



*'Send Three and Fourpence...'*  
the Queen's Rink Ballroom Project

an installation by  
**neil armstrong**



PRESENT





*Seaton Carew 1956*

## *‘Send Three and Fourpence...’* the Queen’s Rink Ballroom Project

an artwork by Neil Armstrong

I knew very little about Hartlepool except for a few mentions during my childhood of a grandfather I never saw and some remote cousins. Not so much in search of identity, more in search of mystery, I took this on with an open mind and a deliberate lack of agenda; as a researcher into the nature of time itself.





I had been congratulating myself on getting everything sorted. The transport was booked for the dancers, audio playback in place; I had got permission from the football club to use their facilities, my camera crew were about to be briefed - and I had signed the relevant council paperwork to cover the land's use. Then I saw the grass;  
*"My god it's like... four feet high!"*

I really hadn't considered the laws of seasonal cause and effect. The last time I had driven past this empty space that is the site of the Queen's Rink Ballroom, it was in its usual green and scrubby state. A place to walk your dog. A cut through. Now I was confronted by this sea of grass - swaying gently like it was waiting to be made into hay. I was about to ask twenty dancers to somehow trip through over grown pastures, when they were expecting something much less resistant to movement. We considered the option of hiring a strimmer, but decided it would take too long. Tom and Imogen would be here at ten with the polecam and the schedule was tight. In the end we had a go at stomping it flat. It was so long that it formed a mat when pushed down, so I decided if we waited until everyone arrived, with teamwork, we could make the equivalent of crop circles .

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that in fact this was a beautiful device. The point of filming here was to visually emphasise the passing of time, and it being overgrown really added something to that feeling.

Preface

The Queen's Rink Ballroom was built in 1910 in the North East coastal town of Hartlepool. Over a period which spanned two world wars and eventual industrial decline, the town experienced dramatic cultural and economic change.

With shipbuilding and steel production at its industrial heart, the Rink Ballroom was THE social hub for people in *'the Hartlepoons'*, surrounding pit villages and army camps. After the wars, it witnessed the demise of partnered dancing as the emerging pop culture swept away the big band era and with it, some say, the soul of the place.

The Rink ballroom was a receptacle of memories that still reverberate for many today. Lives that passed through that much loved space are both intertwined and unique; each portrait a snapshot of recall. The Rink closed its doors in 1968 and the site is now just a patch of open grassland. This is my way of re-opening those doors.

The piece also represents a personal voyage of discovery to a place where I have family connections, but about which I knew very little before taking on the project. I could not hope to do justice to everyone's story but instead have made my own, partial interpretation, of emanations from a place I never had the chance to visit in its glory days but which I have been privileged to explore and reinvent through the generosity of others.

What follows are short extracts from my blog, written over the two years I worked on this video installation. The full account can be found in *'artists talking'* on the [www.a-n.co.uk](http://www.a-n.co.uk) website.

I am indebted to Louise Thody for the following foreword.







## Foreword

*The past is a foreign country:  
they do things differently there*<sup>1</sup>

*‘Send Three and Fourpence...’* derives from the possibly apocryphal story from the Great War when a message sent from the trenches to HQ got muddled up. The message *‘send reinforcements, we are going to advance’* was received as *‘send three and fourpence, we are going to a dance’*.

This amusing anecdote has entered popular mythology as a classic example of Chinese whispers; when original meaning gets lost along the way, and Armstrong’s piece reflects this process of meaning dilution/distortion. It self-consciously addresses the near impossible search for truth derived in the re-telling of these stories whilst interrogating the documentary impulse itself. Clearly recreating time is an impossible feat, so what does it mean when we dig up the past and reconstruct history as such? The so-called truth can never be told; all we can do is create an impression or representation of history and past events.

By piecing together snapshots of personal narratives like an archival jigsaw, *‘Send Three and Fourpence...’* takes us on a journey through temporal space and time. Each story shifts back and forth, mirroring the process of the film medium itself. These snippets of personal histories are brought together to form a renewed collective memory, an echo of the past retold in the present.

This resonates with sociologist John Urry when he said *‘each moment of the past is constructed anew. So there is no past out there or back there. There is only the present, in the context of which the past is being continually re-created and endlessly constructed through the present’*<sup>2</sup>. This is precisely what we have here, a reworking of past events loosely reformed in the present, as hazy as memory itself.







In the face of burgeoning collective amnesia, it becomes increasingly important to recall our personal histories so that we can make sense of who we are in the present. As geographer David Lowenthal has argued, *‘One benefit of the past is to render the present familiar. Without habit and the memory of past experience, we cannot recognize ourselves’*. In a similar way, objects, places and spaces are potent vehicles for past recall and memory transmission. He continues; *‘not only is the past recalled in what we see; it is incarnate in what we create. Familiarity makes surroundings comfortable’*<sup>3</sup>. This comfort is readily sought in today’s fast-paced and hypermodern world where real lived experience and reality become distorted. The past thus becomes the perfect antidote to the present. But it is not always a means of escapism or nostalgia. It becomes our anchor to contemporary reality.

The Queen’s Rink Ballroom is a thing of the past but fragments of it linger on in the minds of those who are old and lucky enough to remember it. There is nothing left of the ballroom now, just a patch of desolate grassland. Easily dismissed as a depressing wasteland, this particular spot is in fact a rich locus of memory. It was French historian Pierre Nora who developed a theory of sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*). These memory sites are crucial to the shaping of our identities in the present. Nora thought that our rapidly changing society makes no room for memory and consequently the past is rapidly slipping away. We assemble *‘second-order’* memory by collecting and archiving historical material but the real substances of memories are fading<sup>4</sup>.

Sites of memory like this grassy spot hold a powerful aura that resonates throughout *‘Send Three and Fourpence...’*

*If we deprive ourselves of these fundamental memories,  
we part with who we were in the past and lose our sense  
of self in the present*<sup>5</sup>







The Queen’s Rink represents the key to unlocking the past and affirming Hartlepool identities in the present. Like other post-industrial towns, Hartlepool has witnessed a gradual economic decline over the years and this empty grassland embodies this process as well as serving as a potent reminder of more affluent and happier times. This passing of time can be seen through the lives of the characters featured in the film. It is through them that we make sense of our local cultural identities. Their diverse personal narratives are mixed together in the collective memory melting pot.

As philosopher Maurice Halbwachs explains: *‘every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework... space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings’*<sup>6</sup>

Whilst not preserved in physical space as an instant mnemonic source, the Queen’s Rink Ballroom has been recaptured in temporal space and reconstituted in the form of *‘Send Three and Fourpence...’* As such, it represents an archive of precious memories, captured and preserved on film for generations to come.

**Louise Thody, Edinburgh College of Art**

<sup>1</sup>Hartley, J.P. (2004) *The Go-Between*. London: Penguin.

<sup>2</sup>Urry, J. (1996) *How societies remember the past*. In: Macdonald, S. & Fyfe, G. eds. *Theorizing Museums: Representing identity and diversity in a changing world*. Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 45-65.

<sup>3</sup>Lowenthal, D. (1985) *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup>Nora, P. (1989) *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. In *Representations*, 26, Special Issue: *Memory and Counter-memory*, pp. 7-24.

<sup>5</sup>Kabokov, I. (1977) *The man who never threw anything away*. In: Merewether, C. ed. *The Archive (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. 2006th ed. Cambridge, Whitechapel and MIT Press, pp. 32-37.

<sup>6</sup>Halbwachs, M. (1992) *Space and the Collective Memory. The Group in its Spatial Framework: The Influence of its Physical Surroundings*. In: *On Collective Memory*. Chicago, Chicago University Press.







## CAREW ANEW

Spoke to my mother the other day. It turns out a photo exists of me tugging at my sister's hair in Seaton Carew. A bizarre detail perhaps, in itself of little obvious interest, but bear with me.

I was brought up in Leeds and moved to Newcastle when I was 19, where I have lived ever since, give or take the occasional artistic residency elsewhere. At no time, before or after, can I recall visiting Seaton Carew, or Hartlepool, until I began the Rink project this year; but apparently I did.

In the photo I am two years old, wriggling in my father's arms as he turns to the camera for our sea front snap. I am sneakily leaning down toward my older sister, attempting to pull her curly hair as she poses below.

I haven't seen that photo for some years and no longer live near my parents, so this revelation took place via BT whilst I filtered my memory banks for recall. That's one advantage of those days...people didn't take many photos, so those that exist of my upbringing can be counted on the fingers of two hands. Consequently I can clearly envisage said pic even though it resides 125 miles away and out of vision; but until now I wasn't aware of its location on that cold, bright and blustery day in 1956.

So what's my point? Well - what intrigues me is that now, armed with the info above, I see that quaint, candid photo in a whole different light. It has acquired a re-interpreted significance...

...Which just happens to be a central theme in this project.

It's like a gift given to myself by my other self.

And to any incumbents who might consider two centuries of confirmable local lineage to be the minimum qualification for handling the hallowed History of Hartlepool...let me tell you; you can't get more Hartlepool street cred than pulling your own sister's hair on Seaton Carew sea front at the age of (only just) two.

I have roots too and I'm damned sure I'm gonna have a good tug at them.

Seaton Carew NOW







## BEGIN THE BEGUINE

I have begun by defining what it must NOT be; confirming to myself that it mustn't look like some worthy presentation of local history. Instead, I want to develop a vehicle that somehow denies the hierarchy of linear time. Although it uses the Rink Ballroom as a starting point, it isn't just about the building, and it's not just about THE people involved...it's about 'people' in general, and also what it is to be unique whilst being part of a whole; all considered through a very discriminating and partial lens (mine).

*"Big canvas"* you may well say, and I would agree. It will have to get more specific.

Over the period of the project I have defined what I'm trying to do in many different ways for the benefit of a variety of people. As we all do, I explain the work differently depending upon what I perceive the listeners potential level of understanding, or sympathy with my cause, might be. But of course it's all just musings on the head of a pin ultimately because if I could write it down then there would be no need to make the installation at all.

