



“Tales of a Grandfather”

Michael Portillo looks back



Introduction

Michael Portillo is well known as a former politician, journalist and TV presenter. What is not quite so well known is his affinity and connection to Kirkcaldy. These and his memories stretch back to the earliest days of his childhood.

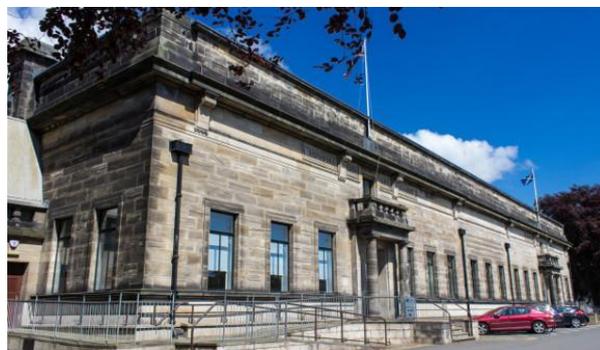
This affinity and connection were perhaps never better displayed than in 2003 when Michael, still a Conservative MP, appeared on the BBC2 series – “Restoration.” This was a series hosted by Griff Rhys-Jones which each week featured three buildings which had fallen into disrepair, with the ultimate winner receiving a multi-million pound restoration. The winners were determined by viewer’s votes.

The neglected Nairn works on Victoria Road which dated back to 1882 were championed by Michael in one of the three segments broadcast on the 15th August. The linoleum factory was up against a Palladian Villa in Mavisbank, Edinburgh, and the Britannia Music Hall in Glasgow where, in 1906, a young Arthur Jefferson made his first appearance on stage. He later changed his name to Stan Laurel and the rest is history.



Derry Sinclair, the former Factory Production Manager, was also involved in the programme – explaining that 81 miles of linoleum were produced every day. Despite the best efforts, Mavisbank won on the night and the overall series winner was the Victoria Baths in Manchester. Scottish Enterprise, Fife, who owned the building, had hoped that the publicity would spark interest in its sale but it was not to be and in February 2014 demolition started. As the stones fell, once again and for the last time the “queer like smell” hung in the air – pure nostalgia.

Michael Portillo was not asked to champion the Nairn building because of his name, reputation, position and presentation skills alone. There was a more compelling reason. This was the fact that his mother was born and raised in Kirkcaldy as one of the three daughters of John W. Blyth – an industrialist and passionate art collector. It was Blyth who was a major driving force behind the high status and reputation which Kirkcaldy Art Gallery has enjoyed since the first unlocking of its doors.



The following are Michael’s reminiscences of Kirkcaldy and his grandparents. We are delighted that he accepted the

invitation to be our first guest writer and he could not have been more helpful, accommodating, and swift in producing his contribution. The following is the centrepiece of this narrative and the foregoing is only by way of an introduction and scene setting. Michael's piece speaks for itself and the story will be rounded off with a little more detail on John Blyth, his love of art, and Kirkcaldy's cultural debt to him.



Michael Portillo's Recollections

When I was a child, a visit to Kirkcaldy was one of the great excitements of my life. My mother, Cora, and her sisters, Dorothy and Margery, had been brought up there, and although all three had moved to London, John Waldegrave Blyth, their father and mother, Alice (nee Lowe), still lived there at Wilby House, in Loughborough Road, Dysart.

Visiting my grandparents involved a thrilling journey on the overnight train. I would be with my mother and one or more of my brothers. We travelled frugally, sitting up all night in second class, snatching sleep as best we could. Even in those days there was marketing hype, and the train was sold as "the Starlight Special". At York, the station name was written on rounded columns. I had heard of New York but not York, and I peered as best I could from the train window around the columns, looking for what I assumed must be the missing word. My mother was horrified by my ignorance.

The highlight of the journey was, of course, crossing the Forth Bridge in the morning. Even then it struck me as mighty and awe-inspiring structure, and nothing since then has lessened my admiration for it.

We lived in London in a semi-detached house. My parents did not drive. So, at Kirkcaldy station I entered a different world when Tom, my grandfather's chauffeur, greeted us. He wore a double-buttoned tunic, peaked cap and driving gloves, and ushered us into the monogrammed maroon 1953 Daimler. In nine years up to my grandfather's death, it accumulated just 14,000 miles on the clock, I would guess mainly around Kirkcaldy. Once we were aboard, it purred the short distance to Wilby House.

