

# Adapt the Nothing

Nicola Winstanley



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# Adapt the Nothing: Responses to Walking in Middleport

Nicola Winstanley

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Middleport is an outlying district of Burslem, one of the six towns that make up the polycentric city of Stoke-on-Trent in England.



# Introduction: A Walking Conversation between Dr. Ceri Morgan & Nicola Winstanley

15/08/18 Middleport

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CM: There are different ways of doing geopoetics... The self-nominated founder, Kenneth White, who describes geopoetics as 'a beautiful gesture' (i) has a vision of it as very ecologically engaged, but not necessarily socially collective. [For him], it's more about disrupting the power hierarchies between the human and non-human. But I was introduced to geopoetics by colleagues at La Traversée, a research group at Montreal, and they always practice it as a collective. The work I've done with them has been essentially site-responsive: you go for a walk, look at things, maybe take notes, and then generate artistic production afterwards.

NW: And do you tend to plan the walks?  
Or is there any particular way you

conduct the walks?

CM: The Montreal group plan their workshops quite meticulously. That's partly to do with spaces – North American spaces are much bigger than European spaces. And they've tended to have workshops which might last a day, or a couple of days, be on specific themes, and might be led by certain, self-nominated sub-groups within the group. [...] With the Dawdlers, at Keele, it varies... The geopoetics workshops I've done so far have been to specific places, but the brief has been very open. [...] We go [to the places] for an hour and walk around...



NW: And do people tend to walk around in groups?

CM: It's up to them. The first one I did was with a group of undergraduates and one colleague – environmental historian, Ben Anderson. We went to the Spode Works in 2015. The students walked around in groups of friends. Sometimes Ben and I chatted a bit together, but otherwise we were on our own. I led a more formal workshop as part of the Back to the Drawing Board exhibition—an exhibition put on at Keele in 2016-17 at the request of Emma Bridgewater and Matthew Rice to pay tribute to [textile and potteries designer] Pat Albeck and [set designer] Peter Rice. At the invitation of Emma Bridgewater Factory, my students and I did the factory tour, and then wrote pieces in response to that. I also did a couple of informal oral history interviews with former Potteries workers. When we do more local geopoetics activities at Keele, we just walk – we don't fetishise the route. We take it in turns to sort of lead. For the 'Memories of Mining' workshop, which then became Seams, the site was important, because it was the site of a former coal-mine, but beyond that, it didn't matter where we walked. What I've done in terms of adapting the geopoetics method, following a Leverhulme Trust International Academic Fellowship I had at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University, Montreal, in 2014-15, I added an awareness of the past and social justice issues [...] so that it wasn't just about responding to the present, but also trying to let the past bleed into the present and, indeed, potentially the future, if you talk about some of those constructions of time by various theorists, including Derrida.

NW: And is this an adaptation that you've made?

CM. It's very specific to Keele at the



moment. It has some similarities with

psychogeography, which is more of a creative writing practice. I also use the method as a means of public engagement and participation.

NW: My [current] project was born out of another project, which has been shelved. [...]. What it was meant to do was learn more about how Middleport works in order potentially to build an artist-led Community Land Trust. Myself and another artist, Laurel Gallagher, worked on it for seven or eight months without any funding. We got to a point where we started to build a consortium of artists interested in going ahead, started to develop the property [plans] –

my original idea was about sustainability of creative practice in a location rather than it being artists who [...] dropped into areas. So it was more accountability on the artists' part for their effects on regeneration. But that got to a point where Middleport Matters, who are the local community organisation, had also got plans [to develop property] and



wanted different aims and outcomes [from us]. And at the time, we thought it was a bit of an ethical problem that we wanted to build, perhaps getting funding that would be denied to them if we were building in the same area... So, we've shelved that idea for now. It's not like it can't happen, or can't happen elsewhere, but it's left this project I'm doing a

little bit orphaned! But I'm using it as an opportunity to [...] focus deeply on a specific location from the point of view of a socially engaged artist who's interested in regeneration in an area that has a lot of brownfield sites, but it's also got working industry, both modern and traditional. It's got Prince's Regeneration Trust [UKHBPT] which are engaged in a creative regeneration agenda. It's got several different estates, which were built for different populations [...] at different times of Middleport's life, and it's got the scar of the history of the failed Renew Pathfinder Scheme and a new community. So I just think it's a really interesting location, so I decided to use [this time] as an opportunity to meet with lots of different people, using walks as my method to discover more about not only the place, but about ways of looking at places.

CM: How do you use walks?

NW: [...] With people who know the place, I let them lead the walks, and talk to them about what they're showing me, where they are, how they feel about where they are, what happened... I just use it as a way of starting conversations, and being led around a place and seeing [it] through other people's eyes.

CM: Have you been documenting [the walks]?

NW: Yes. I've been tracking all of the walks, documenting with photography and writing down what people have been saying, recording those things... I haven't come to any specific conclusions and I'm very happy not to [do so].

CM: Can we talk a little bit about something I've become more and more mindful of? [...] I've been aware that



sometimes, when I've talked about my work, colleagues in other disciplines have said, 'oh! That's data collection'. For me, it's not. [...] I think there is a tension between making a creative output with somebody else and then doing research on those people. You're automatically changing the relationship, and then it's no longer co-production—it's something else. I wonder if even talking about the method, as I do, is problematic... I'm not really sure, at the moment.

NW: I have this tension with doing evaluation work and doing my own creative work, which is mainly, if I'm going to put it in my own layman's terms, is me, going out, and being super-interested in everyone and everything and wanting to learn, and wanting to share what I've learned using the skill that I have, which is art. So that is really difficult when I'm trying to turn [off] one part of my brain that's about data collection and forming an evaluation document and then turning on my creative brain and thinking about what I've learned from my experiences and interactions with people, and how to disseminate that in a creative way.

*Dr. Ceri Morgan is a Senior Lecturer and Postgraduate Research Director for Humanities at Keele University.*

*Nicola Winstanley is an artist from Stoke-on-Trent working with the subject of social engagement in regeneration. She has been practicing for ten years and is currently studying for an MA (by Negotiated Study) in Social Art and Regeneration (working title) at Staffordshire University.*

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# Reflections on Middleport Andy Perkin

In a city that has been codged together from a line of pottery towns, it would be easy to dismiss Middleport as just another outlying district along with scores of others. But Middleport has a fascinating history – one that finds its place in the middle of an industry, the middle of a transport revolution and, eventually, the middle of several regeneration schemes.

## Middle of what?

Anything named after the middle of something needs edges or ends. In this case, Middleport lies between Longport and Newport on the Trent & Mersey Canal. None of these names are particularly old and would have been unfamiliar to local people 250 years ago. At that time, just over a mile to the north of this place, work had begun on the longest transport tunnel ever attempted. Overseen by James Brindley, navigators (about to be christened “navvies”) took their shovels and barrows to make a hole through Harecastle Hill. Soon would come the boats and cargoes which would turn a few local potteries into a world-renowned industry.



The canal milepost at Newport informs us that we are 34 miles from Preston Brook and 58 miles from Shardlow – the former being a village near the west end of the canal joins The Bridgewater

Canal on route to the River Mersey and the latter a village near the east end and the junction with the Trent. A quick calculation makes us 12 miles from the middle. But the ends, and the maths, are unimportant. For the group of pottery entrepreneurs that financed the cut, the Trent & Mersey was never intended as a through route – it was all about getting raw materials into, and finished ware out of, The Potteries. For many of them, this mile of canal clinging to the side of the valley above the Fowlea Brook was the middle.

Ideally, they would have liked the canal to pass in front of their factories in the pottery towns, but the topography – and the need for a generous supply of water at the summit – meant that Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Fenton and Longton were passed by. For the Mother Town of Burslem, the closest practical approach was to be at the tiny hamlet of Longbridge, where the old highway to Newcastle crossed the brook. The name apparently came from a footbridge of planks around 100 yards long next to the ford, but was dropped in favour of Longport when the canal opened in 1777.

