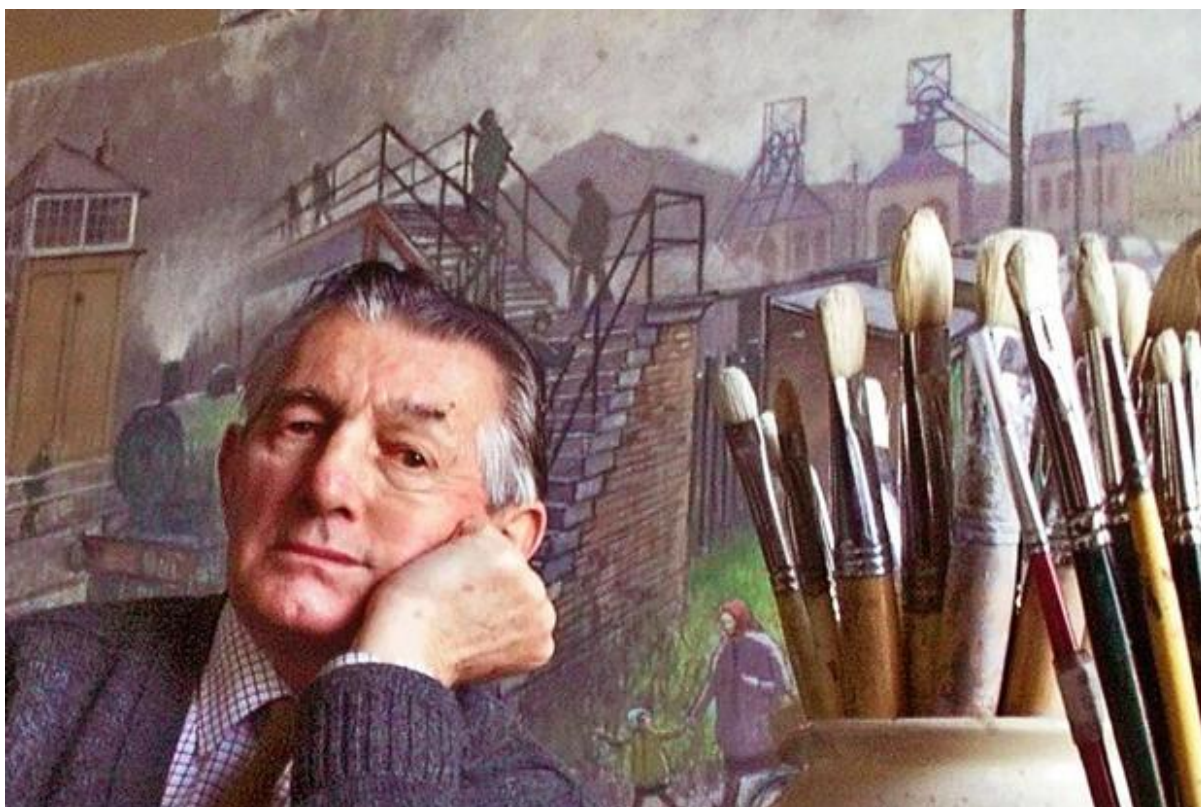


33 Bishops Close Street, Spennymoor –  
Norman Cornish's 1950s home





Norman Cornish was one of the North East's most well-known and prolific artists. He died in August 2014 and following his death, his family donated the contents of his studio, along with other items of furniture to the Beamish. Our plan is to include the (now demolished) house in which he lived with his family during the 1950s in the Front Street of the new 1950s Town.

### **Brief biography of Norman Cornish**

Norman was born in 1919 at home in Oxford Street, Spennymoor, but when he was a few months old his family moved to Bishops Close Street.<sup>1</sup> This tiny two up, two down stone built colliery terrace, housed the family of nine in conditions that Cornish described as 'seeming 'Elizabethan' by modern standards'.<sup>2</sup> Like other colliery houses, the house was cramped and basic, with common features, such as a black range and an outside ash closet toilet.<sup>3</sup> As Norman remarked, it was perhaps unsurprising that he caught diphtheria at the aged of seven; the same age at which the uncle he had been named after had died of the disease.<sup>4</sup> To relieve pressure on his parents, Norman spent a lot of his time at his maternal grandmother Sarah's house, which he describes as being gas lit and decorated with clippy mats, suggesting it had changed little from when his

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Cornish, *A Slice of Life* (Newcastle: University Gallery Publications, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert McManners and Gillian Wales, *The Quintessential Cornish: The life and work of Norman Cornish* (Gemini Productions, 2009), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Cornish, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

grandmother had first moved in.<sup>5</sup> Norman's early experiences of life in colliery housing made him determined to provide a spacious home for his own children in which they could work and play.<sup>6</sup>

Money in the Cornish family was tight. Norman's father had become long term unemployed after the closure of the Whitworth Pit (the pit that had opened in 1839 and around which the town of Spennymoor had developed).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, by the 1920s the other large employer in Spennymoor, the Weardale Iron and Coal Company based at Tudhoe had also closed, leaving hundreds of men without work. Many now had to travel to work in the collieries of surrounding villages.



One of Norman's many paintings of the pit road from Spennymoor.

Norman was initially able to go to grammar school thanks to the financial assistance of his two 'fairy godmother' his grandmother and her friend Martha Sugden.<sup>8</sup> However, his family's monetary situation was so desperate that at the age of fourteen his father his father reluctantly took him out of school to get him 'set on' at the Dean and Chapter Colliery near Ferryhill.<sup>9</sup> His brother Jack was already employed at the colliery as a coal hewer, but Norman was to begin at the bottom as a daily-paid general worker.<sup>10</sup> Upon signing his contract, the official said to him "You've just signed your death warrant".<sup>11</sup> After initially being apprehensive about working life underground Norman became part of the routine of the collieries, and did not leave the pits until 1966, when his chronic back pain proved to be too much.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> McManners and Gillian Wales, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Cornish, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Cornish, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> McManners and Gillian Wales, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Cornish, p. 9.



At the age of fifteen Norman was accepted into the Spennymoor Settlement.<sup>12</sup> The settlement movement arose from the perceived disparity between the accessibility of education for the upper and middle classes of Victorian society and that of the disadvantaged working classes.<sup>13</sup> The first settlement was Toynbee Hall, opened in Whitechapel 1884. It aimed to provide free education and advice to the poor, as well as bring young leaders (including the future prime minister Clement Atlee) face to face with British poverty.<sup>14</sup> From this point onwards settlements appeared in most of the country's industrialised cities, with Spennymoor becoming one of the first provincial settlements when it opened in 1930 thanks to funds from the Pilgrim Trust.<sup>15</sup> With the slow decline of the coal mining industry in the town, a third of its work force were jobless by 1931.<sup>16</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement aimed to counter the apathy and depression caused by long term unemployment and poverty by free providing educational classes, legal advice, community groups. Activities available included woodwork classes, women's sewing groups, the boy scouts and the famous Everyman Theatre (opened in 1939).<sup>17</sup> Bill Farrell was the first warden of the Settlement and his visionary belief was that beyond the basic necessities of food and shelter, people needed self-esteem, friendship and an outlet for creativity.<sup>18</sup>



The Spennymoor Settlement in its original location on King Street

Malcolm Marsden who joined the Settlement as a 12 year old boy in 1958 described its atmosphere as a 'relaxed' one where members could suggest ideas for classes and had the opportunity to learn new skills.<sup>19</sup> Having been interested in art at school, Norman joined the Settlement's art class (which is still running). Here was where he developed his techniques and Bert Dees (the class's founder) and Bill Farrell became his friends and mentors.<sup>20</sup> Norman's art was first exhibited alongside the work by the rest of sketch

<sup>12</sup> McManners and Wales, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> 'Our history', Toynbee Hall website, <http://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/our-history> [accessed 5th March 2015].

