

The Leverhulme Trust - Artist in Residence

The Artist in Residence was Mr Rodney Harris, a sculptor and print-maker based at Spike Island Studios in Bristol. The residency was timed to coincide with the bicentenary of the first geological map of England, by canal engineer and surveyor William Smith, who spent much of his working life designing and building the Somersetshire Coal Canal, near Bath. In the course of building the canals Smith observed successions of rock types, or strata, that he could correlate from one area to another using fossils and so create a map of the underground distribution of the rocks. Smith's geological map, one copy of which is held in Earth Sciences, heralded a sea-change in our understanding of Earth structure and our ability to explore for natural resources.

Rodney's work at Bristol began with an exploration of the kinds of work that geologists undertake. Rodney was interested especially to learn how Smith had set about making his map and what kinds of rocks he recorded. To this end we took Rodney on a number of fieldtrips to sites of local geological interest. Rodney sampled the rock types at each locality to explore the potential for using powdered rock as a pigment. By grinding the rocks up and mixing the powder with linseed oil binder he discovered that he could use the rocks themselves to create printing inks to make a version of Smith's geological map. To our knowledge this was the first time such a thing had been attempted.

Rodney completed his version of Smith's map in October, when it was unveiled by the Vice-Chancellor of the university at a small reception. The map is remarkable on many fronts. Not least, at the same size as Smith's original (2 x 1 m), it is impressive in scale, but also it shows the

British landscape, stripped of its surface soils and other paraphernalia, in its true colour, from the dark grey of the coalfield to the pastels of the Home Counties. The map hangs in Earth Sciences Common Room where the original once hung.

It is perhaps too early to comment on Rodney's legacy as Artist in Residence. However, several consequences are already apparent. Rodney remains a frequent visitor to the School and has encouraged other Bristol-based artists to do likewise, including sculptor, Jo Lathwood, and printmaker, Emma Stibbon RA. Rodney has secured a permanent display space in the foyer to the School, close to Smith's restored map, where his and other artists' work will be shown. Perhaps most exciting of all are plans to have a regular Artist in Residence in the School, perhaps in alternate years, to include not just the visual arts, but also music, writing and drama. In all of these regards last year's Artist in Residence a memorable, timely and lasting success for all.

Professor Jon Blundy, Bristol University, 2016.