I found myself yesterday experimenting with a little video projector - projecting some of my footage onto cylinders I had made out of paper; re-videoing the result and then laying that footage back over the top of the original footage. What I was after is a way of saying, visually, that we are watching an illusion of linear time. Like most things, less is often more. My distorted projection '*echoes*' are interesting but to be handled with caution. I'm not after a surrealistic chaotic soup, just gentle interventions.

Whilst it's exciting to jump into the more expressive elements, I am also aware that I have a great wodge of material that needs to be logged and then cherry picked. This is no small task, and I can't give shape to anything without that is done first, so I am officially starting that process NOW.

In fact the manipulation of fact is no stranger to many of the musicians I have come across. Some have changed their names more than once; their stage names becoming their real names eventually. I like that; it allows me to re-invent some of my material. Fabrication in pursuit of truthfulness. Fabrication as an enabler of an alternative integrity.







## DIAMONDS AREN'T FOREVER

Betty Brotherstone is a lovely lady who was born and bred in Hartlepool, but spent some time in Japan with her husband. I interview her for a while and she chats away about this and that and I am surprised she didn't have aspirations to do a little extra with her life. Yes I am aware of the debate about the value of bringing up a family etc. but I still had the feeling she appeared to have something else about her.

*"So you haven't done anything else apart from that brief period in Japan just after the war?"*

*"No, no not really"*

*"Did you see bringing up a family as your main focus?"*

*"Yes I did I suppose..."*

*(pause)*

*...Oh I was Mayoress of Hartlepool for a few years"* she says

*"Ah" says I "that might be something most people would consider mentioning as an event in their lives!"*

Turns out she was the reluctant accomplice to her brother, the Mayor, who had no wife and needed someone to be the Yin to his Yang. She had no political aspirations but was co-opted into attending the many official occasions that local dignitaries have to attend. I'm sure she did the job well - but it appears not to be something she rated as particularly out of the ordinary.

*"Glen Miller's quicksteps...even now - if the music's on the radio or on the television or a CD - I could be getting a meal ready and I'm still dancing to it...gets you...in the mood!...that was my favourite"* said Betty.

And then there is the Canadian connection. I managed to set up an interview on Skype the other day with June and Charles who now live near Lake Ontario. Charles was stationed at Catterick and used to bus it or hitch a lift to the Rink dances. They married then emigrated in 1959 and don't regret leaving but still have fond memories of the town. When they have occasionally returned, they are not impressed by the way Hartlepool had its character ripped out in the name of development. I ask them about the atmosphere of the place they remember; a community that was buzzing with industry. As we talk something crops up that I hadn't thought about before; the aroma of activity. A mixture of steel works, gas works and breweries; a unique perfume of industry. Now Hartlepool has a shopping centre and a marina but many of the marina shops are closed and the car parks empty. A tin man of a town.

The Skype picture was a bit fuzzy, and their voices intermittently took on a ghostly transatlantic cyber tone, but it sort of added to the charm, and spookily looks like archive footage, which is an interesting twist.

Thanks folks.

*June and Charles in Canada*







## THE SEA THE SEA

I dropped off a photo I had been lent to scan. It is a black and white picture of the outside of the Rink, looking quite depressing really, with a car parked outside, a lone passerby and what looks like boarded up windows. It's the only pic I've ever seen showing the entire frontage and it doesn't immediately occur to me that this would make an ideal 40th wedding anniversary gift. But that, complete with biro inscription on the envelope, is what Nancy O'Connor's husband gave her as a memento of happy times.

He has passed away now and she's very protective of the photo - asking her cousin John to ring me to make sure I will be returning it forthwith. Beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder and memories more powerful than mere actuality.

I have heard this from other people; it seems the Rink was a magical place that didn't display its secrets obviously. I am put in mind of some sort of fairytale environment...like the stories I read when I was a child where there was something to be revealed behind a concealed door, a secret garden or perhaps treasure stored in a room which can only be accessed via a cobwebbed passage in the roots of a forbidding tree.

Having delivered the photo back, and waking John from an impromptu kip in his armchair, I ask him if he thinks Nancy might be up for a telephone interview.

*"Ask her yourself"* he says...and hands me the phone  
*"mmm"* says I...*"I would rather you spoke to her first as I know she doesn't like strangers bothering her."*  
*"I'll show you the secret code"* says John. He dials and lets the phone ring twice then hangs up. Then rings again. Nancy answers.  
*"I've got Neil Armstrong here"* says John *"he wants to ask you something."* He thrusts the phone into my hand and makes an aside to me  
*"Nothing like doing these things when they occur to you"* he says with a wry smile.  
I don't think John was ever backwards in coming forwards.

THE PHONE IS SET ON SUCH A HIGH VOLUME

*"HELLO NANCY"* I say *"I WAS JUST WONDERING IF YOU WOULD BE SO KIND AS TO CHAT WITH ME ON THE PHONE SOMETIME SO I CAN RECORD IT? NOT NOW BUT WE CAN ARRANGE A TIME THAT SUITS?"*

The Tinder Box, illustration by H.J. Ford







*All Good Wishes for 1950 Benny Nelson*

## TAKE THE A TRAIN

Nancy sounds hale and hearty and laughs a lot - again not the impression I had gleaned of a lady who *‘doesn’t get out much these days’*. I think of the room beneath the tree...and that Nancy lives in a similar place in my imagination. I guess, as I probably won’t ever meet her face to face, that this is where she will remain for me; an illustration with a voice, in some ways more potent precisely because of that.

Our dress rehearsal for the main dance event took place on Thursday with a stream of people coming and going. It was the first time I had seen everyone in their costumes, and, due to the range of ages and abilities, not everyone was there for the whole day. It’s a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. The sixth formers have their slot - but also interact with the care home residents. The young carers came later and are augmented by a few volunteers from the dance group, just in case they lose the plot a bit on the day. They all looked fab.

I had a polecam (basically a remote controlled camera on a pole) and operator booked for the day. It was definitely a good move. The ability of a polecam to swoop from ground level up to balcony height made for some beautiful shots. I was particularly wanting to use it to add another perspective (quite literally) to the contribution from those who are less mobile and who will be seated or in wheelchairs.

Looking back at what we filmed, it’s hard not to get a lump in your throat when you see their performance, sedentary though they are, whilst the camera soars above them emphasising their immobility, and yet also conveying their indomitable soaring spirits.

The polecam’s ability to sneak a peek (it has a relatively small lens), where a more conventional camera would be too obtrusively close, managed to steal moments from this real life situation that have a cinematic, almost scripted appearance.

Tomorrow is the big day. I shall be wearing my bow tie, and four of us will endeavor to capture the occasion and do justice to everyone’s hard work.







## IN THIS THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

One of the themes which crops up in this piece is whether things change for better or worse, or whether we tend to think of our own time as always having been the *'best'*.

When I ask people about their memories of the Rink days they invariably say they were *"the best days of my life"* or something similar. You might think that is due to collective, selective memory and that we all tend to view our past with a rosy glow. My job isn't necessarily to take a position on that, but I think my job is to make a work that may suggest interpretations, whilst also allowing the viewer a way in to bring their own experiences and take their own position. There are many elements to this. For instance people talk about the thrill of dancing on the Rink's unique sprung dance floor. A gentleman left a message on my voice mail last week - he described how the floor would *'ripple'* when people did the Palais Glide. It was obviously a very fond memory not now possible to replicate. Other people describe the thrill of dancing with your partner. For them there is nothing to compare, and although they might still go to such dances now...it was somehow different then.

But my piece is centred around a building, and a building of that age invariably changes with the times it finds itself in. People bemoan that it was knocked down; *"it was such a waste"* they say; *"it could have been kept open and then this generation could experience what we had...there's nothing to compare now"*

Something similar was said by Kayleigh's nana. Kayleigh is one of the dancers on this project and is looking to pursue dance as her full time career. Her nana is her biggest fan. She was there all afternoon last week, stood in the tall grass, watching admiringly from the perimeter as we filmed her granddaughter dancing on the site that she herself had danced around as a young woman when it was a ballroom. I interviewed them together on camera and it was quite touching to see the connection between generations being made via the project. Kayleigh had used her nana's recollections to inform the way she danced. She also said that having been part of the project had convinced her to go out and learn ballroom dancing as she felt there was nothing to compare in these contemporary, singular times.

I find that point of view interesting and yet strangely at odds with the sentiments expressed by people who went to the Rink later in the 60s. To many of them the previous big band days represented a link to older, more repressive values, and the fresh air blown in with pop culture arrived none too soon. Those days of pop idols and screaming signaled the death of partnered dancing and heralded the arrival of the *'me'* generation.







## IDEA #371

You can see the life and death of a ballroom as a metaphor for the way society has changed in general. I'm not sure that if the Rink was still standing it would have been much used for partnered dancing now. It's far more likely it would be a nightclub or a sports centre.

We now live in an age of plurality and allow ourselves to dip in and out of differing historical genres. Cultures tend to coexist rather than any one being predominant (in the west at least). So maybe where one social phenomenon replaced another, often in a fairly destructive way, with the passing of time perhaps Kayleigh can benefit from a wider choice and take the best from history. That, to me, doesn't seem like a bad model to adopt, but then maybe, for me, plurality is my own historical '*best of time*'.

It's interesting to ponder what Kayleigh's view will be in 50 years from now.

I have my oxygen rich shower every morning to thank for '*moments of inspiration*' - that often seem like an idea too far once I've had a shave. But then I occasionally end up convincing myself that they really are good ideas and I should take the risk.

So; idea number 371: To write a song in the style of the big band era with lyrics that pertain to the Queen's Rink ballroom and, lyrically, link in some of the memories I have been collecting. Can't be that hard can it? I'm pretty confident of my ability to write the song, but not at all confident of my ability to write an arrangement for the song. Then I thought - maybe the band would like to get involved? (there is a very good contemporary big band in Hartlepool) or maybe it should just be a piano arrangement? But I would still need a crooning type singer. More things to organise, but it could be fun. Then the post-shower person in me thinks...is that a bit crass?

