



**COLLECTIVE
ENCOUNTERS**

The Ballad of Kitty Wilkinson by Val Burton

Born in Derry in 1786

When she was nine,

Father said," Let's go to Liverpool. We'll have a better life."

But, rocked on the storm-tossed seas

The ships came to grief in the Mersey,

Kitty's father and sister were drowned.

Her mother never recovered.



Aged 11, she was working in a cotton mill-

Hard, dangerous work -

Cleaning floors while dodging

The deadly machinery.

At 21, she returned to Liverpool

To look after her sick Mother,

Got married to a French sailor,

Had two children, but then her sailor,

Drowned at sea, like her father and sister.

Once again, bereaved by the cruel waves

not to be defeated, she married again,

This time to Tom Wilkinson.

She went into service and learned valuable skills,

-How to boil water, to clean clothes and bedding,

How important it is to keep yourself clean.

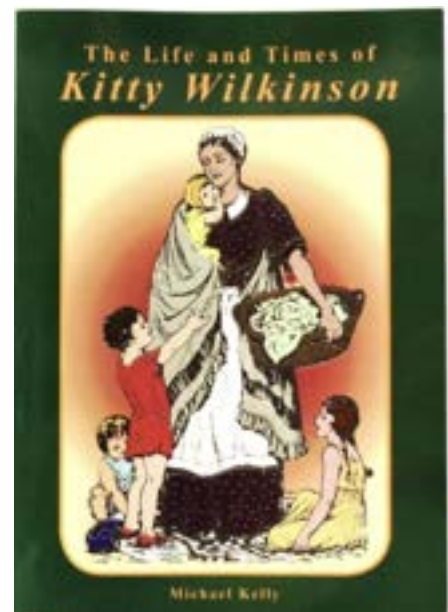


She opened a school for orphans
In her own house.
As her home was the only one with a
boiler,
She invited her neighbours to use it
For an affordable fee.
And so she prospered.

Then in 1832 a horrible pandemic
descended,
Cholera! Cholera! A deadly disease!
What can we do?

Ever the magician,
Kitty came to the rescue.
The skills she taught in boiling and washing
Were now invaluable.
And many lives were saved

Full of ideas, she opened a creche
Where women could leave their children
While they washed their clothes.
And she didn't stop there,
Knowing how equally important it was
For people to wash themselves
As well as their clothes,
She started a campaign
To open a public baths
And also a wash house.
With help from William Rathbone,



The very first bath and wash house
Opened in Upper Frederick Street
In Liverpool in 1842
And Kitty became the Superintendent.

And in 1846 Queen Victoria gave kitty a silver teapot
To acknowledge all that she'd done
A truly amazing woman.

Portrayals of Kitty Wilkinson:

There has been a tendency to romanticise and over- glamorise Kitty in some of the pictures of her. In the stained-glass window dedicated to her in the Anglican Cathedral, for example, she is shown as beautiful and angelic . She is also rather sentimentally referred to as the 'Saint of the Slums'. All this idealisation is quite unnecessary. It also implies that Kitty needed to be made to look beautiful which actually detracts from her true abilities.

Collective Encounters projects pandemic projects

1). Life in Lockdown 2020

As our face to face sessions at CE were interrupted by lockdown, we turned to Zoom as an alternative . During this time the group created some little shows which were recorded by Aidan or Abi of CE.

Life in Lockdown consisted of a number of short sketches about the challenges of coping with Covid and lockdown.

Just as Kitty Wilkinson had found ways of dealing with the problems caused by the cholera pandemic, during Covid everyone had to negotiate the issues of infection and isolation.



One sketch was a conversation on Zoom between 2 friends in which they talk about how repetitive life has become. We also did sketches of fictional politicians talking in the House

of Commons. called "*Unanswered questions*" written by myself and Brian Shortall.

2) The Legend of the Mernix 2021

This was an ambitious project conceived by Abi. It was a mythical-type story about a community, loosely based on Merseyside, that was once protected by a sea creature, the Mernix (a cross between a mermaid and a phoenix). When evil forces prevented the Mernix from protecting the people, a lot of terrible things happened, but everything came right in the end. It involved recorded voices and drawings and was composed entirely on Zoom.

Regarding Kitty, one could imagine that she was also protected by the Mernix when the ship she was sailing on came to grief. You can also imagine her being protected by a force for good which enabled her to accomplish so much.

<https://legendofthemernix.org.uk/>



The Legacy of Kitty



Kitty's spirit still lives on in Anfield at Kitty's Launderette, a community Launderette and Dry Cleaners just outside the city centre in Everton/Anfield, Liverpool. Who offer high-quality, ecological and affordable self

service washing and drying, drop off services, commercial laundry and dry cleaning. They have a scheme to provide free washing services to those in need of it. They also have an accessible social space for people to gather, talk and learn with a programme of events.

Kitty continues to inspire artists today, one such person is John Maguire, an ex pupil of mine, who wrote a play about Kitty Wilkinson that was performed all over Liverpool.

<https://www.kittyslaunderette.org.uk/>

Images in order of appearance:

1. Kitty Wilkinson Stained Glass window in the Anglican Cathedral.
2. Kitty Wilkinson's statue in St. George's Hall.
3. Photograph of Kitty.
4. Book cover illustrating Kitty wilkinson.
5. Photograph of the wash house on Frederick Street.
6. (All courtesy of the Kitty Launderette website.)
<https://www.kittyslaundrette.org.uk/>
7. Still of my character Susan Plainespeake , from "Unanswered Questions." <https://youtu.be/PA2Ph3m2848?feature=shared>
8. The Mernix illustration by Patricia Moffett.
<https://legendofthemernix.org.uk/>
9. The background created by Joanne Tremarco for a photo shoot with Angela Penny combining Liverpool's skyline, with an image of hands wearing PPE touching one another, the marnix by Patricia Moffett. and the statue of Kitty Wilkinson from St George's Hall.