

THE John Harris Society



Newsletter

No 63 Summer 2018

John Harris: miner, poet, preacher 1820-1884

KYNANCE COVE



Captured in word - and music

Composer-in-residence at Truro Cathedral, Dobrinka Tabakova, has set the words of John Harris' poem Kynance Cove to music.

The piece was performed at a concert at Truro Cathedral earlier this year, on May 11, with the BBC Concert Orchestra, around 100 choristers from local

schools and cellist Natalie Clein. Tony Langford takes an in-depth look at the project on page 3.

Picture by Thom Alsop, Wikimedia.

Bi-Centenary Festival - 16-18 October 2020

Arrangements are continuing apace for the above festival with the brochure (listing the various events) having just been circulated 'across the pond' to various groups in their respective countries. This has brought an initial response with people expressing an interest in being kept informed of its progress. To those of our members reading this in countries other than Britain, please do not forget to register your interest as soon as possible. It won't commit you to anything at this stage, but we need to know that it will attract enough interest to make it viable. (Publicity mailing within the UK will take place later this year.) We are also seeking sponsorship for the event and if anyone (at home or abroad) can make a contribution, it will be greatly appreciated. (Our treasurer's details are on the back page.)

Family visits and engineering achievements

While visiting our daughter Helen, son-in-law Mario and granddaughter Tamsin in Chippenham (Wiltshire) during the schools' half-term holiday, we were quite taken with Isambard Kingdom Brunel's brick railway viaduct in the heart of the town with traffic passing constantly through its arches. It was a reminder of John Harris' 19th century when such intricate work was achieved with the least of mechanical equipment. However much we might admire that viaduct, it pales into insignificance when compared to Brunel's engineering feat of constructing the Clifton Suspension Bridge that carries road traffic high across the River Avon gorge near Bristol or, seemingly, his even greater feat in constructing the Tamar (railway) Bridge across the River Tamar at Saltash in East Cornwall. Built in 1859, it provided the first rail link between Cornwall and the rest of Britain, and is still much in use every day in the 21st century when rolling stock must surely be far heavier than when the bridge was built!

A comparison of achievements

I once had an employee who had specialised in drainage schemes and laying water mains below ground whereas my uncle (who worked for the same civil

engineering company) had been responsible for above ground structures which could be seen, sometimes from great distances, and it seemed that this spectacle created some sort of jealousy in my employee!

Well, when we read of all that John Harris achieved during his lifetime in mining, building, scripture-reading and the written word, he doesn't stand out quite like Brunel's structures or those of my uncle, but nevertheless, his success is not to be laughed at for it all came at a great cost. I love the gentleness of some of his poetry such as this extract from:

My Infant Daughter Falling Asleep on my Knee

How softly dost thou fall asleep
Sweet cherub on my knee!
No bird can sing itself to rest
More carelessly than thee.
Five minutes since I heard thy song,
And stroked thy little head:
But now I lay thee down to rest
Within thy cradle bed
Sleep on, sleep on, my innocent!
When years are sped away,
O may thy rest be then as sweet
As it is now this day!

General Data Protection Regulation & subscriptions

You should all have received a GDPR form for completion and return to the secretary. Although this may seem 'over the top' for this small society, we are obliged to comply with the law so I do urge you to ensure that you have given permission for your personal data to be used solely for the society's purposes.

When completing those forms, please check whether your subscription payment is up to date (£6 per annum due on January 1). This payment is something that can easily be overlooked so please check your records and, if appropriate, use the information on the back of this newsletter to settle your account. Thank you, in anticipation that you will attend to this matter.

Lastly, I reiterate my entirely personal request but I am asking each member to consider making an additional financial gift, however small, towards the 2020 Festival, as the collective amount would indicate to potential sponsors a degree of commitment from our members which will be greatly appreciated.

Kind regards to all throughout the world!

WORDS & MUSIC



Kynance Cove.

Picture by: Andy Wright from Sheffield, UK. (Wikimedia Commons)

John Harris poem is captured in music

BY TONY LANGFORD

When Dobrinka Tabakova, composer-in-residence at Truro Cathedral, was looking for a suitable text for a new Cornish work she recalled reading about the life of John Harris.

She wanted to “bring a stronger Cornish connection to the piece” and thought “the descriptive nature poems of Harris would fit the image.” Dobrinka selected his 1855 poem Kynance Cove.