I have now wrestled idea number 371 and have to say I am still erring on the side of going for it. It doesn't on the surface sound like art - but then actually to write something in the style of your subject, and then put it through the same process as the rest of the gathered material, could add a nice touch. A sort of '*historical recall re-presented in the spirit of the period*' approach. It makes me smile anyway.

Been logging my archive footage too - in particular one film called '*Holidays at Home*' made just after world war two. A park full of people ballroom dancing on the open grass; children, servicemen and servicewomen in various uniforms; teenage girls, hopeful boys, dancing into night...laughing into the night. What amazing times; a dreamscape and yet not that long ago; and yet long ago...





Considering her  
account of Buddy



double your pleasure, double your fun

### CHEWED UP

I have made no greater sacrifice to my art than chewing gum. To me chewing gum has a similar effect to the sound of chalk scraping on a blackboard. Amplify that by a factor of ten and hard wire it into your nervous system and that gives you an idea of how chewing gum affects me. Even seeing other people chewing gum sets my nerves on edge.

I have been working on some of the wall pieces this week and something I wanted to reference was an anecdote told to me by the singer Marion Keene, who got her first break at the Rink at the age of fourteen, and who was paid in Spam sandwiches for her efforts. She wasn’t complaining.

Quickly picked up by the then famous Oscar Rabin Band, she soon found herself in the Big Smoke. Standing in for a somewhat worse for wear Billie Holiday one evening, led to her singing on the same bill as Buddy Holly and the Crickets. Boys being boys, the Crickets had been fooling about backstage and somehow Buddy’s front tooth got knocked out.

Marion apparently used to chew a lot of gum in those days and Mr Holly spotted her chewing backstage.  
“Can I have your gum please?” he asked  
“I’ll see if I have any more” said Marion  
“no the gum you’re chewing will do fine” said Buddy

She passed it to him, slightly bemused, and after a short sculptural interlude he pushed it into the gap - just in time to go onstage. A small detail but one that adds richness to my back stories.

So I made the ultimate sacrifice. In order to re-make history I bought a pack of gum (something I haven’t done since I was a kid). I even chewed it so I could photograph the result, nerves a-tingle. I hope you are impressed.

Woke up this morning dreaming of Frank Ifield - he of “I remember yooo...oo” fame. No idea where he appeared from. I can only assume that I am getting so consumed by the project that random bygone stars are now visiting my twilight world uninvited.





Nancy says



## “PLEASE EXCUSE WRITING - EYESIGHT BAD”

That was how Nancy ended her first letter to me. In fact her writing is all in block capitals and on ruled paper, so it was very easy to read.

Thirteen years ago she wrote a poem about the Rink and how she met her husband there. In it she describes how her prospective asked her to dance even though he couldn’t, so they just shuffled around the perimeter.

*“I will take lessons he said to me  
don’t you worry just wait and see”*

When she wrote the poem her husband was still alive. After a few more lines it concludes;

*“We’ve been together through laughter and tears  
but he still can’t dance after forty six years!”*

How many dance halls have inspired poetry I wonder? They are certainly vessels of memory. Even though the building no longer exists physically it seems to have persisted as a collective ideal of what the community used to represent, and what many it seems still wish it did.

She also lived next door to Marion Keene. It’s as if everyone was part of some pre-ordained Queen’s Ballroom cast. She says she can remember the day local band leader Benny Nelson died. She was outside of the Lex cinema . For her it sounded like a ‘*where were you when they shot Kennedy?*’ moment.

Nancy and her friends didn’t want to carry purses around in the ballroom so they rolled up their cloakroom tickets, flattened them out and pushed them under their signet rings. Sorted.

I’ve seen a couple of uninspiring photos of the outside of the Rink and she backs that up. It looked like the exterior of a garage or an aircraft hanger she says;

*“any stranger passing - they could have had no idea of the tremendous pleasure the inside held for all that went there”*

Sounds like she was a bit of a girl in her day. She tells me she was the first lady to go to the Rink in a polo neck sweater. Apparently it caused a real stir. Every now and again girls would stop her and ask where she bought it...and how much it cost. Within a few weeks there were others dotted about the crowd. Nancy was a fashion pioneer, and she must have known that her polo neck sweater was a symptom of the change taking place which would very soon usurp the dominance of the big bands that she so loved. The rebels in polo necks and ‘*sloppy joe*’ tee shirts had more in common with beat culture, the rise of skiffle and the arrival of Bob Dylan et al. The times they were certainly *a-Changin’*.

Nancy tells me her memories are pretty much all that keep her going these days. To me that sounds a little sad but I get the impression from her sparky prose that it’s a happy place, so I guess it makes sense to stay there.







From Lower Archer  
Street to the  
delights of Turkey

## MY TELEPHONE ROMANCE

Eurovision and singing with Bob Hope and Julie Andrews are some of the highlights of Marion Keene’s career. She began singing at the age of 14 with dance bands and before that danced and sang, lit by a warden’s torchlight, in the shelters during the frequent bombing raids over Hartlepool.

Now 80, Marion contacted me after one of her relatives had sent her a clipping from a newspaper article describing my project. She sounded lively and very sprightly, and was full of great stories about her time with the dance bands and then later on as a TV star in the heyday of light entertainment. She was a regular singer at the Royal Albert Hall. Happy days.

I suggested it would be great if I could come round and chat to her about those times and maybe video her for the project. For someone so full of life I was surprised at her reticence;

*“Oh I don’t get out much these days dear”*

*“no I will come to you”*

*“you will?”*

*“well I’ve just had the house painted and they have left a terrible mess outside”*

*“don’t worry I probably won’t film outside”* says I *“where do you live in Hartlepool?”*

*“oh no dear I live on the south coast near Dover”*

She had a fall a couple of years ago and now can only either stand up and walk with a stick, or lay horizontal. She is in constant pain and yet lives on her own surrounded by memories and relics from her past. She used to make her own dresses, and very film star they are too (she sent me photos), and is addicted to Wall’s Cornettos. They provide her motivation to go downstairs to the fridge.

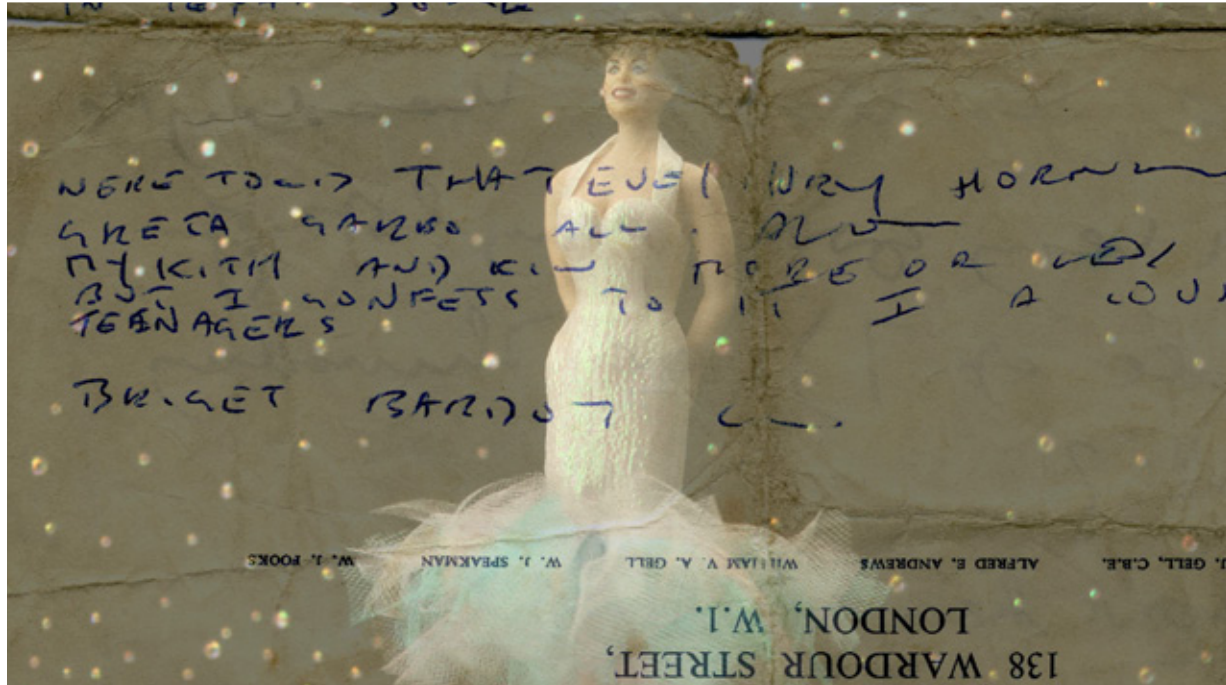
I am still pondering whether to go visit her sometime or whether there is some mileage in the element of distance. She has a compelling speaking voice and I ask her if she would be happy for me to record a telephone conversation with her? She is happy to do that.

There is something here about the nature of sound across time. The recordings she has sent me, and a subsequent one I have heard re-mastered from an old 78rpm are faint and distant despite modern technology. Recording her from a telephone line will not be perfect, but will have a similar quality. I think of how we get used to poor quality from modern technology; the massively compressed audio of the telephone; the high compression of YouTube, the less than perfect (though admittedly improving) quality of mobile phone photography. I quite like the idea of this odd convergence, so resolve to record her remotely through the ether and quality be damned.



