
PIRBRIGHT ART CLUB

Newsletter

PAINTING BY THE POND SINCE 1999

Special "ART IN ADVERSITY" issue



Still Life, by PAC member Jenny Griffith (acrylic).
Painted in the style of the Scottish Colourists for a Friday Class project
(for more see <https://www.maggieread.co.uk/>)

EDITORIAL

Dear All,

This special edition of the PAC Newsletter was never planned. No-one foresaw that we would be virtually shut down by the Covid-19 virus, or the speed with which this has happened.

*As we don't know when we'll next meet, we thought it might be a good idea to get another newsletter out, to try and keep some sense of momentum, but also to bond people together. We are a close-knit **community** with a sense of belonging, and it would be tragic if an unexpected side-effect of the virus was to weaken the ties that unite us. Some of you have been members of PAC for two decades: we need to keep in touch! Please check the Club website regularly for updates: <https://www.pirbrightartclub.co.uk/>*

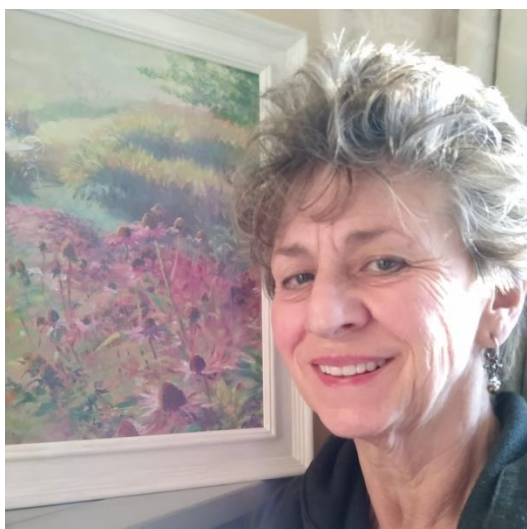
– Maggie

An obvious and major problem with writing this newsletter is that there isn't much Pirbright Art Club News, beyond the temporary curtailment of our activities! Thinking around this difficulty, I came up with the concept of "Art in Adversity": an assorted group of paintings, drawings and cartoons made by famous and not-so famous artists during previous dark periods in our history. Inevitably many of them date from the Second World War, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing, as most of our parents lived through that era. I've largely avoided lurid war scenes, but instead have tried to focus on ordinary people doing ordinary things in what were extraordinary times. I've themed the pictures to try to give them some relevance to our present situation.

Do try to view the newsletter, particularly the paintings, on a laptop or desk computer rather than your 'phone - it'll do the artists the justice they deserve! The selections are a very personal choice, and you may not agree with my comments, but I hope they'll inspire you to investigate the artists further – or even produce some "Art in Adversity" of your own. Please send us photographs of the results; who knows, you might even be on the cover of the next newsletter . . .

- Stephen

With very best wishes from both of us.



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ALL PULLING TOGETHER



“Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring” by Laura Knight, 1943 (oil on canvas, 34” x 40”)

“From early 1941, it became compulsory for women aged between 18 and 60 to register for war work. Conscription of women began in December. Unmarried 'mobile' women between the ages of 20 and 30 were called up and given a choice between joining the services or working in industry. Pregnant women, those who had a child under the age of 14 or women with heavy domestic responsibilities could not be made to do war work, but they could volunteer. 'Immobile' women, who had a husband at home or were married to a serviceman, were directed into local war work.” – Imperial War Museum

I make no apologies for putting a single painting on this page. It's just so brilliantly drawn and executed, although I recoil somewhat at the apparent lack of safety goggles and gloves – a hairnet seems to have been considered adequate in those days. It was painted onsite over four weeks at the Royal Ordnance Factory at Newport in South Wales – please note, not from photographs (gasp - respect!).

Ruby Loftus was an outstanding 21 year-old factory worker who had mastered complex engineering skills in a very short space of time; Knight was best known for her paintings of circus artistes and dancers, and had not painted industrial machinery before. Yet look at the lathe in the foreground: the sense of heavy steel machinery is palpable. The hands too – notoriously difficult for even the best artists – are beautifully observed.

Laura Knight was the first woman elected to full membership of the Royal Academy, and her large retrospective exhibition there in 1965 was the first for a woman. How utterly well-deserved, if somewhat late in the day . . .

THE FIRST OFFICIAL WAR ARTIST

I wonder how many of you who grew up in the '50s and '60s - not Maggie, obviously! - remember the BBC children's programme "Sketch Club"? It was presented by a dapper gent named Adrian Hill, who had a prodigious talent for drawing and painting and a gift for explaining it to children. I seem to recall a certain disappointment that he painted mainly peaceful landscapes and figures, rather than the bombers, battleships and tanks I favoured as a small boy.

It was many years later that I discovered this courageous man had had an illustrious previous career. Adrian Hill was Britain's first ever official war artist, during the First World War.

Hill was a private in the Honourable Artillery Company in France, and was encouraged to sketch by his commanding officer, who intended to use the results to illustrate the regimental history. On being invalided home Hill showed Charles ffoulkes, the curator of the newly-founded Imperial War Museum, the sketches he had made under fire as a scout and sniper. In December 1917 Hill was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant to work exclusively as a war artist for the IWM. He completed 187 pen and ink drawings before the war ended.



"A Penny All the Way: London Buses on the Amiens Road", 1918 (ink and watercolour, 12" x 17")

Over 1,300 London General Omnibus Company double-deckers were used abroad for the transport of troops. Hill's drawing above clearly shows the windows on the lower deck replaced by wooden boards, as glass was prone to breakages by the men's rifles and packs.



"Interior of a Dugout at Gavrelle", 1927 (oil on canvas, 22" x 28")

This is a post-war painting, but it was done from first-hand experience and portrays the squalor of living conditions for both sides on the Western Front. I love the way Hill has depicted the rough timbers and the light falling from the entrance: it might be interpreted as a ray of hope.

After his war service Hill studied at the Royal College of Art, and then painted professionally for a living.

In 1938, while convalescing from TB at the King Edward VII Sanatorium in Midhurst, he passed the time by drawing, and found the process helpful in aiding his own recovery. Hill was invited to teach drawing and painting to other patients – initially to injured soldiers returning from the war, and then

to general civilian patients. Hill found that the practice of Art seemed to help to divert the patients and to relieve their mental distress. He thereafter worked tirelessly to promote art therapy, and eventually became president of the British Association of Art Therapists when it was founded in 1964.

<https://arttherapycentre.com/blog/adrian-hill-uk-founder-art-therapy-morgan-bush-intern/>



Adrian Hill presenting "Sketch Club", BBC TV 1957

<https://www.facebook.com/BBCArchive/videos/1957-sketch-club-adrian-hill-on-composition/588033368236364/>

Black & white TV only in 1957. This short clip scarcely does justice to Adrian Hill's talents, although his presentation is typically clear and instructive. Note the gong signifying the end of his allotted 20 minutes!

QUEUEING FOR FOOD



“The Food Queue” by C.R.W.Nevinson, 1918 (pastel on paper, 20” x 26”)

Food rationing was introduced in 1917 and again in 1940, due to the threat to supplies by German U-boats. Nevinson’s grim drawing with its hatchet-faced women was originally named “Squalor”, but was renamed by the artist in order to make it more newsworthy. I much prefer Evelyn Dunbar’s painting; note the unusual dimensions and composition, and how she’s daringly truncated the figures in the foreground. The Fish Shop she portrayed was at Strood in Kent. One can imagine Beryl Cook painting her own version of this scene!



“The Queue at the Fish Shop” by Evelyn Dunbar, 1944 (oil on canvas, 24”x 72”)

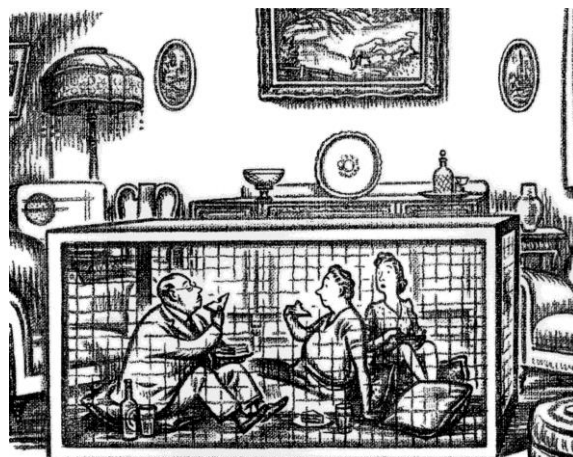
KEEPING A SENSE OF HUMOUR . . .

Humour is a vital element in keeping morale up during times of national crisis, arguably more so in Britain than in many other countries. Cartoons can sometimes bridge a gap between lofty Government instruction and the daily concerns of ordinary people. We grumble a bit, and we moan about whoever is in power, but in the end we usually do the right thing.

“Society has always to demand a little more from human beings than it will get in practice. It has to demand faultless discipline and self-sacrifice, it must expect its subjects to work hard, pay their taxes, and be faithful to their wives, it must assume that men think it glorious to die on the battlefield and women want to wear themselves out with child-bearing. The whole of what one may call official literature is founded on such assumptions.

I never read the proclamations of generals before battle, the speeches of fuehrers and prime ministers, the solidarity songs of public schools and left-wing political parties, national anthems, Temperance tracts, papal encyclicals, and sermons against gambling and contraception, without seeming to hear in the background a chorus of raspberries from all the millions of common men to whom these high sentiments make no appeal. Nevertheless the high sentiments always win in the end: leaders who offer blood, toil, tears and sweat always get more out of their followers than those who offer safety and a good time. When it comes to the pinch, human beings are heroic.”

George Orwell: “The Art of Donald McGill”, 1941



“By the way, did you remember to feed the canary?”
William Sillince, Punch magazine, 28th May 1941

The cartoon above depicts a family sitting in a Morrison shelter in their living room. The Morrison shelter, named after the then Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, was a cage designed during the Blitz to protect the occupants from masonry and debris if their house was hit by a bomb.

Punch magazine was for many decades a staple of doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, reaching the peak of its circulation in the 1940s. Many well-known cartoonists submitted their work to Punch. Sadly, after the war its sales declined, and it ceased publication in 1992.

<https://www.punch.co.uk/archive>

MATT



Daily Telegraph, 27th March 2020

A Matt cartoon during the current Coronavirus outbreak, following the Government's instruction that people leaving their homes for exercise should keep 2 metres apart. As in the Sillince cartoon above, the British people and their pets provide a seemingly inexhaustible source of material.

Matt's cartoons are not sophisticated drawings, but they're immediately recognisable and always effective. He relates headline news to the often mundane lives of us ordinary folk in a few words and lines - and makes readers smile every day. An art of the highest order, I'd say.

<https://telegraph.newsprints.co.uk/search/scu/p/u/206068/1/matt%20cartoons%20archive>

... AND JUST KEEPING GOING



“Scene in an Underground Train, 1943: Workers Returning from Night Shift” by Ruskin Spear

This understated painting seems to me to convey perfectly the exhaustion that ordinary civilians felt after years of hard graft and privation to support Britain’s war effort. Note how the perspective leads to the two women at the centre of the composition, and how the pale face and the orange headscarf draw the viewer’s attention from the drab colours of the tube carriage and clothes of the other passengers. The windows of the carriage have been covered with brown tape to reduce blast injuries.



A Henry Moore tube shelter scene, c. 1940-41
Ink, watercolour, crayon and gouache on paper

The sculptor Henry Moore produced a series of drawings of working-class Londoners sleeping on underground station platforms during the Blitz. They were purchased by the War Artists Advisory Committee, who later commissioned him to draw miners working underground at the Wheldale Colliery in Yorkshire. Examples of his drawings were included in the WAAC exhibition “Britain at War”, which toured North America, raising support for this country.

Moore’s claustrophobic drawings of anonymous working-class Londoners huddled together on tube platforms have become synonymous with the Blitz. As with Goya’s “Disasters of War” drawings, they retain their power many decades later.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/henry-moore/henry-moore-room-guide/henry-moore-room-guide-room-5>

STAYING IN TOUCH

In an age of instantaneous global communication we tend to take mobile phones, e-mail and applications like Facebook, Skype and WhatsApp for granted. Previous generations relied on letter-writing and the humble postcard.

