

The Ashington District Star



The Ashington District Star editorial team credit: Jason Thompson

The Ashington District Star is a free newspaper / photographic journal produced by an editorial team of local people inspired by the Ashington Group painters.

The Pitmen Painters¹, as they were commonly known, used their art to share their thoughts and feelings on everyday life in Ashington. The Ashington District Star aimed to document everyday life in Ashington today through photographs of local people and places taken by the editorial team. The project began at the end of 2013 and the photos were published between autumn 2014 and autumn 2015 in four editions of the newspaper distributed to approximately 2,000 people. The project was celebrated in an exhibition at Woodhorn Museum which ran from October 2015 to March 2016. 120 people attended the launch and preview event in October 2015 and approximately 13,650 people visited the exhibition over four months.

Project Information

Project aims

The project had an overall aim to inspire a new group of photographers and artists, of all ages and abilities, to look at Ashington today and creatively document the area and its community. Photographic artist Julian Germain proposed the idea for a project to bait based on The Pitman Painters. This reflected the inspiration taken from The Pitman Painters for the bait programme overall which provided the impetus to commission an initial research and development phase.

¹ <http://www.experiencewoodhorn.com/the-pitman-painters/>

This initial phase began with invitations to local people to work with the project to agree the content and locations for contemporary recreations of selected images produced by the Pitman Painters. The project evolved over time to include the production of the Ashington District Star newspaper and exhibition at Woodhorn Museum.

Target participants

The project has revolved around a core editorial team of 15 people from south east Northumberland. A similar number of people have attended one or more meetings but not sustained their involvement with the project. Led by photographic artist Julian Germain, the editorial team includes people with an interest in the photography and social and cultural history living in the Ashington area. The group also includes a number of students and staff from the School of Art and Design at Northumberland College which has a campus in Ashington and is a partner in the project.

The production of the newspaper also aimed to engage the local population in the project. Copies were distributed by the team to members of the public in the streets of Ashington and stocked in a range of community venues around south east Northumberland. In addition to the physical distribution of the newspapers, the project also facilitated wider interest and discussion through a Facebook page² attracting 1,260 'likes' between September 2014 and February 2016.

Project partners

The key partners in the project included:

- **bait** Creative People and Places programme as commissioner and project manager. The project is managed by bait's **Creative Skills Development Manager, Lesley Wood**.
- Photographic artist **Julian Germain**³
- Staff and students from **Northumberland College**, Ashington
- **Woodhorn Museum**

Project activities

The inspiration for the project grew out of an unrelated exhibition by Julian Germain hosted by Woodhorn Museum in 2012. Julian was inspired by the permanent exhibition of the Ashington Group collection of work at the museum and began to think about a project based around the work of the Pitman Painters. The bait Creative People and Places programme, and the inspiration it took from the story of the Pitman Painters, provided the opportunity for Julian to work up a project idea. This idea evolved from creating contemporary versions of the paintings in photos to the development of the Ashington District Star newspaper.

The project began with a research and development phase in which Julian assessed local interest for the project. This included call outs in the local media for people to take part in a series of photographs that recreated scenes depicted in the original paintings. The initial agreement was for two editions of the newspaper. An option to develop a further two issues was agreed based on positive feedback generated through reflective conversations with the bait Creative Skills Development Manager after the first edition.

Publicity for the project, and recruitment to an editorial group, was undertaken through a range of newspaper adverts, meetings, presentations and conversations with local people interested in

² <https://www.facebook.com/AshingtonStar/>

³ <http://www.juliangermain.com/>

photography and/or the Pitman Painters. Examples included a talk by Julian to art students at Northumberland College, meeting younger people through the YMCA and discussing the project with people at an exhibition⁴ at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in which Julian was involved. Other members, including a former Ashington resident who travelled from Leeds to contribute significantly to issues three and four, were attracted by hearing about the project or seeing a copy of the newspaper. The eventual core group of the editorial team was stated to 'gel' as a team based on a shared understanding of and passion for the project.

