

LIGHT ON THE WATCH - HANNAH WHITTAKER RESIDENCY

Overview

The residency focused on researching the history of the Police Section House at the Historic Dockyard Chatham, the former residential quarters for the Dockyard's own police force. I was given access to newly uncovered discoveries, artefacts, and archival records, alongside invaluable support from members of the Chatham Dockyard Historical Society. From this material, I was tasked with developing an immersive, interactive experience.

The breadth of available research was both fascinating and challenging. There were many compelling stories and details, and deciding what to foreground, and what to leave out, proved difficult. Rather than attempting to present everything, I chose to focus on the tension between *watchers and the watched*, turning the gaze back onto the police themselves and placing them under scrutiny and suspicion.

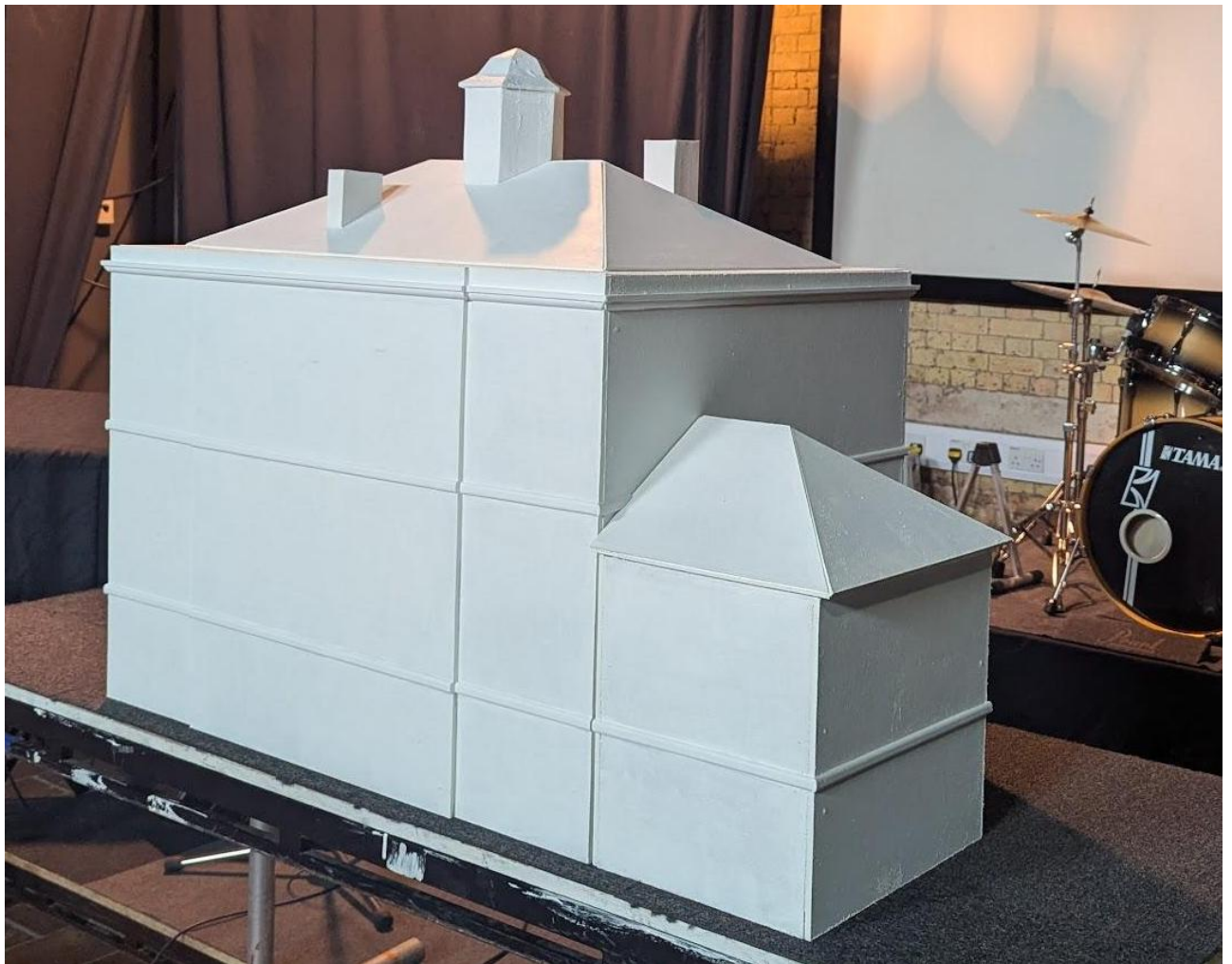
Central to this decision was a desire to use the source material to create an artwork that was genuinely interactive, rather than a factual or didactic museum-style display. To achieve this, I focused on a single defining element of each individual's story, allowing interaction to reveal personal, often hidden, narratives.

