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Exhibition to honour women's presence in historic York church where Anne Lister was married

Many moments in history will have been witnessed at Holy Trinity Church which were deemed too inconsequential to ever record.

By Ruby Kitchen
Monday, 30th August 2021, 6:00 am

Leeds Artist Lorna Johnson, latest sensory exhibition 'An Agreeable Space' launching on September 1st at Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate, York, where Anne Lister's marriage was blessed, honouring women's presence in this space over the centuries. Image: James Hardisty

A secret shared or a promise made, over the course of 800 years when a woman's voice was too often ignored.

Now, in the same space where the first modern lesbian Anne Lister's marriage was blessed, these fleeting strands of social fabric are to be honoured in art.

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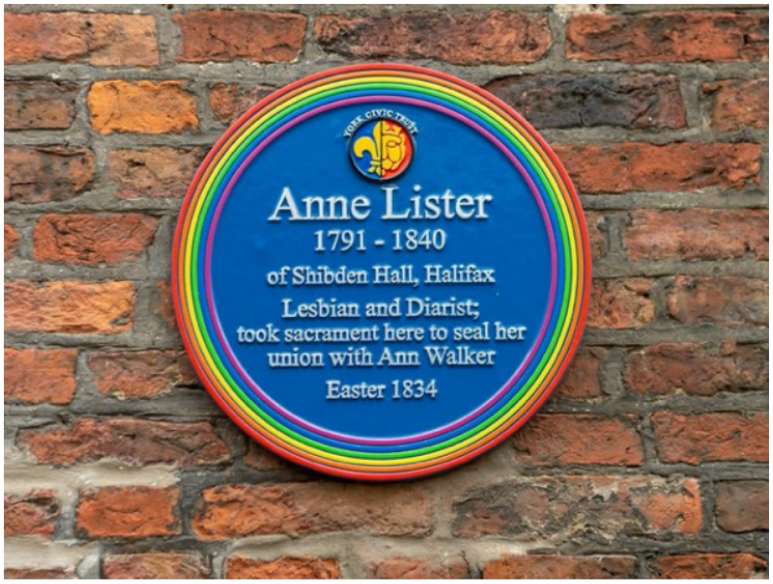
An exhibition from artist Lorna Johnson is to see 140 hand-sewn lavender cushions laid and candles lit, to remember the presence and past of women within these walls.



'An Agreeable Space' launches on September 1st at Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate, York, where Anne Lister's marriage was blessed. Image: James Hardisty

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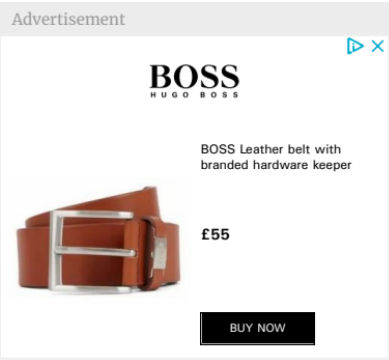

"When you step into a church you have this idea about the people that used it and what it has seen," said medievalist Ed van der Molen, site coordinator for the Churches Conservation Trust.

"The narrative comes from a very small section of society, and it's always men. This is about those you don't always think about. Churches were used by women, in all walks of life."

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The Grade l Listed Holy Trinity, on Goodramgate, has been a part of the

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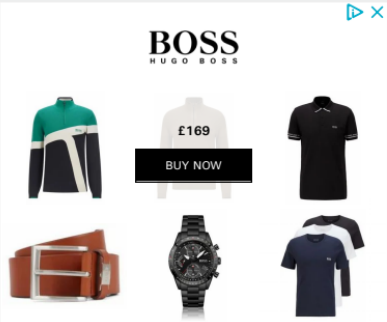

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York landscape since the 12th century, but with much of the building today dating to around the 15th century.

Benefaction boards hung inside the church for those who have donated to the church. Image: James Hardisty

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Among its most celebrated moments was the marriage 'blessing' between Anne Lister and Ann Walker, with the church since featuring in the BBC period drama Gentleman Jack.

To Mr van der Molen, Anne's Lister's story is emblematic of the issue. A lesbian who married here in 1834, at a time when such unions weren't recognised and certainly weren't recorded.

"She's probably not the only one to have used it in a way we didn't expect," he said. "If we look at it through another lense - what don't we know? What else are we missing?"

There are memorial plaques on the church walls, honouring the wealthy men who might have contributed to its history, but there is little to no record of women's presence here.

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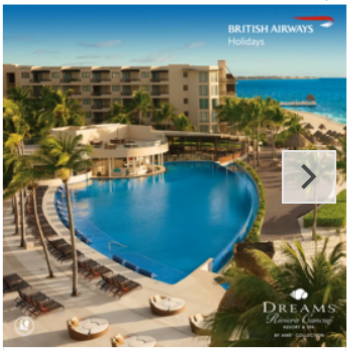

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Artist Lorna Johnson with one of her many hand sewn lavender scented pew cushions. Image: James Hardisty

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Art installation

The new art installation is aimed at creating a sensory evocation of their existence, with the sights and the smells of over 100 wax candles and the perfume of lavender filled pews.

Over 140 hand-sewn cushions will fill half the stalls to represent half the congregation, made from fabrics to signify the differing social standing of those who would have rested here.