The finished piece is 12 minutes long and, in the words of Christopher Gray, director of music at Truro Cathedral, “Dobrinka has delivered something really special.”

He highlights the direct way “she has depicted the rolling waves in semiquavers that act as an undercurrent running through most of the music.”

He points out how the “wondrous cliffs” of the Harris poem are represented by “the waves occasionally giv-

ing way to block chords.”

But that is not all. Gray says: “There are also more subtle effects like dreamy harmonies that, for me, evoke memories of hazy sunshine at the end of a day on the beach.”

In preparing Kynance Cove, Dobrinka Tabakova collaborated with Truro Cathedral and the BBC Concert Orchestra, where she is also composer-in-residence.

The involvement of three local schools – Truro High School for Girls, Truro School and Richard Lander School – was another aspect to this work. “They have all been extremely

welcoming and enthusiastic about this project,” says Dobrinka.

In preparatory workshops they were joined by choral scholars from Truro Cathedral.

The culmination of the venture was a concert at Truro Cathedral on May 11 this year, with the BBC Concert Orchestra, around 100 choristers from local schools and cellist Natalie Clein.

In the words of Dobrinka Tabakova it brought “the downs and cove of Kynance to the grand cathedral.”

The wide range of music in the concert also included an arrangement of the folksong Shenandoah, a Bach concerto and a recent work by Cornish composer Graham Fitkin.

It was recorded for BBC Radio 3 and a CD will be released later this year.

John Harris captured the beauty and atmosphere of Kynance Cove in words. Now Dobrinka Tabakova has captured his words in music.

Dreamy harmonies evoke memories of hazy sunshine at the end of a day on the beach

Extracts
from the
West Briton
- life in
Cornwall
in the early
19th century

Down Memory Lane
compiled by Eve Parsons

On the Tresavean man-engine

After the miners had gone down, and most of them had returned, many of the visitors descended a few fathoms. We went to the bottom, at a time when nearly all the candles (placed in the shaft) were burnt out. While we were on the journey, our light was extinguished, and there we were, moving up and down, making no progress....

4 November 1842

[The man-engine at Tresavean comprised two parallel rods of wood running down the shaft, power-driven from surface. Each had steps spaced along its length. As one rod was made to fall the other rose, pauses in their movements allowing miners - by the light of candles fixed to their hats - to step alternately from one to the other, and so progress up or down the shaft. This was the first machine of its kind in Cornwall, where miners were accustomed to climbing up or down thousands of feet of vertical ladder roads.]



Our light was
extinguished, and
there we were, mak-
ing no progress....

Income tax collectors

In a parish on the eastern side of Falmouth harbour, where the Income Tax to be collected amounts to between one and two hundred pounds, the assessor, in the course of his duty, after walking one hundred and four weary miles, collected 11s. 6d. This, we believe, is by no means a solitary instance, as the assessors in general, who are allowed 3d. in the pound, complain of earning very poor wages for their trouble. The tax is, in truth, highly unpopular, and there will be great difficulty in collecting it. 3 March 1843

[An income of property tax was first levied in this country during the Napoleonic Wars and was removed in 1816, after the return of peace. Its reintroduction at 6d in the pound, in 1842, caused general dismay. To this was added anger as the tax surveyors set about their work, not only because of their enquiries into people's private affairs but also because they frequently disregarded the income returns submitted, made higher assessments, and seized goods to the required amount where necessary.]

A singular hobby horse

Mr. Blitz, jun., son of the Signor Blitz, whose slight-of-hand performances are so well known, astonished the inhabitants of Redruth, on Wednesday, by travelling down the steep street of their town on a wine-puncheon!

The barrel was placed on its side, and Mr. Blitz, standing on the centre, propelled it with his feet . . .

Stopping his singular hobby-horse in the hill, and turning it round at pleasure, he arrived at the bottom of the street "safe as a cat".

He then, still keeping his place on the cask, ascended the street at the western end of the town, and returning in the same manner, finally "drew up" his conveyance in front of the green market, where he was loudly cheered by the crowds who had assembled to witness his performance.

11 November 1842

Woollen mill at Ponsanooth

On Saturday morning last . . . a fire broke out in the woollen factory, belonging to Mr. Lovey, at Ponsanooth. The factory consisted of five stories, and the upper storey contained a quantity of wool, some of which was skin wool of the current half year, and there was a quantity of oily wool from the carding engines, which is technically known as "flyings" . . .

