





Cover image:

***Embarkation On The Steam Tractor***

Charles Williams 2016 35x45cm oil on canvas

***The Boy With The Glasses***

Charles Williams 2016 40x30cm oil on canvas



## Grandfathers: painting from the archive by Charles Williams

*Localism And Legacy is a project about Faversham, a town in Kent, and its relationship with the First World War. Faversham is blessed with a Society, which has conserved and curated its history for many years and we, a group of artists with different connections to the town, were asked to respond to its museum collection, to make work considering and perhaps illuminating the effect of the war on this town, fought a hundred years ago. The work was exhibited in August 2016 at the Fleur Gallery in Faversham.*

I wanted to work from photographs in the archive, using them as a source for paintings. I was interested in two photographs in the list of artefacts I was given, described as being of people looking at the destruction wrought by a lone bombing raid by a German aircraft on Norman Road. I live in a late Victorian terraced house round the corner from there, built in the late nineteenth century on the edge of the brickfields. My wife and I moved here from London, but we are from this area originally, and the photographs are of familiar subjects, a hundred years ago.

Photographs of home in 1916 shock, black and white images not of mud and weaponry and twisted, rotting skeletons grinning in rusting helmets but of Norman Road, or Athelstan Road, Victorian terraces and villas with people shot while walking in their stiff suits and dresses, although where they are walking to is hard to conjecture. Did they go shopping as we do? What for? Weren't the groceries delivered? Perhaps it's the ceremonial peace they contain that shocks, because of what was going on a hundred miles away or so to their sons, fathers, brothers, sisters.





The raids must have come as a shock to them on Norman Road, but perhaps not as big a shock as the explosion at the gunpowder works. It wasn't as ordered and calm a life as the poses in the photographs might suggest. We carry our own vision to images, imagining their stories are ours. They are not. Grandfathers never told the whole truth about the War, either, because it couldn't really be told, and shouldn't sometimes.

Picasso, the grandfather of Modern Art, said that a painting is the sum of its destructions, and poured images of destruction into his painting of Guernica, a small town in Spain destroyed by foreign backers of his fellow countrymen. Faversham wasn't destroyed, neither by the raids, which were apparently quite random and untargeted affairs, nor by the explosion at the gunpowder works, but things changed quite a lot. The photograph, which catches at a tiny moment and then replicates it for us, remains.

Photography has everything to do with that tiny moment. Painting is unlike photography in that it contains time differently; anything that happens in a photograph after the shutter has clicked is post-production, editing, while painting is all editing, all destruction and remaking. We are making a New World, they said at the beginning of the last century, a new Twentieth Century World, as if that made it unique.

In the archive I went unsystematically through the box of photographs, looking for the pictures of bomb damage on Norman Road, but I couldn't find anything. There were, however, lots of photographs of men in rather well cut uniforms, looking elegant. Even the old men.







The photographs that interested me most seemed to be in pairs. There was a pair of identical pictures of a hospital in the Mount, a large house on the edge of town. There was a photograph of returned, wounded men, two of them wearing captured German helmets, with white patches of bandage seemingly casually stuck on their faces, grinning off to the left of the picture, and a photocopy of it, making the white bandages more evident.



There were two photographs on larger sheets of paper than the others, printed much later and bearing scars of aging, of men in uniform getting into a steam-driven cart and being driven down Preston Street, and there were two others also with damaged negatives, with more men in uniform smiling and joking, looking back at the photographer. In one of these the men, or boys, are standing in what looks like an alley, some of them smoking in a movie star manner, some smiling frankly, others looking back, impassive, and in the other, which has been processed darker, they sit on the curb - I thought Edwardians were supposed to be formal people - and smile back at us, a row of good-looking, friendly young men. One of them seems to have no front teeth, and leans back, as if he has made a joke, and another, the one on the edge of the group, can't concentrate and moves himself, looking away to the right, his cap pushed back on his head, his dark hair making him look like Dean Martin. They might be Faversham's Rat Pack - popular with the girls, expert snooker players and always getting into scrapes. Equally, they might not even know each other.



