

“PARKING A POEM IN A BISCUIT FACTORY”





***Parking a Poem in a Biscuit Factory:
unpacking a cultural ecology***

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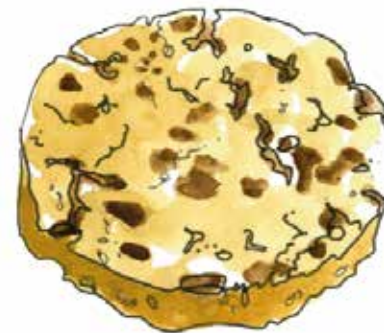
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ENGLAND**

“PARKING A POEM IN A BISCUIT FACTORY”

*unpacking a
cultural ecology*



Len Grant



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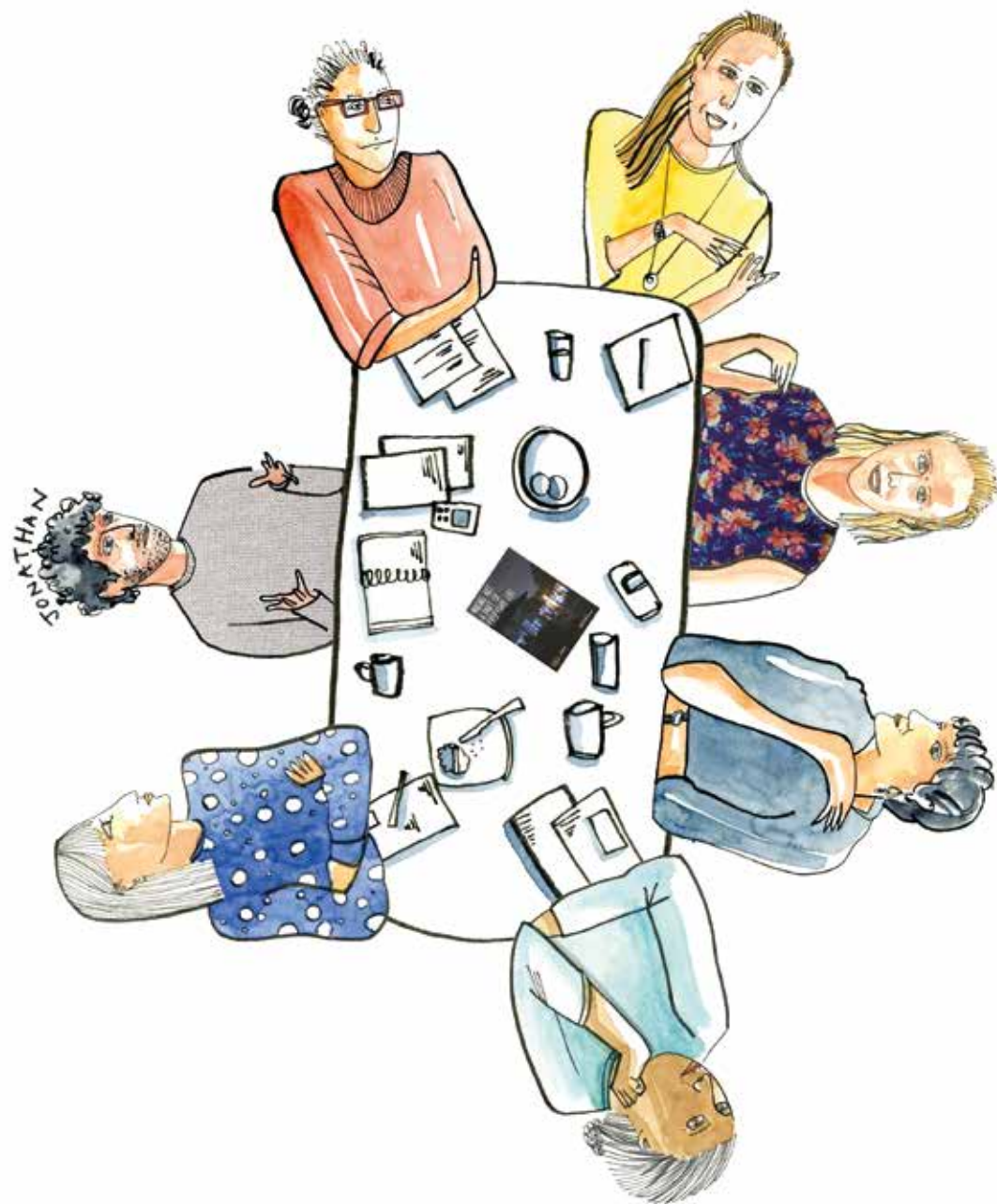
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Cultural Ecology – An Introduction

Jonathan Gross & Nick Wilson

In this book, *Parking a Poem in a Biscuit Factory*, there are many examples of why the idea of ‘cultural ecology’ is important. For the people of North Kirklees, the freedom to make culture depends on the complex interconnections (between people, places and things) that make up the place they live. Cultural ecology is an idea that helps us to better understand places: what they consist of, how they work, and the roles they play in enabling cultural opportunity.

It is sometimes said that a place is a space with meaning. And yet the meaning of a space is always developing and changing – via the stories people tell. Telling stories, individually and collectively, is central to how we come to know who we are, where we are from, and where we are going. A place never has just one story. Some voices will be louder than others, and different stories will be in competition. But our stories (and our capacities for storytelling) are interdependent – to narrate ourselves we need each other. The question is: what are the conditions within which people are really free to tell their stories?

Re-Thinking Cultural Participation

For many years in the UK there has been plenty of talk about increasing cultural participation. This might seem an uncontroversial ambition: a goal that most people would wish to see achieved, even if they do not give the issue much thought or treat it as a top priority. Recently, however, these conversations have taken a new direction. Many researchers and artists have made the point that it is not always clear what *cultural participation* means. Do all kinds of culture count? When we participate, what are we participating in? And why exactly is participation a good thing?

OPPOSITE:
Round table discussion
with Jonathan Gross and
Creative Scene partners.

The Arts Council of Great Britain was set up in 1946. Along with the NHS, it was one of a number of new institutions that aimed to create conditions for a good life for people living in Britain following World War II. Since then, a lot of importance has been placed on increasing the number and diversity of people who attend publicly-funded arts organisations and events. At one level, this clearly makes sense and is the right thing to do. If public money is spent on arts and culture, the benefits of this spending should be equally available to everyone. But what if this approach gets things the wrong way around? What if focusing primarily on increasing access to publicly-funded arts organisations and events presumes too much about what cultural participation is, and what makes it important?

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From Cultural Participation to Cultural Opportunity

Over the past few years, we have undertaken a series of research projects seeking to understand cultural participation beyond a narrow focus on publicly-funded arts organisations. Through this research, we have found it useful to introduce the idea of *cultural opportunity*. In other words, we have investigated the ways in which people are free (and unfree) to make culture in ways they choose for themselves – whether or not their activity involves publicly-funded, institutionalised or ‘recognised’ forms of culture.

What our research shows is that there are no clear boundaries between publicly-funded arts organisations, everyday (or amateur) creativity, and the profit-making world of the ‘creative industries’. These different locations



Because it's action research based there's been an opportunity to take risks.

I can't imagine another place where different groups of people come together to appreciate outdoor shows. The streets are a great space for that.



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of culture are deeply interconnected. But discussions about cultural participation often focus too narrowly on only one. So, what if instead of asking how cultural participation can be increased, we pose new questions. How do people's cultural opportunities expand and contract? What are the factors that make a difference? And what would cultural policy and practice look like if focused not on cultural participation, but on cultural opportunity?

Introducing Cultural Ecology

Working in locations around the UK – in collaboration with initiatives including the Get Creative campaign and Creative People and Places (CPP) – we have explored how cultural opportunity happens, and why it matters to people. One of the most important things we have seen is that there are many different kinds of *resource* that make a difference to people's cultural lives. Theatres, concert halls, cinemas and museums are very important. But so are schools, youth clubs, parks, pubs and town halls – places that are not always thought of as ‘cultural’ centres. Nor is it only physical assets like buildings and money that make a difference. It is also intangibles, such as friendships, networks, skills and access to information. Moreover, these different kinds of cultural resources do not operate in isolation. How they interconnect is crucial. A neighbourhood, town or city may have lots of tangible and intangible assets – but if they are not well connected, this limits their potential, and who benefits from them.

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Talking to our stakeholders about what makes a successful cultural ecology.

With all this austerity people feel downtrodden... they don't have the energy for creativity.

I don't feel like I fit into the Asian or the white community.

It should be about making life better for people.

I like that Creative Scene has sprinkled water on the seeds that are already here. There are conversations happening that weren't happening before.

Creative Scene? There's a problem with the name. I'm not creative, so I don't feel like it's for me.

It's about a sense of belonging, isn't it?

If you've got an idea you've got to be able to go out there and take a risk.

There has to be an understanding amongst our local elected representatives that there's social and economic benefit in the creative industries.

It was life-changing being part of that show.

It's allowed us to grow our events and given us credibility.

The Creative Scene team has always been accessible. They've spent a lot of time talking to people.



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Part of the ecology is about growing the gardeners who can look after the garden.



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This brings us to the term cultural ecology. The idea of ecology was introduced by biologists in the nineteenth century, to refer to the interconnectedness of different forms of life. During the 1950s, anthropologists began using cultural ecology to refer to humans shaping (and being shaped by) their environments. More recently, in the past twenty years or so, the phrase cultural ecology has increasingly been used in relation to the 'cultural sector'. But even when employed specifically in this context, people use the phrase in different ways. We suggest there are at least three applications of the term:

- i) **A condition of the world.** 'Cultural ecology' highlights that interconnections between different kinds of cultural resources are *real*, and they matter.
- ii) **A descriptive and analytical perspective.** 'Cultural ecology' refers to a particular way of trying to understand how culture works: namely, *paying attention* to the interconnections between different cultural resources.
- iii) **An approach to cultural policy, programming and practice.** 'Cultural ecology' identifies an organisational, managerial or strategic *method*, which deliberately seeks to cultivate conditions supportive of interconnection.

All three of these ways of using the term are illustrated in our report, *Creating the Environment: The Cultural Eco-Systems of Creative People and Places* [www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/our-learning/creating-environment]. First, we found that interconnections between different kinds of cultural resources are real, and they matter. Second, we demonstrated that ecological analysis generates new insights into how cultural activity takes place in CPP locations. And, finally, we showed that an ecological perspective points towards innovative, more democratic approaches to cultural policy and practice – such as the possibility for new styles of 'ecological' leadership.

Looking to the Future

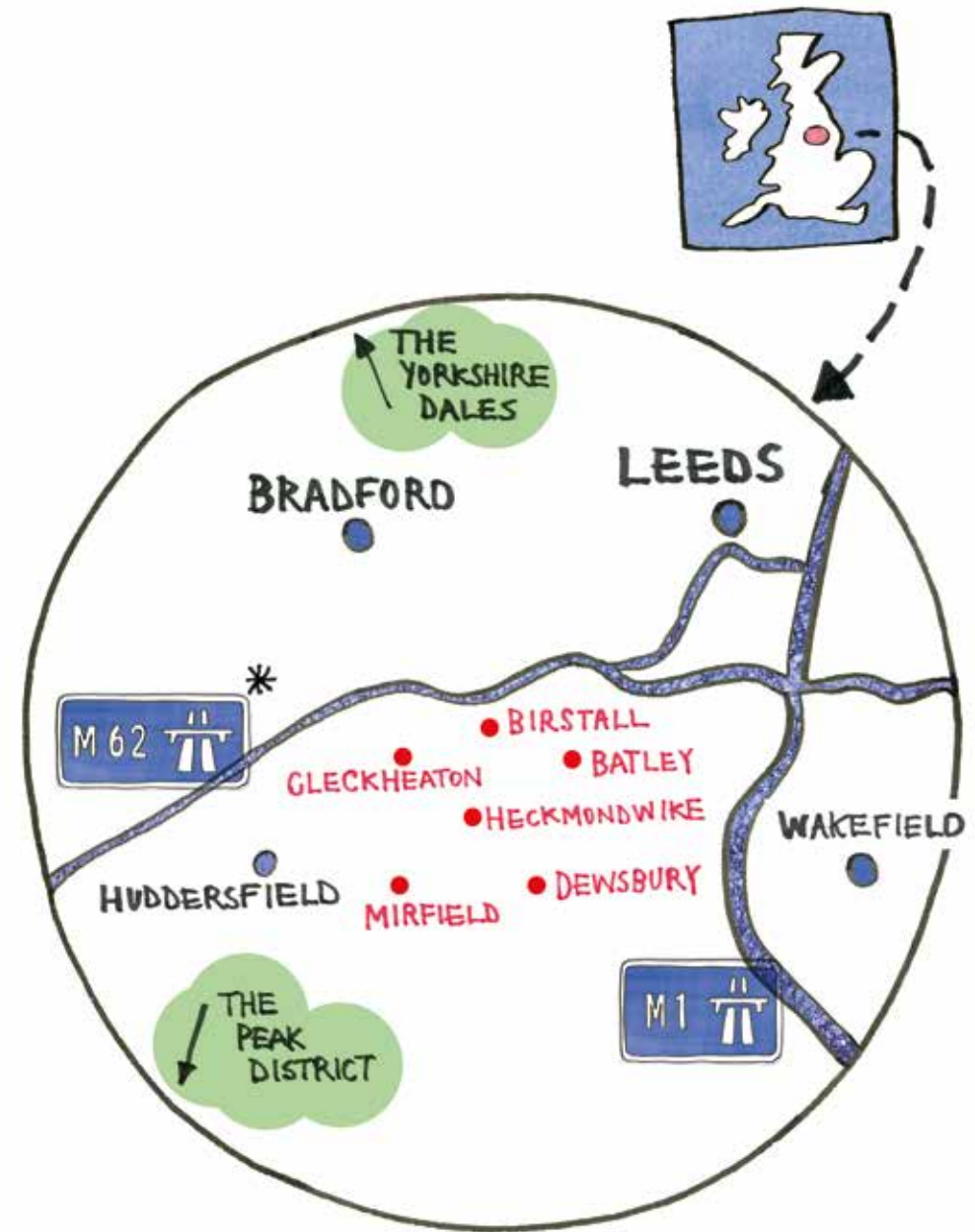
A place is a space with meaning. With an ecological perspective we can better appreciate that the meanings of the spaces in which we live are always *in the making*. The challenge is to create the conditions in which as many people as possible have the opportunity for equitable involvement in the storytelling. Projects like Creative Scene – and others which deliberately take an ecological approach – are experiments in doing just this. By going beyond narrow approaches to cultural participation, they have the potential to create more socially just and sustainable conditions of cultural opportunity.