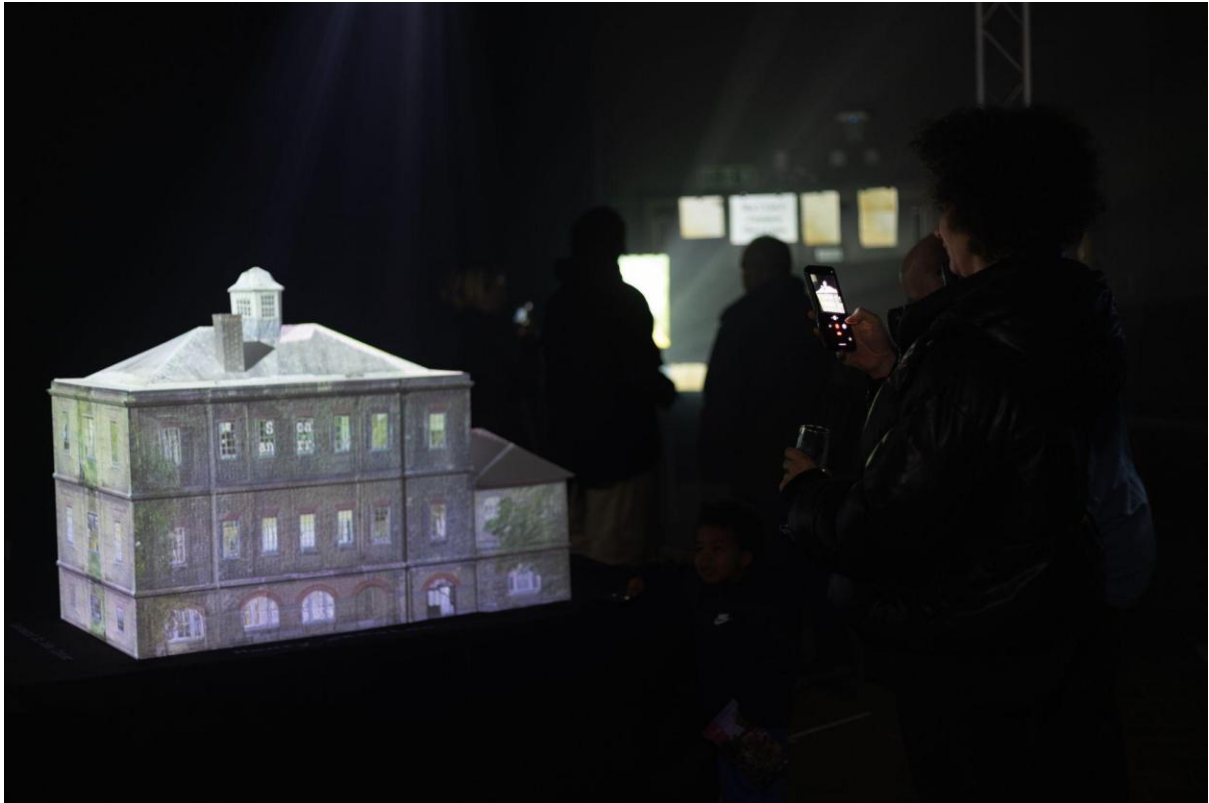


The Model

I created a scale maquette of the Police Section House to act as the physical and conceptual centre of the installation. Projection mapping transformed the white façade of the model into the historic building itself. Using a Stream Deck, viewers could press a button to take them “inside” the structure, with the exterior projections peeling back to reveal interior spaces.

