



In association with
Wakefield Civic Society
 Building Interest in Wakefield since 1964



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

VISIT LOUISA'S PLAQUE



AT 21 ST JOHN'S SQUARE

REMEMBERING

LOUISA FENNELL

LOUISA DESERVES A

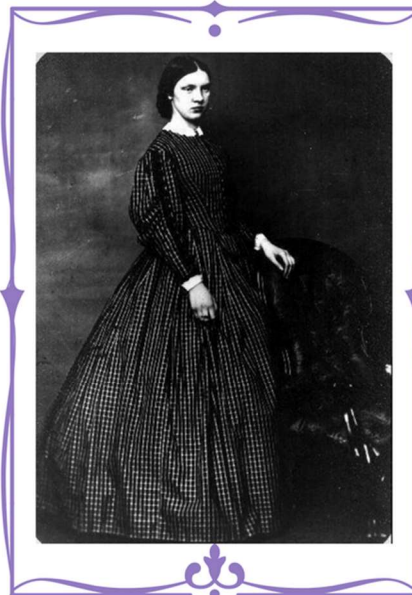
BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE...

of her extraordinary artistic skill that served to forever preserve the soul of the City of Wakefield that has since been so radically changed by redevelopment. Louisa is a quiet landmark for women in the art world and deserves a place of honour in the city she called home.

REFLECTING ON LOUISA'S LIFE

It took me some time to connect with Louisa. She seemed so aloof, so isolated and I felt that her paintings, whilst beautiful and full of detail, just didn't give me any insight into her as a person. Then, as I read her diary, written when she was about 12 years old, I suddenly saw her as a young woman searching for a way of expressing her creativity. Her life was constricted and ordered by social convention and so, with the birth of her younger brother Walter, there coincided an opportunity to start drawing lessons (which she liked better than dancing lessons). She spent the next year travelling as far as Whitby to see and experience cultural sights whilst continuing to observe how Wakefield's cultural landscape was changing. As I read more of her own words I felt her as an old soul. Louisa grew up in a houseful of children, (12 siblings of which 3 died) which had several servants. She saw extended family regularly so it seems there was no need to step out side of this world to socialise and if she did, there was certainly no mention of it. I think it is very telling that her diary entries are full of thoughts about paintings and visits and only mentions her own birthday in passing. Louisa continued to travel and collect experiences which she captured in her art work. She was also invested in. Her father enabled her to study in Rome, at the Penzance art school Barbara Hepworth would go on to study at, and in York. Her relationship with her father was close and her love of scrap booking clear. Wakefield Library archives have boxes and boxes of Louisa's scrap books. There is one about India, one on The Royal Family, one on Great Houses in London. Many of them have her fathers annotations within so it's easy to see his personality coming through. I see Louisa gliding through the streets of Wakefield, a little shy but not unsure of herself and doing what she can to feed her creative and artistic soul by painting. And thank goodness she did, for she has given us a beautiful insight into our lost heritage.

-Sarah Leah Cobham, DTC CEO



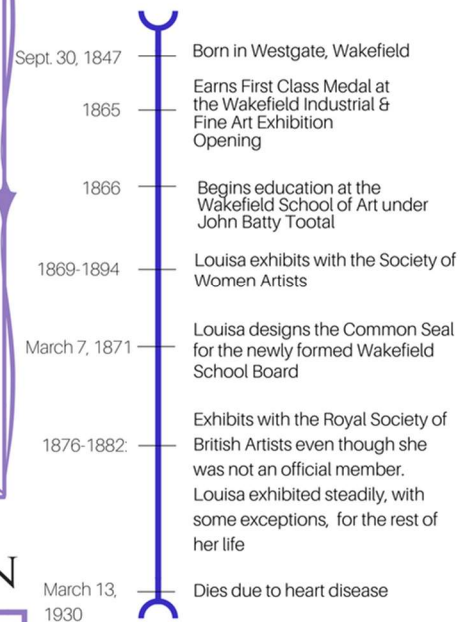
FWW IN ACTION



Louisa's grave at St John's Church Graveyard, St John's, Wakefield, is currently in a state of disrepair.

