Building Wainsgate

Our creative vision

Wainsgate is a place with a long history of work, worship, hosting, making, conversation, conflict, care and change - A place where people have always gathered - sometimes to mark significant moments in their lives and sometimes just to share experience together.

Today, artists, neighbours, volunteers, audiences and visitors are adding another rich chapter that will become part of Wainsgate's long story.

This Creative Vision describes the ideas that will guide that next chapter. It's not a programme plan or a list of projects. It sets out what we believe about Wainsgate as a place, about art and heritage, about participation and access, and about how we want to work together.
It asks what should remain fundamental as Wainsgate changes, and what will support and keep us moving as we navigate that change.

Where we are building from

Wainsgate is a place of work - a place built and sustained through work.
For generations, the landscape around Wainsgate, Old Town and Wadsworth has been shaped by people making things, growing things, building things, worshipping, organising, arguing, adapting and working together.

Farming, domestic textile production, mills and manufacturing have left their marks on the buildings and landscape. So have religious dissent, collective organisation, industrial struggle, social change, migration and successive waves of people making their lives here.

It's not a simple history and we don't want to imagine it as one.

Work could be skilled, sustaining and a source of pride. It could also be dangerous, exploitative and poorly rewarded. Communities could be generous and mutually supportive whilst co-existing with profound inequalities and exclusions.

New people, industries and ideas have repeatedly brought energy and possibility whilst also producing tensions around belonging, ownership, class and change. These contradictions continue. They are part of the place we are working in now. Wainsgate has survived through repeated periods of building, alteration, use, decline, care and reinvention.

Different generations have understood what the building was for in different ways. Over the last twenty years, and accelerating over the last ten, another chapter has begun.

Artists, neighbours, volunteers, audiences and visitors have gradually inhabited Wainsgate again as a working cultural place: somewhere to practice, rehearse, perform, draw, write, listen, research, repair, cook, garden, host, celebrate, learn, question and gather.

People are coming back up the hill.

What has emerged has developed through practice: trying things, noticing what happens, returning, changing things, learning through doing and allowing different strands of activity to inform one another.

A commitment to process is part of Wainsgate's continuing heritage.

A living place

Wainsgate is a living place.

Its stone and mortar endure, but the meaning of the building continues to change and grow according to what happens within and around it. Rooms acquire new histories. Old purposes become legible in new ways. Possibilities emerge that could not have been predicted by the people who used the building before us. The traces of what they did and who they were inform and make possible what's happening now.

Reinvention is part of Wainsgate's continuity, sustainability and success it is a way to continuously celebrate the place we have become temporary custodians of.

Our responsibility is to understand what we have inherited, care for it seriously and contribute thoughtfully to what Wainsgate becomes next.

Heritage is active. It contains buildings, objects and documented histories, but also labour, memory, conflict, changing populations, overlooked lives, traditions of dissent and the ways people continue to make meaning from the places they inhabit.

We will become increasingly specific about these histories: who worked here and around here; whose labour is visible and whose has disappeared from the record; who has held power and who has been excluded; what different communities have made of this place; and how earlier struggles around work, class, migration, belonging and difference resonate now.

It's a kind of creative archaeology - a process of unearthing what was in order to understand better what we might do next.

It's also generative. We continue to engage with what's here and what's gone before; to notice how the past acts as a keystone for how we move towards the future in a process of anchored transformation.

Art as work

At the heart of this moment at Wainsgate is a belief in art and what it has to offer. There are values within the histories of skilled work and manufacture that have shaped this place that speak strongly to artistic practice:

attention, knowledge, repetition, discernment, curiosity, precision, effort and an understanding that how something is made matters.

The materials of art might be bodies, sound, language, movement, images, objects, time, space, memory, relationships or ideas. Sometimes what remains is an object, and sometimes an experience disappears almost as soon as it has happened.

Art can make something visible that we had stopped seeing or never noticed. It can bring us into contact with unfamiliar experiences. It can disturb assumptions, heighten perception, hold contradictions open and give form to questions for which there are no straightforward answers.

It can challenge, excite, confront, and sometimes it can change us.

At a time when public life often rewards speed, certainty and immediate judgement, we believe there is value in places where people can take time to practise another kind of attention alongside others.

Art can ask us to stay with something.

- To look again.
- To notice detail.
- To savour uncertainty.
- To experience something before deciding what it means.

And rigour is important. It’s a demonstration of thought and care - to follow an idea or question closely and thoroughly enough for something particular and unexpected to emerge.

Practice

Practice has become one of the foundational principles of Wainsgate.

Practice as doing something repeatedly while remaining curious about it; developing knowledge through action and testing what we think we know against what actually happens.

That understanding comes from all kinds of creative practice, but also informs how we approach the organisation itself.

Wainsgate is being discovered, understood and developed through use.

Our programme, relationships and approaches to hosting, heritage, participation, access and sustainability are all forms of practice. We try things. We pay attention. We learn. We shift accordingly.

