

PART 2.

Alfred Wallis: Final Days

7. The Workhouse

Surrounded as she was by Stokes' collection, Mellis nevertheless decided that she would like to have her own painting by Wallis. She later recounted the time when she decided to defy Nicholson and to visit Wallis on her own. Since her marriage, Adrian had taken control of their finances and she '“had practically nothing.” . . . She insisted on paying Wallis ten shillings for a painting at a time when lots of people were buying his pictures for only two shillings.’¹

Berlin may have played his part in recording the life of Alfred Wallis but it was Nicholson who first drew attention to him; one of Nicholson's acquisitions ended up in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Nicholson visited Wallis on one occasion and showed him a reproduction of the work. Wallis was totally unimpressed. 'O yes!' he said, 'I've got one like that at home'.²

During one particular visit while Nicholson was away, his friend Marcus Brumwell noticed how run down Hepworth looked. Aside from the growing triplets, she still had Paul to cope with; he had been there for a good part of the year. Nicholson's excuse was that he had a mouth abscess that needed specialised treatment in London. But as Checkland speculates: 'No doubt the strain of the full house contributed to his need to get away; it proved to be the first in a series of escapes from the family fold.'³ There can be little doubt that Nicholson's absence added to Hepworth's maternal dilemma. In the event that Paul was packed off, presumably to North Wales again on 24 Sept 1941, leaving Hepworth to get back to her garden; she wrote to Nicholson in London confessing relief at seeing Paul go.

Contrary to commonly held belief, Berlin's work experience at Little Park Owles was short-lived; he was there for a few months only; he began work in late April or early May, 1941 and, come the winter, he had left. That autumn, Helga found that she was pregnant with her second child and the family was required to move on bringing an end to Berlin's time at Little Park Owles too. They moved out beyond Zennor to a cottage belonging to Robin Nance.

Berlin would have learned after the event that by way of a Christmas gift Nicholson and Stokes sent some paints to Wallis while he was in the workhouse. They had been at considerable pains to get what they thought Wallis wanted from Mr Burrell, a decorator with whom Wallis had dealings. But according

to George Manning-Sanders, Wallis flew into a rage and threw them across the floor. Wallis was given another gift of some water colours. He became anxious over their French names, packed them into a box and hid them away in the corner of his room.⁴

In November 1941, it was decided that, for three months, income from what had been established as the National Red Cross ‘Penny-a-Week’ campaign would be diverted to raise money for Britain’s new ally, Russia, in its fight against German intrusion. With Mrs Churchill at the helm, the new fund, became known as the ‘Aid to Russia Fund’. The *Marylebone Mercury* declared that ‘At the present rate of contribution this will mean that our Russian ally will receive from the workers of Britain, medical and surgical supplies to the value of approximately £300,000’.⁵ The wish list included emergency operating theatres, X-ray equipment, blankets, surgical dressings, drugs, medicines and ambulances. On 13 December 1941, Gabo celebrated in his diary: ‘Moscow is saved! It means there is still some strength left in our people. I have not had such a happy days for many years.’ This would be his last diary entry until 23 May 1942.⁶

Isolated as he was, in Zennor, Berlin seemed unaware that St Ives – for which, presumably, read Carbis Bay – was raising funds locally to buy an ambulance for the Soviet Union. For three months ‘an unusual amount of trouble was taken by the artists’; Hepworth in particular, it seems. Her son, Paul, had only recently departed and, with her husband escaping occasionally to London, the triplets were the focus of her life. Nevertheless, ‘Miss Barbara Hepworth (Mrs Nicholson) one of the hardest workers as well as one of the instigators of the campaign’⁷ headed publicity for the ‘St Ives Committee for Soviet Aid’. There was a poster campaign, competitions, auctions, concerts, door-to-door collections, shop window displays and the like. The town was invited to ‘See Russia!’ at an exhibition of what were surely Gabo’s photographs of Russian peasants, farms and related artefacts that opened at Lanham’s Gallery in the High Street on Wednesday 11 February 1942. Mrs Arnold Freeman, most probably, the mother of Stokes’ gardener, Peter Freeman, ‘had devoted more than a week to arrangement and working of the exhibition’⁸ that ran for four days only with local dignitaries giving a short address each afternoon at 3 o’clock. No doubt reluctant but feeling that it was incumbent upon him to do so, Gabo took his turn on the Thursday afternoon but whether he attended the final talk remains doubtful. On Saturday, Mark Arnold-Forster – the grandson of Rt Hon H.O. Arnold-Forster, Secretary of State for War 1903-1905 – brought the event to a close with ‘an interesting history of the Russian Revolution and policy over the last few years.’⁹

By 23 April, an ambulance had been sent to Russia, paid for entirely by money raised in St Ives alone and believed to be the ‘first community to have sent a single, definite gift. . . . The Mayor of St Ives . . . has received a letter from Mr. Maisky, Ambassador of the U.S.S.R., in which he says: “I am very interested

to know that the citizens of your small borough have raised the splendid sum of £1,500, enabling them to purchase an X-Ray Ambulance.¹⁰ In a letter to Read on 8 April 1942, Hepworth confirmed that money was raised in the allocated twelve weeks. Many years later, Peter Freeman told Gabo's biographers that as the ambulance was being made ready it was decided to display a plaque in the cabin to explain where it had come from. 'Adrian Stokes offered a prize for the most appropriate wording' but Gabo was not best pleased. 'As the one and only Russian in St Ives, he insisted that he alone should be the arbiter of what went on the plaque. The argument simmered and the ambulance was duly sent off without its plaque.' With whom Gabo argued is unrecorded but Freeman's recollection was that 'Gabo was not seen for several weeks.'¹¹

Whether Gabo did shut himself away remains unknown but that matter was concluded beyond Freeman's hearing. The local paper tells us that an 'engraved inscription in English and Russian' was

fixed to the outside of the ambulance. It read: 'We, men, women and children of the small and ancient borough of St Ives on the far Atlantic coast of England, send this gift, to you, our distant comrades. In doing so, we bring you near.'¹² That it was translated into Russian and was gifted to Russian 'comrades' suggests that Gabo had a very strong hand in its creation.

SEE RUSSIA!
SOVIET LIFE EXHIBITION.
 AT LANHAM'S GALLERY, ST. IVES.
 OPEN DAILY, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.,
 until, and including, SATURDAY,
 February 14th.
 A SHORT ADDRESS EACH AFTER-
 NOON AT 3 P.M.
 Wednesday: MISS MARGARET
 KENNEDY.
 Thursday: N. GABO, Esq.
 Friday: MRS. ARNOLD FREEMAN.
 Saturday: W. E. ARNOLD-
 FORSTER, Esq.
 Also SALE OF TOYS, GRAMOPHONE
 RECORDS and BOOKS.
 The profits of the Exhibition will go
 to the St. Ives Committee for Soviet
 Aid-Mobile X-Ray Unit Fund.
 (Treasurer: F. J. A. Woore, Esq.,
 National Provincial Bank Ltd. St. Ives).
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4. Advert for 'See Russia! / Soviet Life Exhibition'. Lanham's Gallery, St Ives. 11-14 February, 1942.

8. The Borlase Smart Link

The nucleus of the Little Park Owles community comprised three families only; those of Stokes, Nicholson and Gabo; but those of Lanyon and Berlin might be included as absentee members. Despite what history tells us of their future paths, we may never know who felt deeply committed to a permanent Cornish life in those early days. Berlin perhaps; he had been in Cornwall on and off since 1934. We know that Gabo was desperate to get to the States; any number of his Hampstead friends had made their way over there, including Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). Barns-Graham's presence seems to have been decided by Mellis being here, but one wonders; were Stokes and Mellis here for keeps?

As a proud Cornishman, it is improbable that Lanyon would not have returned home after the War. Whatever drawbacks Hepworth had to put up with, the fact that her children would now be well established at school may have persuaded her to remain. But unless he could do something to alter that, Nicholson in particular was miles away from the focus of his Hampstead abstractionist credo. Whatever thoughts they may each have been harbouring, for as long as hostilities continued, the Stokes, Gabo and Nicholson families were all trapped in Carbis Bay.

After two years of war, they all seemed to have settled to their singular routines. The earlier threat of imminent invasion had dispersed and a perverse sense of normality now prevailed. The relative comforts of both the house and garden at Little Park Owles must have been a constant attraction to everyone. Contemporary photographs show the main lawn surrounded by a profusion of flowerbeds in which the native, springtime daffodils would have flourished. A charming mother-and-child photograph of Mellis and Telfer in 1942 graced the pages of the exhibition of St Ives art at the Tate in 1985. In another 1942 photograph, the toddler Telfer is standing, holding hands with his handsome parents.

