



Craft and Rural Development

Dr. Karen Yair

Research Associate, Crafts Council



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Craft is said to be [one of the key drivers of the future creative rural economy](#), key to the [£500m](#) contributed each year by creative professionals to the rural economy of England. In this briefing note, we explore this assertion in detail, investigating the economic contribution made by craft to a diverse and evolving rural England.

Rural contexts:

Every rural community is different: a former mining village, a commuter hamlet, a market town and a traditional seaside resort town each has its own, distinctive economic make-up and culture.

Some rural areas – and particularly those close to London – are growing, but for many the story is one of economic imbalance and overall decline. On the one hand, wages – often seasonal – are low in comparison with urban areas; on the other, house prices are high and costs of living inflated. The legacy of decline within traditional industries – farming, fishing and mining – remains obvious in some areas, and has created new vulnerabilities in terms of over-dependence on public sector employment in others. Some market towns may appear affluent yet conceal the economic stagnation typical of towns where commuting, retirement and second home ownership are common.

The most recent statistics suggest increases in reported crime which are, to some extent, indicative of the economic and related social issues faced by rural communities. Poor public transport can limit access to work, education and social opportunities, and whilst some communities have schools, pubs and churches, in others people rarely meet. Some rural communities are dominated by traditional values, and in others these values exist in tension with those of incomers from different backgrounds.

The retail economy:

In March 2011, the Crafts Council and [Craftnet](#) (1) co-hosted an event in Farnham to consider the question, 'is it possible to replicate Hay-on-Wye's success as a national centre for books by accentuating the role of crafts at the heart of a rural market town's cultural offer?'

The Hay Festival model gives literature audiences the chance to hear authors speak and discuss their work, and to buy books. It's a model that treats visitors as cultural consumers – and it works for the local economy. Visitors to the Guardian Hay Festival topped [200,000](#) for the first time in 2010, swelling the town's population from [1,300 to 80,000](#) for ten days in early June. And sales for 2011 are said to be up a further [15%](#). In 2008, these visitors spent around [£15m](#) locally, during the festival, in addition to the [£9-£10m](#) paid for event tickets. Affluent and culturally-minded, in the business they bring to the town's restaurants, hotels and cafes provides local farmers with a new market for premium food products, and [employment](#) for farmers' families. Whilst the pace of Hay's transformation and its effect on local [culture, community](#) and [house](#)



[prices](#) are questioned by some, the town remains a recognised exemplar of cultural tourism as driver of rural diversification.

Could craft do the same for Farnham? Certainly, craft and literature / publishing are very different industries, but the outlook is good. Farnham itself is well equipped to build on existing craft programmes and partnerships between galleries, arts organizations and an academic research centre (the Crafts Study Centre). And major craft events in other areas attract significant visitor numbers. Dorset Art Weeks – a rural Open Studios event with a high number of craft exhibitors – draws over [8000](#) visitors in two weeks; whilst the annual Earth and Fire International Ceramics Fair in rural Nottinghamshire – combining retail with workshops, exhibitions and other events – attracts [7000](#) visitors in just three days.

Year-round craft destinations with a strong visitor offer – typically combining exhibitions and shops with food and drink in a rural setting – pack a still stronger punch. The Devon Guild of Craftsmen attracted [120,000](#) visitors in 2009, and the Dartington Cider Press Centre – which turned over more than [£4m](#) in 2008 – draws over [600,000](#) each year. A single exhibition held at the Hub: National Centre for Craft & Design in Sleaford, rural Lincolnshire, attracted over [10,000](#) visitors over 10 weeks in 2007, providing evidence of the Hub's role in [Sleaford's evolution](#) from agricultural market town to cultural tourism destination. The [Handmade in America](#) network of branded 'craft towns,' connected by a guidebook of 'Craft Heritage Trails' featuring studios, shops and galleries across the State, has created 633 jobs in its 15 year history.

For tourists, buying direct from a maker, from a workshop or from a specialist gallery or shop, can be an integral part of the holiday experience. As the Crafts Council's recent [Consuming Craft](#) report explains, craft purchases tell stories about the places they come from, the people who made them and the materials and processes they employ – they feel like a real 'find,' and serve as a powerful prompt to memory and reminiscence. This powerful connection between craft object and place plays out in high levels of tourism demand, with over 90% (i) of makers in the South West of England in 2001 identifying visitors to the region amongst their customers and clients.

The experience economy:

So the strength of craft buying – as part of a rural tourism offer – suggests strong potential for a rural craft destination or 'town of craft' modeled on Hay-on-Wye. But it is interesting to consider whether this model is the only role for craft in rural regeneration.