It’s not a casual approach. Experimentation requires thought, care and precision.

We want to build from the ground up, understanding the particular conditions of this place: the building, its histories, Old Town and Wadsworth, the people who live around us, the artists who come here, the resources available and the wider world in which all of us are living - what we practice is a process of doing whilst observing.

Specificity matters.

We are not reproducing a model of an arts organisation that already exists somewhere else - our approach is both innovative and grounded, outward looking and bespoke.

Over the next years Wainsgate will become more clearly and confidently itself - for those directly involved in shaping it, and for anyone who encounters it.

Work, attention, relation

These ideas run through much of what we do:

Work asks what we are making and how we are making it.

Attention asks us to look genuinely at what is happening.

Relation asks what our presence and actions mean for other people, bodies, places and futures.

These ideas connect artistic practice to hosting, producing, heritage, conservation, volunteering, governance and organisational development.

The communities around Wainsgate aren't homogeneous. There are social and economic differences, complicated histories of established communities and incomers, diverse relationships to land, property, education, culture and work, and different ideas about what places such as Wainsgate are for.

Our responsibility is to listen, to notice who is present and who is absent, to understand that trust takes time, and to build relationships through repeated interaction and conversation.

We must also continue to be bold, and to build a Wainsgate that carves its own way. What we are developing is already a hopeful beacon of creative activity, and we will continue, stone by stone, and hand by hand to create a space for meaningful gathering, and creativity.

Art and access

We believe access and artistic ambition can strengthen one another.

Access is about making ways in.

It is about affordability, physical access, good information, warmth, food, conversation, familiarity and being made to feel welcome. It means recognising that people arrive through different doors.

Someone may first encounter Wainsgate through a children's activity, the graveyard, a walk, a concert, Open Practice/Drawing, a workshop, volunteering, a seasonal event, food, an exhibition or an experimental performance.

Access does not require art to become simpler.

Some of the work at Wainsgate will be unfamiliar, difficult, intense, playful, beautiful, bewildering or radical. People do not need specialist knowledge to encounter it. They do not even need to like it.

Our job is to create the conditions in which that encounter is possible.

We want Wainsgate to be somewhere you can meet something extraordinary, strange or challenging and still feel taken care of and valued.

Radical art with homemade cake and a cup of tea is not a contradiction here.

Participation without dilution

We believe participation matters, but participation alone is not a measure of success. Too much participatory work is temporary and disposable. A project arrives, people take part, something enjoyable happens, the project finishes and everybody moves on.

We want to take a longer view - to acknowledge that real engagement and more meaningful participation take time.

Open Practice and Open Drawing are two examples of ways in which we can participate over time and experience the ways in which that participation can change us.

And taking people seriously means taking the art seriously too - having faith that art can do something real and substantial.

Where we describe something as artistic work, it should have integrity and curiosity. It should be worth somebody's time and attention. Participation is not a substitute for artistic quality, and artistic ambition is entirely compatible with generosity and openness.

Work might leave behind a new skill, a relationship, knowledge, confidence, a memory, an altered practice, a question, an artist whose work has moved somewhere unexpected, a child who thinks of Wainsgate as somewhere they belong, or a reason for somebody to return.

Who gets to shape Wainsgate?

As Wainsgate develops, our values need to become increasingly visible in the organisation itself.

That means looking closely at how we make decisions, who is invited to work here, whose voices are heard, how artists and participants are treated, how people are welcomed, who has access to opportunities and who has influence over what Wainsgate becomes.

We want younger people to become much more present in this.

That means more than providing activities for young people. We want to create opportunities for younger people to initiate, lead, curate, programme, make decisions and develop their own relationships with the building.

If Wainsgate is to have a future, new generations need opportunities to change it.

We will not ask them simply to inherit our version but to be instrumental in shaping the development of Wainsgate.

How we work together matters

The values we bring to our artistic and public work should also be present in the ways we work with one another.

This vision is about creating a coherent and cohesive core from which to work - a holding stone from which to grow and build Wainsgate. Setting off from this centrepoint also allows us to acknowledge that Wainsgate is made by people bringing different experiences, perspectives, skills and ideas.

We want to create a culture in which those differences are valued; where people have time to think, speak and be heard; where questions and disagreement are possible; and where we do not rush towards consensus simply because it is easier.

Working well together requires attention. It means listening properly, being willing to question and be questioned, making room for uncertainty and allowing people to change their minds.

It means treating one another with kindness and respect, being clear about responsibility, and paying attention to how decisions are made and who gets to make them.

We cannot assume that we all share the same perspectives, economic conditions, social or cultural backgrounds.

All of us experience things differently.

We want people coming into Wainsgate — as artists, staff, trustees, freelancers, volunteers or collaborators — to feel welcomed and able to contribute. We do not expect everybody to think alike. Difference, held with care and curiosity, will make the work and the organisation stronger.

