

# Margaret Powell (1921-1992)

## ‘A great gift to the people of Milton Keynes’

If you visit Milton Keynes Theatre and make your way to the bar on the ground floor, you may be intrigued for a moment by a striking art installation called The Electric Sheep, which shows a changing and colourful image of a lamb.

Before entering the building, and as you strolled across the large square in front of the theatre, perhaps you noticed the name of the square – Margaret Powell Square.

And if you had been energetic enough to walk down Midsummer Boulevard from Milton Keynes Railway Station towards the theatre, a large building with the name of Margaret Powell House may have caught your eye.

So who was Margaret Powell, and why is she such an interesting and important figure in the history of Milton Keynes?

Let’s expand our tour of Milton Keynes and head west towards Tattenhoe, once an area of woodland, isolated farms, a priory and a tiny mediaeval church. Tattenhoe, Tattenhoe Park and Kingsmead have now developed as residential areas, although farmhouse buildings and the church of St Giles still remain and you can enjoy walking through preserved ancient woodland sites like Howe Park Wood.

Margaret Powell was a sheep farmer in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She lived and worked at Tattenhoe Bare Farm, located in what is now Kingsmead. As Milton Keynes Development Corporation worked on its plans for the new city, large areas of land were being bought for housing, schools, businesses and all the accompanying infrastructure. The land belonging to Margaret Powell and her family was included in the planning, and so eventually it needed to be sold. So that was that.

Except ...

Let’s move on a few years to the early 1990s when Margaret Powell, sadly, died. And this is where her remarkable legacy was revealed, for she had bequeathed a sum of two million pounds for the purpose of setting up a fund for the support of frail, elderly and disabled people in the area. The money, which was in a trust fund in a bank in Towcester, was just waiting to be put to good use. Solicitors in Towcester wrote to the Milton Keynes Community Trust asking them to apply for grants. Tim Hill, then Chief Executive of the Trust, worked with the Development Corporation and a relative of Margaret to set up the Margaret Powell Foundation.

In the words of Tim Hill: *“I said - Look, why don’t you think in terms of investing it ... give it a name – The Margaret Powell Foundation – and let us operate it for you in the way that Margaret would have wanted, for disabled people.”* (Living Archive interviews, 2014)

The money grew significantly and was used for grant purposes. Opportunities for matched funding were used and up to £100,000 was granted to applicants annually. During the past 22 years more than £3 million in grants has been used to support Margaret Powell’s vision.

So – where does the Electric Sheep fit into all this?

The Margaret Powell Foundation supported the enhancement of facilities for the elderly and disabled in Milton Keynes Theatre. Artist Bruce Williams was commissioned in 2003 by Milton Keynes Council and Milton Keynes Theatre and Gallery Company to commemorate Margaret

Powell's generosity. The sculpture has two images of a sheep, laser-cut into both sides of a large steel structure and backed by glass, with coloured lights fading and changing the image. The sculpture can be seen from Margaret Powell Square as well as from the interior of the theatre. The sheep image refers of course to Margaret Powell's life as a sheep farmer, but also reminds us of the rural origins of Milton Keynes.



**Bruce Williams**

*Electric Sheep*, 2003, Milton Keynes Theatre  
Commissioned by Milton Keynes Council and the Theatre  
Laser cut steel, glass and controlled lighting sequence  
3m high, 1.4m wide and .5m deep

When the sculpture was unveiled, in the presence of the actor Nigel Havers, Margaret Powell's cousin and founder trustee Roger Norman, said: *"I am delighted that my cousin's generous legacy has been acknowledged in this way ensuring that even more people, whatever their disability or age, can enjoy their local theatre and gallery."*

Roy Nevitt, present as Chair of the Milton Keynes Theatre and Gallery, said: *"Bruce Williams' brilliantly conceived and executed piece exhibits a wit and flair which does justice to the memory of Margaret Powell."*

An earlier commission in 2000, by the Korean artist Mee Kyoung Shin, was a portrait of Margaret Powell. This was painstakingly created from 30,000 coloured marbles. Unfortunately the growing fragility of the work meant that it had to be dismantled and kept in storage. The portrait, shown below, was an image of Margaret Powell the farmer, in a rural landscape and feeding a horse.



*Commissioned image of Margaret Powell by Mee Kyung Shin (2000)*

A new Margaret Powell Foundation Fund has recently been created following the decision of the trustees to gift the worth of their foundation to the Milton Keynes Community Foundation. The new fund has the aim of making in excess of £250K worth of grants annually, ranging from micro-grants to larger capital projects. In recognition of this gift the city centre building in Midsummer Boulevard, which houses the Milton Keynes Community Foundation, has been re-named Margaret Powell House, and the stated aim is *“to honour Margaret’s values and build a lasting legacy for our city.”*



*Margaret Powell Square, Theatre District, Central Milton Keynes*

Margaret Powell, the philanthropist, is recognised and celebrated in Milton Keynes. Art and architecture bear her name and the committees dealing with her legacy have granted millions of pounds worth of funding in line with her wish to support the elderly, frail and disabled.

But what can we learn about Margaret as a living, breathing person? Who was this farmer living and working at Tattenhoe Bare Farm? Margaret Powell the woman is someone who is more hidden from our view, and we are left with just a few tantalising glimpses of her. Perhaps that is what she would have preferred.

The vision and compassion embodied in Margaret Powell's legacy have been of great benefit to the people of Milton Keynes and she is rightly honoured. Her name resonates throughout the city and her legacy continues.

**Acknowledgements:** Special thanks to Bob Hill, Jenny Walker and the Community Foundation. Photograph of Margaret Powell Square by Liz Whitelegg. Other photographs come from the Community Foundation archive, reproduced with permission.

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