

# Going out to people

Shirley Toulson on some rural arts centres

A company of amateur actors touring playgroups in Suffolk; a bring your own poem poetry reading in a North Devon seaside town; an art gallery housed in a re-furnished old town hall in West Oxfordshire: these are all examples of community arts. Yet nobody really knows quite what they are meant to understand by this umbrella term.

A working party on community arts, set up recently by the Arts Council, found it futile to attempt to arrive at a satisfactory definition of the object of its study. This is hardly surprising, for community arts centres have grown in various ways to meet various needs, and no two are alike. The only thing they have in common is that they are all reluctant and disgruntled grandchildren of the Arts Council, looking for sustenance from the coun-

cil's immediate offspring, the regional arts associations. They are annoyed that official patronage is given predominantly to established and expensive art forms, with opera and ballet companies heading the list, and they justify their complaints with a historical perspective on the role of the arts.

A conference of people involved in arts centres and community arts groups was held last May. They agreed that "the Arts Council was not useless but inadequate. Its view of art as a self-evident source of pleasure appealing to well-formed Taste derives from the eighteenth century. Its view of the public as a passive mass to whom works of art, embodying spiritual values, should be made available, belongs to the tradition of public works and benevolence stemming from the nineteenth century. But the estab-

lishment of the idea that arts activities should begin with the human experience of the sixty-odd million inhabitants of this Island—which belongs to the thinking of our own time—has not become part of the Arts Council's interpretation of its Charter."

This is not quite fair. The Arts Council working party viewed community arts in the light of the council's aim "to develop and improve the knowledge understanding and practice of the arts". That is exactly what the various community arts centres are doing.

The trouble for the administration is that in so doing they blur or ignore the conventional distinction between professional and amateur; they interpret "arts" very widely; and they have no hesitation in putting more value on individuals than on artefacts. The

impatient may consider that their activities are more the concern of the Department of Health and Social Security than the Arts Council and indeed the working party felt that aspects of community arts should be part of a social worker's training. I used to think so, too, until I took a closer look at some of these centres' activities, and came away with a different view.

In rural areas, where access to the established art forms is remote or occasional, it is silly to imagine that people unfamiliar with music, theatre and the visual arts will rush to take advantage of the few opportunities that come their way. Suffolk people who are genuinely concerned to foster "the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts" at grass roots level, resent the amount of money which the Eastern Arts Association pours into the Aldeburgh Festival. This, they maintain, is really a national event, drawing its audience as much from London as from East Anglia. They believe that a regional arts association should be more concerned with the people in its immediate neighbourhood.

The East Anglian Arts Trust is a loosely associated group of people who stimulate and help to organize various para-artistic activities in the villages around Lowestoft, Bungay and Beccles. If they have a geographical centre it is the Lowestoft Theatre Centre, a local education authority project directed by Patrick Redsall, drama adviser for East Suffolk. The playgroup drama, which I have already mentioned, comes from here, and so does the mobile cinema unit which takes films to villages, lacking both cinemas and film societies.

The Eastern AA is beginning to take a constructive interest in the trust's activities. Tangible evidence of this is the video equipment, which will be kept at Lowestoft and used in the villages to record events and compile documentaries.

The trust is best known for its organization of an annual event, which is in danger of becoming as much a national matter as the Aldeburgh Festival. This is Barsham Fair.

The fair is held on the three days of the August Bank Holiday and has been running since 1971. This year over thirty thousand people came to this "alternative medieval fair", many of them in the appropriate costume. You can get in more cheaply in a sack, and the organizers believe that unusual dress is a great way to break down artificial barriers between people. This festival has always been astoundingly free of any sort of violence. The police are only afraid that the organizers will not get a fair going for 1975. They worry about the crowds of people who are bound to turn up in Barsham regardless.

Meanwhile Simon Loftus, one of the first instigators of the fair, was still recovering from last summer's efforts, when I talked to him at the end of October. Which is not to say that the activities of the trust are suspended. Its members are endlessly busy about their main task of setting up activities for the people in the villages. "We should always go out to them rather than expect them to come to us", says Bede Faulkner, one of the trust's most active founder members.

The idea of going out to people is common to all rural arts centres, for obvious considerations of transport if for no other reason.

Although the Beaford Centre in North Devon, which was set up by the Dartington Hall trustees in 1966, did not actually come to the idea of community arts until 1970, it is still one of the pioneers of the movement.

Beaford has its own community arts organizer, Ros Birks, and for the past year the community arts activities have been running on the same financial and administrative basis as the other Beaford projects. In fact it is not easy for a visitor to discover where one sort of activity begins and the other ends. All the Beaford schemes dovetail into each other. Last year, Tim Porter, the Beaford composer in residence, wrote the music for a musical play set in imaginary Hardy country, and this was presented by amateur actors and musicians in Okehampton and Hatherleigh.

