

New gallery to tap into rich seam of miners' art

Works depicting Durham's dying mining heritage will go on permanent show

The Guardian 12 Sep 2017 Maev Kennedy Harvey Men Going Outbye – Tom McGuinness



Off the Way Bob Olley

A unique collection of paintings by Durham miners, many made by men who spent their working lives underground and their nights painting on kitchen tables, are to go on display in a dedicated museum being created in a former bank in Bishop Auckland.

Norman Cornish, the most famous of the group, left the pits at the urging of his wife to become a full-time artist and spent the rest of his life recording the streets, shops and people of Spennymoor, where his studio is preserved in an exhibition at the town hall.

Tom McGuinness, who was made redundant in the wave of pit closures in the 1980s, earned enough money from his art to build a

coveted indoor bathroom, although he installed a printing press in the space instead.

The collection also includes several pieces by Bob Olley, still painting at 77. One – much reproduced – has paid his bills for years: Westoe Netty shows six men in a urinal and a cheeky lad peeing on his neighbour's leg. The council tried to have it banned. When the urinal itself was being demolished, Olley and friends rushed to salvage it, and it is now in the Beamish Museum.

The collection began when a man came into Bishop Auckland library and asked to put a piece of paper on the noticeboard. The librarian, Gillian Wales, said: "I expected to read about a community show or a charity jumble sale – and instead I was astonished to read that he was a painter, and his work was going into an exhibition in London." The man was Tom McGuinness.

She later discovered that a local GP, Bob McManners, was also fascinated by McGuinness, one of his patients, whose commitment was so strong he hitched lifts to evening art classes miles away after shifts and walked home afterwards. They were so impressed they bought a painting each, then more as they discovered more painters. They

'It won't take long until all we have left of the mining industry is the paintings'

began writing about the artists, and set up their own imprint to publish the books. Wales and McManners' collection – now more than 400 works, valued at more than £600,000 – will now be permanently displayed in the converted bank in the market place.

The mining art gallery is the first in a string of developments in the town and its castle, the former palatial home of the prince bishops, all intended to largely sponsored by an investment banker, Jonathan Ruffer, who launched the scheme by buying the castle.

The mining paintings record working lives and society in pit towns that have almost vanished. Olley is delighted a permanent exhibition will keep the memory alive. He doesn't miss the dirty, dangerous work, but he does miss the humour and camaraderie. "It won't take long until all we have left is the paintings," he said. "It's good that it went, but it went too quickly – in Germany they spent years training the workforce, here they just turned the lights out."

The Mining Art Gallery will open in Bishop Auckland on 21 October. Museum of miners' art to open as part of Bishop Auckland culture drive

Collection of more than 400 works will be permanently displayed in former bank building, and other museums also planned



Setting A Prop, by Bob Olley, who worked in a mine where the drift shafts stretched up to three miles under the sea. Photograph: Colin Davison/Gemini Collection/Zurbaran Trust

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A unique collection of paintings by Durham miners, many made by men who spent their working lives underground and their nights painting on kitchen tables, in attics or garden sheds, will go on display in the first museum in the UK dedicated to such art.

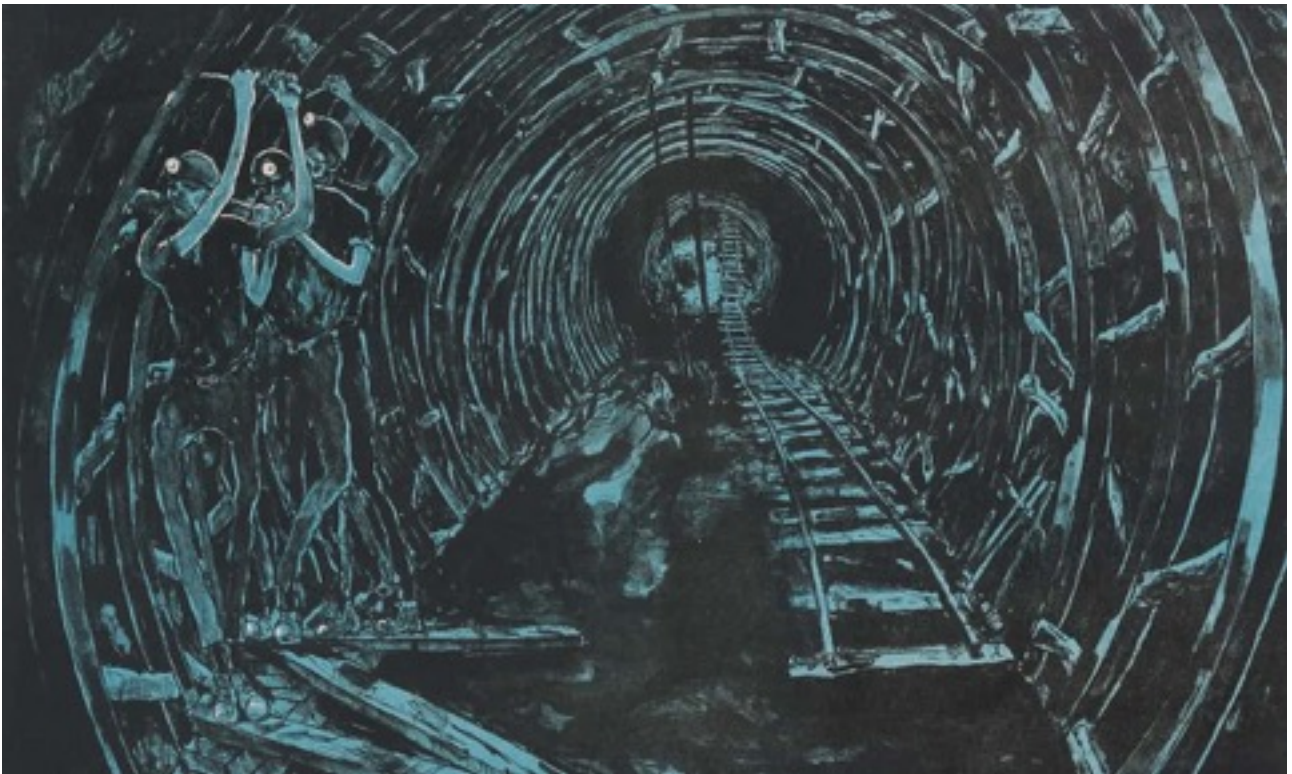
[The museum](#) is being created in a former bank building on the marketplace in Bishop Auckland. It includes works by Norman Cornish, the most famous of the group, who left the pits at the urging of his wife to become a full-time artist and spent the rest of his life recording the small streets, shops and people of