## From the outside in

For the eighteenth century industrialists, Longport was the place to be, and the land adjacent to the new canal bridge was quickly snapped up. Brindley's brother established the Longport Pottery to the north and the land to the south of the bridge bought by his brother-in-law, Hugh Henshall, who established Longport Wharf and The Duke of Bridgewater inn. Other potteries took the prime spots, many of which were absorbed into the ownership of William Davenport by the



end of the century. Davenport developed a further pottery, together with a grand house for himself, three-quarters of a mile south and named the area Newport. Land by the canal continued to be much sought after, particularly the east side – closest to the town and away from the towpath. South of Westport and between Longport and Newport was to be a new wharf, to be named, appropriately, Middleport.

## Branching out from the middle

This new development did not go unnoticed in Burslem, where the pottery manufacturers still struggled to get their raw materials into town by barrow and packhorse. A 30 ton shipment of ball clay or flint, that could be pulled by a single horse by narrowboat, would have taken nearer 60 trips by packhorse. Josiah Wedgwood had already left to set up his Etruria factory to take advantage of a canal-side site.

As part of the Trent & Mersey Canal Company's strategy to forge better links with the pottery towns and Newcastle-under-Lyme, a new half-mile branch canal was to be cut alongside Dale Hall Brook to a new wharf, from where goods could be transported to onto a rail- or tramway to the town centre at St Johns Square. Completed in 1805, this tramway predated steam and electricity and relied on horses to pull the wagons on cast iron rails. Until the arrival of the North Staffs Railway and the Potteries loop line 60 years later, the arrangement remained the best way of moving heavy goods in and out of Burslem, the canal branch surviving until a breach in 1961.

## A home in the middle

Writing in 1843, John Ward only refers to Middleport as the name of wharf rather than a place. It seems that in the early days, people made their way from Burslem to work in the newly established factories, mills and wharfs that lined the canal, while very few called Middleport their home. With the coming of the branch canal, a triangular community emerged defined by the two watercourses and Newcastle Street. William Davenport was among the first to invest in new terraced housing, which was complemented by a chapel and a park. A network of traditional terraced streets grew throughout the nineteenth century, until hundreds of homes filled the spaces between the canals and factories.

The basic two-up, two-down terraced housing was ubiquitous into the twentieth century and worked well. Fronts-facing-fronts across uncluttered streets provided good surveillance and backs-facing-backs enclosed private spaces for washing and drying clothes. Ongoing wear and tear gave rise to selective rebuilding, which commenced with those streets immediately to the south of Newcastle Street. Here concerns about the increasing use of the motor car and the perceived need to separate pedestrians from trafficked areas, led developers to adopt Radburn-style housing layouts, pioneered in America. Much-reported catastrophic failures of the model from abroad did not deter local developers from repeating their mistakes as regeneration swept through Middleport, right up to the 1990s.

The lowest point came at the start of the next millennium when an ill-fated housing renewal scheme set up on the wrong foot – demolishing relatively





robust terraces rather than their poorly designed neighbours – and left empty spaces and displaced families when recession bit.

## From the bottom up

Fortunately, by this time the community had decided it had had enough of being done-to, that the cavalry was never going to arrive, and local people needed to take matters into their own hands. Early adopters of this bottom up approach were Burslem Community Development Trust (BCDT), working with local partners.

With the Trust's support, Middleport Environment Centre campaigned for and acquired (for a time) the derelict Port Vale Flour Mill, from which they ran North Staffordshire's first curb-side recycling scheme – long before local authorities

were obliged to offer the service. As Middleport Environment Trust, the group still supports local initiatives.

Also with the help of BCDT, an ambitious plan was hatched to restore and reopen the Burslem Branch Canal. The project has been hard fought for by the Burslem Port Trust over two decades now, but their ideas are finally chiming with regeneration agencies and work is starting with a view to re-establish the lost towpath and level the land.

## Middleport still matters

Further regeneration has centred around the welcome renovation and resurgence of Middleport Pottery, complementing the historic Burleigh factory with enterprise units and a heritage centre. The work was

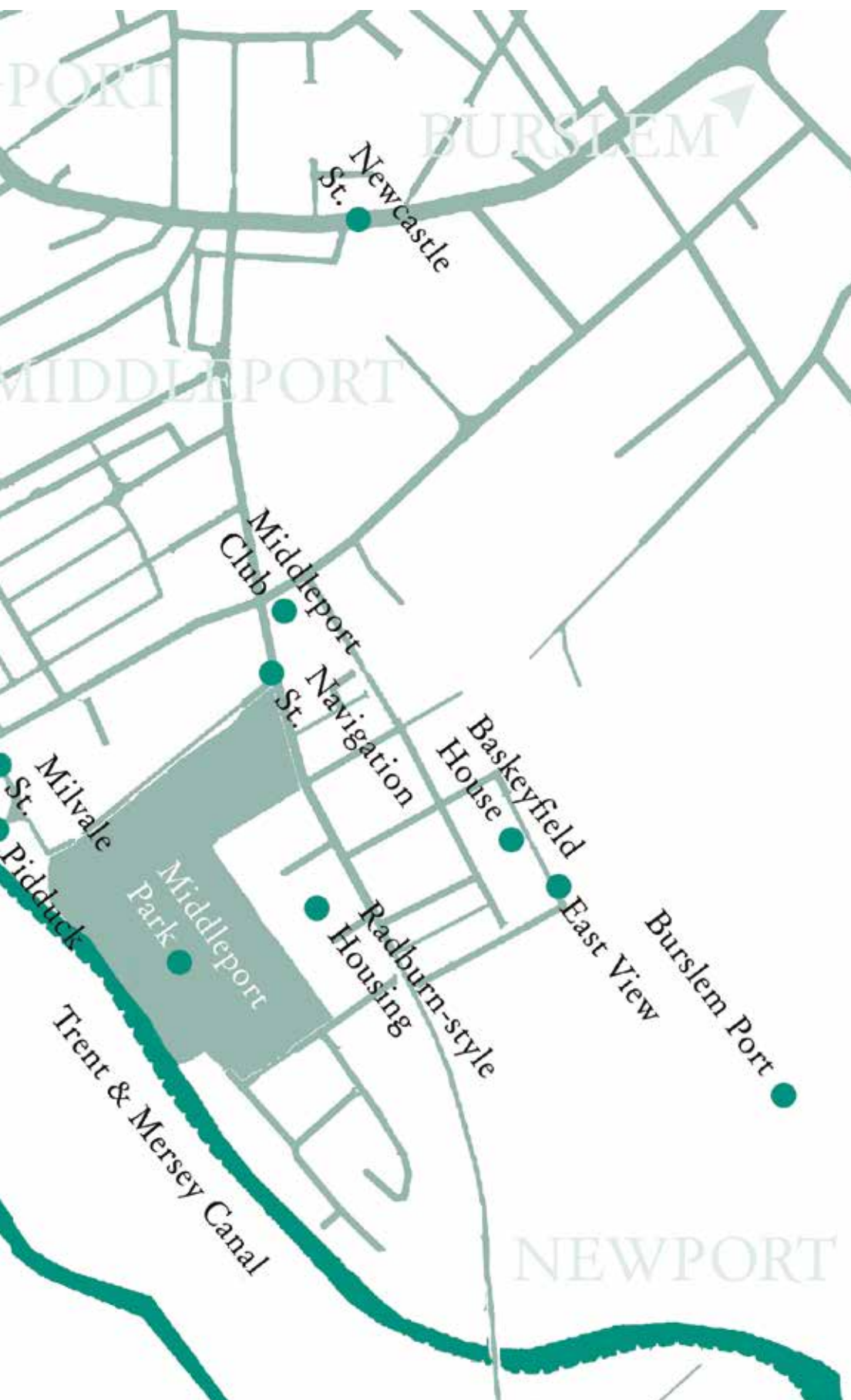
initiated by The Princes Regeneration Trust and the attraction is run by the United Kingdom Historic Buildings Preservation Trust with support of local volunteers.

By far the most promising initiative to secure a bright future for the area has been the Middleport Matters community organisation. The group started small with regular litter picks and activities for parents and children, but quickly gathered momentum. Constituted in 2017 as Middleport Matters Community Trust, it has a vision for the area as a “safe, thriving and welcoming place for everyone” and aims to bring this about by bringing people together, improving health and wellbeing, enhancing the built and natural environment, and supporting local enterprise. The group has already initiated the local neighbourhood plan and aspires to tackle derelict buildings and set up community housing projects.