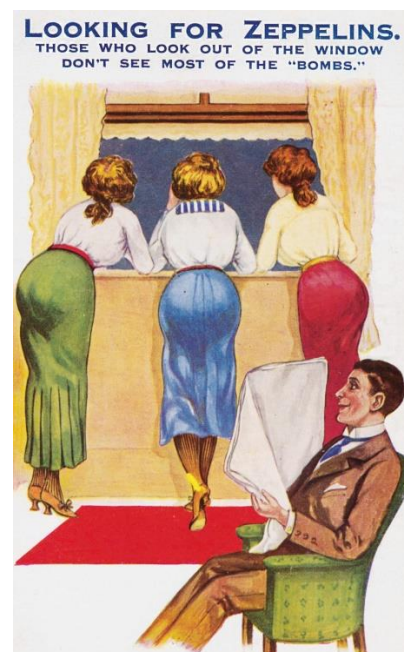
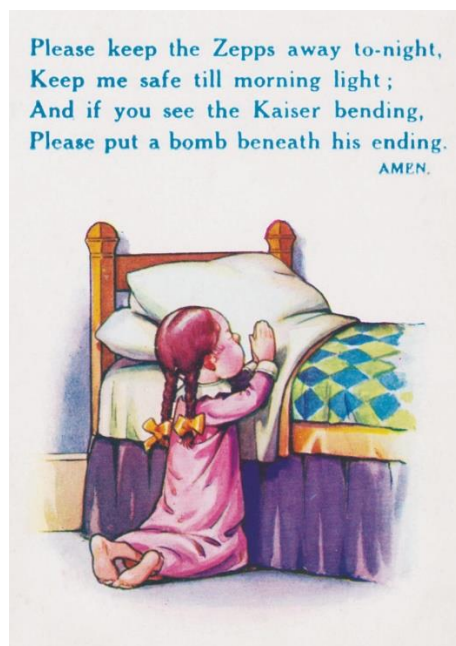
The Post Office employed 250,000 people at the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Its annual revenue was £32 million, making it the biggest economic enterprise in Britain and the largest employer in the world. On the eve of war the Post Office was handling nearly six billion items of post per year.

During the First World War up to 12 million letters per week were delivered to troops, many of them actually on the front line.

The first picture postcards were introduced in 1870, and cost only an old penny to send - the "Penny Post". By the outbreak of war there were a huge variety of images available on postcards in every country.



The images on postcards varied immensely, from the cloyingly sentimental to the intensely patriotic to the bawdy. I like these humorous responses to the aerial bombing of civilian Britain by German Zeppelins. Unfortunately the artists are not known. The one on the left looks like a Heath Robinson, although I've been unable to find confirmation of this.



WHEN IT'S ALL OVER

This atmospheric triptych by Leila Faithfull shows Londoners gathering outside Buckingham Palace on 8th May 1945, to celebrate the surrender of Germany's armed forces. Sadly, it looks as though this year's 75th anniversary commemorations will be muted or delayed by the Corona virus outbreak.



“VE-Day Celebrations outside Buckingham Palace” by Leila Faithfull, 1945 (oil on canvases)

I wanted to conclude this brief personal rag-bag of artworks on a positive note, and I can think of no more cheerful painting than Renoir's magnificent “Bal du moulin de la Galette”. It was painted in 1876, some six years after the siege of Paris, in which 47,000 civilians died, many through starvation. The painting depicts a typical Sunday afternoon at the original Moulin de la Galette in Montmartre, where ordinary working class Parisians would dress up and spend time dancing and drinking. Renoir's sun-dappled painting conveys a carefree joi de vivre – and reminds us that dark times will pass eventually . . .



“Bal du moulin de la Galette” by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1876 (oil on canvas, 52” x 69”)

AND FINALLY . . .

These are difficult and unprecedented days for all of us, and it's been tricky balancing the content of this newsletter between sober reality and optimism for the future. I hope we've succeeded, and at least given our members some food for thought.

Your editor was inspired by words from two very different writers. Jennifer Scott is the Director of Dulwich Picture Gallery, and she wrote a moving letter to all Friends of the Gallery upon its temporary closure on March 17th. I've taken the liberty of quoting the last few lines, which seem apposite to Pirbright Art Club.

My second writer is probably more familiar to you . . .

"I want to take this opportunity to thank you for being part of our family. Your support gives us the confidence to dream big, ensuring that Dulwich Picture Gallery can be a space for everyone to find themselves in art, building on the vision of our founders from two centuries ago.

For now, I wanted to turn to my favourite painting in the Gallery's collection, the incomparable *Girl at a Window* by Rembrandt van Rijn. She has seen many things in her 375 years. The light in her eyes reminds us that art can see us through difficult times.

Please look after yourselves and each other"

Jennifer Scott
Director, Dulwich Picture Gallery



"Supposing a tree fell down, Pooh, when we were underneath it?"

"Supposing it didn't," said Pooh after careful thought.

Piglet was comforted by this . . .

A.A. Milne, "The House at Pooh Corner"