

## Dame Laura Knight and Colwall – Andy Ball



Amongst the many famous people associated with the Herefordshire village of Colwall is the twentieth century artist Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970). She lived a full and interesting life and had fallen in love with the Herefordshire and Worcestershire countryside surrounding Malvern. Alongside her husband, Harold, she became both a frequent visitor, and for a few years a resident in Colwall, during the middle part of her life. In writing this short article I must acknowledge the excellent book - *Laura Knight In the Malverns* by Heather Whatley - that has provided the vast majority of information used.<sup>i</sup>

Born in 1877 in Long Eaton, Derbyshire Laura Johnson's life had started with adversity. Her parents separated soon after her birth and she never knew her father. Her mother

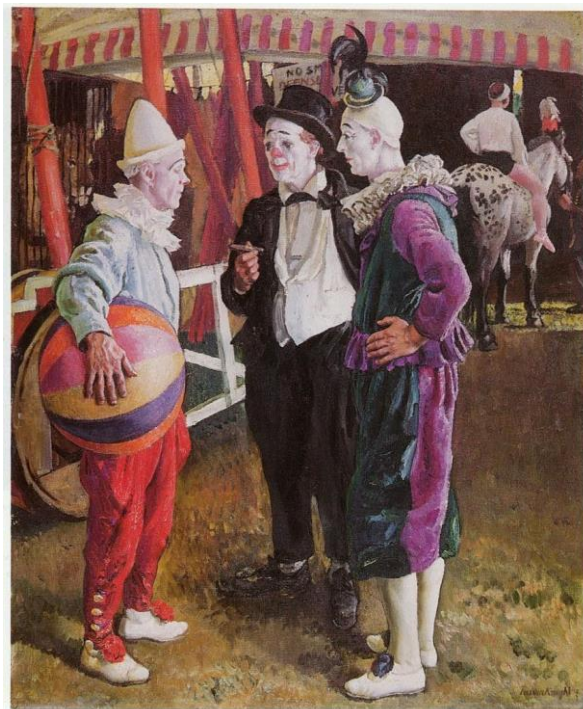
Charlotte, a teacher at Nottingham School of Art, had Laura enroll as a student there when she was just 13. Laura took over her mother's teaching duties two years later when Charlotte became ill with cancer and subsequently died leaving Laura and her sister as orphans. Whilst at art school Laura met another talented artist - Harold Knight (1874-1961). Harold painted a portrait of the young Laura whilst at college. She was later to recollect that it was at this time she '*first got a hint that I meant as much to him as he to me.*' The couple later married in 1903 when she was 25 and he was 29.<sup>ii</sup>

In their early years together Laura and Harold struggled financially and travelled as artists to Staithes on the Yorkshire coast, to the artists' colony at Laren in the Netherlands, and to Cornwall in 1907 where they settled. Working from Newlyn and Lamorna they became part of the Newlyn School of artists and met influential people like Alfred Munnings and Sir Barry Jackson.

Gradually, over time Laura's career flourished and she covered a diverse range of subjects – seascapes, landscapes, gypsies, children, ballet, theatre, circus – in a variety of media including watercolours, oils, drawings, etching and aquatint.<sup>iii</sup>



