

# INTRODUCTION

To early travellers, Cornwall appeared remote and desolate. Cut off from the rest of England by the River Tamar, and bordered by the sea, the county was almost an island, closer in many ways to Wales, Ireland and Brittany than to other parts of England. Rugged moorland, scarred in mid Cornwall by the china clay industry, and further west by copper and tin mining, was softened on the south coast by wooded valleys and a verdant landscape. Isolation had bred a hardy, self-reliant people of independent spirit – farmers, fishermen and miners – who had more in common with their Celtic brethren across the seas than with the Anglo-Saxons beyond the Tamar.

Landscape artists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries travelled far in search of their romantic ideal, but Cornwall had provided few subjects. The problems of travel over its rutted roads had made exploration difficult, and the signs of civilisation – great houses, abbeys and churches – were noticeably lacking. The one native genius of Cornwall John Opie (1767–1807), called ‘The Boy Wonder’, ‘who paints as the bird sings’ had left Cornwall at the age of twenty and soon became a fashionable portraitist in London.



JOSEPH FARINGTON

*Carclaze Tin Mine, Cornwall, 1823.*

Engraving by S. Middiman from Britton and Brayley *Guide to the County of Cornwall.*

ROYAL INSTITUTION OF CORNWALL.

## THE SHINING SANDS

The first major pictorial record of the coastal scenery was made by Joseph Farington (1747–1821), a student of Richard Wilson, who visited Cornwall in 1809 in preparation for his publication *Britannica Depicta*. His view of St Ives is the earliest known, in which the present form of the town, harbour and the 'Island' are clearly seen. Four years later William Daniell (1769–1837) set sail from Land's End to record the coastline of Great Britain from the sea. His series of aquatints, published as *A Voyage Around Great Britain* was the most ambitious of the many topographical publications of the nineteenth century. Thomas Rowlandson (1757–1827) also made a coastal tour of Cornwall and was a frequent visitor to Hengar near Bodmin, where he sketched the high tors and wooded valleys around the River Camel. His drawings of the church of St Breward served as the setting for 'Dr Syntax Preaching' in the first volume of William Combe's *Tour of Dr Syntax* published in 1812.

The magic and mystery of Cornwall was most effectively captured by the masterly genius of Joseph Mallord Turner (1775–1851) who made two extended visits to Cornwall in 1811 and 1813. Although eclipsed by his later European tours, which produced his greatest achievements, the Cornish sketchbooks and the few pictures that came from them captured the imagination of many later artists. On his first visit, made in preparation for his great early work *Picturesque Views of the Southern Coast of England*, Turner produced more than two hundred sketches, an impressionistic

JOSEPH MALLORD  
WILLIAM TURNER  
*St Michael's Mount, c. 1836.*  
watercolour with some body colour, 320 x 440mm.  
UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL.





record of conditions of weather, incidents on his journey, the landscape and the coast in changing mood. Indifferent to comfort, he travelled slowly and alone as far as St Ives, on foot or by horseback and occasionally by sea. His panoramic sketch of the town from a high point on the Stennack is now in the British Museum. He returned through Tintagel, whose ruined castle he transformed into a lofty fortress set in the clouds, with burrowing miners working at its base. An even greater grandeur was bestowed upon the already majestic St Michael's Mount, which became a mountain rising from the sea, its medieval masonry transformed into a gleaming classical acropolis. Turner's second visit was brief and made only to the most easterly parts of Cornwall along the River Tamar. His painting 'Crossing the Brook' exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1815 transformed the village of Calstock into an Italianate perspective, the river, bridge and bathing figures in the foreground shining in golden light.

Other artists visited Cornwall in the first half of the nineteenth century, but the county remained remote and isolated from the rest of Britain until the coming of the railway, when Brunel's last great masterpiece, the bridge over the Tamar at Saltash, was opened in 1859. Then, for the first time in its history, Cornwall was in direct communication with the rest of England. Two years later the Queens Hotel was opened in Penzance and in 1878, following the connection of St Ives by branch line, the Great Western Railway's hotel, the Tregenna Castle, was opened above the town.