The visuals were informed by LiDAR scans of the building, grounding the work in accurate architectural data. Three sides of the model featured small sculptural figures, each introducing a real historical character and their time spent in the building.





Henry

This piece took the form of a digital portrait that subtly comes to life and tells a secret when the viewer gets close.

Henry Skeates rose from modest beginnings to become a respected and seemingly model policeman, enforcing discipline and order. However, in 1918 he joined the illegal National Union of Police, despite it being a proscribed organisation. Although he later persuaded his men not to join the 1919 strike, thereby avoiding their dismissal, his involvement reveals a more complex and conflicted figure.

The portrait remains still and composed, quietly whispering “psst” to attract attention. When the viewer approaches, Henry checks that the coast is clear before leaning in to reveal his involvement in the Union, implicating the audience in this moment of secrecy.

Tech:

Originally, this interaction was designed to use a Kinect to detect proximity. However, due to repeated crashes, I replaced it with a more reliable solution: a contact microphone hidden beneath a board. When stepped on, it triggered the animation. Although less concealed, it maintained the essential requirement that the viewer physically approach the work.





Walter

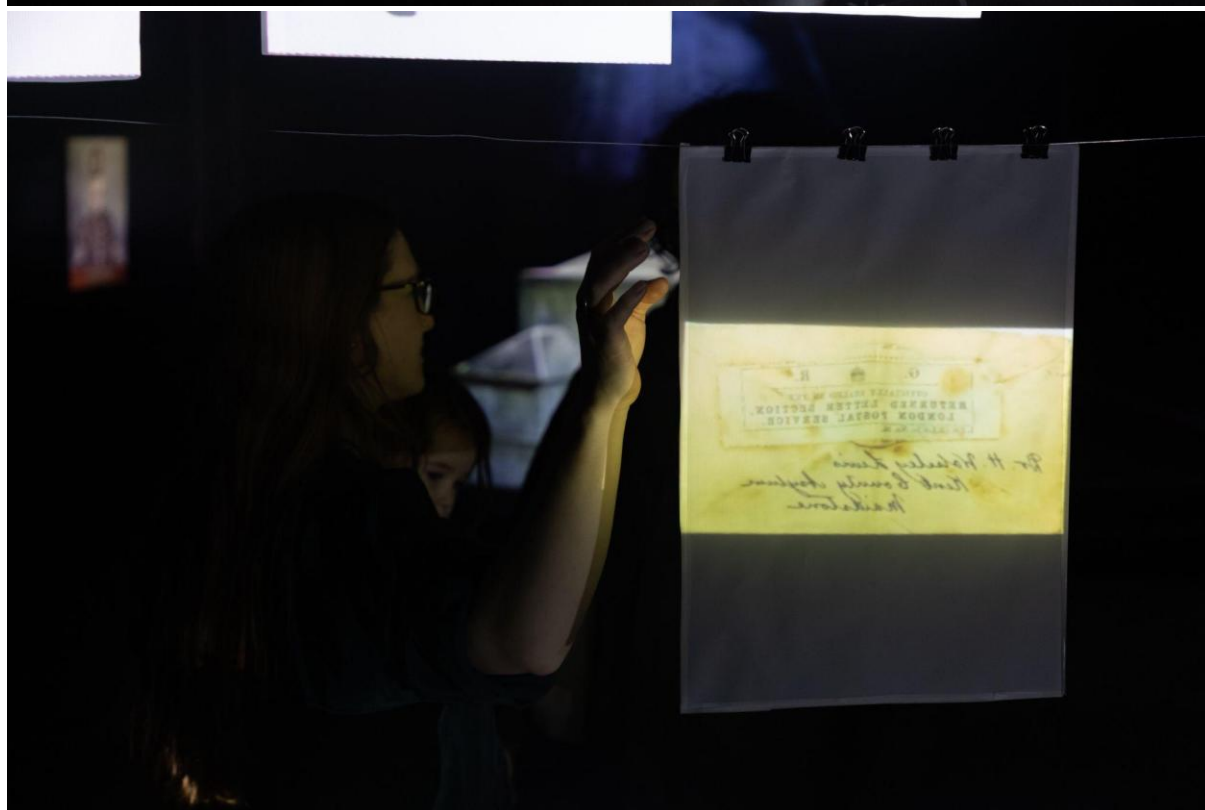
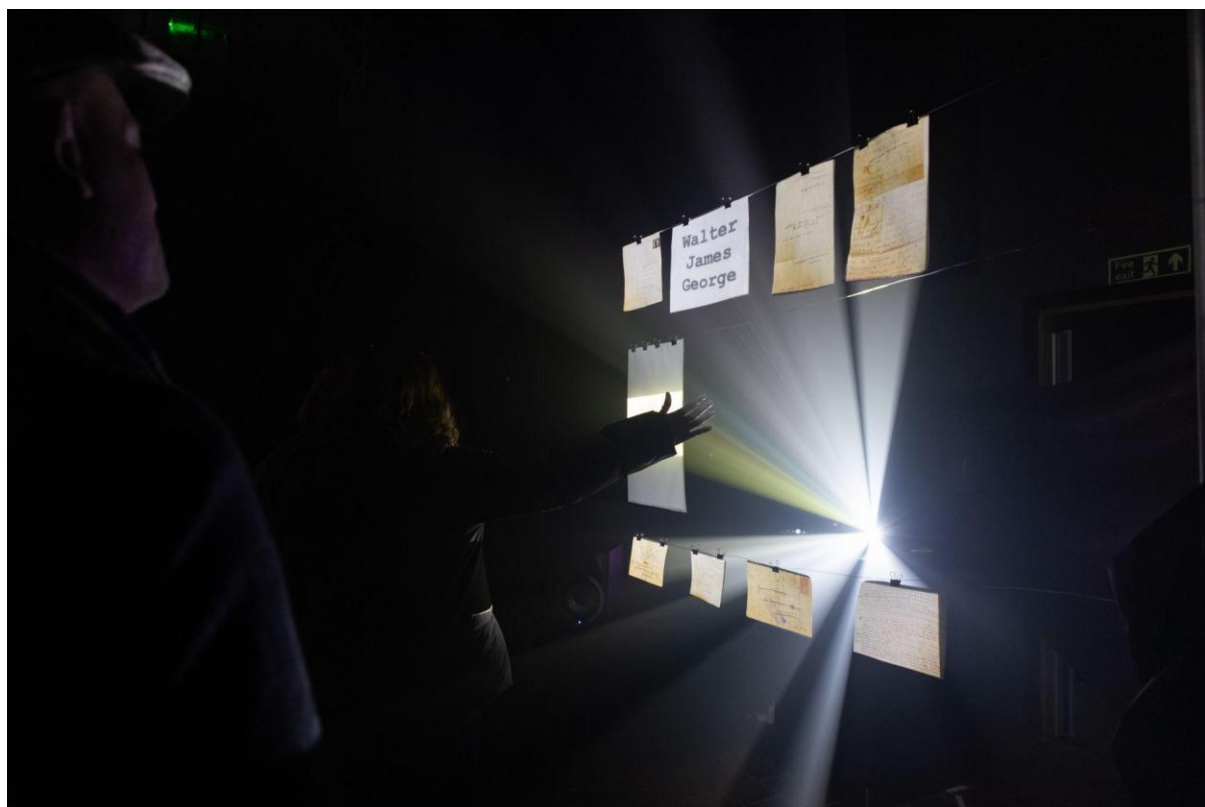
Walter's story is complex and tragic, involving family breakdown, illness, and institutionalisation. Extensive written records exist, including letters, forms, and medical documents. Walter developed syphilis, which led to insanity; he was admitted to Barming Asylum, where he died a year and a half later.

I was interested in presenting the written archive itself, and the beautiful handwriting, and chose to display fragments of his story suspended along a line, echoing an evidence board or an attempt to piece together a life from traces. Audio was added to assist with deciphering the handwriting and to give emotional presence to the text.

