



The Alfred Wallis Factor
Conflict in Post-War St Ives Art

DAVID WILKINSON

Foreword by Alan Livingston C.B.E.



The Alfred Wallis Factor

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and

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The Alfred Wallis Factor

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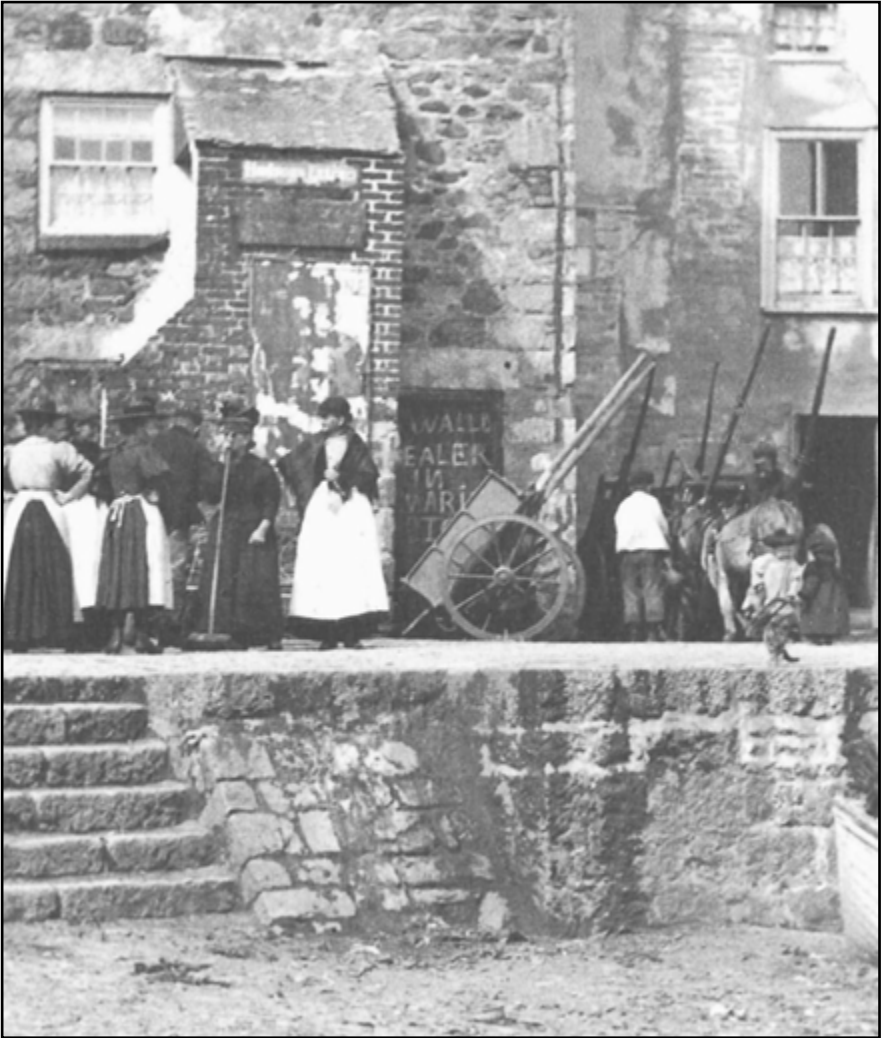
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Frontispiece: Alfred Wallis's Marine Store shop front, St Ives.

'A WALLIS
DEALER
IN
MARINE
STORES'.

The Alfred Wallis Factor
Conflict in Post-War St Ives Art

DAVID WILKINSON



The Lutterworth Press

For Julia

*For St Ives and the memory of Guido Morris,
this book is set in the typeface Bembo.*

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It speaks volumes of their continuing altruism that St Austell Brewery engaged an archivist; Chris Knight has spent many an hour going through the files, helping to re-connect the Brewery to their post-war sponsorship of art and artists in St Ives that came about through the friendship of Brewery Chairman, Egbert Barnes and Borlase Smart.

Over the last twenty-five years, I have been privileged to know so many of those who appear in this narrative, none more so than my very dear friends Sven and Julia Berlin. Some artists, those who could afford to do so, left their archives to national or regional libraries. Berlin did not; to his dying day circumstances forced him to sell. Not surprisingly, Berlin received very bad press in the wake of his 1962 book, *The Dark Monarch*. Those who recognised their thinly veiled persona took action resulting in the book being recalled and destroyed. Sadly, so much was lost by that action. But access to Berlin's records show that with practically everything he wrote, he had the paperwork to hand as he recorded those turbulent times. My very sincere thanks are extended to Julia Berlin for consent to use those records.

So many people from those post-war years made themselves known when I opened a bookshop-cum-gallery in St Ives in 1993. Berlin's close friend, John Barnes, sent round his identical twin, Bill, to confuse me. Their sister, Joan, would talk nostalgically about the 1940s. Vivienne Morris, the Barnes family, Willie Barnes-Graham, Terry Frost's son Anthony, Patrick Heron and John Wells gathered in the gallery in 1994 when Berlin launched the first volume of his

autobiography, *The Coat of Many Colours*. Vivienne Morris wanted Joan alongside when she met Berlin again in 1994; she was among those who benefited from the action against him over *The Dark Monarch*. Arthur Caddick had led that action but by the time I had met Peggy, his wife, and Diana, his daughter, all was forgiven; my thanks go to Diana for consent to quote from her father's writing.

Guido Morris' first wife, now Mrs French, made a very tentative approach during a modest exhibition of Guido's work, which I mounted in 1995. She learnt to her pleasant surprise that Guido had become part of the folklore in St Ives. My heartfelt thanks are extended to her for meeting me again in August 2016. My thanks are also extended to Christopher French – previously Morris – for consent to quote his father's words.

John Paddy Browne, Berlin's friend for many a long year, offered guidance and a valuable exchange of views on reading my early manuscript. Toni Carver, part of Berlin's family of friends, was the editor and proprietor of *St Ives Times and Echo*, contributed vastly. For over a hundred years, the newspaper has recorded the weekly happenings in the art world of St Ives in what amounts to the most valuable resource imaginable. In their own way, these friends have contributed so much to this book; my thanks go out to them all.

