

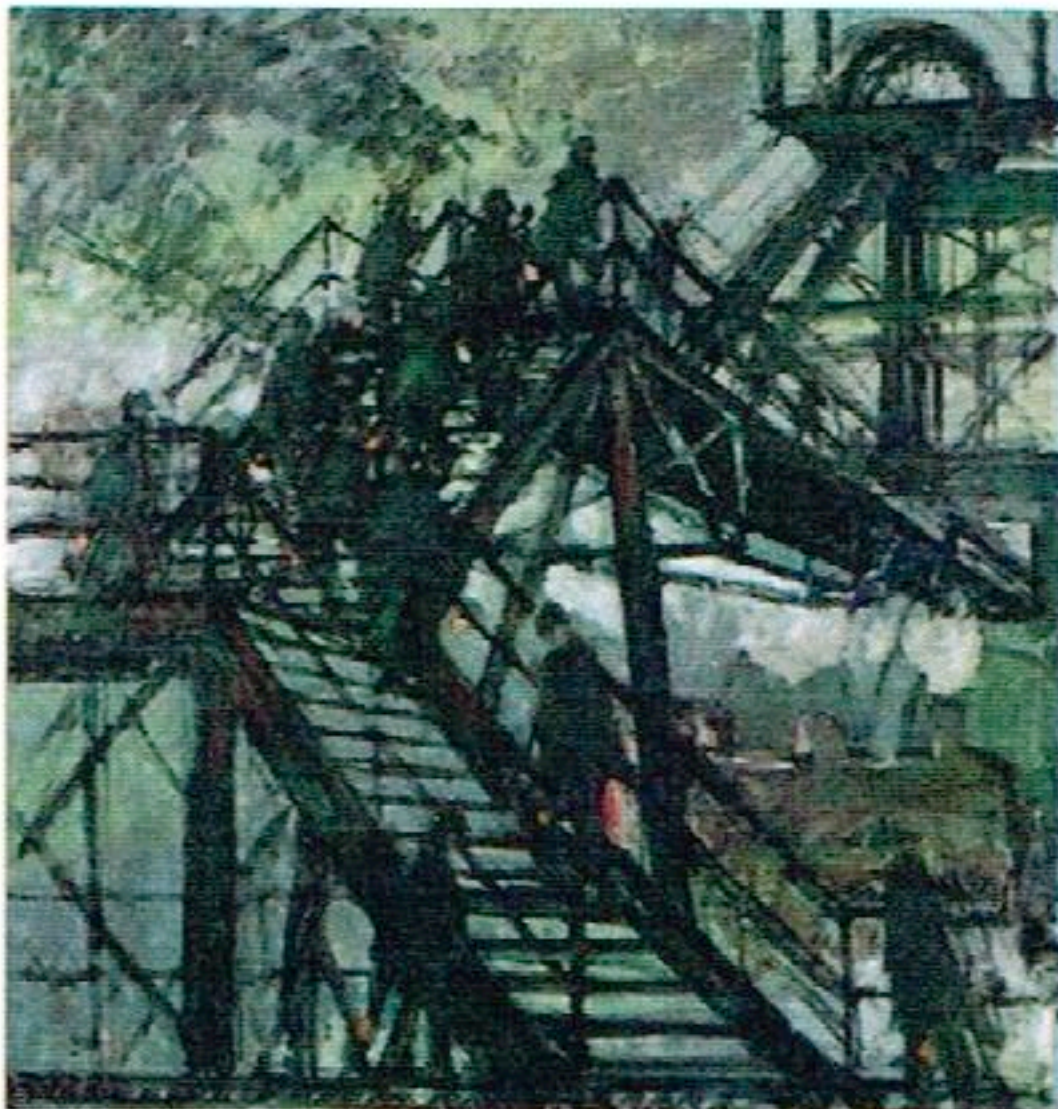
PRESS RELEASE

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The Lost World of Norman Cornish

Paintings, drawings, watercolours and pastels

Norman Stansfield Cornish was 65 when he was persuaded to write his autobiography. He called it 'A Slice of Life' and indeed it was just that although one could say that it was brought into being a little prematurely given that a further three decades of remarkable activity were to follow its publication. Sid Chaplin, his fellow miner and alumnus of the 'Pitman's Academy' at Spennymoor vividly described in a memorable 'Guardian' article of 1960 the 'Narrow World' that Cornish had created. "Cornish's narrow world has two poles, two extremes" he maintained. "On the daylight side are pigeon crees and allotments, pit rows and pubs, fish and chip vans and market stalls, men carrying banners he himself designed. Time is defeated; the demolished houses, the dying woman, are there in paint. The derelict is whole again. The living are caught before they go; the pigeon fanciers, corner-enders, off-shift miners squatting on their hunkers and soaking in the sunshine and the good crack. In a moment the bus will come and the buzzer blow for the backshift. Now it is all recorded, time cannot take away the seven ages of man and woman - his grandmother, sister, wife and daughter; or his father and brothers, his friends and pit marras. Soon the baby will be a small boy; he will change, a drawing or painting is a shot against time."



Several of Cornish's subjects from the daylight pole of his "narrow world" are mentioned in that article but he, too, was capable of vivid word-pictures. In the prologue to 'A Slice of Life', he describes the Dean and Chapter Colliery where he was to work, as "lying at the foot of a huge pit-heap which reminds one of a volcano, not only because of how it looks, but also because its contents have been spewed out of the depths in similar fashion." Imaginative and poetic perceptions like this one are present throughout his paintings and drawings which, one might reasonably claim, are his true autobiography.

He was born in 1919, one year after the end of the First World War and seven years before the General Strike. Major events, the Depression of the 1930s, World War II, pit disasters, the Nationalisation of the coal mines provided a mere backdrop to his life which was resolutely focused upon his art and his family. Cornish remembers with pride winning a prize at the age of four, of a halfpenny at Primary School for his drawing of a boot. Later, after a bout of diphtheria and having passed the eleven plus he went to the Alderman Wraith Grammar School. He remained there for three years but due to the family's financial constraints he left school and began work at the age of fourteen at the Dean and Chapter Colliery, known locally as 'The Butcher's Shop'. In a poignant account of his first day at work Cornish described walking the two miles to the pit at two in the morning.

