

*SUGAR*  
*and its legacies*

*Co-production*

*Research Papers #2*

**LONDON  
MUSEUM**

# ABOUT THIS REPORT



## IDEAS GENERATION SESSION

As London Museum relocates in 2026, we are establishing a Research Centre as a trusted hub for London-focused research. The centre will foster collaborative, equitable research across our collections, engaging experts from diverse lived experiences.

Our first iteration of Ideas Generation Sessions explored the theme of Compassion (Co-production Research Papers (2024). Exploring Compassion. London Museum), leading to a participatory research project exploring Compassion on public transports in London in partnership with the University of Derby (Maratos, F.A. and Mobey, B. (2025). Compassion in London, Life on Buses. London: Research Centre Papers, London Museum), and a related Art Commission.

We are now testing this approach for object-based research. In November 2024, we held an Idea Generation Session on the theme of Sugar, bringing together lived experience experts, artists, academics, and community partners (a list of attendees can be found in Appendix). Insights from the session will shape a research project funded by London Museum, launching in April 2025.

## WHY SUGAR?

Sugar, woven into the city's past and present, offers a powerful lens through which to re-examine London's story. Our collections and archives capture London's relations to sugar in many forms—from patterns of dental decay in archaeological remains and objects tied to the British trade of enslaved Africans, to the very building we occupy in Docklands.

Through creative exercises and small-group discussions, we explored these connections, asking:

- How has sugar shaped and continued to shape London?
- How can we actively research sugar's legacies across the city?
- What role can museums and their collections play in this research?

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### Trigger Warning

*This document contains information and photographic images of human remains, and objects connected to the British Trade in Enslaved Africans which may be distressing. These images and materials are shared for research purposes and should be handled with care, respect, and an awareness of their historical and ethical significance.*

# AIMS, PROVOCATIONS, AND INTRODUCTIONS

The session began with a warm welcome, acknowledging both in-person and online participants. Housekeeping matters were addressed, including confirming consent for recording and photography. The session's aims were outlined, referencing past research and the available budget. An overview of the agenda helped set expectations for the day ahead.

Participants introduced themselves in a quick-fire format, keeping their introductions to two minutes. Since biographies were pre-shared, this allowed for a concise yet engaging start, ensuring everyone's perspectives were acknowledged.

It was noted that discussions would take place in both large and small groups, with pre-assigned groups remaining consistent throughout the day. The importance of sensitivity in discussing matters concerning race and legacies was emphasised, recognising that these topics impact individuals differently. A mindful and respectful approach to dialogue was encouraged.



# FIRST WORKSHOP

In advance of the workshop, London Museum sent images of objects in the collection that illustrate how sugar has shaped—and continues to shape—the lives of Londoners. Session participants were asked to review this list in advance and prepare a brief response connecting two or more objects which highlighted a key message or story about the relationship between sugar and London.



**2015.47/69**  
Date: 2005-2015

A side portrait of a scaffolder wearing a hard hat and protective glasses whilst at work at the Tate & Lyle Sugar Refinery, Silvertown.

Some participants were drawn to pictures of workers. One read a quote from Michael Gove (journalist and Conservative politician):

“Why do you want to undermine a commercial success in this country? British sugar is a huge success. Why would you want to not have a single sugar beet grown in East Anglia and people losing their jobs in the Docklands?”

The participant commented on government positioning of sugar as a great British success story, a commercial success story in terms of jobs in the docks, but also in terms of financial success. British sugar is publicly traded on the London Stock Exchange, and Tate and Lyle with operations in London.

This participant wondered: to what extent are we willing to jeopardise the commercial financial success story for London on the basis of good health for people?



**PLA/PLA/PM/6/1/109/4**  
Date: c.1930-1935

Dock workers piling sugar in an import shed at the Royal Docks.

2.



**BIG82 [580]**

St Botolph Church, Billingsgate, London Early Post-Medieval (church destroyed in Great Fire 1666) – burials ceased. Adult male, age estimate 36 – 45 yrs.

The clinical dentist was drawn to a photograph in the collection, with pictures of human remains documenting cavities and periodontal disease, commenting that she has seen similar conditions in modern patients.