It is supposed that the fire originated either in the skin wool or the flyings, by spontaneous combustion . . .

The fire then communicated to the lower part of the building, which contained a large quantity of valuable machinery, comprising "willies", carding engines, spinning frames, mules, tucking mills, and washing mills. The whole of this machinery was rendered totally useless . . .

The engines from Penryn were very soon on the ground, and prevented the destruction of the adjoining buildings, containing a large quantity of wool and basils [tanned sheepskins], and also the water wheel in the Engine-house.

23 June 1843

Once every three months

Bodmin Gaol. The 43rd rule is that all prisoners, except debtors, should have the tepid bath once in every three months. We [the magistrates] thought that unnecessary . . .

30 June 1843

LIBRARY PRESENTATION



FdA English Studies student Kerri Bridgeman (centre) at the Morrab Library with members of the John Harris Society, from left: Paul Langford, Gillian Langford, Tony Langford and Steve Crossman.

Poetry event gives reason to rhyme

BY BRITTONY DUFF

Reigniting passions for poetry, the John Harris Society visited the Morrab Library in Penzance to encourage and inspire young people by talking about the poet's life and works.

With the aim to keep John Harris' spirit alive, members of the society led an exploration into the background and works of the Cornish miner and literary figure, reading extracts from both his poems and his autobiography.

Organised as part of her English degree course at Truro and Penwith College, Kerri Bridgeman was pleased that the event was well attended and brought in an assortment of people of all ages, backgrounds and professions.

Kerri said: "You can see that people were genuinely interested in the speakers and the good turnout really shows the need for more events like this in the future. I'm so grateful that the English Studies degree at Truro and Penwith College has helped me to organise this event."

Keen to get more involved with the younger generation, John Harris' great-

nephew, Tony Langford spoke at the event and felt that it was a fantastic opportunity to educate the community.

Tony said: "It's been a pleasure working with Kerri and we're really grateful that she thought of the idea for this event. It's so good to see young people becoming interested in the John Harris Society, particularly with the help of the students from Truro and Penwith College."

Dr Vanessa Hager, FdA English Studies Programme Leader at Truro and Penwith College, was pleased that Kerri had organised a fantastic event to celebrate the poetry of John Harris, demonstrating the academic and professional skills needed for future employment.

Vanessa said: "Speakers from the John Harris Society took the audience on a moving journey through the life of this Cornish miner and poet. Kerri's project captured the spirit of the English degree at the college, which has a strong focus on identity and sense of place; John Harris's poetry powerfully evokes the epic endurance of life in the

mines but also his joy in the Cornish landscape."

Thrilled with the popularity of the event, India Vaughan-Wilson from Morrab Library commented: "One of our regular members said that it was one of the best events that we've had here at the library. It's great to get involved with the younger community and it's fantastic to make a link with the college too, something that we're keen to get more involved with in the future."

Fellow English Studies degree student Chloe Roach attended the event and found it beneficial to gain an insight into John Harris' life and works. Chloe said: "What makes this course so special is having the opportunity to organise and attend events like this, focusing on the works of Cornish writers and literature within the community."

To find out more about the English Studies degree course at Truro and Penwith College, visit the website, www.truro-penwith.ac.uk/uni or contact the University Courses team, heenquiry@truro-penwith.ac.uk, 01872 267061.

John Harris - A chronological view

COMPILED BY **DEREK REYNOLDS**

1820

John was born on 14th October at '6 Chimneys', a short row of cottages at Bolenowe Carn, oldest of ten children of John (Snr) and Kitty Harris. His father was a miner and smallholder (seven acres leased) and an ardent Methodist.

John's youth was idyllic according to him. He was early taught to kneel and pray, and he learned to read from the Bible.

1829

John went to work for a distant relative, George Harris, on his smallholding - no wages, just one meal a day. By 1830, John was an assistant to Waters, a tin-streamer.

1830

John became a Dolcoath miner - working 'above grass', wheeling around ore in a 'Cornish barra'. He began to write rhymes about his boyhood, family members, farm duties, Christian anecdotes. He would recite them if pressed.

1832

Great Reform Bill. John went underground ('below grass') at Dolcoath to work with his father. 2,000 feet, 75 miles of adit and shaft.

