

Preview

The Test of Time

The Test of Time: A new book about the life and work of Norman Cornish.



Cornish

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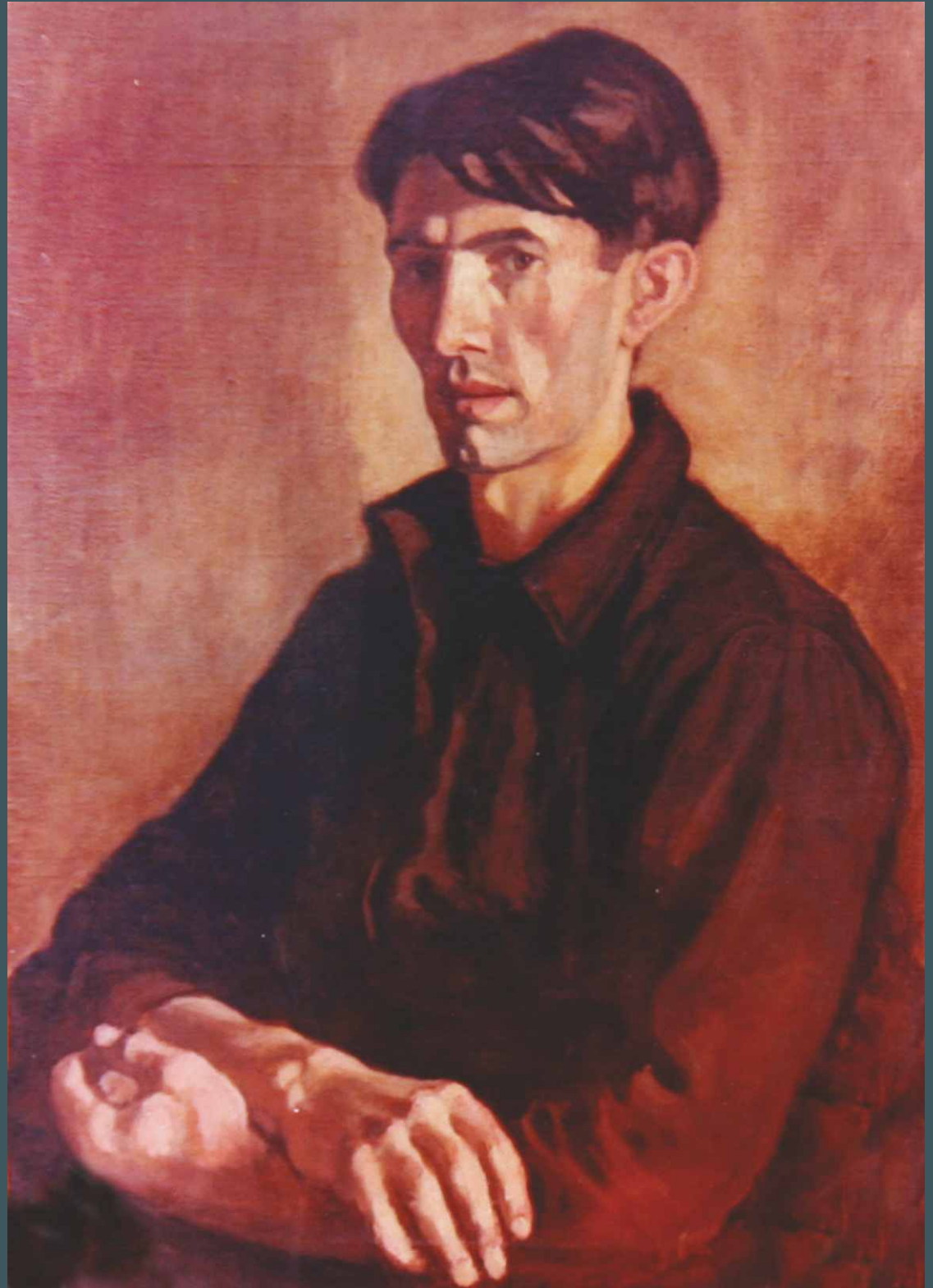
Cornish