“...but it was just a car park”





S of France - brought back  
Rebecca's 'don't let the rain come'  
to sing it  
(h.) now I  
it fit! Bah!  
to film  
- may 1st  
t cool to  
The

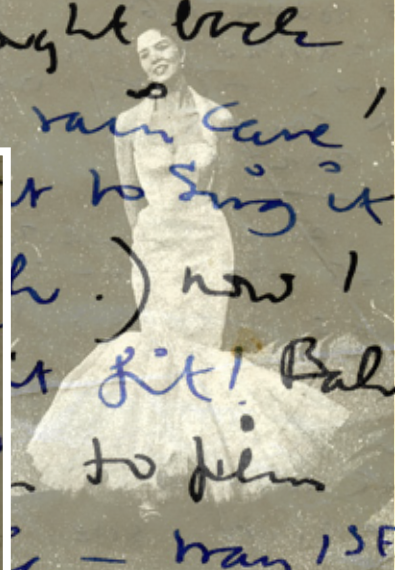
NEED TO... THAT EVERY DAY MORNING  
GRETA GARBO ALL ALONE  
MY KITH AND KIN FOR OR  
BUT I WOULD LOVE TO I A  
TEENAGERS

BURGET BARRON

138 WARDOUR STREET,  
LONDON, W.1.

W. J. SPEAKMAN  
ALFRED E. ANDREWS  
WILLIAM V. A. GELL  
W. J. FOOKS

Wednesday  
Tuesday/te  
28<sup>th</sup> (a very good day lots of  
multiple of 7) or Thursday  
He 30<sup>th</sup>?  
If I don't hear - I'll still  
continue to sigh and  
Thanks enormously for the  
'photos



I do also suggest to her during another conversation that she might like to 'sing' various lines and phrases that I will be emphasising in my final piece.

The idea comes from recently talking to a lady suffering from dementia. She sang everything to me as if it were normal dialogue. I filmed this but don't really want to include it in the piece as somehow it seems too exploitative. It did give me the idea though that I might get various people to sing phrases that have occurred in general conversation. I like the idea that, alongside more conventional documentary voice, there will be occasional more structured interventions which imply something being worked and re-worked. I thought the idea might appeal to Marion so I describe my thinking. She is a little nonplussed so I give her an example. I sing a few lines down the telephone in something akin to plainsong;

"See what I mean?"

"No dear I don't understand"

"OK - we can talk about it later."

## DONTCHA JUST LOVE DOLLIES?

I am having a doll made.

I had thought I might go and film her one day, but as the months slipped by it began to feel more appropriate to represent her in a way that was more remote. A Marion doll, resplendent in shimmering fish tail dress, is the essence of what she is to me. Marion laughs at the idea but I think she secretly rather likes it. My Marion Keene doll lives!

"I feel like I've known you for ages" says Marion.

I agree, despite the fact that only I have been asking the questions.

The 'person' we know of each other is of course a very focused one. She is in the spot light and I'm some sort of 'media man' to her as I'm not sure the concept of 'artist' in this context is helpful. Her image of me comes from a press clipping sent to her by a cousin back in Hartlepool a couple of months ago. My image of her is gleaned from a myriad of photocopies she has sent of her press clippings from all manner of music and general publicity over the years.

Marion doesn't have a computer. She can't be doing with such things. We both exist in the world of the imagination. We both complain about aspects of the impersonal and the ironic falseness of targeted marketing; of the pursuit of celebrity status for its own sake brought on by the adoption of mass media culture; and yet I can't help thinking that ours is a virtual friendship in a spookily 21st century way. That for all our talking about when she was a girl in the 40s, that the 'here and now' of our adult voices is based on a fine balance of me having all the agenda and her having only sent me pictures of herself from over fifty years ago.

I want her effigy to go on a little journey around Hartlepool. I want to see her in the shopping centre where her house used to stand; and to take a trip to the (now closed) cinema she used to bunk off to. She should really be carried around by a little girl. I need to work on that.



MARION P  
"A long life"







## KIP'S TRUMPET

So there I was, in the fab Hartlepool Maritime Museum, wearing rubber gloves and handling the well worn, nay, beaten up, brass tubes and three valves that comprise the object we call '*a trumpet*'. A passing visitor happened to ask;

*"Is that Kip Heron's trumpet? It has a link to the Beatles you know - he used to play in George Martin's band"*

No I didn't know that - but thus far I can't confirm or deny it, though I know a man who maybe can, as in the cabinet there is a biography about Kip, written by a gentleman called Gavin Smith\*, whose name I recognised. I have in fact met Gavin before, but despite that didn't know he used to play in a band with Kip.

It really is all about asking the right questions. But knowing what the right questions are is the ultimate trick.

As a child I always wanted to play the trumpet, but my school only had one and some older boy apparently had loan of it for the duration, so my aspiration was never fulfilled. Didn't really consider it at the time, but I'm thinking now that the trumpet was a forerunner to the electric guitar in the '*sexy instrument*' stakes. Singular and difficult to ignore, it could be considered the centre forward of my fab fantasy musical squad.

I was impressed by how battered it is. It really shows its use and there is something very evocative about that. Wearing white gloves to handle it seems strangely at odds to the treatment it so obviously had in the past.

The video sequence I made to feature his trumpet (apart from where we go looking for the site of Kip's café) is made from single frames shot on my stills camera. I wanted to take snatches of time and reform them into something else. Like single notes strung together, fired out to the beat. This object as a vessel of history; made to deliver sound; fallen silent; brought alive again.

The Hammond Organ I used to accompany the video is played by a musician called Paul Flush, who I interviewed previously, and who now lives and plays in Belgium. He reckons he was the youngest musician to perform at the Rink, whilst still at school in Hartlepool. This first break was due in no small part to the connections his father, a big band leader himself, provided and led to Paul supporting many of the big names of the time - much to the envy of his peers. Bringing two great musicians together who never actually met, albeit in a slightly abstract way, is for me the essence of this project. Re-shaping the past and delivering it into the present.

*\*Gavin eventually ended up working on the arrangement for my big band song*







## TAKE A LINE FOR A WALK...SEE WHERE IT LEADS YOU

My father is the family link to Hartlepool and in his early youth, 15 - 16, he could be found with a few mates eyeing up prospective dance partners on the Rink dance floor. Various things like pacemakers being fitted (my father) and a broken hip (my mother) have meant that filming was delayed until yesterday, when we finally headed down the A1 to Yorkshire for a bit of a chat.

I have met quite a few people now who have coloured in the detail of the Rink for me and, although I wanted him to do that too, I was interested to get a wider perspective, being that he was brought up in Hartlepool, evacuated, and then returned when still a boy. He was one of the bicycle squad that delivered messages around the town when communications were down after WW2 bombing raids.

Being taught to box is one of the things that cropped up. At the beginning of the project I had thought boxing might have been a bit of a theme, but it hasn't turned out that way even though I think there was a time when bouts were promoted at the Rink. No one I have met can tell me much about that aspect, and to pursue it would be tangential to my piece, so this is one of the few times it gets a mention. In Hartlepool boxing is a topic in its own right.

Interestingly though, there is a generational link to this theme. One that probably just about had its day after my generation. He talks about being taken by his father to a boxing club to learn to defend himself at school. It obviously worked, because he got a reputation as someone you didn't mess with. School is a tribal place of course, and as a boy I learnt to box too and the same applied. You didn't need to throw too many punches to send out a signal that there were softer targets in the school yard. It pretty much worked for me, but I'm not sure if the Queensbury rules are adhered to these days.

After the war there was no shortage of work. He was regularly asked to work seven days a week, but wasn't too keen on spending his entire life in a factory, and the promise of eventual promotion to the heady heights of Lipton's branch manager wasn't entirely what he had in mind as a career move either.

Saturday nights were Rink nights though; he even took dancing lessons, and tells me he often got compliments on his technique. Well, I'll have to take his word for that. The floor is the star. Others have said the same; that as a full floor of feet moved in time to the rhythm you could feel a communal feedback of motion propelling you across the expanse. In my mind I imagine a Mexican wave of floorboards in sympathy with the sea that is the backdrop of Hartlepool's identity.







## H...IS FOR BECKENKRAGER

Mr Bekenkrager called me this week - he is full of memories and interesting perspectives. It just so happens that he is also a spiritualist and has a multitude of testimonials from people who have been ‘cured’ by his healing hands.

You may or may not be sceptical, but it certainly adds a new dimension, as he also apparently picks up on voices from the beyond. I shall test him on that one when we meet ; perhaps I can do an interview with Benny Nelson or Joe Loss from the ether. Now that would be something. I have arranged to interview him at his home in Seaton Carew; just a couple of miles down the coast from Hartlepool; a return to the scene of my second birthday bash.

He is 80 now and spent his early life in the navy, but is keen to tell me about the Rink and the moment he met his wife to be. This year would have been their diamond wedding anniversary but she didn’t quite make it.

*“Without wanting to pry too much” I say “it must be quite a change for you now”*

*“it is, yes” he responds.*

I can see he is going a little misty, and I really am not in the business of letting the camera run and exploiting that, so I shift the subject a little;

*“you said you were thinking of maybe taking up dancing again?”*

*“yes, I just have to be careful with my knees, but I would really like to try that”*

He shows me photos. *“She looks a little stern in that one John” I say*

*“Oh you wouldn’t want to cross Pat when she was in a mood” he laughs.*

I ask him if he would have done anything different in his life, but all in all he seems pretty contented with his lot. His lot has included being a naval man on Christmas Island at the time that Britain was testing the H bomb. There he is smiling in his all white ‘anti-flash’ suit.

*“Weren’t you concerned about radiation?” I ask*

*“No we were ok as the wind was blowing away from us. There was a Soviet cruiser downwind though and we were radioing them to get out of the area...”*







*“There was a white spiritual orb...whether it was my wife helping me I don’t know”*

## ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

He has a picture of the mushroom cloud in all its disastrous beauty.

He left the navy to bring up a family and didn’t go back to the Rink once the pop era had arrived. They were family focused, and played cards a lot. For them the Rink had a certain time and place in their lives and he only recalls it being derelict when he returned to Hartlepool, although it was in fact still a thriving venue by all accounts. It has a particular place in his life; forever fixed.

But John has another side to him. He heals people. He sees dead people. He can *‘remote’* and sometimes receives instructions to lead souls towards the light if they are lost.

His particular dance with death is one in which he partners souls. He feels Pat enter inside him when he heals people and has glowing testimonials from people who have been helped by his healing hands. He believes we are reborn and he is guided by the spirits of North American Indians.

Ever one to be looking for clues to this cosmic puzzle, I quiz him a little more. If he has taken people to the very door of the afterlife, what does it look like?

What is the purpose of life and where did the universe come from?

John has a mild smile on his face;

*“The flowers are very bright on the other side”* he says

but I’m not sure he knows.

Perhaps I am asking the wrong questions.







