



Southern Arts

Number 20

Berkshire/Hampshire/Isle of Wight/Oxfordshire/West Sussex and Wiltshire December 1975 Diary and Review 15p



inside: Bampton Arts Centre

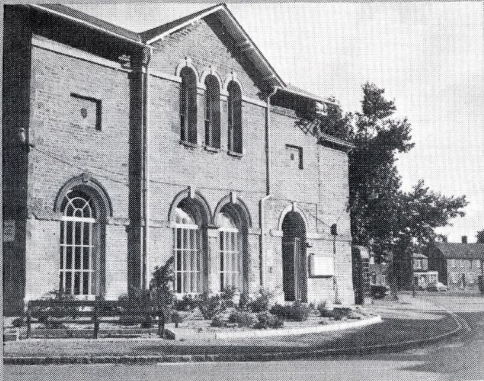
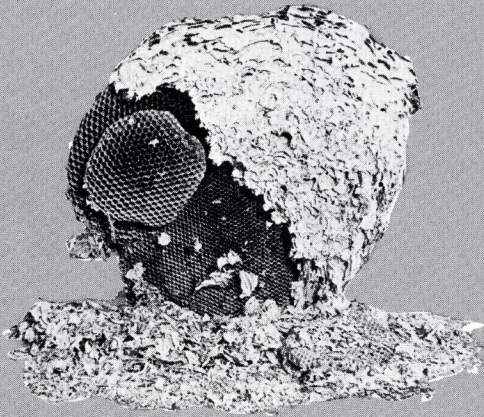
W.O.A.A.

You can normally tell from the start whether a local arts council is going to work or not. In very general terms the ones who write and say 'We'd like an arts council, what do we do?' are the ones who won't make it while the ones who ring up and say 'We've started up an arts council, will you come to our third meeting next week and tell us how much you're going to give us' are the ones who will.

Christopher Kerr

West Oxfordshire Arts Association and its first child the Bampton Arts Centre were conceived and born some months before my arrival here two years ago, but I did go to their first AGM that October and heard very plainly the healthy squalling of the energetic and precocious infant. It was a fine and archetypal example of how a group of lively and likeminded people can stretch circumstance and opportunity to get what they want. In December 1972, an art exhibition had been organised by a local college and put on in Bampton Town Hall, which had only recently been refurbished. Some local artists felt that the experiment should be repeated regularly and persuaded the parish council to let the Town Hall be used as an arts centre. The interests of the pioneers were primarily to do with the visual arts and so it was natural that early events were exhibitions of pottery and painting and sculpture. It's a fact that no arts centre in the world caters equally for all the arts; each has a bias and it's right that that bias should reflect the enthusiasms of the centre's organisers. At Bampton, unsurprisingly, the enthusiasm attracted others and by May 1973 the W.O.A.A. had been formed. Under the chairmanship of John Birkhead, Head of Design at Radley College, panels dealt with art, music, theatre, literature, film and photography, promoting in the two and a half years since then a mighty impressive selection of events.

