Local Yokel

He was nearly six feet high, gallantly formed to […] maintain the ring at a wrestling match; and although he might have been overmatched, perhaps, among the regular professors of the Fancy, yet, as a yokel, or rustic, or a chance customer, he was able to give a bellyful to any amateur of the pugilistic art.

Sir Walter Scott, 'The Two Drovers', 1827

The word 'yokel' became popular in the nineteenth century as a cheerfully dismissive term for an artless rustic. Its etymology is uncertain – possibly deriving from the German name Jokel (a variant of Jacob, once used as a catch-all appellation for farmers) – but its meaning has always been plain. Embodied in the word is much of what the Romantic tradition has downplayed or caricatured: the native, untamed, even vagabond side of English rural life.

'Local Yokel', this summer's exhibition at the Art Station, Saxmundham, is a reflection of contemporary East Anglian life that embraces the eccentric, the abject, the mundane, and the carnivalesque, through a selection of works by twenty artists who live in (or have an association with) the region. The tenor of the show is summed up by **Sarah Lucas's** installation *Trugs and Buckets* (2026), an array of old plastic receptacles suspended from the ceiling. Out of misshapen, broken, and begrimed objects, which rotate on a 'mobile' armature of metal axles and wires, Lucas has constructed a constellation of trashed forms. As throughout her practice, lofty ideals (whether in relation to the body, the countryside, or Englishness itself) are rudely punctured.

A large-scale painting by **Laurence Edwards**, *Akenfield, 2025*, enacts a similar, if somewhat gentler, skewering of ideals. Covering an entire wall of the Art Station's main space, the work is an anomaly for Edwards, who is best known for his figurative bronzes. (The show also features sculptures by the artist that are similarly incongruous – clay monkey head and bronze casts of wrapped objects). But in its rural subject and subdued theatricality, the painting mirrors a broader sensibility in his work. The silhouettes of trees, delineated in blues, greens and an intermittent maroon, lurk within inkier masses of the same tones. At the centre of the scene, a strip of green suggests the flat, marshy, rained-on terrain of Suffolk. The picture is dominated by a blank sky that seems to confirm the long-ago sentiments of a Suffolk resident, recorded by Ronald Blythe in his 1969 book *Akenfield*: "The big skies leave the East Anglians empty. The skies are nothing. […] Because they are a flat-land creature there is a lack of imagination and excitement in the Suffolk character."

In Edwards's painting, human habitation is signalled by a sketchily-outlined house that seems to hover within a crop of trees, more phantasmal than sturdily physical. But in essence, the vista presents an unpeopled wilderness. The sculptures of **Bob Bicknell-Knight** enact another kind of relegation of the human body, using 3-D printing to produce plastic objects whose dense honeycomb structures speak of automation rather than craft. *Swine (Standing)* (2024) takes the form of a pig's upended body, repeated three times like a poorly loaded graphic. The object is divided into coloured segments that bear no relation to its subject, like a crude digital overlay. It is a reminder of the programmatic nature of the sculpture, but perhaps also a hint at the brutal reality of industrial farming, whereby livestock are bred like so many digital confections.

In a series of smaller objects made using the same technology, Bicknell-Knight has created a language of flowers or fungi: individual letters are mounted on toadstool-shaped supports and arranged in a large circle on the wall – a formation vaguely redolent of crop circles or the placement of neolithic megaliths. As with the remnants of prehistory, there is little trace of a human hand.

Bicknell-Knight's printouts, for all their high-tech modernity, appear almost primordial – as though they had survived an apocalypse (or sprung up in the aftermath of one).

The physical structures of nature, specifically of trees, are the focus of a new series of bronze sculptures by **Kabir Hussein**. Spindly, ramifying twigs are recreated in a material that closely mimics their original leafless appearance, and yet there is a counterweight to their naturalism. Inserted between some of the branches are mottled, papery 'joins' (also rendered in bronze), as if the organic structure were beginning to coagulate into a stylized sculptural form – one of the planar figures, say, of Lynn Chadwick. **Eleanor Rodwell** (b. 1996) is another artist for whom the small structures of nature harbour a faint symbolic potential. *Stripped*, 2026 and *Knotted, 2026* are bronze casts of bramble stems, the latter piece evoking a crown of thorns, although its tangled structure might just as easily be the product of nature. Everyday organic matter tilts towards the iconographic, the metaphoric, while remaining as doggedly literal as Albrecht Dürer's *Great Piece of Turf* (1503).

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There was fun mixed with the fear; and the yokels knew too much about turnips not occasionally to think of turnip-ghosts.

