

Bob Devereux (pupil 1940 – 1951)

Poet, performer, artist and librettist

Bob Devereux has been one of the leading lights of the contemporary art community in St Ives, Cornwall since the 1960s.

A multi-talented artist, Bob's abstract paintings have been exhibited widely. Through his own gallery in St Ives, the Salthouse Gallery (now closed), he showcased not just his own works but also those of many other contemporary artists. His poems have been engraved in metal, etched into stone and set to music: they are regularly performed (often by Bob himself) in festivals across the country. One of his songs, "Morris Room", was even chosen by the comedian Billy Connolly as a Desert Island disc!¹



Bob Devereux was born in Dorking in 1940. He first lived in Orchard Road with his parents, his grandmother, his aunt and her husband. The family moved to Chart Downs when he was 8 years old, when his younger brother Chris was born.

Bob and Chris both attended St Paul's School, as had their father Charles and aunt Margaret² before them.

Both Bob's parents and his aunt were nurses at Dorking Hospital. They were all very community minded and encouraged Bob to become a cadet for St John's Ambulance, as a result of which he spent many hours as a boy helping on the wards of the Hospital. St John's Ambulance gave early recognition to his artistic

¹ You can hear Billy Connolly's 2001 appearance on the famous Radio 4 programme amongst the archives accessible from the BBC Radio 4 website.

² In the 1970s, Margaret wrote about her own experiences at St Paul's School and her memories of growing up in Dorking during the First World War – you can read her personal recollections in "Mrs Margaret Barker (nee Devereux) – pupil 1916-1919".

talents when his painting of Dorking won him first prize in a National St John's Ambulance competition.

At St Paul's School, Bob's teachers included Miss Harwood, a calligrapher who was particularly pedantic about the children's handwriting, and Mr Truscott, who introduced the young Bob to the importance of perspective in art.

Bob's teachers, too, recognised the young Bob's artistic skills when, at the age of just six, he correctly drew a figure of a leaping man in profile, with features properly viewed from the side, rather than, as many of his fellow students had done, with the face twisted round so the man's eyes, ears, mouth and nose were fully in view.

In 1951 Bob left St Paul's and went to Sondes Place School, Dorking (now The Priory School). At the age of 13 he transferred to Leatherhead County Secondary School in Dilston Road, Leatherhead (now Therfield School) and then at 17 he gained a place at Kingston Art School to study Graphic Design. From Art School Bob set up his own graphic design business, which began to grow.

Then in 1965 Bob discovered St Ives.

St Ives

Since the 1940s, St Ives had been a haven for contemporary artists, especially those whose interests lay with abstract art, such as the members of the Penwith Arts Society. Bob abandoned his graphic design business, moved to St Ives and set about submitting works to the Society for exhibition, but with no success.

Believing that his pictures were better than many others that were accepted, frustration led in 1969 to Bob temporarily abandoning painting, and he instead turned his attention to poetry and music. He began to compere at folk clubs, reading poems he had written as a student, and soon he teamed with guitarist Jim Hughes and a young violinist Bridget Tickner. Together they spent the next few years touring all over the country as 'Mask', performing in folk clubs and at folk festivals.

Bob also worked with the banjoist, Clive Palmer (of the Incredible String Band), recording an album, "Suns and Moons" – a niche album which was popular with members of the folk scene, and particularly so with a certain Glaswegian comedian.



In 1979 he attracted the attention of the composer Christopher Brown. Together they wrote a choral work Seascape Op53 "...consider a wave....", first performed in 1981 as part of the St Ives Festival. Bob supplied the libretto:

“...Consider a wave...” (opening lines)

Here, in the full light of the sun,
Facing the great atlantic ocean,
An artist prepares to paint;
Evading all quaint romantic notions of his father’s generation.
He needs no red sails,
 No white whales,
 No weepers at green windows,
 No sad-eyed maids in widow’s weeds,
 No brave deeds of the deep;
Only his easel and his paints and the restless sea.

There followed a series of collaborations with Christopher – three children’s operas (one in German), two cantatas, an adult opera and a piece called ‘Brown Bear’ for spoken voice, string quartet and woodwind, commissioned by The Lindsay String Quartet and performed by Bob and The Lindsays at The Crucible Theatre in Sheffield. Bob has also collaborated with six other composers.

In the meantime, Bob was given a set of watercolours and he began to paint local harbour scenes. An exhibition at St Ives Library, at which all his paintings were sold, led him in 1973 to take space at the St Ives Craft Market, which in turn encouraged him in 1980 to open his own gallery, the Salthouse Gallery.



Coastal Harbour with Figures and Boat, 1974



Untitled, 2001

Through the Salthouse, Bob exhibited the works of abstract painters and artists both new and established, as well as his own paintings. When the Gallery closed in 2010 there was strong local feeling that a chapter in the history of the art community in St Ives had ended. Jeremy Annear, a fellow Cornish artist wrote:

“At the Salthouse, the important and tireless contribution of Bob Devereux should not be underestimated. He took risks all the time giving new and upcoming artists shows based purely on their work without any consideration of potential sales. His gallery was important because artists went to shows to see new and exciting/innovative work. In those days sales were secondary to the quality of shows. Bob had no money. It was really hard but it’s what we were all familiar with and expected. The idea of commercial never entered the artist/Gallery relationship significantly. Even when work was sold we often didn’t get paid for ages and then only after pestering.”³

³ On artcornwall.org, an online journal for art, artists and galleries in Cornwall

Life after Salthouse

Bob continues to be as busy as ever: painting, writing, and performing. He is Director of the St Ives Literary Festival held in May each year, and is deeply involved in the annual St Ives September Festival – a festival of jazz, blues, folk, classical, painting and poetry. Bob is also responsible for the fortnightly open mic sessions in the Arts Club in nearby Penzance – Café Frug.

Where can you see Bob's work today?

Saltmill Park, Saltash, Cornwall

Saltmill Park is a former landfill site that has been successfully regenerated into a public recreation ground. The Park contains numerous green open spaces, a skate park and many public works of art celebrating the diverse artistic skills of the Cornish community. A poem by Bob is carved into the Park's handrails.

Bodmin Hospital

A poem by Bob is mounted on the wall of the main entrance to Bodmin Hospital. The names of the Hospital's wards are taken from this poem – Harvest, Bowman, Fletcher, Garner, Fettle. Another Cornish artist, John Blight, has incorporated the names into a three-panelled painting, which also hangs in the Hospital entrance.

“When you feel in fine fettle
and your world is fair dinkum
and you garner the harvest
and your anchor don't stray
You've been healed by a fletcher.

It's time to go home now
fly straight as the arrow
and live for the day”

Heartlands

Heartlands is a new visitor attraction developed on land that was once part of the tin mining industry in West Cornwall. Now part of the “Cornish Mining Landscape World Heritage Site”, mine buildings have been restored and developed into art exhibition space and gardens have been designed to tell the story of Cornish emigrants around the world. A poem by Bob about these emigrants (the “Cornish Diaspora”) is carved into



12 granite boulders that form a work by David Mackie entitled “Seams and Veins”.

Written with thanks to Bob Devereux
Helen Wharmby, October 2011