



Cornish Buildings Group 'Buildings at Risk' Project

Falmouth School of Art

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A application to list the Old Art School, Arwenack Avenue, Falmouth, was rejected by Historic England on 6 November 2019. The Initial Assessment Report noted

Although possessing some claims to interest, the former Falmouth School of Art does not meet the criteria for listing. However, it is important within the history of artistic education in Cornwall, and particularly the foundation of Falmouth University. The connection with the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society and Anna Maria Fox has very strong local interest, as does the building's design by Oliver Caldwell. It also makes a positive contribution to the Falmouth Conservation Area and the setting of Arwenack Avenue. Further research may reveal other historic artistic connections.

This summer long-read presents the history of the art school. The author is seeking any information that may support a future listing application. Please contact cbgcasework@gmail.com if you have any additional details on significance of the building or the students who attended.

The Falmouth School of Art

The foundation stone for the Falmouth School of Art was laid in 1901, and the building opened in 1902. It is an arts and crafts building of considerable architectural merit, with a commanding presence, and retaining most of its original external design. It was not possible to physically inspect the interior as the businesses want to protect their commercial confidentiality. The building is located next to the Grade II listed gateposts to the former Arwenack Avenue, and it forms a prominent feature when walking up the Avenue.

The Falmouth Art School building is included in the Falmouth Neighbourhood Development Plan as a candidate for Local Listing. However, the process of drawing up local lists by the Town Council is not a priority, as they are faced with

problems such as the closure of, and withdrawal of funding for, its leisure facilities; the serious deterioration of the Prince of Wales Pier and a large funding shortfall in achieving its place shaping aims and masterplan for the town centre.

Of immediate concern for the School of Art, are economic uncertainties, and immense pressure in Falmouth for development. The building is no longer owned by Falmouth University, but is owned by Redgrave Commercial, and marketed as 'offering office/ studio space in central Falmouth with parking'. Tenancy has recently changed from a gaming company to a branding company Kingdom & Sparrow. While it is currently in the hands of responsible and caring owners and tenants, there is no guarantee of this remaining in place in the future. Despite the unsuccessful application to Historic England for listing, Falmouth Civic Society believe that the building is of such an architectural and cultural significance that it merits statutory protection.

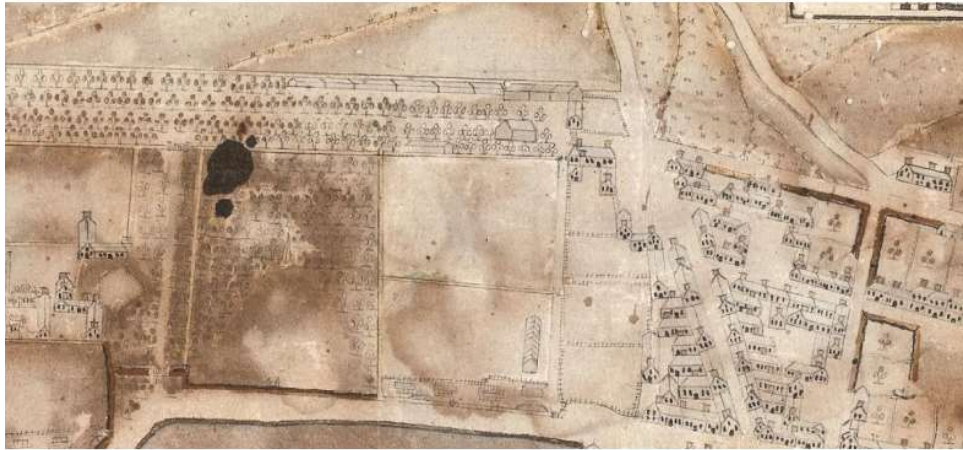
The setting

Falmouth Art School is situated at the northern end of Arwenack Avenue which was originally the main access to Arwenack Manor, two large stone gateposts, each capped with a stone ball, mark the entrance. From the mid-18th century the avenue was used for a rope business – hence its name, the Rope Walk – at this time the northern end of the avenue was built-on, and subsequently the rope-work buildings were considerably extended down the avenue to the south. In 1848 the area was listed as 'The Rope Walk and Avenue, with a Dwelling House, Workshops, spinning ground and Appurtenances.' and tenanted by 'W and E.C. Carne' (Shuttleworth, 1848). Buildings extended further down the Avenue in the late-19th century. The area in which the Art School was to be constructed was built up with numerous industrial sheds and other buildings.

