

Mapping Four Art Commissions in Swale & Medway, North Kent

Introduction and Reflections on Mapping Four Art Commissions in Swale & Medway, North Kent

By Sophie Hope with Stefania Donini

This document provides a partial snapshot of Ideas Test's Out of the Ordinary Places commissions that took place in Strood, Isle of Grain, Sittingbourne and Iwade in Swale and Medway, North Kent, England in 2015–16. The purpose is not to evaluate the Impact of the projects, or whether they succeed or fail in their aims and objectives. Rather it is to map the complexities of the processes involved in developing art projects in these particular places.

The information gathered here was generated during four half-day workshops in February 2016, each focusing on one of the art projects and involved artists, curators, producers, collaborators and participants who told their own stories of the beginnings, middles and ends of the process. Sophie Hope and Stefania Donini facilitated the workshops, mapping the process on a long piece of paper. The conversations were audio recorded, transcribed and edited to make the digests in this publication.

During the workshops, we encouraged honesty and diversity of opinion, acknowledging there were different interpretations and perspectives around the table. There were things that were left unsaid and project contributors not present at the table who would have brought alternative viewpoints. The editing process can also lead to simplifying the narrative in a way that misses some of the nuances and tones of voice that might reveal other sides of the story. The aim of the workshops and this document, however, is not to reach consensus about what happened but to try and retain some of the complexity and contradictions in working practices and experiences of participation. The result is a set of fragmentary narratives of a particular group of people, at a particular moment in time, reflecting on their experiences. We hope this glimpse into the world of these projects from different perspectives, alongside other documentation and traces of the work, will provide an insight into commissioning art in Swale and Medway that may be useful to those of you initiating, practicing and exploring something out of the ordinary.

This method of working stems from the Social Art Map, a resource that Sophie Hope developed with Emily Druiff at Peckham Platform, London, where they mapped five socially engaged art commissions in London. The resulting

timelines were subsequently published as a way of providing windows into the different processes, hurdles, motivations and experiences of artists, curators, commissioners, locals, participants, and collaborators (see www.socialartmap.org.uk). This document uses this mapping method to develop four more timelines.

The Social Art Map process revealed the diversity of approaches to making art happen in different contexts. There is no single way of commissioning, curating and carrying out socially engaged art, and nor could there be. With Ideas Test's OOTO Places commissions, this also became apparent. Producers Sam Trotman and Phoebe Davies wanted to explore different approaches for each of the projects: in Strood the community trusted in the programmers' instinct; in Sittingbourne a local Advisory Board selected an artist's proposal following a public meeting; in Grain the work was co-commissioned with a Kent based cultural organisation (Whitstable Biennale) and in Iwade they carried out a longer speculative research process before choosing the artist. A pantomime, series of public interventions, an exhibition in a barn and films were the culminations of months of meetings, workshops, walks and talks between curators, producers, artists and local people. While some artists had an idea of what they wanted to do before arriving, others found that the focus and methods emerged through listening and being in the place.

Ideas Test is an arts organisation set up to 'empower communities in Swale and Medway to live more creative lives' and 'increase opportunities for everyone to take part in the arts in ways they choose'. Ideas Test is supported by the Arts Council's Creative People and Places programme, a £37 million publicly funded investment into 21 places around England which have been identified by the Arts Council as areas where there is low adult participation in the arts, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of participation.

The overall timeframe of the OOTO Places programme was short, running from the end of summer 2014 to the end of 2015. Producers Sam and Phoebe were appointed in September 2014 by Ideas Test to undertake research into eight locations in Swale and Medway to realise the

OOTO Places commissions. On 28 November 2014 there was a panel discussion made up of community catalysts, local arts organisations and representatives from the national art sector, which selected four of these places in which the commissions would happen. The next six months involved Sam and Phoebe doing a lot of groundwork, meeting people in the different places, identifying 'gate-keepers' and prepping the ground for the artists to start work. This involved informal conversations, many cups of tea and getting a sense of the existing arts activities and cultural infrastructure (or lack of it) in each place. During this research stage Sam and Phoebe asked questions including: Are there groups willing to engage? What kind of infrastructures are in place? The lack of infrastructure (e.g. communal public and commercial spaces and services) is not something an arts project can solve. Rather the projects happened through informal structures that could support them, such as Facebook groups, key networked individuals and existing community organisations. The projects also relied on chance encounters, such as finding a poster in a Chinese takeaway or an artist asking if they could hang a golden curtain in a shop doorway.