**On the cliffs (c.1917)**



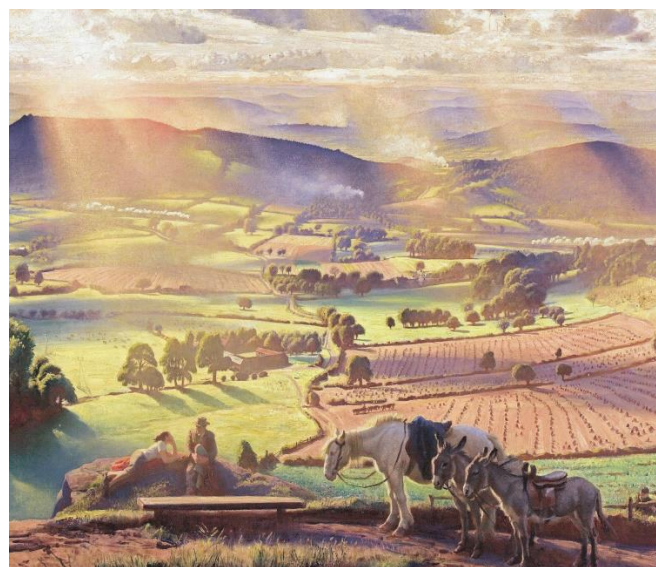
**Three Clowns (1930)**

Laura and Harold developed a widespread circle of friends. Laura's fun, outgoing and eccentric character was a suitable foil to Harold's more repressed, reserved, and quiet personality. It was the theatre impresario Barry Jackson who first introduced the Knights to Colwall. He had invited them to visit Malvern and to attend the Malvern Dramatic Festival in 1930. *'Do come and stay with me in my little cottage on the Black Hill in Malvern and join me in my Theatrical Festival.'*<sup>iv</sup> This was the start of many years of visiting Malvern. The Knights stayed at several Malvern properties still in existence today including at 'Lawnside', The Unicorn Public House and The Mount Pleasant Hotel. These visits were very sociable affairs with parties and mixing with celebrities including Daisy Kennedy, John Drinkwater, Scott Sutherland, Lascelles Abercrombie and George Bernard Shaw.<sup>v</sup>

Barry Jackson's home at this time was 'Black Hill' an arts and crafts house possibly designed by the prominent architect William de Lacy Aherne.<sup>vi</sup> The house is situated in nearby proximity to what is now The Malvern Hills Hotel close to the Herefordshire Beacon. With wonderful views and direct access onto the Malvern Hills this property must have contributed greatly to the Knight's appreciation of the Malvern Hills which they both loved to walk upon.

Over time Laura and Harold increased their summer visits to Malvern which often lasted longer than the duration of the timetable of the Dramatic Festival. Laura utilised several local buildings as temporary studios during this time including a garage at 'Bello Squardo' in Great Malvern.<sup>vii</sup>

Just in advance of World War II the Knights moved to Malvern, temporarily leaving their London home in St. Johns Wood which they feared would be unsafe in the face of the impending conflict. They initially stayed at the Mount Pleasant Hotel in Malvern and it was during this time that Laura painted some of her most recognizable local views including *Harvest* (1939) the image that has been used on the front cover of the Victoria History of Colwall, published recently, and which so wonderfully captures the magic of the low summer light and marvelous local landscape of the Colwall area.<sup>viii</sup>



***Harvest. (1939)***

By 1940 the Laura and Harold had moved to The British Camp Hotel (now the Malvern Hills Hotel). In doing so they may well have been motivated by the close proximity of the Hotel to Barry Jackson's house. The Knights were also friends of the Cadbury's who owned the house previously occupied by Jenny Lind 'The Swedish Nightingale' at 'Wynds Point', again only a stone's throw away from the Hotel. Laura captured the image of the Cadbury's daughter Bryony then aged seven, with her terrier dog Sally, in a pencil, charcoal and watercolour entitled **Companions (1942)**.<sup>ix</sup>



During this time Laura used temporary studio space in the grounds of the British Camp Hotel and a converted garage at 'Winds Acre' that Laura called her 'Stable Studio'. The latter was owned by Professor J.R. Allardyce and Josephine Nicholl.

It was an unusual looking, two-storey structure with black timber walls and a pitched roof. It had two studio spaces with good North light, and windows commanding panoramic views to the West over the Herefordshire countryside.<sup>x</sup>

Laura wrote lovingly of the vista *'The view from my studio window was a feast in itself: red roofed grey stone farm buildings, fields of all shapes: ploughland, golden harvest, green meadow. Here the sun gilds a cow that, bereft of its calf, bellows loudly; the scent of new-cut hay tickles the nostrils; here a pathway leading into the far distance is outlined by a shaft of sunlight piercing blue cloud shadow. And now comes the tempestuous dark of a thunderstorm and the blinding wiggle-waggle of lightning, followed by the slanting fall of a shower to curtain the great arc of a rainbow.'*<sup>xi</sup>

In the mid to late 1930s the Nicholls were featured in several portraits produced by Laura. Allardyce Nicholl featured as the pipe smoking man in *Harvest* demonstrating how much of her work was an artistic assemblage of characters garnered from previous studies rather than a faithful reproduction of an image at a set moment of time. Similarly, the donkeys in *Harvest* belonged to an owner who used them to transport children or the less active up the Hills from Great Malvern so are unlikely to have actually been present in the location of the painting.

In the early 1940s Laura produced numerous images of local working farmers. Frequently they included members of the Bishop family who were, according to the *1939 Register of England and Wales*, occupants of Cummins Farm in Colwall. In 1939 the family included George Bishop (a farmer) and his sons Walter (a farmer), Jack (a butcher) and Fred (who was assisting his father).<sup>xii</sup> The images provide an interesting record of local farming during the war.

Example of this work include *Walter and Fred Bishop Loading Corn* (date unknown) and *Carting Corn* [aka *A Cornfield*] (1943) both of which are landscapes with the Herefordshire Beacon in the background.

The painting *Plough In The Cherry Orchard, Malvern Hills* shows a pair of heavy horses ploughing up the land in a cherry orchard, could quite conceivably have been a Colwall image. Candidates for the location would have been the former cherry orchard adjoining Old Church Road between Orlin Road and the lane leading to what is now Stamps Cottage, or alternatively part of the extensive cherry orchards at Broadwood that were planted at the start of the Great War and which the Bishops were once tenants of.



***Plough In the Cherry Orchard, Malvern Hills (Date unknown)***

Once again, the final painting was most likely based upon staged studies initially produced in the open air, often with considerable hardship. Laura described part of the process in her second autobiography – *‘the frozen ploughed red clay soil was partially laden with snow, and the farmer, from whom I hired two horses and a plough to pose as model, built up six stooks of straw to protect me from the bitter cold. But that barrier was not so effective as a thermos flask full of boiling bread and milk – an internal poultice.’* <sup>xiii</sup> These studies were repeatedly used as the basis for work over a long period of time. For example, a close-up pencil sketch of a ploughman with two horses - entitled *Ploughing clayland* (1940) - became the wider landscape oil on canvas painting of the same subject entitled *Ploughing* (1960).

The ploughing up of pasture between trees due to the requirement to grow more food demonstrated how the impact of the war had come to the relatively safe confines of Colwall. In her second autobiography - *The Magic of A Line* - Laura described how one day she had caught sight from her ‘Stable Studio’ window of a group of women from Ledbury who had volunteered to dig and sack potatoes from the field below. They were heavily dressed due to

the extremely cold and Laura could not resist the temptation to capture such an unusual sight. They were working in a half-gale with the wind being too strong for Laura to set up her easel, so she had to repeatedly rush back and forth to her studio to record what she had witnessed.<sup>xiv</sup> The resulting sketches were probably the basis for her later work *Sowing Potatoes On a Windy Day* (c. 1950-51).



***Sowing Potatoes on A Windy Day* (c.1950-51)**

Laura and Harold would often join their near neighbour Barry Jackson, and his friend Scott Sutherland, for dusk time after-dinner walks out along the Malvern Hills. From a vantage point on the ridge they were able to witness the strange beauty of searchlights as far away as Bristol, and the terrible sight of the German bombing of Coventry and Birmingham...<sup>xv</sup>

Indeed, German bombs even fell in Colwall. Laura recounted how when dining at the British Camp Hotel a loud explosion had nearly shook the assembled diners from their seats. Their waiter made light of it joking that another member of staff had dropped the ashbin! <sup>xvi</sup>The true cause was likely to have been one of the bombs dropped on Knell Farm in October 1940 as recalled by Barbara Eagles in the Colwall Village Society Newsletter published in January 2015. There were two bombs. One had exploded upon impact killing a horse and causing considerable damage to properties nearby and at the Wyche. The second bomb had not initially gone off but was subsequently blown up - again affecting local buildings.<sup>xvii</sup>

Towards the end of the year the Knights moved out of the British Camp Hotel following a disagreement with the owner, Mrs. Parrish.<sup>xviii</sup> It is also possible that the Knights were suffering financially as the onset of the war had caused the cancelling of several of Harold's financially lucrative portrait commissions. Interestingly it seems that the Knights, despite their success and fame spent much of their time living hand to mouth as Laura once reflected upon. *'Throughout Harold's and my later life when we were both at the height of*

*whatever fame we may have had and supposedly doing well, periods frequently came when we did not know when we should find the next quarter's rent. Fortunately, manna always seemed to fall from heaven each time to save us; but not until comparatively recent years did we both feel a little more certainty.'*<sup>xix</sup>

