

# Aberdyfi Art Society 1968 to 1993

## The First 25 Years



*Above: The Quay, Aberdyfi by Edward Morris.*

Edward Morris was the President of the Aberdyfi Art Society and has exhibited with The Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours and The Royal Society of Marine Artists.

## Aberdyfi Art Society

### Foreword

I am delighted to have been asked to write a foreword to this account of the Aberdyfi Art Society's history by Mr. Kilner.

When I suggested starting a small society for local artists back in 1968, I of course had no idea that it would grow to as many as 90 members, or that each year such excellent work would continue to be shown in their Summer Exhibition. I remember well that we were in those early days such a happy friendly group. I believe this spirit among the members did much to ensure the society's success and will continue to do so in the future.

Barbara Fuller, Tywyn July 1993

### Acknowledgments

I have been most fortunate, whilst preparing this short history of the Society, to have had not only the encouragement of some of its earliest members, but also the benefit of listening to their recollections of what must, with hindsight, have been the Society's 'salad days'. I am particularly grateful to Mrs. Barbara Fuller, Mr. and Mrs. Owen Hughes, Mrs. Phyllis Winnington, Mrs. Joan Newman, and Mr. and Mrs.

Edward Morris. Mrs. Margaret Hayes would, I am sure, have been a further source of much information on the Society's birth but, alas, she died in a tragic air accident in Cuba in 1981.

I am also indebted to the previous secretaries who kept records of the Society's meetings to as far back as 1975, and thankful that these have survived.

Lastly, I am most grateful to my son-in-law, Christopher Mann, and his business partner David Young, for their most generous help in the printing of this booklet. And to Jenny Matthews for typing it so well.

I hope to be forgiven for any errors in this account, which, where they occur, are of course entirely my responsibility.

*Edward Kilner, Aberdyfi, July 1993*

## **Aberdyfi and the Art Society**

Aberdyfi and its surrounding countryside has long been an attractive venue for artists, both amateur and professional. Some have made it their home; others coming from 'away' bring their sketchbooks and paints with them to enjoy a holiday by the sea. Until recently, these enthusiasts worked independently, sharing a common interest, but without the benefits of an organisation to bring them together, or to provide the means to show their work to the public.

Aberdyfi is, perhaps, best known to those who live outside Meirionnydd not for the talent of its artists, but for the legend of its Bells or, perhaps, for its Brief Glory as a shipbuilding centre and port in the last century. More recently, it has become known for its Outward Bound Sea School set up at the start of the last war and offering residential courses for youngsters from a mix of social backgrounds. These involved tough physical out-of-door activities, and were designed to improve fitness and encourage both self-reliance and a team spirit among the pupils. It may come as a surprise to the reader that it was on the initiative of a member of the school staff that local artists were brought together. From its inception, students had been encouraged as part of their training to keep a written record of their experiences during their stay. In the late 60s, Barbara, wife of the then Principal Captain Fuller, suggested that the boys - at that time there were only boys on the course - would, in addition benefit from some professional instruction in sketching and the use of watercolour, to help them illustrate what they had seen in class and on their outdoor activities. Captain Fuller appealed for help to John Tinkler, head of the art department at Aberystwyth. His response was most generous. He provided materials, and his wife offered to tutor evening classes at the school - all free. (When later the Art Society had been formed, Captain Fuller continued to take a keen interest in its activities, because he firmly believed that the Society provided an important link between the school and the local community. In fact, so much so that in 1971 he accepted an invitation to become its President - a post he held for a total of eight years.)

Joan Tinkler proved to be a gifted and inspiring teacher, and the classes were an immediate success. So much so that Barbara invited a number of local amateur artists to join with the boys and sit in on these evening classes. Notably: Richard Vernon, Ursula Mark-Wardlaw, Betty Kirk-Owen, Noel Gover, Margaret Hayes, Jack Marchant, Helen Pearce, Edward Morris, Bill Owen, Keeley and Theresa Brazier, Sally Tibbott-Davies, Kathleen Whelam, 'Sprig' Nanney-Wynn.