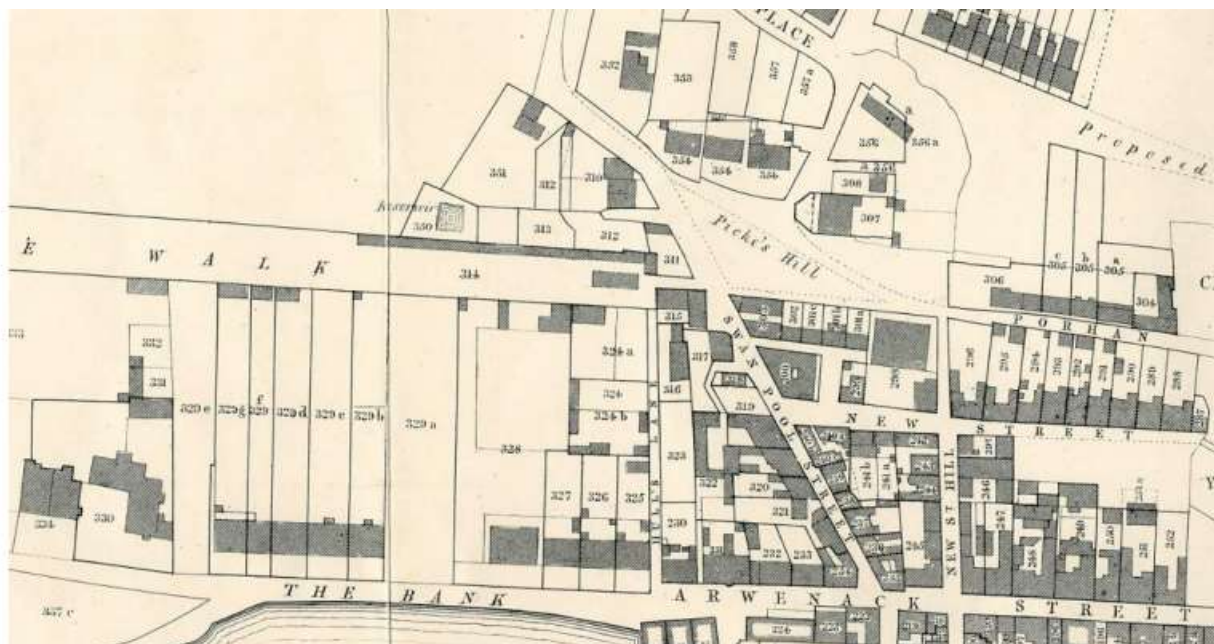
At the time the Art School was built, the rope-works had ceased business (around 1895), and according to Susan Gay it was then called Manor Avenue. The removal of these buildings and the building of the Art School between 1901 and 1902 at first was not necessarily liked. Susan Gay noted that: 'Another recent mistake has been in the creation of the excellent Art School in a corner which obstructs the view of the fine old Manor Avenue, as one approaches it, and the view of the harbour from above' (p.190). However, subsequently new buildings have effectively blocked any distant views that may have been present at that time.

Its setting now is a great improvement from its past industrial uses, and the clear run of the length of the avenue now gives an impression of its tree-lined form that was formerly the entrance to Arwenack Manor. However, at the northern end, car parking

