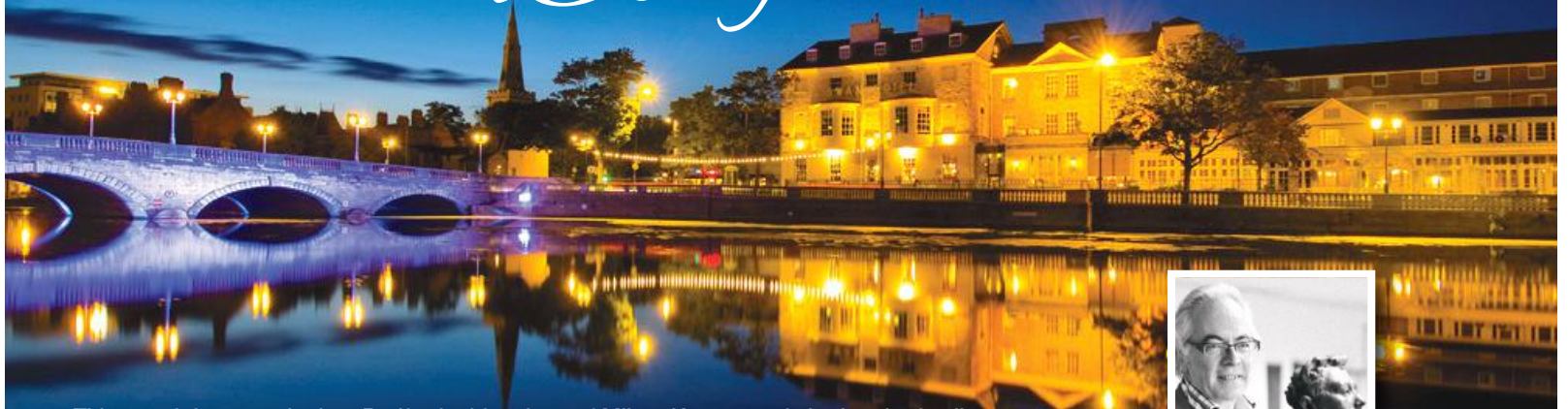




THE ARTS

A glimpse at *Bedford*



This month I want to look at Bedford, older sister of Milton Keynes and sharing the family postcode. This is also my sixth profile of a settlement along the Great Ouse, having previously covered Buckingham, Stony Stratford, Wolverton, Newport Pagnell, and Olney. All very different, and all going back centuries. But this isn't an in-depth study – just capturing some headline impressions of a fleeting visit to a town I really don't know very well. Maybe I should...



JOHN BEST, CHAIR
ARTS GATEWAY MK

History

Bedford traces its status as a borough from Henry II's charter in 1166, but its history goes back to before the local burial of King Offa at the end of the eighth century. By 1066 there was a Minster church in the town. Through the Middle Ages wool was important to this riverside market-town, and lace-making was important from the 16th century. In 1660, after restoration of the monarchy, local non-conformist preacher John Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford leading to Bedford's premier literary event, the writing of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In all he wrote over 60 titles and after his release went on to be Pastor of the non-conformist Bedford Meeting.

The town grew up over several centuries, particularly when the river became navigable downstream in 1689. The town developed the thriving brewing sector still evident today and in the mid-19th century came gas-lighting, sewerage, the corn exchange and the railway. Through the 20th century the town matured and evolved, but retained its characteristic role as a river-based county town.

Its population grew eight-fold to 35,000 in the 19th century and doubled again in the 20th century. Its cultural profile grew accordingly, with development of education over four centuries through the Harpur Trust, and higher education over four decades leading to what we see now as the University of Bedfordshire. During the second world war Bedford was '*Somewhere in England*' from where the BBC broadcast the daily service, recently recognised by exhibition and recent theatre performances. Bedford is now a significant urban area with a diverse population of over 160,000.

