

A Creative Village

Evenwood Waymarkers – A Scoping Project.

A report by lead artist, Ewan Allinson



Introduction

This project was undertaken by the Evenwood, Ramshaw and District History Society with funding from Northern Heartlands' Community Initiative Fund via County Durham Community Foundation. I was appointed as lead artist by them and was supported throughout by Northern Heartlands' community facilitators Tariq Imam and Anna Collins, both of whom helped steer a path through the subtleties of the village's dynamics.

Brian Carter of the history society summarized the project's purpose as this:

"What we wanted was for people to recognize what there has been, what there is now, and what's disappearing."

The emphasis has been on getting villagers themselves to get creative about waymarker ideas, where to place them, what to represent and what materials to use. We ran two public meetings

towards the beginning of the project and then a series of days in which people were able to share and acquire skills working the kinds of materials that could be used for outdoor artworks. We also talked about what symbols of the village's heritage could become the basis for sculpted waymarkers.

Some context

The history group are very accepting of the changes taking place. The exercise was nothing to do with nostalgia and everything to do with marking what musn't be forgotten. In the same way that the Randolph cokeworks and slag heaps that defined the local landscape are gone for good, so are many of the traditions that went with that time such as the village carnival. Any attempts to revive these symbols of pit-culture would miss the point.

What does stubbornly remain for pit villages is a certain stigma, especially pronounced in the Durham coalfield because of the toxic legacy of the council's D-village policy. Evenwood was not a D-village but it does get an unfair press which in turn has profound consequences.

We project things onto places, prejudge them and that effects that place in a host of ways, not least economically. But woe betide, anyone who puts Evenwood down. One of the members of the history group described a public meeting at which a major NGO was proposing to secure some funding for some projects around the village. The moment the presenter described the village as 'deprived' she lost everyone in that room. Needless to say the project didn't go ahead.

Community pride is strong in Evenwood, and they're friendly with it. I walked around the village with the history group and then several times with the Evenwood walking group. I was struck, as we bumped into people, how good-humoured and convivial people were. Evenwood is in a good place and has everything it needs to act under its own steam.

Finding my own motif.

I learned a great deal from the history society about village history as well as its contemporary dynamics. I got to walk around the village with members of the society who shared their intimate knowledge of the heritage we encountered as we walked. I was also able to pore over their archives held at the Randolph Centre.

There's always something that jumps out at you loudest and it was while looking through these archives that a picture of Oaks Victory Homing Club jumped out at me.



When Jackie of the history society explained that her husband was one of the very last pigeon-fanciers in the village and that this dwindling group of men referred to themselves as the Delaware Debating Society, I knew that I had found my own leitmotif. The racing pigeon does symbolize pit culture and their decline marks the cultural changes taking place in Co Durham's pitless pit-villages. Pigeon lofts are one of the strongest remaining landscape expressions of pit culture. When I first moved to Teesdale in 2009, a bus journey from Bishop Auckland to Barnard Castle took me through Evenwood and up on to Cockfield Fell. The pigeon lofts all around were exciting to see and they distinguish the character of the landscape in this corner of Co. Durham. The demise of pigeon-fancying in Evenwood is a portent perhaps for the sport/culture across the coalfield villages of Co. Durham, though it should be added that in Cockfield and West Auckland, both nearby, pigeon-fancying remains relatively strong. I felt that a racing-pigeon carved in stone would be a good contender for one of the waymarkers, close to where pigeon lofts would have been in abundance.

The Collective Research Process

When undertaking public sculpture commissions on my own, I always do intensive research into the many layers that make for a sense of place. This process gives me the tangible and intangible prompts that my imagination craves. I was keen that the History group and I do some collective research. A trip to Palace Green Library was kindly facilitated by Rachael Barnwell of Durham University. The library archivist, Andrew Grey, pulled out a host of historic documents and maps pertaining to Evenwood and ran through them with us, explaining the context of each before we were then able to peruse them for ourselves. Of special interest were the Clergy Visitation Returns, a regular church census dating from the mid-19th Century. Basically, the Bishop provided the vicar of every parish with a questionnaire, requiring detailed answers. The entries for Evenwood over the decades made for fascinating reading. In one entry from the 1890s, one Evenwood vicar reported that villagers' pastimes include 'poultry, pigeons, drunkenness, gambling and day trips to Redcar'.

