Reaction

*We heard much laughter during the show, some pertinent and supportive heckling and the majority of our audiences really enjoyed participating in the singing and other actions we invited them to do. We found that many people were pleased that we were around after the show so they could tell us in person how much they enjoyed the performance and that they were invited to be shown the puppets and the set. – Sarah Green, puppeteer*

*Everything!  
fantastically visual,  
great music, great  
puppetry, great audience  
participation*

*I loved the integration  
of the sounds and  
music with the story,  
and the way that  
Jack's puppet  
managed to steal the  
golden chain!*

*I LOVED it all  
so much. I was  
mesmerised; it  
was totally  
ingenious*

*I really liked  
the blend of 2D and  
3D & the motion of the  
decoration on the  
puppets. Also the  
buildings being  
characters*

*Just occasionally it was  
difficult to make out the  
lyrics of the songs  
through the sound  
effects. (Sound effects  
great though!)*

*The radical message;  
the amazing intricate set; the  
way the puppets moved; learning  
about history in an engaging way*

*I was riveted and  
totally absorbed. I  
loved the painstaking  
detail to Jack's  
movements*

*Keeping it high  
when the floor is  
flat! (Hard to see  
at the back)*

*I really enjoyed  
the audience  
participation – singing,  
placards, pint glasses  
etc. I liked the music  
and the voices were  
funny*

*I enjoyed so much:  
the set is very surprising  
as it is revealing new  
secrets; the puppets all  
have such character even  
though they are mainly  
2D.*

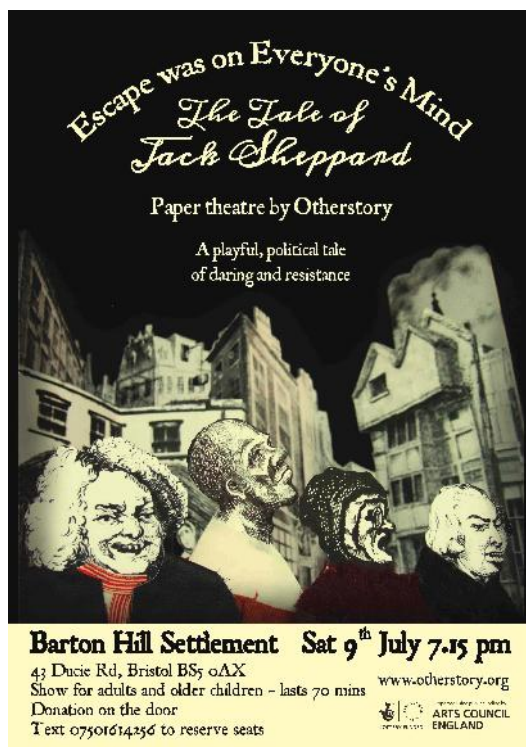
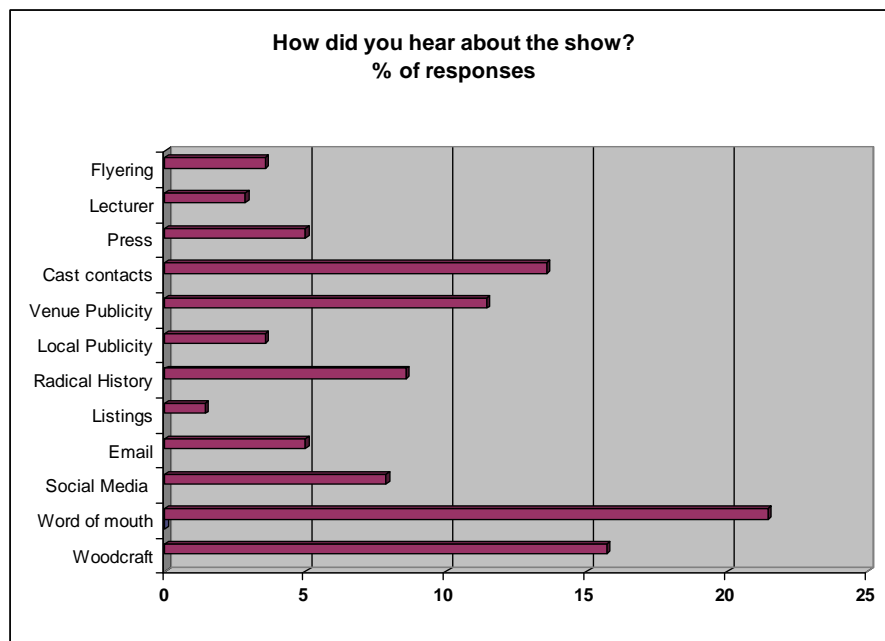
*I liked the different  
sizes of the people  
compared to real life*

*Brilliantly  
showed emotion  
through  
puppeteering*

*Creative use of  
Hogarth's portraits, space  
and landscapes, cityscapes...  
Mesmerising, great  
choreography, technically  
brilliant*

## Outreach and publicity

We employed a wide range of methods to advertise our performances on the tour. These included our website, email notices to our contact list, Facebook, Twitter, online listings in each location, press releases to local papers and radio, poster, flyers and an A-frame information board (placed outside each venue). But by far the most effective means of outreach were word of mouth, and using our project partners. We had good support from local Woodcraft Folk groups, and radical history groups put publicity out through their mailing lists. Our speakers also put the word out to their personal contacts.



