

Launceston & District U3A Seventh Annual Lecture Day 2009

Fifteen members of the Bude & District U3A attended the lecture Day on 20 February and what a great day it was! There were three lectures by three excellent speakers who were explicit, humorous and whose knowledge of their subject could not be surpassed.

The first was given by Alison Bevan, Director of the Penlee House Gallery & Museum, Penzance. Her lecture on the "The Newlyn School of Artists" was fascinating and illuminating and many of the works of art we were able to see on screen. Alison spoke about the formation of the school in January 1884 by Stanhope Forbes and of the many artists who studied and worked there. In the early days many of them were of middle class background & had sufficient funds to work in places like Paris, Antwerp or Brittany before settling in Cornwall. They came because they found the air was pure, clear and light and the climate so mild, they could paint in the open air. Alison mentioned the Birmingham trained artist Walter Langley as one who came from a very poor background. It was he who first captured the working man at his trade, usually fishing, and often using muted colours, as was the fashion. Many of the artists are remembered today; Norman Gustin William Kernow, Terry Frost, Mitchell and Titcomb, to mention a few. Today they are considered pretty and attractive but at the time they were not really appreciated. Between 1880 and 1900 one hundred and twenty artists settled in Cornwall, however, in the 1890's the colony started to decline and a new generation of artists arrived. The old ones used working class people as models, painting as they sat watching them at work but the 'new' ones paid models to sit for them. More than a thousand students passed through the school over the years and it eventually closed in 1950.

After a coffee break we returned to the hall for a second lecture from a man who, like Alison, had a profound knowledge of his subject. Cliff Snell stood centre stage, large red book on his left arm and expounded his knowledge about the poet laureate "Sir John Betjeman – His Life, Times and Lady Friends". He enraptured us with his readings of some of Sir John's poems and we were riveted by his delivery. As a very well known Poet Laureate we had all read some of his work and knew of his love for St. Enodoc, on the Camel Estuary of Cornwall. However, the finer details of his life came as a surprise to many of us. Born in Highgate London in 1906 into a well to do family John was lonely as he was an only child. This may have been one of the reasons he started writing poetry from a very early age and continued throughout his life. His relationship with his father was considerably strained as their personalities were very different. Father wanted him to go into the family business but John would have none of it. He was schooled at Marlborough College and was a borderline candidate to get into Oxford where he was very happy as he felt free at last from the constrictions of home. He did not his complete degree however, and there were a couple of failed teaching jobs plus a term of unemployment before he finally obtained work as a journalist reviewing films for the Architectural Review. They were popular as he wrote them in verse. Also, he enjoyed the job because he was fascinated with church architecture from his youth and being somewhat of a loner he had enjoyed many hours in churches.

He met and married his wife Penelope Chetwode in 1933 and they had one daughter, Candida, born in 1942.

Then there were the lady friends! He met twenty two year old Jill Menzies in 1950, (He was 44). She was employed by him for four years but when it became obvious the relationship was more than platonic she left her employment. Apparently there were others but the last 'lady friend' was Lady Elizabeth Cameron who had a relationship with him for many years and was with him at his death. It was she who called

his wife Penelope and daughter Candida, who were staying close by, to see him for the final time.

Clive Snell captivated his audience with his excellent rendering of Sir John's poems and the remarkable telling, (with hardly a glance at the big red book), of the life of the great "Sir John Betjeman."

We, the audience, couldn't believe we could get a third lecture of the same high quality as the previous two but the afternoon lecture was no less! Standing beside a grand piano, centre stage, Mr Paul Drayton introduced his subject

"Fascinating Rhythm – The Story of the Gershwins". He explained he was going to tell us the story of Ira and Georges' lives interspersed with playing some of their melodies and we could 'hum along' if we wished. Well we certainly did and the rhythm was certainly fascinating!

The brothers father Jacob Gershovicz arrived with their mother in USA in 1892. Ira arrived in 1897 and George in 1906. George was a prodigious child with a great talent for music though the family had no musical back ground. The older Ira also had the musical talent and they worked together and almost exclusively for each other for many years, composing at least two dozen great songs for Broadway. In fact, they made a song writing team whose voice was synonymous with the sounds and style of the Jazz Age from the time of their big hit "Lady, Be Good", starring Fred Astaire and his sister Adele. While today they are best remembered for numerous individual song hits, their greatest achievement may have been the elevation of musical comedy to an American art form. Together they helped raise popular musical theatre to a new level of sophistication. Their now – classic opera "Porgy and Bess" is constantly revived in theatres throughout the world. Concurrently with the Gershwin's musical theatre and film success, George attained great acclaim in the concert arena and as a piano virtuoso, conductor and composer of such celebrated works as "Rhapsody in Blue", "An American in Paris" and "Concerto in F."

In 1937, the year of his untimely death, George was contemplating work on a symphony and another opera. Ira continued to work in film and theatre with others and is remembered for such songs as "Long Ago and Far Away", "The Man that Got Away", both nominated for Academy Awards. His lyrics made critical acclaim in 1959. He died peacefully in 1983 aged 86.

The Gershwin brothers music is still very popular today, as we were reminded by many of the lovely songs Paul Drayton played so beautifully, interspersed with his fascinating words relating the story of the Gershwins and their "Fascinating Rhythm"

It was the end of a 'Perfect Day'

Lucille Opie