

Civic Pride

My visit to Barnsley coincided with the premiere of a new film by Barnsley-born, Liverpool-based artist Sam Batley at the independent Parkway cinema. *The Town I Love So Well* is described as a love letter to this South Yorkshire town, focusing on the idiosyncrasies of its creative and cultural community. The work was commissioned by Barnsley Council as part of Storying Barnsley, a three-year Cultural Development Fund engagement programme supported by Arts Council England, which has designated Barnsley a 'priority place'. Batley has produced a delicately paced piece of filmmaking, balancing straightforward documentary techniques with an oddness and humour redolent of his broader practice encompassing photography, collage and poetry. The film features interviews with an assorted range of Barnsley characters who, in Batley's words, 'love loudly': visual artists, poets, community workers, choristers, volunteers, activists and cultural figures. Two things are evident in the film and reinforced elsewhere during my visit: that Barnsley's art scene, although small, is thriving, and that living and working in Barnsley, and the surrounding villages that make up the metropolitan borough, deeply informs and gives colour to the practices of many of the artists based there.

'I think the best way to describe my sense of pride for this place', says Darfield-born poet and broadcaster Ian McMillan in Batley's film, 'is that, when I'm not here, I feel diminished. I feel like I've got fewer dimensions. I feel like a cardboard cut-out of myself.' McMillan has enjoyed national success as a published poet, and as a presenter across BBC Radio's cultural programming, but has lived in and around Barnsley his whole life. Throughout his long career he has been a passionate advocate both for the broader appreciation of poetry, and for Yorkshire culture and dialect. He has been poet-in-residence at both the English National Opera, and Barnsley Football Club. His fierce pride is shared by graphic designer Craig Oldham, another contributor to the film, who sees his creative instincts as forged through the tinkering and improvisation of a pit village childhood where there was little to spare. He also acknowledges the sensual qualities of working-class life: 'I love fluoro; I love hand-drawn stuff; I love seeing things manifested by people who have no training. And that's got to come from walking through Barnsley Market.' Oldham's practice as a designer is socially engaged and research led, considering the visual culture of protest movements, and specifically the Miners' Strike. His book *In Loving Memory of Work*, a visual record of the strike and an exploration of the ways in which those involved designed and produced their own visual material is now in its third edition with Rough Trade Books. It presents a critical commentary on the banners, posters, badges, typography and photographic documentation that emerged during the strike, and celebrates the ways in which



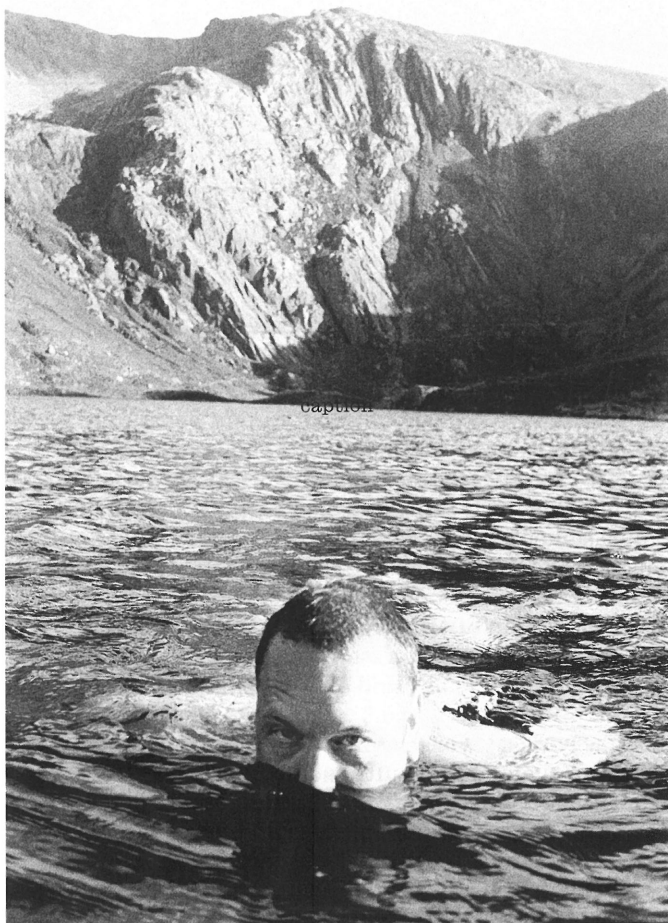
Sam Batley, *The Town I Love So Well*, 2025, film

