



## **WITHY ARTS C.I.O.**

**A.G.M. – 21<sup>st</sup> November 2017.**

### **Chairman's Report.**

Withy Arts is holding its first AGM since receiving its registration as a charity on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2016. Still a 'very young' organisation, the attainment of registered charity status has opened up the potential to operate on a larger scale, both in terms of size and duration of projects planned and undertaken. It has also facilitated an ability to seek larger funding grants from a variety of sources but in particular, the Arts Council and the National Lottery, e.g. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the Big Lottery Fund.

The past year has seen Withy Arts seeking to develop and expand the good work carried out since its formation in November 2014. Its founder members and trustees shared a vision to work with a range of organisations which supported individuals who for various reasons, are faced with some profound challenges. These may have been brought about by difficult personal circumstances, life-changing events or learning disabilities. Being primarily an art, craft and design orientated organisation, with a strong leaning towards willow weaving and basketry skills, Withy Arts, appreciates the tremendous therapeutic benefits of partaking in artistic creativity and aims to reach these marginalised groups of people through the organisations which support them.

Norfolk has a rich and interesting heritage and much of the work undertaken through the Withy Arts projects is influenced by elements of local history and folklore. This approach brings together a rich 'tapestry' of individuals, organisations and artistic skills.

To date, support groups and organisations with whom Withy Arts has worked, include:

- Headway – supporting individuals who have suffered brain injury.
- Shine – which supports young people with learning disabilities.
- Leeway – Offering refuge to those who have suffered domestic abuse.
- Herbies – A Gt. Yarmouth Salvation Army Charity supporting vulnerable adults such as the homeless, and those on the streets coping with the effects of alcohol and drug abuse
- Barrington Farm – A working farm located at Walcott complete with art barn. The farm is designed and run as a facility for individuals with learning difficulties.
- Norfolk Museums Service – focussing particularly on the Time & Tide Museum, Gt. Yarmouth and Gressenhall Rural Life Museum.
- The Norfolk Archaeological Trust – the guardian organisation for Norfolk's listed ancient monuments.
- Friends of St. Benet's Abbey – A Norfolk Broads based group, set up to support and provide the public with information about the iconic site on the banks of the River Bure.
- The Broads Authority – The Broads management organisation which has worked with Withy Arts to provide a valuable source of willow.
- Independence Matters – an organisation providing day services to people in East Dereham with learning disabilities.
- MIND – Norfolk and Suffolk Mental Health NHS Trust – providing wellbeing services to people with mental ill-health.

At its inaugural meeting in 2014, Withy Arts appointed a board of trustees. Initially, this was a group of seven. Since then, it has had one resignation owing to personal circumstances but in order to better manage the demands brought about by becoming a registered charity, five new members have been co-opted onto the board. Their addition has provided a very welcome expansion to the range of skills and experience available to Withy Arts.

In addition to trustees, two project workers were given the responsibility of planning, managing and delivering the projects for which funding had been awarded. Initially, while Withy Arts was starting life as an Unincorporated Organisation, it was agreed that there was no reason why the two project workers could not serve on the board of trustees. However, as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, the trustees have had to revisit and amend their thinking in this respect. The trustees have also worked hard and agreed a range of policies covering such things as safeguarding, health & safety, volunteering, grievances, expenditure and conflicts of interest. The most recent is an Open Recruitment Policy which deals with securing the services of project workers for significantly larger projects.

An important tool in publicising Withy Arts and its projects, is its website [www.withyarts.org](http://www.withyarts.org). As well as providing a record of past projects, it also provides a blog facility so that interested parties can be kept informed of the progress and achievements of current projects.

With regards to completed projects, these can be looked back upon as being highly successful in many ways. Obviously, the experience and pleasure gained while sharing time with the target groups has etched a lasting impression on the project workers. Detailing all the projects would make this report unnecessarily long particularly when interested parties can access them via the website. However, two which from the chairman's perspective, really stand out are, 'Awakening the Ludham Dragon,' which seemed to inspire some wonderful involvement at all levels, from the artists at Barrington Farm. In addition, the project received tremendous publicity by providing a very striking visible presence at the annual service at St Benet's Abbey with The Bishop of Norwich in attendance. Not only did the bishop bestow his blessing on the project but he also took time to speak to some of the artists as well as trustees and project workers. In the days following, pictures of the Withy dragon (or Ludham Wyrn) appeared in the local press and on social networking sites. So successful was this project, that Norfolk Archaeological Trust, Broads Authority and Friends of St. Benets, expressed a wish for further project work with Withy Arts. Hopefully, suitable funding will be forthcoming to enable a new project to materialise which will be part of the abbey's millennium celebrations next year. Initial ideas are beginning to come to mind with the craft group at Gt. Yarmouth's D.I.A.L., suggested as a possible source of artists.

Another area of overwhelming success has been the projects inspired by the very substantial Lorina Bulwer sampler. Lorina, who found herself condemned to the workhouse in Gt. Yarmouth, spent hours sewing some very lengthy 'rants' at what she perceived as the unfairness of her situation. These pieces of needlecraft inspired some quite moving work from the women in Leeway refuges, while participating in the 'Letter to Myself' project. Lorina's Legacy was a further project inspired by Miss Bulwer's needlework.

In referring to the workhouse, worthy of mention was the recent 'Workhouse Workshop' project which took place at Gressenhall Museum, itself a former workhouse. This linked the making of baskets with an occupation carried out by the former inmates. Two groups from East Dereham learnt the skills necessary for the construction of Zarzo baskets which were exhibited in an exhibition at Gressenhall. A volunteer for the project, an MA student from UEA, researched and produced a very impressive photo book, which showed early pictures of basket making.

Taking an all-embracing look at the work of Withy Arts leading up to the writing of this report, there has been much to celebrate and which can be revisited via the website. On the other hand, we have had to experience some disappointments. With the current economic climate and feelings of uncertainty running through the country at this moment in time, we hear reports of overwhelming demand for funding. This has made the competition for awards so much greater. We have failed to secure funding on two occasions. A tremendous amount of work went into planning an exciting three-year project entitled, 'Catching the Memories and Passing on the Skills.' This project tapped into the history of the long gone, Gt. Yarmouth herring fishing industry and plans included working with the Time and Tide Museum as well as former basket makers, holiday makers and members of the general public. Sadly, our funding application was unsuccessful. Although disappointed, the response from the HLF hinted that we could amend and resubmit our application. This is something presently under investigation by one of the trustees. We are also awaiting judgement on another application which will fund a three-year creative arts project, working mainly with Leeway's women's refuges.

Further plans for the future include working with the Broads Authority at Whitlingham Country Park near Norwich. The plan is that Withy Arts would teach volunteers the necessary skills to make willow hurdles and screens, some of which could be used at the site.

In conclusion, I think it fair to say that Withy Arts has much to celebrate. It is so easy to 'home in' on disappointments but feedback received from participants, project workers and staff of target groups would suggest that lots of individuals have benefitted from the therapeutic aspects of the projects and also been inspired by the various history lessons contained within them. Finding readily available funds will continue to prove a challenge. However, the trustees are currently exploring other options for generating funds.

As Chairman, I would like to express a huge vote of thanks to project workers, volunteers and trustees for all their dedication and hard work involved in moving Withy Arts forward and helping it achieve its aims.

Jerry Walker  
Chair of Trustees  
November 2017.