At the Farnham event, Professor Simon Olding (Director of Farnham's Crafts Study Centre) argued for an approach to the development of 'craft towns' that recognises and builds on a place's existing assets to address its own needs. So, does craft have something distinctive – and different from literature – to contribute to sustainable rural development?

The short answer is, yes.

In terms of tourism, rural makers today are not only selling work but are also providing a range of participatory experiences for visitors, with the accent on



active making. Indeed, these workshops and holiday courses, offering the experience of learning to make in an idyllic rural landscape, have become the backbone for many rural makers' businesses.

Guy Mallinson is one such maker. A woodworker and furniture maker who set up, ran and sold two businesses in London before moving to rural Dorset in 2004, Guy has used his skills and passion for wood to build a growing business which is also playing a key role in Dorset's evolution as a cultural tourism destination.

Visitors to Guy's [Woodland Workshops](#) learn carving and green wood working skills in an idyllic woodland setting, complemented by locally produced food, cooked and eaten outdoors. Guy explains the appeal:

Our guests often say that they've enjoyed spending a day or two in the peace and quiet of the woods just as much as they have enjoyed the course, and everyone seems to get a buzz from 'connecting with nature' – either through woodworking or through working in woodland.

Guy creates a new experience for visitors, immersing them in woodworking and the woodland environment. Whilst his courses focus on making a bowl or a spoon, it's the process that is important: Guy encourages his visitors to enjoy working with the wood's grain, and to take away with them a new affinity with its warmth and tactility. In this way, the Woodland Workshops meet an identified consumer need for meaningful and 'authentic' experiences which has endured despite – and perhaps to some extent because of – economic downturn.

The Woodland Workshops business has proved itself to be sustainable: built up from scratch, the business has grown to include an online tool shop and extended facilities themselves which now include bodgers' shelters and on-site camping. Importantly, it is also helping to extend the tourism season into the less popular spring and autumn months, an important strategy for the development of sustainable communities in rural tourism areas. Its work seems to be part of a bigger trend too: click [here](#) to read about [Eastnor Pottery](#) and [Keep & Share](#), businesses which are both attracting new visitors to rural Herefordshire and helping to build the local tourism network [Creative Breaks](#).

Makers are supporting rural tourism behind the scenes too, supplying tourism sites and venues with important creative services. Heritage sites for example, frequently commission makers like [Rachel George](#) to supply bespoke models and props. Amongst other projects, Rachel has recreated Saxon jewellery for Historic Scotland and 18th century kitchen and prison furnishings for a Scottish castle. Rachel makes some reproductions herself, and commissions others from glassblowing, leatherwork and ceramics specialists. Her work, profiled in recent [Crafts Council research](#), adds value to the tourism offer by bringing heritage venues to life and enabling visitors to experience them in new ways.

In another example of collaboration between makers and rural heritage venues, the [Museumaker](#) project has enabled outstanding makers to create new work in response to historic collections including those at rural venues [Killhope Mining Museum](#) and [Kedleston Hall](#). On this programme, makers' have not only created



inspirational new interpretations of heritage collections for visitors, but also enhanced staff skills at the venues and allowed new audience development strategies to be tested.

Beyond tourism:

The new generation of designers-makers have so far done most to engage with other sectors of the local economy in rural areas. NESTA [Rural Innovation](#) report, December 2007

As Guy Mallinson and Rachel George's work shows, makers are key players in the rural tourism economy, helping to create and fulfil market demand in a range of different ways. Makers' contribution to rural economic development goes far beyond the tourism agenda, however: [recent research from the Crafts Council](#) shows makers' businesses contributing to the development of sustainable rural economies in four key ways:

Innovation: Along with other creative businesses, makers bring new ideas and ways of working to rural areas, as well as new products and services, attracting other businesses and investment along the way and encouraging innovation amongst competitors and colleagues.

The Woodland Workshops is a good example here – its work has opened up an entirely new market niche and created new business opportunities for local catering suppliers, hotels and restaurants, as well as for other, local creative workshops. According to recent research from [NESTA](#), this kind of impetus for existing local businesses to develop and diversify is essential to rural economies: by working in this way, makers and other creative businesses can support the evolution of healthy, diverse rural economies which not only respond to but also drive market demand.

Local trading: Makers are often strong supporters of local trading. Research from NESTA suggests that other creative businesses in rural areas tend to trade mainly with businesses in urban centres. In contrast, the Crafts Council's own research finds that many makers – including those working in rural areas – consciously source local suppliers, distributors and retail outlets.

This emphasis on local trading – resulting in part from the overlaps between craft and the sustainability agenda discussed in our briefing note [here](#) – produces important benefits for rural communities, reducing the environmental impact of shipping whilst also retaining money in local circulation.

