From Western Front to Seaside Surrealist

Jeremy Miles explores the extraordinary life of war artist Paul Nash, the subject of a major retrospective at Tate Britain, who found solace, inspiration and love in 1930s Swanage.

PAUL Nash (1889 – 1946) is best known as one of Britain’s greatest war artists and one of the few to record the horrors of both World Wars. His most famous paintings offer uncompromising visions of the devastation at Passchendaele and Ypres.

Witnessing the dreadful carnage on the Western Front was a shattering experience for this young landscape painter. He wrote to his wife: “I am no longer an artist. I am a messenger to those who want the war to go on for ever…and may it burn their lousy souls.”

His experiences in the trenches damaged both his lungs and his mind but he found solace and some understanding in strange otherworldly places, not least right here on the Dorset coast where he lived in the mid 1930s.

Nash and his wife Margaret initially stayed at a hillside farmhouse just outside Swanage but then moved down into the town. While they were living in their seafront house called The Pinnacles on The Parade, Nash embarked on an intense affair with the artist Eileen Agar.

A painter and maker of curious sculptures constructed from stones, shells and flotsam which she often found on Swanage beach, Agar was about to become one of the English stars of the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Nash exhibited there too and together the couple became known as The Seaside Surrealists.

Now a major retrospective of Nash’s work at Tate Britain offers a stunning overview of his entire career and brings into sharp focus just how pivotal his time in Dorset was. While living in Swanage he created works - both paintings and assemblages - that reflected his past, pondered on his troubled life and offered a signpost to the future.

The Tate Britain show, which runs until...
March 5th, reveals fascinating connections between modernism and tradition and traces Nash’s career from early symbolist watercolours exploring the spiritual life-force of trees to his late visionary landscapes inspired by the cycles of the equinox and the phases of the moon.

In between these romantic journeys into the natural world we find the all powerful war paintings. Sad and stark in their condemnation of the destruction of life and landscape, these are the masterpieces that he must have wished he never had to paint.

What it does to your mind to have witnessed such things is hard to say but it seems certain that Nash was suffering from some form of post traumatic stress disorder or shell shock as it was known in those days. He was probably struggling with survivor guilt too. In 1917 he had been evacuated back to England after falling into a trench and breaking a rib. A week later, he heard that his division had been virtually wiped out and almost all of his fellow officers killed in an attack on the infamous Hill 60.

This perhaps gives a clue to the origin of his strange and unsettling meditations on dreams, sense of place and the power of inanimate objects.

These works that occupy such a central position in this survey of his career largely emerged from his time in Dorset. Like other artists of his generation, haunted by demons from the recent past, Nash had been drawn to surrealism ideas since the 1920s but he explored and developed them in a quintessentially English way.

Not for Nash the flamboyant behaviour and showy gestures of those at the vanguard of the movement across the channel. He

The stunning backdrop of Ballard Head with its rolling downs would help inspire landmark paintings like ‘Landscape from a Dream’
Paul Nash ‘Equivalents for the Megaliths’ 1935 Oil on canvas

Paul Nash ‘Totes Meer (Dead Sea)’ 1940-41 Oil on canvas

Paul Nash ‘Battle of Germany’ 1944

was far too middle class for that. Working from his studio at The Pinnacles he imagined uncanny connections created by the juxtaposition of found objects, often discovered while beach-combing with Agar, and the ancient Dorset landscape that he could see across the bay from his window.

The house faced directly onto the seawall with an expanse of glistening water set against the stunning backdrop of Ballard Head with its rolling downs. It was, and still is, a wonderfully dominant landscape that changes with the light. It would help inspire landmark paintings like Landscape From A Dream (1936-8) - a bizarre vision of the Dorset cliffs with a hawk studying its reflection in a giant mirror. This Freudian influenced comment on the power of dreams, the uncertainty of memory and the shape-shifting plane between reality and otherness made a real impact and even garnering the praise of Surrealism’s founder, André Breton. It was just one of a number of important works to come out of Nash’s time in Swanage. Another was Event on the Downs (1934) which features an old tree trunk and a giant tennis ball seemingly surveying the downland with Dorset’s chalk cliffs in the background.

Nash had known Swanage for many years, since the days of childhood holidays. His return in the 1930s was in part driven by the hope that the mild climate and sea-air would improve his failing health. He had battled with asthma for years. »
Though Nash loved the natural beauty of the Purbecks he was scathing about Swanage itself which he described as being of "such extreme ugliness, architecturally, that the inhabitants instinctively look out to sea ..."

From The Pinnacles Nash couldn't do anything else but look towards the sea while the eccentricity of the town, whatever he thought of its haphazard architecture, undoubtedly offered fuel for his fevered imagination. His connections with and affection for the county ran deep. In 1935 he was commissioned to write The Shell Guide to Dorset - the latest edition of the famous motoring guides founded by John Betjeman two years earlier. Nash's edition - written, designed and illustrated by its author - would become the series most sought-after volume. It is a work of art in its own right.

Even though there were other special places that inspired Nash throughout his life - including Dymchurch in Kent, Rye in nearby East Sussex and Whittenham in Oxfordshire - Dorset in general and Swanage in particular held a lifelong fascination.

His love of the Dorset coast would last literally until the day of his premature death from heart failure on 11th July 1946. He was just 57 years old. Paul Nash had spent the final days of his life at a guest house in Boscombe. He had taken a brief holiday to visit Swanage, Worth Matravers, Corfe and Kimmeridge Bay - places that and been so important to his life and career a decade earlier.

He was feeling increasingly unwell but was in reasonably good spirits. In a letter to his friend Richard Smart at his London gallery, Nash wrote: “Boscombe is next to Bournemouth, Bournemouth is next to Poole and Poole is next to Swanage. And there I am in my kingdom.” On the day of his death he was planning to make one more visit to Swanage. It wasn't to be.