

The Valley

Art on the Border
A Cultural History of Marsland

An Exploration by Peter Stiles

This booklet has been produced to accompany The Valley - Art on the Border at the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon from May 24th to July 5th 2025.

Published and distributed by Museum of Barnstaple & North Devon.

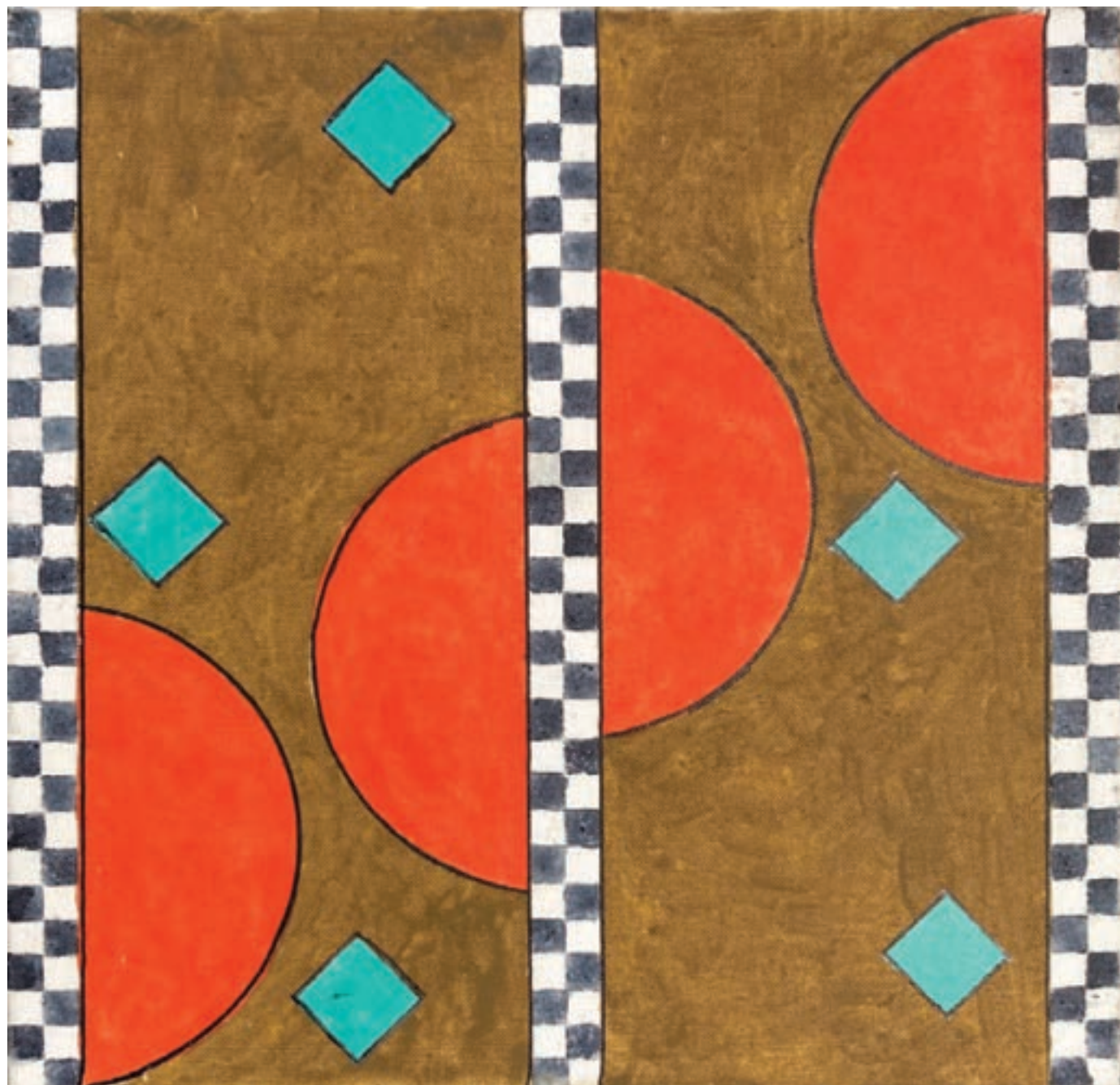
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without permission of the copyright holder.

Museum of Barnstaple & North Devon
The Square, Barnstaple, North Devon EX32 8LN

Text copyright ©Peter Stiles 2025

ISBN 978-0-9933596-6-8

Front cover: Marsland, by Gillian Ayres 2003



The Valley

The Cornish Peninsula is almost entirely surrounded by water. The natural boundary between Cornwall and Devon is the River Tamar. It rises just under four miles from the north coast and runs due south for 61 miles before entering the ocean at Plymouth. The divide between the two counties over that short remaining distance is defined by the River Marsland which rises close by the source of the Tamar and flows west from the other side of the watershed into the Atlantic.

Marsland valley is a kind of afterthought that completes the natural separation between Cornwall and Devon. Its parenthetical status has attracted pacifists, artists and those at one remove from broader society to live and work alongside families who have lived there for generations.

At first there was the river – cutting into the bedrock that formed over 300 million years ago at the Equator then drifted north on a tectonic plate, the layers of hardened mud squeezing and buckling between other tectonic plates to create the distinctive zigzag patterns that are visible in the cliffs today.

The river removed and deposited banks of debris here and there. In the colder weather, before the 10,000 years of the more temperate climate that we now enjoy, the permafrost had a kind of sludge resting upon it – created



by the action of the water and the frost. This sludge crept down the slopes onto the floodplain, occasionally overwhelming the ability of the river to pursue its original course. Terraces were created as the river changed its route from time to time until the warmer weather arrived and the river was able to cut through the now decreasing amount of deposited material and into the bedrock again.

The river is carrying on its work. If you come closer and listen to it tumbling over the stones, you will hear gossip: some of it is true. This is a very small part of the river's tale that I've been able to write down.

The valley's history goes unremarked for centuries –

Marsland Valley by
Peter Stiles, 2025



although there are Iron Age settlements nearby and many legends associated with St Nectan, who died in nearby Hartland in 510 AD. A local farmer decapitated St Nectan but the saint ran along the coast with his severed head under his arm – down one side of Marsland and up the other into Cornwall – and wherever a drop of blood fell

a spring of fresh water rose up.

The valley is mentioned in the Domesday Book and, while the great events of British history would have had an impact, there is little evidence of anything distinctive occurring that would have attracted the attention of the outside world.

There is another beheading story from Ailward the Goldsmith (circa 1168) when a 'litigious rustic' cuts his own head off with a scythe while using it as a pointer during a land dispute with monks from the chapel of the Blessed Martin of Meddon. Or at least that's what the Monks of Meddon claimed.

There were gold and silver mines once and people remember when they were children being told where they were but they can't remember now.

Over 400 years ago the woodland began to be cleared and cultivated, giving way to many orchards and an extensive field system. There were three mills along the river and traces of mill ponds still remain. However, there have never been many houses at the bottom of the valley. Most perch on the brow of the steep slopes of oak, alder and hazel.

Some of the first writings about the valley come from R.S. Hawker (1803–1875). Hawker was the vicar of Mowenstowe from 1835 and added Welcombe to his duties in 1850 – which meant that he had to cross Marsland Valley regularly to get from one parish to another.

'As I entered the Gulph between the Vallies to-day, a Storm leaped from the Sea and rushed at me roaring. I recognised a Demon and put Carrow into a gallop and so escaped. But it was perilous work. There once I saw a Brownie; and Thence at Night the Northern Glances Glean.'

