

Berwick Church and the Bloomsbury Murals:

Writing and Research by Students from the University of Sussex

Spring 2020

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Preface

Hope Wolf

This pamphlet was made by third-year students from the School of English at the University of Sussex. They took part in a course called ‘Arts and Community’, the aim of which is to work with cultural organisations in order to bring undergraduate research to an audience outside of the university. The course focuses on a different place and project each year it runs, and in the spring of 2020 students engaged with an initiative, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to conserve the Berwick Church murals. They sought to tell new stories about murals and the Berwick site using archival documents at the Keep (East Sussex Record Office), drafts of the murals at both Charleston and the Towner Gallery, Eastbourne, oral history interviews gathered as part of the HLF project, writing from the fields of literature, art history and geography, and on-site observations of the church and its environs (we walked from Berwick to Charleston Farmhouse via Alciston). The course was linked to the Centre for Modernist Studies research project on *Sussex Modernism*, and connections were made between other cultural sites in the area, both on and off the map. The students experimented with both creative and critical writing, and produced 6000-word portfolios, short samples of which they selected for this pamphlet.

The murals were painted by Bloomsbury Group artists Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Quentin Bell in the early 1940s (although additions were made in later decades). The students examined different responses to the murals from the 1940s to the present day, and were encouraged to come up with their own interpretations. Where published writing on the paintings has often emphasised the ways in which the Bloomsbury artists depicted local people and landscapes (as seen in *The Nativity* by Vanessa Bell, for instance), the opening essay in this pamphlet, ‘Berwick and Beyond’ by Bee Hendry, explores Grant’s uses of abstraction and inclusion of international references (considering, for instance, the pineapple painted onto the pulpit). Hendry takes up cultural geographer Doreen Massey’s idea that ‘every place is a “meeting place” of cultures, experiences, and relationships’, and the information she has found about artefacts in the church that preceded the Bloomsbury Group’s intervention points the way towards further research on colonial connections and imperial histories. Her essay

also touches on links made between Grant's murals and his sexuality, a subject that is explored further in the second pamphlet contribution, *Heartfelt Summer* by Rupert Tarrant. This creative study visually reimagines one of Duncan Grant's *The Four Seasons* screen panels. With photography, textiles and collage, Tarrant develops, in a more explicit way than Grant was able to, the theme of 'queer affection' and 'queer pain'.

The next two entries turn the lens away from the famous artists, and focus their attention on past and present local residents. Charise Niarchos has conducted new research on the figure of Nancy Sandilands, who opposed the commissioning of the Berwick murals. She discusses how Sandilands' story, and the way in which she has been represented, links both to wider debates about the relationship between the country and the city and also to questions of power, specifically of who decides what kinds of art should be displayed in regional venues. Niarchos's contribution to the pamphlet is concerned with diversifying the voices we listen to from the past, as is the essay that follows. Here, Scarlett May Walker weighs up arguments about heritage from its critics and defenders, and places the Berwick project in the context of regional efforts to involve individuals and groups in telling alternative histories. She references, for instance, the 2019 anthology *Hidden Sussex*, which brings together fiction, non-fiction and poetry from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic experience, and includes writing on the Chattri (another nearby spiritual site in a rural setting). In class we also explored writing and digital sites that have mapped places proximate to Berwick quite differently from materials aimed at tourists, for example *New Pathways: A Psychogeography of Lewes*, run by the Centre for Life History & Life Writing research at the University of Sussex.

Students were asked, in making this pamphlet, to think through the difficulties of working to commission. They were introduced to site-specific installations produced by writers and artists whose work they might take inspiration from or critique. They also looked at writing produced by first-year students the previous year: a pilot project in which they were invited to create a piece of poetry or prose for the Berwick site. This year Grace van der Byl Williams designed an installation inspired by Virginia Woolf's writing. As part of the course we considered parallels between Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* and the murals, given that the former was published and the later started in 1941, and acknowledging that Bell and Woolf were sisters living so close by. The installation, however, drew on Woolf's earlier essay 'Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car'; it also looked beyond Bloomsbury and the murals to think about the pagan history of the Berwick grounds, and also the surrounding rural landscape. Van der Byl Williams

