

We Are Our History: Towards Racial Equity

Project report, 2026



WHAT WE DID

'We Are Our History : Towards Racial Equity' (WAOH) ran from Summer 2022 until Autumn 2024. The project was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We were delighted to win the Vice Chancellor's award for Commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Spring 2024.

Through the project we wanted to build on our existing work on inclusion and belonging in the Bodleian Libraries by examining our collections, our work with audiences, and our staffing through the lens of racial equity and the legacies of empire.

The project's title was taken from a quote by James Baldwin: "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history." It was delivered through eight workstreams across three broad themes: collections, audiences and staffing. This structure allowed us to look at racial equity not as a single issue, but as something that affects all parts of our work.

Collections

Bodleian and Empire

We investigated how wealth from empire built the Bodleian's collections. We examined how our special collections and archives privilege the voices of colonisers. We also created spaces for discussion through workshops and collaborative approaches that encouraged new interpretations and "counter-archiving."

Collection Description

Despite our wide and varied collections, Europe and North American countries and languages are more widely represented. We reviewed language used in cataloguing and classification, with the aim of replacing historically insensitive terminology and improving the discoverability of materials.

Collection Development

We developed methods for diversifying our collections, reviewed gaps, and worked with librarians to think more actively about global and inclusive collecting.

Digitisation

We audited digital content, identified underrepresented materials for future digitisation, and developed content warning statements for sensitive items on Digital.Bodleian. Mellon funding also supported the digitisation of key collections to make them freely available to all, including items from the Anti-Slavery Society and the Codrington Archive.

Audiences

Public Engagement

We collaborated with artists, speakers and communities to bring different perspectives into exhibitions and events. This included work with Peter Brathwaite on Mischief in the Archives, the We Are Our History Conversations series, and events beyond the library building, such as activity in the Westgate Shopping Centre.

Communications

We developed a clear project identity, web content, social media, video and internal communications to share our work more widely and encourage conversation with both existing and new audiences.

Staffing and organisational culture

Staffing

We reviewed recruitment and retention practices, introduced compulsory training for recruiters, and developed a diversity statement now included in job adverts. Following this we saw a notable improvement in applicant diversity data, with offers accepted from BME groups rising from 2.7% in 2020/2021 to 17% in 2021/2022.

Organisational Culture

We created self-directed learning pathways, toolkits and intranet resources to help staff build confidence and understanding around equality, diversity, inclusion and racial equity.

The project was supported by a strong governance structure, including a cross-organisation Internal Steering Group and an Advisory Board comprised of experts from within and beyond the University. Dedicated project staffing, including a Project Manager and a Research Associate, was key to maintaining momentum and ensuring that the workstreams progressed in a coordinated and meaningful way.

Throughout the project, we shared our learning through outreach activities such as news items in the Bodleian Library Record, and presentations at international library conferences and the University's EDI Round Table.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THE PROCESS

One of the clearest lessons was that racial equity work is most effective when it is embedded across an organisation rather than treated as a standalone initiative. We learnt that to make meaningful change we need to engage with all areas of our organisation.

We also learnt that dedicated resource matters. The appointment of a Project Manager was especially important because it gave the work continuity, coordination and visibility. The project benefited from the knowledge and commitment of existing staff, but limited capacity was a challenge in several workstreams. Particularly where staff were delivering project work alongside day-to-day responsibilities.

Another key learning point was the importance of collaboration. Through the project we brought together different experts: librarians, archivists, researchers, students, artists, community groups and external partners. Public programmes and workshops demonstrated that difficult histories can be explored in ways that are thoughtful, creative and constructive when collaborators and communities are included from the outset.

The project also showed that change involves both practical action and institutional reflection. Some progress was tangible and immediate: updated recruitment practices, new training resources, digitised material, improved description, and public events that reached new audiences. But the work also raised deeper questions that was not only about doing new things, but about changing how we think about existing collections, policies and systems.

Finally, we learned that measuring impact in this area is challenging but essential. Audience development, culture change and collections representation are not always easy to quantify. The project highlighted the value of benchmarking, evaluation and revisiting work over time so that progress can be properly understood.

LONGER-TERM IMPACTS

Although the formal project has ended, it has given us a strong foundation to build our work going forwards. The recommendations developed by the steering group make clear that many parts of the work can and should continue.

One major legacy is the creation of a Bodleian Belonging Committee to provide oversight and momentum for inclusion work beyond the life of the project. This committee would help ensure that racial equity remains part of strategic planning while also applying learning from the project to other aspects of inclusion and belonging.

Secondly, many of the recommendations from the WAOH project have been integrated into our strategic projects and activities. The Bodleian Libraries' Strategy 2022-2027 has a commitment to inclusion as one of its guiding principles. We are looking to see how we build on this in the next strategic period.

The project created a stronger shared understanding that inclusion is not an add-on to library work. It is central to how collections are interpreted, how services are designed, and how people experience our organisation. That shift in awareness is one of the project's most important achievements, and one that can continue to influence decision-making well beyond the original funding period. We want to make sure that we continue the work that we started and to build inclusion and belonging in everything we do.