The composition of each edition was informed by open and transparent meetings of the editorial team. These meetings facilitated discussions and debate on the content of the centre fold double spread, front and back covers and inside pages with Julian providing guidance on technical issues whilst sharing responsibility for creative input with the team. Meetings were complemented by discussion on a Facebook page accessible only by the editorial team.

Each edition of the Ashington District Star had at its core a painting from the Ashington Group collection accompanied by a photograph recreating the scene from modern Ashington. Surrounding this regular feature was a selection of photographs taken by members of the editorial team which documented the lives of local people, activities and places in and around Ashington. The paper also had a regular feature incorporating photos from people's own photo albums which was replicated in the exhibition.

As the project continued, new themes and opportunities for photos were identified from discussions between the team and the local community. A focus was maintained however on photographs capturing everyday life in line with the paintings of the Ashington Group rather than sensationalist or staged images. The four editions of the newspaper have included images focusing on people including children playing, people working at a car wash, a greyhound track as well as local industrial landmarks including the Alcan Lynemouth Aluminium Smelter and the new AkzoNobel paint factory.

None of the photos are attributed to an individual members of the editorial team including those taken by the photographic artist. This reinforces the community and team focus of the project and echoes the group approach taken by The Pitmen Painters.

Key challenges

The project has addressed a number of challenges:

- A project celebrating the everyday life and times of a town many people are potentially looking to leave, either for social, work or education reasons, may struggle to engage younger people with weaker ties to the area's cultural heritage.
- Projects working directly with communities over a sustained period of time will require sufficient resources to maintain engagement in the arts amongst participants and local people.
- The nature of the project in documenting, as opposed to dramatising, everyday life in and around Ashington will not be understood or appreciated by everyone. The lack of explanatory text on the photos could be seen as 'elitist' and inaccessible to the public.

"...If you don't put an explanation on for the general public then it's like the arts world speaking to itself..."

- Delivering a project at a personal level, for example, having conversations with people in reaction to a photograph does not lend itself to the recording of informal stories.

⁴ <http://www.balticmill.com/whats-on/detail/the-curves-of-the-needle>

“...Conversations are difficult to record as they cease to become a conversation anymore. A notepad is a conversation killer...”

- It is not always possible to add value to every aspect of project delivery with artists, participants and funders requiring flexibility and compromise. For example, resources may restrict the amount of possible to spend working directly with communities. Likewise, logistical barriers may influence decisions on the layout or touring potential of an exhibition.

- Audiences for the exhibition have been boosted by Woodhorn hosting the Poppies: Weeping Window at Woodhorn installation and the Weekend of Wonder. However, the capacity to undertake more targeted promotion of the Ashington District Star exhibition was reduced as a result.

Outcomes and impact - what changed as a result?

Project outcomes

The project has shown the value of using an area's cultural assets to support engagement in the arts. It has validated the role of local heritage as a catalyst to encourage participation engagement. The relationship between the project and Ashington's mining heritage, including the links to Woodhorn Museum, were identified as a key catalyst for interest in a project celebrating local identity⁵.

“Even if people ‘didn’t get it’, they liked the quality and subject matter of the photos”

The project has prompted a range of personal outcomes for members of the editorial team. These include the strengthening of business activities and study ambitions linked to photography and the wider arts and culture sector. The project has also enabled Julian Germain to develop his own practice, building on his previous experience of using newspapers to distribute messages, albeit this time in a more collaborative way, focusing as much on making connections as capturing images.

Project impact

Participants in the editorial team outlined a range of personal, skills and social benefits resulting from their involvement in the project. These included transferable skills gained from collaborating with others as part of a team to produce the newspaper against a deadline, people skills employed in discussing content and ideas and strategies to promoting the newspaper to the public.

Members of the editorial team specifically reported gaining in confidence - both personally and technically, as a result of their involvement in the project. This was primarily defined in terms of their increased enthusiasm to share their photos with the group and ability to help shape the planning and production of the newspaper and exhibition. This included contributing to often passionate discussions as part of open and transparent meetings of the editorial team.