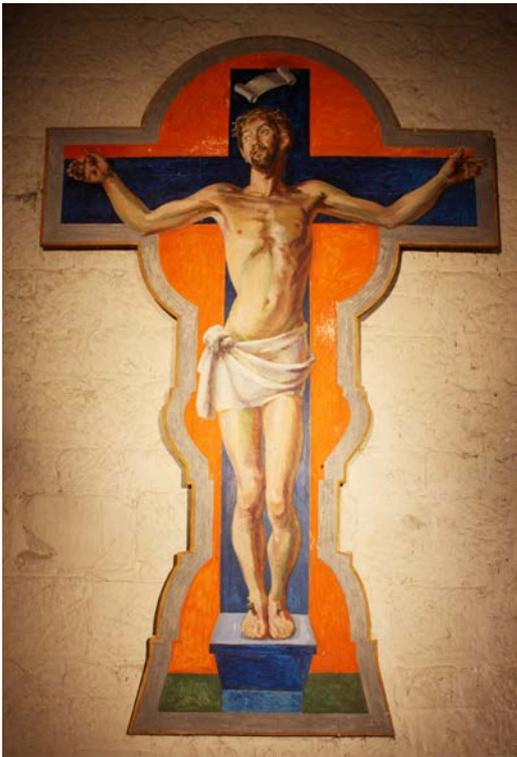
devised a work that sought not to privilege any one individual artist or maker: ‘Woolf, groundskeepers, gardeners and farmers should all be credited for creating the experience’, she writes. The collaborative nature of her design reflects the collaborative nature of the project we were involved in, which benefitted from the assistance of many different people.

Both the course and this pamphlet would not have been possible without the help of the Reverend Peter Blee, who shared his scholarship with the students, enabled us see the murals when they were being restored, and helped us to access research materials when libraries and archives were shut due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thank you to Helen Ellis, Berwick Church Project Manager, who made the oral history interviews available to the students and assisted us with our field trips. Thank you to Michele Boys, churchwarden of Alciston Church, for sharing her knowledge of the building and also her creative writing. We are grateful to Darren Clarke, Head of Collections, Research and Exhibitions at Charleston, for giving us a tour of the Charleston archives, to Terry Henson for her tour of both Charleston and the Towner collection and to Karen Taylor and Sara Cooper for enabling our visit to the Towner. Thanks also to Karen Watson and Drew Boulton at the Keep for facilitating our visit and providing follow-up information on the archival materials. Trips were made possible by funding from both the HLF and also the School of English at the University of Sussex. Sadly, due to the pandemic the students were not able to meet parishioners, but we hope that this pamphlet will offer a way of sharing some of their work with them, and also with others with an interest in the Berwick murals and the longer history of the church and its site.

**Berwick and Beyond:
Abstract Forms and International References in
Duncan Grant's Designs for the Church Murals**

Bee Hendry

The Crucifixion, or The Victory of Calvary



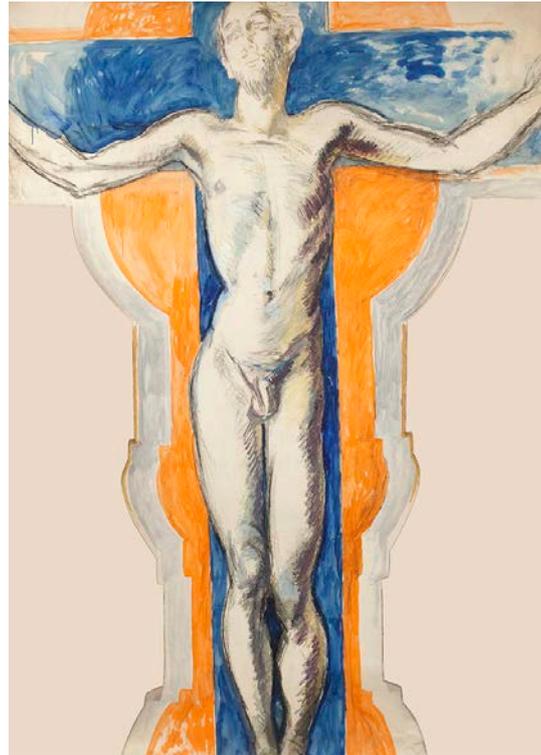
Grant, Duncan. *The Crucifixion*. St Michael and All Angels Church, Berwick.
Image courtesy of Peter Blee.

The murals at Berwick are frequently praised for their attentiveness to their local surroundings as well as the space of the church itself. They include local members of the community posing as biblical figures in front of distinctively Sussex landscapes. Duncan Grant's *The Crucifixion*, however, stands in stark contrast to this trend in the murals overall. While the other murals conform to the spaces they occupy on the church walls, stretching down rather awkwardly to fit into the spaces around the church's arches, *The Crucifixion* stands tall and unencumbered on the large west wall. The joyously bright blocks of orange and blue tones framing Christ's body are distinct from the muted, pastoral tones employed elsewhere in the church. This bold, abstract framing replaces any direct reference to the material world outside.

Rather than looking to Berwick for referents, *The Crucifixion* has more overlap with the queer milieu of Charleston. The model for the figure of Christ, Edward le Bas, was a painter from London and a friend of the Bloomsbury Group. He posed tied to an easel in the Charleston studio (Shone). Grant's preliminary sketches and paintings, now split between the Charleston archive and the Towner Gallery archive, featured Christ fully nude on the cross, as any crucified man would have been at the time. He is not so

slender as in the final mural and his thighs spill over the edge of the orange background, disrupting the frame itself.

Objections were made to these plans and it was requested that Grant alter his depictions of Christ in the murals to be 'less "fleshy" and more spiritual' (Shone). Submitting to this feedback, Grant altered his plans and added a loincloth to the painting. Even with these changes, Grant's Christ is written about unfavourably. For example, Michael Prodger writes that le Bas' posing 'results in Christ resembling a man emerging camply from a shower rather than one suffering in death agony'.



Duncan Grant, Crucifix: Design for Berwick Church Murals, c.1942. ©Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2020. Towner Collection. Image: Towner Eastbourne.

Grant's choice to not depict Christ

as suffering is a purposeful one, reflected in the alternate title of the piece: *The Victory of Calvary*. Christ's death on the cross was the ultimate act of love, sacrificing his own life to redeem mankind. Christ as bold and triumphant on the cross is in line with the text of the Bible and older artistic depictions.

Christ's expression in this piece also importantly links it, in my mind, with the non-religious artistic output of the Bloomsbury Group in Charleston. Grant frequently sketched and painted his male companions at Charleston, celebrating the semblance of queer freedom he cultivated within the bounds of the house and gardens. In his essay 'Duncan Grant's Queer Arcadia', Darren Clarke references other paintings by Grant such as *The Bathers* and *Bathing* as 'expressions of the joy of same-sex society' (162). Despite the changes made to *The Crucifixion*, the joy and power one can see in Grant's other depictions of male bodies are still just as visible in it as they are in his works in Charleston.

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The Pulpit



Grant, Duncan. Detail from the pulpit. 1962. St Michael and All Angels Church, Berwick. Image courtesy of Peter Blee.

The pulpit decorations as they are now seen were painted by Duncan Grant and Angelica Bell in 1962, around two decades after the rest of the murals. The three original central panels by Vanessa Bell, depicting Saint Gabriel, Saint Raphael, and Saint Michael, were irreparably vandalised with black paint. The smaller panels on each edge of the pulpit, with designs showing fruit and flowers, survived undamaged. It was after these surviving paintings that Grant modelled the replacement centre panels, rather than seeking to recreate Vanessa Bell's original figures.

The panels by Grant on the left and right feature similar vases, lending a pleasing element of symmetry to the overall design. The vase on which these paintings are modelled is one brought back to the artists' residence at Charleston from Tunis, North Africa and decorated by Grant (Blee). In the left panel roses and lilies sprout up

from the vase while on the right foliage and butterflies hover above it.

The central panel is the most striking of three. Its painted alcove contains a gravity-defying selection of fruit piled atop an angular white vase. The largest fruit in this painting, the pineapple, immediately sticks out as exotic. While the other fruits are either native to England (apples and pears) or could be cultivated here (peaches and grapes), the pineapple must be imported from the tropics. Its inclusion in the scheme of the murals, frequently praised for its use of local models and landscapes, is initially puzzling.

Upon further investigation, the pineapple, and the Tunisian vase, chime with other international elements in the decoration of the church. One such example is the chapel frontal, made in 1935. A pamphlet produced by Berwick Church in the 1960s to inform visitors about important elements in the church explains that the chapel frontal features "English spring flowers" as well as a 'Bahamense in the centre' (*St Michael and All Angels* 6). This 'Bahamense' is more commonly known as a Bahama nightshade, a

beautifully delicate purple and yellow flower native to the Caribbean. It was chosen specifically in remembrance of Reverend A. R. E. Roe, who ministered in the Bahamas before becoming the rector at Berwick from 1928 until 1934. Another such piece of international décor in the church is the ‘Elephant Stool,’ ‘a model of the ancient Throne of Ashanti, presented to our children by the children of Mampong, Ghana, some years ago’ (*St Michael and All Angels* 7).

These objects all embody a lasting history of international relationships, connecting the church and its community at Berwick with others across the globe. It is all too easy to imagine places, especially rural ones, as singular and insular when in reality, to use Doreen Massey’s words, every place is a ‘meeting place’ of cultures, experiences, and relationships (154). Berwick church is made up of its local, national, and international relationships, and these relationships have become an intrinsic, and beautiful, part of the material church itself.

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Heartfelt Summer

Rupert Tarrant

After sharing his sketches for the panel, *Christ in Glory*, Duncan Grant was told they were too ‘fleshy’.¹ When studied alongside Grant’s later work for Lincoln Cathedral, there is a clear presence of what Lothar Götz calls an ‘obvious homoerotic context’ (21).

Grant painted the Lincoln murals in 1953, which were made available to the public in 1959 and then closed until the 1990s after uproar at its content. It has been suggested that Grant ‘put a little too much of his own life onto the walls’, featuring muscular male labourers gazing at a topless, effeminate Christ (The Collection, 4). My question is, can we see Grant’s homoerotic style in the Berwick murals?

Götz is an artist who recreated Grant’s Lincoln murals for The Collection (a museum in Lincolnshire). He discusses ‘[the] way that Duncan Grant used his private life

¹ ‘[T]he Committee met in the church and decided to encourage the Chancellor to grant a faculty for the work to begin, starting with the ‘Christ in Glory’ which it asked to be made less “fleshy” and more spiritual’ (Shone, Richard. *The Berwick Church Paintings*. Eastbourne: Towner Gallery, 1969).

[...] [and] how he personalised the chapel.’ He refers to the ‘controversial figures’ used in the Lincoln murals, namely Paul Roche, Grant’s lover (24). In the Lincoln Murals, it is clear that Grant’s queer themes are inseparable from his religious work.

After Grant visited Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel in 1911, he focused on ‘use of line and contour when depicting the male body’ (Jones, 99). Grant’s *Bathing* (1911) was inspired by Michelangelo’s erotic statues (Tate, display caption). This work is based on the Serpentine, a lake in Hyde Park that was a central space for gay men. Eleanor Jones argues this painting marked ‘a transitional moment in Grant’s career; it also marks a queer intervention in a public space’ (99).

Grant’s erotic work contrasts to his paintings of male labourers in the Berwick murals. In *Summer*, the workers engage in a harvesting activity so physical, yet so separate. Peter Blee notices ‘an interlocking rhythm that is almost dancelike.’ The composition echoes Grant’s erotic drawings, such as *Deux Hommes* (1920) and *Wrestlers* (1960). The ‘shared activity’ of the task forms a bond, one that echoes the ‘friendships within queer communities’ or ‘organic connections’ between men that Jones describes in Grant’s *Erotic Embrace* (1950).

My response to *Summer* is a collage featuring two queer friends. The photographs are inspired by Vanessa Bell’s reference photographs for the murals. I was drawn to the use of household objects in her photograph for *The Annunciation*, including a ‘draped’ sheet and ‘garden dictionary’ that were used to create the scene (Spalding, 382).

Upon discovering that the models were locals and loved ones of the artists, it struck me that the murals represent a collective labour. I seek to recreate this shared artistry by transforming a masculine image of labour into a soft, effeminate collage. My piece comments on an absence of queerness in *Summer*, filling it with sketches of Grant’s erotic artwork. As Jones writes, ‘Friendships within queer communities and subcultures can provide love and support where heteronormative society does not’ (98).

The new labourers hold a hand-stitched felt bale in place of a wheat bale. Jeanne Vaccaro posits felt as ‘non-woven, yet interlocking’ (254-55). Felt is a metaphor for queer affection, for an interlocking rhythm that is present in *Summer*. Vaccaro adds that craft, as traditionally feminine, ‘provides a rich lens through which to observe gender and its relationship to labour.’

In my piece, *Heartfelt Summer*, craft represents queer pain. I convey this in my embroidery and handwriting of Grant’s letter to Maynard Keynes (1908): ‘You cannot

imagine how much I want to scream sometimes here for want of being able to say something that I mean [...] Here I am surrounded by them, not a soul to speak to.'

I include a leaflet for £10 Queer House Tours at Charleston House. The cost, combined with the uneven surroundings of not only Charleston, but Berwick Church itself, meant that as a disabled student, I would not have been able to visit without the funding and travel provided for this project. The inclusion of these leaflets symbolizes the inaccessibility of cultural sites. In my work, I hope to comment on how many queer people cannot access their own history.

I am deeply interested in interactions between queer artists and the church, particularly in light of Bishop Bell's words from 'The Church and the Artist' (1942): '(churches) must serve a living purpose [...] why should not the present age also make its contribution?' I am excited to produce work that reimagines the murals, and places them within the 'present age'.



Grant, Duncan. *Summer, The Four Seasons*. 1941. St Michael and All Angels Church, Berwick. Image courtesy of Peter Blee.

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Country and City: Mrs Sandilands and the Making of the Berwick Murals

Charise Niarchos

Mrs Nancy Sandilands was a member of the Berwick community and parish during the time of the decoration of the Church. She did not approve of the installment of the murals into Berwick Church and came to be well known within both the Berwick and Bloomsbury communities for this fact. The story of the conflict between the cultural elite and this more marginal figure Mrs Sandilands opens up a conversation about the power of the metropolitan world. Drawing on archival material from the time and more recent sources from art historians, there is an evident dismissal of Mrs Sandilands and her opinions. The debates about the murals can be placed in the context of wider discussions about the binaries and stereotypes that persist around ideas of ‘the country’ and ‘the city’.

Raymond Williams, a cultural critic and novelist who published *The Country and The City* in 1973 analyses this binary contrast and exposes the main stereotypes connected to both sides. He describes the assumption that the ‘country’ is filled with both ‘peace [and] innocence’ and ‘backwardness [and] ignorance’ while the city is a place of ‘worldliness and ambition’ (1). Williams navigates these assumptions and highlights the wrong associations that manifest from these ideologies. He clarifies how the undermining of the ‘country way of life’ persists and, as a conflict that ‘reaches back into classical time’, perpetuates a consensus that the city is therefore superior (1).

In her *Duncan Grant* biography, Frances Spalding affirms the prevalence of Mrs Sandilands during the making of the Berwick murals, insinuating that her shortcomings came from an ignorance in her approach. She asserts that although Mrs Sandilands was ‘determined in her opposition to the scheme’, her choice of witnesses, and false accusation of Quentin Bell as a conscientious objector were two factors that ‘weakened

her case' and credibility (383). Mrs Sandilands' son wrote a memoir outlining the financial and personal hardships she faced after her divorce, presenting a more sympathetic depiction of Mrs Sandilands. However, Spalding does not include these details in her text. She does reveal that Mrs Sandilands 'ran a jam-making circle' in Berwick but does not provide any further personal information about her (382). Instead, she elaborates more regarding Mrs Sandilands' role as the woman who disliked the murals and through this undermines the figure, reinforcing the narrative that her relevance comes from her conflict with the cultural elite rather than as a member of the Berwick community.

In 1941 a letter was written by Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant to a Brighton-based solicitor Mr Stevens, which articulates Mrs Sandilands' objections, and his own objections to her opinions. Grant outlines her four main areas of concern all of which indicate a desire to maintain familiarity and not compromise the current dynamic of Berwick village. The objections questioned 'the suitability of Berwick Church for decoration', complained that the design models being followed were not the same as those originally approved, that it was 'not the time to spend labour on unnecessary work' given the wartime context, and that the 'beauty' and 'interest' of the art could encourage visitors from outside the village and make Berwick church 'unduly crowded' (Grant).

In his comments, Grant acknowledges his own disagreements, as well as the opinions of other artistic experts and thus presents a direct debate between the opinions of Mrs Sandilands and his own spheres. This sets up the oppositional relationship between so-called 'locals' and 'outsiders'. Where Mrs Sandilands questions 'the suitability' of the art, Grant uses the opinions of architect Frederick Etchells to dispute her. He argues that with Etchells' 'great knowledge and love of Ecclesiastical Architecture' he would have been the 'first person to express disapproval' and yet he felt 'a Decorative treatment [...] would give an added interest and charm' (Grant). While Mrs Sandilands,

as an inhabitant of the space, displays her concern for preserving the ‘traditional’ church, Grant (who had a base in London and a country home in Charleston, near Berwick) dismisses the opinions of this marginal figure and sides with the cultural elite.

Spalding writes that Mrs Sandilands was not aware of the artistic tradition of the murals: ‘In England [...] there lingered evidence of medieval wall paintings [...] This however had been forgotten by those parishioners at Berwick [...] who began to listen to the Hon. Mrs Sandilands’ (382). To position Sandilands’ lack of knowledge against those who were artistically qualified relates to a more general undermining of ‘the local’ and given the connections of commissioners such as Grant and Kenneth Clark to London, substantiates the stereotype of the ‘worldliness’ of the city.

