

Blue Plaques of
Intangible Experiences
Dr Claire Barber

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Project Description

The portfolio presents examples of research designed to facilitate the empathetic imagination through stitched-based practice and communal making in an educational and community context. The process of social engagement is fundamental to the research. It is not just a means to an end but the non-material relationships are part of the journey through which positive and intangible experiences are explored. Much of the artwork is impermanent or given away, so the written articles and website document the process and capture it for the reader.



Research Aims & Objectives

Project Duration:

2014 – 2020

Funder:

£1395.8 School Research Funding to support travel costs and conference fee to present *Crafting the Community III* conference paper presentation Utah Valley University (2015).

Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences received £7,168 Arts Council National Lottery Project Grant (2018-2019) and £100 funds raised through donations at Bradford Soup hosted by InnChurches in partnership with Bradford Rotary Club.

£2967 School Research Funding International Conference Underwriting/ International networking to support international exhibition and workshop on the theme of *Humanitarian Handicrafts* held at the University of Huddersfield.

Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences: LWC received £3000 support from Arts Council England and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) to be developed at Wetlands Unravelling exhibition, London Wetlands Centre, Barnes, London (2020).

The single-authored essay *Stitch as a compassionate action* received £500 support from The Textile Study Group (2020).

Research Partners, consultants, collaborators:

Penny Macbeth - *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live*.

Penny Macbeth - *Craft in Unexpected Places*.

Rowan Bailey - *The Sleeping Bag Landscape*.

(My role was arrived at through a hands-on engagement with primary research methods compatible with developing a socially engaged project in the local community. The research was extended through Bailey's contribution and the discovery of a theoretical proposition for *The Sleeping Bag Project* as a 'travelling concept' (Bal, 2002).)

June Hill - *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* (writer and curator) with additional contributions from the textile artist Leigh Bowser.

Research Aims & Objectives:

- To develop strategies for social engagement practice through a stitch-based practice made possible in and through an ethics of care (building on earlier research in *The Sleeping Bag Project*).
- To use absorption in the activity of stitchery as a way to connect self with others, site and place.
- To highlight the positive aspects of living in a diverse community through exploring individual perceptions of neighbourliness and bringing people together in stitch-based activity (in the specific contexts of inner-city Bradford and the neighbourhood surrounding London Wetlands Centre).



Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences [socially engaged textiles]
Great Horton Village Hall, Bradford 16 March 2019.



Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences [socially engaged textiles], presented at The Storehouse and Great Horton Community Hall, Bradford 3 December 2018 - 24 April 2019.

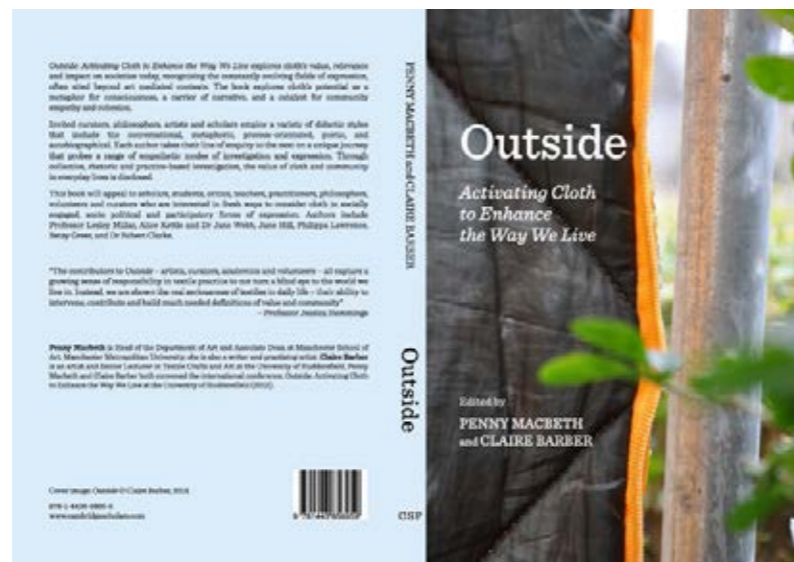


Barber, C., & Hill, J. (Curators). (2015). *Art in your heart* [Textile installation including *The Sleeping Bag Project*]. Exhibited at Forsters Deli and Bistro, Bradford 18 April 2015 - 5 May 2015.

