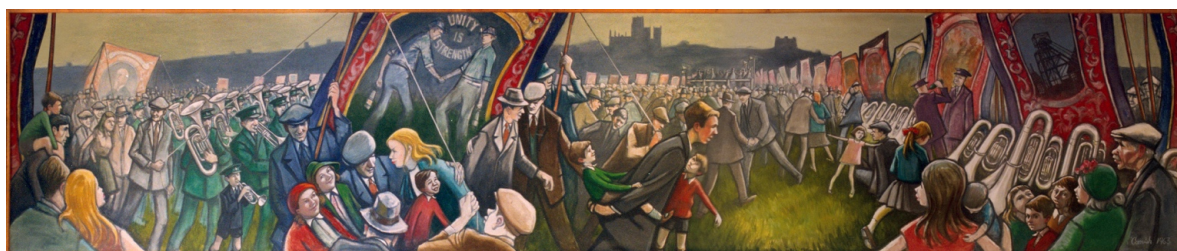


## The Miners' Gala Mural Norman Cornish MBE 1919-2014



This iconic Mural was commissioned in 1962 by Durham County Council to coincide with the opening of the new County Hall in October 1963 by The Duke of Edinburgh. Norman's agent at the time considered that the painting would become the cornerstone of his career and it was quite appropriate in his centenary year, that the Mural found a new home in 2020, as Durham County Council prepared to relocate to a new County Hall in Durham City.

In 1962 the coal industry was in decline and Norman was also under pressure from his agent Mick Marshall at The Stone Gallery in Newcastle to become a full time professional artist – such was the demand for his work and a burgeoning national reputation. Becoming a professional artist introduced different risks compared to those he faced underground on a daily basis. His house was 'tied to the mine' and irregular income added to the insecurity of making the 'big step' from miner to professional artist.

One day, working at the coal-face at Mainsforth Colliery, Ferryhill, he was summoned to receive an important telephone call from Durham County Council to commission Norman to paint a Mural typifying life in County Durham, for the new county hall.

Initially reluctant, he received support from his wife Sarah and also from Bob Heslop and Bert Dees who were also members of The Spennymoor Settlement Sketching Club. Norman was granted 'leave of absence' for twelve months, without pay, which sadly confirmed his view that the miners were treated like slaves.

The commission was conducted in secrecy and he was given permission to use a former church hall as a studio although it was draughty and without heating. Norman had to acquire his own materials including the canvas, which measured 30 feet 9 inches by 5 feet 8 inches. Norman didn't own a telephone and letters were the only means of communication to suppliers of materials.

Four mining related subject themes were initially suggested by the County Council but Norman made an inspired choice with the arrival of the banners at The Race Course at The Durham Big Meeting- The Miners' Gala.

Norman visualised the banners as representing the sails of a galleon with three waves of people in the sea of humanity below. All depicted with an undulating rhythm and counter rhythm to suggest movement. The young people in the wave to the left represent the present and look towards the centre- the future. The elderly folk to the right, representative of the past, turn to the bold central banner which bears the slogan "Unity is Strength"- a symbol of the future. The whole scene represents an allegory of time.

Norman developed his composition by producing preliminary drawings and paintings based upon observations which become smaller versions of the final composition. This allowed Norman to be confident that by a series of steps, the final full -scale version actually worked in terms of the relationship between the figures and the overall composition.

Most of the work was completed during the coldest winter in 40 years and sometimes icicles had to be broken to access the hall. Often, Norman had to wear several coats to keep warm, a muffler, cap and gloves. A secret knock was devised to enable his closest friends to view the work in progress and offer helpful comments.



During his research, Norman made numerous drawings of Spennymoor Town Band members in rehearsal to ensure absolute accuracy. At a later stage he added himself and his son John, on his shoulders, (left hand side) as observers rather than participants, who are fundamental to the composition. It was important for Norman to depict himself as being part of the miners' annual celebrations that reinforced his sense of

belonging, involvement and affinity with his subject. One of the most significant artists to influence Norman was Rembrandt who included himself in *The Night Watch*.

The Mural has been on display at Durham County Hall since the opening in 1963. During 2020 The Mural was re-located to Bishop Auckland Town Hall where a fully accessible permanent exhibition has been installed during the refurbishment works. The display is supported by previously unseen preparatory works for the public benefit, as part of an extended exhibition.

The Miners' Gala Mural is a highly significant work of art that goes to the very heart of Durham culture and which evokes deepening and strengthening emotional attachments for many people who identify with this inspirational record of a bygone era.