1830s

John loved the countryside, nature, long walks, Carn Brea being a favourite place. He saved five shillings to buy a dictionary.

1836

Foundation stone of Bassett Memorial laid - 30,000 attended. John was, no doubt, among the 1,000+ miners who marched to the summit. John was made a Sunday School teacher at Troon Methodist Chapel, later librarian. He also became Superintendent of a Sunday School at Black Rock, Crowan parish.

1838

John 'became enamoured' of Eliza Thomas (1814-1847), one of three sisters who wrote poetry. At 23, Eliza wrote 'Treslothan Cottage'; she would not leave her widowed mother to

marry John. When she died, John was very upset and wrote 'Treslothan'.

1842

Diary entry made by John: 'I will devote Mondays/Wednesdays to Grammar, Tuesdays to History, Thursdays to Poetry-Reading, Fridays to Composition, Saturdays - Miscellaneous Works and Sundays for Theology'.

1840s

He bought a Bible, a hymn book and Shakespeare's works. He became a local preacher and met Jane Rule, a milliner.

1845

On 11th September John and Jane Rule were married at Camborne Parish Church.

1846

On 1st April a daughter Jane was born at Polgine Mine (House - two rooms). 10d. a day wage. Rich vein of ore discovered in summer. £200-work started on building a new home.

1848

John, Jane and little Jane moved into their new home on Troon Moor. On 23rd April, John (Snr) died.

1849

Lucretia, John's youngest daughter, born.

1853

Publication of 'Lays from the Mine, Moor and Mountain' - published in London.

1854

John's youngest brother died in Melbourne, Australia.

1855

Man-Engine (single-rod) installed at Dolcoath (fourth in Cornwall). Saved 2,000 feet ladder climb to surface. Crimean War still raging - freezing weather.

Lucretia died of pneumonia, aged 6 years 5 months - John's greatest tragedy in his life.

1857

First son James (John) Howard born. Became Head of Porthleven Board School. Wrote 'Porthleven' and some new poetry. Autumn - John and family moved to Falmouth - new job as Scripture Reader.

1858

Second book of poems published, 'Land's End, Kynance Cove and Other Poems'.

1859

February - John Alfred Harris, second son, born.

1860

Third book of poems published, 'The Mountain Prophet, The Mine and Other Poems'.

1863

Fourth poetry collection, 'A Study of Carn Brea, Essays and Poems' published. 'Carn Brea' considered by many to be John's best work (autobiographical).

1864

John won the poetry competition to celebrate the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth - April 23rd. His reward was a gold watch. John had got to know many Quakers in Falmouth, among them Caroline Fox, the Diarist, of Penjerrick.

1866

Fifth book of poems published - 'Shakespeare's Shrine'.

1868

Billy Bray died - 25th May. Dr George Smith and Captain Charles Thomas, both supporters of John, died. Sixth book of poems, 'Luda, Lay of the Druids'.

1869

Constantine Tolmen or Maen Rock destroyed.

1871

John wrote about Maen Rock's destruction in 'Bulo', seventh of poems. Jane, his daughter, left home to be married (emigrated 1876/1877 - they never met again).

1872

Eighth book of poems, 'The Cruise of the Cutter' (peace verse tracts) published. These peace tracts had been written for John Gill, friend, Quaker, pacifist and vegetarian. October 29th - Driver Westlake (Par) - heroic act immortalised in verse by John.

Derek Reynolds, October 2000.

To be continued in the Autumn newsletter.

Folk opera at St Ives

The John Harris folk opera, *Copper Has Colours*, performed by Cornish theatre company Women On The Verge, will be at the Porthmeor Studios in St Ives on August 13 and 20 at 3pm. No tickets - donations only.

Walk at Camborne

The annual summer evening walk in Camborne, led by local historian David Thomas, takes place on Friday, June 22. Please meet at All Saints Church, Tuckingmill, at 6.30pm. £2 donation.

Treasurer's notes

Thank you to all members who have supported the Society so well. The committee works hard on your behalf to promote the story of John Harris's life and works.

We rely on your annual membership fees of £6 per person to pay the costs of newsletters and exhibitions etc. If you have not already done so, we'd be grateful if you could either send me a cheque for £6, payable to "The John Harris Society", or pay by PayPal, the addresses for which are both on the back of this newsletter.

