

From darkest days

How a Pensnett artist portrays his Black Country youth and his remote island home



A hand press worker from Clamason's, where Paul once worked, drawn from memory.

Without leaving the country, you can't get much further from the Black Country, literally or metaphorically, than the Shetland Islands, but that's exactly where Pensnett-born artist Paul Bloomer took himself a few years ago, and despite, or maybe because of his remoteness, his career has blossomed.

There can't be many Black Country folk living that far north, a hundred miles off the furthest coast of Scotland, and there aren't many artists creating the kind of work Paul does. So with his work now being sold through a London Gallery,

we at the Bugle thought it would be interesting to ask this artistic ex-pat to share with us his thoughts on his remote location, and his unique creations. Paul, a Bugle reader from way back, was happy to oblige.

When he left Pensnett School in the mid-eighties, Paul took the only path he assumed was open to him, and went to work as a labourer with Clamason Industries in his hometown; but after a while, he began to wonder if there was more to life. He had been a keen artist since childhood, and admits to skiving off school on occasion to sketch the nearby Barrow Hill, but by the age of twenty Paul was desperately hoping that his pencil and paintbrush could lead him out of the daily drudgery he was so unsuited to.

the country, particularly the industrial heartlands, were in turmoil. The biggest employer in Paul's part of the world, Round Oak Steel Works, was closed down despite turning out some of the best quality metal in the world, and many other firms went with it. Thousand of workers found themselves on the scrapheap, and a generation of youngsters, brought up in the expectation of following their fathers into heavy industry, suddenly found they would have to make other plans.

Childhood

"After an idyllic childhood of fishing and birdnesting, I suddenly found myself in an alien place." Paul remembers. "All the certainties of the culture of my birth were being eroded and my generation felt we were in something of a vacuum. Of course we couldn't articulate that at the time. But there was a sense of despair and frustration at directionless, meaningless lives that found expression through drink, drugs, fighting and dancing. It seemed that over night, the culture that gave the Black Country a sense of mening, identity, pride and purpose was snatched away. The social cohesion that the industry brought gave way to a society based on consumption, self-interest and fragmentation of community."

Harsh words, but it's difficult to argue with the fact that we no longer live in the same types of communities we once did. The days when you knew everyone who lived in your street and all the family worked at the same factory ended, it's probably fair to say, during

those few short years. Paul's early paintings, drawings and etchings reflected this bleak, confusing and ultimately depressing scenario starkly and boldly. Almost always rendered in shades of grey, or from white hacked out of black, the works of this period, as well as those inspired by it a few years later on, capture the despair and the sense of fear wonderfully well.

Children of the Furnace, for instance, portrays the inside of a Pensnett pub, where workers with no jobs drink, argue and fight their days and nights away. Everyone portrayed is based on a real person, and Paul himself is in there somewhere. *The Battle*, meanwhile, captures the violent clashes which took place on Barrow Hill when Pensnett youths squared up to those from Russells Hall on the opposite side of the hill. Other pictures avoid the violence, but even the calmer moments have a listless melancholy about them.

Development

These works and many like them were the eventual result of the sketches Paul had made in the book he carried with him when he first left the factory.

"The book was to be massively important to my development as an artist," says Paul. "I went on to Nottingham Poly to study fine art and threw myself into a series of large charcoal drawings. They were a somewhat desperate attempt to find meaning from my unique upbringing in the Black Country, and are very autobiographical."

