

A bi-monthly newsletter for the Friends of the Polperro Arts Foundation

Polperro's Art History - post-war visitors and residents

More notes from David Tovey's book, Polperro – Cornwall's Forgotten Art Centre (2021)

The final sections of David's two-volume work bring us well up to date with Polperro's art history, and with the history of the village more generally. Chapter 8 is notable as much for its detailed description of the decline of the fishing industry and final transition to a primarily tourism-based economy, as for its account of visiting artists. David describes the changing markets for fish and the steadily reduced numbers of fishing boats with named references to a number of vessels which are long-gone but well within living memory, together with their owners and members of their crews. Some, such as the Patsy Anne with its distinctive yellow hull, featured in many paintings from the 1950s and 1960s.

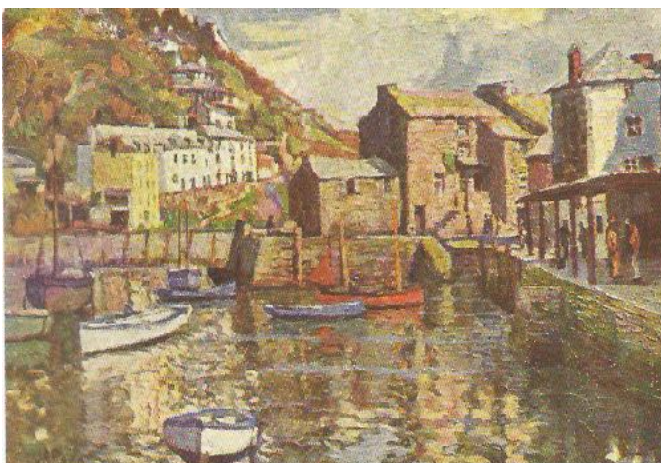
Visiting artists of that period often worked with primarily commercial interests in mind and produced items designed mainly for reproduction and sale such as railway posters, postcards, paintings sold as prints and flyers for local attractions. Alice Butler, Vernon Ward and John Park all provide examples.

Other visitors whom David highlights included Gyrth Russell who toured Cornwall in a gypsy caravan; the brothers George and Kenneth Steel; John Lewis Stant who based himself in St Ives and visited



Alice Butler The Lucky Pisky Well

Other visitors whom David highlights included Gyrth Russell who toured Cornwall in a gypsy caravan; the brothers George and Kenneth Steel; John Lewis Stant who based himself in St Ives and visited Polperro occasionally; Philip Collingwood Priestley, who originally trained as a cartoonist and 'Advertising Artist'; and the prolific James Lawrence Isherwood who was from Wigan and was sometimes known as the heir to LS Lowry. His view of the house on the props is especially striking though in this case not typically Lowry-esque (see the next page).



John Park, Polperro Harbour

Chapter 9 presents a number of long-term resident artists who formed what could be considered the core of a genuine artists colony for the first time in the village. After a short-lived attempt prior to the second world war,

regular exhibitions were held in the Foresters Hall above the inner harbour from 1949 and into the 1950s, supported by resident amateurs as well as by the more accomplished professionals.

The main focus of this chapter is on a selected few residents, some of whom we have met in earlier chapters: Frederick Roberts Johnson, Frederick and Anyon Cook, Stuart Armfield and Jack Merriott. David presents each of these artists as having led full, varied and in some cases quite complex lives.



Vernon Ward, Misty Morning, Polperro



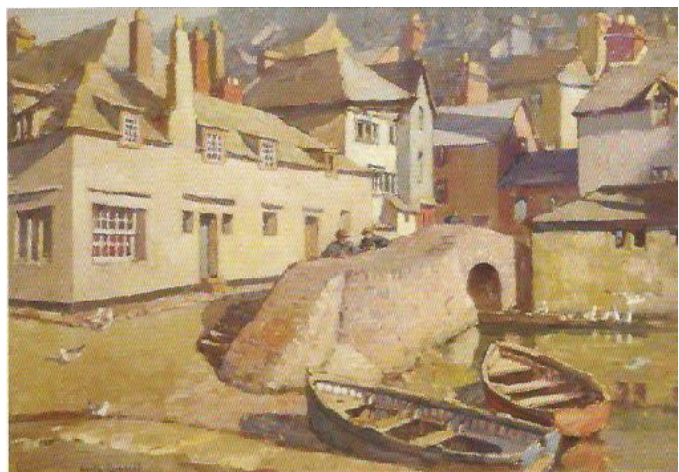
James Isherwood, House on the Props

attempted to capture the 'ever changing scene in the harbour'.

Freddie's wife Anyon was best known as a portraitist who painted royalty and leading figures in the church as well as local people. Among her subjects was the Polperro-based novelist Walter Greenwood, whom David describes at some length. Anyon Cook lived in Polperro until her death in 2002.

