

ARTICLE

Ten Years of Being Human

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(Received 16 July 2024; revised 15 October 2024; accepted 15 October 2024)

Abstract

The Being Human Festival, celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2024, is the UK's national humanities research festival, held every November to engage local communities with creative and participatory events that are free to attend. Over its first decade, Being Human has helped transform UK public engagement practices in the humanities, strengthened community ties, and inspired academic and public participants alike. Looking back on 10 years of Being Human, the director of the festival takes readers behind-the-scenes to see who makes it happen, how, and why. Looking forward, the festival aims to further transform public engagement infrastructure, support vernacular knowledge, and expand globally, advocating for the humanities' indispensability in a democratic society.

Keywords: public engagement; humanities research; knowledge transfer; knowledge exchange; co-production; engagement legacies; engagement impact; community partnerships; research dissemination; creative engagement; vernacular practices; public humanities

1. Who We Are

Celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2024, the Being Human Festival is the UK's national festival of humanities research. Taking place every November, it offers free events focused on engaging local communities with researchers' work in creative ways. Led by the School of Advanced Study at the University of London and supported by Research England, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the British Academy, the festival has become a platform for innovation in public engagement, putting into practice and testing ideas about the relationship between humanities research and the public sphere that align with many public humanities conversations today.

Being Human centres on an inclusive and highly legible approach to public humanities work. It celebrates human curiosity, highlighting the humanities' importance to society and exploring what it means to be human in a changing world. It funds co-produced, mutually beneficial public engagement that connects specialist research with non-specialist audiences. Our model, "humanities plus," welcomes multidisciplinary but insists on grounding research in humanities disciplines.

At Being Human, we connect humanities research with everyday lives, politics, communities, and cultures. Rather than merely disseminating academic knowledge, the festival has

opened up new avenues for rich conversations with the public, creating a strong exchange of knowledge that benefits both researchers and communities. This approach fosters genuine partnerships between academia and the public, enhancing societal understanding and empowerment, while simultaneously enriching academic scholarship through interdisciplinary collaboration and the real-world application of research insights.

The festival features a diverse range of events and has cultivated a strong ethos around innovative platforms, encouraging researchers to move beyond traditional classroom methods (lectures, panel talks, interviews) toward formats that are more creative, participatory, and engaging. The festival is an incubator for early career researchers (ECRs), offering them the opportunity to test new approaches to public engagement and often take their first steps in this space. Rather than waiting until research has been published to disseminate “finished results,” we recognise that research is an ongoing process. Our approach involves working with researchers to design creative formats that bring their ideas to relevant communities, allowing for a mutual exchange that shapes the research itself.

Being Human is national by virtue of being local, with grassroots events in towns and cities across the UK and globally. Each November, around 200–250 free events occur, including family, school, and group-specific events. Events take place in about 50 towns and cities, led by researchers and staff from 65–70 universities and research organisations, partnering with 250–300 community and cultural partners. In addition, each year around five UK universities run festival “hubs,” mini-festivals offering a larger program of events regionally. Hubs are selected for their excellence, ambition, innovation, and regional diversity.

Celebration is central to our approach, reminding participants that we are running a festival for public audiences, which sets certain expectations. This celebratory approach shapes the activities we support—symposia, for example, are not known for being “festive.” This by no means excludes serious or challenging material from our programming; celebrating research does not mean everything must be playful. Where play is appropriate, we encourage it, but we also explore other constructive approaches like celebrating collaboration, collective problem-solving, or making connections. Rather than shying away from difficult topics, we have found that creative, sensitively designed events create opportunities for addressing challenging issues with public audiences in constructive ways.

As a national festival, regional representation, inclusivity, accessibility, and sensitivity are high priorities. Our decentralised model allows applicants to bring us their ideas; we do not curate the festival or invite organisers, giving researchers autonomy in event delivery. This approach mitigates bias from our central organisation but means we do not fully control outcomes. We work hard to reach underserved communities, supporting researchers in activating collaborations with diverse communities through their festival events, including those without ties to higher education or humanities research. We also work to build opportunities for the underserved in the higher education community, including under-resourced higher education institutions, underfunded humanities departments within STEM-focused organisations, and individual researchers who may feel unsupported in their research environment.

Our focus on creative public engagement formats includes prioritizing off-campus events and encouraging a culture change in which researchers actively engage with communities in a wide variety of public spaces, rather than expecting a wide variety of the public to come to academic institutions. We have tripled the number of cultural partners in the festival in our

first decade, encouraging universities to engage outwardly and form strong external partnerships. We emphasise co-produced events, supporting researchers in designing events collaboratively with their audiences and cultural partners and providing free training and toolkits on effective co-production. We also encourage collaborations with creative professionals—performers, writers, musicians, visual and graphic artists, and filmmakers—to bring innovative ideas to life.