We discovered that it is hard to reach a non puppet show going audience unless we were performing in a familiar place to them (e.g. a community centre) or because our subject matter had a particular interest to them (e.g. radical history). For our more community based performances we had most success in reaching this wider audience when we went out and actually talked to people about the show as well as giving out flyers. We did this in London outside the Tower Hamlets library and at Barton Hill Settlement (at a barbecue and Saturday lunch club).

Over a third of responses on our feedback questionnaire indicated people had not seen a puppet show (or only in childhood, at the seaside etc.). So we did succeed in attracting a new audience for contemporary adult puppet theatre addressing this kind of subject. Overall we achieved an average of just over 70% capacity at all venues.

## Post-show discussions and radical history groups

We have found puppetry can create imaginative space around a subject, provoking open and curious thinking, empathy; enabling conversation to take new directions. So we aimed to extend this space in post-show discussions that followed some of the performances on the tour.

We wanted audiences to have the chance to explore the social and historical context for the show and to find out what early 18<sup>th</sup> Century England was really like for a young carpenter's apprentice. We were aided by input from members of radical history groups: Steve Wright and Roger Ball (Bristol Radical History Group), Stuart Butler (Radical Stroud) and Alex Hodson (Past Tense) who each provided a rich commentary on the times of Jack Sheppard.



*About 20 people stayed after the Stroud show in May for a talk and discussion. I raised questions on the whys and wherefores of using puppetry to present history, and the relationship between dramatic presentation and historical sources. This was interwoven with a performative presentation from myself on the 18th century criminal code and the political context; with more Q and A. All this led to a thoroughly engaging half an hour after the show, with a focus on dramatic presentation and historical context. – Stuart Butler, Radical Stroud*

At Frome, Steve talked about how characters like Jack Sheppard, and the mob generally, would take situations fermented by the rich for their own purposes and turn them in another direction. An example being the Gordon Riots (depicted in the show) which were provoked by the anti-papist rhetoric of Lord George Gordon but was redirected by the mob to burn down Newgate prison and make attacks on the homes of the rich (rather than Catholics).

At Bristol, Roger spoke about the introduction of new laws at the beginning 18<sup>th</sup> Century that brought in the death penalty for various property offences and rioting. He explained that the poor had no vote but had achieved reform and control of food prices by riot.

At the London shows, Alex talked about Jack's fame and the culture of celebrity. What happened in Jack's time would not have happened twenty years later when dissent became more organised. The 1820's was a time of chaos with many rootless poor people in London and so celebrities like Jack became a focus for general discontent. Alex suggested that we are in similar moment currently.

Other themes raised by participants included enclosures and privatisation, the South Sea Bubble and the Dotcom Boom, policing and private security, Robin Hood and land rights, corruption e.g. Panama Papers and MPs' expenses. Someone drew the parallels between Jack and Banksy. There was also discussion about the links between puppetry and radical politics.

*"Discussion was excellent, learned loads." "Loads more context about the times, the history, the society. Rich with information, imagery, facts, passion." - participant comments*



## Workshops

The workshops were aimed to empower participants, through using simple, accessible, fun puppet making techniques, to explore and voice their own experience, transforming them from passive spectators to active agents. How do we practice freedom in our lives?

Through the tour we developed a workshop format that lasted one and half to two hours. Each workshop included most of the following elements:

- Viewing the short trailer of the show
- Quick demo of how to make a simple puppet and then making the puppets
- Exercise in two lines of participants facing one another, one acting as audience and the other as puppeteers – the line of puppeteers would be asked to use their puppets to express and emotion (e.g. fear) the audience line would give feedback. Then the lines would swap roles and another emotion would be given to the puppeteers etc.
- Exercise in small groups of three or four, performing with their puppets on a table with a simple set of upright objects. They would be asked to move in a particular way (e.g. stealthily) or to move to sounds from a cymbal or drum.
- In groups devising a simple playlet on the theme of 'escape' lasting a few minutes and then performing to everyone else.

The groups came up with stories that included fleeing war in Syria, outwitting a cruel teacher, and collectively standing up to bullying.



*After watching the trailer, the young people were very receptive and excited to make cardboard theatre style puppets and to use them to express an idea. They were imaginative and creative in their choices and often had never made puppets before. They had fun thinking about the puppets motives in a scene and then discovering how to move them to express their thoughts and feelings. I learnt that children these days are hardly having any art activities in school or at home and that that they are so happy to be making things even if*

*their confidence is low to start with. They were all thrilled with what they made and how their puppets performed in their little groups. Of course some of the older boys struggled to show their enthusiasm...and a few girls were just too shy to learn to perform in such a short time.*

– Sarah Green, workshop facilitator

Windmill Hill Woodcraft Folk



Baton III Bristol



***“It is a simple and yet potentially powerful way for our Venturers to communicate their own ideas about an important social issue, that they can then share with others.”***