In a sense, the community arts activities run parallel with the work Beaford has always been doing with the Orchard Theatre, its own touring company of professional actors. Like most established arts centres Beaford encourage artists of all sorts to stimulate active participation among local people. The poetry and music sessions at the Lobster Pot in Instow are a long-standing example.

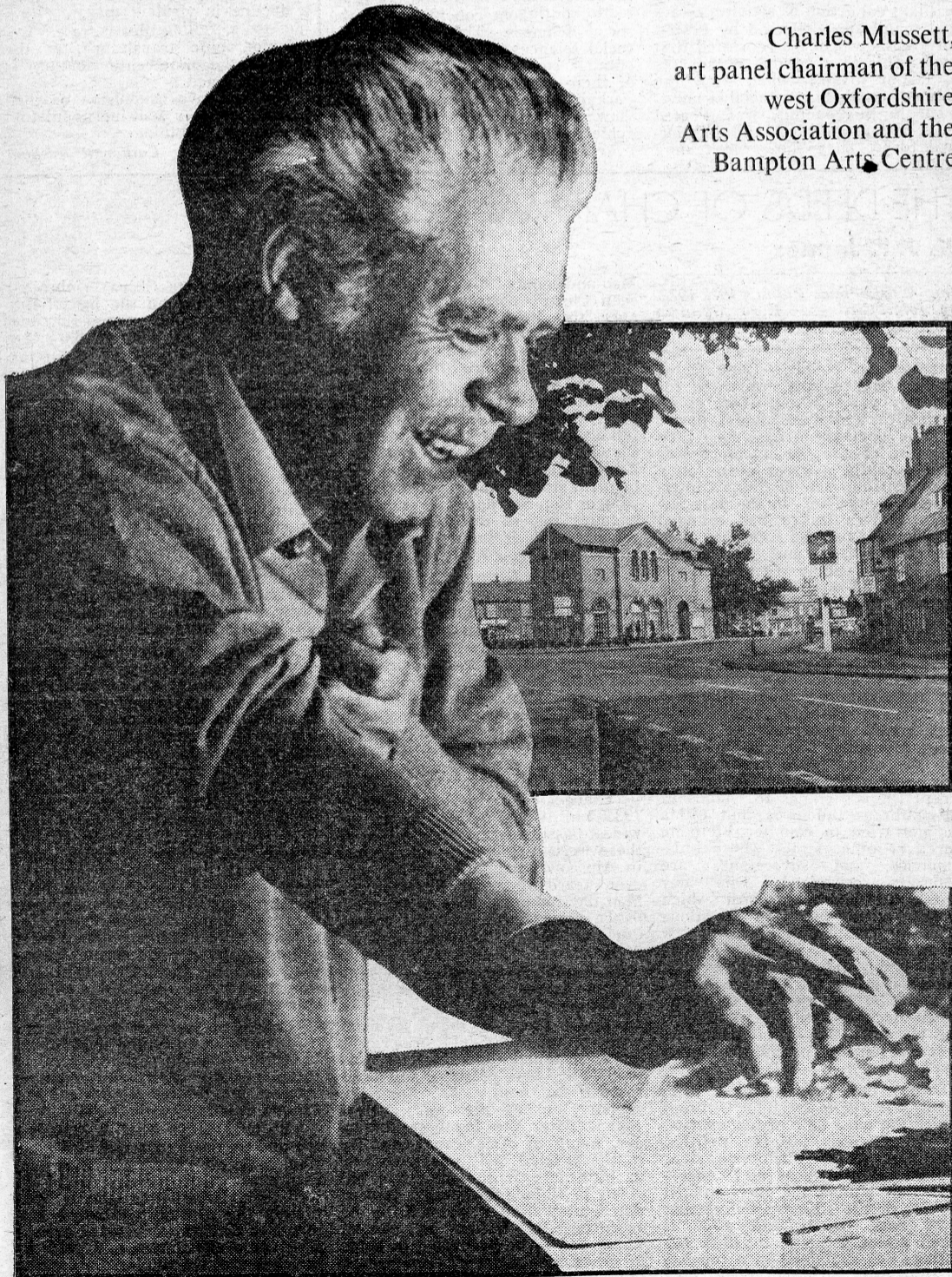
When it comes to local history, the tables are turned. It is then that the people give ideas and material to the arts centres. Forget about the dusty records that are only of interest to a few solitary antiquarians, and consider turn-of-the-century photographs of workers on Devon farms (these have been collected by the Beaford Centre, and are at present touring the country); a documentary play based on Suffolk life, which the Lowestoft Theatre Centre is working on; or a newspaper compiled last summer holidays by the children of West Oxfordshire, which included pictures of the town hall decorated for Queen Victoria's jubilee and a crowd of Bampton Edwardians at church.