In more relaxed moments Stokes, Mellis and Telfer would have welcomed guests from far and wide to join them in a game of croquet. Nicholson was hardly a team player; while she was there, Ann Mellis found him infuriating. Miriam Gabo agreed; Nicholson would toss a coin, declare himself the winner and decide who went first and, if he wasn't winning, he would change the rules. Then, as now, London would appreciate the opportunity to visit St Ives. A third photograph from around June 1942 shows Herbert Read, Margaret Gardiner and Nicholson in his emblematic white cap playing croquet on the lawn at Little Park Owles. Stokes, who may well have taken the photograph, turned more heads than Mellis may have noticed. Margaret Gardiner only had to take one look at him and she was positively swooning.

Herbert Read's St Ives connections would have been significant. It is often the case that the reputation of an artist or, in the case of St Ives art, the legacy of an entire movement, is determined by the written word. Read, like Stokes, was a formidable critic who, a few years hence, would heap praise on his St Ives friends. His friendship with the Stokes-Nicholson partnerships stemmed from shared days in Hampstead. Margaret Gardiner (1904-2005) too, had lived in Hampstead from the early 1930s and had put together a significant collection of work by her friends. Gardiner was a painter herself and took an active part in left-wing politics that linked her to Stokes. Her legacy, as far as this story is concerned, is that she moved to Orkney where, in 1979, she founded the Pier Art Gallery around her personal collection of St Ives art that continues to enthrall to this day.

If we are to accept the commonly repeated belief, Nicholson was still strapped for cash and in January 1942 and was appealing to Herbert Read for work – yet, throughout the War, he was having his shirts tailored by W. English of Pall Mall. Nicholson would be happy to produce work of a more commercial

nature but nothing came of this as Read was keen to keep his friend on the path to abstraction. Nicholson undertook a number of impressionist sketches of the cottages against a backdrop of the fortifications along the neighbouring beaches of St Ives. Nicholson was spending time in London and his commitment to both Hepworth and to St Ives is open to question. Checkland tells us that while he was in London, Nicholson paid courtly attention to one Ursula Crimp. And life between Stokes and Mellis at Little Park Owles was not all sweetness and light.

Lanyon was home on leave in February 1942. He had been in the RAF since 8 March 1940 and now a fully trained aero-mechanic, was about to set off on his first overseas posting. He had been making sculpture in the RAF workshops and brought one piece home, presumably to show Gabo, his mentor, to whom he had handed over his 'Attic Studio' for the duration. 'Construction 1941' – shows Gabo's significant influence. While he was on leave, Lanyon took on the role of escorting Mellis to the local hop. Stokes was ever the reluctant socialite but on Lanyon's arm Mellis could meet friends in what Hepworth would, in later years, acquire as a studio – the *Palais de Danse*. Lanyon had been fond of Mellis since they met at Euston Road in those heady pre-war days, those flirty days in which Stokes had been escort to Lanyon's sister Mary. Mellis was only four years older than Lanyon. How strong the bond was remains unknown but as Lanyon was due to be posted, Stokes would have little to be concerned about. 'Lanyon was an excellent dancer but Stokes, despite his interest in ballet – or perhaps because of it – disliked such exhibitions . . . and refused to attend.' Mellis recalled: 'I used to go dancing with Peter every Saturday night in the St Ives dance hall, and we all went to the Zennor dance with the Griggs of Tremedda. There was also the cinema in St Ives where we were shown films like *Gone with the Wind* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.'¹³ Before the end of February 1942, Lanyon was posted to North Africa where despite the fact that he remained as ground crew he played his part in and witnessed the bombing of Alexandria.

Most significantly, links between the modernists – rather than the abstractionists – and the old school in St Ives were becoming firmly established, largely through the warm hand of welcome held out by Borlase Smart. He had already found Barns-Graham a studio and now he introduced Berlin to the St Ives Society of Artists. Berlin tells us in print and in conversation that the Castle Inn in Fore Street, St Ives, was their headquarters after he had stepped away from the security of Carbis Bay. In any event, Berlin alone, of the Little Park Owles fraternity, was the drinker and, in parallel with his paintings and newly emerging sculpture, Berlin was also writing. Inside his personal catalogue of the March 1938, Christopher Wood exhibition at the Redfern Gallery – a name that crops up quite frequently in the St Ives context – Berlin wrote a significant but unpublished critique of the show.¹⁴ The main attraction of the Castle Inn for the modernists was the

landlord Frank Edward Endell Mitchell. Mitchell – known as Endell or Michael – and his brother, Denis Mitchell, had moved from Swansea to West Cornwall in 1932 to work on two cottages in Halsetown on the outskirts of St Ives that belonged to their Aunt Lilian. The added bonus was that the cottages came with one and a half acres of land that the brothers turned into a smallholding. It took two years to complete the building work, by which time the property market was flat. Their aunt was nevertheless pleased and allowed them to stay. By 1935, they took on another two acres nearby and turned the whole enterprise into a fully-fledged market garden. Denis married Jane Stevens in the Parish Church at Towednack on 14 September 1939; their daughter Jennifer was born in 1940. Come the War, rather than join the army Denis went underground as a tin miner at Geevor Tin Mine out towards Land's End. In 1938, Endell became Landlord at The Castle Inn. So by the time Berlin arrived at Carbis Bay in May 1941, Denis Mitchell and the Home Guard had already linked The Castle to the conscientious communities at The Leach Pottery, Halsetown and Little Park Owles.

The Castle came to epitomise the distinction between the abstractionists and the modernists. The abstractionists at Carbis Bay had access to their London galleries but the young modernists in The Castle Inn did not. As a result, the walls of The Castle became a gallery for the opportunistic regulars and a further factional divide began to open up. Whilst Nicholson and Hepworth may have been laying plans for a future in St Ives, there is very little evidence, for example, that Gabo, Stokes or Mellis ever ventured the mile or so into St Ives, let alone any suggestion that they participated in the gallery world down there; Stokes was heavily engaged in his writing and Mellis had Telfer to care for. Through the open-minded auspices of Borlase Smart, those in The Castle Inn were beginning to establish tenuous links with the old school at St Ives Society of Artists (STISA). Nevertheless, there was little evidence of either faction in the STISA spring and summer exhibitions of 1942. Barns-Graham however was proving to be the independently spirited woman that St Ives remembers well; on 'Show Day', 12 March 1942, she exhibited paintings in her studio. Show Day was an annual collaborative event organised by Lanham's, in conjunction with St Ives Society of Artists. Lanham's was the main supplier of artists' materials and ran their own gallery from their premises in the High Street in St Ives. They put out an annual folded brochure listing those whose studios were open for the occasion.

That spring, Hepworth was awarded a Certificate of Merit for her vegetable garden at Dunluce. Nicholson, however, was engaged elsewhere. Alongside E. Hartley Ramsden, he took a curatorial hand in the touring exhibition, *New Movements in Art: Contemporary Work in England*, which was showing in Lancaster House in London between 18 March and 9 May 1942. The Little Park Owles community was to the fore and included Nicholson's own work alongside two

collages by Mellis and other works by Gabo, Hepworth, Lanyon and Mondrian. The exhibition travelled to the Mortimer Museum in Hull on 2 November, where Paul Nash, John Tunnard, Edward Wadsworth and Graham Sutherland were listed alongside Nicholson and Gabo.¹⁵

The surroundings of the hardware of war gave a machine-age significance to Lanyon's sculptural art. Many years later (about 1959) he wrote that 'there were quantities of shattered machinery and broken aircraft wherever I went. A mentality common to many of the air force fitters and riggers was a kind of beach combing, to see what was interesting or valuable or good salvage', which he turned into sculpture.¹⁶

In December 1940, Lanyon had sent Nicholson a photo of a piece made from the piston rings of an aircraft engine. And Nicholson had managed to show Lanyon's *Construction 1941* (in metal, Perspex and thread) in the Lancaster House exhibition. If one squints at these RAF pieces one could easily imagine them to be by Gabo, so strong was the influence.

Gabo's diary entry of 23 May 1942 tells us that, alongside some earlier works, his 'Spiral Theme' was something of a breakthrough. Among the ten thousand or so visitors to the exhibition were a number of critics who, until this moment, had been largely impervious to his ideas. Gabo, who thought no more of it than two earlier pieces alongside, was taken aback by the tremendous effect 'Spiral Theme' had on the visitors. The truth seems to be that the peaceful surroundings of Carbis Bay and Lanyon's 'Attic Studio' were beginning to have the desired effect on Gabo. He says as much in his diary; the studio had been produced over a three month period under a time of psychological calm.

While he was working underground, there is every chance that Denis Mitchell would have met Graham Sutherland who was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee to record the workings at Geevor Mine. For six months, between June and December 1942, Sutherland commuted between his Kentish home and that of Edward and Enid Bouverie-Hoyton that gave him a base in Penzance. By 1941, Bouverie-Hoyton (1900–1988) a Rome Scholar and a Member of the Royal Society of British Artists who had been appointed Principal of Penzance School of Art and, being familiar with his student Lanyon's surroundings, Bouverie-Hoyton had introduced Graham Sutherland to the Little Park Owles community.