In *Creating the Environment*, we suggest a set of fourteen 'considerations' for any communities, networks, organisations, groups or individuals seeking to develop a flourishing cultural eco-system. But there will be no 'one-size-fits-all' method for supporting cultural ecologies to flourish. Quite the opposite. Taking an ecological perspective involves recognising that how best to nurture cultural opportunities is an open-ended question: the answers to which will vary across time and place. In this sense, cultural ecology as a strategic approach – like all forms of democratic practice – is always a work in progress.

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North Kirklees.
It's a curious place.
You won't easily find it
on the map and
few people would say
it's where they're from.

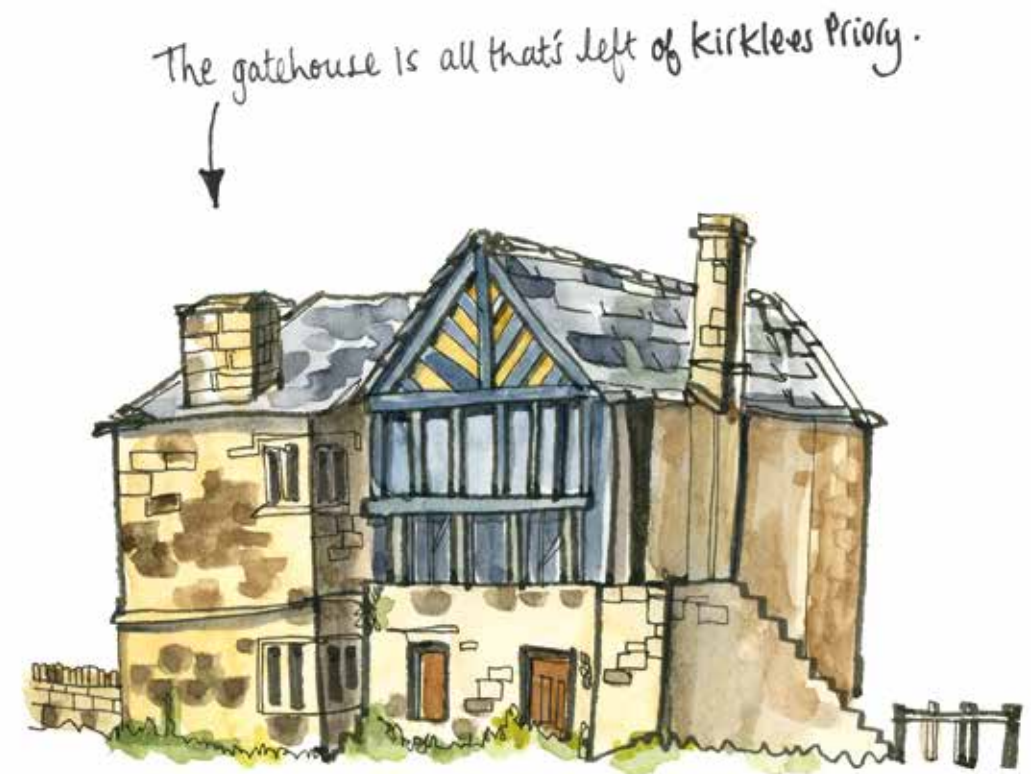
Sandwiched between
the M62 and the M1,
the dozen or so towns
and villages that make up
this rural-urban sprawl
are **fiercely independent**
and individual
in character.



* The M62 is Britain's highest motorway

Set up in 1974
The Metropolitan Borough
of Kirklees is the most populous
borough in England.

Snuggling up to Leeds, Bradford
and Wakefield, it has none of its
own postcodes but instead shares
those of its city neighbours.



Kirklees could have been called
Upper Agbrigg, Wooldale or
even Brigantia but instead
takes its name from a long
disappeared priory.

Reminders of this place's rich
industrial past are everywhere.

(Lots of long dead Victorian blokes).

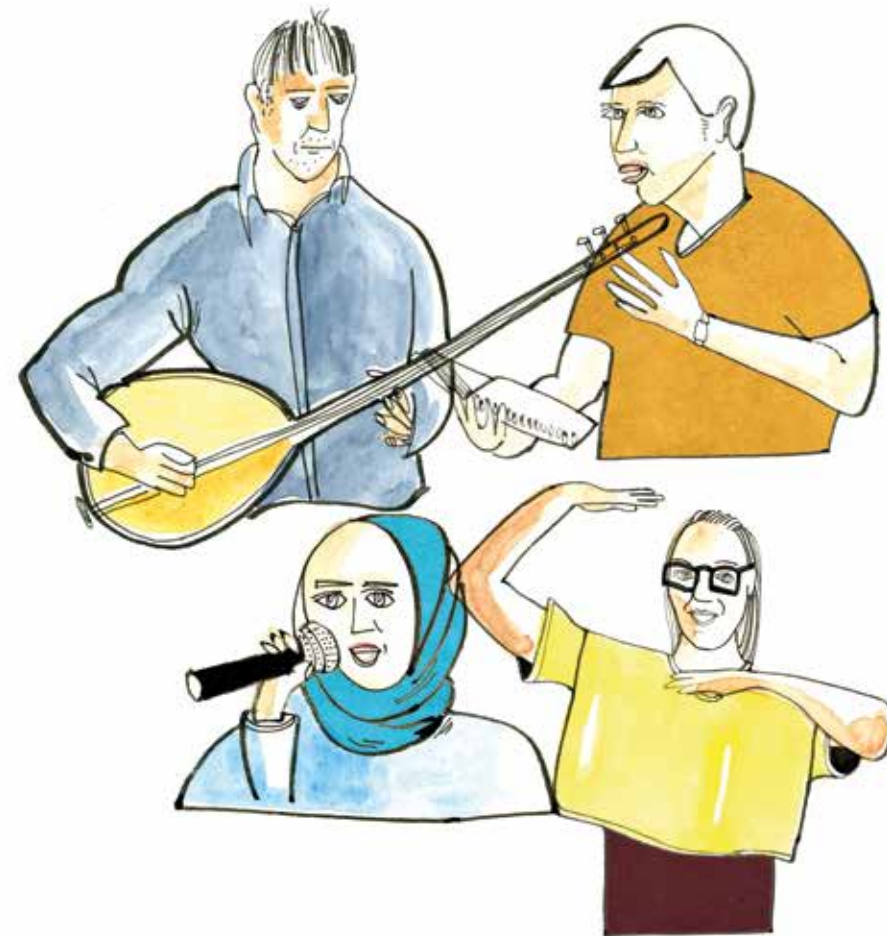


The heavy woollen industry attracted
hard-working South Asian migrants
whose families now add to the diversity
of our towns and communities.



But now these once vibrant towns are struggling.

The parades & festivals that made people proud have all but disappeared and the local meeting places – the pubs, cinemas – are dwindling fast.



And yet creativity still emerges.

Since July 2014 Creative Scene*
has been exploring new ways
of making art a part of
everyday life here

* an Arts Council England
Creative People and Places project.



We're experimenting to find new ways to
commission, produce and promote the arts,
Keeping people and place at the very heart.

"It's great when people of different backgrounds get involved, everyone's together, just enjoying themselves."

"It's about strengthening friendships and meeting new people, re-igniting my spark."

"Why can't we have opera here? I'll go and speak to Opera North."

"Let's do something relevant, something local, made by local people. I think that's important."

"I liked the idea of being a Young Producer but I didn't know how to go about it. Now that I've met others like me, I'm able to question a lot of things, and make things happen."

"I want to see how commissions get made, to see behind the scenes and learn about the process."

"In the past I would've shrugged this off — not for me — but now I'm getting insight into how these events work and how you involve people."

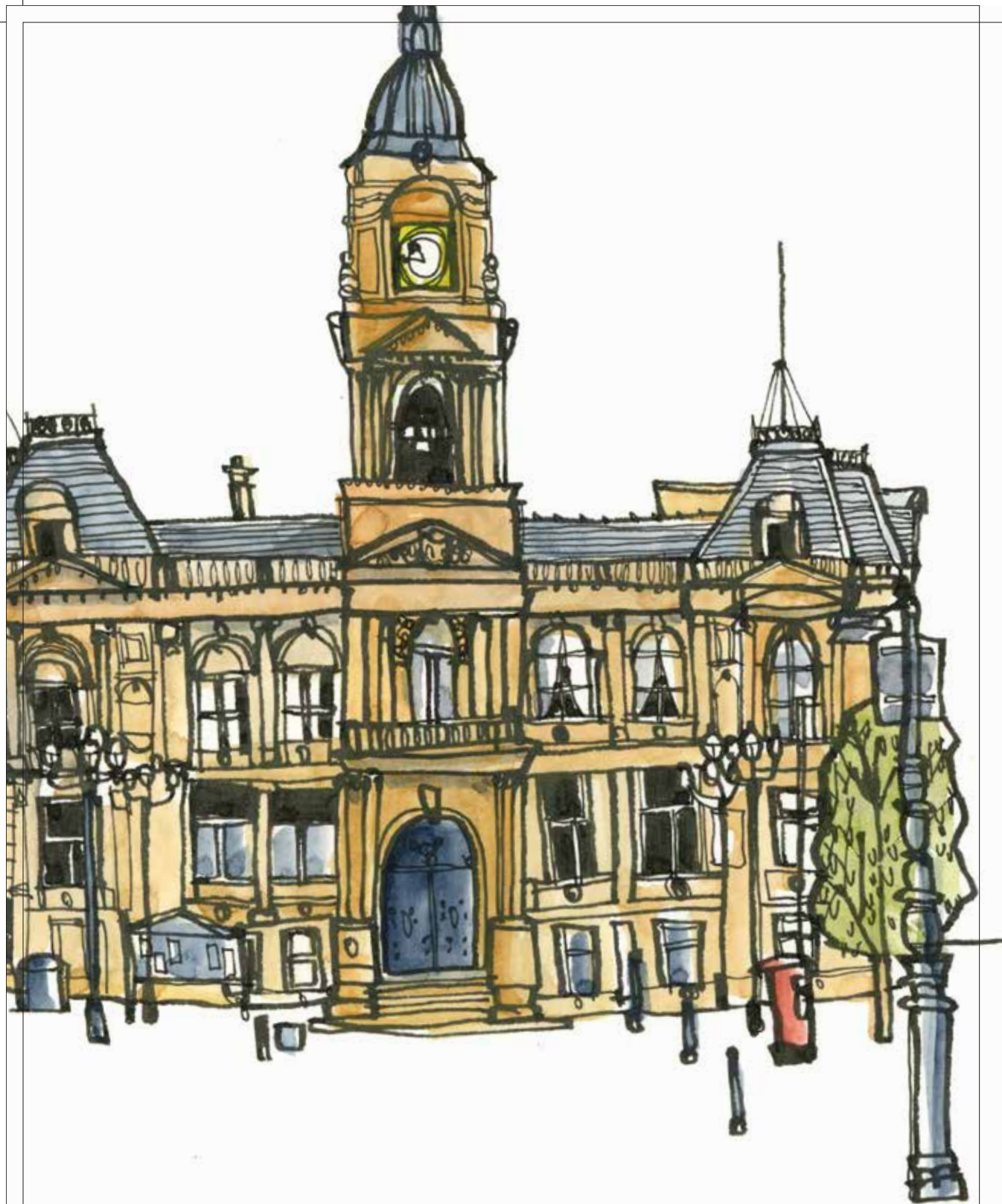
"It's the first time I've done something like this. I was petrified but wanted to give it a go."

"It's made me take another leap and sign up for Batley Choir."

We're pulling out the potential and creating a web of creative connections...



...and all the while investigating what it takes to build a vibrant cultural scene that can look after itself in this age of austerity. And that's what this book is about.



“No throwing popcorn”

I’m sat on the bench opposite Poundworld drawing Dewsbury Town Hall. It’s a warm day, but the old guy shuffling past with his stroller is still wearing his overcoat. “Morning Ray,” he calls to the man pulling on his rollie next to me.

“It’s Ron,” corrects Ron without returning the greeting.

Two middle-aged women, each with large plastic Poundworld bags, part company in front of my bench. “I hope you’ll still speak to us after you’ve moved to Mirfield,” one shouts back to her friend as she heads past the e-cig shop towards Northgate.

Sketch complete, I find the town hall entrance and head upstairs to the second floor. Today’s lunchtime event is in the Mayor’s Reception Room, but on my way, I’m accosted by an older woman waving her walking stick towards the grand staircase. “Is there something going on today?” she asks.

“There’s a film premiere at lunchtime,” I begin, “we’re showing 12 short films all about different people around Dewsbury...”

But she’s already lost interest. “This is Eileen Fenton, she swum the Channel,” she says, peering into a glass cabinet. I peer in besides her. The display says local woman Eileen was the first woman to finish the International Cross-Channel Race in 1950. “She was a school teacher, she never married. I still know her.

“This all used to be in the Dewsbury Museum before it closed,” says my impromptu local history guide, leading me to another cabinet where there’s a wooden shuttle from blanket manufacturer Wormalds and Walkers. “I used that when I worked there. I wove all the army blankets, for China and all over.”

“You worked there?”



"NO THROWING POPCORN"

"Oh I did, at 14," she says. "If one of those shuttles – they have steel ends – flew out of your loom because it wasn't flat, you could seriously injure someone. I had to pay a woman to show me how to weave when I first started. I paid her out of my first wage." She looks again at the shuttle. "It's really taken me back has that. I'm nearly 91, you see." Dewsbury's full of stories.

Outside the reception room, name badges await Creative Scene's invited guests. Today I'm Len Grant, storyteller and artist. I like that. As the sandwiches and mozzarella bites are laid out, the Creative Scene team come together for a briefing. "It's about networking today," says creative producer, Vicky. "Let's make sure everyone's suitably impressed."

Today's event is a double-header. An invited audience are excited to be the first to see Alistair Macdonald's 12 short films commissioned by Creative Scene that showcase the unique character of this area. But, before they've even reached the bottom of their popcorn bags, Creative Scene will share their impact report – what they've achieved in the last four years – and their latest development plan.

"On the social media, Alison is looking after Twitter, Anna is on Instagram and Lisa and I are covering Facebook. Okay, fab. At about 12.25, let's start to lead people towards their seats..."

As guests begin to arrive at the top of the staircase, I'm introduced to some of the films' stars. Emma tells me she's the owner and founder of The Pie Shed, a café on the edge of a Dewsbury council estate. "You'd never put a café there in a million years," she says, bemused by her own success, "but we have and we're coming up to our fourth year so we must be doing something right."