Interaction required viewers to physically move the "paper" elements, gradually revealing further sections of Walter's story.

Tech:

Using a Kinect and Isadora, documents were initially projected out of view. As a piece of "paper" was slid into the projection beam, the image appeared. The Kinect detected the illuminated area and triggered the corresponding audio. This process repeated along the line until the viewer encountered Walter's photograph and was prompted to reset the installation.





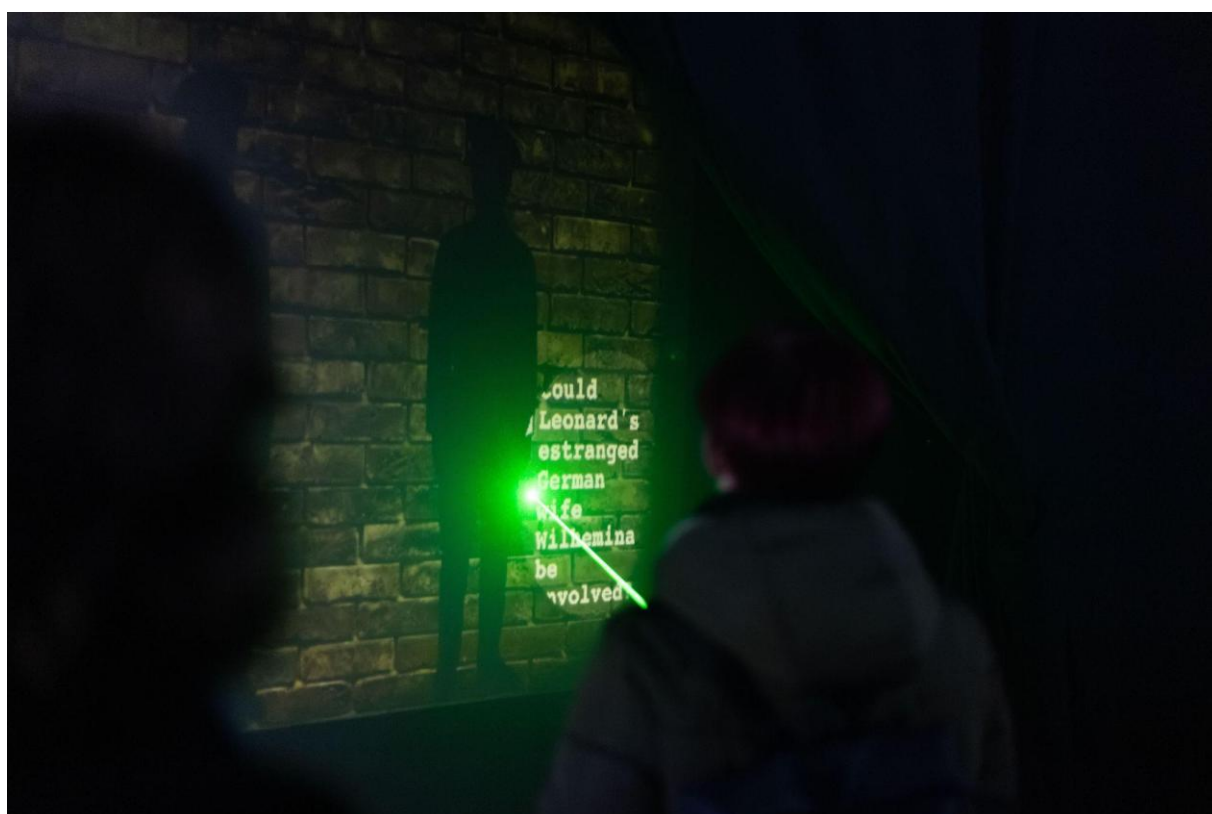
Leonard

Research suggests that someone may have been working at the Police Section House under the assumed identity of Leonard St Crozier. The real Leonard was registered as working in Benfleet, had no military experience, and had previously been dismissed from voluntary army training as unfit.