working-class communities have employed creative practice to process their experiences and tell their own stories. The first, self-published edition of the book had a dustjacket printed with coal dust from the remaining mudstacks of Barnsley Main Colliery. Much of its archival material comes from the collections of the National Union of Mineworkers, headquartered in Barnsley. Proceeds from sales of the book are donated to the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign.

Younger artists working in Barnsley and featuring in the film, such as the multidisciplinary Ailish Treanor and fibre artist Eloise Clarkson, point to a renewed sense of confidence and conviction in Barnsley's creative community. 'People are less scared,' says Clarkson, but it is with an uncertainty in her voice that suggests that it still takes considerable effort to keep impostor syndrome at bay. It's interesting that both Treanor and Clarkson independently acknowledge the influence and tutelage of their grandmothers, who taught them creative skills such as knitting, sewing and tapestry. Like Oldham's publishing, it speaks to the ways in which creative practice is embedded within working-class life, as both a process of pleasure and of imaginative problem-solving. At the same time, the idea of being a 'professional' artist is often internalised as somehow pompous, aspirational, or above one's station; legitimised only, perhaps, through a university degree in a distant city.

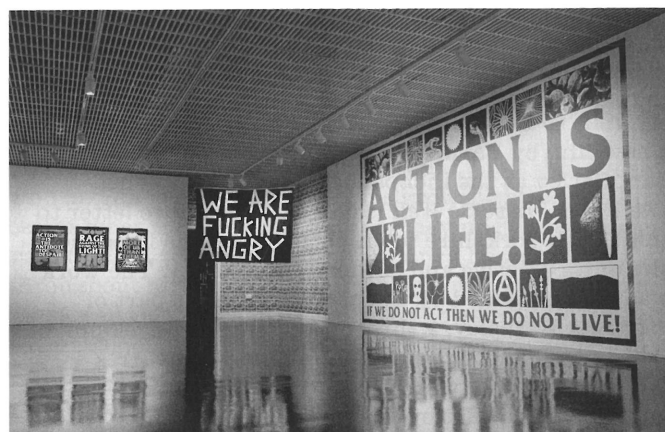
In marketing copy aimed at attracting investment to the town, Barnsley's location is feted: beside the M1, 15 miles north of Sheffield, 20 miles south of Leeds, Manchester just 50 miles west across the Pennines. This proximity also makes Barnsley easier to leave, and it seems that for many years that's what local artists and arts workers did, attracted to the established scenes of the northern cities, or even – god forbid – London. However, this trend seems to be diminishing. 'Artists making the decision to stay in Barnsley are making a deliberate political choice,' says Elizabeth Dickinson, curator at town centre cultural space Barnsley Civic. The Civic is clearly a focal point of the town's artistic energies; built in 1877 as the Barnsley Mechanics Institute and Public Hall, it was relaunched

This ambivalence, around class, tradition and masculinity, and around Barnsley's industrial heritage, gives Sam Batley and Sean O'Connell's work a contemporary relevance and compelling energy.