**SA/PKC/PRO/1/14/4/10/1**  
Date: 1070s

Image of Sainsbury's sugar products

The neuroscientist stated that his team is known for the discovery of the cells that make humans crave sugar, which are in the intestine right after the stomach. “Gut feeling” is no longer an esoteric term, as his team discovered the biology powering these feelings in the subconscious.

Another participant was drawn to packaging products of sugar and jars from different regions, and stated that it would be interesting to see how sugar was sold over time and how we've got to the stage where it is ubiquitous. Television has encouraged more baking, and the city has changed with a plethora of coffee shops and bakeries, with the majority of bakery products being sugar forward. The participant felt that the impact of sugar on teeth could be better acknowledged in society.

*“The main reason why a child could be admitted to hospital is because their teeth have been extracted, often because of sugar products that they're having. So something about the city, sugar in the diet and the impact on dental health.”*

3.



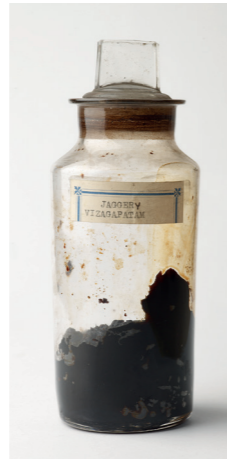
**Sugar samples**  
Date: 1900-1935



**DK88.116/236**  
South-Africa



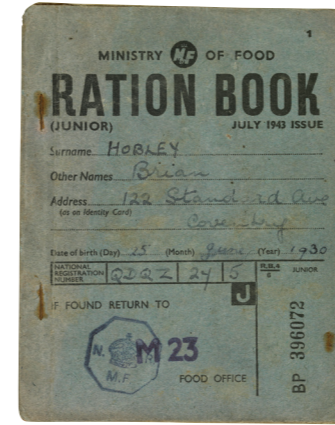
**DK88.116/237**  
Guyana



**DK88.116/290**  
Southeast India



**DK88.116/292**  
Madagascar



**83.176/2**  
Date: 1943

Junior Ration book with blue cover. Issued to Brian Hobley aged 13 years by the Ministry of Food in July 1943.

The ration book was felt to have a very different kind of deployment of state power, in the service of emergency wartime, the service of public health and maintaining supplies. This contrasts modern barriers to government intervention to change diets which politicians call “the nanny state” which was felt to be unwarranted, particularly as the government supported the sugar industry as far back as the 16th Century. The participant referenced the journal article in the museum collection pictured here.

**JS JOURNAL**

September 1974

**Stranded! Girl tells of holiday ordeal** page 2

**What's under the beef mountain? - Euroflation** page 4

**Steel shoes are all the rage** page 2

**Training pays off for the champion hurdler** page 8

**Sugar: Mr JD ticks off the Government but the shortage still goes on**

The sugar shortage goes into another week with few signs that the supply problem is being alleviated. This is in spite of statements by the Government and the major sugar refiners that the world market is still recovering from the August situation. It is not clear how much of the world market is still recovering from the August situation. It is not clear how much of the world market is still recovering from the August situation.

**Diary of a crisis**

February 25th Government decision to raise price of sugar comes under fire from European Commission. First arrival of required regular shipments of sugar from the Caribbean expected in late March.

March 15th Commission continues to claim the cost of production has risen. Price supported under Commonwealth Sugar Agreement continues at £28 and government subsidised with UK.

April 5th British Food Reserve Administration urges Government to open up supply.

May 12th 17 million bags of cane sugar, 6.6 million of which will be 20 per cent below the stipulation on the understanding that minimum Government emergency stock when supplies from the Caribbean are expected to arrive in the next few weeks.

July 13th Sugar industry leaders are to meet officials at the Ministry of Agriculture to discuss means of increasing production of refined sugar.

July 28th Sugar supplies agreed to by Tate and Lyle.

August 2nd Assurance by Mr Frost that the immediate supply position will improve in the middle of the month when supplies are expected to arrive in the country.

August 15th First Payment of the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement continues at £28 and government subsidised with UK.

August 15th Sugar crisis eased by 100,000 tons - Ministry of Agriculture.

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**SA/SC/JSJ/28/9**  
Date: September 1974

'JS Journal': Sainsbury's in house staff magazine 'JS Journal' reports on the sugar shortages in 1974 and the impact it had on the company and customers.



**DK86.18/97**  
Date: 1909-1940

Very large sugar sampling iron with turned wooden handle.

Another participant was prompted by the sampling iron and rationing book to consider the application of state power and its public acceptance in supporting a certain type of industry, noting the iron was dated to the period when the West Indies Docks had a monopoly on sugar imports into the UK, and that the trade links to enslaved people across the globe.

# SECOND WORKSHOP: SUGAR AND OSTEOLOGY\*

The second session delved into the connections between sugar and the osteology collection, exploring why this topic is relevant and significant. Jelena Bekvalac, Curator of Human Osteology at London Museum, shared what human remains in our collection reveal about diet and the city's past consumption of sugar.

Jelena discussed the significance of the osteological collection in linking the past to the present, particularly in understanding public health trends. By recording data in a standardised way, it can be compared with modern datasets, such as dental health records.

- Her presentation highlighted the historical and contemporary impact of sugar consumption, showing evidence from skeletal remains of children with decayed teeth due to high sugar intake, similar to modern trends. Socio-economic factors influence diet, access to dental care, and public health interventions.
- Historical patterns, such as tea breaks for workers, demonstrate how sugar became embedded in daily life. Education and media play crucial roles in shaping awareness, and recent research corroborates these findings.
- Jelena also emphasised the potential for collaborative and innovative research to better understand sugar's widespread impact on health, industry, and society.



\*Osteology is the study of human bones and the analysis of their shape, structure, and composition



Following the presentation, participants worked in two groups—one online and one in-person—each facilitated by a London Museum (LM) representative.

## Key discussion points included:

- The relevance of sugar to osteology collections
- How historical contexts intersect with present-day concerns
- Objects that could best explore these themes
- Research questions and methodologies to capture these ideas effectively

Following the group discussions, feedback was shared, and three potential areas of enquiry were identified:

## INDUSTRIALISATION AND WORKFORCE

*How has sugar shaped global trade, industrialisation, and social inequality, from the early modern period to today?*

- Sugar is one of the oldest commodities in global trade and serves as an example of the consequences of a dissociation of the sensory experience of food. Take coca leaves: Amazonian tribes found they were high in calcium but of course they also produce cocaine. For the tribes, linking coca leaves to cocaine would be like linking potatoes to vodka. The issues stem from the industrialisation, the segregation of these molecules.

- If a mother is exposed to sugar during pregnancy, the preference is passed to her offspring. Participants felt it would be very educational for adults to be able to see the consequences of the entangled sensory experience from food.

# THIRD WORKSHOP: SUGAR AND LEGACIES – DOCKLANDS’ HISTORY AND COLLECTIONS



- Historically the production of sugar created a sudden break between diurnal patterns and nocturnal patterns of behaviour: suddenly people were working through the night to produce sugar in the Americas, which never happened before. Sugar had to be milled and boiled quickly or it rotted, so the enslaved people had to work through the night. It is why slaves died in such droves. One participant spoke of examples in the records of slaves literally falling asleep into boiling sugar. Creation of proto-industrial mills and boiling houses fascinated Britain, who thought of it as part of the scientific revolution, and were constantly trying to develop new revolutionary techniques.
- On the other side of this, the mass production of sugar allows for more consumption of calories, which enables people to work longer hours and work through the night, which drove industrialisation of Britain. There are two levels on which this happens: one is that the profits from sugar production are re-invested in industrialisation. More importantly it creates an enormous amount of excess calories and this was key to the early modern period because people were in famine and regularly struggled with access to food. These were not healthy calories by any means but they allowed workers to work longer hours, creating an industrial working class. Because it was being produced in larger quantities by more enslaved Africans, from the 1680s onwards there was a rapid drop in the price of sugar, enabling the working class in Britain to consume more sugar. This is evidenced in London Museum’s collection from the 18th and 19th Century individuals. In the Americas, historical archaeologists can now identify enslaved skeletons by the sheer amount of lead poisoning in those skeletons, because on early plantations they were using lead pipes in the boiling houses.
- This is related to the modern day because people who are economically disadvantaged or from deprived backgrounds tend to consume sugar the most- because it is cheap and allows them to get the calories they need to get through their days. It is unlikely to be some grand manipulative strategy, but it is cheap, and people are instinctively drawn to sweetness.

## ACTIVISM

*How can we engage young people today in understanding sugar’s historical and social impacts, as past generations did in the fight against slavery?*

- In the 18th Century there were protests in the UK against sugar that were led by women and children. Children understood they were enjoying a delicious product but it was linked to the slave trade, which was a cause that resonated with them. How might children be activated by this issue?
- Compared to contemporary young people’s activism in response to the climate crisis, how many young people today are aware that children played a role in stopping the slave trade?
- Children’s health and school meals: climate-friendly diets are making progress, but there is little action on sugar. Participants felt children are forced into sugar consumption in their environments.

## HEALTH AND INEQUALITY

*How does sugar consumption shape long-term oral health inequalities and overall well-being?*

- Sugar consumption is linked to the rise and fall of teeth brushing and dental care awareness. People are making different food choices, but they still contain a lot of sugar. To an extent this is linked to the food environment, which links to dental health and an individual’s whole health, such as being unable to eat certain foods, or links with mental health.
- The British Dental Association has recently produced research recently on oral health inequalities and have mapped health inequalities, which in certain regions of the country are historic.

After a short break, attention shifted to sugar’s role in the Docklands History and Legacies collection. Jean-François Manicom, Senior Curator (Docklands and Legacies), explored his personal connections to sugar growing up in Guadeloupe, and responded to some of the objects relating to sugar in the London Museum collection.





Jean-François shared a deeply personal and historical narrative about sugar's impact on his own family and broader Caribbean history. He referenced objects in the collection, including sugar-related artefacts, before shifting to his own lineage, tracing connections to the sugar cane industry through his ancestors.

The story follows Jean-François' great-grandfather, a plantation owner, and their grandfather, who worked in the sugar industry without inheriting wealth or recognition. Their family sought to break the "sugar cane malediction", choosing professions outside the industry. Jean-François' journey from Guadeloupe to becoming a contemporary artist and museum curator is rooted in sugar's legacy, culminating in his work establishing a major museum on slavery. He reflected on how sugar has shaped his life, highlighting the paradox of our museum's limited representation of its true power. A machete belonging to his grandfather and used in a sugar plantation, now in his home in Ireland, serves as a tangible link to this legacy.

A second round of group discussions, again split between in-person and online participants, explored:

- The historical and contemporary significance of sugar in London's Docklands
- Relevant research methodologies and key questions
- Objects that could serve as focal points for exploration

Groups reconvened to share their findings, contributing to a broader mapping of overlapping themes. This exercise distilled the following potential areas of enquiry:

## IMPACTS OF BRITISH TRADE IN ENSLAVED AFRICANS

***"The sugar industry can be a river of emotion, of money, of disease"***

- Sugar plantations in the Caribbean created radical changes in the disease environment – yellow fever and malaria spread very rapidly in part because of the way sugar was cultivated. It became an urban disease because so many people were working on these plantations, which is a testament to the sheer number of people brought from Africa to grow sugar.



- The first yellow fever outbreak in the Americas was in Barbados between 1647 and 1652, which happened immediately after sugar farming began and killed 1/3 of the island's population. This happens because they brought over a species of mosquito from West Africa that carries the vector for yellow fever, along with people from the British Isles who had never experienced yellow fever, carried by enslaved Africans. The clay sugar pots spread all over the plantation breed mosquitos in huge numbers in the bottoms of the pots because of stagnant water. Yellow fever also impacted Cuba and anywhere else in the Caribbean that produced sugar.
- Deforestation was another consequence as trees were needed for the boiling houses, and when trees were depleted from one area the operation moved to different forested area. As soon as you start cutting down the trees, and the birds that eat mosquitoes disappear, the mosquito spreads along with viruses. Most modern sugarcane now comes from Brazil, which is experiencing rapid deforestation. Future research might explain the movement of people, objects, mosquitoes, and disease and the interlinking of these aspects.
- Links between sugar and climate change were raised, as slavery and plantations started the model and the transformation of reserves as commodities. It was the first extractive industry creating norms and economic models, giving rise to the modern relationship with the natural world.
- A discussion was held about the descendants of sugar workers who fled the fields for alternative employment. This created an employment gap, which is political as well as linked to movement from achieving independence.

