

Ringdown Barn and the Camden Town Group

In the 1910s a group of innovative young London-based artists, inspired by the work of Van Gogh and Gauguin on the continent, came together as the Camden Town Group. The group, which included Robert Bevan, Spencer Gore and Walter Sickert, provided much of the impetus for the development of post-impressionism in Britain, and though their paintings mainly focused on life in the capital, the Blackdown Hills briefly played an important role in their art.



Harold Harrison was a gentleman farmer who had met members of the Camden Group at the Slade School of Art. In 1909 he bought a farm at Applehayes, near Clayhidon on the Blackdown Hills, and soon after he invited the artists to come and paint at Applehayes as a summer residence.

The Blackdown Hills landscape clearly inspired the Camden Group members, with the steep valleys, flat-topped hills and pattern of hedges and woods providing a great subject, as they experimented with their bold style and blocks of colour.



Amongst the bucolic landscape around Applehayes, stood the modest chert-built barn at Ringdown, then part of the Applehayes estate. Robert Bevan in particular used the barn as a subject in several paintings, and because so little has changed in the surrounding valley, it is possible to pinpoint almost exactly where the canvases were painted.

In 2004 a group of contemporary artists in the Blackdown Hills brought fresh attention to the Camden Group in an exhibition called 'Applehayes Revisited'. Meanwhile time had taken its toll on Ringdown Barn, now part of a Somerset Wildlife Trust nature reserve. When the Trust drew up plans with the Neroche Scheme to invest in the heritage of its nature reserves, the opportunity presented itself to repair the barn and retain the link to the Camden artists.

The restoration has not been easy. David Northcote-Wright, Nature Reserves Manager at Somerset Wildlife Trust said: “The barn is peculiar in that it is very well constructed, with beautifully knapped stone and rounded walls, and yet it stands right on the springline, in permanently wet soil. Before restoration could happen we had to divert some of the water away from the base of the structure, as well as waiting for a long enough



spell of dry weather in which to carry out the main work – re-roofing the barn and re-pointing the walls. The work was carried out by specialists in the repair of old buildings, the Bucknall Partnership from Colyton.”

David added: “The barn occupies an idyllic position in the centre of Ringdown Nature Reserve, which is a haven for wildlife including the rare Large Marsh Grasshopper.”



Commenting on the project, Gavin Saunders, Neroche Scheme Manager said: “Through the Neroche Scheme we want to ensure that the rich history, nature, wildlife and landscape of the area is nurtured and celebrated. Funding the restoration of Ringdown Barn was a chance to show that what makes this part of the Blackdown Hills so special is the combination of nature and culture – natural and man-made history – laid down over centuries. The farmed landscape of this place helped

inspire a generation of artists who shaped the course of British Art in the twentieth century, and Ringdown Barn is in part a memorial to that period.

But more than that, it is a practical building, built for a straightforward farming purpose, and it is thanks to the down-to-earth farming and woodland tradition of the Blackdowns that we have inspiring landscapes to enjoy today.”

Ringdown Nature Reserve is open to the public, and is situated a mile south of the Merry Harriers pub, near Garlandhayes. For more details contact the Neroche Scheme office on 01823 680846 or check the website www.nerochescheme.org. Details of the location of Ringdown Nature Reserve can be found at www.somersetwildlife.org.