

Exhibition brings into focus lives of paupers

by Matty Airey

PEOPLE labelled as 'paupers,' condemned to a life in Stroud Workhouse, and then buried in unmarked graves are to have their lives acknowledged in an exhibition in Stroud Cemetery this weekend.

Ash, hair, flowers, cloth and words will be used in Angela Findlay and Shirley Margerison's *Redressing Absence*, five site-specific installations, projections and layered textiles, placed at key points within Stroud Cemetery, The Memorial Chapel and the vaults of the Cemetery Gate Lodge.

Angela and Shirley both have backgrounds working in social care and there is a strong element of social justice in their project, a sense of putting things to rights, a magnanimity.

"We are trying to make present people whose lives have not been marked - in contrast to the often elaborate and grand memorials and tombstones of the wealthy, or the 'great and the good'," said Shirley.

"We are both interested in the areas of history that never made the history books because the people, or the events weren't deemed of enough value or interest.

"Having met many of the people behind the negative labels of 'prisoners,' 'murderers,' 'drug addicts' etc through working in prisons and with disadvantaged people, I realise that everybody has a story to tell," said Angela.

"Many of those people would probably end up in the workhouse if they still existed, so evoking a sense of the humanity behind the label 'pauper' is important to me."

A sense of shame hung over the workhouse, and part of Angela and Shirley's interest is in the way society blinkers itself from seeing



◆ Angela Findlay and Shirley Margerison

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uncomfortable truths.

"Social justice and highlighting inequalities are of great importance to both of us and our hope by drawing attention to this aspect of Stroud's hidden history is that people can be remembered with pride rather than shame; for their human qualities rather than their

place in society," added Angela.

Redressing Absence, a Stroud International Textile Festival event, is at Stroud Cemetery and Lodge, 114 Bisley Road, this Saturday and Sunday, 11am-5.30pm, plus Saturday, May 16 and Sunday, May 17, 11am-5.30pm.



Shirley Margerison and Angela Findlay who will be exhibiting a site-specific installation at Stroud Cemetery.

Artists' graveyard shifts focus to unsung heroes

By Tracy Spiers

NOT many consider going to a graveyard to enjoy or experience art.

But for artist Angela Findlay the peaceful setting of Halsey Road cemetery has proved the ideal place to live and work.

Angela bought Lower Cemetery Lodge four years ago and, over two weekends in May she and fellow artist Shirley Margerison will be hosting a moving and thought-provoking exhibition.

It features five site-specific installations, projections and layered textiles in key points within the cemetery. Memorial Chapel and vaults of the lodge. It's a fascinating tribute to Stroud's unsung heroes - the ones who worked gruelling hours in local mills behind the looms, had no chance in life or once enjoyed respectable trades yet fell on hard times.

Offering a different spin and thread to Stroud International Textile Festival 2009, Angela and Shirley highlight the



sharp social and economic contrasts during Victorian times with meaningful use of earth, flowers, ash and cloth. Aptly called *Re-dressing Absence*, this artistic memorial will encourage the 21st Century onlooker to contemplate as stories behind

unmarked graves come to life. "We started out researching the cemetery, the workhouse and the history of this site, who lived here and who died here. The other trigger for this work were the themes of the festival itself which included memory and decay," explains

Angela, whose evocative and dramatic paintings of sky, sea and weather have become well known in past years - particularly her signature use of River Severn mud. Brought up in Hampshire, Angela lived in Cologne for seven years teaching art in

prisons and running a programme for rehabilitating youths. She spent 10 years as a painter working with skins, weather, soil, sand and mud. In moving here, Angela enrolled at Stroud College, where both she and Shirley are doing a Fine Art degree course, aiming for an MA. The theme of 'memory of place' remains strong, an interest shared by Shirley.

"I'm fascinated by the history which has not been written, the aspect of life or events that

don't make the history books. I'm interested in the shame of the rich and poor, the hidden personal history which doesn't get talked about yet becomes integrated into people's lives," says Shirley, who has a strong interest in materials and enjoys working with latex, cloth, wax, text and photography.

Brought up in Scotland, Shirley has worked in mental health with young offenders and children. Like Angela, she's used art therapy.

Having always wanted to be an artist, she's now fulfilling her dream and is excited about *Re-dressing Absence's* role in May's textile festival.

The exhibition is on May 9, 10, 16 and 17. It runs from 11am to 5.30pm at Stroud Cemetery and Lodge in Halsey Road. For information send an email to angela@angelafindlay.com or samargerison@yahoo.co.uk or visit festival website at www.stroudinternationaltextiles.org.uk



Angela's *Re-dressed Lives* in cloth, text and wax.

REVIEW

Re-dressing Absence, Stroud Cemetery and Lodge

UNNAMED candle makers, bakers, cabinet makers and even umbrella makers are among the unsung heroes of Stroud's past who are at last receiving the special tribute they deserve.

A poignant, moving and sensitively-created artistic collaboration in the grounds of Stroud Cemetery - in the form of five site-specific installations - is not only cleverly thought-out and skilfully put together, but well researched.

Re-dressing Absence highlights the sharp social and economic contrasts in the Victorian era, both in life and death and is the combined work of artists Angela Findlay and Shirley Margerison.

Their ambitious and unusual project, is their praise-worthy contribution to Stroud International Textile Festival 2009 and fits in neatly with the festival's themes of memory, decay and repair.

I found it personally touching and heart-rending. Not only did my late great uncle used to live in the Cemetery Lodge and lovingly attend the graves, it was humbling to think any one of those unnamed tombs could so easily have been an ancestor.

Amalgamating Shirley's fascination with materials and process, and Angela's long-standing use of mud and sand in her paintings of moody skies, the artists have used ash, hair, earth, cloth and words as their chosen tools. The results are stunning, acting as a moving epitaph to the paupers.



■ Shirley Margerison, left, and Angela Findlay.

teachers, weavers, watchmakers and labourers who made such vital contributions to the development, wealth and prosperity of the Stroud valleys. Months of research, and a shared interest in memory, history and sense of place, has enabled the artists to achieve their goal.

Re-dressing Absence, does exactly what the title suggests. It's a significant memorial thousands of lives should have received decades ago. Yet it's also a remarkable display of combined creative talent - the result of which the artists should be proud.

Tracy Spiers

■ *Re-dressing Absence* can be seen this Saturday and Sunday from 11am to 5.30pm at Stroud Cemetery and Lodge, Bisley Road, Stroud.