<sup>15</sup> McManners and Wales, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> 'Spennymoor Settlement Movement: A potted history', Spennymoor Settlement website, <http://www.spennymoorsettlement.co.uk/history.html> [accessed 9th March 2015]

<sup>18</sup> Robert McManners and Gillian Wales, *Way to the Better: The Spennymoor Settlement* (Gemini Productions, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Personal Com. Malcolm Marsden

<sup>20</sup> McManners and Wales, p. 38.

class at the Settlement's annual show in 1935.<sup>21</sup> Other artists included fellow miners Bob Heslop and Tom McGuinness, as well as blacksmith Jack Roache and decorator Bert Dees.<sup>22</sup> From here the group continued to exhibit, most significantly contributing pieces to 'The Works of Artists of the Northern Counties' exhibition at the Laing Gallery in Newcastle – a show which normally displayed professional artists.<sup>23</sup> Norman was however very cautious of being labelled as a 'pitman painter' (as the group of miners based at the Ashington Group would become known). For him, the focus on his occupation undermined his art; as he put it 'Why do people call me a pitman painter? Why should they? Strauss worked in a bank at one time but would you call Strauss the bank clerk musician. No you wouldn't, it doesn't sound dramatic enough.'<sup>24</sup>

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War, Norman was detained from fighting as mining was a reserved occupation. In his autobiography Norman simply states that 'The war affected the mining industry as it affected everything else, so we won't dwell on it, except to say that, like everyone else, we miners were obliged to endure it to the end.'<sup>25</sup>

Shortly after the end of the War in 1945, Norman had his first one man show in the green room of the People's Theatre in Newcastle when the play in production was *Rhondda Roundabout* by Jack Jones, which had a coal mining theme.<sup>26</sup> From here Norman's independent artistic career took off; there were regular local and national exhibitions of his work and television documentaries followed. In 1959 Norman began a twenty-two year relationship with the Stone Gallery in Newcastle, whose owners Mick and Tillie Marshalls effectively became his commissioning agents.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Norman's most significant commission was the Miner's Gala Mural for the new Durham County Hall building, which opened in 1968.<sup>28</sup> This piece of public art cemented Norman's position as a professional artist.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Personal Com. Norman Cornish, noted by McManners and Wales.

<sup>25</sup> Cornish, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Cornish, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> McManners and Wales, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> McManners and Wales, p. 82.



Norman's sketch of his  
Grandmother.

Norman and Sarah moved into Bishops Close Street on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1953. After marrying in 1946, the couple lived with Norman's maternal grandmother, who in her old age had grown into (in Sarah's words) 'a bit of a slave driver'.<sup>29</sup> Things got so bad that Sarah lost two stone in weight and her father threatened to take her home if they didn't find somewhere else to live.<sup>30</sup> They moved out and spent the next two years living as lodgers with a widow, before being able to purchase 24 Catherine Street in 1948. This was formerly the same maternal grandmother's house, which the couple were able to afford to buy for £80 because the house was listed for demolition. The house had been built by the Tower Brewery to house their workers. Sarah recalls it being 'very basic and difficult to live in'.<sup>31</sup> Norman and Sarah's first child, Ann, was born a year later whilst they were living at Catherine Street. The family spent five years in this house before eventually moving to a colliery house on Bishops Close Street (the same street that Norman had lived on as a child). Norman confessed in his autobiography that '[he] didn't like the idea of moving into a colliery house, as [he] felt it tied me more to the pit, but eventually [he] came to be quite happy there.' Norman and Sarah's second child, John, was born in 1956. Norman left work as a pitman in 1966 due to his bad back and became a full time professional artist. He was however, allowed to keep his NCB house. The Cornish's stayed at Bishop's Close Street until they moved to a converted Methodist Manse on Whitworth Terrace in 1967, where Norman painted and lived for the rest of his life.

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<sup>29</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>30</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>31</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

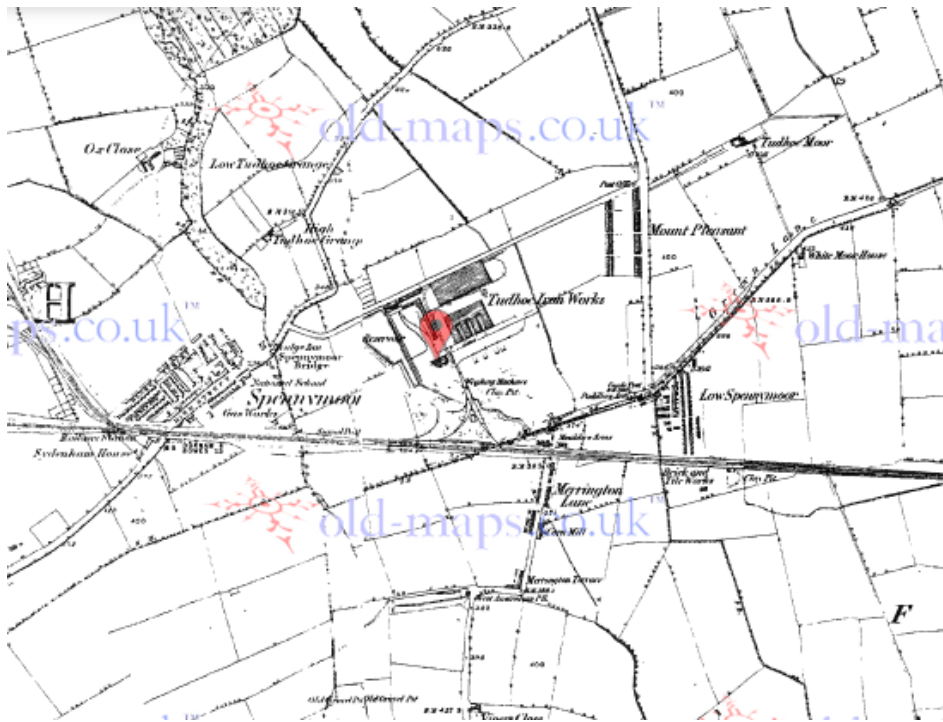


The Cornish's house on Whitworth Terrace

Norman's importance as an artist was not simply as an aestheticist, but as an observer and recorder of everyday life in his community. He was never seen without his small pocket notebook, constantly making sketches of those carrying on their lives around him. As his friend and contemporary George Lavery remembers Norman could always be found drawing in a corner of the Spennymoor's bowling pavilion, band practices, local pubs, and of course at the Settlement. What his prolific outpouring of work conveyed was an industrialised area in decline and the struggles (and triumphs) of its population as it tried to adapt. Most of the buildings and streets that he painted have now been demolished, and although some of the people depicted by Norman (or at least their descendants) are still connected with Spennymoor, many have moved on. The story of Spennymoor in the latter half of the twentieth, while unique to its individual inhabitants, is reflective of other mining communities in the North East, who slowly had to adjust to their changing world.