It seemed to be enormous. Beautiful lawns manicured by Tom surrounded it. You entered through a porch where a wooden umbrella stand bristled with my grandfather's walking sticks. The hall was broad and long and dominated by a magnificent oak staircase which led past stained-glass windows to the bedrooms.

There were paintings everywhere. Art was John Blyth's passion. For a small person, as I was then, the pictures could be intimidating. Some were physically huge, and in heavy gilded frames. For some reason, I lived in fear of them tumbling from the wall and crushing me. Then, the subject matter was alarming too. Some of those by William McTaggart showed children huddled on beaches, apparently in mortal danger of being swept to sea by the terrible storm. Others were more gentle. A Samuel John Peploe of Kirkcudbright was painted impasto. From close up, it was nothing but squiggles of thick paint. But as I backed off, there emerged a pastoral scene with cattle, so naturally it became for me "the Disappearing Cow".

Wilby House had been built in 1909, on a scale that was completely new to me. For instance, the windows were very large, and it was a sadness from time to time on a sunny day to hear a dreadful thud, as a bird had flown full pelt into the glass, deceived by the reflection.

Life there was formal. All meals were in the dining room. They were announced by the pounding of a gong in the hall. Tom's wife, Mary, cooked and served. The silverware and napkins were impeccable. But my grandparents were good with children. I was allowed to ring that gong, and at night to grind the coffee beans for breakfast. To this day, the smell of a coffee mill transports me to Wilby House, as surely as a madeleine cake carried Proust back to his childhood holidays.

One of the excitements was that trains between Kirkcaldy and Dundee passed close to the garden, and we would rush out as we heard them approach. They were hauled by steam engines, and if we were lucky, we earned a wave or a toot from the driver or fireman.

John Blyth (known as Jack) had made his money from linen. The town was famed for linoleum, of which it smelled, and linen was used as a backing to linoleum. He would take us to the Hawkleymuir factory, where we could ride on trolleys used to cart around the raw materials. But the factory was already in decline and closed in 1961.

Much of his wealth went into art, it is said to Alice's irritation. Sometimes he would not tell her of new acquisitions, or at least wait for a good moment to make the revelation. He might rush back from the factory to spend his lunch hour contemplating a new purchase.

There were paintings by the English L.S. Lowry and by the French artists Eugene Boudin and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot; but the vast majority of paintings in his collection were Scottish. There were some canvases by Edward Atkinson Hornel, and many McTaggarts. But Blyth collected, above all, paintings by the Scottish colourists.

I have mentioned Peploe. The others were John Duncan Fergusson, Francis Cadell and George Leslie Hunter. They were a group of post-impressionists who made magnificent use of colour, rejoicing in the cold light of Iona as much as the warm glows of Antibes. They were also gifted portraitists and masters of the still life. My grandfather was quick to recognise their worth, and his opinion is probably vindicated by the high prices that their paintings now command.

A short while before the end of the Great War, Ian Nairn, aged 25, was mown down by a German machine gun while serving with the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry on the Somme. His father, John Nairn, chairman of the linoleum-manufacturing company, gifted to Kirkcaldy a war memorial and an art gallery in memory of Ian.

The gallery opened in 1925. At the ceremony, my mother, aged 6, presented a bouquet to Gertrude Wemyss Honeyman, John Nairn's daughter. John Blyth became the gallery's convenor and held that post until his death.

As his collection grew beyond the bounds of Wilby House, many of his purchases had to hang in the gallery. On his death, much of the collection passed to the gallery where it resides to this day.

Some the best (and smaller works) accompanied Alice after her husband's death, as she joined Dorothy and Margery in a modest-sized house in Stanmore, a London suburb. The paintings were beautifully displayed there. My school was close by, and once classes were over, I would very often join my grandmother for tea. So, I have a much stronger memory of her than of Jack. I found her delightfully gentle, and despite her very high standards, she was remarkably unjudgmental of her youngest grandson.

