

Feature

Enjoy a world of creativity in

Esther Lafferty

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THIS month the county blossoms with art as the Oxfordshire Artweeks festival sees about 500 venues inviting us in to enjoy paintings, photography, textile art, pottery, jewellery, sculpture and other art and crafts.

This week, the focus has been on southern Oxfordshire. Nestled along the Thames valley and the Ridgeway are art, craft and design in both intimate open-studio settings and large pop-up exhibitions – and we have two more days to explore them before the focus shifts to the north and west of the county.

Rachael Anders is a colour pencil artist in Didcot, who specialises in wildlife and birds, as well as taking pet portrait and floral commissions, often with an inbuilt narrative. Although a newcomer to the festival this year, opening her home studio to visitors, her kingfisher illustration was chosen to grace the cover of the Oxfordshire Artweeks festival guide.

“I always loved to draw as a child,” says Rachael. “I was enchanted by the classic Flower Fairy illustrations by Cicely Mary Barker, which were first published 100 years ago this year. I loved the detail and the colour, the way each fairy represented a flower and the whole narrative behind each picture.

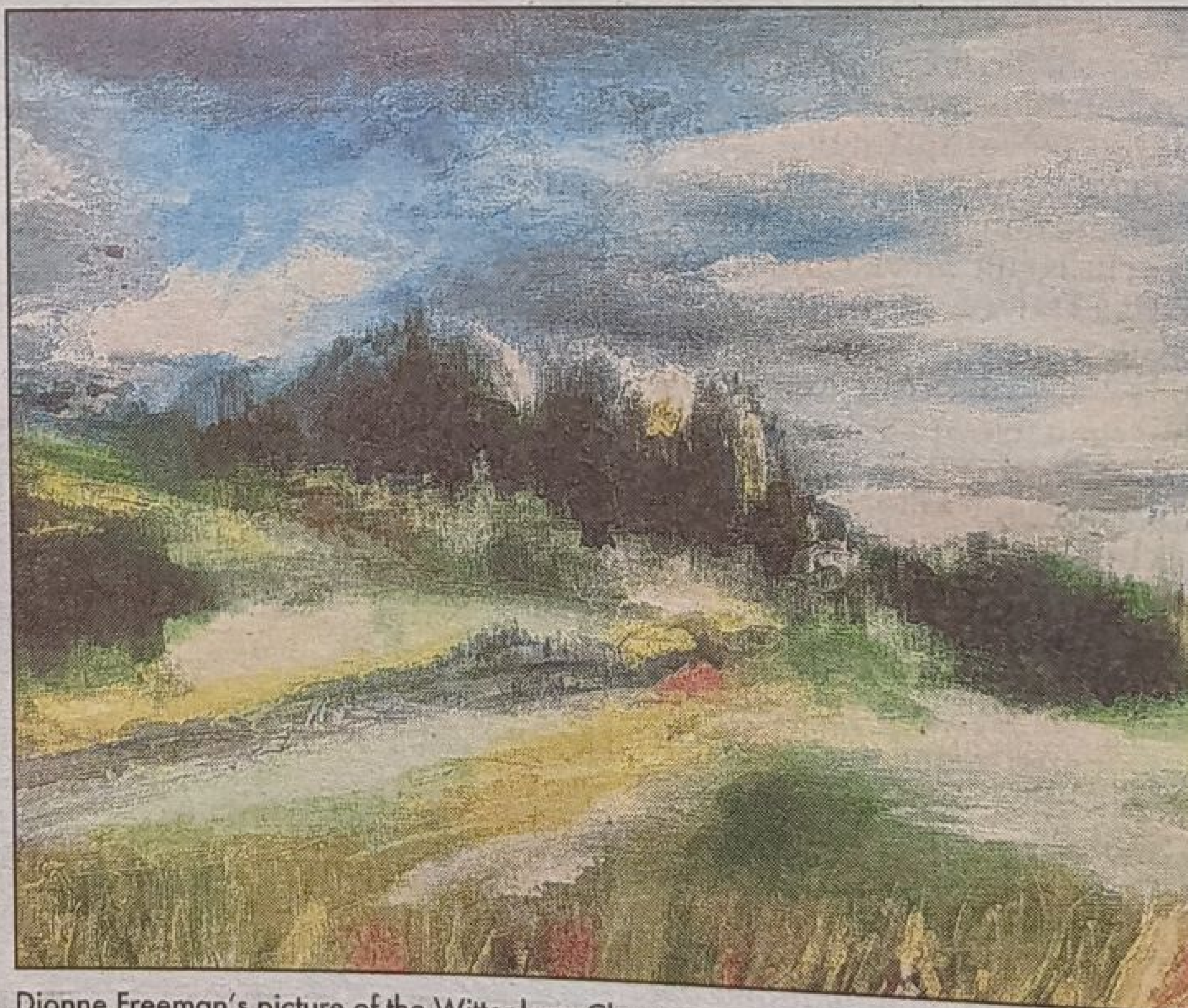
“Weirdly though I never took art at school. I remember the class being told to draw a bowl of fruit on a table and it seem interminably dull. It wasn’t seven years ago when I was randomly sketching the cat that my partner suggested that I should consider changing career and becoming an artist. I took an intensive course, trying my hand at many media, but I found I always came back to the natural world. I grew up in rural West Hanney so it’s drawing flowers and wildlife that I feel most at home.



