

DRIFT

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TIDES OF CHANGE: ON THE RIVERBANKS OF NEWPORT

If you stand for a while on one of Newport's many bridges, you will see the flotsam and jetsam of modern day life being carried away out to sea by the river below. Stay a while longer and you will see what is then washed back in again.

To write about a river is to write about change. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact point of transition; it helps if you can observe the direction of its tide. The Usk, the river and focal point in many of these bodies of work, has its humble beginnings nestled deep up in Wales' Black Mountains. It's waters travels some 63 miles to reach the sea, some days looking brown and squalid, others quite serene depending on the hard light of day. We should always remember a river reaches both it's highest and lowest point each day.

Historically, the tidal reaches of the Usk have made the river attractive to colonies and trade for much of the last millennium, mostly because the river's deep and wide mouth has enabled major shipping vessels to travel significant distances upstream. The river itself used to service docks and landings for Paddle Steamers that fed right up into the heart of Newport's city centre – a history completely hidden from the redeveloped streets we walk today. To Newport, the river has brought people, tourists, wealth and tradable goods to the town and it is still used as a viable source of commerce and tourism.

However, as with anything in our history that has survived to modern living memory, obvious footprints become erased over time. Attitudes towards such remnants become complacent, indifferent, and even superficial - often until something is thrown back at us, making it take on new meaning for us once again.

In July 2002, the city's world famous medieval ship was discovered in the muddy bed of the River Usk, where it laid buried for 550 years, during building work for the city's newly commissioned Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre. Constructed in around 1450, the vessel itself is the most complete surviving example of a medieval merchant ship from the 15th century and is of international historical importance. The Newport Ship is just one example of the long-standing status of cultural heritage in the city. One where people literally had to dig to discover what lay beneath the surface.

This of course is not Newport's sole cultural inheritance. It was the home to John Frost and the bloody climax of the Chartist Uprising in 1836. The famous escapologist Harry Houdini performed a number of times in the city, famously escaping from a Newport Police cell in 1905, and jumping from the city's Town bridge in manacles in 1913. It was birth place of Tom Toya Lewis, Newport's very own faulted-hero of the Dock Disaster of 1909 and the city where Kurt Cobain allegedly proposed to Courtney Love whilst Hole were on tour at The Legendary TJ's in 1991. It is also home to the art works of mosaicist Kenneth Budd whose work adorns many walkways around the city, birthplace to Hollywood actor Michael Sheen and the home of the Newport Art College on Clarence Place, which hosted such notable names as Joe Strummer from The Clash, Keith Arnatt and Magnum Photos photographer David Hurn. This is by no means a comprehensive list of the city's accomplishments, but it is clear that with a little bit of physical and metaphorical digging, there are many more interesting stories to be found about the city and the lives of people who live along the water's edge.

Compared to neighbouring cities like Cardiff and Bristol, it is easy to be critical of Newport. It certainly doesn't appear to be as vibrant or cosmopolitan, nestled as it is between the two cultural capitols of Wales and the South West. Many people are put off by the patina of discount stores and empty shops left by high street brands relocating their stores on the outskirts of town. But, as it turns out, they have left in their wake a multitude of viable vacant spaces which artists and community groups are beginning to move in to. Slowly but surely, people rather than retailers are moving back into the city centre, and what they're bringing back into the city, or making more visible at least, is it's soul.

I myself graduated from BA Photographic Art at Newport in 2011, and was one of the few in my year who stayed in the city. In the time since then spent living, working and engaging with artists and residents in this community, it is clear there is an energy that still thrives in this old city. We are on the cusp of change. Through working with the Community Arts Development team at The Riverfront, I became involved with The Project Space in 2014, an artist led initiative that has assumed the role of a creative community space in the heart of Newport's Commercial Street. Developed to occupy vacant retail units and fill them with exhibitions, workshops and events, the function of these spaces are two fold; they encourage artists of all ages to come in, in this case students of University of South Wales, access space, exhibit their work and develop their skill set specific to their practice, whilst simultaneously bringing art to the high street and directly engaging with the community. We've had incredible success with this project so far, and are now hoping to develop it into a longer-term resource. It has been a pleasure to work with this group of students and to facilitate for them a platform for which to show their work, but especially to see their work develop as they have researched and responded to the river, the community and the history that surrounds it – I hope they continue to do so for many more years to come. Equally, what excites me is to see what happens next.

Let us return to the Newport Ship. After it's discovery, construction work on The Riverfront was suspended whilst a team of experts and volunteers painstakingly excavated, dismantled and recovered the Ship piece by piece. Utterly unique, the investment of time, money and effort put into it's preservation has ensured that the Ship will be preserved for future generations to discover and explore. Imagine what else is out there under the surface. Imagine what else there is to celebrate about Newport. Imagine what else will come in on the tide.