

H W A R T O O D

OF
/ THE

*Ways
of the Plant*

A film of myth, mask
and folklore inspired by
the Carboniferous, imbued
with folksong, forged by
the blacksmith...

ART
DOCS



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



Lapworth
Museum of
Geology



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Hart of the Wood 'Ways of the Plant' at the Lapworth Museum of Geology 2023

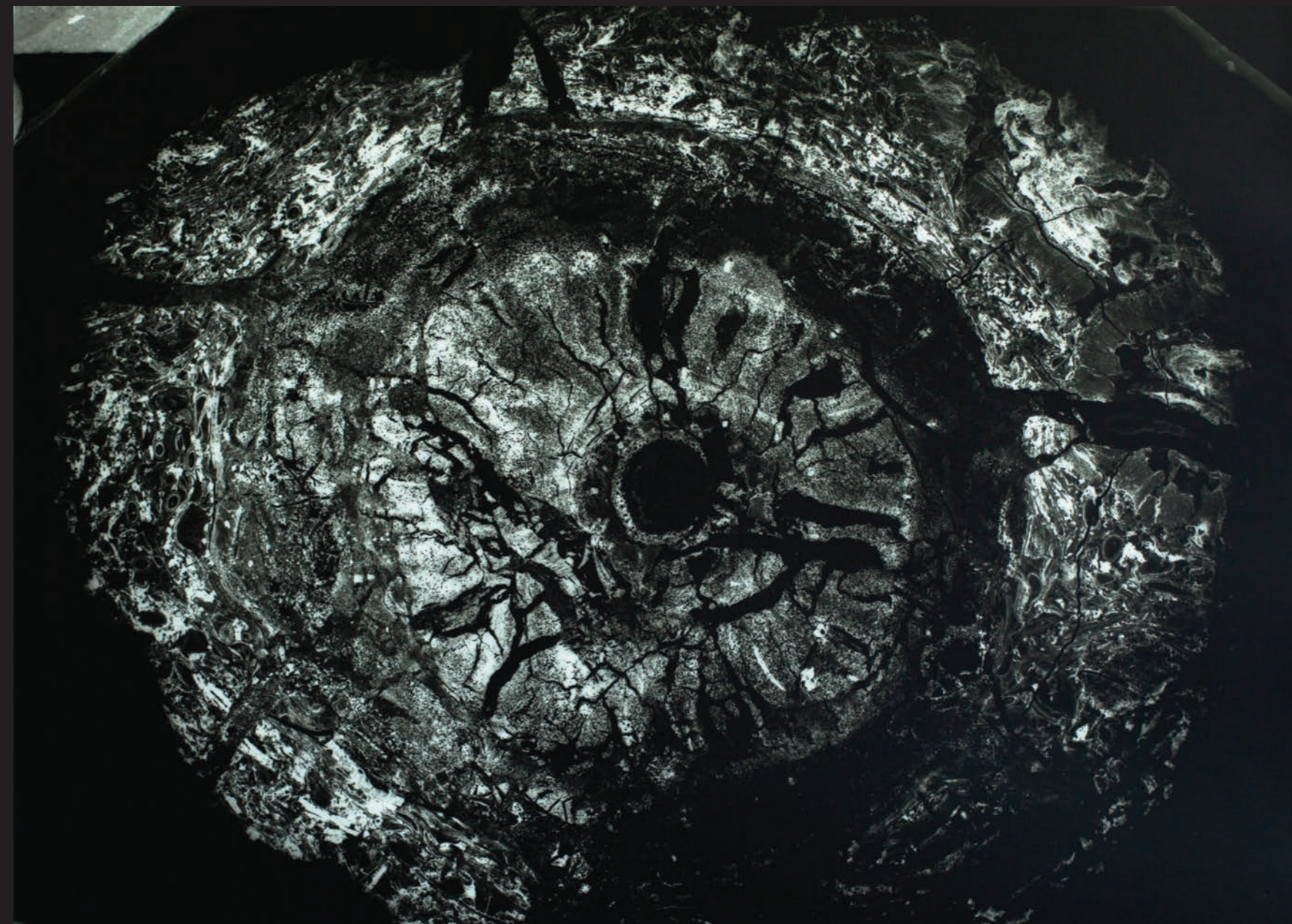


Hart of the Wood 'Ways of the Plant', is a bold new multidisciplinary art & film project, led by artist and filmmaker Benjamin Wigley, which celebrates humanity's ingrained relationship with the woods that spans deep time; carbon, the Carboniferous and the journey of coal. Working collaboratively with the Hart of the Wood artist collective, Ben responded to the Lapworth's extensive Carboniferous fossil collection to create a new multi-modal film and art exhibition at the Lapworth Museum of Geology; on display throughout 2023.