After the deaths of my aunts, I had the privilege of having some of the loveliest of the Blyth paintings on my wall, (until the complications of inheritance taxes led us, as a family, to sell them). It was uplifting to see such glorious art every day, surrounding me and being part of my life. Although I cannot claim to have the taste of my grandfather, I could understand the passion that had led him to assemble such a superb collection, and the joy that it gave him.

I have been back to Kirkcaldy a number of times. I have made radio and television programmes that have involved reminiscences about my childhood. One, for BBC radio, was called "Look Out for the Jellyfish", because a strong childhood memory is of bathing in the icy waters of the Firth, and sometimes encountering enormous representatives of the species!

I also like to visit privately. When I am within striking distance, I make my way to the gallery to see the paintings. It is interesting how memory works. I may see a canvas and immediately know just where it hung in Wilby House. "Ah, you're the one that I thought might crush me".



John W. Blyth 1873 – 1962

A Cultural Debt Not Always

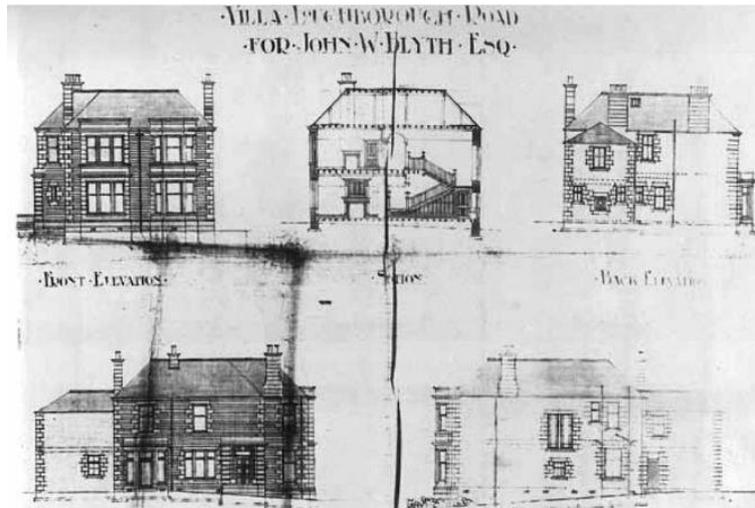
Recognised?



John Waldegrave Blyth was born into a family of linen manufacturers. The business had been founded in 1835 by his grandfather and had been so successful that a factory (Hawkley Muir) had been built in 1853. These premises had been extended significantly over the years. Linen was a very profitable business at that time, especially if procurement contracts to supply the forces could be won. During the Great War, the Company was particularly adept at this, and it was a period of prosperity for the firm along with its owners. Eventually the introduction of cotton and then manmade fibres had a detrimental effect on the demand for linen and the factory saw a gradual decline before closing in 1961.

John was educated at Kirkcaldy High School, leaving at age 18 to take up a post as a Travelling Representative with the family firm. John married Alice May Lowe from Manchester in 1908 and, also in that year, inherited a piece of ground in Loughborough Road.

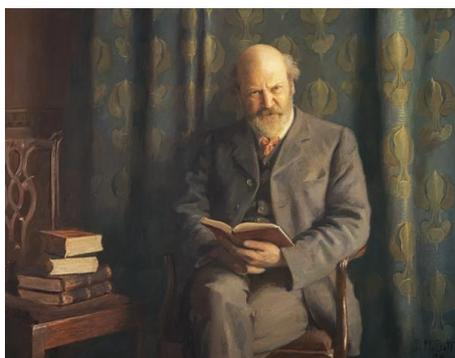
John had an architect draw up plans for a detached villa which was named Wilby House. Previously he had lived in Mayview, Sinclairtown, Kirkcaldy. Moving into the property in 1909, John spent the rest of his life there. It was here that his three daughters were brought up, Dorothy, Margery and Cora.



Coincidentally, moving to the new home also saw the start of John's interest in collecting art works. The dawn of the 20th Century saw many industrialists and manufacturers taking their first steps into forming their own art collections – led by Sir William Burrell in Glasgow. It is not known what sparked John's interest in art, in which he had no training. However, he had some musical education, and regularly played the organ at Dysart Parish Church.