Johnson lived in Polperro for many years and produced an extensive and widely varied body of work. And yet except for his commercial pieces for Punch and other magazines, very little of his work was either exhibited or sold to the public until after his death. David was able to review much of Johnson's art only through his daughters and he presents this body of work in five quite different categories, each with several examples: still life; street scenes; fishing and harbour scenes; favourite vistas; and venerated female figures. Even within these categories the styles vary markedly as the tasters shown on the following page demonstrate.

Freddie Cook (1907-1982) lived and painted in Polperro from the time of his arrival in 1947 until his death. His name can still be seen on the door of his cottage and studio next to the Roman Bridge beside the inner harbour, where he swam regularly. Again, David includes a number of works which show the very different styles with which Cook



Gyrrh Russel, Polperro

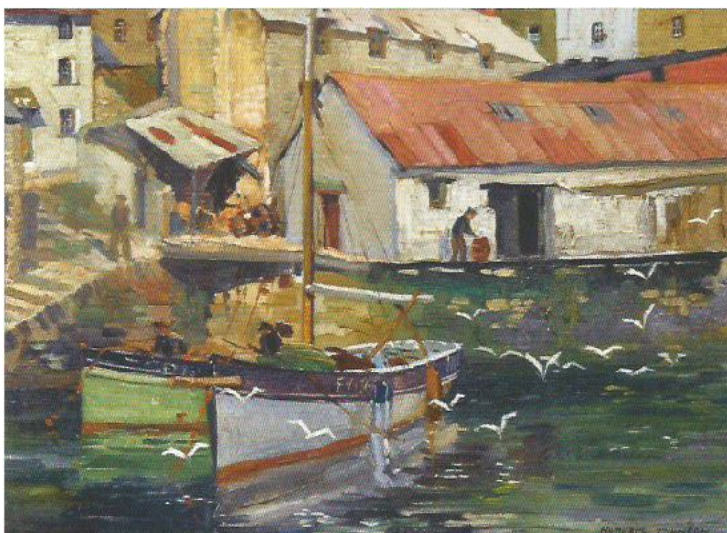
Stuart Armfield (1916-1999) lived in Tycara overlooking The Warren and the outer harbour for more than 30 years from the 1940s to the 1970s, and David reproduces some of the views that he painted from his window. Summarising Armfield's full, varied life is especially challenging. He was trained in architecture and design and his work in the film industry led to extensive travel around Britain and far beyond. As an artist he specialised in the use of egg tempura, a demanding medium requiring particular skills which David describes. He painted many still life images which often incorporated profound symbolism open to varying interpretations. Armfield was well-known and



Frederick Cook, The Outer Harbour, Polperro

respected among the great and the good of Cornish society, many of whose portraits he painted. He often exhibited with the East Cornwall Society of Arts as well as in several other galleries.

Jack Merriott (1901-68) settled in Polperro in 1952 and lived in Island House above the outer quay until 1966. Merriott was multi-talented, and worked both as a commercial and as a 'fine' artist, striving to capture what he described as Polperro's primitive charm. He started work as a shipping clerk and his artistic talent only emerged in the 1940s. He was best known nationally as a poster artist and the National Railway Museum holds over 90 of



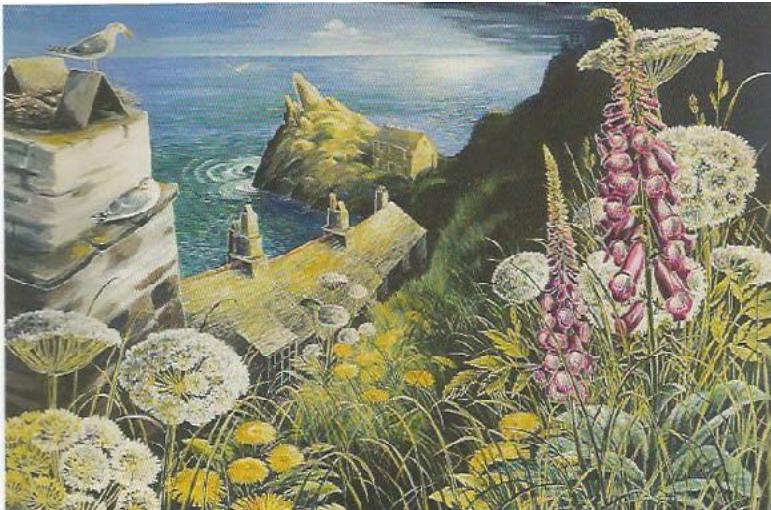
Roberts Johnson, Polperro-FY156 and FY251 by The Slipway

his posters. Merriott also undertook a number of commissions for national newspapers and magazines, he illustrated books and was widely exhibited and well known in British art circles. But for all of his work in the wider world, David considers that Merriott's many depictions of Polperro harbour show him at his best.

The industrious Merriott worked not only at painting but he also promoted art as both a pastime and as a profession. He designed a correspondence course for water colour work, produced instructional films and led painting holidays in Britain and abroad.