"I like to be creative and experiment with new things. I'll try this and that and see what sells. When it involves sugar, butter, eggs and an oven, it tends to work out quite well."

"How did you get into this?" I ask. "Have you always been in catering?"

"I'm a trained chef, but by the time I was 20, I decided I didn't want to smell of garlic and onion the whole time, so I took a boring office job. But work's a big part of your life, isn't it? You've got to do something that makes you happy."

"I did the same when I was 30," I tell her, "I worked in sales and marketing before I chucked it all in."

"You have an epiphany, don't you?"

"And how do you feel about today: you're in the town hall to watch a film about your café?"

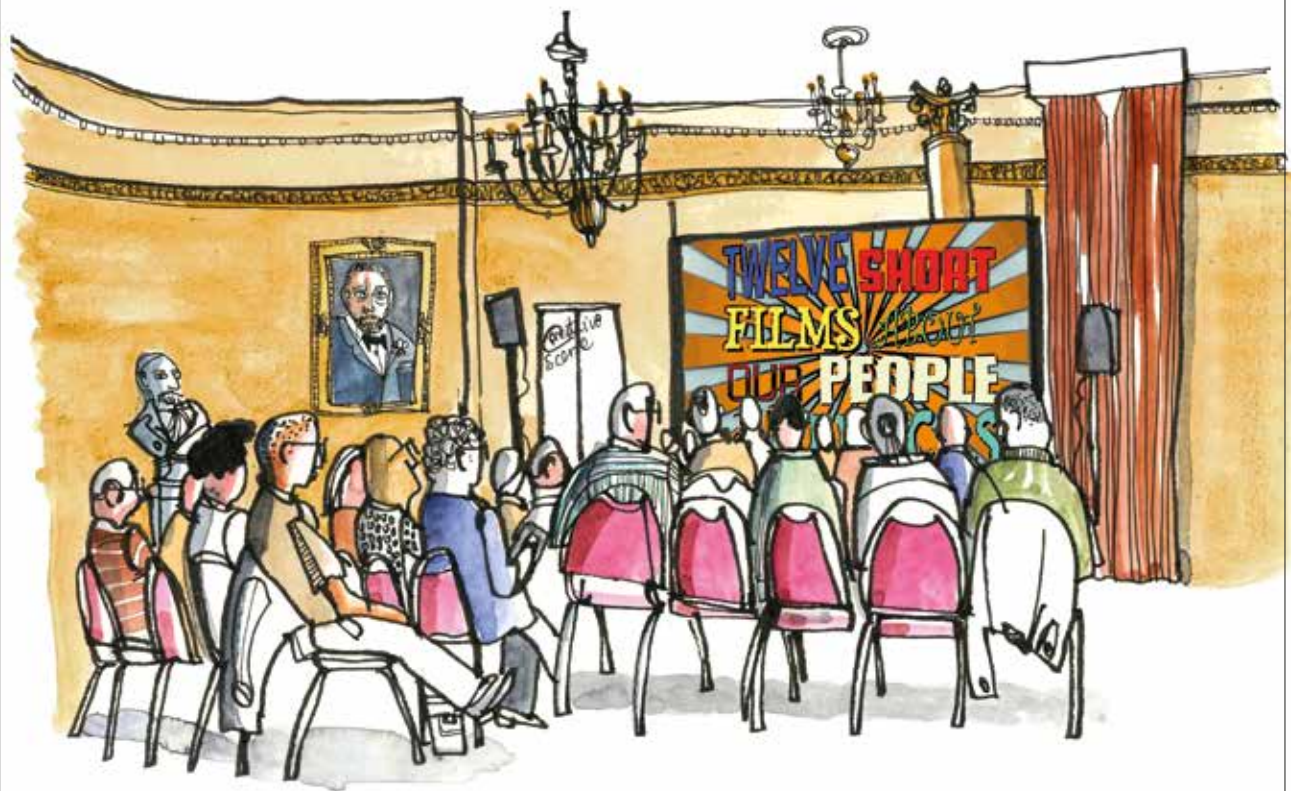
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"I like to be creative and experiment: when it involves sugar, butter, eggs and an oven it tends to work out quite well."

"Proud, very proud," Emma says without hesitation. "I like that people like my little shop, that teenager girls will choose to have their birthday parties there. I love all that. And I love being involved in this. Creative Scene are very much involved in this community, and our community needs that."

"But," she says, nodding towards the screen, "I'm a bit nervous to see how big my face will be on there!"

Next, I meet Sue Baker and Kim Gott from Greenwoods, the oldest shop in Dewsbury. If it were a modern shop, Greenwoods would be a cross between Blacks Leisure and Beaverbrooks the Jewellers. In reality, it's far from either.



Now a retired dentist, Sue ran her practice across the road from Greenwoods for more than two decades with Kim as her manager. "The shop was up for sale," she explains, "but there were no takers, and it looked like it could be knocked down and made into flats. All that history would have been lost."

{ 30 }

"All that history would have been lost."



"So you took it on?"

"Yes. It's been going since 1856, it's part of Dewsbury's history. And we were looking for a change. It made sense. We've still got elderly customers who remember being brought in by their grandparents, or recall buying their wedding ring here years ago.

"It's good to see something positive going on in the town," says Sue when I ask her about the film project, "it's nice to see people getting involved in their own locality."

"Creative Scene is about bringing art to everybody, and you're part of that," I suggest. "You are custodians of Dewsbury history."

"Yes, that's right, we are. With lots of arts and culture venues closing down, you can still see history in context in Greenwoods. We're a living museum really. Have you seen our old-fashioned till?"

I catch up with artist filmmaker Alistair at the buffet table where, between the mini samosas and sausage rolls, guests are mingling with Creative Scene staff.

His films were commissioned by Creative Scene to show another side of the town. Dewsbury hasn't always been associated with positive news stories, and local people think less of their town if they never hear anything good about it. Negativity breeds negativity.

Alistair's films go some way to halt that negativity, if not reverse it. There are 12 three-minute snippets into personal success, community, business, local pride and downright wackiness.

"So, you've filmed in the town's oldest shop... ate cake in The Pie Shed..."

"... Filmed beer being brewed," continues Alistair, "watched calligraphy been written onto walls; spent a day on a dairy farm and another in a monastery. Oh, and swam underwater to film an underwater hockey team."

"Which is your favourite film?" I ask, with a mouthful of tuna mayonnaise.

"I like them all," he says diplomatically. "They're all different, and it's not about the end result for me. It's been about the process of making them, meeting all these different people doing different things. There's been a huge generosity from everyone involved, showing me round and telling me what's special about their place.

"Was that okay?" he asks, nodding towards my tape recorder.

"Fine," I say, "it's all in the edit. What's this about underwater hockey?"

"I swam underwater to film the hockey team."

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I'VE BEEN
EXCITED ALL DAY
ABOUT
COMING.... WE
DON'T GET MUCH
MEDIA
ATTENTION.



"NO THROWING POPCORN"

Fiona, from the Batley Barracudas, is practically standing behind me with her mum. "It's called octopush and you play with a puck at the bottom of the pool," she explains, "that you push along with a stick, but it's much shorter than a normal hockey stick."

"Is it competitive?" I ask naively.

"There are loads of different leagues and tournaments. Our senior team is second from top in the first division" – the Man United of octopush, I think to myself – "and we travel all over the world to compete."

"Last year I went to Tasmania for the World Championships, this year we're going to Canada and next year... Sheffield."

I'm impressed. I had no idea. I turn my tape recorder towards mum.

"What do you make of your daughter being a film star for the day?"

"Whenever you hear about Kirklees on the news, it's always about something going wrong. So to bring out the good bits – people getting involved in different things – I think it's great. It's a really good idea."

"There are no rules for today, except no throwing popcorn," jokes Creative Scene director Nancy as people take their seats. "As you know, Creative Scene is an Arts Council programme that's supporting and creating fantastic arts and cultural opportunities for people here in North Kirklees. Today we want to mark our first four years with you and launch our programme for the next six months."



CREATIVE SCENE
ARE VERY MUCH
INVOLVED IN
THIS COMMUNITY
AND OUR
COMMUNITY
NEEDS THAT.

She introduces Alistair, who takes a bow, and his short films: "We wanted to put a spotlight on this part of the area," continues Nancy, "and show off the diversity of people who live here and some of the weird and wonderful things they get up to. I hope everybody goes away having found out something about North Kirklees that they didn't already know."

An hour or so later I descend the grand staircase with images of carpet weaving, micro brewing and polo swimmers still fresh. Wonderfully diverse in their subjects, Alistair's films all demonstrate an amazing strength of community that underpins life in this part of West Yorkshire.

Today has been about highlighting and celebrating that community, but it's also marked a subtle shift in emphasis. For the past four years, Creative Scene has, in its own words, built strong relationships and laid foundations for partnerships.

But now, it knows it has to encourage those partnerships to mature and work even closer together. The local people, businesses and organisations that have already witnessed the power of the arts and creativity to bring people together have to step forward and make the case for future investment.



The Search for Wonder

How do we create a sense of wonder for children and families that don't usually get the chance to see top quality professional theatre?

They come to see shows at sports clubs, in a converted barn that's usually a wedding venue, in libraries, community and neighbourhood centres that are often run by volunteers. Over five years more than 4000 children and their adults have been tucking into stories – about a boy who was a bit different at school, about a less-than-abominable Yeti and about a rabbit that learned to deal with loss and found wonder in the world again.

Today I've come to Thornhill, on the outskirts of Dewsbury, to check out the latest in Creative Scene's On Tour circuit for children and families. On nearby streets, soggy pumpkins still sit on doorsteps after a night of luring trick or treaters to overindulge in chewy sweets and lollipops. Set back from Edge Top Road, Thornhill Sports and Community Centre stands behind a large car park, mostly empty as I arrive but no doubt heaving on match days for Thornhill Trojans, the local rugby club. A Creative Scene A-board is the only signifier that this afternoon the centre will be the venue for Rabbit Girl and the Search for Wonder, a family theatre show created from the stories of the people of Thornhill and Birstall, devised and rehearsed in Creative Scene's creative hub, Brigantia in Dewsbury. (Since its premiere in these West Yorkshire towns, it's gone on to tour nationally and played in theatres such as the Leicester Haymarket and MAC Birmingham.)

The set is separated from the rest of the bar area – and the gathering audience – by one of those concertina sliding partitions that you find in, well, sports club bars. On the other side of the purple concertina, I pin down today's 'community promoter' who conveniently has her name stitched onto the front of her purple Thornhill Trojans rugby shirt.

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OPPOSITE:
Rabbit Girl and her dad
engage the audience
at Thornhill Sports and
Community Centre.

“Was it a difficult sell for Creative Scene to partner with you?”

“So, what do you do for the club?”

“I’m a player for the ladies team as well as the child welfare officer for the club,” she says.

“I’ve never heard of the Trojans,” I admit. “Are they any good?”

“Last season the men’s team got promoted to the next division. This year we’ve been promoted again, so we’re going up to the Premier League next season. The women don’t have leagues like that, but the men have done two divisions in two years. So, yeah, we’re successful.”

“And what position do you play?” I’m out of my comfort zone now.

“I’ve been playing second row, but this is only my second season. I’m too old for it already,” she laughs, “it takes me a week to recover after a game.”

“So Jennie, this is all about bringing performances for families out of the big theatres and into places where people can easily get to see it,” I say.

“Was it a difficult sell for Creative Scene to get you interested in putting on these shows? Does it fit in with what you’re trying to do as a club?”

“It fits in with the community part of our title,” she says. “The Club is normally closed during the day, so it’s always good to bring in new people, people who wouldn’t normally come to this place. A couple of shows back we had quite a few Asian people in the audience ... Normally they don’t set foot in here... so it was nice to have that mixture of people.

We’ve just set up a new tots rugby group, 3 to 6-year-olds. So I’m hoping I can proper plug it to them for the next one. But a lot of parents still have to work during the holidays, don’t they? We have a childminder who normally comes with 15 kids, but apparently, she can’t make it today.”

And obviously Creative Scene give us a kickback from the ticket sales which is a bonus for the club.”

Each of the venues in the On Tour and Local networks offers a member of staff or volunteer as the Community Promoter. Like Jennie, they coordinate the staging of the performance on their patch. They preview shows so they know what’s touring; they support the marketing effort through sharing information in their venue and through their own networks, and they provide valuable feedback. Crucially this feedback is acted upon, to ensure the next bookings are relevant to the local audience and people keep coming through their doors.

Julia Robinson is Community Promoter at historic Northorpe Barn – home to a charity that supports the mental and emotional health of youth people – and transformed each half term into an On Tour theatre.

“People don’t need to travel to Huddersfield or Leeds to see high quality



Ben Rothera

“Like a lot of teenagers, I had no idea what a career in the arts actually looked like, but I guess I’ve always been interested in live performance. I was in the drama club at school, and we’d often go to Bradford’s Alhambra to see musicals and plays.

“I can clearly remember, at 14, going on a school trip to see Mind the Gap’s production of Of Mice and Men which we were studying. The way they worked with an integrated cast of disabled and non-disabled performers – and minimal props – to reframe a story through performance was incredibly powerful. To see a person with a learning disability playing a character normally played by non-disabled performer was inspirational. That one show made me think what the arts is for and who it’s for.

“I carried on doing youth theatre during university but quickly realised that I just didn’t have what it takes to be an actor. After my course, I drifted for a while from one admin job to another before I saw an advert for an entry-level admin job at Mind the Gap, who were based in Bradford. I applied, and I got it. So my first job in the arts was working for the company that had inspired me years earlier. For the next four years, I’d book venues on the touring circuit and help with marketing and audience development. It was a brilliant introduction.

“Working for a touring company, I felt very close to the process of production but disconnected from audiences. You were parachuted into a place that you might not re-visit for another twelve months. A venue, on the other hand, is rooted in its community and exists to serve that community. I wanted more direct experience of working with audiences, so my next jobs were with a number of different venues and theatre companies before I went freelance in 2014.

“I’ve been lucky. By then I’d seen the process from both sides and I was looking for opportunities to bring the two together. Working with Creative Scene on the On Tour circuit was going to give me that opportunity.

“What’s struck me about the arts is its inherent inequality, not just for audiences but for performers and, in fact, everyone working in the arts. I’m interested in roles that seek to redress that in some way.”



Rabbit Girl

“As an audience member you have to feel you are present in that room.”





children's theatre. It's here on the doorstep and at a fraction of the cost," she says.

Back in the bar of the Thornhill Trojans, more families arrive. Mostly it's mums with their children, some grandparents and a couple of red-fleeced childminders who've brought a minibus load of young people from, their logo says, The Counting House Nursery and After-School Club in Birstall.