We were so enthralled by this vein of material that we arranged a subsequent trip to the library to spend more time leafing through the entries.

Building towards the skills fair.

Needing to get villagers properly on board with the project, the history group arranged a very well attended 'craft and chat' day in the Parish Hall in May. Ideas for waymarkers were discussed and then those ideas turned into prototypes by villagers, using a range of media. It was interesting how the village's disappeared industrial past was the most common theme, such as the cokeworks flame, the cokeworks silhouetted against the slag heap, pit-wheels etc. I used clay to fashion a prototype of the pigeon I planned to carve in stone.

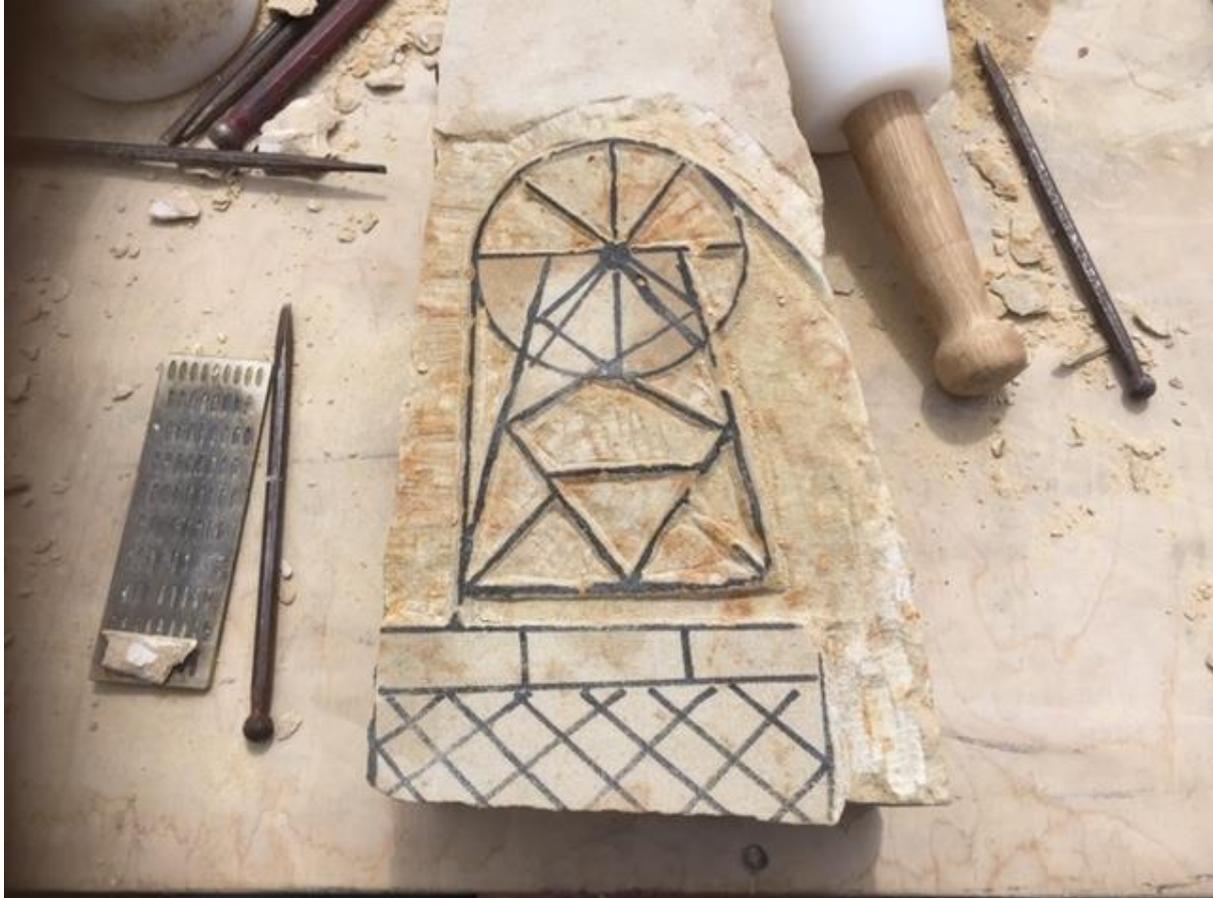
In order to build on this lively event and generate interest in the the skills fair, we agreed that I would spend some days out and about in the village offering stonecarving instruction, while also working on my Evenwood Pigeon. First stop was the Summer Fair at Cornerstone in the heart of the village at the end of June. Usually a very busy event, the weather conspired against us. It was the first nice Saturday for weeks and it seemed the whole village had caught the train to Redcar. There was a steady trickle of interest though and it meant that the two Lilys (friends at primary school) got to have a good go, successfully carving their initials and a love heart each onto a block of sandstone.