John used his work as a travelling representative to locate galleries in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and often became friends with the owners, as well as a customer. Aitken Dott had started his first art business in Edinburgh in 1842 and in 1896/7 the business expanded significantly through the efforts of his son, Peter McOmish Dott. The opportunity was also taken



to change the name of the picture selling arm to the 'Scottish Gallery'. The firm celebrated its 175th anniversary in 2017 and they retain receipts and records stretching back to day one. The 'Scottish Gallery' appears to be his most favoured outlet and it was through this firm that many paintings were sourced and purchased. He had a long-lasting friendship with Peter and maintained his connection with the gallery over



almost fifty years. John also had a strong relationship with Alexander Reid, who in 1889 had opened his own gallery in Glasgow, naming it - 'La Société des Beaux-Arts.' Reid has the distinction of being painted by Vincent Van Gough, having been a friend of his brother Theo.

John was a friend of John Nairn, another local enthusiast and collector. Nairn was the Chairman of Michael Nairn and Co., the largest employer in the town. Nairn's daughter Gertrude married Robert Wemyss Honeyman and in time he became a distinguished collector in his own right. All three men were to become significant figures in the story of the Art Gallery. John Nairn gifted the town its Museum and Art Gallery, followed by the library two years later. These and more led to Kirkcaldy having outstanding grounds and buildings as part of the memorial to its fallen. Blyth and Wemyss Honeyman worked tirelessly to ensure that the Art Gallery became, and maintained, a position of being one of Scotland's outstanding provincial galleries.



Mr R. Wemyss Honeyman
1929
James McBey (1883–1959)



Mrs R. Wemyss Honeyman
1928
James McBey (1883–1959)

John bought his first major work by McTaggart (Away to the West) through the Scottish Gallery in 1910, the year of the artist's death. His



first Peploe (Town in Brittany) was bought in 1915 from Alexander Reid. James Lawton Wingate was another artist favoured by John, and once again a significant number were acquired in his collecting lifetime.

His daughter Margery recounted that her father was 'strong minded and liked to haggle', also remembering that 'he groaned heavily when having to write a cheque'.

John Blyth collected for his own taste and not to be in competition with other collectors. He certainly did not try and compete with Burrell who, in 1926, spent £6500 on a Degas. The most John spent on an individual painting was in



1920 when McTaggart's 'White Surf' was purchased for £1050.

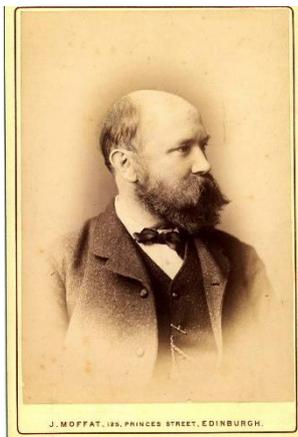
As an almost inevitable consequence of his knowledge and love of art, he was drawn into the public eye through his work in the development of Kirkcaldy Art Gallery. In February 1925 he was appointed Honorary Curator of the Gallery. He was also appointed Chairman of the Scottish Modern Art Association and in 1944 he became a Trustee of the National Gallery of Scotland. Each of these positions he held until his death.



John Blyth maintained the details of his collection in the simplest of manners. He used an address book where paintings were detailed alphabetically under the artist's name, with the size and price paid being the only details recorded. John did not record the dates purchased and it is only thanks to a large number of receipts and letters that 210 of the paintings have their dates of purchase established.

Wilby House soon outgrew the burgeoning collection and John started lending his works to Kirkcaldy Art Gallery,

frequently refreshing them. The first floor room was a handsome place to display the canvasses, allowing the public access to what was in essence a private collection. There can be no question that the health of the gallery was an important part of his thinking as well as further endowments. John Blyth had such an affinity for this Gallery that it is said 'he visited it every Monday throughout his life'.



William McTaggart



Samuel Peploe

Many believe that the second phase of his collecting stemmed from the purchase of his second Peploe in 1924. From 1924 until the commencement of the Second World War – Peploes and McTaggarts were his main purchases. Peter McOmish Dott had given Peploe his first and second exhibitions in the 'Scottish Gallery' in 1903 and 1909 although he does not appear to have directed Blyth in Peploe's direction. It was George Proudfoot, who became Gallery Director after the retirement of Peter Dott, who started to champion Peploe to John Blyth. This advocacy was added to by the success of Peploe and the other "Scottish Colourists" (George L. Hunter, Francis C.B. Cadell and John D. Fergusson) at an exhibition in the Leicester Galleries in January 1925.