I have done my best to contact copyright holders. The blame for any errors or oversights that remain is entirely mine. Frank Turk and his wife have passed on but in consultation with the recipient, I have quoted in full the letter that he wrote to John Paddy Browne in July 1967. I must also thank Rosalind Mudaliar for consent to quote from the work of the distinguished poet, W.S. Graham.

I am honoured that Professor Alan Livingston C.B.E. agreed to write the Foreword to this book. Thank you Alan.

Above all, I am deeply indebted to Adrian Brink, my editor Bethany Churchard, and everyone at The Lutterworth Press in Cambridge for converting my manuscript into such a beautiful book.

Foreword

by Professor Alan Livingston C.B.E.

In his wonderfully acerbic and free-flowing book, *The Coat of Many Colours*, 1994, Sven Berlin confronted a fundamental difficulty with autobiography and his desire to present a fair and honest assessment of a rich and complex life. With a fierce determination to pursue the truth, he concedes that ‘The memory has a way of squashing events together like toffees, so they can’t later be separated. When exactly this or that happened is difficult to say.’

This observation offers an insight into Berlin’s uncompromising and non-objective art practice. In many ways, it also reflects the tumultuous time he had spent in St Ives, when he was, quite literally, at the heart of every significant debate (and argument!).

For over a century, the art community in St Ives has been a hotbed of rumour, argument, innuendo and petty jealousies. Recognised internationally as a major centre for innovative art practice, St Ives has consistently attracted leading figures from Britain, Europe and further afield. As a small and remote seaside town, it could never provide the professional ‘anonymity’ offered by major art centres like London, Berlin and New York.

The price paid for living and working in St Ives was a significant loss of privacy. Everything about an individual artist and his/her work was noted and discussed – where they lived, where they drank, where they chose to exhibit their work, with whom they were sleeping. Most of these conversations were not over-burdened with concern for facts or any attempt at objectivity! The St Ives rumour machine churned endlessly, making it almost impossible to keep up with events and even more difficult to separate fact from fantasy as time went by.

Of course, all the records of these goings-on provide rich pickings for art historians. But it must be obvious that an acceptance of contemporary local mythologies, reading old interviews with artists, will not necessarily be the best way to get a balanced overview of what actually happened. Even when the artists write their own books, there may be moments when the ego can over-ride a more considered and objective analysis of events and influences.

The Alfred Wallis Factor by David Wilkinson is the result of meticulous research, with many hours spent reading and re-reading numerous books, journals, letters, records and newspaper articles in order to build a more comprehensive and robust understanding of significant artistic events, meetings and conversations. Although it does not attempt to offer a critical re-assessment of individual artistic reputations, it certainly contributes new insights on how, why and when

things happened – and on those who were present at the time. This level of detailed research and corroboration will undoubtedly help future generations of art historians, critics and curators to re-examine, and re-assess, some of the well-established narratives in the constantly changing story of St Ives.

With dominant personalities like Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Adrian Stokes, Bernard Leach, Terry Frost, Roger Hilton, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham and Patrick Heron, it was inevitable that personal misunderstandings would occur. Although some of these tensions and divisions can appear trivial, it should be remembered that many of these individuals were playing for high stakes; they were involved in creating work, and reputations, of lasting significance. Their passion was strong and their ambition was even stronger.

David Wilkinson's sleuth-like endeavour will provide new insights on a number of perennial questions. What were the key issues behind some of the long-running disputes? Who was the instigator, who was the peacemaker? What impact did these feuds and divisions have on professional relationships within the art community – or even the art itself? From a personal perspective, I welcome any new information that will help us gain a better understanding of Alfred Wallis, his art and the conditions surrounding his death. I agree with Sven Berlin's assessment, as expressed in his biography of *Alfred Wallis: Primitive*, in 1949, that Wallis was 'the most misunderstood and exploited artist of our time'.

However, David Wilkinson would recommend that Berlin's belief in Wallis' artistic significance should be carefully analysed in order to ensure that it stands up to scrutiny. The *raison d'être* underpinning this meticulously researched book is brought into sharp focus by an observation by Christopher Hitchens, the brilliant (and recently deceased) author and journalist. With typical intellectual precision, Hitchens hits the nail on the head:

That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.

David Wilkinson is one of those rare individuals who gets pleasure from discovering and assessing the significance of a diverse range of facts, figures and statements. I really hope that the 'hard yards' gained by the author will assist future researchers in their relentless quest to establish artistic quality, significance and influence.

Professor Alan Livingston.
December 2016.

Introduction

War, or rather the avoidance and evasion of military duties and the subsequent demobilisation of others, in company with a number of influential women, brought a nucleus of modernist painters and sculptors to the long-established art colony in St Ives in Cornwall. They included Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Sven Berlin, Terry Frost, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth, Peter Lanyon, Margaret Mellis, Denis Mitchell, Ben Nicholson, Adrian Stokes, John Wells and Bryan Wynter together with those associated with the printed word: Arthur Caddick, Anthony Froshaug, W.S. Graham, David Lewis, Guido Morris and Denys Val Baker.

Since his death in 1942, St Ives has become marinated in the spirit of the naïve painter Alfred Wallis. Ben Nicholson – in the company of Christopher Wood – came upon Wallis in 1928, which can now be seen as a pivotal moment in the story of modernism in St Ives. At that time, Alfred Wallis (1855–1942) was living a life of a recluse in a tiny cottage in Back Road West. He was a semi-literate, one-time rag-and-bone merchant and an ex-merchant seaman. Surprisingly, for one so slight, he had sailed the Penzance to Newfoundland run in the days of the tall ships. He first moved to St Ives in 1890. A painted inscription was to be seen on the door of an old fish cellar where The Wharf meets Quay Street – distinguished by a back-to-front letter N – proclaimed his new business: A WALLIS / DEALER / III / MARINE / STORES. He had begun business in dealing in scrap iron, sails, ropes and the like with a handcart and, later, a pony and trap.