In July I pitched up at Cornerstone again, close to the road so as to be prominent and be able to pass the time with passers-by and encourage them to have a bash. Which they did. We had chosen the day to coincide with the walking group's weekly meet. Initially a bit coy about picking up the mallet

and chisel, several of them had a go and caught the bug. These pictures tell the story.



Ernie, closest to the camera above, also caught the bug on this day. His pit wheel relief carving, shown below, was the fruit of hours of concentration. He described the process of carving as 'very therapeutic' and as a member of the local dementia society, is absolutely convinced that stonecarving instruction would be ideal for the group.



The Skills Fair and Aftermath

The fair was very much for the villagers. We didn't do any concerted marketing of it beyond the village. I had asked Andie Harris Associates to organise the fair. Andie's experience at running such events across the North East over the years really showed. Positioned at the heart of the village on the Church Green, it had a great presence. We had agreed on a range of skills that were relevant to the creation of outdoor waymarkers. The village turned out in force and people were walking proudly away with tokens of their own handiwork. Jackie Dodds of the history society sums it up:

"I think the skills fair for me was a big, big, big thing. I thought that captured the imagination of people so well. There was a buzz about the place and people still talk about it now, about just how good it was. Comments like "Is there gonna be another one?" " Are you doing any more like this?" We get that all the time. I bet that 90% of the village know about it."

A couple of weeks later, we had two final days of stonecarving, one at the YMCA's community house in the Wellgarth estate, the other outdoors by the Randolph Centre. Both days, it was the kids who were most engaged in carving. On the rather dreich day at the community house, there were two young cousins who kept coming back all day. In the recording below, you'll hear them come in excitedly for their final session of the day. Many of the same children then came to continue their work by the Randolph Centre the following day.

All this work meant that there was now a collection of stone blocks covered in relief carvings by the villagers. These have been housed in the public garden curated by Ernie at the back of the Cornerstone church building for everyone to be able to pop by and enjoy each others handiwork.

The pigeon I have carved will be mounted on a stone block and placed along one of the paths earmarked by the project. It makes sense for it to be placed near to where pigeon lofts would have been in abundance, and with it facing towards open skies.

Looking back over the project and summing it up

The momentum and interest created by this grassroots-creativity project has successfully laid the ground for a future commission for a set of waymarkers, co-created by villagers and an appointed artist. The history group feel positive about the exercise and are planning to take things forward after having a breather for a few months!

In this conversation, recorded at the end of the session in the YMCA community house, Brian Carter, Jackie Dodds of the history group, and I discuss the ins and outs of the village's lost landscape heritage, not a trace left of the cokeworks or byngs that had towered over the village. We discuss the impact that this project has had in the village and then get interrupted by two young cousins, coming in for a final go at carving, having been the first through the door in the morning.

<https://www.mixcloud.com/EwanAllinson/a-creative-village-with-jackie-and-brian-of-the-evenwood-history-soc/>