

HELEN SMITH: REVIVING THE ART OF PRINT IN YORK THROUGH COLLABORATION AND CURIOSITY

A CASE STUDY



**Professor Helen
Smith**

University of York

Professor Helen Smith founded Thin Ice Press - a museum, gallery, and workshop venue - after she was approached by people keen to use the historic printing equipment she had assembled at the University of York. Today, Thin Ice Press collaborates with local businesses, libraries and community organisations, as well as international galleries, contributing to York's cultural and creative economy while strengthening the city's international reputation as a centre for arts and heritage.

Creating a hub for hands-on research

As an expert in early books and printing, Professor Helen Smith is bringing people back to ink, paper, and the sensory experience of print, asserting that these physical qualities reveal how different societies have interacted with print across history. Her work champions both the physical processes of manufacturing and the social and psychological impact of print. Noting the widening distance between people and physical making in the digital era, Helen founded Thin Ice Press: the York Centre for Print, a place where students, researchers, and industry collaborators could engage directly with historic printing practices.



TOP TIPS

- **Do something you love** and want to learn more about - let that enable your search for partnerships.
- **Take the opportunities that present themselves;** the more you do, the more you'll find!
- **Don't overpromise and overestimate** – manage expectations and be proud of all you've achieved.

The centre functions as both a research environment and a creative studio, investigating historical and contemporary printing practices across different periods and geographical contexts. From studying printing errors to experimenting with traditional techniques, the centre bridges scholarship and making. By producing prints, hosting events, and offering creative collaborations, Thin Ice Press has introduced a commercial dimension to the research and is now preparing to spin out from the University of York as a self-sustaining organisation.



‘WHEN I FIND OUT SOMETHING NEW, I THINK, “WOULDN’T IT BE FANTASTIC TO SHARE IT AND FOR OTHER PEOPLE TO BE PART OF IT” - THAT’S WHY I VALUE COLLABORATION.’

Rooted in York’s cultural landscape and beyond

Thin Ice Press has quickly become embedded within York’s creative community. One standout collaboration took place during York Ghost Week 2025, when the centre partnered with local makers, the York Ghost Merchants, to produce three print designs celebrating the city’s reputation as ‘the most haunted city in Europe’. The project blended heritage, storytelling, and printmaking, demonstrating how traditional craft can connect with contemporary audiences in playful ways.

Beyond cultural events, the centre has worked closely with the City of York Council and York Conservation Trust to deliver workshops and produce bespoke prints. Collaborations with museums have also supported the preservation and exchange of historic printing equipment, ensuring that knowledge and tools remain accessible for future makers. .



Not only has the centre cemented York's reputation as a creative capital of the UK but has also forged partnerships further afield, including a long-term relationship with a printing museum in Tokyo that exhibited Thin Ice Press pieces. These relationships enable knowledge exchange across cultures, connecting traditional techniques and shared craftsmanship values while demonstrating the reach of York's heritage collections.

Collaboration as creative practice

Perhaps most importantly, Helen values the human impact of her work. Whether collaborating with partners or teaching students, she finds joy in creating opportunities for others to engage with print, experiment creatively, and experience the satisfaction of making something real.

Limited time and resources can be challenging but Helen emphasises the importance of building trust, establishing shared values, and nurturing relationships before formalising agreements.

Driven by curiosity and a commitment to material creativity, Helen's work demonstrates how hands-on research can spark diverse collaborations and produce tangible results. From international exhibitions to local cultural events, Thin Ice Press is helping keep the endangered art of printing alive – not as nostalgia, but as a living, evolving practice.



FAST FACTS:

- **What sparked your initial non-academic connections?**

After we established an MA module in letterpress printing, people would ask if they could come and do workshops with us, using our equipment, which sparked the idea for Thin Ice Press.

- **How did you formalise the relationship?**

Our recent funding bid is in collaboration with independent bookstores, libraries and community organisations, which has helped formalise the partnerships and establish specific actions and goals.

- **How were your collaborations funded?**

A variety of funders and arrangements. We've had funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Daiwa Foundation, Northern Accelerator, the World Wood Day Foundation and more! We also operate some partnerships commercially to bring in the income needed for the activity.