Supported by: Arts Council England Project Grants | ART DOCS | Lapworth Museum of Geology

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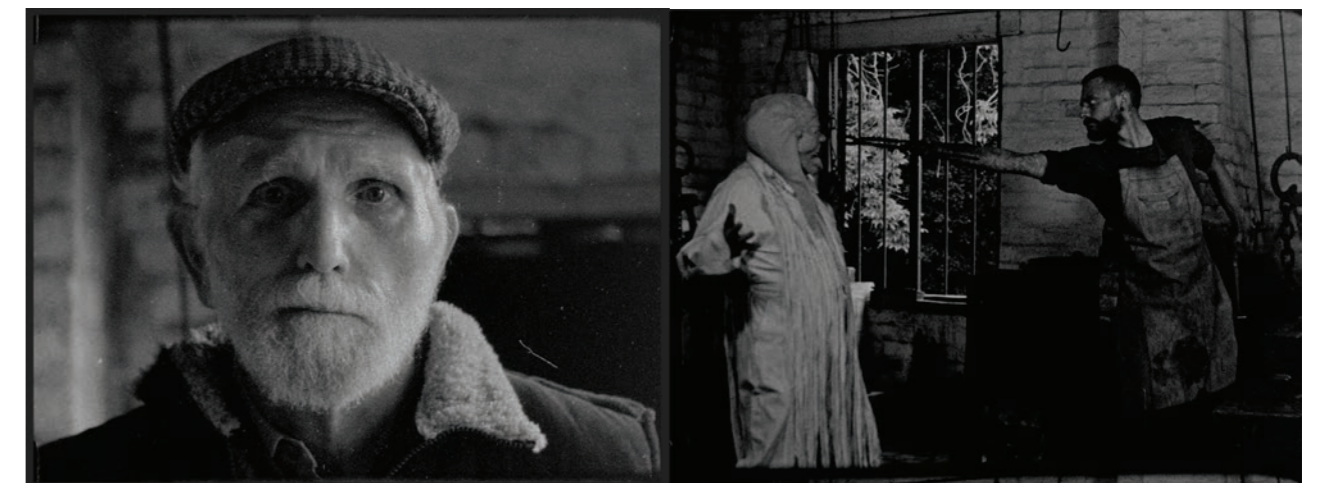


Project Highlights



Ben created a multi-disciplinary art exhibition on show in the Lapworth Museum of Geology's temporary exhibition space for over 8 months. A unique use of an underrepresented Carboniferous fossil collection at the Lapworth, sharing culture to inspire knowledge on fossils, geology and industrial heritage.

The project encompassed a 30-minute hand-processed 16mm motion picture film/ artist moving image work; original music and score; original hand-crafted masks for our archetypes and characters; live expanded cinema performance; photographic prints; original sculptural works out of metal and hand carved in wood; photogravure etchings; paintings, and drawings.



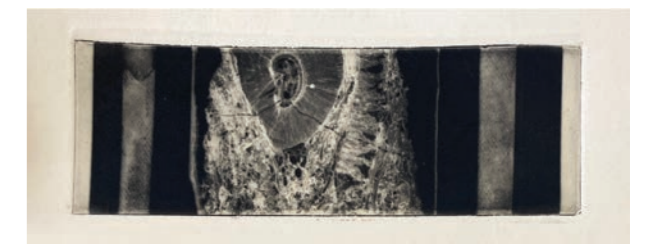
The team worked with a local heritage project, Mushroom Green Chain Shop community where local blacksmiths volunteer to give demonstrations on how chain would originally be made. Here they met two important artist collaborators from the local community (Happy and Luke Perry) and also Robert, an original chain maker, who is 85 years old. They all became key collaborators in the film.



Development

"Myself, and my key collaborators each moved our own practice forward into ambitious new ground and galvanised our working relationship as an artist collective.

