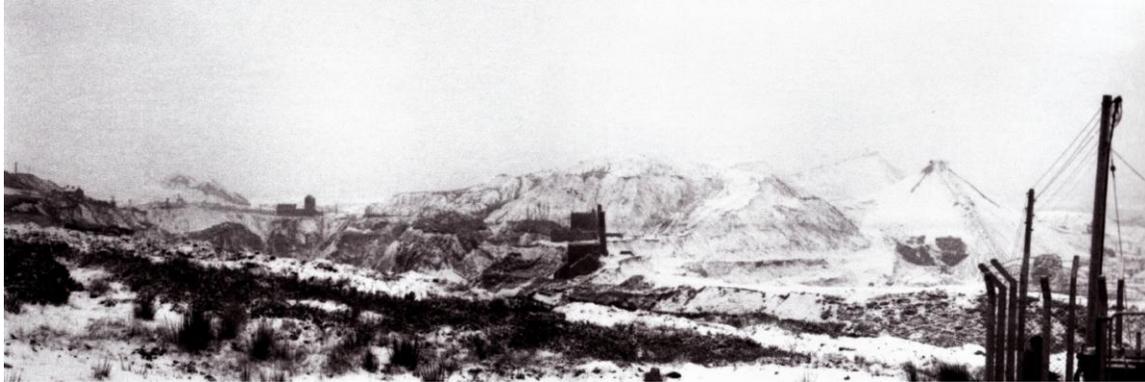


The St. Austell Landscapes

The St. Austell etchings have not always been recognized as landscapes. These prints and many other prints and drawings of similar subjects are the result of visits to a specific, if rather a strange landscape. I think of them as sharing something in common with 18th and 19th century Romantic landscapes, which record the pervading mood as well as the distinctive texture of a particular place. Maybe I should try to give some idea of how they came about.

When I was a schoolboy, my parents took me on holidays to Avoca in County Wicklow, where there had been considerable mining in the 19th century. I remember the pleasure of exploring the disused and ruinous workings where lead and copper had been extracted. It was a dramatic landscape littered with abandoned kilns and large pieces of rusting machinery. The whole area was made picturesque by the banks of ochre, where the surface soil had been disturbed. It was an area that I delighted to come back to over several years.

From 1949 to 1957 we lived in Cornwall and I taught in the Falmouth School of Art. The landscape of Cornwall is very rugged and has been celebrated since Antiquity for its deposits of tin and other minerals. As a result of centuries of mining it is covered to an extraordinary extent with ruined mine workings, which I found fascinating to draw. To my students these ruins were so commonplace as to be unworthy of notice and they found my enthusiasm for drawing them yet another of their teachers amusing eccentricities. Their comment was “if you like that kind of stuff you should visit the clay pit workings at St. Austell”. I took their advice and found an extraordinary landscape.



The china clay deposits at St. Austell were accidentally discovered in the 1780's. It proved to be one of the largest kaolin deposits in Europe and its discovery transformed the ceramic industry in Britain, for it made possible the manufacture of high temperature porcelain. This development happened first in Plymouth and Bristol and then in the Potteries District of North Staffordshire.

Kaolin or china clay is found in disintegrating granite-like rock where small pieces of silica are embedded in fine clay. It is extracted by washing down such rock faces with high pressure hoses and collecting the resulting slurry in large ponds where the particles of silica sink to the bottom, while the kaolin remains in solution in the water. This kaolin solution is then pumped into heated brick lined shallow tanks to be dried. Before this drying process complete and while the wet kaolin is firm enough to hold an impression, it is raked with large wooden combs made from widely spaced twelve inch long wooden dowels. In this way the dry kaolin will be formed into manageable

roughly rectangular blocks about the size of a large brick. As well as in the manufacture of ceramics, kaolin is also used as an extender in many materials as varied as graphite pencils and chocolate bars, so there is a great demand for it.

Before the discovery of kaolin in the St. Austell area there had been some mining for tin and other minerals but most of the countryside consisted of small hills covered with heath. In the two hundred years since the finding of china clay this landscape has been changed beyond recognition. The hosing down of the disintegrated feldspar has created gigantic pits. Because of the irregular distribution of the kaolin, these pits are sometimes isolated and sometimes are clustered together in interconnected groups.

Man-made landscapes are sometimes characterized by more or less lucid geometric patterns, but at St. Austell no such patterns are present for here everything is determined by the location of the kaolin which is arbitrary and largely unpredictable. The capricious and irregular character of the whole undertaking is one of its great picturesque charms. The pits that are being worked have steep gleaming sides and can be identified at a distance by the great cones of white silica, which has been dredged from the settling ponds and carried out of the pits on skip ways. In addition the water in those settling ponds is a startling opalescent turquoise blue. In contrast, scattered amongst these active pits there may be abandoned workings that are desolate, overgrown and enveloped in bushes and small trees.



This was the dramatic industrial landscape that my students' suggestion had led me to. I was overawed by the transformation of so large an area of countryside. A transformation brought about entirely by the search for china clay, but which in the process had brought about an astonishing variety of picturesque images, often huge in scale, sometimes dramatically coloured and almost always richly textured. It was an environment which might be viewed from above as a series of very large precipitously walled excavations that dwarfed the men working in them or which also might be viewed from within and below, where they become great amphitheatres; some with large strangely formed columns standing in them. These huge objects were pieces of feldspar which had not degenerated and therefore would not disintegrate under pressure hosing. It was a vast eroded scene; at times sinister but entrancingly varied. It has proved to be unforgettable!

For about three years after that first visit, on holidays and at weekends, I would, from time to time, go back to St. Austell. I would pack my lunch and my drawing board in my knapsack, take the train from Falmouth to Truro and from there to St. Austell and walk up into the workings. I might visit new sites or return to those I already knew, making drawings to be worked up into water colours and prints. These visits came to an end in the spring of 1957, when I resigned from the Falmouth School of Art, and we came to Canada. I have never been back to the St. Austell workings. I am told that during the more than forty five years since I last visited St. Austell the use of heavy machinery has changed the appearance of the workings. However during that interval, images of that strangely surreal landscape have continued to surface from my memory in the form of drawings and prints.

So much for the subject matter found at St. Austell between 1955 and the spring of 1957, but this gives no indication of the source of the pictorial conventions used to present this subject matter. I believe that these pictorial conventions come from a time long before the visits to St. Austell. In 1943, when I was still an undergraduate in Trinity College Dublin, I found in a book shop, one volume from the Penguin Modern Painters series edited by Sir Kenneth Clark. I think I was led to buy this volume because I had seen two small black and white illustrations of Graham Sutherland's Pembrokeshire paintings in Cyril Connolly's "Horizon" magazine. These small illustrations were all that I knew of Sutherland's paintings, but they had excited my curiosity and I was surprised and delighted by the sixteen coloured and sixteen black and white illustrations in my new purchase. I remember showing them to friends and our excitement over these landscapes with their bright emblematic colours and their mysterious, slightly sinister mood. My enthusiasm for art was great but my knowledge about it was slight. I knew of William Blake as a poet, not as a graphic artist and I had never heard of Samuel Palmer. So that the sources that had nurtured Sutherland's art were unknown to me. Sutherland, like Blake and Blake's followers, had an ability to portray grandiose scenes in relatively small images, but what most impressed us was his ability to simplify landscape into shapes arranged on the picture plane and enlivened with areas of texture - in effect to "do Palmer over again from Synthetic Cubism".



Clay Pit, George Wallace etching 1955