

THE ARTS



JOHN BEST, CHAIR
ARTS GATEWAY MK

This month I'm looking at Brackley, 15 miles outside MK. I've not been able to discover what the rather dissipated 18th century cartoonist Thomas Rowlandson was doing in Brackley, but the scene suggests the (rather male) citizenry affected by something important that has just happened, or is about to happen. Keep watching...

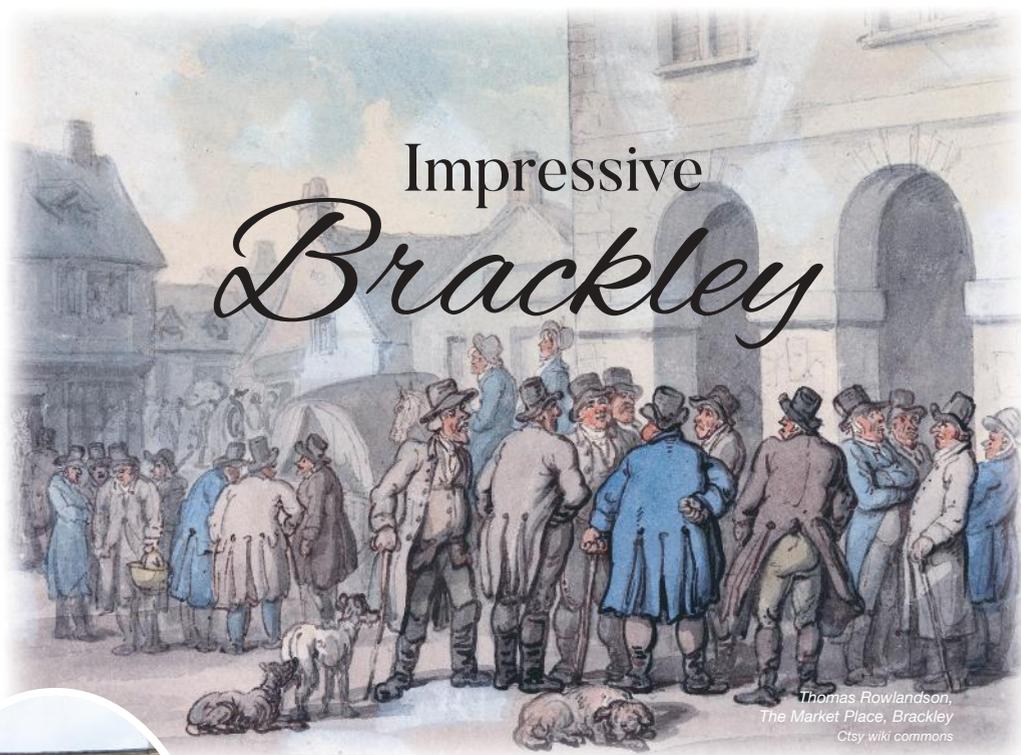
History

Few places can claim references in both the Domesday Book and Das Kapital. By the 11th century Brackley had a church, now St Peter's, and Brackley Castle was built, only to be sacked within a hundred years, in 1173. In 1215 Magna Carta was almost signed here before being postponed to Runnymede. For three centuries Brackley was known for churches, hospitals and Magdalen College School, now the oldest school building in the country in continuous use.

Prosperity came from the wool and lace trade, at the intersection of important north-south and east-west trade routes. Elizabeth I incorporated the town in 1597, followed by several good centuries.

The railway came and went, with not one but two stations. Brackley Town (1850) and Brackley Central (1899) closed in the 1960s and the magnificent Brackley Viaduct followed in 1978. This prompted the poignant Signalman's Lament graffiti in the subway under the A43.

Brackley's connection to Royal cleanliness ended in 2013 when H Bronnley & Co, soapmakers to Queen Elizabeth and the Prince of Wales, closed their Radstone Road factory after six decades. But, as you'll see below, there's still a lot going on in the 21st century.



Thomas Rowlandson,
The Market Place, Brackley
Ctsy wiki commons



The very elegant
Old Hall

Deep-rooted
Character

Today Brackley remains dressed in some fine historic buildings which it wears with a well-mannered, if a little dishevelled, air. As well as the grand, there are more modest buildings, and seductive corners like Market House Courtyard and Draymans Walk.

I asked everyone I spoke to, "What are the six coolest things about Brackley?" which proved difficult to answer. But the more I asked it, the more came out: historic, friendly, safe, pleasant, cultured, close to the country, long and wide high street, St James Park and lake, and even the Signalman's Lament. They're all in here.