9. Saved From a Pauper's Grave

Nicholson and Hepworth moved house again in late spring of 1942. On 23 June 1942, Nicholson committed the family to a forward-looking lease of seven years on a new home. Chy-an-Kerris was a Tudorbethan semi in Headland Road at the far end of Carbis Bay from St Ives. 'Sky-and-Cherries' as Nicholson would have it, had seven bedrooms and views over St Ives Bay that

would at least match those from Gabo's Faerystone; after three years working in various bedrooms Hepworth finally had a studio of her own. A retrospective of her work at Temple Newsam, Leeds, was planned for 1943 and once more she was able to concentrate on sculpture. Nicholson even arranged for a phone to be installed. The Carbis Bay community could hardly be called closed or even insular but they were certainly self-contained and it becomes evident that Berlin (and perhaps others) felt socially uncomfortable in the presence of Nicholson and Hepworth.

Berlin had taken up the cause of Alfred Wallis and, Boswell-like, having worked among the old man's relatives in the fields of Cornwall, he began putting together notes for his 1949 book on Wallis. Wallis had only recently left No.3, Back Road West where Nicholson and 'Kit' Wood 'discovered' him in 1928. Berlin and Wallis never met. One day, in the spring of 1942, Berlin cycled in from Zennor past Wallis' empty cottage. He had even peered through the window. The room was just as Wallis had left it after he was transferred to the workhouse.¹⁷

The plight of Alfred Wallis was a frequent topic of conversations between Stokes and Nicholson and between Stokes and Berlin but by 1949, Berlin had to be very careful what he said. He judges his words carefully: 'The question of what could have been done for Wallis at this crisis is too involved with the lives of living persons to be freely discussed here.'¹⁸ Berlin's expanding knowledge of Wallis gained him an appropriate degree of respect from Stokes. No one else could have written on Wallis as Berlin did. Stokes' disposition as a writer would have encompassed Berlin's deep understanding in putting together his informative notes on Wallis. There remained a sincere understanding between Berlin and Stokes; through working the land together they had become firm friends. Nicholson, since 1928, had groomed Wallis with gifts, and that patronage and his collection of Wallis paintings brought out his competitive side. Berlin succinctly tells us that there were discussions of how they could help Wallis but his suggestion that a collection should be made among artists and writers came to nothing.¹⁹ It seems likely that Nicholson considered Berlin an interloper; as Stokes' gardener, Berlin was, after all, merely a registered agricultural labourer.

Shortly after the Nicholsons moved, Berlin was invited to 'Chy-an-Skerris' to take in Nicholson's collection of 'Wallises'.²⁰ To all intent and purpose, Nicholson looked upon the life and work of Alfred Wallis as property – his property – and Berlin was wrong-footed from the start; Nicholson seems even to have resented Adrian for befriending Wallis. While in the presence of the collection and Nicholson, Berlin felt intimidated by the sparkling white interior and the sculpture on display. He assumed the sculptures were by Henry Moore but they were Hepworth's. Berlin was left feeling ill at ease. He recalled the visit years later; he told David Lewis and Sarah Fox-Pitt that it was 'a bit like going to the dentist.'²¹

The reality of war once more impinged upon St Ives one Friday afternoon in late August. Even those in Carbis Bay two miles away, would have been aware of what was happening. The relative tranquillity of family life was thrown into turmoil; the children would have all been hustled indoors. At 3 o'clock on Friday 28 August 1942, Berlin was in St Peter's Square when a German plane strafed Back Road before dropping his last bomb on the Gasworks.²² Nicholson's biographer reports that two German fighter aircraft had swept overhead, machine guns blazing. The only casualty was a woman in town who died. Ironically, St Ives Gasworks, the site of the future Tate St Ives, was put out of action. Nicholson had witnessed the whole scene and, on duty as a warden, went to help clear up the mess.

Sven and Helga's daughter Janet was born on 4 July 1942, not at Zennor but at the home of Frank Vibert, Leach's Secretary. In January 1942, at the Conscientious Objectors' Tribunal in Bristol; Vibert, a former rating officer with St Ives Corporation was granted exemption from active service on condition that he undertook to work for the pottery.²³ The Berlins remained at Zennor for a few more months, during which time Berlin was once more driven by the need to meet Wallis. Checkland tells us that Berlin planned to visit Wallis on 30 August, 1942.²⁴ This was thrown completely as the news came through that Alfred Wallis had died the day before. In his biography of Wallis, Berlin gives credit for what followed to Stokes.

At his own request [Wallis] was given a Salvation Army funeral – the arrangements for which were made by Adrian Stokes – and was buried in St Ives cemetery. . . . Mr Stokes' diplomatic and vigilant help procured a grave for him at the last moment when the coffin had already arrived, saving him from a pauper's grave.²⁵

In fact, Berlin goes a little further in his 1994 autobiography. 'Adrian Stokes bought the grave to save him from the pauper's corner – one with a sea view, as Barbara succinctly put it.'²⁶

Berlin recalled the August afternoon when he was walking along The Wharf. He saw Stokes walking towards him looking distraught; they had been out of contact for a while. Berlin sensed correctly that there was something wrong. Stokes was unsure where Berlin lived and had come into town on the off-chance. Stokes had taken the responsibility of acting as Wallis' executor and the body was already on the train for Carbis Bay. I can't do with it at Little Park Owles, he told Berlin, and did not know what else to do.

Stokes himself confirms what Berlin said about his reclusive nature. 'During the six years, except for the Home Guard, for the sale of vegetables, for market garden purchases, I rarely went outside the two and a half acres.'²⁷ Mellis was far

more to the point; she says simply that Stokes didn't 'enjoy' people.²⁸ Margaret Gardiner also believed that Stokes shut people out. 'I hear the doors banging, and feel that there is so much bitterness and defeat and that your nerves are so taut that you simply can't stand other people at all.'²⁹ We may never know positively if Wallis' coffin did arrive at Little Park Owles but the evidence suggests, as Berlin implies, that for however short a time, Wallis was laid to rest in Stokes' garage, perhaps alongside Stokes' 'Veggie van'.

We were standing outside the Salvation Army headquarters.

"Go in there, to the Salvation Army, Adrian. I know his wife was a devoted member. Probably Wallis was too. They will fix the funeral."

"Well can you fix the flowers, Sven? It's awfully good of you. Tell them to send the bill to me," said the perfect English gentleman.³⁰

Berlin was right; he knew what Wallis would have wished. Wallis was a lapsed Salvationist. Stokes paid the extra four pounds and ten shillings to save Wallis from a pauper's grave and Berlin ordered the flowers from Mr Anthony for whom he worked in the fields. For over 50 years, Berlin kept the press cutting of Wallis' funeral from the local paper. It contained the final farewell from the Little Park Owles community. Berlin had pasted it into a freestanding photographic mount on which he had written: 'ALFRED WALLIS – REPORT OF THE FUNERAL. CONTRIBUTED BY ADRIAN STOKES'.

Beautiful floral tributes were sent as follows:- "In homage to the artist on whom Nature has bestowed the rarest gift, not to know that he is one"; Mr & Mrs. Naum Gabo; "To a great artist," Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson; "Tribute to an extraordinary artist." Margaret Mellis and Adrian Stokes; "To a great painter," Helga and Sven.³¹

The funeral took place on 3 September 1942. In the event, Berlin was unable to attend the funeral for the most ironic of reasons. He says he '... did not go to the funeral because I was in London arranging the publication of the book [his Wallis book] but Bernard Leach took my place and George Manning-Sanders, both of whom told me about it afterwards.'³² Bernard Leach's papers confirm that while he was on leave Berlin was meeting publishers, Faber & Faber, to whom he was probably introduced by Herbert Read.³³ The suggestion that Leach stood in for him at Wallis' graveside is merely a reflection that when asked by the undertaker, Leach would have stated that he was representing Berlin.

As Stokes told Berlin, he had accepted the role of executor to what can be loosely termed the 'estate' of Alfred Wallis and it is largely due to Stokes' attentive actions and Berlin's pains in helping to classify the work that Wallis' legacy can be seen on gallery walls to this day. Wallis' cottage remained untouched in the year following his departure to the workhouse but on his death the authorities moved in to clear the place. What remained, together with Wallis' possessions

from the Madron workhouse, were sent on in one batch to Stokes and stored at Little Park Owles. Berlin would have found himself in a dilemma. He was seemingly well into negotiations over his Wallis book and yet Stokes' diligence allowed him a further overview of Wallis' work. Stokes put everything into his garage and he and Berlin settled to the task; nevertheless it proved to be 'more or less impossible, save in a few cases, to tell which ones were painted at Madron and which were not'. As Nicholson's biographer reports, Nicholson had '“first choice” of the picking'.³⁴

Adrian Stokes gave Berlin several of Wallis' paintings, some of which he and dubbed *Death Paintings*. Accepting what Edwin Mullins dubbed Berlin's 'apocalyptic interpretations', the one *Death Painting* included in the published book shows a line of ghost-like people on board one of Wallis' emblematic vessels.³⁵ Even in 1949, there were restrictions on paper and materials that prevented Berlin from showing more from this series.