Pieces by Charlotte Storrs



Kingfisher by Rachael Anders



Dionne Freeman’s picture of the Wittenham Clumps



The Thames from above by Hedley Thorne



Avian study by Rachel Anders

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the county's beautiful south

"I'm working on a bird series, including a kingfisher, a robin, a blue tit, a woodpecker and a greenfinch. There's something so special about birds; they're rather like the flower fairies of the natural world.

"There's so much I love about birds. Many birds are also so tiny, so delicate and yet so clever and they can be so colourful. I love that they sing beautifully evoking such feelings of spring and joy.

"We take it for granted but birdsong is such a treasure – a world without birdsong would be a much poorer place. But best of all about birds is that they can fly – that's the superpower I would choose if I could – I'd love to be able to see the world they way they do and to swoop above the landscape."

It's exactly these birds' eye views of the landscape that visitors to the Earth Trust Gallery in Little Wittenham can enjoy, with aerial views from a drone flown by photographer Hedley Thorne.

"It's intriguing when you see a familiar landscape from the air. If you live in south Oxfordshire, you'll be used to views of the iconic Wittenham Clumps because it is visible for miles around," says Hedley.

"However, it's rarely seen from above and seeing things from an alternative perspective, you see different patterns or shapes and it makes you think afresh about the ground beneath your feet. It's intoxicating."

He goes on: "Aerial photography has been used in archaeology for many decades.

"I was always fascinated by flight and the view from the sky," continues Hedley. "From the wide open wilderness of Wiltshire, across to the South Downs and the North Wessex Downs, close by, I feel that we are all responsible for embracing its past, enjoying its present and preserving its future. Well-loved local areas such as Wittenham Clumps, Uffington White Horse Hill, the Devil's Punchbowl and our own local area of Lowbury Hill, all conveniently strung along The Ridgeway, will never lose their haunting geometry. But I fear we are now at a time where

we need to be diligent about what is happening around us to protect and preserve their beauty. In this stressful world of industry, transport and construction, the presence of beautiful landscapes here in the South of England has never been more important than it is right now."

Alongside Hedley's photography, five other artists who are also inspired by and championing the natural environment are showing colourful expressionist paintings, wildlife photography and tactile ceramics, both wheel-thrown stoneware for the table, with akemia quinata vine handles by Charlotte Storrs and ethereal delicate and decorative vessels by Laura Murphy.

The collection includes a series of colourful and mysterious works by another Artweeks newcomer, Emma Williams who celebrates the artefacts and monuments created by the area's previous prehistoric inhabitants. Some of her pieces are made using a photographic process called sun prints (known as cyanotypes) which create intense blue images. These she has over-painted with real indigo pigment, coloured paints and forged chalk from the Ridgeway.

