

Cornish
CENTENARY 2019


THE BOWES
— MUSEUM —

Norman Cornish: The Definitive Collection
16 November 2019 to 23 February 2020

The first major retrospective of the work of Norman Cornish



The Bowes Museum is honoured to be holding the first major retrospective by one of the most loved artists from the North East of England in the 20th Century; **Norman Cornish: The Definitive Collection**, opening almost 100 years to the day after the artists birth in Spennymoor.

Visitors to the Barnard Castle based Museum will be able to see more than 60 works including, pastels, charcoals and oil paintings from both public and private collections, some of which are previously unseen.

Norman Cornish's work has an enduring popularity and leaves a wonderful legacy - an immediate and accessible social documentary of a bygone era. There can be few, if any, who have contributed more to the area's artistic and cultural identity.

Aged 14, he was obliged to begin life as a miner – a career which was to span four decades. As his father and grandfather had both been miners before him, there was an inevitability Cornish would follow in their footsteps.

On his first day at the colliery, he recalled: “The men climbed the steep steps of the gantry; their swaying oil lamps looked like fireflies. Then I saw a mass of railings, steps, girders and wires. I thought it looked like a great, steel spider’s web.”

Around that time, his artistic ability found fulfilment when he joined the Sketching Club at the Spennymoor Settlement. The Warden, Bill Farrell, advised the young boy to “paint what you know”. His inspiration did come from the world he knew; his own ‘slice of life’.

His honest depictions of miners reflect the harsh working environment – the claustrophobic space of the seams where men and pit ponies toiled. He dubbed them “industrial gladiators”.

A small town in the Durham Coalfield may seem an unlikely source of inspiration. But for the artist, this was not a constraint, his work reflects the core features of mining communities: the pit, the pub and the sociability of street life; with its chip van horse-drawn carts, miners at leisure, women in wrap-around pinnies gossiping and children playing.

Norman Cornish painted many versions of the pit road. It was a road he walked for some 30 years or more, so naturally it became a significant part of his life. With telegraph poles looming like crucifixes, characters struggle along reminiscent of a kind of Calvary scene. To watch the man ahead plodding resignedly was a subject he felt demanded to be drawn again and again.

He was a magnificent chronicler of everyday life, recording the social environment and industrial landscape in which he lived and worked; painting the community he knew with integrity. The streets, people and landscape that surrounded him were a constant source of inspiration. His drawings demonstrate his skill in capturing not just a likeness but a complete attitude.

“I made drawings of pub interiors in days past because I was fascinated by the men standing at the bar, drinking and talking or sitting playing dominoes. I was attracted by the wonderful shapes they made in their various attitudes.” Norman Cornish

Alongside these mining community chronicles, the retrospective will include some of his commissions which ranged from portraits and industrial scenes to a visit to Paris for Tyne Tees Television where he was encouraged by the producer to critically appraise the art of the French capital through the eyes of the Northern artist. Some of his industrial commissions included the Port of Tyne Authority’s request for him to capture in oils their “Roll-on, Roll-off” facility at North Shields and The River Pageant, commemorating 900 years of Newcastle’s history, as well as British Oxygen’s commission to depict industrial scenes at its Birtley site near Gateshead. The first two of these will be seen by the public for the first time.

Broadcaster and author Melvyn Bragg, whose first TV documentary for BBC Monitor in 1963, ‘Two Border Artists’ (the other was Sheila Fell), focused on the work of Norman, said in his Foreword to Behind The Scenes: The Norman Cornish Sketchbooks, *“he stands as a magnificent Chronicler of one of the most important passages in English history.*

“The paintings and drawing he brings to us of the hard-lived lives of a community which defied the odds will be enduring. He has not only preserved a life lived by millions of people in this country and others around the world, he has given it significance and permanence that only a real artist can achieve.”

Dr Howard Coutts, from The Bowes Museum, said: “We are truly honoured to be holding this first major retrospective of works by Norman Cornish. His chronicles of life in a bygone era are captivating and draw you into the scene that he’s portraying.”

Norman Cornish: The Definitive Collection
The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle
16th November to 23rd February

As part of a year-round celebration of the centenary of Norman Cornish's birth, two further exhibitions dedicated to aspects of Norman Cornish's work open in the Autumn

- **The Greenfield Gallery in Newton Aycliffe (Man of Destiny, 10th October – 11th December)** The exhibition chronicles the journey of Norman Cornish and the great determination and resilience he showed to become a professional artist. Featuring personal quotes from Cornish and an interesting narrative, the exhibition highlights key moments of his career and showcases work that was produced when materials or conditions were not optimal.

- **Durham University's Palace Green Library (The Norman Cornish Sketchbooks, 16th November – 23rd February 2020)** For Norman Cornish, sketching was second nature; an inherent part of his everyday life. This exhibition of little seen sketchbooks will present a new dimension to the artist's practice, focusing on his observations of life, landscapes and family, revealing the inner artistic processes behind some of his most iconic works.

