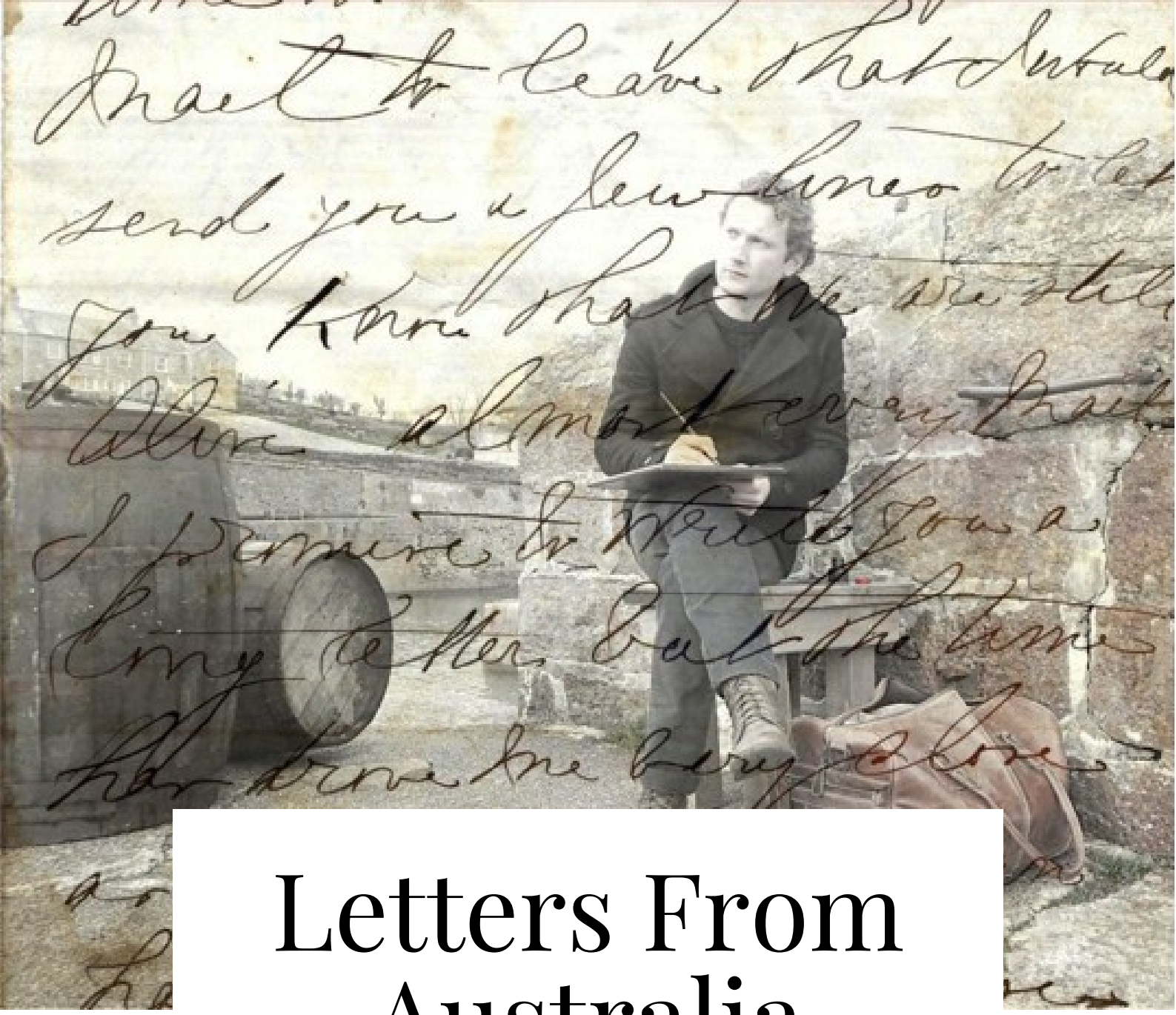

Letters From Australia

CASE STUDY

Creative UK

Ideate Plymouth

*Part of **Creative UK** & **Ideate Plymouth**'s Mentorship Programme*

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ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Letters From Australia

Never before in our history have we had the ability to tell the stories of our past in such dynamic, compelling and artistic ways.

