

The Friends of Dame Laura Knight Society, Malvern & Colwall Branch

Saturday 22nd October 2016: Women of the West - An illustrated talk by Alison Bevan, part of The Autumn in Malvern Festival
(click on image(s) to enlarge view)

The afternoon's proceedings were opened by Heather Whatley our Chairperson, who welcomed on our behalf special guest Alison Bevan, Director of Royal West of England Academy.



Below, are a few words of appreciation of the talk, by Gwyn Klee, our Vice Chair and Treasurer.



There was a warm buzz of anticipation in the hall, and a full house, to welcome Alison Bevan to talk on 'Women of the West'.

The first image we saw was an old 1880 photograph of the Brotherhood of Newlyn — not a woman in sight - and perhaps a discreet reference to the theme of the lecture.

Soon after this image was published Stanhope Forbes, with the aid of Caroline Gotch and her husband founded the colony of artists who made up the Newlyn/Lamorna Group. When Elizabeth Armstrong joined, then married, Forbes, her huge talent inspired the group; plein air painting, ordinary working folk sitters — fish gutters and the like - were illustrated by Elizabeth's techniques; etching in the style of Whistler and Sickert, a bold technique of square brush painting and a realistic approach to domestic themes, all brought much criticism but great acclaim. She it was who established the place of women painters, exhibiting and selling more work than her male counterparts, in this rapidly expanding and enlightened approach.

Dod Proctor, arguably the most famous artist of her day, met her husband Ernest at the school founded by the Forbes. She specialised in painting the nude. She became well known and feted after her

'Morning' was bought and exhibited at The Tate. Dod Proctor was a painter brave with the brush and palette and with an outspoken view of the place of women in the world of art.

When the Knights joined this colony Laura was hugely inspired by the vibrancy and energy she found there. Her approach became bolder and larger in every respect and some of her best work was done in the milieu of this bohemian atmosphere where members of the group would help with the transporting of her larger canvasses. The images we were shown were the ones we have become happily familiar with —and they too have become old friends. Laura's painting of the nude Ella Naper has become an iconic image, highly acclaimed, warmly received and most remembered. Ella taught Laura enamelling, the design and production of ceramics; the two women, with their partners, would spend some time in the hut near Dozmary Pool and live in bohemian style, much of it sans clothing.

Alathea Garstin, daughter of Norman, became a central figure in the group, regarded by one critic as England's leading impressionist painter. She and Dod Proctor were great friends, influencing and supporting each other each other though Dod spent her later years painting solitary women.

What followed in Alison's talk was a parade of sedate lesbian couples, all acclaimed in their time as excellent painters — Helene Schjerfbeck, Penlee the only UK holder of her work, Marianne Stokes, considered one of the leading women artists, Penlee have her 'Cornstooks'. With the arrival of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, bringing with them their attitude to 'open marriage', changing and swapping partners, a wind of change blew through the group bringing with it a nod at 'modernism'. And when Dorothy Larcher and Wilhelmina Graham came along, the latter clearly influenced by Ben Nicholson, her study of 'Rock Form' showing a wider influence of the many painters in that western peninsula, the place of this group in the Pantheon of painters was secure.

The last in this line of luminaries was Rose Hilton who has a current private showing in London. She is still painting in her studio in Newlyn and, in spite of her husband's ban on her picking up a brush while he was alive, her bold abstractions from an exciting palette are keenly sought. Good that the last brush stroke of our picture of the Women of the West was delivered by such a strong voice.

Gwyn Klee - Oct. 2016



It was a full house and a very successful event. We all are looking forward to many more. At the end of the talk, Murray Forsyth (our Archivist) gave a vote of thanks, on behalf of our Society.