

FIONA SPIRALS



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Birds Got Rights" screamed the front page of The Edge of Quietness, a fanzine created by residents of Higham in 2002. It formed part of the campaign to stop the proposed £9 billion airport at Cliffe, near Rochester.

Higham resident Fiona Spirals joined the campaign. "I want to speak for the ones in nature that cannot speak for themselves," she says, ahead of her solo exhibition Marshy Mud Flats and the Call of the Curlew at St Mary's Church.

EARLY CAREER

Originally from Lee in London, Fiona moved to Higham at 27, leaving a job in a hardware shop for something closer to wild space. Working as an artist's model, she soon got the urge to be on the other side of the canvas.

She began with an adult education course, then took access courses in Art and Design at the University College of Creative Arts in Rochester and Maidstone. "I loved them," she says.

She had no interest in a degree. "I hated having to write one essay. It made me cry," she laughs, recalling the moment she was diagnosed with severe dyslexia.

Fiona chose her own path. Inspired by a book by artist John Piper, she began working with paper. A love of kayaking, walking and rock climbing sharpened her observation and deepened her connection to the marshes. Old climbing magazines became intricate collages. From collage to sound-scape, drawings to poems, her work became rooted in the local landscape and the need to listen to the cry of nature.

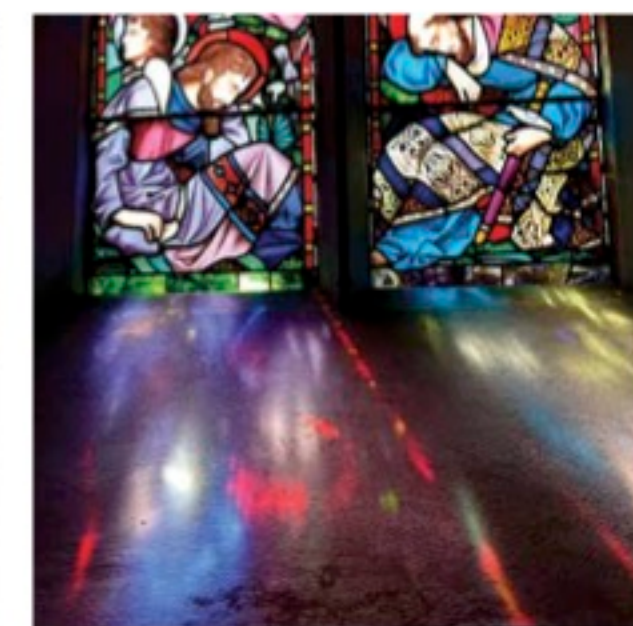
CRY OF THE CURLEW

The Call of the Curlew continued earlier themes of love of place, the environment, and making nature accessible. Fiona first planned to create bird collages, but the precision required proved limiting. "So I started drawing. I didn't think I could draw, but it became a journey of discovery."

Centred on the curlew, a wading bird with a curved beak and haunting cry, "which really stops you; the call travels across the marshes," the exhibition featured artworks, poems and sound recordings. Partners included Curlew Action and a talk by Simon Ginnaw from Elmley Curlew Recovery Project.

Fiona admits awareness-raising can feel like a drop in the ocean, so she is raising funds for both organisations through a 6km sponsored swim. "In the first week, I raised £400!"

"I wanted visitors to have a whole-body experience. To hear, see and feel the space. Not just the birds, but the church, marshes and history."



ST MARY'S CHURCH, HIGHAM

Fiona's connection to St Mary's goes back nearly two decades, beginning with the airport campaign and scarecrow festivals, when the church became a natural gathering point. "So when the Churches Conservation Trust put out a call for a friends group in 2009, there was a ready-made community."



The Friends of St Mary's allowed for "all the fantastic events we've had."

The medieval church shaped her approach to the exhibition. "I think of St Mary's as a friend, although I am not religious. When you enter, you meet the atmosphere; warm, friendly, old. Knowing it's at the bottom of the road is a comfort. Witnessing a long history is exciting."

The Thames once reached the church door. Nuns from the old priory ran a ferry to Essex. "I felt honoured to have an exhibition there."

LOOKING AHEAD

Fiona is open to technology. "AI can help. Merlin is a great app for identifying bird songs. If it gets people listening, that's a good thing. Birds are hard to see, harder to hear. They change their songs, they mimic. If AI helps people notice more, then maybe there's hope."

Fiona hopes to volunteer with bird monitoring at Elmley. "I don't want to rush into something else. I want to be outdoors, seeing birds, maybe counting chicks."

The show ran from 21st to 29th June 2025 at St Mary's Church, Higham.

www.stmaryschurhigham.com
www.curlewaction.org
www.elmleynaturereserve.co.uk
www.visitchurches.org.uk
www.kentonline.co.uk/kent/news/anti-airport-protestors-launch-w-a8132