Bedford's cultural offer

I shall not even try to present the totality, but here's a flavour. There's plenty of performance choice for a medium-sized town: *The Corn Exchange* and *The Harpur Suite* provide a fine civic offer; *The Bedford Theatre*, *The Quarry Theatre* and the *University Theatre* are all institutional houses open to the community; *The Place Theatre*, *Sharnbrook Mill Theatre* and no doubt several others provide the independent choice. All are available to the many theatre groups: the *Swan Theatre Company*, *Bedford Drama Company*, *Bedford Marianettes*, *ShowCo Bedford* and *The Bedford Pantomime Company*, to mention five. Then there are half a dozen clubs including the *Empire*, *The Pad* and *The Vibe*, a dozen bars and a couple of dozen town centre pubs. Finally the town has an astonishing 300 places to eat, admittedly including coffee shops and fast food outlets, but still an amazing total.

The biggest cultural creature is the *University of Bedfordshire*, bringing to the town students, facilities, a flexible part-time workforce and dynamic cultural programmes. Close behind is *The Higgins* (see below), which brings together art, heritage and community. As in any town, there are communities of artists: visual artists, theatre groups, musicians, writers and poets. They get support from various organisations in various ways, including *Bedford Arts and Crafts Centre*, the *Bedford Society of Artists* (now over 60 years old), *Bedford Creative Arts* (see below) and *Creative Bedfordshire* (networking across the creative sector). No doubt there are many more.

Visiting Bedford

I'm grateful to colleague Maria Giangliulo for joining me for this visit, and contributing ideas and photos.

We arrived on a wintry February morning that was trying to snow and made our way to a multi-storey car park. Serendipitously we engaged a passer-by in conversation, leading to the best introduction to the town we could have wanted. Tracey Levine has lived just outside Bedford for 17 years, and is a working artist and maker. Having researched beforehand what Bedford has, we thought that for this article we should concentrate on what Bedford feels like. Tracey offered us an unplanned slice of her day to share some of the highlights.

Street life

Bedford was full of Friday bustle. Tracey seemed to know many as we made our way through the crowds. Culture at street level was evident and welcoming. We made our way past the art-friendly Kiln, and narrowly chose Coffee with Art.

Coffee with Art, 82 High Street

What a great place, started by two entrepreneurs with a dream: Ian Tarbit and Michael Polak have transformed a run-down shell into quite the most dynamic café. The idea emerged around the time of the *Bedford Happy* campaign developed in 2013 by *Bedford Creative Arts*. The décor and (hand-made) fittings are a mix of authentic repurposed wood, and witty artistic allusions; there's art on some of the walls, presenting local artists in rotation; another wall is entirely lined with repurposed books, as are the risers on the staircase.

Manager Holly Presland, with them from the beginning, spoke persuasively of the dynamism of the place, its



Holly Presland
ctsy MG





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Staircase of books ctsy MG

inclusiveness and the many therapeutic roles she needed to fulfil for the place and the people. It seemed full but Holly was used to it being fuller. We talked through Holly's lunch-hour and picked up more of Bedford's creative seam with Tracey.

Bedford crafter Tracey Levine currently sells her work through *My Little Vintage* in Olney and is expanding into Northampton's *Most Marvellous Place to Shop*. She's a great example of artistic ambition over circumstance, having left school with severe dyslexia and very little else, and choosing to stand by her creativity rather than the Jobcentre.



Tracey Levine ctsy MG

That her daughter Freya is studying makeup and prosthetics at university and has her own business, *Pretty Ugly Creations* (great name!), is a testament to Bedford's creative productivity. It was a delight seeing Bedford from Tracey's point of view.

The Higgins

Bedford has a good choice of museums, including the *John Bunyan Museum* which celebrates the churchman and writer, and the *Panacea Museum* which tells the story of the early 20th century Christian

community the *Panacea Society*, a worldwide group centred in Bedford. By far the biggest museum presence in the town is *The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum*, housed partly in the recreated Victorian home of the Higgins family of brewers. In 2013 a £5.8m project led by the Council, several Trusts and Heritage Lottery, allowed the unification of three entities: *Cecil Higgins Art Gallery*, *Bedford Museum* and *Bedford Gallery*. The museum has local history collections, while the galleries have notable collections of watercolours, prints and drawings, ceramics, glass and lace. We visited unannounced, were treated very well by front-of-house Jennifer Ayley; serial volunteer Ken Thomas showed us around. We found an establishment both delightful and accessible, with a diverse range of collections including seven Picasso prints, a gallery of Edward Bawden much local historical and archaeological material and reconstructed period interiors. Rather than I try to describe it all, go visit, or take your children for a comprehensive treat. Well done, Bedford.