In fact, many of the boys proved to be surprisingly artistic and displayed their sketches on the walls of their dormitories with justifiable pride. This artistic activity would surely have been welcomed by Kurt Ham, the founder of the school. Within a few months, however, the amateur artists felt that sharing classes was not enough. In particular they wanted to arrange their own programme of classes, to make their own choice of tutor, and be able to exhibit their work to the public.

In the late summer of 1968 this small group of artists decided to form their own club, initially called The Bryneithyn Painting Club. To get it moving, a small committee was formed and, at its first meeting Margaret Hayes, a remarkable lady of strong character and well loved by all, was elected President, while Ted Morris, Ursula Mark-Wardlaw, and Owen Hughes became chairman, secretary and treasurer respectively.

## **First exhibition**

In 1969, the Club had its first exhibition of pictures in the school sheds on the sea front of Aberdyfi - surely a most unusual venue for an exhibition of art!

There was but one manuscript catalogue (listing some 25 to 30 exhibits) in the care of Ursula who had taken down the details of the pictures as they were brought in. Among the entries were paintings of sailing ships by Stan Hugill, a one-time mariner of Aberdyfi who in his youth had 'served before the mast' and was internationally known for his singing of sea shanties. Stan learnt to paint whilst a prisoner of war. There were also some splendid and very original paintings by Margaret Hayes, who had only taken up painting in her seventies. (Ted Morris still recalls with amusement an entry of hers depicting herself in the bath with the taps and her toes visible at one end and her head with smiling face at the other!) Details of the exhibition had been displayed beforehand on the school notice board outside the wharf sheds and hand-stencilled posters advertised the event about the village. The paintings were propped up on boats, hung on rigging, pinned to the walls - wherever space could be found, even to the extent of overflowing onto the pavement outside! The event was stewarded throughout by Kay Morris. It proved a great success and aroused much interest both in the village and among visitors.

For many, it is often only on reaching retirement that youthful artistic aspirations can be indulged, and for them to show a picture in an exhibition for the first time and perhaps then for a stranger to buy it can be a wonderful thrill and enormous encouragement.

A change of name

The first recorded committee meeting was held in July 1970. The club was by then called the Aberdyfi Art Society but it was soon to be changed to The Aberdyfi Art and

Field Society - Field Society was added because some members were keen bird watchers or interested in the local flora and fauna, and with the blessing of the Forestry Commission, walks were arranged for these in the nearby Dyfi Forest (at that time a no-go area) and to the bird sanctuaries such as those at Eglwys Fach on the south of the Dyfi estuary (now a part of the RSPB Centre at Ynshir) and at Gogarth on the Northern shoreline.

There were by this time (1970) some 20 to 25 paid-up members, including some who are still very active and exhibiting their work in the annual exhibition to this day. Subs had been set at 10 shillings. Plans went ahead to hold a second exhibition on the wharf during the first week of August. Artists were allowed to enter up to four pictures each. A printed catalogue with nicely bound cover (price 5 pence) was prepared and a programme of future activities made available for interested visitors. Notices of the forthcoming exhibition were posted on notice boards in Aberdyfi and around the nearby villages. It was decided to charge no entry fee, but to invite visitors to donate if they wished towards a silver collection in aid of the RNLI (and a separate one towards the expenses of the society).

31 artists (not all members of the Society) exhibited 87 pictures. These were hung by Geoffrey Stride, a young art teacher from Tywyn school. The pictures, as previously, were hung wherever a space could be easily reached. Some, indeed, were displayed on the paving outside - there is no mention of what action would have been taken if it had rained! Prices of pictures varied from as little as £2 to, in one or two cases, as much as £120. Among the exhibitors were Keeley and Theresa Brazier, Sally TibbottDavies, Joyce Francis, Noel Gover, Margaret Hayes, Mary Hughes, Elizabeth Kirk-Owen, Lillian Lumley, Ursula Mark-Wardlaw, Ted and Kay Morris, Will Owen, Helen Pearce, Olive Sharpe, Irene Williams, David Woodvine and Matvyn Wright.