The editorial team also highlighted a variety of technical skills and knowledge gained from their involvement in the project. These included identifying what makes a good shot, being more open to ‘photographing the everyday’, working with raw⁶ rather than jpeg formats and recognising what will work within the newspaper format. Members of the editorial team each stated that the process

⁵ See FRESH MINDS (2007), *Culture on Demand: Ways to engage a broader audience*, Department for Culture, Media and Sport
⁶ RAW files are uncompressed and unprocessed snapshots of all of the detail available to the camera sensor which need to be viewed and processed using the camera's software or software like Adobe Photoshop.

of developing each issue was exciting and gave them a strong sense of pride and creativity on completion.

“It’s been very exciting for me to become part of a local photography project. It’s given me confidence, direction and hope for my future as a photographer.”

Skills development linked to the project also included learning the skills required to be an effective and quality artist. Participants highlighted the benefit of observing Julian’s approach and ability talking to people, putting them at ease and encouraging them to share stories linked to the photograph. These skills are reflected in the project’s ability to actively engage the local community, taking the newspaper to the streets of Ashington for example and supporting people to discuss the photos and share their stories.

Participants also highlighted the inspirational nature of the project. This stemmed in part from working with acclaimed photographer Julian Germain but also contributing to a project celebrating the people and places of the area in which they live, work and study.

The positive experiences gained from the project have supported participants’ ambitions to develop their professional identity with several subsequently winning freelance work or exhibiting their own work⁷.

“This project will get my name out there in the photography world.”

Other members highlighted their success in related academic studies. The project was stated to have helped by supporting the practical application of skills in producing high quality art rather than just ‘snapping and shooting’ or concentrating on staged photography.

“You can see growing awareness of context and conceptualisation”

The close links between the project, the local community and the Ashington Group collection is illustrated by the project becoming the first exhibition to be presented in all three galleries at Woodhorn Museum. The unique nature of the project was also reflected in the number of people attending the exhibition opening and the interest shown from artists and representatives of arts organisations based in the North East region. Those attending remarked on the innovative nature and quality of the project outputs with the exhibition drawing project activity and the inspiration behind the photos together.

Legacy

- The project has left a strong legacy in the form of the skills and experience of the editorial team. The combination of participating in the development of quality art and the production of a newspaper has resulted in a pool of enthused individuals, many of which are described as ‘job ready’.
- The project has generated widespread community engagement and support. This has ranged

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1690802504509267/>

from the intensive participation of local people on the editorial team, the provision of resources, locations and subject matter to inform the photographs, to more casual conversations stimulated by the newspaper.

- The success of the project in delivering a community-focused photographic journal or newspaper emphasises the potential for future iterations of the project. Whether presented in hard copy or in a digital format, photography has proved to be a powerful art form to engage communities that could be replicated on a more targeted thematic or geographical basis in the future.

“The Ashington District Star provides a documentary of life - its proportionate and honest.”

- The project has produced a catalogue of photos which document everyday life in Ashington today. The longer term legacy of the project may not be fully appreciated for some time but eventually viewed in the same light as similar records depicting social and cultural life through history.

Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform ongoing and similar activities across south east Northumberland include:

- The project has demonstrated the benefits of flexibility in the relationship between the artist and bait. This has been illustrated in progressing an idea promoted by an artist and supporting the iterative development of the project in line with an action learning approach.
- Establishing links with Northumberland College and enthusiastic students and staff members in particular proved to be effective in promoting the project. Links with the college also led to the construction students making the vitrines for the exhibition.
- Links to pride in local (mining) heritage and the relationship between Ashington and Woodhorn Museum provided a critical mass of credibility to the project when promoting the newspaper and exhibition to the local community.
- The esteem in which the Pitman Painters are held, especially amongst older people more likely to reminisce about the past, enabled people to grasp what the project was about and make a link to a topic area they are familiar with.

“People know about the paintings - it’s a great way in”

- The editorial team has developed over the course of the project to work effectively as a team. The team-orientated ethos has added great value to the project with creative control, for example, largely assigned to the editorial team as a whole rather than led solely by the artist. This approach has enhanced the experience of those participating and increased the authenticity of the project.

“It was good to work on a project of such a scale and with a clear purpose”

- The meaningful contribution of people living in and around Ashington to the project has added value to both its production and the eventual outputs. Local people have been instrumental in not only producing the newspaper and related exhibition, but also in identifying

other people and places of interest to provide the content.