This installation used a very dark video projection, partially obscured by a curtain, showing three shadowy figures. Viewers were invited to pick up a “torch” and investigate. As they pointed it at the wall, the illuminated area revealed information about Leonard, mimicking the act of searching for hidden truth.

Tech:

The torch incorporated a laser pointer. Two versions of the video were created, a shadowed version and a lit version. A webcam and Isadora tracked the brightest point of the laser and used it to position a mask, revealing the illuminated video beneath.

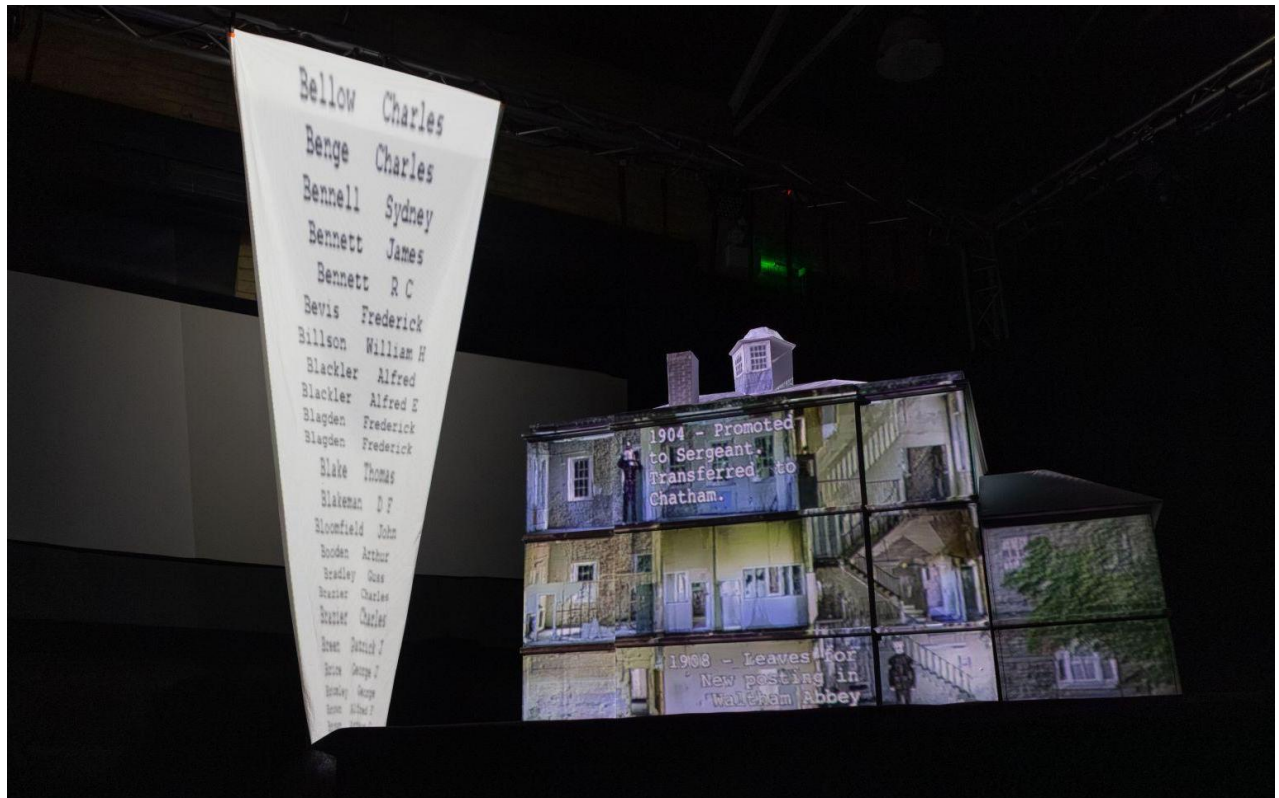


Typewriter

This non-interactive piece served as a reminder of the many individuals who lived in the Police Section House, stories that could not be included or have yet to be uncovered.

