

Cavendish Morton - 17th February 1911 - 30th January 2015 - by Bella Janson

My first proper conversation with Cavy was on the ferry to Ryde. I must have been about fourteen, on my weekly adventure back to the island on a Friday afternoon. The excavation of the Mary Rose was underway and we were both fascinated by what was going on under the murky waters of the Solent.

Although I can't remember our exact words I remember being struck by how lovely it was to have a conversation with someone where my age was irrelevant, just that we shared a curiosity for nature, science and art. He instantly became elevated to the status of mentor in my eyes. I don't think I'm alone in thanking Cavy for his inspiring friendship.

Trying to sum up the life of someone who lived a very full 104 years isn't possible in a couple of minutes so please bear with me...

Cavy was so many things in his lifetime - an artist, designer, teacher, philanthropist, friend, son, twin, husband, father, uncle, grandfather and great grandfather.

He believed that art is all around us and his work, unusually, reflected how he gloried in both the natural world and the mechanical innovations of his time.

From the age of five Cavy wanted to be an artist and his career was to span nine decades. His work mirrors the different passions that consumed him in that time - from how a boat moves through the water to the thrill of aviation in the 1920s and 30s...from racing cars to the intricate beauty of seed heads in the 50s and 60s...from the light on sails to the piers of the island in the 80s and 90s...and then at the turn of the millennium on how to capture the moods of the sea and sky as his eyesight failed him. He never stood still, there was always something to pique his interest.

Born today ...in 1911, Cavy and his twin brother Conc, Concord, lapped up the experiences of their childhood. He felt lucky to be a twin and they were inseparable. Their father was a well known photographer and art director and their mother an actress turned novelist who wrote under the pen name of Concordia Merrell. A house in Thornton Heath, and later one in Bembridge, acted as the base from which the family could explore towns and villages of the south coast for months on end. Their father's photographs show two happy mischief makers with meccano, microscopes, lathes, saws and quite a lot of mud.

They were encouraged to have enquiring minds and the sometimes eclectic home education set by their father founded Cavy's interest in nature, mechanics, art and music. The conventional syllabus of the three Rs was expanded on with painting lessons; early morning walks to sketch and look at nature; frequent visits to museums and exhibitions; lessons in Japanese; and even a six month stint as boat builders in St Ives. Life was never dull and their imaginations given no boundaries.

The family made Bembridge their base in the early 20s and the marsh, woods, hills and beaches became Cavy's playground. Tennis was key to a good social life and the brothers excelled. If he wasn't on the beach painting the Bembridge Club Boats racing he'd be crewing on one. The Gloster Hotel in Cowes was another favourite spot to paint yachts from and he would often find himself set up alongside Paul Maze.

Cavy honed his painting techniques in a variety of mediums and he treasured the time the artist Laura Knight praised him on his ability to compose a picture. As he said “*compliments like these are not easily forgotten*”.

Across the Solent the brothers were given the freedom to paint at Portsmouth Naval Dockyard. Cavy loved all the to-ings and fro-ings of the busy yard and the juxtaposition of *HMS Victory* with her modern contemporaries, like *HMS Hood*. W L Wyllie even procured the brothers services in 1930 to help paint some of the background of his 42ft panorama, *The Battle of Trafalgar*, at the Royal Naval Museum. While over in Gosport at the Camper Nicholson shipyard Cavy set up his easel in a shed where the J Class yacht, *Shamrock V*, was being built as Thomas Lipton's fifth challenger for the America's Cup. This painting, *The Shipyard*, gained him his first entry to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. It was to be one of many to come in the following years. He was just eighteen. He was also sporting his first moustache ...and on the way to being the dapper dresser we all knew.

The Solent was a hub for aircraft production too and the RAF's High Speed Flight Squadron had set up home at Calshot. The squadron's attempts to win the Schneider Trophy acted as a magnet to the brothers and they would go across on the paddle steamer to watch the flying meetings.

Cavy would spend the day drawing the Supermarine and Gloster floatplanes while Conc sketched portraits of the pilots. Their work was soon spotted and they found themselves building a career producing artwork for Supermarine Aviation, Airspeed and Saunders-Roe and even a steel foundry in Glasgow. Among the friends Cavy made was Nevil Shute, the novelist and aeronautical engineer at Airspeed, and he would often sail with him.

In a letter to the family Eric Verdon-Roe, the grandson of the founder of Saunders-Roe, recalls how his father Geoffrey, one of the company's test pilots, looked back on those years as some of his happiest days. He, Cavy, Conc and John Perfect used to get up to all sorts of pranks on the island and it often took Cavy to get them home safely and out of the hands of the plod...!

The brothers also turned their hands to interior design when they were enlisted by Forester Britten to decorate the Commodore Cinema in Ryde and later the Spithead Hotel in Bembridge. Cavy struck up a friendship with Forester's daughter, Rosemary. They both loved music and often exchanged records but had no idea they were laying the foundations to a long marriage.