As the audience settles, I notice local artist and poet Madiha settling down with her two sons, Yusef and Tabrez. Apparently there's a section of the show that's inspired by a South Asian folk tale the family related at one of the collaboration sessions last year.

The Ho Jamalo story tells of a railway bridge that had been constructed under British rule in the Indian province of Sind. The army officer in charge offered to reward handsomely whoever tested the bridge, and the challenge was taken up by a local man, Jamalo Khoso, who was in the town's prison on death row.

Jamalo successfully drove a train engine across the bridge and was subsequently pardoned and set free. On his return to his village, his courage was written about, and then sung, by his jubilant wife. The Ho Jamalo song has since become a hugely popular anthem of celebration at weddings, festivals and graduations.

During the show, as Rabbit Girl's father relates the familiar tale, eight-year-old Yusef turns and shoots a this-is-our-story-smile at his mother. He looks made up.

"Such a multi-faceted show," Madiha says, "with all the live music, the performers, the puppetry and the animation. They were absolutely mesmerised. And I'm so proud that a piece of South Asian art heritage has been incorporated, my children loved it. They've heard that story so many times – I'm a bit obsessed by it – they recognised it straightaway."

"That was the best one we've seen," says one of the childminders as she rounds up her charges. "Better than the yeti one. Benji, don't forget your coat. Cameron, is that your lunchbox?"



Our Local: spaces and places we go

We don't run a venue or have an arts centre in North Kirklees, so the Creative Scene is emerging in unusual places. Our venues are well-loved and well-used spaces familiar to the people we want to attract. They are a challenge to perform in, and the audience will let you know if they don't like it.

Chip Shop Chips by Box of Tricks at The Leggers Inn, Dewsbury | Pan in the Park by Wrongsemble at Bagshaw Museum and Wilton Park | Variety Night at Bagshaw Museum | Terror from the Skies by Matthew Bellwood at Roberttown Community Centre, Liversedge | Game On by Pat Pinch of Scary Little Girls at The Navigation Tavern, Mirfield | Idle Women on a canal boat at Shepley Bridge Marina, Mirfield | Rear View by IOU Theatre at Fox's Biscuits (and other Batley locations) | Dough by Olivia Furber at Northorpe Hall Barn | The Next Train by Alistair I McDonald and Kevin Threlfall at Dewsbury Train Station | Batley Does Opera at Batley Methodist Church | Animated Portraits by Rozi Fuller at the Aakash Indian Restaurant, Cleckheaton | Bingo Balls by Let's Go on the facades of Victorian buildings in Batley | Savage Hart by Citrus Arts in the walled garden of Oakwell Hall





“It’s f-e-s-t-i-v-a-l d-a-y!”

The walk from the station into the centre of town is a step back in time. This avenue of Victorian architectural splendour once housed the head offices and showrooms for the area’s textile businesses. Modelled in the Italian Renaissance style, the overly-ornate stonework and lavish facades competed with each other to impress clients coming straight off the train.

That prosperity has long gone. Now pubs, dance studios and optimistic recruitment consultants occupy these grandiose buildings like cheeky cuckoo chicks squatting in the wrong nest.

On the high street, like dozens of others, the banks and building societies have given way to charity shops, takeaways and nail bars. I can see more people in the Tesco car park down in the dip than there are on the main street. This is Batley, West Yorkshire and today it’s Batley Festival.

Kimberley is walking down the esplanade when I arrive, pulling her lapel microphone up to her face like some secret service agent: “Have you got some tarpaulin for the outdoor play?” she asks whoever’s on the other end.

Craft stalls, charity fundraisers and a number of food stalls are setting up in the Market Square. The falafel van arrives. First aiders check their radios. Anna flicks through spreadsheets of performance schedules on her clipboard. Up in the Memorial Gardens, Simon breaks into a gentle trot in time to help Donna put up a gazebo.

“Okay, we’re running out of time,” says Kimberley into her lapel as she strides past. “Are there any major jobs that need covering? Do you need any more help with those tables?”

The library clock strikes half past ten. Time for the volunteer briefing. “Right. Good morning everybody. It’s f-e-s-t-i-v-a-l d-a-y!” Kimberley sings

"IT'S F-E-S-T-I-V-A-L D-A-Y!"

to the small group. "You'll be pleased to hear I'm not going to talk for long because this year I have two righthand women.

"This is Nicky, our safety officer for the day and Ann, who you know is looking after the volunteers, so if you have any issues speak to them and not me. I'll be a corner somewhere being stressed. Remember people, if you're smiling, the public will smile too. Have fun."

We hear from Nicky who tells us the radio code words for lost children and terrorist attacks, hopefully not confused. Ann explains how the volunteers should accompany the walkabout acts around the site.

As the festival opens, Donna is organising wooden logs and straw bales for the den building activity. Since she volunteered last year, she has become something of a Creative Scene stalwart. I've photographed her and her daughter getting stuck in with performance cyclists... and a few months ago she threw herself into the Make It Happen programme which saw 25 local artists working with acclaimed performance company Walk the Plank.

Over a series of weeks, she and her fellow artists learnt how to soak paper rope with paraffin. The finale was an outdoor event in the town centre which saw hundreds of local people enjoying their town in a new light.

"How did that experience change you?" I ask as she collects an armful of bamboo poles.

"It definitely made me feel more confident. I don't feel so weird and strange any more," she laughs. "It made me realise there are other people out there who want to do the same things I want to do and that I'm not aiming too high. Because it gets to you like that, doesn't it? You've got to have ambition, but I thought I was aiming too high, and now I know I'm not. I just need to work at it.

"Did you know we've been asked to do something for the Christmas lights switch-on in Dewsbury?"

"Brilliant," I say. "That should be great fun. And tell me, do you enjoy doing this festival?"

"I can't wait for it, Len. And then I can't wait to start planning the next one."

"Planning the next one? You're only ten minutes into this one!"

I stop Khadija, Firdaws and Aisha as they make their way around the Memorial Gardens in their official volunteer high vis waistcoats. "Can I ask why you all signed up as volunteers?" I ask.

They look from each other to my phone that I'm using as a tape recorder. "Shall I do it?" Aisha asks her friends diplomatically.

"Go on," says Khadija.

"We wanted to volunteer because we know that Batley Festival is the main festival for this area to bring everyone together. So we thought, why not be a part of that?"

"This is our first festival because we're actually from Dewsbury," chips in Firdaws, as if Dewsbury was on the other side of Yorkshire. For some people, such is the rivalry between the different towns in North Kirklees, it might as well be. It's actually less than two miles away. "I'd heard about it on Twitter and it looked really enjoyable and fun to help out with. It feels like we're experiencing it as a visitor as well as a volunteer."

"And had you heard about Creative Scene before?"

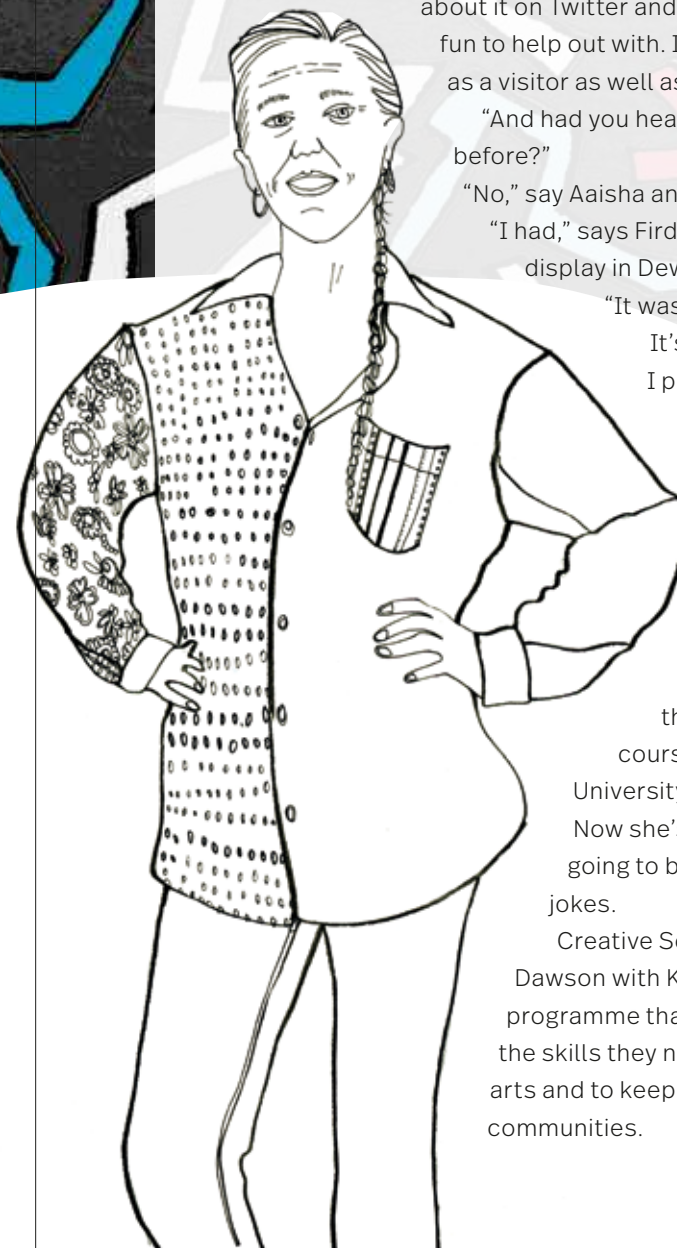
"No," say Aisha and Khadija together.

"I had," says Firdaws. "I went to that big fire display in Dewsbury town centre."

"It was good, wasn't it?" I say.

It's another half an hour before I pin Nicky down. Already the cobbles outside the police station have been covered with a colourful chalk maze and silver buckets are set out in a circle for a street theatre piece. She tells me she's a professional events manager and, up until three months ago, she was the course leader for Huddersfield University's Event Management course. Now she's researching for a PhD. "I'm going to be a Doctor of Events," she jokes.

Creative Scene has twinned Nicky Dawson with Kimberley as part of a mentoring programme that provides local people with the skills they need to get paid work in the arts and to keep making things happen in their communities.



"IT'S F-E-S-T-I-V-A-L D-A-Y!"



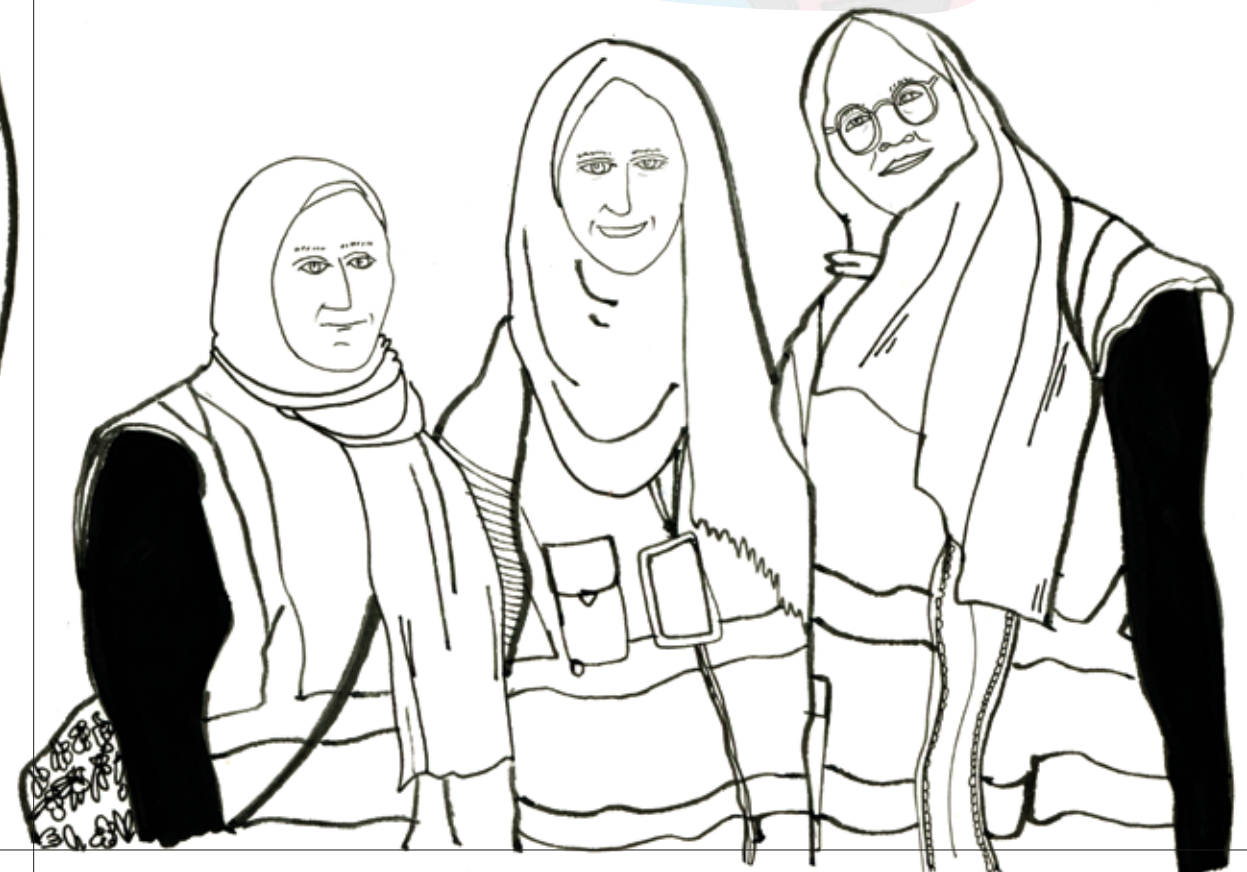
"Kimberley is a wonderful events manager," says Nicky, "but it's the safety management stuff that's difficult to keep up with. With all the terrorist treats, potential litigation issues and new legislation it's a very fast-paced area of event management. For the last eight weeks or so we've been going through a process of dos and don'ts and, then, after the festival, we'll have a time of reflection to consider what went right and what didn't."

"If Creative Scene wasn't around, how do events like these afford your services?" I ask.

"That's very interesting, and it's exactly what I'm writing my PhD about... attitudes towards health and safety legislation. There are more and more events that are not being run safely that are, ironically, being closed down by councils who actually want them to happen in the first place. It's a difficult chicken and egg scenario. Also, community organisers are no longer staging events for fear of litigation if something goes wrong. These are scary times for community events."

"So what needs to happen?"

