

# The Accidental Archivist



The quietly transformational 33 Arts Centre ran by registered charity Luton Community Arts Trust (LCAT) operated largely from its home on Guildford Street in Luton between 1975 to the Centre's closure in 2004. Set up by the 'Refleks'; a local group of artists in their mid to late twenties comprising of Linda Farrell, Martin Green, Phil Imber, Paul Jolly and Tim Powell - 33 Arts Centre contributed significantly to nurturing local and national creative talent across contemporary visual art, film, video, photography, theatre, stand up comedy and music through its free community arts projects, exhibitions, youth programme (SNAP) and accessible, multi-use facilities. These included; a theatre, a music recording studio, video editing suite, gallery, photography dark room, rehearsal spaces and vegetarian café.

More recently an ambitious Heritage Lottery funded archiving endeavour led by one of the organisations founders Paul Jolly is attempting to look back and collaboratively re-trace and preserve the centre's expansive, interdisciplinary output and understand the long-lasting impact of the organisation on the social and cultural life of those involved with a view to creating a formal archive. The project involves working with Norfolk Records Office and Bedfordshire Archives to restore and organise existing audio, music, film and photographic material as well as an oral histories campaign - featuring a programme of new interviews with a host of artists, musicians, audiences and recipients of the Trust's outreach activity.



At the point of 33 Arts Centre's inception – Luton was a rapidly expanding and ethnically diverse town. For 200 years Luton was the epicentre of ladies hat manufacturing – an industry built on the town's association with straw plaiting which was well established by the 17th century. The decline of Luton's straw hat industry in the 1870's was fuelled by the increased availability of imported cheaper plaits at which point local factories began to focus on the manufacture of ladies hats[1]. In 1905 Vauxhall Motors opened its factory in Luton. The arrival of its car manufacturing plant heralded a new era of industry for Luton and brought people from all over the world to the town. At its peak the factory employed 35,000 people and a significant proportion of Luton's population worked there, but by 1975 the UK and the town's labour market was experiencing economic challenges. A decline in traditional industries like manufacturing and mining were contributing to sustaining high levels of unemployment. In Luton workforce reductions and layoffs at the Vauxhall Motors plant had an impact on the town's economy and likely affected personal and local pride.

[1] 'The Hat Industry of Luton and its Buildings', Carmichael, K, McOmish, D & Grech, D [Historic England Online], 2013, Images credit: [Yorkshire Post](#) & [BBC News](#).



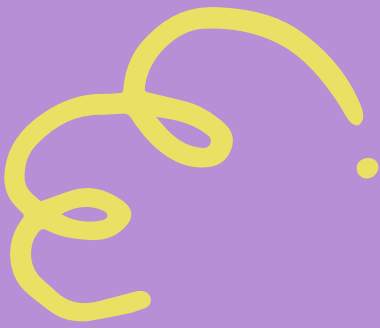
33 Arts Centre was established against the backdrop of this challenging economic climate. But the arts and cultural sector in the seventies was also experiencing the heyday of the British Community Arts Movement[2] – which emerged in the 1940’s as localised attempts by artists to democratise the production and engagement of arts and culture and participation beyond traditional venues. Across the country networks of artists were making collaborative work in their own contexts, affording agency to working class people, ‘challenging the distribution of cultural resources’ and, more profoundly ‘the legitimacy of the institutions claiming to judge what was artistically worthwhile’[3].

At the time Refleks were artists, musicians and theatre makers themselves, opportunistic and ambitious in equal measure they responded to both the ‘community demand for arts facilities’[4] as well as the swell in national self-organised activity with a vision for an accessible, welcoming and interdisciplinary arts organisation and opened the doors to 33 Arts Centre in their hometown in 1975. The grassroots organisation not only withstood but thrived for over three decades.

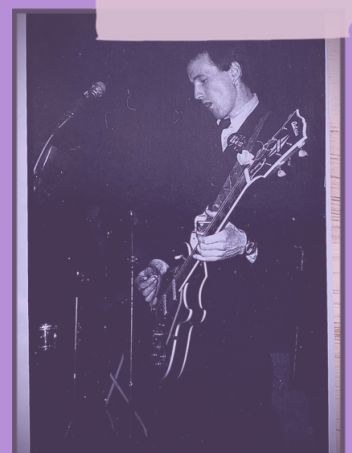
[2] ‘Art Term: Community Art’ [Tate Online], [www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/community-art](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/community-art) .

[3] ‘A (very short) history of the British Community Arts Movement’ [A Restless Art Online], 2018, <https://arestlessart.com/2018/03/08/a-very-short-history-of-the-british-community-arts-movement> .

[4] ‘Accidental Archivist Press Release’, Paul Jolly, 2022.