When Nicholson met him, Wallis was a near neighbour to so many artists and their studios but it came as a surprise to many that following the death of his wife Susan, in 1922, he too picked up a brush and began to paint. As Naum Gabo later declared, Wallis' gift as a painter was that he never knew he was one. Wallis' approach was singularly unconventional. He hid himself away from prying eyes, working prodigiously, and painted everything within reach including his kitchen table, his bellows, pots and pans, his wardrobe doors and odd bits of cardboard that he salvaged from Mr Armour, a local antique dealer for whom he did odd jobs. There was an innocence to Wallis' work that had an immediate influence on both Nicholson and Wood and, after the death of the latter, Nicholson was to ensure that Wallis' work would become a benchmark for modern British art.

Believing that he had the field to himself, Nicholson had begun to lay claim to the old man's legacy; until 1941, that is, when the (then unknown) sculptor, Sven Berlin, had set out to write a biography of Wallis. In 1949, Berlin had

arranged publication of his pioneering book, *Alfred Wallis: Primitive*, which brought matters to a head as Nicholson did everything in his power to prevent the release. In doing so, Nicholson resorted to ruthless tactics, which brought an end to another friendship; that with the writer and philosopher, Adrian Stokes. Along the way, Naum Gabo fell out with Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson.

Critical monographs have been written about most of those involved but each party has only been seen in isolation. There is nothing to explain their shared motivation, their friendships, how and what held them together and, indeed, the often intense rivalry that tore many apart. This previously ignored context, when looked at chronologically sheds light upon a revealing stream of consequences.

The controlling influence of Nicholson and indeed Hepworth did not settle entirely on Berlin, Stokes and Gabo but had spread to include the St Ives Society of Artists. Berlin and Peter Lanyon allied themselves against Nicholson but even they fell apart when Lanyon rounded vindictively on his friend. Only four short years after the international armistice, the bickering and, at times, outright warfare in the ranks of the St Ives Society of Artists led to formation of the Penwith Society of Arts in Cornwall. Both societies claimed a debt of gratitude towards the placatory artist, Borlase Smart, and yet a damning letter from Smart's widow, Mrs Irene Smart, appeared in the *Western Echo* of 16 April 1949 after a flurry of back-biting at the St Ives Society.

Borlase Smart stood for kindness and tolerance, and would never have associated with a policy based on vindictiveness and intrigue as displayed at the extraordinary general meeting.

Tellingly, the Introduction to the catalogue of the inaugural exhibition of the Penwith Society announced that the society was 'entirely opposed to exclusiveness and antagonism', a maxim that many would have done well to remember. In 1950, the lawyer-cum-poet, Arthur Caddick – whom, his close friend Guido Morris later declared, was called to the wrong bar – had decided that 'there are a lot of solemn souls about, and you never know how people are going to take things' and yet recognising a fictitious portrait of himself in Berlin's 1963 novel, *The Dark Monarch*, Caddick led the action that financially crippled both the author and his publisher.

The period until 1952 had encouraged heroism but during those post-war years treachery was everywhere. Adrian Stokes and Margaret Mellis had given refuge to Nicholson and Hepworth when war was declared in 1939 and, a few weeks later, Stokes paid the rent on a nearby cottage to get shot of their argumentative guests. After the publication of Berlin's Alfred Wallis book, Nicholson went into damage limitation mode, even bringing in his London connections in an attempt to save his international reputation; Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh entered the fray. Adrian Stokes left Margaret Mellis and ran off with her sister. Anthony Froshaug then caught Margaret Mellis on the rebound.

The cartoonist, Harry Rountree, has a lot to answer for; he fed disillusionment in the St Ives Society of Artists. The town council terminated the lease on Berlin's studio. Berlin, having knocked out the two front teeth of Arthur Caddick, compensated Arthur with the gift of a goat. After their divorce, an intense rivalry developed between Hepworth and Nicholson. Nicholson short-circuited the system to gain tenancy of one of the Porthmeor Studios. Injury to the heart, reputation and finances was met with that of the physical for the poet, Sydney Graham, who fell off a roof and was hospitalised for three months after a night out celebrating Berlin's birthday in St Ives.

Lanyon, a Cornish fundamentalist, devoted a disproportionate amount of time feuding with 'foreigners'. He set up three annual exhibitions by the pioneering Crypt Group that changed the face of British art. He then pulled the plug on the fourth and threw in his lot with the emerging Penwith Society under the controlling influence of Nicholson and Hepworth. He then walked away and covered acres of newsprint attacking them. He and Hepworth remained in St Ives for the remainder of their lives but Lanyon never spoke to her again. He penned a treacherous letter to the *Cornish Review* following an article by Berlin. Berlin's veracity in describing those tumultuous days in his later autobiography withstands scrutiny; he had the paperwork beside him as he wrote and it speaks volumes on his behalf.

A 'Mr Ergo Jones' in Bristol took issue with Lanyon; he presumed that the lavatory walls in Cornwall were so highly glazed that it was impossible to write on them. Of all those around at the time, Bernard Leach was the only one to remain unscathed – except once, in a delightful summary of those turbulent times, Peter Lanyon's son, Andrew, brought him injudiciously into the mix.

It was inevitable that in such a rich pudding some cherries would decide to sit on top, just as it was inevitable that some of the under currants would blow raspberries at those perched aloft. There were the three B's: Barbara, Ben and Bernard and it was an irresistible temptation for my father to play Goldilocks and help himself to their porridge.

And all in the furtherance of art.

David Wilkinson,
St Ives, Cornwall.

PART 1.

Alfred Wallis and the St Ives *Milieu*

1. Little Park Owles

Adrian Durham Stokes (1902-1972) was an aesthete, a poet, a well-respected historian and critic of art, architecture, theatre and the ballet but above all he was a scholar and an academic with a number of books to his name. He was also financially independent. He was born on 27 October 1902 the son of Durham Stokes, a wealthy stockbroker. Stokes went up to Magdalen College, Oxford in 1920 where he read history, philosophy and economics giving him an introduction to the London intelligentsia. In time Stokes became a cultural bridge between all aspects of the creative arts. Latterly, he had lived at Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead in close proximity to the radical painters, writers and architects of the time. He met Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson through the artist Margaret Gardiner, and wrote about their work. Until the early 1930s he spent some time in Italy, though between 1930 and 1938 he was back in London. He had his own philosophy towards the appreciation of the arts and in 1936, at the late age of thirty-four, he took up painting.

Stokes first visited St Ives in 1936, around which time he met nineteen-year-old Lysbeth Mary Priscilla Lanyon. Mary, as she was known, was the elder of two children of the photographer, pianist and composer, William Herbert Lanyon (1862-1936) and his wife Lilian (1880-1954) who lived at The Red House in The Belyars.¹ Mary's brother, George Peter Lanyon was a year younger; he was born in 1918. In a recorded talk given in 1963, Peter Lanyon, as he is known, says that Stokes 'came down to live in St Ives and rather fell for my sister.'² The Lanyons and Stokes came from similar social strata. As Lanyon later confirmed: 'I was fortunate in being brought up in a family that had a certain amount of money.'³ His schooldays were spent at private preparatory schools in St Ives. In a 'hidey hole in an escalonia hedge', Lanyon and his school friend Patrick Heron formed The Golden Harp Club, a precocious 'society for the preservation of culture in England' for which they printed their letter heading with a John Bull printing outfit.⁴ Patrick Heron's father, Tom Heron, was the director of Cresta Silks with a factory in St Ives making bespoke garments for the London Fashion Houses.

Herbert Lanyon died unexpectedly on 5 September 1936. By late 1936, Lanyon had taken over his father's 'Attic Studio' at The Red House – a fact that had given him immediate credibility among those who visited it. 'It had more or

less been empty and I had fiddled around in it for some time. And this was where I worked, and in fact it was then transformed completely, into screens of white paint and bright colours here, right, left and centre, really turning the things into a whole sort of space organisation.⁵

Peter Lanyon then spent 18 months at Penzance School of Art under Edward Bouverie-Hoyton around the time Stokes was drawn back to Mary on a return visit to St Ives in 1937. As Lanyon confirms, it was through Mary that he and Stokes got to know each other. Stokes ‘saw one of my paintings and bought it. He helped me a lot.’⁶ Lanyon had taken to painting outdoors with Borlase Smart, a painter who plays a pivotal role in the future of modern art in St Ives. In 1938, Stokes enrolled as a mature student at the newly established but short-lived, private art school at 316 Euston Road. Their elders Augustus John, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Paul Nash added a curious mix to the declared pot but the school was founded by Graham Bell, William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore and Claude Rogers, all younger than Stokes. The school closed at the outbreak of the War, by which time Stokes and Coldstream had established a lasting friendship. Stokes prompted Lanyon to enrol at Euston Road. In a recorded conversation in 1962 with his friend, Lionel Miskin, Lanyon confirms that: ‘The fact that I went to the Euston Road School was entirely due to Adrian Stokes.’

In 1936, during the time that he had been stepping out with Mary Lanyon, Stokes went to the Cezanne exhibition in Paris where he met and fell in love with a young Scottish art graduate. Margaret Mellis (1914–2009) one of two daughters to Scottish missionary parents, was born in China in 1914. Between 1929 and 1933 Mellis studied at Edinburgh College of Art where she met fellow student Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. A travelling Scholarship took Mellis to Paris and on to Spain and Italy before returning to a Fellowship back in Edinburgh between 1933 and 1935. Mellis joined the Euston Road School alongside Stokes in 1938. In May 1938, Stokes and Mellis married and took their honeymoon in Italy. But they had hardly got back home before they headed west to continue their celebrations in St Ives. Mr and Mrs Stokes were exploring the coastal path from St Ives to Lelant one day when they were attracted to a low granite house, sheltered by the tall trees bordering Wheal Margery; that house was Little Park Owles.⁷ The attractions of the place would have tugged at the heartstrings of this newly married couple. Legend has it that they spoke to a woman through one of the upstairs windows. That woman was the owner, Mrs Emma Thomas. Having lost her husband barely three years before, it is easy to imagine that Emma Thomas would be weary of the place and after very little persuasion, agreed to sell the place to the newlyweds.

2. The Market Garden

The Stokes’ move from Hampstead to Carbis Bay was delayed until 3 April 1939. Little Park Owles suited them well; they had a studio each and rooms to spare. Mellis tells us that in that first summer the stream of visitors included Victor Pasmore and Thelma Hulbert, Catharine Sinclair and Bill and Nancy

Coldstream. During their time here, Stokes and Mellis played host to the nucleus that brought modern art to St Ives: Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Sven Berlin, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth, Patrick Heron, Peter Lanyon, Bernard Leach, Denis Mitchell and Ben Nicholson. It is tempting to say that all this happened despite the intervention of World War II but in truth the avoidance and evasion of war was a common factor in bringing the first few together. As a foreign national, the Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo was forever in political limbo and bore the burden of his country with his stoic national pride. There were those like Leach and Nicholson whose ages put them beyond the call to arms and others such as Sven Berlin and Patrick Heron who declined to serve on the grounds of conscience and who were therefore required to work on the land. Lanyon spent his war as ground crew in the Royal Air Force.

Denis Mitchell and his brother Endell were in a reserved occupation. They kept a market garden out at Halsetown. Stokes was in a similar position. When war was declared he planned his own market garden; he had two and a half acres at his disposal. Stokes was 37 in 1939 and had been desk-bound for much of his life and so such a physically challenging enterprise was by no means a casual affair. By meeting certain Government requirements, he would have been required to register the new business thus exempting himself from military service and enabling him to offer employment to conscientious objectors with whom he sympathised. As the War progressed, the local paper published weekly details of those who obeyed the call to arms and those whose conscience persuaded them not to. On 18 April 1940, the *Cornishman* reported that just over 1,200 men between the ages of 20 and 25 joined up in the Penzance–St Ives–Redruth district, of whom 10 stated their objections. In the first week of July, the figures were 736 with 7 registered objectors. The ‘Conchies’, as they were dubbed, were required to work the land.

Almost immediately, Stokes began by clearing the two-acre paddock on the high ground including the tennis courts that the previous owners, Emma Thomas and her late husband, had so carefully constructed not that long before. There are suggestions that Stokes and Mellis kept chickens and Mellis herself had begun beekeeping. Mellis’ biographer Andrew Lambirth suggests that Stokes engaged Denis Mitchell to plough up the land around Little Park Owles so that it could be made workable as a vegetable plot. There are further suggestions in Sarah Jane Checkland’s biography of Ben Nicholson – and in the Catalogue to the 1985 Tate exhibition – that Sven Berlin was working at Little Park Owles in 1939 but they are both mistaken.

Stokes laid the tennis court down to vegetables, and later also part of the southeast end of the main garden, though the long lawn was preserved. The main vegetable plot was the area that had been the tennis court, set higher than the main garden at the northwest end of the house. There was a tool shed there and another at the end of the main garden, together with a greenhouse. An evacuee, Peter Freeman, and a local gardener called William worked on the vegetables and Stokes had his notepaper printed

with “Stokes the Vegetable Man”. He took great pleasure in working the ground and producing vegetables, lettuces, and mushrooms, which he grew in a glasshouse. Most were sold nearby, Stokes driving round to deliver them, but any surplus would surreptitiously be given to local schools. Produce was also sent up to friends; Kenneth Clark, with whom Stokes was a regular correspondent, received a basket of garlic at the National Gallery. Though Stokes had his writing and painting to do, and Mellis was trying to continue painting as her domestic chores permitted, there were often sociable teatimes on the balcony (the terrace at upper garden level beside the front door) where anyone who happened to be around would join them for tea and saffron buns.^[8] Stokes confirmed this. “Throughout the first summer at tea-time the prospect of war opposed the green-yellow of saffron cake.”⁹

With similar Ministry conditions to those attached to the market garden, Stokes and Mellis were required to offer accommodation to evacuees fleeing from the Zeppelin threat in London. London was beginning to panic and families with young children were being evacuated. Air raid sirens were installed everywhere. Church bells throughout the country were silent, only to be rung in the event of German invasion or victory. By way of fulfilling this requirement, Stokes and Mellis were able to offer a sanctuary to friends, the Nicholson family – Ben Nicholson, his wife Barbara Hepworth, their triplets – Simon, Sarah and Rachel – Kathleen the nanny and Olive the cook. They arrived at midnight on 25 August 1939. They had driven down from Hampstead in a 1931 Morris Oxford car that they had bought for £17, the proceeds from the sale of a painting.

Ben Nicholson was the eldest of four children born to the painter William, later Sir William, Nicholson (1872-1949) and his wife Mabel Pryde. In the late 1890s, Nicholson and Mabel’s brother, James Pryde, went out as the ‘Beggars’ Brothers’ whose startling poster-work had a profound effect on the Edwardian advertising industry. William Nicholson and particularly Jimmy, as Pryde was known, bathed in the epigrammatic ripples of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s Café Royal. Nicholson and Hepworth’s arrival in Carbis Bay proved pivotal in so many ways; had he not been married with children, there can be little doubt that Nicholson would have remained within the influential coterie at the heart of international modernism in Hampstead. They had arrived in the middle of a storm that was to last the best part of a week. Nicholson was immediately confronted by William Coldstream, who, with his wife Nancy, had also taken temporary refuge from world events with their Euston Road friends at Little Park Owles. Mellis found the atmosphere strained, to say the least. Nicholson and Coldstream were poles apart aesthetically. Mellis’ maid, Martha, would be there to help, but for a while life in Little Park Owles became chaotic. In terms of the accommodation, although there was plenty of space in the house, for a few days, at least there were twelve people to be catered for: Stokes, Mellis, Martha, Coldstream and his wife together with the five Nicholsons, the Nanny and the cook.

3. Temperamental Guests

Only days later, on 3 September, Britain declared war with Germany. Mellis began to refer to Nicholson and Hepworth as ‘the enemy’.¹⁰ The parallels are clear enough; Poland had been invaded by the Germans and Little Park Owles had suffered a similar fate with the arrival of the Nicholsons. Stokes and Mellis gave in to their demanding visitors. Mellis tells us that: ‘Bill and Nancy . . . had to sleep in the passage as every room was full up.’¹¹ Miriam Gabo, who knew Nicholson and Hepworth in Hampstead, had already decided that they were ‘scratchy people’ and Stokes knew what to expect; he warned Mellis to be careful as they would try to change everything. And things did change. She gave up her studio to Nanny and the children and Adrian gave up his to Nicholson and Hepworth.

Nicholson and Coldstream rubbed along well enough for the few days they were in each other’s company before war was declared and the Coldstreams returned home. Nicholson was demanding and had begun work at the first opportunity; Mellis joked that he was hard at work in Adrian’s studio within ten minutes of his arrival. But the five-year-old triplets had colds and, as she later confirmed, Hepworth’s spirits were at zero. Mellis saw Hepworth as ‘a cold fish’ with ‘all sorts of silences’ and Lambirth had decided that Nicholson and Hepworth ‘appear equally selfish and ruthless to their beleaguered hosts.’¹² That word, ‘ruthless’, crops up frequently in discussion of the members of the St Ives art community. Margaret Gardiner, their friend and neighbour from the Hampstead days, recalled Hepworth’s pre-eminent nature. ‘It may have been because she was extremely logical that Barbara could at times be fierce, even ruthless, in a way that I found it hard to understand.’¹³

Once the weather cleared, Nicholson began to appreciate his surroundings and settled down to work in earnest – even urging his close contacts from Hampstead to come and join him in Cornwall. Hepworth’s reduced circumstances prevented her from producing sculpture; she saw things from a mother’s point of view and remained worried about her children. She felt that the thirty-four windows in Little Park Owles as a nightmare when it came to the wartime blackout. Naum and Miriam Gabo, with their dog Snezhka (snowball) were the only friends from Hampstead to respond to Nicholson’s call. They arrived in Cornwall on 4 September 1939 and found accommodation at Faerystone, comprising four rooms and a kitchen, with an earth floor. It was practically next door and well within shouting distance of Little Park Owles.

Gabo was therefore very close to Nicholson, who characteristically saw in Little Park Owles the makings of an emergent art community. As a Russian, Gabo was in a very invidious situation and could hardly have joined them immediately but, at the end of September 1939, through the auspices of Nicholson’s contact,

Alastair Moreton, Nicholson, Hepworth, Stokes and Mellis took on a singular contribution to the War-effort. The towers of Hayle Power Station on the far horizon of St Ives Bay stood out as an obvious target for stray enemy aircraft and this unhappy coterie accepted the contract to camouflage them. The work was to be done along the lines laid down by Britain's principal camouflage artist, the marine painter Norman Wilkinson, who just happened to be Mellis' uncle. In the event, Mellis was the only one who did not suffer vertigo and was hoisted aloft. To Mellis' chagrin, Stokes insisted she pass her £5 share of the £20 wages to the impecunious Hepworth-Nicholsons. Luckily for Margaret, Ben's second venture into camouflaging – this time the ICI factory, also at Hayle – came to nothing.¹⁴

Despite the fact that he was now married, Stokes' friendship with Mary Lanyon remained as firm as ever. Mary was now engaged to Sydney Elmer Schofield (1901-1983). Sidney was the son of the American artist Walter Elmer Schofield, Mary's father's friend, who arrived in St Ives in 1903. In 1937, or thereabouts, Sidney had bought Godolphin House – now arguably the most prestigious National Trust property in West Cornwall. Mary and her brother would have been among the early visitors to Little Park Owles and most probably were invited over to catch up with Lanyon's tutor at Euston Road before Coldstream left on 3 September 1939. Both Mary and Lanyon would also have met Nicholson in these early days. The friendship between Lanyon and Nicholson is well-documented enough but evidence of the emerging friendship between the two *families*, although scant, suggests the relationship was firm. But within the walls of Little Park Owles, however, matters were decidedly tense. Years later, Mellis' notes confirmed the ancient ritual of 'family-hold-back' that prevailed in Little Park Owles. Nicholson was working in Stokes' studio while Hepworth was working in the bedroom that she was sharing with her husband. Nanny and the triplets had been given Mellis' studio while she worked in her bedroom. But there were compensations for Mellis if not for Stokes, too. It must be remembered that Stokes in particular had only recently picked up the paintbrush and, although possessed of a degree in art, Mellis kept an open mind about her work. She was pleased that she and Nicholson began to get on quite well.

Nicholson's self-esteem knew few boundaries. Along with the evacuation of London families, the nation's art treasures were being hidden away for the duration of the War. In November 1939, Nicholson began shipping his work to the United States and, as David Lewis later confirmed, he was forever working, writing letters and looking around for people who might be interested in his work.

As time was to prove, Stokes would have been hard-pressed to put together a pair more prickly than Nicholson and Lanyon. Lanyon recalled the day – probably in late November 1939 – when Stokes had

got me to see Ben, and I walked down to the house . . . and saw these extraordinary things, these white reliefs of Ben Nicholson's, and I couldn't believe that here was a person who was doing this, all this, seriously, the same thing I was trying to do myself.

Stokes knew exactly what he was doing; he had introduced the two most significant painters in the history of modern art to St Ives. Lanyon confirmed this; Stokes was ' . . . a really invaluable man, not an influence but an important person, who could understand me.'¹⁵ Despite the respect being heaped upon his pioneering work, Nicholson needed ready cash as much as the next man. Stokes took the obvious step and put the two together; he knew that Lanyon would appreciate tuition and could certainly afford to pay. Lanyon himself confirms this: 'He said to Nicholson, who wasn't earning anything in those days: why don't you teach Peter?'¹⁶ As a result, Nicholson headed over to Lanyon's impressive 'Attic Studio' at The Red House.

Stokes would already have been familiar with Herbert Lanyon's old photographic studio but it would have been as much a revelation to Nicholson as his own work was to his young student; it seems likely to have provoked a tinge of envy in the mind of the Master. This young man lived and worked in circumstances way beyond Nicholson's expectations; he would have been full of it back at Carbis Bay. So much so, that he and Stokes took Gabo along to see the place. As Lanyon says: 'This was 1939.'¹⁷ This was a major turning point for twenty-one-year-old Lanyon.

4. Dunluce

By the end of 1939, the initial fears of invasion had fallen away from London and a considerable number of evacuees had returned home. The European war may not have been over by Christmas but the tensions at Little Park Owles were eased somewhat when the Nicholsons decided, or were persuaded, to take a place of their own nearby. On 29 December, after four months and one no doubt stressful Christmas with Stokes and Mellis, the Nicholson-Hepworths moved.

Their new home was Dunluce, a small house in nearby Wheal Venture Road, where they were to stay put until 1942. Obviously Stokes was keen to get shot of the Nicholsons. Mellis wrote to Margaret Gardiner, telling her that their nerves were on edge and the air charged with TNT. Lambirth adds that tension grew so great that Stokes offered to pay the rent on a small house nearby, 'so that both families could have some peace. The Nicholsons . . . were kitted out and made comfortable with various loans of carpets and pots and pans, some of which were the Stokes' own wedding presents.'¹⁸

Nicholson's biographer Norbert Lynton assures us that 'in return Ben gave Adrian some pieces from time to time' as much in response to Stokes' 'keen, supportive interest as much as to repay his financial help.'¹⁹ Dunluce was no more than five minutes' walk from Little Park Owles and that, with Gabo alongside,

remained the focus of this emerging group. The Nicholsons would surely have raised an imaginary glass to their new home on New Year's Eve. Days later, what horticultural skills Hepworth had picked up from Stokes were to prove invaluable. In January, food rationing was introduced. Nicholson carried on as normal but the exigencies of war meant that they had to lay-off Olive, their cook. Nanny Kathleen remained to help with the triplets and, aside from toiling in the garden, Hepworth was then reduced to doing her own housework.

In these early days, the social mix between the Lanyon, Stokes and Nicholson families was greater than many have credited. Mary Lanyon in particular was in regular contact with Hepworth and the children and took the Nicholson triplets under her wing early in the New Year. In January 1940, Lysbeth Mary Priscilla Lanyon married Sydney Elmer Schofield. The wedding would have been a lavish social occasion perhaps with a marquee reception on the lawns at Godolphin House. Without Herbert, her late father, to give away the bride, that role fell to her brother, Peter Lanyon. And, as if to underline her friendship with Nicholson and Hepworth, Mary chose the Hepworth triplets to carry her train; they were dressed in costumes designed by Nicholson.