### **Committee changes**

At a meeting held in September, the exhibition was judged a success. It was at this meeting that Kay Morris and Joan Newman (to become chairwoman in 1983) joined the committee. In the Autumn, classes - evening and daytime - were held under the guidance of Mr. Stride, Mr. Leach, Mrs. Eales, and Mr. Woodford (whose pictures were later to be chosen by Prince Charles as a wedding gift). It was a happy time with romance in the air! Geoffrey Stride married Sally Tibbott-Davies, herself an accomplished young artist and a member of the society, and Betty Kirk-Owen married Richard Vernon. In these early years the Society was indeed fortunate not only to have had a team of dedicated and hard working officers (by 1993 Edward Morris had served first as chairman and then as President for 24 years, Mr. Hughes as Treasurer for 13 years, and Phyllis Winnington for over 10 years as Secretary) but also to have had the support of well-known professionals, as for instance Hywel Harries, Ralph Mall atratt and Matvyn Wright.

By 1971, membership had risen further. In anticipation of a successful exhibition, 800 catalogues were printed, membership cards were introduced, the Arts Council approached for a grant, and advertisements placed in the Liverpool Post, the County Times, and the Cambrian News. It was decided to ask artists for a 10% commission on pictures sold. Among those entering were Hugo Brittain, Margaret Clive, Nora

Rudge, Phyl Winnington and Joan Newman, in addition to a number of those who had exhibited the previous year.

## **Setbacks**

It would seem that the exhibition was not as successful as had been hoped. The number of entries were down - there were only about 30-and a profit of just £6 was made on the event. There were now 43 members. Mary Hughes, a retired art teacher, took over the job of Secretary from Ursula Mark-Wardlaw in the Autumn. Aubrey Phillips and Edward Morris tutored the outdoor classes and those held in the evening were taken by John Morris of Aberystwyth and Frances Goodborn.

In the spring of 1972, the aspirations of the committee must have soared, as there was talk of opening an art centre in Aberdyfi and of holding at some stage an exhibition in Machynlleth as well as in Aberdyfi. But for some unexplained reason this enthusiasm must have faded as nothing more came of the proposals. Nevertheless, at the following meeting it was agreed to print 1,000 catalogues (at a cost of £23) to be sold at 5p each, and 800 leaflets. The insurance premium paid to cover a claim for accidents to visitors was £3 (in 1993 it was £60!). The exhibition was open for the first 10 days of August, and held for the first time in the Church Hall, a venue to be used annually for the following 20 years. 89 pictures were exhibited and among the artists showing their work for the first time were Joan Newman, Irene Williams, and Mrs. Needham. Comments in the visitors' book were not all complimentary; 'unimpressed' and 'uninspired' were the opinions of two local residents! Another thought there was 'not enough variation'. On the plus side, however, one at least of the visitors thought they varied from 'good' to 'very talented', and yet another wrote that some were 'extremely professional'.

The vicar (at that time the Rev Ken Francis) claimed that damage made by nails to the walls of the Hall was quite unacceptable and, as a consequence, permission to use it in the future was on the point of being withdrawn. Peace, however, was restored after an apology. Shortly afterwards, Joan Newman was asked by the committee to seek the vicar's approval for guests to be offered alcoholic refreshment on the evening prior to the exhibition being opened to the public (this was surely tempting fate!). There is no reference in the minutes as to whether her request was accepted or rebuffed!

A small but generous grant in aid of the exhibition expenses and of the tutors' fees was obtained this year from the WEA (Workers' Educational Authority) and was continued for some 10 years. Classes were again taken by John Morris and Mrs. Goodborn (attended by 31 people) and there was a demonstration of portraiture by Hywel Harries.

In 1973, it was decided for the first time to hold a buffet supper for members at the Woodlands Hotel, Bryncreg. It was a happy social occasion which was to become an annual event (at Woodlands and elsewhere). Guests were welcomed on arrival by the President and his wife with a glass of wine or sherry (and on one later occasion with a glass of hot punch!) These gatherings were extremely popular - often attended by as many as 80 members with their friends - and on occasion was followed by dancing. (It would seem that dancing was not confined only to such occasions! The author has been told that at the end of a class taken by 'Matty' Wright, the latter and Helen

Pearce gave a lively demonstration of the tango. Those were the days!) One year it was held by the lakeside at Talyllyn and is well remembered by those who were there for the beauty of the surrounding scenery on that evening. There had been throughout the day a very hard frost, and the lake was frozen and covered with a light dusting of snow.

The following Spring, the committee demanded much more publicity for the annual exhibition - it was said that the public did not look at the posters or, if they did, did not read them. For the forthcoming exhibition it was decided to hang a 12ft banner outside the Hall and another in a prominent position in the centre of Tywyn. Car stickers were sent to all members for display.

Frances Goodborn was asked to supervise the hanging of the exhibits (done by Jack Meredith, Jack Williams and John Brown), a job requiring not only a good eye, but also a great deal of tact! The Sea School was asked to provide two boys to clear the Hall (times have since changed!). This year it was decided not to print an expensive catalogue but to duplicate the list of entries and offer this free to visitors to retain if they wished. A collection made during the exhibition in aid of the North Wales Society for the Blind raised £32 (this charity has been supported in subsequent years, and in 1992 the magnificent sum of £321 was donated.) There is unfortunately no record as to whether the exhibition was more or less successful than the previous year.

Day classes were tutored by Mr. John Perfect of Wolverhampton at Penmaendyfi and at other venues by Edward Morris and Mrs. Goodborn. Margaret Hayes gave 20 well-attended evening classes in the Church Hall during the Autumn.

## **Gang of four**

Important improvements in the way pictures were presented at the exhibition were made in 1974. All pictures now had to be properly framed and displayed on free-standing hardboard screens - for this exhibition loaned by a school in Dolgellau (an offer from the Sea School of domestic 'clothes horses' was politely declined!). In consequence, hanging space was greatly increased and many more pictures could be shown. Moreover, the screens could be so arranged on the floor of the hall that the exhibits could be viewed more readily and in a better light than was possible previously. (Following the Vicar's complaint, attempts has been made to prop up pictures on tables or to hang them on tapes like Christmas cards both of which was most unsatisfactory.)

At that time about 12 members lived in Tywyn. Among these were Olive Sharp, Edith Needham and the two Phyls - Mrs. Meredith and Winnington. These four housewives, called The Gang of Four by the Aberdyfi members, formed their own club and decided to hold a small annual exhibition of their own in the Institute at Tywyn. This Tywyn exhibition was later to be organised by Mr. Aubrey Clarke.

It was Aubrey Clarke who constructed the first half dozen screens to be owned by the Society and they were painted by his wife assisted by Phyllis Winnington. As they were quite expensive, the cost was shared between the two groups and the screens were used at both exhibitions. Being both bulky and heavy, every year there was a problem as to where to store them. Some years they were put in the Sea School attics,

other years in private garages, the Institute at Tywyn, even under the floor at the Church Hall and, latterly, in the Hall's boiler room. Transported to and fro as required by the ever willing Ken Connors.

## **Spreading the word**

The next year (1975) publicity was further extended. Following special pleading by Dennis Clive, a great advocate of the need for the society's work to be recognised and rewarded, the Mid Wales Tourist Board was asked to support the exhibition through its own publicity media and BBC Wales to announce the event. Over 2,000 visitors were attracted to the 10 day exhibition and 23 pictures were sold. A painting by Margaret Hayes, *Washing on the Line*, caused the anxious owner of the garments to telephone the artist to obtain an assurance that her washing was clean! Day classes - a very popular event - were held this year as far afield as Abellefenni. In memory of the late Noel Gover (a founder member), the committee decided to offer an annual prize of £10, funded equally by Mr. John Gover and the society, to an artist entering a picture in the annual exhibition adjudged by ballot of the visitors as the best. It was won in 1976 by Mr. Hollis of Aberdyfi with Mr. Collier the runner up. There is no mention of this award being given in subsequent years.

