

The Legacy of Poldark

As Cornwall celebrates the centenary of the birth of Winston Graham, Megan Westley looks at the ongoing romance with the Poldark saga.

The writer Winston Graham is probably best known for his Poldark series of novels; in Cornwall this is certainly the case.

For set in this, the wildest and arguably most inspirational of countries, the Poldark saga, spanning 12 novels from *Ross Poldark* to *Bella Poldark* and 1783 to 1820, captures in breathtaking plausibility the Cornwall of days gone by.

Though once called 'the most successful unknown novelist in Britain', Graham enjoyed his share of literary glory, not least with the television adaptation of his novels in the 1970s. Audiences reached 15 million, and the Sunday evening programmes were aired in 22 countries around the world. Clearly something in Graham's work captured the attention of the public, and it is a love-affair set to continue with the republication of the entire Poldark collection by PanMacmillan in June.

Poldark author Winston Graham; he claimed he was the most successful unknown novelist in Britain.

Not only this, but Graham's centenary is about to be remembered in spectacular style with the opening of an exhibition entitled *Poldark's Cornwall - The Life and Works of Winston Graham*, which will run for four months at Truro's Royal Cornwall Museum. Hoping to attend the exhibition's official opening, depending on work commitments, are the Poldark stars who were closest to Graham: Angharad Rees (*Demelza Poldark*), Christopher Biggins (the odious *Ossie Whitworth*), and Jane Wymark (*Morwenna Chynoweth*), in addition to his publisher, editor and family members.

The exhibition, devised by museum director Hilary Bracegirdle working with the writer's son Andrew Graham, will be contained in one room packed to the rafters with information and items. Not to mention a riot of colour and costume. As well as Poldark memorabilia, such as Graham's notebooks and manuscripts, the exhibition will include a great deal of contextual items based around Poldark's setting of 18th and 19th-century Cornwall. Dresses made from the luxurious and historic Spittalfields silk are equalled, or even surpassed, in luxuriousness by elaborate men's and boy's embroidered coats and waistcoats.

Jo Mattingly, curator of social history, says the idea is to offer an insight into Graham's books not only through viewing his notes and manuscripts, but through catching a glimpse of Cornwall as it was then. In addition to these traditional costumes and artefacts, the museum is currently talking with the BBC in hopes of displaying original outfits and costume designs from the 1970s series, which, for fans old and new, will be screened throughout.

Angharad Rees as *Demelza* and Robin Ellis as *Ross Poldark*. Nearly 15 million people followed their on-screen love affair.

Originally from Manchester where he spent the majority of his youth, Graham moved to Perranporth at the age of 17 when his father became increasingly ill. His first novel was written in Cornwall at the age of 21, and took only 10 weeks to write. The publishers who rejected this novel, and his second, could little see the potential that lay within the man who, at this stage, never believed he could make a living out of his words. Instead, Graham used his skills for more practical purposes, adapting and improving the Women's Institute plays that he sometimes performed in. His first real triumph was the writing of his own three-act play *Seven Suspected* shortly after this. Though this, his first play, was never printed, it was initially performed for three nights with great success.

At the insistence of his aunt, an enthusiastic encourager of his talent, Graham's discarded first novel was sent to the publishers Ward, Lock & Co., who accepted it. And so *The House with the Stained-Glass Windows*, published in 1934, was to become the first in what is now a sizeable bibliography. After 12 more novels in speedy succession, Ross Poldark, Cornish hero, came striding proudly into the world in 1945. With him came a wealth of characters to be loved and hated. Over 60 years ago, readers were introduced to those people who would live on to this day: the feisty, independent Demelza; Elizabeth Chynoweth, the original ice-queen; and the instantly and enduringly detestable George Warleggan, to name but a few.

Graham, unusually when considering the snobbery or dislike of many who moved to Cornwall from the cities, never felt himself different, or superior, to the Cornish. Instead he possessed a passionate love for the Duchy that can be seen most plainly in his Poldark books. This series also features Cornish-bred heroes rather than characters who we are told have moved to Cornwall, such as in the works of other writers of Cornwall like Daphne Du Maurier. It is never disputed that the families in Poldark are anything other than Cornish families, living as the Cornish did. Because, quite evidently, in suitability for a gripping and interesting story, Graham saw little that needed to be changed about Cornwall or the Cornish. His passion for Cornwall really took shape, he said, when serving as a coastguard in the Second World War. Spending large periods of time thinking while gazing at the Cornish coastline, he "came to watch and understand the sea and to love Cornwall in a new way".

George Warleggan, played by Ralph Bates (right), talks to fellow actor Christopher Biggins (who played Rev Osborne Whitworth) during the filming of Poldark at St Winnow Church.