During its lifetime 33 Arts was able to operate with a high degree of autonomy and reactivity. The organisation was financially supported by a portfolio of funders; with an initial grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation and subsequent project specific funding from Eastern Arts, Arts Council, the local authority (Luton Council), European funders, Manpower Services and Channel 4. Despite the government facing competing budget priorities at the time, it's still easy to romanticise the financial provision and comparative abundance of resources available to DIY (do-it-yourself), grassroots and community artists in the 70's and 80's. Today, after 23 years of Conservative rule in the UK, the diversity of opportunity, accessibility and availability of arts and cultural public funding has been decimated. What remains is a piecemeal, prescriptive offering available only to art-workers privileged with the vernacular and courage to defend the validity of themselves, their communities and their work amidst the smoke and mirrors of funders shifting objectives.



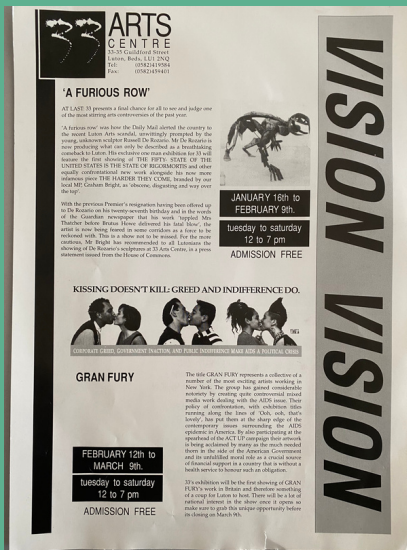


33

For 33 Arts and other grassroots organisations operating up until the turn of the century, a fertile funding landscape was key to creating the conditions for local arts leaders and change makers to galvanise truly diverse local voices on their own terms and nurture creative talent by facilitating open ended opportunities for self expression, creative exploration, education and imagination. Today, the 'Accidental Archivist' project is necessary to accurately research and understand the transformational effect on individuals of long term access to and agency within arts and cultural provision in Luton with a view to informing arts, cultural and civic organising, programming and local decision making today.



For the Heritage Lottery Fund Luton (HLF) Luton had been identified as 'An area of Focus'[5] both because the town scores highly on the 'Index of Multiple Deprivation'[6] and the town has historically received lower investment from the funder. The 'Accidental Archivist' proposal spoke to HLF's commitment to resourcing the UK's Heritage and within that their strategic priority of supporting the development of new and existing archives - so that they can tell the stories of the UK's places, people and cultures[7]. The HLF resists defining 'Heritage' and funds a broad remit of environmental and cultural projects. Nevertheless, popular and historical understandings of the term still allude to the social, religious and craftsmanship histories tied to historical objects and buildings of architectural significance.



- [5] 'Areas of Focus' [HLF Online], <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/our-work/areas-focus> .
- [6] 'English Indices of Multiple Deprivation' [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government], 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019> .
- [7] 'Our Work' [HLF Online], <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/our-work> .



The project's title 'Accidental Archivist' refers to the fact that neither Jolly or Farrell ever considered archiving their work and the centre's outputs at the time. It is of course often only with the benefit of hindsight that society can recognise the cultural and social significance of peripheral, grassroots counterculture. Today, the retrospective research and archiving approach being undertaken by the 'Accidental Archivist' project taps into a more contemporary understanding of Heritage preservation - one which necessarily recognises the significance of preserving the more intangible aspects of heritage such as personal memories and oral histories.

Similarly the project disrupts the formality of traditional archiving. Utilising both a dedicated Facebook page and a retail base in Luton, Jolly has been warmly inviting artists, musicians, friends and collaborators with any association to 33 Arts Centre to submit photos, print marketing ephemera, music, film footage and personal memories. Here the process of unearthing and revisiting the centre's history is open-ended, collaborative and reliant on the contributions of many. If the British Community Arts Movement and associated grassroots organising were about creating decentralised conditions to afford validity and agency to working class people exiled from positions of influence and power, then the project's localised, informal and collaborative approach to building a unique archive of 33 Art Centre's work does justice to the centre's original ethos which touched so many.



Writing and resource developed by Kerry Campbell as part of the 'Accidental Archivist' project.

[www.kerrycampbelltmt.com](http://www.kerrycampbelltmt.com)

The 'Accidental Archivist' project has been made possible with the generous support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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#### **Associated Resources:**

Dr Susan Croft has been supporting the Accidental Archivist project in a consultancy capacity. Her 'Unfinished Histories' project which is dedicated to documenting the history of alternative theatre in the 70's, 80's and 90's in Britain has been a great source of inspiration for Paul Jolly. You can find out more here: [www.unfinishedhistories.com](http://www.unfinishedhistories.com)

The 'Accidental Archivist' Facebook page which is dedicated to soliciting and sharing photos, music, lost tapes and memories from the community of artists and audiences who made 33 Arts Centre 'both special and unforgettable': [www.facebook.com/groups/1173609936550575](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1173609936550575)

For any further project enquiries please contact Paul Jolly on [info@33jazz.com](mailto:info@33jazz.com).