Thriving and welcoming encapsulates the spirit of Middleport, where the current highway project is to connect underused land near Newport directly to the A500 dual carriageway. Let’s hope that this latest infrastructure project helps make Middleport’s future as significant as its past.

*Andy Perkin is Treasurer of Potteries Heritage Society and a Community Consultant and Project Manager who has supported several Middleport-based initiatives including Burslem Port, Middleport Matters and Middleport Neighbourhood Plan.*











*Private/Public*  
Radburn Style Housing  
2018



In 2015, Middleport Matters, now a Community Trust, was established with the aim of making Middleport a safe and thriving place for everyone. Just before Christmas, 2016, they decided to focus their efforts on improving a popular gateway into Middleport via the canal footbridge that is reportedly the location of the opening chapter of Arnold Bennett's world famous Clayhanger Trilogy.

The ambitious Canal Renovation Project took over two years to complete as various land owners were tracked down and adequate funds were raised. The project included cleaning and repainting the footbridge, cleaning off graffiti, clearing overgrown areas and laying hardcore to prevent weeds. New fencing, planters and tile mosaics were commissioned and installed, as well as a 'Secret Garden' which disguised an old industrial roller-shutter door.

In place of the old sheet metal fence that ran along Pidduck Street, community members commissioned beautifully appointed walls made from bricks reclaimed from the partly demolished industrial buildings on the site. It took several months for the community to make good the old bricks. They held weekend events where locals would chip off the old mortar ready for the builder. It was painstaking work. By June 2017 the wall was built. Along with the other improvements, the project was finally finished with a launch event in April 2018.

What this wall, and the wider Canal Renovation Project, represent is the essence of Middleport Matters' ongoing work; which is to reconstruct, both physically and perceptually, what Middleport is, and what its community does.

# Making Good

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Photographs courtesy of Middleport Matters Community Trust  
[www.middleportmatters.co.uk](http://www.middleportmatters.co.uk)







# Encounters with MPM

## Part I

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*“Why do they have to break everything?”* This is the question some of the residents of Middleport ask as another window is smashed, another car is vandalised, another swing is pulled off its frame. Much of the destruction is pinned squarely on teenagers, but who are these teenagers? Why is destruction their strongest currency? Is it for lack of influence? Attention? Social capital?

On a walkabout in Middleport with PCSO Ian Hopley in June 2018 I began to understand that this homogenous group of ‘teens’ was not one group at all, but many smaller friendship groups of three to four people, and to my surprise, they tended to stay well away from Middleport to avoid one specific teen gang- the self titled Middleport Mafia (MPM) who they say can be dangerous for them to come across.

It’s sort of a starter gang, Ian tells me, mainly of young boys- brothers, sons and cousins of more hardened criminals. They deal mainly in class B drugs, commit petty crimes and general antisocial behaviours, which prime them to move onto harder crimes. It’s a cycle Ian has seen many

times over in Middleport. He has been Middleport’s PCSO for 3 years and, on our walk, spoke on personal terms with almost everyone we came across. It’s frustrating, he says, it takes so much time and effort from himself, the community and parents to extract boys from MPM, but it is possible. This was exemplified by a teenage boy we came across on our walk through Burslem from the police station. We



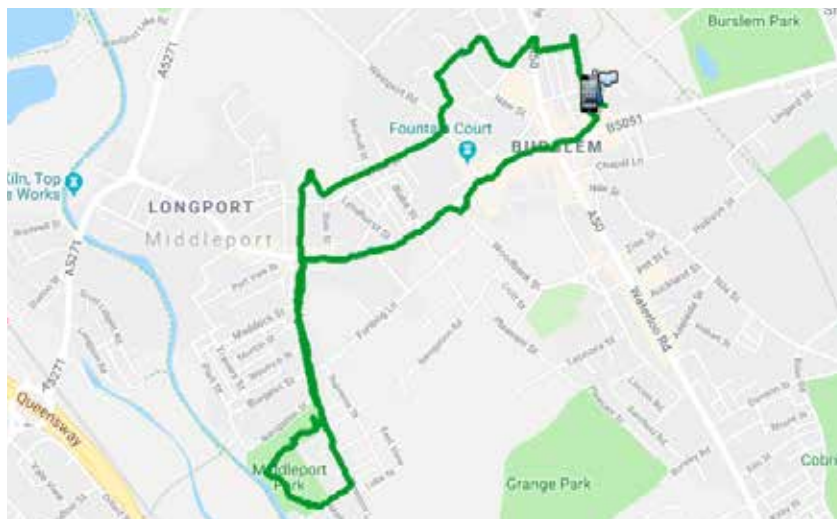
spoke for a little while, he seemed shy and mild mannered. *“He’s a good lad, him”* Ian says as we part ways, *“he was very much involved with MPM for a while, but he stays away from Middleport now to avoid being targeted or sucked back in”*. A little further in our walk we get to a sun dappled green space. Within it there was a small community centre which Ian and his fellow area officers use



as an outpost from which to conduct surgeries and workshops. We go inside, have a drink of juice and continue talking about Middleport. We look at a map of the North of the city on the wall, broken up into approximately two square-inch territories by red lined boundaries. This policing area was about to grow due to a national police shake-up. Back out into the sun and we spot a group of teenagers- boys and girls- sitting on the low wall around the edge of the green. We go over for a chat and hear the same story again- *“we don’t go into Middleport, we’ll get our heads kicked in”* say the boys. The girls are less worried about this.

*“What do you want to be when you’re older?”* I ask.

*“A mechanic, a nursery teacher, an artist or designer”* they say in turn.



*“If there was anything that could be done to make Middleport a better place to live- absolutely anything you can imagine- what would it be?”* I ask.

*“More police, definitely more police”* comes the answer.

The reply hits Ian like a brick. His eyes

widen, he steps back, takes a deep breath in before audibly blowing it out through pursed lips. *“I didn’t expect that answer”* he says.

Neither did I.

When we reach Middleport there is plenty to do. Ian breaks off from our conversation to check on an elderly lady he hadn’t seen for a while, to advise a passing driver who stopped to ask a question about their car insurance policy, to spend 20 minutes trying to find a homeless man a bed for the night after he approached us in utter desperation (the closest bed was Birmingham, he’d have to sleep by the canal again until the following night when a bed became available in Stoke) and witness the tail end of a drug deal.

*“As a PCSO there’s not much we can actually do in terms of enforcement, but we can gather intelligence and be there for the community in whatever way they need us”.*

In Middleport itself, to my dismay, MPM were nowhere to be found. I’d hoped to have a conversation with them with Ian’s support- to put the community’s questions directly to them, but it wasn’t to be. *“I wish the local councillors and MPs had been on this walk with us today”* said Ian as we trudged slowly up the soft incline of Newcastle Street back up to Burslem, *“you really get to see what’s going on day to day this way”.*



Edgelands - Abandoned but not  
entirely

Human spaces, not designed.

= - Traces

Young Peoples desire lines.

- Trodden paths, not so obvious

Outdoors  
Burslem Port  
2018

Burslem Port - 10.44. 13/June/18  
Grasses, buddles rubble, buttercups  
brambles, scratchcard, omega white  
uder can. Thistles house brick, cuckoo  
spit, breeze. Nettles, cowslip clover  
dried earth, Co-codamol packet, empty.  
Grasses, thistles birdsong, moss, scratch  
card, bee. Omega white uder can,  
concrete, bee, Plantain, red clover,  
bee, bee, bee. Hawthorn, meadow  
salsify, cuckoo spit scratchcard.  
Grasses, bee, bee. Scratch card.  
fallen tree, yellow sweet clover, corrugated  
steel, mild steel, grid, manhole cover,  
pigeon, sewer smell, breeze. Hum. vehicle  
reversing, cowslip, cricket. Bramble  
sweet clover, concrete post, bee, bee.  
curb, fullers teasel, bare standing  
ceramic, snail shell, warm. Rose, barbed  
wire - Glass, plastic, polystyrene.  
Herb Robert, nettles, birdsong, grasses.





# Urban Explorers Laurel Gallagher

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Walk with me down a dead-end street in a post-industrial neighbourhood; on one side high walls and fencing protect a new build estate, on the other crumbling brick walls shield a demolished factory site. Pass through a hidden opening and uneven steps lead you to a pathway overgrown with brambles, littered with beer cans and burnt objects; the signifiers of a disused urban space. This is Burslem Port.

