



ANDY FARR

PORTRAITS of COVENTRY

2 August – 30 August 2022

COVENTRY CATHEDRAL



COVENTRY
CATHEDRAL



INTRODUCTION

Portraits of Coventry is a celebration of the heritage, lives and memories of people who live in Coventry – Some have lived all their lives in the city, others came to find employment and others sanctuary.

Each painting is based on conversations Andy had with the participants over the past two years focussing on memories of their life in Coventry.

The project was funded by Orbit, a not-for-profit housing association.

Andy Farr is an award-winning artist with a studio in Coventry's Canal Basin. He graduated from Coventry University with an MA in Painting in 2017.

Polina



Polina came to Coventry recently to escape the conflict in Ukraine. She and several generations of her family have lived in the city of Kramatorsk in the Donetsk region of Ukraine.

Polina, like many Ukrainians, has a strong link to nature. She remembers as a child being taken for walks in the forest, fishing, and picking mushrooms. Her father has for many years been closely involved in a project to create a nature restoration zone, actively working to support flora and fauna. That forest has now been destroyed, part of the continuing tragedy resulting from Russia's invasion.

Making clothes is a family tradition dating back to WW2. Polina's great-grandmothers repaired and transformed old clothes into new ones, including some made from sky-blue parachutes, thereby earning something to survive during Nazi Occupation. Before fleeing Ukraine Polina studied

as a fashion designer and created clothes in Ukraine for 5 years and was getting ready to create her own environmentally responsible clothing brand.

Sadly, her father now wears the camouflaged clothes she designed for him to wear when protecting nature as he fights to defend Kramatorsk.

The background for Andy's painting is based on pictures and film Polina took of the forest before the war started, but now shows its destruction. He hopes that whilst the painting is sombre in tone it also conveys a sense of hope: A hope born out of the spirit and strength of the Ukrainian people to defend their country and embodied in the yellow of the dawn light cast across the landscape.

Roz



When Andy first talked to Roz she described how her family had moved to Birmingham from Uganda in the 1970s, and then how for family reasons she had needed to find a place of refuge. Coventry, with help from Orbit, became that place of sanctuary. Roz moved here in the early 90s with three young children and made a new life for them all.

Later, after the easing of lockdown, Andy was able to meet with Roz in her home. While he was talking with her, he felt that her bookcase was an amazing encapsulation of many of the things that Roz had experienced, and the new life she was able to build. It reflected on so many aspects of her life – interest in books and films, geography and ecology, cooking and home, sport and games. It contained mementos, cards, and photographs of her son's rescue dog, a Labrador/greyhound cross.

But, most important of all, pictures of her with her family.

One of the items on the shelf reads - “family is not an important thing, it is everything” and this seemed to say it all.

Andy, in his painting, sought to convey the richness and depth of Roz's life and interests, the warmth and expressiveness of her persona, but also reference some of the darker times that she has endured.

Trevor & Val



Trevor and Val grew up in the same area of Woodend in Coventry during the 1960s. When Trevor talked to Andy one comment in particular stuck in his head:

"We've always loved each other, and the garden as well..."

Andy knew straight away that their painting needed to capture both their love for each other and for gardening and nature. Trevor has created a community garden at Shortwood Court and told Andy about some of the plants that will be flowering through the year:

...daffodils, tulips, crocus, corn flowers, gypsophila, love in the mist, candy tuft, marigolds, gladiola, foxglove, evening stock, echinops, English lavender, gaillardia, roses and much more in the side garden a greenhouse, plus fruit and veg plot...

Trevor and Val have been involved with many

community related projects including the establishment of Coventry's first community fruit and veg shop "2T Fruity". As Val said at the time of opening:

"Since the last fruit and veg shop closed down in Riley Square, local people have been finding it difficult to get hold of good quality, fresh produce. This is especially true for older people or people who find it hard to travel far."

Trevor hasn't lived all his life in Coventry. In the late 70s he worked in West Berlin, and was a regular visitor through the checkpoints into East Germany, as he says *"interesting, but scary times"*, and woe betide anyone who took a camera across with them!