***The Returned (previous page)***

Charles Williams 2016 35x45cm oil on canvas





When my father was eleven, his father died. That was in the late forties. My grandfather was a legendarily ancient figure in family stories, who had enrolled at the Greenwich Naval Academy but ran off to join the Devonshire Regiment when the Boer War was declared. He was a Colour Sergeant in the Devons, but was shot in the stomach by accident on a firing range while serving in India on the Andaman Islands, which meant that he was disabled. I don't think he could walk properly any more - the few photographs of him often have walking sticks, a wheelchair, or a motorised wheelchair in them.



The Andaman Islands were prison islands, I think, for disobedient sepoys. What kind of colonial hell my grandfather was implicated in I cannot really tell. Knowing my uncle and my father I don't suppose authority came naturally or sat comfortably on his shoulders, but who am I to say? At any rate, he missed both the great wars, honourably, and neither my father nor my uncle were old enough for the Second. My grandfather was a man of schemes and ideas to make money, but ended his days as the ferryman carrying people back and forth across the river Dart.



My maternal grandfather was old enough to enlist in the Navy, though, and serve on destroyers, convoying ships to Russia in the early forties. He missed two sinkings; two of the ships on which he served went down while he was on leave. The war changed him, according to my mother, and made him too curious to settle back down to his teaching career in Leeds. His ambitions shrank, but his interest in life grew. He became the headmaster of a rural school in the Midlands. I look at his photograph and hope to see my own face in his handsome features. I knew him as the kindest of men, innocent and untouched by cynicism.





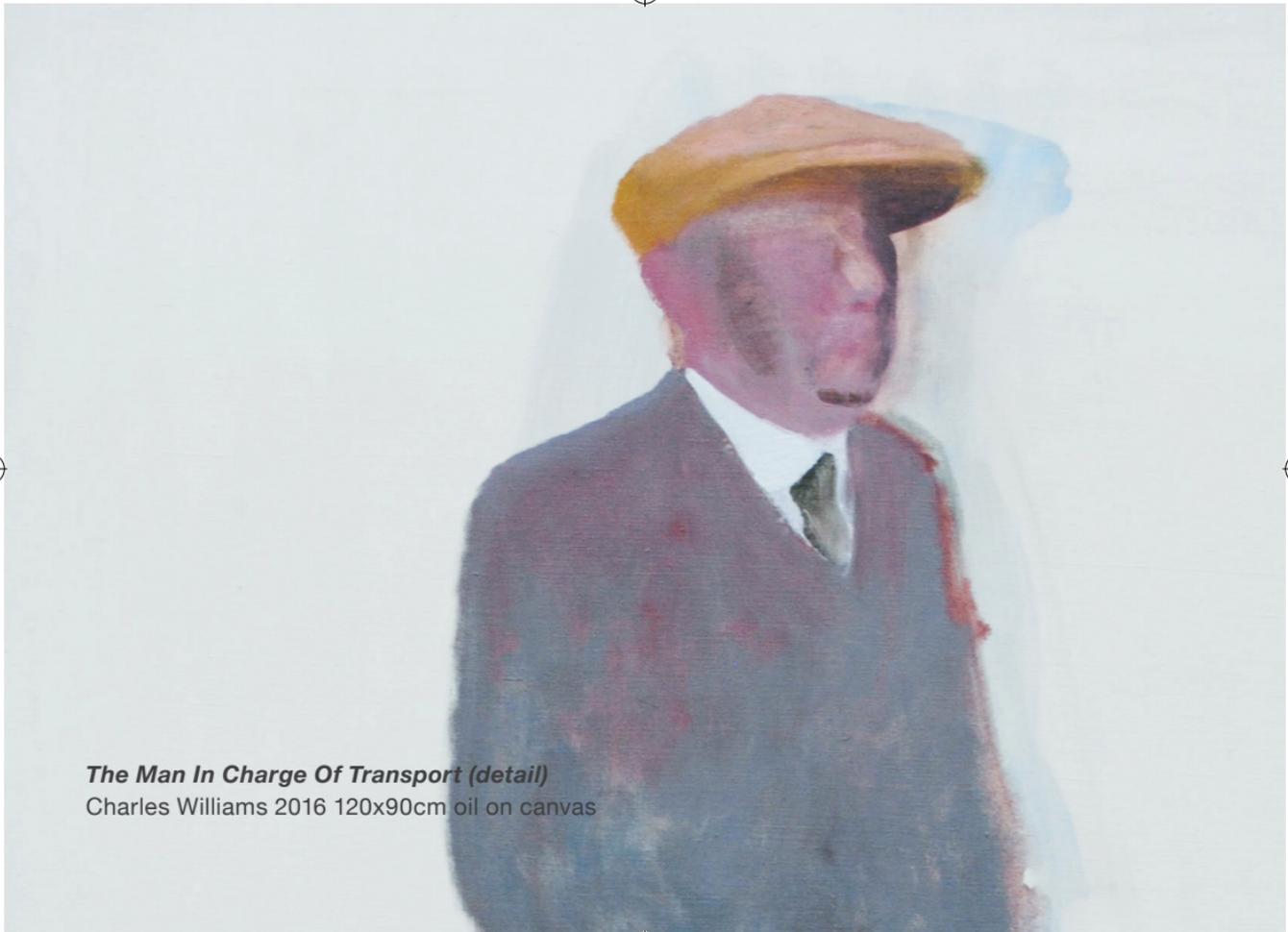
The men in his family had all been in the army, though, stretching back as far as anyone can remember, apart from my great grandfather, who was a skilled steelworker. Non-commissioned officers and regimental band members. I belong to a relatively undistinguished line, and if I were a celebrity I expect I would be passed over for 'Who Do You Think You Are'.

