



# J.A.M. Lomas

## Lost Painter of Porlock?

For years, he perfected his art on the fringes of Exmoor, unknown and unrecognised. Then, after a decade of success in the top London galleries, J.A.M. Lomas again disappeared from view. Here, Jeff Cox investigates the life of one of West Somerset's most accomplished, but now sadly neglected, landscape artists.

In the summer of 1905, the artist John Arthur Mease Lomas was working alone in his secluded studio in West Somerset, putting the finishing touches to his latest canvas, 'Porlock, from Hurlstone Point'.

For weeks he had struggled to portray the complexities of the light; to capture the sun reflecting on Porlock Bay, the soft dappled light over the marshes, the distant haze high over Whitstone Post.

Stacked along the walls of his studio were some of his other recent studies – 'A Sunny Afternoon, Bratton'; 'Sunlight in Horner Woods'; 'The North Hill, Minehead'; 'A Hazy Morning, Devon Cattle'.

Lomas had developed his art for more than 20 years, after starting his training at the top salons in London, Rome and Paris. But then he returned to West Somerset, determined to shake off these outside influences and to perfect his own artistic style.

Few knew of his work; he appears to have painted in solitary isolation. His passionate determination was to reflect the kaleidoscopic qualities of light in a landscape. His studio was littered with scores of canvasses that marked his slow progression towards finding his true and distinctive style.

And this solitary pursuit was finally to be recognised. He had just sold his first work – 'Porlock, from Dunster Steep' – to the barrister, Sir Charles Chadwyck Healey, QC, who had built New Place (now known as Bossington Place) in Porlock some ten years earlier.

Now, in 1905, Lomas' solitary artistic life in West Somerset was to be transformed. The precise details are sketchy, but it's clear that his paintings had been seen by a City financier who was on holiday in the district and was so struck by the originality of the work that he persuaded Lomas to select some canvasses for his first public exhibition.

Apparently in desperation at the quality of much of his work, he burnt hundreds of his paintings, reportedly as many as 800.

This was to be no debut exhibition in a small regional gallery, such as an unknown artist might expect. This City 'gent' clearly had contacts, for in April 1906 Lomas was asked to crate up his paintings for delivery to a top London venue, the Quest Gallery at 172 New Bond Street.

Lomas was under such pressure to select paintings he thought worthy of this prestigious venue that, apparently in desperation at the quality of much of his work, he burnt hundreds of his paintings, reportedly as many as 800. He finally sent just a dozen to London.

At the end of April 1906 the Quest Gallery opened its doors; the sophisticated Metropolitan critics sharpened their pencils as they scanned the first exhibition by this unknown artist from the unfashionable West Country. It was entitled 'Scenes in West Somerset, Light and Shade on the Borders of Exmoor, by Mr J.A.M. Lomas'.

But any fears that Lomas may have had were unfounded. His powerful and original depictions of the West Somerset landscape



Tina, off Studland.  
Exhibited at Royal Society of British Artists 1912.



Porlock Bay, from Hurlstone Point.  
Exhibited at the 1906 Quest Gallery Exhibition.

were welcomed by the London art world with unanimous enthusiasm. The art critic for one of the leading journals of the day, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, wrote: "Mr Lomas' landscapes of Minehead and Porlock district are certainly among the most remarkable and brilliant things that have seen the light of exhibition for years past and he steps with one stride into the foremost ranks of modern British landscape painters." The critic for the recently-launched *Daily Mail* was equally impressed: "It is

Porlock from Dunster Steep. Exhibited at the 1906 Quest Gallery Exhibition and (inset) self portrait.

impossible here to go into Mr Lomas' techniques but the results are brilliant to a degree and his little exhibition ought to establish him among the most original and brilliant landscape painters of the day." Similarly enthusiastic reviews appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*, the *Morning Post*, the *Yorkshire Observer* and even the *Dundee Advertiser*.

But despite this national acclaim, despite clearly being one of West Somerset's most significant artists of the twentieth century, frustratingly little is recorded about Lomas' life in the district. Most importantly, we don't even know the location of that lonely studio in West Somerset, in which he laboured unknown for so long. The *Pall Mall Gazette* described Lomas as "a painter who for twenty years has worked alone and uninfluenced in the seclusion of a remote country village on the northern slopes of Exmoor." The *Daily Mail* said that Lomas "pitched his tent in a peaceful little West Country village".

The weight of evidence, the subjects of many of his paintings, and his known contacts with local families suggest that Lomas must have worked in, or close to, Porlock, but there is no factual record to prove this. However, while much of his life as an artist in the district remains sketchy, we do know more about his West Somerset background.

John Arthur Mease Lomas was born in 1862, the elder son of Thomas Lomas, a wealthy industrialist who came to West Somerset from North Shields and established the Bristol Channel Chemical Works at the Quay in Minehead. In 1877 Thomas Lomas built the first villa on North Hill, Cleveland, which is still there today, close to St Michaels' Church and now divided into apartments.

Much more is known about John's younger brother, Harold Lomas. Apparently guided by his elder brother's artistic vision, Harold started a small photography business in Selbourne Place in Minehead in 1899 and immediately specialised in photographing local hunting scenes. When Philip Evered was preparing his well-known journal, *Staghunting with the Devon and Somerset 1887-1901*, he asked Harold to illustrate his book with photographs of the hunt across the moor. Harold went on to film the first ever moving images of the hunt, the start of a film-making career that was to take him as far afield as Norway, Borneo and China, and to establish him as an early pioneer of the British cinema.

