

## Porthmeor artists' studios: crumbling beauty



Roy Conn's Studio 1, a space the artist has occupied since 1963

By Emma Thomas

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**Porthmeor artists' studios in St Ives is the oldest such complex in Britain. It is also in an advanced state of decay and in urgent need of funding. Emma Thomas meets the artists and fishermen who work in its unique atmosphere**

Weather-beaten and worn, Porthmeor artists' studios has stood in the Cornish town of St Ives for more than 150 years, stubbornly clinging on to the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. In stark contrast to the modern Tate gallery nearby, the building possesses a crumbling beauty that is superficially alluring. The oldest studio complex in the country - internationally influential artists have worked here - its history is ingrained in the distressed and faded patina of every wall

panel and floorboard. The light here is extraordinary. Infinite. Even on a dull day, mesmerising. One artist occupant said, 'You can't do rubbish paintings here. Your work has to match this amazing place.'

At the moment there are 11 artists working here, despite the fact that the studios are literally falling down around them. Finding the funds to enable urgent repairs is a priority for the Borlase Smart-John Wells Trust, the charity that owns the building and looks after Porthmeor studios. The building itself dates from around 1815 and is Grade II listed.

Its structure is a mixture of masonry including the earliest use of mass concrete in Britain, recycled pipes from local old mine shafts and breathtaking lengths of timber. It was originally used by fishermen as net lofts, fish cellars and salt houses for curing pilchards. Today four of the cellars are still used by working fishermen. One of them, Chris Care in Cellar 3, has been making fishing nets here for more than 13 years.

The studios epitomise the connection between the town, artists and the fishing industry. Artists started coming to St Ives after 1880 when the Great Western Railway linked the town with the main London to Penzance line. They found these large north-facing fishermen's net lofts and began converting the spaces into studios. More studios were built on top of the fishermen's cellars and an artists' colony began to evolve.

In 1890 the Swedish artist Julius Olsson set up a school of marine painting in the Porthmeor studios, and Borlase Smart, a London artist, began to visit on painting holidays. By the late 1920s the St Ives Society of Artists was formed, with Smart as its secretary. A gallery space was created for the society in two of the studios. A decade later, in 1938, Smart was also involved in setting up the St Ives School of Painting in the studios. The school has been part of the community ever since, and this year celebrated its 70th birthday.

When Ben Nicholson and his wife, the sculptor Barbara Hepworth, came to live and work in St Ives at the end of the 1939, they were at the centre of a post-war Modernist movement, which included the artists Naum Gabo, Bernard Leach, Patrick Heron, Terry Frost and Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. Ben Nicholson,

1894-1982, not wanting any distractions, shunned the sea views for the one space, Studio 5, without a view, and played a radio to drown out the sound of the sea. Patrick Heron, 1920-1999, inherited the space from Nicholson in the late 1950s. Their paint marks are still on the wall.

Borlase had always wished for the St Ives Society of Artists to acquire Porthmeor studios in order to secure its future as an artists' colony. After his death in 1947 a memorial fund was set up to raise the money, and the Borlase Smart-John Wells Trust was established two years later. As well as the Porthmeor studios, the trust manages the Anchor studios and Trewarveneth studios in Newlyn where the artist John Wells worked (Anchor studios is part of the long-established Newlyn Art School). The main aim of the trust is to provide studios for local artists and to create the right conditions for artists to make the most of the environment. How far this ideal has been compromised was made clear when I visited recently.

The resident artist Steve Dove's Studio 4 presents what could easily be mistaken for an art installation. It is in fact a large collection of buckets clustered together for the purely practical purpose of catching drips from the leaking ceiling.

In John Emanuel's Studio 2, cloudy puffs of plaster dust fall from the ceiling, which he sweeps aside and keeps to add later to the concrete for his clay figures. Most of Emanuel's large studio window overlooking the beach is boarded up; the window blew in during a storm a few weeks ago. Much of his work was destroyed.

Bob Crossley, aged 95, is the oldest artist here, and has been at Porthmeor since 1962. On his wall there is a fabulous collection of old tools used for making frames and canvases. They are hung in an orderly fashion with line drawings of each piece to show where it lives. It is in itself a work of art. Occupants change over the years. Clare Wardman and Iain Robertson moved into Studio 7, a space they share, last year.

Emerging artists are the province of the Ben Nicholson/Terry Frost Studio, now reserved for and supported by the Tate St Ives Artist Residency programme. Luke Frost, the grandson and son respectively of the artists Terry Frost and Anthony

Frost, is currently working in this space. A ping-pong table covered in artist's materials dominates the room. The lines on the table echo the lines edging the blocks of colour in Frost's work, which hangs on the studio walls.

It is impossible not to sense a slight nervousness about the intended renovation work. It is inevitable that some of the character and charm of these magical spaces will be lost. Naomi Frears in Studio 3 takes a pragmatic view. 'The place is falling down. What everyone wants are studios that people can work in, fishermen and artists together. St Ives needs its working heart.'

Yet renovation will cost about £3.7 million, and so far only £1.2 million has been provisionally allocated from the Arts Lottery Capital programme.

Porthmeor still needs to find the rest within the next 12 months, or it risks losing this. Chris Hibbert, the manager of the Borlase Smart-John Wells Trust, is working to narrow the gap to about £500,000, when he would be confident in approaching public trusts and foundations. 'They are going to want to see a project that is almost there rather than a big empty pot,' he said. At the time of writing, the trust is 'in discussions with the Heritage Lottery Fund'.

It is also hoping for support from the European Regional Development Fund (Cornwall is due for a shot of European gold as the county's economy is lagging behind that of the rest of the country, and there is a strong case in that the project is supplying workspace for local artists and fishermen) and with Sea Change, a body administered by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, which is concerned with regenerating seaside resorts.

A neighbourhood community fundraising appeal, Smart Regeneration, has also been set up. It was launched by Janet Street-Porter in 2006 with a target of £100,000, of which £45,000 has been raised so far. It raised £30,000 through selling a limited-edition prints portfolio by the current tenants of Porthmeor studios. These have sold out, but Smart has a new fundraising project: a lithograph, Blue Light, by Anthony Frost, which is to be sold in a limited-edition of 160 for £335 each, with all proceeds going to the regeneration fund.

Roy Conn in Studio 1, who has worked at Porthmeor since 1963, emphasises how the renovation project will only be successful if the focus is on 'restoration

not alteration'. MJ Long of the architects Long & Kentish, who are charged with the project, and who have previously designed studios for Frank Auerbach and Peter Blake, said, 'The attraction of the building is that it grew up like that and the artists don't want to change its character. Nor do they want the place fixed up to the point at which they won't be able to afford the rent.' The plan is to allow limited public access, bearing in mind, as the architect says, 'We have to protect the artists' need for privacy. They won't want to be on display.'

Hibbert comments that as well as preserving and restoring the fabric of the building, there will be some alterations to the current complex. The trust has plans to divide up some of the bigger studios to provide more workspace, create opportunities for more artists and to raise revenue that will help keep down the rents. Disabled access will be added and an exhibition space will be created. He stresses that the building was designed for fishermen and artists, and the trust wants to protect this relationship.

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Borlase Smart-John Wells Trust: 01326-252203; [bsjwtrust.co.uk](http://bsjwtrust.co.uk). Smart Regeneration Appeal: 01736-332657

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