



## Artistic AMBITIONS

From furniture designer Gordon Russell 100 years ago to present-day artist Jeremy Houghton, Broadway and its famous tower have witnessed many years of creativity and conflict. Tracy Spiers explores this Worcestershire town's heroes, past and present

One hundred years ago, a 26-year-old Broadway man returned to his Cotswold village along with other comrades who survived the First World War. Over the four years he served in the Worcestershire Regiment, this young man – namely Gordon Russell – steadily earned his way up through the ranks to Commissioned Officer and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. Like so many he was devastated by the loss of life and horrific scenes he witnessed, but Russell came back with purpose and a determination to do something positive with his life. Interestingly, in his officer's record book he had written down 'Designer of Furniture,' as his profession. He admitted it was "an expression of hope rather than a statement of fact," for at the time he had only dabbled in design,

learning about the history of furniture design as well as the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement. His dad owned Lygon Arms which had a workshop restoring and repairing antique furniture. Russell's eye for detail and drawing as a method to understand how something worked, was developed on the battlefield. Russell's sketchbooks of war drawings – revealing his sense of humour despite the horrors and his powers of observation – are on show at the Gordon Russell Museum in Broadway along with all the subsequent furniture designs he went on to create. It is testimony of the fulfilment of this pledge he made a century ago:

"My generation, which had destroyed so much lovely work, had a constructive duty to hand on to those coming after us, good things of our own creation." Russell spent a lot of his time thinking

about furniture design in the army. He drew when he could so that when he returned he translated those ideas into reality.

Russell's legacy wasn't just about design. It was about investing in people and future talent. The skills he used in managing men on the front line were transferrable to building up a workforce where high morale was paramount.

"The army taught me a great deal about the delegation of responsibility and the esprit de corps of a well organised unit," he stated in his autobiography. He also mentioned that "devotion to the work in hand was paramount," a message which came through his business ethic.

Verity Elson, museum manager and curator believes that Russell's time at war helped fuel his desire to make a difference.

**ABOVE:**  
'Rushing for the Skies', by Jeremy Houghton

**BELOW LEFT:**  
Jeremy Houghton's studio desk

**BELOW RIGHT:**  
'Tim Elkington', by Jeremy Houghton

"Despite everything he faced, he reflected on how he could use his experiences for good when he returned. He not only wanted to create something of value after witnessing so much destruction, but his time in the army also helped him learn how to lead and to inspire. He went on to have a national role and was able to spread ideas about good design and the impact it can have on people's quality of life. Encouraging people to take pride and pleasure in their work was part of it," she tells me.

Inside the museum, items of furniture include detailed labels which details the names of who took part in the designing, making and finishing process. To Russell, who employed up to 250 people at one time, each person was important and deserved to be credited. During World War II, Russell, he was responsible for the Utility Furniture programme and was later appointed Director of the Council of Industrial Design. In 1955 Russell was awarded a Knighthood for his services to Design and British Industry and as Director of the Design Council.

"I believe his experience in the ranks shaped his design philosophy in many ways, not just in his career as a designer, but how he ran the company and the national roles he took on as well," she adds.

Interestingly, whilst Russell's experiences at war influenced the way his art developed, it is the stories of those who fought in the war that have inspired the current work of Broadway's successful living artist, Jeremy Houghton.

To mark the centenary of the Royal Air Force, Jeremy has been tracking down and sketching the remaining airmen who flew in Spitfires, Hurricanes and Lancasters during the Second World War. As well as creating a group picture of the four surviving fighter pilots who flew on the Battle of Britain entitled *The Last of the Few*, he has produced a group picture of the seven remaining bomber airmen entitled *The Last of the Many*. Both images were sold in a silent auction this summer to raise money for the RAF Air Cadets. As well as these portraits, Jeremy has completed other historic aviation works which will be on show throughout November at Trinity House in Broadway and at the Lygon Arms, where he has been resident artist.

One of the last Battle of Britain pilots, John 'Tim' Elkington lives in Rissington near Stow. Tim survived only because when he bailed out, another pilot managed to create a slipstream that carried him towards the land instead of an almost certain death by drowning in the sea below. Jeremy appeared on *The One Show* on BBC TV interviewing and sketching Tim.

"Their almost matter-of-fact attitudes to what by any measure were extraordinary heroics, reflect how they modestly underplay their own personal contribution to the defence of many privileges that we now take for granted," explains Jeremy.

"My hope was simply to try and capture, in the uncomplicated and straightforward terms that they prefer, the sense of service, courage and bravery they showed." ▶





## *‘Russell’s legacy wasn’t just about design. It was about investing in people and future talent’*

“They were all so young, so brave, so frightened... they were still boys and they all said that they were freezing up there as there was no heating in the planes.”