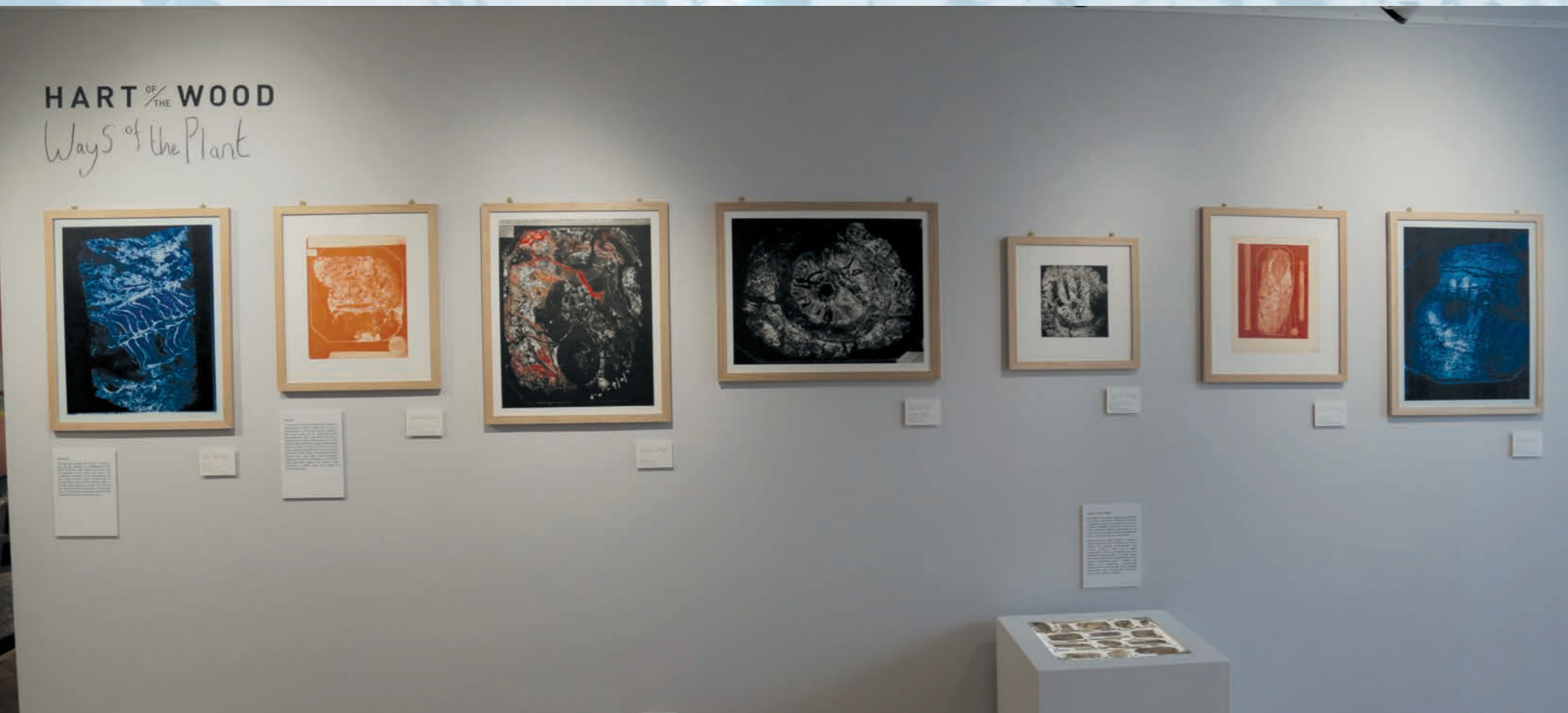
I began working with Master Printmaker Kristina Chan, at Plaintiff Press London, to explore Polymer Photogravure and Chine Collé etching techniques." Benjamin Wigley