G.K. Chesterton, *Fancies Versus Fads*, 1923

Aldeburgh Carnival began in 1835 as Ye Olde Marina Regatta. The annual parade epitomises a festive strain in the English rural tradition (reflected equally in May Day celebrations and countless other local rites). **Michael Wickwar** channels that spirit in small-scale sculptures that allude to childhood visits to fairgrounds, as well as his grandparents' tales of working at travelling fairs in the 1940s. *The Egg* (2020) could almost be a miniature replica of a piece of carnival puppetry. A large ceramic egg, painted with a 'sad clown' visage, sits atop a wheelable wooden throne, as though Humpy Dumpty had become a medieval king.

Folklore is also a revenant in the work of **Susanne Jannoch**, whose figurine *Rage of Rumpelstilzchen* refers to the magical imp of the German fairytale, a character who spins straw into gold in exchange for a woman's firstborn child, but who is finally thwarted in his demonic intention – hence his rage at the close of the tale. Jannoch has construed a foot-stomping figure out of straw and plaster, in a degraded version of the metamorphosis in the story: straw is hardening not into gold but the brittle, expendable stuff of plaster.

A modern fairytale seems to be unfolding in **Jools McClean's** photograph *Sizewell Sturgeon* 2025, although there is none of the reassurance, here, of a knowable narrative. The black-and-white shot captures two figures in a landscape, illuminated by the camera flash against a black sky and blurred into spectral traces by their own furtive motion. They might equally be initiates in a ceremony or bizarrely disguised trespassers: in the distance, lit up by floodlights, looms Sizewell Power Station. Tentacle-like appendages sprout from the figures' masked heads, vaguely reminiscent of rabbits' ears but also hinting at a freakish genetic mutation. In the foreground, illuminated seedheads echo their tendril-like forms.

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The coach was none of your steady-going, yokel coaches, but a swaggering, rakish, dissipated London coach; up all night, and lying by all day, and leading a wild life of it.

Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 1844

Since antiquity, portrayals of rural life have drawn a contrast between the notional simplicity of the countryside and the heady – often corrupting – cosmopolitanism of the city. The yokel, despite his or her capacity for waywardness or rough manners, often exhibits a stable, stoical, and unpretentious character. This more sedate incarnation is reflected in **Kasia Hobson's** oil painting *Platforms, 2026*, which offers a cropped view of two sandalled feet and shins clad in leggings. This is the opposite, one senses, of urban swagger – the anthesis of fast living. The point is underscored both by the anonymity of the subject and by the painting's almost naïve style – a brushy, uncomplicated laying down of colour. One of the sandals is lifted to reveal its underside, much as Caravaggio's subjects sometimes revealed their dirty feet, reminding us of their lowly identities.

'Yokel' carries an insinuation of the homespun, the handmade, the crafted. Many of the works in the show refrain from direct allusion to the people or landscape of East Anglia, while nonetheless evincing a mood of ordinariness that seems in keeping with the place. Everyday things are cobbled together, never quite losing their everydayness. Transformations are subtle rather than dramatic. **Cab Kenningale** is the creator of two-dimensional assemblages that appear at different points in the exhibition, each grafted together from assorted items. *Duper's Delight,* 2026, suggests a small-scale, makeshift variation upon a Robert Rauschenberg *Combine*: wrapping paper festooned with stars sits alongside smears of paint, wedges of cardboard, and lengths of tape. The amalgam seems fragile, poised between falling apart and falling together. In the paintings of **Michael Stubbs**, meanwhile, reclaimed dustsheets act as supports for abstract compositions. In *Animation Correggio Mend* (2025), whose title alone speaks of colliding influences and impetuses, Constructivist-style shapes float translucently across the spatters and blots of the reused support. Life intrudes on art, continues to make its mark, refuses to be expunged.

A more abstract, less declarative iconography of forms is articulated by a group of suspended sculptures by **Alice Andrea Ewing**, each titled *Navigation*. Bronze rods and struts combine to produce 'drawings in space' that hang from the ceiling on wires – interlinked squares, a long arrow pointing to nowhere. Such shapes suggest coordinates, fragments of hand-drawn diagrams, half-remembered signs; but equally they express as sense of placelessness, a loss of fixed reference points. Rotating slowly on their wires, they betoken a space that cannot fully be charted, or only imperfectly. In this way, they are akin to the informal markers and signs that predated modern cartography.

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The philosopher is a sort of intellectual yokel who gawks at things that sensible people that for granted.

Alan Watts, *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks, 1960-1969*, 2006

Several works in 'Local Yokel' incorporate the literal stuff of east Anglia – its turf, crops, sand, straw, or timber. **Kristina Tonev's** installation *Immortal Wheat* (2026) consists of numerous square slabs of earth encased in mesh frames and hung from the ceiling by chains, forming a series of tiers or 'steps'. Each has been sown with wheat and inverted, so that the crop will grow downward over the course of the summer – eight fragments of the world turned upside-down. Offsetting the live organic matter of the installation is an elaborately stitched-together 'net' of dry wheat that extends across the floor with almost Baroque flamboyance, an earthbound counterpart to the aerial arable plots.