You can't mention Hartlepool without at some point referring to the monkey hanging incident...this one may be a distant relative



## YOU MAKE ME WANT TO

Dot attempts to sing SHOUT!

Lulu crops up in quite a few people's recall of the early 60s Rink experience. Something to do with the big orange hair and the big bundle of personality. Lulu is the essence of Glasgow, and Lulu fits into the Hartlepool landscape with ease. They connect. There is shipbuilding in common of course, and a sense of closed community forged in adversity.

There is definitely a sense in Hartlepool of the underdog having something important to say. But, conversely, they don't shout it. They say it in a surprisingly quiet way. If you don't know the place, it seems to have no heart. It seems to be a bit here and a bit there. Even the geography means that the town is split into two; the *Headland* (old Hartlepool) and across the water, what was formerly called West Hartlepool, is now *'the Town'*.

When I first started this piece I thought shipbuilding would have been quite central. As it turns out it gets mentioned less than I thought it might. Its dominance faded a long time ago (oil platforms and wind turbines now have the ascendancy). Dot's father worked in the shipyards though, and eventually died of asbestosis as a consequence of his job. But it is his pride in the leeks and other prize vegetables he grew which Dot remembers the most; *"can't stand this frozen stuff you get from the supermarkets now"* she says.

These days Hartlepool has what most towns have; a Morrisons, Asda, Boots; a Marks and Spencer, a Burger King etc. etc. but because of the odd backwater nature of the place it doesn't quite seem to have been fully remodelled by this development. Even the relatively new marina doesn't get much of a mention in day to day conversation. This fractured nature seems to have prevented its total absorption into the more common contemporary *'city out of a box'* style and instead evolved a space between *'now'* and *'then'*. I quite like that, even if it's probably not what a politician would want to hear.

I was discussing these issues with a friend of mine. He was of the opinion that I should politicise my attitude to how things are now. I explained one of my planned shots. The camera moves high above where the Rink Ballroom used to be and looks over the landscape across the town and towards the sea.

*"I'm not sure you need to say any more than that"* I said.







## THE HARTBEAT BOYS

Local legends of the time, and all round Hartlepool superstars, the two remaining members of the Hartbeats are sat round a table with me, unassuming and down to earth. They formed at the turn of the 60s and wasted no time getting down to the local high street tailors to get the snazzy red suits run up that were to become their calling card to recognition.

Roly recalls ordering an original Fender Stratocaster, via a Hartlepool music shop, from the States and having to borrow the money from his hard working postman father. This was the period when youth culture was being invented, though they didn't quite understand that at the time of course, and his father must have been a pretty enlightened man in his own way. He wasn't exactly enthusiastic about the purchase and tried every which way to put Roly off; his final tactic being to take out the fifty guineas (yes guineas) from the bank and spread it out in front of Roland on the table in order to show him the enormity of the intended purchase. No-one in his family had ever seen that amount of money lying naked in all its glory in such a way. It was a scary moment says Roland, but not one that made him waiver in his resolve to be the guitar's owner. Blame Hank Marvin for that. They did in fact go on to win Opportunity Knocks with Hughie Green and another low budget pre X-Factor type programme called New Faces presented by Micky Most and music hall hero Arthur Askey. Musical time telescoped in what we might now regard as a quaintly crass mash-up of genres.

John's house is the first one on the street and overlooks a wide open expanse of fields - dominated by electricity pylons in the foreground with the Teesside Billingham chemical plants in the distance. It's a real bonus I hadn't expected. A surreal, yet typically, *'real'* backdrop to show off the Slingerland '64 kit in all its glory. He tells me that up until last year there was a chemical factory at the end of his street. Now there is just stubble from the freshly mown fields. Growth and decay are necessarily themes in this piece and it fits nicely.

We chat in John's hall and another theme emerges; that of the foot pedal and the *'encapsulation of sound'*. It's interesting because the foot pedal can be seen as a time machine in its own right. In the 60s an AC30 amplifier for instance had a volume knob, a tone knob and a tremolo knob. That was it. I was under the impression that there was a reason for this; that it got used quite a bit. John reckons you didn't really use tremolo unless you wanted to sound like Jim Reeves, which was a somewhat partial and dubious ambition for early rock and rollers.

But then all the PEDALS came out. The fuzz box, the wah pedal, the sustain pedal etc. etc.

*"I tried a Jimi Hendrix pedal"* says John

*"It was amazing, but after a while you start thinking...Hendrix didn't have a Jimi Hendrix soundalike foot pedal - he just made that sound up himself".*

*Roly's first guitar was a Rosetti - he says all it was good for was putting on the back of a fire*





1963 TAKINGS:

| DATE                              | PLACE OF BOOKING           | AMOUNT  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|---------|
| 1st 1st June                      | Maison de Danse            | 10 10 0 |
| on 2nd June                       | New Durham W. Club         | 10 0 0  |
| on 3rd June                       | Maison de Danse            | 10 10 0 |
| 4th June                          | Magnet Hotel               | 6 0 0   |
| on 7th June                       | Wheatley Hill              | 7 0 0   |
| at 8th June                       | Station Town Catholic Club | 10 10 0 |
| TOTAL                             |                            | 54 10 0 |
| Cash in Hand b. fwd from old book |                            | 26 3 5  |

EXPENSES:

| DATE | DESCRIPTION OF EXPENSE | AMOUNT   |
|------|------------------------|----------|
|      | TRANSPORT.             | £14 10 0 |
|      | POSTAGE STAMPS.        | 0 5 0    |
|      | HAMILTONS.             | 20 10 0  |
|      | PETER PELL.            | 0 12 0   |
|      | ACCESSORIES.           | 5 19 6   |
|      | GROUP PAY.             | 6 0 0    |
|      | Hired in Vocalists.    | 3 0 0    |
|      | TOTAL                  | 50 16 6  |
|      | Manages Petrol         | 1 10 0   |
|      | total.                 | 52 6 6   |

Cash in Hand £2 4 0  
+ 26 3 5  
Total Cash in Hand £28 7 5

Apparently the first night the guys wore those suits the crowd rushed forward towards the stage in a mass;  
"It was really quite scary" says Roland, but also, grinning (an electrical engineering apprentice in white winkle pickers, guitar hitched high, facing up the hysterical mosh)  
"It doesn't get any better than that" he said.



ONE AND SIXPENCE FOR A PLECTRUM (allegedly tortoiseshell)

With brolly and hope, I was filming John and Roland on a wet Friday morning, standing in front of where the Rink ballroom used to be. Gradually we were moving further and further down the road (literally and metaphorically as it turned out) because the patch of grass, weeds and daisies most people assumed was the site of the Rink was, historically speaking, slightly askew. It's interesting in that even such a simple fact; a 'fact' that was taken for granted by most I have met (the majority of whom went to the Rink many times) turns out to need tweaking. We were in the process of mentally moving the building from the nice neat space I thought it inhabited, to slightly further down the road towards the football ground. Not a massive move admittedly, but one that intrigues me.

One of the thrusts of my piece is how stories are told and re-told, and in the process get re-invented. I have always been aware that this piece is a re-invention on my part anyway...so to have to conceptually shift the literal space that is my theme is a fine example of myth making at work. I had had nagging doubts from the first time I visited the site. Wandering around the grassland it just didn't seem as wide as I first imagined it should be. But I convinced myself it was just an illusion, that if the area was instead no longer open space but occupied by a building, then once inside that space I would realise it's actual largess. So I thought myself out of the doubt. Some time later I received a letter which referred to the Rink now being occupied by the football ground ticket office. 'Yes I know what she means' I thought 'but I think she's just got her bearing's slightly off'. Turns out that lady is most certainly right.

Standing with John and Roland they recount having a friend who lived in one of the houses that still overlook the grass - she was able to watch the crowds form on dance nights and he is sure there was open space where people would mill around...and yes Roland vividly remembers where the fire exit was. Being onstage, he was well placed to see the bouncers as they unceremoniously hurled certain unruly unwanted head first out of the fire exit onto the grass; so there had to be open space where I had imagined the building stood. And yes the football ground wouldn't have had a car park or a ticket office there, so said space must have been what the ballroom inhabited. A simple shift but one which acts as a great big reminder that even the most basic facts are often not facts at all.

I am interested to take the guys around town. We stand by the junction where Roland's house used to be. It's all very anonymous now; featureless office buildings and scrub land. Around here were rows and rows of terraces; it used to be buzzing I'm told...all the way down to Lynne street where the tailor's shop stood. Four red suits made to measure. Here the suits were born. Bright red in a grey world.







## BLOW UP

I have the management thumbs up to hang out with the Manfreds before their gig at the Sage in Gateshead, and to film our chat for the project. They represent one aspect of what the Rink became; a venue for passing stars on their way to 60s fame. It must have been interesting times. You had the likes of Manfred Mann singing 5,4,3,2,1 - already the theme tune for Ready! Steady! Go! - breezing through the town and making the girls scream...whilst the next night the same crowd might well be trotting round the floor in a much more sedate and orderly fashion. For a while the two worlds coexisted rather than collided.

For me it will be a strange experience to interview them as I remember watching them on our two channel black and white tele when I was but a wee snip. They were in the first ever pile of 45s that my sister and I got as a joint Christmas present, along with an olive green Dansette record player. Surely they are not real people? And if they are, why was the band named after the keyboard player and not the singer?

I would have been nine years old. The record was *Do Wah Diddy Diddy*. It spent two weeks at number one in the UK that year and the same in the U.S. I can remember complaining about the random record choices my parents had made, though I don't remember which records I disliked. Gene Pitney's maybe. I do however remember loving the Manfred Mann single...that opening line; Paul Jones out of nothing; *"There she was just a walking down the street singing..."* ...and BANG into the song.

My interview (for want of a better word) will focus on what they might collectively be able to bring to bear to make that creased black and white Rink photo come alive. They might not remember anything; maybe it was all a blur, but I'm sure they will have a really interesting perspective. I'm less interested in the obvious facts and dates; more smells, atmosphere, illusion, the dressing rooms, the sounds, the anecdotes, the screams, the flat tyres, first impressions, reflections, dance lessons, clothes shops, shifting amps, the price of stamps...