Jeremy chose to do the portraits with wax pencil, partly because none of the men wanted to be painted. Instead, he recalls, they preferred the simplicity of a sketch and an absence of ceremonial dress and the many medals they have rightly earned. Interestingly Jeremy’s work is usually associated with movement, but for this project his subjects have been motionless, yet represent heroic action in the skies. In recent years Jeremy has captured speed be it tennis balls as Championship Artist at Wimbledon 2017, or cars, horses and live action through his artist residencies for Land Rover Ben Ainslie Racing, America’s Cup; Windsor Castle for Her Majesty the Queen, Highgrove for HRH The Prince of Wales and the London Olympic and Paralympic Games.

“This time my brief was no more than to sketch. My blessing was that we did also talk, benefiting me certainly, in that, for me, the conversation informs the picture. Sketching is effectively my note taking,” says Jeremy.

“This project has been such a privilege. These guys are all modest people but to

me they are very much live heroes.”

While I visit Broadway I pop into Trinity House in the High Street where Jeremy’s work will be on show. Noah Warren, who runs the gallery, is proud of the village’s past.

“It’s all about the history in Broadway and there’s been an association with art for so long since the turn of the 20th century. We work as a community of gallery owners to try and promote it as a mecca for art,” Noah explains.

Trinity House Paintings will be showing a collection of work by the renowned artist Neil Helyard from September 28 until October 14. Neil’s award-winning work has been a mainstay of Trinity House’s contemporary collection for a number of years. Meanwhile, Broadway Museum & Art Gallery will be hosting *Making an Impression*, featuring prints by Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. Curated by Katherine Wodehouse from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, this exhibition which runs until December 19, not only explores hidden aspects of the Impressionists’ achievement, but showcases the work of influential printmakers who exhibited with the Impressionists, including Félix Bracquemond and those who succeeded

them such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Another must-visit destination for art lovers in Broadway is the excellent Little Buckland Gallery which has year-round exhibitions of work by artists and designer makers such as Susan Early, Charlie Calder-Potts and Arabella Kiszely.

Broadway has a long association with visiting artists and other creatives. An American artistic colony chose it as an idyllic spot to make home in the 1880s. John Singer Sargent paid his first visit to Broadway in September 1885 and it was here where he painted what was to become one of his best loved pictures, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*.

Landscape designer Capability Brown used his talent to help create Broadway Tower, a vision which was carried out with the assistance of renowned architect James Wyatt for George William, 6th Earl of Coventry. This was completed 220 years ago. The 65ft high tower built on an ancient beacon site is at the second-highest point of the Cotswolds (after Cleve Hill) and considered one of the country’s finest viewpoints. Up to 16 counties can be seen on a clear day. My twins, husband and I enjoy the view from the top and watch the resident Red Deer down below. It is fitting that our visit ends at this spectacular landmark, for it ▶

**ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT):** A page from Gordon Russell’s sketchbook, showing his sense of humour despite being on the front line; Gordon Russell in his later years; Verity Elson, Gordon Russell museum manager and curator, looks at some of Russell’s war sketchbooks

The view from the top  
of Broadway TowerRog and Tracy Spiers at  
Broadway Tower

*‘Broadway Tower helps us experience a bit of magic in this wonderful countryside’*

has connections to both art and war. The Royal Observer Corps used the unique vantage point to track enemy planes during the world wars and later built a nuclear bunker to report nuclear attacks during the Cold War. The bunker is one of England’s few remaining fully equipped facilities. Not far from the tower is a memorial to the crew of an A.W.38 Whitley bomber that crashed there in June 1943 during a training mission.

Broadway Tower has also been used in happier times, namely as an inspirational retreat for art folk who used the surrounding countryside to re-energise. It the place William Morris, his wife Jane and daughters Jenny and May used as a holiday retreat and where he began his campaign for the preservation of historic monuments. The day we visit is particularly windy, so I find the words of Morris’ daughter May (on display in the Tower’s ‘Morris Room,’) quite apt.

“The tower was certainly absurd – the men had to bathe on the roof, when the wind didn’t blow the soap away and there was water enough... but how the clean aromatic wind blew the aches out of our tired bodies, and how good it all was.”

The same views, the same open skies greet those who visit today. And whilst we can’t quite have a bath like William Morris on top of the tower, people still come here to grab those precious care-free moments. Managing director



**ABOVE:**  
Rog and Tracy feeling sheepish at Broadway Tower; Rog, Tracy, Kezia and Rosie outside The Lygon Arms

of Broadway Tower, Annette Gorton says it hasn’t lost its charm throughout the years.

“I think it is an astonishing landmark. The important thing is that we share it with others. It helps us step back, regain a sense of calm and more clarity and enables us to celebrate the joys of life. It is why the tower was put there by Capability Brown and James Wyatt and it is something that is still very important in our lives today,” she explains.

“Broadway Tower helps us experience a bit of magic in this wonderful countryside. It’s why people have such an emotional connection with it. They come back time and time again and it is such a fixture in locals’ lives.”

Like some of the key characters who have lived in Broadway and beyond, the Tower has witnessed war and been connected to creativity. The height, view point and open skies continues to encourage fresh perspective and an appreciation of the things that matter. Perhaps most of all it is the appreciation of living – something the life of furniture designer Gordon Russell and the war heroes Jeremy Houghton has captured on paper, display so well. ♦

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