Colin



Colin moved to Coventry to work in the early 1970s as an Industrial Radiologist, X-raying engine castings for Alvis during the city's industrial heyday. Using machines that were many times more powerful than the X-rays used in hospitals to see through humans!

When he arrived in the city it was a very engineering orientated city with a vibrant manufacturing sector producing cars, bikes, watches, chemicals, textiles, aircraft components and armoured vehicles. As Colin says *"The wages were high and the opportunities were immense"*. Colin has many ongoing interests with involvement in the University as a part time lecturer, singing groups, theatre and as a church warden.

For the painting Andy wanted to convey something of the polymath that is Colin – combining his engineering background, through an image of an industrial X-ray, with a photograph taken by the BBC of Colin holding a skull - *"Alas poor Yorick, I knew him..."* - a link to his abiding interest in theatre. Colin remembers as a child coming to Coventry from Birmingham for pantomimes and later in life becoming involved in an over 50's drama group.

Daksha



Daksha is a force of nature, an active community organiser with a particular focus on the area around Foleshill. Her family moved to Coventry in 1972 as a result of the expulsion of Asians from Uganda by Idi Amin. Her father drew upon his expertise as a gold and silver miner to work at Keresley colliery. They moved into Jackson Close, where the family was embraced by community, despite tensions in some other areas of the City.

Times became harder after the death of her father when she was only 11, a time when Coventry started to feel like a dark and dangerous place for her. Daksha developed a level of inner resilience and independence that continues to be present in all her activities. This was one of the things that Andy wanted to capture in his painting.

The painting shows cosmopolitan influences that have helped to shape who Daksha is today. Its background is based on the pattern on a pocket square of her father's, combined with the vibrant yellow of her favourite Sari, a pendant from her "Nani Ma", Hindu ankle bells alongside Daksha herself wearing western clothes and overlaid with elements from a mural in Foleshill created by one of the community groups she helps to organise and inspire.

Angela



Angela was a nurse for over 40 years. She trained in London at the end of the 1950s, and whilst nursing hours didn't give her much free time, she remembers seeing Bill Haley, Cliff Richard – as an 18 year old, Adam Faith and the King of Rock and Roll himself.

She moved to work at the Walsgrave Hospital in Coventry after she got married. Angela talked to Andy about her career as a nurse for “Portraits of Coventry”. She was an expert phlebotomist – otherwise known as a “Bleeder”, so she was experienced at inserting needles!

Angela's is one of three generations of nurses, her mother was a Midwife, and her daughters then followed her into nursing. It was this family connection to nursing that is the inspiration for Andy's painting.

The painting includes a picture of Angela with her mother, taken just after she had been made a Sister, and one of her daughters in their uniform.

Steve



In 1987 when Coventry won the FA Cup Final Steve was there. He has still got the scarf and the ticket. He remembers Keith Houchen's amazing diving header that took the score to 2-2 before City won in extra time. And he remembers the celebrations that enveloped the City following the Sky Blue's victory, the one and only time in the club's history.

Steve told Andy about the match - *"I went to the FA Cup final in 87, we surprising everyone by beating Tottenham. I mean, we went to extra time and then it was 2-2, and then Gary Mabbutt scored an own goal and that meant 3-2 to us at the final whistle and Coventry won the cup"*.

Steve had spent his life in the city, born just off the Gulson Road. Sadly he was an early victim of the decline in Coventry's car industry in the early 1980s.

Steve is a mine of information about Coventry's past. His recollections reach all the way back to include those of his father who remembered

seeing Laurel and Hardy perform at the Hippodrome, now the site of the Transport Museum.

Steve inherited his father's musicality, modestly mentioning his Grade 7 piano almost in passing!

"I went to a lady called Mrs Russell. She died of a heart attack at age 68 when I was only 21.

So I gave up after that like an idiot and people have said it was a natural gift, you could have been like Liberace..."

For Steve's painting Andy wanted to immortalise the 1987 Cup victory. The painting features a Roy Lichtenstein inspired Pop Art version of "that goal" alongside Steve sporting his treasured FA Cup final scarf, and the score from his favourite piece of music – "The Dream of Olwen" composed by Charles Williams.