"Events like the Batley Festival could do with recruiting volunteers who have health and safety knowledge. It doesn't need to be in event



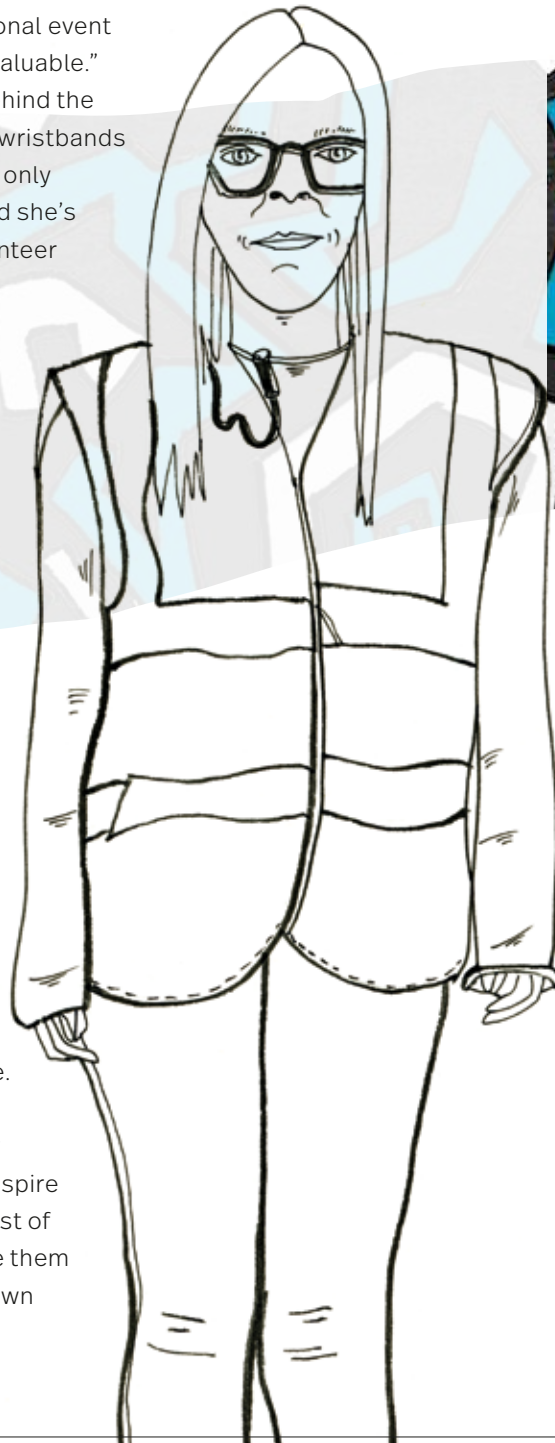
"IT'S F-E-S-T-I-V-A-L D-A-Y!"

management, it could be in a biscuit factory, the principles of common sense are the same. And to have organisations like Creative Scene fund professional event management is absolutely invaluable."

Ann is taking a breather behind the table that sells bright orange wristbands promoting the festival. This is only her second Batley Festival and she's found herself working as volunteer coordinator, a role that's not unfamiliar to her as she does the same during the week in her full-time role at a charity. She came to Batley four years ago from Leeds to start a family. "Leeds is too big, you can't easily make connections there," she says. "I wanted to come to a town where I could feel was home and was a community for my little one – Beatrice is two – and that's worked, she's part of everything that I'm part of now."

"What do you get out of volunteering?" I ask.

"I just love Batley and want it to be the best it can be. The festival is only on for one day, but maybe people will try something today that might inspire them to take forward in the rest of their lives. Or maybe it'll make them think differently about their town



and take a bit more care of where they live. It's important to invest in where you live."

The festival is now in full swing. Around the silver bucket circle, veteran outdoor performance troupe Avanti Display have a large audience glued to their every blank stare, every mime move. "This is the funniest thing I've ever seen," says the man in front of me to his teenage son. "That's the good thing about art. You can do anything, absolutely anything."

Not everyone is having a good time. "We had promises from 25 volunteers but only six have shown up," says Kimberley when she slows down long enough for me to push my voice recorder app under her nose, "we're massively thin on the ground. It's disheartening, but what can you do? I'm going to have to have a re-think for next year."



Kimberley's story

For a couple of decades, wife, mother and grandmother, Kimberley Thirkill has harboured a burning ambition. Until now other priorities have come first. Not any more.

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Teaching performance to children with special needs has been my ambition since university days. But over the years, the only things I've done around performance has been activities with my kids – trips to the theatre or whatever – and the things I've done with Creative Scene. I've had no hands-on experience to speak of, and lots has changed in that sector over the years.

I've always loved art, always loved performance. I was in a dance school from the age of three, first in Batley where I grew up and then Dewsbury. If there was any drama performance at school, I was in it.

I wasn't particularly into visual arts. When we were on holiday, my mum and dad wouldn't be interested in looking round galleries or museums. It just wasn't something we did.

After school, I decided to study performing arts and went to Bretton Hall near Wakefield. By the second year, I had to decide what to specialise in, and my tutor suggested directing. He'd noticed I always liked to be in charge and make myself known. He was probably right.

One of the other tutors was a photographer for teenage girl magazines like My Guy and Jackie, and I did quite a bit of modelling for him. They were all love stories of course, and I'd play the character who was swooning over some guy one week and jilted the next. It was a lot of fun, and I'd get £10 a time, a lot of money back then. My mum still has all the magazines.

In real life I was spending more time learning about boys than I was about performing arts, and by the time I'd left university, I'd neglected my first love. If I were to become a teacher of drama, I would need to finance

KIMBERLEY'S STORY

a teaching degree, but life got in the way. Simon and I met soon after university, and we started making plans. I needed a regular income and got a job as a training manager for PC World.

I don't regret taking that route. I wanted to be able to afford the car, the house, the holidays, and I put the arts to one side as I became a wife and mother. I enjoyed my job, travelling up and down the country training staff, and at the weekends I did what mums do: I'd take our son to football and our daughter to dance classes, as my mum had done for me.

The arts weren't really in my life then. We might go to the local art gallery when we were on holiday – I still couldn't be dragged into a museum – but we'd only go to the theatre if we were taking the kids to see something. That was more about not having the money than not having the time.

I left PC World after one particularly irate customer screamed at me – it was the last straw – and found myself the manager of a care home. I still had the desire to support people, but, at that time, it wasn't in the arts. I worked in the care home for the next ten years until our family commitments changed, and we needed to find a more flexible way of earning a living.

So Simon and I found ourselves opening a café in Heckmondwike. Neither of us had done anything like that before and neither of us particularly wanted to be running a café – it was only ever a stop-gap – but it did mean we connected more with the local community.

I was already part of the Ladies Circle, organising fun events for a group of local women and fundraising along the way. Because of that, I was invited onto the committee of the new Batley Festival, which I was happy to do. Batley is my community, and I was keen to bring us all together in some way. Within a week, I found myself as secretary, and it was apparent at that point, there was no clear artistic ambition for the Festival.

Don't get me wrong, the first one was fantastic, really good. No one really knew what they were doing, but we had a lot of help from the Council. It was basically a showcase for lots of community groups – Batley Baths brought down exercise bikes, Youth Services did something else – but there was very little art. We'd booked a compère and a couple of walkabout acts and that was it.

I remember being in a meeting when someone from the Council was giving us advice about putting on a festival. I was thinking, I want your job, I could do your job. My creative appetite was coming back. I recalled what I'd been doing all those years ago, why had I let that go?

We were each handed responsibility for different areas of the festival and I was given the Memorial Gardens. That's what did it for me, I was

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“My creative
appetite
was coming
back.”



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determined to change things. I wanted to bring in better quality acts, for people to try things they'd never tried before, and for families to come and spend the whole day doing things together – and to get off their phones!

After the third Festival the committee chair stepped down and I took over. At about the same time Creative Scene offered their help, and so here I was, the new chair of the Festival with some professional help at my disposal.

For me, Creative Scene was never about the money. It was no good waving a cheque book in front of me if it wasn't going to make the change I wanted to see for Batley Festival. I was determined to shake things up. Still not entirely sure what Creative Scene wanted to do, I did feel I could learn from them, and that meant more than anything.

I was invited to go and see other festivals and events around the country, to get inspiration and see what might work, and what wouldn't, for us in Batley. We hit the streets of Great Yarmouth one weekend for the International Festival of Circus and Street Art. Another time a group of us piled onto a coach for a trip to the seaside to see Anthony Gormley's Another Place on Crosby Beach before hearing him talk about place-making at an event in Liverpool.

One September we spent a weekend in Redcar at the Festival of Thrift. That was interesting because I was able to pick out what I thought didn't work so well. It was staged over a very large site which was quite difficult to navigate. I'm not sure there was an easier way of doing it, but you really needed two days there to get your bearings.


I was inspired by what I can only describe as a Mad Hatter's tea party. Rows and rows of tables set out in a walled garden for a meal created by local chefs. All the food was themed on things that represented their town and while you were eating there was roving entertainment from a band and a choir. And because you were all sat together, you got to speak with people you'd never met before. I loved that.

Those trips away were stimulating and my creative curiosity got a proper boost. As well as festivals, I started to go and see theatre again... I even enjoyed going to museums.

Through Creative Scene, I made connections with people I didn't even know were out there and got to work with theatre companies that I could only ever dream of collaborating with. For the 2016 Festival I had an aspiration to make a new show about the town of Batley, but nothing that wallowed in nostalgia. I was looking for a contemporary show celebrating where the town and its people were now.

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"I felt
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As part of Creative Scene's 'Go & See' initiative Kimberley and her partner Simon were invited to attend Greenwich and Docklands International Festival in June 2015 to see a show by outdoor theatre specialists, Periplum. Based on Ray Bradbury's 1953 dystopian novel, 451 is a large scale spectacle that tells a dark tale of a society where literature is banned and firemen get paid to burn piles of books. The performance made a huge impression on them both and was the beginning of a compelling relationship between Periplum and the Batley Festival.

Here producer Claire Raftery and writer Damian Wright reflect on that relationship.

“ For more than 20 years we've been interrogating the potential of outdoor work and with 451 we were fortunate to have the resources to make a show that matched our ambitions. It had a long research and development stage and was the first time we'd used a book as our source material. Technically it was very demanding and had a particularly mesmeric soundtrack that totally immersed the audience. We had no idea Kimberley and Simon were watching.

We first met Kimberley a few months later in the Tesco Café in Batley. It was good to hear that 451 had had such an impact and always encouraging to start a new working relationship with a collaborator who understands your work, especially if it's a bit off the wall like ours. When we meet someone who's enthusiastic and sees the potential of outdoor work then the process is always a good one. It is, after all, all about partnership.

Kimberley was serious about her vision for the festival: she has an ambition to see it grow and reach more people. But she also has a good sense of humour and that allowed us to click straightaway. If you can have a laugh then you relax more and let your imagination flow and dream of different possibilities.

When we were offered the commission no one had any idea what was about to happen. It was the day of our first meeting with residents when the news of Jo Cox's death broke. That totally shaped our show and we were clear that it would be something that celebrated Batley in every way possible. We wanted everyone, whatever their background, to feel positive about the town and its people.

We had a lot of fun. Doors were opened for us and we included a lot of different people who you wouldn't necessarily associate with a cultural event. Filming with the Mount Pleasant Cricket Team was possibly one of the most surreal days in our careers.

We come in as humble artists – outsiders – hoping to make people a little more involved with the place they live. With The Batley Picture Show we shared back people's own memories and, we're told, it was a huge success. Batley Festival has had a lot of love put into it and you can sense that as a performer and, we're sure, as part of the audience.

Much of our work over the last few years has been in places like North Kirklees that don't normally get exposure to these sort of shows. That's been a really positive experience for us and we can see the impact it has. And events like the Batley Festival will continue to grow as long as there's support for ambitious people like Kimberley.

In the same way, we had no idea Kimberley and Simon were watching 452, we have no idea of the long-term impact The Batley Picture Show will have on its audience. Exposure to this type of work can get someone thinking differently: about their town, about their values. It might even inspire someone to think about a career in the arts. There's legacy in all of that. You can't monitor or quantify it.

”



With Creative Scene, we worked up a brief, interviewed prospective companies and subsequently commissioned Periplum Theatre Company. I'd first seen their amazing outdoor work at the Greenwich and Docklands International Festival with Simon. We'd never experienced anything like it before and were both absolutely blown away.

I remember Claire and Damian from Periplum coming to Batley and being particularly impressed as they listened carefully to what I wanted from this production. They didn't treat me like some little woman on a committee that knows nothing about it. Here were professional artists taking on board what they heard and, with us, creating the show we wanted.

The Batley Picture Show brought me to tears, I cried the whole way through, it was magical. It's one of the best experiences I've had.

By day, I'd now left Simon to run the café, and I'd taken a fixed-term contract with a community organisation working with blind and partially-sighted people. I was supporting vulnerable people again, and it was good to get back into that profession. It was my job to get clients out from their own four walls into the community, building friendships.

And I got to be creative again. We'd have art and craft classes once a month – we'd do pottery and make cards rather than the usual coffee morning and bingo – and I'd organise trips to museums, theatres or stately homes. We'd go to the Hepworth in Wakefield or the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Visits to the Grand Theatre in Leeds were always a hit: there'd be pre-show talks and touch workshops especially for the blind and partially-sighted.

I enjoyed that role but the funding ran out and, at first, I thought that was the right time to start something myself working with people with special needs and performance. But, after some initial research, I decided the timing was not quite right. I still have a mortgage to pay, still need to put food on the table and I still want my holidays.

So now I've taken up a new role as a development officer at a community centre. It was council-run but has effectively been handed back to the community, and it's my job, as the only member of staff, to make it a fully-functioning hub, used day and night. Again, it's a fixed contract for two-and-a-half years, and it's part-time, but that suits me perfectly. I can use the rest of the time to develop my ideas and gain the extra skills I need.

When my contract runs out in two years, I'd like nothing more than to get a role with a theatre company that works with people with special needs or be ready to start something community based myself.

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"The Batley Picture Show was one of the best experiences I've had."

There's still loads to learn, but working with Creative Scene has put me back on the right road. In my early days, at university and in my first job, I considered myself quite self-confident. Over the years I've lost my way. Working with the Festival and with Creative Scene has helped me find the confidence that's been tucked away all this time. I've got my passion back.

And yes, that love of creativity is filtering through the family. In our house, art has certainly become an everyday thing: you just have to walk into our living room and there's some project on the floor, something Simon is creating or building. One evening a week, he and our five-year-old granddaughter Lydia will get the paints out – it's all over the floor, walls and chairs – but she has a great time.