Here began the inspiration for the books that arguably brought Cornwall and Cornish culture to the fore. In fact, Graham loved Cornwall so much that even when he and his family had to move away in 1959, he continued to return for regular holidays and visits to friends. Jo Mattingly feels that a much more honest view of Winston Graham is offered by considering the relationships he treasured with friends in Cornwall, to whom he was loyal and supportive. When an idea for a story came, she says, he was always sure to share the money with those who needed it. Of particular interest to those keen to get to know Graham will be a collection of his letters to friend and historical advisor Fred Harris, which display a unique, witty, and often naughty, sense of humour that brings him to life.

One hundred years after his birth, Winston Graham is still as popular today as when his books were first published. It says something about the strength of his characters and portrayal of Cornwall that *Bella Poldark*, the final Poldark book, could be published in 2002, 57 years after the first, and still be received by a heartily appreciative audience. Instead of Graham's appeal dying out, new generations of readers are beginning to fall in love with his books all over again. Perhaps it is in part due to his ability to merge so seamlessly the gripping and exciting with the tragic. The thrilling realms of ghosts, crime, and even the French Revolution, combine with heart-rending subjects like extreme poverty, disease, paralysis, and premature death in an effort to never shy away from the real and upsetting in life. In the days of Poldark, the upper-classes may have been privileged, but Graham never excludes the hardships of honest (and thoroughly dishonest) working-class Cornish people. The result is ever and always an entertainingly accurate account of life that keeps any reader wanting more.

Poldark's Cornwall - The Life and Works of Winston Graham will run from June 14 to September 9, and will be open from 10am to 430 pm, admission is free.

Robin Ellis frequently took to horseback in the filming of Poldark, falling off his steed while galloping on one occasion.

10 Things You Didn't Know About Winston Graham:

1. Graham lied about his age, telling many that he was born in 1910 rather than his actual date of birth, 1908. Many of his obituary notices therefore wrongly recorded him as being 93, when he died in 2003.
2. His first novel *The House with the Stained Glass Windows*, published in 1934, made him only £29.
3. Graham had a great fear of climbing, rather than a fear of heights, which stemmed from an occasion in Cornwall when, exploring on the cliffs, he slipped six feet down a mineshaft called Sobey's Ladder. Sobey, a miner who kept a boat there for fishing, was renamed Kellow by Graham and featured in Poldark.
4. Grace Kelly, Princess Grace of Monaco, was originally intended to play the heroine (of sorts) in Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of *Marnie*, but the principality refused when they discovered the character was a sexually repressed thief. Tippi Hedren, star of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, instead took the lead.
5. The Poldark television series outsold every other historical drama on video, except Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.
6. In his autobiography, Graham compares critics' initial response to the Poldark books and television programmes to the response to one who has loudly and vulgarly broken wind in a Victorian drawing room.
7. The character of Jud Paynter, one of Ross Poldark's servants, was based on three different men. One of these was an old sailor called Sampson that Graham served with as a coastguard during the Second World War.
8. The Poldark television series was so popular that Sunday evening church services were rescheduled around the programme.
9. Research was a major aspect of Graham's writing, so much so that he even had a historical advisor, Fred

Harris. When researching his novel *The Walking Stick*, which features a robbery, Graham took a real-life safe-breaker to lunch.

10. *Strangers Meeting*, his eighth novel, was based on a failed play, *Forsaking All Others*. Evidently, Graham considered the novel little better: he identified it as the worst novel he ever wrote.

Places to Recognise:

Filmed in Cornwall, the 1970s television adaptation of *Poldark* used many local sites. Look carefully, and you may recognise:

Godolphin House and Trerice Manor: Trenwith, Francis and Elizabeth Poldark's house, was actually made up of two of Cornwall's finest properties. Godolphin House, near Helston (recently re-opened to the public by the National Trust) was used for the exterior shots and can be recognised by its distinctive columns. The interior of Trenwith is actually the Elizabethan house Trerice, in Newquay.

Pendeen Manor Farm, Manor Farm Botallack and Roscarrock Manor Farm: Nampara, Ross and Demelza Poldark's house, was also a mixture of two properties in the first series, combining Pendeen Manor Farm and Manor Farm Botallack. In series two, Roscarrock Manor Farm was used for exterior shots.

Lanhydrock House: Lanhydrock, the Victorian home of the Agar-Robartes family in Bodmin, was used as the residence of Sir Francis Bassett in the second series.

Towednack Church: Towednack Church, six miles from Penzance, was used as the setting of Francis and Elizabeth's wedding, as well as the funeral of Francis's father, Charles Poldark.

Towednack Church, near St Ives, was used as a setting in many of the church scenes in the series. Photographed by Sam Batchelor.

Braddock Church: Morwenna Chynoweth and Drake Carne were married here, with Winston Graham himself playing a member of the wedding party.

Mousehole: The fishing village was used as the site of a march by rebellious miners, who can be seen walking through the heart of the village where many view the famous Christmas lights each year.