Research Context

The investigation of the cultural traditions and vocabularies for contemporary socially engaged textiles has been a fundamental component of the book *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* (CSP 2014). It introduces a new vision for textiles as a catalyst for community cohesion examined through a collection of new writings to which I contributed, along with June Hill, Lesley Millar, Alice Kettle & Jane Webb, Philippa Lawrence, Robert Clarke, Penny Macbeth, Betsy Greer. I co-edited the book and co-convened an international conference that gave rise to it, while co-writing its introductory essay with Macbeth. The book provides a contribution to writing about textiles that considers cloths transformative potential as a socially engaged form of creative practice in facing contemporary social concerns. Jessica Hemmings in her review of the book states that:

The contributors to *Outside* – artists, curators, academics and volunteers – all capture a growing responsibility in textile practice to not turn a blind eye to the world we live in. Instead we are shown the real seriousness of textiles in daily life – their ability to intervene, contribute and build much needed definitions of value and community. (Hemmings cited in Barber & Macbeth [outside back cover], 2014)



Barber, C., & Macbeth, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Outside: Activating cloth to enhance the way we live*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars (103 pages).

A further article *Craft in unexpected places* was published in the scholarly peer-reviewed journal *Crafts Research* by Intellect, co-written with Macbeth and presented within the conference 'Transitions-Rethinking Textiles and Surfaces' (University of Huddersfield, 2014) to provide a re-examination of our book *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live*.

Both the *Outside* book and *Craft in unexpected places* journal paper capture examples of processes of creativity which explore how textiles can benefit individuals, communities and places. This is the context for the socially engaged artwork *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* that involves processes of interaction and exchange in the presentation of an active relationship with stitch that is both seen and unseen.

<https://blueplaquesofintangibleexperiences.com/>

Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences had its origins in an earlier collaborative project with the writer and curator June Hill, *The Sleeping Bag Project*, about which I subsequently co-wrote an article, included within this portfolio, *The Sleeping Bag Landscape*, (2015) in collaboration with Rowan Bailey, published in the scholarly peer-reviewed journal *Craft + Design Enquiry* special issue, 'Landscape, Place and Identity'. An invitation by The Textile Society to present the project at the Wellcome Trust in London (2015) was motivated by their interest in current textile research that addresses political issues.



Barber, C., & Bailey, R. (2015). *The sleeping bag landscape*. *Craft and Design Enquiry* (7) 49-69.



Barber, C., & Hill, J. (Curators). (2015). *Art in your heart* [Textile installation including *The Sleeping Bag Project*]. Exhibited at Forsters Deli and Bistro, Bradford 18 April 2015 – 5 May 2015.

My ongoing collaboration with June Hill since 2009, enabled the development of the socially engaged artwork *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* to instigate a purposeful, inclusive, creative and meaningfully socially engaged textile project. A process of monitoring, reflection and contextualisation will inform our longer-term aim of scaling-up *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* in the future. The project was presented at the conference, 'Humanitarian handicrafts: Materiality, development and fair trade, a re-evaluation', at the University of Huddersfield in June 2019. Our contribution to the conference was an opportunity to inform and be informed by what it means to be engaging with textile art to support vulnerable groups as part of the ongoing wider debate around art and ethical engagement.

A further invited essay, 'Stitch as a compassionate action: The War Widows' Quilt' (2020) (included in the *Insights* book edited by June Hill and Melanie Miller, published by The Textile Study Group) presents a personal investigation into *The War Widows' Quilt* by art duo Arthur & Martha as an opportunity to continue to learn from other artists' approaches to a socially engaged stitched-based practice, discussing the terms used to describe our work and the relevance in adopting traditional and non-traditional textile skills in experimental work created in participatory contexts.