Cornish's former home from the 1950s and 60s is set to be re-created as part of the Remaking Beamish Project 1950s' town, which is expected to conclude the centenary events around the region.

More information on the artist and the Norman Cornish Centenary events can be found at www.normancornish.com/centenary

The Norman Cornish Centenary Exhibition programme is supported by Arts Council England National Lottery Fund.

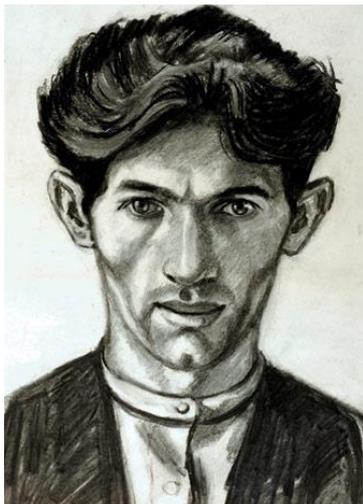
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A **press kit** with further information on the Centenary, images, and quotes from and about Norman Cornish can be found [here](#)

For further enquiries, opportunities to visit the Centenary celebrations, and interview requests please contact:

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Norman Cornish, Self-Portrait

Norman Cornish is undoubtedly the most celebrated and most sought-after British Artist of the 20th century. For over 50 years his images of the miner's working life and his observation of social activities have intrigued an appreciative audience.

Norman was born on the 18th of November 1919 in the small town of Spennymoor. At the age of just 14, Norman left school and began work as a coal miner. From a very young age, Norman had always been passionate about drawing and painting and he soon became aware of the sketching club at the Spennymoor Settlement. Norman was accepted as a member at the age of 15, giving him the opportunity to meet other likeminded artists and ultimately offering him the opportunity to exhibit his work.

During the post war years, Norman's work gained a discerning following nationally and he was subjected to increased pressure by the owners of The Stone Gallery in Newcastle to become a professional artist. The closure of coal mines in SW Durham during this period accelerated Norman's decision to make the step with support from his wife Sarah - a decision which was to become his destiny. In the years that followed, Norman became known as one of the most sought-after contemporary British artists. In 1974 Norman was awarded an Honorary Master of Arts degree from Newcastle University and in 1995 awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Civil Law from the University of Northumbria, to whom he gifted a body of work for their permanent collection just a couple of years later. Norman also had a long-standing connection to the University of Sunderland, which was recognised in 2012 when he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Arts from the University.

Norman continued to paint until his peaceful passing at the age of 94 in August 2014. His work continues to be loved by people of all ages and backgrounds.

<https://normancornish.com/resources/biography>

About #Durham19

For a number of years Durham has seen continued growth and investment in cultural activity through Durham County Council, wider partners and cultural institutions large and small. 2019 sees the compounding effect of this sustained investment in an incredible year of openings, activities, festivals, events and anniversaries, which has been designated as the county's Year of Culture.

With a number of high-profile, multi-million pound developments coming on board to add to the wealth of world-class attractions, festivals and events, #Durham19 will celebrate the county's cultural offer. The campaign, delivered by Visit County Durham in partnership with Durham County Council and cultural partners across the county, will increase visits, promote Durham as a cultural destination, engage residents and encourage local communities to discover Durham's culture and heritage.

- The Bowes Museum was created over 100 years ago by an extraordinary couple, John and Joséphine Bowes. Together they built up the greatest private collection of fine and decorative arts in the North of England and constructed a magnificent building to house them in. The collection contains thousands of objects including furniture, paintings, sculpture, ceramics, textiles and many other items covering an extensive range of European styles and periods.
- The Bowes Museum receives a core funding grant from Durham County Council and as a Major Portfolio Museum receives support from Arts Council England. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to visual art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2018 and 2022, we will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £860 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. www.artscouncil.org.uk
- The Bowes Museum is a registered charity. Charity number 1079639.
- The Bowes Museum has undergone major redevelopment, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, One NorthEast through the County Durham Economic Partnership, English Heritage, Northern Rock Foundation, The Monument Trust, Garfield Weston Foundation, The Foyle Foundation, The European Regional Development Fund, DCMS/Wolfson Museum and Galleries Improvement Fund, Designation Challenge Fund, The Shears Foundation, **The Richard and Suzanna Tonks Family Fund at County Durham Foundation**, Durham County Council, The Friends of The Bowes Museum, The Headley Trust, Sir James Knott Trust, Catherine Cookson Charitable Trust, Fenwick Ltd, Mercers Charitable Foundation, Welton Foundation.
- The Bowes Museum is a member of the Discover Durham partnership of attractions. Our commitment is to promote Durham as an exciting and vibrant group travel destination and to provide the travel trade with a professional and knowledgeable service: hotline number 03000 26 26 26, www.discoverdurham.co.uk