You could arrange to pay by standing order on January 1 each year, and if you ring me on 01209 713863, I will give you the bank details.

Once again our thanks,

Christine Couls

Kynance Cove (1855)

The wondrous cliffs are polished with the waves,
And flash and flicker like huge mineral walls,
Their scaly sides are clothed with leafy gold,
And burn with beauty in the light of day.
The sands that lie on this Elysian cove
Are all ring-straked with painted serpentine:
The hollow caves the waves have fretted out
Are dashed with images of fiery hues:
And on the rocks, like beautiful psalm-leaves,
Are odes of music lovely as the light,
Trilled by the sea nymphs in the watery robes.

I'm fond of travelling old deserted paths,
Searched by the winds and soft with solitude
Of matchless Nature in her robe of crags,
Or fringed with flowers, or edged with velvet moss;
And shout together, "God hath made us all!" –
Of odorous heaths, that oft inspire my Muse,
And lift me high on Inspiration's steep;
Of musing lonely by old Ocean's shore,
And roaming wildly through the fields of thought;
White castles, towers and palaces arise,
Built with chaste light, and roofed with burning gems,
But starting from my song trance one bright morn,
And turning down yon crooked curious lane,
These fancy-pictures floated in the dark,
As rock on rock uncurtained to my gaze,
And rolled upon my vision like a spell.

Hail, fairy-featured, beautiful Kynance!

A loving smile is ever on thy face,
And Beauty revels mid thy gold arcades,
Along thy glittering grottoes tones are heard
Like songs at evening by some distant lake.
Thy coloured crags, on which the sea-birds perch,
Are tuneful with the tread of tiny feet.
No harsh discordant sound is heard in thee;
And he who journeys through these sculptured creeks,
And gazes on those hills of serpentine,
Where Nature sits upon her chiselled throne,
Smiling benignly in her samphire robes,
Wearing her best, her craggy gem of crowns,
When clustered once more in his loving home,
Will feel a sweetness flowing through his heart,
And more exalted views of Nature's God.

Why seek for beauty in the stranger's clime,
When Beauty's state-room is gay Kynance?
Why seek for visions courted by the Muse?
When Kynance opens like a mine of gems?
Why seek for language from the waves' white lips
When Ocean's organ fills this pictured Cove with hymns?
Why seek for caverns striped with natural lays,
When they are stained here by the surging sea?
Why seek for islands girdled with the main,
When Kynance holds them in her feathery folds?
So mused I in the sea-damp Drawing-Room,
While through the Bellows rushed a flood of song.

**Copy deadline for the autumn
newsletter is September 3, 2018**

THE JOHN HARRIS SOCIETY

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John Harris 1820 - 1884

BY TONY LANGFORD

John Harris was born in 1820 at Six Chimneys on Bolenowe Carn, near Camborne, the eldest of 11 children.

Largely self-educated - he started school when he was six or seven years old, before finishing at the age of nine - John had an insatiable appetite for reading from his early years.

On his ninth birthday he started work, briefly as a ploughboy, then for a tin-streamer, or - tinner operating in Forest Moor.

When he was 13, John went to work underground at Dolcoath. He was to ply this arduous occupation for 24 years, seeing the famous mine pass from copper to tin.

Poetry, or verse-making as he called it, had been part of John's life since his first attempts at rhyme at school when he was just eight years old.

Whatever he was doing, verses were forming in his mind and he scribbled these down whenever and wherever and on whatever he could. He used the clean side of cast off labelled tea wrappers,

About
the
poet

and when no paper was available, would scratch his poems on slate, using a sharp pointed nail.

In his mining days his miner's 'hard' hat was sometimes used for this purpose. When no ink was available, he used blackberry juice.

He fitted his writing into a busy life that, apart from his work and his family responsibilities, included being a Methodist lay preacher and a Sunday School teacher.

John Harris left Dolcoath in 1857 to take up an appointment as a Scripture Reader at Falmouth, a post which he threw himself into with enthusiasm.

He continued writing poetry, and began writing peace tracts and became a Quaker.

John Harris died in 1884 and lies buried in Treslothan Churchyard.

Grateful thanks go to all those who have contributed news articles in the past and more articles from you, our readers, will be most welcome for possible inclusion in future editions - anything connected with Cornwall, John Harris, poetry, including other poets and Cornish life.