The couple moved into The Park Hotel in the centre of Colwall where they stayed until 1947.<sup>xx</sup> Harold was able to utilize part of a stable block to the rear of the hotel as his studio. Laura used a room at the front of the hotel as her studio. Looking from Walwyn Road to the front of the hotel this is to the upper floor, left-hand side of the building. Laura became well-known in the village and was recalled by locals as someone who was very friendly and approachable. The Knights befriended the Bells who ran a chemist's shop opposite the hotel and Laura babysat, and played with their children, entertaining them with her sketches of the circus and the ballet.<sup>xxi</sup>

In 1944 the Knights held a sale of paintings at The Park Hotel in aid of the war effort for Army charities. Amongst the paintings sold was Harold's portrait of Stalin.<sup>xxii</sup>

During the war years her national reputation was further enhanced by her incredibly realistic and detailed studies of war workers – especially women. Her work - *Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring* (1943) - was particularly popular - accurately illustrating how women could readily do work previously considered to be solely a male domain.



***Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring (1943)***

Ruby Loftus was a worker at the Royal Ordnance Factory and was the first woman in engineering history to tackle the complex engineering machining operation known as screwing a Bofors gun breech ring. This was so complex that usually a man would only attempt this after having had eight- or nine-years training. Ruby Loftus mastered the process in under two years.<sup>xxiii</sup>

This and several other paintings were commissions that came through the War Artists Advisory Commission which had been set up in 1939.<sup>xxiv</sup> Laura produced some large sized and dramatic imagery under such instructions. They included *Take-Off* (1944) depicting an understandably tense looking Stirling bomber crew, at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk, going through their pre-flight checks before a mission. When Laura discovered that the navigator depicted in this image had subsequently been killed, she arranged for a photograph of the painting to be sent to his grieving mother.<sup>xxv</sup>



***Take-Off* (1944)**



Laura also had private commissions to record other war worker work. At Skefko's ball racer shop she worked in crowded and unpleasant conditions being showered with oil and sparks. Her rubber-soled shoes rotted off on the first day on the oil-laden floor, and the workers took bets that she wouldn't last more than a day. She 'lasted out' for six weeks thus demonstrating her dedication and tenacity.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Another private commission saw Laura not have to travel very far as her work took her to the DowMac facility in Walwyn Road, Colwall. This is a little-researched part of Colwall's wartime past. In *The Magic of a Line* Laura recounts how she had been commissioned by Mr Harry Dowsett of the Dowmac Company to paint a six foot by five picture of Mr Limb, the foreman of the works, testing the strength of a pre-stressed concrete railway sleeper.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The history of the Dowmac Company (also known as Dowsett Mackay) in Colwall is currently poorly understood. The company, which had a series of different manufacturing and civil engineering arms, first appears in adverts for their quarrying branch based in Colwall in 1940. In a piece from the Liverpool Daily Post from Monday 11<sup>th</sup> October 1943 the company ran the following advert – '*on the new road. On this DOWSETT-MACKAY highway an army advances. Excavators, tractors, bulldozers . . . steel and concrete . . . serve the skill of construction commandos. Road, railroads, docks, airfields objectives attained by DOWSETT-MACKAY ... an ever-growing force in construction and reconstruction. DOWSETT-MACKAY COLWALL MALVERN WORCS*'.<sup>xxviii</sup> It seems that in terms of office headquarters that the company used space at the Colwall Park Hotel and, in the latter years of the war, that the racecourse may have been used to store vehicles such as the excavators, tractors and bulldozers mentioned above.

Dowsett-Mackay Properties Ltd had bought the former Colwall Park Racecourse as part of an estate of 113 acres offered for sale by auction in Ledbury on Tuesday July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942. The company acquired the racecourse and land adjoining, between the railway and Walwyn Road, that had previously been Brookmill Farm. It was reported that the company paid £10,500 for the racecourse and other land and buildings. At the time a director suggested that there was a good chance that the site would at some stage return to its previous use as a racecourse so from the outset it seems that the company saw the Colwall venture as being temporary.<sup>xxix</sup>

Laura Knight describes the company premises as being '*then temporarily established out of doors on Colwall racecourse*'. Again, painting the picture called *The Test* was something of a labour of love with bitterly cold winter weather and heavy winds. She painted in an unwallled shed half filled with straw and with a green canvass as a background. Nevertheless, Laura seemed to enjoy this commission possibly because it was local but also because she formed a good friendship with the foreman Mr Limb. Mr Limb had initially criticised the part-finished painting – '*If George Herdman put no more weight on that lever than he's doing in your picture, I'd give him the sack tomorrow*'. Laura dutifully amended the picture.<sup>xxx</sup> To date the whereabouts of this work is unknown. The painting was displayed in the Royal Academy Summer 1945 Exhibition.<sup>xxxi</sup>