The Forgotten Women of Wakefield project is working to ensure that, alongside Louisa's blue plaque, Louisa's grave is restored. This is just one of many projects undertaken by FWW at the grassroots level to ensure the legacy of our remarkable women is protected for future generations.

TIMELINE



Our amazing volunteer research team found a great deal more about Louisa's life as an artist, but because Louisa was such a private person, details of her thoughts and feelings and experiences were not as easily accessible.

As such, DTC asked award winning journalist Nicky Harley to investigate, and she uncovered a deeply layered and worldly side to Louisa.

Read Nicky's groundbreaking editorial overleaf.



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD



A LANDMARK ARTIST BY NICKY HARLEY

One of the greatest female watercolour artists of the last century, Louisa Fennell's works provide a magical snapshot of the Victorian era. Her success is measured in her treasured works which now languish in the vaults of the Hepworth Gallery. An elite award winning artist, she trained at the country's leading art institutes home and abroad and for decades her work was displayed at prestigious exhibitions across the country. She devoted her life to her love of painting, travelling the world but always returning to her hometown of Wakefield to be with her family.

The eldest of 12 children, she lived in the hub of Wakefield at her family's wine merchant business in Westgate.

Whereas her brothers were sent to France and Spain to learn the family trade, she and her sisters followed in their mother's footsteps and turned to art. A worn leopard print diary of a young Louisa reveals how just one three-week period of her life in April 1860 went on to influence her art until her death at the age of 82.

The 12-page manuscript, written at age 13, reveals a snapshot into a loving childhood full of culture. Her father William Fennell ensured she was exposed to a world beyond Wakefield's walls with pop up pictures shows of ostriches, vivid South African sunsets to images of St Peter's in Rome, just yards from one of the cornerstones of Renaissance art, The Sistine Chapel with its ceiling having been painted by Michelangelo 250 years earlier.

Already a budding artist, an extract from her diary reveals her excitement at having her first art lesson. The now discoloured pages reveal a number of influences which forever stayed with the artist and can be seen in her works decades later. The diary starts with the birth of her brother Walter in January 1860, the entry is proudly followed on the first page with "I had my first drawing lesson with Mr Tootal". It was John Batty Tootal who then helped his young prodigy to get a place in art college years later.

Her diary focuses on a major event in the city - the rebuilding of the cathedral spire which to this day, stretching 247ft high, remains the tallest church in Yorkshire dominating the city skyline. Her April 4th entry reveals how the old spire had been opened up to allow everyone to visit it before it was taken down to be rebuilt. Months later she writes about attending a commemoration for the finished building and getting to touch the giant weather cock before it was placed on top of the spire. Later the cathedral appeared in many of her works.

The diary is full of places she returned to in later life to paint, her description of visiting York in June that year read: "We stayed at York and saw the minster. It is beautiful! The height and size of the pillars, some of which are about 57 yards round is wonderful." But it was attending a picture show of visions from around the world which is most striking.

As the youngster recounts what she's seen, she draws a sketch of poachers shooting an ostrich. The rare drawing may be her earliest artwork still in existence. Next to it she wrote: "The curious manner in which the people shoot the ostrich it is with the bow and arrow.

"The men being dressed to represent an ostrich can get near to them, the birds being so very frightened of man. Then there were views of India and it finished with a view of St Peter's at Rome by daylight which gradually changed to night with crowds of people singing."

When she wrote of her adventures, little did the young teen realise she was about to embark on a life dedicated to her love of painting. Inspired by the images of Rome, it would be a place she returned to paint twice and later studied alongside the talent of the time. Remaining traditional, Louisa chose to paint in watercolours.

Her first major accolade was winning a first class medal at the Wakefield Industrial and Fine Art Exhibition in 1865, also known as Wakefield's Great Exhibition, at the age of 18, beating her father who submitted two entries.