Artists were commissioned at different stages in 2015 and their projects ran until December 2015 and beyond. It is perhaps no surprise that two of the projects (in Grain and Iwade) spread well into 2016. The open, fluid process that many of the artists worked through, together with the time it takes to gain the trust of people locally, meant that in practice the process was more flexible. This fluidity of practices comes up against funding structures, accounting and auditing processes. Indeed, this short timeframe led to intense working practices and conversations being cut short. What felt like the beginning of a process in fact had to become the end, or at least officially. Funding aims for audience-building differed from the aims of the artists' practices which often focused on forging fewer, more specific, longer term relationships.

In a way, each of the projects interrogated the assumptions of what is meant by engagement and participation and how art can be understood differently and exist unexpectedly in everyday spaces. The places were approached with curiosity and sensitivity – not assuming no/low engagement, but that there are forms of cultural engagement that may be hidden and just not visible to the data gathering efforts of the funders in identifying areas of low engagement. Indeed, one of the artists remarked on how, despite Iwade being of supposedly low engagement, it is an inherently creative, social place. Artists were asking unusual questions, introducing surprising visual interruptions, exploring hidden histories and focusing on self-organised, unofficial activities rather than on the dominant narratives that people tell themselves or can

be told about the places they live. These are all ways of getting under the surface of a place and piqued the interest of neighbours and passers by. This is where something 'out of the ordinary' emerges. There is a commitment to try things out that otherwise might not happen, or be seen to happen.

But what does it mean for people to engage in unknown, uncertain and unpredictable experiences? If you are facing difficult life circumstances it might be harder to 'step into the dark', especially if this involves a lot of volunteer labour. For others, the drive to meet people and find out more about the place where they live might be a motivation to get involved. Not knowing what is going to happen next can be exhilarating, tiring and trying. These unpredictable encounters, if they are to be sustained (even in the short term) need 'holding' by commissioners, artists, producers, curators, facilitators, to avoid people retreating or giving up on the process. These acts of non-participation are also often beyond the control of anyone involved. Life intervenes.

These projects brought out the fact that there is nothing ordinary about a place. Each project pushed people to experience the places they live in and move through in different ways. Many questioned the legacy of these transient moments: What is left behind when the circus leaves town? What happens next and how do the relationships continue?

We hope these maps will offer insights and inspiration to explore and try out other ways of working that might tease out the extraordinary from the everyday to see what could happen next.

Sophie Hope
Practice-based researcher, Lecturer in Film, Media and Cultural Studies Department, Birkbeck, University of London

Stefania Donini
Research and workshop assistant

Thanks to all the contributors to the mapping workshops and to Phoebe Davies, Sam Trotman, Joanne Matthews and Stefania Donini for making this mapping process happen.

About Out of the Ordinary Places

Out of the Ordinary Places (OOTO Places) is an Ideas Test programme working in four areas of North Kent where commissioned artists created projects shaped by people and place. Developed to enable more people to get involved in the arts, four new projects took place in Iwade, Sittingbourne, Strood and the Isle of Grain. OOTO Places explores how local residents and artists can co-create new and experimental work that re-imagines and challenges perceptions of place and, in turn, raises wider social and political questions.

