

LS Lowry

Who was Lowry?

L S Lowry is one of this country's best-known artists, famous for his distinctive paintings of industrial scenes. Much less well-known is the fact that he had a long and close relationship with North East England, and that Sunderland became a second home for him towards the end of his life.

Laurence Stephen Lowry was born on 1 November 1887 in Old Trafford, Manchester. 'Laurie', as he was known by his family, was an only child and grew up in the relative splendour of suburban south Manchester. His parents ran into financial difficulties in 1909 and the family had to move to humbler surroundings in Pendelbury. It was a fall from grace for Lowry's mother Elizabeth, and she never recovered from the shame. It was here, however, that Lowry found a new inspiration for his art in the houses, factories and mills that he saw every day. It became his lifelong mission to 'put the industrial scene on the artistic map'.

After leaving school Lowry had begun work as a clerk. This provided him with the finance to attend evening classes in art. In 1910 he began working for the Pall Mall Property Company where he stayed until his retirement in 1952. Lowry kept his day-time job secret from the art world, as he was afraid that he would be dismissed as a 'Sunday painter', and not treated seriously as an artist.

Lowry's father died in 1932 and his mother's ensuing long illness left her bed-ridden. Lowry's mother had always been a very important figure in his life. He was devoted to her, and now looked after her as well as continuing with his day-time work. He could only paint late at night after she had fallen asleep. Lowry frequently expressed regret that he received little recognition as an artist until the year that his mother died (1939), and that she had never been able to enjoy his success.

In 1948 Lowry left Pendlebury and moved to 'an ugly stone-built house' called The Elms, in Mottram-in-Longdendale, Cheshire. He never liked the house, and simply used it as a base from which he could visit friends and travel the country.

Lowry's connection with Sunderland

Lowry's first known visits to North East England were in the mid-1930s, when he started to visit Berwick-upon-Tweed. He liked the town so much that he regularly returned, and even considered buying a house there in the late 1940s. After his retirement in 1952, Lowry's association with the North East continued to grow. The region became a retreat from the pressures of his success, and provided him with a rich source of subjects for his work: buildings, coast, sea and shipping. Travelling down from Tyneside in 1960, Lowry discovered Sunderland by what he described as chance, and this started a long and close relationship with the town. Over the next fifteen years he spent much time in the North East, using Sunderland as a base for exploring the region. Lowry always stayed in room 104 at the Seaburn Hotel (now the Marriott), except on rare occasions when the room was not available. Separated from the beach only by a road and promenade, Lowry could look directly out over the North Sea from his bedroom and from the dining room where he always sat at the same table, next to the window. The North Sea fascinated him and he would spend hours walking along the sea front. Fascinated by monuments, Lowry was interested in Bede's Cross, which he saw when walking towards Roker. This monument had been erected in 1904 in memory of the Venerable Bede.



Seaburn Hotel in about 1960

When he had no sketch book with him, Lowry would often draw in pencil or ballpoint pen on the back of scraps of paper such as envelopes, and sometimes gave them to people he met. The fact that Sunderland attracted day-trippers to the coast rather than residential holidaymakers pleased Lowry, who felt that many of the larger seaside resorts had an artificial nature. Plain and unspoilt, the sea front at Roker had a quiet Victorian feeling, which reminded him of family holidays at Lytham St Annes.

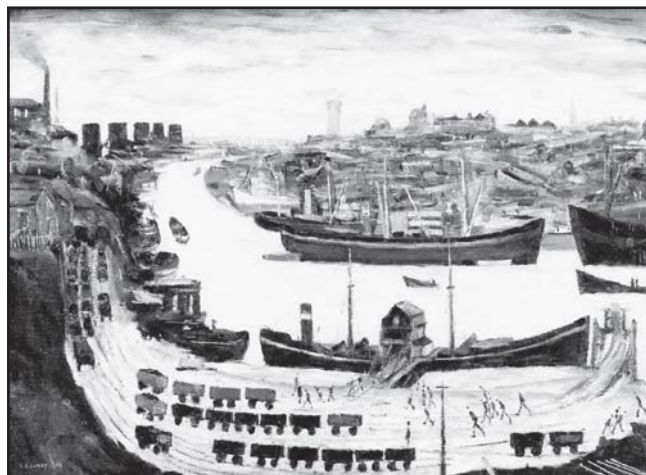
When in Sunderland, Lowry often visited the Museum and Art Gallery, where an exhibition of his work had been held in 1942. One of the Museum's paintings that he particularly liked was T M Hemy's *Old Sunderland* (1885), an atmospheric view of the River Wear and Ettrick's Quay at the East End of the town. Sunderland Museum and Art Gallery was the first venue for the national tour of the 1966 Arts Council L S Lowry exhibition. This was a great success, with over 13,000 people visiting the exhibition during the twenty-three days that it was open.

While Lowry loved the sea front, the fact that Sunderland was also a busy industrial town with a river at its heart was another reason he chose to stay. Lowry picked out two main areas of the river as subjects for his work. These were the harbour mouth and the Lambton Drops, where much of Sunderland's industrial activity took place in the 1960s. He also had a particular liking for Monkwearmouth and the East End of Sunderland, where he was attracted by some old, neglected buildings and made a number of drawings of them.

Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens house a collection of Lowry paintings, some of which are on display in the Art Gallery.



L S Lowry at Sunderland Museum & Art Gallery in August 1966
© Sunderland Echo



Docksides, Sunderland 1962 © The Estate of L S Lowry, 2007

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Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens, Tyne & Wear Museums

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Find out more about Lowry

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library & Arts Centre, which has many books on LS Lowry, such as:

- 'L S Lowry', edited by Leber, M & Sandling, J (1987)
- 'The Paintings of L S Lowry', by Levy, M (1978)
- 'L S Lowry - A Biography', by Rohde, S (1999, 3rd edition)
- 'L S Lowry in the North East', edited by Horsley, J (1989) (revised edition will be available in late 2007, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund)
- 'The Lowry Lexicon: An A-Z of L S Lowry', Rhode, S (2001)

Visit Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens to see paintings and drawings by Lowry on display in the Art Gallery.

Find out more about Lowry on the following websites:

www.thelowry.com/lslowry

www.berwick-pt.co.uk

www.twmuseums.org.uk/sunderland