By the 1880s there was a well developed tourist industry in west Cornwall and artists began to come regularly to the fishing villages of Newlyn and St Ives. They belonged to a new generation who had studied in Europe, in the teaching studios of Paris and Antwerp, where they were trained in the observation and representation of nature. In the summer months, when the ateliers closed, they had joined the artist's colonies of Barbizon and Brittany, and returning to England they sought to continue this shared way of life, painting outdoors by the sea. They went to the remote villages of Staithes in Yorkshire and Cocksburnpath in Scotland, but more came to Newlyn and St Ives in Cornwall.

Newlyn on the south coast, was the first to attract major attention. At first the artists came on sketching trips, as they had visited the little ports in Brittany, finding their subjects in the life and work of the fishing community and the rural landscape of west Cornwall. Soon they began to settle there, and each year throughout the 1880s and 1890s an important group of paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy came from Newlyn. The twenty-five or thirty painters who formed the Newlyn School added significantly to the quality of British painting. They achieved early popular success, for although 'modern' their work was honest and was not considered extreme. Their paintings were tonal and silvery, combining accuracy of detail with the story painting that had been dear to British art since the Pre-Raphaelites. Authenticity was important, and local people were often used as models, set against the background of their homes and streets. Outdoor or *plein air* painting was a characteristic of Newlyn artists, and it was not unusual to see painters working in the streets or on the beaches, their easels weighed down with stones against the wind.

The earliest resident artist of Newlyn was J. Henry Martin, who had made paintings of Mount's Bay and the Newlyn area around 1873 and may have been there much earlier. Thomas Gotch and Henry Scott Tuke came on a visit in 1879, Walter Langley in 1880, Edwin Harris in 1881. Langley settled in Newlyn early in 1882, followed by Edwin Harris, Ralph Todd and Leghe Suthers who all



took up more or less permanent residence in 1883. Stanhope Forbes, who was to be the most prominent and the longest established, came in 1884 as did Frank Bramley and Chevallier Talyer. A further group came in the following year, including Fred Hall, Percy Craft (who also worked in St Ives), Elizabeth Armstrong (who married Stanhope Forbes), and William Fortescue. Norman Garstin, arrived in 1886, and like Forbes and Langley remained in the area for the rest of his life. Frank Wright Bourdillon came in 1887.

Just ten miles away, across the West Penwith peninsula, St Ives on the north coast attracted its own colony of artists. From the first St Ives was remarkably international. In the winter of 1883–4 the American, James McNeill Whistler made an extended visit to the town with his young assistants Walter Sickert and the Australian, Mortimer Menpes. They were followed by successive groups of Americans, Scandinavians and Australians who joined the resident English artists. Whistler's series of sketches of sea and sky from the beach – quick impressionistic colour – influenced the St Ives artists. For them, the study of the figure became less important than capturing that strange beauty of the coast, made magic by the ever-changing light and weather and the many moods of the sea. In 1888 an Artists' Club was established as a meeting place for a group of sea painters that included Julius Olsson, Adrian Stokes, Arnesby Brown and Algernon Talmage, all prominent Royal Academicians.

By the turn of the century Newlyn had changed. The harbour had been enlarged, and the fishing trade greatly expanded. Public taste in art was finding new directions and many of the artists left Newlyn. In the early years of the twentieth century, the nearby wooded Lamorna valley became the home of a group of painters whose work explored the more acceptable conventions of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. John 'Lamorna' Birch, and Harold and Laura Knight were particularly associated with Lamorna; Alfred Munnings and Augustus John made extended visits. The working port of Falmouth also had a special attraction for a few. By the 1920s St Ives was a centre for the scattered groups in Newlyn and Lamorna. Far removed from radical developments in Europe, it remained strongly traditional and rejected modernism. It was not until the 1950s that St Ives recovered its reputation as an artistic centre that brought it to the forefront of international avant-garde art.

This book is concerned with artistic developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the years when the triumphs of Realism melted into the more seductive charms of Impressionist colour that have come to be associated with this far-off corner of England.

Opposite:

J. HENRY MARTIN

*A December Morning, Mount's Bay, c.1875.*

oil on canvas, 540 x 1000mm.

PENZANCE AND DISTRICT MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY.