



**Torre
Abbey**

AGATHA CHRISTIE FESTIVAL 2024: REPORT CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS FOR SCHOOLS

'The Mystery of the Golden Arm Ring'

A partnership project between Agatha Christie Festival Limited, The Writers' Block and Torre Abbey Learning Department



'Mystery of the Golden Arm Ring': children from Abbey School Torquay find inspiration to write their own mystery story, Torre Abbey, September 2024 © Agatha Christie Festival/Emily Appleton

Background and our case for support

Agatha Christie Festival Ltd, a registered charity, uses the global reach of Torquay-born Agatha Christie's reputation to promote local, national and international engagement in literature and the arts, supporting the cultural ecology of South Devon and delivering value to the visitor economy of our region.

Working in partnership with cultural venues across the English Riviera, community-based charities and civic organisations, we stage the Agatha Christie Festival annually between two weekends in September (across 9-10 days) to celebrate Christie's life and legacy and use Festival receipts and other funding to deliver a programme of literary arts projects across the year for identified disadvantaged communities in Torbay, which counts among the 20% most deprived areas in England. Our strategic focus is on children and young people resident or at school in Torbay.

In 2024 Agatha Christie Festival worked in partnership with [Kernow Arts Education Partnership \(KEAP\)](#)'s 'Writers Block' programme and Torre Abbey's Learning Department to engage a cohort of Year 6 pupils from Torbay primary schools. This is the fourth consecutive year that the Festival, supported by funding from The Rosalind Hicks Charitable Trust, has successfully delivered creative writing residencies at Torre Abbey for young schoolchildren. The Festival applied once again for support in 2024, building upon the outcomes of the previous three years. We were delighted to receive news that our application was successful and that the Trust was awarding us a grant in the amount of £4,500 towards our new project this year. This grant was matched by a cash contribution of £1,510 transferred from the Festival's reserves.

We wish to express our thanks to The Rosalind Hicks Charitable Trust for their trust in us and to both The Writers Block and Torre Abbey Museum learning department for their enthusiasm and help during the project operation.

This Report sets out the detail and outcome of that investment.

Mystery of the Golden Arm Ring: Agatha Christie Festival's creative writing residency for schools 9th-13th September 2024

The objective of the Children's Creative Writing Residency is threefold:

- To strengthen the motivation of the children who take part to write
- To improve the quality of their writing in terms of language use, characters, setting and story
- To celebrate their creative writing, enhance self-confidence and working as a team.

We produced 10 x 2 hour workshops over the course of Festival Week so we could cater for the growing local demand for workshops. Participating schools were Shiphay Learning Academy (2 classes/63 children), Abbey School (1 class/14 children), Sherwell Valley School

(3 classes/90 children) and Home Educators Group/15 children. A total of **182 children** plus 6 teachers and 6 home-educating parents attended.

All schools had attended previous year's workshops, demonstrating the value that they place in them. Even with the workshops being fully funded, the schools still have to invest in transport and supply cover for teachers. This year, we offered transport bursaries if transport costs proved a barrier.

One school – Galmpton Primary – which had originally booked, unfortunately had to withdraw and we were unable to fill that space. We believe this was because the timing of the workshops fell on the first full week of the new term and this was tricky for some schools to manage. We were however pleased to welcome for the first time the Home Educating Families Group. Families who elect to home educate often do so because mainstream school is not suitable for their children, particularly the case for children who are neurodivergent. They can thus often miss out on this special type of creative experience as they have to fund activities themselves.

Two writers led the sessions so we could split classes into smaller groups.

The workshop leaders were Olivia Lowry and Polly Roberts from KEAP, The Writers' Block. Olivia Lowry is a writer, artist, workshop facilitator and writer-mentor. Olivia leads the Young Writers programme for The Writers Block and their work with care-experienced young people. Polly Roberts is a writer, workshop facilitator and writer-mentor. Polly has published a collection of poetry and her novel 'Together We Evolve' was published by Hermitage Press, October 2023.

Our venue was once again Torre Abbey. We were fortunate that the restoration works at the Abbey were close to completion and children had full access to the Abbey's Learning Lab and gardens. Greater links were fostered with Torre Abbey through using the arm-ring as inspiration, so integrating the major Viking exhibition then currently on show at the Abbey with the Festival programme. We are indebted to Grace Melsher, Learning and Community Engagement Coordinator at Torre Abbey, for her support with bookings and the delivery of the workshops. Separately and in addition to this project, Torre Abbey commissioned The Writers Block to develop a creative writing resource pack for use alongside the exhibition.

The workshop format

Deep in the archives of Torre Abbey lies a mysterious ancient arm-ring. The jewel was found along the local seashore but how did it get there? Who owned the bracelet? What story lies behind it. Nobody knows.



*Choosing 'characters' and mapping story narratives, Torre Abbey Learning Lab,
September 2024 © Agatha Christie Festival/Emily Appleton*

This year's theme '*The Mystery of the Golden Arm Ring*' linked the workshops to a major archaeological loan exhibition at the Abbey, highlighting an intriguing find – a Viking age gold bracelet - unearthed here in Torbay in the 1970's on Goodrington Sands.

The workshop began in true Agatha Christie style: the children received a letter and a map from 'a curator at Torre Abbey', asking them to visit and solve the mystery of the arm-ring. Each child was given an envelope containing a letter and a map. They were encouraged to begin to create the character of their detective, using place names on the map and personal objects and clothing from a mystery suitcase. This technique is used to elicit ideas about what a character might look like, how they walk, their likes and dislikes. The children then used a map to follow clues around Torre Abbey grounds to solve the mystery. The creative exercises including writing a three-line kenning poem (an old Anglo Saxon descriptive term) about the natural surrounds of the gardens, and encouraged detailed observation using a view finder to zoom in on specific parts of the monastery ruins and the use of descriptive language to describe them.

By the end of the workshop lead writers explained that the children had everything they needed to write a compelling mystery story. A call to action (the letter), a double mystery, setting, a protagonist, a trail of clues, interesting imagery descriptions and a satisfying ending. All were encouraged to continue their stories on return to the classroom.



Year 6 pupils with Polly Roberts, Torre Abbey Gardens, September 2024/© Agatha Christie Festival/Emily Appleton

Feedback from teachers

'My class absolutely loved it, they came up with such great names using the maps and some wonderful setting descriptions', Teacher, Abbey School

'The children were engaged and motivated as part of the session and were then inspired to do their own mystery writing after. They also have good insight into what it's like to be an author and were given tips as to how to write like an author.' Sherwell Valley Primary School

'The use of high quality props to make the writing come alive. I want to find the same parchment used for the maps as it was so authentic. Also, going outdoors to start the thinking process'. Teacher, Sherwell Valley Primary School

'The resources hooked the children in' Teacher, Shiphay Learning Academy

Conclusion

The Mystery of the Golden Arm-Ring, a 5 day creative writing residency in partnership with KEAP The Writers Block and Torre Abbey Learning Dept. successfully built upon the experience of the previous three years and was able to meet the demand the Festival has created for the week among Torbay primary schools.

The Festival, in partnership with The Writers Block and Torre Abbey, is currently surveying teachers and considering an expansion of its programme for primary education from 2025 to include sessions at other times during the school year as well as during the Festival season.

October 2024/Agatha Christie Festival Limited