Barber, C., & Hill, J. (Curators). (2019). *Humanitarian Handicrafts* [Textile installation including *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences*]. Holocaust Education and Learning Centre, University of Huddersfield 27 June 2019 – 4 July 2019.

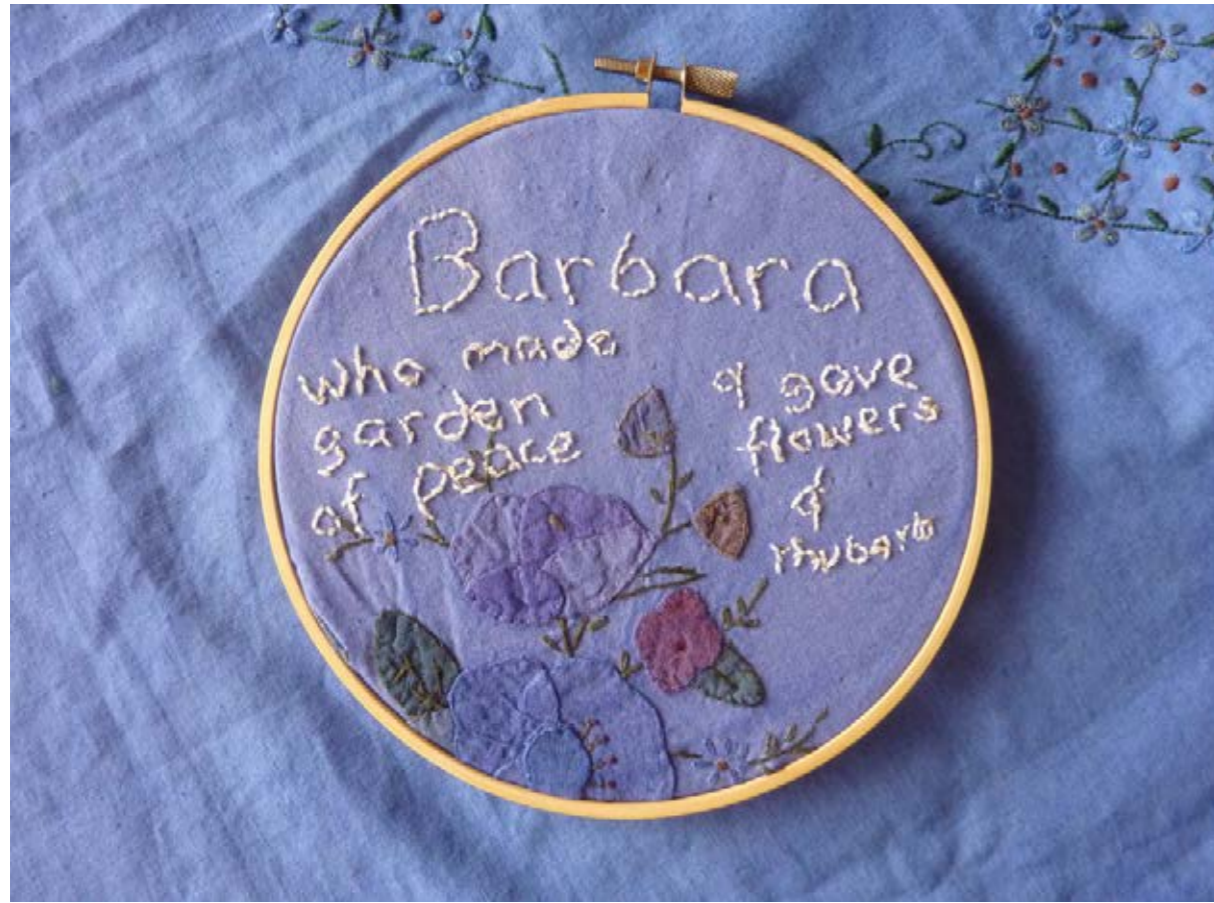
Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences is now being developed for a temporary exhibition (Spring/summer 2020) as a single authored engaged artwork in the outdoor environment of the London Wetland Centre (LWC), Barnes, London as part of *Wetlands Unravelling* a major temporary exhibition that aims to showcase extreme or conceptual craft in a site-specific context. Other exhibiting artists include Tania Kovats, Jonathon Wright and Anne Deeming. As the recipient of one of six LWC commissions I am supported through the *Unravelling* organisation to create a stitched-based intervention in a conservation environment. For more information refer to the project website:

<http://www.unravelling.org.uk/news.html>



Barber, C. (2020). Stitch as a compassionate action: The War Widows' Quilt. In J. Hill and M. Miller (Eds.), *Insights* (pp. 34-39). Great Britain: The Textile Study Group.

Research Methods & Process



Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences [socially engaged textiles] at The Storehouse, Bradford with The Thursday Group, 24 January 2019.

The organisation of the *Outside* book was the culmination of Macbeth's and my own experiences of working with community-led models of collaboration and social engagement in textiles practice first-hand, highlighting other creative ventures consistent with addressing cloth's value, relevance and impact on societies. Through the reflections presented by textile artists Alice Kettle and Philippa Lawrence it can be inferred that cloth is capable of embodying a site-specific quality that can be appreciated as an autonomous artwork while transforming people's appreciation of the site in which the work is placed. Millar and Macbeth examined the roles of artists who negotiate their creative journeys through ethical and social modes of textile production, while Hill explored humanitarian perspectives for textiles from her own experience as a curator and local volunteer. Further cultural and historical research

informing contemporary socially engaged practice is presented in the article *Craft in unexpected places* (Intellect 2015), co-written with Penny Macbeth as part of 'Craft and the handmade: Making the intangible visible' in *Craft Research*, Volume 6 Number 2 (Intellect 2015). A range of visual and textual narratives inform our perception of 'Craft in unexpected places' to bring visibility to a selection of craft interventions by making links between the wide-reaching possibilities of craft-based practices and their expressive potential within the social and political landscapes they inhabit. 'The Sleeping Bag Landscape' in 2015 co-written with Rowan Bailey examined my involvement in *The Sleeping Bag Project*, extending my research through a theoretical proposition for *The Sleeping Bag Project* as a 'travelling concept' (Bal, 2002) positioning the sleeping-bag as a place holder for different identities in its material resonance and use in landscapes as diverse as Mongolia and Antarctica and crafting an identity of place for the displaced of urban Bradford. Through small empathetic gestures the sleeping-bag becomes a way of putting oneself in the place of another as well as providing another with a warm, dry place to sleep.

Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences [socially engaged textiles] at The Storehouse, Bradford with The Thursday Group, 24 January 2019.



Such social engagement involving stitched based practice is continued in *Blue plaques of intangible experiences*, focusing on positive stories of communities in inner-city Bradford, specifically in light of their representation through media and public opinion. The project engages with two physical and transient communities: a community centre in Great Horton and a pay-as-you-feel café. The outcome was developed through two strands. One involved the creation of blue plaques of individually stitched cloth created during group workshops with the experienced textile artist Leigh Bowser. Distinct from the blue plaques heritage scheme which creates a

public emblem to notable people and the buildings in which they lived and worked, this is a stitched-based project as restorative activity, caring for the latent activities and actions of neighbourliness often hidden from view, revealed as palpable stitches into cloth. The second was open-ended, combining the absorption in the activity of stitchery as a way to connect self with others, site and place. Participants sit at blue fabric covered circular table tops offering shared spaces for stitchery to take place, bringing new significance to the cloth as democratic spaces for expression.