Festivals in Bedford

Any town worth its salt will have a programme of festivals and celebrations.

Bedford celebrates with the second largest outdoor festival in the country after Notting Hill. *Bedford River Festival*, which includes sports, funfairs and live music, takes place every other year and attracts



Bedford River Festival 2016 ctsy Love Bedford

250,000 people. The world comes to the Great Ouse for that weekend, next due on 14th–15th July 2018. Diary time.

The *Bedford Regatta* each May is Britain's largest one-day river rowing regatta and, while we're on the river, I know from personal involvement there's an

excellent trip boat, the *John Bunyan*, throughout the season. Other annual events include *Bedford by the Sea*, when sandy beaches are created in the town centre, and the *Bedford International Kite Festival* in June. *Proms in the Park*, takes place in early August, and we saw evidence of the upcoming *Bedford Festival of Music, Speech and Drama* in March. There's plenty going on.

Bedford Creative Arts, 104 Midland Road

This is the leading Arts Council funded organisation in town – in fact Bedford's only National Portfolio Organisation. They are a compact organisation with a wide reach, headed by new CEO Alan Ladd. BCA provide studios at *iCreate*; support contemporary artists of all kinds; collaborate with others on a variety of interesting projects including *Music in Detention* and *Bedford Community Arts Choir*; run *Creative Bedfordshire* for the creative sector. After a brief flirtation with another name they have happily settled back as the authentic *Bedford Creative Arts*. I know them from their collaboration with *Arts Gateway* both on *Creative Challenge* to connect artists with local schools, and on the *Creative Workspace Network* across the sub-region, on both of which I've written here before.

Conclusion

Bedford has all the ingredients of an exciting cultural place: long history, amazing riverside, established education institutions including a thriving university, diverse community, pumping night life. Like everywhere else it has many creative communities working, making and presenting round the year. I discovered in my web research that the namesake city of *New Bedford Massachusetts*, though smaller than our Bedford, is assessed by influential academic Richard Florida as one of the US' top ten artistic places. I didn't feel, as we walked around our Bedford, that there were enough obvious street-level creative outlets for this to show... until, that is we walked into *Coffee with Arts*. They seem in a short time to have tapped into a tremendous seam of very diverse citizen energy and created something significant. I'm sure there are other places in the town doing the same, but I left feeling there's unmet creative demand in the town which will make itself felt in the next couple of years. And I know *Bedford Creative Arts* will continue to help this happen. We will all see a big change and I, for one, shall be dropping by more often. ■



Aesop's Fables: Peacock and Magpie by Edward Bawden ctsy The Higgins/JB

NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

We were sad last month to leave *Clyde House*, our fifth Arts Central hub, and are now hopefully well on our way to getting our sixth. We're rolling forward with the *Creative Workspace Network* second phase and *MK Arts Week 2017*. *Culture Challenge* continues to sign-up MK artists keen to work with schools. We already have exhibition

programmes for most of 2017 for both our galleries. *AC Gallery at Norfolk House* is showing artist *Neelum Aftab*, followed by Iranian AC resident *Maliheh Zafarnezhad*. *AC at the Cornerstone* is exploring *Lent* with an exhibition by *Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga*, followed in April by a mixed group of visual artists on *Nature*

celebrating Earth. If you know someone who'd like to discuss exhibiting, pass them on. Our first quarterly *Mingle* of the year will on Wednesday, March 29th, starting at 6.30. Check the website for confirmed venue – we're getting out and about more this year.



As always, those who *really* want to get involved in projects, in exhibitions or as a volunteer can sign up on www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on 01908 241122. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.