(Brownies are magical creatures bound to a particular house who perform household chores at night although

they actually live in caves or along the riverbank)

One of my two parishes, Welcombe, is in Devon, the other, Morwenstowe, is in Cornwall. They and the two counties to which they belong are divided by a small Rivulet or Brook. In an eddy of this stream, and just below a deep, dark Pool, a Man – a Miller – found on Saturday the Body of dead Female Child.

"A corpse found!" At Marsland Mouth, washed in just where the wreck came ashore: When I arrived it was a singular



Notes

1: From "A selection of quotations relating to The Marsland Valley from The Life & Letters of R. S. Hawker by Charles Edward Byles

2: J K Rowling would have based some of the attributes of House Elves such as Dobby on the brownie. They are bound to particular houses and perform household chores at night although they live in caves or along the riverbank.

scene. A bright, calm, joyous Summer or Spring day. The Sea calm. The wind gone down. A cluster of Rocks, with Men seated around, and in their midst on his back as tho' asleep a young man about 18 or 19, a little bruised about the face by the rocks but otherwise a fine calm look.

That day the sky was silent with heat and the whole scene was so lonely that hardly God was there; when all at once a swift, brown, rough shape started up among the gorse bushes and rushed or glided towards the stream. I felt myself flush and then grow pale; but remembering St Thomas's word that every spirit must crouch to the Sign, I made it in the air and rode as fast as I could urge the mare towards it. I saw its head disappear down the bank and although I looked along the river and followed its course, I caught sight of it no more. It was a kind of nameless and indefinable sensation rather than the sight that assured me it was preternatural; at least I thought and think so'.

Hawker also gives us the first mention of the Box family in a letter to Rev. W. Valentine, July 27, 1864.

'We have had rather a filthy business here. While I was absent, my miscreant Tommy Box, having found out that a swarm of Bees had made honey in [Morwenstowe] Church Roof, got two or three other rascals to accompany him, and with a Bar of iron broke down a hole in the Roof, lighted a fire to smoke out the bees and stole a great deal of honey'.

Hawker is remembered today as a poet who invented the Harvest Festival and wrote the lyric 'And shall Trelawny live? / Or shall Trelawny die? / Here's twenty thousand Cornish men / Will know the reason why!' He won the Newdigate Prize for poetry while he was a student at

Oxford (other winners included John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde, John Buchan and James Fenton). He also took opium – but that should not make us doubt his testimony. Brownies and demons are there still.

Although Marsland was relatively far from the nearest railway, it began to attract holiday makers in the Victorian era – referred to as The Lodgers by the locals. And wealthy people were building places to stay. William Walker, a wine merchant from Kensington, bought land and built Welcombe House (which burnt down in 1929) on the northern side of the valley. As is sometimes the case, there were tensions between the established families (such as the Okes) and the newcomers.

A few months later on May 8th 1885 another Oke was born – William, from the Southole branch a mile or

WELCOMBE
31st March, 1885 – Right-of-way dispute on Westerfield Estate, Welcombe. Attempt by Squire Walker, owner, to prevent children using path through woods to St. Mark's School 3½ miles. Fence 12 ft high erected; vanished in night. Next morning two men stopped children, who went home. Farmer Thos. Oke (parent) at once went to place, stick in hand, and asserted right to pass. Men advised him not to try. He persisted, was collared by men and brought to the ground, but smartly chastised guards. Bailiff watching from a distance, challenged farmer to trial of strength, but words with him spoke louder than actions.

so away. He was brought up in a house close to the beach at Welcombe Mouth called Strawberry Water. And in 1891 Emmeline Ward came into the world. She grew up at Hennaford, which is situated nearer to the head of the valley.

At that time, people from farming communities throughout Devon – particularly the young – attended what was known as a Dairy School where they learned how to make butter, cheeses and creams. William Oke and Emmeline Ward went along to the classes of 1910. We have a photo of the group with St Nectan's Church at Welcombe in the distance – and Church Cottage beside it, where William's uncle Titus lived from time to time. Emmeline would have been 19 and William 25. Emmeline took exhaustive notes, neatly transcribed in a blue exercise book. They both took part in the associated butter-making competition and their respective certificates were framed. Emmeline won first prize while William took third place. They married in 1921 and the certificates and the group photo were hung up in their first home together in Gooseham. Perhaps the course had some romantic significance to them both and the fact that Emmeline had won first prize and William third was an in-joke.

When he was a young man, William kept small red diaries with barely enough room for a couple of lines per day and some of them were found after he died. In the 1912 and the 1913 diaries he records where he was working – mostly at home. It's a record of similar days and regular tasks.

There is a gap in the diaries after 1914 and the next



one we have is dated 1917 when the entries have utterly changed. Although he uses a small certificate – presented to Emmeline Ward for 'very regular attendance at Welcombe S. School during the year 1903' – as a bookmark, he is now in a very different world.

The 1914–18 Great War marked an abrupt transformation for people who up until that point rarely if ever left their village. William joined the Royal Engineers, which took part in campaigns in Gallipoli, Macedonia and Palestine. They were kept on in Egypt after the war ended in order to help crush an independence movement.

At the beginning of the war the Royal Engineers consisted of nearly 12,000 men with another 13,860 in the Territorial Force but by August 1917 had grown to a total manpower of 295,688. They were responsible for a mind-boggling array of tasks: building and maintaining railways, roads, water supply, bridges, tunnels and



William Oke and
Emmeline Ward.



fortifications. They looked after weaponry, telephones, wireless, carrier pigeons, inland waterways and motorbikes.

On the back of the photograph, inscribed for Emmeline, William wrote: 'How do you like this chap.

Not much like a soldier is he. Have not shaved off moustache yet, it's rather heavy and a bit one-sided'. William makes machine gun stands, water troughs and builds roads and bridges. He also constructs the officers' mess wherever they end up (it seems to be a priority).

We have his diaries for 1917/18/19. In 1917 the Royal Engineers were transferred from Macedonia to Palestine, sailing from Salonika and disembarking in Alexandria on the 28 September. After a nine hour train journey they arrived at El Qantara, a supply depot on the Suez Canal (where William went for a swim on October 5). He journeys across Egypt until he reaches Rafah.

The Sinai and Palestine campaign consisted of British Empire, French and Italian troops fighting alongside the forces of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. The primary goal of the Arab rebels was to establish an Arab state stretching from Aleppo to Aden, which the British government had publically promised to recognize in order to cement their alliance in 1916. However, the British reneged on their promise, having made a private arrangement with the French that would later see the region divided up into what were euphemistically referred to as protectorates. France seized Lebanon and Syria while the British took Palestine and Mesopotamia (which included Iraq). In 1917 Britain, in order to win Jewish support for its war effort, also promised – in the Balfour Declaration – the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The Declaration further exacerbated tensions in the region and encouraged Jewish immigration to Palestine after the war had ended. The tragic consequences for the Palestinians

and the Middle East that we see today have deep roots in Britain's past involvement in the region.

William's first involvement with the campaign came at the Battle of Beersheba, which was fought on 31 October 1917 and ended the stalemate in Southern Palestine.

He was at, or close to, all the most important engagements of the latter part of the campaign including the Third Battle of Gaza on the night of 1-2 November and the Battle of Mughar Ridge on 13 November 1917, which resulted in the occupation of Jaffa (now part of Tel Aviv). On 4 November William records '1 killed'. Next day they are marching to a captured wadi – 'tons of ammunition and guns' – and on 7th he is fixing up a water trough at Hareira Redoubt. On the 8th he mentions about 8000 prisoners working on the water supply and then digging a well on the 9th.

On the 10th he marches back 9 miles to camp for the important task of building the officers' mess the next day.