To artist Ms Johnson, the exhibition is about creating a space where visitors can imagine the presence and nuances of the women who have gone before them.

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"We can often forget that spaces we now experience in mainly an observational way were working spaces," she said.

"Spaces to take stock, find solace, draw strength from, be at peace, rest and, for spaces such as this church, a space for all.

"That feels really important. This space will have seen so many different people walk through its doors, but all hopefully will have come away feeling better than when they arrived."

An Agreeable Space

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The exhibition, An Agreeable Space, is aimed at creating a sensory experience where visitors can consider the lives of all the women who have worshipped here.

It will be hosted at the medieval Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate, between September 1 and 18 before going on tour across Yorkshire.

This Grade l listed former parish church has been a part of the York landscape since the 12th century, and has been in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, the national charity caring for historic churches at risk, since 1972.

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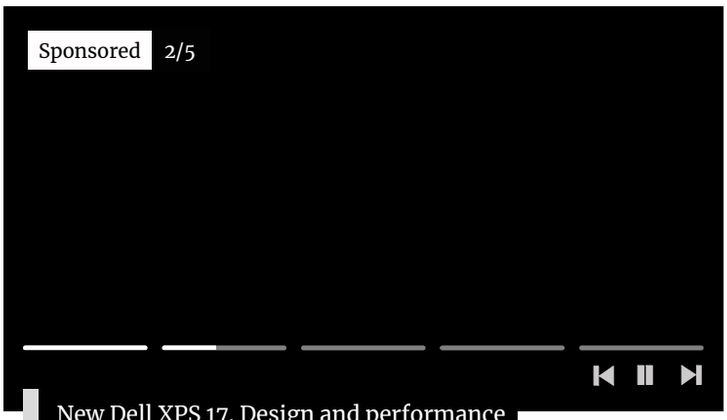

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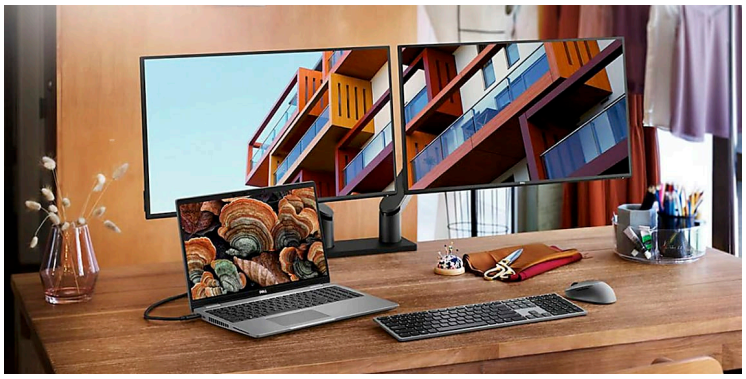

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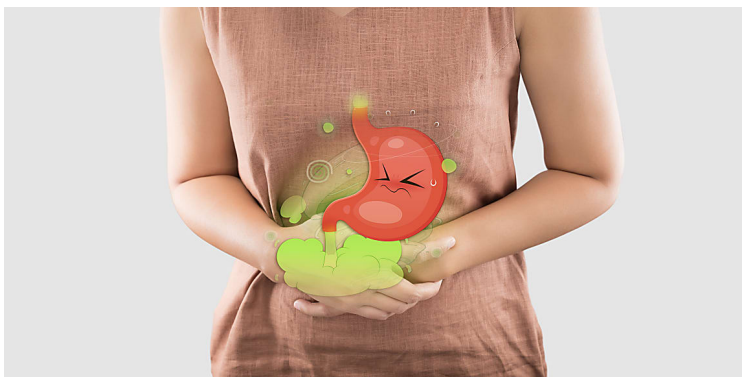

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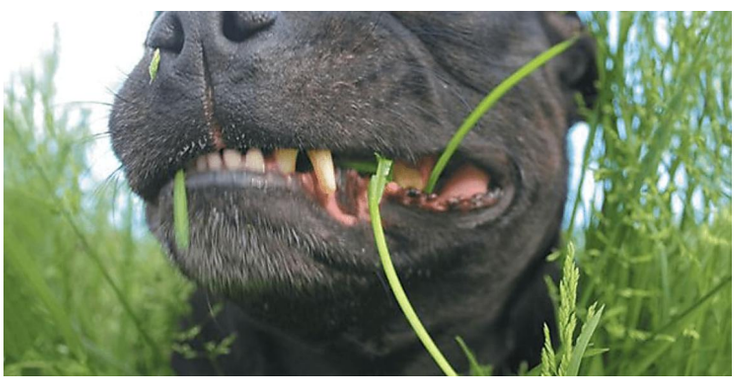

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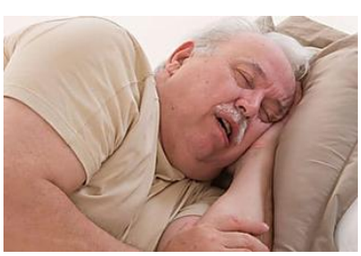

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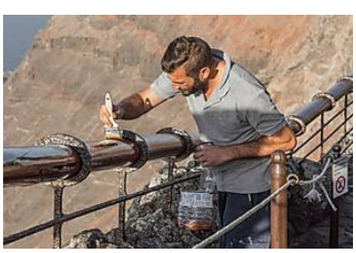

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