PORTRAIT OF MIDDLETON : recording the households of Middleton in 2022

General Report

Portrait of Middleton, part of the Bateman bicentenary of Middleton and Smerrill, celebrated the parish in 2022 with photographs and stories of each of its households.

The project was funded by Middleton Village Hall, Derbyshire Aggregates, The Duke of Devonshire's Charitable Trust, the Lady Neville Charity and the Heritage Lottery Fund, to a total of £9302. It was devised and delivered by a team of five Middleton residents.

Sixty-six households took part in the project though two have still to complete. Four declined to take part. The photographs were professionally taken while members of each household contributed their stories, supported by a journalist and volunteer scribes. They wrote a total of 32,000 words. The images and stories were combined on watercolour paper banners and exhibited in the Middleton Village Hall for two weeks; 104 members of the village and 49 friends and relatives of the village attended, many returning several times. At the end of the exhibition, we packed the exhibition in a specially designed box a resource for future generations .

Additional activities supported by Portrait of Middleton included the production of leaflets and newsletters, creating new well dressing boards, providing children's workshops, and improving amenities in Middleton for residents and visitors.

Selection of the creatives

We advertised for photographers, a writer and box maker, but we were disappointed only to receive a few applications for each post and none for the box maker. However, we appointed two Sheffield photographers, Lucy Marriot and Jeremy Abrahams who were well experienced and qualified for the role, and Andrew McCloy, a local journalist and writer. We asked another of the applicants, Tony Fisher, a Derbyshire photographer, to document the Village Well Dressing and Village Market as part of the project. We contacted several local artisans directly, asking them to make the box; all declined so a member of the team fulfilled the commission.

Communication

We recognised that good communication would be essential to the delivery of Portrait of Middleton. The village already has good channels of the communication; a digital and paper newsletter, and a strong grapevine aided by many families that live across the village. But we also produced four Portrait of Middleton newsletters before the project began. These explained Portrait of Middleton, what it hoped to achieve and what would happen. Produced with images and text on a single sheet, these provided news about the project and covered different topics (photography, stories, permissions, etc). These were essential in engaging the village, and creating the understanding, goodwill and enthusiasm required for the successful delivery of the project.

Photography

The photography was planned to be completed by the end of July but both photographers had other commitments and in the event the photography continued into September. Early on it was easy to group 4, 5 and occasionally 6 households for each of the photographer's visits, but towards the end, with fewer households to photograph, this became difficult. The final two households were unavailable due to the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II the following day. We hope to capture these before the end of the year.

Lucy Marriot and Jeremy Abrahams used different media and approaches to their work. Lucy worked with a handheld 35mm camera, usually taking the final shot with film. Jeremy's approach was a more technical, digital one using a tripod and using a strong composition. Both photographers established good rapport with their subjects and this, as well as their approaches, is evident in the final images. It was good to have a contrast of styles and we were well pleased with the photographs produced. Had

there been sufficient applications, we might have stretched to three photographers for the work with households, but any more would have been unnecessary and trickier to manage.

Story collecting

The collecting, editing, and proofing the stories was one of the unexpected joys of Portrait of Middleton. About two thirds of the village households felt comfortable in writing their own accounts of their life in Middleton and just reading of their experiences was wonderful. Others asked for support, usually scribing, sometimes in structuring their stories. Journalist Andrew McCloy took the major role and was helped by mentoring duties of the team. We had originally planned to have a creative writer running writing workshops, but the option of the journalist was probably better. It was pleasing that some children contributed to their households' stories but a pity that many of the stories were dominated by one voice. The average length of stories was about 500 words and occasionally, with unresponsive Airbnbs, we borrowed their online advertising blurb for their text. Andrew and the team proofread all stories before publication.

For some, the story telling was a bit of a grind, but most commented how interesting it had been. For some it had been an opportunity to reflect on their life, not only in Middleton, and for others to make their statement to be passed onto the future. The activity undoubtably generated conversations within households and ultimately in the exhibition, conversations with others.

The collection of personal stories for the exhibition must be seen as a major success of the Portrait of Middleton; titled photographs would have fallen far short of our original goal.

Banners

Our plan was always to combine the photographs and stories on a sheet for each household and the format we choose was a split-down-the-middle A1 banner, stiff enough to hang without further support; we had calculated the narrow width of these banners was the best way to exhibit them in our village hall. Each banner contained the masthead, Portrait of Middleton above the photographic image, followed by a headline with the property name and occupants, and two columns text before a modest footer.

There was a disagreement between the team and the photographers over the layout and medium of banners. Jeremy's images were mostly landscape, Lucy's most portrait. We proposed cropping the images square and the use of watercolour paper for the final banners; Jeremy and Lucy objected to both. In both cases it was a difference of focus between the photographic image and the final exhibition banner. In the end we completed the banners on watercolour paper and ordered a set of 12" x 8" photographs on photographic paper, together with a smaller set of banners for each household.

In retrospect we should have saved time and goodwill by resolving these differences, setting the banner design and square image, before starting the project. Otherwise, the overall banner design and layout proved excellent. However, the colour quality of the images on the watercolour paper was variable and further efforts and skill would be required to get a totally satisfactory print quality across all the images. But photographic paper, glossy or semi matt, would not have been appropriate.

Exhibition

The exhibition was installed in the Village Hall. The banners were attached to a laminated wooden ellipse, fixed to the four walls of the hall, and spaced a 35mm intervals. This allowed all 64 banners to be spaced around the hall with doorways at either end, encompassing the visitors and all equally visible. We hung the banners neighbor to neighbor, as if the spectator travelled round the village. However had we hung the images in order of age we would have told of a life in Middleton, from a small child (we had no births in Middleton this year) to death (we had four deaths, including the unexpected death of team member Louise Toombs, in Middleton this year).