Sean O'Connell, *Sam Batley*, 2025

in 2009 as a theatre, contemporary art gallery and community hub. Treanor describes hanging around the Civic and being a nuisance until they eventually gave her a job; the gallery and its community have subsequently been significant in the development and refinement of her practice. Her large-scale solo exhibition, 'Uterior Motives', opened at the Civic in late 2024 alongside a suite of works by Georgia O'Keefe, and comprised sculpture and works on paper made in direct response to the work and writings of the artist. During my visit, the Civic was hosting the first institutional exhibition of the work of Cj Reay and Black Lodge Press, an autonomous, activist print project grounded in queer, anti-fascist and anarchist politics. Titled 'The Old World Is Behind You!' after a piece of graffiti seen on the streets of Paris in May 1968, the exhibition surveyed a decade of works on paper, zines and merchandise inspired by agitprop, protest banners, DIY record labels and radical counterculture. While the press's uncompromising slogans and distinctive typographic style are beginning to enter the mainstream (I've joked that the popularity of its 'Growing A Garden is a Beautiful and Radical Act' poster on middle-class kitchen walls makes it the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' of the mid 2020s liberal elite) the exhibition gave considerable space to Black Lodge's less politically palatable works, including those advocating for direct action, violent struggle and defunding the police. This felt courageous and welcome from the Civic, especially as Nigel Farage's Reform set its sights on former Labour strongholds in South Yorkshire. The exhibition also featured an open-access production



Black Lodge Press, *THE OLD WORLD IS BEHIND YOU!*, 2025, installation view, Barnsley Civic Centre

space with a supply of Black Lodge offcuts and test prints, plus magazines and other print media, alongside scissors, glue, and resources on zine-making and wheatpasting. Promoting Voltaire's assertion that 'Twenty-volume folios will never make a revolution', and instead it is the 'little pocket pamphlets that are to be feared', the exhibition reflects the healthy spirit of self-publishing notable in the town. The Civic permanently hosts the Barnsley Zine Library in its street-level community gallery, which features dozens of donated titles covering topics from queer punk, trans joy, ghost architecture, collaborative craft, pagan horror, and disabled people's contributions to the 19th century textile industry in Leeds. This dedication to community-led, co-authored, politicised and radical practices seems to set the Civic apart from so many other publicly funded, regional art centres, which are incentivised – by both tightening budgets and ACE's conservative drift – to play it safe.

Elsewhere in the town, a picture emerges of a tight-knit, mutually supportive scene working in close proximity. Batley's latest publication, featuring images of life in Barnsley sourced through open call, is hand bound with threads spun by Clarkson. It is designed by Spencer Hughes, a designer, visual artist and member of the arts collective Borough. Along with fellow members Jake Smith, a filmmaker and photographer, and Robert Cox, also a photographer, Borough is based in a studio in the centre of Barnsley and sees life in the town, and its surrounding hills and moors, as a defining characteristic of its collaborative output, which includes photo zines, artist books, exhibitions and workshops.

Photographer Sean O'Connell, whose work features on a huge street-facing display at the Library in the city centre Lightbox development, publishes under the moniker Broth Tarn, an in-joke term for something that's a bit shit, coupled with tarn, the common colloquial name for Barnsley. His coarsely-textured, hand-printed photographs map moments of tedium and transcendence against a backdrop of the town's terraces, backstreets and recs. The images deliver an effective counterpoint to the assuredness of Batley's film, which is almost uniformly joyful and laudatory. Barnsley feels buzzy at the moment, but it remains the 38th most deprived out of 317 local authorities in England. Around a quarter of its children live in poverty. The cradle-to-grave welfare and employment of the National Coal Board is a distant memory; online

retailer ASOS is now the area's biggest employer. While the town has struggled with poor and precarious employment prospects common to all deindustrialised areas, Barnsley is home to over 40,000 residents deemed 'economically inactive', largely due to long-term physical or mental ill health – significantly above the national average. Both Batley and O'Connell are in addiction recovery, and both have used their practice as a form of therapy. Their photographs and self-published books, like those produced by Borough, confront the reality of 21st century life on the South Yorkshire coalfield, but avoid the cynical romanticism that characterises so many photographic representations of post-industrial Northern Britain. This ambivalence, around class, tradition and masculinity, and around Barnsley's industrial heritage, gives the work a contemporary relevance and compelling energy.

For generations, there was a sense of inevitability to life in towns like Barnsley. After school, men followed their fathers, grandfathers and elder brothers down the pit. Women ran the households, and bore more miners. Those who could get into the grammar schools went on to university, and then to clerical jobs. Artists, if they wanted to take their work seriously, left. 'The miners' strike and the closure of the pits is like a big gong that got struck at the end of the 1980s, and it's still reverberating,' muses the endlessly quotable Ian McMillan in *The Town I Love So Well*. It is now 40 years since the strike ended and miners returned to the pits, with a growing resignation that the industry, and the way of life so tethered to it, would soon be gone. The recovery for towns like Barnsley, the need to forge an almost entirely new identity, has been long and painful. Even despite new investment, and a cleaned-up face in the form of a shiny town centre retail and leisure development called the Glass Works, intergenerational trauma remains. The town that produced Arthur Scargill couldn't possibly forgive, and refuses to forget.

