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SWINDON HERITAGE

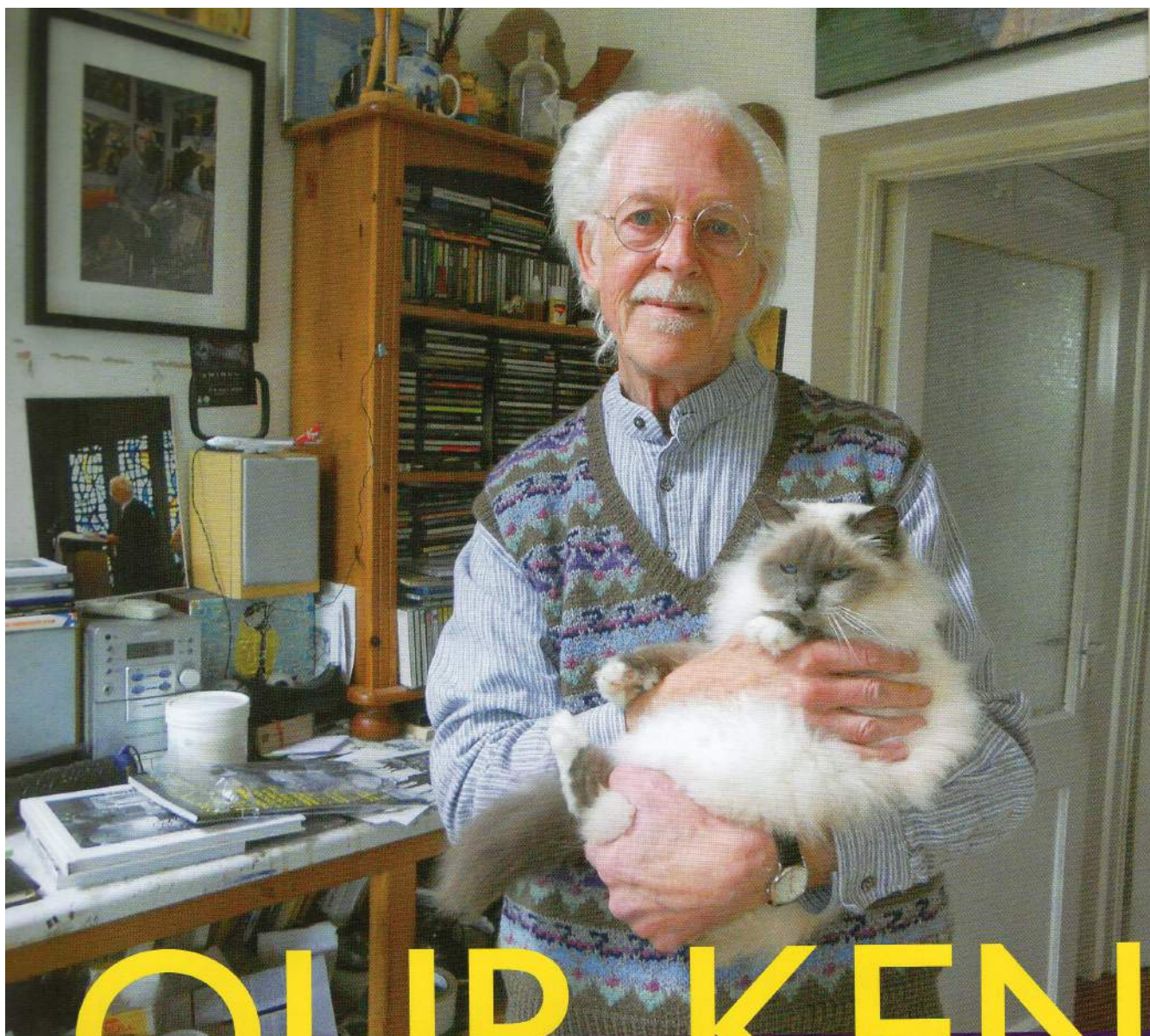
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KITH AND KEN

AN ARTIST'S VIEW OF THE RAILWAY TOWN



FLEMING: A FOOTBALLING HERO
ROYAL CONNECTIONS AT LYDIARD
HOW GARRARD CHANGED THE WORLD



OUR KEN

FRANCES BEVAN
puts the spotlight
on Swindon artist
Ken White and
finds out about
railway and
other heritage
influences on
his works

We are proud, in this edition, to feature the story of – along with a small selection of the works of – Swindon's most famous artist.

