Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

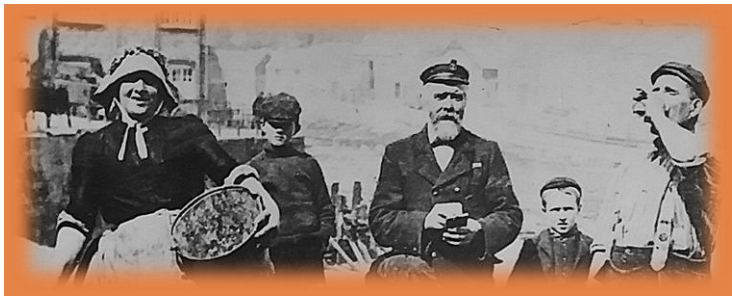
Dame Laura Knight in Staithes

Tees Valley Museums

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Kirkleatham Museum · Captain Cook Birthplace Museum · Dorman Museum · Hopetown Darlington · Preston Park · Museum of Hartlepool · Hartlepool Art Gallery · teesside dementia link services

Tees Valley Museums



Welcome to another edition of the Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Each month we use objects and photos from our museums in the Tees Valley to take a closer look at the lives and stories from people in our area.

This month we are looking into the beginning of Dame Laura Knight's painting career in Staithes. During the 13 years she spent in Staithes, she sketched the town, the fisherfolk and their boats, and started her long career in painting.

She became one of the most well-known artists in England, painting circus performers, travelling communities and the many service men and women who took part in the war effort in World War 2.

From 1894 Laura lived in Staithes with her partner Harold when she was just 17. Some of her sketches from that time have survived and are kept at Kirkleatham Museum.

As a teenager Laura had worked at Nottingham School of Art, teaching children how to paint when she barely knew many painting skills herself.

She was determined to become a painter but could not think of where to go when she had to leave the School in 1894. It was a fellow Art tutor who told her -

"Staithes is the place to go! There is no place like it on all the coast for painting!"

To Laura, Staithes would have been the perfect place to paint like the Impressionists – outdoors, with quick brush strokes and unmixed colour.

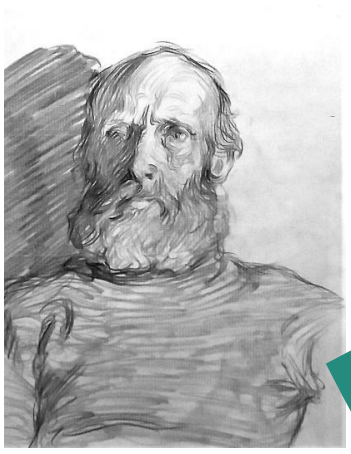
She was drawn to the lives of the fishermen and their wives. She wanted to make a painting that encompassed the rush of boats and people when the catch came in and the fish market that followed.

But she admitted that she was very unskilled in painting and had a lot to learn.

Instead, she focused on sketching Staithes, the fisherfolk and their boats to learn how to paint them in future.

You can see a big difference in how Laura sketched –

…some are simple studies of the fisherfolk and how they moved during their work…



…and others are highly detailed studies.

In the 1890s Staithes became a popular spot for other artists. They were more experienced than Laura and taught her some useful techniques.

One of them was Charles Hodge Mackie. He would come to her studio and teach her how to paint simply, and how to paint the effect of light on colours.

"He told me, too, how to lay my palette – white on the left – then through the rainbow range – yellow – orange – scarlet – red – crimson – purple – blue – black – green."

Laura was still learning how to be an artist while she was living at Staithes and only a few of her paintings during this time survived.

Sadly, most other paintings and drawings she made ended up being thrown on her fire, simply to keep warm since she could not afford firewood.

A sketch of a child playing on the beach while the fishermen work behind them. Laura used to pay children in pennies so that she could sketch them.

A sketch of the Staithes fishermen arranging the catch. Laura wanted to capture the sense of the hard work they experienced.

Laura and Harold got married in 1903. For the next few years they travelled to Holland in the summers to paint, and back to Staithes for the winters. They steadily became better painters and were able to earn enough money to start building their savings.

They both wanted to further their art careers and eventually made a very difficult decision to move to Cornwall.

Laura never returned to Staithes, but she continued to paint and became one of England's greatest artists.

"To turn away from all that it had meant, fearing never to return, hurt me terribly… It was there I had found what I might do".

Sensory Activity

Look at this picture of Staithes. If you could put yourself in this painting, what would you hear, feel and smell?

Would you hear the hustle-and-bustle of people in the streets?

Would you smell the salty sea air?

Would you feel the sun on your skin, and the water between your toes?

The Staithes Art Group

There were many artists in the Staithes Art Group. Here are four of the artists whose paintings are also kept at Kirkleatham Museum.

James Booth

Booth learned how to paint in Manchester. He and a fellow artist, Fred Jackson, would often paint together. As well as painting the fisherfolk, Booth painted ploughing horses, still lives of flowers and landscapes of villages on the North East coast.

Fred Jackson

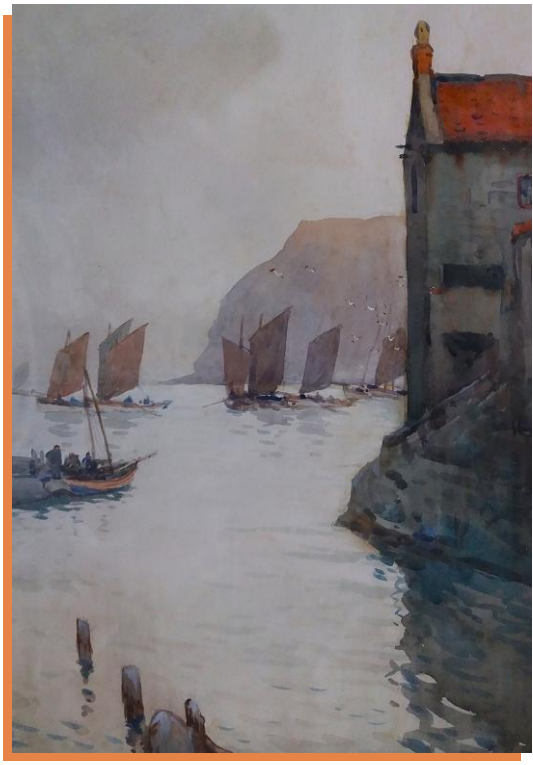
Jackson was once a member of the Manchester School of Painters, who pioneered plein air painting in the 1870s, despite the criticisms of traditional artists. Throughout his life he painted outdoors in all weathers.

William Gilbert Foster

Foster taught Art in Leeds and he would often take his students to Runswick Bay, down the coast from Staithes, to encourage them to paint outdoors. Runswick was also where he spent many summers painting in the 1890s.

Ernst Dade

Dade lived in Scarborough as a child, learning how to paint at the local School of Art. His early paintings, as well as those he made during his time with the Staithes Art Group, were of boats on the sea and the fisherfolk.



Have a Go! Sketch like Laura

Have a look at all the sketches in the pack and see how Laura used to draw.

Then try sketching something you can see. Try looking out a window for inspiration.

If you sketch someone, make sure you ask them first.

All images used in this pack are courtesy of Kirkleatham Museum and Grounds.

You can find all our Talking Tees Valley packs through the Tees Valley Museums website under 'Latest News' or here: https://teesvalleymuseums.org/news/

If you would like to share your stories or contact us about the packs please e-mail teesvalleymuseums@stockton.gov.uk