Since 2016 I have been delivering a program of interventions, workshops and events in Middleport, a residential and

industrial district that sits within the 10% most deprived areas in the country (i). The Trent & Mersey Canal runs through the area, with canal side industrial buildings in a range of states from abandoned to regenerated or demolished. A number of criminal gangs operate in the area with children as young as 8 at risk of being groomed and limited public spaces where young people can socialise and play.

A disused urban space “*remains as forgotten wasteland or gaps between buildings and other constructions*” states Anja Graner in her article ‘Why Should We Deal with Abandoned Urban Spaces?’ (ii), but disused spaces are never truly forgotten, and we see evidence here of dog walkers, graffiti artists, drug users and the homeless. Each group recognising a value in this space, whether it be somewhere to let dogs run or privacy for illegal activities. Graner goes on to recognise the high potential for reconstruction and repurposing of disused spaces by integrating them into the community, and this is where my interests lie.

Workshops invite young people to explore disused spaces, re-imagining



them for their own purposes while experts bring the tools and skills needed to transform young people's ideas into reality. It was clear from the start that disused urban spaces offer young people unique experiences, igniting their sense of adventure, creativity and freedom. Over the past three years the young people I have worked with have transformed Burslem Port into a place with a clear sense of identity. They have developed a sense of ownership and connection to the space; visiting it in their own time with friends and family. Re-imagining and re-purposing a disused space for their own needs. I have witnessed young people building new friendships, learning new skills and developing a strong sense of identity connected to nature and community.

Jenny Hallam (Derby University) is researching the relationship between wild spaces and wellbeing. She linked the experiences of young people on our

projects to a range of benefits centring on learning and mastering new skills, connecting to nature and developing a growing awareness and attachment to the space (iii). With most of the world's populations living in urban areas children are at risk of disconnecting from the natural world with serious consequences for their mental and physical health. Nature Deficit Disorder is a term coined by Richard Louv (iv) that describes the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature. With teachers, doctors, MPs and charities warning that children's mental health in the UK is reaching an 'intolerable crisis' (v) we need to address the factors which are contributing as well as those that could alleviate this situation.

When young people in Stoke-on-Trent were invited to share their experiences of adventures with researcher Holly Norcop (Keele University) fear was one of the significant barriers cited as to why they







don't play in wild spaces. Biophobia is a term used to describe fear and anxiety of hazards associated with nature. Parents, teachers and the media spread biophobia through real life stories; such as the tragic drowning of a local boy in open water or criminal activities such as child abduction. These risks are real, but they need to be weighed up against the equally real risks posed by online cybercrime including, bullying, harassment and grooming. I believe it is the responsibility of adults to support children by educating them about the risks of wild spaces and how to manage them rather than allowing them to disconnect them from the natural world.

I propose that disused urban spaces hold

a unique value for young people as places that they can access for free, re-purpose to their needs and build their own child-led communities. That by spending increased time in wild spaces children's sense of wellbeing, mental and physical health will improve. Furthermore, that by increasing positive activity in disused urban spaces they become assets for the whole community.

*Laurel Gallagher is currently studying an MSc in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Birmingham and leading interdisciplinary projects researching co-creative placemaking, disused urban spaces and wellbeing in Stoke-on-Trent.*

*Laurel Gallagher [www.feralstate.org](http://www.feralstate.org)*







Photograph  
by Jenny Harper







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# Encounters with MPM

## Part II

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The peripheralisation of ordinary groups of young people leaves Middleport with the impression of a monoculture of troubled and troublemaking teens, but in reality, there are many more positive young people whose imprint cannot be felt in the public realm. A 'Planning the Future' workshop was my attempt at a small offering towards rebalancing the scale. It was designed to be a way for young people to be constructive, to imprint on the public realm and feed into a wider debate about regeneration in a positive way, harnessing their innate skills, confidence and neuroplastic brains to invent new futures for their neighbourhood.

The workshop was designed to introduce a few basic concepts of planning- how to assess a space and predict how it will be used. Then, the young people would create a campaign of tactical urbanism, identifying places where temporary, low-cost interventions could improve specific places- which may lead to permanent change. Stencils and spray chalk were prepared to sensitively mark areas with potential. After a month of planning and promotion, myself and two other artists- Laurel Gallagher and Allison Dias (who was there to assist us from Middleport Matters) waited for participants to arrive at the starting point- Middleport Park Pavilion.

After 30 minutes or so, a group of teenage boys approached the door and one of them came inside and sat at the end of the room while the rest stood at the door. This was MPM...



MPM: What are you doing?

NW: A workshop about urban design with young people like yourselves, just waiting for people to turn up.

MPM: What's this?

NW: It's spray chalk, we're experimenting with what's called 'tactical urbanism' using stencils. Would you like to...Wait, don't take those. Please bring them back....

...

AD: This is what you're up against, see.

## Tactical Urbanism Stencils and their Meanings



Places that would benefit from more people being able to dwell.



Places that would benefit from more people slowing down. Restricted access.



Landscaping - interventions to increase the quality of the environment.



Places that would benefit from more surveillance.



Places that would benefit from better safety regulations or better legibility.

As the group disappeared off over a garden wall near the top of the park, I couldn't believe my luck. What I feared would happen next was revealed to us daub by daub as we traced their steps from the park to the back of Baskeyfield House and onwards to Burslem Port. What I had hoped to counter I had contributed to.

That evening the rain came down in sheets, so myself and the community members I had woefully informed delayed action in the hope that the rain would wash away the chalk. No such luck. The next day it was still there, Laurel and I spent a day with a brush and sponge scrubbing as the soapy fluorescent liquid ran down and across the gullies of mortar between heritage dressed stones and sharp orange new-build bricks alike. It wasn't until a few weeks later that the episode reached a surprising conclusion.

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### Conversation between myself and Laurel Gallagher

LG: You'll never guess what I found at Burslem Port.

NW: What?

LG: The empty spray cans had been left by the bench, they must have ended up there. They've painted all the trees surrounding it and it looks pretty good.

NW: It looks really good - like it's been designed with purpose - it's as if they didn't need to spray their names all over it because it's already theirs.

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Having had some time to lick my wounds with the hugely comforting support of Middleport Matters, I began to see that, though they didn't intend to, the MPM boys did complete the workshop I had set out. They identified three areas with inadequate surveillance, poor legibility and inappropriate scale. They also identified a good dwelling place in need of further landscaping.











*Weeping*  
East View and  
Middleport Pottery  
August 2018





# 122,000 Visitors

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The 16th September 2018 was the final day of Poppies: Weeping Window at Middleport Pottery. The handmade ceramic poppy installation that erupted volcano-like from one of Burgess and Leigh's (Burleigh's) Victorian bottle ovens was part of 14-18 NOW's UK tour, commemorating soldiers who died in the First World War. Many of the poppies had been made in Stoke-on-Trent, so the display was colloquially regarded as a kind of homecoming. Since it was the final day, I decided to make the Middleport pilgrimage that some 122,000 people had made in the preceding 45 days. It was hard to believe that so many people had descended on Middleport from the walks I had taken around the wider area in this time. To avoid parking pandemonium, visitors were directed to park on the former McGuinness' scrap yard, sandwiched between the Trent & Mersey Canal on one side and the A500 on the other, which had been purposely cleared by the City Council to accommodate the influx of visitors. The upshot of this was that visitors had a pretty direct route in and out of Middleport Pottery itself, either by walking up and over the canal bridge and along Milvale Street, or via a shuttle bus that took people directly to the entrance every 20 minutes.

Although on foot, I ventured onto the

carpark site, avoiding soupy clay puddles that had pooled in the undulating but compacted earth and the splashes from leaving and arriving cars. I was spotted by carpark attendants from quite a distance, so I picked up my pace to explain what I was doing by attempting to walk this treacherous route. I wanted to see what visitors saw, I said, and I was allowed to continue onwards.

As I got to the far end I could see a shuttle bus waiting to make one of its final journeys, and visitors on foot being funnelled upwards towards the canal along what looked coincidentally like a WWI trench wall holding back the spoil created by the clearance of the McGuinness' site. I stopped at the bridge to talk to a few visitors and gather their impressions of the event. Some were local and some were not, but most hadn't realised that Middleport Pottery existed as it did, and all were complimentary.

