

**CARLOS TROWER**



**Myers-Insole Local Learning CIC**  
**[www.locallearning.org.uk](http://www.locallearning.org.uk)**



Historic England



\*Accessibility Statement: This case study report is designed to be colourblind-friendly to ensure accessibility for all readers. The colour schemes that are distinguishable by people with various types of colour vision to enhance clarity and readability.

\*All Illustrations and photographs shown, unless stated otherwise, were done and taken by RHIZA Studio.

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# RHIZA STUDIO

Rooted in Community, Growing with Purpose



Amardeep Singh



Olivia Elsey



Mustafa Alhawari



Oneilla Weeratunge



Najah Mohammed

At R-H-I-Z-A Studio, we are more than architects—we are storytellers, collaborators, and innovators. Our designs are driven by the belief that architecture should be an experience that inspires, connects, and endures. By blending creativity with purpose, we craft spaces that resonate deeply with the people who inhabit them.

- How We Work:**
- Collaborative Approach: We work closely with communities, clients, and stakeholders to create designs that are meaningful and relevant. Every voice matters and our process thrives on the collective energy of collaboration.
  - Playful Creativity: We believe in the power of play and experimentation to push design beyond the ordinary. Whether it's through interactive exhibitions or reimagined public spaces, our work is a celebration of creativity and fun.
  - Purposeful Design: Accessibility, culture and legacy are at the heart of what we do. We design with the future in mind, creating spaces that leave a lasting impact.

**Our Vision:** R-H-I-Z-A Studio strives to reimagine architecture as a tool for connection and empowerment. We envision a world where design is a catalyst for meaningful change, weaving together the threads of heritage, identity and innovation into spaces that inspire. Whether designing for today or dreaming of tomorrow, we are rooted in our values and driven to grow with purpose.

- Our Ethos:**
- Accessibility: We ensure every project is inclusive, creating spaces that everyone can navigate and enjoy.
  - Community Engagement: By collaborating closely with communities we design spaces that tell their stories and reflect their aspirations.
  - Historical Relevance: Honouring the past is central to our work, embedding the legacy of history into designs that shape the future.
  - Disability Awareness: Partnering with groups like DAB (Disability Activism Bristol), we reimagine how architecture can break barriers and empower all.
  - Legacy: We believe great architecture leaves a lasting impact—not just in physical form, but in how it shapes culture, empowers people and transforms communities.
  - Culture Heritage: We are passionate about preserving and celebrating cultural heritage, ensuring that the rich history and identity of places are respected and integrated into our designs.

# LOCAL LEARNING



**Myers-Insole Local Learning CIC**  
[www.locallearning.org.uk](http://www.locallearning.org.uk)



*Fig.1 - Ruth Myers & Pete Insole of Local Learning*



*Fig.2 - QR for Local Learning About page*

Local Learning is a community-focused organisation that creates educational and cultural projects to celebrate and preserve local history, heritage and identity. It collaborates with schools, artists, historians and local residents to bring untold stories to life through creative and participatory initiatives.

The organisation often works within specific communities, facilitating projects such as oral history collections, exhibitions, and performances. For example, its “Meadows to Meaders” community soap opera in Southmead engages locals in storytelling, showcasing the lived experiences of the area. It also partners with institutions like Bristol Old Vic, St Mary Redcliffe Church, and schools to enhance learning and cultural understanding. Through these collaborations, Local Learning uses tools like intergenerational workshops, multimedia exhibitions, and performance art to foster connections between historical events and present-day social themes.

‘A Fine Balance’ explores the legacy of Carlos Trower, anti-slavery campaigner and circus performer, reflecting the organization’s commitment to diversifying historical narratives. We worked closely with Ruth Myers and Pete Insole, the co-directors of Local Learning, during the course of this project. (Local Learning, 2025)

# CARLOS TROWER

This project drew inspiration from a previous Songlines project 'A Fine Balance' and Carlos' story was part of it. We also chose Carlos's project as it is something different from an architectural project, something really inviting to look into history and bring a story of inspiring legend along with the community.

