"Sharing my skills – changing my life": Film-maker Viv Thomas

What is a volunteer? Photographer and film maker Viv Thomas talks to EVA ELLIOTT about his thoughts on what volunteering is and how we underestimate its transformative power

I met Viv for a coffee on a rainy day in January, excited to hear his story about his connection to ACE and, in particular, the Caer Heritage project.

This is probably ACE's most ambitious project. and has its origins before ACE became an entity of its own when the team were part of Wales' Communities First programme, serving Ely and Caerau.

Conversations between Dave Wyatt and Ollie Davis from Cardiff University and Dave Horton from ACE developed into what is now a nationally recognised, and award winning, archaeological project, which not only saw the development of a heritage centre, but also realised the unique significance of Caerau and Ely itself.

It has brought professional archaeologists, academics, residents and artists together in a joint ambition to realise the historically significant importance the area holds in the history of Wales itself. It is a quite different story of place to the one the media insists on promoting. Viv is an important part of this collaborative endeavour, and his role challenges our understanding of what a volunteer is and can be.

Viv was born in Caerau and as a child he moved to a house in Ely where he has lived for the past 54 years. Social housing has been a life-saver for him as he has a secure and affordable tenancy. However, if he wanted to move, he would not be able to. No way of leaving, as rents are so high.

Burning interest and curiosity

But this is not a negative situation. Viv had, and has, bold ambitions. He started his career repairing televisions in Sloper Road. He did that for four years, then moved onto domestic appliances for another 13 years. However, he had a burning interest in photography and a curiosity about video production.

So, he took the step to find his way into the creative industries – widely acknowledged as competitive, demanding, dependent on social networks and

offering little in terms of a secure and reliable career. But he loved the craft and was determined.
He enrolled on a media course for four years, where he had access to equipment, then found opportunities to work in the broadcast industry as a camera assistant, starting out at the Pop Factory in Porth.

Describing it as a brilliant experience, he met a number of artists at the top of their careers, including Cerys Matthews and Larry Adler. He shadowed Welsh language light entertainment programmes at S4C as a camera assistant going on to help on Songs or Praise and the comedy High Hopes, some of his best memories. He then went to London to take on more camera and lighting training, and found himself working with the latest equipment at the high end of the broadcast industry, now as a camera operator, not an assistant. But it was not regular work.

He initially expected to stay for three days during a dig but stayed for the full month. Since 2013 he has been there consistently - for every dig possible.

Interestingly, he felt that time credits were not the key motivator for people involved in the digs. It was how they were involved, included and valued. "They feel valued and feel part of a family." Many other people, when interviewed, also said that it was a way of escape, forgetting about their problems and being able to switch off.

For Viv himself it was even more than that. Initially he had wanted some simple shots but soon felt that this was where he was meant to be. "I was in my element. In with the muck and the dirt!" He had found his home, his team, and family in a way that he had not been able to find, let alone sustain, in the precarious creative industry where he always felt his skills lay. At the end of that month he was given a card, signed by everyone, and a bottle of champagne.

He still has the card that thanked him. The thank you was overwhelming. It said at the end, so he recalls, "thank you for getting to know us." It is still one of his most treasured possessions.

"It's more than volunteering"

However, he feels ambivalent about the term 'volunteer.' "It is more than volunteering because I don't feel I'm a volunteer. I see myself as somebody with skills who can give back to the community and be useful." With the Caer Heritage project he could both develop and contribute his skills. This was enhanced by the involvement of professional artists that funding provided.

He felt that he was part of a creative community, "a family within a family," with other artists such as Nic Parsons and Paul Evans, but he also sensed that other people could benefit as he had, so he floated the idea of a Caer Collective, knowing that "people are in their bedrooms, undiscovered, with all their ambition and creativity." With other artists they set up the Caer Studio.

One of the creations was a puppet making film, creating characters on the lines of the Muppet Show. They got the community to make and design the puppets with

scenarios capturing different local themes and then set up a studio at the Dusty Forge, using the green screen technique. It is one of many films that remain iconic in Viv's portfolio.

He feels very strongly that his photography and films have made an important contribution as they shine a light on the work that ACE and its Caer Heritage project do. He quickly realised that the archaeology work was not being chronicled and he tries to film every day during a dig. In fact, BBC's Digging For Britain used quite a lot of his footage in 2025 when they came to film the latest dig in Trelai Park. For that he was in the credits, "bragging rights" but, like everyone working on the team, he was not getting paid.

