

Gainsborough Packet: Matt Stokes's 19th century pop video

The former Beck's Futures prize winner has turned the adventures of a 19th-century jack-of-all-trades into an uplifting, irony-free film installation

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A vagabond's tale ... Matt Stokes, Gainsborough Packet Photograph: Baltic Mill, Gateshead/Public Domain

Three hundred years ago a Scotsman named Alexander Selkirk was rescued from a four-year, self-imposed exile on a Pacific island, a story that Daniel Defoe turned into a best-selling survival primer. Artist [Matt Stokes](#) is doing something similar for John Burdikin, a 19th-century jack-of-all-trades who laid out his life story in a letter to his friend Pybus, with a film translating Burdikin's adventures into a nine-minute Super-16mm pop video. The work is showing more or less simultaneously in London (at the [176 gallery](#)) and Gateshead (at the [Baltic](#)) until early summer.

Matt Stokes
The Gainsborough Packet
Baltic, Gateshead

Starts 4 March
Until 10 May
[Book tickets here](#)

On one level, the video could be viewed as a primer on the hazards of a slipshod civilisation: our side-burned hero (folk-singer Sam Lee) is robbed, buried alive in a coal mine and escapes death by a whisker from the blazing "Gainsborough Packet" that gives the piece its name. It is also an uplifting, irony-free piece of

film-making that may, consequently, puzzle the fans of an artist associated with respectful but anthropological studies of musical sub-cultures. Stokes, the 35-year-old son of an ex-RAF helicopter pilot, picked up the 2006 Becks Futures award with a seven-minute study of aged Northern Soul dancers gyrating in the gloom of an arts-and-crafts Dundee church.

That film featured hypnotic music and a stubbornly static camera which flitted between religious symbols and bodies decked in 1970s fashion. In contrast, [The Gainsborough Packet](#) is almost, well, [Barry Lyndon](#). A £50,000 budget, financed partly from his own bank account, enabled Stokes to film at seven north-eastern locations with a cast of 76. This time the period costumes are hitched to painterly camerawork and a distinct narrative, as well as a catchy soundtrack. New media exhibition-goers, used to anti-heroic monologues, will be dumbfounded by Sam Lee, a rascally Ryan O'Neal with duck egg eyes, hollow cheeks and a deep trunk of a chin which, when prised open by an accordion chord, spills large white teeth, a horseshoe smile and an honest, confiding baritone. The lyrics, written by Jon Boden of the group [Bellowhead](#), unfold Burdikin's saga with wry clarity.

So what? some will ask. That, you suspect, is precisely the point. English folk music is an overlooked musical sub-culture, no less valid for being associated with unruly knitwear and earnestness. Sceptics may also be under-valuing Stokes's technique of open-minded collaboration. He stumbled on his theme as he roamed around Camden, 176's hinterland, in search of material for his site-specific commission. The gallery is a former Methodist chapel and the English Folk Dance and Song Society is close by. Stokes proceeded serendipitously: he heard Northumbrian pipes. He thought about the parallels between 19th-century Tyneside and London. He found the Burdikin letter in a northern archive and attended debates on the future of folk song. The idea of pulling the strands together and creating a contemporary folk epic that linked Camden and Tyneside, where he lives, finally took shape.

The charge might be laid that [The Gainsborough Packet](#) is too smooth. Many visitors to the display, especially in the modernist Baltic setting, may think they have walked in to a promotion for the band [Bellowhead](#). The layers of creativity are invisible. Stokes has abandoned the use of evocative ephemera which marked his earlier projects. Even Burdikin's letter has been exiled, on the grounds that it could "heritage" the show. Is this wise? Robinson Crusoe did crave for company, after a while.

[The Gainsborough Packet](#) is at [176](#) until 28 June and at [Baltic](#) until 10 May.