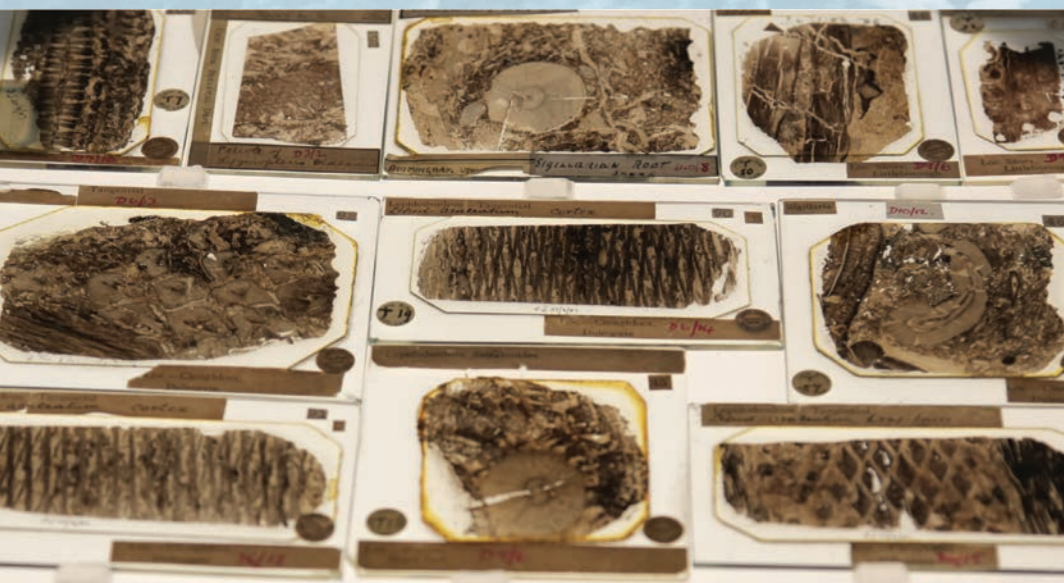
Workshops

With a range of very diverse community groups, people created masks inspired by Stephen Jon Cooper's Plant Guide and fabricated metal leaves to be adorned to local Artist Luke Perry's metal apron sculpture, which featured in the film and exhibition.

The Exhibition



The show had around 20 hand printed photographs, painted photographs, etchings, a large-scale drawing, and three sculptures that were part of the film. There was video interpretation about the project, and fossil slices and X-ray prints presented on light boxes.