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I look at the photographs of the young men, their grey faces looking back at me, and see other people's grandparents and great grandparents, looking remarkably familiar. They always do, don't they? My wife's family come from Faversham, and I look for familiar features, her grandfather Harry Knowles who owned 'Knowles For Fruit' on Preston Street, where the funeral parlour is now, opposite the Fleur Gallery, her grandmother, maybe her Aunty Clare, in the crowds. That small boy, perhaps, in glasses, which might have kept him safe from conscription for a while, staring back at the camera, eating an apple. Whoever he is, I expect his children or his children's children are in the same queues for groceries as I am and we probably exchange jokes in M&J's.

If I had been a young man in 1914-18 I expect I would have enrolled, just like the German artist Max Beckmann, probably, excited by the idea, and later driven nearly mad by the horror. I don't expect I would have performed any heroics, nor risen past the same rank as my ancestors. I don't suppose I would have been a 'conchie' but my shortsightedness and my timidity would have made me a poor soldier. I don't mind dressing up and marching around though, or shouting. Perhaps I would have learned an instrument and been in the band.





***The Man In Charge Of Transport (detail)***

Charles Williams 2016 120x90cm oil on canvas



I asked my wife for any photographs she might have of her grandfather and her mother gave me a sheaf of them. Harry Knowles was a sociable fellow, and one struck me particularly. He is looking at the camera, in company with a man with a mustache, who is caught forever in the tiny moment, eyes closed, recalling some funny incident or coining a witty turn of phrase. The photograph of returning wounded with their trophy helmets is posed more or less the same, two men in Mr. Knowles' place, their hands casually holding cigarettes in the same gesture as he holds his glass of bitter, laughing with or perhaps at, another mustached man, in the same position as Mr. Knowles' companion.

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I spot another man in the photographs, middle-aged, in a flat cap, boots and a thick looking suit. He is almost silhouetted and there's a splodge of bad processing across his legs, as he appears to be walking briskly next to the steam engine that pulls the wagon that carries the excited young men in their elegant uniforms. To me, he looks as if he is responsible for the steam engine; maybe he's the owner of the carrier company that runs it. They are probably the company that transports fruit to the London market, volunteering their equipment for the national cause. His expression is hard to read, but I think he looks anxious. Is it safe, carrying these young men in transport meant for produce? Is it a good idea?



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***Harry Knowles In Conversation (back cover)***  
Charles Williams 2016 35x45cm oil on canvas