J D Fergusson



Cadell



George Leslie Hunter

MEMORIAL EXHIBITION S. J. PEPLOE, R.S.A.

A COMPREHENSIVE Exhibition of the Works of S. J. Peploe is bound to prove a great treat for anyone who knew the man and his art, and a rare opportunity for those less familiar with them.

Having lived with Peploe's pictures for many years, we have experienced an ever-growing conviction that he was probably the greatest painter of his generation. As is the case with most great artists, his art passed through a number of phases, and one may have preferences according to one's individual taste, but the masterpieces of each period are eloquent of his supreme gifts as a colourist and of his amazing skill in the art of picture-making. We have been told that certain pictures by Peploe recall Manet, and have heard a great deal about the influence of Cézanne. Well, as Brahms said when it was pointed out to him that a theme of his commenced with the same notes as the Prize Song in Wagner's "Meistersingers," "Any fool can see that!" Naturally, with the passage of years Peploe's art expressed more and more of his own personality, and in its later phases became unique and unrivalled in its own sphere.

Peploe was a great man, and his pictures are the ardent outpourings of a great heart and a great mind. To live with them is a sheer delight.

J. W. BLYTH.

April 1936

What is certain is that at this point John Blyth started to focus on collecting Peploe's work, but never losing his love of McTaggart and Wingate.

In 1928, Blyth organised a second inaugural exhibition in the Kirkcaldy Gallery and in one room 25 works by S.J. Peploe were on display. The other Scottish Colourists did not feature as heavily in John's collection, with only 11 in total

finding their way to Wilby House.

Following Samuel Peploe's early death in 1935, John Blyth wrote the introduction to the catalogue for the Peploe Memorial Exhibition held in the Scottish Gallery. At this stage Blyth had secured a wide range of the late artist's work including still life, landscapes, seascapes, and a number of figure subjects. John lent a considerable number of his paintings for that exhibition. His efforts brought a letter of thanks from Peploe's widow,



John Blyth spent considerable time in London in the years 1939-1940 and it was here that a young energetic art dealer, Lillian Prowse, nurtured and developed Blyth's interest in the English artist Walter R.



Sickert. By the time of John's death in 1962 he had amassed 24 works by Sickert, by far the greatest percentage of English artists in the collection. Whilst Lillian was a devotee of Sickert's earlier works, John's preferences favoured his later paintings. John purchased his first Sickert in 1939, the same year he first purchased a 'colourist' painting other than by Peploe.

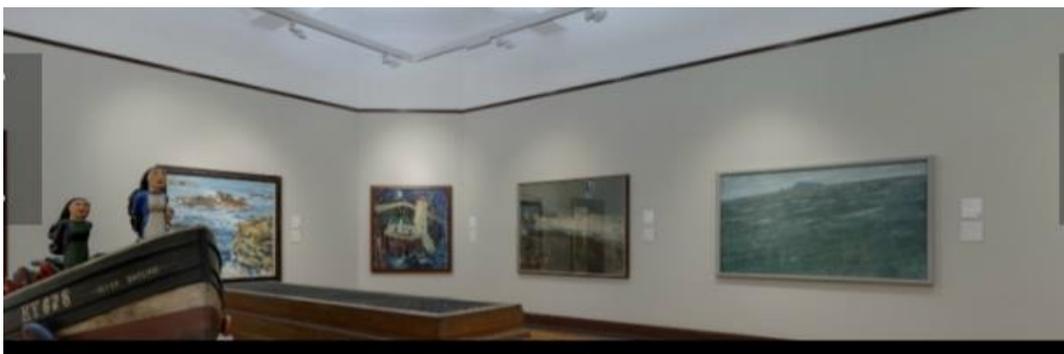
In August 1956 selected modern Scottish, English, and French modern painters, in John Blyth's collection were exhibited by the Scottish Arts Council in Rothesay House, Edinburgh. In all 25 paintings were exhibited by 13 different artists.