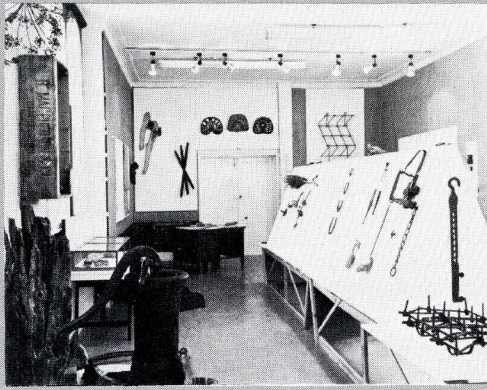
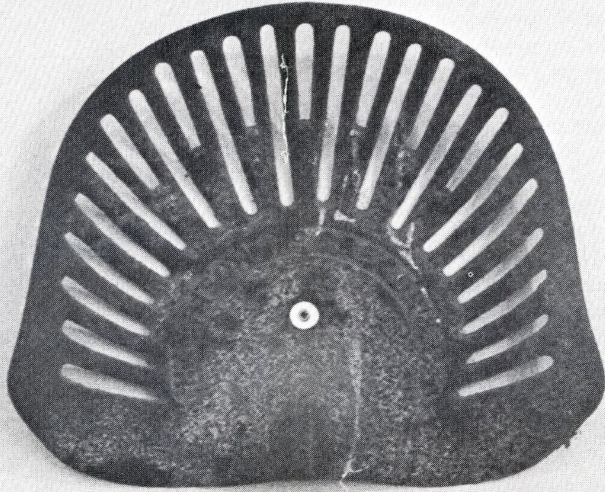
The town hall is small and consists of little more than an elegant upper room which makes a delightful gallery, where exhibitions continue to be the principal fare. But what exhibitions! Local artists are featured, of course, but there've also been drawings and paintings from private collections in the county, Oxfordshire photographers, craft-demonstrations (and not just your corn-dollies and pottery but glass-blowing, ceramics, wood engraving and many others). A fascinating show recently featured the photographs of Peter Espé on the theme Now and Then and in July a 'Jackdaw' exhibition provided the opportunity to show items whose attraction was incidental to their purpose. Word swiftly got round the local villages and before long people were bringing in all manner of old farm implements dug out from ancient chests and attics. Charlie Mussett, the American chairman of the Art Panel, is looking forward to a sort of overdue apotheosis next summer when he is planning to arrange an exhibition of outdoor sculpture by American Artists in honour of the Bicentennial.



top: Wasp's nest from Jackdaw exhibition, above Bampton Arts Centre



above: Ford radiator, below: iron tractor seats, from Jackdaw exhibition



above: general view of gallery

The town hall is in the very centre of Bampton and suffers accordingly from traffic noise; enough, some would say, to kibosh the idea of drama and music. Not so. Local churches and schools, private houses and the RAF community centre at Brize Norton have provided the venue for recitals of organ music, poetry and prose, drama by National Theatre players, carols, an evening of Victorian music, and concerts by inter alia, the A Capella Choir and Anton Weinberg. The literature panel are in the throes of their third West Oxfordshire writing competition and with a panache which one envies and respects have demonstrated yet again their skill at local fund raising by coaxing over £100 of prize money from two of the main clearing banks.

If there's a suspicion that the W.O.A.A. is an elite band of well-heeled intellectuals playing at patrons, it's misplaced. Certainly the nucleus of the animators are newish to the area but their concern for the more longstanding residents is unarguable. Increasingly the Arts Centre is attracting the villagers; of the nearly 400 members, new joiners easily outstrip the departures and for local children the new exhibition at the town hall is a regular port of call on the way home from school. Where there are local celebrities the Association has snapped them up: among the judges for the writing competition this year are P. J. Kavanagh, Andrew Osmond (co-founder of Private Eye and now smiling happily at the reviews of his new novel *Saladin*) and Brian Winston, whose vast knowledge of the media is regularly put to work helping local kids produce a newspaper of inspired wit and imagination.

John Birkhead, the mover and coordinator of all the divergent energies in the young association, died at the beginning of April. I met him at most half a dozen times but could hardly fail to see that the possibility of the Arts Centre's contraction or failure had simply never occurred to him. His limitless drive and good humour are, of course, badly missed but, as tributes go, perhaps he'd be pleased with the knowledge that the organisation he set up is still running with that same smooth controlled dynamic. It's as hard to think of Bampton Arts Centre without thinking at once too of John's wife Margaret who dealt in the early days with publicity and simply keeping things going and of Ann Manly who until recently so efficiently shouldered the vast secretarial and administrative burden of the association, and who, despite ill-health, continues to act as adviser and co-ordinator.

The structure of centrally-funded but autonomous panels is one that brings a smile of relief to the lips of arts administrators and the inventiveness of the programme is a constant surprise; hard to accept that there's not a single salaried member or full-timer in the whole set-up.

New members, of course, are always needed and especially group members. If you're interested in joining or in finding out more about the Association's work, drop in at the arts centre or write to: Brian Mulliner, The Poplars, Alvescot, Oxon. Telephone: Carterton 841932.