When the war came Cavy and Conc were seconded into Saunders Roe as part of the huge drive to produce airplanes. The next six years comprised of hard but rewarding work. His only regret was that he had to turn down a Naval request by Nevil Shute to come over a few days after D-Day to do some drawings. Cavy was in Bembridge on VJ day and bumped into Rosemary at celebrations on the beach. To his joy they were engaged within months and by the summer of 1946 they were married and living near Liss in Hampshire. Cavy took up his career as an artist again and was soon involved with a couple of local painting committees, a habit that he was to build on!

Within two years they made the move to Eye in Suffolk, to a house they'd spotted in the ads page of the Times. Stanley House was Elizabethan and Cavy's idea of a dream house - it offered a haphazard layout, a generous garden and plenty of

space for their expanding family. Their daughter Katherine was soon followed by Sarah and James.

East Anglia inspired Cavy's work and he was soon charting the windmills and churches of the area. He and his Dormobile became a regular sight around the countryside.

It also wasn't long before Cavy became involved in the East Anglian art world ... or lack of it. In an era when there was little opportunity to appreciate modern art outside London, he held a passionate belief that such art should be enjoyed by as wide an audience as possible. His frustration at the lack of contemporary art on view in the area led him to organise an exhibition at the Town Hall in Eye for the 1951 Festival of Britain. Most of the pictures were loaned by David Carr and included ones by Lowry, Piper and Lucian Freud. It caused quite a stir. Continuing on with this crusade he became a stalwart member of the Norwich Twenty Group and the Norfolk Contemporary Art Society whose shared aim was to make art accessible.

He worked alongside David Carr and other East Anglian artists like Jeffery Camp, Mary Newcomb and Mary Potter - who as you can imagine soon became friends.

Somehow Cavy found time to paint, teach, work for Sphere magazine and even become Mayor of Eye ...twice. He enjoyed teaching and worked for many years at Belstead House and Hethersett girls school, where he was affectionately known as Morty.

He also got involved with another passion of his ... cars ... and found himself on the committee of the Snetterton racetrack. His work as a technical illustrator for Sphere magazine and his intuitive sense of aero-dynamics even landed him the opportunity to design the chassis of the 1956 Tojeiro-Jaguar racing car.

As one paper later put it - Cavy packed more into his time in East Anglia than most men could in two lifetimes. But this didn't stop him having fun with his children, especially when it was cold.

Katherine, Sarah and James recall several winters when their father took them out into the flat Suffolk landscape looking for hills to toboggan down and skating on the fens with other families. Here they would play ice hockey with everything from walking sticks, umbrellas and planks of wood for hockey sticks ... and a Cherry Blossom tin full of concrete as a puck. Cavy could never resist showing off his skill at high speed skating and figure skating too.

Each summer the family spent a couple of weeks with Rosemary's father and stepmother at their house, St Denis, in Bembridge. The garden was a paradise to children and Zoe Britten would keep an eye on them while their parents disappeared down to Bembridge Sailing Club to crew on a Redwing.

At home the siblings main memory of their childhood is that their father was always talking to people! Their mother would send the three of them out with him and they would play while he was painting, or sit on the roof rack watching the racing at Snetterton.

They never found it hard to persuade him to show off that he could walk on his hands and do headstands, little knowing they just wanted the change that fell out of his pockets.

He created a tennis court on the lawn at the back of the house and made frames of wire netting to protect the windows from tennis balls. To make it look really

professional he would take great pains marking out the court with an old fashioned line marker. The only trouble was that an old apple tree overhung one part of the court!

That apple tree may have hampered tennis games but it was to star in many of Cavy's paintings. Before a one-man show Cavy would stack up paintings in the hall and when some friend or acquaintance would wander in and take a shine to one of them he would always do a deal as it meant no gallery commission.

Suddenly he would be short for the exhibition and would have to work all night to replace it! One of his most creative periods was triggered around 1960 when they bought a holiday cottage in Aldeburgh, within yards of the North Sea. Cavy was mesmerised by the moods of the sea and the fishing gear he found on the beach. They loved spending time at Edinburgh Cottage and soon became involved with the Aldeburgh Festival of Music and Arts, working with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears.

James recalls going to a rehearsal of *Peter Grimes* with Ben on the piano, Yehudi Menuhin fiddling and Peter singing from the pulpit. Afterwards this famous trio were standing outside the church and a boy came by with an autograph book...but walked straight past them and up to Cavy to ask for an autograph. James was very impressed that his father's weekly art demonstrations on Anglia TV's Afternoon Club had gained him such a following!

Sarah remembers Cavy coming to the East End school she was teaching at in the 70s and demonstrating how to draw and paint to her class. He could communicate with anyone, young or old.

Not slowing down he took on the chairmanship of Gainsborough's House Society in Sudbury in 1964 and he was proud at how the committee shaped the way for its future as an independent museum and art gallery.

He was always experimenting with his own painting technique and had fun with gloy paste and watercolour in his '*decorative paintings*' - a phase

triggered by the gift of some huge agapanthus seed heads. Working in mixed media suited his next project too when he decided to document the construction of a concert hall at Snape for the Aldeburgh Festival. As a member of the festival committee Cavy had constant access to the site from 1965 to the opening of Snape Maltings in 1967.