“You need to look at people’s own collections and professional work in same light and value both equally”

- The familiarity of the newspaper format enabled local people to engage with the project and generated better quality outcomes than would have been possible if moving straight to an exhibition. The format also enabled the project to take art direct to the local community by distributing copies on the street and in community venues.

- The project has used social media, and Facebook in particular, as a way of sharing the contributions of the editorial team and promoting the project to the public. Whilst proving effective as a means of sharing information, photos and ideas, some misuse of the medium highlighted the requirement for strict rules and formal structures to administer the group.

- It takes a significant amount of time, effort and coordination to effectively plan, set up and promote an exhibition effectively. As such, adequate planning and clearly communicated allocations of tasks are crucial to maximising its impact.

Replicability

The following are highlighted as top tips for replicating this project:

- The project has benefited from the focus provided by the inspiration of the Ashington Group and the cultural and heritage traditions of the area. Identifying a similar connection to an organisation, project or collection of images/objects will help to attract interested participants and engender support from the wider community.

- The newspaper format of the project output offers a familiarity which removes barriers to engaging with the arts. The distribution of a free newspaper in the heart of Ashington enabled the project to access the public directly and address barriers to engagement more effectively than traditional marketing activity.

- Future projects should maintain the role and contribution of an artist in order to sustain the quality of content and enhance the experiential learning potential for participants.



Above left: Fred Laidler’s family with the Ashington District Star’s Fish and Chips image, inspired by Fish and Chips by Fred Laidler
Above right: crowds visiting the Ashington District Star exhibition at Woodhorn Museum. Both images, credit: Jason Thompson

Evidence of progress against Theory of Change

Ambition: to make a change in levels of participation in quality arts activity

By connecting the past to the future via the Ashington Group, the project has generated a feeling of identity and local pride amongst those participating. The reach of the project is reflected in the successful distribution of approximately 6,000 copies of the Ashington District Star between autumn 2014 and autumn 2015 and the flow of visitors to the exhibition at Woodhorn Museum.

The project has directly impacted on the participation levels of the Ashington District Star editorial team. The opportunity to contribute to the process of developing the newspaper, either by taking photographs or supporting the wider production and design, has served to broaden and deepen participants' engagement in quality arts.

The project has also been successful in engaging a cross section of the local population. This has been achieved through a direct approach emphasising the links to Woodhorn Museum, the Pitman Painters and the exhibition to encouraged participation.

The project has impacted, to varying degrees, on a range of people across the local community and widened the reach of the project through a combination of direct and online approaches. Although it is too early to assess the project's impact in terms of effecting long-term change in levels of arts participation in south east Northumberland, it provides an example of a community-focused project driven by local people which are likely to encourage participation across south east Northumberland.

Ambition: to involve local people

The project has the involvement of local people at its heart in line with the ethos of the Ashington Group. The editorial group has worked with the guidance of photographic artist Julian Germain to build a collection of images published in four editions of the Ashington District Star inspired and enjoyed by the local community.

The Ashington District Star exhibition running between October 2015 and March 2016 highlights the wider input of the local community in the project. It collates the photographs taken mostly by local people with donations of family albums and archive materials from local people presented alongside a gallery of portraits taken by Julian Germain. Many of the people featuring in the photographs also attended the opening event. The exhibition coordinates the project activities and draws together the portrayal of the local area developed by local people.

Ambition: to demonstrate the benefits to well-being of quality arts activity

Whilst not having specific aims of generating well-being benefits as a result of participation in the project, members of the editorial team expressed a range of positive benefits stemming from their involvement. These include contributions to increased personal, educational and vocational confidence which have led to intentions to start or revisit study, career and volunteering activities including becoming a bait Creative Connector.

Ambition: to leave a sustainable legacy of enhanced capacity, resources and infrastructure for the arts in south east Northumberland

The major sustainable legacy of the project is found in the enhanced skills, knowledge and confidence of members of the editorial team. This is complemented by increased knowledge of the approaches required to replicate these positive results in other areas.

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