THE STORY OF SKILLS UNEARTHED

Poems by Maxine Green
and prose compiled to document the artists' work
for BHAAM's Skills Unearthed exhibition in 2013

Podcast with music available to listen here
https://soundcloud.com/blackdown-voices/sets/the-story-of-skills-unearthed
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PROLOGUE

Ten artists of the Blackdown Hills
in twenty thirteen whet their skills
by teasing out our track and trace
upon this land, and in it's wake
the yield that nature will retake.

With these strands of time and space
they wove a fabric of this place,
displayed it's human hands and face.

We are the bards. We gave our words
to tell this tale called "Skills Unearthed".
Life in our landscape revealed, reviewed,
and - where ideas set seed - renewed.

TIM MARTIN

It's easy to get lost around here, without doubt,
and many have struggled to find their way out.
In the heat of this summer, ditching hat and sweater,
Tim Martin set out to get to know the Blackdowns better.

The map's longest line through these fields, roads and stiles,
from Culmstock to Axminster, about 16 miles,
was Tim's pilgrimage path, and with purpose to boot:
stops at all points of public access on route.
There were 50 of these, and at each one he drew
in his sketchbook, on iphone, he filmed on cue,
made notes of grid references, geology too,
and, marking each visit, to beg the site's pardon,
he placed there a stone chosen from his own garden.

"So I had all this stuff", he would later recall,
"and my work was a way to make sense of it all."

Tim had imagined he'd greet the population,
discuss their ideas, exchange information.
But people were far between, and few,
despite sounds of activity, he met only two!
They're at home, on their farms, at their businesses, mills,
you just don't come across them, hiking over the hills.

SARAH HITCHENS

Our next artist sought them out, for her chosen scheme
was to fashion 10 pots, each taking it's theme
from a Blackdowns' producer, unique in their way.
And so Sarah Hitchens shaped with her clay
forms inspired by breeders of longhorn steer,
and local brewers of cider and beer
whose beverages you might wish to uncork
and taste with the beef, or with Gloucester Old Spot pork
or gourmet fish, and bread and soft cheese,
and produce from local sheep, poultry - and bees,
the friends to caretakers of wildflower seeds
whose harvesters' feet can stay warm and spry
in angora wool socks made from goats bred nearby.

"I wanted large pots", said Sarah, reliving
the process, "and porcelain proved too unforgiving."
After one mug was made, she resolved to adjust:
nine pots are of stoneware, more stable and robust.

Sarah made up her own glazes from scratch
donning mask, mixing powders, testing each batch,
then electric kiln firing. Result: predjudicial
to the depth that she wanted, too superficial.
So a japanese sleeping dragon was roused,
an anagama climbing kiln, wood-fired, to house
Sarah's pots, glazing each with a different brand
from the salt lick of flame where they happened to stand.

CATHERINE BASS

In her own words

“...I, with my husband, started a group called Blackdown Early Music Projects some ten years ago. We recreate music that was composed over the centuries up to about 1720, we stop at 1720 because the music gets rather more complicated and actually rather more familiar at that point. We’ve got probably about a millenium’s worth of music prior to that, that we can dip into. Anything from plainchant forward, through medieval renaissance into the early baroque.

“We were able to stage the first UK performance of one baroque mass.
We could not possibly have done that work anywhere other than a really large consecrated space.
The architecture does so much for the music.
Music itself is an architecture.”

ANDRE WALLACE

Aspiring to advance an architectural theme
André Wallace's muse has fallen to grace
inside churches. They enshrine his recurring dream
of an odyssey to explore consecrated space.

Volume, and shape, the formal considerations,
aren't separate from the spiritual, they interrelate,
and André, with human sculptural creations,
reveals how these facets transform and translate.

He documents his work: "I am no magician,
I follow the ancient heritage of makers.
My records continue the path of transmission,
the art of the possible is theirs for the takers."