From 8 December he is in the hills making roads – sometimes at night – in preparation for the Battle of Jerusalem which begins the 9th. On the 11th General Allenby was filmed entering the Old City on foot through the Jaffa Gate, instead of on a horse or in a vehicle. This was portrayed as a gesture of respect. Lloyd George described the capture of Jerusalem as a Christmas present to the nation. This doubtless raised a few chortles at the time but it's not a joke that has aged well.

The next diary covers 1918 and part of 1919 prior to his return to England. However, the entries are much more sporadic. They mostly record trips on leave but also

the Battle of Nablus. This marked the beginning of the final offensive of the campaign and took place, between 19 and 25 September 1918. Will notes in his diary on 19 September a 'big advance on the left and by the 23rd he notes the taking of 25,000 prisoners, 260 guns, 932 horses and 55 lorries.

Although the Armistice of 11 November 1918 marked the official ending of hostilities, the hope that all the troops could return home immediately was frustrated by numerous factors. Many had to wait until the treaty of Versailles was signed on the 28 June 1919.

In William's case the situation in the Middle East further complicated matters³. He was kept on to deal with the Egyptian revolt against British occupation from November 1918 to July 1919.

Some of the regular letters from Emmeline to Will survive – though only those from the latter part of his enlistment. She tries to entertain him with the gossip from the village:

Sep 1918

If Elizabeth Ann don't look sharp Jim will lose all his beauty before she gets him. I thought he was getting more like a monkey than ever, but I reckon she don't think like I do about him

I expect he looks handsome in her eyes. Ive heard that a toad looks handsome in a duck's eye. ha! ha!

Oct 1918

A lot say that after the war is over that the chaps who have left the country won't come back again to that way of living but I'm sure you will only be to glad to come back

Note

3: Although the revolution was crushed by British forces the UK recognised Egyptian independence in 1922 but refused to recognize full Egyptian sovereignty over Sudan or to withdraw British forces from the Suez Canal.

While she tries not to worry him too much there are a series of calamitous events that she feels bound to mention.

Nov 3 1918

I expect you knew Willie Martin he used to go about singing with his sisters, you must have seen him at g mill, he had something the matter with his head and kept turning it about, he had this flu and it got in on his lungs and Wednesday he died so it seems rather more serious than the kind of flu that used to be around here, that used to be the Russian influenza and this is the Spanish they say

This is the first indication of the seriousness of Spanish influenza in the letters. After this Emmeline hid the full extent of the impact from Will, remarking, for instance, that:

'I heard there was 5 to bed with it down at Lana Park' instead of recording their deaths.

By the time the Spanish flu was over in 1919 it had resulted in 50 million deaths worldwide, making it the deadliest pandemic in world history. It is thought that it was spread via troop movements during the war.

Dec 1918

For certain you have seen about the election in the papers, Welcombe voters have to go to Meddon to vote so there'll be no chance for them to get a bit tipsy will there and someone said all public houses were going to be closed for that day, I think that's a good idea if it's true now women have votes or there would be some brave sights.

Women over 30 gained the right to vote in 1918 and this was extended to all women over 21 in 1928.

William's 1918/19 diaries show that now the big battles in the region are over he is starting to relax a little.

28 Oct landed at Cairo 11.30 put up at the Grand Royal Hotel, Esbekiah street paid for 8 nights and breakfasts.

Went to the Egyptian museum saw the mummies of Kings and Queens - very fine museum.

He went to see the Pyramids of Cheops, Chephren and Menkaure as well as the Sphinx. He sent some souvenirs home, including three yards of white silk, and went to Esbekiah Gardens. He also bought two Roman coins.

The engineer in him notes that the monuments are built of huge granite blocks and pillars and faced with sandstone.

On 4 November 1918 the sultan passed through grand procession Italians celebrating their great victory and on 11 Nov 1918 he was making paths and sandbanks around our camp ... war ceased with Germany - general holiday.

Every Sunday Emmeline is responding to Will's tales of his adventures:

March 23 1919

I would have liked to have been with you 3 weeks ago today when you climbed to the top of the pyramids... mind I shall expect you to explain some of the stories in the bible

April 1919

No we haven't seen about the rioters there around where you are. I don't know how it is but we don't see much at all concerning

the war on the newspapers now. I think its about time it got settled up don't you?

Mr Oliver is in a brave fix about Harry going again, yesterday he went to Barnstaple about it and when he got to Bideford station yesterday he had some kind of fit and dropped down...what would happen if harry had to go away foreign somewhere I don't know. It seems such a silly thing too to be calling away the men now just as the busy time as started, if it was 2 months later it would be different wouldn't it, but we have to obey orders whether right or wrong when it's the governments orders haven't we.

There had been a special occasion – probably in 1918 but, since Will is using the diary over a two year period, it might have been 1919 – when he went to Jerusalem over Easter. He was there for three days of leave and visited the inner city and the Garden of Gethsemane. He saw ‘the crypt where Mary hid’, the Mount of Olives, the Holy Sepulchre, the Mosque of Omar and the Pool of Bethesda. Then he travelled to Bethlehem and saw the Church of the Nativity.

He bought souvenirs and sent them home. Will had been brought up within a community rooted in Christianity, regularly attending Sunday School, so the experience of visiting the places that he had heard about all his life must have been especially meaningful. And for Emmeline, whose life sounds as if it were even more rooted in the scriptures, Will's description of his travels must have sounded extraordinary.

Emmeline is allowing herself to imagine their lives together:

Well Dear I'm sure you would feel the cold if you were home here now, its terrible cold here now, and we have had some nice warm days that it almost seems the worse for it now. I should have to turn up your collar to keep you warm that is if you haven't turned it up before.

Will's diary records: Demobbed July 5th 1919 A.F:W (5100.A. postcard to get at Post Office for the war medal).

And on 9 July he simply states ‘Come down to Strawberry Water’ and the diary entries end. He was able to buy his own house in Gooseham from the money he had earned during the war.

Although Emmeline's wish came true and they married in 1921, she died in childbirth in 1924. Will remarried in 1930 – to Elizabeth Howard (1908–1960). They had a son, William Edward Oke, a year later. He was known as Ed and it was said that he only spent one night away from Gooseham up until his death in 2009.

On June 15 1919 Emmeline had written:

Lodgers are getting about very early this year. Berry Park folks had some in yesterday and six more coming tomorrow and then I think Lizzie had some in before that...so Welcombe will be quite gay now for the next few months.

One of the more regular lodgers was the painter Dora Carrington (1893–1932). She was painting a portrait of Elizabeth Box, who had brought a successful paternity suit against William Oke's uncle, Titus Oke, in 1895.

Dora Carrington had studied at the Slade School in London from 1910–14 alongside Stanley Spencer, David Bomberg, Paul Nash and Mark Gertler. She was part of a new generation of painters who were heavily influenced

Elizabeth Box, by
Dora Carrington.
(Reproduced by
permission of the
trustees of the
Cecil Higgins Art
Gallery)



by the Post-Impressionists.

Two of the most prominent Post-Impressionists, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, had gone into the French countryside to find examples of people living a life close to the soil – an embodiment of a primitive ideal that contrasted with the decadent class-ridden urban society that they wished to escape. Gauguin painted Breton women wearing their distinctive white bonnets, while the women in Van Gogh's (Dutch) Potato Eaters also wore the same kind of headgear.

Perhaps Carrington went in search of similar subject matter in North Devon. She first came to Gooseham in 1917 with the writer Lytton Strachey (who she lived with) and some other friends. At first they stayed in a real 'pigsty of a farm' and were covered in flea bites, but eventually they found Mrs Box at Home Farm in Welcombe which they described as a 'simply perfect' farm.

