

# Celebrating creativity

Suffolk Craft Society has been supporting the county's artists and makers for 50 years. It's time for a celebration

WORDS: Jayne Lindill



Batik artist Helen Dougall is a member of Suffolk Craft Society

Image: Su Anderson

## SUFFOLK CRAFT SOCIETY

It's one of the highlights of the year, Suffolk Craft Society's annual exhibition in Aldeburgh, an eclectic collection of ceramics, glass, prints, etchings, furniture, textiles, jewellery, and more, brought together by some of the most talented artists and makers you're ever likely to find in one county.

If you haven't already made it a regular feature of your summer in Suffolk then perhaps it's time you did. This year the SCS celebrates its 50th anniversary, and the range and quality of members' work is as impressive as ever.

It was in September 1970, in a tea shop in the Buttermarket in Ipswich, that a small group of creative souls gathered – artists and makers from all corners of the county, who had come together to form Suffolk's first craft society.

It was an exciting prospect. For individuals used to working in solitude, and often isolation in their homes and studios throughout the county, the promise of a membership organisation that would provide support and camaraderie, as well as a shop window for their work, was very welcome.

Among them was John 'Chip' Chipperfield, a young

Stowmarket-born ceramicist, recently graduated from the central School of Arts and Crafts (now Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design). It was he, together with another potter, Robin Welch, who took the first steps towards forming what would become the Suffolk Craft Society.

Fifty years on, Chip is still working from his Brockdish studio, producing his distinctive, quirky jugs which he sells through various East Anglian galleries and at the annual show.

These days he's less at the centre of the society's activities, but he's thrilled to have been made an honorary member and he's justifiably proud of what he helped to found.

"There were very few outlets for our work in those days... the society gave us opportunities for our work to be seen and appreciated," he says.

It all started when Chip and Robin Welch approached Commander John Jacob

suggesting the establishment of a

regional centre for arts and crafts to be based at Snape Maltings. At the time, Cdr Jacob, ex-Navy pilot and pig farmer, was organising the appeal to rebuild the maltings after a disastrous fire the year before destroyed much of the building, including the concert hall. He not only supported the idea of a Suffolk Craft Society but became its first chairman, supported by Charles Hocking as secretary.

Even at those early meetings, the wide range of talent in Suffolk was evident. Alongside Chip were and Eric Sandon, architect, writer and great supporter of the crafts in Suffolk, artist Muriel Wright, furniture makers Robert Townshend and Donald Simpson, weaver Peter Collingwood, glass engraver Sheila Elmhirst, potter Susan Hicklin, embroiderer Hebe Cox, jeweller John Grenville, and Royston and Winifred Gage, of Corncraft.

The society boldly set out its mission to help Suffolk crafts people by bringing their work to the attention of the public,

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## About Suffolk Craft Society

Suffolk Craft Society was formed in 1970 to promote the value and importance of contemporary crafts and to support individual makers in the creation of their work.

The society is best known for its annual summer exhibition held at the Peter Pears Gallery in Aldeburgh, although it also holds other one-off exhibitions. Its aims are to promote good design and fine workmanship in the crafts, to advance the careers of the society's makers,

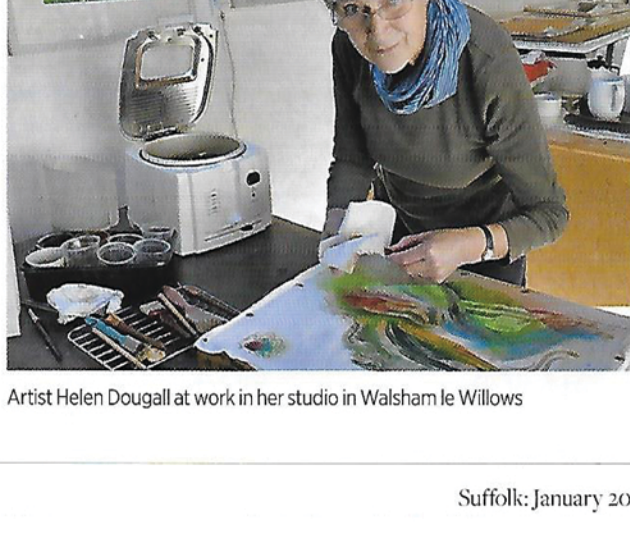
to recruit new makers who demonstrate excellence in their craft, to promote the education and training of craft workers, to inform and educate the public about the crafts.