THE ARTS

Artists & Makers in Milton Keynes

Striking work, creatively lit,
from Helen DenDulk



JOHN BEST, CHAIR
ARTS GATEWAY MK

This month I'm looking at a wide and important group of artists in the city, the artists and makers captured in a really definitive and handsome book just published. I'm no great fan of the Art Book, the collections of striking pictures set out to impress, and destined for an undisturbed decade on the drawing room table. *'Maker-Artists of Milton Keynes'* is much more than that, setting out as it does a cameo of each of 25 artists, giving several pages of insights into the artist and their practice. It captures a moment in time of MK's creativity, through the people who make up our creative capital. And it deserves a read.



Researchers, artists and authors Linda Wilks and Ann Pegg, captured by Gyosei Art trail by Brian Tomlinson



and Andrew McDermott, inspired by *MK Arts Centre*. The ceramicist I want to highlight is Rosa Wiland Holmes.

Danish potter Rosa Wiland Holmes, a new artist to me, moved from London to Great Brickhill around a year ago. I'm always impressed when people arrive, make contact with networks within days and, almost certainly, have an impact within months. Rosa works from a home studio but has links with *Westbury Arts Centre*. She brings to MK a background in menswear and childrenswear design and, in applying it to ceramics, is very focused on ensuring her practical ceramic ware does what it says. But she surrounds herself with stylish items from her Danish background, both in the furniture and directly in the pottery she produces.

Short cut

This excellent book is the brain-child of academics Linda Wilks and Ann Pegg, supported by over 150 exemplary images from photographer Brian Tomlinson (all images here from the book are by him). The three of them are rooted in local creativity, living respectively in Olney, Bletchley and Newport Pagnell, and all three have creative practices of their own. It's always good to see local writers published, better still when they are so clearly part of MK's creative scene, and better still that the quality of their subject matter is so good. This is the sort of evidence we need to show the world that MK means to make an impact, and is steadily building the range of diversity across its arts community that other places take centuries to achieve.

Rather than follow the structure of the book I am grouping the 25 artists into five categories, and selecting for a deeper look one artist from each category. My five categories are Ceramics and Pottery; Textile Artists; Artists in Special Materials; Multi-media Artists and Artists making Specialist Artefacts. All will become clear...

Ceramicists and potters

The book has interesting sections on Venezuelan artist Juan Victor Cobos (with some fabulous images), Mark Compton, with the soda-fired kiln he shares with Kirsteen Holuj, both working from *Westbury Arts Centre*,



Rosa Wiland Holmes at work with
inspiration from chickens and garden

Textiles

The book covers several textile artists, including **Jane Charles**, of whom I've written before, batik artist **Jane Sharp**, weaver **Julienne Hanson** and **Sally Hutson**. The textile artist I want to focus on is **Helen DenDulk** working from a studio at *Westbury Arts Centre*.

Australian **Helen DenDulk** now lives in Campbell Park and really appreciates the evolution of MK. She is retired after several years as a secondary school teacher. She produces abstract pieces, conceptual rather than pretty, but having tremendous impact. Projects often evolve beyond the initial proposition but maintain a clear thematic purpose. At the same time she keeps a firm grasp of the craft and technique of her genre, running a regular machine-sewing class at *Westbury Arts Centre*.

Artists in special materials

Ceramicists and textile artists work with a chosen category of material. This category extends the same principle more widely across **Lynne Lane** (glass), **Melanie Watts** (mosaics, and of whom I've written before), **Kate Edwards** (metals), **Nicholas Packham** (blacksmith, of whom I've written), **Louis Francis** (stone) and **Rosemary Wright** (wood turner). A vibrant arts scene will have creatives working in every medium, with every group of materials, in every genre. This sets out MK's account, from where we move forward...

Stained glass artist **Elaine Marsh** finished a globe-trotting public service career and embarked on an MK-based stained glass practice where she could explore new techniques and approaches and could experiment. Her three-dimensional curved pieces are becoming too large to complete in a day and, as they grow, they call for bespoke approaches. It has been great watching her explore and develop in her *Arts Central* space over the last 18 months as her practice has evolved.



