

# HISTORY & SECTOR DEVELOPMENT



## CHAPTER SIX: HISTORY & SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

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### HISTORY OF RURAL TOURING

The first rural touring agencies started in the 1980s in Hampshire, Lincolnshire and South East Wales. In Somerset, an inspired individual with a passion for taking the arts into rural areas carried out a feasibility study to establish a rural touring programme and used the Hampshire model as the starting point.

With start up funding from Arts Council England (ACE) and the local area government offices, Take Art was formed in Somerset, SW England in 1987. Good ideas have a habit of growing and during the 1990s Zeitgeist many more similar organisations were developed across England. Currently, in 2018, that number totals 25.

In 1993, a group of seven or eight rural touring organisations from central and SW England came together for a joint meeting. They discovered that they shared many common interests.

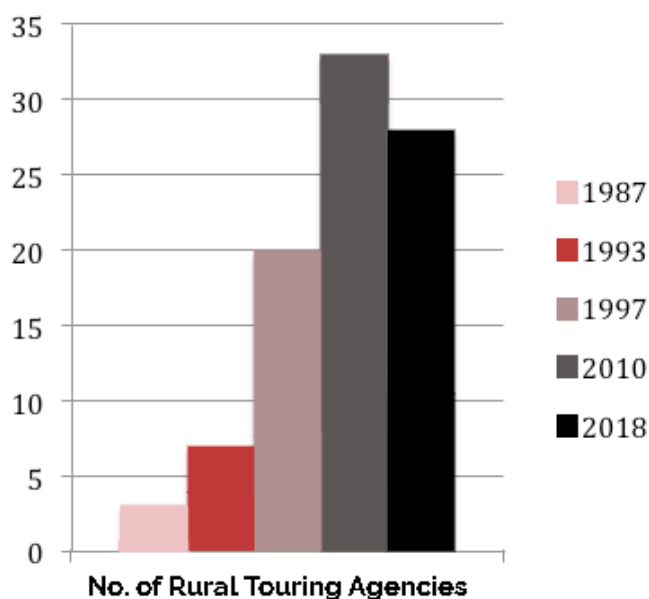
They discussed the value of creating a national

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'advocacy' organisation and so the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF) was established in 1997.

*"1997 was a defining moment for rural touring as a new sector."*

National Rural Touring Forum



## NATIONAL RURAL TOURING FORUM

The NRTF is the umbrella body representing rural and community touring agencies in England and Wales. It is a member led organisation and a registered charity (not for profit) as well as a company limited by guarantee.

The NRTF ambitions are: to be the leading advocate for the UK rural touring sector and; for rural communities to become cultural centres. Their aims are: to further strengthen a thriving sector; to support the growth and development of rural touring agencies and; to support more artists, promoters and venues across the UK.

The NRTF Articles of Association state that only rural touring agencies are able to vote at meetings. This means that the NRTF operates under the direction of its 'full' members. Artists and companies are also encouraged to join the NRTF but as 'associate' rather than 'full' members. They cannot vote on key decisions.

In the beginning the turnover of the NRTF was approximately £6,000 per year. This was enough to contract a freelance person for a few days a year to support an annual conference and to produce some advocacy material.

The NRTF immediately attracted 20 rural touring agencies to join as members at this early stage so it is evident that the local rural touring infrastructure in England, Wales and Scotland pre-dated the existence of the NRTF as a body.

### Of those 20 original NRTF rural touring agencies:

- Over 50% were organised through the arts department of the local government department;
- 35% were independent charities (or not for profit organisations);
- The remaining 15% were part of a larger arts organisation with significant other responsibilities outside of rural touring.

Almost immediately after formation, the NRTF was very successful in fundraising. When ACE created a new funding programme, the NRTF applied for and received almost £500,000 for a 3-year period from 1997-2000 to expand and develop projects associated with rural touring. It is interesting that not all the 20 touring agencies wanted to commit to working together and this project involved only 13 of the members. This very significant project was successfully delivered and ever since the NRTF has been a regularly funded ACE organisation.

*"I believe the NRTF was successful in its project application in 1997 partly as a result of the late 90s national politics focus on 'arts and rural areas'. ACE saw the NRTF as a way to reach many rural areas of England and thereby create a 'good news' story."*

Ralph Lister, Take Art & NRTF Development Director 1997-2018



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Isla by D'Click. Photo Credit: fotografia de Pilo Gallizo



## The NRTF operates in a number of ways:

- It provides the rural touring network with training, information and networking services;
- It delivers and enables innovative work, international partnerships and commissions;
- It promotes better understanding of the value of rural and community touring through research and advocacy.

There are 25 members (2018 statistic) and members are listed on the NRTF website [www.ruraltouring.org](http://www.ruraltouring.org). This provides a good starting point for potential new agencies in avoiding duplication of existing organisations. One of the strengths of the network has been the willingness to help each other and to discuss plans with new parties.

