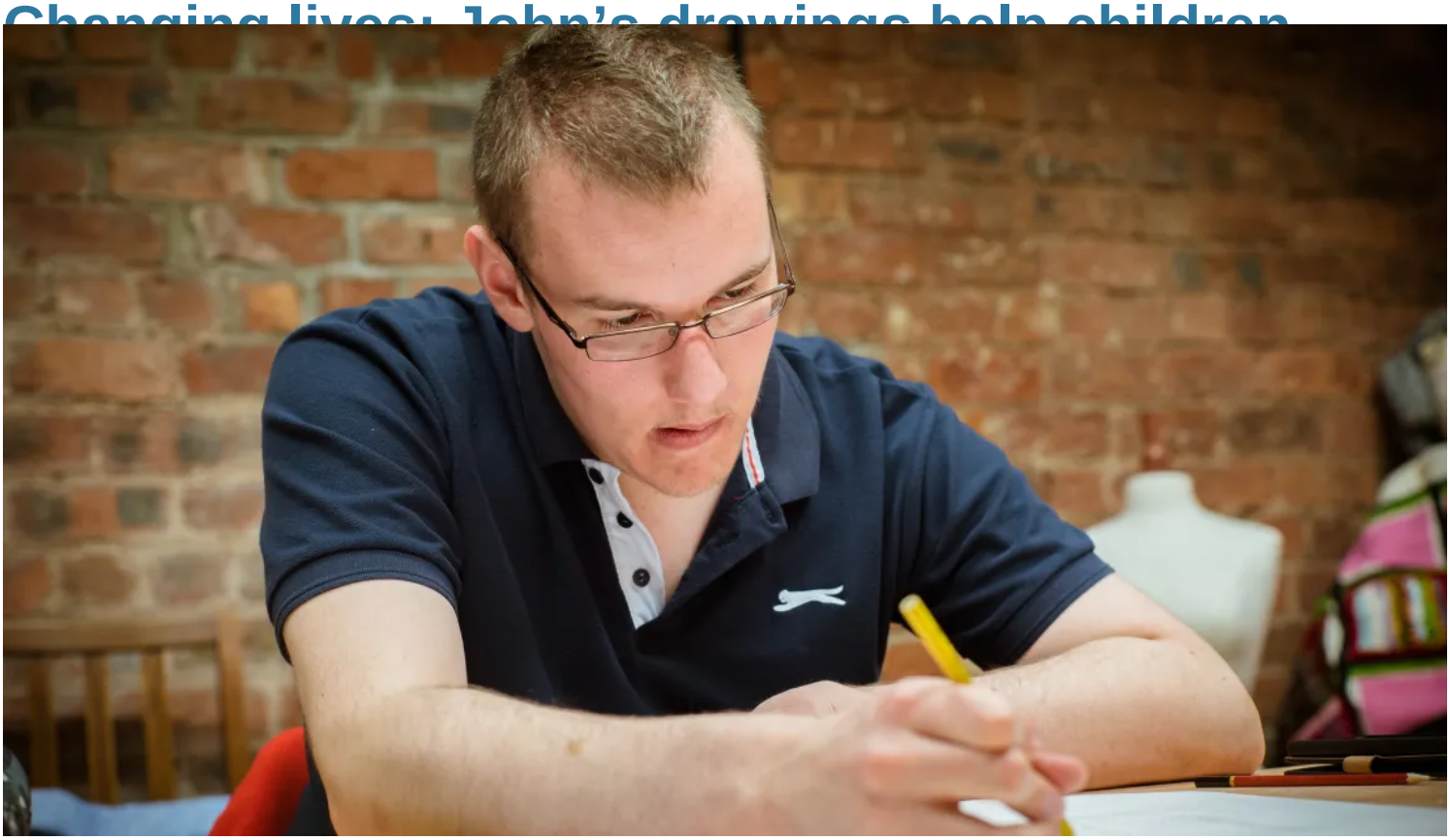
Changing lives: John's drawings help children



John Lake knows a lot about Viking warriors going berserk. Not literally, of course. The word 'berserk' comes from Old Norse, he explains whilst engrossed sketching an intricate Viking head-dress.