An exhibition disseminates these outcomes, employing June Hill's extensive curatorial experience. My ongoing collaboration with Hill (including the trialling of a University of Huddersfield socially engaged textile project at the Storehouse in 2017, alongside Hill's work in 2017-2018 with community members at Great Horton Village Hall) has helped to ascertain the relevance of *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* to the community that use each venue and the appropriateness of conducting workshops and co-creative activities within them. In total approximately 63 participants took part in our activity with some hoping to continue meeting after the project's completion in their own homes, many of whom had not engaged in such activity before and valued the wellbeing aspect of the project. An on-going display of the project at The Storehouse, a hub supporting vulnerable individuals and communities affected by poverty and discrimination by race or gender across Bradford, was agreed, at their request, from January 2019.

The project will support others at grassroots level in communities without arts training to create their own *Blue Plaques* workshops and share outcomes and resources with a wider community, including with ESOL groups at Community Works Foundation community centre in Bradford (beginning June 2019).

The extension of the *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* project at London Wetland Centre (LWC) involved a further development of its ideas when, on a visit to LWC, I was struck by a guide's personal experience that pointed to deeply felt emotions whilst the sonic movement of aeroplanes was a repetitive metronome to this discourse, and reminder of daily conflicts to a conservationist's vision where opposite ideals co-exist. The LWC is a person-made site, carefully managed to encourage selected species to thrive, but also a zone of conflict where battles such as native vs non-native, wild vs managed and change vs preservation are played out. These conflicts are not straightforward to resolve; but through offering shared spaces for stitchery to take place I aim to prompt creative, intellectual, physical, ethical and moral debate between participants.



Preliminary sampling: *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* (LWC) [Socially engaged textile intervention] as part of *Wetlands Unravelling*, London Wetland Centre, Barnes, London. Autumn 2020 – Spring 2021.



Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences [socially engaged textiles], presented at The Storehouse and Great Horton Community Hall, Bradford 3 December 2018 - 24 April 2019.

Research Outcomes & Dissemination

Academic Dissemination

Barber, C. (2014, November). *Air*. Conference paper presented at the 32nd meeting of The Textile Society, Wellcome Trust, London.

Barber, C., & Macbeth, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Outside: Activating cloth to enhance the way we live*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.

Barber, C., & Macbeth, P. (2014, November). *Craft in unexpected places*. Paper presented at Transition: Rethinking Textiles and Surfaces conference, University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

Barber, C., & Macbeth, P. (2015). Craft in unexpected places. *Craft Research*, 6(2), 275-285, doi: 10.1386/crre.6.2.275_1.

Barber, C. (2015, January). *Crafting the community III*. Conference paper presented at the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning conference, Utah Valley University, Orem, USA. Abstract retrieved from:
<https://www.hetl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/HETL-SoTE-Conference-Proceedings2015-V5.pdf>

Barber, C. (2015, October). Vanishing textile industries. Paper presented at *The Guild* symposium, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire.

Barber, C., & Bailey, R. (2015). The sleeping bag landscape. *Craft and Design Enquiry* (7) 49-69.

Barber, C. (2016). Crafting the community, *Journal of applied research in higher education*, Vol. 8 iss 1, pp.59-71. Permanent link to this document:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-09-2014-0073>

Barber, C. (2020). Stitch as a compassionate action: The War Widows' Quilt. In J. Hill and M. Miller (Eds.), *Insights* (pp. 34-39). Great Britain: The Textile Study Group.