Resting in the garage at Little Park Owles would be the first overview of Wallis' work available to anyone. Stokes and Berlin were confronted with an embarrassment of riches, hundreds of drawings and paintings by the one man amongst them whose work would alter the face of British art for years to come. There were tabletops, cupboard doors, fireside bellows, pots and the like, all of which Wallis had painted. Nicholson had given Wallis four sketchbooks that he had filled instinctively; they had come back with Wallis' possessions giving Berlin access to the old man's instinctive marks. The list of illustrations in *Alfred Wallis: Primitive* shows this death painting to be from: 'Collection Sven Berlin'. There is nothing to suggest proportional possession but of the other fifty-odd works listed in the 1949 edition of *Alfred Wallis: Primitive*, ten remained with Sven and Helga. Four were from Stokes' collection and thirteen from Nicholson and Hepworth; their friend Helen Sutherland had one; so too did David Leach, H.S. 'Jim' Ede and Herbert Read and no doubt due to the Bouverie-Hoyton link, one went to Penzance School of Art. Three had already found their way into public collections at MoMA in New York, The Redfern Gallery and the British Museum and, with one or two exceptions, the others went to Berlin's local friends like Brett Guthrie and William Care.³⁶ In sorting through Wallis' belongings Berlin, leaped jubilantly upon a significant letter written to the old man, on 18 February 1928, in which Nicholson recorded the price he paid for a small collection of paintings; to Berlin this was a trophy but when Nicholson discovered that Berlin had seen that letter, his actions cut like a wedge through the Little Park Owles community.

TBerlin's book reveals how diligently he wanted to record Wallis' life and ancestry. Compared with the facilities available nowadays, it may seem parochial but as Berlin was practically penniless all he could do was write around to friends for help. He had got a clue that Wallis may have had Scottish roots and wrote to Barns-Graham accordingly. She had gone for her annual break to St Andrews and began to ask around. In late September 1942, Barns-Graham wrote a two-

page letter offering advice. 'My parents rather suggest there is no (Wallis) or Wallace tartan, that it is a lowland family, Renfrewshire, [*sic*]' but she offered to speak to Mrs Wallace, a friend of her parents.³⁷ We cannot be sure what else Barns-Graham was able to tell him as Berlin had to put everything on hold. In 1949, Berlin says that while he was writing the early pages of the book he was called up for military service;³⁸ but that would be to disguise the fact that his conscientious objection was folding in on him.

That reality got the better of Berlin's objection to fighting and was obviously a Damascene experience. He was cycling back to Zennor one night when he saw a British convoy being attacked by enemy planes. In abject horror, he sensed that the War could destroy his family life if he did not acknowledge it. In short, he decided to join the army. But first, he had to be sure of two things before he could go for active service. Firstly, he made sure that Helga and the children would be relatively safe by moving them into St Peter's Studio in St Ives.³⁹ That achieved, he began to put his Wallis book into some sense of order. With the family under the watchful eyes of friends, Berlin tucked the manuscript under his arm, joined the army on 3 December, 1942, and set off for the required six-month training course. Berlin hints that he may even have spent his war as a rear-gunner in the RAF had he not rejected an offer made by a wing-commander in Oxford but he does not elucidate.⁴⁰

By way of a complete and utter contrast that would forever mark the distinction between Berlin and his contemporaries, Herbert Read told Nicholson in a letter, dated 12 November 1942, that he had been talking to Marcus Brumwell about what, by 1943, would become known as the Design Research Unit. The DRU was a multi-disciplinary design consultancy whose personnel would come to play a tangential but noteworthy role in the history of art in St Ives. It was the brainchild of Marcus Brumwell, the managing director of the Stuart Advertising Agency in partnership with Misha Black, one of the more significant industrial designers of the time. Their plan was to introduce good design to post-war British industry. Alongside another Brumwell project, Mass-Observation, they set up their office in London's Kingsway where Herbert Read was appointed DRU's first staff member. Brumwell had a holiday house at Feock on the estuary of the River Fal on the south coast of Cornwall. Nicholson and Christopher Wood were staying with the Brumwells in 1928 and met Dr John Wells who was staying with his cousins, the Williams family nearby.

Six Days later, Gabo was in London for a few days while he took part in a seminar at the Czech Institute alongside Read. He had the ear of Brumwell and the architect, Leslie Martin, with whom he was staying. Naturally, the talk was of sculpture and industrial design, a field in which Gabo saw himself working with the new materials brought about by wartime technology. In 1938, Gabo made a model of a larger piece, 'Construction in space', only to have it stolen from his car while it was parked outside a restaurant in Frith Street, Soho. 'Greatly

distressed by his loss, Mr. Gabo, speaking from his Hampstead studio, said to a reporter – “I will gladly pay a reward for its return. I had sold this model, which stands about a foot high, to Mr. Leslie Martin, Professor of Architecture at Hull, for 30 guineas.”⁴¹ Doubtless their conversation ranged around Gabo’s particular requirement for clear plastics and an industrial thread for use on his experimental stringed sculpture. He had conceived his emblematic piece, *Linear Construction No. 1*, which he saw as a prototype for a large-scale public sculpture. As a result Brumwell, gave Gabo an introduction to ICI who played a key role in making Perspex for aircraft cockpits and in December, shortly after Gabo’s return to Carbis Bay, Brumwell sent him some glass thread.

10. Gabo’s Grudge against Nicholson

Gabo’s mindset was balanced precariously between the urge to work and anxiety about his family in Russia. He found work difficult but in January 1943 he may have been working on a larger version of *Linear Construction No. 1*. Then, on 18 January, much to his delight, he heard that Leningrad had been liberated. He tells his diary that he had begun work on a piece that he would dedicate to Leningrad. He would do it

as a symbolic expression of his deepest . . . feelings of admiration for my homeland, an expression of the humble feelings of a . . . son for an afflicted, passionately loved mother, whom fate has separated. I will put all my powers into making this my best work, or I will not allow it to see the light of day.⁴²

With his ancestral homeland a near neighbour of Gabo’s beloved Leningrad, Berlin would have understood his emotional friend. With his Wallis book well on the way, the major part of the work has been done during months of intensive training in billets, tents, Army canteens and guard rooms in different parts of the country, and in the vestry of the Methodist Church at Hitchen.⁴³ Discussions with Faber & Faber about the book in London accounted for Berlin’s absence from Wallis’ graveside in September 1942 but ‘because of the shortage of war, and a few shadowy sanctions, it did not appear till 1949. . . .’⁴⁴ Those ‘shadowy sanctions’ will become all too evident but there was an immediate side-effect that, despite what Berlin says, does recall the proverbial ‘chicken-and-egg’ dilemma. Provided that he could meet the deadline, Berlin had the chance of having an article on Wallis published. The opportunity arose via Herbert Read again who sent the article to Cyril Connolly and Peter Watson, the editors of the cultural magazine *Horizon*.

At that moment, Berlin’s pioneering article was destined to be the first on Wallis ever to be published but Berlin reckoned without the ‘shadowy sanction’ of Nicholson who put in an appearance. Mellis’ biographer, Andrew Lambirth, tells us categorically:

Nicholson had no time for Berlin, considered his work negligible and had already made his disdain clear. Berlin simply wanted to write about Wallis. Nicholson was as possessive as usual about what he considered his discovery, and tried to persuade Stokes to stop Berlin from publishing. Nicholson feared Berlin may say deleterious things about him, and he also wanted to be the first to publish something on Wallis.⁴⁵

Hepworth's biographer, Sarah Jane Checkland, underlines this. 'But once Ben got wind of Sven's plan, he quickly wrote his own article in order to pre-empt Sven's, and appealed to Stokes to dissuade Sven from publishing. The result was a stand-up row between the decent minded Stokes and the determined Ben. . . .'⁴⁶ Lambirth suggests that the aftermath – from Mellis' perspective – was that 'Ben quarrelled with everyone. . . . Everybody was so jealous and always quarrelling.'⁴⁷

The ramifications of that alleged 'stand-up row' forever tainted Berlin's reputation. In the event, *both* articles were published in the January 1943 issue and unbelievably, *both* had the same title – 'Alfred Wallis'.⁴⁸ In the introduction to the recently revised edition of his Wallis book, Berlin writes from a safe distance that Nicholson heard about his piece 'and at once sent an article of his own to push in front of mine, but the editors insisted on mine going first, which left a splinter in Ben's finger.'⁴⁹ Apart from the frosty silence between Stokes and Nicholson, this splinter became a rapier in the fencing match between Berlin and Nicholson that would last Nicholson's lifetime and beyond. Berlin came firmly to believe that Nicholson's feelings towards him lay behind what he believed was his 'isolation' by the Art Establishment. There may even be a hint of conspiracy about what happened next. Berlin confirms:

was in uniform when it came out and completely unknown; my article was the target of a really nasty attack by Evelyn Waugh, but it was defended by Graham Greene in the next issue. This might seem irrelevant were it not that this was the first writing about Wallis and opened up the whole firework display which has gone on ever since as if I had hit an ammunition dump with a stray rifle bullet.⁵⁰

Gabo meanwhile, in a letter of 16 February, expressed his gratitude towards Leslie Martin who, like Brumwell, had been trying to help him not just to access an appropriate supply of new materials but also a possible sale of his work. That sale came about in March when Gabo sold the first documented sale of *Linear Construction No.1* to Helen Sutherland for whom Martin had designed a house. Then in a letter of 19 March, Read wrote from the DRU asking Gabo to comment on the design of a new car being planned for a post-war market by Jowett Cars. Gabo would have been better pleased to have been asked to work on an aeroplane but was nevertheless delighted with a commission that would

ALFRED WALLIS

One

(Born 18th August 1855; died 19th August 1942)

129th

It is part of the incalculable crime of modern life that people still starve, still live in abject poverty. We have the Poor Law to guard these sad lives, it is true; but only those who have been forced to use this law know the inadequacy of the help it extends, the unsympathetic indifference of those whose business it is to put it into operation, and the interior agony of the human being who has sunk so low on the social scale—from whatever cause—that he must apply for relief from destitution, or struggle along on the Old Age Pension, finally to enter the Workhouse Infirmary when age, sickness and suffering have done their work of destruction.