Carrington wrote to her friend Barbara *'I am so happy here. Almost a headache every morning because I get so tired and exhausted. Simply loving so hard! The sea has yellow sands and big rocks and there are valleys such as you never saw with rivulets which flow down to the sea and green forests on the hills. It is surely one of the best places in England. I am painting old Mere Box who is 70, an amazing old Lady, who wears a pink bonnet and curious garments. Miss Box and her sister and brother keep the farm. I have swum in the sea twice with Noel.'*

Carrington went back to Mrs Box a few times to work on her portrait. In 1919, just a week after Will and Emmeline had been reunited, not far away Dora was writing to Lytton Strachey.

Monday, July, 14, 1919,

West Mill cottage, Welcombe, Bude

Dearest, Twenty times a day. I wish you were here! One can't tell ever what would have happened. But I feel now it would have been worthwhile, almost to engage this cottage for three months, just on the chance of being able to come with you!

Well, you shall know what I've done since Friday. On Saturday, we went to Shop and bought food. That took most of the morning, walking up and down innumerable valleys. One's memory fails one horribly remembering these depths. Such a lunch at the Bush Inn, Morwenstowe for 1/3, cream, saffron buns and black-a-berrie jam. Then I went after tea to see the Boxes. On the path down the hill. Mrs. Box appeared driving the cows: she held up both her arms and waved them with a stick in one hand. And then ran towards me! It was delightful to see her again. She is still full of vigour and every day she fetches the cows from the marshes by the cottage and takes them back to the farm! And she is 72!

The evening was spent quarrelling vigorously over the war and COs till I became so tired and angry that I gave it up. The night was pleasant, but oh dearie, I see God has devised matters so that there can be no pleasures without sorrows in this damned life. I hope for the best...

Noel came late on Sunday afternoon. It was such a perfect day. We went and swam in the sea and lay in the hot sun on the rocks. He read me the beginning of Cezanne, which I enjoyed enormously. Noel seems very happy and gay. I gathered from his account of a dinner that the Wolves had been playing with him unmercifully. I could hear Virginia plying and probing him with questions. Even he seemed a little perturbed by her curiosity! The major remains exactly the same. I'm afraid there's no chance of



Note

Details about Elizabeth Box are courtesy of research by Victoria Partridge, Keeper of Fine and Decorative Art at the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford)

his ever becoming less dull. His extreme kindness, however, makes him fairly easy to get on with. This afternoon, we took a long walk over Hartland way and missed our tea, called in on Box who had roasted us a cold fowl and a huge bag of scones and reached the cottage at eight o'clock...

There's no doubt that eventually in our old age we shall both have to come and live here in Cornwall just because the people are so kind and sympathetic.

On Sunday morning, July, 20, 1919

West Mill cottage, Welcombe Bude

I am sitting down in that little ravine that you remember just before you turned down to the sea. Do you remember the day you sat with me in the sun? Oh, I tried to paint, but the wind blew my easel down. So I've been forced to retreat to this little valley. It's baking hot here, lying on the greenery out of the wind, and more divinely beautiful, with the waters babbling over the grey rocks beneath me and above the high cliffs, great white balloons of clouds racing across a cerulean sky. The young men are trout fishing. So far they have only caught eels. So much to write about, and everything is distracting. Buzzards, grasshoppers, one of those birds has just flown down, is now perched on the rock above me. There is no bird so grand, and elegant! it looks completely artificial, sitting on a great stone under a little cavity in the sun.

MOPSA XXXXX

On Tuesday night, October, 28, 1919

chez Box,

Dearest, we have just come in after a long walk to Hartland point. The valleys and cliffs are lovely past the quay and hotel, but I still think Spekes Mill Valley and the waterfall are far the

most beautiful. Then we walked back across fields and through lanes to Stoke and looked at the church, then we had tea and a little cottage with three grey tabby cats and an old lady. We reached Boxina's at 7.30. She gives us beautiful suppers, tartlets and cream and tea.

Elizabeth Box was born in 1847, probably in the Bideford workhouse, to Elizabeth Colwill and Thomas Box, who were not married at the time. This was possibly the same Tommy Box who is mentioned by Hawker. She spent most of her childhood living with her maternal grandparents, Richard (a thatcher) and Betty in Down, Welcombe. When she was 18, she had her first child, Mary Grace and two years later another daughter, Elizabeth Ann and both were given their great grandparents surname, Colwill. She moved several times around Welcombe over the years. Her grandmother died and her grandfather retired, but stayed with Elizabeth wherever she happened to be. Elizabeth had several jobs: charwoman, housekeeper and church caretaker (which brought the tenancy of Church Cottage with it). When she was 36 she had another daughter, Emma Jane, followed by a son, William. Both children were given her own surname, Box. When Carrington knew her, she was living at Mead Farm with her farmer son and her eldest daughter. Home Farm, where Carrington and her friends stayed, was next door and must have been let out by the Box family.

While none of her four children had legal fathers, Elizabeth Box brought a paternity case for two of her children; Richard and Emma Jane against Titus Oke who



owned a cottage Elizabeth had lived in. A witness testified that Titus visited Elizabeth ‘frequently’ and continued to do so after the birth of both their children. Titus gave Elizabeth money to help care for both children as well as ‘a suit of clothes and rabbits’ but when he got married the payments stopped, leading to Elizabeth taking him to court. The judge ruled in her favour and ordered Titus to pay 2s a week for each child until they were sixteen. Elizabeth Box kept all four of her children with her and looked after both her grandparents until their deaths.

Carrington married Ralph Partridge and had numerous affairs. However, she remained devoted to Strachey (who was homosexual) and – unable to live

without him – committed suicide a few weeks after his death in 1932. Strachey was a well-known pacifist and his replies to those who thought that he should join up included – in reply to the question ‘Tell me, Mr. Strachey, what would you do if you saw a German soldier trying to violate your sister?’ ‘I would try to get between them’. And (although this is apocryphal) when a woman demanded he ‘fight for civilisation’, he replied ‘Madame, I am the civilisation they are fighting for’.

This link with the Bloomsbury set possibly encouraged other people associated with the group to holiday in the valley. Bertrand Russell (who was also a famous pacifist) is known to have visited and his third



wife, Peter (Patricia) Spence, remained in the valley for many years.

After the First World War Welcombe began to attract more artists (and pacifists) to its beautiful landscape, where they could live pleasantly and work with few distractions at low cost. If they had a little cash to spare they could build themselves a hut to live in or even a house.

Tudor Trevor (1920–2003), a recent graduate of the London Theatre Studio (where he studied alongside Peter Ustinov), decided to build himself a house on the side of the valley – Aller Park. William Oke was among those lending a hand. Photographs show them measuring out the foundations and digging out a quarry close by. A lime pit for the cement and trees from the next valley – Coombe had a sawmill – provided the other materials that they needed in order to start building.



Tudor's sister Meriol (1919–2000) shot footage and took photographs of Tudor and his friends from drama school. These included Sonia Rolt, with whom she later worked on cargo boats on the canals between London and Birmingham from 1943 to 1945.

Meriol Trevor eventually became a well-known Catholic novelist and was to write many novels in the house. She is probably best remembered for her two-volume biography of Cardinal Newman, published in 1962, which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

Tudor was a pacifist and set up a farming co-op during

the war alongside the writer Ronald Duncan.

Ronald Duncan (1914-1982) was born Ronald Frederick Henry Dunkelsbühler in Rhodesia. He went on holiday to Welcombe as a child and took a cottage there when he was 18 in the hope that he might be able to live in it one day. After graduating from Cambridge, Duncan wrote a pamphlet for the Peace Pledge Union in 1936. He also wrote the words for a Pacifist March composed by Benjamin Britten (another pacifist). He sent a copy of his pamphlet to Mahatma Gandhi, who invited him to visit his ashram in India.