As part of the recent efforts to preserve the murals, parishioners were interviewed about Berwick. One interviewee, Joanna Lumsden was well acquainted with Mrs Sandilands from living in the village and allows further insight into this debate. Robert Hewison, a cultural historian, highlights that ‘1940 [marked] the beginning of the modern period in official British cultural policy’ where there was a push for culture to be brought to wider populations, including the rural communities (xxiv). Lumsden confirms that it was not merely a dislike for the murals that caused controversy around the commission, but that members of the parish, including Mrs Sandilands, were not ready to experience this cultural shift while Britain was ‘in the worst years of the war’. Nonetheless, in his letter Grant acknowledges but dismisses Mrs Sandilands’ anxieties about spending money on ‘unnecessary work’, stating that the commissioners had felt it was ‘necessary’ enough to fund the scheme (Grant). Grant’s response does not consider the emotional turmoil of the war and in accordance proposes a favouring of his artistic spheres.

The archives reveal the commissioners’ questioning of Mrs Sandilands’ contradiction that the art would be both ‘unsuitable’ for the Church and yet their ‘beauty’

would also attract visitors. However, while this inconsistency is clear, it does clarify Mrs Sandilands' primary concern that things would be changing and, as Lumsden suggests, there was worry it would cause an undesirable divide in the small congregation of Berwick. Lumsden expresses the community's distress that the encroachment of the art and the outside audience it would bring would be an imposition on their village. This resistance to encouraging outsiders into the local parish indicates a challenge to the aim of the cultural elite to bring their art into these spaces. However, while Mrs. Sandilands exemplifies her loyalty to the Berwick community and church, her consequent failure accentuates the power of those outside of her locale. Therefore, despite her relentless fight, her subsidiary role as a 'local' was limiting against the wider movement to modernise this space.

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A 'space for us': Local communities and their Heritage

Scarlett May Walker

Smaller communities are believed to have a stronger sense of community attachment; this includes feelings of belonging towards, and an emotional connection to, the collective known as community (McMillan and Charis, 1986). Community buildings play an important role in uniting members of the community under one roof and 'while their primary objective may be religious, churches are [...] important for enhancing community integration.' (Lui et al, 435) Whilst some individuals may have an 'outward looking' approach to their community, welcoming changes, others have an 'enclosing and defensive' stance and feel a desire to protect the community as they know it (Massey, 147). These opposing stances were demonstrated in Berwick in 1941 when Bishop Bell proposed that members of the Bloomsbury Group should decorate the interior of St Michael and All Angels Church. Bishop Bell, who had an 'outward looking' approach to community, saw the decoration as a catalyst to forge a relationship between the church and the arts. However, 'the honourable Mrs Nancy Sandilands' (Lumsden, 2020) from the parish council was the strong voice of opposition.

As a hub of community life, Berwick church facilitated a strong sense of locality for many Berwick residents which helped create a sense of 'stability and a source of unproblematic identity' (Massey, 151) during the turbulent time of World War II. Mrs Sandilands and others' objections to the murals were rooted in a resistance to change and although the murals were only an interior change, it is understandable that some rejected this transformation during a time of global, national and local uncertainty. Her fear was that the murals would result in an increase of tourism to the area, disrupting the community. These fears still resonate for Berwick residents today. Christine Skinner stated in an interview:

I don't regret what's happening at all. What I regret is perhaps how the simplicity of a village church's life has now been lost and will be lost and I don't think that can be recovered, I think that's inevitable. (Skinner, 2020)

Joanna Lumsden, another Berwick resident, remembers how some families vowed to never return to the church and recounted how Mrs Sandilands said, 'my real concern is that this gentle little hamlet will in fact get overtaken because Berwick Church is very

very special' (Lumsden, 2020). Was Mrs Sandilands' cause for concern justified, given the heritage industry has become a key player in the UK tourism?

Local heritage has become a widely enjoyed activity for many people in the United Kingdom. Companies such as The National Trust and English Heritage own over nine-hundred heritage sites, with English Heritage alone claiming to have over ten-million visitors each year (English Heritage Annual Report, 2018). With local heritage tourism expanding each year, local councils are utilising their own heritage spots to boost tourism and thus create further profit for their communities. Whilst the heritage industry has been criticised for profiteering from gift-wrapped history, it is also argued that heritage tourism 'gives a privileged place to local knowledge' and 'brings a new awareness of the historicity of both landscape and townscape' (Samuel, 259 and 277). The heritage industry can bring to the foreground alternative histories that may have often been overlooked, focusing on the importance of the local rather than the monumental moments of history.

Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*, published in 1941, features a rural village pageant, its theme an outline of British History. The subjectivity of national narratives is drawn attention to throughout the novel, for example when Mr. Mayhew complains "Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the Army, eh?" (Woolf, 380) Different events take precedence depending on individual perspective: for some the military takes priority, for others the arts. The drama of the novel occurs between the scenes of the pageant. National narratives are presented as frail through the interruption of more immediate events having impact on the proceedings of the pageant, to illustrate: "They were singing; but only a word or two was audible [...] The wind blew away the connecting words of their chant", and even a whole scene is cut from the pageant due to time restraints (Woolf, 344 and 373). This demonstrates how easy it is for some narratives to be excluded from the larger historical narrative and reminds us of the importance of creating space for them to be heard. The Berwick murals project draws attention to narratives that could have potentially been overlooked. The inclusion of servicemen in Duncan Grant's *Christ in Glory*, alongside the use of local people dressing up for the murals in Vanessa Bell *Nativity*, like the local people in La Trobe's pageant, allows for not only the religious and artistic narratives to be presented but creates a space for further contextual and local narratives to be revealed.

The *Sussex Modern* website boasts of the importance of Sussex heritage: 'Sussex occupies a unique position in the recent history of British thought, art and literature. It

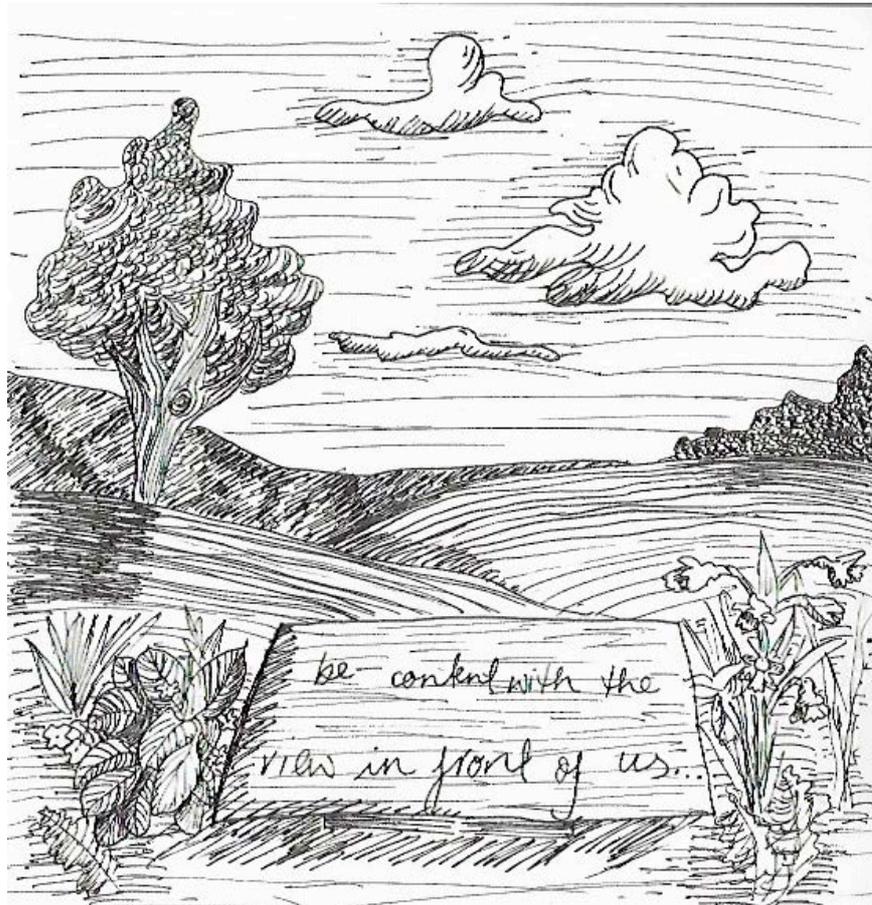
has helped shaped our modern world' (What is Sussex Modern? - *Sussex Modern*, 2020). Western culture often privileges white history, habitually excluding alternative narratives. Dulani Kulasinghe, an academic and contributor to the *Hidden Sussex* anthology, addresses the lack of inclusion of other ethnicities and cultures in British classroom history. She emphasises the importance of creating a space for alternative histories, arguing that as England is a multicultural country it is integral that we create a space for other voices to be heard, 'even a little knowledge, a few pictures, can make space for us – however incomplete, that knowing helps us straighten up and find a wider view of this place and ours in it' (Kulasinghe, 9). Local heritage tourism is an excellent way to create a space for alternative narratives, those produced by women, children and the working class. As *Between the Acts* suggests, history is often happening in between the monumental events. Although the importance of the Berwick murals to local and British heritage is evidenced, an awareness of this historical trend is important to possess especially when working in the heritage industry. The preservation of the murals not only ensures that the work of the notable Bloomsbury Group continues to bring joy to many but the art itself is a window into further local history. As the murals include local landmarks and people, they offer further insight into the lesser-known histories of Berwick. Despite this there is always more to uncover: the Pagan burial mound, the symbols and words carved into the church and the stories of the people buried in the grounds of the church. When presenting history curators need to maintain an awareness of the alternative voices that are not being given attention and it is with this hope that we will unearth even more fascinating histories.