To an artist this agony is tenfold, because of his increased consciousness of life and his innate sensitivity.

To the mind of a Cornish peasant, who is still insular, still in need of an impossible secular paradise (as indeed so many of us are at heart), who is in terror of hellfire and damnation—a tribe that has for centuries worked on the fields and sea with the stubborn persistence that characterizes the crude instinct to breathe and move for ever under the threat of the invading foreigner—to such a mind the thought of the Dark House is always present, with the primæval fear of extinction.

1c

Working on the fields of Zennor during the winter I have seen men drop to the ground beside me rather than give in to the cold and hard work. It is the ancient fear of starvation, the stern morality of their religious upbringing that keeps them going—the fear of destitution, fear of the 'Boss', fear of the Saxon, the Roman, the Dane, the Old Testament God—it is all the same: this fear moved in the dim brains, stiffened the damp fur of these men at a time when their bare claws were split on micre jutting from the rock.

So it is that an ancient mechanism has been put to a modern political use.

The reason why a Cornish peasant—the miner, the farm labourer, the fisherman—so often became a drunkard or an intensely religious person, or both (the St. Ives fishing community was always split up in this way), had its roots in the economic conditions that kept alive this deeply ingrained fear.

The Cornish are an emotional, literal people with no art of their own through which to free themselves; these compensa-

occupy him for some time to come. One can almost hear his mind ticking over. On 1 April, he 'produced an extended critique of the design, focussing on the exaggerated streamlining (based on American precedents) on alleged defects in such elements as the fenders, bonnet, front and rear windows, and on the failure to use positive colour for the bodywork.'⁵¹

Jowett Cars were impressed and, as Read reported on 12 May, they offered DRU a contract on which Gabo would work. Naturally, there were conditions but, in principle, Jowett was 'prepared to pay us £3,000 in three yearly payments of £1,000 for the design, and a further £3,000 in three yearly payments if the design is put into production.' Given that this hub of industrial design was to be in Lanyon's 'Attic Studio' in St Ives, Brumwell expressed reservations to Nicholson, in a letter of 17 May, about Gabo's suitability for the job; nevertheless, he was particularly keen to accept as the contract would help establish the DRU.⁵² Naturally, Gabo was excited with thoughts that one of his designs might reach production as much as the degree of financial security that the project would bring. Nevertheless, negotiations continued into the autumn before the contract was finally signed. For the second half of the year, as he began work on the project Gabo's diary remained blank. He had been distracted by the time of the arrest of Mussolini on 25 July, an event that he saw as the beginning of the end of the War.

While Gabo was settling down to work, Berlin was back in camp. His unique contribution to the entire Alfred Wallis saga was that linking the local community to the art world. Without the book, so much of Wallis' day-to-day existence would have been lost forever; it could not have been written without the sympathetic understanding that Berlin had learned from working in the fields alongside Wallis' relatives. He picked up on the Cornish cadence of speech and recorded accurately stories as they had been told. He made himself known to Wallis' friends and neighbours, including the milkman and the trades-people who supplied the old man with materials on which to paint. After what can have been no more than ten days leave, if that, Berlin packed his Wallis manuscript in his haversack and went back to barracks where he trained as a gunner with the 53rd Heavy Royal Artillery Regiment with all the routines that one has come to expect from the British army. Somewhere between all these field manoeuvres, Berlin wrote the Preface for his Wallis book; it is dated August 1943 and was written at Strensall Camp about 5 miles north of York.

Stokes was at the centre of all this activity; he would be in daily contact with Gabo next door and wrote regularly to Berlin. Nicholson also corresponded with Berlin but he may well have breathed a sigh of relief that Berlin's departure left the Wallis field clear once more. Of that initial Little Park Owles nucleus, absentee member Alfred Wallis had now departed and Lanyon and Sven Berlin were now both on active service. Barns-Graham had established her place among the artists in town. Presumably Peter Freeman remained in the garden with Stokes, while Nicholson and Hepworth toiled away on their own legacy down the road.



By the time he took on Little Park Owles in 1939, Stokes had had written seven books of art and historical criticism. *The Thread of Ariadne* was published in 1925 when he was twenty-two. *Sunrise in The West: A Modern Interpretation of Past and Present* followed a year later. Then came the significant volume on *The Quattro Cento: A Different Conception of the Italian Renaissance* in 1932, *The Stones of Rimini* and *Tonight the Ballet* (both 1934) and *The Russian Ballet* (1935) all indicative of Stokes' love of classical ballet and anything Italian. Another significant title, *Colour and Form*, was completed in 1937 before he and Mellis married and moved to Carbis Bay. For all the obvious reasons – shortage of paper, family life, the garden and the exigencies of war itself – his next Romantic title *Venice: An Aspect of Art* did not see the light of day till the end of the War.

Since moving to Little Park Owles, Stokes continued as an out-of-town member to The London Library – a convention of which was the right to borrow a parcel of up to fifteen books at a time. He had been a member during his bachelor days in London that Margaret Gardiner remembered so well. Gardiner was puzzled that this young aesthete lived in such a mess.

“His flat in the Adelphi was a twilit silt of books and dust,” she observed. He once told her how he tried again and again to borrow a certain book from the London Library that he particularly needed for his work. He finally requested to know who had borrowed it, only to discover it had been out continually in his own name for two years. Eventually he disinterred it from the crowded floor of his flat.⁵³

The moment that Nicholson and Hepworth moved out, Stokes reclaimed possession of the two rooms on the ground floor at the east end of the house. The northerly room overlooking the yard became his studio and he used the long room next door as his study, the windows of which offered far reaching views over the Bay to the east and the sunken terrace to the south. Mellis took the dining room as her studio, while their living room looked out onto the garden. Since the birth of Telfer, Stokes and Mellis had separate sleeping arrangements.

All was not peace and harmony at Little Park Owles. Mellis' younger sister, Ann, was a frequent visitor and became an established part of the household; she remembered the bickering that followed Nicholson and Hepworth's competing personalities. How much Mellis knew at the time remains pure speculation but a growing affection was seeded between her little sister and her husband. Ann Mellis was born in 1922 and still in her late teens when Stokes and Mellis took Little Park Owles. Born in 1902, Stokes was old enough to be her father. There are suggestions that the Stokes marriage was 'stormy' but whether tempestuous or not, Mellis would not have been prepared for the ultimate treachery that lay just over the wartime horizon. Her own words would come to haunt her; she couldn't believe that anything could go wrong between them whatever

happened.⁵⁴ The Carbis Bay community remained self-contained and yet, following the stand-up row between Stokes and Nicholson, it was in total discord. Sitting behind his gun sights, Berlin would be blissfully unaware that his actions were at the centre of a chasm that now divided Little Park Owles from Chy-an-Kerris during 1943.

Contact between Nicholson and Stokes was reduced to handwritten notes. Nicholson's influence in the world of modern art was beginning to rival Gabo's international reputation. His presence in Carbis Bay had attracted influential people – the British Council, the Arts Council and the like. But while everyone was becoming complacent about it, the country was still at war with Germany. By late 1943, Lanyon had been posted to Tripoli. Gunner Berlin's regiment had taken over an eighteenth-century mansion in the Midlands where his colourful presence added to a family of peacocks strutting about the lawns.