He wrote about his time there:

This tiny settlement built of adobe had now become the political and spiritual centre of India. It consisted of a simple one-roomed house with verandas on two sides. We ate our meals on one and I kept my belongings on the other. There was no furniture or decorations of any kind. The walls were of mud or adobe: the floor was swept earth, trodden hard. This was Gandhi's workroom. There was a rug and spinning wheel on the floor and in front of this a soap box which served as a desk.

He describes long conversations with Gandhi. He was impressed by Gandhi's actions, such as the time when he saw men squatting in order to relieve themselves by their only well. Gandhi began to scavenge the excreta and bury it with his own hand...within a few minutes the villagers began to follow his example.

During the 1930s, Gandhi's call for Indian independence and his campaign of non-violent civil unrest attracted a great deal of hatred from the British establishment. Churchill described him as 'a seditious

Middle Temple lawyer, posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East'. Gandhi was to be imprisoned alongside other Congress Party leaders during the Second World War.

Gandhi became a model for others who combined spirituality with non-violent protest, such as Dr Martin Luther King. His insistence on communities becoming self-sufficient – symbolised by his Khadi movement – was also influential. He wanted every village to grow raw materials for yarn which they could spin into enough material (Khadi) to clothe the community. He wanted India to become independent from both foreign rule and foreign materials.

Gandhi was highly critical of Duncan's addiction to tobacco but his efforts to stop him smoking were to prove unsuccessful. Duncan was amazed that urgent matters of political moment, correspondence with the Viceroy, were all put aside to keep me provided with toffee made out of the palm sugar as a substitute for cigarettes.

Duncan's book *Journal of a Husbandman* describes his attempt to run a farming commune in the Marsland valley based on Gandhi's principles. He purchased West Mill in 1939 and lived there with a music student he had met in London, Rose-Marie Hansom. While helping to get the farming coop off the ground he started a publication called *The Townsman*. On his way back from Gandhi's ashram Duncan had called in on the poet Ezra Pound in Italy. Pound urged him to pursue the idea of producing a magazine and gave him notes of introduction to Constantin Brancusi, Jean Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky, and Fernand Léger and also encouraged him to print the

Note

4: Although Fascist sympathies were downplayed for obvious reasons after the war, much of the media was sympathetic. The Western Morning News advertised itself accompanied by swastikas and after the June 1934 'Night of the Long Knives', in which Hitler murdered more than 100 political opponents, the Daily Mail report began: 'Herr Adolf Hitler, the German Chancellor, has saved his country'. In the early 1930s, the Daily Mail's owner, Lord Rothermere, was so close to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists that his staff began to mimic their dress – wearing black shirts to work.



poetry of e.e.cummings in the first edition. Pound was impressed enough to remark : 'At any rate kid [Duncan] has got sense and is quick, not Brit. Suet'.

The Townsman ran from 1938-1945 despite Duncan's summary of the final figures for the first Townsman : 'Cost of producing No 1 = £59 Copies sold 35 (many more still out on sale or return) Loss on No 1 £53.

At the time there were a number of 'back to the land' initiatives and an interest in organic farming had begun to

surface. This created some very peculiar bedfellows; pacifists, far seeing environmentalists and followers of Gandhi were mingling with fascists.

Gerard Wallop, 9th Earl of Portsmouth (1898–1984) visited Duncan. He was a writer on agricultural topics but also part of the English Array, a group that wanted a return to a pre-industrial age that included feudalism, organic farming and rule by the aristocracy. They wanted to protect the purity of the English race and to control immigration – particularly when it came to Jewish people. (Women were not allowed to be members).

Wallop corresponded regularly with T.S. Eliot, who was also advocating a return to the land and believed that the arts and agriculture were bound up together. Eliot used his position as a publisher at Faber & Faber to build up a collection of writers on husbandry and the soil. Duncan was eventually to form a close friendship with Eliot, who published his poetry for many years. Some of Eliot's greatest poetry has an idealised vision of rural life at its core. In 'East Coker' (1940), part of Four Quartets, Eliot looks on approvingly at the English 'peasant':

*Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth...*

As war grew closer, some members of the English Array backtracked on their links with Fascism although others, such as Jorian Jenks – who had North Devon connections and later became one of the founders of the Soil



Association – were interned.

Turning away from metropolitan concerns and the attempt to move towards something more rooted in nature was a feature of much of the work produced in the valley during the 20th century. The shadow that accompanied this move can clearly be seen in the Nazi's blood and soil ideology. Linking nationalism, the land and the purity of your race is a lethal combination. Although Fascist allegiances were downplayed after the war there were many who were sympathetic. After the June 1934

'Night of the Long Knives', in which Hitler murdered more than 100 political opponents, the Daily Mail report began: 'Herr Adolf Hitler, the German Chancellor, has saved his country'.

Most people who had served in the First World War were desperate to avoid another conflict. Duncan was friendly with Henry Williamson, who lived in North Devon and was the author of *Tarka the Otter*. Williamson had witnessed the Christmas truce in the Ypres Salient as part of the London Rifle Brigade and was so appalled by the idea that Britain might go to war again that he failed to recognise Hitler's menace. He admired Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and attended the 1935 Nuremberg Congress. A factor in Williamson's vivid immersion in the natural world was his retreat from man's cruelty, but his Fascist sympathies stayed with him; as late as 1957 he was still describing Mosley as 'perhaps the most misunderstood man of my generation'. Williamson stated his own belief in these terms: 'That life is a Spirit; that the artist is but a medium of the Spirit of life; that many, if not all, of his "imaginative" thoughts and impulses towards magnanimity are as it were signals'. These mystical impulses and his electric prose were bound up with his relationship with nature but found a dangerous echo in the vicious racism of those who believed that racial purity and the link with the land were natural phenomena.

The commune had fallen apart by 1943. In 1944 Duncan was brought before a conscientious objection tribunal but was acquitted. He later wrote a book called *Tobacco Growing in England* in which he acknowledged



Briony Duncan
and Benjamin
Britten at Spekes
Mill.

that while his 'community experiment' had failed, the attempt to become self-sufficient in tobacco succeeded. He described this success in terms that would have been familiar to Gandhi – citing the benefit of ceasing to rely on imports so that the community could invest its capital locally. But Gandhi would hardly have approved of his choice of crop and Duncan remained a life-long smoker, dying of complications caused by lung cancer at the age of 68.

Ronald Duncan achieved a great deal of success after the war. In 1942-43 Britten had stayed at West Mill while completing his opera, *Peter Grimes*. Duncan subsequently wrote the libretto for *The Rape of Lucretia* in 1945-46 and Britten dedicated the one act opera *Noye's Fludde*

1958 to my young friend Roger Duncan (Ronald Duncan's son who was born in 1943). In 1952 the BBC broadcast a series called *Jan at the Blue Fox*. It was based on the 'Jan's Journal' columns written by Duncan for the *Evening Standard* which described the comic activities of local people – much to their annoyance.

Duncan wrote many successful plays, including the verse-drama *This Way to the Tomb* (1945) with its score by Benjamin Britten, *The Eagle Has Two Heads* (1946), an English-language adaptation of Cocteau's *L'Aigle à Deux*



Têtes, which at one point starred Marlon Brando and Tallulah Bankhead, Stratton (1950), *St Spiv* (1950), *Our Lady's Tumbler* (1951) – written for the Festival of Britain – *Don Juan* (1953), *The Death of Satan* (1954), later made into a television play, *Abelard and Heloise* (1960), *The Catalyst* (1961), also known as *Ménage à Trois*, which resulted in a public censorship furore, *O-B-A-F-G* (1964), an experimental play in one act for stereophonic sound, and the film script for *Girl on a Motorcycle* (1964), starring Marianne Faithful and directed by Jack Cardiff.