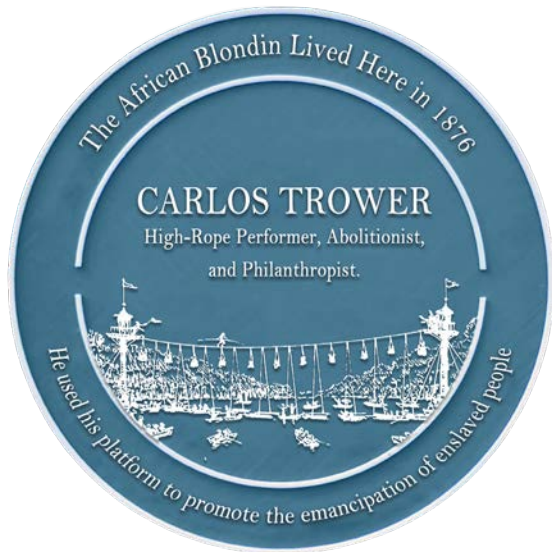
Carlos Trower, famously known as the 'African Blondin' was born into slavery in the United States. one of the World's greatest ever high rope walkers and he used this platform to promote the emancipation of enslaved people. Having fled to this country, Carlos risked his safety and returned to America in 1862 to perform at the Emancipation Day Picnic in Brooklyn, New York. He was 12 years old.

His performances raised money for orphans and widows, hospitals and famine relief. "This wonderful Performer has astonished millions by his Daring and Marvellous Exploits on the High Rope." But this headline act, this star attraction, this 'African Blondin' died in poverty at the age of 39 and little is known about his life away from the limelight. Carlos made a daring escape as a child through the Underground Railroad, a secret network that helped enslaved people reach freedom. After gaining his freedom, Carlos discovered his incredible talent as a high-rope performer. He later moved to the UK, where he amazed audiences with daring stunts, including walking blindfolded, lying down mid-wire, and performing surrounded by flames.



*Fig. 3 - Portrait of Carlos Trower by Rachel Hemming Bray*

# THE BLUE PLAQUE



*Fig.4 - Proposal of the Blue Plaque imagined by RHIZA  
Studio inspired by Trevor Haddrell*



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Historic England

The national blue plaque initiative by Historic England highlights individuals from various backgrounds who have profoundly impacted society, whether by enhancing human happiness and welfare, advancing their field, or serving their communities in extraordinary ways.

Administered by Historic England on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, this program builds upon the achievements of the London blue plaque scheme, managed by English Heritage, and works alongside similar local projects across the country. (Historic England, No date)

In this context, the Blue Plaque would be placed at 7 Christmas Steps in Bristol, where Carlos lived. It's not just about marking a physical location; it's about acknowledging his contribution to the cultural and social fabric of the city.



# RHIZA'S RESEARCH

The 15th of October was our initial group research workshop held in the Bristol Archives joined by the whole of Rhiza Studio, UWE History and Animation. One group dived into learning about Carlos' early life, his way into Bristol and his time spent performing in the UK. The other group zoned down to researching more on the residents of Christmas Step. Following the Street Directory and St.Micheal's School Registration Directory we attempted to imagine the community in the 1870s, their occupations and an outlook of how different a walk down Christmas Steps would've been.

There were several drama workshops planned to commence across three days in the week of 11th November. They were organised by Local Learning to be held at Willow Park Primary School located near Christmas Steps.

In preparation we had a meeting the week prior involving Ruth Myers, Dr. Paul Green, Julian Warren of the Theatre Collection and Dr. Rose Wallis of UWE M.History to discuss engaging tactics to involve the children in the research process. It was a brilliant idea designed to spark excitement in the children to discover information about the community of 1870 that once lived in the very same area where they now go to school. Guided by Dr. Paul Green we familiarised ourselves with the Christmas Steps Christmas Steps shops and community as they are today, while he drew comparisons to how they existed in the 1870s.