He called this work "Ascent", the cyclical zone
of transcendance, and of it's converse, the Fall,
as a sign of the present day, a milestone
politically, socially, economically, for us all

RUTH BELL

Excerpt from “Skydiving”

> *“So when you exit the aircraft you’re jumping into the slipstream of the plane, so you don’t just drop, you actually feel the air cup you, and it feels like you float up, really gentle sensation.... You can do so much up there, you can angle your body in different ways, you can fly across the sky, you can slow yourself down and speed yourself up, so you can almost give the illusion of going up and down. Fly belly-to-earth, what we call flat flying, or you can free-fly which is like aerial ballet...”*

Airfield radio recording

> *“Dunkeswell radio good morning this is Golf Charle Delta Oscar Kilo inbound and request landing instructions.”*

Born as RAF Dunkeswell in 43
now a legacy aerodrome
and home to skydivers - like the one you've just heard -
who inspire Ruth Bell's choreography.

There were dances at Dunkeswell during the War.
Ruth revived them, to jive like they did in those days
when tomorrow the airmen took flight overseas,
and tonight they spun out their last steps on the floor.

Excerpt from “Skydance”

> *“The american boys used to like jives, they taught us to jive and of course when we went to these (dances) we met nice young men of course, fleet airarm they were mostly...and they used to tell us all about it because they were active in the bombing and things. And sometimes you would think you’d got a nice young man, he wouldn’t come the next week because he’d been shot down. Sad wasn’t it.. it used to be sad."*

JON ENGLAND

These wartime airmen - how are they known?
Do we need to give them weight,
to ground Fred Bloggs and John Doe, and commemorate
with anonymous monoliths in bronze and stone?
    101st Airborne Division, a.k.a. Easy Company,
    are now famed as "Band of Brothers" on TV,
    American paras stationed here at Upottery
    a fleeting time, before D Day flights to Normandy.
Five were wounded in action. To signal their trace
.Jon England painted a testimony.
with the battlefield antiseptic as his base.
    Iodine. It sublimes.
    A transient monument.
    Medium and message, to stitch a seam
    between the airmen of 1944
    and the Blackdowns' artist of 2013.
One of the wounded did not survive.
Jon portrayed him in boot polish, to immortalise
his image, while the iodine fades,
and the men in those portraits still living their lives
are shining their shoes for today's parades.

CARLY BATCHELOR

Title	Living Memory	
Camera	Carly Batchelor	
Subject	World War Two veterans then and now	
Location	in their homes	
Depth of field	Blackdown Hills to United States of America	
Time lapsed	69 years	
Time bracketing	1944 and 2013	
Exposure	double	
Exposure method	subjects hold their World War Two portraits	
Lens	macro, up close and personal, larger than life	
Aperture	stopped	time in its tracks on the sands
Shutter	opened	on veterans from two different lands
Focus	fixed	present and past in their hands.

LOUISE COTTEY

In centuries past, before planes and world wars,
before heavy machinery and factory floors,
it was sheep drove the wolf from most Blackdown doors.

Wages from weaving sheep wool into cloth
bought cottage workers their bread and their broth,
while riches flowed into the landowner"s hand
from Blackdown Hills' weave worn all over our land.

A fabric called kersey, double-sided
made the pre-industrial workers' costume.
Louise Cottey retrieved a pattern to guide
it's contemporary weave on her artist's loom,
and then framed the kersey’s resilience and worth
pictured back in the landscape that led to it’s birth.

Handweaving a kersey. "Mercy mercy!"
exclaimed Ms Cottey, as her biceps grew knotty!

It's not what she's used to - the finest of thread -
but a coarse Devon longwool, hard wearing, instead.
As robust as the weavers who wove for a living,
tough like merchants and traders, selling and bidding,
sturdy as those with this cloth on their backs
while they worked in the fields, while they gathered the stacks
for three centuries, half a millenium ago,

and if not for Louise, we might never know
how this westcountry fabric - fleece spun to weave gold -
generated the wealth as it kept out the cold.

GILLIAN WIDDEN

In the mid 20th century - cottage weaving long scrapped -
textiles still threaded the life of these hills.
Hooked teasels from Somerset now raised up the nap
of cloth machine-made, mostly in Yorkshire mills.

This trade, as it layers in history, hidden,
was excavated by Gillian Widden
and brought to light on six poles to display
the old tally of teasels now dwindled away.

