What is it that gives an area its character, its distinctiveness and its ‘sense of place’? Clearly the geology and climate of a place have a significant effect on the physical appearance of an area, its natural features and the flora and fauna that thrive there. But what else adds distinctiveness, the things that let you know, for example, that you are in Cornwall rather than the Canaries, the High Street in Milton Keynes or the High Street in Exeter?

Before the age of industrialisation, mass travel and global business, the human inhabitants of a particular locality generally used the materials closest to hand, most easily grown, made, quarried or otherwise locally acquired. In this manner the topography of an area became established and local distinctiveness was apparent in many ways including building materials and style, locally made artefacts, clothing and foods.

Common Ground, a part of the inspiration for this exhibition and the wider national audience development project of Home Ground, is a charitable organisation, founded in 1983 by Sue Clifford, Angela King and Roger Deakin, with the express purpose of exploring the relationship between nature and culture and raising awareness of the gradual disappearance of valuable elements of both. By pointing out that communities, towns, villages and landscapes were becoming homogenized and degraded by the loss of their attributes made up from elements of history, culture, vernacular architecture, topographical features and nature, Common Ground, along with other champions of local distinctiveness, managed to make the erosion of distinctive community assets a topical issue. Most of us are now familiar with phrases like ‘clone town Britain’ and ‘the homogenisation of high streets’, and hopefully we are all more aware and protective of our smaller, more ‘everyday’ treasures such as village landmarks, woodland, orchards and other vanishing assets.

Devon Guild of Craftsmen sits on the fringe of Dartmoor National Park; our ‘home ground’ is a vast granite bump with the bedrock exposed on high ground as stacks of weathered stone. These tors (right), together with open moorland, ancient woodland and boulder-strewn rivers, give the area its wild and distinctive character which merits National Park status.  

1 The arrangement of the natural and artificial features of an area  
2 Dartmoor National Park status confirmed in 1951
The predominant raw material of granite, put to use by human hands for the purposes of farming and housing (images above), already defines this landscape and therefore sits easily within it. For their first model project initiated to highlight local distinctiveness, Common Ground commissioned local sculptor Peter Randall-Page\(^3\) to make five sculptures, and a public village garden, in and around the Dartmoor village of Drewsteignton. The sculptures are not signposted or marked in any way; they are simply placed in the landscape where walkers and visitors may come across them as they explore the locality. Locally made and locally distinctive, these pieces enhance the environment they inhabit, emphasising the qualities of a place worth caring for and preserving.

Granite Song: Peter Randall-Page  
Image: Chris Chapman

National Parks have care and conservation at the core of their existence. Development of any sort is strictly controlled with measures in place specifically designed to retain the unique qualities of the place, thereby protecting it ‘in perpetuity’ as an amenity for everyone who chooses to visit. This is not the case for the rest of the country which makes the recognition and preservation of our smaller, ‘everyday’ assets even more important. Hedgerows, orchards, significant buildings, copses, meadows, playing fields, heaths and many other ‘local’ treasures need protecting by, and for, the communities who use them. Our progressively populous world necessitates an ever-growing amount of infrastructure, agriculture and commodities but our growing awareness of the value of our surroundings means that local assets are now increasingly taken into consideration in the fields of design, planning, tourism, heritage and the natural environment.

Much of our rural landscape and our urban space is shaped by the activities of the people who have lived and worked there over centuries. Towns and counties were

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\(^3\) Current President of Devon Guild of Craftsmen
known and recognised for their particular industries, skills and products which in turn were made from resources and materials readily available in the locality. Staffordshire for example, rich in accessible clay deposits and coal, became the creative centre of a world-renowned ceramics industry. The abundant clay was so close to the surface that potters simply had to dig a hole to get at it (if you have ever wondered about the origin of ‘pot hole’, you now have it). Up the road in Sheffield, fast flowing rivers, iron ore, coal and millstone grit provided everything required for sharp blades; knife making, albeit hard and hazardous work, literally ‘nose to the grindstone’, shaped the town, its skills and surroundings.

The wider project of Home Ground is a three-year audience development project and touring exhibition which takes the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, with its commitment to craft knowledge and practice, to football clubs across the UK whose heritage, reflected in the teams’ nicknames, is linked to the traditional craft industries of their locality. Devon Guild of Craftsmen will tour a capsule exhibition, alongside craft participation projects, in partnership with the following football clubs: Stoke City (The Potters), Sheffield United (The Blades), Macclesfield Town (The Silkmen), Walsall (The Saddlers) Luton Town (The Hatters) and Crystal Palace (The Glaziers).