www.oootplaces.co.uk

Phoebe Davies & Sam Trotman
Programme producers

Hannah Standen
Interim programme producer

Joanne Matthews
Maternity cover producer and marketing co-ordinator

Tom Merrell
Graphic design

Felicity Crawshaw
Photography

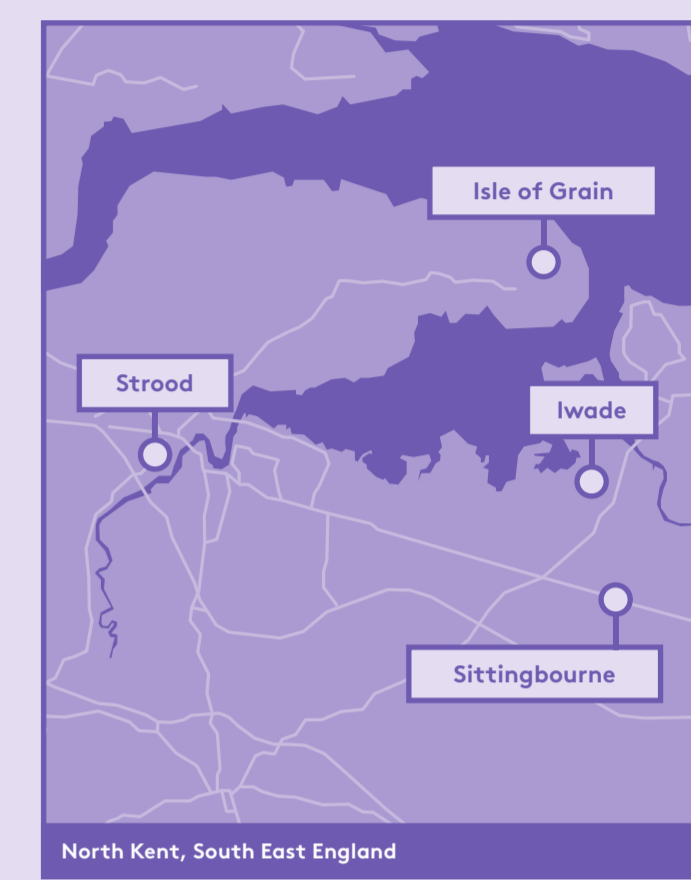
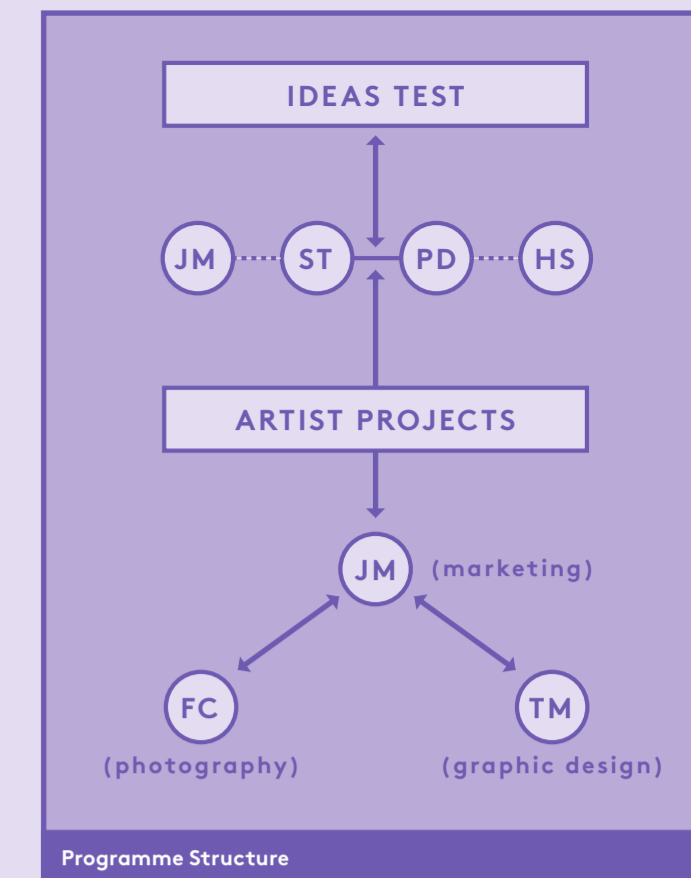
During the project Phoebe Davies took a two-month sabbatical for a British Council Fellowship to Portland State University (USA) to work on the Art Social Practice MFA, during which time Hannah Standen took over her role. In December 2015 Sam Trotman went on maternity leave and Joanne Matthews took on her role until March 2016.

