



A century after the founding of the famous Staithees Group of artists, art in the picturesque Yorkshire seaside village is enjoying something of a renaissance with the opening of a new gallery. SUE MASON meets gallery owner Alison Milnes – who doesn't paint, but does everything else . . .

It's almost a century since Laura Knight left Staithees, where she helped found the renowned Staithees Group of artists. She painted in a studio at the back of the village's post office, which has long since gone. Located in the High Street, opposite the acclaimed Endeavour Hotel, since Laura Knight's day the post office has been a bakery, a café and more recently a sailboard factory.

When York couple Alison and Dave Milnes bought the derelict property five years ago, it hadn't been used for eight years. Over the last couple of years they've restored it, converting the outbuildings at the back into a studio with its own living accommodation.

They've also renovated the house for themselves and transformed the shop at the front into a very smart gallery, currently occupied by works in all media and styles, but mainly of Staithees and the surrounding area.

Oh – and they also found a smuggler's tunnel.

"It was very exciting," says dark-eyed, dark-haired Alison, who is also a mother of five. "We knew there were supposed to be a lot of smugglers' tunnels and some people said there was one in the house, and we found it during the renovation."

She leads me out of the shop, up into the house then down again into a dusty passage and finally into a dark, cobwebby hole, where the concrete blocks have been taken out of an ante-chamber wall to reveal the blocked-up entrance to the tunnel.

A very spooky dressmaker's dummy stands guard at the hole which leads right down to the beach side. "It is said that you used to be able to unload cargo from ships and take it right up into the village without going above ground," explains Alison.

She has just overseen the gallery's first very successful exhibition, in aid of Staithees and Runswick RNLJ and is busy planning forthcoming shows. She's a former teacher and Dave is a psychiatrist, but they've been in love with the village for a long time and have been caught up in its art heritage.

"There's a lot of art going on now in Staithees," she says. "People always think of the Staithees Group at the turn of the (nineteenth and twentieth) century painting but in fact it's never gone away. In the 1950s Lillian Coulbourn formed the New Staithees Art Group and now there are people like David Curtis, Robert Brinley and Bruce Mukahy."

Curtis has a cottage in the village and paints in watercolours and oils; he is one of several artists in the recent exhibition.

Alison cites Sue Atkinson, who paints cheerful, naïve family scenes against local seaside backdrops, Michelle Saunders, who works in a studio at nearby Lythe and who paints sweeping coastlines, and pastel artist David Allen as being amongst the current crop of Staithees artists.

There are currently several paintings in her gallery by Robert Shaw. These striking, atmospheric pictures are characterised by their clutch of red-roofed cottages, stormy weather and an unusual dripping effect.

So what is it about Staithees that attracts so many artists? "The Staithees Group said it was the light," explains Alison. "The bay is north facing so the sun is always on the sea. Then there's the buildings. The cottages and old cobbles have a lot of character that attracts artists. There are lots of little paths going up behind houses and that gives lots of different perspectives looking down or across. David Curtis says you never run out of subject matter here."

She points out that however many times different artists paint the same scene – of boats on the beach – they never look the same.

The Staithees Group also used to paint the people of the village and one of the paintings at the first exhibition featured a group of old local characters on a bench on the seaford. It attracted a huge amount of local interest and was quickly snapped up by someone in the village.

Nowadays Alison and Dave and their five children (Ruby, 15, Pearl, 13, Max, 12, Bonnie, 10 and nine-year-old Olmo) divide their time between Staithees and York but they lived in Spain before the birth of Olmo and three years ago they went back-packing for a huge adventure.

"Dave was ill and thought he was terminally ill," recalls Alison. "He only thought that for about 10 days, but it was enough. He said the thing that he hadn't done enough of was spend time with the children."

The couple had heard about the medieval pilgrim route from France and Spain to Santiago de Compostella, and they decided that rather than wait until the children had grown up to walk it, the seven of them would walk it together now.

The route would take them 480 miles across northern Spain. "Because our youngest was six, we walked at the pace of a six-year-old," says Alison. "Your whole way of thinking and experiencing the world slows down. Some days we did just two or three miles, especially if we were walking into a city."

The most they walked in one day was 15 miles and the adventure took them nine weeks – at one point they were even overtaken by a 90-year-old man ("although he was a very fit

# Staithees still inspires



90-year-old," says Alison.

Wherever they went, people knew about them – and the 90-year-old – because the walkers who overlook them would talk about them at their next stopping point.

Although they stayed mainly in youth hostel-style refuges, they did treat themselves to a bit of luxury in the middle of the walk. "We stayed in a parador which, in medieval times, was a pilgrim's hostel but it's now a five-star hotel. That was luxury."

Inspired by their pilgrimage, the family has since walked pilgrim routes in Britain, including the Minster Way from Beverley to York. "It was horrible weather and much harder to find somewhere to stay," recalls Alison. "That route goes through North Dalton, Bishop Wilton and Millington and it took us five days."

Pilgrim walks will have to take a back seat now as Alison and Dave work hard at the gallery five days a week and plan forthcoming exhibitions.

Pencilled in for the next couple of months are York artist Baz Ward, who paints the city where he lives but who has been busy developing a new style in Staithees, where he has been examining boats and buildings.

Sheffield painter Sue Nichol, originally from the Staithees area, is inspired by the north-east coast and paints many scenes of Bempton Cliffs as well as boats in the beach.

Robert Shaw's Rough Seas, Staithees (above) – on show in the gallery (bottom)

her coastal paintings in August.

Visitors to the gallery will have to make their own pilgrim walk from the car park at the top to the Staithees Gallery at the bottom of the hill. But it's not a bad walk really. Even a 90-year-old could do it.

■ For further details on forthcoming exhibitions call the Staithees Gallery on 01947 841840. The gallery in High Street is open Wednesday-Sunday.



Gallery owner Alison Milnes