

Widening the net

In spite of local opposition, the Jerwood Gallery, in Hastings, is quite a catch, says Hugh Pearman

It's remarkable what we get used to. If you had said, 20 years ago, that the fast-declining seaside resorts, fishing ports and retirement towns of southeast England would become a chain of cultural "destinations", in the jargon of the tourist trade, you would have attracted pitying glances. Yet so it has proved. And now we have the latest offering to tempt us: the newly opened Jerwood Gallery, right on the working fishermen's beach in the old town of Hastings.

This joins a lengthening list that includes the Turner Contemporary, in Margate, the Towner Gallery, in Eastbourne, the revitalised De La Warr Pavilion, in Bexhill, the Pallant House Gallery, in (just inland) Chichester, and the Quarterhouse performance and film centre, in Folkestone — also home to the Folkestone Triennial, a contemporary art festival. This is partly a grant-aided trickle-down of the notion of "cultural regeneration" that was so modish around the millennium, and partly a reflection of the growing

gentrification of these places: the south-coast bolt hole has become quite a thing for affluent middle-class second-homers, which is why you find a pair of very designerly gastro-cafes on the West and East beaches of Littlehampton, or a scattering of artfully vernacular modern homes on the shingle of Dungeness.

That the Jerwood Gallery is part of all this, is on the cusp of Old South Coast and New South Coast, is amply demonstrated by the "No Jerwood" slogans and banners you find on the fishing huts around it. This building has been controversial locally, to the point of being burnt in effigy, because this quarter, the Stade, is still — hurrah! — a working, messy, junk-strewn shingle beach where tiny fishing boats are winched in and out of the sea, bringing back Channel catches that are sold on the spot. It's good: the fish and

chips (and poncier seafood) in Hastings is some of the best you can eat. The fisherfolk wanted the gallery, if at all, at the sprawling western end of town. Not on their eastern patch, specifically part of a coach and truck park that brought in paying customers.

But there we are, and here it is. The fishing community here goes back to Saxon times, and since the early 19th century, there has been friction between it and the town's resortish tendencies. A spot of very municipal tidying up has taken place, with the £4m Jerwood Gallery forming part of a small formal group around a kind of large square, including a community centre. Relish the thought of the earnest London masterplanners setting out their concept of a neat rectilinear development to the hard men

of the Channel, with their historically unplanned arrangement of tall black timber net towers, low blockwork huts and rusting machinery. Those two sides were never going to see eye to eye. Which makes this a thoroughly interesting juxtaposition.

It's good, the new Jerwood Gallery, even though it's a bit of an obvious response to the context. As the historic net towers around it are pitch-black, the architects — HAT Projects — made their building pitch-black, too. In this case, it's not timber, but locally made ceramic tiles with an almost metallic sheen. And, though it rises to two storeys in part, the bulk of the building is intelligently

broken down around a little courtyard, so as not to dominate its surroundings. Inside and out, it avoids an easy symmetrical arrangement: rooms and stairs are offset, views generally glimpsed, rather than seen on axis.

Downstairs is a big, semi-industrial temporary exhibitions gallery: the opening show is by the Kent-based, nationally important artist Rose Wylie. The painters Gary Hume and Gillian Ayres will

Jerwood Charitable Foundation, which gives revenue grants to artists and arts producers. It is administratively separate from the Jerwood Foundation, which gives capital grants to arts building projects. Here — this being by Jerwood for Jerwood — they stumped up all the money. When you do that, you keep control in a way the public sector cannot. Worth noting, however, that this is not a free gallery, like others

around the coast: if you are not from Hastings, you will pay £7 to get in. Locals pay £2.

I'm not too bothered how architects get selected — Grieve Sr ran a competition for the building, which HAT Projects won — as long as the results are manifestly good, and here they are. It's a little jewel of a gallery, beautifully considered and detailed. Rooms

open into each other in a natural, unforced way. There are — and this is anathema to many curators — several windows giving views out to the old town and the beach. The aesthetic is pared-down and deliberately raw in places, but it doesn't feel clinical. It feels exactly what it is: personal.

There's a cafe upstairs, with a terrace from which you can gaze out over the bolshie fisherfolk on their beach. Directly below is a hut selling fresh fish. If you are going, do take advantage of this. It will be excellent. I'm sure they will learn to coexist, the new art gallery and sceptical Old England. I'd like to think they could find each other mutually beneficial. **B**



'Manifestly good': the new Jerwood Gallery, designed by HAT Projects



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