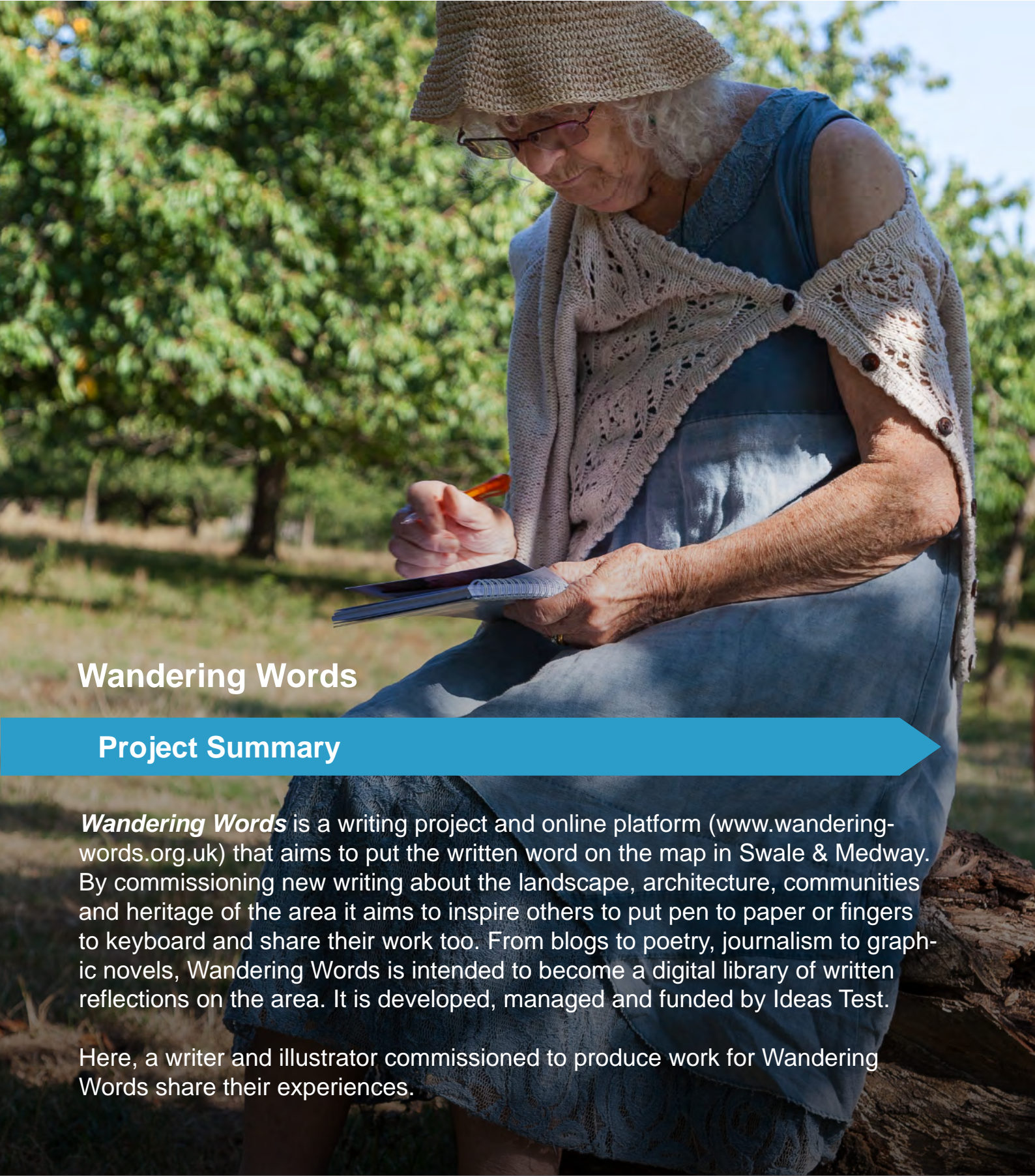




Empowering communities in Swale & Medway to live more creative lives

www.ideastest.org.uk



Wandering Words

Project Summary

Wandering Words is a writing project and online platform (www.wandering-words.org.uk) that aims to put the written word on the map in Swale & Medway. By commissioning new writing about the landscape, architecture, communities and heritage of the area it aims to inspire others to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and share their work too. From blogs to poetry, journalism to graphic novels, *Wandering Words* is intended to become a digital library of written reflections on the area. It is developed, managed and funded by Ideas Test.

Here, a writer and illustrator commissioned to produce work for *Wandering Words* share their experiences.

