

Sally Madge shelter 2002 – 2010

Presentation for W.A.L.K Research seminar

In the autumn of 2002 I constructed a small drystone shelter on the rocky northern shore of Lindisfarne, a tidal island accessible via a causeway from the Northumberland mainland. The shelter survived eight years of winter storms and spring tides and gained status among locals and visitors as a public artwork, site specific installation, museum and/or space for reverie, play, pilgrimage, parties, sleeping and bird-watching. Most people came across the building quite by chance while walking around the island or just exploring off the beaten track, although as word of mouth (and Web) spread many also followed recommendations. In both cases the shelter would become a favoured waymarker and destination, with visitors often then graduating to fully-fledged active participation in its development. And, over time the interior filled with a bricolage of flotsam, found objects, handmade artefacts and personal mementos, including comments in a book left there.

Originally an anonymous, playful, unofficial artwork, the shelter gradually became a collaborative venture with all those taking part assuming an integral role in its development. The boundaries between artist/maker and visitor/spectator became not only blurred but interchangeable. I regularly tidied, edited and rearranged the contents – and so did others, often not to my liking. The shelter became a locus for an ongoing symbolic engagement between strangers (sometimes humorous, frequently poignant, occasionally unpleasant), and I found myself disoriented as well as intrigued by the fact that ownership and provenance had become such a moveable feast.

In October 2010 I heard from a contact on the island that someone had destroyed the shelter. Having rescued some of the contents, I made safe remaining walls, piled up the roof timbers nearby and left the site open for further intervention.

Thinking about the project's life and demise, its informal, spontaneous and unmediated exchanges of ideas and practices seem especially significant and worth recording for posterity. While wishing to remain true to such an ethos, I would also like to continue this discussion as a more structured collaboration.

I have now embarked upon a process of archiving, exhibiting and presenting material concerning various aspects of the shelter's history. In addition, there are plans for it to be rebuilt, which will inevitably entail a rather different approach. Thus, in parallel with the shelter's physical existence, I aim to explore some of the questions thrown up by its shifting significance and status through an active research process which gathers together layers of commentary emanating from a range of sources.

