

Folklore, Custom and Contemporary Legend - The CCL Research Group at SHU.

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Andrew Robinson – CCL at Creating Knowledge conference

SLIDE 1

Hi – I'm Andrew Robinson, Senior lecturer in Photography in the Department of Media Arts and Communication.

My photographic practice explores expressions of individual and communal identity through a visual anthropology of people, place, and trace using mainly still and moving imagery but also text, audio, and found materials.

SLIDE 2a

My interest in folklore began in the 1990s when I undertook a long-term photographic project documenting the many strange and unusual customs and traditions that still exist across the country from the Cheese Rolling at Coopers Hill in Gloucestershire to the Hallaton Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking in Leicestershire and the triannual maypole rising at Barwick in Elmet near Selby which you can see [here](#).

Slide 2b

I began the project in 35mm Black and White however I soon moved to medium format colour in order to avoid the historical connotations and emphasise the contemporary relevance of these events to the communities who observe them.

It was a discussion regarding this work that led to me working with David and Diane on the creation of the Centre for Contemporary Legend and this has become an increasingly fruitful area of research for me.

SLIDE 3

Currently I am revisiting a number of these customs to collect new material and to observe the changes that have occurred over the last 20 years.

This is me at this year's Whittlesea Straw Bear Parade – I'm the one on the far right...

Whilst providing strong links to the past, these customs and traditions are still very much contemporary events, developing and adapting from year to year, and play an important role in creating a sense of place and identity within the communities concerned.

SLIDE 4

My key interest is in studying the role photography plays in both documenting and communicating these events across different media and across time.

In recent years, as the United Kingdom moved towards devolution and Brexit there has been a resurgence of interest in folklore across popular culture, from contemporary art to fashion....

Slide 5

.... and music to television drama.

The chapter I contributed to Folklore and the Nation mentioned by Diane, examined the relationship between photographic surveys of calendar customs and attempts to define national identity at three key points in time.

SLIDE 6

Photography has long played an important role in the events and their recording. In visiting and photographing the customs one is not only part of the ritual of the event itself but also part the ritual of photographing the event, something shared with other photographers over more than 120 years.

Here we see photographs of the burning of the fool at Haxey Hood across the last 116 years from 1904 to my own colour images from 1997 and this January at the bottom right, where year after year photographers attempt to capture the same event, a process of ritual re-photography.

I presented a short paper on this topic at the Royal Photographic Society Research Day, held as SHU in November 2019 at which David also presented a paper on the mystery of the Cottingley Fairies, best known through the famous photographs that are now 100 years old.

SLIDE 7

Another important consideration which as a team we are interested in is the survival and development of such events within contemporary communities.

Castleton Garland for instance struggles to find sufficient dancers to accompany the Garland due to the small number of children now attending the local primary school even after opening up the dance, first to boys and then to children from nearby Hope.

Health and Safety considerations along with costs of organising and policing the events can be problematic for small local organisations.

Last year in exchange for a donation the organisers of the Castleton Garland paused the procession in the rain for 20 minutes allow French photographer Charles Fréger to take a portrait of the garland before the procession moved on.

Slide 8

This year the Garland procession was cancelled for the first time in more than 100 years due to Covid-19. Visitors were asked to stay away and indeed the town was deserted at the time the procession normally takes place however local residents marked the day with displays of wild flowers and oak leaves and shop keepers displayed photographs from previous years.

At 7:30 in the evening I happened upon a small unpublicised ceremony in the village square, attended by 12 to 15 people all observing social distancing, at which the chair of the garland committee placed a small garland of Oak leaves and peonies on the war memorial.

Slide 9

The Garland Website then carried a selection of photographs contributed by residents to mark the custom

Slide 10

Collecting plays an important role in our practice, from capturing online materials and commentary to location based fieldwork.

The archive is also important for folklore study. Here we are visiting the archive of John Widdowson, founder of CETEL in Edale.

Slide 11

In time we plan to create our own living archive of contemporary material and are currently developing a website alongside social media feeds through which we are sharing material.

Slide 12

The Covid-19 crisis has resulted in numerous communal and individual responses to the impact of virus and the resulting lockdown across the U.K. that have been widely shared and often copied in both the physical and online worlds.

Many of these activities have developed spontaneously as new customs and rituals, from the communal clapping on Thursday nights, to the display of rainbow drawings and teddy bears in front windows along with displays of scarecrows in gardens and beside roads.

As a team, we are interested in such community responses to the crisis and as part of this workshop we are asking you to share your own experiences and observations either via an online questionnaire or via our email address and we welcome comments in the Q&A following this talk.

To help with this I'd like to share some material that I've collected in my local neighbourhood during my daily walks.

Obviously rainbows have been seen in many places despite the almost complete absence of any rain for most of lockdown.

Slide 13

Scarecrows have also been popular in places – the Scarecrow on the left appeared on a main road near my house early on in lockdown in support of NHS keyworkers.

A week or so after being erected a Boris mask was attached and not long after graffiti was added to this. Two months later the figure is little faded and the mask is gone but the figure survives.

Slide 14

More recently local residents organised a scarecrow festival to give children something to do and to provide something to look at and explore on daily walks. Scarecrows have also been documented by David and Diane in and around Sheffield and the Peak District.

Slide 15

Curb Side Gifts have also been a common sight on streets across the country. A neighbour of mine has progressively emptied their garage week by week. A mixture of time to spare, far more people walking around the streets and the closure of charity shops and tips has led to fascinating offerings.

Slide 16

On one street nearby Fairy Doors appeared at the base of every tree and have survived now for nearly two months.

Slide 17

On another street, small inspirational quotes were pinned to every tree. Interestingly a resident on this street told me about the Fairy Doors on the other side of the valley however wasn't aware of the quotes on her own street.

Slide 18

In Buxton flowerpot figures appeared outside houses...

Slide 19

And a 'Covid-19 Snake' of painted stones gradually grew along the side of the Pavilion Gardens amassing more than 2000 pebbles. Similar snakes have appeared in other towns.

With the support of the research centre we have recently submitted a proposal for a Covid-19 related British Academy Grant to both collect and study such communal responses further, leading we hope, to a conference and related publications. We hope to hear by the end of the month if we've been successful.

Slide 20

Thank you for listening - I will now hand over to Sophie who will tell you about her PHD and interests.