On John Blyth's death in March 1962 a list was made of the paintings hanging in Wilby House. They show the artists displayed on a 'one room – one artist basis'. The dining room held the larger McTaggart, Wingate in the sitting room, mixed artists in the hall and staircase, Peploe in the master bedroom, smaller McTaggart in the second bedroom. The three remaining bedrooms again holding a mixture of artists. The 1962 list disclosed 114 paintings in Wilby House with 123 in the Art Gallery. One collection was never considered better than the other and indeed Blyth's favourite painting, 'The Wave' by McTaggart was hanging in the Gallery at the time of his death. His daughter Margery said that 'he felt responsible to keep a representative and often refreshed selection on display for the public eye and to maintain the status and popularity of the gallery'.



His estate was managed by his three daughters and 22 of John's treasured art books were donated to the Kirkcaldy Library. This was nothing compared to the generous offer made by the executors to sell 118* paintings from the collection to Kirkcaldy Town Council for the sum of £9000. In September 1964 these paintings passed into the Council's hands and added even more lustre and kudos to what in a 1952 newspaper article was described as the "Tate of the North".

What richer accolade could a provincial art gallery wish?



Generosity and Kirkcaldy's Magnificent Gift

John Blyth had died in March 1962 and it was his three daughters who were executrixes of the estate. As mentioned previously, lists had been drawn up at the time of his death, detailing the pictures held in the Art Gallery (114) Wilby House (123)

It was clear at the outset that the executrixes were mindful of John Blyth's love and affection for his hometown Gallery. Almost from the first steps in winding up his estate there was

always the intention to pass significant numbers of the collection to Kirkcaldy. As it transpired, the executors offered 116* paintings, mostly hanging in the Gallery for £9000. The Legatees retained some of the paintings which hung in the Gallery, but also included some of those in Wilby House (including three large McTaggarts) in the sale. While this seems a high figure, it was very significantly below what would be achieved on the open market.



At the Art Gallery Sub Committee Meeting held on the 5th June 1963 a motion was passed that the convenor (Robert Wemyss Honeyman) should inspect the paintings held in the Gallery and make a list of those he recommended for purchase. Being a friend of

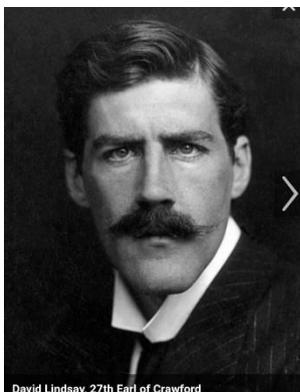
John, Robert Wemyss Honeyman had an intimate knowledge of the collection and very few if any were discarded.

Events moved forward apace with negotiations taking place between the Council and Mr Wilson of Gibson, Spears & Dow and Son, who were acting for the executrixes. After these were completed the formal terms were drawn up.

1. That the pictures should be exhibited in the Gallery in a separate room or rooms as a collection, to be known and suitably labelled for the information of the public as the "John W. Blyth Collection".
2. That the paintings would be retained by the Town Council for public exhibition in the Kirkcaldy Art Gallery, for a period of at least 15 years from the date of the contract of sale being drawn up.
3. That notwithstanding the terms of condition 2, the Town Council might sell any of the pictures in the collection within the 15 year period, if either of the following conditions arose.
 - a) If a written offer made by the Town Council to the sellers, to resell the picture or pictures to the sellers at the individual price or prices stated in the list attached to the contract of sale had not been accepted within three months of its date.
 - b) If the written consent of the sellers had been given to the sale, without an offer to resell to them at the list price having been made.
4. That no objection would be taken by the sellers to the Town Council sending pictures from the collection for temporary exhibition elsewhere.

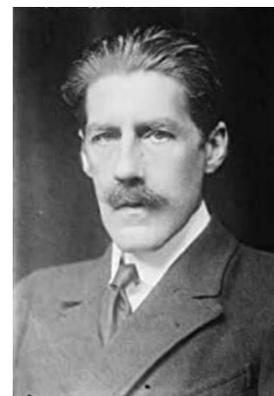
These conditions were acceptable to both parties and the bargain was concluded. However, assistance to purchase

