

[Skip to main content](#)

University links

University links

For staff

- [For Staff](#)
- [Services A-Z](#)
- [Student Education Service](#)

For students

- [Minerva](#)
- [Mobile app](#)
- [For Students](#)

Faculties

- [Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures](#)
- [Faculty of Biological Sciences](#)
- [Faculty of Business](#)
- [Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences](#)
- [Faculty of Environment](#)
- [Faculty of Medicine and Health](#)
- [Faculty of Social Sciences](#)
- [Lifelong Learning Centre](#)
- [Language Centre](#)

Other

- [Staff A-Z](#)
- [Campus map](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Alumni](#)
- [Contacts](#)
- [Library](#)
- [IT](#)
- [VideoLeeds](#)
- [Leeds University Union](#)

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- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Medium](#)
- [Weibo](#)
- [The Conversation](#)
- [RSS news feed](#)

Close quicklinks

Search  Destination

[Living With Dying](#)

- [Home](#)
  - [Home](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Family Historians](#)
  - [Family Historians](#)
  - [Workshop: Family history and academic history](#)
- [Leeds General Cemetery](#)
- ['Remembrance' Exhibition](#)
  - ['Remembrance' Exhibition](#)
  - [Events Programme](#)
- [The Grief Series](#)

1. [Home](#)
2. [Blog](#)
3. If life (and death) really were a picnic: when history and art come together

If life (and death) really were a picnic: when history and art come together

Category

[Research](#)  
[The Grief Series](#)

Date

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[Laura King](#), University of Leeds

How can we best communicate and share our research? As academic historians, our writing is always going to be crucial. Our books and essays for fellow academics are our bread and butter, increasingly peppered with blog posts, tweets and articles written with the hope of reaching an audience outside the confines of academia. We might appear on television, radio or a podcast, run a heritage trail, or put on an exhibition, and work in collaboration with museums, archives and community groups. There is much fantastic work going on.

But could we be even more creative? This summer, I had the absolute delight of seeing my research represented as a picnic, of all things. Complete with tartan rugs, hampers, and proper napkins (actually, more accurately, 'mapkins'), a collaborative team of artists, designers, historians and chefs put on a 'Picnic with Absent Friends'.



Ellie Harrison, the caravan, and its beautiful interior

This was part of a bigger project, in which artist Ellie Harrison, of [the Grief Series](#), has been exploring where the memories of the dead live. Ellie and I have been collaborating over the last couple of years, and the culmination of this has been the creation of a space to discuss that question – of the location of our memories of the dead – in an ordinary, domestic caravan. This project is, in turn, part of a longer series of [artworks about grief](#). Ellie and the Grief Series team made this ordinary caravan extraordinary, transforming it into a mobile micro-museum and archive full of stories, which, as project postdoc [Jessica Hammett](#) writes, [felt open, non-judgmental and safe](#). Touring Britain and Germany this summer, the caravan invites participants to share and collaborate with us in building a creative space to think about how and why we remember those we've lost. And this is the focus of [my research project](#), which in part inspired some of the caravan's contents, the stories and scenes hidden in drawers and cupboards.

Food is notoriously nostalgic, and a series of meals punctuated the caravan's journey. Our picnic celebration was the icing on the cake, an end to the caravan's inaugural tour, on a hot, sunny June day in at Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds. Those who came feasted on tasty food from Leeds institution [the Swine the Dines](#), and the stories and history that inspired the picnic.



The picnic, with a 'mapkin' pinned to the hamper.

The Grief Series used [material from my research](#), in which people in the past wrote about food as a specific way to bring someone's memory back to life, or recalled meals or things they ate when writing in tribute to someone they loved. For Peter Wood, this meant brewing elderflower champagne as his Aunt Annie had done each June, from her handwritten recipe (reprinted in his family history, 'Won't Somebody Please Remember the Knowles Family of Knostrop?') For Elin Gottschalk, who was exiled from her native Estonia in the Second World War, remembering her grandmother, her Estonian heritage and the food of her childhood were bound closely together throughout her autobiography, *Into Exile* (2013). So of course we toasted absent friends with elderflower fizz, and feasted on beetroot salad inspired by Elin. There were delicious soft fruit pies, cheese toasties, morning rolls, fruitcake and more. Each picnic item was based on a story I'd uncovered in the archives, and brought deliciously to life by [the Swine that Dines](#) (seriously, if you're near Leeds, I totally recommend eating there).

There are some wonderful examples of historians of food making that past tangible, and taste-able, not least [You Are What You Ate](#), run by my Leeds colleague [Iona McCleery](#). Yet I'm not a food historian myself, really. In

fact food, although central in one sense, as the main draw and theme of our Picnic with Absent Friends, was also secondary to a bigger idea. Food was just one compelling way of starting a conversation about how we think about and remember those who have died – and how that's changed. It opened up an opportunity for thinking about the role of the senses in remembrance, and how remembering people is also related to our own identity – as British, Scottish, Estonian, northern, working-class or whatever else. The experience of eating and participating, as well as visiting the caravan, made this an evocative and meaningful experience of engaging with research.

Any collaboration worth its salt has to go both ways. One of the best things about collaborating with creative practitioners is how their ideas shape our own research as much as vice versa (and I've written about this [elsewhere](#)). I hadn't thought about food much before Ellie asked me what role it had played in the lives and ways of remembering of the people I'm studying. Now it's something I'm writing about – maybe I will become a food historian, after all. And the amazingly original, creative ideas of the artists and designers were a hundred times more engaging – and beautiful – than any way I dreamt of presenting my research. Perhaps most remarkable was how carefully the Grief Series artists thought about the fit between the message we wanted to send and the medium through which we did this. Bethany Wells, project designer, summed this up as we sat in the sun and ate blackberries and cream. 'After all', she asked, 'if the kind of research you do is about everyday life and ordinary people, why wouldn't you present that research back in a form that's *of the everyday and ordinary*?'

And what's more essential to and symbolic of our everyday lives than food?

*Does food remind you of someone you've lost? We would love, as always, to hear your stories below.*

This post was originally featured on the [Social History Society's Community Exchange blog](#).

## Footer navigation

## Site information

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'Don't forget the cream!' Each item in the picnic was inspired by a story from my research.