Each project will team a community group, affiliated to one of the clubs, with a local artist and other partnership organisations such as local museums, art galleries and industries. Each group will have the mission of designing and making an ‘authentic souvenir’, from local materials, inspired by the football club’s history and the heritage industry recognised by the nickname and the locality. A final exhibition, bringing together and celebrating all the work produced, and recognising all the participants involved, will be presented in the autumn of 2016, at Devon Guild of Craftsmen, and titled Souvenirs from Home.

So what exactly is a souvenir and why do we take them home with us? A souvenir is a token of remembrance or a keepsake; when we think of souvenirs it’s likely that what springs to mind is something like a snow globe, a tee-shirt, a toy London bus, a tea towel or a stone picked up from a beach - but always something associated with a particular location or event – and quite probably (although not always) something that has little value. Nonetheless, souvenirs have a narrative attached to them; they provide the owner with an affirmation, ‘I was there, I saw that’, which is what gives the souvenir its meaning and value. And of course commemorative merchandise is a big money-maker for the tourism industry with the idea of collecting souvenirs partially embedded in the products.

An ‘authentic’ souvenir, rather than a mass produced item made in a distant factory, is something locally made from local materials. Authentic artefacts, souvenirs and local foods have the added advantage of economic benefit for the makers and sellers which in turn emphasises the identity and, if successful enough, the prosperity of the locality.

Using the arts, artists and makers to address issues of landscape, nature, history and
locality, and how to value, preserve or enhance the places in which we dwell and work, can be an effective way to further engage with ideas about change in relation to preservation, tradition and innovation.

The exhibition *Home Ground* explores the idea of local distinctiveness through the work of makers whose practice is rooted in their use of locally sourced materials alongside an exploration of the issues surrounding landscape, nature, history and locality. Our twelve makers are all using their home ground, and the materials they have found or grown there, to shape their ideas and the resulting work. This emphasis on local distinctiveness in hand-made products will be carried forward into the Devon Guild of Craftsmen wider project of the same name.

Our twelve exhibiting makers are Lise Bech (willow), Jane Bevan (contemporary craft from the woods), Anna Bowen (letter carver), Hilary Burns (basketry), Jaki Coffey (jewellery), Jonathan Garratt (ceramics), Michelle Greenwood-Brown (mosaic), John Haggar (leather), Chris Knight (metal), Eleanor Lakelin (wood), Laura Rosenzweig (woven textiles) and Claire Wellesley-Smith (textiles).

Lise Bech’s work is closely tied to her rural Scottish home and her lifestyle. Following the example set by her father, Lise grows her own willow which she sometimes uses in combination with other traditional basketry materials gathered from the local landscape. Lise’s love of her chosen materials is apparent in her beautifully made work. For this exhibition she has chosen to make traditional basketry with reference to the famous Glenbuck Cherrypickers, now chiefly remembered as Bill Shankly’s village team, as Glenbuck is also Lise’s own home ground.

Derbyshire based Jane Bevan is also a user of natural, found and gathered materials but her work is more on the sculptural than the functional side. Following a twenty-five year career in museums and galleries, Jane now spends her days walking, gathering and making her own distinctive work (right) from a wide range of natural materials including twigs, bark, feathers and seeds.

Anna Bowen lives in Dorset where she makes full use of the wide range of locally quarried stone available to her including Sherborne, Portland, Purbeck, Thornback, Flinty Cap, Inland Freestone, Wheldon and Pond Freestone. She doesn’t use computerised fonts or machine tools in her letter cutting, describing herself as ‘a kind of calligrapher’, allowing the particular stone she is carving to have a degree of influence over the design of the lettering.

Hilary Burns also grows her own willow and forages for her other materials. She grows a variety of willows on her beds at Dartington (Devon) and makes use of English rush as well as larger scale materials such as hazel, oak and chestnut. In her statement Hilary talks about the cyclical nature of harvesting and gathering basketry materials. Willow is harvested in the autumn/winter when the sap is down whereas rush cutting is done in the rivers in July and August (bark is gathered in the spring when the rising sap creates a gap between the bark and the wood). Inevitably this imparts a natural cycle to the work where the seasons (and the weather), play their part in the finished product.
Jaki Coffey’s wearable skips (left) confound most people’s idea of jewellery. Most of us have, at some point, rummaged through a skip and know that skips are about rubbish, as well as being very large, whereas jewellery, traditionally, is small and precious. But jewellery is also fun and Jaki has used materials found on footpaths, beaches, her Dublin studio floor and skips to make her brooches. The wearer can further exploit their own little skip by changing the contents.