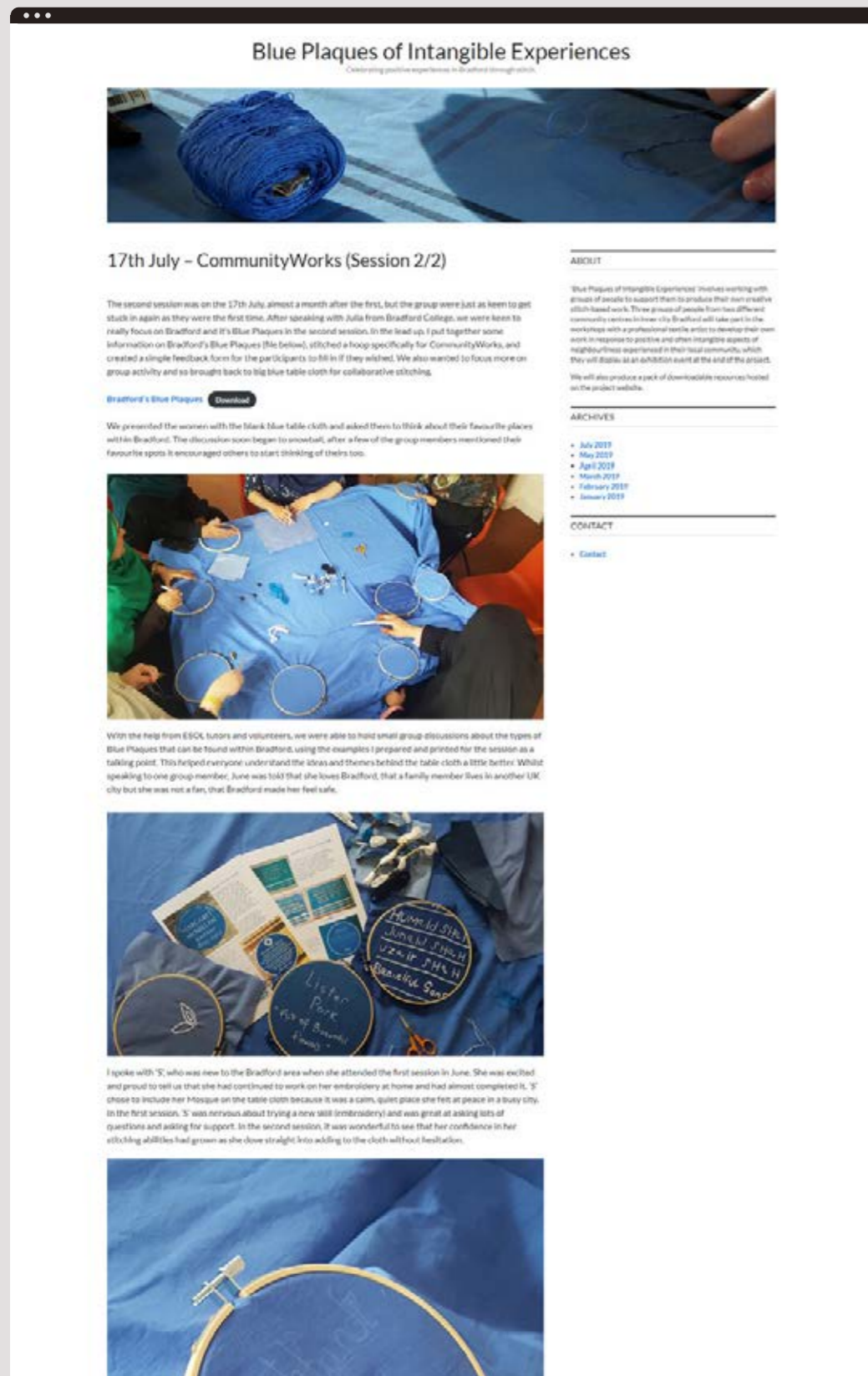
Public Dissemination

Barber, C., & Hill, J. (Curators). (2015). *Art in your heart* [Textile installation]. Exhibited at Forsters Deli and Bistro, Bradford 18 April 2015 – 5 May 2015.