Hepworth was distracted by an, albeit, measured responsibility for the care of her son Paul. Paul Skeaping (1929-53) was the only child of Hepworth's first marriage to John Skeaping. Except one similarity, that they were both sculptors, the marriage of Hepworth and John Skeaping was a most unsuitable affair. Having been out of touch for a while, Skeaping made contact with Hepworth sometime in 1939. Hepworth told him that Paul had become 'an unmanageable, problem child and she had been obliged to send him away to Dartington Hall School . . . at the age of five'.²⁰

Free of what must have seemed like an endless stream of visitors, Stokes and Mellis settled down to life on their own again at Little Park Owles. By spring 1940, Miriam Gabo would surely have been the first to hear Mellis' news that she was in the early stages of pregnancy. Lambirth tells us that Stokes was a great worrier and 'sometimes descended into rages about, what he termed, Mellis' incompetence. She, in turn, demanded support from her beloved younger sister, particularly when she discovered she was pregnant. "I want Ann to come and stay here soon, as soon as possible," she wrote to her mother. "Adrian may be going off and I am here all alone in a large empty house." Mellis also thought Ann could help with the market garden. Otherwise, Margaret Gardiner and her entourage threatened to come down to stay.²¹

Mellis was not without female companionship, her confidante, Miriam and Gabo had little option but to remain at Faerystone for the time being. Gabo bowed to Miriam's wishes to stay; she had been married before, she received an allowance from her previous husband and needed to remain close to her children. Gabo had hoped to go to the United States where an exhibition of his work had been put on hold, pending the inconvenience of the War; he saw Cornwall merely as a temporary bolthole. Gabo's diary entry of 7 February 1940 is telling; he had been unable to work for the past three months.

As a result of Lanyon's plans, Gabo's circumstances were about to change. Unlike his elders associated with Little Park Owles, Lanyon had been considering the call to arms. But meanwhile, he was utterly absorbed by contact with Gabo who, in turn, was inspired by Lanyon's work and his 'Attic Studio'. It is obvious that Lanyon was given the utmost respect by those he met. That Lanyon was tutored by Nicholson is an established fact but years later Michael Canney confirmed that 'Gabo was his true mentor'. Lanyon has always been thought of as purely a painter but often made constructions as a means of understanding his art. For the first three months of 1940, Lanyon's work changed to reflect Gabo's constructivist influence. In 1959 (or thereabouts) in discussing the concept of space in his work, Lanyon said that: 'It is here that I owe my chief debt to Naum Gabo. . . .'²² The influence is manifest in Lanyon's first box constructions.

One of my first experiments was this box construction made in 1939. The aim was not to represent any external experience but to examine the space of an open box – which is not at all unlike the illusion of space that my paintings give. I closed the box with two sheets of glass, and between them I sandwiched these colour transparencies. On the back plane I made a dish form, a cylinder with a red square on it and another brownish shape which you will see on the left hand side. The idea was to fill the whole space described by the outside dimensions of the box. Inside the box shapes and colours seem to take up different positions. The black line and red square come right forward. The yellow is in front of the green; the greyish shape before the yellow. The odd thing is that as you move from right to left they change places. The whole thing is rather like a stage.²³

In February 1940, Lanyon enlisted in the Royal Air Force and was subjected to a series of interviews and medicals. By early March, he was tidying up his life, making ready to leave home and offered Gabo the luxury of his 'Attic Studio' for the duration. Whether he ever considered offering it to Nicholson instead remains unknown but Lanyon's preference was obvious. Only days before leaving, he made another Gabo inspired box construction, this time calling it 'Triangle Construction'.²⁴ It was still fresh and stood alongside the earlier one when, in what seems to have been a formal handover ceremony, he invited the Little Park Owles contingent to The Red House. More so than any of his new friends, Lanyon would be well aware of the annual custom in St Ives for artists to open their studios to the public; 'Show Day', as it was called, falling in early March, may have inspired Lanyon to mount this opportunist display for invited friends. Days later, on 8 March, one month to the day after his twenty-second birthday, Lanyon left to join the Royal Air Force. His first task was to make his way to Uxbridge. His medical assessment showed that he was unfit to fly and, once through the formalities, Lanyon was posted to Morecambe to train as an aero-engineer, where he remained 'til December 1940.

After Lanyon's departure, Mellis would have been cheered to have the company of her friend Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, when she came down to see her in March 1940 for a week or so. Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912-2004) – 'Willie' as she is still remembered with affection in St Ives – was a fellow student of Mellis at Edinburgh College of Art from 1932-37. She spent the first few days in Treloyan Manor Hotel, St Ives, before she was invited to stay at Little Park Owles, where she first encountered paintings by Alfred Wallis.²⁵ Not surprisingly the attractions of St Ives and Mellis' presence persuaded Barns-Graham to stay; she was among the first of this emerging group of modernists to connect with the old school of St Ives painters in town. She soon met Lanyon's painting companion Borlase Smart, the studio ringmaster, who was able to allocate the use of No.3 Porthmeor Studios while the incumbent George Bradshaw was on active service. Quite fortuitously, Barns-Graham's studio was only a couple of doors away from Alfred Wallis' cottage. For two years she watched the old chap coming and going as he put his rubbish in the bin. She would chat to Wallis occasionally and remembered seeing 'paintings all down the side of the – inside the door[,], on the walls, there were paintings from the ceiling to the floor, done on the wall and on the top of the table.'²⁶ For a while Barns-Graham did her bit for the War, too. She worked in a camouflage factory for a year or so 'til dermatitis prevented her from continuing.