The exhibition was up from 19 November to 2 December (14 days). The first afternoon (Saturday) it was open in the afternoon for the residents of the village and on the second afternoon open to

residents, relatives, and friends of the village. On subsequent days it was accessible through hall keyholders to residents, relatives, and friends of the village.

Reception and response to the exhibition

The exhibition was attended by all but four of the permanent residents of the village; out of holiday season we didn't expect many of the owners of those cottages to attend. The exhibition was characterized by a high number of returns or long stays by visitors who wanted to read every one of the 64 banners and our flexible opening policy was validated by these extra visits. Many stayed an hour or more, reading the banners and talking with others. There was an intensity of reading and studying the banners that exceeded that of many professional exhibitions in galleries – it was a subject matter which really connected with those who visited the exhibition. Another feature of the visits was the impromptu conversations stimulated by a central table, chairs and copious tea, coffee and cakes.

Responses of residents and friends of Middleton was one of praise, surprise and enthusiasm for the exhibition's content and professionalism. Its impact was enormous: "It is astonishing in detail and of great interest" was typical of the comments. Just as rewarding was how much people learned not just about the village but the wider parish, "I know the parish but I know it better now" and "it showed me how much of Middleton and Smerrill lies beyond the village". There was lot of interest in the agricultural heritage that bought the outlying farms, originally part of the Middleton Estate, back into the village fold. For others it was an education: "The exhibition really explained many of the kinship links and how many have roots in the village"; "It was good to understand how people came into the village and why they choose to live here" and "I realized how much the village had changed over the past ten years." 0thers disagreed: "I don't think the village has changed much since I was ten." Perhaps most satisfying was the way it bought the community together; the circular layout of the exhibition, which placed neighbor next to neighbor, was praised, "everyone had equal value and it bought the whole parish together as one."

A reciprocal visit was made by Martha Jacko-Lawrence, who curated Sheffield Weston Park Museum's Bateman exhibition. She was impressed, not only by the quality and range of the work, but she remarked on the very high percentage of residents who had engaged in the project. The Duke of Devonshire, whose charity part funded Portrait of Middleton, has expressed interest in seeing the outcomes early in the New Year.

Information Leaflet

Information was a key to the delivery of the Portrait of Middleton project. Each year we develop new leaflets for the village to sell at the annual Village Market and the leaflet distribution board. This year we added a Bateman Trail leaflet and a new, re-designed, Sites of Meaning leaflet.

We produced 4 monthly newsletters to introduce residents to Portrait of Middleton and the activities it would involve. These were delivered to every household by hand and by email.

Heritage items and activities

Well dressing has been part of the Middleton calendar since 1977. This year, to help pass on well dressing skills, especially to younger generations, we built two new sets of boards for two other wells (taps) in the village. This was supported by a pizza and petals workshop for the village children which decorated the new boards for their inaugural display.

To enhance facilities for residents and visitors, we have continued to develop public garden and our picnic area. Portrait of Middleton allowed us to add four planters for growing herbs in the community herb garden.

Middleton regularly runs workshops and activities for village children. This year, as part of Portrait of Middleton and in addition to the well dressing workshops we ran a photographic workshop for children led by Lucy Marriott while we supported and welcomed children from the Youlgrave Primary School, to explore some of the archeological heritage of Middleton unearthed by Thomas Bateman.

A new information board was set up in the village square explaining the history and development of Middleton. We have re-processed, printed and framed a set of early twentieth century photographs of Middleton and its people that was one of the inspirations for our contemporary Portrait of Middleton.

Reflection & conclusion

Artistically the project worked well at a variety of levels; for the households, the creatives, the mentors (project team) besides the community as a whole.

For the households it was an opportunity to take stock of their life in Middleton. It was not an easy task for many, particularly those out of the habit of writing. But at least one member in most households made a significant effort, often supported by a scribe or the professional journalist, and many fascinating stories were told; life stories from some who grew up in the village, stories of converting buildings to homes, and tales told from a children's perspective of home and village life. Some were short but pertinent, others long and detailed, and most households contributed five hundred words or so. The banners will be reproduced, on a smaller scale as a record of the personal creative achievement

For the creative professionals this was not only time to earn money, but to become involved on the project and the village for the best part of the year. Many notable images were taken, and fascinating stories were scribed or recorded. Both photographers sought permission to use several of the images in future applications and mixed exhibitions. While there was some disagreement over the display of the images, we think they all understood how the exhibition was arranged and agreed that it was a creative and effective solution.

For the project team, this was meaty project to get engaged with, and achieve the satisfactions of a professional and important community outcome. It was an important role, getting the households interested, arranging the photographic sessions, encouraging and sometime scribing the story telling. We got to know everyone in the village, particularly important in these post Covid times, and were able to re-engage the children of the village in a variety of related workshops. It has taken 18 months from planning to completion, and an achievement we will look back on with pride while we are in the village.

But perhaps most satisfactory was the achievement of bringing the parish of Middleton and Smerrill, adults and children, long term residents and recent incomers, the village cottages and the outlying farms in the concluding exhibition. Achieving our vision of a "*Village united by its sense of place, past and purpose*"

Portrait of Middleton delivery

Delivery team: Louise Toombs, Mary Marsh, Dianne Jeremy, Paul Jeremy, Sallyann Carlin, Charles Monkhouse.

Photographers: Lucy Marriot, Jeremy Abrahams, Tony Fisher.

Writer: Andrew McCoy

Portrait of Middleton's original vision was a

Village united by its sense of place, past and purpose.

And its original aims were to

To bring the village together in post COVID in a reflection and celebration of who and what we are.

To create a portfolio of images and stories that leaves a snapshot of Middleton for future generations.

To acknowledge the role of the Bateman family in the development of the village and its impact on our lives.