Ken White's magnificent murals once graced the streets of our town, becoming part of our cultural and artistic heritage.

So it's fitting that in more recent times he has turned to the social and industrial heritage of his home town for inspiration.

Although, these days, the canvasses are smaller than the building- or aircraft-sized artworks he became internationally famous for, his newer works, based on his own memories of the railway town and the people in it, are just as iconic.

As a former railwayman himself, there is no mistaking the affection that Ken has for what Swindon once

stood for. So it's a shame that while we rightly claim to have one of the best set of artworks in the country in The Swindon Collection, including works by that most famous painter of industrial landscapes, LS Lowry, there are no Ken White paintings among them.

When we put it to Ken that Swindon Borough Council might have thought to buy one and still could, he could offer only a shrug of the shoulders in philosophical resignation.

The following few pages represent our own small tribute to Ken.

They include an overview of his life (which is told in full in a monograph by Mark Child, to be found in Swindon Central Library's Local Studies collection), and a close look at just some of Ken's evocative paintings of the railway town.

The artist who was revered as the king of murals now often turns to heritage in his home town for his ideas



*The last remaining Ken White mural in Swindon town centre, at Whalebridge. Although this scene is set in 1908 and shows the Golden Lion Bridge, which crossed the canal in Bridge Street/Regent Street, it was painted in 1976 to commemorate the centenary, in the following year, of the birth of Alfred Williams, the 'Hammerman Poet' who also wrote the 1915 book, *Life in a Railway Factory*. Like Williams, Ken began his career in the Railway Works as a rivet hotter. The mural was repainted in 1983 and again in 2009.*

Ken White is probably best known, locally, for the series of 40 murals he painted in and around Swindon in the 1970s and 80s.

Sadly, only the Golden Lion Bridge mural on the end of a house in Medgbury Road remains in the town centre, painted as part of a job creation scheme in 1976.

Today, Ken's canvases are smaller, and he increasingly turns to his memories of Swindon in the 1940s and 50s for his subject matter, when British Railways was the major employer and most men worked 'inside'.

Ken was born on March 23, 1943, in his grandparents' home in Gordon Gardens. His father, a Flight Sergeant in the RAF, was from London, but his mother was born in Swindon, the daughter of a railwayman.

His first artistic success came at the age of 11 when a drawing of a clown's face was published in the Advertiser, but Ken's talent went largely unrecognised when employment in the Works was the obvious option for most of the town's young men.

His first job in the railway factory was

as a rivet hotter, but he quickly moved from this to an apprenticeship in the signwriting department, while studying O and A Level art at evening classes.

In 1962 he left the Works for good and enrolled as a full-time student on a four-year pre-diploma course at Swindon Art College, much against the wishes of his parents. He describes himself as something of a late starter, but committed and always deeply focused, only ever wanting to paint.

"I don't think you're born an artist," he says, modestly. "It's like any job; you get better, the more you do it."

In the 1970s Ken was based in the Town Hall, where he produced a series of posters promoting events on the Swindon calendar and a distinctive advertisement for the GWR Museum. Now deposited in the Local Studies archive at Swindon Central Library, some can be viewed online at www.flickr.com/photos/swindonlocal.

During this period he also designed album covers for Swindon pal Ray (Gilbert) O'Sullivan, and his work appeared in The Beatles Illustrated Lyrics.

Later, he produced an artwork for XTC's album, *Black Sea*, based on an idea by Andy Partridge (see page 14).

But it was as a muralist that Ken really made his name, painting more than 100 worldwide, and working for some well known and wealthy patrons.

In 1982 he was commissioned by investment banker Jacob Rothschild to paint a 60-foot-tall faux Georgian town house façade on the Royal Opera House, overlooking the Jubilee Gardens Piazza in Covent Garden.

For 25 years he worked as the personal artist of Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group, painting murals in megastores across the world.

Other commissions for Branson included Japanese scenes at his Roof Garden restaurant and a set of Disney characters for the Branson children's bedroom. Ken also designed the famous Scarlet Lady logo for Virgin aircraft.

His eclectic body of work includes Egyptian paintings inspired by Philip Glass's opera, *Akhmaten*, and a series of

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bleached-out portraits of Marilyn Monroe in the Andy Warhol style, painted for a store in the Brunel Centre.

Ken attributes his influences to a number of different schools of art, including John French Sloan, one of the founders of the Ashcan School of American art, and US realist artist George Wesley Bellows, both from the beginning of the 20th century.

