

OUR MEMORIES CAUGHT IN PAINT

During George Eliot's 25 years of exile in London, estranged from her family who lived in the small, drab town and unpicturesque villages of the Nuneaton area, she revisited the beloved "central plain" in her mind's eye, and wrote: "There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born."

For those of us who have lived on this crescent of land on the North Wales coast for a long time or for those of us who were born here and remain still here, the scenes of by-gone days can still be with us thanks to the conjuring trick of the watercolour picture. Magicians like Warren Williams, J. Aitkin, Ben Hoyles, Llewelyn J. Jones, Marion Bastock, A. R. Quinton, Florence Pike, and H. Watkinson reveal the reality of our memories, clothe us in the mist of our imagination and add to our true local historical record.

These painters show us Colwyn Bay and the surrounding area as it was years and years ago, and they also to some extent idealise the past; but then so do we in our memories. Nostalgia is a great stimulator of the creative imagination; but it is a powerful

force. In all societies and in all ages our painters show the truth of this adage.

Some paintings, historically, are fascinating. In 1895 Llewelyn J. Jones painted an oil painting of Bryn Defaid and Llandrillo-yn-Rhos Parish Church. It shows the view from the brow of the hill on what is now Dinerth Road (originally Penrhyn View) at its junction with Princes Avenue. Bryn Defaid was the manor house of Llandrillo, but was demolished in 1996 and has been replaced by a housing development named after the old manor house. Miss Irinis Cheer Roberts, who was born in 1910 (and died on 2nd October, 2005) could remember whizzing down Penrhyn View and down Llandudno Road on a home made skate board. As you look at Mr. Llewelyn Jones' picture you can imagine the ease with which Miss Roberts hurtled down the

lane knowing full well that she would not meet any sort of mechanised transport.

Two years later in 1898 Marion Bastock painted the view of Bryn Eirias House on Groes Road. The building, now demolished, stands alone in the surrounding fields, caught by Miss Bastock for eternity.

An anonymous water colourist, just on the cusp of changing times for Colwyn Bay, in about 1850 as Lady Erskine was selling her home and the railway was arriving, painted Erskine House and the surrounding fields, with hay making in progress.



Llandrillo and Bryn Defaid by Llewelyn J. Jones, 1895



Bryn Eirias House by Marion Bastock, 1898

Queen Elizabeth I, in her old age, recalled with fondness the time of her youth, which, God knows, was harsh and risky, for no one's head was safe, including her own, when her ferocious father ruled. Painters show us in vivid form our home town recalled with fondness and maybe with uncertain memory.

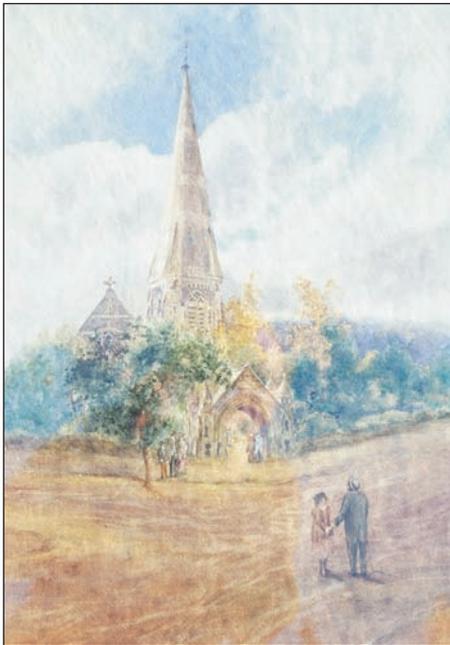
On 12th October, 1904 Fredrick William Jackson and Pollie Buckley were married at St. John's Methodist Church in Colwyn Bay. As a wedding present Ben Hoyles painted a bright water colour memory of the occasion and he and his wife presented it to the couple over 100 years ago. It shows Fredrick and Pollie standing in what is now the middle of Conwy Road where the mini



Erskine House, anonymous c.1845

round-about is situated at the bottom of Pwllcrochan Avenue. They stand alone, the Church seemingly floating just behind them, a living record to the skill of Thomas Foulkes and his builders.

Ben Hoyles also painted an evocative picture of Llandrillo church. The church stands surrounded by fields of hay in the evening light.



St. John's Methodist Church by Ben Hoyles, 1904

Talleyrand always said, in old age, that those who had not known France before 1789 had no conception of what civilised living and happiness were like. Nonsense, of course, but also true. Before that great convulsion and the long wars it generated, people did not fear the future and the horrors it might bring; they had confidence in life as it was. There have been no great upheavals in Colwyn Bay unless you count the arrival of The Ministry of Food during World War 2; the drama of the world has mercifully passed us by. None the less our lives sixty years ago, as our artists knew and

as they depicted our area, were lived free from fear and ignorant of the horrors now visited upon the world.

Llewelyn The great's seneschal dwelling, his "chiefest manor-house" was Llys Euryn at the foot of Bryn Euryn. This was where Ednfyd Fychan lived when he visited these parts, using the narrow track (now Rhos Road) down which he travelled to his boat which would have been tied up on the sea shore opposite where Nino's Cafe now stands. Hundreds of years later Mr. A. Netherwood R.C.A. painted the scene and titled his picture, "Welsh Chieftan's Home, Rhos-on-Sea". Mr. Netherwood must have sat and painted his picture from where now Cowlyd Close winds its way behind Llys Euryn. The tall chimney of Llys Euryn is evident and the small window in the right hand wall is there in the ruin as it still is in 2006. The Penmaenhead hill can be seen in the distance and he sweep of the Bay. Tranquillity reigns, for that is all the painting



Llandrillo by Ben Hoyles, c. 1900

shows; there are no other buildings, just green fields, trees and a higgledy piggledy wooden fence. An age gone by, ignorant of our present fears and horrors.

Warren Williams, a prolific local water colour painter, painted mostly views of Snowdonia and the Conwy Valley. However he also painted Rhos-on-Sea, Pwllcrochan and Colwyn Bay. He was commissioned by Mr. Jones to paint his farm on Groes Road on The Glyn and by Mr. & Mrs. Neil (of the confectionery shop on Rhos Road) to paint a view of Colwyn Bay from Penmaenhead looking down to Colwyn Bay. This painting still hangs in the home of the relatives of the recipient and is inscribed on the frame: :To Mr. A. J. Dando as a reminder of fourteen years happy association from Mr. & Mrs. E. A. Neill, October 1930 Colwyn Bay.

Warren Williams was painting in the early part of the 20th Century and exhibited 7 times at the Walker Art Gallery and a phenomenal 95 times at the Royal Cambrian Academy. His better paintings now change hands for thousands of pounds. He lived in Conway and so enjoyed a drink that he would sometimes dash off a picture purely to raise enough cash for a visit to the pub. These quick second rate efforts, are easily identifiable to-day.

Samuel Palmer, that beautiful genius of a painter was born in 1805 and started his career at a time when English art was poised between internal fantasy and rapturous observation of the world. In his great and justly celebrated painting 'In a Shoreham Garden', an apple tree foams over with blossom and a graceful female figure passes through the garden. As you look at Palmer's paintings you feel drawn into his mind in a very unusual way. When looking at his 'The Magic Apple Tree' of 1830 with its shepherdess in a shady golden glade and the tree extraordinarily overladen with red apples, you can almost feel Palmer's excitement. In a modified sense, in a more



Llys Euryn by A. Netherwood, R.C.A., c. 1900

-muted manner, so our local artists in their more pedestrian way have seen Colwyn Bay and through rose tinted glasses in many cases have shown how beautiful is our spot of earth, but also, the realism of their vision shines through.

Two such beautiful water colours, one painted by H. Watkinson and one by Ben Hoyles were painted from somewhere on the lane to Llanellian or Llysaen; both show the hamlet of Colwyn, quiet, unconcerned, before the advent of the railway or the motor car.