So when Martin Eddy was handed a box of fascinating old letters passed down from his family for generations, little did he realise just how epic the careful calligraphy on those worn pages would soon become.

They told of his Cornish family's story of migrating to South Australia in 1860 - and the joy, loss and heartbreak along the way.

Together with three friends, these Letters from Australia would soon become a story worth not just telling, but immersing in.

They've been brought alive by imagination, emerging technology and support from mentors and creative organisations such as **Creative UK** and its **Ideate Plymouth** mentorship programme.

Uncovering the Letters from Australia

As a previous historian and geologist, Martin immediately saw the potential of the letters, written by his four times great grandfather, Thomas Osborne, in Australia to his son John Osborne (Martin's three times great grandfather) back home in England.

The letters tell of two brothers standing on Plymouth's Barbican filled with anticipation of the journey ahead. They travelled from Zennor in West Cornwall to Plymouth and now on the maritime city's pier, stood looking at the SS London - their transport to Melbourne in Australia.

Over the following years the brothers and their father sent home a series of letters describing their experiences and emotional trauma of separation and hardship.

The letters are difficult to translate, not only due to the elaborate, cursive handwriting of the time, but also their use of 'cross writing' to make the best use of expensive paper and cost of postage in the 19th century.

"The letters tell of two brothers standing on Plymouth's Barbican filled with anticipation of the journey ahead."

Evolving from page to radio, to immersive screen

What started as a handful of delicate, lovingly-written letters from a family separated in the 1860s, became a fully immersive play set to a score of original music.

Before long, Martin brought in friend and retired arts lecturer and photographer Dave Hotchkiss, to see his vision brought to life. Dave's role on the project brought a creative vision, playing around with the idea of Virtual Reality (VR).

However, the team all agree the project didn't truly come together until Nick Hart came on board. Musician and former head teacher Nick, took the words written by Martin's ancestors and turned them into song.

"Having deciphered one of Martin's letters, I said, I can see this visually," Dave explains.

"I want to get my hand in and do something like create a VR headset for it - so asked if I could use the letters to be a catalyst for doing it. And then it just sort of snowballed from there.

"I put a storyboard together, having read through the letters, and then we brought Nick in because we thought we needed music. Once Nick got involved, the whole thing exploded because it became far more structured and far more organized.

"When Nick had created the music using the letters' words as lyrics - literally lifting the words off the page - it just gave them a whole new life.

"It soon became a play with music, and then bizarrely at the same time of me talking to Martin about the VR idea, Real Ideas put a call out for something called Start Something Immersive."

Suddenly, the project had a structure. Turning the words to lyrics was a "game changer", and together with the help of Creative UK's Ideate Plymouth programme, a multi-faceted, ambisonic project was born.

It was turned into a radio play - before the potential of becoming a full immersive 360 degree experience was uncovered.

Starting out in the world of immersive

The group, together with actor Miles Sloman, applied to the **Start Something Immersive** programme hosted by **Real Ideas** - the organisation behind the remarkable Immersive Dome at the Market Hall in Plymouth. The stunning 360 degree Dome is the biggest of its kind in Europe and had the potential to tell the story of the Letters from Australia in a medium like no other.

They were successful in their bid, enrolling onto **Start Something Immersive** - giving them access to the Dome as well as free support and training.

"The stunning 360 degree Dome is the biggest of its kind in Europe and had the potential to tell the story of the Letters from Australia in a medium like no other."

“It gave us the opportunity to use the dome,” says Dave. “And then critical was the support from **Ideate Plymouth.**”

Crucially, they also found that the ongoing support from **Creative UK’s Ideate Plymouth** programme, guided them through the process of how to make the most of the immersive platform they now had access to.

Ideate Plymouth matched the Letters from Australia team with two mentors (Alison Norrington and Exitus Ab) to help them navigate contrasting elements of their project.