When they played on the three foot high Rink stage they couldn't have known what lay in store. I wonder if they knew they were inventing something. I wonder if they were aware they were part of a demolition crew as well, sweeping away the post war dance bands, or if the excitement of the new was their primary drive.







*'...onward, onward  
rode the six hundred...'*

## READY...STEADY...GO...

The day (last Thursday) finally came for my interview with them at the Sage Gateshead. I arrived with three sheets of A4 peppered with meaningful questions, designed to sound sort of 'general interest' but slanted in a way that they might illicit less stock answers than a more conventional journalistic approach.

Stuck in traffic on the Quayside, my cameraman and I arrived at the Sage just in time. No probs getting through the stage door and then, scarily quickly, we are in the wings watching the guys sound check. No screaming girls, just a pervading air of calm.

A dressing room was offered as a potential interview space, but was a bit claustrophobic, with poor light, so I asked if there was any chance we could use the stage instead. There we were in the middle of the stage in Hall One and I was clutching my questions, a rifle mic and the collection of photos I had brought along as prompts.

I had worried I might go blank but the adrenalin pumped in and away we went. I was massively helped by the fact that the three original Manfreds I had asked to interview, Paul Jones, Tom McGuinness and Mike Hugg were such genuinely nice guys. No pretensions, happy to engage and very generous with their time.

Those typed questions didn't all get asked of course. In fact I rarely looked at the sheets of paper as the conversation flowed. My interview technique is, shall we say, *'unorthodox'*, as I tend to ramble a bit before getting to the crux of the question.

Tom talked about a time when it seemed anything and everything was possible. A time of full employment when you could pack in one job on a Friday and start another on the Monday. Paul didn't think the pop thing would last - no one did really.

I showed them the Rink photograph - their younger selves in short depth of field fuzz. They didn't remember the exact gig but knew when it was. Tiny speakers, tiny amps, sore throats and demented audiences. Paul quizzed Mike about the *"dreadful snakeskin waistcoats"* and Tom recalled the revolving stages where, literally, a pop group might replace a big band on stage on the same bill. A visual metaphor in motion.

My thoughts for the video are that they are to be brought into focus by this encounter. Pulled from their reticulated past in the Rink photo, and thrust into the space where memory and recall inform the present. It is quite apt that the 60s Antonioni film *'Blow-Up'* uses a similar device.







## MR MOLE...

...is his real name. When I first spoke to Lenny, over a year ago, I was under the impression it was ‘Moule’... which would indicate its French roots, however although those roots definitely exist it turned out his name is actually spelt ‘Mole’

With Lenny it took a while, but then a major theme emerged from what I filmed which now seems like a *‘drrrr how come you didn’t see that before’* thing. He talks about the life he always wanted, to be a market gardener; to work outside in the fresh air. The irony emerges that he was called up during the war to be a *‘Bevin Boy’* working underground in the mines. Not to make a bad joke out of it...but you can’t help thinking that a name like Mole is just too serendipitous for such an occupation.

His house is a treasure trove of things collected over the years; to the unfamiliar eye arranged in a somewhat haphazard way. No doubt this is not the case and I’m sure Lenny knows exactly where everything is. At one point during our chat his bird clock chirps in. It didn’t occur to me at the time, but on trawling through the material it stands out as a brief *‘NOW’* moment; less about recall and more about reaction. It’s funny and Lenny smiles.

Birds seem appropriate to his story. His love of the outdoors and the more functional metaphor of a canary in a coalmine fit perfectly. I have made the plastic bird trill act as a background metronome through this piece, to mark time in a hopefully poignant way.

He wanted to emigrate to Canada *“but of course when the war broke out that stopped it all”*. He ran his own successful market gardening business, *“even employed two blokes...I was doing champion. But with the bad winter of nineteen forty seven - I had no income coming in, couldn’t work you see”*. He spent the last thirty pounds on getting married, out of the one hundred and thirty he had saved as a deposit on a bit of land - and promptly went bust.

He was one of many who met his wife at the Rink. *“I’ll meet you under the clock”* they would say.

Making these pieces I am acutely aware that they have to be snatches, an essence of a situation. Seen in the gallery context they will loop and compete with each other on the various monitors. I want viewers to be able to dip in and out of these worlds, taking away with them singular impressions but also an appreciation of lives running in parallel.

Lenny Mole...From Darkness into Light.







As a child, living in Leeds was my roots, my normality; our little house in Horsforth. Hartlepool was my Narnia.

Except I was never inclined to go into the wardrobe until now...

...and now I have all these things I want to bring back.

## SUNDAY HOPPING

Now that is what I call cold; just hovering around the freezing mark, the wind had the sea crashing and rearing like a Perfect Storm. Poor Erin...I had arranged to film her in Hartlepool over the weekend and we lucked out with the weather. Well lucked out in terms of my hand nearly froze off and she, being just a small person, was none too pleased about hanging around staring at seascapes and industrial landscapes. I tried my best to minimise her exposure to the cold; parked the car close; only got her out when I was all set up; but it is probably only something you could ask a relative to do (with the promise of a present afterwards). The sea really was amazing though, all churning and dangerous looking. Timeless really.

Luckily one of our locations was inside the shopping centre where Marion's house once stood. Unluckily Erin trapped her fingers in the car door as we parked up. For a moment it looked like a trip to A and E would cut the shoot short. Luckily it wasn't as bad as it first seemed. We cajoled her into the shopping centre and pretty soon she was happily spinning around the concourse to my direction (after a protracted episode with security. I had got advance permission to film but let me tell you; those shops are VERY well guarded and nobody had told security we were coming). A bizarre Sunday perhaps, but one of the final elements in this project. I wanted my Marion doll to go on a little trip, with the assistance of a new generation.

Last week I went back to Hartlepool to show some of the retirement village residents my videos. I have had a few requests for copies, which is interesting in its own right. This isn't exactly social history in the telling, but I will give those who took part a copy of the complete piece if they want one. I was chatting to a gentleman I hadn't met before as the videos played and I offered explanations. Turns out he was a singer at the Rink Ballroom and a veritable mine of info that would have been useful to me previously. He is interested and polite, but in a way that I can tell he wants to be the one who has all the stories, and the fact that I now know quite a breadth of stuff about the Rink is perhaps unsettling (annoying?) for him, as he is used to being the font of information. It is only after an hour of sitting '*watching*' that he tells me he is blind.

His reading of the piece must be so very different from mine.

It is at this juncture that I am glad I have my ACE.

*"I would be interested to get your opinion of my song"* I say

*"I wrote it in the style of the period and I wonder if you think it fits?"*

His demeanor changes markedly as he listens.

*"That is actually really good"* he says, *"well done"*

Now in my book, that is definitely a result.







## DIG DEEP FOR VICTORY

Hartlepool is only a small place but it's very odd. The more I find out the more complicated it seems to get. My little *'dancehall on some grass next to the football ground'* has invisible threads that connect into the fabric of the community. It's any place I guess; look closely enough and you see more detail.

Funny; before I started this project I had begun working with animated fractals, mainly because they intrigue me as a visual example of never ending detail and complexity. It seems you can keep going inward forever. Look out into the sky and the universe similarly goes on forever...well apparently not...there was a BIG BANG! But now that theory is being de-bunked and we have potentially billions of other universes out there. So potentially there is no end. No end to the end.

Tomorrow morning I head back down the A19 to Hartlepool to run through the final arrangement for my big band song with the arranger. It still seems a little bizarre even to me that I have pursued this particular line, especially since it has taken so long to get this element together. I am clear now though as to how I see it fitting in.

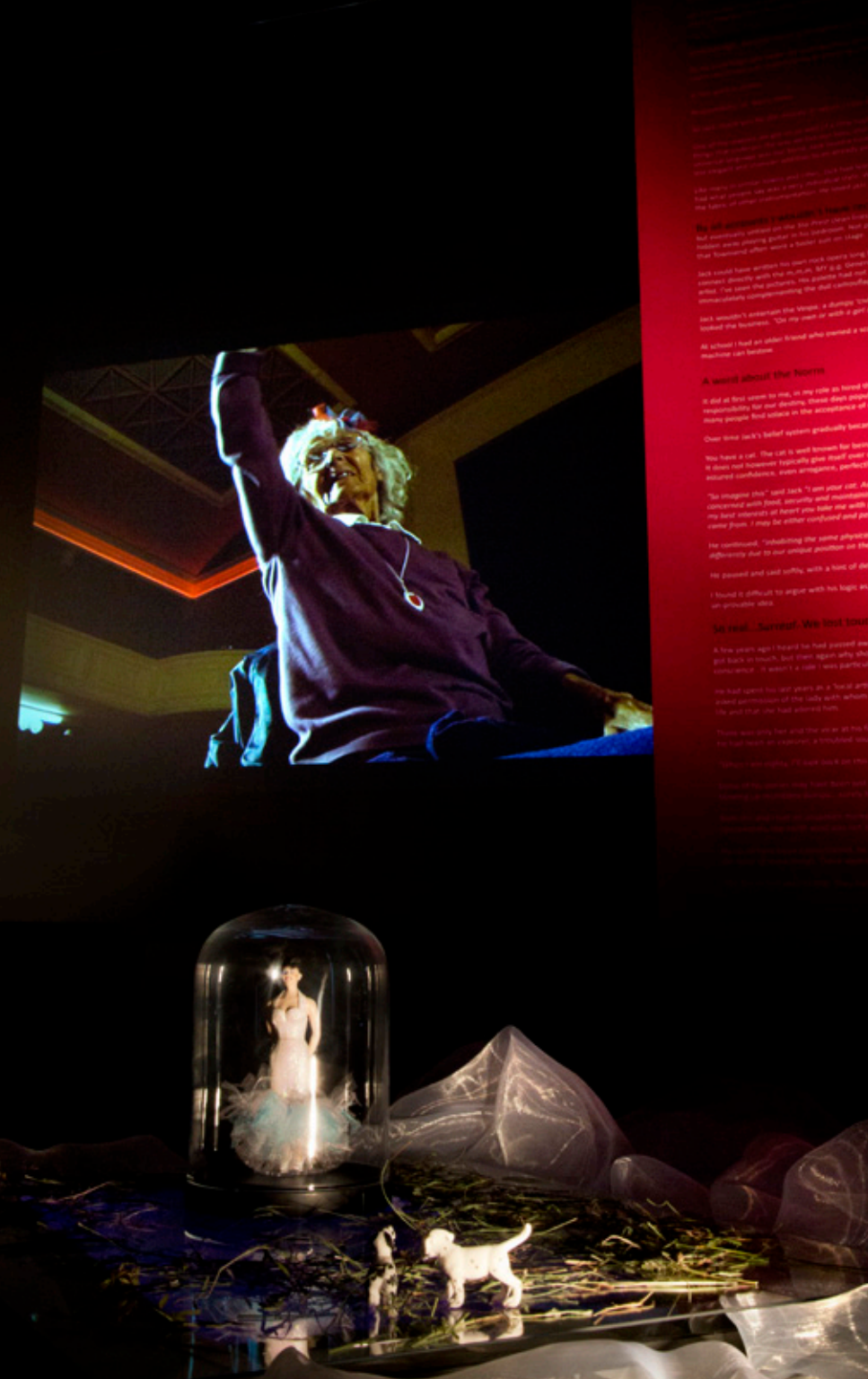
In essence this song is the gateway to a narrative which allows me to explore wider issues in the whole piece. It's a prop really I suppose...but one that has not been easily achieved. Having said that I'm very happy to be questioning my own definitions of what *'ART'* is. This aspect has the added bonus that it involves quite a range of people too, from musicians to performers and then through to audiences. I'm hoping, albeit naïvely perhaps, that it will become a bit of a legacy for the piece after my Hartlepool show is over. Something that will be played and remembered. For me it's kind of interesting that my agenda is perhaps not what the average punter might appreciate, but that doesn't matter in this context. It has a dual function, and those functions can be independent of each other.