Stokes was still on duty with the Home Guard but compared with those around him, his correspondents would be literary, academic; most would be from the world of letters, their exchanges frequently bordering on the philosophical. He tells his friend, Edward Sackville-West, in a second undated letter – about 1943 – that he has been stimulated by his friend's essay on Graham Sutherland.⁵⁵ This was '... an interest that has been slow to grow [since Stokes met Sutherland]. You have much of the poetry of the painting and forestalled irrelevant questions which is a clever thing to do.' Stokes believed that Sutherland deserved his success 'and that it will be resounding.' The letter ends with a note of reality, telling Sackville-West that seven refugees have arrived and that he is off 'for a night's watch on the promontory.'⁵⁶

Gabo too, would appreciate Stokes' philosophical discussions but since May he had become involved in discussions and meetings before the DRU agreement with Jowett was finally signed in October. He had visited ICI at Welwyn Garden City in September to discuss the use of Perspex for the windows of the car and by way of linking industrial design with his art, the new Nylon fabrics finally enabled him to make satisfactory versions of *Linear Construction No. 1*.⁵⁷

Nicholson received a letter dated 16 October 1943 from the poet Sydney Graham. William Sydney Graham (1918-1986) had read both Berlin's and Nicholson's article on Wallis in *Horizon* and wrote suggesting that if Nicholson was willing, he would cycle over to meet him. 'Jock' Graham was born in Greenock. He left school at the age of fourteen to take an apprenticeship, like Berlin, with a firm of structural engineers. His gifted draughtsmanship would frequently illustrate his correspondence but his calling was elsewhere. At the end of his apprenticeship, he obtained a bursary that until the War intruded, allowed him to study literature at Newbattle Abbey College in Edinburgh; it was here that he met Agnes Kilpatrick 'Nessie' Dunsmuir. The conscientious grounds on which he stated his objection to war found no favour with his tribunal. He therefore sought temporary refuge in Ireland before a fortuitous ulcer proved

him unfit for active service. He was given night work in a torpedo factory at Greenock leaving him time to write. He told Nicholson that his first published book of poems, *Cage without Grievance*, had come from David Archer's Parton Press in 1942. David Archer was a generous and sympathetic patron of the arts. With Archer's help, Graham visited London where his interest in the visual arts was sharpened by meeting the painters Robert Colquhoun, Robert McBryde and John Minton. By 1942, Graham was working as a teacher in Galloway but in 1943 he and Nessie moved into two caravans in Germoe between Marazion and Helston in Cornwall. They were to remain in Cornwall until 1947. Graham told Nicholson that he was 'quite alone' and needed the stimulation of conversation.⁵⁸

In view of the controversial nature of his assertions over Nicholson's treatment of Wallis, it is inconceivable that, even stuck in his barracks, Berlin would not have passed his Wallis manuscript to Stokes. Berlin was alleging that Nicholson had paid Wallis less than was his due for the paintings that he had bought from the old man. Berlin might concede that Nicholson was amply qualified to talk of Wallis' art but would assert that he, Berlin, was better qualified to express the humility of the old mariner. Ever the diplomat, Stokes, in one of his letters, would have urged Berlin to let Nicholson read it. But by now, Stokes and Nicholson were virtually incommunicado. For the best part of a year barely a word had passed between them due the very fact that Berlin was writing on Wallis in the first place. In view of Nicholson's attempts to control Wallis' affairs, no reason has come to light to explain why he was not appointed Wallis' executor; instead he seemed to accede to Stokes' appointment but Stokes obviously felt that it would be prudent for Berlin to pay homage to Nicholson's position. Gunner Berlin sent a draft of the Wallis manuscript to Nicholson in late January 1944. He should not have been – and maybe was not – surprised by Nicholson's response; Nicholson exploded with indignation in a fulcrum of disagreement on which Berlin balanced his own emotions 'til his dying day.⁵⁹

Nicholson's letter appears to be lost to history but Berlin's reply dated 6 February 1944 seems to quote Nicholson's words back at him. Berlin felt that *he* was now under 'attack' from Nicholson and that Nicholson's reaction was simply not 'fair play.'⁶⁰ There can be little doubt that Nicholson felt similarly injured. The frost between the men-folk affected their wives, too. Helga was well out of reach but Lambirth tells us that sometime in 1944 Hepworth wrote to Mellis saying that Adrian had snubbed her and that his private quarrel with Ben was escalating into a family feud. However, Mellis and Hepworth managed to maintain friendly relations. Barbara thought Ben and Stokes' natures had become incompatible 'either through war nerves or something else. They misunderstand each other so completely that it seems to me impossible to judge the situation on merit'.⁶¹ It is obvious that Hepworth had no idea what that 'something else' might be. Checkland tells us that in an earlier discussion, Berlin and Nicholson held opposing views on the effect of Wallis' poverty on his art.

Sven then began wondering why Ben had made himself scarce in the immediate aftermath of Wallis' death, but had nonetheless turned up promptly when it came to gathering up the pickings from the hovel. Becoming convinced that Ben had not paid Wallis fairly, he included a footnote showing that Ben had paid a mere 13 shillings for a total of nine works, while the text also quoted a local novelist, George Manning-Sanders, who on visiting Wallis at . . . Madron was regaled with a stream of invective about "*Them They, Him*" and how "He" had "Got 'undreds of my paintens" and was "goin' to make thousands a pounds".⁶²

Although Lanyon's 'Attic Studio' was hardly an industrial design studio, Gabo had been so busy working on the Jowett car that his diary had remained blank since Mussolini was ousted in July 1943. He had told Read in January 1942 that he had taken on design projects whenever the opportunity arose; over the last fifteen years he had designed 'at least twenty-five new objects' and he knew that he was good 'for a few hundred more, if only society' would let him do it.⁶³ In late January 1944, he had submitted a patent application for an elliptical steering wheel but, by February, Jowett Cars were applying pressure on DRU for the completed design and, as the intermediary, Read was pushing Gabo. As a result, Gabo told his friend that he had not worked so hard since his work on an earlier project for the Moscow Palace. By 28 February, he had nevertheless 'arrived at a definite solution . . . the whole car, the overall shape as well as many details' were already clear and he was making the required clay model for his progressive, concept design.⁶⁴ The contents of his waste-paper basket would have been a treasure trove of discoveries.

Gabo was offered another distraction in February 1944; this came from Meary James Tambimuttu, an eccentric Sinhalese publisher. Tambimuttu's life in publishing was varied and confusing to say the least, except that in an editorial role, the publishers, Nicholson & Watson, provided his magazine, *Poetry London*, with its first London office. They gave him a free hand in establishing his innovative imprint, *Editions Poetry London*, between 1942 and 1946. Tambi, as he was known, had obviously become enamoured with West Cornwall. In the near future, his name would be linked with a number of those in St Ives and Carbis Bay, but among his earliest of projects were plans for a book on Constructivism, to be introduced by Nicholson over whose involvement with his personal philosophy, Gabo would have felt dispassionate. Then came the suggestion that Tambi had approached Nicholson about publishing a series of monographs.⁶⁵ This would have settled more easily with Gabo as it would involve his brother, too. He says that 'At the beginning of the year Ben informed me that a publisher approached him with the suggestion of publishing a series of monographs on living artists. This was to include Antoine Pevsner, Gabo, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, [Graham] Sutherland and [Henry] Moore.'⁶⁶ Gabo was excited at the prospect

and then begun to lay plans including a translation of his *Realist Manifesto*, a large number of plates and a series of essays. It soon became obvious to Gabo, however, that Nicholson was changing the agenda to exclude Pevsner from the project.

Berlin, of course, would not be surprised; even as he was still in training, he and Nicholson were rutting like stags over the Wallis affair. And on 21 February 1944, Hepworth entered the fray. She sent Berlin what Checkland describes as a letter of ‘monumental pomposity’.⁶⁷ As if it was their God-given right to pass judgement, Hepworth reminded Berlin that she and Nicholson had known Wallis and that he had not.

She denied that Ben had “exploited” Wallis, saying that on one occasion “we tried to keep fewer things & send the same money so that we paid more for each’, but that, because Wallis assumed this meant they had stopped liking the work, they had never tried that again.”⁶⁸

Berlin, however, knew better and although Nicholson was aware of that, Hepworth was not. Ignorant of the speculative likelihood that Berlin was privy to Stokes’ views on Nicholson’s behaviour, Hepworth was indignant over Berlin’s implication that Nicholson was using Wallis to further his own reputation and, quite naturally, decided that Berlin was blackening Nicholson’s integrity. But then, two weeks later in early March 1944, for whatever reason, Nicholson began to backtrack; maybe it finally dawned on him that Berlin was headed to France on active service, from which he may not return.

He wrote subjectively, congratulating Berlin on his efforts so far and suggesting a long list of corrections. He also claimed that he and Hepworth had helped arrange Wallis’ funeral but to what extent still remains open to discussion. Nicholson’s explanation was that at the moment that they had heard of Wallis’ death, Hepworth had got onto Stokes saying that something must be done to avoid Wallis being given a pauper’s grave. And, of course, Stokes – rather than Nicholson – did something. In view of the fact that Berlin never made it to Wallis’ graveside, his next letter to Nicholson was, at face value, a well-considered compromise. ‘Where there is variance concerning the exact nature of events at & before the funeral I shall be inclined to leave things unsaid to avoid dispute all round.’⁶⁹ Berlin revised his Wallis manuscript in the vestry of the Methodist Chapel in Hitchen while he was no doubt ‘at rest’ in his military training. For the time being, the discussion with Nicholson was dropped and Berlin went back to duty. He was promoted from humble gunner to Lance Bombardier Berlin (the equivalent of Corporal) and became known in the ranks as ‘Bomb Berlin’.

