

Among the Ruins

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In April of this year, Clandon Park, a National Trust house near Guildford, suffered a catastrophic fire. A registered museum, it housed its own indigenous collection, two collections of ceramics and the Surrey Infantry Museum. Apart from a few hundred items that were salvaged during and shortly after the fire, the fate of most items is, pending careful salvage operations, unknown.

I got married at Clandon Park

And then a few years later, I found myself working for the National Trust, with the team at Clandon as well as other places across the region.

I spent the night after the fire on site, supervising rapidly arranged security. The seeds of the stories in this Twine game were planted that cold night, as sparks crackled among the embers.

My research concerns storytelling in three dimensional spaces, and I wanted to use this opportunity to create a virtual space and experiment with pacing a number of stories around the space. Interactive stories suffer from “the Narrative Paradox” - that the more interactive they are, the less emotionally engaging the narrative becomes. This Twine is a modest attempt to create an interactive narrative that also reaches an emotionally engaging climax.

There are four stories, featuring different aspects of the history of the house and collections: the story of one of the slaves sold with two plantations to pay for the building of Clandon; the story of a soldier, treated at Clandon during the First World War; the story of scion of the house who, after admitting his homosexuality went into self-imposed exile in France, and fathered a respected composer; and, the story of Hinemihi, the Maori meeting house in the gardens at Clandon.

The Twine is an attempt to interweave those stories with certain locations around the place, but to react to the virtual visitor’s interest in each story, and also an element of randomness, to create one of a possible 116,640 stories (combinations of locative and story elements) that all build to a moment of climax and reflection that (I hope) retains emotional power. At the same time, unscripted relationships between passages, places and items may offer alternative interpretations to the reader.

An important part of this is the use of affective media, pictures and sound, not throughout the virtual visit, but placed strategically to amplify the impact of the narrative.

Cat Cooper writes: Since starting my thesis I have been drawn in to exploring sound in the past. More recently this has spread to thinking about how the acoustics of spaces changes over time (whether quickly or slowly) and how this can be explored. Clandon gave me the perfect opportunity to compare closed and open spaces with some beautifully appropriate music. Pairing up with Matthew has further given me a chance to see how this can be put to use within heritage engagement at places which have changed very quickly and are no longer accessible.