

## Walter Langley

The connections between Birmingham and the county of Cornwall are remarkably strong for places that can hardly be called next-door neighbours. Take any street in the Duchy and you'll find a nest of retired Brummies.

But it's not simply that they get our pensioners and we get their seagulls. Once upon a time Cornwall and Birmingham were partners in the Industrial Revolution. Boulton & Watt steam engines went west to pump out the Cornish mines, which in turn delivered up their copper and tin for use in the West Midlands. William Murdoch, for one, knew the lanes around Redruth as well as he knew the ones in Handsworth.

If you're heading for Cornwall on holiday this summer, there's another strong connection to explore. It's highlighted in an exhibition currently running at the excellent Penlee Art Gallery (excellent for its food and bookshop and gardens as well as its art) in Penzance.

The Penlee exhibition showcases the work of the Birmingham school of artists who formed an art colony at Newlyn in the late 19th Century. The headline act is undoubtedly Walter Langley, but he is ably supported by Edwin Harris, William Wainwright, William Banks Fortescue and a good half dozen others. For some, like Langley, the move to Cornwall was permanent; for others it was a temporary sojourn.

Like St Ives, which also assembled an art colony, the clear strong light at Newlyn was a magnet for artists, who wished to paint en plein air, as the current fad for open-air painting was called. They soon discovered, the Cornish weather being what it was, that it was useful to rent a studio with a roof as well.

There was, I think, one major difference between the two schools. While St Ives was breathtakingly picturesque, and the artists there assembled found their work transformed by the light, the sea and the landscape, Newlyn was much more of a working port. Take away the obvious qualities of sky and sea, beloved of holidaymakers today, life at Newlyn (for those who actually lived there) could be nasty, brutish and short. To engage with Newlyn was to understand the toll taken by the sea.

The work of Walter Langley perhaps shows this best of all.

Born in a back-to-back in Irving Street in 1852, Langley attended the Unitarian mission school in Hurst Street, where his talent for drawing won him a place at the Birmingham School of Design. Langley attended evening classes at the school, while working in the day as an apprentice to a lithographer - August Heinrich Biermann - in Newhall Street.

Although Langley was to abandon lithography for painting, that skill in drawing was more than a useful preparation for his art. A black-and-white charcoal sketch (a finished work in its own right) preceded almost all of his paintings.

Langley was exhibiting watercolours (always his strongest suit) at the RBSA by the early 1870s, before forming the Birmingham Art Circle with a group of fellow artist in 1879. It was in the company of a fellow member - Henry Pope - that he first journeyed down to Cornwall in 1880.

It was only in 1887 that Langley, by then married and with children, made the move to Newlyn a permanent one, and he remained there until his death in 1922.

Walter Langley's response to Newlyn was not what one might have expected in art school. It was less to the sea and the sky, and more to the fishing community itself, eking out a precarious living in the most unforgiving of elements. The overwhelming emotion of the art that Newlyn generated through Langley's brush was the sense of loss.

Here again, Langley chose the most unexpected of ways to convey it. Not the storm-tossed waves and fishing-boat bobbing sea, but the quiet cottages on shore. The fishermen themselves are mostly absent; Langley focuses on their wives and widows, mothers and orphans, waiting (often in vain) for the fleet to return.

We see the ocean not through the eyes of an artist, but through the eyes of its refugees.

One painting, in particular, called "Charity for Short" (the full title is a couplet culled from Pope's *Essay on Man*) and painted in 1897, captures the mood perfectly. In a little stone cottage a mother and daughter are watching silently as a young boy - barefooted and threadbare - is eating from a bowl by the fire. We imagine him to be an orphan or a beggar. That, at least, is how the great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, interpreted the picture in his book *What is Art?* Langley is one of very few artists, commented Tolstoy, who fully understands the true function of art.

The curiosity of all this is that Walter Langley might have found (indeed, probably witnessed) all of these themes - loss, poverty, widowhood - around the corner from where he was raised in the middle of Birmingham. He did not need to go 300 miles to paint them.

And here we come to a question of simple economics. While the Midland industrialists who commissioned and bought from Langley were uncomfortable seeing the poverty on their doorstep,

and even less likely to want it hanging on their walls, they were more than happy to see it displaced to the distant Cornish coast.  
Ultimately the Birmingham artist still had to be a businessman as well.