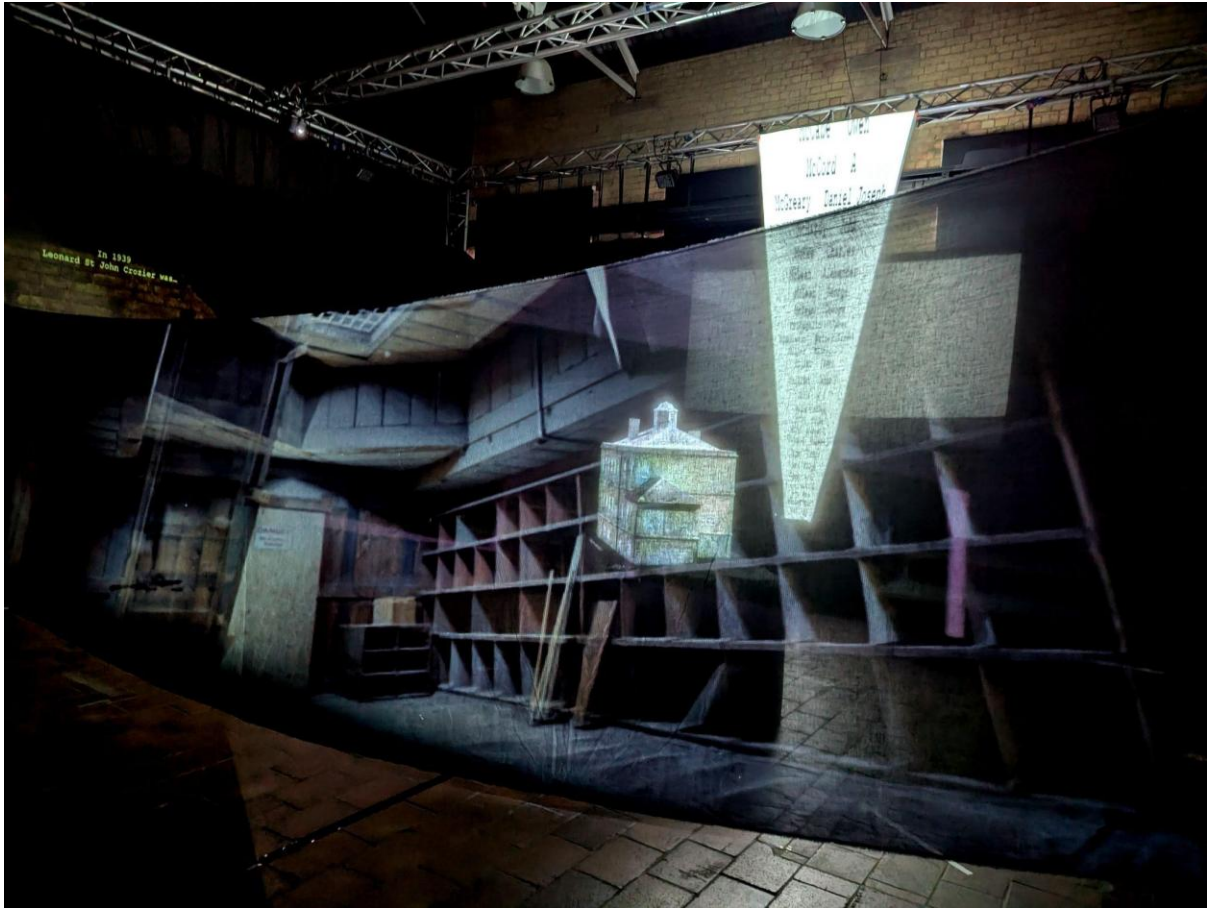
Tech:

A typewriter was installed with a long length of white cotton fabric emerging from it, resembling an oversized reel of paper. Names were projection-mapped onto the fabric, slowly scrolling upward in the rhythm of a typewriter, accompanied by audio.



Scenery

To make use of the striking interior LiDAR scans, I used large quantities of gauze to shape the space and create a corridor that visitors passed through before reaching the installation. The semi-transparent material produced a ghostly effect, allowing viewers to see through to projections behind it and reinforcing themes of presence, absence, and memory.