Many artists still leave, although they don't go far – Batley splits his time between Barnsley and Liverpool, and Craig Oldham is in Manchester – but more and more are sticking around, sensing that Barnsley has something to offer beyond the availability of cheap space and modest pots of funding. My feeling is that this has something to do with, on the one hand, a deeply entrenched socialist and egalitarian politics shaped by generations of labour activism and established networks of mutual aid; despite the inroads made recently by divisive nationalist political figures, Barnsley people have an instinctive understanding of solidarity and shared struggle. On the other hand, it's plainly a place of poetry. As a practice of storytelling, memorialising, and pleasure, poetry drifts through its pubs and bingo halls, its community centres, in the call and response of its markets, and through *The Town I Love So Well*. It's there in the union banners inspired by Aesop's fables, in its colliery bands playing William Blake's *Jerusalem*, and now in the words and pictures of a young community of artists ready to set the scene for the next story to be told.

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Letter from Malta Set in Stone

Malta is a nation of seeming contradictions; robust faith, Catholics, Royalists, wild parties and LGBTQ+ bars and clubs. I visited during a perfect storm: the month-long Malta International Fireworks Festival – an atmosphere perhaps only comparable to a football tournament – made of explosions choreographed to techno beats and fire-breathing dancers. Malta was also possibly claiming its first ever Pope (Cardinal Mario Grech was a popular forerunner) and a Eurovision Song Contest win; the chorus to Miriana Conte's censored 'Serving Kant' was repeatedly sung during my trip – 'kant', by the way, means 'singing' in Maltese. The conservative makes way for the subversive.

Malta, Gozo and Comino form the Maltese archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, located between Tunis, Rome and Athens. The summer heat across the region is intense. The numerous local seafood dishes and sweet pastries offer a welcome distraction. Prickly pear cactuses line the roads on this small stretch of land – its expanse smaller than Scotland. Malta has a calm feeling that is entirely its own. While visiting the Ġgantija temples in Gozo, a UNESCO World Heritage site, I learn that survivors of the last Ice Age sailed here nearly 8,000 years ago. These were the first hunter-gatherers; evidence has only recently been unearthed of butchered Mesolithic birds and wild deer that didn't exist in the later Neolithic period. Experts had thought that early humans who used simple stone tools and antlers to cut and carve and chisel couldn't travel over such large bodies of water; now an updated history of the Mediterranean has been uncovered here in Malta.

These stories saturate the ochre landscape and are humbling. Rough gouges in Ġgantija's soft limestone altars depict the constellations. In the act of being able to touch such surfaces, a sense of the distance between then and now becomes less distinct, the human lifespan seemingly momentary. As I'm here to get a sense of the legacy of Valletta's 2018 European Capital of Culture (ECOC) win, Europe's flagship cultural programme, it is comforting to be grounded with this broader temporal perspective, and to consider the possibilities about what forms and customs culture takes.

The award promises much: my home city of Liverpool is often evidenced as a success story of ECOC's impacts, including a raised international profile, cash for colossal landscaping and groundwork projects, and thriving cultural tourism – a long-term overhaul that sparks confidence and ambition, but one that does not materialise in every winning city. As a critical 2020 report from John Ebejer, Karsten Xuereb and Marie Avellino (University of Malta) reminds us, for 20 years Malta used heritage to increase tourism, but Valletta needed regeneration. In 2024, Malta welcomed a record-breaking 3.56 million tourists, a 20% increase on previous years.

It never feels overcrowded here, but development is visible. The medieval and baroque Mdina citadel, which was founded by 12th-century knights – and unbelievably remains owned by the same families today – offers a panorama of one- and two-storey buildings in shades