

Introduction

The Bridport Art Scene: A Brief History

Bridport is a small but distinctive market-town with a strong agricultural and rope-making heritage, situated in 'Hardy Country' in the south-west of Dorset. It is on the Jurassic Coast, halfway between Lyme Regis and Dorchester, set a couple of miles back from the harbour village of West Bay.

For many years the area has attracted artists to live and work and Bridport is now gaining a national reputation for its unique character and vibrant artistic community. The 'Bridport Art Scene' includes everyone from nationally recognised names to mid-career, emerging artists and keen new-comers. Bridport has a rich continuity of artistic heritage, and there is enough material to potentially fill a book in itself, but for the purposes of this book, a brief summary seemed appropriate.

As far back as 1865 Bridport boasted the first government funded art school in Dorset. This was situated at the top floor of the Bridport Literary and Scientific Institute in East Street. Its most famous student was Francis (Fra) Newbery who went on to become one of the most distinguished directors of the Glasgow School of Art between 1885 and 1900, commissioning one of his students Charles Rennie Mackintosh to build the new Glasgow School of Art. Newbery also exhibited internationally with the Glasgow Boys, and promoted the work of his students so that the Glasgow style of Arts and Crafts became internationally known and emulated. Mackintosh and other friends and students visited Newbery in Dorset on sketching holidays, and some of the architectural sketches made by Charles Rennie Mackintosh of Bridport buildings are held in the local museum. Newbery also donated paintings and murals to the town celebrating the 'Spirit of Bridport', which can still be seen in the town hall.

Throughout the 20th century artists came to visit or live and work in the area. Both the landscape and the proximity of the sea are important factors here, though no stylistic school of painting

such as happened in Newlyn or St Ives in Cornwall, occurred here. Instead the area seems to have attracted individuals working on their own ideas. In the 1930s landscape painter Paul Nash and painter and sculptor Eileen Agar, the two British artists who came to be known as the "seaside surrealists" were frequent visitors to the harbour of West Bay while based in Swanage. By the 1960s and 70s artists who had already established their own style of working took up residence, such as American-born abstract expressionist painter John Hubbard. Then there was figurative painter Robin Rae, formerly a teacher at Liverpool School of Art, who studied under Francis Bacon and John Nash at the Royal College of Art. The experimental photographer John Miles also moved here; he studied painting at Wimbledon School of art and then turned to photography under the influence of his teacher Gerald Howson.

The seeds of the current artistic revival were probably planted in the 1980s when both John Miles and Robin Rae taught at Symondsbury Art College, started by Peter Hitchin in the Old Manor in Symondsbury, just outside Bridport. The Art College was followed by the Oakhayes Art Residency run by Ann Barnes in the Symondsbury Old Rectory during the 1990s. The rectory sits at the foot of Colmers Hill, a distinctive local landmark with a pudding bowl shape and half a dozen Scots pine trees on the top. For several years Ann had been placing adverts for the residency in the Artists Newsletter magazine and this had attracted dozens of artists from across the country. These artists included Helen Gillilan, Horst Lindenau and Roger Lawrence, as well as Simon Poulter and Julie Penfold, who went on to set up Bridport based PVA Labculture, an award-winning digital arts association that has continued to support artists to develop, produce and exhibit new work since 1996. By this time the presence of many other artists in the area was the draw for other artists to follow and this process has continued to grow and expand the artistic community ever since.

My own introduction to Bridport came when I was invited by a friend to visit the art community at Oakhayes. After driving through miles of wooded lanes, seemingly lost, I finally arrived at this grand old house in an equally idyllic village. When I returned to London a few days later, images of this magical area, the old rambling house and the artists in residence remained with me, and within a month I found myself uprooting my life to take up residence in Oakhayes in a bare attic room with a single skylight for a window.

My residency wasn't to last long as Oakhayes was closed six months later, but it was a remarkable experience to work alongside so many talented artists including Douglas McDougall, Dan Bendel, Keith Dunhill, James Ursell, Georgina Richardson, Rob Buchanan and Alastair Crawford. Most of the Oakhayes artists then moved into accommodation in Bridport, and I rented a shared house with Dan Bendel and Keith Dunhill. Under pressure to complete a couple of commissions, I then went looking for a new studio, and soon found a space in an old factory on the St Michael's Trading Estate, where I have been working ever since. A couple of years later I was joined by Andrew Leppard and Caroline Ireland and that was the start of St Michael's Studios.

As well as marking the start of St Michael's Studios, 1999 was also the year Caroline Ireland initiated and coordinated the first Bridport Open Studios (BOS), which has continued to grow over the years. The event was started in response to the number of artists working locally and producing extraordinary and individual work, and the relatively few opportunities locally for work to be seen by the public. Despite the number of artists in the area the number of galleries has always been small. BOS now involves the participation of over 100 artists each August Bank Holiday weekend and attracts thousands of visitors. The popularity of these events has led to the creation of more Open events over the year - during the Bridport Literary Festival in November and over the Easter and May Bank Holiday weekends.

