

*Isolation and Loneliness of Older people
Now and Then*

Devised during a series of visits to shopping streets, coffee mornings, lunch clubs and meetings with Meredith Freeman, members of the Older Peoples' Advisory Group (OPAG) and other older people.



I (artist Davis & Jones) set out to create an inaccurate map of Greater Bedminster showing older people's personal stories from the past and, taken from these, tips to equip ourselves for the future. This initial idea came after two older women spoke with me about the past, about their husbands and families, their experiences of the second world war. There was an insistence on the ridiculousness of looking back on the past as if it was wonderful, because their parents had had such hard lives. They said "We've never had it so good (as today)", "You've got to take the best of the past and use it now, for the future" (*not an exact quote*).

On 22nd and 24th May, 2015, I went out onto the streets of Southville and Bedminster accompanied by members of OPAG. Offering free tea, coffee and cakes, we invited passers-by (particularly but not exclusively those who looked like they might be over 50) to share stories about their lives in the area.

"Will you tell us something about you, or something about this place that a visitor would never guess?"

"What do your stories from the past offer us today?"

We were accompanied by illustrator and visual scribe Laurie Stansfield who, equipped with a large red easel, paper and pens, made drawings from the conversations as they happened. For some of the time we were also joined by Jenny Barke the Bristol & Cardiff Universities, Productive Margins project, community ILOP project Research Associate and Meredith Freeman, a Community Organiser who has been working with the OPAG as well as having 'conversations' with older people from the Greater Bedminster area around isolation and loneliness.



The intention was to:

- Create a visually curious, light hearted event;
- Have conversations with people across Greater Bedminster
- Gather stories and anecdotes about the area;
- Draw out the values, habits and sensibilities revealed;
- Re-present these tips to equip us well for today and the future;
- Hold conversations which could feed in to the wider research, either in their content or by making connections with people who may want to get involved.

Working with a visual scribe to notate the stories through drawing as we went along, my idea was to:

- make passers-by curious, in a light hearted way;
- avoid the bureaucratic feel of writing notes;
- make the interaction and capturing immediately visible.

A flyer explained the wider context of the project, invited anyone interested to be involved in the research and described where/when the resulting map/postcards could be seen.

In addition to being out on the streets, we also went into one couples' house (arranged by their neighbour) and to a lunch club. 54 conversations were annotated (others happened without being annotated).

Observations:

- Most people were open and convivial. Some skirted round us avoiding eye contact as we often do when approached in the street by a sales person or a beggar.
- Choosing an opening phrase was difficult; we kept adjusting it as we went along. It needed to be short; reassure people that we weren't selling things; effectively describe our request/opening question e.g. *"Will you share a story with us?"* *"We're gathering stories about Bedminster and Southville – have you known it for long?"*
- A lot of people talked about the shops which had changed; most conversations did not get to a depth where we could draw out the values, habits and sensibilities revealed for us to re-present as tips to equip us well for today and the future.

Connected Communities Festival Report 2015: Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement, University of Bristol.

- There is a strong interest in local history, and conversations often went towards recollections about buildings that have changed, particularly shops. However we had wanted this to be about more personal experiences, which needed time, willingness and a particular framing/introduction.

I was glad to be in close contact with other people on the project, and able to talk this through and share the experience. The experience left me with questions about:

- The responsibility I have towards participants, when I potentially stir up emotional interactions within a project that's small, when I cannot provide follow-up contact and support.
- How I look after my emotional wellbeing in these circumstances.

Since the events took place, Laurie Stansfield has created a large map poster, filled with drawings and writing. I took a draft print to a coffee morning to discuss editing decisions with people who have been informing the project throughout. Responses from members of OPAG to the first draft of the map were positive. One was 'transfixed' by it; 'Sorry, I can't stop reading it!' and another said it was 'lovely!'. They felt it likely that people seeing it would be reminded of other events, people, occasions. There was a suggestion that it could support memory work with people. It was also suggested that people could order copies to have themselves.

At a meeting in August, the OPAG will choose which details they want to have turned into postcards.

On projects which are short I am unable to fully co-produce. This project has benefitted greatly from the input, guidance and involvement of people I met through Meredith and OPAG; however, a lot of the concept and delivery was led by me.