"When I turn up, however, you never know how valuable this material is." His photography is witness to discoveries as they happen. If he had not dedicated this time, the digging up of the bronze age pot would never have been recorded. He had three cameras on that.

"On the hamster wheel of life"

At this point his skills were recognised and he was asked, as a professional, to shoot film for Newport students developing their scripts, in order for them to graduate. He provided a step for people seeking their own route onto the ladder and a number have been successful. "Great experience," he reminisced.

However, during all this time he was still working as an appliance engineer so juggling too many things at one time. Everything came to an abrupt stop with a mental health set-back. "Basically, the wheels of the wagon fell off, and I came crashing to a halt. On the hamster wheel of life." The phone kept ringing, but he could not answer it. Soon there was silence.

In this isolated silence, he realised that he knew little about the community he lived in. He wanted to know more. He had heard about food banks and went down to Communities First, then based in the rent office, to get a food voucher. There he met Hazel Cryer, from the Communities First team.

He found out that there were a number of community projects in the area, but he felt that they were under the radar and hidden from view. A few weeks later he went back to Hazel and told her more about his background and his media related CV. He took courage and asked if there was anything that he could video. He wanted to interview local people so they could tell their story, and people working on projects so he, and others, could find out more. Hazel was able to give him the go-ahead as soon as he was CRB (DBS) checked for the usual safeguarding purposes.

At first, he believed that the trust in him was low. After all, people did not know him, so he felt that he needed to do a lot of convincing. But trust growing is at the heart of successful community development and eventually he found himself part of something enlightening, educational and uplifting. He also needed to build trust. After all, he was dealing with vulnerable and private people so could not just go putting a camera and microphone in front of their faces.

He wanted to interview people, but nothing was released until everyone was happy. He felt Dave Horton and John Hallett were particularly helpful, and funds were found for editing and motion graphics training, and he used those skills to create the graphics for the videos he was producing.

Time banking

At the time, the Communities First team were developing a Time Banking scheme, where volunteers can earn credits for their services. At this time, it was led by an organisation called Spice. He interviewed numerous people who were leading, or benefiting from, the scheme. With regard to the film, he saw it as a contribution. Any skills he had learned, he tried to put back "so they have the value of it."

But he benefited too, as he felt inspired by the stories he heard: "when you come from a background of hurt and pain, and you see this other side to life, it basically gives you a massive boost." He felt that it was a part of his own therapy as he was no longer 'a recluse.' By breaking down the barriers, he found the energy and confidence to connect with people.

In 2013, a year after ACE emerged as a community organisation in its own right, he interviewed Ollie Davis about the time credits earned from working on the Caer Heritage project. Then his life really changed. Archaeology became the focus of his life's work, and he wanted to document and film the uncovering of the artifacts dug from the ground as they emerged, which held clues to the unique history of the old hillfort, and surrounding community in Caerau.

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He remembers Tom Hicks meticulously digging the pot out of the ground, using his techniques with bits of bamboo. "Without that filming that footage would not exist." Understandably he felt the irony of not being part of the filming crew, but he recognised that they had their own team and their own way of doing things. In any case, he knows that they could not possibly have had the time commitment to provide the diary footage to document the digs. Only he could do that.

Much as Viv loves the professionals that he engages with, it is getting to know the community, both past and present, that seems most important to him. The fact that he can contribute his skills and knowledge is important. An example of this is during covid. It was a creative time for him and the group responded to his ideas. One of the collective ideas that the team had was for Viv to film YouTube videos of how to dig a test pitch and search for artifacts in people's own gardens. People would send him mobile footage, and he would use his graphic skills to produce something that was amusing, accessible and practical.

So why is Viv not happy with the blanket term "volunteering"? He wishes there was a better word to describe what he and many others do. He says it is the opportunity to be a valued asset, to go somewhere, offer your time, be appreciated, and be part of

a family. Be recognised. “It is more than just events that you pop along to and go. You can make a difference to people and be part of a bigger picture. That is what they all try to do.”

At the time of writing, we are preparing an event to celebrate his achievements. There is a considerable archive to wade though. So yes, thank you Viv for getting to know us. I hope we know you better now too.