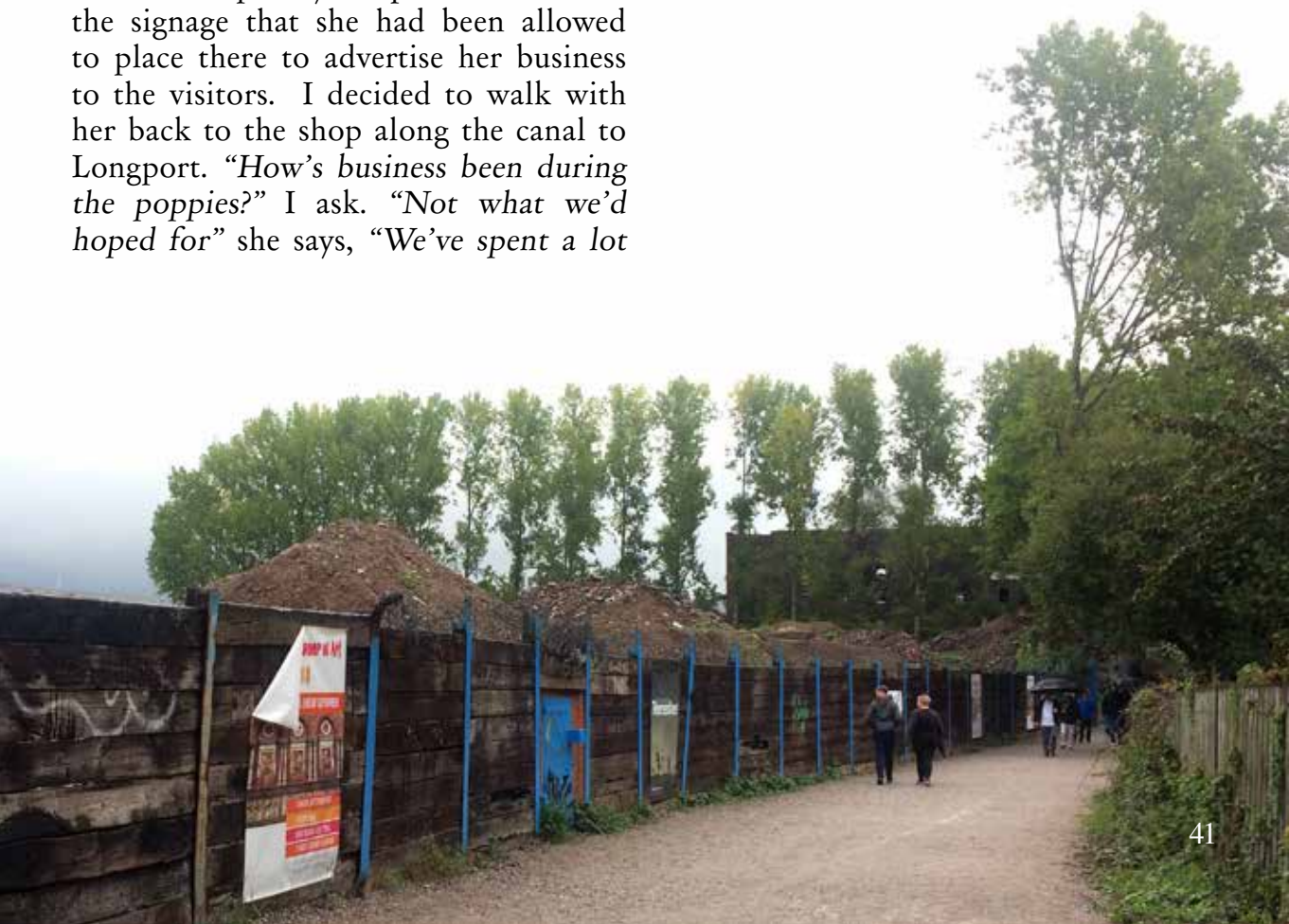
In June 2011, The United Kingdom Historic Building Preservation Trust (UKHBPT) stepped in to restore Middleport Pottery after the buildings had fallen into disrepair, embarking on a £9 million, three-year project to regenerate the site. Since June 2014, the refurbished Middleport Pottery has been open to visitors- containing the Burleigh factory, which has been in continuous

operation since 1851 and is the last working Victorian pottery in the UK, a visitor centre, a tea room, a factory shop and studios for creative businesses. The site also includes Clay College, which offers a two year skills-based Diploma taught by national and international potters. In recent years, the popularity of The BBC's 'The Great Pottery Throw Down', hosted at Middleport Pottery, had helped to put the factory site on the map before the program was axed after its second series in 2017. The arrival of the poppies seemed to be the next big step towards establishing Middleport as the model of heritage-led regeneration and tourism for the wider city.

I walked along the canal towards the factory to get a view of the bottle oven across the water. Just then a shop owner I had met several times before came flying past with a quick "hello". She had been to the temporary carpark to retrieve the signage that she had been allowed to place there to advertise her business to the visitors. I decided to walk with her back to the shop along the canal to Longport. "How's business been during the poppies?" I ask. "Not what we'd hoped for" she says, "We've spent a lot

*of money preparing for increased footfall but visitors haven't been directed past us. The heritage talks we've organised to coincide with the poppies have been a huge success, though, and we wouldn't have done that otherwise, so in that way, it's been worth doing."*

I had heard similar things in conversation with others at the time; Perhaps the practicalities of facilitating over a hundred thousand people to visit the poppies hadn't allowed for the kind of exposure that might have directly benefitted the local area outside of the factory site. However, the opportunity of international attention did seem to inspire people in Longport, Middleport and Burslem to act cooperatively, ambitiously and creatively in anticipation of a more dynamic future, which now seemed closer than it had for many years.







UKHBPT are currently fundraising for The Harper Street 'Engagement in Heritage' Project, which will see the renovation of eleven Victorian terraced houses adjacent to Middleport Pottery, turning the original workers' houses into a new heritage attraction, studio & workshop space, publicly accessible

archive and community hub for Middleport's residents. Since the closure of Middleport Sports & Social Club, Middleport has been without a community space, which over the years, along with aggressive regeneration strategies, has damaged the fabric of the community. At present, the terraces stand as a stark reminder of darker times. In the future, the integration of heritage tourism and community life promises to again change the personality and functionality of Middleport, and the relationship between its past and its future.





# Walking from Harper St Stephen Seabridge

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Middleport sits in the rain in June, silent.  
Heat is a memory of the week before.

This is the time before the terraced houses were done up with new walls,  
new driveways, new tarmac on the roads. This is the time of learner drivers  
reversing corners as houses, blocked and board with metal,  
watch the wheels spin backwards.

It's hard to resist peering into the houses,  
through the holes where the boards have bent back at the corners.  
They sag towards my gaze, buildings yawning with deep, familiar pain.

Trinkets of last autumn – and the autumn before,  
and the one before that – are scattered within,  
vines, spiders, leaves rotten down to memory on the floors  
stripped bare of carpets,  
fireplaces black with the power of fallen soot.

They are empty, erased from family,  
the laughter at the top of the stairs a faint echo  
in the past,

even the weeping, the rows,  
all gone.