An extract from the illustrated lecture at
The Federation of Northern Arts
Conference,
Ormesby Hall.
July 4th 1968

*'If a painting carries nothing
derived from life experiences it is
sheer decoration.'*

*If on the other hand it merely
copies life without translating such
experiences into forms proper to its
medium it is nothing more than
illustration paler than life, and
without the impact or the new
experience implicit in any work to
which we give the name of art.'*

Norman Cornish



Norman Cornish MBE 1919-2014

A Man of Destiny

There are few people who would fail instantly to recognise the work of Norman Cornish. Often described as a master of the informal portrait and the unguarded moment, his evocative paintings and drawings provide an unrivalled social record as a chronicler of an important era in English history from the 1930s to the early '70s. His observations of people and places are a window into a world which to a large extent no longer exists, but which Norman Cornish has immortalised for us all with its struggle, its beauty and its dignity.

Cornish was born in 1919 in Spennymoor County Durham, in a house with no bathroom or inside toilet, where he shared a room with his five brothers and one sister. He described living conditions as 'primitive' and he contracted diphtheria when seven years old. There was very little reading material at home.

His journey from miner to professional artist is a story of great determination and resilience to overcome hardship and prejudice. Cornish belonged to a generation denied the opportunity of continuing with education, and he saw working from an early age as a duty to support his immediate family. Working class artists were deemed to be 'Sunday painters' and there was an assumption of the naivety of such artists by the Arts establishment because of their occupation, as well as implied political associations. He was denied a place at The Slade School of Art in 1939 due to the national crisis and when he worked at Sunderland Art College in 1967 he was resented by some students and several of his contemporaries because he lacked an academic background.

Cornish's modest income as a miner was a constraint upon the acquisition of materials and a further dilemma existed between his interest in art and aesthetics, and the hazards he found working and surviving underground. Conditions for all miners were appalling with a constant risk of death or serious injury. These traumatic experiences inevitably impacted upon his work and the interpretation of his subjects.

Despite the obstacles to success, a rare talent emerged in the post-war years and a burgeoning national reputation that placed further pressure on his future direction.

This upward spiral of interest and engagement in Cornish's work began in the immediate post-war era and continued without interruption. Initially the members of the Spennymoor Settlement Sketching Club held their own annual exhibitions and they subsequently progressed to regional exhibitions at The Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle which was regarded as the 'Royal Academy of the North.' The Settlement became a cradle of creativity and also inspired other men of modest means who were later to achieve national success including: writer Sid Chaplin OBE, Newspaper Editor Arnold Hadwin OBE and artist Tom McGuinness.

An invitation to exhibit in London 'Art by The Miner' at The Academy Cinema, Oxford Street, in 1947 was followed simultaneously by his first live BBC broadcast from Alexandra Palace. Further invitations to exhibit followed at Tullie House, Carlisle in 1951 where 'The Northern Realists - Realism in Contemporary Art' included Northern Artists such as Victor Pasmore, Theodore Major, L.S. Lowry and Ned Owen. Cornish was also invited to exhibit during this post war era in mixed exhibitions in London at New Burlington Galleries and Chesil Gallery, Chelsea.

Lowry purchased two of Cornish's paintings. He and Lowry were both considered to be unteachable and perceived to be outside of the established fine art community, without an art school qualification and representation by leading London galleries. However, along with Lowry Cornish's work was represented from 1959 to 1982 by The Stone Gallery Newcastle, often regarded as the leading commercial gallery in the North of England. The gallery owners also represented Sheila Fell, John Peace and Sir William MacTaggart.



Norman Cornish and Edgar Degas

Degas (1837-1917) was a French artist famous for his pastel drawings and oil paintings of ballerinas. He also produced bronze sculptures, prints and drawings. He was one of the founders of Impressionism, although he preferred to be called a realist, with his observations of contemporary life and activities.

A print by Degas – *'Combing the Hair'*, used to hang on the wall outside Cornish's studio at Whitworth Terrace in Spennymoor. Inspired by Degas, the 'dry media' of charcoal, chalks and pastels became Cornish's favourite media in his portraits and some large works. By the age of twelve, Cornish's daughter Ann was accustomed to posing for her father in many different situations.



Edgar Degas, France 1834–1917 *Trois danseuses a la classe de danse*

Girl in Petticoat
1961



Cornish 61.

Family

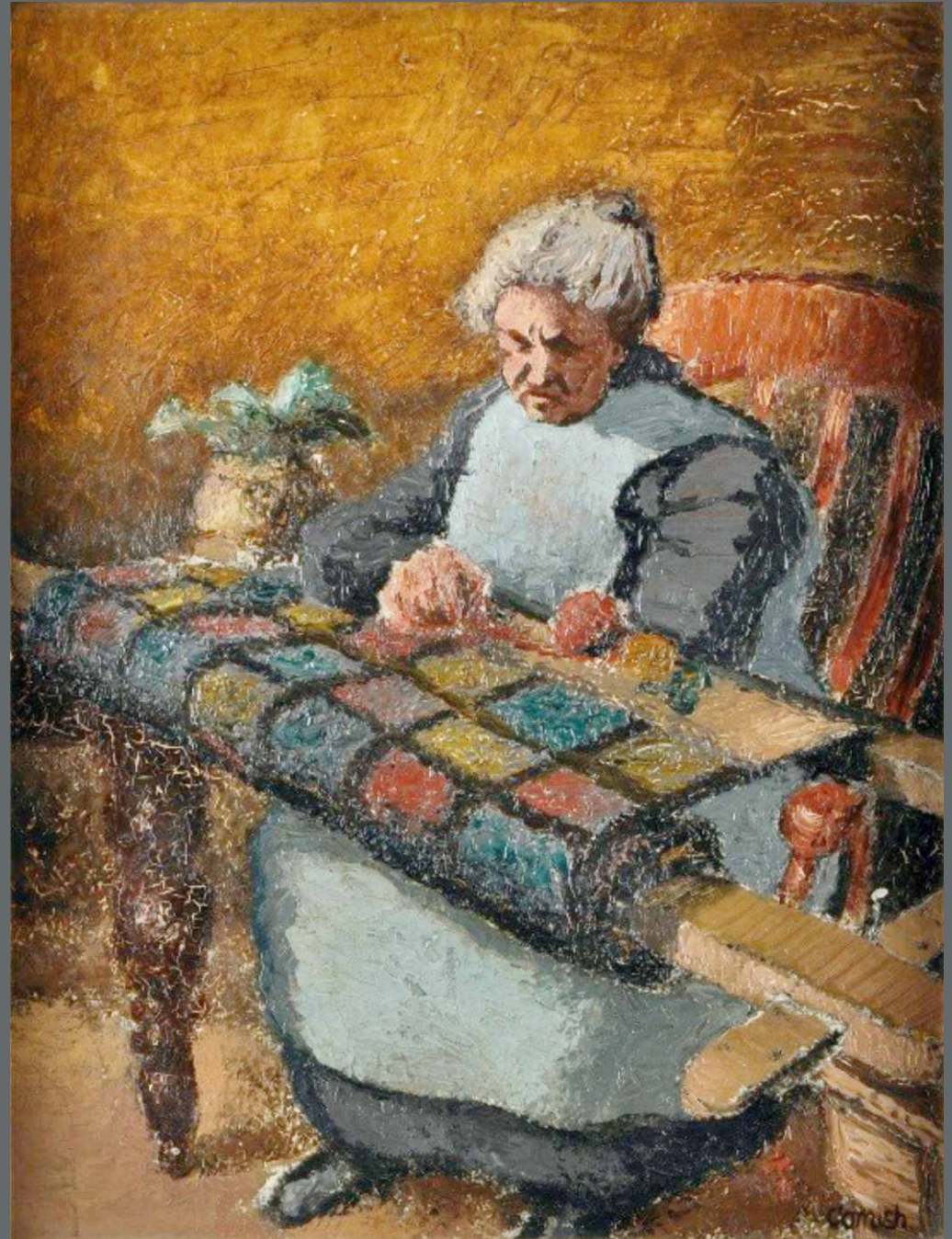
Grandma and the Proggy Mat

Cornish's first oil painting was 'My Sister Ella' which was exhibited at the 'Works of the Artists of the Northern Counties' annual exhibition (1940) at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle. During preparations for the 'Man of Destiny' exhibition at the Greenfield Gallery in the Centenary year 2019, an interesting discovery of a previously unseen drawing was revealed during removal from an old frame. Closer examination disclosed a signed and dated pencil drawing 'Sketch for Portrait of Grandmother.' Chronologically (1941) the drawings suggest that they may have been preparatory sketches for his second oil painting as the pose is developed to show his grandmother making a 'proggy mat.'

Making 'proggy mats' was certainly part of the cultural landscape in all sorts of different communities and not only in the North East. From an early age Cornish was aware of this tradition and in the following extract from his autobiography he recalls some vivid memories.

'Some of my early years from about three to four were spent with my maternal grandmother. I remember playing with marbles in front of the fire on a home made clippy (proggy) mat. On the mat was a complicated pattern, and in my mind the pattern was imagined as rivers, roads and mountains as I deployed my marbles. At that time people would make mats by stretching a piece of hessian on a special wooden stretcher. They would then prod into it strips of cloth, wool etc cut from old clothes. There was often a mat in the making, stretched across the room and I used to be quietly annoyed when ducking under this contraption in order to get near the fire, especially if the washing was also stretched across the room. I used to think it resembled a Persian market.'

The tradition of making rag mats isn't unique to the North East but the terms hooky, proggy and clippy are. Proggy mat making was originally born out of necessity but today is very much about the pleasure of making and the growing interest in re-cycling.



Darning Socks and Courting

There were two attempts made to help Cornish go to art school. The first in 1939 was an application to the Slade in London but being in a 'reserved occupation' he was unable to proceed. The second in 1942, was to Newcastle University where Robert Lyon, who had crucially supported the Ashington Group of mining artists, was Head of Painting. Funding was refused by The Miners' Welfare Fund which claimed that such help was *'not part of their brief.'*

Painting the life he knew with integrity was fundamental to Cornish's motivation and 'dabbling' in alternative theories and modern art might have risked damaging his approach, which was based upon the advice of Bill Farrell at the Spennymoor Settlement.

Denied this opportunity to attend a prestigious art school was, in hindsight, to become a blessing in disguise, as his young wife Sarah became his muse and the subject of many paintings and drawings. They had met at a ballroom in Spennymoor in 1944 and following two years of 'courting' had married in 1946. Life drawing classes were a foundation of art college teaching but his observations of 'real life' happening at home, at work and in the community were to become the hallmark of his approach to painting and drawing. Cornish was surrounded on a daily basis by Sarah going about the typical tasks within a young family: preparing the vegetables, knitting, *'bathing the bairns'* in the tin bath, scrubbing the front door step, telling a bedtime story, giving words of comfort. They all became subjects of interest following, *'hold it there.'* or *'don't move,'* as the position was held while the drawing was completed.



The Story of The Durham Miners' Gala Mural

Successful artists are often approached by individuals and organisations who wish to commission a specific piece of work that may reflect an important event or moment. Commissions also often guide an artist towards a particular style and artistic outcome, which may be a challenge for the artist especially when the painting will potentially be viewed by thousands of people. Such a scenario emerged in the early 1960s for Norman Cornish and, here, some previously unseen aspects of his first commission are featured for the first time.

By the beginning of the 1960s Cornish's career as an artist was beginning to develop. The dilemma he faced was of a double life of a coal miner, to provide security for his family, and that of an artist whose work was increasingly in demand by a national public becoming ever more aware of this emerging talent.

Durham County Council was coming to terms with acquiring a new County Hall to replace the Old Shire Hall in Durham City. The re-location was to provide a modern facility to meet the needs of and manage the changing face of County Durham in the second half of the 20th Century.

The 1960s were also the beginning of a decade of huge social upheaval as coal mines in SW Durham became exhausted. Norman Cornish transferred to Mainsforth Colliery in 1962 as part of the re-deployment of miners at Dean and Chapter Colliery as it declined from one of the largest coal mines in Europe to closure in 1965.

During this period Cornish was also under considerable pressure from his agent Mick Marshall at The Stone Gallery in Newcastle to become a full-time professional artist. At this time the only forms of communication were letters in the post or by telephone from the telephone box near The War Memorial in front of the old Arcadia Cinema (now Wetherspoons) at the end of Bishop's Close Street.

It has emerged from the Cornish Archive that 20 letters were written during this period by The Stone Gallery between 1960 and 1963 in an attempt to persuade Cornish to leave mining, however, becoming a professional artist would introduce different risks with a young family to support and no longer the benefit of a colliery house 'tied to the mine.'

An irregular income from buyers of his work added to the insecurity of making the big step from miner to full time artist, a move that would also require appropriate accommodation for a studio.

One day in 1962 at Mainsforth Colliery, Norman Cornish was working at the coal face when a message was brought to him to go to the nearest telephone underground. Thinking that a problem had occurred at home, he approached the telephone nervously to discover that it was someone from Durham County Council.

The caller introduced himself and proceeded to commission Cornish to 'paint a Mural' typifying life in County Durham to be installed in the new County Hall which was planned to open in 1964. Imagine the scene, sweating, covered in coal dust, semi darkness, underground and suddenly requested to undertake a major commission!



Miner at the Coal Face

Cornish was reluctant at first but discussed this request with his wife Sarah, Bob Heslop and Bert Dees from The Spennymoor Settlement, as well as with Mick and Tilly Marshall at The Stone Gallery who considered this commission (if accepted) would become *'the corner stone'* of his career. Norman was initially nervous about the scale of the project and concerned about his main source of income being removed.

He was granted 'leave of absence' without pay for 12 months but before he could start he had to report to the manager of Mainsforth Colliery (whom he didn't know) to discuss his leave.

Cornish's view was that the miners were treated like convicts by the officials at the mine and forced to live in primitive conditions in mining communities almost like slaves.

A conversation with the Mainsforth Colliery manager

CM " So you fancy yourself as a bit of an artist. Well, I've never heard of you"

NC "Well then, could you name me two British artists or sculptors of world-wide renown, who are still living and working in this country"

CM Heavy silence broken by "No I can't I'm afraid, but it's not in my interest."

NC "It had been in your interest enough to say that you hadn't heard of me, but you hadn't heard of any artists or sculptors. You ought to have got at least one sculptor"

CM "Oh and who might that be?"

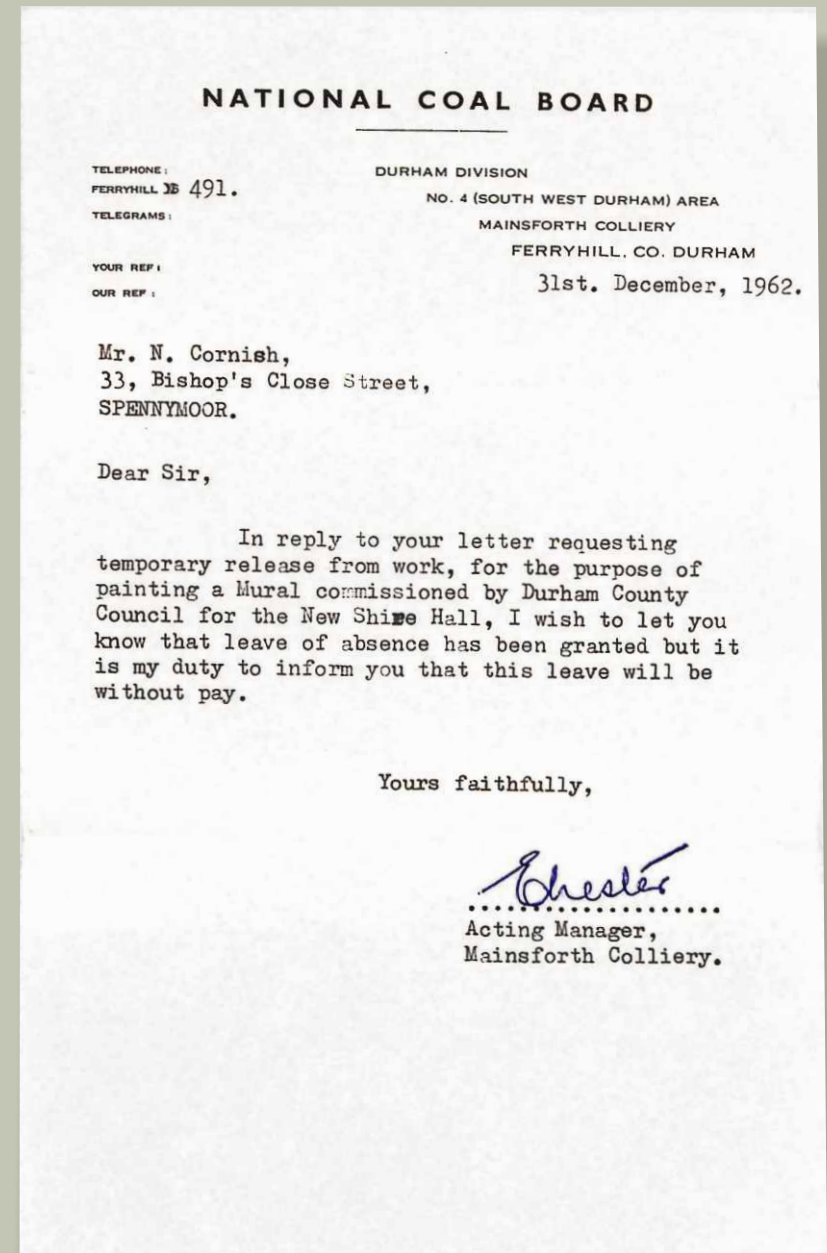
NC "Henry Moore was the son of a pit deputy who later became under-manager of the Wheldale colliery in Castleford."

Lost for words the Colliery Manager finally shrugged his shoulders and said "Ah well, the moving finger writes."

NC "Can you finish the quotation?"

CM "No", he replied. "Can you?"

Cornish finished the quotation and added several other verses from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.



A Canny Hand

Cornish's work is noted for the quality of his drawings, often made quickly to catch a moment in time. His jacket was adapted by his wife Sarah who created a 'poacher's pocket' on the inside, large enough to hold his sketchbook and Flo-master pen so that wherever he went his sketchbook and pen were always with him. During his era there were over 37 pubs in Spennymoor and at times they were busy with men not only 'enjoying the craic' but often playing dominoes or darts, which were a common feature in all of the pubs in the region and beyond.

A canny (good) hand would be a common term used by domino players in the pubs where the game flourished and sometimes involved competitions amongst the men. The 'doms' would often be held in both hands to shield the numbers on the domino pieces from other players.

The players' hands would deliberately rest on the edge of the table to avoid disclosure of 'the hand.' Even so, experienced players could quietly guess the dominoes held by other players as the games progressed. Powerful hands from working men would nevertheless create a study in concentration, assessing the next move and a big decision.



Man Playing Dominoes

Cornish blended in, he was 'one of the lads.' A few hours earlier he would most likely have been working underground, and when he sat down in a pub with his favourite bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale he would immediately begin to observe and absorb whatever human interaction emerged unscripted, a treasure trove for an artist of his calibre and uncanny ability to quickly record what was happening all around him. His skill in sketching and drawing with speed and accuracy, to capture a moment in time, was fundamental towards his future success.

Cornish returned to the theme of the pub throughout his career. There were bar scenes with individual character drawings, convivial conversations, and drawings of darts players. He also made detailed drawings of the beer pumps, furnishings, pint glasses and posters to ensure accuracy in his work. These features sometimes appear as individual component pictures because of their own special qualities and occasionally they are brought together in large composite paintings. Most of Cornish's larger works involving many characters are constructed in this manner.



Two Men Playing Dominoes

Allotments and Pigeon Crees

In 2023 in County Durham there are 159 county-owned allotment sites thriving in towns and villages, continuing a tradition which began in the 19th century and had originally been created for the working man to provide additional food throughout different seasons. Looking after an allotment became a worthwhile activity, one that was very much part of the cultural landscape of mining communities.

Growing vegetables also became competitive in the Autumn during the annual 'Leek Shows' where prizes were awarded for the biggest and best specimens in each category. This annual tradition remains at the heart of many communities today and the seeds obtained from prize-winning vegetables are highly valued. Sabotage sometimes occurred between rival growers and examples of 'Leek slashing' are legendary.

Cornish was advised at an early age to paint *'the things around him'* and it was inevitable that with so many allotments and pigeon crees in the Spennymoor area they could hardly fail to become a subject of interest. The daily walk to and from Dean and Chapter Colliery passed by the allotments in Low Spennymoor, and conversations with his 'marras' would reinforce the interest. The local 'Leek Shows' never appeared as a subject in his work but posters advertising 'Leek Shows' sometimes appeared in his bar scenes.



Walking to the Allotments

During the research phase for the 1950s town by staff at Beamish Museum, Sarah Cornish recalled the annual occasions in Bishop's Close Street when a pig was slaughtered at one of the local allotments and the carcass shared amongst families in the street, such was the value of sharing in the community. Other livestock were also kept in some allotments including poultry and of course, pigeons. Back yards were also utilised and Cornish's father kept Zebra Finches, Budgerigars and Canaries in a special cree in the backyard of his house a few doors away from Cornish's home in number 38 Bishop's Close Street.

Pigeon crees were very much part of the allotments as an additional past-time and two of the images record that moment in time when pigeons 'homed in' on the cree! One of the images included is The Holy Innocents Church in Low Spennymoor, which features in all of the pictures of Salvin Street, with allotments at the bottom in front of the church. Basically it is a detailed study of a feature usually incorporated into the larger street scenes of Salvin Street.



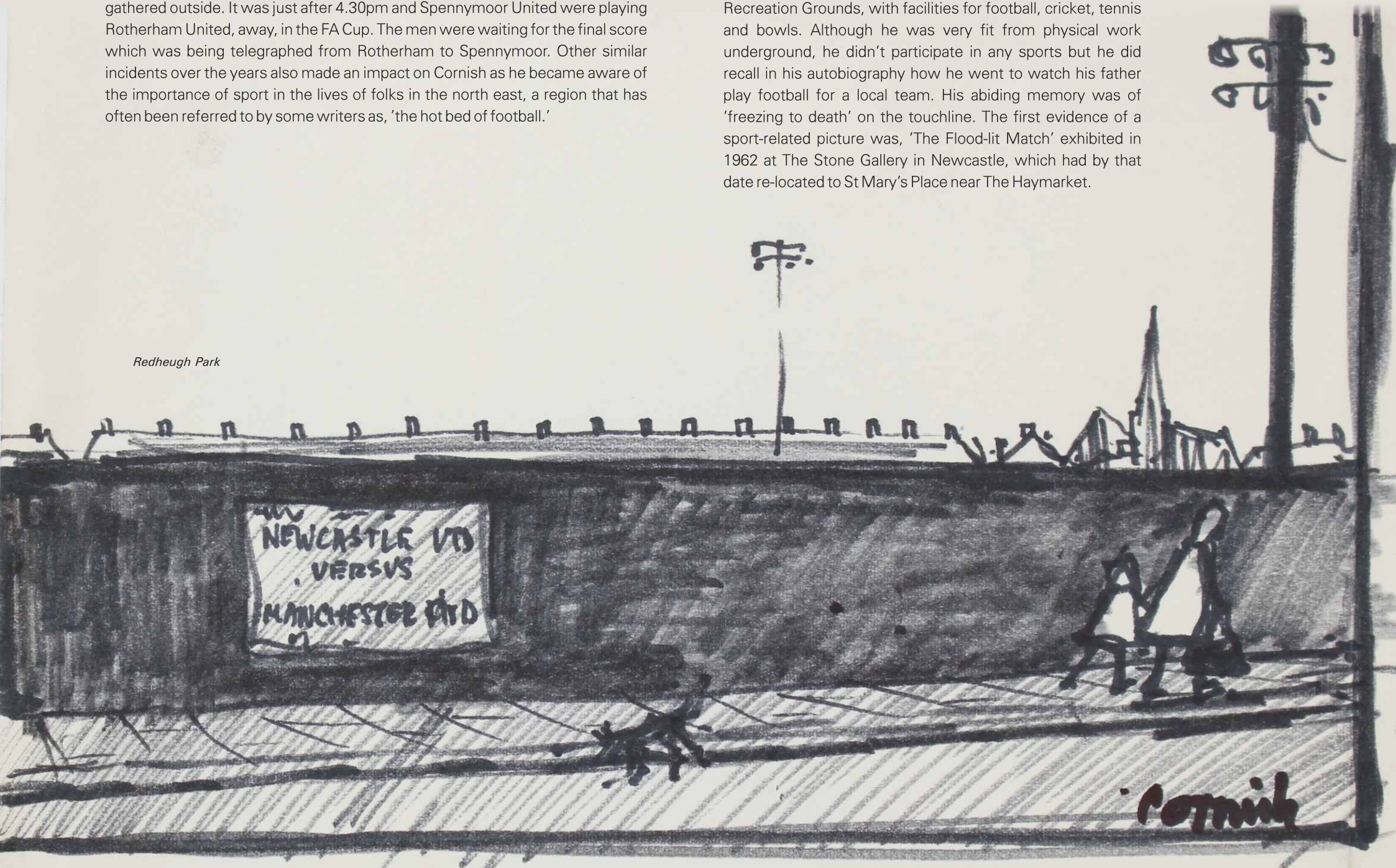
Allotments near the Holy Innocents Church

Waiting For The Result

One Saturday afternoon in November 1934, the young Norman Cornish was walking past the Spennymoor Post Office where a crowd of over 100 men had gathered outside. It was just after 4.30pm and Spennymoor United were playing Rotherham United, away, in the FA Cup. The men were waiting for the final score which was being telegraphed from Rotherham to Spennymoor. Other similar incidents over the years also made an impact on Cornish as he became aware of the importance of sport in the lives of folks in the north east, a region that has often been referred to by some writers as, 'the hot bed of football.'

The regional landscape during these times was dominated by coal mines and pit heaps, but there was also room for Miners' Recreation Grounds, with facilities for football, cricket, tennis and bowls. Although he was very fit from physical work underground, he didn't participate in any sports but he did recall in his autobiography how he went to watch his father play football for a local team. His abiding memory was of 'freezing to death' on the touchline. The first evidence of a sport-related picture was, 'The Flood-lit Match' exhibited in 1962 at The Stone Gallery in Newcastle, which had by that date re-located to St Mary's Place near The Haymarket.

Redheugh Park



'We finally landed at the shaft bottom and I was relieved to find that it was well lit by electric lights. A tunnel curved away into the distance. My mining career had begun.'



Going Inbye (inbye means going away from the pit shaft towards the coal face)



Shovelling Coal



Testing the Lamps