In his notes to that 1906 exhibition in New Bond Street, John was keen to draw a distinct line between his own and Harold's artistic approach, noting that many would expect his paintings of the Exmoor landscape to be "a literal transcript of the forms and colour", but that this was the province of photography, "a matter of science rather than of art". He was more concerned with painting his landscapes under "special conditions of light" and presenting their leading characteristics "in the simplest possible manner". His paintings reduce the landscape to flat, mosaic-like



*Hill Clouds 1911 (cropped).*  
Bottom left: The only known photograph of J.A.M. Lomas, on a bicycle, with father Thomas Lomas outside the family home, Cleveland, on North Hill, Minehead (photo taken by Harold Lomas) and the list of exhibits, Quest Gallery, New Bond Street, 1906.

blocks of light and colour; he strips away unnecessary details and devotes the canvas to the essential power of the scene.

Such was the success of his 1906 exhibition that John Lomas decided that he would need to move to the heart of the art world if he was truly to make his name as an artist. By 1911 he was listed as living in the grand Waldorf Chambers, in the Aldwych, with his wife Mary, an enameller and art critic whom he had married in 1908.

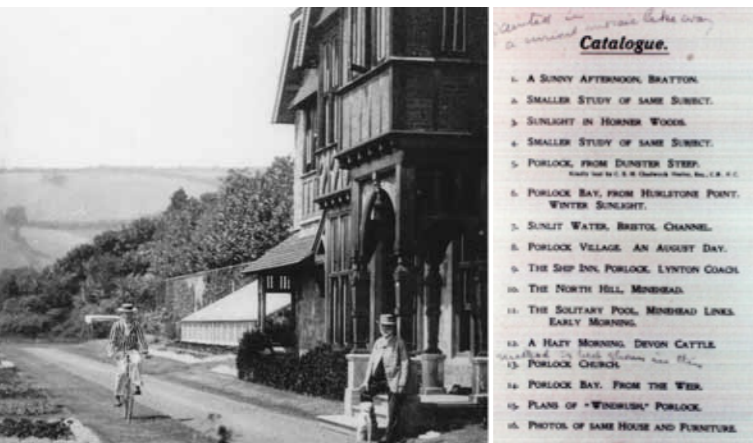
From 1912 he exhibited regularly at the Royal Society of British Artists in Suffolk Street and was soon elected a member of the Society. His work was regularly reviewed. In October 1912 *The New York Times* hailed him as one of the wave of English painters who had developed the work of the French Impressionists into the purer colour and line of Post Impressionism.

Over the next ten years Lomas developed his earlier mosaic-like landscapes, seeking inspiration in natural land forms around the country, particularly in Dorset and parts of Scotland.

Then, some time in the 1920s, and for reasons which have not yet come to light, Lomas' mainstream work appears to have dried up, he moved to Wainhill in Oxfordshire with his wife and finally, in the late 1930s (by now he and Mary were into their seventies), John Arthur Mease Lomas returned to West Somerset, settling in Timberscombe.

Here he is remembered as a rather stooped old gentleman, with a long white beard, elegantly dressed in black frock coat and hat, and who still painted daily in his studio in Great House Street, constructed for him by a local builder Frank Huxtable. Mary had died in 1938, leaving no children and in his last decade JAM Lomas lived alone, apparently in some poverty, supported by a few local art connoisseurs who still bought his distinctive landscapes. He died in Timberscombe on 6 January 1950, aged 87; just five mourners attended his funeral in St Petrock's Church. His tombstone still stands in the graveyard, propped up against the church wall, the only tangible evidence of one of West Somerset's most distinguished artists.

Jeff Cox is keen to hear from anyone who has fresh information about J.A.M. Lomas, or who may know the whereabouts of any more of his landscapes; please do contact Jeff by email [jeff.cox@talk21.com](mailto:jeff.cox@talk21.com) or phone 01494 862918.



- Painted in minehead like was a summer in minehead*
- Catalogue.**
1. A SUNNY AFTERNOON BRATTON.
  2. SMALLER STUDY OF SAME SUBJECT.
  3. SUNLIGHT IN HORNER WOODS.
  4. SMALLER STUDY OF SAME SUBJECT.
  5. PORLOCK, FROM DUNSTER STEEP.
  6. PORLOCK BAY, FROM HURLESTONE POINT. WINTER SUNLIGHT.
  7. SUNSET WATER, BRISTOL CHANNEL.
  8. PORLOCK VILLAGE, AN AUGUST DAY.
  9. THE SHIP INN, PORLOCK, LYNTON COACH.
  10. THE NORTH HILL, MINEHEAD.
  11. THE SOLITARY POOL, MINEHEAD LANE. EARLY MORNING.
  12. A HAZY MORNING, DEVON CATTLE.
  13. PORLOCK CHURCH.
  14. PORLOCK BAY, FROM THE WEB.
  15. PLANS OF "WINDHUSH" PORLOCK.
  16. PHOTOS OF SAME HOUSE AND FURNITURE.