Peter



Peter's association with Coventry Cathedral dates back to before its consecration. As a 6 year old he remembers getting to worship through the building site. He and his family were at the consecration ceremony in 1962. His parents continued to be very involved in the life of the cathedral including as Church Wardens, and his mother was the Cathedral Bread maker for many years. Peter moved away to work in London but maintained his connection to the Cathedral through his family and recent involvement in the installation of new Sound & Streaming systems.

Peter has a love of practical sciences and following a degree in Electrical Engineering joined the BBC in 1976 as a project engineer in TV studios. He was closely involved in the developments of CEEFAX and world leading work in Access services for Digital Television, audio & VOIP and 8K TV. He has a passion for training and mentoring.

In 2012, Peter reformed the UK Section of the Society of Motion Picture & Television Engineers (SMPTE) and grew it to be the third largest SMPTE section within four years.

Peter's love of television dates from seeing the behind the scenes around the consecration - and he has been involved for many broadcasts from the cathedral – including Tangerine Dream in 1975 and BBC One on Christmas Day 2021

Andy's painting of Peter draws on both his life-long association with the Cathedral itself and his role as a TV Engineer. The painting composition interweaves the iconic tapestry of Christ in Glory by Graham Sutherland, which Peter remembers laid out on the floor before it was hung, with patterns and colours drawn from the SMPTE logo and CEEFAX pages.

Frances



Frances was “made in Coventry”. Her mother came here during WW2 from Glasgow along with her sister to work and trained to be a skilled machinist. Her parents met while working at a factory after the war.

Frances grew up in Willenhall, “*I remember the precinct, you could buy everything you ever needed ..it was like a village, everyone knew everyone. My grandparents came from Binley village, as they worked at Binley pit*”.

Frances got a job at Stoke G.E.C. At 16 she was one of the youngest wiring/assembly Inspectors working on telephone exchanges where normally you had to be 18. She has memories of meeting her mum, who was by then a specialised assembler working in a secure area working with gold, at the works canteen on Fridays and having lunch together. She also has fond memories of family get togethers with her parents, aunties, uncles, cousins, great-auntie and great-uncle.

Many of them were in the Binley Male Voice choir and so these gatherings often became family singalongs. Frances remembers them singing *I take you home again Kathleen* to her mum Kathleen.

Singing is now an important part of Frances’ life, but it wasn’t always the case. She overcame her fear of singing in front of others with the help of her late friend Maureen, and a confidence course. She has been a member of several Coventry choirs: Young at Hear, One Voice, Co-op Ladies Choir, Rock Choir, Willenhall Community Choir and Gosp-Ability Choir who performed at Coventry Cathedral.

In developing Frances’s painting Andy decided to build into the image one of the choirs she had sung with and Coventry Cathedral’s iconic baptistry window. Andy wanted to convey the sense of joy that singing gives to Frances and as she says “*The main thing about singing is the enjoyment you give to others.*”

Liam



When Liam talked to Andy one of the things they discussed was his time as an amateur boxer in Coventry in the 1970s, a period when most of the major companies in the city had a boxing section:

I started off with the Rootes amateur boxing club. We moved as Chrysler took over and by the time Peugeot took over, I was the secretary matchmaker of the club. It was quite big scene back then, virtually every Club in Coventry had a boxing section ... the only places that I know of now that still going is Bell Green and I think Willenhall, but all the others have gone.

One of Liam's opponents was Tony "Golden Boy" Walsh who was later to become a wrestler during the heyday of British Wrestling when it was a staple of Saturday afternoon TV.

Liam moved to Coventry as a child during the war

from Ireland. After ending his boxing career, he took up crown green bowls reaching the All-England Finals. He was married for 55 years to Mary, who sadly passed away seven years ago. Liam still talks to her every day and mourns her passing.

Andy was able to meet and photograph Liam outside and the pose he chose for the painting was a reflective one. Capturing Liam's tattoos was an important part of the image, as well as his wife and daughter's names he also has one that dates back to 1954, created by Jessie Knight, Britain's first female tattooist.