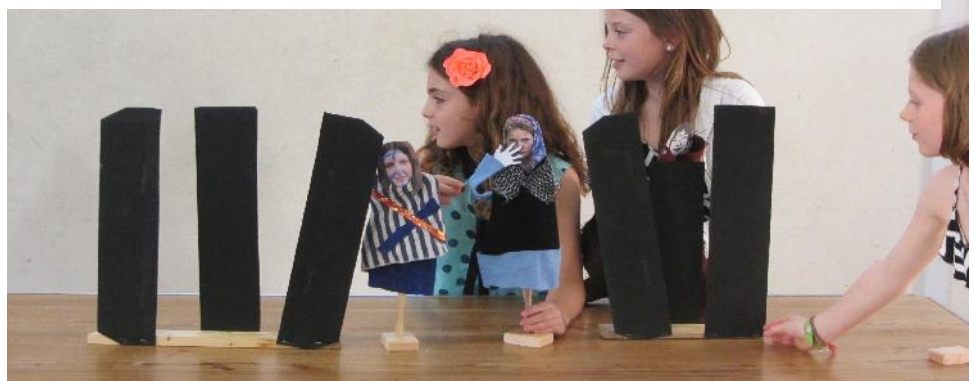
Stoke Newington Woodcraft Folk



Stoke Newington Woodcraft Folk



***“I enjoyed making the puppets and choosing the face, the hand and the fabric”***







***“Very engaging – enabling kids to explore new ideas and express creatively their emotions through puppets. Very cool puppets too!”***



***“It was good because it was so easy and it was a good result”***





## Things we learnt



We chose to perform in venues such as pubs and community centres which often had only basic facilities. So we had to find ways to make it possible for the audience to see when there was no rake or stage – the purchase of some bar stools on ebay and some low stalls from Ikea made all the difference.

We also had to bring our own (hired) lighting to most venues. We recognise that we still have much to learn about how to use lighting to best effect.

*I learned to combine live and recorded audio with theatrical performance more intricately than I have done before. I developed my skills of creating sounds to fit a brief, collaborating with theatre practitioners to create a show we were happy with and performing that show in a range of spaces to a variety of audiences. – Paul Walker*

*I saw how effective the songs and soundscape were in creating the atmosphere and telling the story. It makes me want to devise future shows around ballads and music. – Trevor Houghton*

*I think if anything could have been improved upon, it would have been more rehearsal with the puppeteers built in, to allow me more time to become familiar with the script and musical cues. It was a show that would have worked very well with one person being narrator and working the computer and fades in and out, and a second musician who played the live music and the live sound effects. – Heather Summers*

*Having made and repaired, packed and unpacked, put up and taken down all the kit for this show I have learnt the need to keep it simple. I now want to devise a puppet show that will fit in a suitcase and can be taken on a train. – Trevor Houghton*

*The theme was popular and proved to be a good conversation starter on the tour – I would be keen to work on more radical history shows. However, I sometimes felt a dissonance between the under-class resistance content and the often middle-class entertainment settings, which left me thinking it would be good to explore ways to challenge that in the future. With such a strong theme, I would be interested in experimenting with making a show do what it is about. - Paul Walker*

*The tour has been a great opportunity to develop the ways we make our work part of a conversation. Coming together with so many groups to imagine, and question, and create, has broadened and deepened the story we began with. This input from many voices will inform and feed our future work. - Emma Byron*



Audience participation  
in the carriage ride  
scene of the show

## List of Performances / Workshops

6 <sup>th</sup> May	Stroud Subscription Rooms, Stroud, Gloucestershire (with post-show discussion)
7 <sup>th</sup> May	Hubnub Centre, Frome, Somerset (with post-show discussion)
12 <sup>th</sup> May	Bath Spa University, Newton St Loe, Bath (with post-show discussion)
14 <sup>th</sup> May	The Southbank Centre, Southville, Bristol (with post-show discussion)
19 <sup>th</sup> May	Cardboard Citizens, Whitechapel, London (with post-show discussion)
20 <sup>th</sup> May	Brady Arts Centre, Whitechapel, London (with post-show discussion)
21 <sup>st</sup> May	Tower Hamlets Local History Library, Whitechapel, London
22 <sup>nd</sup> May	London Action Resource Centre, Whitechapel, London (with post-show discussion)
11 <sup>th</sup> July	Barton Hill Settlement, Bristol
15 <sup>th</sup> July	The Shakespeare, Sheffield
16 <sup>th</sup> July	Beverley Puppet Festival, East Riding of Yorkshire
10 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Stroud Theatre Festival, Stroud, Gloucestershire

## Puppetry Workshops

21 <sup>st</sup> April	Windmill Hill Woodcraft Folk	10 <sup>th</sup> Aug	Barton Hill Playscheme
28 <sup>th</sup> April	Windmill Hill Woodcraft Folk	5 <sup>th</sup> Sept	Urban Escape Bristol
9 <sup>th</sup> June	Stoke Newington Woodcraft Folk	6 <sup>th</sup> Oct	Hackney Woodcraft Folk
7 <sup>th</sup> July	Stroud Woodcraft Folk		