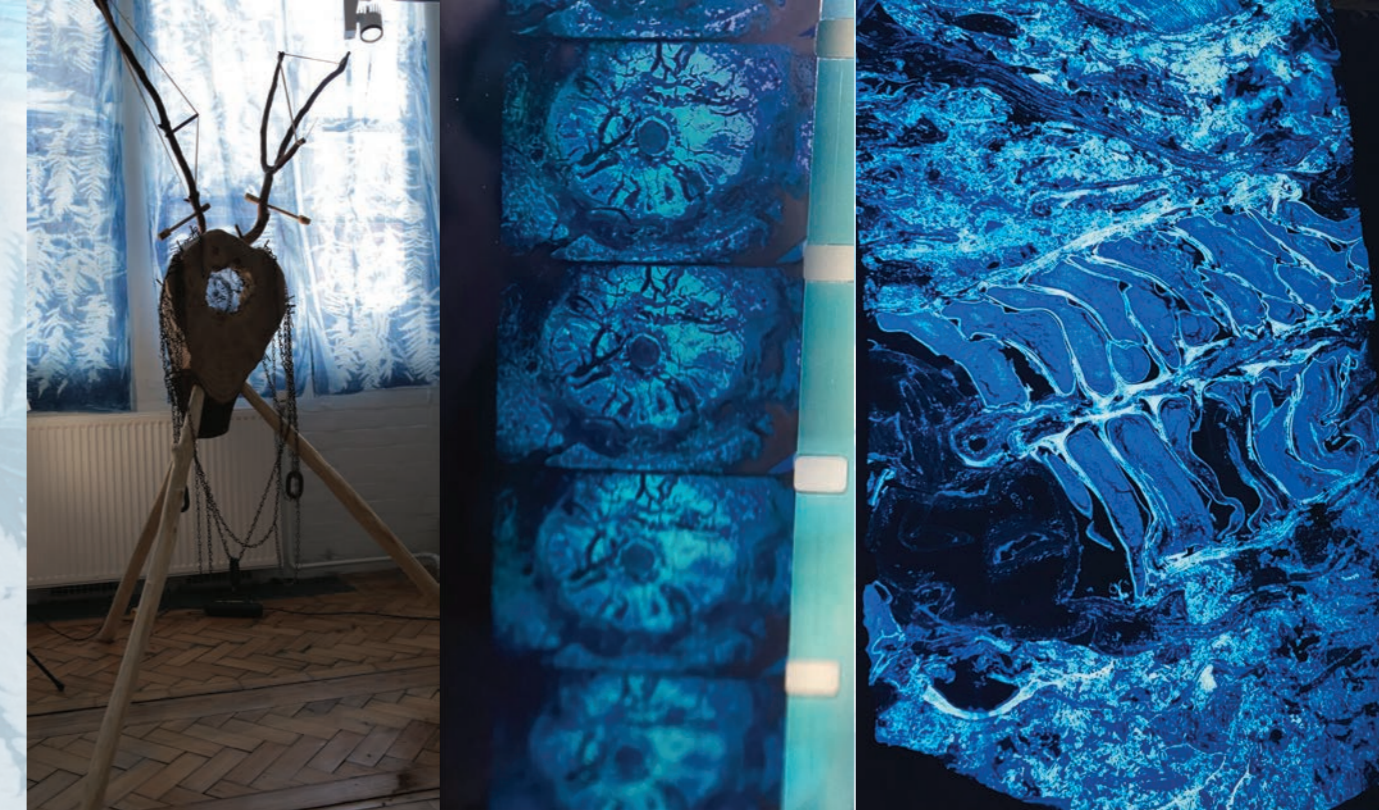
Fossils Microscope Slides

The microscope slides contain a range of extinct plants from the Carboniferous period related to lycopods (clubmosses) and modern quillworts. They were a major component of the Coal Measures flora and are approximately 319 million years old. Ben took these fossils directly into the darkroom and printed through the fossil slides to create photographs.



Drawing

The large carbon-charcoal drawing is a joint drawing made by Benjamin Wigley and Stephen Jon Cooper. This artwork was inspired by the *Lepidodendron fuliginosum* fossil print. This drawing was used in the artist's moving image work as an evolving moving image drawn and animated across time: a palimpsest of imagery that is manifest and erased on film.



Sculpture

This is an Upper Palaeolithic Shaman's Oak Viewer, which Ben made with artist Martin Somerville to be used within the artist film work. It's a phenomenal device, a kind of rooted and rough-hewn technology, used during the Shaman's ritual that opens the threshold to the transformative cave journey.

Iron Blue Toning

The geology infuses the project in subject, but also as medium. In collaboration with Dallas Simpson, Ben used Iron to tone the photographic fossil prints. This is inspired by the Iron Pyrite (Fool's Gold) mineral that is formed within Coal. Pyrite meaning 'stone or mineral which strikes fire' which also informs the opening ritual sequences in the film and draws a line with the underground fires at the coal seams.



Photography

In the show, Ben explored various photographic methods: cyanotypes, iron toning, hand-painting prints, X-ray printing and photo gravure etching. He collaborated with Dan Wheeler (Make it Easy labs) and Dallas Simpson to learn about photography experiments in x-ray printing and Iron toning.

Print

Ben used X-Ray film to make fossil print transparencies that could then be used to create photo etching printing plates. He then worked with esteemed London printmakers, Plaintiff Press, to create a series of printed works using the beautiful and ancient printing technique 'Chine Collé'. The fossil etching is printed onto long grain semi-transparent Japanese paper and adhered to a Somerset high-cotton-rag paper. This 'Chine Collé' technique is what gives the image its luminescent glow.

Expanded Cinema Live Performance



The expanded film performance of HOTW "Ways of the Plant", at the Lapworth Museum of Geology, was a very special experience. The venue provided a beautiful setting for the film and live performances, which unpacked the project's research and creative investigations. The live event celebrated the creative collaborations with local community, artisans, blacksmiths, scientists, and geologists through sound, performance and sculpture, which form material layers present in the film work.

"I am interested in multi-sensory expanded cinema, which seeks to immerse the viewer in the film, sound and live performance. There was live masked performance, living sculptures, film projections and musical and sonic interventions".

Stephen Jon Cooper performs as the Plant Guide

Sonic laments from Nathaniel Mann, and the fossil choir.



"It was particularly rewarding to share the work with the fossil choir and the workshop participants, and we received a great response from the academic and scientific community who contributed significantly to shaping the project." **Benjamin Wigley**

Martin Sommerville's Shamanic Wind-Wands.



ARTIST MOVING IMAGE FILM

Ben's films are not contained within a specific genre and bleed into documentary, myth, folklore, science, poetry and visual essay. The film depicts the journey of an early human, from the Upper Palaeolithic Period, who partakes in a transformative ritual that compels him to crawl into a cave system on a quest to find the 'Plant Guide' spirits, to ask them the 'Ways of the Plant'. (The 'Plant Guide' is a conceit we have developed that is inspired by the 'Animal Helper' archetypes seen in Upper Palaeolithic cave art.) The work takes inspirations from cave art and the 'Transition' period when it is conceived, by some scientists, that early humans had a leap of evolutionary development within the neural networks of the brain (neuropsychology). And where humanity began to develop memory, dreams and imagine their future.