Duncan was also instrumental in forming the English Stage Company at London's Royal Court Theatre, which opened in 1956 – with a view to it putting on his plays. Ironically, one of its first productions – John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* – was a crucial factor in shifting the fashion away from the kind of work that Duncan was doing. Alan Sillitoe, author of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, wrote that Osborne's play didn't merely contribute to British theatre – 'he set off a landmine and blew most of it up' (including the religious verse drama that Ronald Duncan hoped would become more popular).

Duncan bred Arabian horses on his farm and was co-promoter, along with his friend Michael Ansell, of one of the UK's first long-distance equestrian competitions, the Golden Horseshoe. This covered 50 miles across Exmoor and finished at his farm. Probably his best known poem – 'The Horse' – is read out annually at the ending of the Horse of the Year Show.

The Horse

Where in this wide world can
man find nobility without pride,
friendship without envy or beauty
without vanity? Here, where
grace is laced with muscle, and
strength by gentleness confined.
He serves without servility; he has
fought without enmity. There is
nothing so powerful, nothing less
violent, there is nothing so quick,
nothing more patient.

England's past has been borne on
his back. All our history is his
industry; we are his heirs; he
our inheritance.

One of Ronald Duncan's most significant local achievements was to instigate the Taw & Torridge Festival Society, which ran from 1953 until 1958. He was dismissive of the local culture, saying 'One thing is certain: I cannot have been attracted to Devon because of any cultural vitality there'. However, he thought he could bring in great art using his personal connections. The 1953 Festival included the first ever performance of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in Gay's hometown of Barnstaple, concerts by Britten and his partner, the tenor Peter Pears, and Ronald Duncan's own play, *Don Juan*. There was an exhibition of paintings by Turner at the Burton Art Gallery, a Grand Ball, firework displays, boat processions and a cricket match. The Festival was funded by membership at three guineas a head and the Mayors of

Barnstaple and Bideford agreed to put a penny on the rates. Although it was a great success, with 10,000 tickets sold, it made a loss financially. In later years there were regular visits by the Ballet Rambert and 1955 saw the English premiere of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, performed by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. As fashions changed Duncan felt increasingly ignored – and he embarked upon an epic poem – titled 'Man' – which would cover science, history and politics over the centuries. Although parts were praised, the poem did not

achieve the recognition he had hoped for.

The valley became a nature reserve after being purchased by Christopher Cadbury (1908–1995) in the 1950s. Cadbury was a member of the chocolate dynasty, a Quaker and a pacifist. In the Second World War he drove an ambulance during the Birmingham Blitz. Traumatized by the experience and needing to recuperate he retreated to the valley where he had holidayed as a child – staying at Tall Trees. He told Gary Pilkington – the warden who still lives on the reserve and worked there

Small, pearl
bordered fritillary
by Ross
Hoddinott.



for over 30 years – that he decided that when the war ended he would set up havens where wildlife was protected and where the healing power of nature could be preserved.

Cadbury said that his first job was going up and down the country's railways restocking the family firm's chocolate machines that adorned most station platforms in those days. As he travelled he began to buy up parcels of land along his route. Eventually he came back down to Marsland and over the course of a hectic weekend visited 13 landowners in turn and by Sunday evening was in possession of most of the valley. The present day site is pieced together from land purchased from 32 owners – and including bequests from people including Ed Oke and Frank Morton – to form the 500-acre Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC) Marsland and Welcombe Reserve. One of Gary Pilkington's first jobs when he began in 1988 was to sort out the deeds to the valley. While Cadbury believed that he had bought the land in the 1950s, some landowners had gone on to sell it twice – even three times – over.

In the 1950s the concept of managing the land so that a variety of species could thrive had not really been formulated. It was thought best just to stop mankind's activities and allow nature to take its course – so the trees began to take over. Most of the trees in the valley are under 50 years old, with a few obvious notable exceptions such as the great oak by the stream. However, Cadbury was persuaded that some coppicing would pierce the canopy and allow a greater variety of wildlife to inhabit the valley – offering particular encouragement to the

butterflies. A warden was appointed and began to create the mosaic of different habitats that we see today.

Some of man's activities are helpful to wildlife. Coppicing – cutting a tree down to the stump to allow a plethora of thinner branches to spring forth – is particularly beneficial. Coppicing hazel used to produce handles for tools, from brooms to spades. Now coppicing hazel allows light to penetrate through to the forest floor and – when the ground is cleared – bugle and dog violets are sown. Two rare British butterflies flourish here now – the small pearl bordered and the pearl bordered fritillary, whose caterpillars feed on dog violets and who drink the nectar of the bugle. Dormice also benefit from the spaces created and the nuts that hazel produces.

34 species of butterfly have been recorded at Marsland. These include the white letter and the purple hairstreak. The latter rely on the oak tree – one of 326 species that are only found on the oak trees which are common throughout the valley.

Otters have always flourished in the valley. It is more likely that the brownies – the fairy folk seen by Rev. Hawker along the river bank – were in fact otters. The otters eat the brown trout but occasionally stray onto the beach to pick up shellfish and hunt among the rock pools. Gary Pilkington once saw an otter eating a crab over a mile upstream in the forest. Their presence and that of the dipper – a bird that can swim underwater – are testament to the purity of the water. Eels and elvers were once common but after a pollution incident many years ago they have not returned.

The sea mist means that the valley floor is kept damp

James Ravilious
oak tree (after
Mondrian)
Marsland Devon
1997.



Mondrian, Tree.
(Courtesy of
Kunstmuseum Den
Haag – bequest
Salomon B.
Slijper)

and can support a wide variety of ferns and lichen – including the rare golden hair lichen. The valley has a good selection of the flora and fauna of the British Isles – unfortunately including a healthy population of ticks – the carriers of Lyme disease. The reserve is now owned by the Devon and Cornwall Wildlife Trusts after it was donated by Christopher Cadbury in 1964. He was President of the Royal Society for Nature Conservation 1962-88.

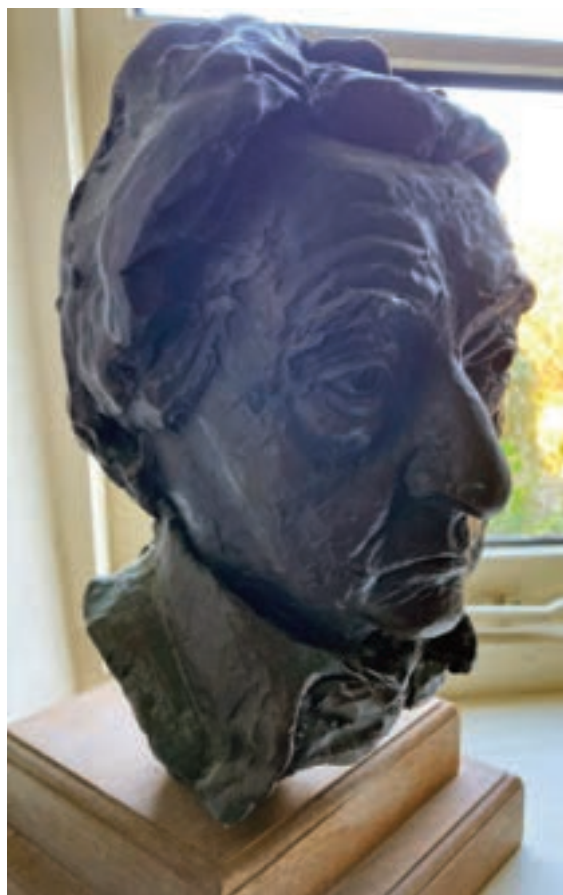


One of the best known photographs by James Ravilious is of a great oak tree that hugs the bank of the River Marsland. It has various names including the Medusa Tree – after the gorgon which had snakes instead of hair growing out of her head. Local children, on the other hand, used to refer to it as the ‘Curly Wurly Tree’, persuading those younger and more innocent than themselves that if they licked the bark it would taste like a Curly Wurly.