How we work together is key to how Wainsgate is made - what it’s made of and to what it means.

The conditions that make the work possible

Wainsgate has achieved an extraordinary amount through voluntary labour.

That generosity, commitment and shared ownership remain among its greatest strengths, and volunteering will continue to be an important part of how Wainsgate works. But voluntary labour has limits.

Running an ambitious year-round programme, caring for a historic building and developing an organisation requires time, continuity, accountability, and particular kinds of knowledge and expertise.

We need a financial model that allows people to be paid when work genuinely needs to be work - when it goes beyond what we can reasonably expect of ourselves and each other, while continuing to create meaningful ways for people to contribute voluntarily.

This matters for the efficacy, health and sustainability of the organisation: we cannot rely indefinitely on a small number of people having the time and capacity to carry significant responsibilities unpaid.

It also matters for who gets to shape Wainsgate. If unpaid work becomes the principal route into responsibility, influence or opportunity, we risk excluding people who cannot afford to give their time freely. And if we want Wainsgate to keep changing, we need to be able to bring new people, ideas, skills, experience and perspectives into the organisation.

Paid and voluntary work can coexist and strengthen one another, but their roles need to be understood clearly. Volunteering should be something people choose because it is meaningful, enjoyable or gives them a way to contribute — not a substitute for essential professional capacity.

At the same time, we don't want to build a large infrastructure that consumes the resources that should support activity, artists, and the building itself.

Wainsgate's independence and resourcefulness are valuable, and we must continue to nurture the strength of that position. Our challenge is to become more capable without becoming cumbersome, and more sustainable without losing our ability to adapt.

Funding should help us build knowledge, relationships and long-term strength. Finding the model that works for Wainsgate is part of the practical and creative work ahead.

An ecology

Wainsgate contains many forms of activity: performance, music, dance, words, visual art, workshops, gardening, residencies, heritage, research, Open Practice, Open Drawing, seasonal gatherings, food, volunteering, weddings, sewainsgate, walks and informal encounters.

They do not all need to perform the same function.

Wainsgate is an ecology in which different activities contribute differently to the health of the whole.

- Some generate income.
- Some support artists.
- Some build local relationships.
- Some bring people from across the country or internationally.
- Some create regular habits of participation.
- Some help us investigate the history of the place.
- Some create moments of celebration and pleasure.

They are underpinned by an attention to detail, by curiosity and by the ways in which they offer something distinctive into the mix.

The important task is to understand the relationships between them more clearly without homogonising them..

We want connected programmes, not a succession of isolated events.

We want relationships that accumulate.

We want knowledge generated through one part of Wainsgate to be able to inform another.

Locally rooted and outward looking

Wainsgate is deeply particular to where it is.
That does not make its concerns parochial.
Questions of work, belonging, migration, social division, environmental change, identity, inequality, care and how we live together are simultaneously local and global.
We want strong and increasingly informed relationships with the communities immediately around Wainsgate while remaining connected to artists, ideas and practices from much further away.
Artists coming here from elsewhere bring different experiences into this landscape.
Work developed at Wainsgate travels out again and might be seen on international platforms.
There is a cross-pollination and exchange that matters and brings energy, ideas, knowledge and investment.
A rural arts organisation does not need to be culturally provincial.
A small organisation does not need to think small.
Our ambition is for Wainsgate to become recognised as an artist-led cultural organisation of genuine significance precisely because of the particularity of what happens here and where it happens.

The next stage

The last 20 years have been a period of inhabiting Wainsgate and discovering what is possible. The next period is about becoming clearer and bolder.

- Clearer about the artistic work we value.
- Clearer about our relationship to heritage.
- Clearer about how different strands of the programme connect.
- Clearer about who currently feels they belong at Wainsgate and who does not.
- Clearer about the conditions we create for artists, volunteers, participants and audiences.
- Clearer about how younger people can shape the place.
- Clearer about how we generate and spend money.
- Clearer about what needs professional capacity and what is genuinely enriched by voluntary participation.
- Clearer about the things we choose not to do so that

Growth for its own sake is not the aim. We want depth, resilience and distinctiveness. We want a Wainsgate in which artistic ambition and public welcome sit easily together: where heritage is encountered as something living and contested; where people come to make, try things, question and gather; where serious work coexists with celebration, pleasure and levity; where different people can enter the life of the place without being asked to become the same.

We want to build an organisation capable of paying attention: to what has come before. to what is happening now; to the consequences of what we make; to who is present and who is missing.

And to possibilities that are not yet fully visible.

Wainsgate isn't a finished inheritance.

What it becomes will be made through what we do here and how we do it.

That is the work.
Our task is to keep making Wainsgate: with attention, imagination, care and courage. To honour what we have inherited, remain open to what is emerging, and create the conditions for new things to happen.

Wainsgate will continue to change. This creative vision sets out a frame for how we can be part of that change — thoughtfully, ambitiously and alongside each other.