*Fig.5 - Research at the Bristol Archives*



*Fig.6 - Guided tour of Christmas Steps by Dr. Paul Green*

# WORKSHOPS

At Willow Park Primary School we worked with a class of 22 children in years 4 to 6 teaching the children all about Carlos Trower, his life as a performer and the community around him on Christmas Steps. Co-delivered by David Ellington with BSL interpretation by Sherrie Eugene-Hart, during the workshop we assisted in engaging with the children and collecting their thoughts.

Led by David and Paul, our first workshop was all about community research which involved a walking tour of some of the important places featured in Carlos' Bristol story; Christmas Steps, Carlos' house (which is currently 'I Am Acrylic'), Bristol Beacon and finally the Theatre Collection. Along the way David taught us all the sign names to each of these locations which both captivated and engaged the children during the walk. It was a very special and unique experience for them to take part in finding out about Carlos and his community in the 1870s. It was amusing to hear their genuine remarks and thoughtful questions about Carlos and his life throughout the walk, a few which are captured below

*"Wow he walked really high up, its almost touching that window on top!"*

*"If I fall down then everyone in front of me will fall down" (while walking down Christmas Steps)*

*"What race was Carlos? Was he black?"*



**Willow Park**  
C of E Primary School



*Fig.7 - Illustrations of the workshops held at Willow Park School*



Our second visit to Willow Park School included two engaging drama-based workshops. The first workshop, led by Ruth M. and David interpreted by Sherrie, gave the children an opportunity to learn more about Carlos Trower's incredible life. They explored his time in the circus, his daring escape from slavery in America, and his journeys across Europe as a celebrated performer. The session encouraged the children to imagine themselves as part of the circus, deciding what their own acts would be. It was truly a joy to watch their characters come to life, sparking creativity and imagine what life was like for Carlos and his friends in the circus.



*Fig.8a - Illustrations of the drama workshops held at Willow Park School*

The second workshop, led by theatre maker and performer Carlota Matos and theatre producer and community legend Ruth Pitter MBE, focused on life down Christmas Steps. We made some props for the acts that were well received by the children. They shared their ideas about the residents and what kind of shops might have been down Christmas Steps at the time when Carlos was living there.



*Fig.8b - Illustrations of the drama workshops held at Willow Park School*

# CARLOS'S STEPS

Rhiza Studio worked collaboratively to set up the exhibition at The Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne. As part of the effort, the team reached out to the Christmas Steps community proposing the idea of placing easter eggs in their shop windows to create a trail leading to the exhibition. The community embraced the idea enthusiastically, making it a truly collective and engaging project.

Incorporating contributions and creative elements from Willow Park School truly made the exhibition feel special. From the panel outlook to the accessibility of the space, we prioritised inclusivity to ensure the exhibition could be appreciated by a wide and diverse audience.



Fig.9 - Rhiza Studio x Local Learning x Dr. Paul Green

Fig.10 - Carlos' s Steps exhibition at The Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne

# Playbills

The children brought the circus to life through their imaginations, envisioning themselves as performers and creating vibrant sketches of their roles. Their work was a testament to their enthusiasm during the workshops, reflecting the inspiration they drew from Trower's story and David's impressions.



Fig.11a - The children's adaptations of their circus acts & characters

The children also created playful circus character names that brought a chuckle to all readers, adding a delightful touch to the workshops. We combined their creations into circus playbills and they were thrilled to see their characters featured in the exhibition.



