The Blades

Sheffield United Football Club was formed in 1889 and nicknamed *The Blades* due to the steel production and, particularly, the cutlery industry of the city.

For this project we worked with Chris Knight, an artist based in Sheffield, known for his functional and visually provocative silverware. His practice includes sculpture and public art, the largest of which, ‘Cutting Edge’ Sheffield, has received numerous awards.

Chris worked with Lowerfield Primary School, part of Sheffield United’s community outreach programme, and the clubs Girls’ United and Senior Blades. Using drawing, Lowerfield Primary were asked to illustrate their own ideas about life in Sheffield and any connection they might have to Sheffield United. Coming from a broad range of cultures and countries with 33 different first languages spoken, the meaning of what it was to live in Sheffield was not typical of the image of the city. The workshops began by introducing a range of simple traditional metalworking processes including embossing, chasing and doming. Each pupil was able to use these techniques to make a brass medal. Their enthusiasm and response was very rewarding, especially as this was the first encounter of craft making for many of the children.

With the Senior Blades supporters group Chris explored basic hammer techniques such as blocking, sinking, raising and planishing, enabling each participant to create a small copper bowl and a series of fold-forming experiments. Following this they were asked to think about their own relationship and feelings towards Sheffield, the place, and Sheffield United, the football club. The hope was that they would create a personal narrative of the place where they lived and would involve their families in their drawings and text. Their designs have been photo-etched onto copper sheet and, using the expertise of a local professional metal spinner and Sheffield United supporter, have been spun into shallow copper pie plates.

For Chris’s commissioned piece he has produced a large photo etched copper plate. Having considered using typical images of Sheffield, its metalwork industry, factories and furnaces, he eventually decided to centre the piece firmly on Sheffield United. Whilst discussing ideas with the Senior Blades, what is locally known as the Chip Butty song was often referred to and seemed close to the hearts of the Blades. This is a song that speaks of all the finery of Sheffield life and is sung to the tune of John Denver’s ‘You fill up my senses’. The graphic design of the plate endeavours to convey the rise and fall of the supporters’ combined singing voices.
The Silkmen

Macclesfield Town Football Club was formed in 1874 and gained the nickname *The Silkmen* as silk weaving, both pre and post-industrial era, was the predominant craft, and then industry, of the area.

Zoë Hillyard, known for developing ‘ceramic patchwork’, an innovative textile-based approach to reconstructing broken vessels, was our lead artist for this project. She has undertaken commissions for the British Museum, National Trust and The New Craftsmen Gallery and is a Senior Lecturer within the School of Fashion & Textiles at Birmingham City University.

This project began at a mill in Langley, two miles from Macclesfield - home to Adamley Textiles. Adamley have been printing fabric on this site for the past fifty years and holds an extensive collection of archived designs, including hundreds of variations of the distinctive geometric micro-patterns, known as Macclesfield ‘neats’, often used for men’s tie fabric. Adamley kindly donated a kaleidoscope of coloured silk off-cuts to use for the project. Zoë and the participants were shown the complex stages involved in hand printing world-class silks and they also learnt about changing times and the introduction of digital technology to the production process.

Working with a wide range of participants, Zoë helped them to realise their ideas on paper and silk, using a variety of printing techniques. The workshops explored their experience of living in Macclesfield and being Silkmen fans (and not!) while they worked towards making a series of souvenir football shirts, as a signed football shirt is often a treasured possession for a fan. A collection of silk covered buttons was also made, referencing Macclesfield’s prolific silk button production which was established in the sixteenth century. Mother and baby groups, match-day visitors, behind the scenes club catering staff and players all left their mark on silk fabric and this was, in turn, used to cover individual buttons.

Zoë is known for developing an approach to reconstructing broken ceramics using just fabric and stitch. For her commissioned piece, *The Silkmen Cup*, Zoë has created a piece that celebrates the town’s silk heritage and reflects the football club’s determination and strength. The structure of the cup takes on a particular resonance, as the inaugural match played under the name Macclesfield Town Football Club, in 1876, was against Stoke City - *The Potters*. These teams, which grew out of their respective trades, clash again in Zoë’s celebratory piece, through the mix of silk and ceramics.
The Potters

Nicknamed The Potters, after the world famous pottery industry of Stoke-on-Trent, Stoke City Football Club are the second oldest professional football club in the world having formed in 1863.

Teaming up with Philip Hardaker, a community-based artist, living and working in Stoke-on-Trent, this project was able to utilise his knowledge of working with people from all walks of life and his experience of creating large site-specific artworks in public buildings, schools, libraries, universities and in the community.

Stoke-on-Trent has a rich cultural history and heritage connected to its long association with ceramic production, with Burslem as the birthplace and mother town of British ceramics. Many Stoke City supporters have connections with or experience of the ceramic industry, making this project the perfect opportunity to connect with people through clay.

Potclays, a ceramic supplies company in Stoke-on-Trent, gave fantastic support with materials and a space to create the work for the project. Philip worked with a diverse range of people; Stoke City supporters, children and young people visiting the British Ceramic Biennial and staff from Potclays. Each participant was encouraged to choose a shape to work with which they then incised, drew and painted with personal images of Stoke, lastly adding lettering to make phrases or words. The final piece has been collaged together as a real celebration of Stoke City Football Club and a lasting testament to their passion for the city and football team.

Philip’s commissioned piece is a combination of his own work and that of the participants. It is based on the FA Cup, a national competition that Stoke City have not yet won. The work is made from ancient shards of pottery dug up in the locality. These fragments represent and celebrate past workers’ creative skills and their huge contribution to the heritage of the area.

The piece intertwines images and text with the found shards. An image in memory of Lucas Williams a passionate Stoke City supporter, is in the centre, flanked by Stanley Matthews, Stoke City’s famous son, and Gordon Banks and his hand print. All these images come together to create a vision of Stoke City and its great cultural past with its enduring relationship to ceramics.
The Saddlers

Walsall Football Club was founded in 1888. The club’s nickname, The Saddlers, reflects Walsall’s status as a traditional centre for exceptional saddle manufacturing.

For this project we worked with Melanie Tomlinson, an illustrator based in Birmingham, who works predominately with metal. With over nineteen years’ experience, Melanie has worked as an artist leading participatory projects which explore nature, identity, and a sense of place. She has won several awards for her work, and her sculptures can be found in collections in this country and abroad.

This project developed a strong narrative content from the outset. Melanie’s workshops, attended by a large number of children, especially on match days, explored football scenarios, strategy boards and invented footballers, using brightly coloured pens and pencils. From these designs the children were able to transfer their drawings onto leather using a hot iron, metal foils and gilding techniques. The process of hammering letters and motifs into leather using special embossing tools also allowed them to use highlights and texture. Thanks to a kind donation from Black Country Saddles, off-cuts of brightly coloured leather were used to create collages, using hexagons (the shape used to make footballs once stitched together) as the basis from which to create a series of wall-based pieces representing the ideas and vision of the young fans.

Melanie’s commissioned piece, Jo Boxhall’s Football Boots, was inspired by working with the young Saddlers fans and their families. It became apparent that a narrative created around a fictional footballer was the way for the young fans to ‘own’ the project and learn about the history and traditions of their club from the older generation. The children and their families developed the character of ‘Jo’, what he looked like, his playing career and his family background with its links to the leather industry. The gilded boots are from 1957 – they represent Jo’s boots, with a special casket made to house them, and depict the narrative of Jo’s family - workers in Walsall’s leather industry. The piece portrays the marks and scratches embedded on work benches and tools used by leather workers - repetitive craft skills permanently embossed forever.