Suffolk's beaches were the source of a new series of wall-mounted sculptures by **Willem Keys**. Each consists of sand that the artist cast, while on the beach, into simple linear shapes. Scattered across the wall of the main space at the Art Station, the objects retain the semblance (however vague or improbable) of marine invertebrates, while resolving into emblematic signs: a tree-like armature, an arrow endowed with wings, the outline of an aeroplane. Dull, granular matter has solidified (but equally somehow dematerialized) into line drawings. Next door, in the old vault of Barclay's Bank, Keys has installed a group of gnarly cuboid objects – coral-like accretions of white gypsum that were created by allowing mealworms to eat through polystyrene, and then casting the remnants to produce 'reverse wormcasts'. Nature is not longer simply the substance of art, but an artificer in its own right.

In an equivalent appropriation of East Anglia's fauna, **Kate MccGwire** uses birds' feathers as the basis for complex, iridescent compositions that traverse two- and three-dimensional formats. In the framed work *DISSIPATE* (2022), another subtle transmutation is at work – the rooster feathers remaining recognisably *what they are*, while also massing into a semi-abstract relief. The undulating, tessellated pattern and the green metallic coloration (suggestive of Verdigris) imply a succession of waves or ripples across water.

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Reserve is not the leading characteristic of the average yokel.

P.G. Wodehouse, 'The Prefect's Uncle', 1903

The ludic spirit that runs flickeringly through 'Local Yokel' breaks loose in the garden of the Art Station, a meadowy enclosure that resembles the 'colonel's garden' in G.K. Chesterton's novel *Tales of the Long Bow* (1925), a place tended by a "rustic yokel": "it really looked like the corner of a farm in the country, and all sorts of practical devices were set up there."

William Wallace's *Life/Work balance* (2026) is a functioning rocking horse, crafted from stiffened calico that has been stretched over a wooden frame. A toy magnified to the scale of a real horse, it gives the suburban garden (like the colonel's in Chesterton's story) a momentary bucolic aspect. But the effigy is also a vessel for wilder impulses: inside its rockers are ridges for fuel, allowing the entire structure to be framed by fire. Wallace's installation *Hedging Around Our Heritage* (2024), installed nearby, is yet more overtly theatrical. Sackcloth panels – their outward faces embroidered with the shapes of trees – have been arranged around a boarded floor to create a pavilion-like enclosure, its interior panelled with mirrors. Inlaid in the floor are depictions of cavorting skeletons, a *danse macabre* that throws into relief (and wryly implicates) the living bodies of those who enter the space. It is a darkly comic interlude – a staged memento mori – within the miniature Arcadia of the garden.

The colonel's garden in *Tales of the Long Bow* was not without its own oddities: "Perhaps the only incongruous intruder […] was the curious boundary-stone which marked the edge of his domain; and which was, in fact, a shapeless South Sea idol". A similar incidental totemism belongs to **Maddie Exton's** *The Coin Tree*, 2026, a stump of tree into which visitors are invited to embed coins, gradually coating the dead wood like piecemeal gilding.

In the old telephone exchange, along the high street from the Art Station's main space, is a smaller assortment of works that extend and compress the multifarious themes of 'Local Yokel' – not least those concerning place and heritage. **Rhea Storr's** video, *A Protest, A Celebration, A Mixed Message* (2018) documents a Caribbean performance troupe – mostly of the Windrush generation – working in the UK. Shots of carnival performances in London give way to a recording of a lone performer in

the English countryside, seeming like a traveller from (or to) an antique land. Against a shot of idyllic, empty countryside, the artist asks: “How can Black bodies in rural spaces protest?” It is a question with wider ramifications. Many of the artists in ‘Local Yokel’ insist on the potential of rural space as a site of discourse and transformation: not merely a picturesque scene but a stage for decisive action.

Annabel Dover’s ceramics, also on view at the telephone exchange, contain in their glazed surfaces a mass of allusions to the wilder, whimsical strains of pastoral life. A horse, a sprinting hare, and assorted flowers throng across the earth-toned surface of a vase, while a roundel bears the words of an Elizabethan posy ring inscription: “As a ring is round & hath no end – so is my love unto my friend.” The vessel is an apt metaphor for the exhibition at large – a capacious form in which history, folklore, nature, everyday life, and romantic sentiment find concurrent expression. And lurking within the rustic charm of such an object – such a show – is a vital note of waywardness, true to the character of the yokel.