Fig.11b - The children's adaptations of their circus acts & characters



Fig.12a - The children's Circus acts created into Playbills

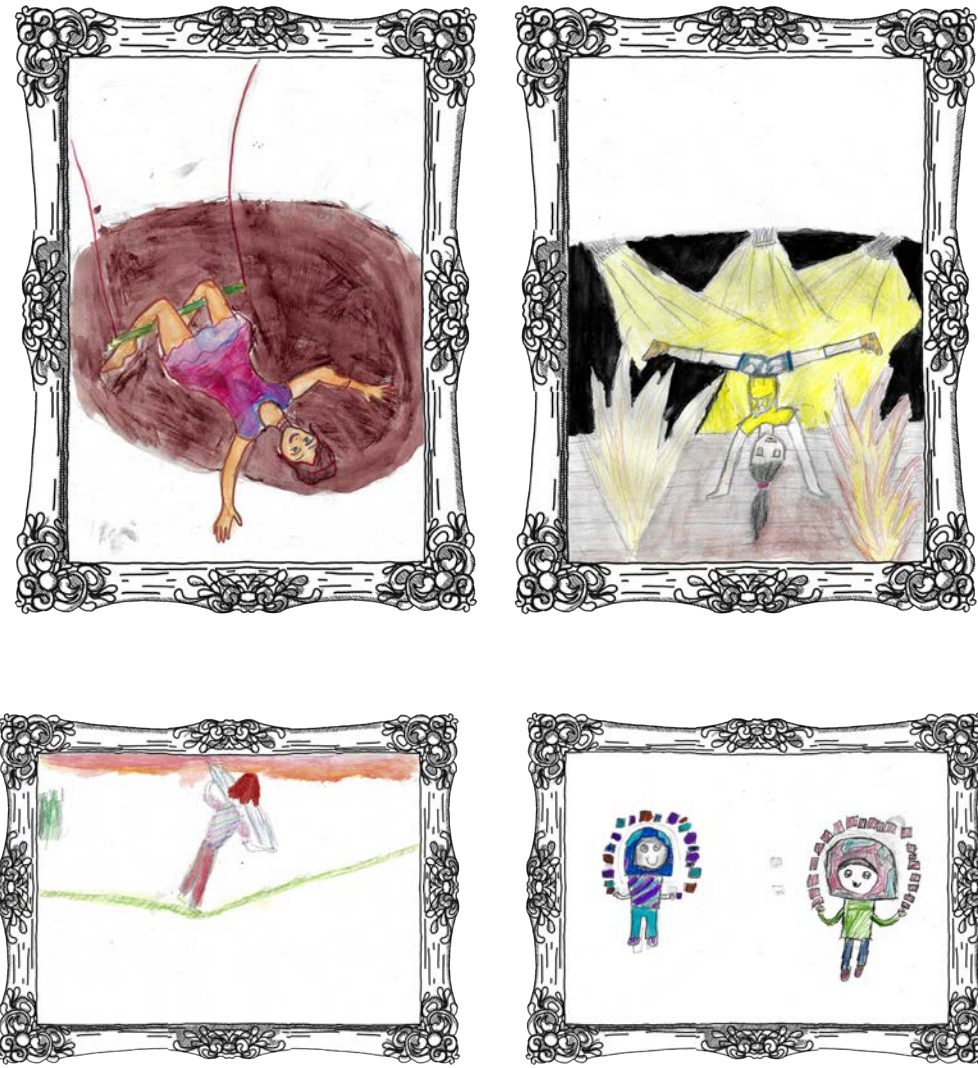


Fig.11c - The children's adaptations of their circus acts & characters



Fig.12b - The children's Circus acts created into Playbills



# FEEDBACK



*Fig.13 - A visitor leaving feedback at the exhibition*



*Fig.15 - Feedback Tickets received*



*Fig.14 - QR for Rhiza Studio*

For the exhibition, we designed artifacts in the form of circus tickets. The tickets served as a memento, as the tag features a QR code, highlighting everything RHIZA Studio has done.

Each visitor received a ticket upon entry, adding a sense of playfulness and excitement to the experience. These tickets also featured a feedback question to engage the community. We welcomed over 100 visitors, including both locals and people further away.

The responses were amazing, especially the feedback from the Willow Park Primary School Children, as they really enjoyed the Playbills and seeing their acts and drawings displayed for all to see. Although most Bristolians that visited the exhibition hadn't heard of Carlos' talents and fantastic life before, many wished to see Carlos' legacy live on and be passed down to future generations as historical knowledge. We had positive responses of raising more awareness on the topic and was done by sharing this exhibition widely via the QR code; connecting more people at everyone's convenience.