Nicholson’s international reputation was becoming known in St Ives and Borlase Smart – whose place in St Ives art history is defined as the ultimate diplomat – had made an approach. Barns-Graham had been working for the

best part of a year in the studio, to which she was given access by Smart. As Berlin confirmed when he bumped into Stokes in late August 1942, Stokes and Mellis very rarely set foot in town; only occasionally, it would appear, did Nicholson or Hepworth – certainly not Gabo. But Nicholson would surely have wandered in to see the work of the St Ives Society of Artists. Had he done so, he would have probably taken one look at the art on show and walked straight out again. Nevertheless, while he, too, knew comparatively little about the ‘advanced artists’, it is entirely characteristic of Smart that he wanted to meet Nicholson, Hepworth and Gabo with a view to them showing alongside STISA. In early 1943, he prevailed upon Barns-Graham to make the introductions.

By any measure, this was a meeting of some import. Nicholson would have been flattered to have a local *enthusiast* and unwittingly, Smart’s invitation altered STISA forever. Quite how much of an opportunity Nicholson would have seen this as at the time and with what honours Borlase Smart would have been rewarded, remain to be seen but both men saw this coming-together as a step forward. Gabo, however, had begun to distance himself from Nicholson over Tambi’s monographs and was not so enthusiastic. His biographers tell us that he felt increasingly alienated from what he saw as ‘the Constructivist group in St Ives’ and that he had responded to Smart accordingly.

Ever since I began to exhibit my work I have purposely refrained from joining any group of artists or any artistic society. My work being of a controversial nature, I have always thought that that is the only way to avoid friction amongst the members as well as keeping myself free from responsibility for the ideologies of the others.⁷⁰

In a gesture that no doubt raised a few eyebrows, both in town and out at Little Park Owles, Nicholson was supposedly invited to show work in No.1 Porthmeor Studios – Smart’s studio – alongside that of his host. ‘Show Day’ was on 2 March 1944, Nicholson may well have made the initial suggestion. He had, in all probability, been privy to Smart’s aspirations for a significant new gallery and Smart’s link to St Austell Brewery, which would shortly bear fruit. Indeed, Smart may have been helping Nicholson to find a studio at this time. In a later letter to Philip James at the Arts Council, Nicholson explained that he had been held back from taking a studio because it had been let, he was told, to some woman who paints very small watercolours.

Coach loads of people came to St Ives annually for Show Day. Smart’s work was noticed in the *St Ives Times* on 10 March 1944. Nicholson, too, got a mention. ‘In the same studio, in astounding contrast, Ben Nicholson exhibits a group of geometrical designs for which he is famous. This innovation of modern art was a surprise to many visitors.’⁷¹ No doubt, Barns-Graham would have been happy; she was showing in the No.3 Studio, practically next door.



Lanyon tells us that: ‘I landed at Taranto in 1944’,⁷² which must have been in April, 1944. The sixth Armoured Division moved to Taranto on 20–21 April 1944.⁷³ But war was the last thing on Lanyon’s mind; he had fallen in love again, not with a woman but with the beauty of Italy. It was to be a lasting affair. ‘Apulia, the heel of Italy on the Adriatic coast, was a new Cornwall for me (I was to hear that trade between that coast and Cornwall was probable very long ago). I wondered how I could illustrate the heart of the Italian peasant, vital and strong like the slow lumbering white oxen on the plains beyond Foggia, fortissimo in the streets of Naples. Then I recalled the gong at the bottom of the stairs – and at once the images crowd in – the opera, the lottery, discussion and gesture and the childlike joy which accompanies the barrel organ. With the Punch and Judy shows the barrel organ always has a curious quality of fumbled magic. Out of the Via Roma in Naples the funicular railways run up and down, up to Vomero and down again right into the heart of Naples, into the drum with its hundreds of pins twanging as the handle is turned round and round.’⁷⁴

11. Nicholson is Side-lined by Stokes and Gabo

There were still a few hoops through which Berlin would have to jump but there was progress with his Wallis manuscript. His discussions with Read’s publishers Faber & Faber at the time of Wallis’ funeral in August 1942 had come to nothing, probably due to the exigencies of paper supplies imposed by the War. But even then, Nicholson remained prickly, complaining to Read with no justification whatsoever that Berlin hadn’t checked with him first. Checkland does her best to explain what followed but, besides Nicholson, she too seems oblivious to the fact that Bombardier Berlin was being made battle-ready for the most horrifying event imaginable, the Allied assault on France. ‘At this point Ben made a cunning move, by introducing Sven to Tambimuttu [*sic*], the eccentric Sinhalese publisher’⁷⁵ over whom, as we have seen with Gabo’s monograph, he appeared to have held some sway.⁷⁶ As Checkland confirms, ‘Feeling beholden to Ben, Sven then agreed to amend his text and combine it with Ben’s *Horizon* article, while asking Ben to take over the project entirely in the event that “I suddenly vanish”.’⁷⁷

Sometime in April 1944, the 53rd Heavy Royal Artillery Regiment had moved south to Aldershot. Under such circumstances, it would have been a while before Nicholson’s letters would have caught up with Berlin who was probably becoming battle-weary with the whole Wallis affair anyway. So, too, as Berlin’s confidant, was Stokes. But Nicholson was not going to let matters rest entirely, particularly where Stokes was concerned. As Checkland suggests, it is understandable that Stokes, who had been generous to a fault, ‘should not only steer clear of Ben, but be casting aspersions upon him.’ After all said and done, Adrian had taken in Nicholson and Hepworth when they fled London and – for an undiscovered period – he had even paid the rent on Dunluce for them.

Gabo, too, was going through anxious times, none of which, in this case, were of Nicholson's making. Between 25 April and 23 May, he became frightened of making contact with his family in Russia for fear that the authorities may hold them to account for his absence, even though, as he confided in his diary, 'I have always been pro-Soviet and know of no accusations against me.'⁷⁸

Alfred Wallis' penultimate resting place may well have been in Stokes' garage, only to be followed in quick succession by his possessions from which Nicholson had been granted first pick. Berlin would have not have been surprised when he came home on his first annual leave in May 1944 to learn that, after the long-standing frost, Stokes and Nicholson had stopped speaking altogether. On 15 April 1944, Nicholson had written a 'swingeing letter' to Stokes suggesting that their friendship of some years' duration – their 'mock friendship' as Nicholson called it – should be terminated altogether.⁷⁹ The only trouble was that Nicholson was still beholden to Stokes for one of his paintings. 'June 1937', which, at 62¾ × 79¼ inches (159.4 × 210.3 cm) was the largest painting that Nicholson had made and it, too, was being stored alongside Stokes' vegetable delivery van and Wallis' possessions in the garage at Little Park Owles. Nicholson had effectively shot himself in the foot since he stopped speaking to Stokes. He needed to collect the painting and he had no option but to write a note to suggest that Stokes might like to leave it with Gabo at Faerystone, next door, from where, under watchful neighbouring eyes, he would have to carry his cumbersome burden along the breezy, half-mile walk back to Chy-an-Kerris.

Gabo, however, was now at war with Nicholson and Hepworth too. As his biographers confirm, 'Relations became strained to the point of acrimony during the last two or three years of Gabo's stay in Cornwall.'⁸⁰ Seeming to pass over his distance from Nicholson, their interpretation was that:

Gabo felt obsessive anger and resentment at the spectacle of artists of secondary importance and limited originality achieving a level of recognition and success which was equal to or even greater than his own.⁸¹

In a letter dated 22 May to Ramsden, Gabo explained cynically that Nicholson had told him 'in his charming innocent way that he dissuaded the publisher from including Antoine Pevsner' and that Nicholson made a counter-suggestion that he – Nicholson – Hepworth and Gabo should be combined in one book. Gabo refused. 'Apart from the fact that it would have been blatantly disloyal to my intimate comrade in life and work, the whole scheme was to me too obvious a danger of building up a clique . . . an undertaking in which I could never allow myself to participate.'⁸²

Gabo sensed that everyone saw him as a drawer to be opened to access the store of Constructivist material it contained.⁸³ Constructivism was a term that in Gabo's eyes, he shared exclusively with his brother; it was a philosophy, not merely a slogan for:



6. Sven Berlin with his parents, 1940s.

any artist who comes along with a few squares and circles painted on canvas, or a contraption of a few pieces of glass and wire and thread and stone etc. . . . There was a time when Pevsner and I stood alone in this field. The time is coming when we will be many, but I have never have nor will I sponsor or participate in a movement which would facilitate the formation of a stagnant school or group under this name. As I see it constructivism should not serve for the benefit of one particular artist, a group of artists or any particular country.⁸⁴

Hepworth felt that Gabo's drawer metaphor epitomised what she saw as his 'conscious and unconscious obsessions.'⁸⁵ Gabo's biographers understood Hepworth to be saying that 'if Gabo felt he was responsible for the constructive idea, "what a load he must be carrying, my God . . . [h]is life must be one long anxiety with so many unruly artist children knocking about the world"'. Hairs were being split over the relative definitions of 'constructive' and Constructivism, from which latter group Hepworth was now anxious to distance herself. With little concern for the strains of war on his family in Russia, Hepworth saw Gabo as withdrawn and put it down to his work on the Jowett. She felt unable to approach him, believing that there would be 'a first class row if we speak first and Ben is in no mood to deal quietly with *that*. There would be harsh words and a complete rupture which would not do anybody any good.'⁸⁶

These acrimonious exchanges however, were paltry compared with what Berlin was about to face. He was given a short leave and used it to see his parents.

