

PRESS RELEASE

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The Bowes Museum Celebrates Norman Cornish with Intimate New Exhibition and Landmark Acquisition



Image credit: Salvin Street, oil on board, Norman Cornish. © Norman Cornish Limited

***Norman Cornish: A Life in Sketchbooks* opens at the Bowes Museum, a new exhibition exploring the creative process of one of the North East's most celebrated artists.**

The exhibition brings together drawings, paintings and watercolours alongside the preparatory sketches that shaped them, offering visitors a rare glimpse into Cornish's working practice. The exhibition also features *Sarah Peeling Potatoes*, by Norman Cornish, a major new acquisition made possible through the Friends of The Bowes Museum legacy funds.

Building on previous exhibitions at the museum, including *Kith and Kinship: Norman Cornish and L.S. Lowry* which included works by Cornish, this new exhibition presents a more intimate perspective on Cornish's work. By focusing on his sketchbooks, it reveals

the artist's process, careful observation and ideas that underpinned his practice and ability to find significance in ordinary lives.

Carrying a sketchbook almost everywhere, Cornish filled 269 of them across his lifetime, capturing the streets, people and communities of the Durham coalfield with remarkable warmth and sensitivity. The artist hoped for his sketchbooks to **“have a life of their own... and to teach people to look at things.”**

A Significant New Acquisition

Cornish's work, *Sarah Peeling Potatoes*, is a portrait of the artist's wife that embodies the tender care and admiration he felt towards her, while also reflecting the domestic scenes that run through his work. Sarah provided the support that enabled Cornish to develop his career as an artist and this intimate portrait suggests the deep respect and gratitude he held for her. Slightly bent, in a prayer-like posture, she is presented with a quiet strength and dignity that led Cornish to describe such images of his wife as representing “thousands of women who were heroines of the coalfield”.

The acquisition has been made possible through legacy funds from The Friends of The Bowes Museum, an independent charity that supported the museum for 75 years and continues to enrich the collection through important acquisitions such as this.

Vicky Sturrs, Director of Programmes and Collections at The Bowes Museum said:

“Norman Cornish was one of the North East's most celebrated storytellers, capturing everyday life with remarkable warmth, honesty and insight. Through his sketchbooks, this exhibition offers visitors a rare and intimate glimpse into the artist's world, revealing the observations, ideas and creative process that shaped his life's works.

“We are also delighted to present *Sarah Peeling Potatoes*, a significant addition to the museum's collection. Acquired through the generosity of the Friends of The Bowes Museum legacy funds, the painting ensures that an important part of Cornish's artistic legacy can be enjoyed by audiences for generations to come.”

The exhibition runs from 27 June 2026 until 3 January 2027.

Find out more: thebowesmuseum.org.uk/exhibitions/norman-cornish-a-life-in-sketchbooks/

About the artist

Norman Cornish (1919–2014) was born and raised in Spennymoor, County Durham. He was 14 when he began his first shift in a mine on Boxing Day at Dean and Chapter Colliery, Ferryhill and he worked as a miner for 30 years alongside his artistic practice. Encouraged by the Spennymoor Settlement to “paint what you know”, Cornish remained deeply committed to portraying the communities in which he lived and spent longer as a professional artist than he had as a miner. He was long associated with Durham County Council, which commissioned him to paint the Miners' Gala Mural in 1962—an iconic work

considered the cornerstone of his career and one that still holds strong resonance in Durham communities and culture.

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Notes to Editors:

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www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk

About the Friends of The Bowes Museum

The Friends of The Bowes Museum was an independent charity that supported the museum for 75 years. Although it disbanded in 2025, its Legacy Fund continues to support the production of museum programmes. The Friends played an important role in the museum's history, and that support continues today through the fund and the generosity of individual former members.

About The Bowes Museum

The Bowes Museum is a charity managing a Grade 1 listed accredited museum and Grade 2 listed parkland in Barnard Castle. Founded by Joséphine & John Bowes 150+ years ago, this purpose-built museum brings together an extraordinary, designated collection of European fine and decorative art as a cultural resource for the people of Northern England, where today we celebrate artists, designers and makers. The Bowes Museum receives funding from Durham County Council and, as a National Portfolio Organisation, receives support from Arts Council England. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. artscouncil.org.uk

The Bowes Museum is a member of the Discover Durham partnership of attractions, whose commitment is to promote Durham as an exciting and vibrant group travel destination and to provide the travel trade with a professional and knowledgeable service. discoverdurham.co.uk

Year round admission to The Bowes Museum is £25 for local members (residents of County Durham and Darlington), £28 for members (residents elsewhere), £20 for a day ticket, £22 for a day ticket including gift aid. Under 18s, full time students and carers are free. As a registered charity (number 1079639) The Bowes Museum needs to generate more than half of its income each year to care for the historic collection, buildings and parkland. Your donations are vital to that work. Visit thebowesmuseum.org.uk/support/ for more information.