Just as importantly, by supplying local galleries and shops with unique products, makers' businesses are supporting the drive away from [clone town Britain](#) and towards a more distinctive and sustainable high street. The government clearly recognizes the importance of this distinctiveness both to tourism and to a community's sense of 'place' with Mary Portas now appointed to lead an [independent review into the future of the high street](#), due to report in autumn 2011.

New uses for local waste materials: As part of this local trading impetus, craft businesses often discover and market new uses for other farmed materials, including leather, hemp and flax. [The Rural Cultural Forum](#) highlights the craft



sector's role in transforming these natural – and often waste – materials into high profit commodities which include bio-technology products as well as fashion and furnishings.

Just one example of this type of locally connected, innovative and low energy craft business is the Devon-based company [Bellacouche](#), which locally sources each component and material for the 'green' burial shrouds it produces. Bellacouche owner, Yuli Somme, collects waste wool from Dartmouth farmers, arranges for it to be dyed locally, and then felts and assembles it in her workshop, incorporating wooden components made by a local woodworker. In this way, as outlined in recent [Crafts Council research](#), economic and environmental sustainability are built into every stage of the production process. And as a result, local landfill is reduced whilst farmers are supported and money is kept circulating within the local economy.

Skills development: Craft can play a significant role in creating the right conditions for sustainable economic development, by engaging isolated or excluded young people and helping them to find satisfying work.

The [Xtravert](#) programme in Cornwall is a good example of a rural project that does exactly this. Profiled at Assemble 2010: the Crafts Council conference, the project uses skateboarding as a hook to engage young people who were previously not in education, employment or training. Developing the young people's carpentry and business skills over a three month period, it offers employment to the most successful within the Xtravert team. The project's emphasis is on working with the young people's existing interests, encouraging the development of focus, motivation and practical skills through craft.

The programme's first round saw a 100% attendance rate, and three of its participants are now working to run the business and the workshop. Mentor Andy Cathery explains how the programme builds skills which can lead directly to qualifications and employment:

It's an opportunity for them to learn through doing: while on the training programme, all the trainees gained their Arts Award and now Jack, James and Matt are working towards their City and Guilds qualifications. The team are involved at every step of the way, from pitching for tenders and taking briefings for commissions to conceiving, designing and building the products. It's growing the team's practical and creative skills in all sorts of ways.

And the benefits go beyond the individual participants: indeed, the economic contribution of this type of programme crucial for geographically remote rural areas such as Cornwall, as a means of retaining younger, economically active people who more typically leave the area to seek work elsewhere.

Conclusions:

Rural communities have arguably been under-represented and under-served, over the past decade: national cultural policy has been criticised for its focus on creative cities and urban deprivation. Current developments have raised new concerns. On the one hand the Government's localism agenda has focused new attention on rural areas; on the other, existing support for culture and the creative industries has been threatened by funding cuts at regional and local



authority levels.

Our contention is that the contribution of creative businesses – and craft businesses in particular – to the rural development agenda should be recognised more fully, and barriers to their development addressed.

A rural 'town of craft' model adopted from the Hay Festival could function successfully as a way of stimulating the buying and selling of craft objects, and of creating debate around craft, whilst also benefiting the host town and its surrounding area. There are other roles for craft to play in supporting the countryside's sustainable development, however, both within and beyond its contribution to tourism.

Working in rural communities, craft businesses can support the evolution of vibrant, distinctive and colourful rural high streets, and encourage innovation by rural businesses. They can play a significant role in growing the local business networks and supply chains which encourage money to circulate in local economies. They can help to diversify these economies away from over-reliance on declining industries, whilst creating new, high value markets for these industries to supply. And they can help isolated young people into employment whilst making their communities more attractive places to live and work.

[Recent research from NESTA](#) suggests that the economic, social and technological conditions are ripe for creative businesses – including craft businesses – to contribute more fully than ever to the development of sustainable rural economies. It also, however, identifies many barriers to growth, ranging from inadequate education and transport infrastructures – to poor political support on a local level and restrictions on land use. The barriers also include a paucity of rural business investors, and the dispersal of high level skills across a wide geographical area. At the same time, employment in creative jobs remains highly concentrated in the most accessible rural areas: remoteness is considered, by many, to be a more significant challenge to rural business development than rurality.

We join NESTA's call for the creative industries to be routinely integrated into rural development policies around town planning and redevelopment as well as tourism, and for business and rural development strategies to be developed which promote collaboration between creative and non-creative businesses in rural areas. In addition, we look to all emerging policy developments promoting localism to fully enable the potential of creative businesses. Craft businesses in particular, we believe, have the potential to drive sustainable rural development – not only through the full range of their contributions to tourism, but also through the services they provide and the business practices they follow.

(1) CraftNet is an inclusive, collaborative network of established and emerging leaders in the field of craft

(i) South West Arts (2002) *The Real World: A Prospectus for the Crafts in the South West*.