## The Big Read

## for painter Teresa From darkness into light

The light that shines in the paintings of **TERESA WICKSTEED** today is a reflection of the darkest moment in her life, she tells MARTIN FREEMAN

N LIFE there was so nearly death. Teresa Wicksteed had just given birth to daughter Rose.

The new mum had a few moments of joy with her first baby before nine words changed her world.

"I think we have a bit of a bleed," one of the doctors said. That was her last conscious

Next she remembers walking through a tunnel towards an amazing, strong light. She looked down on her body from way above.

"I saw my father who had died two years before," she says.

Then she woke up and found she was on a life-support machine. Teresa had suffered a huge haem-

orrhage. She was told she effectively died several times during those missing five and a half hours. "The anaesthetist asked me lots of

estions about what I could remember." says Teresa. "He took notes but said nothing.

Various other (medical) people came to see me and said it was a bit of a miracle that I was still alive."

Only later when she was well, and as her husband John supported her through her recuperation, was she strong enough to try to find out more.

"I read everything I could about people who had gone through something like that, people from dif-ferent parts of the world, from different cultures and different religions and no religion.

"They all remembered the same things, that 'out of body' experience and that strong light, a feeling of calm,

"I realised I had had a near-death experience.

The incident and the knowledge she gained from her encounter with death have had a profound effect.

What Teresa saw 33 years ago she is producing for others to experience. The accomplished artist bases her

vibrant, fluid paintings on the vision she experienced. Her cliffside studio offers one of the

most stunning views in Cornwall, across miles of unspoilt Whitsand The natural wonders are an influence. They can't compete, though, with

supernatural wonders. "I meditate a lot." she says, "It clears the mind. It is a bit of an altered state in

"That bright light and those colours

a way, and it takes me back.

"The view does influence me and the colours do change slightly with the seasons, not as bright in the winter.

"People see the lines in my paintings as being the waves in the sea.

"But they aren't. They are from the near-death experience, from what I

"What happened to me changed so many things.

Home then was a modest house in London. Today she lives in a castle in Cornwall, or at least in a house next to a fort that she and John own. They own Polhawn Fort on the Rame peninsula.

Rose thrived, "She was the healthiest baby in the hospital and I was sickest mother the nurses in the hos-

effects being with her but not fully

boarded at Channing School, north London, the painting had to take second place.

Leeds University where she met John, who was reading classics. They were school teacher.

He enjoyed success with one work that was staged at the King's Head Islington, a leading off-West End

But the need to make a living led him into building contracting. He began doing work for family before turning a DIY hobby into a thriving

vention and a bleed followed.

intravascular clotting, caused by nto her circulation system

bleed, it doesn't stop.

When Teresa took the decision to try for a second child she had several miscarriages before a successful

hospital under the same consultation who probably saved my life when I gave both to Rose.

terhooks, but I decided I wanted as little intervention as possible. I had talked this over a lot with my GP he felt that the problem with the first delivery was too much intervention. I'd had an epidural, very strong con tractions and a forceps delivery.

mum as John's business built up.

The move to Cornwall began as a

something in the country," she says. "We were looking for something near London that we could get to easily and that he could do up.

auction in a magazine. I cut it out and said to John, 'Here is your country

pital used to say to me." She went on to have a second child, Bernard.

There was no sudden transform ation, though, after that first traumatic birth. Teresa talks about the nerging until she returned to paint

near Bognor Regis, West Sussex. When she won a scholarship and

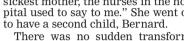
acquaintances and got together when she moved to London as a primary John was a struggling playwright

Life was routine until Teresa's first pregnancy. "In those days, doctors didn't like a labour to go beyond 24 hours," she says. That led to inter-

amniotic fluid – the liquid in the sac in which the baby develops – leaking

"It basically means that if you get a

John this time. The medical team was ready in case anything went wrong but nothing did."



ies." she savs. "I was told not to go to art college because it was seen as a bit dodgy. It wasn't thought to lead to a Teresa did a degree in English as

Teresa suffered disseminated

"For the delivery, I was in the same

"The medical staff were all on ten-

"We only had the midwives and

"John was interested in buying

"I saw Polhawn being advertised for

She had always enjoyed art at home growing up in the village of Yapton,

'I was pushed into academic stud-

"I was very very lucky I was in Queen Charlotte's a maternity hospital that was also a teaching hospital had the best care."

cottage'. It was a joke, but he was

Teresa enjoyed life as a full-time "I thought he was bonkers at the

> The fort, needing large-scale renovation, was sold at auction – but not to John and Teresa. "I was pregnant with Bernard at the time and we didn't go for it.

