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WINSTON GRAHAM, POLDARK & PERRANPORTH

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There is a Charles Causey poem called *My Young Man's a Cornishman*. When I met my husband in the early seventies, he was my young Cornishman. I was delighted to come and stay with his family in Cornwall but knew very little about Cornwall other than memorable family holidays there. Winston Graham's books about the Poldarks gave me valuable insight into the history and culture of Cornwall. I enjoyed reading every one and like millions sat down with my, by then, husband and his family on a Sunday evening to enjoy the BBC Poldark series in 1975. Now that there is a new and equally popular BBC TV dramatization of Winston Graham's work I would like to pass on some fragments I have gathered about his time in Perranporth, from Winston Graham's own writing, his rare interviews, obituaries, research in Perranzabuloe Museum's archives and local memories.

Winston Graham relates in his autobiography *Memoirs of a Private Man* how the family moved to Perranporth after his father's stroke because his brother Cecil was determined to move there following a holiday he had enjoyed with his fiancée in September 1924. Cecil had found the place in the *Great Western Holiday Guide* and fell in love with Cornwall and especially Perranporth. As Winston tells us, Cecil was so keen to move to Perranporth that the family took a holiday there for two weeks, staying at the Tywarnhayle Hotel, with a view to deciding if that was the place to start anew. Winston tells us, **'The whole family saw the light and was converted.'** Within that time they had arranged to purchase a plot of land from Donald Healey's father for Cecil and soon-to-be wife Elsie, to build a shop. They also rented a house in Perrancoombe for a year to accommodate Winston and his parents. They all moved down eighteen months later. As Winston said, **'Cecil never wanted to move again.'** Several older people remember Winston Graham's brother when he was elderly, cycling so slowly through the village that they wondered he didn't fall off.

Winston Graham was born in Manchester and went to a small private school near the family home. Because he was considered a delicate child the doctor had advised a short school journey, as he didn't think

Winston could manage a longer one to school, thus dashing his father's hopes of Winston going to Manchester Grammar. Perranzabuloe Museum holds a copy of a school report for Winston Grime, for Grime was the family name, when he was 15 in 1923. He attained the highest score in the school and the comment by the Headmaster praises his work and conduct as ***'excellent'*** claiming that, ***'his exemplary conduct throughout (has) been marked by sterling honesty and integrity of purpose'*** [the Head's underlining]. Though Winston in his autobiography is very modest and self-effacing about his abilities, the Headmaster's comments are perceptive.

Winston shared his brother's love of Cornwall as is exemplified in his book *Poldark's Cornwall* where his enthusiasm and knowledge shine through. He was to remain in Perranporth for 34 years. During that time and supported by his mother, his career as a writer flourished. He also first met his wife Jean Williamson there when he was eighteen and she was fourteen. Her family had moved from Plymouth after the First World War when her father was sent to supervise the dismantling and detonating of the explosives at Nobel's Dynamite Works on the cliffs at Cligga, up St George's Hill along the coast from Perranporth. Although Mr Williamson was transferred a few months later, the family remained as they had relations in Cornwall. As Winston says, ***'My wife ... had a lot of Cornish cousins and was herself a quarter of Cornish blood.'*** He found her knowledge of Cornwall useful for the Poldark novels as ***'she drew on memories of her Cornish farmer cousins.'*** He also spent time chatting to local miners and fishermen and the people one meets in everyday life. He tells us ***'From many old men I heard about the mines and the country's strange history.'*** In fact many of the Poldark stories are based on historical events in Perranporth and the surrounding area, such as the wreck of *La Seine*¹ clearly visible on the beach at low water. He also used local names like Wheal Leisure Mine, now in the centre of Perranporth and the main dumps of which lie buried under the Wheal Leisure car park. There's Nampara (the middle 'a' being pronounced as in 'cat') a small hamlet on the road up to Perrancoombe and Hendrawna consisting of three houses and a barn a short way up a dirt track called Hendrawna Lane.

What makes Winston's work stand out over so many novels set in Cornwall is that he tried to thoroughly understand Cornwall and the Cornish and went to great lengths in his research. One example of his detailed research is shown in a copy of a letter in Perranzabuloe Museum's archives. In reply to a query of Winston's needing forensic advice from the

County Pathologist it starts **'Dear Winston, Re: the girl you strangled.'** In the novel *The Sleeping Partner* the main character finds his wife buried under a pile of anthracite in the cellar. In his story Winston has used the words of the County Pathologist to describe what he finds. Winston also enjoyed the friendship of Fred Harris, an adult education lecturer with the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) who helped with historical advice for the Poldark novels.