Alongside the 2021 painting Andy has also painted Liam based on an archive picture from the 1970s.

Rene



On the night of Thursday 14 November 1940 ‘a bright moonlit night’ the City of Coventry was bombed into ruins over a sustained eleven-hour period. An estimated 568 people were killed that night, and Coventry lost its great medieval Cathedral, central library, market hall, hundreds of shops and public buildings and much of the city’s industry was destroyed.

That night Rene was sheltering only half a mile away from the Cathedral in the cellar of the Golden Cup pub on Far Gosford Street.

Rene celebrated her 90th birthday in 2021 and her memories of Coventry include celebrations as well as sadness: VE Day, the Coronation and the times when the Queen visited Coventry.

Rene worked for a variety of companies in Coventry from the age 14 when she started work operating machinery through to when she worked at the Walsgrave Hospital in CSSD sterilising the “instruments of torture” as she called them.

Andy’s painting of Rene includes references to that night during the Coventry Blitz as well as her 90th birthday which she celebrated during the social distancing of lockdown.

Dot



Dot was born in Coventry on Little Park Street in 1935. When she spoke to Andy for “Portraits of Coventry” they talked about many of the events she had witnessed over the past 80 years - her father’s lucky survival of the bombing of the Coventry Hospital (he’d been moved to Keresley the day before because of scarlet fever), dancing at the Locarno and Hippodrome, running with Godiva Harriers, and managing a hotel in Blackpool. But one strand that stood out was the family’s connection to Triumph motorcycles.

Dot’s Grandfather worked for Triumph when they were based on Clay Lane before the war, and then her father, husband and two brothers-in-law all worked for them when they moved to Meriden. In 1973 the owner Dennis Poore decided to close the business to build houses on the site. Dot and particularly her brother-in-law, Dennis Crowder Johnson, were central to the campaign to save the

factory. The workers staged a two-year sit-in and eventually, helped by the Government, set up Meriden Workers Co-operative to buy the factory and market the Triumph motorbikes they produced. The factory was supported by actors Steve McQueen and Richard Gere, who visited in the mid-1970s.

Dot told Andy about their march to parliament seeking support, and this features in the painting.

Ultimately the co-operative ended, and the factory was demolished, and a housing estate was built on the site. However, a new company Triumph Motorcycles Ltd gained the rights to the name and has been successfully building bikes in Hinckley since 1988. Dot’s family connection continues as one of her son’s works for a Coventry business manufacturing components for Triumph.

John



Music was one of the main reasons John came to Coventry in 1983 to study *"I started watching bands at The Lanch, saw the Smiths there, and the infamous Jesus, and Mary Chain gig - the semi-riot gig"*

After his degree John stayed in Coventry working in vocational guidance, a role which evolved when the Labour Government came in to power in 1998. They introduced a ground-breaking initiative to tackle drug abuse – bringing employment, health, criminal justice and housing - *"You can't tackle drug misuse in isolation. You've got to have that joined up approach"*.

After 3 years John became manager of the NHS substance misuse employment service, a service that genuinely helped many people in Coventry and Warwickshire secure work and training.

"On average we supported 35 to 40 people a year with a history of substance misuse and offending into sustainable employment ... It was a real privilege to see people, people you thought would probably be dead in a couple of years, pull their

lives around ... at the time, drugs related costs were about 20 billion a year. It makes sense to do something about it, to have a long-term strategy. The revolving door of short-term prison sentences resolved nothing: they come back out again to the same lifestyle, a complete waste of time and money. Sadly, from 2012 governments failed to continue the project and funding was significantly cut".

Orbit Housing were involved in providing the housing support at the time of the initiative, which was where he first encountered them. John is now a manager in one of Orbit's Independent Living Schemes.

Andy drew upon John's passion for helping people and his love of bands. The painting uses Coventry's 'Moving Blue' and features the names of bands that John has seen live, and some of the words he used when talking about his life and work in Coventry.