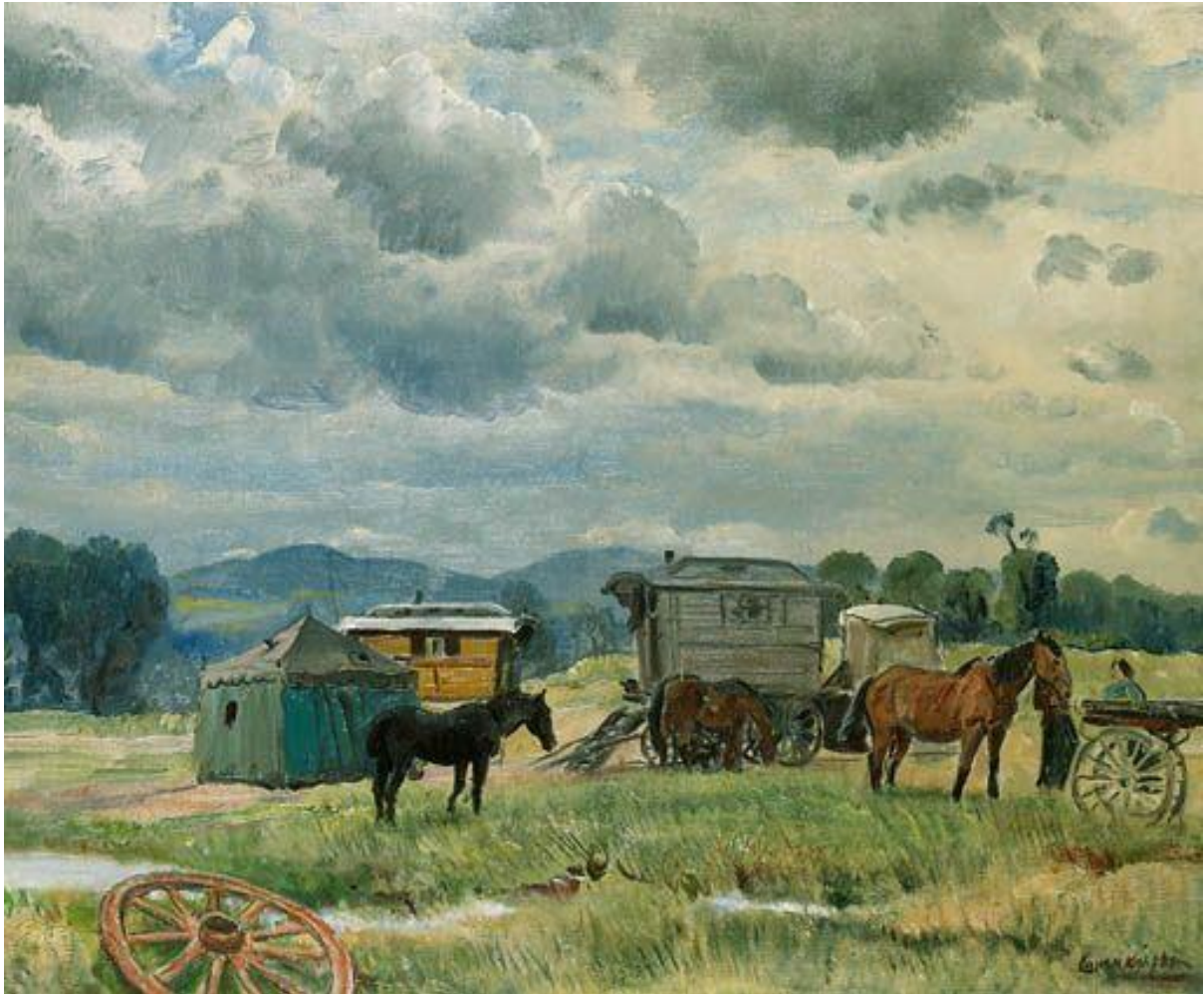


**Black and white image of *The Test* (c. 1945)**

Her wartime work frequently saw Laura travel to capture imagery at war effort manufacturing sites around the country and this period also saw her produce portraits of women at war. Often these portraits would be finished at her Colwall studio.