We were interviewed by Bristol 24/7 about the exhibition and its connection to architecture, which is rooted in designing spaces that serve the community, preserve cultural heritage and promote inclusivity. This interaction played a key role in sharing Carlos Trower's story with a wider audience, supporting our goal of raising public awareness.

What do you hope this exhibition will achieve for its audience or the community?

show off the amazing history in the area + engage others

How do you think this exhibition could inspire or change the way others think about community or storytelling?

People will be more open minded to possibilities. We have proof that Carlos Trower lived and resided in Bristol and had an incredible skill. Thank goodness for the historians keep the story alive!

What was the most surprising thing you learned from this exhibition?

He wheeled a wheel barrow on the high rope! 😲

What do you hope this exhibition will achieve for its audience or the community?

Sharing the story of the greatest high rope walker. Making Carlos Trower's story live on through generations

What did you most enjoy about the Carlos Trower exhibition?

I enjoyed the combination of the Christmas story exhibition + the chape exhibition. I loved walking the steps he would've walked. The sign figure is wonderful & very informative

What have you learned about Carlos Trower?

That he liked to be thought of as younger than he was, on his name certificate

What did you most enjoy about the Carlos Trower exhibition?

What a great surprise!! Even though I live in Bristol for 5 years, I wasn't aware of this part of history!

What do you hope this exhibition will achieve for its audience or the community?

Raise awareness for Carlos Trower, help towards gaining a blue plaque, be the first of many exhibitions / events in the chape! ♥

What did you most enjoy about the Carlos Trower exhibition?

The part where we made the circus where my favorite were

How do you think this exhibition could inspire or change the way others think about community or storytelling?

Thinking about how local places + people connect with bigger movements + histories

What did you most enjoy about the Carlos Trower exhibition?

seeing each others pictures and bit tops

What have you learned about Carlos Trower?

he was a tightrope walker who raised money for important causes such as banning slavery & helping those in need

Fig.16 - Some feedback by visitors that could contribute to the legacy of Carlos Trower

# ACCESSIBILITY | SUSTAINABILITY



*Fig.17 - The Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne*



*Fig.18 - Accessibility ramp*

When we learned the exhibition would be held at the The Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne, it was incredibly exciting. Not only is the chapel a more accessible location, but it also added a sense of uniqueness and charm to the event, as many had never been inside before. Working with DAB (Disability Activism Bristol) was instrumental in embedding accessibility into every aspect of the design, ensuring it was a fundamental principle, not an afterthought.

Accessibility was a key focus from the start. Our goal was to ensure the exhibition could be experienced and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of ability. The design aimed to recreate the magic of walking through the Christmas Steps—a journey through history brought to life with lights and elevations, but in a more accessible setting.



*Fig.15 - QR for Rhiza Studio*

Upon reflection, including the QR code has proven to be a valuable tool for extending the exhibition's reach and accessibility. It allowed people who couldn't attend in person to engage with the content and learn about Carlos Trower's life conveniently and at their own pace. The digital format ensures the exhibition's message endures beyond its physical presence. Moreover, it highlights the impressive work of the students from Willow Park School, giving their contributions a platform to be appreciated by a wider audience.

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Fig.2 – QR for Local Learning About page

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Fig.4 – Proposal of the Blue Plaque imagined by RHIZA Studio inspired by Trevor Haddrell

Fig.5 - Research at the Bristol Archives

Fig.6 - Guided tour of Christmas Steps by Dr. Paul Green

Fig.7 - Illustrations of the workshops held at Willow Park School

Fig.8a - Illustrations of the drama workshops held at Willow Park School

Fig.8b - Illustrations of the drama workshops held at Willow Park School

Fig.9 - Rhiza Studio x Local Learning x Dr. Paul Green

Fig.10 - Carlos's Steps exhibition at The Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne

Fig.11 a- The children's adaptations of their circus acts & characters

Fig.11 b - The children's adaptations of their circus acts & characters

Fig.11 c - The children's adaptations of their circus acts & characters

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Fig.17 - The Chapel of the Three Kings of Cologne

Fig.18 - Accessibility ramp

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