



On the Beach, Staithes by Dame Laura Knight, who was entranced by the village and its people.

The little bay of plenty

A staith is a generic term for a landing place, and the locally-built boats, known as cobles, were launched and landed on the beach. The name of the village and the construction of the cobles reveal Viking origins. Today's community, wedged into the narrow cleft formed by the Rowby Beck, was once one of the largest fishing ports on the North-East coast, with some 300 men employed. It was even worth building a railway station here, at which trains of the Whitby, Redcar and Middlesbrough Union Railway called three times a week.

The trains took away the fish and brought

back painters. From the 1870s "art colonies" had started to develop around the British coast starting in North Devon and Cornwall, the artists encouraged by the stalling of the railways to deliver them easily to previously inaccessible spots where the people were largely untouched by modern living and the machine age. These artists were inspired by the French "Plein Air" movement who had established artists' colonies in the Fontainebleau forest and in Brittany where they could paint outdoors. The English artists had either seen, or were influenced by, the Impressionist exhibitions

in Paris between 1871 and 1886. Their occasional seaside visits turned into lengthier stays, property was acquired, and on the Yorkshire coast, the Staithes Group emerged with William Gilbert Foster, Frederick Jackson and Mark Senior as the main names among about 30 who were most active. The group held their first annual exhibition in 1907.

As a young unmarried woman from Nottingham, Laura Knight was drawn here by "the freedom, the austerity, the savagery, the wildness" — even though she had barely enough money to survive. One reason so

many of her earlier Staithes works depict children is because she could only afford the half penny fee for a child model. The threepence fee for an adult model was beyond her means. Later she returned much better off, with her artist husband Harold Knight and they spent about 10 years in Staithes.

It was an Edwardian thing. By the start of the First World War, after a 30-year existence, the Staithes Group had gone. The fishing families who had been there forever, the Verrills, Theakers, Browns, Shippeys, Trattles, Rodhams, and others remained.



without success. Then we discovered a loose stone and from that found a false wall at the back of the cellar. It led to the end of the shop and then turned to the backside. They still think there might be more of it to be found. According to local stories, in the 17th century it was once possible to make your way from the bottom of the village to the top, above the cliff, without coming above ground."

Other discoveries were less welcome. As work progressed, they found that their three-in-one building also provided a lesson in the history of jerry-building — walls without foundations supported only by sand, and solid-looking beams which turned out to rest on thin air at the other end. They are in a conservation area and had to square two sets of building and planning officials who looked at each step of the project with different eyes, one interested in safety, the other in aesthetics. The saviour was a local builder who listened to the demands of both sides, thought for a bit, then came up with a workable compromise every time.

The gallery is a three-hour round trip from the Milnes's home in York. Staithes is a very quiet place

out-of-season. Another businessman close by said, "I wish them the best of luck. Anything to bring a few more to Staithes. We've had a few art galleries here..." So can Alison and family make a go of it? "There is a sense that everything else has been tried here. When we first saw it, all boarded up, it seemed such a shame. It's been a bit of a meeting point at the front here for locals, so it's wonderful to revive it. I think we can do it from York five days a week."

They share the inspiration which brought the Staithes group in the first place. But the tragedy which drove away its biggest name no longer hangs over the place. "I've been reading Laura Knight's autobiography *Oil Paint and Greasepaint* and in her last winter there was a disaster involving one family she knew and that was the end, she couldn't take it any more," says Alison. "Only one or two families make a living from fishing now."

■ Inaugural exhibition and site of work by 14 mainly local painters and a sculptor, in aid of the PNEU, Staithes Gallery, High Street, Staithes, until next Sunday April 23, 10am — 5pm.



Above: Staithes Harbour.

Pictures by Michael Hickling

Left: A whale bone pictured at the gallery.

Picture by Simon Hulme