

Institution: University of Portsmouth		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 25: Area Studies		
Title of case study: DarkFest: Connecting Communities and Enhancing Creative Cultures in Portsmouth		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 - 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Karl Bell	Reader in Cultural and Social History	01/08/2007 - date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016 - 2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Since 2016 DarkFest has established itself as one of Portsmouth's main creative festivals. Karl Bell's historical research into the urban supernatural directly informed and shaped the initial activities that created this event. Bell's ongoing support has enabled local creatives to take increasing ownership of the festival. Its growth has led to the involvement of the city's major cultural institutions, including its theatres, Southsea Castle, and the Historic Dockyard. DarkFest has helped connect the city's diverse but fragmented artistic communities, providing them with common themes and a coherent platform through which to annually showcase their talent. This has resulted in them obtaining Arts Council England funding and, more broadly, facilitating new local cultural engagement. With its genesis in Bell's research, Darkfest has had a transformative impact on Portsmouth's creative cultures, benefiting a diverse range of practitioners, audiences, and stakeholders.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Dr Bell's wide ranging research into the supernatural urban landscapes of 19th and early 20th century Britain has been groundbreaking in demonstrating the significance of the fantastic in the modern urban imagination. Using case studies from London, Manchester, Norwich, Portsmouth and elsewhere, he has demonstrated the extent to which communities have used supernatural storytelling to create a sense of local identity, to enrich their understanding of their environments and to entertain themselves. His research has provided new insights into the relationship between ghost lore and local and civic identities (R3), and the way supernatural ideas and narratives have historically contributed to fostering a shared sense of cultural community in cities (R1, R4).</p> <p>His first book (R1) looks at the existence and function of supernatural mentalities in 19th century urban environments. It deploys a wide ranging selection of sources to explore how people of all social classes in the modern city used magical practices and beliefs, and ghost stories, to shape their own identities. Rather than just a lingering tradition, the research demonstrated that the supernatural remained culturally pertinent in a modern urban context. Bell's second book (R2) highlighted a remarkable case of this in the urban legend of Spring-heeled Jack. This Victorian bogeyman featured in many stories and Bell used it to analyse and explore Victorian popular culture, sexual fears, spatial anxiety, and tensions between a persistent oral culture and the claimed authority of the literary and journalistic. Bell's body of individual work has stimulated and developed interdisciplinary collaborations, leading to projects and publications involving literary scholars, geographers, anthropologists and folklorists. In his introduction to the recently edited collection that he assembled, he has defined a new taxonomy for the urban imaginary in looking at enchantment, anxiety and spectrality (R5).</p> <p>Bell's research is situated methodologically at the forefront of key contemporary shifts in urban cultural history. It draws on anthropological interpretations of magic as a form of agency and on interdisciplinary research into the nature and development of folklore, blending the significance of oral and literary cultures in a supposedly modern environment. It contributes to what has been described as spatial and spectral turns in urban cultural history, and to an ongoing challenge to the narrative of a disenchanting modernity. Research of this kind contributes to a rediscovery of the intangible heritage of the modern city, not just as a concrete background for social interaction but as a space in which lives are imagined as well as lived. It demonstrates that the most apparently banal spaces of the urban environment are also fundamentally shaped by stories.</p>		

3. References to the research

(R1) Bell, K. (2012). *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England, 1780-1914* (Cambridge University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511740107> This peer-reviewed text was commissioned by a highly respected academic publisher and was shortlisted for the Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize.

(R2) Bell, K. (2012). *The Legend of Spring-heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures* (Boydell and Brewer). As an external indicator of this publication's quality and significance, it won the Folklore Society's Katharine Briggs Award in 2013.

(R3) Bell, K. (2014). Civic Spirits? Ghost lore and civic narratives in Nineteenth-Century Portsmouth. *Cultural and Social History*, 11(1), 51-68.

<https://doi.org/10.2752/147800414X13802176314483> Published in one of the leading peer-reviewed journals within the field.

(R4) Bell, K. (2016). "They Are Without Christ and Without Hope": Heathenism, Popular Religion, and Supernatural Belief in Portsmouth's Maritime Community, c.1851-1901' in B. Beaven, K. Bell and R. James (eds), *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700-2000* (pp. 49-67). Palgrave. Peer-reviewed publication commissioned by a well-established academic publisher.

(R5) Bell, K. (2019). *Supernatural Cities: Enchantment, Anxiety, Spectrality* (Boydell and Brewer) Peer-reviewed publication produced by a respected academic press.

4. Details of the impact

Bell has used the historical insights of his research to influence the work of Portsmouth's creative communities, and to encourage locals to rethink and reimagine their urban environment in the present. The city's *Culture and City Development Business Plan 2016-2019* highlighted Portsmouth's longstanding cultural lag behind more historically attractive and culturally prestigious neighbouring centres, and noted the challenges arising from weak local aspirations and lack of funding **(S9)**.