Spennymoor, where his studio is preserved in [an exhibition](#) at the town hall.

There are also many works by Tom McGuinness, a miner until he was made redundant in the wave of pit closures in the 1980s, who earned enough money from his art to build a coveted indoor bathroom but then installed a printing press in the space instead. There are several paintings by Bob Olley, still painting at 77, who originally trained as a signwriter before working in a mine where the drift shafts stretched up to three miles under the sea. There is a print of the painting that has paid his bills for years, through copies and reproductions: [The Westoe Netty](#), six men at a heavily graffitied urinal while one cheeky lad turns round to grin as he pees on the leg of his neighbour. When the painting was first exhibited, Olley's local council tried to have it banned. When a neighbour banged on his door to tell him that the urinal was being demolished, he rushed with friends to salvage it, and it has gone to the Beamish outdoor museum.

The collection began when a man came into the Bishop Auckland library and asked the librarian Gillian Wales if he could put something on the noticeboard. "He gave me a bit of paper which I unfolded, expecting to read about a community show or a charity jumble sale – and instead I was astonished to read that he was a painter, and his own work was going into an exhibition in London," she recalled. The man was Tom McGuinness.

Later, in conversation with Bob McManners, a GP in the town, she discovered he was equally fascinated by McGuinness. The pair were so startled by the quality of his work, his knowledge and the seriousness with which he took his vocation – he hitched lifts to evening art classes after shifts and frequently walked miles home afterwards – that they bought a painting each. As they discovered more painters, including Cornish, they bought more and more pictures, began writing about the artists and set up their own imprint to publish the books.



The Drawers, by Tom McGuinness, whose notice in a library led to the collection of miners' art. Photograph: Colin Davison/Gemini Collection/Zurbaran Trust

Wales and McManners' collection of more than 400 works, valued at more than £600,000, has been transferred to a new trust, Gemini, and will be permanently displayed in the handsomely converted bank building.

The mining art museum is the first in a string of developments in the town and its castle, the former palatial home of the prince bishops, once second in power only to the king. There will be a museum of Spanish art in another former bank on the marketplace, a new building for a museum of faith within the castle walls, a new restaurant within the restored walled gardens, and two derelict hotels brought back to life. All are intended to restore the fortunes of the town and its hinterland by attracting thousands of visitors and generating hundreds of jobs.

The first museum opens next month, and the 29-metre viewing tower of a new visitor centre is already rising. The scale of the project is audacious, and the cost equally so: David Maddan, chief executive of the Auckland Castle Trust, said they had secured grants of £11.4m from the Heritage Lottery Fund and a further £10m from other private funders and grants, leaving a gap of around

£110m which Jonathan Ruffer, an investment banker, who launched the whole scheme by buying the castle and its contents, proposes to cover himself. “He is very committed to it,” Maddan said, with dry understatement.

The mining paintings record working lives and a society in the pit towns that have almost vanished. Olley is delighted they are being collected in a permanent exhibition to keep the memory alive. He doesn’t miss the dirty, dangerous work – a painting by Tom Lamb, Laar Coal, shows his own brother working in a seam barely the width of his shoulders – but he does miss the humour and camaraderie of the workforce.

“It won’t take long until all we have left is the paintings,” Olley said. “It’s good that it went, but it went too quickly – in Germany they spent years training the workforce before closure; here they just turned the lights out.”

• The Mining [Art](#) Gallery will open in Bishops Auckland on 21 October 2017.