
Reflections on the 'Taste the Archive' event – Great Fish and Chips Exhibition at the University of Kent

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The original exhibition – The Great British Fish and Chips – was commissioned by Counterpoint Arts in 2021 as part of National Refugee Week, in partnership with Canterbury Cathedral and Turner Contemporary, Margate. Reportage artist Olivier Kugler, and writer Andrew Humphreys, interviewed and illustrated the everyday stories and experiences of migration connected to Kent's most celebrated high street food; fish and chips. They explored the history of fish and chips, Britain's national dish through interviewing and learning the stories of shop owners, staff and customers at Fish & Chips shops across Kent, and discovered that it could not exist without global trade and migration. Migration and displacement are central themes. Fish & chips can be traced back to Huguenot and Jewish arrivals in the UK and people from all over the world continue to be central to the farming and fishing industries and the high street shops. The hosting of this travelling exhibition also includes a display of items from the University of Kent Special Collections & Archives.

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In association with

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Basma El Doukhi

Doctoral Researcher in Migration Studies and one of
the Great Fish and Chips project's lead

The Great Fish and Chips exhibition and the volunteer Research and Curation Group's work created specially to complement the exhibition and display of items from the University of Kent Special Collections and Archives were launched on Wednesday 22nd June 2022 during the Refugee Week in the Templeman Library Gallery.

The Great British Fish and Chips was originally commissioned to investigate the history of the Fish and Chips by celebrating, sharing and investigating the stories and experiences of migration across Kent through interviewing and talking to people engaged in the Fish and Chips industry like shop owners, and customers. This commission was achieved through a great partnership among Counterpoint Arts, Canterbury Cathedral and Turner Contemporary, Margate. Reportage artist Olivier Kugler, and writer Andrew Humphreys in 2021. This partnership led to the exploration of displacement and migration as a main theme by creating five art works that illustrated these daily experiences of the involved people in this industry.

Looking back at the history of the Fish and chips, we learn that its origin come from Huguenot and Jewish arrivals in the UK – and people from all over the world.

One of the events that we hosted as part of the exhibition was the 'Taste the Archive', a sensory food event. The event offered attendees a chance to sample a variety of cuisines, from British fish and chips to similar Middle Eastern dishes such as Maamoul, Arabic homemade bread, Humous and Falfel while exploring the exhibition. The event aimed to create a safe and inclusive space for individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their migration stories and cultural heritage using food, arts, and creativity. 'Taste the Archive' was the first event of its kind at the University of Kent in relation to intersectionality of migration, stories of people, food, culture and trade led. The space used for the exhibition – the Templeman Library Gallery – was a unique setting and it was the first time that it had been used for a sensory food event.



The exhibition at the University of Kent was led and initiated by Basma El Doukhi, a third-generation Palestinian refugee and a doctoral researcher, after she was awarded funding by the universities Migration and Movement Signature Research Theme. Basma collaborated with the Templeman Library Gallery team and Canterbury Cathedral to bring this exhibition on campus. Basma is a third-generation Palestinian refugee who lived in one of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Her research in migration studies explores refugee leadership in humanitarian action focusing on the refugee-led organisations as a form of this leadership. Basma attended the original Great British Fish and Chips exhibition at Canterbury Cathedral and decided to bring the exhibition to the student and staff at her university with a focus on migration and displacement in the UK and globally, through food, culture, and trade. This event gave students and staff the opportunity to engage with ongoing efforts to challenge the status quo and the hostile environment faced by people who are seeking sanctuary in the UK.

A major highlight of the Great Fish and Chips exhibition at the University of Kent was exhibiting the hand-stitched dress from the Palestinian refugees residing in Rashideh Camp, one of the twelve Palestinian Camps of Lebanon. In addition, the exhibition displayed photography by Rania Saadallah, who is a Palestinian artist.

Rania's photographs captured the stories of inspiring refugees living in the Palestinian Camps in Lebanon, and depicted the preparation of foods such as falafel, ma'amoul, and traditionally baked breads, as well as refugee fisherman at work. Through these images and stories, the exhibition explored the process by which people can be brought together by sharing food, stories, and cultural traditions.

A second success story was the co-curation of the exhibition with the volunteers who formed the Research and Curation Group. The group spent two sessions exploring the original material in the Special Collections and Archives at the University of Kent, selecting items that particularly interested them, and writing captions to describe their item and explain its inclusion in the exhibition. Themes explored by the Research and Curation Group included attitudes to migrant communities in Britain today and in the past, immigration policy in the UK, the development of the fishing industry, the maritime history of places in Kent, and expressions of British 'ownership' of the seas in the past as expressed in our theatre collections.





Another triumph was the 'Taste the Archive' event that accompanied the main exhibition. Below are some reflections about the impact of the event from a handful of the attendees;

Question: Do you think eating the foods reflected in the exhibition had an impact on your experience viewing the exhibition today?

"The sensory element added to the enjoyment of the event. It was a really nice part of the experience."

"I think it enriched the sensory experience and made it much more convivial – the atmosphere was lovely and that was due to the sharing of food."

"It helped me think about the history and the culture behind certain foods."

"It was a unifying experience and people said it helped them understand the content of the exhibition."

Question: Do you think you have learned something about the food and cultural traditions of someone with a different background to you at the event today?

"Yes – I was reminded about the importance of food and not to take the sharing of food for granted."

Yes – the global roots of fish and chips."

Yes – talking about the ingredients in the food, and how they were made for special occasions. The illustrations – it was good to see some of the past racism and the change in opinions."

It was eye-opening for Basma, the volunteers, and attendees to learn about the history of fish and chips through enabled, affective, and interactive conversations about the connection between one of Britain's national dishes.

In a conclusion, the Great Fish and Chips Exhibition and the 'Taste the Archive' event offered more than 100 attendees – including displaced students, university staff and students, and community organisations – the opportunity to engage in discussions about seeking sanctuary, migration, food and culture – and the role that universities should play in supporting these sorts of initiatives. It was important that the University of Kent were present and engaged in these discussions, especially considering the university's application to become a University of Sanctuary: an award given to institutions that offer a place of safety, solidarity and empowerment for people seeking sanctuary. By prioritising work like this, we hope to advance the university's public engagement, promote a open environment, and encourage important conversations in public discourse.

Our exhibition taught us that universities, like the University of Kent, can play a significant role in promoting a welcoming culture by engaging in conversations with diverse people on contemporary issues, especially during these difficult times for displaced communities. By supporting proper engagement, we can help shift existing narratives and discourses about displaced communities in the UK and globally.