Elaine Marsh's increasingly complex glass shapes

Multimedia art

Some artists' practices transcend the narrow single-genre parameters and several are profiled in this book... former Arts Central resident **Soraya Billimoria** is a good example, as is **David Whittington-Jones** who produces some diverting mixed media assemblages from his studio at *Westbury Arts Centre*.

The artist I want to profile here is *Arts Central* resident **Elaine McKenzie**. Across a very mixed creative practice she relates her projects to a very personal journey of finding her way in the world and her identity within it. It's no accident she found her way very few months after moving to MK from London to the very mixed environment of *Arts Central*, and no surprise that she appreciates the very diverse support it provides. Now living in Netherfield, she's beginning to get and appreciate MK, and actively supports the *AC@Cornerstone* Gallery.



Elaine McKenzie exploring identity through her art

Specialist makers

The fifth and final category is what I describe as the specialist makers in the mix. They range from Hungarian **Judit Acsai** producing clothing and shoes, through lacemaker **Elizabeth Knight**, milliner **Gillian Hughes** and former *Arts Central* resident **George Hart**, maker and designer of clocks under the label **Tox Clox**. All have great stories to tell.

Lisa Kinrade, maker of bespoke handbags as **Jack & Rose Vintage**, has been very active in supporting *Arts Central* since we were at Station House. Her neighbours have in turn been supportive of her in her quest for new designs for modern users that can incorporate vintage materials into designs that have a classic feel. With **Gillian Hughes** and half a dozen colleagues she was instrumental in convening *Weddings at Arts Central* which presents creative alternatives to conventional wedding adornment. Lisa is another example of Milton Keynes' creative strata which Lisa hopes will thrive in her two teenage children.

Conclusion

The book clearly places the art into the lives of the artists and into the life of MK. It provides some great insights into why the artists and makers take the path they do. It also provides a clue into what works to build MK's creative and artistic sector: it's about catching the right moments for each of the featured artists with the support and nourishment they need. I'm also struck by the high proportion of our emerging creatives are from outside the UK – a significant challenge for our Brexit negotiators if we are to safeguard the creative sector in particular.

There is a programme of follow-up workshop events to the book throughout the year as part of *MK50* celebrations starting at *Westbury Arts Centre* during May:

Meet the Artists

Friday 12th May, 5pm–8pm

Get Making Roadshow (Free event)

Saturday 13th/Sunday 14th May, 11am–5pm

Thursday 18th/Friday 19th May, 11am–4pm

Saturday 20th /Sunday 21st May, 11am–5pm

May Makers' Soirée (ticketed event)

Thursday 18th May, 7.30pm

You can get the book from local suppliers including **Eddie & Pearl** in Stony Stratford, **Mrs B's Emporium** in Wolverton, **MK Biergarten** in Wolverton, the **Central Library**, **Waterstones** and **Amazon...** or signed copies direct from the authors at makerartistsmk@gmail.com

Linda Wilks, **Brian Tomlinson** and **Ann Pegg** have done a great job for MK creativity. ■



Lisa Kinrade making vintage elegance



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

In April we failed to get the two new premises we were hoping for. In both cases the landlords decided to use their premises themselves, days after signing a lease with us. At least the buildings are to be used rather than left vacant. So we have squeezed a few more spaces into Norfolk House where we now have more artists than ever before.

Current programmes include **Culture Challenge** (artists into schools), **Creative Workspace**

Network (collaboration with other spaces), and **Mótus** (dance programmes in May). Planned programmes include a brand new **MK Literary Festival** in September, the second **MK Arts Week** in October and a possible **MK Film Festival** in October, all if we can get our act and funding together. And we'd like your help on these exciting projects.

Planned exhibitions include **Maliheh Zafarnezhad** (April/May), followed by **Sam Shane** and **Alan**



Self Portrait by Maliheh Zafarnezhad

Moore (June /July) at *Arts Central*. Young Photography call-out 'My MK' shows in May at *AC@Cornerstone*.

For those who *really* want to know where we are, you can sign up on www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on **01908 241122**