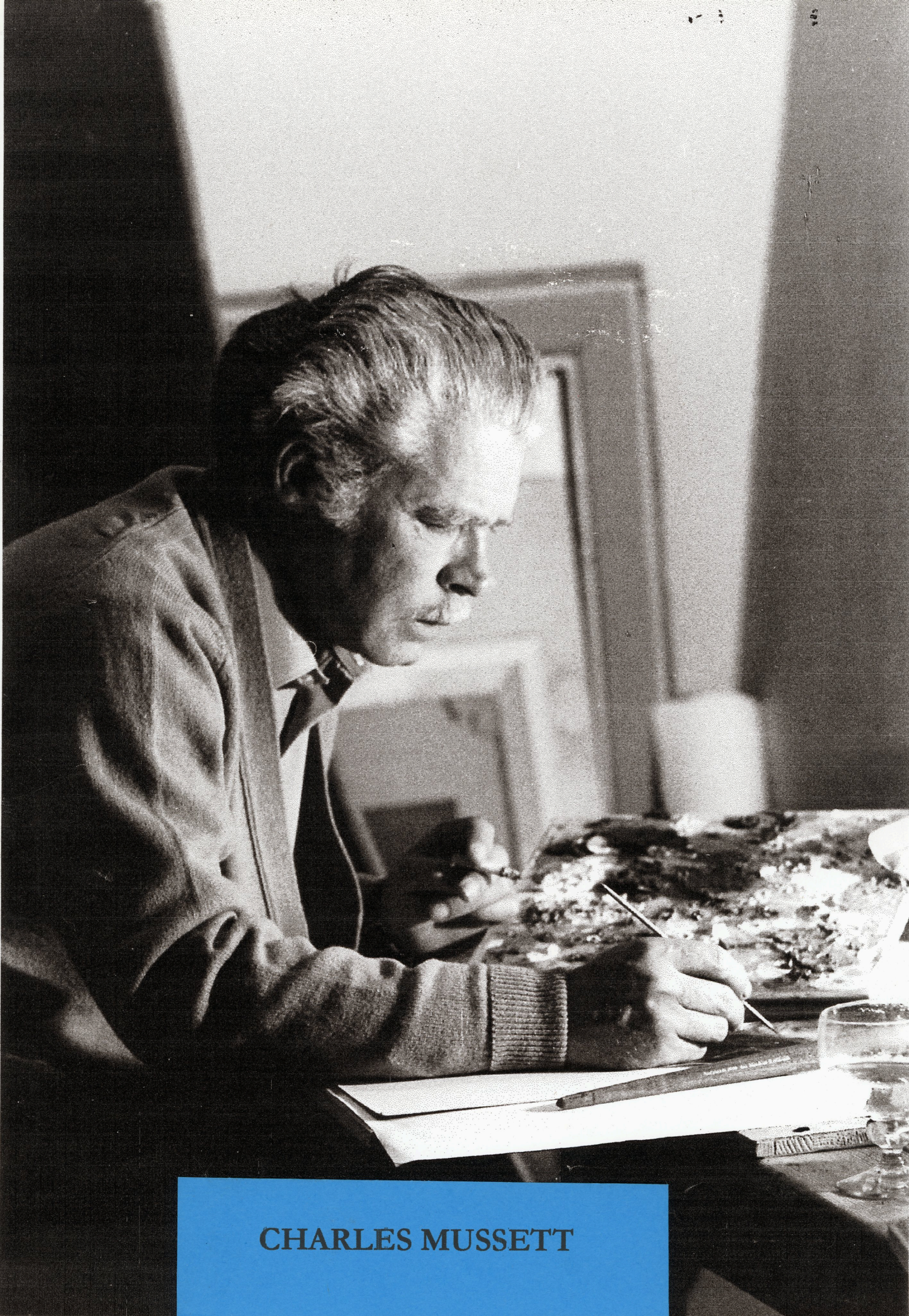
It is the old town hall that now houses the West Oxfordshire Arts Association, and where its exhibitions and events are staged. This association has evolved from the enthusiasm of John Birkhead and Charles Mussett, who both teach at Radley. The association is run through panels devoted to art, drama, film and photography, literature and music. Its programme of events for the winter season includes a craft fair, a children's book day, a clarinet recital and a film show on the theme of trains.

Like most other arts centres, Bampton receives some money through the local authority and some for specific projects through its regional arts association. Like all other community arts centres its vitality comes from the fact that it is autonomous, and this independence has to be balanced against the practical necessity for financial support.

The members of the Arts Council working party on community arts were sensitive to the need to achieve a proper balance of support. In their report they wrote "our feeling is that in this sphere more than any other, partnership between the local authorities, the Regional Arts Associations and the Arts Council is desirable and indeed essential". However, they look forward to a day when community arts, like libraries and museums, will be a service which local authorities are expected to organize. That solution would be fine in a few places, but I doubt if rural areas would be among them.

Charles Mussett,  
art panel chairman of the  
west Oxfordshire  
Arts Association and the  
Bampton Arts Centre





**CHARLES MUSSETT**



Charles Muesett & Peter Palumbo (Chairman Arts  
Council)  
in the WAAA Gallery 1989