While the city has a diverse grassroots creative culture, Portsmouth's artistic communities have remained fragmented and relatively lacking in opportunities for collective development. Bell has been able to draw these communities into closer collaboration via the creation of DarkFest, a modern festival of the urban supernatural. The themes of his research on stories as a form of community-building have catalysed activism within Portsmouth's creative circles, stimulating events and given practitioners the confidence and skill to fulfil more ambitious, multimedia projects. This organic development compliments official efforts to enhance local culture as a means of 'placemaking' **(S9)**.

Over four years (2016-2019), DarkFest has worked with 48 different community groups and local organisations, and over 250 individual artists, writers and performers, some of whom have returned to contribute to multiple Darkfest programmes (including a shortened, online Covid-safe DarkFest 2020). Under Bell's leadership, a Darkfest steering committee has staged 113 individual events, with a total of 81 days of activity. Bell's role as festival director has ensured that his research interests continue to influence the content of the annual programme.

DarkFest originated from an initial collaboration between Bell and the Portsmouth Writers Hub. Bell provided them with inspirational urban folkloric accounts drawn directly from his research and historical sources, and local writers then created ghost and horror stories set in the city. Tessa Ditner, Portsmouth City Council's Literary Officer and leader of the Portsmouth Writers Hub, notes "Karl's research ... brought the writers together beautifully around the theme of ghost stories" and led to *Dark City: Portsmouth Tales of Haunting and Horror*, an anthology of Portsmouth-based horror stories **(S5)**.

Bell coordinated a modest creative festival built around the publication of *Dark City* at Halloween 2016. The first DarkFest saw Bell's historical research on supernatural communal storytelling updated for a contemporary urban audience, with local creatives actively making new supernatural narratives in a range of media (written stories, spoken word performance, film, music). Under Bell's leadership, DarkFest has continued to expand its reach into the city's creative communities. As it has done so, it has developed three dimensions of impact: to enhance the profile and functioning

of Portsmouth's creative cultures; to break down barriers to collaboration and further development within that creative community; and to deliver specific social, economic and professional benefits to individual participants and groups.

Enhancing Creative Cultures in Portsmouth

DarkFest has enriched local communities' cultural experiences within the city. Event organisers estimate that just under 1000 people attended the 22 events in the 2016 programme (S4). Since then, DarkFest has become a set three-week feature of Portsmouth's cultural calendar around Halloween. It averages 30 events per year, ranging from small workshops to sold-out musical events at the Square Tower. It now stands alongside Portsmouth Bookfest, the city's other major festival in February/March, running since 2011, and offering a similar number of events. Bookfest, however, does not draw upon Darkfest's rich diversity of venues and its focus is purely on literature, rather than the broader range of artistic communities within the city.

This diversity is important to its local significance. Author and DarkFest 2017 contributor Victoria Leslie states, "*DarkFest has contributed enormously to the cultural and creative identity of Portsmouth ... [it] provides an essential space to celebrate creative engagement with the city and its history*" and promotes "*dialogue between different members of the community through storytelling, art and music.*" (S4). Novelist and DarkFest committee member William Sutton claims the festival has "*broadened the literary and artistic activity and impact across the city, connecting practitioners across disciplines and finding new audiences*" (S6).

Sutton notes, "*DarkFest is probably the festival that has seen collaborations with the most venues and organisations in the city*". This includes all its major theatres, libraries and local museums, tourist sites such as Southsea Castle, HMS Warrior, and the Historic Dockyard, and "*numerous exhibitions and performances ... in cafes and other unusual venues*", including the Cascades shopping centre (S6). With sharper programme curation from Bell and the steering committee, DarkFest has gradually seen the creation of larger and more focussed events, including major multimedia performances, as outlined below.

Locally, DarkFest's growth and appeal has been reflected in it being shortlisted for a Portsmouth Guide Award in the Best Event category in January 2020, the nomination based on public votes. An awareness of DarkFest has expanded beyond Portsmouth, resulting in the involvement of London-based spoken word performers and even US-based author Dacre Stoker in helping to enrich the city's cultural life (S2).

While expanding to larger venues, DarkFest has also developed sustained relationships. DarkFest 2016 used Hunter Gatherer, a new coffee shop, to launch the *Dark City* book. This helped the cafe owners to establish their venue on the local cultural map, and led directly to a role as an open mic performance venue for local organisations such as The Front Room and T'Articulation. As [text removed for publication] states, continued collaboration with DarkFest has "*undoubtedly brought new customers to Hunter Gatherer and thus increased our business turnover.*" DarkFest "*has helped create a bond with our customers and made us feel a positive force in the community we serve*" (S1).

Connecting the city's diverse but fragmented artistic communities

Over four years, DarkFest has engaged with a wide range of local creative practitioners and organisations. It has resulted in "*dozens of writers and performers having the chance to perform to audiences. These have ranged from experienced performers delivering Arts-Council-funded shows to try-out floor spots performing their own work for the first time ever*" (S6). The sustained focus on the cultural value of supernatural narrative has led to new ways of thinking that influence both creative practice and audience reach.