Jonathan Garratt’s practice mainly revolves around ceramic plant containers for gardens and green spaces. To describe them as ‘garden ware’ or ‘flower pots’ would be wholly inaccurate as the forms are unique and sculptural but also within a tradition. The recognition of his pots and more sculptural pieces as springing from ‘tradition’ comes about from his use of materials, in that these are all sourced from the locality of his Dorset workshop, which in turn comes from Jonathan’s long-held awareness of the value of locality in producing distinctive work.

Michelle Greenwood-Brown’s practice as a mosaic artist is surprisingly diverse and the work she has made for Home Ground (right) represents a new exploration of her chosen material. Using the due-for-recycling tile heap from decades of production at the British Ceramic Tile Factory in Heathfield, Devon, Michelle has made work that employs the texture, chips and degradation of exposed, weathered tiles. Her resulting landscape panels impart unexpected expressive qualities to these broken tiles, now a very different thing to the original mass-produced, machine made product.

John Haggar is a craftsman known for the quality, design and longevity of his work. Armed with an array of skills, John has used the football connections of the wider Home Ground project to make a hand-stitched leather football, but not with entirely traditional materials. John comments that his football, although freshly made, already looks as though it’s been kicked around a lot. Perhaps this is what the footballs used by the Shankly boys and the Glenbuck Cherrypickers looked like. A thing of charm and character, but apparently not a consistent kicker as natural leather absorbs water which makes the ball heavy in wet conditions.

Chris Knight’s work embraces some weighty universal themes – life, death and religion – but he is looking to Sheffield, his home ground, and its industrial relationship with metal casting, in the techniques he uses to make the work in this exhibition. Although taking the recognisable form of vessels, his work explores historical and contemporary iconography through the use of precious and non-precious metals alongside references to ecclesiastical art. Chris’s work is held in many public collections including the V&A and Sheffield Cathedral.

Eleanor Lakelin’s sculptural, turned wood vessels are made from trees that were taken down during the winter storms of 2014. The trees all grew in close proximity to her London studio but, as she points out, being an urban artist who uses wood has its challenges. Material to work with, and space for drying and seasoning, are more difficult to obtain but, happily, also influence her work in that available trees will signpost her direction. After lathe-turning, Eleanor sandblasts, carves and/or bleaches the surfaces.
of the pieces, processes that reflect the richness and variety of her very unique home
ground.

Laura Rosenzweig collects the fleece she uses to weave with from farms in and around the Yorkshire Dales. These particular scarves, made with a broad-stripe theme with reference to traditional football scarves, are woven from Bluefaced Leicester wool, described by Laura as ‘one of Britain’s best and highest quality home-grown wools’. Bluefaced Leicesters (right) are known for their Roman noses (and blue faces) while their curly threadlike fleece is light, soft and lustrous. Laura’s scarves are warm and soft and become even softer with use.

Claire Wellesley-Smith has a more conceptual approach to her work and has utilised the site of a former Bradford dye works to gather plants for dyeing the felt and thread used in her work made for this exhibition. Bradford has a long history of textile production, becoming a boom town of the industrial revolution, sometimes then referred to as ‘the wool capital of the world’, and home of numerous textile mills. The industry declined rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century but a rich legacy of the town’s former prosperity still exists in the architecture and heritage. Claire uses her socially-engaged practice to explore the changing layers of the social and cultural history of her area.

The artists and makers selected for this exhibition all share a concern about the ecology of their materials and Home Ground seeks to illustrate and endorse the practice of considered, home-grown making as described up in a recent Crafts Council report, Making it Local;

‘Craft often represents an intensely personal or symbolic relationship with a particular locality. This ‘sense of place’ does, by its very nature, largely defy objective analysis: it is as unique to each person as it is to each locality.’

To find out more about Devon Guild of Craftsmen’s Home Ground project, please visit www.homegroundcraft.com

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Crafts Council: Making it Local: Dr Julie Brown (Report commissioned by Crafts Council in 2013)