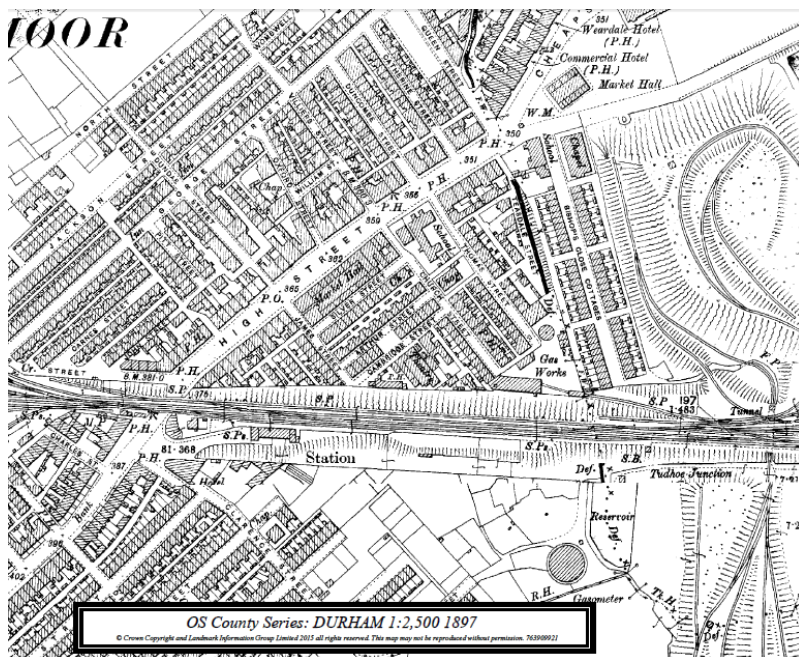


## The street – what was Bishops Close Street like in the 1950s?



## The 1861 OS Map

OS Maps show how Spennymoor boomed from a tiny settlement in 1861, with only a handful of streets, to a fully established town by 1897. The biggest building period appears to have been between 1895 and 1897, which coincided with the growth of the Weardale Iron & Coal Company.



The 1897 OS Map. Bishops Close Street was the row of terraces the ran perpendicular to the railway line with the chapel and school at the end.



Bishop's Close appeared during this time, located to the east of the town, sandwiched between the slag heaps and the gas works. The street was made up of three blocks of ten terraced houses on either side of the road, which were built of stone rather than brick like most of the later terraces. At the end of the street was the colliery railway line. The houses seemed to have been developed here at roughly the same time that the width of line was expanded and a tunnel was created underneath it. This created the 'pit road' that led out of the village in the direction of the collieries. Many of Norman's painting show the pitman trudging up and down it on their way to and from work.



A photograph of Bishops Close Street that was probably taken in the 1960s

At the opposite end of the street to the railway line was the National School (which first appears on the 1895 OS Maps), which was presumably built to cater for the growing population. The Methodist Chapel was opposite the school. Sarah's father was a Methodist preacher and she played the organ for the chapel.<sup>32</sup> However, Norman managed to secure permission from the minister not to attend chapel, so that he could have more time to paint during the weekend.<sup>33</sup> A photograph of the street that was taken in the 1950s shows that a fairly large 1920s cinema on the junction at the end of the road.

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<sup>32</sup> Cornish, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



One of Norman's oil paintings of Bishops Close Street.

Norman's paintings of his street show the uniformity of the houses, all with green front doors and undisguisable from each other. The scenes include children playing outside and neighbours chatting on the doorstep, suggesting that there was a strong sense of a safe and friendly community. Significantly, there are no cars on Bishops Close Street or on any of the other Spennymoor streets that he painted during the 1950s.



Norman's oil painting of the Berriman's Brother mobile fish and chip van



Instead, there are men and children on bicycles, women pushing prams, general dealers with their horse and carts and the Berriman Brother's mobile fish and chip van. This chip van is the one that is currently next to Davy's in the Pit Village. Norman painted the van at the end of various streets numerous times. It would perhaps be appropriate to re-position the van on our 1950s front street to invoke the streetscapes of Norman's paintings. The streets of the town were also populated by dozens of old gas lamps that had been converted to electricity – their old lamps replaced with Revo 'Elsa' heads. This economical adaption appears to have been extremely characteristic of the pit villages and the mismatched street furniture features in nearly every one of Norman's street scenes. This is something that we could very easily recreate and again lining our front street with a couple of these lamps might be something that we would like to consider.



The second oil painting by Norman of Bishops Close Street.

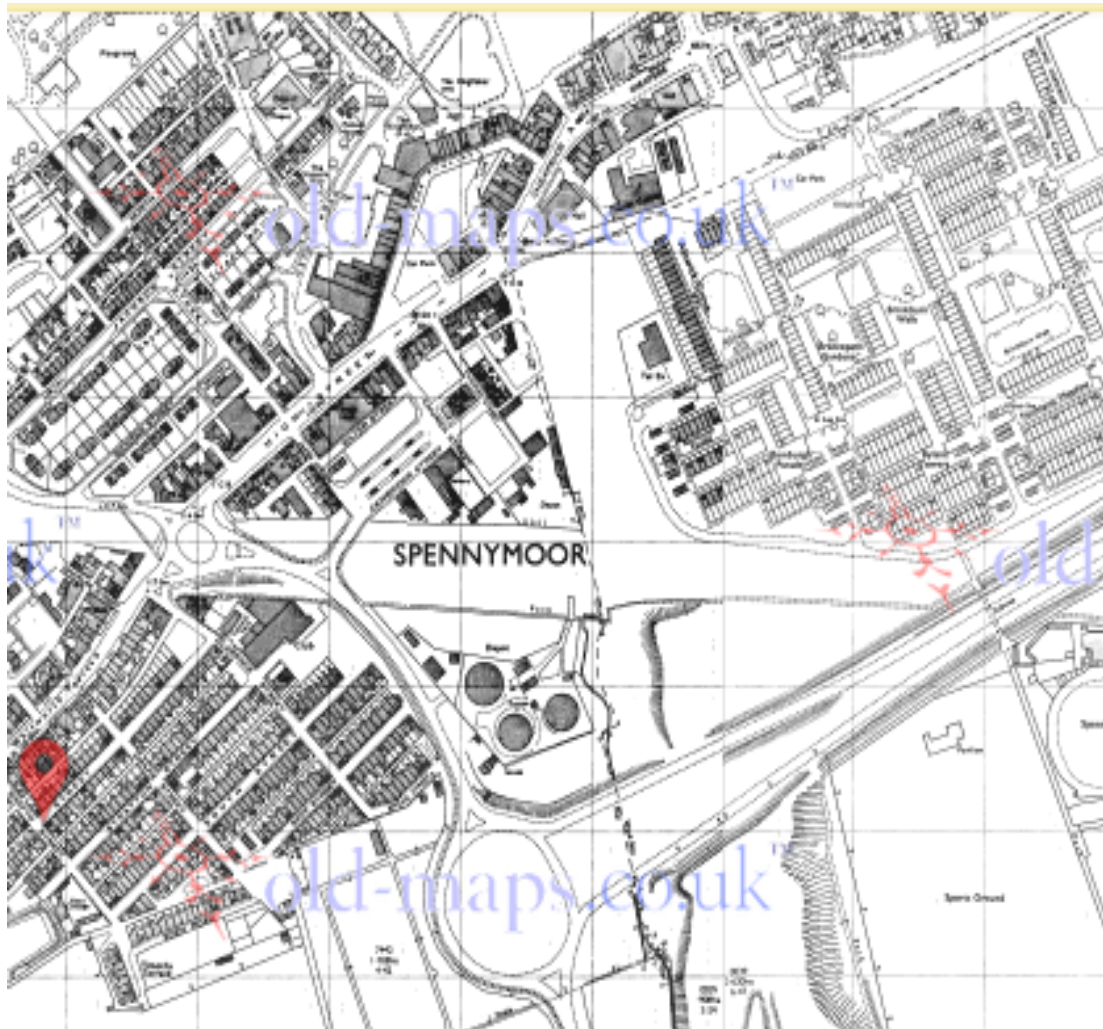
Norman's parents too lived on Bishops Close Street, as his father Jack was also a miner (although he went phases of long term unemployment). Jack kept an aviary in his 'back yard with canaries, budgerigars and zebra finches and some illegally caught native birds'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Norman's sketches of Spennymoor's back streets indicate the hotch potch of sheds, outhouses and washing lines that littered the rear yards of the houses.



Norman's sketches of the back streets of Spennymoor.

<sup>34</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

Following the nationalisation of the coal mining industry in 1947, the ownership of the colliery terraces transferred to the National Coal Board. The NCB offered sick pay, paid holidays and better safety regulations.<sup>35</sup> They also had strict rules about their housing, as to qualify for an NCB house a member of the immediate live-in family had to be employed as a miner. They were however responsible for maintaining adequate and free housing for their employees.



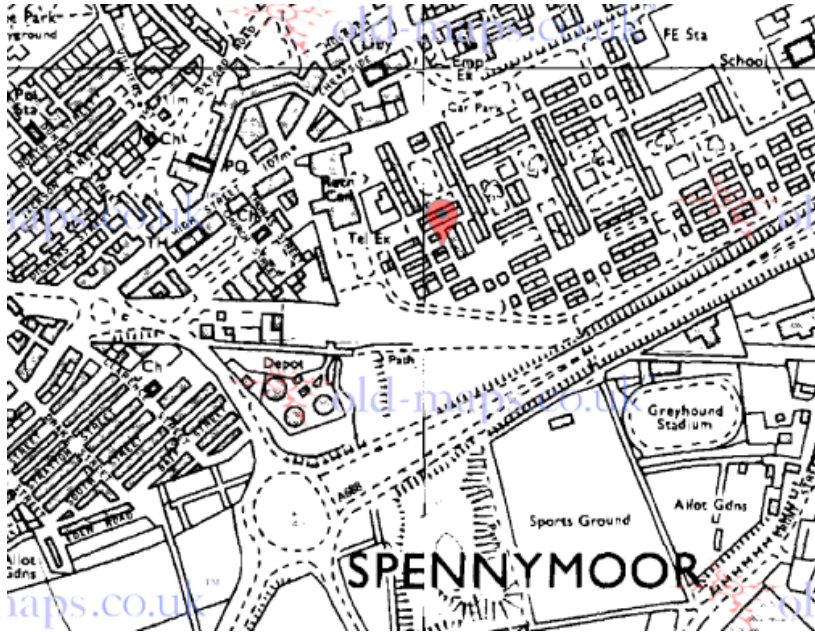
The 1974 OS Map of Spennymoor – Bishops Close Street was where the large gap is visible above the gasworks.

Bishops Close Street, along with other surrounding terraces, was demolished during the 1970s. As the last pits closed during the 1970s and 80s, swathes of colliery houses were demolished across Durham. Empty scrub land in villages like Leaholme and Coudon are now often the only visible indication of where they once were. A leisure centre appeared on the site of the street in 1980s – Norman's house is now under the deep end of the swimming pool!

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<sup>35</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p.189.





The 1984 OS Map of Spennymoor showing new constructions on the site of Bishops Close Street.

### The house – what did 33 Bishops Close Street look like in the 1950s ?

When the Cornishs first moved into 33 Bishops Close Street, it was (except for the flushing toilet in the yard) an unmodernised colliery house, identical in layout to the others on the terrace. Over the course of the fourteen years that they lived in the house Norman and Sarah gradually updated it. However, while there were many distinctions from the homes of their neighbours' thanks both to the painter's extra income and aesthetic taste, the Cornishs faced many of the constraints as other families living in the street. Sarah recalls the lack of space, (especially given that their bedroom became Norman's studio), but that 'You had to make the most of it.'<sup>36</sup>

### The exterior



Stills showing the front of 33 Bishops Close Street taken from a 1962 Miners Review film, which featured Norman.

<sup>36</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.



As expected from colliery houses all of the exteriors of the terraces on Bishops Close Street were identical. The houses were built from loosely coursed stone with brick chimneys with four pots (presumably each set of two houses shared the chimney, using two flues a piece). The chimneys had the nice detail of corbelling around their tops. The plain and un- chamfered lintels, as well as the six over six pane sash windows indicate the relatively early age of the street compared to the rest of Spennymoor. Still standing pit terraces in the Spennymoor (of a similar date) show that there was definitely a stylistic vernacular, as there were presumably constructed by the same builders. These surviving houses provide crucial details about footprint size, stone and brick type, mortaring, lintel size and dressing, chimney construction etc.



Other late 19<sup>th</sup> century pit terraces in Spennymoor.



As shown in Norman's paintings of the street and as remember by his children, all the front doors and window frames were painted dark green. The doorsteps were placed directly onto the street pavement, where as some later terraces were afforded a small front yard.

A couple of Norman's sketches that show Sarah hanging the washing out in the backyard provide details about the rear face of the house. The upper storey window of the back bedroom again appears to have been a six over six pane sash, which sat directly under the eaves to the south side of the house. Directly below this was the pantry window. Like the front windows it had a wide, plain stone lintel and a wooden frame. Norman's sketches seems to show it as only having six panes in total, so perhaps it was a two over four sash designed to provide ventilation. The back kitchen door was adjacent to this window, again with the same type of lintel. It appears to have been a wooden plank and latch door. A nice detail is that a horse shoe hung on the wall next to it.

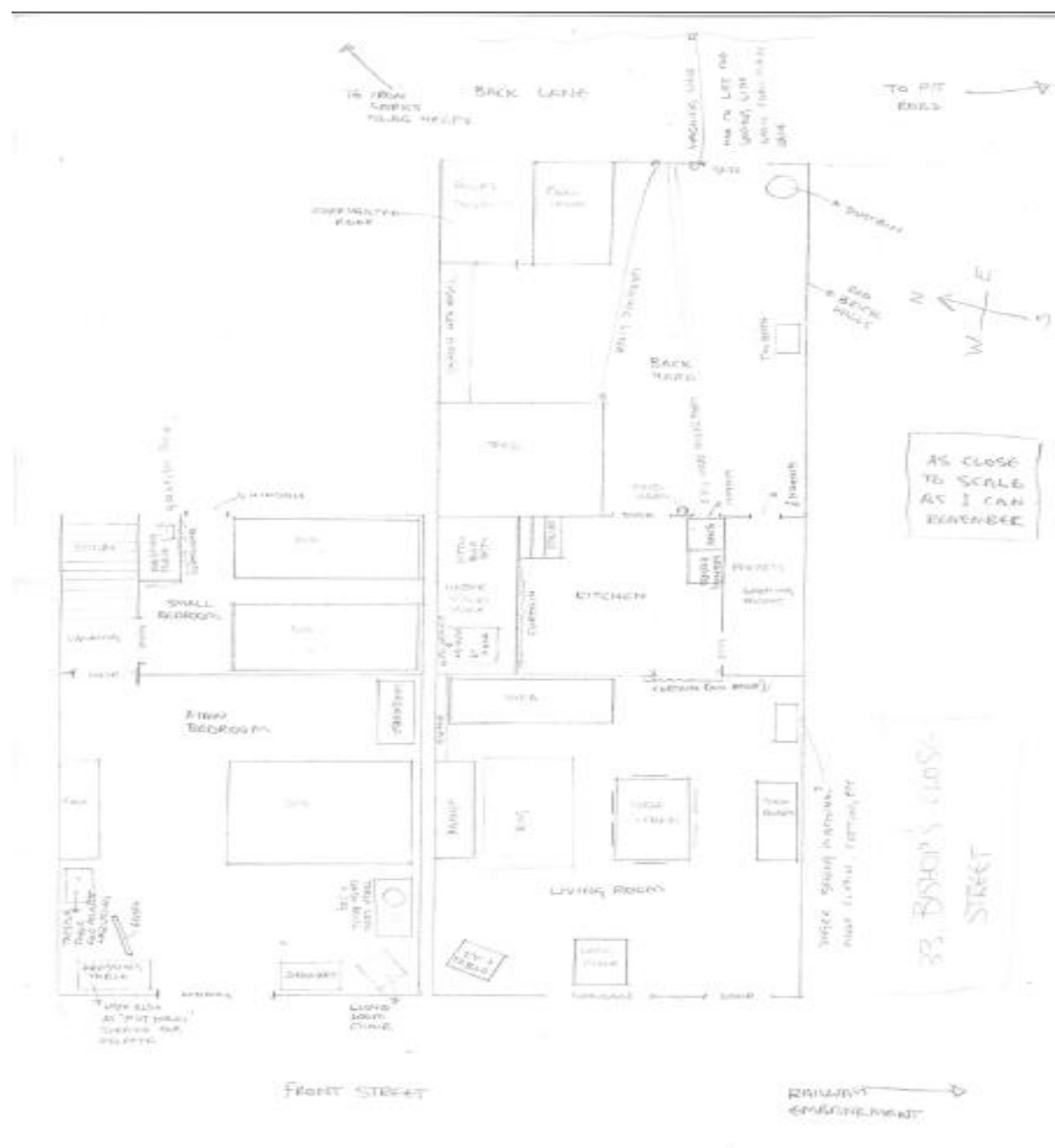


### The floor plan

Norman's daughter Ann who lived at number 33 during her teenage years has drawn a basic floor plan of it. The cramped scale of the house is indicated by its footprint as shown on the OS map, which suggests that externally it was approximately 19' wide by 33' long. However, this was marginally larger than the brick built pit terraces at Witton Park which were 18' wide by 26' long. George Lavery (who lived with his parents on Bishops Close until 1954 when he got married) confirmed that every house on the street

was identical in layout and could not be altered or extended without the colliery's permission.<sup>37</sup>

The houses on the street were a standard 'two up, two down'. On the lower storey, the street entrance lead straight into the front room, behind this was the back kitchen with a pantry to the south and an under-the-stairs cupboard to the north. A door to the rear of the back kitchen lead outside to the yard, which included a small brick building that contained the toilet and coal store. Upstairs, there was a larger main bedroom above the front room with a smaller bedroom behind.



Ann's sketch of the floor plan of 33 Bishop's Close Street.

<sup>37</sup> Personal Com. George Lavery.



## The front room



Family photograph of the front room, taken in the 1950s.

When Norman and Sarah first moved into Bishops Close Street in 1953, the main focus of the room would have been the Victorian black range. However, by the mid-50s they had replaced this with a modern 'Gloworm' enamel range. Sarah remembers the range as being a 'creamy gold colour' and Ann suggested that it may have had green tiles in its hearth.<sup>38</sup> George Lavery remembers that his parents were still using their black range during the 1950s, but with six children in the house and on a miner's income money must have been much tighter. Combination enamel ranges were available from 1920s and were readily available by the 1950s. Even so, the Cornish's with its double oven and moulded fire hood would have been a particularly stylish example.

The decorative scheme for the front room was far more up to date than that which one might have expected to find in the other houses on the street. Sarah remembers the wallpaper being a 'plain linen-textured paper' and that the floor was covered with lino.<sup>39</sup> One of Norman's sketches of their son John reading on the floor appears to indicate that the lino was dark green with ochre coloured panels. Sarah also remembers a rug being in

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<sup>38</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish and Ann Thornton.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

front of the range and that there could have been more elsewhere in the room.<sup>40</sup> A childhood photograph of John shows him sitting on a Persian style rug in what looks like the front room. From Norman's sketches, the skirting boards seem to have been simple with half round moulding running along the tops and painted gloss white.



Norman's sketch of his mother sitting on the sofa in the front room of 33 Bishops Close Street. The sketch includes Norman's colour notes.

One of the couple's major purchases for this room were the matching dinning suite and sideboard. They first saw the set while on honeymoon in London at Heal's department store. Heal's were known for being particularly trend setting. Upon seeing them again in a furniture shop in Bishop Auckland they reserved them for their new home. John believes that they were Scandinavian and Sarah described them as having been 'very modern and a light golden yellow colour'. Given this description they were probably designed and manufactured by a brand such as H. J. Wegner and Peter Hvidt & Orla Mølgaard-Nielsen who were importing 'contemporary' designer furniture into Britain during the 1950s. As Sophie Leighton describes this kind of furniture was both beyond the budget of most working class people and also considered to be 'more for intellectual, artistic classes'.<sup>41</sup> Instead many people during the early 1950s 'preferred to return to reproduction furniture in earlier styles. Chunky Tudor style furniture in dark woods was featured in magazines and elegant Regency antiques were in vogue, as was light-coloured, solid furniture made of beech and elm in the English cottage tradition.'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Sophie Leighton, *The 1950s Home* (Oxford: Shire Books, 2009), p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 38.



There are a couple of photographs in *The Durham Advertiser* (see above) which show a furniture exhibition held in the Town Hall in 1951. The furniture included appears to have ranged from Art Deco 1930s style wardrobes and dressing tables, to Tudorbethan dark wood tables and a few 1940s looking sofas and upholstered chairs – nothing that resembles the simple lines of the modern Scandinavian furniture.

Clearly, the couple's artistic sensibility had much to do with their appreciation of new styles. Indeed, Sarah said that she can 'remember that our furniture was light and modern, whereas everyone else in the street had old-fashioned dark wood furniture.'<sup>43</sup> However, by the end of the 1950s, British manufacturers (including the famous G-Plan) were beginning to make Scandinavian style furniture, although the stark designs were often softened<sup>44</sup> In 1958 *Homes and Gardens* magazine claimed that the British had 'assimilated the new trends and translated into our particular style...modern furniture and decorations are used which still retain our traditional homeliness'.<sup>45</sup> The Cornishs were obviously ahead of their neighbours in both stylistic taste and budget, yet the availability of Scandinavian furniture in Bishop Auckland does suggest that it was not entirely out of the reach of those living outside of London. It also signals the beginning of

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<sup>43</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>44</sup> Leighton, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



the dominance of Scandinavian design in our own homes with the rise of brands such as Ikea and Bang and Olufsen.



The Cornishs' 'Ercol' chair, which has now become part of Beamish's collection.

In addition to their Scandinavian dining set and sideboard, the Cornishs also owned a very fashionable 'Ercol' armchair, a company that was run by designer Lucian Ercolani (who was an Italian immigrant) and which exhibited at the Festival of Britain in 1951.<sup>46</sup> The armchair was placed in front of the window and there are many of Norman's sketches which show different family members sitting on it. It went with the couple to Whitworth Terrace and was included in the donation to Beamish.

Across the room from the chair was another piece of modern furniture; the sofa bed. Space saving furniture became increasingly popular as people either wanted to increase capacity in their older terraces or fit more into newly built flats.<sup>47</sup> Examples of this type of furniture included drop leaf tables or pull out ironing boarding. The dark green sofa bed that was owned by the Cornish's, with its simple design again looks very Scandinavian.

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<sup>46</sup> 'Ercol Timeline', Ercol Website <http://www.ercol.com/about/ercol-timeline/timeline/> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015]

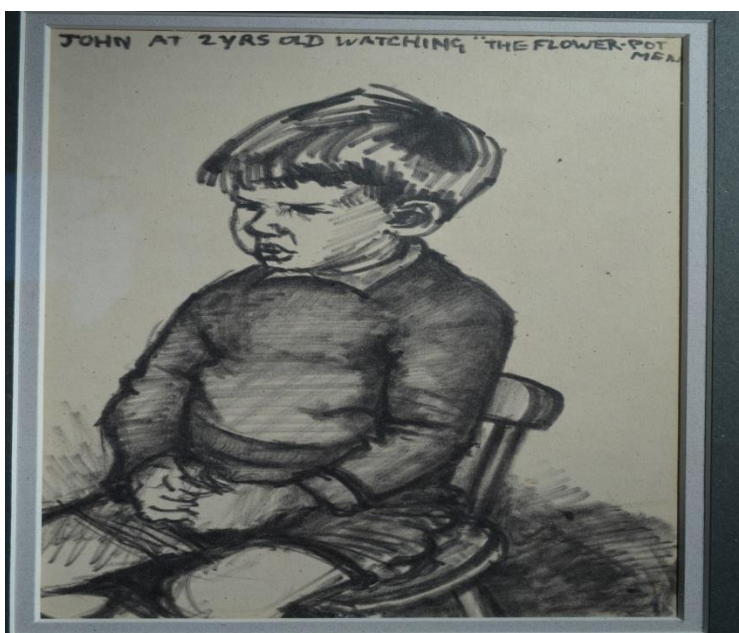
<sup>47</sup> Trevor Yorke, *The 1940s & 1950s House Explained: From Blackout to Sunlight* (Berkshire: Countryside Books, 2010), p. 68.





The Cornishs' sofa.

The family were modern in another sense, in that they were among the first in Spennymoor to own a television. While televisions were commercially available they were beyond the means of most working class people, even by the end of the decade. Sarah remembers getting their first television in the late 1950s or early 1960s.<sup>48</sup> There is a sketch of John, which hung on the wall in the front room, and is labelled 'John aged 2 yrs old watching 'The Flowerpot Men''. John turned two in 1958 suggesting that they must have bought the TV by then. Obviously, they were able to do so because of the extra income that Norman's artwork brought in.



Norman's son John at two years old watching television. This sketch hung in the front room.

The motivation to purchase a television was apparently to allow Norman to watch himself.<sup>49</sup> As he and the other pitman painters became better known, Norman featured in many documentaries including the Tyne Tees production 'Burning Heads' in 1960 and the nationally broadcast 'Two Border Artists', in 1963, hosted by Sir Huw Wheldon and produced by Melvyn Brag. Prior to owning a television,

<sup>48</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>49</sup> Personal Com. Mike Thornton (son-in-law of Norman)

Norman, like most people in Spennymoor had to go a local pub to watch telly.<sup>50</sup> Norman recalled in his autobiography how he wanted to watch a programme called 'Portrait by Rembrandt', so after discovering that a nearby pub had a television set, he decided to visit the pub each night for a couple of weeks in order to become a 'local'.<sup>51</sup> On the night the programme was due to be shown, Norman settled himself in the bar opposite the TV. Yet, just as the programme start the landlord 'leapt across the bar and switched the set off', saying 'Nee-body wants to watch that rubbish'.<sup>52</sup>

Despite having a television, the Cornish's did not own a telephone and Norman had to use the telephone box at the end of the road to phone his agents at the Stone Gallery.



The above drawing of the centre of Spennymoor hung over the mantel piece.

The pictures of the walls of the living room also reflected Norman's artistic interests. Along with portraits of the two children, one of Norman's pen and ink drawings of the centre of Spennymoor, showing the market and Market Hotel, hung over the fireplace. The things included in this scene, such as busy stalls, children, dogs, a policeman, working men and a mobile soup van, are entirely typical of the types of everyday details that Norman recorded in his

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<sup>50</sup> Cornish, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



work. In the corner of the room was a reproduction of Rembrandt's 1661 *Self Portrait*. Norman was introduced to Rembrandt as a young man, via one of the many books on famous artists that were kept at the Settlement and which Bill Farrell encouraged the members to read.<sup>53</sup> He admired the artist's technical skill, but was more influence by Rembrandt's interest in painting the routines of normal street life in the Netherlands during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> This confirmation that his subject was an important one and the role of the artist as an elevator of the mundane seems to have stayed with Norman throughout his life. As he commented in his autobiography 'For my own special painting world, all I can do is to illustrate the sort of situation that might arise as I walk down to the town centre.'<sup>55</sup>



A couple of the hundreds of Norman's sketches of his wife Sarah.

Although, clearly very different to some of their neighbours', the Cornish's were more conventional in other respects. Sarah, like many of her friends, made most of their family's clothes, as well as all of their curtains.<sup>56</sup> Her singer sewing machine was tucked into the far corner of the front room and there are number of Norman's sketches that show her working at it. Indeed, Norman's drawings of his family life reveal a lot about the dynamics of their household. Both Ann and John recall Norman constantly telling them to 'hold it there' whilst they were in the middle of doing something, resulting in countless pictures of them watching television, doing their homework or

<sup>53</sup> McManners and Wales, p. 124.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Cornish, p. 79 .

<sup>56</sup> Personal Coms. Sarah Cornish and Ann Thornton.

having a bath. Ann even joked that she and John use to hide upstairs in their room for fear of being trapped in a pose for hours.<sup>57</sup> The sketches of Sarah going about her daily activities indicate her role as a typical housewife. She can be seen scrubbing the front steps, preparing vegetables, knitting, or bathing the children. The only image of Sarah at rest is called the 'Tired Woman'. There was a great deal of love and respect in Sarah and Norman's relationship, and he credited her for encouraging his work and pushing him to finally leave the pits.<sup>58</sup> However, the typical gender roles were clearly very entrenched – Norman went out to work, while Sarah kept the home. This was further compounded by Norman's art; as Sarah's 'housework routine revolved around Norman's painting or sketching schedule and Sarah kept out of his way when he was busy, not always an easy task in such a cramped family house.'<sup>59</sup>

Although it was largely Norman's taste that had the greater influence on their décor of their home, Sarah as a housewife, was responsible for actually decorating the house. Whenever she stripped off the old wallpaper as they gradually updated the house, Norman would 'get a big brush and some distemper paint and use the big bare wall space to paint on.'<sup>60</sup> One of her clearest memories of 33 Bishops Close Street was when she re-wallpapered the front room. She decided to take the opportunity while Norman was in hospital receiving traction on his back to strip the paper and avoid him painting impromptu murals. However, Norman returned early and typically covered the walls in doodles. Sarah recalls her embarrassment when a new doctor called round to check on Norman and saw the state her front room. Shortly after Norman had a relapse and the doctor had to be called again. Sarah had by this point had the chance to re-paper the walls – the doctor apparently could not believe the transformation!

Sarah's tastes seemed to have been more strongly indicated in the ornaments that decorated the sideboard, mantel piece and corner shelf. These were a mix of small ceramic jugs and pots, a Wedgewood biscuit barrel, a silver letter rack and a Bakelite ashtray (used by Norman to put his 'bits and pieces in').<sup>61</sup> Under these were 'some lovely green doilies' that she had crocheted herself. Again, these were all fashionable items, but perhaps would have been considered more traditional in style than the Scandinavian furniture.<sup>62</sup>

### The back kitchen

The divide between the front room and the back kitchen was screened by a dark fabric curtain with a small pattern on, rather than by a door. Sarah can remember the kitchen

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<sup>57</sup> Personal Com. Ann Thornton.

<sup>58</sup> McManners and Wales, p 156.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>60</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>61</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>62</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.



‘being painted a light colour’ but not the specific shade.<sup>63</sup> The floor was covered with lino.

Sarah recalls having used the range in the front room for cooking on, but that she also had ‘couple of gas rings as [she] used a pressure cooker a lot’.<sup>64</sup> Probably what she had was similar to one of the freestanding 1950s gas cookers that we have in the collections.



John having a bath in the kitchen sink.

In the corner by the back door was a Belfast sink and a draining board. This was where the children were bathed when they were small. Norman’s sketches of their bath-times, show that the area around the sink was tiled with plain white tiles and that there was a draining board next to it. The taps with their long bodies and short spouts were very typically 1950s in shape. The presence of two taps indicates that the house had hot water, presumably provided by a back boiler in the range. The sketches also show that there was a window to the east of the sink, hung with short red curtains.

Ann remembers that the adjacent pantry did have a door and it was here where the wash basket and cold slab were stored.<sup>65</sup> On the other side of the kitchen to the pantry was a large under the stairs void that was screened by a curtain. In here was kept the blue tin bath that was used by the family to bath in (and is recorded in Norman’s sketches). The hand-agitated washing machine with its attached mangle was also stored here.

The popular presumption is perhaps that the normal domestic kitchen completely changed during the 1950s – transformed by freestanding English Rose kitchen units,

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<sup>63</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish

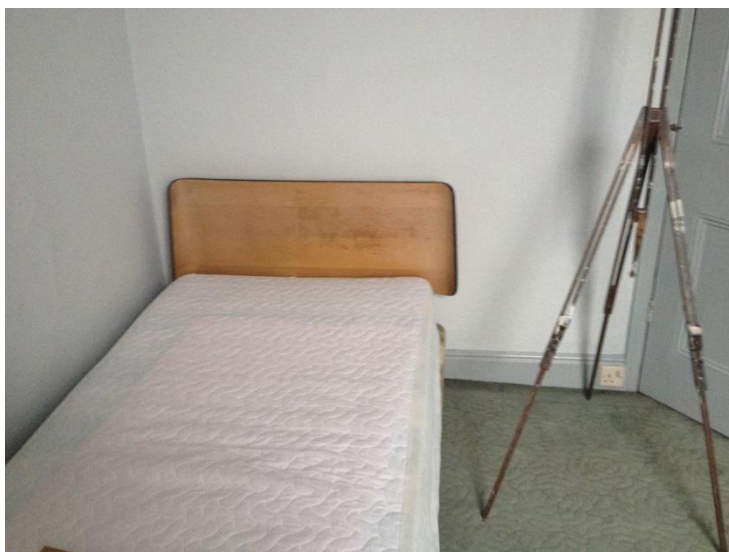
<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Personal Com. Ann Cornish.

Formica worktops and gadgets, such as the Kenwood mixer and electric refrigerators. Yet, the fully modern kitchen was beyond the means of most working class people, particularly if they lived in a pre-war house. However, restrictions on hire purchase were lifted in 1956 meaning that for the first time utility goods and kitchen devices could be paid for monthly – although this was of course only possible if you were able to keep up the payments. Some people, like the Cornishs, may have updated their old back kitchen with relatively affordable time saving devices such as a twin tub or agitator washing machine, but as members from community groups that we have spoken to have confirmed, most were making do with the same level of technology that their parents had. The ladies from the Chopwell (another mining village) Knit and Natter Group said that '[t]he kitchen had a bath under the bench (If you were posh!)', but that largely nothing had changed since before the war. While the Cornishs may have had more up-to-date tastes than most, their relatively modernised back kitchen was still far from the 1950s dream of a labour free kitchen. This indicates the disparity between the levels of comfort provided by earlier industrial housing built by the collieries and iron companies (that were often taken over by the NCB after privatisation) and the new social houses that were being constructed, which usually had gas central heating and indoor bathrooms.<sup>66</sup>

#### The back bedroom

The stairs leading to the upstairs were located at the rear north west corner of the back kitchen- according to Ann's plan they had a half turn. The small back bedroom was where the two children slept in adjacent single beds. We collected Ann's bed as part of the Cornish donation. These beds were again were very modern in design with oblong shaped, laminated wood head boards. The family cannot remember the colour of the wallpaper, but the floor was covered in a blue carpet, which again we collected. In the corner of the room was a little dressing table with curtains around the bottom, under which they kept their toys. On top of this table they had a little tank with two goldfish in.<sup>67</sup>

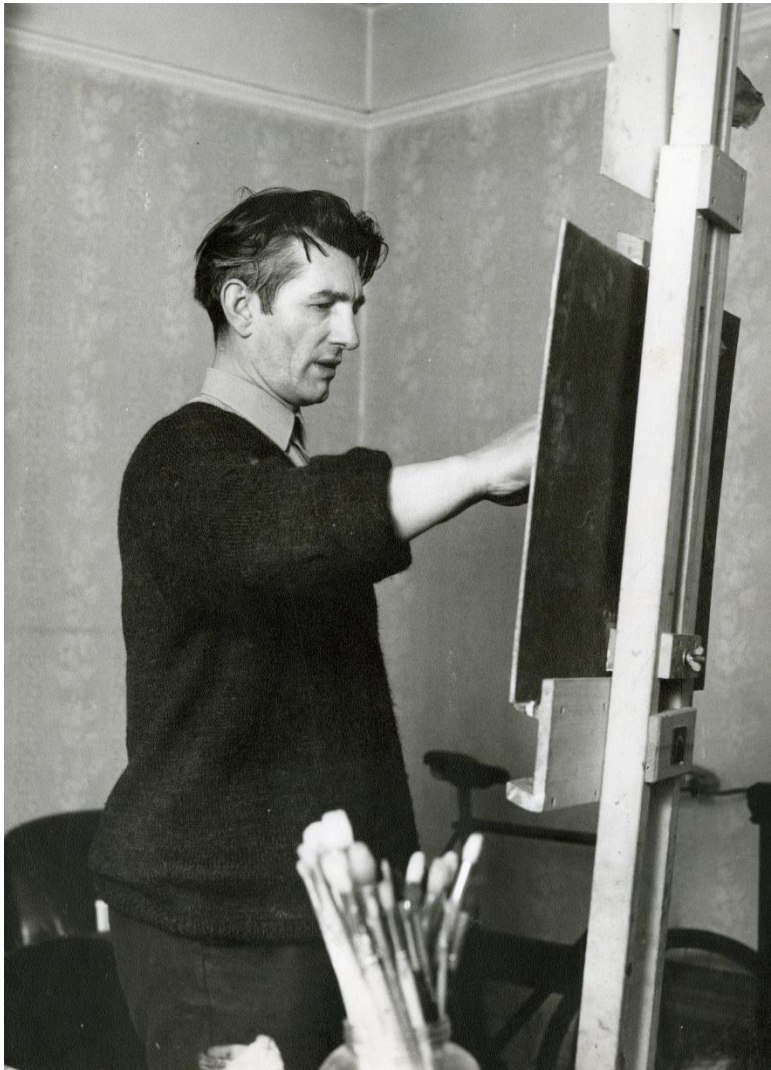


Norman's daughter Ann's bed – now part of Beamish's collections.

<sup>66</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate New History* (London: Granta Publications, 2012), p. 80.

<sup>67</sup> Personal Com. Ann and John Cornish.

## The main bedroom



Norman painting in the main bedroom during the 1950s.

The larger bedroom at the front of the house had the double function of being both the main bedroom, and Norman's studio. It was decorated with 'pinkish, plainish floral-patterned wallpaper'.<sup>68</sup> Along the east wall was squeezed a wardrobe, double bed, table and a wash stand. The presence of the wash stand, along with the chamber pot that was kept under the bed, is a reminder of the lack of facilities in the house. Adjacent to the wash stand was a Lusty Lloyd Loom chair. Furniture using 'Lloyd Loom' technology (in which 'kraft' paper was wrapped around metal wire) had been produced in Britain by the Lusty family from the 1920s. They re-launched their collection in 1951 after their factory was bombed during the Second World War.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish. There are images of the bedroom that show it as having dark coloured anaglypta paper, but these were taken during the 1960s.

<sup>69</sup> 'History and Manufacturing', The Lloyd Loom website <http://www.lloyd-loom.co.uk/history/> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March 2015]





The Lloyd Loom chair that sat in the corner of the Cornishs' main bedroom – again now part of Beamish's class.

Against the south wall, either side of the window were a chest of drawers and a dressing table with wing mirrors, which matched the wash stand – although we do not (as yet) have any record of what they looked like. Next to the corner where the dressing table was, was the area that Norman painted in. He had an easel angled to catch the light from the window and a table 'covered in boxes of paint and turpentine and linseed oil, etc.'<sup>70</sup> Sarah described how the smell of Norman's art equipment could be 'overpowering' and that she 'must have been very patient'.<sup>71</sup> There was also a fireplace in this room opposite the bed- again the family cannot recollect what this looked like. It might have been a small Victorian bedroom fireplace that would have been original to the house or could have possibly have had a more modern enamel surround.

### The backyard

The Cornishs' backyard would not have altered much from when the house was built, accept that the former ash closet (in the north east corner) was replaced with a flushing toilet with a high cistern. The coal house shared the same flat roof brick built outhouse. The yard itself was concrete with a central gully running the length of it from the waste of the kitchen sink. It was surrounded by a high red colliery brick wall. There was a brick-built shed in the south east corner against the side of the house (visible on the OS Maps) in which Sarah thinks the family's bikes and 'some of Norman's wood and glass' for his making his own picture frames with.<sup>72</sup> There was also 'a dustbin in the corner near the green garden gate to the back lane' and a tin bath hanging on one of the walls.<sup>73</sup> Sarah also had a small 'garden' (which presumable was an earth box) next to the shed in which she grew roses.<sup>74</sup> There was a washing line hanging from the shed to the back wall and

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<sup>70</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>71</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>72</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>73</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

<sup>74</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

another across the back lane. Sarah remembers 'that everyone had their washing lines out in the back lane, and when the coalman came we had to lift the washing line up or take the clothes in.'<sup>75</sup>



One of Norman's sketches of Sarah hanging out the washing in the back yard.

## Summary

The Cornishs' house was unusual in its décor and furnishing in comparison to their neighbours. However, this infrequency could provide us with an opportunity unavailable elsewhere to display cutting edge 1950s style. As stated above it was very rare for people outside of London, or from lower income households, to furnish their homes in the latest fashions or own the newest technology. Certainly those living in social housing would not have had the means to do so. As we have no plans to include any privately owned homes in the 1950s town, the Cornishs' home would be the only space in which to tell the story of the emerging designs and gadgets that were produced in the era and which would radicalise the nation's homes. The presence of these items in a pit terrace was of course exceptional; however in the case of the Cornishs it was illustrative of Norman's artistic aesthetic. Norman's distinction as an artist – or rather as a recorder of everyday life in his home town - offers the chance to explore the lives of those in depressed coal mining villages who were not necessarily experiencing the benefits of post-war economic recovery. Contrastingly, Norman's involvement with the Spennymoor Settlement provides the opportunity to look at the ways in which communities were offered hope. Furthermore, the daily routines of his family which Norman fastidiously

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<sup>75</sup> Personal Com. Sarah Cornish.

sketched show the normalities and realities of living – albeit with an increased income - in a Victorian colliery house, in a confined space with very little indoor plumbing or modern conveniences - in comparison to a newly built semi-detached or flat. Perhaps most importantly, the response that we have had so far from community members from Spennymoor, who knew Norman and his family, has been fantastic – the presence of Norman sketching seems to be a prevailing memory from that period.

### **Next steps**

- As we progress with the finer details of the design for building, more work will need to be done with the Cornish family to recover their memories of their home and to make sure that they feel consulted and included.
- As stated above, the conversations that we have had so far with people from Spennymoor have been extremely informative and everyone has been very enthusiastic about the project. There are still lots of questions to be asked and memories to be collected from the contacts that we have made already, as well as further leads to follow up, and others who can remember the Cornishs and Spennymoor during the 1950s.
- There is a lot of contextual work to be done around the Spennymoor Settlement in order to allow us to tell the history of the movement and others like it in pit villages such as Ashington. Having met with one of the Settlement's committee members, we have arranged to visit the group's Saturday coffee morning to speak to current members, as well as talk to the members who were attending the Settlement during the 1950s. A new research volunteer will also be working through the Settlement's archive (now at the University Library in Durham).
- The majority of Norman's personal papers and unfinished works have been gifted to the Gallery at Northumbria University. We are working with the Director Mara-Helen Wood to gain access to any helpfully documents as the gallery catalogue the collection.
- The University Gallery is planning a major exhibition of Norman's work in summer and we are hoping do some community outreach work or a collaborative event in connection with this.

Clara Woolford

26/03/15