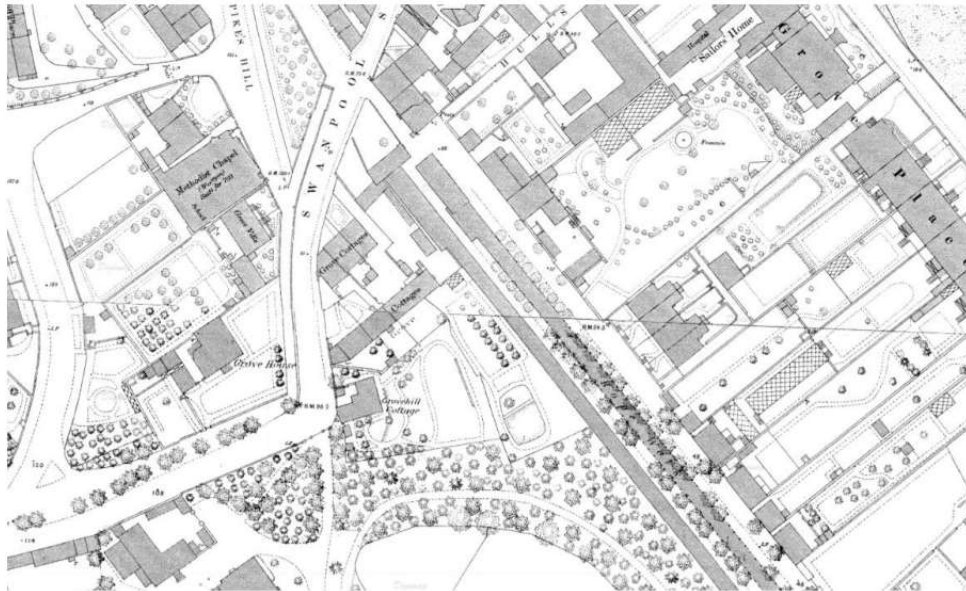
and poor design of the hard landscaping currently detracts from the setting. But this would be relatively easy to fix, and careful design would improve it, complementing its potential for listed status. Despite the cars, the Art School now stands proud as part of the fine setting of the Avenue, gateposts and road opposite which was the former carriage drive from the town centre to Arwenack Avenue. It forms an important and memorable architectural feature in the town.



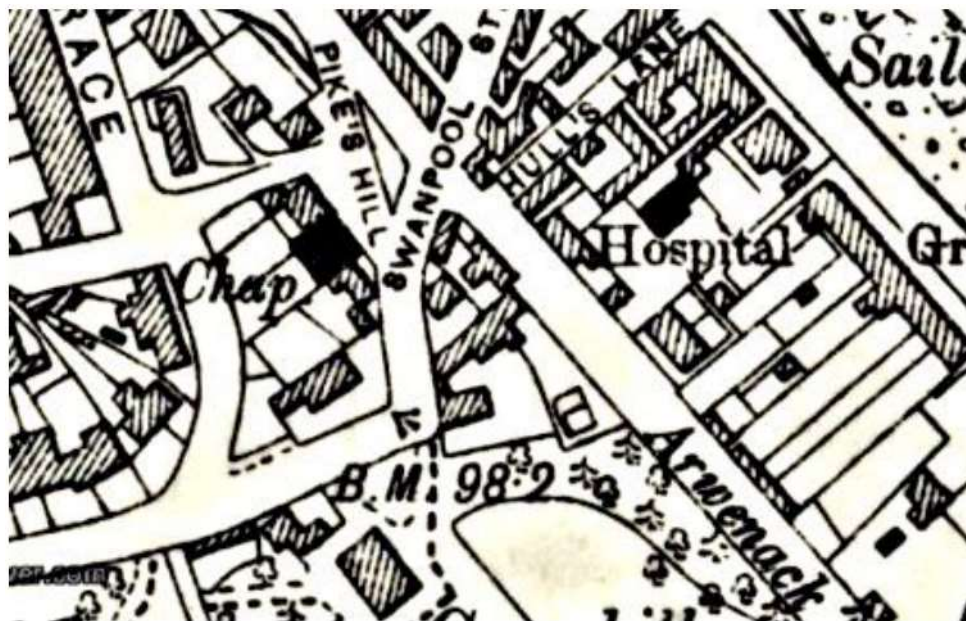
The 'avenue was leased to Thomas Deeble in 1737 as a rope walk' (Gilson, 1990). The 1773 map shows the buildings gathered at the northern end, and the covered sheds running down the avenue (Falmouth Art Gallery).



1848 The rope-works buildings are clearly seen. Above (to the west) are gardens and a reservoir, and below (to the east) are a cluster of houses, an office, workshops and a carpenter's yard (Shuttleworth, 1848).



Towards the end of the rope-works business, with intensive development at the northern end of the avenue (where the Art School was to be built), and covered sheds stretching the length of the avenue (Digimap, copy from Tom Weller).