Each year, the festival has a theme guiding our programming and inspiring participants. Past themes include “Renewal,” “Hope and Fear,” and “Rhyme and Reason.” For our tenth anniversary, we have chosen “Landmarks” to celebrate this occasion and encourage participants to consider how their research relates to both literal and figurative landmarks. Organisers will explore human relationships with the land, natural landmarks, manmade monuments, the built environment, and the climate crisis, as well as metaphorical landmarks including historical, artistic, and political milestones.

One of our most exciting recent landmarks is the development and strengthening of international partnerships. Our longstanding collaboration with the University of Melbourne in Australia has deepened, while the National Humanities Centre in the United States has also adopted the Being Human model, and is rolling out a national Being Human Festival across the continental US, piloted in April 2024. For the first time in the 2024/25 Being Human Festival season, we will see three international partners all featuring the same theme, so that the idea of “Landmarks” across three different continents and three different societies will be explored across hundreds of events. Far more than a “co-badging” branding exercise, this international collaboration is expanding the model that Being Human has encouraged, of research-led collaborative events that are designed with the intention of bringing the study of the humanities to life in creative and interactive ways.

2. What We Have Done

The Being Human Festival has played a key role in transforming public engagement by moving away from a model where researchers talk and the public listens toward fostering rich, meaningful exchanges that benefit both researchers and the public. Through its small grants model, the festival has created a safe space for experimentation and risk-taking, allowing researchers to explore creative and innovative public engagement formats that larger, more traditional research grants often discourage. This approach has resonated with public engagement professionals in universities, encouraging a culture of openness and experimentation in how research is shared and co-created with the public.

The Being Human Festival is about showing what the humanities can do, rather than simply explaining why they matter. In that spirit, 10 years of Being Human can best be understood by showcasing specific events, led by creative and ambitious teams across the entire United Kingdom.¹ What follows is a deliberately extensive list of the wide array of innovative events humanities researchers all over the country have created, and a few of their many impacts and legacies—a celebration of Being Human (and of being human).

Being Human events have included: 3D printing workshops; alien autopsies; art installations; banner-making; banquets; behind-the-scenes tours; boat tours; bookbinding workshops;

¹ Because a majority of our events are team-designed and delivered, restrictions of space mean that this essay cannot name the many individuals behind each of these wonderful events. Many of them are available on the Being Human website at www.beinghumanfestival.org.

building a kiln; bus tours; cabarets; car shows; cave tours; cemetery tours; circus shows; co-created card games; co-creating poetry with AI; codebreaking workshops; collage workshops; comedy nights; cooking sessions; craft workshops; creative writing workshops; dance performances; drag performances; drawing workshops; escape rooms; exhibitions; food markets; food tastings; gardening sessions; graphic novel workshops; hackathons; high street takeovers; immersive sonic performances; installations; kayaking tours; lantern processions; life-sized board games; magic lantern shows; masques; meditation sessions; murder-mystery trails; museum lates; object handling; one-woman plays; open archives; open mic nights; painting classes; pantomimes; photography walks; pop-up performances in disused buildings; pottery workshops; protest recreations; puppet shows; puppet-making; quiz nights; robotics workshops; Scottish ceilidhs; screen printing workshops; screenings; sensory experiments; sewing and knitting workshops; singalongs; stargazing; storytelling; street parades; tea parties; theatre-by-post; treasure hunts; upcycling and repair workshops; VR displays; walking tours; weaving workshops; Welsh folk performances; Wikipedia ‘editathons’; wildlife walks; wrestling matches; and zine workshops.

Such innovative formats clearly lend themselves to, and at times require the use of, cultural spaces off-campus. Over the last 10 years, we have funded events in archaeological sites, archives, arts centres, beaches, bookshops, botanic gardens, bridges, buses, cafes, canal boats, car clubs, castles, cemeteries, churches, cinemas, city farms, city squares, community centres, community circuses, community kitchens, ferneries, galleries, heritage sites, hospices, libraries, local parks and gardens, mental health community centres, mosques, museums, nature reserves, NHS trusts, observatories, palm houses, pottery studios, pubs, record offices, schools, shopping centres, theatres, train stations, water sports and activities centres and more. Cultural partners in addition to these venues have included art therapy charities, bereavement services, domestic violence support groups, educational trusts, faith groups, homeless support services, local government authorities, prison libraries groups, refugee support groups, travellers’ trusts, veteran support centres, wellbeing practitioners, and women’s associations.