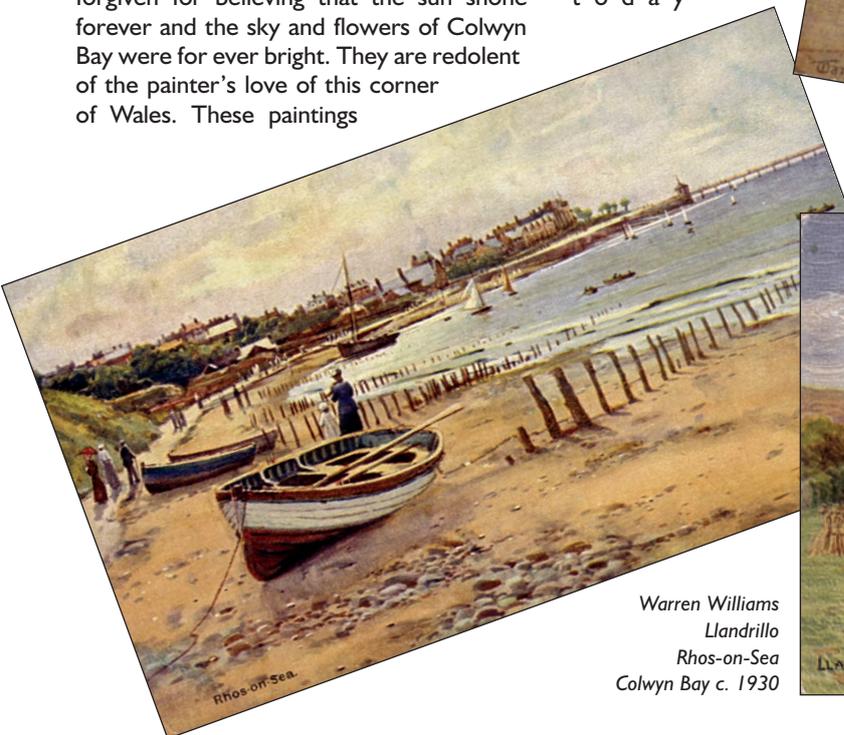
Florence E. Pike was also painting about this time (c.1900) and she caught the view of Groes Mill, and in another painting, the cottage opposite the Mill, in vibrant water colours. Fizzing with acid greens, shocking red, they are almost as shocking as when they were painted a century ago. The great thing is that you can go straight outside and see the same views, not so greatly changed today. In her paintings one would be forgiven for believing that the sun shone forever and the sky and flowers of Colwyn Bay were for ever bright. They are redolent of the painter's love of this corner of Wales. These paintings

executed generally around the turn of the 19th century, are typical of their time. They chucked out history, ancient and modern (no nymphs or generals) and made the present the subject, catapulting the places of everyday village life - homes, leafy lanes, pubs, into the frame. They also made the Colwyn People, the customers of the pubs, the farm labourers, part of the subject. These pictures, as Walter Sickert said of his paintings are, "fragments of a thing seen"; meditations on the fleeting experience of life in the emerging modern town of Colwyn Bay. Nothing it seems, was unworthy of an artist's attention. So J. H. Aitken painted Lady Erskine's dovecot. This was situated where t o d a y

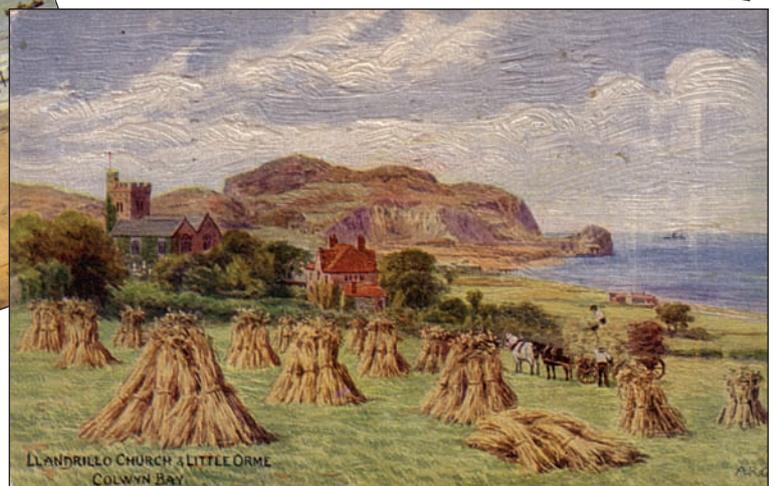
stands the 'Dutch House' on Walshaw Avenue. (A black and white reproduction of this painting appeared in Porter's Book, 'Colwyn Bay Before The Houses Came'). Mr. Aitkin also painted a lovely water colour picture of the Nant-y-Glyn Valley from where today the Glyn Estate has been built. James Aitken was born in 1884 and died when he was 49 years old. He exhibited his work at the Walker Art Gallery, the Manchester City Art Gallery, seven times at the Royal Academy, twenty nine times at the Royal Cambrian Academy, and twice at the Royal Scottish Academy.

