

What happened in Watlington over the summer of 2020?



Over the August bank holiday weekend, Watlington Artweeks presented an outdoor hidden art trail with celebrity support, an example of an Artweeks community coming together and thriving during the pandemic which resulted in an Oxfordshire Artweeks extravaganza

Abiding by strict Covid guidelines, **Watlington's Outdoor Hidden Art Trail** was a response created to celebrate the local community's support during our current crisis, explore how local artists responded to lockdown, and encourage residents to enjoy discovering hidden art around the town.

The Trail - based on Spheres – was inspired by the environmental challenges our World faces today and, of course, the ubiquitous virus. A group of local artists led by Jaine McCormack, Andrea Brewer and Jules Bishop came together with others to create outdoor Art from recycled, repurposed and found materials. The unconventional artworks had no intrinsic value and were placed in a variety of locations throughout the town. Made from waste plastic, discarded CDs, rusted metal, found items from the local countryside, and thousands of otherwise wasted Artweeks 2020 festival guides. The aim was to demonstrate that Art can be created from anything.

Watlington's artistic community also stayed connected during Lockdown through an inspiring **Back to our Roots** initiative – instigated by painter Frances Ackland-Snow. Local artists were encouraged to produce *miniatures* of the work they would have displayed during Artweeks in May, and these pieces were photographed each week – set in a secret location amongst the roots of a magnificent beech tree. More than 40 artists gradually contributed over 100 pieces as the weekly exhibition grew. The culmination of this creative journey was a video recording of the work incorporating a fairy tale called the "*Little Girl with No Voice*". The tale was read by Jeremy Irons, and an accompanying piece of poetry by Mary Oliver was recited by Sinead Cusack from the roots of the extended tree. The Fairy Tale was written by Frances Ackland-Snow as a tale with additional meaning and the short film was directed and produced by Nicola Schafer.

The film provided an atmospheric back drop to the re-creation of the **Back to our Roots** Exhibition in St Leonard's Church over the Bank Holiday weekend, along with audio recordings made in interviews with some of Watlington's artists.

Jeremy Irons commented on his experience of being involved: *"What a wonderful unravelling surprise to experience the "Back to our Roots" exhibition nestled in its original lockdown location in the woods on the outskirts of Watlington. The unexpectedness of it all was truly uplifting".*

With **Sinead Cusack** observing the beneficial therapy that these artistic initiatives had had during lockdown: *"The diversity and talent of Watlington always astonishes me. It was wonderful to see the miniature Art Exhibition being used as art therapy and as a way of keeping artists connected during lockdown, with contributions from 9 year olds to some over 80. Supporting creativity at any time is important but even more so during difficult times."*

All of the resulting miniature pieces of art were part of the display in St Leonard's Church and were donated by the artists for sale in support of the Prince's Trust and Riverside Counselling Service.

Jaine McCormack – Watlington Artweeks Coordinator and Artist stated that *"Although the May Oxfordshire Artweeks festival was forced on-line this year, our Artists were able to stay connected during lockdown, and we wanted to say thank you to the community. We hope that residents enjoyed discovering some amusing pieces of art around the town, as well as buying a piece of miniature art for a good cause. Watlington Artweeks 2020 would have been the biggest in Oxfordshire and we are looking forward to starting to plan an evolved Artweeks for 2021!"*

Watlington Art Community participates in **Watlington Artweeks** which is part of Oxfordshire ArtWeeks (www.artweeks.org) - the UK's oldest and biggest free open studios and pop up exhibitions for art. As an art community, the aim is to encourage artistic talent – whatever age, background, experience and interest level – throughout the year. The next Oxfordshire Artweeks festival will take place in May 2021.



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