She's very creative, she goes dancing and to drama and loves them, so our renewed passion has started her off as well. In the past, she'd come with us on our weekends away, to the Yorkshire Dales or wherever. But now I'm searching online to find out what festivals are going on, things that she'd enjoy too, and we're all going there instead. Art and creativity has turned our lives around.

Meanwhile, Creative Scene was developing a scheme aimed at creating new opportunities for people to get work in the creative industries – people who wouldn't usually get the chance or be able to take up work because of family commitments, support needs or lower incomes. The Inspire Internships offered paid placements in projects that present a bigger experience than might ordinarily be available in North Kirklees. The idea then was for the newly-inspired intern to make things happen in their home towns.

So, when Creative Scene heard that Bradford-based Mind The Gap was working on a major new production with a community cast and outdoor arts specialists Walk the Plank, they seized the moment to introduce Kimberley and support her role for the duration of the show.

"This is the point when the army advances," says tonight's rehearsal co-ordinator, Chris Singleton, as a dozen or more performers, a couple in wheelchairs, hold hands across the dance studio. Kimberley is pushing Michael in one of the wheelchairs, a big grin across his face.

It's Tuesday evening, and this is one of a series of rehearsals for Zara, Mind The Gap's most ambitious project so far. The theatre company provides roles for people with learning disabilities both on and off the stage and Zara is the last in a quartet of productions highlighting disability issues.

"We take four steps forward and then four back," says Chris. "How many times do we do that?"

Zara follows the experiences of one learning-disabled mother as she fights to keep her new baby. The story is based on interviews the company has conducted with parents across the country where they found 40% of parents with learning disabilities have had children taken from them.

"We need to end up as a ring, holding hands around the imaginary baby."

Tonight's participants are part of a 100-strong community cast made up of learning disabled and non-disabled performers. "This is our sixth or seventh rehearsal," says Kimberley when, halfway through, everyone takes a break. As an intern for Mind The Gap, she has had to weave these extra responsibilities with her regular paid work at the community centre.

"I'm doing all the admin for the community cast," she says, "so there's lots of paperwork, but I'm loving it. I can't describe it, it's just an absolutely amazing experience. Up until last week I wasn't actually in the show, I was just managing everyone, but we needed more support workers so now I'm in it. I'm having to learn it very quickly."

Kimberley is in her element. "For me, this is what I've always wanted to do. It's been fantastic to be able to rebuild my skills, remind myself why I went into performing arts and support everyone else's passion."

Michael's wife, Sarah, is also learning disabled and part of the cast. "We've been to some of Mind The Gap's performances before," she says before the rehearsal re-starts. "But this is the first time we've been involved. Kimberley has really helped me with Michael, it means I can enjoy it much more."

"Can we get back at it?" shouts Chris. "Grab your placards and sticks."

Two weeks later and the baby's huge blue eyes gaze blankly at Halifax's Piece Hall square. Hovering around its fat legs a team of six 'midwives' spring its mechanical arms and legs into life on the instructions of the woman with a megaphone.

This evening sees the first technical rehearsal for Zara, as over 180 cast and crew see their individual preparations come together ahead of tomorrow's premiere.

The baby rotates (there's a forklift behind it) and lies on a bed of colourful cushions. "It's having its bottle," yells a passing child to his mother as an oversize baby bottle is carried above heads onto the stage. The mother stops, puts the breaks on her buggy, and takes it all in.

In front of the stage, next to an army tank, movement director Manuela Benini is running through a sequence with Kimberley and her group of



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Kimberley supports learning disabled performers for the Halifax performance of Zara.



'protestors'. "Let's all go over here," Manuela shouts, "and see what it looks like from there. Shall we all follow Paul?"

The Brazilian choreographer has a collaborative approach to directing the community cast. She continually invites feedback and allows the participants to make suggestions of how a scene might play out, keeping an eye on the overall feel.

"All mothers have rights!" chant the protestors. "Save the baby!"

With one eye each on the rehearsals, producers Lisa Mallaghan (Mind the Gap) and Liz Pugh (Walk the Plank) take time out to feedback on Kimberley's contributions over the last couple of months.

"When we first met Kimberley with Creative Scene," says Lisa, "she talked about the experience she already had and the gaps she wanted to fill. Straightaway we knew we could absolutely find her a role in this project."

"She's been an absolute joy," says Liz, "incredibly positive, reliable and has really taken on board the ambitions of the project to work in an inclusive way."

"Absolutely," reiterates Lisa. "When you're working with a community cast of over 100 - 80% of whom have learning disabilities - you need a safe pair of hands, and that's what Kimberley has given us."

"I imagine she's learnt a lot from Manuela," says Liz, as the protestors run across the front of the stage, placards in hand. "I'm sure she's watched that approach and taken it on board."

The first rehearsal over, the crew and cast have a short break as they wait for the light to fade before another run-through to test the spectacular lighting effects.

Kimberley is elated. "It's reminded me that this is what I've always wanted to do. A lot has changed since I was at university and being involved in this has brought me right up to date.

"I would eventually like to start something up myself in North Kirklees because there is nothing like this back there, but I don't want to jump into it until I know I'm up to speed with all my skills.

"I'd have never been able to have this opportunity without Creative Scene setting it up. I don't have those connections. It's been invaluable. This won't be the end of it for me."

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"It's been fantastic to rebuild my skills and support everyone else's passion."

Our Vicky*
makes the space
for great creative
things to happen

Her early
arts career
included
posts with
established
theatres and with
touring companies.



"Those roles helped me
understand the role of
participation and
engagement in
developing audiences."

At Creative Scene
Vicky has made
the space for...

It's important we
value each other

...Local artists to grow and learn
from each by setting up
exchanges, arranging
masterclasses and instigating
support networks...

*She's our Programme Producer

Back in the day...



... she put on variety shows with
the other kids on her street.



...She's made the space for a writer to join up
with Batley Bulldogs – to write a play about
their Under 16's girls rugby team



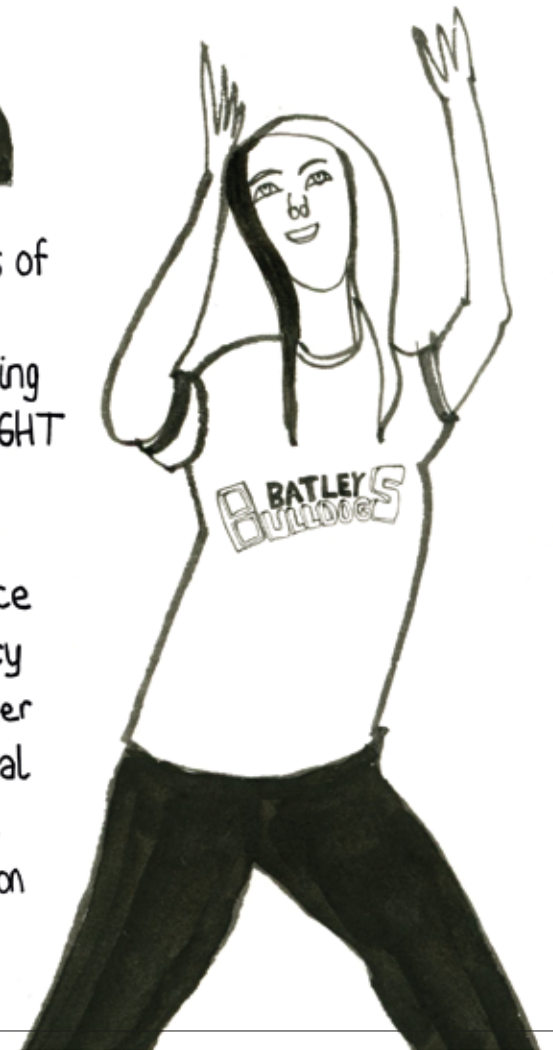
She's made the space for dozens of
local students to work with
international artists making amazing
installations as part of HeckmondLIGHT
annual light event...



and she's made the space
for pubs and community
centres to come together
as a new network so local
people can experience
top-notch theatre right on
their doorsteps.



...and she's found the space
for it to be professionally
produced and performed
across West Yorkshire.



Today Vicky is hosting fifteen international participants to a new network for 'Creators of Common Ground'



"At Brigantia in the heart of Dewsbury we're exploring whether there's a role for the arts and culture in enabling conversations between communities who don't normally come together."



Ironically, there's a far-right march outside



"It's about mutual respect..."



"Bringing harmony... although it sounds cheesy... is what the world and our communities need right now."

"This is a good opportunity for me to make sure the work I'm doing in Berlin has a global impact..."



"Is 'common ground' the right phrase?"



This weekend it's about sharing methodologies and learning from each other's projects. Next they'll consider what initiatives they can do together.

Vicky makes the space for all this to happen.

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On autonomy

Art scenes that emerge by themselves are the ones that hang around. Artists need to explore and experiment, they need to be able to fail. There shouldn't have to be an outcome.

Money is useful in supporting that process, but funding comes with strings attached. Conditions have to be fulfilled, targets met.

If funders could trust the process to happen organically, to give it some autonomy, that would be great. But I don't think it works that way.

There are artists everywhere, but they are spread out and don't have the resources to self organise. If we had a central hub of activity, somewhere where people could feel comfortable, where different disciplines collaborated, that's when we'd get a multiplier effect.

In the tech world, they understand if you bring people together in co-working spaces then people share ideas and support one another.

If you had a place that was open to all then you'd start to create audiences, artists could sell work and an ecosystem would be created that feeds itself. I really think that's what we need.

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{ 75 }

Imran, filmmaker

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Madiha, creative change-maker

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On change

I wasn't born here. I'm an immigrant. I moved to Dewsbury when I was six. I remember very clearly this new place, not being able to speak the language, not having any friends.

Academically I'm from a scientific background. I was encouraged to have a 'proper' career and, until recently, have always put the arts on one side. But six months ago, I decided to change direction and follow my passion. Collaborating with Creative Scene has given me the confidence to make that change.

I'm involved with a literature forum that celebrates the Urdu language – poetry is such a big part of the Indo-Pak heritage – I've learnt now to develop audiences rather than cater for existing ones.

Locally we've been having conversations around art and creativity, about this idea of a cultural ecology. I've made good friends through those networks and developed opportunities that have helped me grow. I love connecting with new people.

Through art, I'm getting more involved in my town. Last year I co-hosted the Christmas lights switch-on which for me was a big deal. Twenty-six years after arriving, I feel like Dewsbury is now home.

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On unknown consequences

Urban acupuncture. It's about connections and the idea that a little pin prick can unblock tension and make something flow again. So imagine making a small action in a place which ripples outwards somehow and makes a difference. Perhaps it'll make no difference. But I love the idea it can be the tiniest thing: maybe I pick up litter off the street. Someone sees you and they too pick up litter. You can be making a difference and you just don't know.

I left Dewsbury at 18 to go to uni and I've not really been back until now. In the early 60s, we lived in the Flatts. Slum clearance was everywhere and houses were pulled down around us. I was in a gang of lads who'd make dens in the attics of the abandoned houses. It was a real adventure back then and adventure has run through everything I've done as an artist since.

It's only in recent months that I've started to tune into the town again. Yes, I do look at the place creatively, you do that wherever you are. The truth is everywhere is exciting and different, it's just a case of finding your own way in. And then you need the confidence and enterprise in your own ideas to see them through.

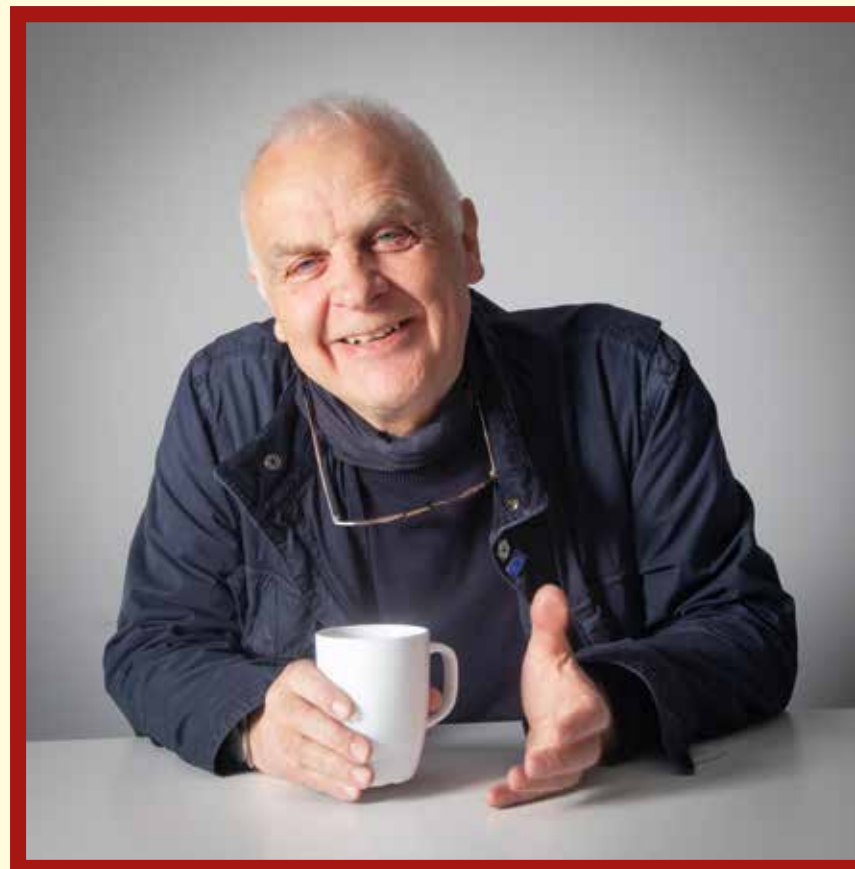
The place has clearly changed since. Physically it feels relatively deadened, but there's also a distinct coolness between the white and Muslim populations. Mistrust on both sides. That's something to bridge. When did we stop talking to each other?

There are lots of ingredients that make a place distinctive – it's culture, the people, nature – and we need to take the time to look more closely, feel more deeply and get beneath the veneer and see the connections that have more resonance.

So, getting back to the idea of urban acupuncture, if each of us, every day, thinks every action is important and could have huge, perhaps unknown, consequences then that should shape how we live our lives.

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Stephen, artist



Kira, student and Creative Scene volunteer

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On giving back

We had a good sing-song on the back of the coach when we went to the Lawrence Batley Theatre with our youth club. That was my first experience of Creative Scene.

I'd done a bit of dancing at the club, but when we were invited to be part of Jungle Book, that was the first acting I'd done. I had no confidence, I was proper insecure. I remember at the rehearsals I was the only one from my estate. Everyone was in a massive group, I was scared to talk to them. It felt like there was a big divide. Then one day I offered someone a strawberry, and we've been good friends ever since.

