

Historical Environment Report October 2024

Our September visit was quite an unusual one, looking at History through the medium of Art. Many of us had enjoyed the recent L S Lowry / Norman Cornish exhibition at the Bowes Museum and it seemed appropriate to walk the Norman Cornish Trail in Spennymoor to see how the great man's paintings reflected the society in which he was brought up and lived. At first sight Spennymoor seemed a fairly typical example of a County Durham town that had seen better days: the town is bypassed by a fast-moving ring road which keeps the focus of most people passing by away from the centre. The roads into the centre seem to draw most visitors into one of two superstores, and the car park beside the Town Hall takes some finding. However, the Town Hall itself is a revelation. More of that shortly.

The trail starts from the Town Hall where a well-produced booklet can be picked up. The walk lasts an hour or so, leading you between ten strategically-placed information boards which mainly feature paintings by Norman for comparison with the same scene today. Three of the viewpoints featured fish and chip establishments, each immortalised by the artist. Board one showed Norman's painting of 'Eddy's Chip Shop', clearly the focal point of a bustling street full of shops and people; today the houses remain, 'improved' with stark PVC windows, but the shops and bustle have disappeared along with Eddy's, now sadly the site of a scruffy car park. Board ten was the site of the famed 'Chip Van' painting, bang in the redeveloped centre of town, the street totally unrecognizable (although a replica of the van is preserved at Beamish). In between these two boards there was a history lesson in 'then and now'. Out of the centre the changes were less noticeable – St Paul's Church stands out as prominently today as it did when Norman painted it a number of times.



Photo by Tim Meacham. September 2024

The walk was complemented by a visit to the Bob Abley Gallery. This and a very interesting Mining Museum are contained within the two wings of the Town Hall, evidence of current civic pride. The gallery was a revelation featuring Norman's reconstructed study, a display of his work (originals for sale from £3,700 upwards) and paintings by other local artists. The whole experience is not to be missed. This was a great (if rather windy) visit and can be recommended to all interested in art and history.

Tim Meacham.

