

Murmurations

Something in the air... An interview with the creative minds behind Murmurations: the #MakeChester Talks

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Creative change has taken wing in Chester.

With its line-up of innovative speakers inspiring local doers to generate culture and business, Murmurations: the #MakeChester Talks returns to the city for 2017 after a sold-out debut last June.

The event is the collective brain child of local architect and engineer, **Andy Foster**, forward-thinking sustainability professional and Good For Nothing activist, **Alice Elliott**, foodie entrepreneur and one of two Natural Veg Men, **Tom Whitley**, and creative dynamo/master of all things photographic, Tortoise's own **Sam Ryley**.

I caught up with co-founders Andy, Alice, Sam and Tom, for a bit of a murmur, to reflect on the success of last year's talks and to find out what's in store for us at this summer's Murmurations.

M: So, first things first. Tell me about how Murmurations came about. What parts did you each play in bringing the talks to life?

S: There were actually quite a few precursors to Murmurations happening.

Al: Well, I set up the Good For Nothing chapter here in Chester and met Andy, Tom and Sam through GFN events. There was always this conversation going on about what we could do next.

S: We all got together, started to feel like we could really do stuff for the city, and ideas started to flow between us.

An: I was involved in organising a public lecture series on architecture in historic places and I'd been to the Do Lectures at around the same time. At that point, I'd wondered what could be next? That's where the idea to use inspirational talks to affect place-based change first came into being. >>

Al: I think there was a conflation of the architecture talks and celebrating 10 years of Andy's business with us reflecting on what to do about communication in Chester, people feeling more like citizens, and igniting things a bit too.

S: It was about getting activated, networking and starting to do, which resonated with my focus at the time. One of the workshops hosted when I was in the co-work space at 61 Watergate South in early 2016 was the first #MakeChester talks. People loved it, so we knew there was a real audience for it. After that, the four of us met up one night and went to the pub. That was when Andy said: "Right, I've booked St Mary's centre on the 1st July. What can we do with it?" And Murmurations grew from there.

T: To me, a desire for creativity is something that exists at a base-level within us as humans. In an age of political austerity, there's a very real danger that people could grow up without outlets for it, and Murmurations is about the belief that we can either moan about it or we say hold on – what else can be done? It's about balancing and being real too. No one can do everything, but by bringing people together, we can usher in diversity and new ideas, and showcase them to doers, decision-makers and people who are motivated in Chester. A lot of those things are infectious. It catches on and snowballs. It collectively rises us up.

M: And what is it about Chester specifically that's lead you to get behind its culture scene?

Al: I'm originally from London, but I suppose it's in my personality to be up for big, new things, which is one of the reasons I came to

Chester. I'm in sustainability, that's my background and expertise, and I was already involved with GFN back in London. When I arrived, I desperately wanted to do something with that here in Chester.

T: From my point of view, the overall creative scene in Chester has been quite underdeveloped and one of the original concepts behind Murmurations was asking why the city's culture sector doesn't seem as strong as it could be.

An: Chester's my home town and when I came back here I found there were still some remnants of its old ways hindering it. I believe being small is an opportunity to be amazing, not a reason to become a backwater, and the city needs to be moving continually forward.

S: I sort of came to Chester accidentally and took up freelance work here. I wanted to find out who was doing what and I met a lot of proactive creatives. But there weren't really networks that I was aware of and nothing that was pulling people together enough, so I was looking to help build a stronger creative social scene for everyone.

T: We wanted to shout about the great things that are going on here, but also to show the doers of the city ideas from elsewhere, and inspire them to reinterpret those ideas here. A lot are scalable things; they may be changes that are made at home, as well as at a citywide level. If you present alternative ways of doing things to people, they'll respond to them. All of us need to be open to fresh perspectives and positive change, or else we'll stagnate. It's like Orwell once put it: "we must grow greater or grow less." >>

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M: Can I ask why you settled on the name 'Murmurations'?

S: I'm a massive fan of wildlife. I was watching a programme one night about starlings and about the collective movement they have, which is known as a Murmuration. It mentioned this newly discovered algorithm that's been worked out about how starlings respond to what the seven others closest to them do. They're tuned in, you know? I thought it all chimed in metaphorically with how we're trying to work together in Chester, the collective movement here, so I suggested the name and it flew!