This extraordinary body of work went on show in Aldeburgh that summer but Cavy never made it to the opening as he had a massive heart attack. By strange coincidence both his brother and brother-in-law had them that year too.

It took some time to recuperate but he was back at the easel to document the next chapter in the history of Snape Maltings, when a fire destroyed the concert hall on the opening night of the 1969 festival. Cavy captured its rise from the ashes in another wonderful series of paintings. It's difficult to choose a favourite era in Cavy's work but I love how these paintings of Snape combine his passion for mechanical structure, light and surface texture. I think he was a magician.

In 1977, on Rosemary's diagnosis with MS they decided to come back to Bembridge to be near her stepmother, Zoe, and his brother Conc. It was hard to move from their life in Suffolk but the island welcomed them back. Cavy replaced his committee work by becoming very involved with the Bembridge Sailing Club

alongside his brother. Conc had never fully recovered from his heart attack and sadly died in the spring of 1979. It was a harsh blow to lose his twin.

Both of Cavy's nieces, Julia and Sue, are over in Australia at the moment so couldn't be here. They sent these words "*We've been talking about Cavy so much these last few days. He spoke of Dad with such affection, and we are both so grateful to him for keeping his memory so vividly alive. It meant a great deal to us both.*"

Rather than retiring to the island, Cavy started a new painting career at the age of 66. He captivated a whole new generation of islanders with his paintings of the Solent. He loved the action of boats through the waves and he did many paintings of Redwings, Club Boats and the Round the Island Race. I imagine a few of us have them hanging on our walls. Working with a restrained palette he could capture the different moods and states of the foreshore, sea, sky and sails in an alchemy of light and colour. I told you he was a magician.

He saw as much beauty in a grey day as in any other sort of weather conditions. Ted, the barman at the sailing club used to greet him on murky days with 'Just your day, Sir!'

The sailing club became very important to Cavy. Not only did he start up the annual summer art exhibition but he helped raise essential money with the memorabilia he produced from his work. He enjoyed working with Pepe Stratton as they came up to the Club's centenary and he was thrilled that the gate he donated then is still in use.

Cavy patiently looked after Rosemary as her MS progressed and he often painted by her bedside, as they listened to music on the radio. He mostly worked in watercolour so the smell of turps and oil paint wouldn't disturb her. They loved seeing their grandchildren and Cavy enjoyed passing on his love of the natural world and teaching them how to draw and paint. As they got older he used to put them to work whenever they came to visit and they might even find themselves cutting down a picture to fit in a frame or even touching up a painting! When I was recording Cavy for the book I always enjoyed coming in on him and Jeff arguing merrily about some piece of music.

I think we'll all agree with Jo, his grand daughter, in describing how he was full of animated conversation and loved to discuss and debate many subjects as well as find out about us.

His eyesight started to fail in the 1990s but this only brought on a more impressionistic phase in his painting. He was so proud that he sold every one of his paintings since returning to the island - this helped enormously with his care of Rosemary until her death in 2000.

I have an image of Cavy flying around on his scooter around this time - with a scarf sailing behind him. His blindness finally forced him to lay down his brushes in 2003, aged 92.

These last twelve years have been marked by music, conversation, laughter and a reflection of his life with Rosemary and on his work, which he could still just see. A wonderful retrospective of his work at Castle House in 2007⁸ moved him to tears and to say he had been *stirred*. What an evocative word. I felt truly blessed that we wrote '*his*' book and his joy on seeing the first copy was a very special day for me.

Cavy was very good on his own and when he moved into the Elms he always reassured his children that he was fine and happy and showed interest in what they were up to. He continued to care about his clothes and didn't feel himself unless he was wearing a red or blue sleeveless jumper with the accompanying neckerchief. To the end he was good company and full of bonhomie.

Cavy was clearly a man of many talents, a renaissance man - like Leonardo da Vinci - fascinated by inventiveness and with, of course, much of Leonardo's draughtmanship. He called himself an artist with a '*modest talent*', while in reality he was a genuine '*artistic crusader*' who helped to make art accessible to as wide an audience as possible. In East Anglia he has left a lasting legacy with his educational work and involvement with the Aldeburgh Festival, Norwich Twenty Group, Norfolk Contemporary Art Society and Gainsborough's House.

He didn't stand at the sidelines but played a part in a significant portion of British cultural life in the last century.

The president of the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours is effusive about Cavy's influence on others and the Royal Institute of Oil Painters are holding a minute silence for him at their next meeting.

Cavy enriched so many of our lives with his art and his friendship and his death leaves us with a big hole ...but as one of the letters to the family put it 'Cavy had a brilliant innings, scoring his century followed by some cheeky singles!'

Before I finish I'd like us to think of Cavy setting out today, like he did on so many other birthdays, to paint one of his '*birthday*' paintings. He loved that the 17th of February could be gripped by winter or bursting with spring and I wonder what would have caught his eye today. Have a think about it as you drive back across the island.

17th February 2015