

COMING HOME Learning and Engagement Case Study

Portrait of Samuel Johnson by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Lichfield Cathedral



1. Introduction

Dr Samuel Johnson was born and resided for 27 years in Lichfield, living at the family bookshop. A journalist, literary critic and poet, he is still famous for his landmark *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). He was an imposing figure, who was plagued with tics and could not bear solitude. He had an immense circle of friends and was regarded as one of the greatest conversationalists of all time. His friend Joshua Reynolds founded the Literary Club in 1764 to 'give him unlimited opportunities for talking'.

Joshua Reynolds began this portrait of Samuel Johnson around 1756. The painting was never finished and remained in Reynolds' studio until 1798, when it was given to James Boswell, Johnson's biographer. Boswell had it engraved as the frontispiece to his *Life of Johnson* (1791).

2. Participants

- Families (mostly)
- Primary schools.

3. Activity

A number of open access activities were available to general visitors and school groups, accompanied by a volunteer guide:

- 'Ask me a question:' using the National Portrait Gallery's Toolkit template, visitors were invited to think further about the portrait by asking the portrait a question. How? What? When? Why? What If? I wonder . .

- ‘How does home shape me?’ Using another template from the NPG Toolkit, visitors were invited to consider how living in Lichfield has influenced them.
- **Draw a self-portrait:** visitors were invited to consider the following questions before completing their own self portrait on a golden framed card:
 - *How do you see yourself?*
 - *Who and what influences your appearance, values, actions and behaviours?*
 - *Are your biggest influences people, places or events in your own life, famous people, world events or issues?*
 - *What is important to you and how could you represent this in your portrait?*
 - *How important is your community/locality in your sense of identity?*
 - *Does Lichfield feature in your sense of identity?*

A series of practitioner-led workshops offered a more guided version of the portrait activity. Three of the four sessions took place during the Cathedral’s annual light Illuminations. Thousands of people visit the building during this period for the external light show. The workshops were offered inside the building during this time to engage as many visitors as possible.

4. Outcomes and reflections

Participants

Quantitative feedback was collected through paper questionnaires. Response rate was low, but those who responded:

- 85% rated the general activities as good
- 95% of respondents rated the workshop as good or excellent.

Qualitative feedback was collected by the staff and volunteers at the Cathedral. Qualitative feedback of the portrait drawing workshops was very positive, with comments indicating that people enjoyed the experience both creatively and in terms of thinking about themselves within their community. Many commented on their love of the city of Lichfield after taking time to think about all the things it has to offer. Comments also indicated that people enjoyed learning how to draw a portrait, the basics of composition and proportion.

The organisation

19% of respondents to both the free access activities and workshops had not attended the Cathedral before, indicating this project attracted a new audience.

Although Lichfield Cathedral has hosted major artworks before, being able to offer an education and engagement project specifically linked to it was a new initiative for the organisation. Being able to partner with the National Portrait Gallery on the activities gave the project added kudos, with anecdotal feedback indicating visitors were more inclined to engage with the free access activities in particular because of the National Portrait Gallery logo.