The Old Fire Station



All towns have coffee stops; Brackley has several new ones, where I sought out their back-story. I started with the youngest. Sarah Myers presents a happy mix of heritage, community and 21st century entrepreneurship in the brand new conversion of the former fire station. It's run as a family enterprise with three generations, including her parents Barbara and Spencer Myers, her son Lucas Tanner, Jenna Sparks and at least two other young helpers on the day I visited. All good coffee places include art, and the Old Fire Station is no exception, with a selection of cabinets displaying curated collections of work, as well as fire artefacts donated by the former occupiers. A platform for mompreneurs, like Sarah who continues her excellent cake-making online, as The Mixing Bowl, and a beacon for creative enterprise.

The Hummingbird

Nicky Fulton and Tracey Peters live in MK and decided in 2015, without restaurant experience, to

set up The Hummingbird in Market House Courtyard. Their evening opening is now around curated events (quiz, wine, butchering, societies, Rotary) which expands their regular clientele. They have art on the walls, crafts on display, dispense specialist oil and vinegars, sell alcohol, manage events and can spread outside. Regulars Karen and Tony Warren couldn't speak highly enough of the place,

And right opposite, husband and wife team Kevin and Mel are in the very first stages of living their coffee house dream in the newest addition to the Courtyard Mews. Kevin has 40 years experience in large scale Film and Motor Sport catering and their breakfasts and cakes are already making an impact.

Right-Angle Artists and Artisans

Sadly I got to their Manor Road premises after they closed, but I had read about their recent transformation from 34 years of picture-framing into a mixed-genre gallery. Chris and Val Pendleton, themselves artists, are now selling paintings, prints, jewellery, studio pottery, art glass and forged ironwork, both in the gallery and on-line. This is undoubtedly good for Brackley (and hopefully for them too), and they deserve great success.

Performing Arts

Brackley comes over as a place with many strands of creative arts. Brackley Players present three Am-Dram productions a year, imminently Alan Ayckbourn's 1992 Communicating Doors starting on Wednesday 31st May to 2nd June at Southfield School, Banbury Road.

Music is well represented, from the work of the Brackley and Cheney Music and Performing Arts Centre, through to pub gigs and music in the park. Brackley Music Festival have for 20 years presented two weeks of diverse local, national and international talent. Heritage Music has been repairing instruments for 25 years and now offer a very wide range of brass and woodwind instruments from new.

The Brackley Morris Men probably dig deepest into Brackley's history of performing arts. Dating back to the 1600s, they are one of only seven 'traditional Cotswold' sides remaining in England. In 1866 the Oxford Chronicle described their Banbury performance with 'many coloured ribbons and other gaudy finery', and the 'witless buffoonery' of their 'fool'. Yet another example of the town's ability to lead progressive cultural behaviour.



Drayman's Walk picks up
the historic town form



Market House Courtyard is as
creatively inviting as possible



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Chris Bridger at Old Hall

The Old Hall Bookshop

Literary Brackley will have been boosted when in 1602 metaphysical poet John Donne was elected to Parliament. Around that time The Old Hall on Market Place started life. Now an Aladdin's Cave of the printed word, antiquarian, new and second-hand, all set in a gem of a listed building. Manager Chris Bridger was generous with her time as she showed me from

cellar to rooftop of the amazing project set up 40 years ago by John Townsend to house his interest in antiquarian books. The Georgian front sits on a 17th century core and offers a fabulous town view from the leaded roof. Assistants Olivia Sparrow and Jo Duffy were adventurous in their selection of their six coolest things in town. I can't wait to experience a summer event in the Old Hall garden, and made a note of an important new connection for the MK Literature Festival later this year.

Global Mapping

Though not strictly Literature, they're part of the town's creative offer. Based in Courtyard Mews, they have won awards for their Wall Maps including The World, Europe, Africa and British Isles, walking guides and astronomy products. And they commendably run a community news service, Brackley Online Post.

Not quite new

Brackley Antiques Cellar, with over 180 dealers and 80 display cabinets in 30,000 sq ft of floor space offering everything you could imagine, draws people from far afield and has been voted the best Antiques centre in Britain. Created 20 years ago by Jim Broomfield in a modern basement, it's a lesson for (mainly new-built) MK.

Funky Junk on Borough Road offer great combinations of low cost used furniture, unexpected curios and creatively upcycled gems. Heady mix for the discerning punter.

Artisanal food

Brackley does a great job in creative food, including bespoke artisanal breads from Caked in Bread.