For more information about membership, becoming a friend, individual members and their work visit

[suffolkcraftsociety.org](http://suffolkcraftsociety.org)

You can receive information about the society, including its summer exhibition by emailing

[info@suffolkcraftsociety.com](mailto:info@suffolkcraftsociety.com)



Artist Helen Dougall at work in her studio in Walsham le Willows

Image: Jayne Lindill

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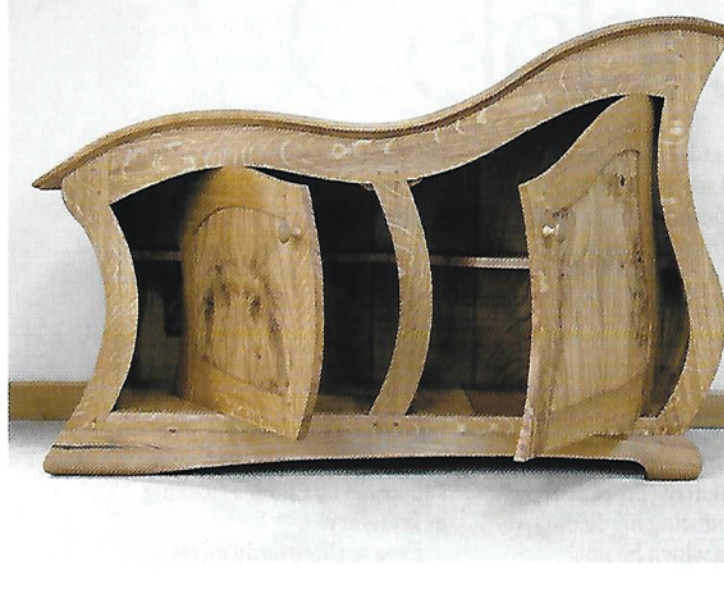


Image: Lucy Taylor

and to enable people to become more aware of high quality work being done by talented people living in their communities.

And so, true to its aims, the first SCS exhibition was organised at Snape Maltings.

"I really wondered whether anyone would come but it was a success," recalls Chip. "There were concerts going on at the same time and some of the musicians came to see us during their breaks. I sold some mugs to Christopher Hogwood [Academy of Ancient Music] and a complete dinner service to John Shirley Quirk, [bass baritone and later associate director of the Aldeburgh Festival]."

Chip's well preserved minutes of early SCS meetings show there

were 37 members in 1972. By the time the first directory was published a decade later Suffolk Craft Society had more than 80 members representing over 20 crafts. There was a newsletter, a friends' organisation, and the beginnings of a permanent collection of members' work.

Exhibitions continued to be held at Snape Maltings, until the Peter Pears Gallery in Aldeburgh became the regular venue for the summer exhibitions. Membership has increased – it's currently around 90 – and last year's summer exhibition showcased the work of 62 of the society's makers.

It's the breadth and the quality of the work that gives the society its standing in the art world and

which has allowed it to keep going. In our dumbed-down, digital age Suffolk Craft Society is reassuringly analogue, brimming with original talent and ideas, with people prepared to work long hours and get their hands dirty to create something of beauty with enduring appeal.

And if craft sometimes

*'The breadth and quality of its work gives the society its standing'*

struggles with its image, it has more to do with the word than the substance. There's nothing homespun or amateur about Suffolk Craft Society. The work is of the highest quality, created by professional makers who have invested time and money in training to make their living from their craft.

If membership seems surprisingly low in numbers, perhaps it's because the society is so scrupulous about who it admits. It vigorously vets every artist and maker before they join, and monitors work to ensure quality is maintained.

It's something current chair person Sarah Thane is passionate about. She's been a fan of the SCS

TOP LEFT: Furniture by SCS member Dylan Pym

CASCADE, a work by ceramicist Paul Todd

LEFT: Sally Freer, printmaker and vice chair of Suffolk Craft Society



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ABOVE: Ipswich Sculptor Antonia Hockton

since her first move to the county as East of England regional officer for the Independent Broadcasting Authority, when she was introduced to the society by John Jacob, then chair of Suffolk Radio Group. In the 1990s, Sarah moved back to London to take up a role with the Independent Television Commission but returned to Suffolk every year for the society's summer exhibition and began collecting pieces she still owns today.

Sarah has brought energy and vision to the SCS, and a realistic approach to securing its future.

Practical and financial support for the arts isn't easy to come by in the 21st century and there have been disappointments.

The loss of its Gallery 2 space in Ipswich Town Hall, which provided a focus for the SCS' 40th anniversary, in 2016 after ten years, was a setback. And now the society is looking for a new home for its summer exhibition, as the Peter Pears Gallery will no longer be available after the 2020 show.

Still, the drive, ambition and talent of Suffolk Craft Society is undimmed. Sarah wants to

recruit more 'friends' of the society who will help promote its members and their work, and she wants to raise the profile of the society in the region's impressive arts portfolio.

Celebrating the society's 50th anniversary is an important part of that effort. There will be a celebratory event at Snape Maltings and plans are underway for a revival of its west Suffolk exhibition with a 'Back in Bury St Edmunds' show. The summer show promises to be memorable. Here's to the next 50 years of Suffolk Craft Society. ♦

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