After that, I was in a parkour performance with Urban Playground. That was my favourite. It was different. It makes me smile every time I talk about it. The people were proper nice, and I met one of my closest friends there.

The first time I volunteered for Creative Scene was There Will Be Fire at Dewsbury Park. I put on that orange jacket and felt so proud to be part of the team, and I wanted to give back because Creative Scene had been so good to me.

I hated school, sat at a desk. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to be. But I took every opportunity Creative Scene offered me. They pushed me and help me discover who I was.

I wanted something different and did auditions to do an acting diploma at college, which is where I am now. I'm also doing some part-time work with Creative Scene, some data entry, so I've gone from performer, volunteer to working for them. And I've just applied to do acting at uni too.

If it wasn't for Creative Scene, I don't know what I would have done. Even the youth club isn't there any more.

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SceneMaker to ChangeMaker

Local businessman Simon Thirkill first partnered with Creative Scene to help drag his town’s traditional Christmas lights turn-on into the 21st century. Back in 2014, he had no idea that his involvement would literally change the course of his life.

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It’s an hour or so before the big light switch-on, but already Green Park is beginning to fill with local families. At one end a forest of huge illuminated paper lanterns sway in the wind, in the middle half a dozen gas-fired jets make synchronised whooshing. In between, various interactive displays, all with a theme of light, entertain and entice. Santa and his oversized elf make their way to the grotto where children wait with varying degrees of bemusement and excitement. It’s HeckmondLIGHT again.

Simon is standing in front of ten or more lightboxes, each with a laser-cut design. “I worked with a group of young people from a local college,” he tells me. “When they said they couldn’t draw we discussed different ways of them expressing their ideas, like working with others in the group to realise their designs on the computer.”

He points to a snow globe. “A young man and woman got together and collaborated on that one.”

“And what was your role in that whole process?” I ask, fishing for a particular response.

“Um, artist, I guess,” he says with a smile. “Lead artist.”

* * * * *

Four years ago Simon and his wife Kimberley were running the Blue Moon Café on the busy Westgate Road through Heckmondwike. The corner café, adorned with 50s music memorabilia, became legendary for its all-day

‘Hecky Breakfast’ consisting of any combination of 12 breakfast items. “You could have had a dozen rashers of bacon if you wanted,” recalls Simon.

For them both, it was something new. Life circumstances had forced them to re-evaluate their work commitments, ditch the conventional 9-5 jobs and find a way of earning a living that gave them more flexibility. Not content with running the café in isolation they each saw value in supporting the wider community, although Simon’s motivation for such support was to change over time.

Via the Ladies Circle Kimberley became involved in the Batley Festival and Simon set up the Heckmondwike Business Alliance. “There was no coordination in the town at that time,” he recalls, “so I thought it would be a good idea to get some people together to try and make things happen. It started as a business alliance but has changed since then to be more community-focused. Getting people involved has always been a challenge.”

At that time the Christmas lights switch-on event was partly funded by Kirklees Council and a team of local contractors was paid to string up the lights around town and set up a stage. It was perceived primarily as a council-run event that was provided for the town. For the 2013 event, the Business Alliance took the lead and, significantly, started to ask local people their opinions of what they wanted the event to look like.

Six months later, in the summer of 2014, Simon was introduced to Creative Scene, and it was a collaboration between the two that would start to bring this 100+-year-old tradition bang up-to-date.

“He was sitting at the back of the room during a Batley Festival meeting,” recalls creative producer Vicky Holliday who was just beginning her new Creative Scene role, “and, hearing he was from Heckmondwike, I began to pick his brains because the town was part of the portfolio I’d been allocated.

“I hadn’t heard of the Illuminations before, but it soon became clear this might be an Heckmondwike opportunity for us to engage with the community there and something from which we could hang other things.”

A few months later Creative Scene invited a dozen or more local people to Café Ollo in Huddersfield’s Media Centre to take part in a special quick-fire Pecha Kucha event. Simon joined musicians, illustrators, poets and youth workers as they made fast-paced presentations to each other about what they were passionate about in their towns.

Simon took the opportunity to talk about the history of the Heckmondwike lights. “The tradition of lighting up the town started, as far as I can tell, back in the 1860s with the opening of a market,” he recalls.

“It’s taken different forms over the years, and the history differs depending who you listen to – everyone in the town has got their own handed-down illuminations story. We know that in 1904 Heckmondwike became the first town to have a freestanding electric display which pre-dated the more famous Blackpool Illuminations.

“The lights are both a bone of contention and a symbol of pride. They’re different things to different people. Some want to take them back into the past and others into the future. It’s a massively difficult job joining those aspirations up somewhere in the middle.”

“In those early months I could see Simon was well connected and driven,” recalls Vicky, “but also eager to learn new things. He would make things happen. In the autumn of that year, we began inviting applications for our first cohort of SceneMakers, and it was clear that both Simon and Kimberley would make valuable contributions to that programme.”

Borne out of Creative Scene’s initial business plan, SceneMakers were a group of volunteers with an interest in what creativity and culture could do for their communities and places. Recruited through an open call, they provided valuable insights and community connections as they helped to shape the early programming.

The first dozen or so ‘arts ambassadors’ included a young mother, a solicitor, local aspiring artists, a nurse, and an art school graduate amongst others. The first SceneMakers meeting was in the basement of the Cocoa



Lounge, a new café in the centre of Dewsbury. After introductions, the Creative Scene team split the group into two and invited contributions on questions like ‘What do the arts mean to you?’ and ‘What would you like this place to feel like?’.

Simon: “I had no idea what to expect but was reassured when I arrived that there were other people I knew. There was Andrew, a solicitor from Batley and Rebecca who ran her own dance school.

“Like some of the others, I was initially more interested in what Creative Scene could bring financially. How could they help to increase footfall in the town and support the local businesses, including my own? It didn’t take me very long after getting involved to see the social effect that creativity can have on communities and to appreciate that was much more important than footfall.

“We all live pretty mundane lives here: we don’t have a theatre, no art gallery to speak of, no cinema. We’re not used to being exposed to the arts, and so we’re in danger of sinking into not doing anything to stimulate ourselves.”

To inspire them some of the SceneMakers were invited on ‘go & see’ missions, an opportunity to witness events in other parts of the country that Creative Scene thought might align with their interests and whet their creative appetites. In September 2014, Simon took himself off to Blackpool Cricket Club to watch Wired Aerial Theatre perform their climate change epic, ‘As the World Tipped’.

“The minute the stage starts to rise you can see it’s not going to be a conventional performance,” he says. “It was just epic. At one point they did a little sequence with an actor on each corner of the stage, hung upside down doing a dance routine. It was as if they were in zero gravity with magnetic boots, just dancing upside down. Amazing.”

Blown away by the experience Simon suggested the show might come to Heckmondwike Cricket Club and so an exploratory meeting was set up between the production company, Creative Scene and representatives from the club.

“It would have been fantastic to bring Wired to our town, or indeed anywhere in North Kirklees,” says Simon, “but sadly the finances didn’t stack up. But for me, it demonstrated Creative Scene’s ambition. There was a big difference between the small festivals and events we’d normally have the resources to put on here and the prospect of staging something like that.”

Undaunted, Simon had another, more modest, idea he put to Creative Scene. In conversations over the Hecky Breakfast, a café customer had

suggested something might be done with a pair of defunct, vandalised phone boxes on the high street. The iconic red boxes could be transformed into a community asset as others had been through a BT adoption scheme. More than 5000 boxes have been transformed, housing everything from defibrillators to mini-libraries and art galleries.

To investigate the possibility, Creative Scene director Nancy Barrett introduced Simon to Chris Squire from Impossible Arts and one crisp January afternoon the three of them intrigued passers-by as they poked and prodded the boxes outside the Midland Bank.

“I remember we threw around a number of ideas,” says Chris, who describes himself as a collaborative problem-solver. “One was audio-related where you might pick up the telephone receiver and hear stories from the town. Another was more for the kids: using the phone box as some sort of console that controlled lights that cascaded from the upper floors of shops down into the street.”

Despite the collective enthusiasm, that idea fell at the first hurdle. “We didn’t fit the profile set out by BT for adopting phone boxes,” recalls Simon. “You had to be a registered charity, so we were excluded from that opportunity. Thankfully those criteria have now been relaxed so we might have another go at that in the future. We could develop them as a light installation for Heckmondlight that changes each year. That could finally happen.”

Simon and Kimberley (by now the chair of Batley Festival) continued their inspirational explorations, taking up Creative Scene’s invitation to see festivals and shows that might excite West Yorkshire audiences.

“We were in London to visit a festival, and I remember we also went to the Whitechapel Gallery the next day. Afterwards, we turned the corner onto Brick Lane – wow! – all that creativity. I’d never been interested in street art before but here were people just putting stuff on walls and seemingly not getting any hassle for it.”

Simon was particularly taken by a paste up by ‘Silent Bill’ the founder of the Secret Society of Super Villain Artists, a worldwide 3,500-strong collective of street artists. He later contacted Bill and subsequently applied to the Society. His ‘application’, consisting of a skull montaged onto a beheaded figure, was successful and he began collaborating with other street artists to raise money for global humanitarian causes.

“It’s a genre that’s really captured my imagination. I love its diversity. When I was growing up things were put into little boxes. My dad loved opera



but hated pop music. He liked early English porcelain and Italian painters. Everything was compartmentalised. With street art, anything goes from paste up to spray paint, from freehand to performance and poetry. There are so many ways people can put their message out there.

“The first thing I ever put on a wall was a stencil featuring a character I created called Mr Bim, based on a 1950s children’s toy. I started by doing a black and white stencil series called Mr Bim says. The first one was ‘Mr Bim says... this is postmodern, urban and conceptual street art with a pop art twist.’ I was posing the ‘what is art?’ question.”

Although the phone boxes project never materialised, Chris Squire and Simon were brought together again for the 2015 HeckmondLIGHT festival. Chris proposed an idea to produce huge vacuum-pressed heads onto which people’s faces could be projected. “It was a mechanism to tell stories, to literally put words into people’s mouths and to have fun,” he recalls.

Prior to the festival, Simon used his connections to get Chris in front of a number of local people to pre-record stories about the town. Rather than creative collaborator, Simon contributed his local knowledge and can-do approach. “I didn’t see him as a potential artist back then and I don’t think he would either,” says Chris, “but as someone in the know, he made a huge difference in the way that project developed.”

The ‘Hecky Heads’, as they became known, were a huge success on the night despite challenging conditions. “We’d never seen anything like it before,” says Simon. “They were a brilliant idea that brought a contemporary digital element to the traditional festival. But it was the worst weather we’d had for a long time and the rain drove the ‘Heads’ inside to the Market Hall. People had a lot of fun with them.

“By now I was really beginning to understand the power of art in bringing a community together but, despite my street art adventures, didn’t necessarily see my own future as someone who made art. What was happening to me, however, was more profound. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew there was something wrong.

“When I started to engage with the arts – go to festivals and see shows – I started to question how I felt inside. I used to be quite angry and dealt with things in a very bullish way.

“I sought advice, and I’ve since been diagnosed with PTSD and general anxiety disorder. A lot of that comes from my childhood because my dad was quite a brutal father. So I was experiencing learnt emotions rather than actual emotions.

“When I started making my own work, there were no rules or boundaries, no one was telling me whether it was right or wrong, I was just doing it for myself. I don’t think I would have been prepared to investigate it further had I not been so relaxed locked away in my shed, creating stencils and spray painting. And that only happened because of my involvement with Creative Scene.

“Outside of the health benefits I think being involved with creativity and creative people has helped me grow as a person. I paint with my granddaughter all the time, which is something I never did with my kids. Yes, we’d play football and dress-up, but when you’re painting – creating together – there’s a much deeper connection.”

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“Creativity has helped me grow as a person.”

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For HeckmondLIGHT 2016 Simon and his co-conspirator had ambitions to do something more spectacular. “We wanted to make the countdown to the lights switch-on more of an event,” recalls Chris from Impossible Arts. “Something really special.”

At the same time, Creative Scene were keen to make the festival more self-reliant and had suggested the Community Alliance make its own Arts Council grant application for a signature artwork.

The idea was born of a giant mechanical Catherine wheel that combined the traditional and the contemporary. Plans were drawn up, and an application was written. “We called it the Momentum Wheel, and it would appear to be powered by pyrotechnics attached to its arms,” Chris explains, “but in fact, it’d be some burly person on the end of a hand crank that powers it.”

The realisation of their contrivance was not going to be straightforward. As an artwork, the aspiration was for it to become the centrepiece for the developing light festival, to be featured in successive years as the community event builds on its heritage.

“I got a phone call to say we’d been successful in our grant application,” recalls Simon. “We were away camping in Newquay and were walking round a car boot sale when I heard the news. I must have leapt in the air. I was on a high for the rest of the fortnight.”

With only a few months between hearing of the funding and the festival itself, Simon and Chris had to move quickly. They commissioned mechanical sculptor Andy Plant to create the five-metre tall metal contraption and collaborated with fire and pyrotechnic specialists pa-BOOM to create a

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My dad loved his paintings. The house was always full of them. He was an antique dealer by trade so some would change frequently. For maybe my 12th birthday I was given a painting by Frank Brangwyn, a Leeds artist who’d painted the murals in the Rockefeller Building in New York. It was a dark, almost abstract painting of a boat on a rough sea with a bloke at the prow in some Communist power-to-the-people pose. I liked that painting and was happy to receive it as a gift. But he promptly took it back and sold it when he realised who it was by.

With a house full of antiques I was lucky in that respect to be able to handle things that you might only now see in museums. I never saw those items as artworks – I didn’t understand the context of them being made – it was just how old they were, where they’d come from, and what value they had.

My dad wouldn’t have considered himself creative although he was in a very utilitarian way: he’d repair broken furniture to make it saleable. There was a lot of skill and creative process involved in that, but he’d never see it that way.

In our family, my older brother was the creative one. He’d paint and sculpt for his own pleasure. Later he started making his own silver jewellery. He made some lovely stuff but never sold anything, everything he made he gave away. For him, it was about the creative process rather than making money from it.

If he was the creative one, then I was channelled into being a businessman. As we grew up, those were the roles that were assigned to us. He’s a roofer now. He collects obscure items like mobility scooters and bath chairs, anything weird and wonderful with wheels.

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Testing, testing.
Andy Plant (left) and
Chris Squire (centre)
assemble the
Momentum Wheel for
the first time.



specific firework sequence that gave the impression the giant wheel was self-propelled. Atop the wheel an LED display ran a sequence of images that, when the wheel rotated at an optimum speed, appeared as moving images.