Roberts Johnson, Polperro-Inner Quay from The Warren



Stuart Armfield, Polperro in June

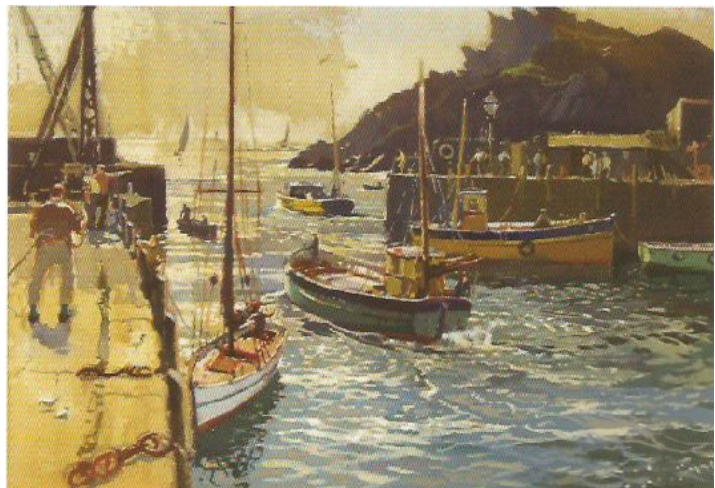
And he wrote well-crafted, poetic descriptions of the scenes that he painted.

To highlight Merriott's diligent, energetic approach to his work David includes several illustrations that were prepared for an article on "The Fisherfolk of Cornwall" by Cyril P Bunn, for which Merriott joined the author on an extended fishing trip and spent hours absorbing the scene as the fishermen sorted out their nets and catches after their return. An article that he wrote in 1963 describes

an imaginary sketching and painting tour of England.

Sadly Merriott met an untimely end as a result of a car crash in 1968. He was one of the most successful of Polperro's artists, widely known during his lifetime, and is now probably best remembered within the flourishing market for railway posters.

Of the other artists who were active during this period, Tom Morton's sometimes distinctive work is worthy of an honourable mention. A few of his works still survive on the walls of our village hall. Morton may also be a little less fondly remembered for a somewhat turbulent life within the community which David recounts.



Jack Merriott, Polperro



Tom Morton, View towards the House on the Props

In a final chapter entitled 'Afterword' David mentions a number of artists who appeared during the 1960s and 1970. The book's last sentence bears repeating especially for its relevance to our friends in the East Cornwall Society of Artists, established in the Ebenezer gallery since 1972, and to our own Polperro Arts Foundation, now in the village hall:

"There are, of course, still artists thriving in Polperro, catering for the tastes of today's visitors, and the work of artists, such as Sue Lord ([former] head of Art and Design at Looe Community School), who has been painting in the village for the last 25 years, will live on."

Special exhibition



After his exhibition in the Falmouth Art Gallery earlier this year, David Tovey's personal collection of historic Polperro art has been moved to the Methodist Chapel where some of the larger pieces will be on permanent display within the main body of the Chapel while others will be stored and made available for occasional exhibitions.

The first of those exhibitions will take place from **15th October to 6th November** this year. Entitled 'Polperro - Cornwall's Lost Art Centre', the exhibition will show 40 works from the 19th and 20th centuries by both resident and visiting artists.

David Tovey's two-volume, 600-page work can be purchased at the exhibition, from his website <www.stivesart.info/art-in-polperro>, at the Post Office and in our PAF gallery at the village hall

Barbara Ellis

It is with great sadness that we have to report the recent death of one of our longest-standing members, Barbara Ellis. Barbara was an active member of the Foundation for many years and her work in an unusual variety of styles was widely appreciated. She created striking seascapes and historic views of Polperro, but was perhaps best known for her quirky images of pets and wildlife. Barbara leaves a son and daughter, and will be sadly missed.



About the Foundation

The Foundation was set up in 2001 to support and promote local established and aspiring artists and to increase awareness of locally-produced art and the long history of art in Polperro. After 19 years at the Chapel Rock gallery in Foresters Hall overlooking the inner harbour, in 2020 the PAF moved to our present site in the Polperro Village Hall next door to the Crumplehorn Inn. Any surplus from sales of our work is used to support supplementary art-related activities in the Polperro School.

Our Team

Currently we have eight exhibiting members all of whom live and work locally: **Rachel Brown** embroiderer; **Sandy Horton**, glass; **Paul Lightfoot**, photographer, writer, newsletter editor; **Sue Lord**, artist; **Charles Summers**, artist and fan-maker; **Babs Taylor**, artist; **Tracy Watts**, graphic designer and illustrator; and **Lisa Woollett**, author and photographer. **Jennie Hale** and **Steve Morton** both work in ceramics and are our guest artists. **Marian Joyce** kindly volunteers for us.

Do let us know if you would like to join us as an artist or volunteer.

Contact us

The gallery in the Polperro Village Hall is open daily from 11am until 5pm. We are always available by email at <polperroarts@gmail.com> or through our website: <www.polperroarts.org>