Barber, C., Hill, J & Bowser, L. (2019). *Blue plaques of intangible experiences* [Socially engaged textiles]. Presented at The Storehouse and Great Horton Community Hall, Bradford 3 December 2018 - 24 April 2019. Retrieved from:
<https://blueplaquesofintangibleexperiences.com/>

Barber, C., & Hill, J. (Curators). (2019). *Humanitarian Handicrafts* [Textile art and crafts]. Exhibited at Holocaust Learning and Exhibition Centre, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield 27 June- 4 July 2019.

Barber, C. (2020). *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences (LWC)* [Socially engaged textile intervention]. Exhibited at Wetlands Unravelled, London Wetland Centre, Barnes, London autumn 2020 – Spring 2021. Retrieved from:
<http://www.unravelled.org.uk/news.html>



Screen shot of *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences* website <https://blueplaquesofintangibleexperiences.com/>

HUMANITARIAN HANDICRAFTS

TEXT BY CLAIRE BARBER AND JUNE HILL, CURATORS

This exhibition is about an exploration of processes of creativity and an innovative use of materials, both new and recycled, which explore how textiles can benefit individuals, communities and places. You will discover pieces by undergraduate and postgraduate students, international community activists, alongside artisanal pieces developed by experienced practitioners. Astonishing historic pieces from the Boer tweed collection and Huddersfield steers new meaning and significance to a visuality of humanitarian handicrafts to foreground contemporary works. Participant workshop-based sessions bring an open space of possibility in the making process facilitated by international artist Lise Bjorne Linnert.

Humanitarian Handicrafts as a mode of contemporary consumption is an ongoing concern, and is by no means certain to continue, but the pieces presented in this exhibition show an inspiring story and powerful statements of creative resilience that embrace the difficulties and joys of crafting in different places all over the world. Many of the works pursue expanded forms of humanitarian handicrafts in the careful arrangement of the individual stitches of a signature, the distinct threads used in a filling stitch, or the cut and stitched selvedge of a denim seam to denote a familiar road. In this way, human stories and characters are embedded into artisanal products and carry a trace of the makers evolving character. Some works question our

ideas about textiles to alter the way that we engage emotionally with different circumstances, particularly during periods of conflict and displacement. Others offer alternatives to poverty, substituting a beleaguered relationship to the status quo towards reassembled structures of peoples' lives through creative craft-based enterprise. Video works by Arthur + Martha and Susie Vickery explore the border territory between moving images and words, and how a reading of cloth can be simultaneously poetic, playful and political.

The exhibition has emerged from a tradition of textile craft activities that have been delivered to University of Huddersfield wider community since 2002 engendering collective and

interactive activities with local charities, galleries, transport systems and archives. We have found ourselves caught in this spirit of activity, working on a range of local ventures notably 'The Sleeping Bag Project' (2009-2013) a humanitarian venture reclaiming sleeping bags for homeless shelters and 'Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences' (2018-2019) an Arts Council England funded project involving groups of people in inner city Bradford in their own stitch-based work. We both contributed to the *Outside: Activating Cloth to Enhance the Way We Live* book (CSP 2014) exploring the value and seriousness of cloth and community in daily life.

With ideas afoot to preserve this knowledge and experience we felt

that an exhibition to promote conversation and criticality could be a way to continue. Recognising this we proceeded in applying (successfully) to URF funding and by establishing conversations with the Humanitarian Handicrafts organisers who generously helped shape this exhibition.

In the development of this exhibition we would like to provide a special thanks to Penny Macbeth for her ongoing support in sharing space and time to discuss participatory art and craft-based practice with us. We'd also like to recognise the generosity of the contributors to the exhibition in enabling items from all over the world to be presented on the University of Huddersfield campus for our mutual benefit.

Poster for *Humanitarian Handicrafts* [Textile installation including *Blue Plaques of Intangible Experiences*]. Holocaust Education and Learning Centre, University of Huddersfield 27 June 2019 - 4 July 2019.

Output Type:

Creative body of enquiry, original artistic works,
contribution to collaborative group exhibitions,
chapters in edited books, journal articles