Ben worked with Keeper of Geology Graham Worton and the UNESCO Black Country Geopark's Carboniferous landscape at the Saltwells Nature Reserve, to further explore the story of the Carboniferous. Film interventions at the nature reserve form sequences within the artistic moving image work.

The Hart of the Wood artists collaborated with the local community to explore the industrial heritage of the site, the chain making, the coal industry, the social history; alongside the geology, plant life, folklore and the 'Intangible Heritage' of the region.



"I continued to utilize my Bolex 16mm celluloid film camera to capture imagery of fossil objects from the Carboniferous collection. I hand processed the film in my lab and I employed new in-camera animation techniques, experimental sound recordings, and creative visual sequences to construct a geological narrative that responds to my research to early human cave art. I collaborated with mask maker Stephen Jon Cooper, Martin Sommerville for pseudo-folkloric ritualistic sequences on screen".

Benjamin Wigley

Sound artist and leading British folk musician, Nathaniel Mann created an ambitious folk soundscape that builds on the Hart of the Wood previous sound work, infused with ideas and the stories that we have developed through the project.

Happy was a local blacksmith and key collaborator in the film sequences. He is the main protagonist who we follow into the cave.

Luke Perry's sculpture, made through community workshops, is the final element in the film. It signifies how our archetype 'Stone Tongue' is re-sequestered back into the rock, from whence he came.



"This has been my first opportunity to be involved in any film making and it was a brilliant experience. The whole team were a pleasure to work with. I found them to be a welcoming and encouraging bunch with an obvious passion for their craft." **Happy (Blacksmith)**

"The opportunity to create the Hart of the Wood Apron allowed me to invite people to have really exceptional experiences, in one case with a near blind participant it was quite life changing. These opportunities are rare but incredibly valuable both to myself as a maker and historian and to those who valued the workshops so much." **Luke Perry (Artist & Fabricator)**

Inspiring People Through Workshops

The team worked with several local groups and artists in and around Birmingham and the Black Country, but it was a challenge to recruit groups interested artist led workshops around the Dudley area. It took hard work and persistence, and it would've been difficult to realise our plan without the help of Laura Dicken, our Creative Workshop Producer.



Black Country artist-led workshops

Local Creative Producer Laura Dicken put together the workshops that were held at Solid Swivel Foundry and The Black Country Living Museum. Laura focussed engagement with the hard-to-reach communities. We had young and old, visually impaired, people living with disabilities and severe illnesses, people from many demographics and various social backgrounds.

"I am now registered severely sight impaired and would never have got up in the morning expecting to be able to use an angle grinder, plasma cutter or arc welding equipment due to my needs and abilities. I arrived expecting to have to sit out most of the program of activity and maybe if I was lucky, to get to hit something with a hammer. Luke and Ben from the very start gave me the confidence, acceptance and assistance I needed to play a fully inclusive role along side every other able bodied participant, to the point that I feel quite emotional now, just writing these words of thanks. For me, it was a very special day that I will remember for ever."

Frank (Metal Workshop Participant)

"Luke is an excellent teacher, very patient, calm and professional. He has a wealth of knowledge and skills that he was enthusiastic about sharing with us. His kindness and generosity shone through and we all learnt quickly, no matter what our experience, age or ability were." **Justine**



Mask Workshops

with Artist Stephen Jon Cooper

Inspired by the fossils in Carboniferous rock, artist Stephen Jon Cooper created the Plant Guide, who has grown out from ancient fern leaves. He created a series of workshops for families and for adults that inspired people to explore organisms or species from geology, to create plant guide masks of their own.

Lapworth Museum of Geology 'Family Fun Days'

At the Lapworth we rolled out Autumn workshops on mask making for children, young families, University of Birmingham academics, and students. Inspired by the Plant Guide character, encouraging interest in geology, arts, and ecology.

The Black Country Living Museum Community Workshops

A series of Mask Making workshops for families and for adults, (working with a group of women through local charity (Top Church), lead by Tahira Ali).

"It was a unique experience to be part of a creative project with a very experienced costume maker and photographer. It was a privilege to be part of a film",

"It helped me with building my confidence and interact with everyone."