I had a dream (yes I really did have a dream) and there were small jewel-like people dancing across a shiny polished surface. In my dream I watched this scene with a sense of amazement. I then realised the people, whoever they were, were speaking a language I didn't understand. And then it dawned on me; it was pure sound; vowels and consonants, but not actual language. It made sense to my unconscious, and it also makes sense to me now.

It was one of those rare occurrences where a dream can actually inform the waking world.







Soprano Dawn Furness sews coal into organza and prepares to sing the song

## JACK BRUNEL AND THE SONG ‘Our Three Shilling Affair’

Working as an art therapist in a psychiatric hospital in the north of England was not what I’d imagined I would be doing, but here I met Jack Brunel. An ex-music teacher, Jack would often come to my art sessions to make real the charcoal dramas he re-worked with smudges and rubber.

Having played professionally, Jack had an enthusiasm for opera, and in particular Wagner’s ‘Ring Cycle’. It suited his brooding disposition. We discussed the finer points of how Jack’s life was controlled by Norns; those female beings who, according to Norse mythology, rule the destiny of gods and men. Despite this, he regarded himself as an average Northerner, with perhaps a little too much Viking in his blood, that was all. His medical diagnosis was irrelevant.

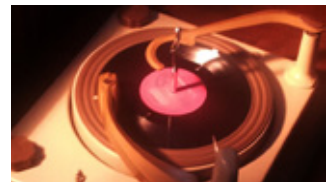
He scolded me for my indifference to the tempestuous storms and huge choral swathes of the Ring Cycle; he championed Wagner’s overpowering sense of the EPIC and indulged the darkness of the ancients. Something of the insular nature of his birthplace resonated within him.

*“Hartlepool is a forgotten place”* he said  
*“The end of the earth to some; a protective womb to others.”*  
*“In need of a future and not just a past.”*

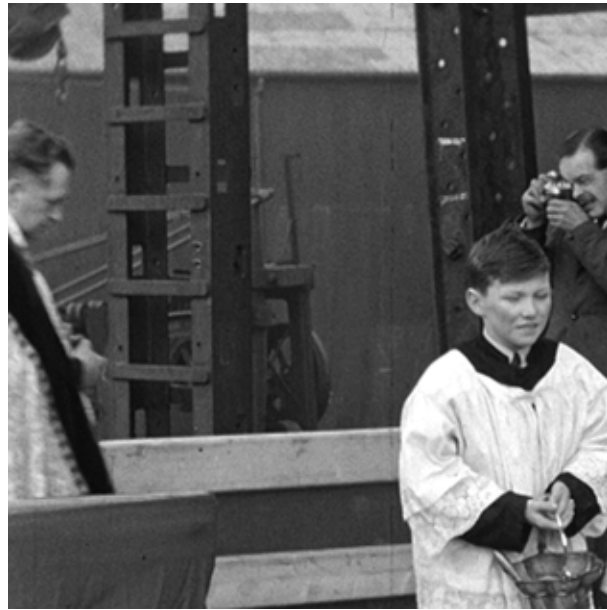
Jack was of the opinion that a benevolent Norn was needed to navigate a fruitful direction. We both agreed that anyway, the idea of progress was a debatable one. One man’s enlightened development was another man’s spoiling. ‘Progress’ being synonymous with expansion we knew to be a suspect idea perpetuated by those who already had the most. ‘Efficiency’ was a meaningless term brandished by scoundrels.

I knew of Hartlepool. We have family connections. For me as a child, it was like a mythical kingdom; a fine line illustration, engraved with archaic symbolism. Now that I’ve seen the place, paced out the place, I still find myself no clearer as to where it sits in the world. Rather oddly, familiarity has not led to clarity.

It wasn’t a direct part of my childhood as I never lived in Hartlepool, despite that first birthday photo. I am held by my father. He stares out on the Seaton Carew sea front - just a pushchair’s push down the promenade from Hartlepool town and I am - well - distracted, apparently trying to pull my sister’s hair. This small sepia print is part of my received memory, like a book read early and now half remembered. I know what was ‘then’ only from the photo, not from actuality. Mystique layered upon misunderstanding is my inevitable construction of those days.







*The auteur vs the wisdom of crowds*

Jack I got to know well; as well as you can whilst trying to maintain the patient/practitioner *‘professional’* divide. I wasn’t cut out to be a therapist, I knew that really. I enjoyed his stories too much, and he had lots of them.

Amongst the trove of mystery we dug through, we excavated Ridley Scott’s first film short *‘Boy and Bicycle’*. An evocative pedal through the town, along the coast and a couple of miles on to Seaton Carew, it pervades a sense of melancholy and other-worldliness. Jack considered it a fitting portrait of Hartlepool. I offered up that it was a film from no place in particular. That it was really a poem about time in a land that time had properly forgotten all about.

Later we re-traced the route Tony (Ridley’s brother) cycled on that bike but the sheds on the beach were no more. A similar sweet shop was still there though, as sleepy and unattended as in a fairytale.

*“A secret world”* said Jack  
*“don’t tell anyone about it, least of all southerners.”*

I pointed out that we’re all south of somewhere, but he was having none of it.

We talked about the Queen’s Rink Ballroom (not featured in Scott’s film) and how in the early days it had been a roller rink. Older residents I’ve talked to since can still remember skating around it as children. Some recall the gondolas that no doubt the more sedate were pushed around in. I imagine ladies with hats and stout men with gout; confident brats laughing as they zigzag like hazardous scribbles in front and behind .

I joked about the *‘Rink Cycle’*. I thought about how dancers drifted round and round that space over the decades and how history has moved on leaving traces of the dance behind for those who have a mind to see.

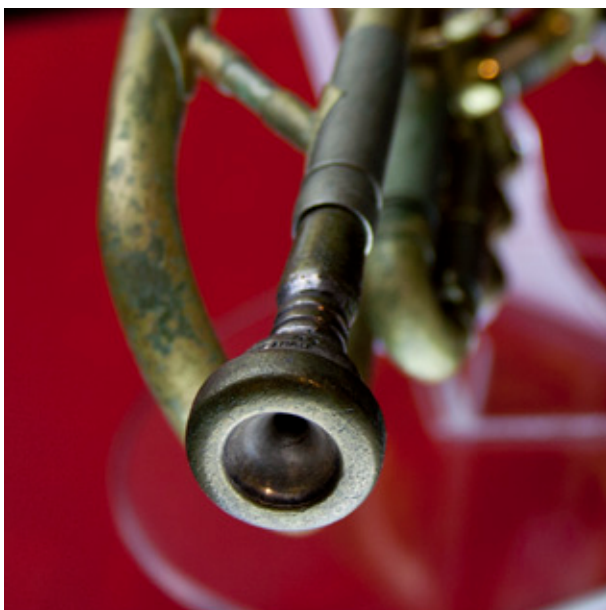
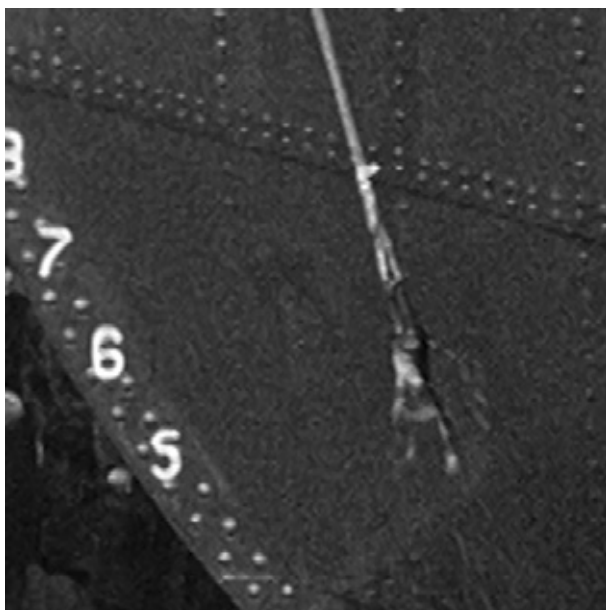
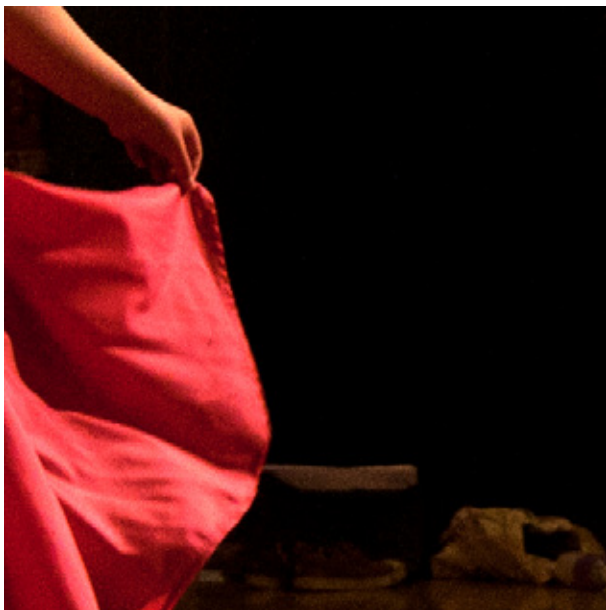
I didn’t know what that meant, I just thought about it.