These events are designed to bring research off the page and make it palpable. Walking tours have explored lighthouses or horticultural trails or followed the paths of artists or scientists or political groups. Pub quizzes showcase research into the gendered history of drinking alcohol in public or the design history of social spaces. Cemeteries reveal research into immigration patterns. An escape room set in a research library required participants to learn about the Great Fire of London in 1666 while demystifying the archive. Roman Britain was brought to life by producing bread, beverages, and even insect repellents from ancient recipes.

A PhD student discovered a 1948 script for selling Kenwood Chef appliances and created performances from that script around consumerism, technology, and gender that won a prize for public social history. “Stitches and Stories,” held at the Ulster Museum, invited the audience to participate in hand-stitching a linen patchwork quilt based on a map of Belfast. A “green bothy” in Edinburgh accompanied COP26 in Glasgow, responding to issues around climate change. Liverpool John Moores University organised a pub crawl with flash mobs singing sea shanties, exploring Liverpool’s maritime history. Durham University brings medical humanities to audiences through “research cabarets” offering musical, comedy, dance performances, and more. Falmouth University invited communities in Cornwall to find sensory renewal after lockdown in their local environment. Cardiff University’s “Facing History” created imaginative portraits of people transported to Australia by the British penal system.

“Crises in the Caribbean” at Hackney Picturehouse, London, brought together filmmakers, poets, and stories from people who have lived through volcanic crises on the Caribbean islands of Montserrat and St Vincent to retell their histories. Edge Hill University’s “Holy Hosts/No Angels,” held at St Luke’s Bombed Out Church in Liverpool, produced live dance, theatre, and music performances around the stories of those who are working in and using homeless shelters. The University of Sheffield’s “Moving Heaven and Earth” at Bolsover Castle recreated a royal banquet in the court of Charles I, and performed a court masque for audiences of all ages, with theatre professionals working with academics to design a promenade experience, craft activities, and song and musical performances. “Cheesed Off,” led by the University of Nottingham in 2023, worked with local cheese producers to introduce audiences to 18th-century food protests, including the story of Nottingham’s “Cheese Riots.”

Many of the events we have supported have led to long-term impacts and substantial legacies. In Coventry, “Against Prejudice” (2016) celebrated the life and legacy of Ira Aldridge, the first person of colour to manage a British theatre, with a production featuring performers from the Royal Shakespeare Company, Coventry’s youth theatre, and community choirs, followed by a torchlit walk. The celebration led to a blue plaque, a staged reading at Shakespeare’s Globe with historian David Olusoga, and the Black Youth Theatre and Choir of Coventry. A key part of the City of Coventry’s successful bid as 2021 City of Culture, led to a newly commissioned sculpture and mural. The University of Leicester’s 2017 “Live British Wrestling and Resurgence” at the Attenborough Arts Centre has evolved into an independent professional wrestling company that produces live wrestling shows and original digital content; it supports research and practice, including the first all-Black wrestling show in the UK, and contributed to an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry on Wrestling.

The University of Bradford’s 2022 “Car Stories” at Bradford City Park brought research around class, identity, and race to a car show featuring modified cars and supercars, to explore shared narratives around car culture. The National Archives and the London Metropolitan Archives joined forces for “Queer and the State,” working from recently opened police and government files on queer spaces to recreate a pop-up queer venue from Soho (the Caravan Club) in the London Met archives with live performances. “Bass Culture Expo 2018: The Culture” was a multimedia experience of photography, painting, music, and film that explored the impact of Jamaican and Jamaican-influenced music on British culture. Marking 70 years since Windrush and 50 years of reggae music, the exhibition also featured filmed oral testimonies, live performances, and a collaborative catwalk that reflected on five decades of music-inspired fashion. It led to a collaboration with the British Library National Sound Archive to produce the first national exhibition about Black British Music, which draws from 12 collections within the library and opened in 2024.

Hub programmes like Northumbria worked with local museums and galleries across the northeast, with strong institutional support for embedding public engagement across their ways of working. The Swansea hub has worked with a wide range of partners across the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) sector, while the Being Human Festival is now part of “Introduction to Being Human,” a compulsory module taught in the foundation year in humanities as part of the four year integrated degree programmes at Swansea University, which encourages students to reflect on how public engagement informs academic study. Since 2015, the University of Dundee has been collaborating with Being Human Festival to design ambitious and innovative events that celebrate writers and literary works from the city’s past and present, including 2017’s alien autopsy, during which a fictional alien described by H.G. Wells in a short story was created by the university’s art

department followed by a forensic pathologist performing an autopsy in front of a live audience, and a discussion of the allegorical meanings of Wells's tale.