M: Let's discuss the talks themselves. The speakers you approached for last year's event were all from very different projects. Why was it you were drawn to what they had to say in particular?

S: Some of the speakers were from personal connections each of us had from our industries. Others were people we'd seen at talks and thought were absolutely amazing, so we wanted to bring them to Chester for them to share what they had to say. All of them are people who have that original, grassroots, left field thing about them. They're all from a spectrum of forward movement.

An: It was also really important for us to include some local speakers, so we could highlight that there are some great people here doing amazing things that we can all build on.

Al: I feel like the speakers we've brought together are incredibly sympathetic to one another. It's about understanding the bigger picture and the connections we have. So, inevitably, people who are talking about food get it, people who are talking about citizenship and place-

making get it, and so on. It's not just about sustainability or economics or wellbeing or entrepreneurialism or any one discipline. It's about coming together and not underestimating how powerful that is.

T: The same goes for the four of us too. We've enough similarities that we work well together, but crucially enough differences that we all bring separate points of view to the table and with that comes the embodiment of what we want to replicate – that strength in diversity.

M: So, how did the first Murmurations event go and what were people's reactions?

T: It was a lot of work, but, on the day, it in some ways felt hugely indulgent because it was exactly the sort of day that I'd want to go to myself. It was everything we hoped it would be and more. To have it in St Mary's rather than just some bland conference centre was tremendous. Being in the food industry, food was always an aspect of real importance for me as well. Rather than just a few jam sandwiches as an afterthought, the lunch we were able to provide from The Cheshire Dining Experience really represented Chester in terms of sustainability, provenance, local and quality. We wanted the quality of the food to reflect the quality of the speakers as well. It just had the whole package – the speakers, the venue, the food, the atmosphere – I don't think there are many events in the whole country that provide that.

S: The highlight for me was the reaction from the crowd. People were talking who wouldn't normally have the chance to speak to each other. It was the buzz. That feeling that people were leaving with the motivation to go and change the city. It was tangible and you could see it.

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An: The fact that people are still talking about it a year later, makes it all worthwhile.

S: It's not about money, it's not about anything to do with that. You can just feel the city's potential to get stronger.

M: Have you noticed an impact in the city as a whole since the talks?

Al: I have no doubts that people will have met at Murmurations and things will have gathered from there. But, it's hard to track that sort of thing and I don't think we should try to. You have to trust in the process and know that things will happen.

S: I feel like a lot of things are changing in this city. There seems to be a lot of ideas flowing between the people I've met, a lot of interactions. A creative economy is starting to emerge. More things seem to be coming to the city as a creative area too, especially with the opening of Storyhouse, and I think there's real scope for Chester to become a hotspot.

M: You're planning to provoke creative murmurs again this year. Can you tell me a little about this year's event?

S: We're really excited to have been invited to host this year's Murmurations at Storyhouse on the 23rd June. It's a new place of creative focus for Chester. We have eight speakers this summer, slightly fewer than last time, so that they'll be able to speak in more depth and it'll also give people more time to

absorb too, because we need it to be both a melting pot of minds and a discussion of ideas.

Al: I think we're even more cohesive in the themes we're drawing out, this time around. The talks will be even more relevant to the city and offer up Chester-focused challenges. The speakers are also going to link together more, in terms of inspiring us to be citizens of Chester, whilst connecting us with sustainability, nature, adventure and doing better things.

T: We don't make any money from Murmurations. We do it because we want to. It stems from the belief that, if you want to live in an interesting city, you have to contribute towards it. However, whenever, you simply need to do something to help bring people together. That's the shared vision that we have as a team and this is our contribution towards that. It's not about taking over the world, it's about helping Chester level up. The line-up of speakers is just as exciting as last year. The range and depth are bold and if you're interested in change, in pushing things forward, in getting involved in what's going on, then you have to be there. Whatever your discipline.

M: Last of all, what one word would you say sums up Murmurations for each of you?

S: Forward

Al: Explosive

T: Dynamic

An: Expectation 