appeared from three unexpected sources and the Town Council were praised in many quarters for the acquisition. Lord Crawford , the 28th Earl of Crawford and the 11th Earl of Balcarres, wrote to the Council expressing his pleasure that the Blyth pictures were to become the property of Kirkcaldy and suggested that it had been secured at such a modest price for so large and important a collection. He went on to praise the Blyth family for selling at a price which, if the collection had been split up and sold elsewhere, would have been much larger and thus giving Kirkcaldy an opportunity which could never recur. Crawford had impeccable art credentials: - created a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire for services to the arts in 1951. He was a Trustee of the Tate between 1932 and 1937, a Trustee of the National Gallery from 1935-41, 1945-52 and 1953-60, a Trustee of the British Museum 1940-73, Chair of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Scotland 1952-1972, Chairman of the Royal Fine Arts Commission 1943-57. and Chairman of the National Library of Scotland in 1944.



David Lindsay, 27th Earl of Crawford

That such a figure should be writing to a provincial gallery speaks volumes for the collection being purchased. As an aside, his father, the 27th Earl, a public figure and a peer of the realm had been so appalled by the



28th Earl of Crawford

casualties on the western front, that he enrolled into the Royal Army Medical Corp, as a private aged 43 in 1915!

The Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh warmly applauded the decision and offered to donate £2000 towards the purchase price. Then, the Town received a letter from the National Art-Collections Fund offering a further £1000 to assist in the purchase. This was to be granted from their Eugene Cremetti Fund. An anonymous donor provided a further £325. So, in total, donations provided £3325 towards the cost.

The Town Council Minutes record on the 17th February 1964, without comment or explanation, that it was agreed that the collection would remain the property of Kirkcaldy Town Council and be loaned to the Public Library and Art Gallery for display. It can only be presumed that the family could not have envisaged local government reorganisation and the subsequent loss of the direct and vital link between the Town and its Art Gallery. Who owns the collection now – where is the collection – has some of it been sold – is some of it out on loan? All these reasonable questions require clarity. Make no mistake, this collection was intended for Kirkcaldy and no further afield, other than temporally lending out to other exhibitions and galleries and receiving due credit. It was and surely still is a jewel for the ‘Lang Toun’.

Despite the issues with covid19, Fife Cultural Trust provided a rapid response. The good news is that all 118* of the paintings which formed the collection are still in the

possession of the Trust. This is heartening news, given the regionalisation/alterations to local authorities which have taken place since Kirkcaldy Town Council was swept away in 1975. It also confirms that Kirkcaldy still retains the third largest collection of Peploes outside of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

When the purchase was completed Councillor (eventually Provost) John Kay moved that there should be a Blyth exhibition in the Gallery and the Council also determined that a plaque should be displayed on the walls of the Blyth room in the following terms



The John W. Blyth Collection

***Purchased in 1964 with the aid of Grants
from Royal Scottish Museum and the
National Art Collection Fund (Eugene
Cremetti Fund).***

The plaque was affixed to the Gallery wall until the last major renovation. It has not been replaced but remains in storage. Should it still be in place? We would suggest it should.

We must acknowledge a man who was instrumental in ensuring quality was always on display in Kirkcaldy, a man who happily loaned from his collection in order that the public had sight of exceptional works of art, a man who was Honorary Curator of the Gallery for 37 years, a man who was a Trustee of the National Gallery for over 18 years. Kirkcaldy had something that neither Edinburgh nor Glasgow could claim at the time – a permanent home for Scottish Contemporary Art.

John Blyth would and should be rightly proud of his collection's history since his passing. Kirkcaldy Art Gallery thanks to his generosity and foresight, along with that of his daughters, is the gem in the municipal crown of Scottish Art Galleries and de facto is the centre for study of Peploe and McTaggart – what more could he have done?

In March 2022 – John Blyth will have lain in the ground for 60 years. Kirkcaldy boasts part of what was one of Scotland's finest collections with all its 118* paintings still intact.

Might it be possible to mount a representative Exhibition of his collection to mark the 60th anniversary of his passing? Kirkcaldy, and her Gallery, in cultural terms at least, could in this way in part repay their debt to John Blyth.

Note* some accounts suggest that there were 128 paintings included in the transaction. However, there can be no doubt that 116 is the correct figure. Two had been donated in 1925 and with the 116 included in the sale; this gives the total Blyth Collection as 118 paintings. The Art Gallery Register confirms the 1964 purchases as being 116.