About Ideas Test

Ideas Test is an arts organisation working hand-in-hand with communities in Swale and Medway empowering them to live more creative lives. Ideas Test uses arts and creativity to support people to develop new skills, feel better about themselves and their community, and make their area a more attractive place to live and work.

Ideas Test supports people who want to participate in the arts but need help to fulfil their ambitions – as both audience members and participants. They also work with community organisations, promoters and event organisers who want to make their local community a better place, as well as artists, creative professionals, and creative businesses with an interest in Swale and Medway who want to create great work in partnership with our communities.

www.ideastest.co.uk
@ideastest
www.facebook.com/ideastest



No Tail

April — December 2015
Strood
By Ruth Ewan

Ain't Got No Fear

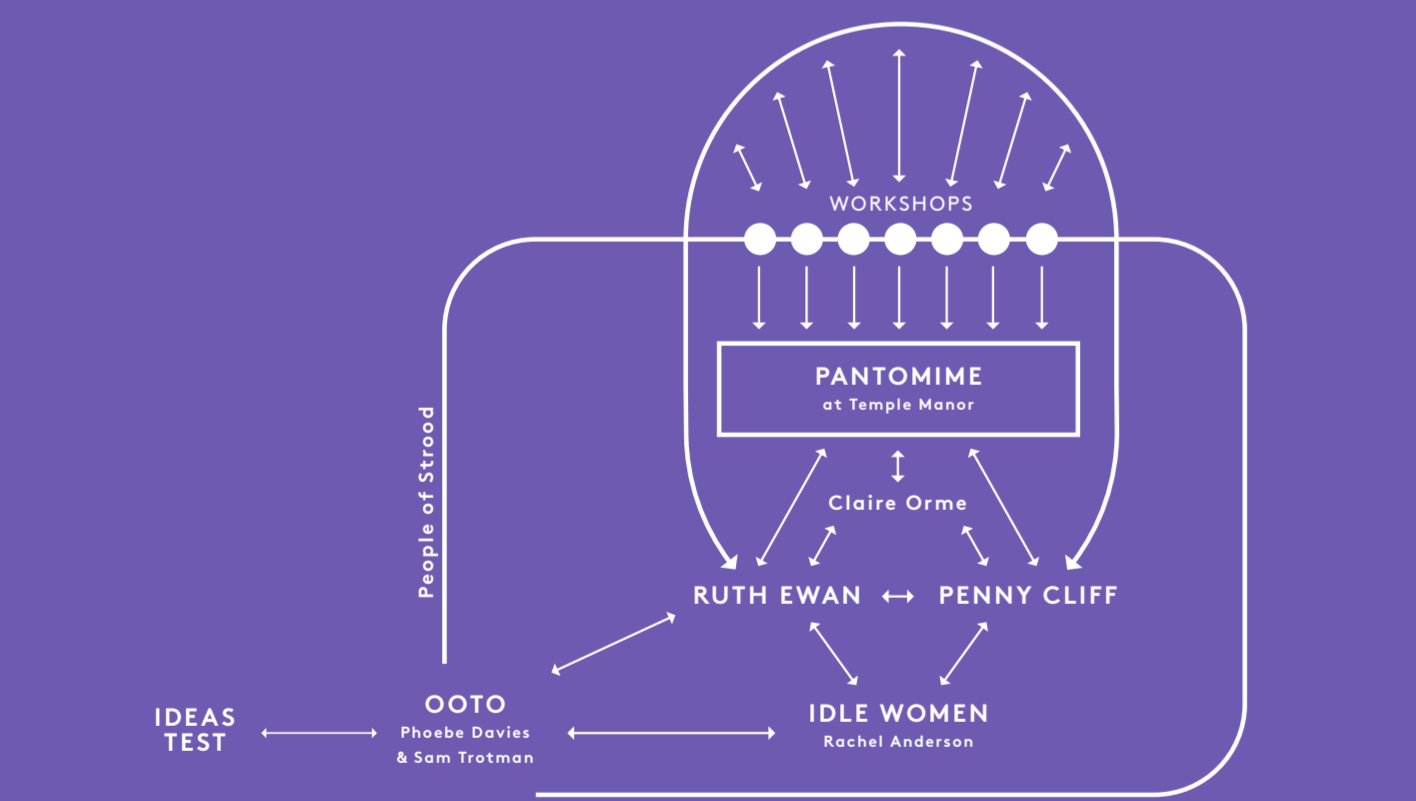
July 2015 — June 2016
Isle of Grain
By Mikhail Karikis