Regardless of their attitudes or beliefs about bearing arms, Checkland tells us that in the spring of 1940 Stokes put together a group of informal Local Defence Volunteers that included Nicholson, Gabo, George Miller-Watt (a cartoonist from the *Daily Sketch*) and Denis Mitchell.²⁷ However, despite his instinctive wish to help, Gabo's status as a registered alien required him to report regularly to the local police and prevented him from becoming involved with even this aspect of the War effort. But Gabo would be, by now, well acquainted with the others that further confirmed the link between the established painters and the new wave in St Ives. The potter Bernard Leach stood shoulder to shoulder with Stokes; both their businesses allowed them to employ 'Conchies'. Denis Mitchell was their corporal. Leonard Fuller was Captain. Leonard Fuller came to St Ives and in 1938 founded a significant institution, the St Ives School of Painting. With his enviable roll call of contacts, the job of Intelligence Officer fell to Borlase Smart. By June, the area around St Ives was a 'restricted area', which put aliens and 'conchies' under further threat, even from within the Home Guard.²⁸

At 50 years old, Gabo was the elder statesman in this group. His intellect and years of creative experience set him apart from many in Carbis Bay. He was a Russian Jew, born Naum Neemia Pevsner. That a man with such creative status as Gabo spent a significant period of his life in Carbis Bay remains a most stimulating fact. He and his brother Antoine Pevsner were co-founders of the Russian Constructivist movement in the early years of the Twentieth century. Gabo arrived in Carbis Bay with his personal philosophy all but set in stone. His *Realist Manifesto* – co-signed by Pevsner – was first published on August 5, 1920. Gabo can nowadays be heard reading the Manifesto on the Internet.²⁹

During his time in Carbis Bay, hairs would be split over the relative definitions of ‘constructive’ and Constructivism. Norbert Lynton tells us that in the early 1940s Nicholson ‘still chose to present himself as leading the Constructive movement’³⁰ but in Gabo’s eyes Constructivism was an ideology, a movement that he shared with his brother – exclusively – a doctrine he retained throughout his life and one that would lead to conflict in the near future. ‘It involves the whole complex of human relation to life. It is a mode of thinking, acting, perceiving and living’, he declared in 1944.³¹

In complete compliance with Mellis’ demands her nineteen-year-old sister Ann came to stay at Little Park Owles. She arrived in late summer 1940 and was around for the birth of Mellis’ son Telfer in October. Miriam Gabo would have been thrilled at Telfer’s birth and is likely to have told Mellis that she too was pregnant. In a letter written around that time, Stokes talks to Edward Sackville-West with a hint of triumph but for misplaced reasons. He tells his friend about his efforts in the market garden. Understandably, for one who had spent his life surrounded by paper and paints, ‘I shall never resent the experience,’ he wrote.

My life, though lucky, is extremely harassing. I have never undertaken anything which makes one as nervous or anxious as working land. For since the early days of the War, with the help of a boy I have worked some two acres of my own land, becoming a real market gardener. . . .

Almost as an afterthought, he mentions that his ‘wife has a baby’.³²

In contrast, Stokes wrote to Margaret and Ann’s mother Masie. ‘Ann is an angel and has made life for us a hundred times easier.’ Ann soon settled down and took to attending lessons at the Phyllis Beddell Ballet School in the annex to the *Palais de Danse*.³³ At the outbreak of war, Phyllis Beddell closed her ballet school in Quex Road in London and brought it down to St Ives. Stokes would have known Phyllis well; she had been a pupil of Pavlova and specialised in contemporary dance.

5. The Alfred Wallis Factor

By the turn of the year, St Ives was becoming paranoid. In January 1941, a stray bomb had dropped on a nearby vegetable patch and virtually demolished the house at the Leach Pottery belonging to Private Bernard Leach, of the Local Defence Volunteers. Chins began to wag in town; it was rumoured that Leach was a deliberate target. ‘Whatever misgivings the locals may have had about the strange Russian . . . at Carbis Bay, they now turned them onto the unfortunate potter.’³⁴ Leach was guilty in local eyes of employing Japanese and ‘conchies’ at the Pottery and sending smoke signals to enemy aircraft from the kilns. According to Frank Vibert ‘in those early days the Pottery was only kept going by C.O.’s (conscientious objectors) refugees and young students who worked either for nothing or only nominal pay.’³⁵ There were echoes here of D.H. Lawrence’s expulsion from Zennor during World War I. Not only was Lawrence married to

the cousin of the German air ace, 'The Red Baron', but the authorities had also decided that by allowing his curtains to flap in the breeze, 'Lorenzo' too had been sending signals to enemy submarines along Zennor's Atlantic coastline.

The market garden at Little Park Owles was obviously bearing fruit but his mention of the 'boy' helper in Stokes' earlier letter, above, to Sackville West is interesting. Stokes is most likely referring to William or the young engineer Peter Freeman, who retained significant memories of Gabo in particular.

After twelve months in the RAF, it is likely that Lanyon was given leave in March 1941. Then on 22 April 1941, Naum Gabo looked out from his east-facing bedroom window in Carbis Bay and watched the flames rising from Plymouth. Sven Berlin, a conscientious objector and gifted draughtsman, had been required to state his case before a tribunal in Bristol and, after spending time in a pacifist commune in Ashburton, applied for a teaching job in Carbis Bay. He had hitchhiked down from Devon for an interview with Mr Rawson the Headmaster at 'Rocklands', a Rudolph Steiner school, which had been resettled in the Headlands Hotel on the outskirts of St Ives. He got the job and in her absence his wife, Helga, was taken on to teach dance. As 'Sven and Helga', they had trod the boards as adagio dancers alongside the likes of The Crazy Gang until their son, Paul Julian Berlin, was born towards the end of 1940. Berlin moved the family to Rocklands in late April or early May 1941. The only proviso was that Berlin's time there was to be shared working at Little Park Owles with Adrian Stokes. For Berlin to be taken on by Stokes was fateful.

Checkland says that Stokes had included Berlin amongst the initial intake of the Local Defence Volunteers in the spring of 1940 but Berlin was not around at the time. Nevertheless, when he did arrive, Berlin remembered how, at over six feet tall, George Miller-Watt towered head and shoulders above his colleagues.

After marching round town in mufti they would repair to one of the local halls to master the skills of surveillance . . . and disposing of the enemy. . . neither uniforms nor guns . . . materialised. . . Furthermore Stokes' moment of glory proved short-lived, as in July 1940 he was obliged to join a more formal force when the government rationalised the Home Guard.³⁶

A month later, on 23 May 1941, it felt as if Carbis Bay itself was under attack. Blackout curtains were a legal requirement; the local papers published blackout times as if they were tide tables. No doubt in common with all but Little Park Owles, whose primary windows faced south, Gabo left the lights off and was mesmerised by the night sky.

On 26 May 1941, Miriam Gabo gave birth to a baby girl, Nina-Serafima Gabo. No doubt Margaret and Ann took baby Telfer round to meet his new neighbour. That Gabo had shipped out for the duration has remained a little-