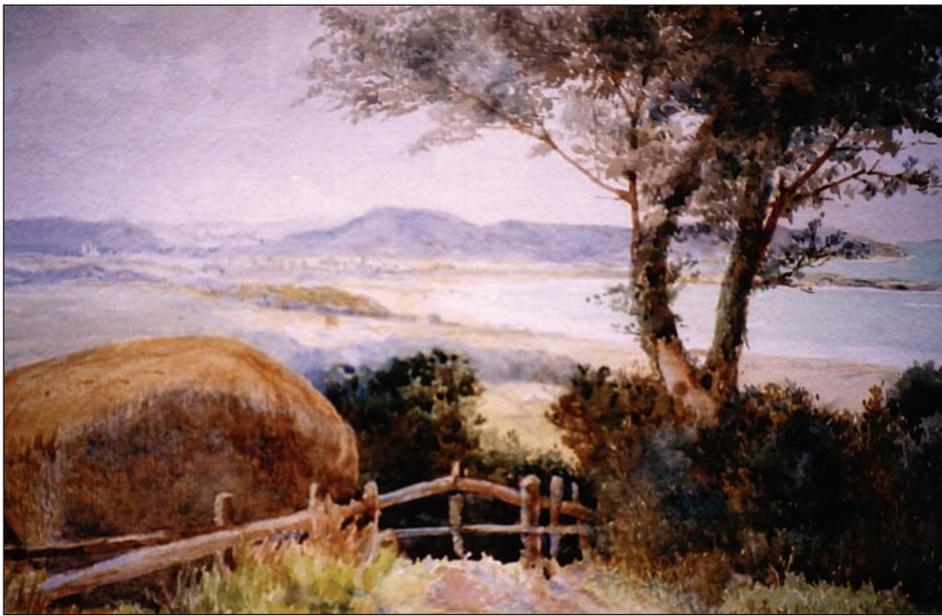
Local architects have also been instrumental in preserving our view of Colwyn Bay. In many dusty local offices must lurk the drawings of yesteryear which were executed to impress former clients. On the cover of the March 2003 issue of this journal we showed J. M. Porter & Co's expert 1908 depiction of how they envisaged the future look of the Old Colwyn Methodist Church. Sadly only the Church Room was eventually built which now acts as the main Church.

Griffiths, Williams Associates, the architectural consultants of Colwyn Bay have been involved in the recent plans for the phoenix like rising of a new Chapel on the site of the old Hermon Chapel building on the corner of Brompton Avenue and Llannerch Road East. The expert plans visualise in great detail how this particular spot will be revitalised by the inclusion of modern flats.



Warren Williams
Llandrillo
Rhos-on-Sea
Colwyn Bay c. 1930





Colwyn Bay, H. Watkinson, 1900

Outside the Cabinet Room at Number 10 Downing Street there is a painting hanging on the wall. It is a huge panorama, painted 300 years ago, looking down from Richmond Hill over the Thames. This view is remarkably unchanged today. The clock tower of Petersham Church; various grand houses, such as Ham and Marble Hill; the same little islands and the same rough meadows, - all are instantly recognisable. Little has altered except for the introduction of housing estates.

How many views from around 1700 are still recognisable in Colwyn Bay. Precious few I suspect. And yet we can still stand where the painters of yesterday stood and imagine

it as they saw our corner of Wales years ago. Erskine House still predominates, the curve of the bay remains, the Nant-y-Glyn Valley is unchanged.

C.R. Cockerell R.A. once upon a time the Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy, said: 'Architecture belongs to history'. That may very well be so but years after Mr. Cockerell passed on his idea all that remains of much of our architecture are the vivid representations realised by our artists.

There is real power in these old paintings; some are beautifully executed, while others are more amateurish, but they all hold a fascination for us. These ancient artists of a



Goes by Florence E. Pike, c.1900

bye gone age change our minds while their paintings remain the same, their freshness grows, while we ourselves, much like the picture of Dorian Grey, become steadily older and blurrier.

How we think we perceive the world is very much conditioned by painting. W. H. Auden wrote somewhere that a friend is simply someone of whom, in his absence, one thinks of with pleasure. We reminisce about our childhood upbringing in our childhood towns and villages and we, who come from Colwyn Bay, can still, in our minds eye, see the town of our youth. Paintings can and do help us remember Colwyn Bay with pleasure.



Colwyn Bay by Ben Hoyles



Lady Erskine's Dovecot, J. H. Aitken, 1850



*Nant-y-Glyn
by G. H. Aitken, c.1860*