Canterbury Christ Church has taken part in the festival since 2016, working with cultural partners all over their region in towns and cities including Canterbury, Margate, Ramsgate, and Folkestone. Their Being Human events were a cornerstone of their submissions around research impact to the UK's 2021 REF (the Research Excellence Framework is a national assessment that evaluates the quality and impact of research produced by UK universities, determining future government funding and research rankings) as were those of Derby University and Swansea University as well (among many others). Goldsmiths University, which has participated in every Being Human Festival since 2015, has been exploring the legacies of activism with and in communities in South London, including industrial strikes in the 1860s, anti-fascist demonstrations in the 1970s, and racial tensions between community groups and police in the 1980s. The University of Wolverhampton, another long-time partner, has developed strong programming in research rooted in local places with everyone from local businesses to nature reserves, alongside an array of ambitious international partnerships, including ongoing work with Ukraine, Romania, and Japan. And that is just a taste of what Being Human has supported.

Over its first decade, Being Human has helped foster imagination and innovation in public engagement, encouraging bold, experimental approaches to the way humanities research is shared. Emphasizing creativity in both content and format, the festival has opened up new possibilities for researchers to engage with communities in ways that are both meaningful and impactful. The small grants model supports unconventional and interdisciplinary methods, allowing researchers to experiment without the constraints of more traditional funding structures. This freedom has not only enriched the festival's programming but also demonstrated the importance of risk-taking and imagination in developing more inclusive, collaborative, and resonant public engagement practices. The festival has shown that by embracing innovation, researchers can cultivate deeper connections with audiences, bringing the humanities to life in unexpected and engaging ways.

3. The Next 10 Years

As we look forward to the next 10 years of Being Human, we are keenly aware of ongoing challenges. Most of these are structural, but that does not lessen our determination to find ways to mitigate the difficulties they create for our organisers and participants. The most obvious is that, as of this writing, academic humanities are experiencing a well-publicised crisis in enrollment and funding. But this challenge also presents an opportunity, for public humanities are also flourishing in spaces beyond the university. This does not negate the value of academic humanities, but it might suggest a need to adapt and evolve. People want to do humanities, but there is evidence to suggest they may be less inclined to study it formally as it is currently being taught.

Another challenge is making the festival visible as a dispersed event that spans numerous venues and community partners across the UK each year. Unlike fixed-location festivals, where branding is more straightforward, our decentralised model, often held in off-campus, pop-up, or outdoor locations, limits opportunities for prominent branding displays. As a result, audiences may attend festival events without realizing they are part of our initiative.

The version of public humanities we have been developing at Being Human over the last decade has tacitly emphasised the importance of vernacular practices (that is, the everyday,

informal behaviours, customs, and activities rooted in the cultural traditions of a specific community or group, rather than the formalised or institutionalised actions that are typically highlighted in academic or official settings, including ways of problem-solving, storytelling, rituals, and artistic expressions that arise organically within a culture, reflecting local knowledge, values, and lived experiences) as a way of thinking through public humanities and bridging gaps across different conversations. This is not a set of ideas we have yet made explicit in our programming and development – not least because speaking about vernacular practices is not, in fact, a particularly vernacular way of speaking – but they have increasingly come to influence my own thinking around the direction the festival has taken over its first 10 years, and how I envision it developing over the next 10 years.

Public humanities scholars have increasingly been writing about the importance of the vernacular, in ways that are highly germane to the practices of Being Human.² These include the importance of vernacular archives in the Global South, decolonizing measures that respect vernacular languages, and the transformative effects of vernacular understandings on histories and knowledge – amplifying and validating the vernacular’s own forms, rather than just subsuming, standardizing, or translating it. Others have suggested that by surrendering the vernacular, academics lost a legible public identity.³ If we re-enter that vernacular space with renewed respect for the knowledge and expertise of individuals within their communities, the value of humanities research might start to become more legible to wider audiences again.

But beyond the borders of humanities disciplines, public engagement work, in general, is chronically under-supported and under-valued in a marketised higher education economy. The benefits of public engagement tend to be indirect, charitable, and long-term, which means that it continues to face inadequate institutional support and relies disproportionately on a culture of voluntarism. This structural bias converges with a market where academics face increasing precarity, reflecting the broader trend of casualisation of academic labour.