Blue Skies

May — November 2015
Sittingbourne
By Lucy Joyce

Wend Iwade

May 2015 — February 2016
Iwade
By Richard Houguez



Overview

Site-specific pantomime performance on the winter solstice in the 13th century building, Temple Manor. Co-written by artist Ruth Ewan with director Penny Cliff, and produced by Idle Women. The pantomime was co-created and performed by Strood residents working with and learning from a creative team with expertise in theatre performance, lighting, music, set and costume design, prop-making and puppetry. (Dom Coyote, Cis O'Boyle, Bernd Fauler, James Frost and Rachel Anderson with research by Astrid Johnston)

Commissioner

Ideas Test – OOTO Places
www.oootplaces.co.uk/places/strood

Mapped By:

Phoebe Davies
OOTO Places programme producer

Ruth Ewan
Artist

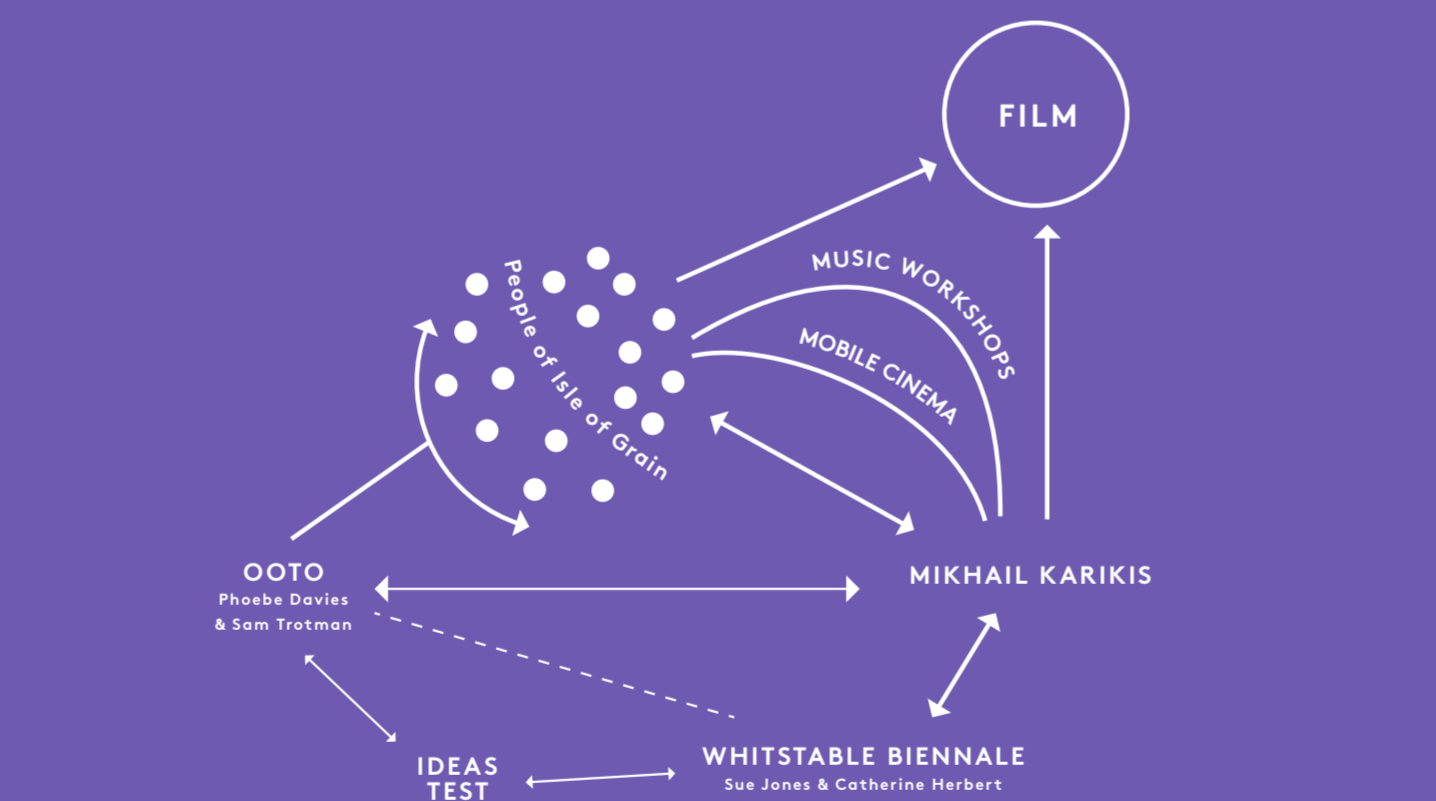
Penny Cliff
Director, co-scriptwriter

Claire Orme
Project co-ordinator

Malcolm Hazleton
Project contributor, local resident, performer

Donna Hazleton
Project contributor, local resident, performer

Sophy Millington
Project contributor, local resident, props and costume



Overview

Project research and development, a series of workshops with groups of young people on the Isle of Grain, researching underground music and sub-cultures. A public event and film screening, including special footage filmed on Grain with local young people. The film, developed by artist Mikhail Karikis with local young people, will be shared on the Isle of Grain and at the Whitstable Biennale in 2016.