Local publisher and frequent Darkfest performer Matt Wingett states: "*One of the really positive effects of DarkFest is to focus creative minds to work toward producing an event or piece of work with a theme ... [It] makes sure work gets produced that otherwise wouldn't [and] bolsters co-operation and camaraderie between and within different artistic communities*" (S4). Roy Hanney, leader of the 1000 Plateaus art collective, observes that "*the banner of DarkFest has enabled us*

to see our work in the context of a general milieu of creative work within the city. It also brought our work to the attention of other creative industries stakeholders and influencers within the city."

Involvement with DarkFest enabled Hanney's 2016 event, *Dark or Darker, Shivering or Not* to "develop a truly cross arts approach" involving writers, dancers and artists. He notes the DarkFest steering committee was "able to offer support and guidance and provide a focus for ours and other local creatives activities" (S7). Over 250 people attended the event.

John Sackett, Director of The Front Room, declares collaboration with DarkFest not only created new audiences but also forged new collaborations further afield, "between creative artists both in Portsmouth and the wider region of The Solent." For example, *Cure or be Cured*, staged at Southsea Castle in DarkFest 2017, involved "9 inspired original poetry, film and theatrical collaborations between over 24 artists". Indicative of DarkFest's live and wider online following, the event had 84 attendees and received "over 1200 views on Facebook" (S3).

Upskilling local creatives: Building confidence and ambition

Key figures within local creative organisations involved in DarkFest have gone on to take an active role in the organising of the festival's programme in 2017 - 2019, and to perform in other local festivals. The local creatives who form the festival's steering committee with Bell have reported learning new skills and confidence, in organising cultural activities and in collaborating across artistic disciplines or with academics. Sackett notes "*The collaboration [with] Karl Bell ... inspire[d] both the creative communities as well as Portsmouth audiences to soak up the histories [of the city]*", to collaborate "with history and arts researchers and work in unfamiliar mediums such as digital technology to create new work" (S3). Singer-songwriter Eilís Phillips notes how DarkFest led to new contacts and collaborations, adding that DarkFest "provides a forum to share not only creative ideas but also a means to share other types of expertise ... business acumen, knowledge of grant application writing, or even practical considerations such as hiring of costumes, access to equipment or venues" (S8).

Based on their experience with DarkFest, festival committee members Sackett and Hanney have brought together diverse local creative practitioners to submit two successful bids to Arts Council England. Sackett's project, *Dark Side, Port Side* (awarded GBP14,000) took its inspiration and walking trail template from *Sailortown*, a phone app based on the research of Portsmouth historians, including Bell (S3). Both this and Hanney's *Dark Tide: Cursed City* project (awarded GBP14,954) culminated in activities and co-produced cultural outputs that formed part of DarkFest 2019's programme. In the year since its launch, *Dark Side* had "over one thousand people taking part in the trail", either online or at the physical locations (S3).

Both projects involved a rich array of writers, performers, artists and filmmakers who have previously gained collaborative experience as contributors to DarkFest events. Hanney notes, "*The opportunity to try new ideas and experiment in a supportive environment was key to the ... 1000 Plateaus [collective] developing the skills, experience and confidence to submit the application and deliver the project.*" In terms of scale and impact, *Cursed City* involved the commissioning of 30 new creative works, 130 days of paid employment for local artists, 6 workshops, and 42 days of performances or exhibitions. The public workshops had 80-100 participants, and events had audiences of 100-300 people, with 150 people attending the final event. This project "led to significant continuing professional development for the 1000 Plateaus team" and they are developing a new funding application for a project in 2021 (S7).

Bell's research has led to a transformative cultural development within Portsmouth's creative communities, benefitting a diverse range of practitioners, audiences, and stakeholders. DarkFest stands as a pioneering example of how the re-imagining of a cultural and historical context through academic research can lead to new forms of artistic expression and enhanced local cultural self-confidence within an urban community.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

(S1) Testimonial from [text removed for publication].

(S2) *Star and Crescent* review of Portsmouth DarkFest 2019

- (S3) Testimonial from John Sackett, Director of Big Adventures and The Front Room 26/09/2020.
- (S4) Data / comments from the DarkFest's Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/portsmouthdarkfest/>. Includes the results of three post-festival online Facebook questionnaires (2017-19).
- (S5) Testimonial from Tessa Ditner, former Portsmouth City Council's Literary Officer and founder of the Portsmouth Writers Hub.
- (S6) Testimonial from William Sutton, novelist and co-organiser of Portsmouth Writers Hub 23/08/2020.
- (S7) Testimonial from Roy Hanney, Director of Kino Foundation and lead organiser of the 1000 Plateau arts collective 25/09/2020.
- (S8) Testimonial from Eilís Phillips, Singer, songwriter, and creative consultant 24/09/2020
- (S9) Culture and City Development Business Plan 2016-2019 - pp.16-17