

# BEND IN THE RIVER

## Market town regeneration

### In a few words...

Bend in the River is an organisation that exhibits contemporary British painting from a Georgian warehouse adjacent to the River Trent. It hosts five shows a year, four of which are solo. It is also the driving force behind an ambitious project at the redundant church of St John the Divine, Gainsborough, called Slumgothic. At the church it provides a vast arts project space plus community rooms for mixed use. To date, its art activities have included an artist residency project, subsequent video installation within the church and a Big Draw event.

It is a partner in the provision of a Flexible Learning Programme in conjunction with a local secondary school, and manages use of the annexed schoolroom by various community groups. These include a residents action group, a mental health art group and performing art group. It intermittently hosts workshop events in conjunction with artists that it works with.



**The Big Floor Draw at St Johns 2006**

(photo Andy Rawlins)

Both art gallery and church project are currently independently funded and receive no support from arts organisations or local authorities.

### The situation

Bend in the River is based on Bridge Street in Gainsborough in the north of Lincolnshire. The town is located within West Lindsey, and has been described as 'on the outside looking in, striving to overcome relative isolation and the dramatic changes to its traditional economies'. It has a population of 18,000 and an unemployment rate of between 4.5 and 7.5%. The South West Ward, where St John's church is located, is in the lowest 20% of the most deprived wards in England.

Bend in the River occupies 90sqm of the building its owners, Marcus and Hilary Hammond, restored over a period of 10 years. The warehouse is adjacent to the River Trent and was built in the eighteenth century. It is listed by Pevsner and is one of the oldest buildings in the town.



St John the Divine is a vast redbrick construction. The church was completed in 1882 and is described as Slumgothic in style.

**Main Gallery with paintings by Peter Cartwright** (photo Andy Rawlins)

It practiced High Anglicanism and was just part of an ambitious building programme that included schoolrooms and a poor house. It has been redundant since its closure in 2002 and was purchased by Marcus Hammond in 2005.

### **The idea**

Bend in the River's purpose is to encourage, develop, exhibit, promote and sell rigorous and intelligent art. It thereby aims to contribute to the wider critical debate that surrounds art practice and to develop and sustain a wide and inclusive audience.

The gallery's primary focus is contemporary painting, principally by British artists and often artists with an isolationist position.

Slumgothic activities at St John's extend the reach of BITR. Here, the aim is to advance creativity and the arts, particularly in relation to locality, community and regeneration. It looks down the other end of the telescope to the gallery by using artistic and social contexts and settings as its starting point.

### **Making it happen**

Bend in the River was founded and is directed by Marcus Hammond and Hilary Hammond, who first opened an art space in Gainsborough in 1996. They are both directors of Slumgothic, the organization that coordinates the activities at St John's. Other directors have been drawn from the local community and also from further afield, namely Sheffield.

The Bridge Street gallery operates on a commercial model with high levels of social entrepreneurship at its core. It survives on commissions from sales and is supported by the other commercial enterprises of its two founding directors.

The exhibition space at Bridge Street, which opened in the spring of 2005, is now open four days a week, a significant increase on the weekend opening that the Hammonds first gallery was restricted to.

Solo exhibition is the principal activity of BITR and while it previously hosted Arts Council touring exhibitions, it currently curates all of its own shows. Artists are sourced by the directors, and a relationship is established that can be in development for several years prior to exhibition.

The gallery promotes its artists outside of their exhibition in various ways including introduction to other spaces, display of work to individual clients outside of the gallery show, and at art fairs.

### **How it was done**

Bend in the River has been built up by the dedicated solo efforts of its two directors, and by a growing support network of likeminded followers and enthusiasts.

It works in similar fashion to the Fanzine. Enthusiasts seek the product out, forge an allegiance to it and commit time to traveling to see shows. They may subsequently commit time and expertise to help the organisation.

Most of what BITR does is bespoke. There is a heavy reliance on the vision of the directors, and on the commitment of the artist to the creative cause.

## The result

Over time Bend in the River has developed a sustainable model for independence. It has positioned art in a rural context that is not provincial, thereby providing a new experience for audiences as well as a context for discourse regarding a sense of the local.

It has also brought international quality and ambition to Gainsborough, provided a catalyst for intellectual dialogue and a model for the future of Gainsborough. All of these activities are a demonstration of possibility (Bowman, report cited below). BITR at Bridge Street and St John's create an appetite for ambition and energy: a future where previously there was cultural scarcity.



**Study for Procession: Michael Bowdidge**

(photo provided by the artist)

## The reasons for its success

In a recent report entitled 'East Midlands Rural Visual Arts Review', co-author Jason Bowman described BITR as a 'poetic gesture producing an appetite for energy and ambition, individual learning experiences, illustrations for the potential of art and the value of creativity...' He concluded that the gallery was 'a catalyst for the conceptual and physical regeneration and restoration of Gainsborough'.

Bend in the River has created:

A SPACE WHERE THINGS CAN HAPPEN

This is a unique achievement that has been homegrown from individual philanthropy, an extremely rare thing in a world of the public subsidy and state sponsorship.

## Further information

Contact: Hilary Hammond

Address: Bend in the River, 54 Bridge Street, Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, DN21 2AQ

Telephone: 01427 617 044

Email: [hilary.hammond@bendintheriver.co.uk](mailto:hilary.hammond@bendintheriver.co.uk)

Website: [www.bendintheriver.co.uk](http://www.bendintheriver.co.uk)

**This case study was originally procuded for the Culture in Rural Development website created by Culture East Midlands. EMARAN is grateful for the chance to share the case study from the selection on that site. To see the case study on that site, visit <http://ruralculture-em.org/site/list/place/lincolnshire>**