Ravilious named the photograph *Oak Tree (after Mondrian)*, Marsland, Devon, 1997. He is referencing a series of tree paintings in which the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian distilled the rhythm of the branches over a series of paintings until they moved from figuration into pure abstraction.

Local people say that when they were children, their parents told them that Prince Charles had a photograph of the Curly Wurly Tree hanging in his loo. Perhaps it was this one, but the tree has proved inspirational to many – including Rosemarie Duncan and Andrew Lawson – who married Duncan’s daughter Briony, a well-known sculptor.

Andrew Lawson is a painter and one of the world’s leading garden photographers. Awarded the Royal Horticultural Society’s gold medal for photography and twice winner of the Garden Media Guild’s Photographer of the Year award, he has illustrated books by many garden writers, including Penelope Hobhouse, Rosemary Verey and King Charles III. The paintings – many of which are based on Marsland – exist in a symbiotic relationship with his photography. This approach where



Briony Lawson’s
portrait of her
father – Ronald
Duncan .bust-of-
Ronald-Duncan

one discipline informs another extends to his love of gardening. He wrote that *"I find familiarity with the language of painting is a useful background from which to view gardens. It does not seem to require a great quantum leap for the eye to adjust from a rectangle of pigment and forms arranged within a frame to coloured flowers and leaf shapes distributed upon the broader*



canvas of the garden.

I find that I now get the same thrill of pleasure from a good garden as I have always got from paintings I admire. This pleasure is a cocktail of sensory delights, spiced with admiration for the skills of the artist. I confess that I have been moved to tears in admiration for gardens just as I have so many times in front of paintings"

For many years Andrew and Briony Lawson have tended the land at the end of the valley making adjustments that not only encourage the diversity of wildlife but enhance the visual impact of the natural forms and flora.

The composition, colour and observation that inform the one carries on into the other – and vice versa.

Briony Lawson was born during the war and family

legend has it that as a newborn baby, she was carried back to Marsland from maternity hospital on an Arab horse. She went to Bideford Art School before studying sculpture at City & Guilds Art School in London. The organic forms that characterise her work reference the landscape of Marsland.

They both hosted a series of arts festivals at West Mill inspired by the festivals that Ronald Duncan organised in the 1950s – and ran workshops. They also hosted a number of artists who produced work in the valley – one of whom was Nichollas Hamper who was a frequent visitor in the earlier part of his career. He had just left the Royal College of Art and was a prize winner at the John Moores exhibition of 1991.

E.W.F. Tomlin (1913–1988) came to Tall Trees in Marsland during the '60s. He got Fred May and Arthur Bryant to build a library onto the side of the house that would later become the studio of Gillian Ayres. He



worked for the British Council in Turkey, Japan and France and was professor of English and Philosophy at the University of Nice. Tomlin knew Henri Matisse's daughter, who told him that – having been arrested during the Occupation – she was subjected to appalling treatment and indignity, culminating in being placed in an ice bath. As she was being lifted into the bath, her smock fell open and exposed her breasts. She remembered clearly, but with a kind of stupefaction, that one of the young men who had been 'working her over', and who was an apparently decent and educated person, quietly and almost reverently drew her clothes together, before submitting her to this final ordeal.

Gillian Ayres CBE RA (1930 –2018), who later moved into Tall Trees with fellow-artist Henry Mundy, had a deep reverence for the paintings of Matisse and was one of Britain's greatest abstract painters. She rose to prominence in what was, at the time, a field dominated by male artists. In the ground-breaking 'Situation show' in 1960 – a turning point for British abstraction – Bridget Riley and Gillian Ayres were the only two women selected (out of 20 artists). However, in the '90s major exhibitions brought her wide recognition, particularly a touring exhibition shown at the British Council's Seventh Triennale in India (1991-92) and her retrospective at the Royal Academy (1997). Although Ayres disliked being defined by her gender, she was known to be helpful and encouraging towards other women artists. She was appointed head of painting at Winchester School of Art in 1978, making her the first woman to hold such a



position in the UK.

Ayres was born in London in 1930 and married the painter Henry Mundy when she was 21. They had two sons, Jimmy and Sam, were divorced some 30 years later but after a while began living together again. She was very insistent – when asked if they ever showed together – that they were not a team. They moved into Marsland Valley in 1987. Ayres converted the library into her studio and began to create large paintings that required a special slit to be carved into the wall as they were much too big to get out through a normal-sized doorway. She consistently forged her own path talking about beauty and spirituality at a time when such language was regarded as unfashionable.

Ayres was known for her use of strong colour – preferring intensity to tone. This meant that she could



Nicholas Hamper painting in Ronald Duncan's Hut

Mole Cottage:
Watercolour –
Nicholas Hamper



look at Bonnard painting a bright orange strip round a doorway (for instance) and see it as an equivalent for the impact of a black shadow. The insistence on the value of the visceral impact of colour enabled her to reach towards something lasting. Ironically enough, given her suspicion

of figuration, she probably came closer to channelling Van Gogh and Gauguin's depiction of a close relationship with Nature than Dora Carrington who, in the end, was more interested in describing Mrs Box's personality. Ayres normally wouldn't give titles to paintings that had such a

direct link to place, so it is strangely appropriate that – having broken this habit of a lifetime and called a painting Marsland – it was wrongly transcribed as Marshland, thus escaping the direct reference.

Henry Mundy (1919–2019) won the bi-annual John Moores painting prize in 1961. Other winners at that period included Patrick Heron (1959), Roger Hilton (1963) and David Hockney (1967). However, Mundy later burnt almost all of his work from that time. He received a scholarship to go to Birkenhead Art School at the age of 13 and studied graphics. By the time he was 17 he had begun to earn good money and was commissioned by the local authority to produce decorations for the coronation of 1936. Luckily there were two coronations that year so he was able to earn enough to remain unemployed for a while – until his father turned him out of bed telling him that he had to find a job or move out. Harry's father was a foreman at Lever brothers and later worked alongside the father of Paul O'Grady (aka Lily Savage).

When the war came, Mundy initially refused to fight and was hauled up before the court. He said that in wars the upper classes gave the orders while the lower classes died. He also got into trouble by claiming that a ship had left Liverpool docks filled with munitions for Germany after war had been declared because Lord Halifax would have lost money on the order. He would have gone to prison but his mother, who was being refused service at the local shops, begged him to join up and eventually he relented.



Mundy served in Burma and ended up staying overseas for six years. Alongside his serious work, his graphic skills enabled him to undertake a variety of often surprising tasks including employment as the cartoonist for the Farmers Weekly. After the war he moved to London and studied at Camberwell, where he met Gillian Ayres. He taught at Corsham (1946–50) and St Martins (1966–82). Although it is possible to make associations from his paintings – seeing shapes from Egyptian art or Byzantine echoes in his juxtaposition of gold against flat colour, he had a rigorous commitment to abstraction and exploring its formal possibilities. He continued to work until shortly before his death at the age of 100. As his parents' health declined, their son – Sam Mundy, an artist in his own right – moved in to take care of them. Sam



studied at Goldsmiths alongside much-heralded Young British Artists (YBAs) such as Damien Hirst but pursued his own trajectory after further study at the National Academy of Art in Sofia.

Will Oke's son Ed continued in the same cottage that he had always lived in. After his mother died in 1960 he lived there alone until his death in 2009. Petra Freeman was brought up in Gooseham and lived in the cottage across the road. Her parents, Peter and Peggy, had four daughters. They were called Pearl, Penny, Pam and Petra but there was a big age gap between Petra and her sisters so, as the youngest, she ended up spending a lot of time



on her own. She eventually became an artist and made animated films, some of which reference her upbringing in the valley. She went to the Royal College of Art and her animations have been shown on Channel 4 and many film festivals including the Hiroshima Film Festival where she met her husband, the film maker Tim Rolt. He had spent his holidays at West Mill. His mother had lived in Welcombe for a while and was friendly with the Trevors. Petra Freeman's film *Tad's Nest* has a particular relationship with Ed Oke.

Petra Freeman recalls:

My parents used to holiday down at West Mill, down near Marsland beach, and they fell in love with the area, saw there

was a cottage that at the time, was only £500 pounds, and they thought 'This is it. We're going to change our life, and move to Gooseham'. And Ed was living up the road from this little cottage, and he had all these skills that meant that my dad could get his help with plastering, and he knew about cob, which the cottage was made of. And so from the word go - I was a toddler, and Ed was there as my babysitter the whole time, which meant my parents could just go out, because Ed was always there. Ed was just always there.

I loved Ed. He quite liked it because we had an old TV set during this time - all this building work - and I'd be watching cartoons on TV, and I could see that he would be looking over his shoulder, watching all this stuff. And he was very constant. He had a very gentle and tranquil manner, and he always had a little fag on the go, just on his lip. He smoked roll ups. And from the day that I can very first remember, until he died, he

always had the same clothes. He wore the same cap, dungarees, Mac, gaiters, I suspect he had his long johns on. He only ever used to take his cap off on Christmas Day, because he used to come around to our house for Christmas. And he had a fine head of hair which never seemed to go grey. So my whole life, he looked exactly the same with his sandy pale brown hair and his little round glasses, and he was very, very thin. And because I felt so familiar with him, I used to be able to go up to his house. I wanted to go to art school and he was always interested in any sort of project I wanted to do. I feel that he was very interested in art in his own way, and he became, later in his life, very interested in photography. He didn't drive, so he used to bother all the neighbours to take things into Boots or the chemists, or it was Walkers, I think, in Kilkhampton that used to develop film. So he'd take these very particular shots of tools like his old spade or a brush against a white wall, looking for contrast. They were

Story-board. Petra
Freeman and Ed
Oke.





actually quite beautiful things. And then he would discuss these with me, or my Dad, whoever was around, in great detail. He was quite an obsessional about these photographs. I expect they exist. Still exist somewhere.

Ed's house was somewhere that I felt particularly comfortable. It was probably untouched since it was very first built. It had no mod cons. He used to have a little sort of gas burner stove in the room that you walked into, and he was always making clotted cream on that, heating up milk. It was a smell of milk and potatoes in there. And then in the back room, his Auntie Sophie had a little shop so children of Gooseham could go around there and buy sweets. And they used to sell things like baked beans in an emergency. And I can remember lots of fly papers, and those two sort of brown and white dogs on the mantelpiece, and Ed's long johns would be hanging up in there. And there'd always be a kind of coal fire burning. There was a very constant climate within his house. Ed was always there, and there wasn't a flush toilet. So you'd be aware when Ed was going to cross the road to go to the loo. He had a little tin shed with a drop toilet, and you'd hear him sort of humming and muttering in the garden. His garden was very beautifully kept. I used to see him sometimes going up to Shop on his bicycle with his belt on round his Mac, even in the summer, same temperature, same clothes, and he had this lovely smile and his blue eyes. He was like part of the landscape, part of my life. He was always there. He was always at our house. And one of the things was, we got a telephone after a few years, and he used to have to come down and use the telephone to talk about his photographs or talk about things he wanted to order from a catalogue. I miss Ed a lot. For me, he still lives on in Gooseham. I can't quite get my head around the fact that he isn't there anymore. He made me feel

very secure. I think he knew that. I think we were friends.

The film Tad's Nest is based on his mythology - when the Tads come up the river, because he was always mentioning these things. He would just be muttering away. I asked him and he just told me where the nest was. I think I had to ask somebody what the Tads were and gathered it was eels and elvers. You can't go down there anymore because it's a private land and there are waterworks.

Tudor Trevor (who built Aller Park) and his wife Jean had two children, Tom and David. Tom is a curator and writer, currently an Associate Professor at the University of Exeter who has previously been the director of the Arnolfini in Bristol, Spacex in Exeter, The Atlantic Project in Plymouth and the 4th Dojima River Biennale in Osaka as well as curating 100s of shows both here and abroad. David Trevor (1958-2023), despite his peripatetic existence, became enmeshed in the history of the valley, living in caravans, some inhabitable some not. He made pots, wrote stories and his hobbies included sitting in St Nectan's well waving at children in cars. He had noticed that children were more likely to look into the well than their parents and liked to imagine the dialogue that would ensue when the children told their parents that there was someone in the well. His ashes are buried in Welcombe churchyard.

This exhibition is one glass of water taken from a river which contains a million stories.

If you listen you can hear them but its sometimes difficult to undertand what the river is saying.

I think I can hear it telling me Frank was the getaway driver for the Krays.

No he came down to get away from the Krays. Nick was making a giant phallus out of clay down by the river bank when the princess of Sweden came round the corner. She admired his phallus and, if it wasn't for the presence of multiple bodyguards and the brevity of their conversation, Nick would have become the King of Sweden. Someone is tying threads across the paths to see if anyone is visiting their neighbours house in the night. The women are laughing at the men who say that Gordon used to seduce women by asking them to teach him how to read. They say the men don't understand how beautiful and handsome he was and how it was the other way round. DH Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Mike Figgis put a photo of Marsland into his film Internal Affairs, David Trevor, Ted Hughes and the green radiance of the glow worms and every evening the gulls fly down the valley to spend the night on Gull Rock. When did they start doing that and when will the Elvers return? Building shrines in the forest, the Mongolians are weeping because they've never seen the vastness of the grey movement of the ocean, Emmeline Emmeline Emmeline,

Peter Stiles, Marsland, 2025

David Trevor, by
Peter Stiles

Thanks to

Tom and Zoe Trevor, David and Joy Savage, Karina, Susie, Briony and Andrew Lawson, Robin Ravilious, Zillah Myers, LSO Live, Sam Mundy, Caroline Walter, Victoria Partridge, Ross Hoddinott, Olivia Desborough, Nicole Hinkin, Alison Mills, Gary Pilkington, Madeline Rolt, Tim Rolt, Zillah Myers, Nichollas Hamper, Ronald Duncan Estate, Petra Freeman, Mark Haworth Booth and Val Brooks.

Further reading

The Life & Letters of R. S. Hawker by Charles Edward Byles

Newman's Journey by Meriol Trevor

Collected Poems by Ronald Duncan

Tall Trees of Marsland: Reflections on Life and Time by E. W. F. Tomlin

Gillian Ayres by Mel Gooding

Strawberry Water to Marsland Mouth by Peter Keene

Peter Stiles is an artist who moved to Welcombe in 1980 after he left the Slade Visit www.peterstiles.co.uk for further information. Previous historical projects include Vivarium – a study of George Eliot and Philip Gosse, The Samuel Taylor Coleridge Festival and a celebration of Keble-Martin's "Concise British Flora in Colour"

Ross Hoddinott is a local photographer who has been taking pictures of Marsland Valley for many years. He is a multiple award winner in Wildlife Photographer of the Year, British Wildlife Photography Awards – including overall winner in 2009 – International Garden Photographer of the Year and Take A View – Landscape Photographer of the Year. Further examples of his work can be found at www.rosshoddinott.co.uk.

Further examples of work by Andrew and Briony Lawson can be found within the publication *Shared Visions Shared Lives*.