Whilst lodging at the Mount Pleasant Hotel in the 1930s Laura had previously befriended and captured several images of gypsy families from Callow End.<sup>xxxii</sup> Later when staying in Colwall she reconnected with the travelers' community and was a regular visitor to their encampment at the former Colwall Brick and Tile Works in what is now Old Orchard Lane. They would probably have been there as seasonal employees of the Ballard family Grovesend Fruit Farms business, helping to harvest crops such as hops, or orchard top fruit including apples, pears, plums, damsons and cherries. At the camp site Laura was known to have sipped tea with the gypsies, sketching their daily lives and their encampment.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Frustratingly, from Laura's second autobiography it's hard to establish exactly when these visits took place. Probably referring to a stay in the Colwall Park Hotel in the 1950s or 1960s she describes how a member of the Colwall gypsy community had recently posed for her and recalled how some thirty years previously she had been treated as a special guest, sharing a '*splendid meal in one of a long row of empty and open sheds, suffering somewhat from former use as brickwork workshops*'.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Whilst it's hard to provide definitive evidence images such as Gypsy Camp pictured below may have a Colwall provenance.



***Gypsy Camp*** (date unknown)

As an example of Laura's approachability and ease with which she was able to engage with children is the story of Anne Dunn who has achieved some notoriety as being one of The Colwall Park Hotel's most loyal customers having visited there for almost 80 years. Anne first visited with her family in 1945 when she was 6 years old. Two years later, when she was aged eight, and having recently been given an autograph book at Christmas time, she approached Laura Knight for her autograph. Laura willingly obliged, sketching the figure of a dancing clown, along with providing her signature. Many years later Anne wrote to Laura thanking her for her kindness. Laura, always a keen letter writer, replied and Anne recalled her response – *"She wrote back to me saying that she did remember this little girl standing by watching her draw, so that is a very happy memory I hold dear from my time at Colwall Park."*<sup>xxxv</sup>

In 1946 Laura had travelled to Nuremburg to voluntarily record the Nuremburg trials.

Once again this was to result in an iconic painting both in terms of composition and execution of artwork. *'The Nuremberg Trial'* is now held by the Imperial War Museum.



***The Nuremberg Trial (1946)***

Production of this painting seems to have been a testing and harrowing experience for Laura Knight for a variety of reasons. In January 1946 she wrote to Harold who had remained in Colwall – *'Such an extraordinary event in my life, I am beginning to long for the time to arrive when I have done my work here and can be back with you Harold in England.'* Indeed, struggling and depressed she broke off work in Germany part way through her stay spending time with Harold at Colwall before returning to Nuremberg via London to finish her work.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The Knights stayed in Colwall until 1947 by which time their London house had been repaired.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Laura seems to have been especially good friends with Barry Jackson and he invited her to paint images of several of his productions including the revival of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford, and at the Birmingham Rep and The London Old Vic.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In 1948 Laura painted an image of *Princess Elizabeth opening the New Broadgate Coventry*. In *The Magic of A Line* she then recounts how this had generally been received badly and criticized from all quarters. During the production of the painting, working in her studio in Finchley Road, London she strained her right arm. Her health deteriorated and soon she was unable to lift either of her hands higher than her waist. Failing to improve despite the attention of two London doctors, Laura, at the suggestion of Harold, travelled to Colwall to recuperate. Here with the help of her old friend Doctor Richardson the Colwall GP she finally got a diagnosis. Her autobiography is vague on the condition that she had but she describes a blood test that revealed it was down to 'danger point'. Laura stayed with him and his wife Auria while she slowly recovered. Later Laura was to claim that she owed her life to Dr Richardson.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The Knights continued to be regular summer visitors to Malvern and to Colwall and Laura maintained contact with local people by letter writing. In Colwall she continued to produce a multitude of artwork including landscapes, gypsies, and children. Easily recognizable as being of local provenance is '*Cornfield*' produced in 1950 with sheaths of corn in the foreground and the iconic Herefordshire Beacon in the background.

