

Harbouring big ideas

Fishing was the stock-in-trade of Staithes and once brought artists flocking from outside eager to paint it. One activity has nearly gone but the other is set for a revival. Michael Hickling reports

An art show to raise money for the Staithes lifeboat would no doubt have got the nod of approval from Dame Laura Knight.

Disasters at sea forced her to quit the village because she could no longer bear to see the worlds of families she painted, and whose lives she partly shared, torn apart. She wrote in later life, "I could not contemplate... more tragedies" among "the wild race of fisher people I loved so well".

Her talent had made her one of the chief adornments of the Staithes Group, and it took her to even greater things. Made a Dame in 1929, she became the first woman to be elected to the Royal Academy and was the official war artist assigned to cover the Nuremberg trials.

There is no successor to Dame Laura's Staithes Group, sharing a similar painterly artistic impulse and ethos. But the area today is rich in artists and from this weekend they get a new shop window in Staithes for what they can do. In fact, it's the biggest shop window that Staithes has and it's at the best address in town on the high street.

The job of turning one of the place's most intriguing buildings into an art gallery has been a five-year task for a couple from York, Dave and Alison Milnes. It's actually three buildings in one. The youngest is 200 years old, another is a century older than that and the third is cruck-framed, where two big timbers are bent together to form a peak. This bit is reckoned to be one of the oldest buildings in Staithes, possibly medieval. Even more intriguingly, it has a smugglers' tunnel.

This space has been converted into a stunning living and working area, a cross between a studio and a bedsit. An artist will be able to come here and paint, sleep on a platform erected between the cruck frame, pad down the steps to make breakfast and get cracking again.

It will serve another purpose. Staithes's charm defines a rugged version of the seaside picturesque, and for a painter to take inspiration from it at beach level means carrying your gear from the car park on the top of the



The fishing village of Staithes was an inspiration to Dame Laura Knight and other artists in the 1900s.

cliff down a tricky steep hill. If the weather took a turn for the worse, there was nowhere to go. Now artists will have this handy bolt-hole close to the beach.

Neither Dave nor Alison have artistic ambitions. They just fell in love with Staithes through coming here for holidays with their five children. This is a family used

to setting themselves challenges. A couple of years or so ago Alison, a former college teacher, and Dave, a psychiatrist, took their brood, Ruby, Max, Pearl, Bonn and Olmo, on a nine-week trek along the 470 miles of the Pilgrim's Way from Biarritz, across the Pyrenees and eventually to the town of Santiago de Compostel in Spain. They have ambitions to hit the pilgrim trail again in the future.

"We started coming to Staithes when the children were very small, staying in a rented house, and it got into you," says Alison. "We put off trying to get somewhere of our own because we thought it would tooying. Then we realised we were coming here eve weekend, half-term and summer holiday. This place had stood empty for eight years. We took the plunge without really having a plan."

The ornamental glass in the door said ironmongers but the building has also been a café and bistro and a milliner's during its long history.

Before the doors closed a final time, it had been a factory making windsurfing boards, sails and equipment. The owner had died and when the Milneses looked it over, the equipment was still intact. They also discovered the deceased proprietor had been a Sunday painter, and acquired one of his works. The researches uncovered another fact that intrigued the Laura Knight used to lodge here.

"An art gallery just seemed the obvious thing to do says Alison. "We spent five years working out how to do it, we were in no hurry. The building work has taken two years."

There were lots of rumours of smuggling tunnels and we met a former builder who talked of falling in hole here. We kept prodding a poker through gaps in the brickwork trying to find the tunnel



Derek Carpenter in the Laura Knight Studio, with cruck frame behind.

Picture by Simon Hulme