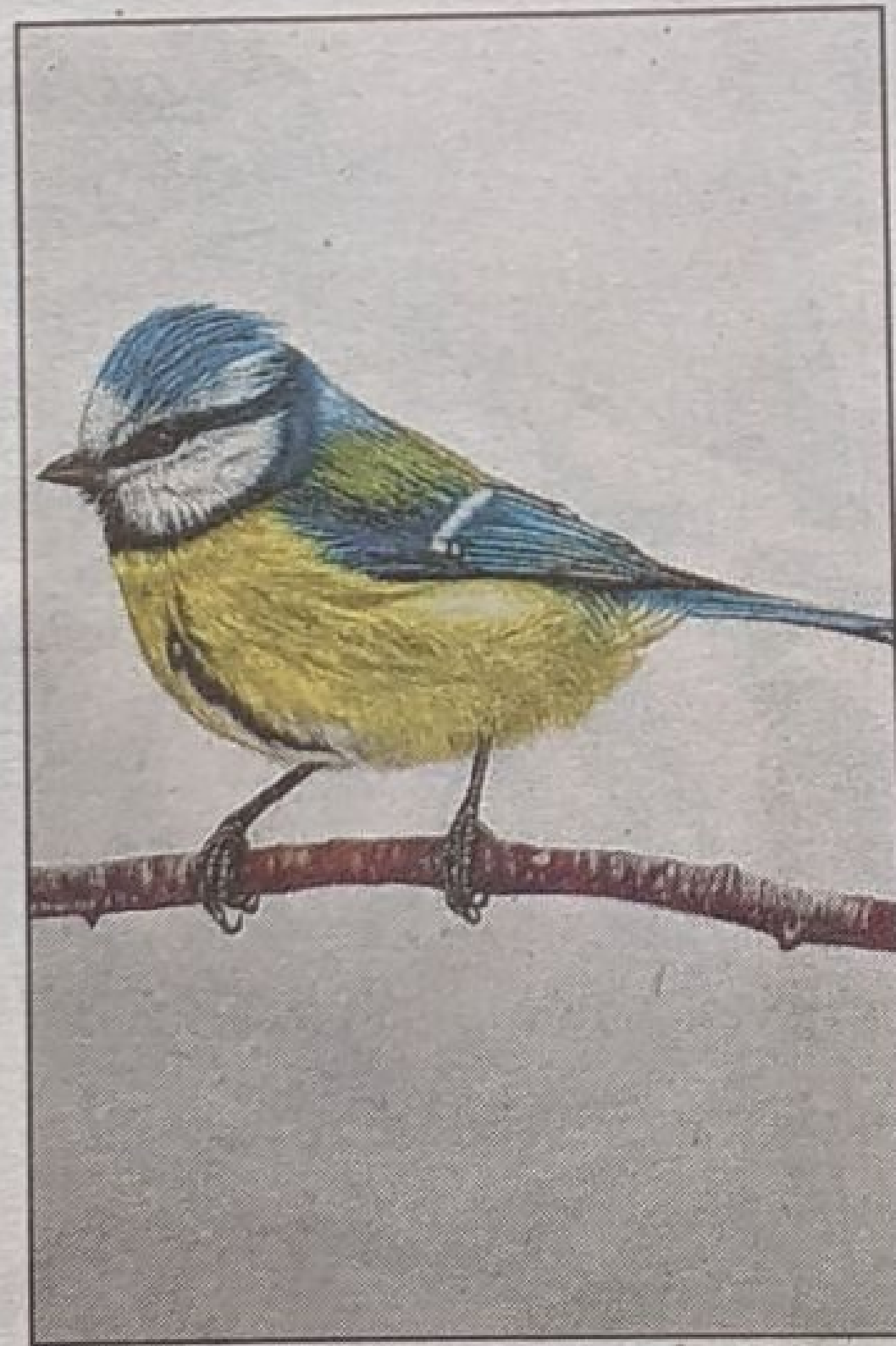
Following the festival art trail further through the Wittenhams, you'll find art on a theme of Synchronicity in a stunning barn gallery and orchard setting, discover colourful textiles and ceramics in a Mongolian Yurt at Haddon Acre, and take an icy journey through Svalbard in the Arctic Circle, Antarctica and Patagonia in South America through photographs and sketches of recent travels by neighbouring artist Jane Duff.

The Sylva Wood Centre is also throwing open its doors for Artweeks to celebrate all things wood, and an eclectic collection of paintings and bespoke furniture by many makers with marvellously different styles. Here too you'll even find beautiful handcrafted boats including a 25foot long electric punt, Voltaire, in mahogany and teak, that's perfect for a regal jaunt down the Thames.

•More on Oxfordshire Artweeks at artweeks.org



A stunning view of the Berkshire Downs by drone, captured by Hedley Thorne



Rachael Anders' blue tit



Ceramics by Charlotte Storrs and, right, Colin Henwood's electric punt, Voltaire

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