At some time during the 1950s Laura used another studio in Colwall at 'Hambleton' at the top end of Evendine Lane close to the junction with Jubilee Drive. The site was originally owned by the wealthy Misses Hingley, Edwardian sisters. They had been slow in developing what was meant to be a site for a grand home overlooking the Herefordshire countryside to the west. They sold the site in 1919 having by then only built a small lodge and a studio – likely to have been the one used by Laura. **Barry Jackson** (pictured right, in a portrait by Harold Knight from 1950) built a new state of the art house 'Hambleton' on the site in 1956 when he was then 77 years old.<sup>xl</sup> It would probably have been at around that time that Laura used the studio.





The Park Hotel had an outdoor swimming pool and this provided more material for Laura who painted an image called *'The Pool'* in 1959.<sup>xli</sup> This image was exhibited at the Royal Academy later that year.

As Laura and Harold moved into their latter years they continued to enjoy their escapes from

London to the Park Hotel. Laura wrote fondly of the Hotel - *'More than ever did we look forward to spending the summer months in the same hotel in Colwall: and there before we took our afternoon naps in two of the big armchairs to be found in the lounge – these were a help to increasing age – we often spent whole mornings saving the lives of the many bumble bees who were drowning in the swimming pool at the end of the garden...in between my making numerous studies of mothers and children learning to swim.'*<sup>xlii</sup>



In 1961 Harold died at The Park Hotel. On his death certificate, registered at the market town of Ledbury, his cause of death was recorded as being (a) Bronchopneumonia and (b) Bronchiolitis. He was cremated in Cheltenham.

An account from a young, local undertaker records that Laura was suitably stoical when travelling with the hearse. Apparently, it was a jolly occasion, with Laura passing round a whisky flask and, very characteristically, smoking cigarettes.<sup>xliii</sup>

Laura was naturally shocked by Harold's death. In an article in the *Women's Guardian* she acknowledged Harold's contribution to her life *'We couldn't have been closer. I didn't feel part of me had died when he died because I feel we are still one ...still together. He gave me every chance from the word go...'*<sup>xliv</sup>

The association of the Knights with 'The Colwall Park Hotel' was celebrated with the unveiling of a memorial plaque there by *Colwall Village Society* in 2008.

After Harold's death Laura continued her friendships with close friends in Malvern and Colwall returning occasionally from London to stay. In an interview with John Richardson for the *Malvern Gazette* in 1964 she recalled her love for the people and landscape of the area.



*'Whenever you see the Hills rounded by weather and time as you enter the district their outline is an inspiration. Their individual beauty when seen in proportion can be superb. From the top of the hills the views in every direction are terrific: looking east is dawn in gold and red glory over Bredon, clearing the film of mist streaming across the miles and miles stretch below, half hiding farm-place, church and roadway; looking west in the evening the mountains of Wales, forty miles away, form a purple line against the glory of the setting sun; and in between are rain, sun, lightning and the rainbow.'*<sup>xlv</sup>

Laura died at her London home on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1970 in her ninety-third year.<sup>xlvi</sup>

As a well-connected, talented, fun, eccentric yet approachable artist she must have contributed much to life in Colwall in the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of her works, in particular her landscapes and images of travelers and local farm workers, are an attractive, enduring, and evocative reminder of Colwall's diverse and picturesque past.

The contribution that Laura Knight made to the local area is more comprehensively celebrated by the *Dame Laura Knight Society* - details of which are available at <https://www.damelauraknightsociety.co.uk/>



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- <sup>ii</sup> Dunbar, J (2009) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography – Knight [nee Johnson], Dame Laura*. Available at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34349?rskey=qaRaG3&result=2> (Accessed 05 January 2024).
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- <sup>xi</sup> Knight, L (1965) *The Magic of a Line*. London: William Kimber and Co. Ltd.
- <sup>xii</sup> 1939 Register of England and Wales
- <sup>xiii</sup> Knight, L (1965) *The Magic of a Line*. London: William Kimber and Co. Ltd.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Knight, L (1965) *The Magic of a Line*. London: William Kimber and Co. Ltd.
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- <sup>xxi</sup> Whatley, H (2020) *Laura Knight In the Malverns*. Malvern: Aspect Design.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Whatley, H (2020) *Laura Knight In the Malverns*. Malvern: Aspect Design.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Fox, C (1988) *Dame Laura Knight*. Oxford: Phaidon Press.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Fox, C (1988) *Dame Laura Knight*. Oxford: Phaidon Press.
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