The Writer

Truda Thurai, writer of *Sittingbourne: Earth Cycle*



“I knew very little about Sittingbourne when I was first approached by Mark Hewitt, editor of Wandering Words, and asked to write about the town. Even in Roman times it wasn’t so much a destination as somewhere people passed through and it’s much the same today. I went there for the first time on a wet day and thought, what am I going to say about this place? But one of the nicest things about the commission was being asked to look closely at a subject that on the face of it didn’t seem very promising because as soon as I got rid of my assumptions and started digging below the surface there was so much material I almost didn’t know where to stop. I feel Sittingbourne has been overlooked for a long time – I was guilty of overlooking it myself - but it really has a rich and fascinating history.

My brief for Wandering Words was very open-ended – Mark wanted people to have a free hand in what they wrote so I began by doing some research. My husband and I walked up and down Sittingbourne high street with cameras and followed a friend’s advice to always look up when visiting an unfamiliar place. It proved valuable; there are some very beautiful buildings hidden away behind the tattoo parlours and plastic shop fascias. In addition to taking pictures, I visited a project called The Meads, a Canterbury Archaeological Trust excavation of mainly Anglo Saxon but also Bronze Age artefacts. A great deal of work was going on in a very unprepossessing shopping mall and that gave me a lot of material for stories. Then I came across a quaint little museum at the bottom of the high street where I found out more about the area’s history. The inspiration for other stories came from talking to local people who I found to be mainly very proud of their town. It was interesting to see that pride because Sittingbourne is really struggling at the moment and has lost a lot over the centuries. There used to be a huge paperworks in the town in the 19th century and when that shut down it took a lot of the town’s industry with it. More recently, the local newspaper has folded. There are a lot of empty shops and buildings but the people I met seemed quite upbeat.

I’d written a book called *Barley, Bread and Cheese*, a collection of short stories based on Rochester cathedral and I suppose *Earth Cycle* was a development of that, in that it was a collection of pieces inspired by the history, people and places of Sittingbourne. I wrote them in the first person, as different voices from the past, with the intention that they should be read aloud. I’d like to record them at some point or give a public reading of the collection. Being involved with Wandering Words was a great experience for me as a writer. Aside from *Earth Cycle* itself, which I found a fascinating exercise, Mark invited me to speak about my work at a series of talks he curates called the Wigmore Library Talks, which was very well attended. The project also led to me being invited to give a workshop about historical writing at Rochester Literature Festival, a newish group that is just starting to take off. I feel I’ve been stitched a little tighter into the local literary scene through my involvement with

The Illustrator

Mark Barnes, illustrator of *Inspector Barnstable Investigates...* *Shepherd Neame Brewery.*



“I’m a freelance illustrator and graphic designer and do a lot of commercial work including branding and posters. But comics and storytelling through pictures have always been my first loves so getting a commission to do a comic strip – and one about a brewery to boot – was pretty much my dream job.

In 2007 I had been commissioned by Medway Council to do a piece of public art for Chatham so I came up with *The Museum of Tales*, in which I collected stories of the area from the public, illustrated them in different styles relating to the period of the story and then uploaded them into an online ‘museum’. The ‘host’ was a character called Inspector Barnstable who looks, strangely, quite like me but with a moustache and a pipe. When I got the commission for Wandering Words I decided to bring Inspector Barnstable back.

My brief was very open – I was asked to produce a comic strip about the Shepherd Neame Brewery in Faversham. I thought it sounded fairly easy but it turned out to be a little harder than I’d anticipated because I wasn’t able to get access to the brewery until quite late into the project. This was challenging for an illustrator because from the outside there’s not very much you can see of the brewery – it’s all enclosed. I had to book myself onto a public brewery tour just so I could get inside and have a look. I didn’t know what angle I’d take when I started but it quickly became clear that the motif that ran throughout the Shepherd Neame story – and the story of Faversham itself – was water. The reason the brewery is located where it is, is because it’s on top of a well and right by a creek, which allowed the founders to bring materials in and take the finished product out. The theme of water helped me link all the bits of the story together. The brewery’s history is completely tied up with the history of Faversham so in telling the story of Shepherd’s Neame, I started to tell the parallel history of Faversham.


Creating the comic certainly changed my impression of Faversham; it made me realise all that had built the town we see today, and all the factors that came into play in its success. I hope *Inspector Barnstable Investigates* might inspire other people to visit the town, and the brewery. If you can tell a story about a place that people are interested in they might look at that place with fresh eyes. It’s like if you go somewhere where something has been filmed; all of a sudden it has a sheen of glamour to it. If people have read *Inspector Barnstable* maybe they’ll take a different view of a seemingly unremarkable building? I definitely subscribe to the idea that stories can transform places.”

Key Learnings

- A commission to write about a place in Swale & Medway challenged writers to address their own preconceptions.
- The process of researching the commission often led to a greater appreciation of an area and greater knowledge of its past.
- Those commissioned feel the work they produced for Wandering Words could help local people to see their area in a fresh light.
- Writers often felt their involvement with Wandering Words helped them to grow and develop in their own work.



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OF SITTINGBOURNE**



Supported using public funding by
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