Spurred on by her success she went on to attend Wakefield School of Art under the tutorage of her childhood scholar John Batty Tootal and Thomas Hartley where she thrived.

Exhibition after exhibition followed and the world was her oyster and for the next 25 years she was given the prestigious opportunity of exhibiting at the Society of Women Artists.

By the age of 23 she was in London painting Trafalgar Square. When the Wakefield Education Board was formed a year later in 1871 her design was unanimously chosen from dozens of entries to become the city's common seal.

A description in the Leeds Mercury read: "The design is very neat. In the centre there is a female in a sitting position and before her are three children, whom she is apparently instructing. Around the figures is the proverb 'Receive instruction that thou mayest be wise'. At the front of the design is 'Wakefield School Board, 1871!'"

In 1876, aged 29, she won a place at the elite Penzance School of Art, one of the country's first institutions of its kind.

Founded in 1853, its famed alumni include Barbara Hepworth and Laura Knight.

Just two months later she exhibited for the first time at the prestigious Royal Society of British Artists at their Suffolk Street gallery in London.

Over the next six years she exhibited 11 pieces of art there, the society was so exclusive that it only had 50 members at this point only selecting the most distinguished artists. It was the spring board which led to her touring Europe to recapture the scenes etched on her memory from her childhood in her own iconic way.

She spent her early 30s in Rome producing a portfolio of 12 lithographs entitled The Life of Saint Paul in Rome. These works were displayed at exhibitions in Derby, Yorkshire and Glasgow and many others throughout the 1880s.

Following this run of success she suffered an illness and went to Harrogate for a time to recuperate, still drawing and posting rough sketches of York and its surrounding areas to her father.

Her mother died in 1897 when she was 49. It led to her focusing her talents closer to home for the next decade, feverishly painting her childhood haunts and preserving for posterity iconic images of a now forgotten Wakefield.

Many of her prints show historic views which are now unrecognisable due to years of unsympathetic redevelopment and reshaping of the city's landscape.

In her 50s she painted more than 17 memorable works of the city. These include an 1899 piece entitled Old Houses on Westgate showing mediaeval timber framed homes which have since been demolished. An 1898 sketch shows Almshouse Lane, later demolished in the 1980s and is now the site of the Ridings Shopping Centre. Others include the former iconic six chimneys in Kirkgate, a newsagents which is now Qubana restaurant, Wakefield's Shambles, now just a shadow of its former self eaten up by development and the Shepherd's Rest pub, all now just glimpses into Wakefield's Victorian past.

Following her father's death in 1906, Louisa, then 58, appears to have taken a step back from her art and only returned to exhibiting at major events in 1911 at the Ripon Industrial Exhibition.

When she was not travelling, Louisa spent her life living in her family's house and business on Westgate only leaving when the 176-year-old firm floundered due to the economic impact of World War One.

Her brother Richard Holdsworth Fennell was brought before the bankruptcy court and accused of having 'back room wine parties', the family offered him financial support in an effort to salvage the historic wine business.

Louisa, now in her 70s, moved to St John's Square where her grandparents had once resided with her other single siblings.

She spent the rest of her life in St John's and is buried in the churchyard in a grave she shares with her sisters overlooking the entrance to the Girls High School.

Sadly today it is in a sorrow state of repair, broken and riddled with weeds.

Louisa never married and died of heart failure at 82.

The last two years of her life were tinged with sadness as she watched her lifelong companions, her younger sisters Mary and Elizabeth lose their lives.

Her legacy lives on in the Hepworth's vaults, where following her death her loved ones bequeathed her life works to Wakefield Art Gallery to be preserved and shared with the people of the city she drew and loved.

These include nine original watercolours of Wakefield, her Artists book of Rome, original sketches and illustrations and three unique fan designs of watercolour on silk.

The final entry in her diary in her beautiful script read "Never put off til tomorrow what you can do today", and she never did.