Though disappointed that his talks with Faber & Faber in 1942 had come to nothing, Berlin begun to hedge his bets. On 20 May 1944, days only before he went on active service for the first time, he wrote diplomatically to thank Nicholson for the introduction to Tambi, a contact that was to prove useful.

12. Alfred Wallis' Grave

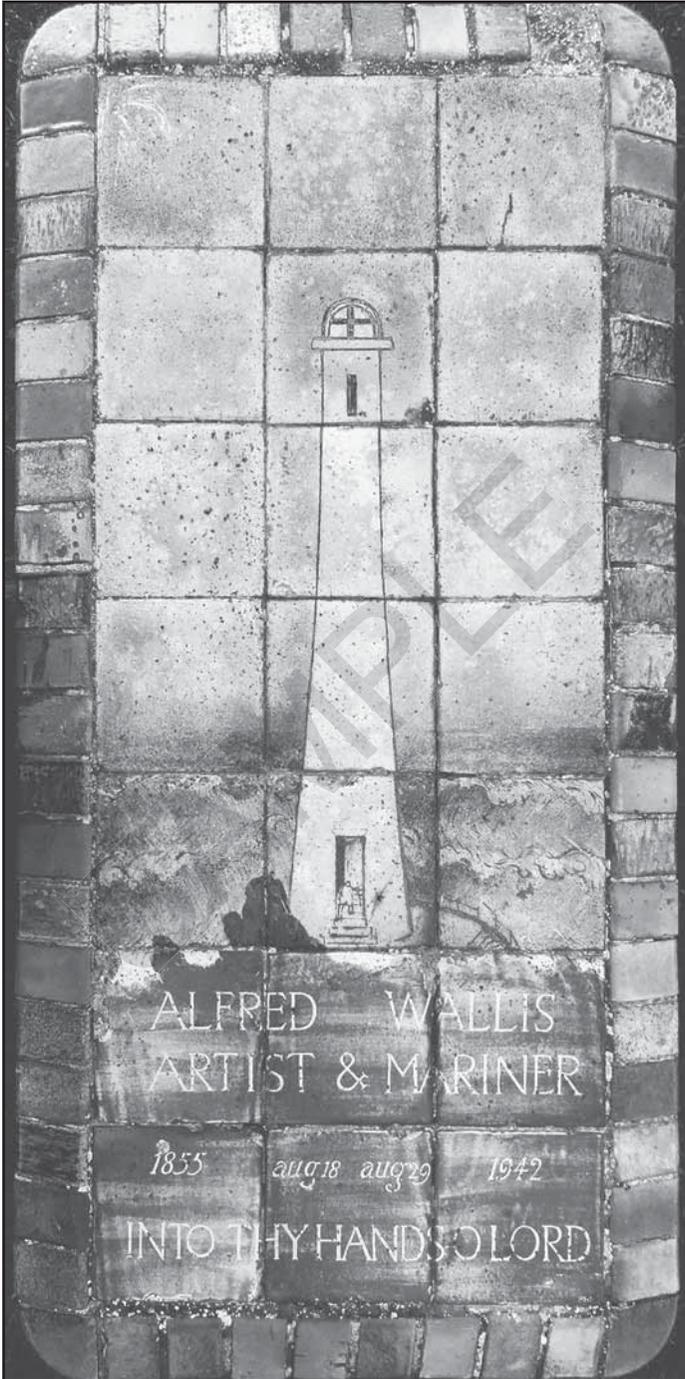
Perhaps as a result of the falling out between Nicholson and Stokes, Alfred Wallis had lain in an unmarked grave for almost a year. As Wallis' executor, Stokes felt the need to mark the grave and urged Berlin in the short time available to take charge of fund raising, to become 'Field Marshall' as Berlin militaristically termed the role.⁸⁷

Jim Ede – who had recently been staying with the Nicholsons – should “be good” for £5, Stokes suggested, while Peter Watson was likely to contribute £10. But, he warned, Sven should not expect to receive more than £1 from Ben and Barbara as they were so mean.⁸⁸

To have squeezed cash from the Little Park Owles group would have been a simple task but his limited time on leave would not have allowed Berlin time to twist the arms of more than the dedicated few in St Ives. The money he did raise went into the Little Park Owles pot and was put towards the memorial slab on Wallis' grave that remains distinguished by Bernard Leach's handmade tiles.⁸⁹ But Berlin compounded these good intentions.

Driven by nothing other than impractical instinct, 'Bomb Berlin' decided he would carve a memorial for Wallis himself. Beret in hand, he called on Nicholson and Hepworth. His intention was as admirable as their reaction was predictable. Berlin looked back to that moment through the mirage of old age. 'I had hoped to carve this myself, but circumstances did not allow. . . .'⁹⁰ He spoke to Hepworth of an idea he had conceived of the idea of a sculpture of a man in granite to be placed at the top of Rosewall Hill above St Ives so that the fishermen returning at dawn would see it rising out of the sea. Berlin was not yet a sculptor but believed he was young and able enough to have cut such a massive tribute. At that moment, he had carved very little that would not fit in the palm of one hand. To Hepworth, this would have been naïve beyond endurance.⁹¹

Berlin would have been unaware that life at Little Park Owles was taking a turn for the worse too. Stokes and Mellis were beginning to lose touch with each other. Stokes was making the odd foray into town without her. It can be a coincidence only, but, in May 1944, while all this was going on, Mellis' occasional cinema escort and dance partner, Peter Lanyon, was finally declared fit to fly. Checkland tells us that Lanyon's superiors continued to refuse him permission to join an aircrew; his work on the ground was obviously far too



7. Alfred Wallis's grave at Barnoon cemetery, St Ives, Cornwall, 2011.
Arranged by Adrian Stokes and designed by Bernard Leach.

valuable. Berlin's leave came to an abrupt end when he was required to play his part in the Allied invasion of occupied Europe. Berlin and Stokes continued to write in earnest while Berlin was fighting his way through Europe and Berlin would have left in relatively good humour. He had frequently spent the evenings in conference with Bernard and David Leach, sitting round the fireplace alongside their apprentices. He loaned Wilhelm's translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life* (1929) to Leach, through which, Berlin confirms, he and Leach became good friends.⁹² Alongside Frank Turk and Arthur Hambly, Bernard Leach completed the trio of people to whom Berlin constantly confirmed a debt of gratitude; he could, however, have added Stokes to the list.

Leach's house at the Pottery had been rebuilt since it was bombed in January 1941. With help from his friend, Berlin was able to move Helga and the children to Way's End to the tiny cottage Leach was now vacating.⁹³ It could not have come at a better time as Leach would keep an eye on them; Leach had volunteered to house Berlin's Wallis collection for the duration. Gabo – as only an emotive Russian could – had given Berlin words of advice before he left. 'He told me that in the Russian Revolution they could tell who would die among the young soldiers when they came up to the front line, and who would live till the next day. If I kept my inner knowledge I would live and not be killed. I would be all right.'⁹⁴

Berlin was back in Aldershot by 6 June 1944, the day that the D-Day landings began. It would have been difficult for Helga and his parents, not knowing 'til he was able to write quite where he was as the Allied assault began. Berlin would not have known, even as he returned to base, that the 53rd Heavy Royal Artillery Regiment was to stay put for a few days yet. Berlin tells us that on D-Day, he was given a special pass to see his publisher. In his *Poetry London* office, Tambimuttu signed the contract agreeing to publish the Alfred Wallis book.⁹⁵

As if to validate matters, Helga received a letter dated 9 June 1944 at Way's End from *Poetry London*. It was unsigned but contained confirmation that any money due to Berlin would be sent to her while he was away. It is obvious that Nicholson had put himself back in the Wallis driving seat and that he had sidelined Stokes; the letter confirmed that 'Ben Nicholson and Bernard Leach are acting for him also. . . .' The letter is adorned with blue pencil scribbles that may be the earliest recorded artwork by Janet, Berlin's baby daughter.⁹⁶ Berlin himself received a distressing letter while he was on leave. Frank Turk wrote to tell him the sad news that at the age of 40, their intermediary, Jack Wilson, had died. Preparations were well underway in Aldershot for the forthcoming invasion.