## BRITISH SUGAR FARMING TODAY

***What kind of sugar supply chains does the UK have a current and historic responsibility to be supporting?***

- Sugar comes from two different crops: sugar cane or sugar beet, which present their own environmental and social issues such as pesticide use and water runoff. According to participant expertise, the UK does not grow much but the country is a huge producer of sugar beet and uses more agricultural land to grow sugar beet than all fruit and vegetables combined. The UK sugar market is 50% from beet and 50% from cane, and these crops have radically different histories.
- There is a narrative that British farming needs to be saved and one of the ways to do that is with a strong sugar beet industry. There is another school of thought that the UK has a historical responsibility toward its former colonies and should be importing cane from those countries. This is a live debate: should Government be putting in place measures to save British farming, or opening is post-Brexit market to enable more sugar to be imported? At the moment, it's done both, with huge amounts of sugar being imported from Australia which has been viewed as a gesture to the Commonwealth.

## SUGAR, A SUCCESS STORY?

***"It is a success story, but also it's a very brutal story"***

- How do you define success? Sugar has a lot of negative side effects, but politicians focus on creating and retaining jobs. The docklands, where the session was held, was built on sugar and therefore created jobs, but how do the negative consequences have relevance today? Who is successful, and how has money from sugar trickled down?
- Younger generations may be wanting to move away from working in sugar and are looking for London connections. Most food production factories have gone, but the sugar factory is still there. What does that say about sugar?
- How do these parallel lives map across London?

# IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL RESEARCH THEMES

With some overarching themes identified, the workshop then turned to refining potential research themes. Considerations included: the limitations of budget and timescale; the necessity of maintaining a strong London connection; opportunities to integrate collections effectively.

## SUGAR, BODIES, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Sugar shapes individual and collective histories through its impact on health, migration, and diet, leaving visible traces in people's bodies and environments. The story of sugar is expressed in people's lives and in their bodies, in their jobs, their migration patterns, their teeth, their gut.

## TRADE, INDUSTRY, AND GLOBAL SYSTEMS

From colonial plantations to modern ultra-processed foods, sugar has driven economies, industrialisation, and migration while reinforcing global inequalities. Sugar's unsustainability causes enormous health consequences including very visibly on teeth.

## RESISTANCE, ACTIVISM, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

From the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and 18th-century sugar boycotts through to modern health campaigns, people have continually resisted sugar's exploitative systems, demanding better labour rights and public health policies.

## ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF SUGAR

As a resource-intensive and unsustainable commodity, sugar has caused environmental destruction and major public health crises, sparking ongoing debates about sustainability and justice. Sugar's unsustainability causes enormous environmental damage - it is a capitalist crop that consumes resources and people.



# LONDON AND LONDON MUSEUM

- London remains central to the global sugar economy. The London Stock Exchange and British Sugar, a subsidiary of Associated British Foods, play significant roles in the financial landscape of the sugar industry. However, the full story of who truly benefits from this industry remains untold. Who is financing our food system and shaping our public health?
- Health Inequalities and Lasting Impacts. While the industry's profits are privatised, its consequences—particularly the burden of ill health on London's diverse communities—are socialised, ultimately falling on the public purse. The long-term effects of sugar consumption, from dental health to chronic disease, continue to shape communities, particularly those historically linked to empire.
- Museums as Spaces for Change – With thousands of visitors daily, the museum has the power to shift perspectives and challenge the inequalities sugar continues to reinforce.



# MAPPING POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

## SUGAR, BODIES, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

- What are the sites of London sugar? This might include sites where sugar appears, bodies as a site of a testimony to sugar, or physical structures linked to sugar.
- What is the physiological impact on the human body of increased sugar consumption, and when did that start?

## TRADE, INDUSTRY, AND GLOBAL SYSTEMS

- In what ways has sugar production and the broader story of colonialism shaped the built environment and the financial investments in modern London (and the UK more broadly)?
- What does the abolition of slavery mean in the context of indentured labour still being used to produce sugar?
- What are the effects of sugar on particular areas? The city, the neighbourhood, the people, the built environment, and/or the financial power? How might the museum or the research project record personal stories surrounding this?

## RESISTANCE, ACTIVISM, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

- If sugar is recognised as unsustainable, how might it be addressed as a global problem? Can international bridges and connections be created to empower people to address this as one commonality?
- How might sugar-related inequality be mapped in London? This could include dental decay in children linked to areas of deprivation; child obesity linked to deprivation, etc.

## ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF SUGAR

- What are the environmental consequences of sugar production? When did that start and how has it changed over time?
- How is the industry “lean washing” to conceal its unpleasant realities to make its products more palatable?