Due to a continued lack of hanging space, entries to the exhibition were cut from four to three per exhibitor and Mr. Jack Williams was asked to arrange for yet another screen to be made urgently. About 1,000 visitors attended the exhibition. There was more talk in the early Autumn of holding an exhibition at the Plas Machynlleth, where the venue would have been free, but as before nothing came of this proposal. In 1977, for the first time, a one day open air exhibition at the Wharf gardens was arranged for the first week in June. Generally the Society had been fortunate with the weather for its outdoor events, but weatherwise this day was a fiasco. It was not only wet but blowing a hurricane! Too late to cancel, the pictures were hurriedly displayed as best as could be in the Sea School museum shed. To the surprise of the organisers, the public poured in. Of the 15 pictures sold in aid of the village Royal Jubilee Fund, 11 were by Joan Newman.

In the following year the open exhibition was held on the Bank Holiday Monday. A glorious hot sunny day, but there were only nine entries and these were supported on bean poles set up in the gardens. Although there were many holiday visitors about, they showed little interest and only one picture was sold. This was a disappointment and it was decided to scrap any future display of this type. In 1977 there were 1,400 visitors to the main exhibition and 22 pictures were sold. The Society's funds climbed to £131, a sizeable sum in those days which enabled more screens to be purchased. In 1978 visitors numbered 2,000 and 40 pictures out of a total of only 77 were sold. In 1979, subs were increased from 5Op to £1. Visitors to the exhibition again totalled close on 2,000 and 42 exhibits were sold.

## **Crisis averted**

In the spring of 1982, the committee was alarmed when it learnt that the North Wales Art Group planned to hold an exhibition in Aberdyfi two weeks before that of the Society! Fortunately, the Chairman, by discreet diplomacy, was able to thwart their plan and a potential catastrophe averted. Nevertheless, the exhibition again proved a

disappointment, and, although 23 pictures were sold, the attendance was down and, financially, the year was a bad one. A loss of £4 was made on the exhibition in addition to a loss on the classes. A collection made during the exhibition in support of the Literary Institute raised £53. In contrast, 1983 was somewhat of a bumper year with the sale of 31 pictures. The occasion was alas marred by the theft of the Tywyn banner, which was of sailcloth donated by the Sea School and painstakingly lettered by Mr. Aubrey Clarke.

By 1988 things were looking up, although the society had lost the financial support of the WEA, there were now a total of 90 members and funds had much improved. More screens were purchased, and the number of pictures sold rose to 47 in 1987 and 54 in 1988. On the occasion of the Society's 21st anniversary (1988) Hywel Harries, a very old friend of the Society, was invited to open the exhibition. After being introduced he gave a wonderful demonstration of his skill as a cartoonist (enlivened throughout with a patter of amusing anecdotes) before cutting the 'coming of age' cake. During the 80s, three professional painters, Ralph Mallatratt of Arthog (for many years President of the Merioneth Art Society), Terry Bailey of Aberdyfi and, more recently, Robert May of Abergynolwyn, all gave classes in Aberdyfi and nearby which were attended by members of the Society and greatly appreciated.

Sad losses

Within the last few years the Society has lost five stalwart members who had served on its committee from early years: Geoffrey Clark, Dennis Clive, Mary Law, in March this year Captain Fuller and, even more recently, Will Swan. All had given much of their time to building up the fortunes of the Society and are sadly missed.

## **The 1990's**

In the Autumn of 1991 the first annual newsletter was mailed to members, reporting on the exhibition, advising details of forthcoming events, and giving news of members' movements and achievements. From all accounts this innovation was well received.