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**‘Be content with the view in front of us’:
An installation Designed for St Michael and All Angels Church**

Grace van der Byl Williams



This installation uses Virginia Woolf’s words from her 1927 essay ‘Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’. The quotation would be placed outside, facing south, corresponding with the view over the downs. The piece itself would be unassuming and small. It would be made of an organic material that would degrade naturally in time – firstly so as not to make a lasting impact on the grounds, and secondly to encourage thinking about the passing seasons. A natural installation that will become part of the ground seems fitting to the Berwick site, as the installation’s reverence and appreciation for nature would reflect the potentially pagan history of the mound to the south of the church, referred to in a local tourism leaflet as a ‘prehistoric sacred site’ (*7 Sussex Churches*). In highlighting the landscape as part of the artwork, I engage with Miwon Kwon’s understanding of site-specific art that commands the work ‘to be singularly

experienced in the here-and-now through the bodily presence of each viewing subject' (86). Visitors would reflect on the view before them and, importantly, the experience of simply being at Berwick. With this in mind, I would be keen to make the figure of the artist as unobtrusive as possible, so as not to assign any particular name to the experience. The installation would be most effective if the words were handwritten by a person who works on the site. Firstly, this would be a nod to co-creativity, and secondly, their relationship with the grounds may be a little like that of an artist to their artwork.

Critics may argue that this simple quotation could be relevant in any location with pleasant surroundings. I would suggest, however, that not only is Virginia Woolf evidently an important figure of local pride (celebrated by the tourism project *Sussex Modern*), she is also, as sister of Vanessa Bell (one of the painters of the murals), closely tied to Berwick's history, and this extract is taken from an essay specific to rural Sussex countryside. In the essay, Woolf playfully compares rural Sussex to an ageing woman, with a 'still fine outline' but some vulgar markings of modernity ('bead shops' and 'red villas') that are exposed in daylight. In the evening, however, the lasting beauty of the landscape is what Woolf notices as the signs of modernity are 'washed away'. By associating Woolf's imagery with Berwick, the installation asks visitors if they can be content with this view as it is, all day long; to reflect on their feelings about any signs of modernity they notice or a lack thereof.

The quotation refers to the view in front of *us*, creating the idea of a communal landscape – no payment is needed, no type of person may be excluded from looking, and a mutual appreciation connects people across all boundaries. For some, this sense of 'us' will also be a meaningful echo of the community of church. These responses are only possible when the quotation is isolated as it would be in this installation; in context however Woolf's 'us' refers to her split selves and their varying impulses when comprehending the views from the motor car. Yet, this is still relevant to Berwick. She writes about a pinprick that shatters moments of experiencing beauty, partly due to a human incompetence to meaningfully communicate such experiences to one another. This is what I understand by 'nature has given you six pocket-knives to cut up the body of a whale', as Woolf goes on to write. We are poorly equipped to render natural beauty digestible and comprehensible in our own languages. It is thus interesting that both *The Nativity* by Vanessa Bell and *The Supper at Emmaus* by Quentin Bell attempt to capture the local landscapes visually, out of their painted windows. The landscapes take up significant space in both works, thus making them, in terms of proportion, as important

as the religious figures. Yet, by framing the countryside with the internal features of windows, the artists could be engaging with the same chopping up and translating of natural beauty into human terms that Woolf describes. They place landscapes within frames, like paintings, and thus they too seem to be asking us to think of these surroundings as art.

The quotation would resonate with viewers who know the essay it is taken from, as they can pull out the various meanings that I have above, and for visitors who have no prior knowledge of the essay or of Woolf at all. There is something universal about it, though I hope I have demonstrated why it is relevant to Berwick. In prompting visitors to see the local landscape itself as art, we offer them a perspective from which to look at their surroundings if they continue along the *7 Sussex Churches* pilgrimage walking route between parish churches in the area.

Having expressed the ways in which this installation is specific to Berwick, it seems necessary to ask why this site-specificity matters. Kwon has established that artworks which are inextricable from their sites hold the potential to transcend the capitalist art market (85). Tying the art and the surroundings together so tightly, as well as understanding the *experience* of the site as part of the work of art, ensures that the work cannot be commodified. This end is also achieved by the lack of a single artist's voice – Woolf, groundskeepers, gardeners and farmers should all be credited for creating the experience.

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