At the same time, in the UK environment, the emphasis placed by policymakers on research impact means that public engagement activities are demanded from researchers without always being fully embedded in institutional reward systems. This situation has improved over the last decade, but there is more work to be done. Researchers report feeling doubly squeezed, expected to find the time in already overburdened workloads while working in an economy that tends to reward income-generating activity like grant capture and student recruitment. The result is that a disproportionate burden falls on the precariously employed, ECRs, women, and minority-group academics. Our principle of holding free events can depress audience turnout, while holding live events in November across the United Kingdom obviously creates problems with weather and can limit our scope, but the busy academic calendar means that there are not necessarily better options on offer.

We continue to monitor this aspect, as we do all of our challenges: indeed, our annual independent evaluation is a crucial aspect of our constant efforts at self-improvement. Our evaluations, which are available online, blend qualitative and quantitative metrics, including demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background), geographic

² See, for example, Jacobson, 2020, 171. See also Parry-Giles and Hogan, 2022, 43.

³ See for example, Barrios, Kornstein, McAllister, and Ruggill, 2024.

spread, audience participation (total attendees, repeat attendance, and engagement with specific formats), and cultural partnerships. The festival also measures satisfaction and learning outcomes through audience surveys while evaluating disciplinary spread to ensure the representation of a wide range of humanities-based and multidisciplinary research. We work every year with our evaluators to improve our monitoring processes; recognizing the inherent challenges in quantifying experiences that are deeply qualitative, we also work on other methods of reporting, including case studies that trace the longitudinal impact of festival events (also available online).

Our goal is to end the next 10 years with robust evidence that we have helped transform not only the public engagement landscape in the UK, but also its infrastructure, levels of support, training, and development and helped ensure that its rewards are direct and institutional, as well as indirect and personal. This will involve advocacy work of various forms and expansion of infrastructure resources, among other initiatives.

We also have plans to keep developing our international offering. The decentralised model of Being Human works well in a transnational context, developing projects organically from the interests and heritage of local communities, that reflect local concerns while also creating opportunities for international collaboration and continuity. Our support for vernacular ways of knowing and working also clearly lends itself to transnational adaptation. It is a scaleable model, and our current international partners are ambitious and enthusiastic. Over the next decade, we hope to expand Being Human across many more continents and into many more contexts.

In my view, the Being Human Festival is advocacy work, and I believe public engagement should be understood as such. Making humanities disciplines more relevant to diverse publics and local policymakers is a pragmatic solution, creating more participatory and inclusive versions of subjects that are often studied in exclusionary ways. But this is not only about convincing non-academics to value the academic work already being done in the humanities. It is also about being open to new ways of working; my view, to give one example, is that academic disciplines should be able to defend not only their subjects of study, but also their methodologies, and there I would argue that humanities academics may have more work to do. The challenge lies in reestablishing trust in knowledge production within a diverse and inclusive space. If what we are trying to achieve is a fuller and more equitable account of what it means to be human, public humanities initiatives like the Being Human Festival can make important contributions to that project.

Despite these ongoing challenges – or perhaps because of them – many of our researchers tell us that Being Human rekindled their sense of joy in their work, reminding them why they do what they do, and reinforcing the priority we give to developing creative and innovative formats, such as the researcher who enjoyed the opportunity to “test new formats or ideas or hunches that you had.” Being part of something national is also important to many of our researchers: “It feels like thousands of people coming together across the country. It is that unique form that creates synergy.”⁴ Audiences, for their part, tell us that they come away with a sense that humanities research is relevant to their lives and makes an important contribution to society, saying that it is “really good at portraying

⁴ All quotations from the 2023 Being Human Festival Evaluation: “fulfilling,” p. 46; “an honour,” and “test new formats,” p. 34; “it feels like thousands,” p. 36.

areas of interest to others that know less. It felt inclusive,” calling it “empowering and collective,” showing that “we can all work together and share our cultures.”⁵

Our project, in short, is to re-establish the value and indispensability of the humanities to a healthy and creative democratic society, building humanistic knowledge not just within the academy but across all forms of civil society. The Being Human Festival has made a valuable contribution to this effort over its first decade, and we are confident that the next decade will bring even greater achievements and opportunities.

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Author contribution. Conceptualization: S.C.; Writing – original draft: S.C.; Writing – review & editing: S.C.

Funding statement. No funding was received for this article.

Competing interest. No competing interests are declared.

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⁵ *Being Human*. 2020. “Festival Evaluation.”, 15, 41, <https://www.beinghumanfestival.org/sites/default/files/file-uploads/2021%2007/2020%20Being%20Human%20Festival%20Evaluation.pdf>.

Cite this article: Churchwell, Sarah. 2025. “Ten Years of Being Human.” *Public Humanities*, 1, e32, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.37>