We played with the words.

The Rink Cycle.







Now Jack was forever humming tunes in the art room. Turpentine and tunes.

Some of these I recognised, but often he'd appear to be improvising, taking themes from one place and reforming them into something else. One day he might drive me crazy humming some ditty over and over again and then the next day it would be gone - only to re-appear days later as something else. An echo of its former self.

*"The Norns"* he would mutter *"the Norns"*.

Inevitably, one of those melodies stuck. It stuck in a way that I thought I'd forgotten it, but all these years later it was still there. Those of you who untangle melodies, be it in your heads, at the piano or whilst sleeping, will understand the doubt of authorship. I have on occasion dreamt a unique melody, only to find on waking that it's already a well known tune.

Other times a theme has come so easily that I've questioned its originality yet, despite digging, have found no other source for it.

Of course Jack may be a thief. He was certainly a thief of hearts. If he did appropriate this tune then I'm dealing in counterfeit goods, but further to any other claim, I must give him his credit. I did dream it, but later I realised its source. Consequently, the melody line for *'Our Three Shilling Affair'* must be credited to Jack Brunel.

His trumpet, his lips stretched tight, his lungs injecting his ballooning cheeks, his ear for a line, all unknowingly inspired the genesis of my ditty.

To my knowledge Jack never did write anything down; he wasn't a man concerned with posterity. What Jack did he tended to do in the moment. Jack wasn't much concerned with responsibility to anything in particular. Believing his fate to be willed by the Norns, gave him a particular, contradictory, license to roam.

A free spirit in chains. Responsibility nil, Norns three.

So Jack...thank you for the melody.

In return I have delivered you posterity.







The gob stopper's stupidly glad dad  
the liquorice sticks and ice-cream  
and it's no fault of his  
that the sherbet's a-fizz  
or of hers for this comical scene  
Though the sports mixture's  
still tired out dad  
the imperial mints are serene  
for tonight it's declared  
not the Lords nor the Lairds  
but the Poor Bens  
shall dance with the Queen!

**We lost touch**

A few years ago I heard he'd passed away.

He had in fact only been living fifty or so miles down the coast in a small forgotten seaside village. He hadn't got back in touch, but then again why should he? In reality I was never a close friend, rather a combination of sometime support system and reluctant conscience. It wasn't a role I particularly cherished and, if I held a mirror up to him, it can't always have been a settling experience.

His last years were spent as a *'local artist'*. Painting predictable scenes, mostly of coastal bliss. People liked them. Jack was popular. Before writing this piece I asked permission of the lady with whom he saw out his last years to make public my musical credit to him. She told me they had been the happiest days of her life and that she had adored him.

There was only her and the vicar at his funeral and by the grave, overlooking the shore from the cliff top she recounted how Jack's eulogy was blown out to sea. He had been an explorer, a troubled soul and a renaissance man who had found rest. He had requested this quote from Scott's film to be read to the wind;

*"When I am eighty, I'll look back on this day, this very minute, and remember that I said I would...and it'll all be like yesterday"*

Some of his stories may have been just that.

I had acted puzzled when Jack's partner told me of his World War Two espionage exploits. Parachuted behind enemy lines and blowing up munitions dumps...surely he'd have been too young? I wasn't sure he could speak French? Didn't his older brother do something like that?

Both she and I had an unspoken moment. Neither of us was about to deliver another version of events. There was nothing to gain from it. Historical co-conspirators, the north wind was not about to contradict us.

He could have been a local legend; he could have composed his own opera...or even played his trumpet in a dance band at the Queen's Rink Ballroom. As it turned out he did none of those things. There were other plans. The Norns had seen to that.

They had dealt Jack a different hand.







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“He used to lift his shirt up and he had MILD and BITTER tattooed under his nipples. God bless Ernie...he’s no longer with us...”

I was thinking - so what if we don’t actually pass through time but time passes through us?

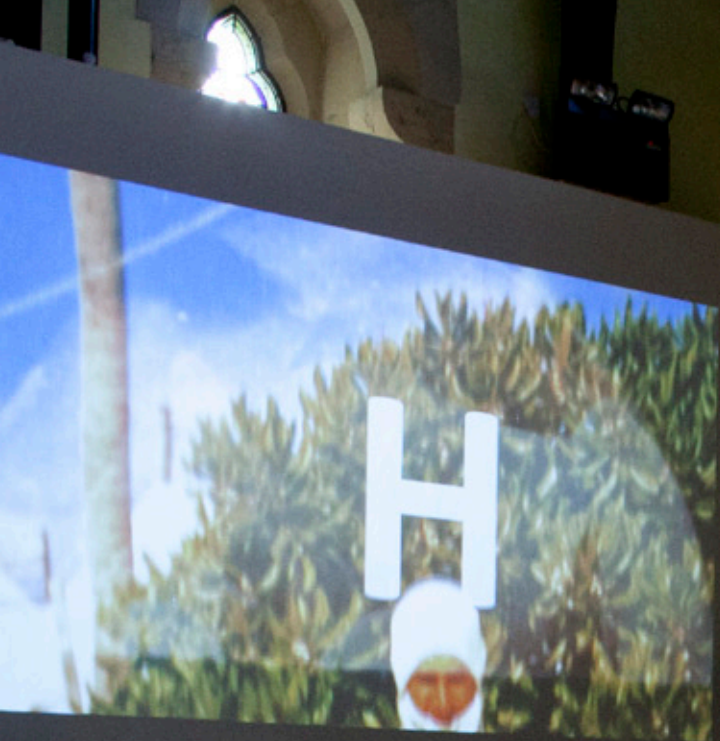
Each one of us a projector, rather than emulsified on film going through the gate?

Like Jack Torrance says in The Shining: *“Mr. Grady, you WERE the caretaker here”*

To which Delbert Grady replies: *“I’m sorry to differ with you sir, but YOU are the caretaker. You’ve always been the caretaker. I should know sir - I’ve always been here”.*

PRESENTLY WE WILL PRESENT THE PRESENT AS A PRESENT TO THOSE PRESENT





You can perhaps look for too many points of reference in a piece; still it's interesting, to me at least, that the Rink Ballroom was open for exactly the same amount of years as I have been on this planet. Without a physical presence, it sustains through the people who passed through it, and takes its place in a wider world context. It represents one life and many lives. It is a long time and it is no time at all.

It began life as a roller rink for pleasant Sunday excursions and local pageants, a place for Victorian families to loosen up a bit. Pretty soon it was billeting first world war soldiers and the skaters were soon up to their knees in Belgian mud and futility. Bit of a break for general societal re-ordering and the demise of the servant class. Votes for all but no real change in the Great British class structure. Then another World War; the disillusioned now given a more noble cause to fight for. You really would be hacked off though if you had been unlucky enough to have to fight in both of them. How easy us baby boomers have had it in that respect.

Moving swiftly on, post war you actually get a Health Service, a dwindling empire and a little hope on the horizon for better days ahead (even though the majority are still in comparative post war poverty). You make it through the 50s into a generational revolution where all previous values are turned on their head and for a brief moment love and peace prevail as a plausible concept at least. You have to say that's quite an accelerated burst of history going on there. From servant to soldier to supposed master of your own destiny.

By comparison what has taken place in my lifetime? On the surface technological development has been exponential. We Brits have been blessed with avoiding compulsory war. You can of course still follow it as a career route. We have seen the rise of consumerism as god, and the idea that year on year growth is the only possible model for mankind; so we have obligingly consumed as much as we can. I was privileged to come from a back street in Leeds, but then go to sixth form and art college without too much pressure to conform to previous employment or obvious class restrictions. I did my own thing. I am a product of relative societal affluence and freedom. Even when I hadn't a bean to my name I felt positive about the future. That is a safety net of sorts.

As far as I can see the biggest change in my lifetime has been the explosion of information and the challenge of what to do with it all. We exploded a communications bomb and got buried in data fallout. Our ability to evolve as a bunch of people who can all get on together doesn't seem to be getting anywhere faster though. We just have more and more background noise. *Jaw, jaw* is only any use if you speak the same language. We are still somewhat in need of metaphysical interpreters.

So I look at the sad black and white photo of the Rink Ballroom with its windows boarded up. It's difficult to appreciate the journey it has been on. I talk to the people who made the building come alive and I am impressed by the diversity of their lives; but it is imagination powered by patchy documentation from earlier times that puts it into a fresh context. It may be annoying that early BBC Television broadcast tapes were typically erased for re-use but, seen another way, that lack of total rewind allows other forms of reconstruction that can be as compelling.

This piece is about how a grain of sand can make a pearl; about making magic from the not obviously magic. It requires that you see it through both a macro and wide angle lens. My own life seems to have been uneventful in comparison, but maybe future generations will be amazed by the fundamental shifts in world order and perception my generation has also (albeit grudgingly) had to adapt to.

[www.neilarmstrong.me](http://www.neilarmstrong.me)

[neil@neilarmstrong.me](mailto:neil@neilarmstrong.me)

twitter: NArmstrongArt