Sloan and Bellows were among a group of artists who resisted the tradition of studying in Paris, choosing instead to paint the people and places they saw every day – a style with which Ken identifies.

Local artist Frank Quinton has been another source of inspiration. Frank also paints scenes from across Swindon, including a view of the back of Curtis Street that Ken now owns.

Ken's studio is stacked with paintings and books, family photos and mementos of a crowded artistic life. Among his souvenirs is a rivet, a relic of his early career in the Railway Works.

In recent years his subject matter has returned to the images he recalls from his childhood – the Works and the railwaymen on the streets of Swindon, using old photographs of the town as an *aide-memoire*.

"You have to have some reference to start from," he says, and in this artistic

'There was such a lot of character then... I knew everybody in the street.'

stream of consciousness, Ken selects elements from photographs and combines them to create his final composition.

He mourns the loss of distinctive buildings such as the Baptist Tabernacle in Regent Circus, and has no desire to paint scenes of the modern town centre.

"There was such a lot of character in the town then. I just like the look of how it was then; nice buildings around, and the way people dressed."

Following his early childhood spent in the town centre, Ken's family moved to the newly built Pinehurst estate.

"I lived in Mulberry Grove when they were first built and I knew everybody on that street," said Ken. "I remember my mum sitting on the wall of an evening, chatting to her friend. It was a very close-knit community then."

Ken has been married to his wife Jan for more than 40 years and their home in Old Town reflects their shared interest in art and antiques – and pedigree cats.

Today Ken's work sells in top London gallery Panter & Hall, and closer to home at the Red Rag Modern Art Gallery in Bath.

In Swindon his paintings hang in the Outlet Village, and the Friends of Swindon's Railway Museum, STEAM have recently bought *Lunch Time*, a painting depicting a group of rivet hotters making toast around a brazier.

But shamefully Swindon Borough Council has yet to include a Ken White in their prestigious collection of modern art.

Does he have a favourite painting?

Perhaps the one of the gasworks, which sold at his 70th birthday exhibition last year, or maybe one of his grandparents outside their home (right), but usually it's the current work in progress.

"I work faster now. My style is looser, more confident; better, I think," says the man whose youthful passion for art went unappreciated.

"I'm still trying to prove myself."

Right: inside the artist's studio in Old Town – layers of paint, built-up after years of mixing colours on top of an old chest of drawers. The studio is an extension at the back of a large Victorian terraced house.





Inspiration from the streets of Swindon

On this and the following two pages we have taken just a small selection of Ken White's paintings from recent years that were influenced by the railway town the artist grew up in.

The evocative painting, above, is often quoted by fans of Ken's work as a particular favourite.

It shows his grandmother scrubbing the front step while his grandfather watches men stream into the Works for the start of a new working day.

There is some artistic licence here, because his grandparents actually lived in Gordon Gardens – which was also Ken's birthplace – but the scene clearly

shows the Railway Village, with the Works in the background and both the Bristol Street water tower and the spire of St Mark's in the background.

Ken's grandfather retired when he was 70 years old, after more than 50 years in the Works. "When he retired he was lost," said Ken. "His life had ended really."

The paintings on the pages overleaf all featured in a 2012 exhibition called *Grafters*, staged by London art agency Panter & Hall.

See more of Ken's railway town paintings on his website, www.kenwhitemurals.co.uk.



Above: Trudging Home. Ken worked as a signwriter on the Carriage and Wagon side of the Works. His journey home began at the Ferndale Road entrance, and in this painting he creates his own interpretation of that scene. "People think I'm a northern artist," says Ken, "but men I remember, growing up in Swindon – that's what it's about."

Right: the Railway Works' own gasworks, possibly Ken's own favourite.

Opposite, bottom: The Regent is a view of the Red Cow pub and the Regent fish shop, demolished to make way for the dual carriageway on Princes Street. This area, where Ken grew up visiting his grandparents in Gordon Gardens, is still vivid in his memory. "Scenes of that area come to mind," he says. "I remember playing along the backsies. I used to climb the walls and look in people's gardens."

Opposite, top right: Waiting in the Rain. Ken particularly likes the effect he can create with wet surfaces. "I like the wet roads, the double images and the way the lights are reflected." He recalls a time when men used to stand around on street corners. "I remember blokes just standing there, chatting, watching the world go by."

Opposite, top left: The Tree Cutters. A modern scene of workers in Old Town gets the Ken White treatment to transport them back to the 1940s.