## It organises and co-ordinates activities on behalf of its members including:

- An Annual Conference: usually a residential

2-3 day meeting that incorporates showcase performances by artists and companies, discussion and debate around current issues and presentations by funders and policymakers.

- Development of Strategic Projects: such as the Rural Touring Dance Initiative (RTDI) over a 6 year period 2015-2021 to encourage the performance of more contemporary dance in rural areas.
- Presence at key events: such as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, one of the largest festivals of its kind in the world.
- Professional Development Opportunities: offering its members grants and bursaries to visit festivals and to be mentored by other professional arts colleagues.
- Research Projects: currently the NRTF is working with Coventry University to research the social impact of rural touring with a major research grant from the Arts Council England.

For more information on the above please visit [www.ruraltouring.org](http://www.ruraltouring.org)



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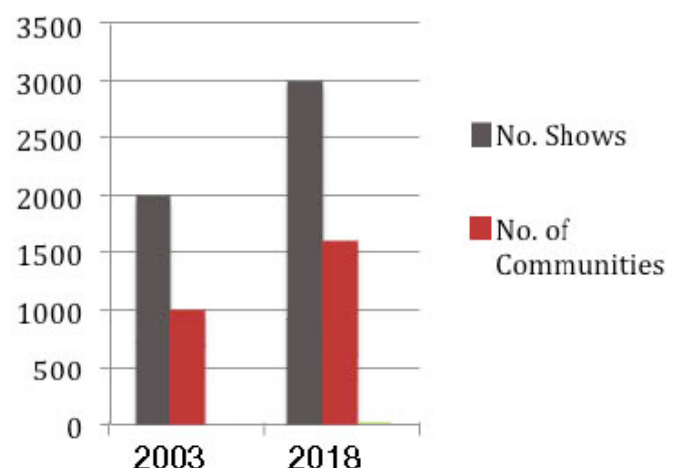
The NRTF has a few members in Scotland and Wales as well as England. These members feel it is better to be part of a larger UK wide organisation than to be alone within their own countries, even though they have a separate funding system. In England, there are several geographic regions but there is currently no interest in developing formal regional bodies. Everyone wishes to be part of a national organisation, which has a critical mass acknowledged by the ACE.

The period from 2000 to 2010 was an excellent decade for rural touring. The British economy was growing and national arts funding, through both local government and ACE, was in a good position. To get a sense of the rural touring story it is important to read *Only Connect*, a report on rural touring, commissioned by the National Rural Touring Forum 2003. Available from [www.ruraltouring.org](http://www.ruraltouring.org)

The NRTF audit of 2003 shows there were 35 English agencies, and one Welsh and two Scottish members, with a network over 1,000 promoting groups, 2,000 performances with over 150,000 audience members and an annual turnover of £1.5 million.

Local authority funding cuts and austerity measures since 2011 has had a negative impact on rural touring. Some organisations have merged with neighbouring networks some have reduced in size and a few have sadly disappeared, see table on previous page.

In the most recent audit carried out by the NRTF in 2018 there were 25 English, 1 Welsh and 2 Scottish rural touring organisations working with a network of 1,600 rural communities, 2,800 performances and reaching an audience of 330,000. The turnover of the sector now amounted to £4 million. So although there were fewer organisations, their turnover and depth of work had increased.





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Nearly 18% of population in England live in rural areas. However 97% of ACE core spending goes to arts organisations based in urban areas. Rural touring goes a small way to help redress the balance by providing access to high quality arts experiences in the heart of communities where people live and congregate.

Rural communities are difficult to categorise. Some are ex-industrial whilst others still heavily depend on agriculture. Many are retirement settlements, others have high numbers of families on low incomes. Most villages have a local hall with a committee of people planning activities for their community. Many villages have a handful of enthusiastic volunteers, or a passionate individual, who wish to see high quality arts events taking place in their village. These are the local voluntary promoters who are at the very heart of rural touring.

## NRTF AGENCIES IN THE UK IN 2019



## REGIONAL NETWORKS

Many of the NRTF rural touring agencies have grouped together regionally and found a strength in combining their resources to successfully work on joint projects.

For example in SW England, there are seven rural touring organisations which between them cover the whole of that region, these are:

- Carn2Cove in Cornwall (also running a temporary programme in Mid & South Devon for 2018/20)
- Beaford Arts in North Devon
- Take Art in Somerset
- Artsreach in Dorset
- AirinG in Gloucestershire
- Rural Arts in Wiltshire
- Orchard Theatre, North Somerset

These are all well-established, successful organisations funded as National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) by ACE. Since the 1990s they have worked together on joint programming and marketing as well as specific national and international touring projects.

Each year they hold a regional network meeting to share programming knowledge and to pitch ideas for joint projects. LocoMotor is a current project funded by ACE strategic funds to bring international work to rural communities across the SW.

Other regions may not have full coverage of rural touring agencies in every county but they will have at least one or two per region.