The recently redecorated Church Hall (to which the Society made a contribution) with its improved lighting and new floor, has done much to make the presentation of pictures more attractive to viewers. At the 1992 exhibition a brief 'curriculum vitae' of each artist exhibiting work, and an explanation of the various media used by artists, were available from the stewards for the information of visitors. It had also been decided by the committee that the exhibition should be open on two evenings of the week so that local people who work during the day should have an opportunity to view the exhibition. Among the thousands of visitors from all over the world that attended the exhibition, there was a gentleman from Japan who, having bought a picture, was so impressed with the work of the artist that he subsequently wrote to tell her of the pleasure it gave him, and that it was hanging in his home and had been greatly admired by his family and friends.

In the autumn of 1992 and the spring of 1993, painting days were held in the comfortable, warm and well-lit new Yacht Club. These workshops have been very well attended and much enjoyed.

In this short account of the Society's history, the author hopes he has been able to highlight the contribution made by at least some of the many members, from its founders to those who have followed over the years, who have sustained its growth and engineered its success. This account would be incomplete if mention was not made of the small band of helpers who, behind the scenes, set up the screens and prepare the hall for an exhibition (appropriately called The Heavy Gang!), those ladies who so tastefully decorate the Hall for the open evening and those members who take their part in the stewarding of the exhibitions.

In conclusion, it would seem that the future of the society is secure, and hopefully will continue to provide pleasure and support to all concerned with the practice of art.

Postscript

From time to time I have been asked how it is the Society has survived and prospered for so long. The reasons are, I believe –

Firstly, the Society caters foremost for the amateur. Pictures, for instance, are not selected for exhibition, all are accepted on an equal footing. Secondly, the continuing support and appreciation of visitors of the annual exhibition. Lastly, the friendships developed between the artists themselves during the classes and social events.

Members of the Committee: Past and Present

## **Officials**

President Vice President Chairman

Margaret Hayes 1969-70 Francis Goodborn 1971-77 Edward Morris 1969-82

Capt 'Freddie' Fuller 1971-75 Geoffrey Clark 1978-91 Joan Newman 1983-90

Margaret Hayes 1976-77 Joan Newman 1992- Sheila Carmichael 1991-

Capt 'Freddie' Fuller 1978-82

Barbara Fuller 1983

Edward Morris 1984- (?)

Treasurer Secretary Press Secretary

Owen Hughes 1969-82 Ursula Mark- Wardlaw 1969-70 Barbara Fuller 1971-73

Mary Law 1983-85 Mary Hughes 1971-72 Geoffrey Clark 1974, 76

Geoffrey Clark 1986-91 Phil Winnington 1973-83 Kay Morris 1975, 77

Stewart Carmichael 1992- Edith Whatley 1984-86 Joan Twining 1978

Ted Kilner 1987- Edith Whatley 1979-87

Ted Kilner 1987-

Ordinary Members

1969-1979 Mr. R Benbow, Noel Gover, Jack Meredith, Will Owen, John Williams,

Judy George, Mr. Butler, Will Swann

1980-1992 Jean Barratt, John Brown, Dennis Clive, Pat Connell, Claire Davies, Glyn

Davies, Wendy Gladwin, George Hickman, Jack Meredith, Will Swann, Ken Whittle,

Kay Wright, Stanley Bray, Kath Whelam

## **Tutors**

Among the many tutors who have taken classes are:

1969-1979 Mrs. Eales, Judy George, Frances Goodborn, Hywel Harries, Percy Hayes, Derek Leach, John Morris, Edward Morris,

Aubrey Phillips, Geoffrey Stride, Joan Tinker, David Woodford, Paul Martinez-Frias,  
John Perfect, Evelyn Jackson  
1980-1992 Terry Bailey, Bernard Barnes, John Carvin, Sharon Clark, Noel Gover,  
Mrs. Jackson, Tony Jeffs, Kath Jones, Myfany  
Kitchen, Derek Leach, Mrs. Littler, Ralph Mallatratt, Robert May, Edward Morris,  
Roy Ostle, Aubrey Phillips, Irene Williams, Kay  
Wright, Matvyn Wright, Jeremy Yates, Mrs. Wooley.

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