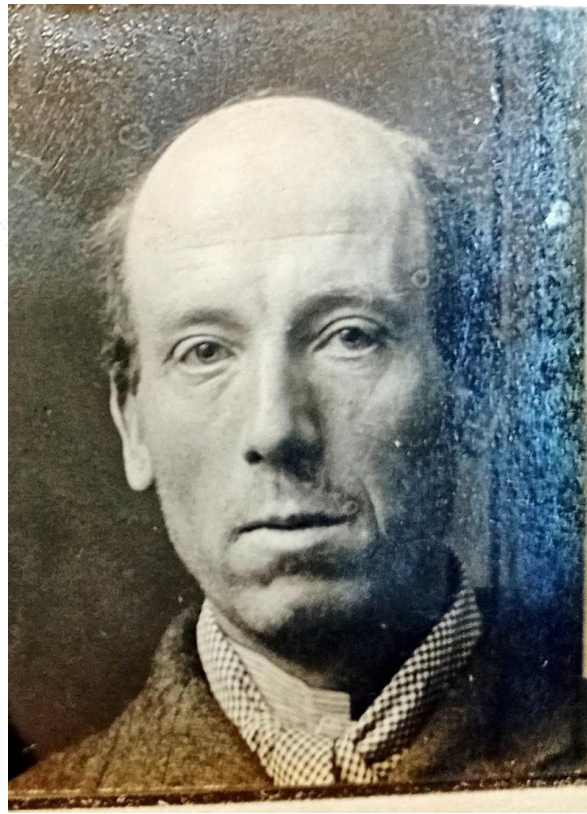
Use of AI

I wanted to introduce subtle animation to each character — enough to bring their presence and emotional weight to life without becoming theatrical or sensational. I felt uncomfortable animating original photographs directly, as this risked turning real people into puppets. Instead, I created hand-drawn sketches based on the photographs and used AI to animate these drawings.

This approach respected the source material while also pushing me to revisit and develop my drawing skills. AI was used primarily due to time and budget constraints, allowing for basic movement, voice generation, and lip-syncing. I worked with KlingAI, which presented a steep learning curve. While generating playful AI content from prompts is relatively easy, producing precise, usable results proved far more challenging and required careful prompt writing.

The only exception was Walter James George. His photograph is striking, particularly his direct gaze. In this instance, the animation was limited to a single blink. After encountering numerous documents and hearing his story through letters and records, viewers are finally confronted with Walter himself. Here, using the

original photograph felt essential to reassert his humanity.



Reminiscence Session

The reminiscence session brought together members of the local community and historians for a morning of shared stories and discovery. Participants explored three detailed case studies of former residents of the Police Section House through timelines, archival materials, letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings.

Members of the Chatham Dockyard Historical Society guided visitors through the research process, demonstrating how these stories were assembled from public records and personal traces. A display of historic Dockyard Police artefacts including manacles, badges, uniforms, and a baton which sparked conversation and collective memory.

Workshops

As part of the residency, I ran two workshops with local theatre groups, Icon Theatre and Square Pegs Theatre. These sessions explored verbatim theatre and introductions to digital performance.

Participants experimented with projection, scale, and surface, working with front and rear projection, live camera feedback, and performing alongside recorded doubles. In small groups, they created short telematic sketches using projectors, cameras, gauze, and fabric to explore illusion, presence, and duplication.

The second part of the workshop focused on verbatim theatre. After warm-ups exploring tone and context, participants discussed ethical and creative principles of working with real words and voices. They conducted short interviews, recorded each other, and performed these recordings, reflecting on the responsibility involved in representing real people.



Reflection

This residency represented a new way of working for me. The sheer volume of research available was challenging, particularly when deciding what to prioritise. If expanded further, I would like to explore the Contagious Diseases Act and the introduction of women into the police force.

Extended access to the space allowed me to experiment ambitiously with scale and technical complexity. While there were newer technologies I had hoped to explore, limited time and resources meant I instead focused on digital systems I was already familiar with, pushing them further and using them more confidently.

Audience response was overwhelmingly positive. The residency allowed me to demonstrate the scope of my practice and reaffirmed my ability to create technically ambitious, conceptually grounded work.

