

From darkness into light for painter Teresa

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**

IN 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 memory.

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 haemorrhage. She was told she effectively died several times during those missing five and a half hours.

"The anaesthetist asked me lots of questions 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 different 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, not fear.

"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 Bay.

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 a way, and it takes me back.

"That bright light and those colours – I still see them.

"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 saw.

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

There was no sudden transformation, though, after that first traumatic birth. Teresa talks about the effects being with her but not fully emerging until she returned to painting.

She had always enjoyed art at home growing up in the village of Yapton, near Bognor Regis, West Sussex. When she won a scholarship and boarded at Channing School, north London, the painting had to take second place.

"I was pushed into academic studies," she says. "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 proper job."

Teresa did a degree in English at Leeds University where she met John, who was reading classics. They were acquaintances and got together when she moved to London as a primary school teacher.

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

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 business.

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 intervention and a bleed followed.

Teresa suffered disseminated intravascular clotting, caused by amniotic fluid – the liquid in the sac in which the baby develops – leaking into her circulation system.

"It basically means that if you get a bleed, it doesn't stop.

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

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

"For the delivery, I was in the same hospital under the same consultation who probably saved my life when I gave both to Rose.

"The medical staff were all on tenterhooks, 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 contractions and a forceps delivery.

"We only had the midwives and John this time. The medical team was ready in case anything went wrong, but nothing did."

Teresa enjoyed life as a full-time mum as John's business built up.

The move to Cornwall began as a joke.

"John was interested in buying 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.

"I saw Polhawn being advertised for auction in a magazine. I cut it out and said to John, 'Here is your country



Artist Teresa Wicksteed at home in her studio at Polhawn Fort, Rame Head

cottage'. It was a joke, but he was interested.

"I thought he was bonkers at the time."

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.

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

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



Picture by John Such

ABOVE and LEFT: Polhawn Fort on the Rame Peninsula (pictured below). FAR LEFT: Etheric 4, a painting by Teresa Wicksteed



Picture by John Such

Polhawn and we had to sell one of them.

"The London property was beautiful, a Georgian house that had been done up and was finished. There was no choice. That was the one that would sell."

So Teresa and John and their two young children set up home in Cornwall.

Polhawn included a bungalow in which the family lived while the fort underwent complete refurbishment. The neglected mid-19th century fort was 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 battering from the elements: it had been exposed to the full fury of the prevailing south westerly wind for a century and a half.

The bungalow would take a battering too: a landslip wrecked the home beyond repair. John and Teresa got permission to build a new house, but only after a long-winded planning

process.

"We ran Polhawn as hotel and restaurant for one season. The hotel was a success but the restaurant wasn't. People did want to come all the way out here.

"We tried self-catering lettings next. Then the law changed in 1995, allowing local authorities to licence suitable buildings for weddings.

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

Today, Polhawn is a highly successful venue for self-catering weddings. Couples and their guests are drawn by the romance of the setting and the unique history of the building.

That takes care of business. Meanwhile, the move to Cornwall prompted Teresa to pick up a paintbrush for the first time for years.

"Would I have been painting now if I were still living in London?"

"Probably not. The built-up environment was not something I wanted to paint."

She was inspired by the light – on the landscape and inside her memories.

"It became more and more insistent."

She was persuaded to do some formal study. First came a foundation course at Saltash College in 1995 and

next a degree in fine art at what is now Falmouth 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 personal."

"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 memory 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 since graduating in 2002. Her work has been shown at several venues in London including the Royal College of Art.

The Brownston Gallery in Modbury, Bowie in Totnes, the Church of St Ila in St Ives and Artmill in Plymouth, are among the many venues that have exhibited her paintings.

Teresa's work is currently on show in Artmill 2, Dartmouth.

She takes part in Drawn To The Valley's Open Studios event – she was one of the first members of the art group.

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

Her other artist outlets include singing with Saltash Rock Choir. Creativity has been passed on to her son and daughter: they both work in film.

Rose is a casting director and Bernard an animator. They both live in London.

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 body.

"I think it probably goes on after death, but not necessarily in some individual way.

"People are afraid of dying 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 fairies!'"

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 Palmerston.

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

Polhawn was built between 1862 and 1867 as a battery, a specialised fortification with armaments to 'batter' the enemy. A fort was a command post with accommodation and supplies for a full complement of officers and men.

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 War the magazine was used as a windowless dungeon, or detention cell for errant soldiers," writes John.

His writings on the wall, "factual, cringing, and sarcastic, are still in good condition" he says.

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

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