

# Anniversary celebrations: an opportunity for experimentation and reflection

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Written by: Sufina Ahmad, Director

Celebrating significant milestones in an organisation's existence can easily become an exercise in self-indulgent and self-aggrandising behaviour. In 2021, Alliance magazine demonstrated through celebrations of its [25<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) that this need not be the case. It was an important year for us too – at John Ellerman Foundation, 2021 marked our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

We agreed on our plans for our anniversary celebrations in March 2021, with an additional £1 million of funding released to deliver our five anniversary-related celebrations. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its many implications on the ever-reducing bandwidth of the sector and civil society as a whole, our anniversary offered us an opportunity for reflection on the through line and legacy of our organisation, and how our past and present can be used to inform and improve our future.

Our 50th-anniversary activities consisted of:

- Commissioning a research team to explore the origins of our endowment;
- Launching the UK Overseas Territories Fund, which was a funder collaboration designed to support environmental work in the Territories;
- an exploration of the role of lived, learned and practiced experience in eliciting social change through the Conference of Equals, which was designed and delivered by the Centre for Knowledge Equity and the Lived Experience Leaders network;
- Protea – an international curatorial exchange programme between the UK and South Africa aimed at curators with at least five years of professional experience; and
- Gathering friends of the Foundation together for a social event, which included a panel discussion hosted by Dame Julia Unwin DBE that explored, amongst other things, the future of philanthropy.

We had three goals for our 50<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebrations. Since the onset of the pandemic, it has been near impossible to mark milestones in our lives personally or professionally. Our first goal was to bring the team and Board together to design and deliver activities that allowed us to re-energise and refocus the organisation. It provided an important escape from constantly thinking about the pandemic – although inevitably every activity we worked on had to be designed with this in mind to ensure that it could be delivered.

As custodians of the legacy of our founder, Sir John Ellerman II, we have been discussing for some time how little is known to us and others about Sir John. Over the years we have made various attempts to rectify this. Our second goal was to use our anniversary as a catalyst to run for the first time an open recruitment exercise for researchers to explore our business and philanthropic histories, with a focus on Sir John, his father, his sister and the Ellerman companies. Researching our history will provide us with a deeper understanding of who we are and the ways in which what we do now complements and contradicts who we were and who we were set up by.

And the third and final goal was to experiment by doing new things that built on the work we're already doing. Since I joined the Foundation in January 2020, we have been making incremental but significant improvements in how we operate. We have also been thinking about how we become a strategically responsive organisation. For us, this means remaining responsive to the needs of the organisations we work with, whilst also discerning where we can offer strategic

leadership within the UK grantmaking sector. The three funding related activities that formed part of our celebrations are linked to our three existing funding categories of the arts, social action and the environment, but they also speak to the future that we are forging to be a more strategic and outward-facing grantmaker that operates with increasing transparency and ambition, and is comfortable in assuming a leadership role where this is required.

Philanthropy, including institutional grantmaking, is under scrutiny. This is understandable and necessary. All of us working in philanthropy need to think deeply and carefully about what's driving the analysis and critique of the work that we are doing, and how we can use this to become better versions of ourselves. Inevitably, within this analysis philanthropy is often framed in binaries like 'old' versus 'new' philanthropy. These binaries offer a useful shorthand sometimes, but they are not accurate. The reality is that we are in fact part of a rich and diverse global philanthropic ecosystem and tradition comprising so many different forms of giving. Organisations like Ellerman started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but I can say with complete confidence that we don't operate as if we are still in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We grapple with the paradoxes that we operate within, relating to things like our unearned power and privilege, and we work hard to be a modern and effective grantmaker. There is much more for grantmakers like us to do in order to be part of the solution, and not simply part of the problem. Ultimately, our anniversary celebrations were an opportunity for experimentation and reflection that built on work we were already doing, but they also challenged us to be a better version of ourselves.