

GETTING INTO THE SPIRIT: Portraits of Bisley Parish in 1998 – MAB 2018

In 1998, putting together a 'village design statement' (one of many pointless and thankless tasks devolved to parish councils by central government) was occupying local worthies – when an even more local worthy, Donald Workman then of Crickety Mill, was fired with a creative idea which he put into practice with characteristic energy. Assisted by his wife Sue, he designed, commissioned and then distributed large blank cardboard frames to just about all households in Bisley civil parish. People were asked to encapsulate within the frames their predominant feelings about their home villages. A surprising number responded, and their 'artwork' was exhibited in Thomas Keble School one weekend in December 1998. It is a pity that these inspired creations were so ephemeral: but perhaps the promise of the show being temporary, and if desired anonymous, gave courage to people not in the habit of showing either their talent or their feelings. A huge variety of themes saw the light of day, briefly.

I mention this exhibition in my introduction on this website to Phyllis Gaston's *Oil Lamp and Candle*, as it was needing to fill Donald's frame that galvanized her into publishing her vivid descriptions of cruel winters in the 1940s – thus starting off her whole zestful booklet. The exercise was novel for most of us taking part in it, and was too good a community effort for us to let it slide out of memory. At the time, it was given an extraordinarily approving half-page in *The Independent* of 19 December 1998, when Duff Hart-Davis under 'Country Matters' wrote about 'The provocative art of village life.' This was illustrated with a choice of four exhibits, one of which was Eastcombe's Susie Browne's harmonious painting of her view across the valley to Ferris Court near the skyline. It was boldly entitled round the broad frame, 'The View From the Loo. Red Lion. Nov 1998.'

My own entry is kicking around the house somewhere. My ruling aesthetic as always seemed to be 'gaudy but not neat,' and I crammed into that relatively small space all the historical material I had amassed about Bismore to that date – the stories of the Barnado's boy and his neighbours, the Bisley entry in the Domesday Book, lists of wild flowers and birds, the names of residents over the centuries, where Ron Fletcher fell off his bike – you name it, I put it in there.

Another friend, with great restraint, blackened the whole 'canvas', sprinkled it with white stars, and framed this sky between gathered white muslin 'curtains' – a perfect evocation of looking out of a snug cottage at a quiet country night sky unpolluted by modern lighting. And another gifted craftswoman actually knitted the scene across the valley, with pasture and woodland and arable fields and woolly sheep under a blue sky. Another used fleecy wool plucked off barbed wire to form a Cotswold sheep... And children painted their houses, their gardens, flowers and autumn leaves, and wild animals in the woods...

There was crispy fresh inspiration everywhere one looked, and the uniting features were the love and awe and pride that we all have in these wonderful surroundings.

In case anyone in the future feels fired to emulate the 1998 exhibition, I am reproducing here the 'Your Village Portrait' leaflet that accompanied the perforated and scored piece of cardboard that was distributed to each household. It says that the initiative was funded by Gloucestershire Rural Arts, Summerfield Trust and The Countryside Commission Special Places Fund. We owe thanks to these organizations, and all the people who helped implement this simple but labour-intensive idea.

Returning to the article written by Duff Hart-Davis: he pointed out that it was not just memorable events like the winter of '47 that were recorded, but village eccentrics or benefactors, kindnesses, festivities, schooldays, craftsmen and artists... And there was some lashing out at the then-very-topical idiocy of the sort of interpretation of planning law that permitted massed housing to obliterate well loved countryside, recklessly destroying pastoral peace and beauty and wild life together. The writer also reminded us that Donald put on show rows of blank frames with their terse messages of 'Gone to Spain,' 'This is a private house' – and ruder. Beside us enthusiasts are also many people who simply wish we would 'Go away'!

Your Village Portrait

“What am I doing with this cardboard box?”

It's not a cardboard box, it's a self-assembly picture frame but at the end of this DIY project you won't have lots of bits left over

“So what's all this about?”

You remember filling in the Parish Appraisal booklet for your village. That information is being made into a document which will be available to everyone. That way, individuals or interest groups will know the opinions of the rest of the community when planning new projects.

“Yes, but what about the frame?”

The Appraisal document contains lots of information in the form of charts, graphs and lists, but a full picture of the community needs more about the actual lives of people. The frame is for your view of the village. Together, the Village Portraits will show what every villager feels about where they live and their sense of belonging there.

“But why me?”

Because you are a unique and important member of our community!

“What do I do with the frame?”

Tell your own story to display in the frame. It could be memories of the past, a description of present-day life, or wishes for the future. It can include photographs, old postcards, poems, cuttings, recipes — anything you like. What do you feel strongly about? Are you sad at the loss of part of the village, or pleased with where you live? Put it all in. Above all, have fun.

“Right, I can do that. Actually, give me two boxes. Then what?”

Bring your finished Village Portrait to Thomas Keble School on Friday 11 December 1998. Come back to view all the portraits at the BIG SHOW over that weekend — where everyone's Village Portraits will be exhibited, and an audio archive will be made, recording local tall tales and anecdotes.

Enjoy making your Village Portrait and see you on 11 December.
(On the back are some ideas to start you off.)

Family names
Leaving home
Stroud Brewery
Old photos
Changing agriculture
Press cuttings
Pub tales
Granny's old knickers
My favourite poem
Roadsides
The shops
Old programmes
Buses
Local writers
Going to work
Footpaths
Wild flowers
The War
Courting couples
Stiles
Western National
Elm trees
Folklore
Birds' nests
Accident!
Cars
Youth clubs
The Sixties
Unemployment
Frosts
Horses
Going to school

The winter of 1947
Pantomimes
Weddings
Village greens
Motorbikes
The Church
Standing stones
Working in the village
Postmen
Telegrams
Famous people
Parking
Stone tiles
The wells
Telecottages
Landscape
The midwife
Growing food
Toys
Field names
The vicar
Allotments
Drought
Old pubs
My job
Songs
Aeroplanes
The doctor
Chapel
The Bobby
Funeral routes
Local dances

This initiative is funded by Gloucestershire Rural Arts, Summerfield Trust
and The Countryside Commission Special Places Fund.

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