"The Viking Berserkers were fierce, brave warriors who went into battle wearing only bear or wolf skins and decorated head-dresses."

John, 19, is a member of Prism Arts Studio Theatre West, a theatre arts company for people with disabilities based at Distington Community School near Workington in Cumbria. His drawings are for an HLF-supported arts project about the Vikings' impact on West Cumbria, where they settled in the 9th century.

John, who has autism, has been fascinated by the Vikings since he was eight years old, so the project is the perfect vehicle for him to apply his immense knowledge and drawing skills. "The Berserkers were forest dwellers," he continues. "They lived close to the animals and nature but also wrote poetry and sagas about heroes and warriors and their wars and battles."

His drawings are the work of imagination but also the result of rigorous research. As well as the head-dress, he re-imagines mythical creatures and richly-coloured jewelled brooches, scabbards and swords, and the embellished prows of longships.

“Yes, they looted and raided, but they also made beautiful items from their rich pickings: jewellery, mead horns, calling horns, helmets,” says John. “They were also brilliant navigators, sailors and explorers.”

[quote= Ali McCaw, lead artist]“Without National Lottery funding talented people like John would be destined to a much more uncertain, uncreative and unfulfilling future.”[/quote]

The Norse Vikings arrived from Scandinavia and their heritage can still be found in placenames, cultural traditions and dialect. ‘Berserk’ is just one of many Norse words we use today; ‘ransack’ is another.

Studio Theatre West members are creating a new saga with the schoolchildren, to be performed around regional schools and theatres. Everyone is contributing story ideas and working on the production, which will use puppets. These will have costumes dyed with natural dyes foraged from local trees and flowers, just as the Vikings did.

“What I’m doing in this project is very simple and eloquent,” John says. “I came in to help the children and talk to them about drawing styles and how the Viking culture mixed with ours.”

This summer John is set to leave Mayfield, his specialist school in Whitehaven. But instead of the uncertainty that faces many in the post-16 world, and especially those with additional learning needs, John will continue at Prism Arts as a volunteer.

“When I found out I was staying at Prism,” he says, “I felt three things: brilliant, excited, excellent. My mum is also chuffed because it means she won’t have to worry so much about me.” John will deliver workshops to show the children his method of building up a Viking drawing in stages.

“John has improved immeasurably through the Viking project,” says lead artist and mentor Ali McCaw. “It’s not just his drawing that has come on, but also his social skills. He is making more eye contact and his natural flair for working with children has been brought out. He can focus on a single child but still gauge where attention is needed around the class. Many teachers dream of having a roving eye like that!

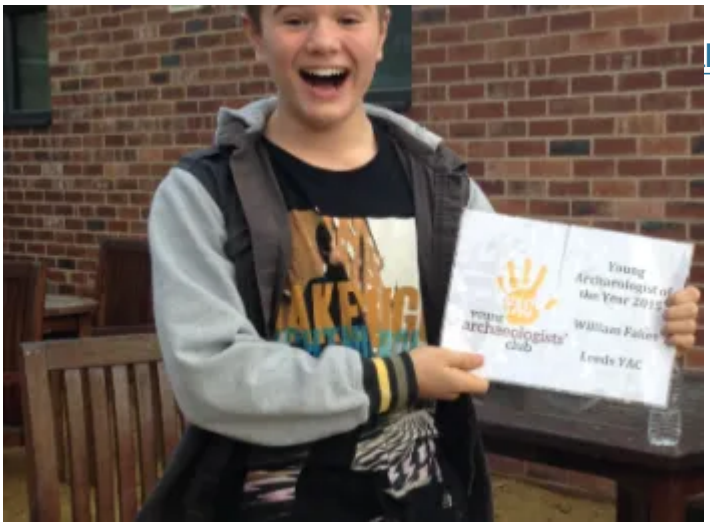
“It’s no exaggeration to say that the National Lottery funding has been a lifesaver for us,” adds Ali. “Without it talented people like John would be destined to a much more uncertain, uncreative and unfulfilling future.”

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