Robert Johnson displays Brackley cuts

Discerning meat-eaters can find rare breed and longhorn meats prepared in traditional cuts by master butcher Robert Johnson at Brackley Butchers. These and others are complemented by a monthly artisanal market.

The Pubs and Eateries

Unusually for me, I did no direct research in the pubs. There are several, each with their partisan supporters, ranging from sports bar Rumours, through the timeless Plough and Red Lion to the more patrician Crown. The range is well supported by at least three Chinese and un-numbered Indian restaurants, of which Spice Lounge and Chilli Peppers were most often mentioned. Moving up the food chain I was recommended Rossettis for Italian and The Green Room for a really cool experience.

The Green Room

Four years ago Jane and Gordon Kille, with a background in retail marketing and property rehab, converted two adjoining shops to a really cool place. The Green Room now employs over 30, serving 80 covers with breakfast, lunch and (four evenings a week) Tapas. Super-chilled relaxed ambiance, with excellent coffee, 35 gins behind the bar and gentle ambient club-jazz on the speakers.



Cool ambience inside and out at The Green Room

The Killes are now planning to open something else nearby. Like me, they love jazz. The two premises will form a cultural gateway to the town centre: This is how places evolve.

Festivals and Events

Brackley has long been known for festivals and events. Brackley was one of five jousting sites authorised by Richard The Lionheart, no less, in an effort to defuse local fighting. And that was the 12th century. Between Crusades. True to form, Brackley now has the largest annual motorcycle festival in the country with large numbers of helmeted warriors cruising up and down.

The festival programme is imminently presenting: 4th June Soap Box Derby, 10th June Carnival, 23rd July Beer festival, 13th August Motorbike Festival, 20th August Classic Car Festival.



Delicious Chocolate factory Ctsy Belfair



Iron Forged Designs Ctsy IFDesigns

Specialist Creative Industries

Asking people for their coolest favourites can lead to an eclectic list. Mine continues with chocolate, hot metal and speed.

Luxury chocolatier Belfair, with an atelier in Top Station Road,

offers hands-on courses. Under Master Chocolatier Stefaan Moyaert, punters learn techniques of hand-dipped chocolates, chocolates made in a mould, truffles and ganaches. Possibly the most satisfying website I've ever visited.

At Iron Forged Designs on Riding Road, blacksmiths Ben Landucci and Stuart Makin are in their element: hot forged metal, manipulated by hammer and anvil, using techniques developed over thousands of years.

They produce elegant, bespoke pieces like the one shown above, following the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement. As a sideline they also create authentic costumes and implements for re-enactments, events and films. Now that's creative.

None of the previous highlights can match the world-beating international reach of Brackley's Mercedes-Benz F1 team. Mercedes' success since they bought the Brawn F1 operation has been phenomenal, supporting Lewis Hamilton for five seasons and winning the constructors' Championship for the last three. A creative marriage of high performance engineering and media excitement. And the Force India F1 team is also in town, with their wind-tunnel on the site of the old north station. Says it all.

Gearing for the future

So Brackley, I'm impressed. In the Domesday Book the population was 24. Today it is around 14,000, with plans for around 18,000, showing great ambition from the city fathers, and bodes well for all the people I've been speaking to. The Town Hall, undergoing an ambitious £multi-million restoration, will again be iconic, and the future will be bold.

Thomas Rowlandson must have recognised that important things have happened in Brackley's past. The town's independent retailers and creative entrepreneurs are already coming back with the prospect of significant new growth. At the very least take time out to sample their creative June programme. ■



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

As of the end of May, we're full up! If you know anyone who wants a space, still point them in our direction because people come and go as their practices change. And we're always on the lookout for more premises. On 22nd June we have our *Summer Mingle*, at Norfolk House, from 6.30pm. A good opportunity to see round.

Our current programmes include **Culture Challenge** (artists into schools), **Creative**

Workspace Network (collaboration with other spaces), and **Mótus** (dance programmes through the summer). Planned programmes include a brand new **MK Literary Festival** in September, the second **MK Arts Week** in October and a possible **MK Film Festival** targeting horror on Friday 13th October. We'd like your help on these exciting projects.

Planned June exhibitions include at Arts Central. **Sam Shane** and **Alan Moore**, both featured in my

recent piece on Tecton. At **AC@Cornerstone** we'll be featuring 11 artists working with textiles, print and mixed media in **Bucks Open Studios** followed by **Newport Pagnell Quilters**.



Sam Shane at Norfolk House

There's more to MK than roundabouts.

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