They certainly made an impression. Paul

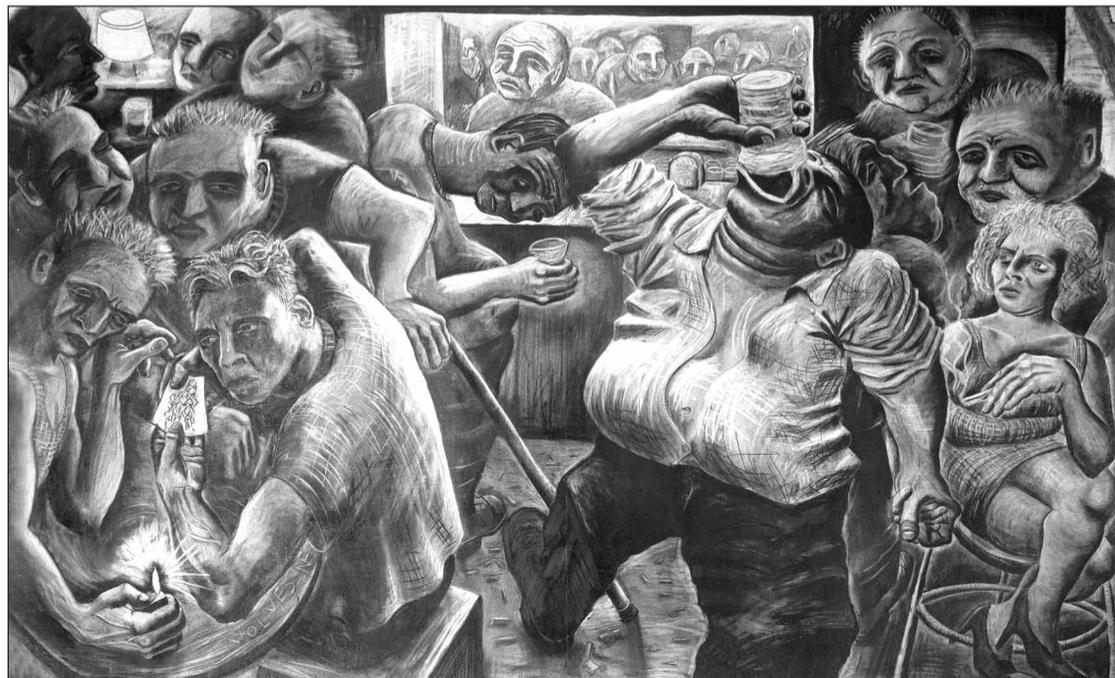
Despair

"At some point during my four years there, I slid into despair at my lack of prospects," he told the Bugle, "and reached for my paintbrush initially as a form of escapism into colour; but more importantly it pointed to what seemed to be the only available exit from the factory. So, aged twenty, I left my job and against everyone's advice went to Art College, first at Dudley Tech and then at Stourbridge. Here, in a small sketchbook, I drew workers, drinkers, dancers and fighters."

It's easy to forget just how hard times were in the Thatcher years. The depression of the twenties and thirties has gone down in legend, and today we are more comfortable than ever, but just a couple of decades ago



Paul in the studio, dwarfed by the enormous scale of his works.



"Children of the Furnace was inspired by the back room of the Albion pub in Pensnett, where I spent a lot of time as a teenager," says Paul. "It is the most accurate portrait of my generation I could draw, every one of them a real person, including a self-portrait. The title comes from the fact that we were children of the furnace, born to work with no prospects, so drink became our pastime."



The Battle, portraying the armed fights which took place in the late seventies and early eighties between Pensnett and Russells Hall youths. Paul witnessed several such skirmishes.

to sunlit nights

was offered a place at the prestigious Royal Academy Schools in London to study painting, and he continued to work from his Black Country memories, earning an Academy prize for his portrayal of a Barrow Hill fight. He returned to Pensnett for a few years and continued to paint, but it was a holiday to Shetland with his Scottish girlfriend **Fiona** that was to change not just his life, but his work. The distant, rugged isles with their endless summer days and winter nights struck Paul as close to paradise, and they decided almost immediately to settle there. Despite being surrounded now by birds and fish as opposed to noisy or empty factories, Paul still had some stuff he needed to get off his chest. A series of large Black Country woodcuts was

produced over a five year period, in a freezing, remote former telephone exchange in the dead of night.

Paul and Fiona are now married with two children, and Paul's work is as different now as his current surroundings are to his former home. Where once there was greyness and harsh black lines, the more recent paintings are flooded with thick, bold colours; the brawls and boredom replaced with sea and sky. Some of the recent works show only clouds and water, the paint laid on in broad washes or thick oils, veering between the bolder work of the Impressionists and the seascapes of Turner.

Surroundings

"The tranquility of my recent work undoubtedly reflects my surroundings on the edge of the Atlantic," says Paul. "but more likely speaks of the emotional security I have found in Shetland with a wife and children."

That said, Paul is currently working on a series of works based on the Merry Hill Centre, an appropriate symbol of the replacement of social cohesion with consumerism, standing as it does on the site of the old Round Oak works.

Living in the thick of nature, with its biting winds, crashing waves and round the clock summer sunlight has taught Paul how to express himself with colour, something he struggled to do when his attention was turned solely to the Black Country in its darker days. Yet each of

his styles is perfectly suited to its subject.

He is evidently very content in his new home, and is making a living from his art, something he only dreamed of when he was labouring in the eighties. His paintings, drawings and prints are sold worldwide to private and public collections. Dudley and Walsall Art Galleries own Paul Bloomer works, and there is a large mural at Amblecote Christian Centre. So does he miss his old home? "Yes I do miss it, but life has not allowed me to go back often, my children are in school and we have various work commitments here," he told us. "It's particularly the people I miss. I have a large family there and friends that I miss very much. I struggled to be an artist there even though it's a major source of inspiration. Somehow I found it hard to make a life there as an artist, but I feel deep down that there is much more Black Country inspired art to come in the future."

Batham's

"Another thing I really miss is drinking Banks's, Batham's and Holdens beer, which is what I would almost certainly be doing if I was there now. As it is I will be amusing myself by fishing for trout on a remote hill loch somewhere in Scotland!"

Paul's paintings are sold through the Boundary Gallery in London (www.boundarygallery.com) and his prints via his own website: (www.paulbloomer.com).



Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. A true story which Paul remembers, set amongst Brierley Hill flats. A man lies dead after a street brawl, while even the swans appear to be chasing each other in the background. Paul, left, captures the grisly scene in the sketchbook which he took with him to college and art school and worked from for several years afterwards.



Night Fishing. An example of the more tranquil recent works. Paul painted this last summer after a midnight mackerel fishing trip. It's midnight, but the sun is still evident just on the horizon.

Bigton Sunset, number 7. This is the view from Paul's back garden, which he continues to paint regularly. So far he has produced 68 paintings of this ever-changing scene; about as far as it's possible to get from his Black Country origins