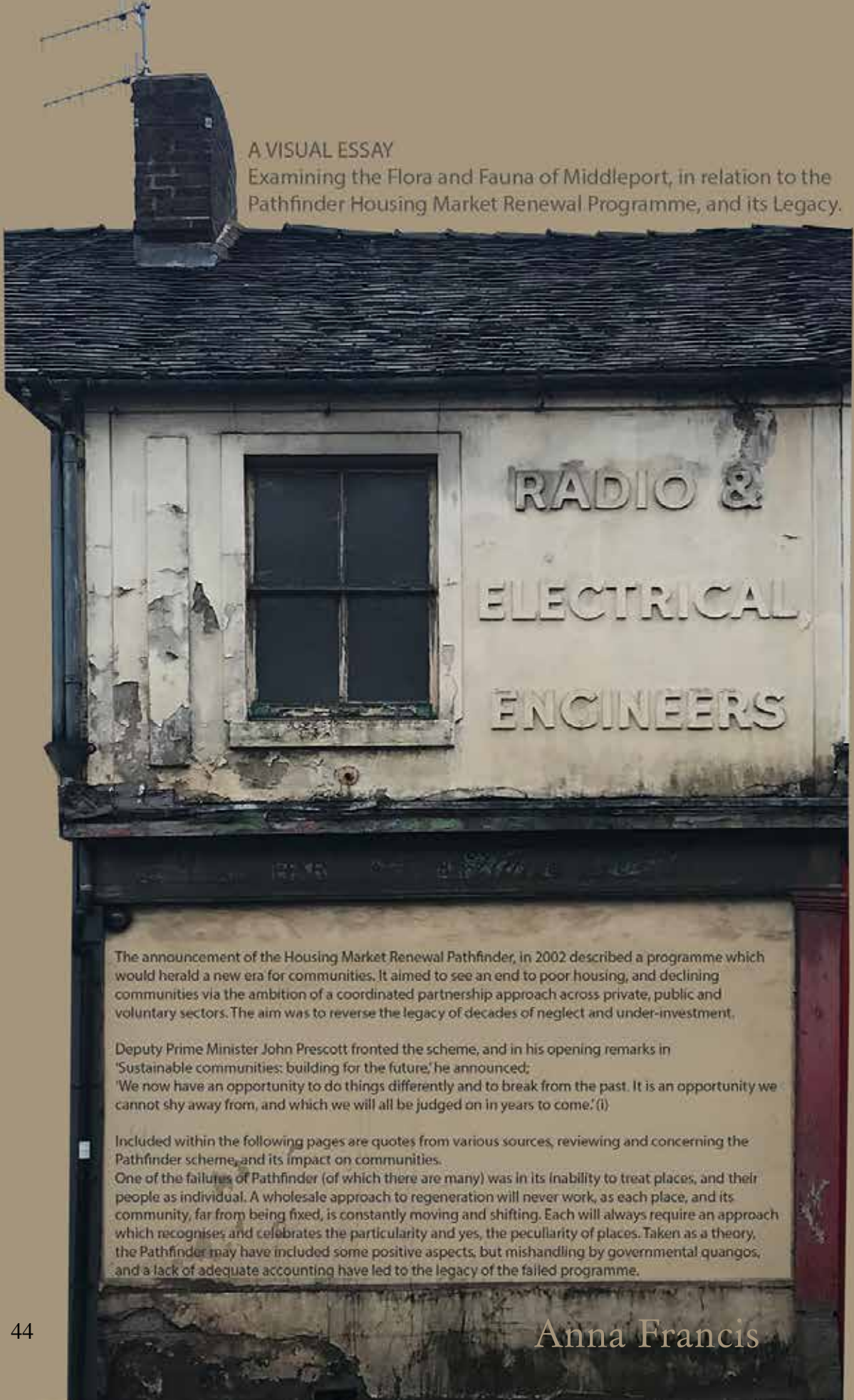
I can hear the canal from this spot, narrowboat engines purring motion into water.  
When I walk along the path, grey water a sullied tongue,  
I see a tiller's dog, sheepdog a show of black and white,  
he jumps from boat to land,  
land moving to land still,

his leaping grace caught like a photograph  
with the fat bulb of the kiln as his backdrop,

no smoke, only figures  
in dust and white  
going about their quiet work

as they dodge the clouds spitting.

I look back once,  
see men smoking under the shelter,  
under the spire of the chimney,  
under the lid of grey sky,  
under the rain.



## A VISUAL ESSAY

Examining the Flora and Fauna of Middleport, in relation to the Pathfinder Housing Market Renewal Programme, and its Legacy.

# RADIO & ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS

The announcement of the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder, in 2002 described a programme which would herald a new era for communities. It aimed to see an end to poor housing, and declining communities via the ambition of a coordinated partnership approach across private, public and voluntary sectors. The aim was to reverse the legacy of decades of neglect and under-investment.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott fronted the scheme, and in his opening remarks in 'Sustainable communities: building for the future,' he announced: 'We now have an opportunity to do things differently and to break from the past. It is an opportunity we cannot shy away from, and which we will all be judged on in years to come.'<sup>(1)</sup>

Included within the following pages are quotes from various sources, reviewing and concerning the Pathfinder scheme, and its impact on communities.

One of the failures of Pathfinder (of which there are many) was in its inability to treat places, and their people as individual. A wholesale approach to regeneration will never work, as each place, and its community, far from being fixed, is constantly moving and shifting. Each will always require an approach which recognises and celebrates the particularity and yes, the peculiarity of places. Taken as a theory, the Pathfinder may have included some positive aspects, but mishandling by governmental quangos, and a lack of adequate accounting have led to the legacy of the failed programme.



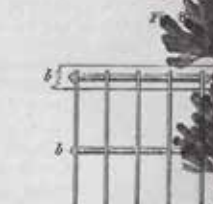


Fig. 9 and 10.



of the stool, and the tempered clay near the  
the moulder. There is no water-box, but

which the strike is thrown when not  
are placed at one end of the page,

Abandoned homes in a Staffordshire city may be left standing because the area they are in is now a conservation area. The houses were due to be pulled down as part of a multi-million pound regeneration scheme to improve housing in Stoke-on-Trent. But funding for the scheme was cut last year by the government.

Now the city council has confirmed the character of the Middleport area of the city must be preserved. Harmesh Jassal, strategic manager for planning and building control at Stoke-on-Trent City Council, said the council needed to make sure the area was developed sensitively. He said: "There are heritage issues at stake.

"We have a Grade II listed building nearby so it's really important we get it absolutely spot on."

The nationwide £1bn Pathfinder Housing Market Renewal scheme had already paid for the demolition of hundreds of Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme homes before it was cancelled. (vi)

Between 2002 and 2006 house prices in pathfinder areas almost trebled, causing problems for local residents whose average incomes, according to pathfinders' research, rose by only 25 per cent in the same period and who, therefore, have found themselves unable to afford alternative properties in their area. Pathfinders have estimated that, on average, there is a gap of £35,000 between the amount of compensation existing homeowners receive for their home when subject to a Compulsory Purchase Order and the cost of buying a suitable alternative property.<sup>10</sup> Such an affordability problem is an inevitable consequence of a programme whose primary aim is to increase house prices in an area. (v)

buddleia

pioneer

These particulars  
to fig. 13, and to  
the

As can be noted from quotes taken from various sources, there was an undervaluing of local knowledge, and an underestimation of the power of community. It was often deemed too slow to adequately consult the public on the future of their areas, and a demolish now, ask later policy seems to have been adopted in some areas.

What has been lost can be seen in those places, like Middleport, where the regeneration scheme was slow in getting off the ground, and in places did not get to the demolition phase. The Port Street Housing Scheme demonstrates the viability, and potential that those streets and streets of houses may have had.

Attributed often to the communities themselves for failing to take up the opportunity of Pathfinder quickly enough, some of the Edwardian and Victorian Housing stock which ended up being targeted was still standing in 2011 when the scheme was scrapped by the newly elected coalition government. A combination of community resistance, rising house prices (making the compulsory purchasing of property much more costly) and heritage issues, have, in the long run, secured the future of some of the housing stock in these areas. The interim between scrapping the scheme, and seeking alternatives for in limbo communities like

Middleport and the Portland Street Estate in Hanley, saw the communities there living through trying times. In Middleport, the Princes Trust Heritage Scheme made a difference to Port Street, and in Hanley, the £1 home scheme has seen the renovation of 33 homes across 4 streets, but the effect on the communities living there of the Pathfinder will be much longer lasting.

Bespoke, and individualised approaches are being taken in these areas now, in the wake of Pathfinder; and in both cases mentioned, it is community resilience which will bring these areas back from the brink.