## ARTS FUNDING IN ENGLAND

The national Government has a number of departments and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has responsibility for the arts. There is an 'at arms length' principle in England which means the DCMS gives funding for the arts to an independent body, ACE to distribute.

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ACE supports a portfolio of over 600 arts organisations for a whole variety of purposes and these include national flagship organisations like the Royal Shakespeare Company (£60 million per year) and smaller grass roots organisations like Take Art (£160,000 annually).

There is a system of over 300 local authorities (local government) in England and they receive their funding through a combination of grants from the national government and money raised through local taxes. They have a number of responsibilities which are either mandatory under law such as providing care for the elderly or they are discretionary (they can choose if and by how much they wish to be involved in carrying out these responsibilities). Funding for the arts falls into the discretionary area of local government responsibility.

## NATIONAL POLICY

In England the principal funder of the arts is ACE, an independent organisation based in London with offices in North, Central, South East and South West England. It receives funding from Government through DCMS and also distributes money funnelled to the arts through a National Lottery scheme.

ACE have produced a number of publications and reports relevant to rural touring and these include:

- Arts Council England and communities living in rural England – a position statement 2014;
- Rural Evidence & Data Review 2015;
- Rural Narrative 2018-2022.

All documents available at [www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

ACE is undergoing a refresh of the Rural Evidence & Data Review in 2018 as part of a process that will inform their next 10 year strategy, 2020-2030. It has created a consultative Rural Stakeholder Group that meets twice a year to discuss arts and rural areas (within a wider culture and rural context).

Whilst it is no longer available to download, ACE commissioned a national report into arts and rural areas in 2005 by social and arts researcher, François Matarasso. This demonstrates that the subject of 'arts in rural areas' has been on the policy making agenda for well over a decade.

It is probably not surprising that countries such as Sweden and Norway, with strong social democratic principles, are investing heavily in enabling rural communities to access culture. In England, which has entered a post-industrialised phase, it has taken a long time to bring the need for rural communities to have good access to culture to the attention of policymakers. Advocacy by pressure groups, such as NRTF, has been instrumental in achieving this.

## OUTSIDE ENGLAND

### SCOTLAND

There are several rural touring organisations in Scotland and while several operate in a similar way to the rural touring agencies in England, the Touring Network is different [www.thetouringnetwork.com](http://www.thetouringnetwork.com) It is an organisation that works with a number of small, rural arts venues as well as the typical volunteer local promoter and they also have developed a website that aims to connect promoters and artists and companies.

### WALES

In Wales, rural touring is structured differently and is actually directly managed by Arts Council Wales (ACW), the Welsh equivalent of ACE. It operates a large programme and relies quite heavily on their website to broker promoters and companies [www.nightout.org.uk](http://www.nightout.org.uk)

### SWEDEN

In Sweden, Riksteatern has a huge rural touring network with 60,000 volunteers promoting events in rural areas [www.riksteatern.se](http://www.riksteatern.se) It is heavily funded by the Swedish government and makes a number of productions annually in a



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Hatch Beauchamp Village Hall

theatre making factory in Stockholm which then tour at a number of different scales. It is also linked with a number of regional Riksteatern agencies such as Riksteatern Värmland which are similar to some of the English rural touring agencies [www.varmland.riksteatern.se](http://www.varmland.riksteatern.se)

## NORWAY

In Norway, there is a national 'Culture Rucksack' that takes performances into school settings across the country and which attracts substantial government funding [www.creativitycultureeducation.org](http://www.creativitycultureeducation.org). Much of Norway can be defined as rural and this programme also works with regional agencies such as Sogn og Fjordane [www.skulesekken.no](http://www.skulesekken.no)

## ESTONIA, ITALY, LITHUANIA AND ROMANIA

In July 2018, a consortium of European partners in England, Estonia, Italy, Lithuania, and more recently Romania, were successful in a Creative Europe Co-operation Project application for SPARSE. The full project title is *Supporting & Promoting Arts in Rural Settlements of Europe*.

The project will foster rural touring in the partner countries i.e. taking performances by professional performing arts companies and artists into rural areas to audiences in local community venues. This will help to address the

issue that many rural communities do not enjoy the same opportunities to enjoy high quality arts as their urban counterparts. Kick-started by a capacity building programme, SPARSE will create a network within each partner country that puts audience development and access to the arts by rural communities at its heart.

Over four years, fledgling rural touring networks will be created and tested in Estonia, Italy, Lithuania and Romania. The English model is not seen as the 'expert model' which must be followed. It provides one example of how rural touring can work and it is anticipated that each partner will customise the model to suit their own individual circumstances.

During the project a new organisation, The European Rural Touring Network, will be introduced to provide advocacy and profile raising opportunities for this needed but under-represented field of activity.

SPARSE is in its early days with a website set to be launched in March 2019. There is, however, a Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/SPARSEU](https://www.facebook.com/SPARSEU)

*"A rural touring agency is like an arts centre with hundreds of volunteers, operating in multiple spaces, serving multiple communities."*

Rural Touring Organisation, UK