# APPENDIX

## PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES, COMPILED AND SHARED IN ADVANCE OF THE SESSION

### Dr Kawther Hashem (she/her)

I am a Lecturer in Public Health Nutrition and I head the research and impact of our action on sugar workstream at Queen Mary University of London.

I have a BSc in Nutrition from King's College London, a MSc in Food Policy from City University London and a PhD in Preventive Medicine focusing on sugar reduction from Queen Mary University of London. I currently hold a prestigious NIHR Advanced Fellowship looking at the policies that led to food reformulation to reduce sugar in the top contributors to sugar intake in children in the UK.

I am curious to meet people interested in exploring the influence of sugar on our history and society and how to overcome its impact, when it has been negative.

### Jessica Sinclair Taylor (she/her)

I'm Jess, Deputy Director at Feedback and project lead for our sugar pollution campaign. Our campaign is the first to bring together the health and environmental impacts of sugar production, and calls for deliberate policy intervention to check the UK's supply of sugar, which is currently nearly three times greater than the maximum safe limit for the population according to NHS England.

### Carina Millstone (she/her)

I am Carina Millstone, the Executive Director of environmental and social justice campaign group Feedback. I am a deeply committed environmental activist with a deep interest in the sugar industry, especially with regards to issues of corporate concentration, colonial legacy and impacts on soils and food security. I am thrilled to be at the workshop and look forward to our conversations.

### A retired dental specialist who wished to remain anonymous

## JOINING REMOTELY

### Dr Justin Roberts (he/him)

I am an associate professor of History at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada. I specialize in the study of slavery in the Atlantic World and have written extensively about the management of sugar plantations and the experiences of enslaved people on those plantations.

### Dr Diego Bohórquez (he/him)

Diego is a Gastronomer. His team is known for establishing neuropod cells as the cornerstone of gut feelings – those sensations elicited from food and microbes in our gut that guide our feelings and emotions.

## MUSEUM STAFF

### Debbie Lowes (she/her)

I have been at the museum for 11 years first as a volunteer and then as a host. I am very much a people person and hope I will bring this perspective to the group.

I am hard of hearing, so it would be best if everyone could take turns speaking. I also appreciate seeing faces, as I rely on lip reading.

### Dr Domenico Sergi (he/him)

I am a cis-male gay working-class Mediterranean migrant. I work as a Senior Research Lead at the museum where I am responsible for setting up a new research centre. I have done all sorts of jobs since arriving in London 20 years ago, and spent the last few years working in both museums and universities. Outside of the museum, I practice Qi Gong and I am involved in a number of local activist organisations.

### Jean-François Manicom

I'm JF Senior Curator, before being in London I was the lead curator of the International Slavery Museum of Liverpool.

I'm coming from the French Caribbean, so I literally grow up in a sugar cane field, my grandfather spent his entire working life in the sugar cane industry, I'm fascinated by the power of contemporary art as a medium for embodied and speak about traumatic stories, and as a curative process.

Out of my museum activities I'm a sound therapist and I'm running a small resilient farm.

### Jelena Bekvalac (she/her)

I am Curator of Human Osteology and have been at the museum for 21 years, having the privilege to care for and learn from the skeletal remains of individuals from the past that have all been revealed through archaeological excavations. The bespoke osteological database used to enter data following the standardised methods of analysis, is a formidable research tool enabling running specific data queries for the extensive osteological collection. I am fascinated by the past and love learning about the people directly from them, thinking about their life course and the meaning of that in relation to the context of when they were alive. I like sparkly things, food with friends (good & naughty!), a good giggle, being in the garden and walking around London. I am looking forward to participating in the workshop and meeting the other attendees.

### Ada Robinsmith (she/her)

I'm an administrator and researcher at the museum, specialising in British theatre and dance history. I've called London home for the last decade and live with my wife and two cats in Hounslow.

### Sarah Cartino (she/her)

I'm a North American migrant with a working class background and lived experience of a mental health disability. I'm also a project manager and as "culture creates social solidarity" (Brian Eno) I am driven to support the arts; before the museum I've primarily worked in music. I've also held a variety of voluntary roles. I'm struck by how the sugar trade has shaped London and society at large, and despite being at the museum for nearly 3 years, I know there's more for me to learn.



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