From the start, pathfinder showed an appetite for destruction. The classic English terraced house was demonised as 'obsolete'. Whole neighbourhoods were declared surplus at the keystroke of a consultant's lap-top. Bureaucratic arrogance reduced communities to inmates of a 'ZOO' - Zone Of Opportunity - for house-builders. Statisticians assumed compulsory purchase and eviction for demolition were acceptable measures for householders in a property-owning democracy. Quite predictably, the cure turned out worse than the disease. (iii)

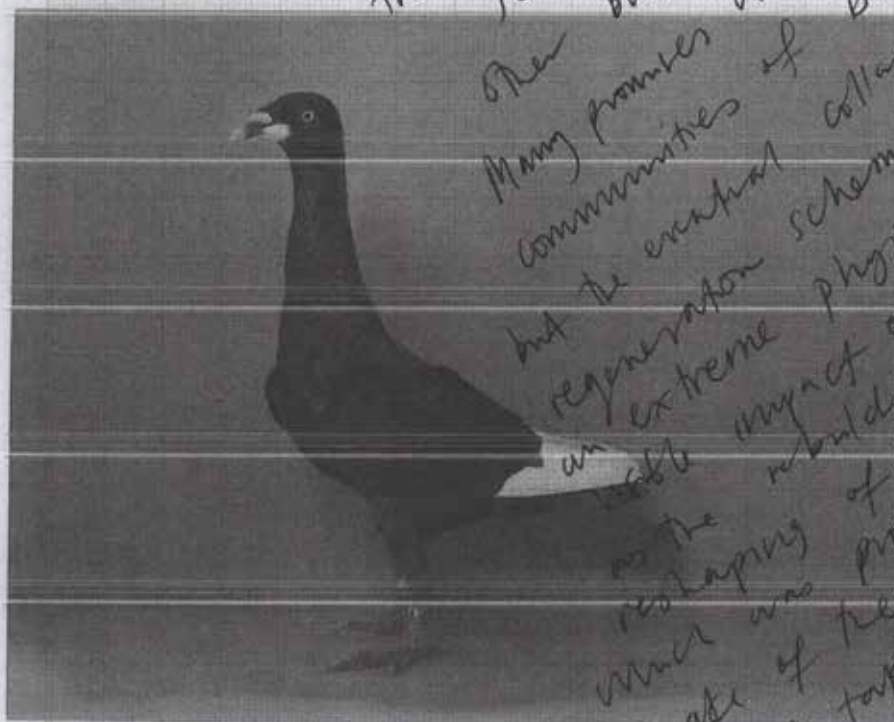
Demolitions: By the end of 2006-07, just over 10,000 properties had been demolished, representing around 1.2 per cent of the stock of housing in pathfinder areas. Far fewer dwellings have been constructed, although it is clear that the rate of HMR-funded new supply has been increasing. Around 1,200 newly built properties have been at least partly funded, by HMR, the majority of these (835) on sites made available by way of HMR funding. Over 60 per cent of this new housing was delivered during 2006-07; confirming that the pathfinders are well into the phases of their plans that are providing new, replacement housing. (iv)

Plants like pansies, geraniums and other plants will brighten the greyest of city roads, and can be grown in wheelbarrows, baskets and tubs.



The area includes one of the Government  
 Pathfinder areas, which focused on  
 Housing Market Renewal, which was  
 managed by Renew North Staffs until  
 March 2011, when funding ended. This  
 saw Middleport being designated as an  
 Area of Major Intervention (AMI) in Stoke-on-Trent.  
 The designation of Middleport (on of our  
 main focus areas) as an AMI alongside  
 the Pathfinder scheme saw large and  
 scale buildings in the area.  
 Many promises were made to the  
 communities of Burslem  
 but the eventual collapse of left  
 regeneration schemes have left  
 an extreme physical and  
 visible impact on the area,  
 as the rebuilding and  
 reshaping of the area  
 which was promised in  
 the wake of the demolition  
 has not taken place!

German Long Face Tumbler



German long face tumbler is a slender upright breed. 1

2012/03

BURSLEM - MIDDLEPORT COMMUNITY PEN

(iii)



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- (v) National Audit Office: REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL. 2007. Department for Communities and Local Government Housing Market Renewal. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/070820.pdf>.
- (vi) BBC News. 2011. Middleport empty homes may be left standing. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-14256685>.

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# Reinforced Edges

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In October 2018, I met Nick Bentley at Longport Train Station. In the pouring rain and thrashing wind, we walked up towards Middleport to visit a place he had not been back to since he watched his former home being demolished seven years previous.

In July 2011, Nick's house was the last one standing on Trubshawe Street, on the edge of Middleport and Longport, in a small estate cut off from the larger area by Steelite, an international tableware factory - iterations of which have operated on the site since William Dunn and Thomas Wood Bennett invented the reinforced plate edge in 1875 and opened the first factory to manufacture hotel porcelain.

Nick had lived in the house for nine years. A significant amount of time, but he was a relative new-comer compared to some of his neighbours who had lived there for many decades. When the Pathfinder Housing Market Renewal Programme set in, there were constant heated negotiations between residents and the Council about the compensation they would receive. As

homeowners accepted the deals one by one the estate started to decline, empty boarded up houses blighted the streets and nefarious activities began to creep into the area. This was a war of attrition. By the end, Nick says, residents wanted to leave and the Council deals became a way out.

As we approached the compound where the houses had once stood, we peered through gaps in the wood panels to see the mounds of scrubby grassland edged by a cracked and potholed pattern of roads. Further on we see the sign for Trubshawe Street still in place outside the enclosure- a sign to nowhere. Nick and I expected not get closer than this, but a little further on we found the gates to the site wide open, as a portion of it was being used by Steelite as a temporary carpark.



There were no signs telling us otherwise, so we ventured in. Nick and I walked onto the estate to what was Bridgewater Street. On the corner we found a den, likely that of a fox that had set up home



at what was 37 Shirley Street amongst the rubble, silt and shraff, protected on all sides by hoardings or canal. We walked onwards to the top of Trubshawe Street where Nick and I stood for a minute to take in the view. A shallow grassy drift had begun to prospect across the tarmac, nearly meeting in the middle where Nick's house had once stood. The human constructure of the site was being eroded and claimed by nature.

When we reached the spot where Nick stood seven years previous, we tried to pinpoint where his rooms, windows, walls and doors had been from photographs he had brought with him. He told me he had rescued one brick from the house to keep as a memento.

During our walk, Nick's recollections were both measured and pragmatic; what had happened, had happened. He was happy where he lived now- it was closer to work. Nick's attitude, however, is not

typical of those displaced by Pathfinder, and it was no coincidence that he had been the only former resident to agree to walk with me- to recount his memories of that time in the presence of absence. Many others had declined. It was still too raw.

As the wind and rain redoubled their efforts, and drops began to drip off our noses, we sought shelter in The Middleport Pottery Tea Room. In the following days, I thought a lot about Trubshawe Street. I contacted Steelite to ask for permission to explore it further and to ask what their plans were for the site. I was swiftly denied permission and no further information was forthcoming,

When researching the site's history I discovered that exactly 100 years before Trubshawe and its neighbouring streets were demolished, The Company that is now Steelite equipped Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole, free of charge, in return for the right to advertise the tableware as being tough and durable. It is probably still there, buried under a century of ice and snow; Relics of human toughness and durability, relics of life amid utter desolation.