About a year later Polhawn came back on the market and was theirs. "We had no clear plan what to do with it," says Teresa.

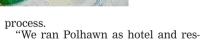
property market in the late 1980s was ill-timed. "Not long after we bought it came Black Monday, the financial

The chaos in the financial markets that began on Monday October 19, 1987 led to a crash in property prices the worst outcome for a John's building contractor business.

'We were over-committed financially, is the polite way or wording it.
We had a property in London and got permission to build a new house, but only after a long-winded planning







buildings for weddings.

"We tried self-catering lettings next.

Then the law changed in 1995, allowing local authorities to licence suitable

"We applied and were the first or second venue in Cornwall to have a

Today, Polhawn is a highly success-

ful venue for self-catering weddings. Couples and their guest are drawn by

the romance of the setting and the

That takes care of business. Mean-

while, the move to Cornwall prompted Teresa to pick up a paint brush for the

first time for years.

"Would I have been painting now if I

"Probably not. The built-up envir-

She was inspired by the light – on the

"It became more and more insist-

She was persuaded to do some

onment was not something I wanted to

landscape and inside her memories.

unique history of the building.

were still living in London?

them. "The London property was beautaurant for one season. The hotel was a tiful, a Georgian house that had been success but the restaurant wasn't. done up and was finished. There was People did want to come all the way out no choice. That was the one that

So Teresa and John and their two young children set up home in Corn-

Polhawn included a bungalow in which the family lived while the fort underwent complete refurbishment. The neglected mid-19th century fort as turned into an up-market hotel.

Despite the name, Polhawn was a battery not a fort. It was a fortified gun emplacement built in the mid-19th century as a part of a line of defences to protect Britain from the theatre of French invasion.

Unlike a fort, it was not designed to be a lived-in fortification. The accommodation was basic and, as befits the proper name, the building had taken a hattery from the elements: it had been exposed to the full fury of the pre vailing south westerly wind for a cen tury and a half

The hungalow would take a hat tering too: a landslip wrecked the home beyond repair. John and Teresa



next a degree in fine art at what is now almouth University.
"For your dissertation at Falmouth

you were encouraged to go into yourself and look at why you paint. 'That was really important to me. It made my painting much more per-

'The near-death experience and

what I saw had never left me. Now I was

responding to it through my painting. "Painting for me is all about the light, the experience of light. "That was the overwhelming ory I had from the near-death

experience. It helped me realise what I was painting and why." She works in oils for their purity of colour and translucency. She also says she enjoys the slower pace that is dictated by having to wait for the many.

many layers of oil to dry. Teresa has exhibited every year ce graduating in 2002. Her work has been shown at several venues in London including the Royal College of The Brownston Gallery in Modbury

St Ives and Artmill in Plymouth, are ong the many venues that have exhibited her paintings. formal study. First came a foundation course at Saltash College in 1995 and Teresa's work is curre in Artmill 2, Dartmouth. Teresa's work is currently on show

Bowie in Totnes, the Church of St Ia in

Valley's Open Studios event – she was one of the first members of the art

London.

Fellow abstract painters Bridget Riley and Mark Rothko are among the artists who have influenced her, she

Her other artist outlets include singing with Saltash Rock Choir. Creativity has been passed on to her

son and daughter: they both work in Rose is a casting director and Bernard an animator. They both live in

ABOVE and LEFT: Polhawn Fort on the Rame Peninsula (pictured below), FAR LEFT:

As for when she nearly passed on, what is her view on what happens after death? "I feel that the spirit is separate from

the body and much more powerful than the hody "I think it probably goes on after

individual wav. "People are afraid of dving but I don't think it is scary when it happens," she says.

Then Teresa smiles, "People will think, 'oh no! she's away with the

## A potted history of **Polhawn**

POLHAWN Fort is a "Palmerston folly" – one of a string of coastal defences associated with 19th century
Prime Minister Lord

They were built to deter the French from invading. The network cost a fortune and the time it was completed.

between 1862 and 1867 as a battery, a specialised to 'batter' the enemy. A fort was a command post with accommodation and supplies for a full

John Wicksteed's historical research shows that the name was apparently changed from battery to fort after 1927, when the building was sold by the then Ministry of War. It was manned until the end

of World War One (1914-18). "For a few months at the beginning of the Great Wa the magazine was used as a windowless dungeon, or detention cell for errant

soldiers," writes John. Their writings on the wall "factual, cringing, and sarcastic, are still in good condition" he says.

A recently excavated 24 pounder cannon of the Blomefield design, dating from about 1809 and weighing two and a half tons is visible half-buried outside the back door.

Picture by John Such