Bailo



Bailo came to Coventry fifteen years ago seeking sanctuary. He was fleeing Guinea in fear for his life after being involved in protests against the regime there.

Bailo describes Coventry as a fantastic place, but nonetheless his life still has tensions and struggles, both within his community in Britain and fighting the enduring sense of loss from his family who are still in Guinea.

With Bailo's painting Andy wanted to represent both this connection back to his heritage and family in West Africa, and the life that he is now building in Coventry. He also to convey the warmth of Bailo's heart that shines through his face.

The shapes and colours in the background are based on fabric patterns on his sister's dress, taken from one of the few pictures he has of her, and from a belt that she gave him before he had to leave, a belt that represents the ties back to his culture. These are combined with the use of blue, the "Moving Blue" of Coventry, thus representing Bailo's journey from Africa to Coventry.

Julia



The idea for Julia's painting emerged from a 'Phoenix' cape she created as a personal response to the collective anxiety experienced following the pandemic, and the ongoing economic and climate crisis. She has always been drawn to the myth of the Phoenix bird, both the imagery and the symbolism behind it *"it has a strong connection to my home city and its regeneration and renewal from the ashes of war: Phoenix Rising"*.

Julia is a fashion designer and maker. Julia was born and raised in Coventry and completed her technical qualifications in fashion design at Coventry Technical College, where she was taught by many of the same team who now run the successful Fashion degree course at Coventry University. She founded her first clothing brand, Medusa, with start-up finance from Coventry City Council and the Prince's Trust. She has worked with many gothic and alternative rock bands.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown she began to make face masks for friends and family and now has a successful online Etsy shop 'Fallen Masques'. Her designs are inspired by the gothic aesthetic, Victorian era clothing, the pre-Raphaelites, dark fairy tales, the natural world and mystical elements. Many of items are made from reclaimed vintage fabrics and trimmings.

The 'Phoenix' cape in the painting is embellished with organza remnants repurposed from a long-forgotten college project and velvet ribbon rescued from a 1960s mini dress!

As well as being a designer, photographer, and community organiser she was a City Host for @coventry2021 City of Culture, and she is passionate about the arts as a way of celebrating diversity and bringing people together. You can see more of Julia's work through her Instagram @jules_fallen



Orbit, was formed in Coventry in 1967 by two people on a park bench contemplating how to tackle homelessness. The company's founders were passionate about the inequality in the access, scale and quality of available housing.

Orbit now manages around 45,000 affordable homes in in the Midlands, East and South East of England, and builds around 1,500 new affordable homes every year. Over 100,000 people live in an Orbit home and the company's aim is to ensure the homes they provide and the places they create are good quality, affordable and safe. They are a commercial organisation with a strong social purpose, enabling them to reinvest profits to improve the quality of their homes, services and communities, and provide more much needed affordable housing.

Orbit were a City Champion for Coventry City of Culture in 2021. Their support for Portraits of Coventry was part of their contribution to the programme, stating that:

"Orbit is a proud City of Culture City Champion and has funded these projects as part of our support for the City of Culture Year. We want to recognise and celebrate the lives of our older Coventry customers and the communities in which they live".

Orbit has three offices in Coventry, based in Binley, and employs around 500 people locally. Across Coventry, Orbit manages around 2,000 properties for over 4,270 customers.

www.orbit.org.uk

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition is the culmination of an inspiring but at times difficult journey that started toward the end of 2019. When Andy first discussed his ideas with Orbit as part of their contribution to City of Culture no one knew that the world was about to live through a pandemic. It was with the tireless help of Pippa Reeve, then Placemaking and Partnerships Manager at Orbit , and dedicated Scheme Managers, Mandy, John and Teresa that it was possible for participants to share their stories.

Coventry Cathedral has been supportive providing both an accessible venue for the launch of the Portraits in 2021 and now for the closing exhibition.

And of course the individual participants whose memories and stories provide the inspiration for these paintings.

At the close of the Cathedral Exhibition each painting will be donated to the participant.



For information about the project visit: www.andyfarr.com/portraits-of-Coventry

For information about Orbit visit: www.orbit.org.uk

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