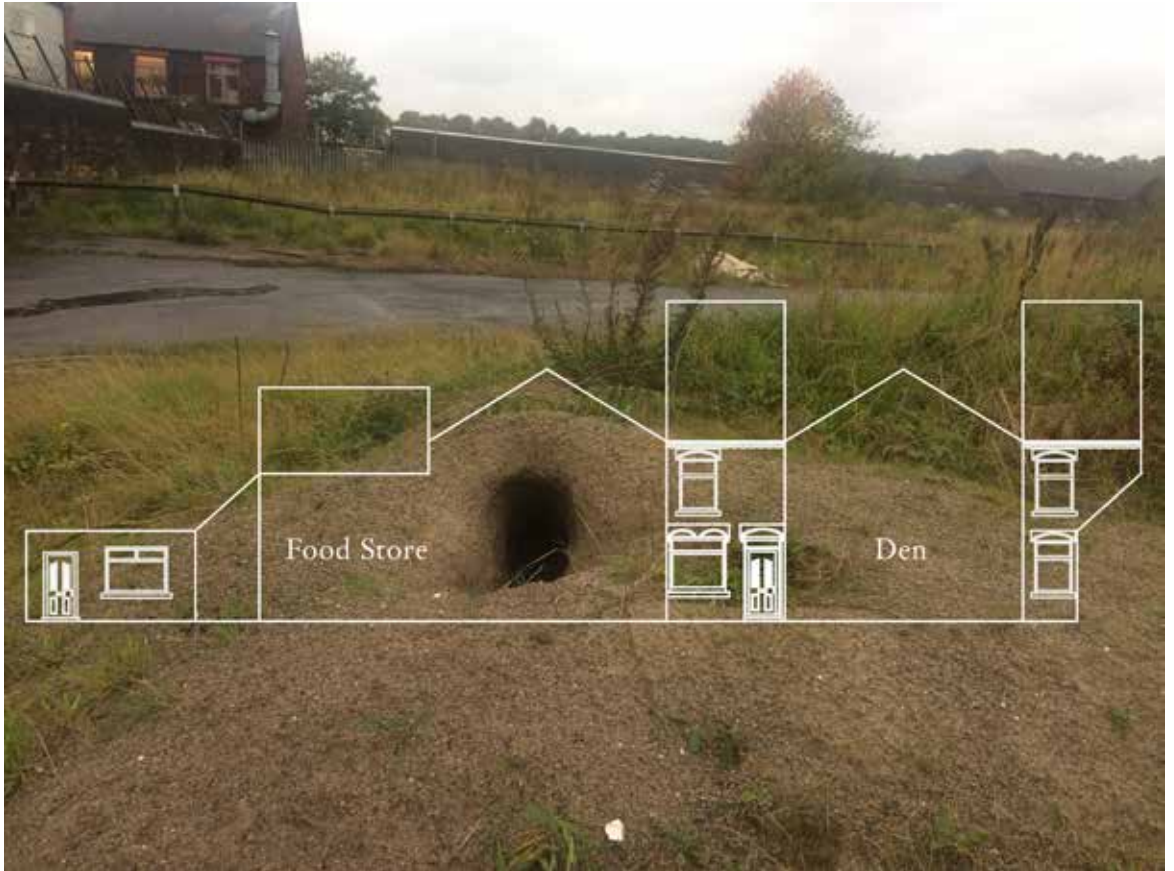


*At Home*

3 Trubshawe Street  
27/07/2011  
Nick Bentley

37 Shirley Street  
12/10/2018





# 104 Rose-bay Willowherb *Chamaenerion angustifolium*

WILLOWHERB  
 FAMILY

A tall plant with narrow leaves, growing spirally from tall stems. When flowering it is unmistakeable with its handsome spikes of large pinkish-purple flowers, each with a white patch on the lower lip. Unlike willowherbs, the long pod which opens to release fluffy white seeds.



SIZE To 2m

**HABITAT** Rocky places, scree slopes, woodland clearings, disturbed ground, industrial sites. Common coloniser of burnt ground, especially in clear-felled woods.

**RANGE** Throughout, but rare in most of Ireland (except parts of N and W Scotland).

**FLOWERS** July-September

Past, Present, Preserved, Pressed Together  
 Baskeyfield House Creative Coffee  
 Jenny Harper  
 July 2018



WILLOWHERB  
FAMILY

## Enchanter's Nightshade

*Circaea lutetiana* 105

Named after Circe, the enchantress of Greek legend who turned Odysseus' men into pigs by giving them magic potions, common woodland plant with rounded leaves, and flowers with small white tubular corolla. Each flower has a cross.



SIZE To 70 cm

HABITAT Woods, hedges and banks; shady corners of gardens

RANGE Throughout England, Wales, Ireland and SW France; also in Central and N S

FLOWERS June



# Middleport Club

## 1919-2018

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On the 13th June 2018 the last remaining building on the edge of the former Slater Street area of Middleport was being torn down. I stood on the corner of Navigation Street watching as the metal mouth of the digger chewed up bricks, plaster and wood and spat them out into rough piles. I went over and asked for a brick, the workman happily, if bewilderedly, obliged. I felt like a stand-in for the many people I thought would

mourn in this moment, for a club which once had 1000 members, but which had long since closed its doors. The shell of the Middleport Sports & Social Club-nee Middleport Working Men's Club- is to make way for a wider turning angle so that buses coming over the canal from the expanded and rebranded 'Ceramic Valley Enterprise Zone' can travel through Middleport, imbibing and decanting some of the proposed 9000 new workers







in technical ceramics, automotive engineering and energy production. My mind stretched back to a conversation I had with some of the elderly residents of nearby Baskeyfield House, who told me they rarely leave the complex since the buses stopped coming. Would work on the new service be completed in their lifetimes?

A few months later I returned to the cleared but fenced-off site where the club once stood. The rubble and undulating ground was a texture map of burnt orange- the clay earth, broken brick and saggar-heavy aggregate made the site look more like Mars than Middleport. I thought about the brick I had taken, and who would care that it had been saved. In 1971, American architect Louis Kahn famously said, “*even a brick wants to be something*” (i). Being in possession of this redundant example, made from

local marl clay and distributed by the Potteries Brick Company to the site 99 years earlier, I felt that, for its 100th year, the right thing to do was to try to give it something to be again.

Middleport Matters Community Trust seemed to me like the perfect custodian of the brick. This group of dedicated residents has been rebuilding in the wake of destruction for the past four years, both physically- in the streets and green spaces- and psychologically in the hearts and minds of their fellow residents. Surely, as their plans grow in ambition, these folks will find the brick something else to be.

In the interim, the brick is a muse- a specimen of a dying age of industrial social relations; An object with a cyclical story of man- labouring in the earth for clay and coal, bricks being made from

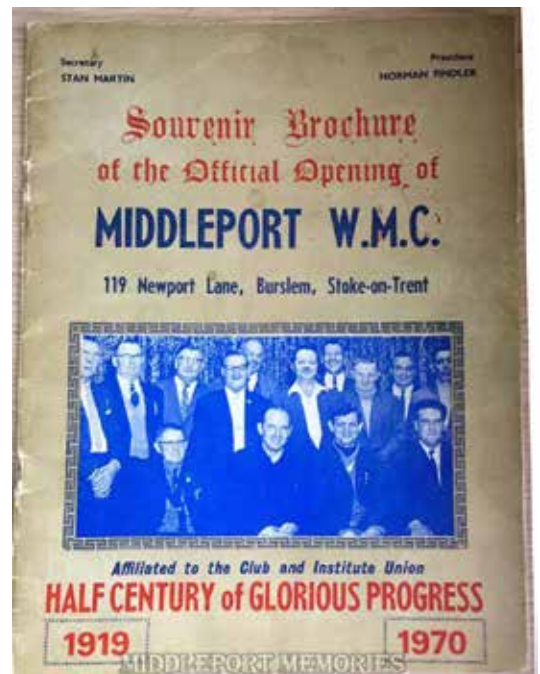
these mined resources and buildings like the social club being built from those bricks to service the labouring man and his family.

As a boy, Chris Morris went to the club with his parents on Wednesday nights for the bingo, where he was usually left to his own devices with a bottle of Hubbly Bubbly and a packet of crisps. Chris recalls one evening being picked on by an older lad who pinned him to the floor with his knees. Having carefully studied professional wrestling moves on the TV program 'World of Sport', he eased his hands under the lad and used his elbows as levers. With remarkable ease, Chris launched the lad high into the air. Unfortunately, the lad landed on an old radiator, wounding his head on a temperature control valve which was missing its knob. The lad's head bubbled with blood. Chris fled to the Bingo Room for his parents as the bingo caller announced the drama over the microphone. The lad was on his way to hospital, Chris thought he had killed him. In the end the lad was OK and nothing more was said about the incident. With the collapse of the first wave of industry this cyclical story- from man to

marl to brick to club to man, from man to son- has all but ended, but what now for the sons of Middleport? Are they destined to be passengers on the bus to the Ceramic Valley Enterprise Zone I wonder? I hope so. It's not just the brick that longs to be to be part of something

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ELEVATIONS OF A BRICK







## XI

- 27 Thirty spokes  
Share one hub.

Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart. Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Adapt the nothing\* therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room.

- 27a Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use.

Proverb from Tao Te Ching  
Attributed to Lao Tzu  
601BC-531BC

\* In all three cases, by 'nothing' is meant the empty spaces.









*5 Minutes of Middleport Park*

22nd August 2018

Audio

[www.nicwinstanley.com/atn](http://www.nicwinstanley.com/atn)





[www.nicwinstanley.com/atn](http://www.nicwinstanley.com/atn)