Starting out in the world of immersive

Alison Norrington - EO, Founder & Chief Creative Director of storycentral, a London-based story-telling entertainment studio - was a huge help in terms of business support and strategy. Exitus Ab are a Plymouth-based company run by Matthew Raistrick and Ryan Thorne - specialists in spatial sound and the technology used by the Dome at Market Hall. They spent two days with the team in the Dome working on their audio and visuals.

“We sort of had a tiger by the tail,” said Nick. “But we didn't know which direction to go. **Ideate** gave us that direction.

“One was they supported in the technical aspects. So here I am sitting in my studio and I'm comfortable working with a number of different sound channels but when you're in a Dome, suddenly you've got 19 channels to work with.

"We didn't know which direction to go. *Ideate* gave us that direction."

“On top of that, we were in danger of running away with too many ideas to deal with. And so the mentoring support from Alison was terrific because she would put us back on track and we would be able to think through this project.”

The final result is a fully immersive play with music, to be screened at Plymouth’s Market Hall Dome from 27 September 2022. The 360 dome play has the potential to be screened in these types of venues around the world, with Martin and Co hoping to bring the play to Cornwall and Australia - key locations in the Letters’ story.

A conversation starter

The versatility and commercial capabilities of the play has made it a real talking point in the local area. Not only is the project a totally immersive dome experience, but there is also a 30-minute radio play version, and the original songs have scope to stand on their own.

The team worked with local PR agency Excess Energy to get the conversation started, and found they were soon picked up by Radio Cornwall and BBC South West Evening News (although they were pushed back a day by a mob of escaping meerkats!). Publicity for the immersive play isn't the only conversation Martin and Co want to start, however...

"The versatility and commercial capabilities of the play has made it a real talking point in the local area."

Why here & now?

Not only are Plymouth and Cornwall integral to the story of the Letters (with some written on the Barbican), but promoting creative stories in the South West is an important aspect to the team. They're aware of the barriers limiting the creative industries in the region, and found that age was a particular hurdle.

Even **Start Something Immersive** has an age limit, so the team brought in Martin's Nephew, actor and writer Miles Sloman. As he's under 30, Miles was able to apply for the programme and secure the support.

In contrast, past lecturer Dave notes that Plymouth and Cornwall (particularly Falmouth) are home to a host of creative schools and universities. If graduates, who are highly specialised in their arenas, had creative support, they would be able to stay and work in the area. This would see creative industries in the South West boom. Contrary to poor press in mainstream media and the political landscape, creative industries in the UK are some of the fastest growing in terms of funding and boosting the economy.

"creative industries in the UK are some of the fastest growing."

The team note that whilst the South West is a growing creative hub, it's also quite an aged community. They hope their project will bring light to the fact that people of all ages want to be involved in creative projects, and help to increase support for this demographic.

Innovative creative technology such as VR is being used in a range of sectors, including medicine and set building. With so many ways to use this technology to create business and save money in the region, the team are hoping this project can bring the issues to the public face of Plymouth and the South West.

Jumping over hurdles

Age and creative support wasn't the only hurdle the team had to overcome though. The help from **Ideate Plymouth**, run by **Creative UK**, was invaluable to them, but the team do admit to a lot of self-funded action. As retired gentlemen, they were able to give up time to work on the project, which was just as well.

One struggle was having the right software to host the data. Firstly, getting to know new software takes time, but the project was so huge (we're talking two times the amount of pixels on a 4KTV) that the computer power struggled to keep up. The slow and time consuming process of putting assets together combined with the cost of hiring the dome means the first time the team will see the project in full is the premier on September 27th.

They confess it would have been beneficial to see the play in full a few times before opening to the public. The other obstacle the team are anticipating is fitting the visuals into different venues around the world. Whilst the current projections fit well in the Market Hall Dome, it's unknown whether it will fit well in other immersive domes when the time comes.

Martin, Dave, Nick and Miles' hard work, from old family letters to a multi-faceted production, is the perfect case study of creative passion coming to fruition in the South West. Creative UK's Ideate Programme is a proud part of the journey, and we're very much looking forward to the next stages. Immerse yourself in the story of the Obsborne's emigration and support local creatives from the 27th September 2022 at Market Hall's Immersive Dome in Plymouth.