Though a rigorous researcher Winston was not without humour as shown in the letter he sent to Perranzabuloe Museum when President. He was responding to an invitation to a Wine and Cheese Party at the Museum with apologies for being unable to attend and enclosing a cheque saying, **'Spend it as you wish, but not entirely, I hope, on improving your toilet facilities.'**

Winston Graham continued writing until the very end of his life. There is a delightful story in the 2003 publication *Scryfa*, celebrating contemporary Cornish writing and edited by Simon Parker. The short story is entitled *Meeting Demelza* and describes the writer's conversation with Demelza, how he created her and the possible meaning of her name. Many who knew the Graham family felt that Demelza was very like Winston's wife, Jean. On reading this story one certainly feels that the character of Demelza was still very much alive even after all the years since he had created her.

The first four Poldark books were written in Perranporth, the seeds of the story being sown when Winston was working as a coastguard on the cliffs at Perranporth. One of his relations suggests that when he had a good idea he wrote it down, but because of the fear of U-boats he had to turn away and scribble by the light of a torch which he shielded with his coat.

The name of Poldark, Winston tells us, originated from his friendship with the young chemist who lived next door to his brother. The chemist was called Polgreen but Winston thought this did not sound dark enough for his main character so the name became Poldark. Winston, Ridley Polgreen and his sister Vera, were keen tennis players, as seen in the photographs below.

During his time in Perranporth, and even after he moved away, Winston Graham continued to support organisations in Perranporth. He was a patron of Perranporth Players and is mentioned in a 1957 programme. In the same year he contributed to the funds of Perranporth Town Band and wished them a very successful season. He was a member,

trustee and chairman of Perranporth Tennis Club, claiming **'misspent my youth playing tennis because you had nobody to let down but yourself ... Nobody else can shout at you.'** In 1985 he agreed to be President of Perranzabuloe Museum at its inauguration. His association with Perranporth and the surrounding area continued with the holiday brochures that advertised, **'Holiday in Poldark Country'** right up until 1993.

Most of Winston Graham's papers and manuscripts have been donated to the Royal Institution of Cornwall in Truro by his son Andrew and daughter Rosamund. Andrew has been thoughtful enough to provide relevant copies for Perranzabuloe Museum and these are the ones that have been used for this article. These include a letter from a cousin about which Andrew comments, **'What is amusing is the deeply ironic style that is used. Clearly other members of his family were part jealous, part amused and part admiring of my father's success.'** There is also a child-like story written in capitals, which Andrew suggests could be his father's first attempt at a story, and a construction of a family tree for the Poldarks.

Winston Graham died at his home in East Sussex on 10th July 2003. Although he was actually 95 at the time of his death most obituaries gave the wrong age because he had misled publishers about his real age in case they would not publish his work.

Perranzabuloe Museum started a fund to erect a granite seat in his memory on the site of the wooden bungalow Lech Carrygy where he wrote his first Poldark books,² above Flat Rocks on Perranporth beach. (The hut burnt down in 1984.)

The Museum Management Committee had to quickly arrange for an extra plaque to be added giving the correct birth date of 1908. The seat is well used as evidenced by the wear and tear of the ground around it.

Winston Graham took delight in being known as **'the most successful unknown novelist in England'** but the success of his Poldark novels has made sure that his name is still celebrated.

In conclusion here is a quote that demonstrates the fondness Winston Graham felt for Cornwall and the Cornish people that were the plentiful inspiration for his stories. In an undated interview³ for *Sussex Life* he states, **'I don't know whether the eccentrics make Cornwall what it is, or whether Cornwall makes the eccentrics what they are.'**

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Wartime coastguards, Winston Graham front right.
Photo: Perranzabuloe Museum, photographer unknown.



Ridley Polgreen's father Cyril's chemist shop, next to Cecil Grime's outfitters.⁴

Photo: Perranzabuloe Museum, Kent Collection.



Top: a young Winston Graham with Lylie Robins on the left and Vera Polgreen on the right.

Bottom: Ridley Polgreen centre

Photos: Perranzabuloe Museum, Kent Collection.



Top: Lech Carrygy (Flat Rocks) the wooden bungalow Winston Graham rented and where he wrote his first Poldark novels.

Bottom: the plaque on the end of the granite seat erected by Perranzabuloe Museum in memory of Winston Graham.

Photos: Perranzabuloe Museum, © J Thorn / L Miners.



Memorial seat on the site of Lech Carrygy showing the view of Perranporth beach Winston Graham had when writing his Poldark novels.

Photo: Perranzabuloe Museum, © L Miners.

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NOTES

¹ WG used the 1900 wreck of *La Seine* as the basis of his 1945 novel *The Forgotten Story*.

² WG wrote most of *Demelza* in Lech Carrygy, but none of the other Poldark novels.

³ The interview, given to Victoria Kingston, appeared in the February 1999 issue of *Sussex Life*.

⁴ The article's caption states "Cecil Polgreen" and "Cyril Grime". I have corrected Cecil Grime's name and assume that Mr Polgreen was called Cyril. Three other typos in the article have also been silently corrected.