Commissioner

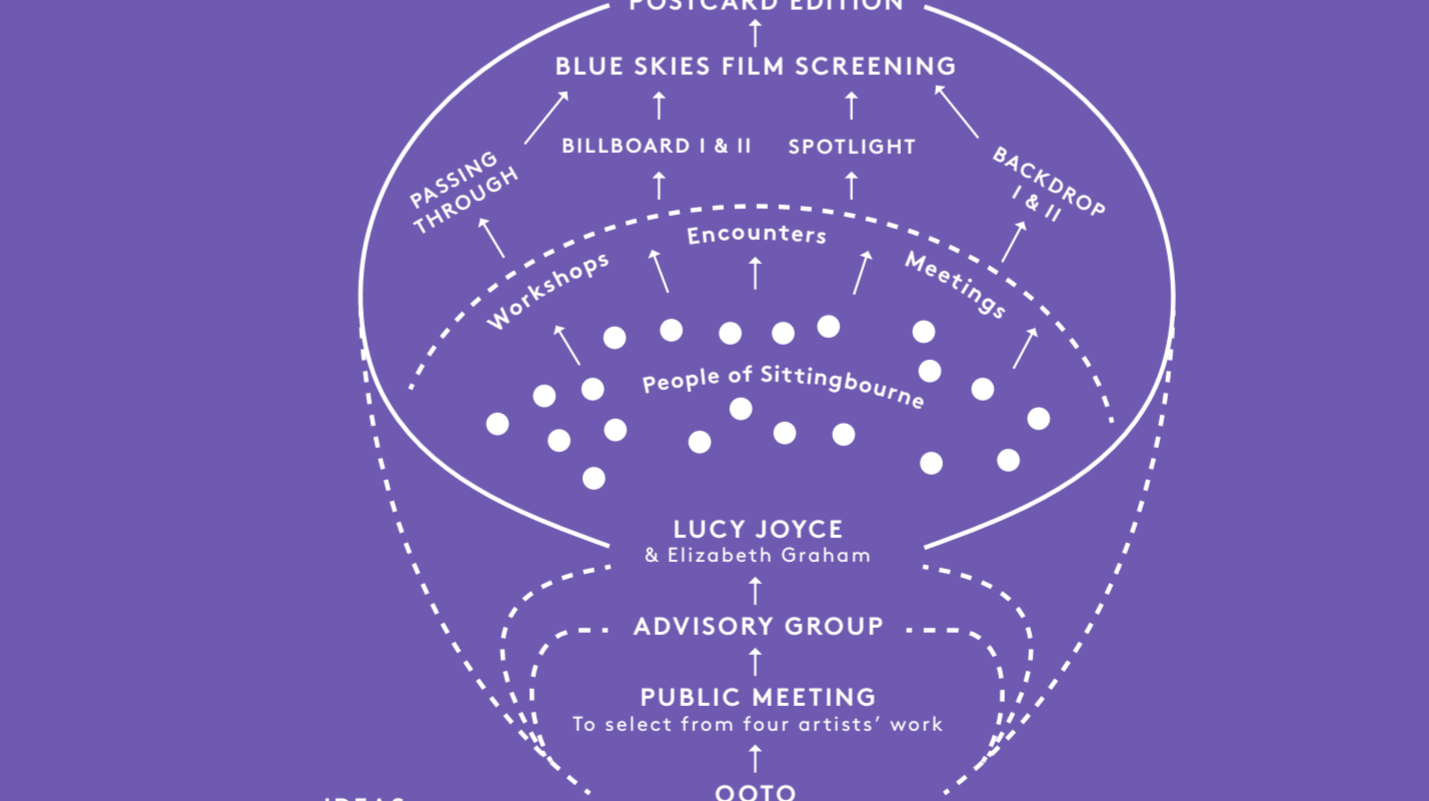
Ideas Test – OOTO Places
www.oootplaces.co.uk/places/isle-of-grain

Mapped By:

Sam Trotman & Phoebe Davies
OOTO Places programme producers

Mikhail Karikis
Artist

Catherine Herbert
Deputy director, Whitstable Biennale



Overview

Series of public performances, events, happenings and public billboards created by Lucy Joyce in collaboration with local residents and participants to explore and re-imagine Sittingbourne's public spaces. The final film, *Blue Skies*, screened at the New Century Cinema, features footage, images and sound, including the conversations, workshops, performances and installations resulting from open workshops and research with local community groups. A set of limited edition postcards have also been given to the project participants.

Commissioner

Ideas Test – OOTO Places
www.oootplaces.co.uk/places/sittingbourne

Mapped By:

