
COMING HOME Learning and Engagement Case Study

Portrait of Paul Robeson by Neil Libbert, 1958: Reading Museum



1. Introduction

Paul Robeson was a Black civil rights pioneer, actor and musical virtuoso. 2020 marked 60 years since Robeson sang at Reading Town Hall, at the invitation of local Justice and Peace group; a legendary event in Reading's history of embracing cultural diversity.

2. Participants

A total over 40 individuals actively contributed to the production and marketing of digital events responding to the display of the Paul Robeson portrait at Reading Museum. There were 16 members of Reading's Black African and Caribbean Community directly involved in the development and delivery of activity. This included senior figures within the community's leadership. The project also included the Mayor of Reading and Reading Borough Lead councillors.

3. Activity

In October 2020, as part of Reading's Black History Month, the Museum announced the temporary loan and display of the portrait of Paul Robeson.

In response to the challenges posed by COVID restrictions, including closure of the Museum during the loan period, several digital outputs were created, at very short notice. This enabled the Museum to bring the portrait, the story behind it, and the Coming Home project to audiences at home and included:

- a [blogpost](#) about the story behind the photo, Paul Robeson's legacy in Reading, and the Coming Home project
- a [film](#) of the portrait's unveiling at Reading Museum, including key figures in the town's heritage community such as David Stephens (Mayor of Reading), Councillor Karen Rowland, Viktor Koroma (Reading Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality) and Jeff Jones (Reading Caribbean Associations Group)

- a [film](#) celebrating Robeson's fantastic music and oration, including a performance by Reading Community Gospel Choir performing Robeson's hit song 'Going Home' and a recital from actor Steve McCauley (one of Reading's leading Black actors) with quotes from some of Robeson's most celebrated speeches. The film was produced and directed by Through a Different Lens, a new young creative agency dedicated to increasing cultural opportunities for Black British and Caribbean communities in Berkshire.

4. Outcomes and reflections

This approach presented an excellent opportunity for the Museum to build on recent digital successes in exploring Black history, in collaboration with partners both local and international, such as its nationally acclaimed *Windrush Day* project.

The Museum's work to prepare and display the portrait, and to plan accompanying activity had been in preparation for many months. However, the renewed focus on the Black Lives Matter Movement, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, brought an additional resonance to the activity, 60 years after Paul Robeson performed in Reading.

It was only with a very detailed event plan and set of risk assessments that permission was granted to undertake much of the activity.

5. Selected feedback

"We are thrilled to share our film of these very special performances by the Reading Community Gospel Choir and theatrical artist, Steve McCauley. Paul Robeson is an inspirational figure in our community, a father figure who spoke out fearlessly in pursuit of equality for black people. These very moving performances by fantastically talented Reading people are a fitting tribute 60 years after Robeson's famous appearance in the Concert Hall."

(Jocelyn Chandler, Creative Director, Through a Different Lens)

It was very pleasing and appreciated to work with the choir and the actor to allow his message of peace and equity echo in the Town Hall building in 2020.

(Brendan)