Sung to the tune of "The Grand Old Duke of York"

For the grand old mills of York,
we'd pick 10,000 teasels.,
we grew them up on the Blackdown Hills
and we cut them down again.

And when they were cut they were dried,
and when they were dried they were stacked,
and then they were packed to the tune of twenty thousand in a sack.

In Gill's own words

"I got inspired by these things which are the hooked teasels which the farmers used to grow in Somerset. They don't exist in Somerset any longer. Round Thurlbear there was a small pocket of teasel farmers, so there are some still alive and I talked to them, and my neighbours used to pick them so the children just didn't go to school when the teasel harvest was on, so they used to go and pick teasels.

"And I kept coming back to this image of the teasel farmers with their teasel poles stacking the teasels that were drying before they were sent off via Hatch Beauchamp station to the ....mills in Yorkshire. And I thought, OK, I'd like to do this but I'm going to have to recreate it with something else, and I had to decide to get the hedgerow teasels, which would then be a substitute for the hooked teasels.

“Unlike the teasel farmers who grew fields of teasels and could just go and pick them, I had to find my teasels....

The cutters would pick between ten and twenty thousand teasels a day for an adult teasel cutter, and in total these poles represent twelve thousand teasels approximately. They were picked in hands and a woman picked a hand of 40 and a man a hand of 50.....and for me it was about plodding around cutting the teasels, forming them into hands, which was all to do with the numbers, and this was the hard work and industry done by the teasel farmers and the teasel cutters.

“...thinking about farmers and this hard labour, and how people just wouldn’t do this these days. Labour is cheap, it’s done abroad, everybody farms out their labour abroad where labour is cheap.

“The black teasels represent the death of the industry. I dyed them with indian ink and I used 25 litres of indian ink. It’s numbers it’s numbers it’s quantities...different from the farmers but the same thing. The farmers would send the teasels off in sacks of 20,000. A sack had to be full with 20,000 teasels to go off to the mills.

“A moth grows inside the teasels, and the moth comes out between May and September. The first 2 lots of poles, if this exhibition goes anywhere else, will produce moths between May and September.

“I thought whatever was possibly in them would die when they were dipped in indian ink, but indian ink doesn’t kill them....”

BRYONY TIDBALL

The moths in Gill’s teasels, unmoved by her art,
may remind us, however we strive to impart
our civilisation to nature's domain,
subjects of nature we always remain.

By tradition when the last standing corn was scythed,
the harvesters cried: "The neck!"
And 'crying the neck' gave it's name to the making
of corn dollies, loops and chains holding in check
the spirits of nature, to capture and tame them.

Sculptor Bryony Tidball reclaimed them
for nature. No neat plaited figurines of straw
but one grand sprawling beast rearing up from the floor.
Awesome, subverting it's miniature effigies.

No fabricated cage for a spirit refugee,
but the strong wild force in the cage set free.

CODA

Thus ends our tale of Skills Unearthed,
of how the artists' furrowed plough
allowed ideas to grow, and verse
to celebrate the harvest now.

We are the bards, heard but not seen
Charlie Hearnshaw. Maxine Green.

And after all's been seen and heard,
the spirit of nature remains undeterred.
The wild has, always, the final word.

CREDITS

The Story of Skills Unearthed was produced by the Blackdown Bards

Maxine Green
Script and narration
Guitar and vocals
Digital recording, editing and sound design

Charlie Hearnshaw
Alto clarinet, Bflat clarinet, percussion, piano, recorder, synthesizer
Digital recording, editing and sound design
Mastering and production

With thanks to
Catherine Bass, soprano
Steve Graham, baroque guitar and theorbo
Ruth Bell, “Skydiving” and “Skydance” recordings

Music and song
“Tim Martin’s Walk” and “Louise Cottey’s Reel” by Charlie Hearnshaw 2013
“Neither sighs nor tears nor mourning” by Nicholas Lanier (1588-1666)
“Dido’s lament” by Henry Purcell (1659-1695)
“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may” by William Lawes (1602-1645)
“Sorrow stay” by John Dowland (1563-1626)
“In the mood” by Glenn Miller 1939
“American patrol” by Frank White Meacham 1885, recorded by Glenn Miller 1942