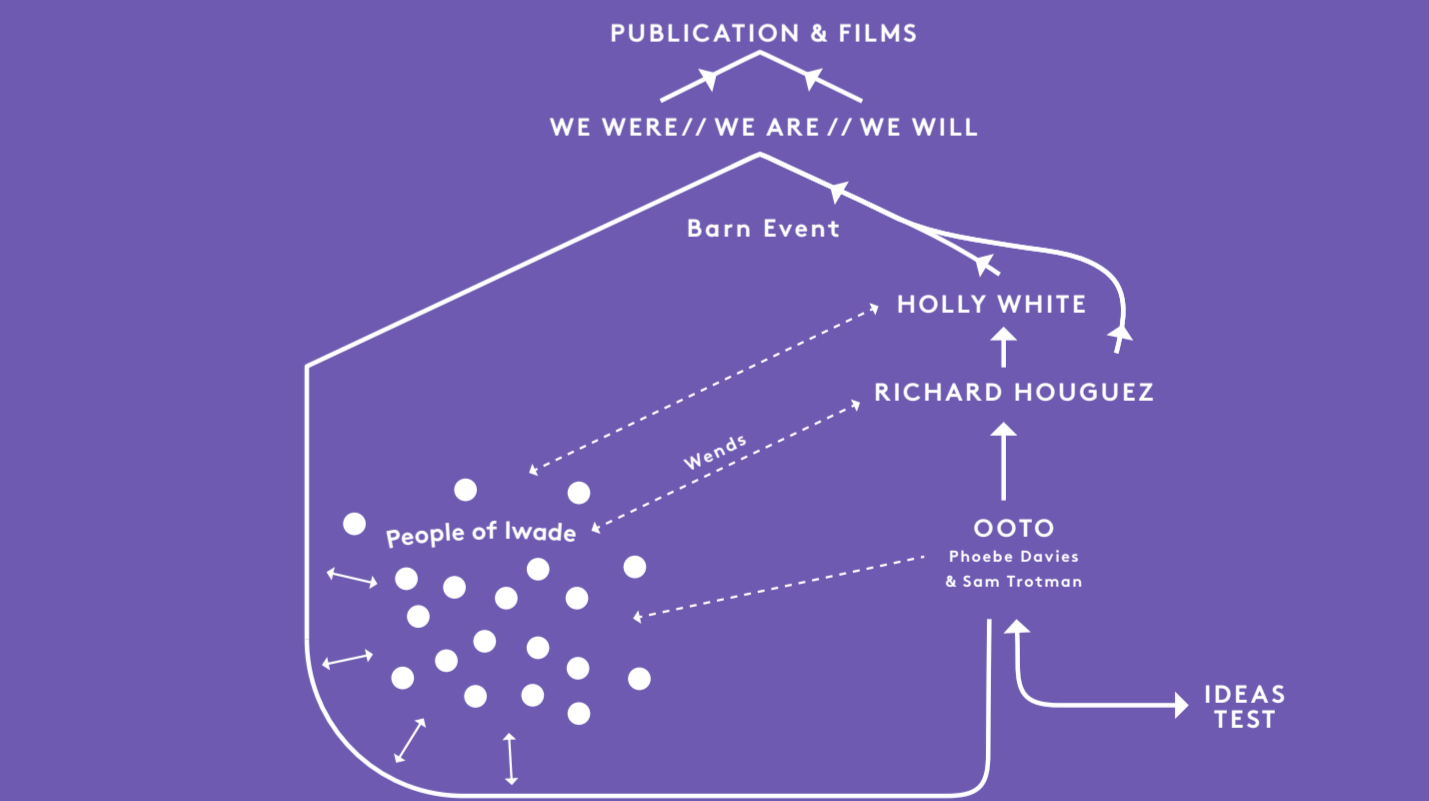
Sam Trotman & Phoebe Davies
OOTO Places programme producers

Lucy Joyce
Artist

Jack Ivory
Project collaborator, local resident

Gerard Norton
Project collaborator, Skillnet volunteer, local resident

Emily Parish
Project participants, Skillnet staff member



Overview

Guided walks, workshops, live events, a film series and a publication created by artists, musicians and archaeologists. The work explores Iwade's changing identity, resulting from a research-based process led by artist Richard Houguez in collaboration with Holly White. Richard also collaborated with Maxie Gedge and archaeologist Kyle Lee-Crossett, PhD candidate on UCL's Assembling Alternative Futures for Heritage programme, who developed a series of works responding to Iwade. Wend Iwade included a series of walks with residents of Iwade, a programme of open workshops exploring 'deep future scenarios' and public events with artists, musicians, archaeologists and residents in the Iwade Barn, a Grade II listed barn given to the local community by housing developers Ward Homes.

Commissioner

Ideas Test – OOTO Places
www.oootplaces.co.uk/places/iwade

Mapped By:

Sam Trotman & Phoebe Davies
OOTO Places programme producers

Richard Houguez
Lead artist

Holly White
Collaborating artist

James Hunt
Project contributor, local resident, chairman of the parish council

Rynn Kemp
Project contributor, local resident, member of team that edits and distributes The Iwade Observer

Sandra Wilkinson
Project contributor, local resident