The role of Bridport Arts Centre in this story cannot be overestimated. The Allsop Gallery is the largest and best public exhibition space in the county if not the wider area. In 1995 it started its own Open Exhibition supported by artists from all over the West Country. It continues to represent the cultural heart of the town, promoting the arts in West Dorset and delivering a diverse professional performing and visual arts programme. It is the home of the Bridport Literary Prize and more recently of annual Literary and Film Festivals. It offers an alternative visual arts programme with cutting edge, contemporary and national exhibitions, as well as being available for the use of local artists.

The location of artists studios within the town itself has been a relatively new development in the attraction of artists to Bridport. Initially artists tended to live in the rural areas with Bridport as a focal hub. This is because it was easy to find cheap rented properties in idyllic surroundings, ideal for artists. In 1999 the majority of artists taking part in BOS were out of the town. By 2000 this situation had begun to change. Now the majority of artists taking part in BOS are located within the town centre. The St Michael's Studios complex is now one of Bridport's most popular attractions, providing studios for 25 artists with regular open events and exhibitions throughout the year.

The studios have also been at the forefront of a cultural regeneration of the St Michael's Trading Estate, and the area is now thought of locally as the Artistic Quarter of Bridport, offering a wealth of creative industries in addition to artists studios, including carpenters, masons, upholsterers, sign writers, designers, architects, and several antiques shops. Unfortunately, this beautiful old industrial estate is regularly under threat of residential redevelopment, and in fact we would already have lost the entire Artistic Quarter were it not for the strong support of local people and the Bridport Town Council, who appreciate that the large community of creative practitioners based here now plays an integral role in Bridport's cultural

and economic prosperity.

In the meantime artists continue to come to Bridport, either because they have heard of the artistic community, or because they are drawn by the landscape or the vibrant community life of the town; and people increasingly come to Bridport to see their work. This book is part of that story.

Introduction to the Authors

Artistically, there is something intriguing and exciting happening in Bridport that no one has been able to explain or put their finger on, and this book is an attempt to explore and shed some light on this thriving, if disparate art scene. Artists, like myself, have been attracted to Bridport from across the country because there is some enigmatic quality here that is as inspiring to us as the light at Newlyn that attracted artists to Cornwall.

This book is a collaboration between painter Kit Glaisyer, photographer George Wright and writer Lu Orza, and is published to coincide with an exhibition at the Allsop Gallery in the Bridport Arts Centre from 17 April to 10 May 2010.

Using our separate creative disciplines, George, Lu and I have set out to present a multifaceted portrait of some of the characters that make up this artistic community, with narratives drawn from Lu's enquiring interviews with each artist, George's photographic portraits taken either at their studios, or in a characteristic setting, and my selection of some of the artists' best work.

I originally started working with photographer George Wright in the autumn of 2008. Our intention was to document the local art scene and to raise the national profile of the many artists who work in the Bridport area. Our first collaboration produced twenty four portraits of artistic practitioners and was featured in several national magazine adverts and articles. This project naturally led us to want to share the results with a wider audience and to draw attention to the diverse range and large number of creative practitioners working in the Bridport area. We decided early on to center our focus just on the visual arts and to try to offer a representative group of twenty five painters and sculptors involved in the local arts scene.

George's photographs, I feel, naturally evoke the idealism and passion innate to creative people and artists, and there is also a theatrical element to his work that echoes the romance and drama of being an artist. He has produced a stunning series of photographs that clearly evoke the excitement we all feel about the artists working in and around Bridport.

Lu Orza has pursued the project with great passion, and it has been a delight to work with her. Her interviews succeed in digging beneath the surface to find the deeper intentions of each artist, and what she reveals can be quite edgy and challenging. Each of her texts is based on an informal interview with the artist in their studio, or place of work, from which she creates a narrative that tries to unravel the intriguing series of motivations and connections behind their work. This method has enabled her to present a very refreshing and candid portrait of each artist, allowing the reader to respond to the work in their own way and draw their own conclusions.

For me, this book is really about celebrating our remarkable town and the vibrant artistic community that has continued to flourish here over the years. My own feeling is that artists are attracted to the Bridport area because this is a place where they feel they can be themselves and where individuality is actively encouraged. This

makes it the perfect place for idealists, non-conformists, dreamers and all those who are inspired to follow their own paths.

Lots more information about many of these artists and about other cultural events in the Bridport area can be found on the www.bridport.org website.

You can find out about current Art exhibitions and Open events at the Tourist Information Centre and the Bridport Arts Centre which has the Allsop Gallery upstairs. Other local venues include the Pierrepont Gallery and the Front Room Gallery on South Street, Bridport, Sladers Yard in West Bay, Artwave West in More-comblake and the Little Gallery in Beaminster.

This book and exhibition has only just scratched the surface of the remarkable wealth of artistic talent to be found in West Dorset, but we hope they whet your appetite and inspire you to explore the Bridport art scene for yourself!

Kit Glaisyer

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