"The Momentum Wheel worked really well for what we were trying to do," says Simon. "With all its chains and pulleys, it definitely has an industrial feel with one foot firmly in the past and then, with the digital displays, it has another in the future."

"We worked closely together over those months," recalls Chris, "and would talk often about HeckmondLIGHT and what could improve it. As a festival, it has its pros and cons. It's on an inflexible site, surrounded by traffic and each year has to compete with the adjacent funfair. But it has such a strong local tradition – people get very passionate about it – and it's being able to build on enthusiasm to re-energise the event, which is really exciting. Having Simon as the community connector with all his understanding of the event's history and challenges is a real positive."

At the beginning of 2017, Simon was invited by Creative Scene to a sharing event in Athens for Tandem, a Europe-wide cultural exchange programme. For the last 18 months or so creative producer Vicky had been collaborating with European partners and sharing ideas of using creativity to stimulate community cohesion.

"Our case study was centred on the work Simon was doing in Heckmondwike," explains Vicky, "and how we were collaborating with



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community producers to connect with people and build cohesion. One partner in particular – Fanni Nanay from Artopolis Association in Budapest – was interested in replicating our approach with a hard-to-reach community in a post-industrial part of the Hungarian capital. We both wanted to reach new audiences.

"It seemed perfectly logical to bring Simon over and put him in front of other community producers, some of whom were working on light festivals. I didn't realise at the time how significant that event was to be for him."

As part of the two-day event, Simon talked to fellow producers about working with others in his community and how the Momentum Wheel commission had helped to bring the town together. "I was describing what I was doing to other delegates and, at the same time, excusing myself, saying I didn't describe myself as an artist," says Simon. "They were right back at me, 'You create, you make, so you're an artist,' they said.

"That was the Eureka moment when I realised what I wanted to do. It gave me permission; it was the catalyst for change."

For the first time, Simon was seen not as the café owner, the husband, father and grandad; not as the chair of the Heckmondwike Community Alliance, but as a community arts producer in his own right. "That made a huge difference," recalls Vicky. "He was in a group of people who would happily accept him for that, and he was able to network in a way he couldn't on his home turf. It was a real milestone for him."



The Momentum
Wheel is a
huge success
on its first
appearance at
HeckmondLIGHT.



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“I didn’t feel
as though
I fitted in...”

Later that year Simon took the plunge and enrolled on a Creative Scene capacity-building course for local artists. Make it Happen was an intensive seven-day programme in staging outdoor events run by acclaimed outdoor art specialists, Walk the Plank. With theory sessions on production, budgeting and event management, 25 participants had hands-on experience of making lanterns and shadow puppets. They learnt how to create spectacular outdoor fire drawings constructed of paraffin-soaked rope configured on a metal frame.

“I walked into a room full of artists and wondered what I was doing there,” he recalls. “I didn’t feel as though I fitted in, but it didn’t take long for me to feel comfortable. Artists, as a group, are the least judgemental I’ve known. They embrace you, want to learn from you and are happy to share their own knowledge and experiences. It’s an accepting place to be.”

The course culminated in The Togetherring, a spectacular evening performance and fire sculpture display in the town square outside Dewsbury Town Hall. Over 400 local people marvelled not just at the artists parading and performing with lanterns and shadow puppets, but at the fact that an event of this calibre was happening in their home town. Dewsbury’s collective self-esteem got a boost that night, and Simon was part of it.

By now he and Kimberley had given up the café, and slowly he was metamorphosing into a practising artist. The street art had developed into creating 3D pieces – skulls and the like – from Plaster of Paris; he’d made a

couple of ‘art bikes’ which are wheeled out for festivals where punters get to spray paint T-shirts. And for the last two HeckmondLIGHTs, he’s added to the traditional displays with his own installations.

He now has a part-time role as Creative Custodian of Brigantia, Creative Scene’s pop-up space on the top floor of a Dewsbury office block that’s used as a workshop and meeting space. From there he’s launched his own initiative, the Creative Breakfast, which brings businesses, artists and local people together once a month to talk about how creativity can enhance a town centre.

“It’s an open conversation about creating ideas for what you’d like to see in the town,” he says. “Hopefully, these conversations will spark something special that can grow. But it’s not about how to get things funded. That’s the really negative part of creativity: when you start having to fill in funding forms.”

Simon’s transition to practising artist is ongoing and not without its challenges. His involvement in different community groups and his connections throughout the area are crucial in a profession where networking is all-important. But they can also hold him back.

“It’s a big step moving from volunteer to paid artist,” he says. “It can be emotionally difficult to extract yourself from the volunteer ethos of wanting to do good for your community. As a freelance artist, your primary aim has to be about making a living.



“During HeckmondLIGHT I have a number of roles. I’m a regular volunteer, I’m the production manager and I’m also there as a paid artist, albeit on a materials-only basis. Getting that balance right is difficult.

“But I’m getting there, I’m beginning to understand the value of my own time and skills. I’m thinking of myself more as an artist and, most importantly, as an artist in business. I’ve started to set myself some objectives for moving forward. But I know that, at other times, I’ll always be a volunteer.

“Yes, it’s true, around here everyone knows you or knows of you. If I were to look for work in one of the neighbouring bigger cities, then I’d be moving into a more crowded market where I’d be starting from scratch. I’d much rather be here, slowly broadening my practice because I want my work to be set in a community where it has a connection. So chasing work in other areas wouldn’t necessarily work for me.”

With Creative Scene’s support and encouragement, Simon acknowledges he’s been set off on a creative journey, both personally and professionally. He’s beginning to take on the role of catalyst, eager to use creativity to build communities and clear that the process starts not with businesses but with people.

“I’ve had my eyes opened so much in the last few years – like a rabbit dazzled in the headlights – I’ve taken and absorbed every opportunity. My ideas and passions are beginning to shape into something tangible, and now it’s time for me to work out where I want to take it.”

“I’m
beginning to
understand
the value
of my own
skills.”

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On being creative

I started singing when I was six or seven. At high school, I was in the choir and remember going to the Eisteddfod one year when Aled Jones was presenting it.

Apart from the odd karaoke, I didn't do much after that until I joined the Batley Community Choir four years ago.

I love the social aspect and the learning: we've had loads of new experiences – sung in an opera, performed on TV – and the range of my voice has really improved.

I don't consider myself to be creative, but actually, I am. As well as the singing I make things at home; I enjoy photography; I do a bit of drawing. Everybody's creative, but we've got to invest some time in nurturing that creativity, otherwise it just falls away.

My role with Creative Scene will be to encourage others to make the first step. People might think the arts isn't for them, that art is a picture hung on the wall, but we need to help them get involved and see where it takes them.

Now I'm doing open mic in a local pub. I'm even thinking of buying a guitar.

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Clare, arts adventurer co-ordinator, choir member

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Pauline, photographer, designer and artist

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On finding myself

I'm going to be bold and tell you I'm a photographer, designer and artist, but it's been a lifelong process to get here.

At school in Scotland, I studied art, but my creativity essentially stopped when I did a four-year marketing degree. I followed that with graphic design and a few jobs in marketing before taking what turned out to be a twenty-year break.

I've had the privilege of being a full-time mum, but now my boys have left home, and it's time to do something new. A few years ago, I got into textiles and realised that creativity was calling me back.

I started studying textiles, began taking macro photographs and became interested in surface pattern design. But then I got stuck. What could I do with all of that? That's when I had the good fortune to meet Erinma, a mentor for Creative Scene. She helped me find direction and find the purpose in what I'm doing.

Since then I've named my company – Dougal and Sid, after my dogs – set up a website and started telling, not only, my story, but begun working with others to help them tell theirs. I've designed the new Arts Adventurer T-shirts and hoodies for Creative Scene and held a series of workshops on personal brand identity.

I now need to start building a network and continue to tell my story. And I guess talking to you is the beginning of that.

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On engagement

Organisations that want to engage with the local Asian community always go to the same gatekeepers.

But it's a hugely diverse community and those who put themselves forward as leaders don't represent us all. If outside organisations only consult with these few, they're not getting to the grassroots of our communities.

And there are sensitivities to be respected. For example, music and dance is a big part of the arts. But members of the Muslim community, who might be very creative, won't engage with that because of religious sensitivities. On the other hand, in the Hindu heritage, music and dance are integral to every celebration.

People do things differently. It's a matter of tailoring to the individual communities.

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Irfan, youth worker

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Iqra, fashion designer

“

On my calling

I think I get my creativity from my grandma, from my mum, in fact, most of the women in my family to be honest.

When I was doing art and design technology at school, I realised I needed to make fabric my medium. Fabric was calling me. It's the thing I love doing.

Of course, I did textile design as one of my A Levels, and it was then that I entered a council-run competition encouraging young people to pitch their business ideas. It was like Dragon's Den, and I wrote a plan for a fashion business and made a dress.

Fortunately, I was one of the winners and was awarded a grant so I could buy equipment which made a massive difference. So that competition, five years ago now, is how my Creative Seams business started.

I've had market stalls and run small community projects, but honestly, it is hard to find customers. Many Asian women in our area who put themselves forward as seamstresses, so there's lots of competition.

I've now done a fashion design degree at Batley School of Art which I absolutely loved, and I know Creative Scene is reaching out to young people to promote a creative atmosphere, but there's no money behind it. What we need is some funding to help us make our products.

I've put my business on a part-time basis for now while I do a higher teaching assistants' course. But to young people, I would say: try and find your creativity, and see where it takes you. Give it a chance and you will be happy. I can't see my life without creativity.

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Glue and Gardeners

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Creative Director Nancy Barrett reflects on the way of working that makes things happen.

There's a small team of creative producers who've been growing the Creative Scene for the last six years. We've found plenty of ambition and creativity here, and learned that remarkable things happen when people make their own choices about the type of arts and culture they want to experience and take part in.

Across these towns and villages, there's now a regular network of pubs, social and community centres, presenting and commissioning professional theatre on contemporary issues. Volunteer-led town festivals have added community-produced, amazing outdoor arts commissions to their celebrations, seen by thousands. Emerging artists and young creatives are developing the networks and accessing the support and experience they need to get on the creative industries career ladder. Disparate communities have come together in memorable moments to see their lives reflected back to them in specially-created immersive performances, multi-media events and exhibitions.

This is a place where people not only participate in the arts, they 'get' what the arts bring to their community, sense of identity and wellbeing. Crucially they want to keep a hand in making things happen into the future.

'A scene is a social contract, a covenant of equal partners... a successful alternative thrives off alienation from the prevailing scene.'

David Byrne, (Talking Heads) *How Music Works*



Exploring all this as an 'ecology' helps us think about the relationships between the different people, places, roles and environment in which creativity and culture happens.

When power is shared and hierarchies of cultural value and institutions are broken down, what is the glue that will keep this 'scene' together? Will the roots local people have put down through the Creative People and Places investment be resilient enough to adapt to changes in new political and funding agendas? Will those roots survive and flourish?

Under the banner of 'The Culture Council', we're bringing together community groups and leaders who understand the value of the arts to their communities. The Culture Council will lead the next stage of cultural change. It will create space for reflection and connection and be a powerful force to influence future resourcing and collaboration. It will explore what it really means for people, artists and creative producers to co-create, and it will support greater cultural democracy, particularly in areas where people are often overlooked.

Good gardeners know that the preparation of the ground is key. They understand the importance of what to plant next to each other, the best time to sow and the right place in the plot. They know when to add heat and food, to make space for growth and to prune. They also appreciate things grow in serendipitous ways and that leaving room for 'chaos' produces unexpected results.

'Culture is an organism not a mechanism; and is much messier, and more dynamic, than simple linear evaluation systems allow.'

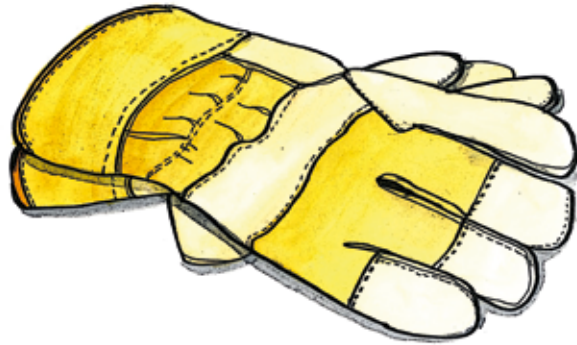
John Holden, *The Ecology of Culture*

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The Creative Scene team may have specific job title roles, but we all share the responsibility for building audiences, creating opportunities for participation, unearthing stories, and finding and supporting new voices. We work outside traditional silos and look at how our roles connect.

Along with our community partners, we collaborate to make programming and commissioning decisions. We think about when we step in, and when we step off. We all get our hands (and feet) mucky with producing events and taking part in activities. We get to know the places we work by the stories that are told about them, and by being part of bringing those stories into the open.

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Biographies

CREATIVE SCENE

Creative Scene is one of the independent Creative People and Places projects, funded by Arts Council England in areas where there are fewer opportunities for people to get involved in the arts. It's about more people choosing, creating and taking part in brilliant arts experiences where they live, work and socialise. 90% of audiences and participants in the Creative People and Places programme come from neighbourhoods with low and medium levels of arts engagement.

www.creativescene.org.uk
www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk

NANCY BARRETT

Nancy is the Director of Creative Scene and, with Dr Erinma Ochu, leads the evaluation approach. Through her MA in Cultural Planning she became fascinated by the interrelation of places, human geographies and their social histories, and wants to tell the hidden and untold stories of towns and communities that have felt the brunt of economic and societal change over the past 20 years.

LEN GRANT

On his business card Len Grant calls himself a sketcher, writer and photographer. For Creative Scene he is – see page 28 – a storyteller and artist. But he's also been their resident blogger, recounting the adventures, over four years, of the 'art ambassadors' as they put their mark on North Kirklees. You can read their exploits online at www.makingascene.net.

Elsewhere Grant documents urban renewal, housing, social issues and health with his camera and sketchbook. His work ends up as exhibitions, books and award-winning blogs. An advocate of urban sketching, Len uses drawing to tell stories of people and places. His first solo sketching book, *The Rusholme Sketcher*, was published in November 2018.

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DR JONATHAN GROSS

Dr Jonathan Gross is a Research Fellow and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London (KCL). His research addresses questions of cultural policy, politics and participation. He is currently working on *Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Creative Economies*, a large research project focusing on ten cities across Europe.

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PROFESSOR NICK WILSON

Professor Nick Wilson is Professor of Culture & Creativity in the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London. His research embraces aesthetic critical realism, arts and cultural management, artful and creative living, cultural care and development, cultural opportunities, everyday creativity, and the historical performance of music.

www.kcl.ac.uk/people/professor-nick-wilson

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