"We get involved with many projects, but this was something unique."

I enjoyed the fact that Steven and Ben lead the group really well, and to watch this was inspiring. They spoke to the group and interacted with the group so well, it was like they had been part of the group forever.



Fossil Choir Led By Mary Keith



Musician Mary Keith led a series of choir workshops, in the Wolverhampton area, leading up to the expanded film performance at Lapworth. During the workshops Mary explored different extended vocal techniques to respond to the brief that Nathaniel and Ben had suggested. The purpose of the Fossil Choir was to perform at the live event and to use recordings during the workshops as a sonic layer within the 30-minute artist moving image work.

"I've had such lovely positive feedback from my singers and their guests. You have produced such an amazing body of work with inspiring cross cultural, historic, scientific and media connections." **Mary**

Singing in the Lapworth Museum was amazing, being surrounded by artefacts and minerals but also hearing the sounds echoing around us. What struck me most was how what we sang led so beautifully into the film, one almost blending into the other and then afterwards, our reprise echoed elements of the film." **Kate**

"I thought it was great. Informative - found out about the geo park and the amazing female chain makers. Learnt some different vocal techniques I loved the exhibition too - the art and the apron. It was a wonderful journey of making strange noises to seeing progress to the final event and the film." **Jackie**

Recordings Used for Film and Live Performance

Nathaniel Mann sent recordings to Mary, that he had made with hydro-microphones in water with fossils. He recorded the sound of the air being released. Those sounds are used on the film. We asked Mary to use those recordings and to create experimental singing techniques that were inspired by the recordings. Mary is brilliant at working with people and very clever at working out the mechanics of how that might work through vocalisation. The results were compelling, strange and beautiful.



We used the Fossil Choir sonic soundscapes as the voice of the Plant Guide in the film and during the live performance.



As well as the fossil recordings, Nathaniel Mann wrote original folksongs that are woven within the soundscape of the film. Mary worked with the Fossil Choir to sing with Nathaniel live during the expanded film event, at the Lapworth Museum.

The Hart of the Wood Artist Collective

The Hart of the Wood Collective, is a group of multidisciplinary artists and collaborators, led by Benjamin Wigley, Nathaniel Mann, Stephen Jon Cooper, Martin Sommerville & Mary Keith, with various shifting specialisms in the visual, sonic & performative arts. The HOTW Collective also create alongside a range of other artists, scientists, thinkers and makers.

Lead artist Benjamin Wigley is a UK based Artist & Filmmaker.

He has a track record of ground-breaking creative multidisciplinary art and film projects that have been shown worldwide in landscapes, galleries, museums, cinemas, international film festivals and broadcasters. Ben is interested in how many ways a person can experience an idea or a story: using performance, documentary and experimental film, sculpture, photography, exhibition spaces, digital immersive experiences, artist walks and interpretation, that all work together to build an augmented viewer experience.

"My projects are often realised in the space between art and documentary. I am currently interested in exploring the magic realism of intangible heritage & folklore as a catalyst for (re)enchantment with the natural world, in the face of the climate crisis. I am developing work that allows the viewer to get a sense of both a physical and an experiential journey; interacting, immersing and participating."

Nathaniel Mann is a musician, composer, singer and sound artist. His research-based practice draws heavily upon folklore and tradition and aims to question our rigid sense of history and identity through Sonic explorations, avant-garde performance, acoustic experimentation and folk song. Most recently his work with folk supergroup Hack-Poets Guild has seen both his research, songwriting, arrangements and vocal performances receive wide acclaim.

Stephen Jon Cooper is an artist and performer. He has specialised in non-naturalistic theatre through the making and use of masks and puppets, which he takes to streets and open-air venues, targeting 'hard-to-reach' communities. He has collaborated with Ben and the ART DOCS community since 2013 with the creation of characters for the Hart of the Wood projects. These characters, built on folklore, use masks and costumes, which he then brings them to life through choreography to performance. Drawing is central to his process. .

Martin Somerville is an artist, maker and communitarian. He builds an improvised bridge from art, experience and cleft wood, dancing over it with whoever we'll be tomorrow. As Hart of the Wood collaborator, Martin co-created the interactive sonic sculptures, co-developed ideas and performs on film and in woods.

Mary Keith is an experienced choir director, vocalist and workshop leader.



Photograph by David Severn

