

From Thurrock, to the world

Ali Pretty is the founding member and artistic director of the international outdoor arts company Kinetika. Here she tells Essex Life about her passion for history, Thurrock and its links to the world



Silk illustration of Thurrock's industrial foreshore



I LANDED in Thurrock in May 2014, not by boat but by the A13. As artistic director of Kinetika, a London based arts organisation, I'd made the decision to move from Hackney to Purfleet, lured by the beautiful brand new Acme studios. Looking out at the River Thames and the Dartford Bridge, all I could see was container ships and trucks.

On my first foray into Thurrock, we drove round and round roundabouts, under bridges and along bypasses through what seemed to be miles and miles of distribution parks that all led one way or another to the citadel of the Lakeside shopping experience.

So when Debbie Maynard, head of public health at Thurrock Council, approached me to develop a walking arts festival for the borough, I couldn't imagine how that would be possible.

'Can you walk 100 miles around Thurrock?' I asked.

'Well there are many footpaths,' Debbie explained to me. 'It's just that most people don't know about them.'

And so the adventure began. Today, I know you can walk 100 miles around Thurrock, because in 2015, the first year of our festival Thurrock 100, we did.

Every day for 10 days we walked 10 miles through fields of potatoes, along the banks of the Mardyke, across rail tracks, clambering down gorges, trampling the concrete path by the side of the seawall and past a mile of graffiti, a drove of wild horses, two ancient forts and more. 100

miles later, we had discovered that Thurrock is jam-packed with hidden stories.

So a year ago, in February 2016, we set about collecting 100 of them. We listened in to conversations, we worked with adults and children to gather words, to write, to draw and to paint each story into a silk flag. These 100

Above: Children fly silk flags at Coalhouse Fort in the finale of the Thurrock 100 project

Image by Brian Slater

Below: The story of Bata Wayfinder shoes represented in a silk flag





A group of Patua painters

STEVE SHAW

flags were choreographed into a spectacular finale at one of Thurrock's fantastic, but lesser known, locations, Coalhouse Fort.

SO WHAT ARE THURROCK'S TOP 100 STORIES?

Some of my favourite stories lay on the walk along the Thames from Purfleet – stretching all the way from the RSPB Rainham Marshes, along the multi-coloured shifting shapes of graffiti, past St Clements Church where they filmed *Four Weddings and A Funeral* and on to Grays for a pint at the yacht club.

Each of the walks is now home to these stories that have been published into a neat publication, *Thurrock 100 Stories*, so you can discover them too and join a growing community of people from far and wide who have a place in their heart for Thurrock, a secret place on the banks of the Thames and a gateway to another world – it has been so for as long as anyone can remember.

The late Jonathan Catton, renowned local historian and former director of the Thurrock Museum, commented that: 'Thurrock has received many migrations of peoples; from the Bronze Age Beaker people from across the North Sea, to the Romans, Saxons (Thurrock is a Saxon word), the Norman's (Grays is named after the Norman Knight Henry De Grey), Dutch sea wall builders and more recently Czechoslovakian shoe manufacturers (through the Bata factory in East Tilbury) during the 1930s.'



One of the silk flags illustrating Thurrock's 100 stories



Jacci Todd and Margaret Hall with Swarna and Mona Chitraker. Image by Steve Shaw

As people have arrived in Thurrock, so Thurrock connects us with the nations of the world. If you go down to Tilbury these days, you can travel in your imagination to the commonwealth countries down Adelaide Street along Montreal Street and turning into Calcutta Street to pick up some Bombay mix in the local co-op.

Fascinated by these unexpected international links, I wanted to extend Thurrock 100 and find the connections to communities further afield. Over the last two years I have developed a new project, Silk River, linking Thurrock and Thames Estuary communities to those along the River Hooghly in West Bengal as part of a national programme called Re-imagine India. Funded by The Arts Council, the programme marks 70 years of Indian independence from Britain.

From September to December 2017 there will be two 100-mile river walks, one from Kew Gardens to Southend along the Thames and the other from Murshidabad to Batanagar in West Bengal. Each community will devise their own walk and then design a silk scroll as a story map. Each UK community along the route is twinned with an Indian community. You may never have guessed, but there is a direct link between East Tilbury and Batanagar in Kolkata as both were a home for Bata shoe-making.

The Kinetika team, including local artists Margaret Hall from Stanford Lee Hope and Jacci Todd from Southend, are currently in Murshidabad, the home of hand-woven Bengali silk. We are working with 40 local craftspeople to create ten silk scrolls that tell the stories of the riparian communities along the Hooghly with a focus on their connection to the UK. This month, the team will return home to Thurrock bringing with them two of these Bengali artists, Swarna and Mona Chitraker, who are masters in their field of devising and singing stories, then revealing them chapter by chapter on hand-painted scrolls. They will be based at Chalkwell Park in Leigh and deliver inspirational performances and workshops

along the river with our partners at Kew Gardens, Wapping, Woolwich, Barking and Dagenham, Gravesend and Dartford, Purfleet, Tilbury, East Tilbury and Southend. Throughout the spring and summer, these communities will create their own silk stories and then in September you can join them along the banks of the Thames as they reveal the 6m long lengths of hand-painted silk. Why not come and walk with us?♦

Find out more

For more details on the project, visit www.kinetikaonline.co.uk/site/silk-river-india-201617 or follow at www.facebook.com/silkriverkinetika/



ABOUT ALI PRETTY

Ali Pretty is best known as the founding member and artistic director of the international outdoor arts company Kinetika, which she founded in 1997 after a long established career in carnival arts and a growing commitment to community engagement work. Ali has collaborated with and led teams of artists to deliver large-scale events to diverse audiences all over the world including projects such as WOMAD, the FIFA World Cup and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.