1904 The Falmouth Art School built, and the Rope Walk (or Manor Avenue) now named Arwenack Avenue cleared of the old industrial sheds (National Library of Scotland).

The building





(left) The Falmouth School of Art around 1905
(Falmouth History Archive @The Poly

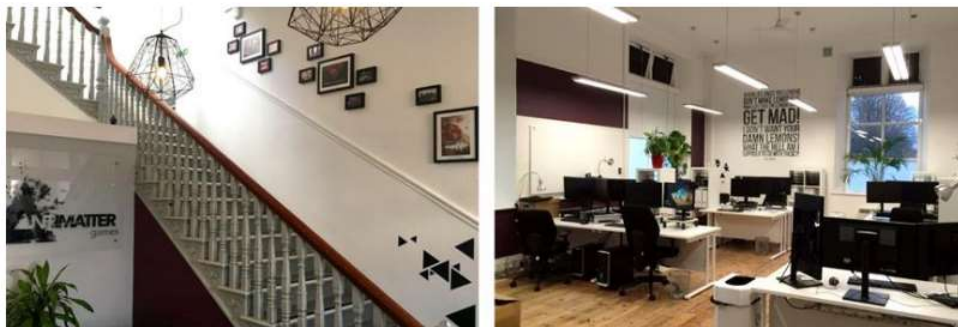
(above) The Falmouth School of Art looking much the same today as it did in 1902 (Photos: Mike Jenks)

Arts and Crafts style buildings are relatively rare in Falmouth, notable others include the Red House in Melvill Road, the old cottage hospital at the top of Killigrew Street and the Gyllyngdune 'Chapel'. As such the Falmouth School of Art, designed by Oliver Caldwell FRIBA (1860-1910), is an important surviving building and an exemplar locally of the Arts and Crafts style. Caldwell was the architect and

surveyor of Penzance for around 30 years, but also had many commissions elsewhere. He was held in high regard, his RIBA Fellowship being conferred in January 1892, the proposers were J. A. Gotch, J. P. St. Aubyn and H. J. Wadling (Brodie, *et al*, 2001; Acorn Archive). On the building's design Mitchley (2020) notes 'The plan style is deliberate' with the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* recording that Caldwell 'sacrificed external ornamentation for the sake of internal efficiency'.

The building, by comparison with an early photograph, retains most of its original external features and details. It is a two storey structure with a single storey annexe:

its principal elevation faces east. The main façade has three bays with gable roofs, and a shallow brick arched porch with the name over the entrance. The single storey annexe has two bays, one with a gable. The pitched roofs are of slate with decorative clay ridge tiles (three-hole arched crest ridges) with frond finials. The walls are white rough cast render, with exposed brick quoins and exposed brick jambs around all the windows (except for one at the rear). On the east façade the windows are large to let in light, as befits its function for art studios. The lower two thirds are fixed, the top third having centre pivoting casements. The south elevation has a timber oriel window supported by carved timber angles, and also a brick framed round window. The barge boards are black painted timber, however the decorative timber details on the south and north elevations of the two storey part of the building have been lost, but the one on the single storey north gable is still in place. The chimneys are brick with distinct mouldings at the top, but the chimney pots have been lost.



The interior, retaining some of its original character (Redgrave Commercial)

While the interior was not possible to survey, the websites of Redgrave Commercial,

and Kingdom & Sparrow show some interior images. There is a fine staircase with mahogany handrail and turned balusters, exposed original floorboards, rooms still used for studio work, and a fine brass plaque to Anna Maria Fox. So far, much of the character remains, and is currently respected.



Brass plaque to Anna Maria Fox inside the building (Redgrave Commercial)

The building thus has considerable architectural merit, with almost all of its original external features surviving. It remains, within its Arts and Crafts style, as an early example of form following function.

Cultural importance in Falmouth

As well as its architectural merit, it is something of an icon in the cultural history of Falmouth. This can be traced prior to its establishment and subsequently as its foundation of an art school running classes, and ultimately to its current status in the University of Falmouth. In 1901 it was noted both in the minutes of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society (RCPS), and in Susan Gay's book (1903 p.238) that: on August 19th, 1901, the 'Art School commenced in Manor Avenue in memoriam ANNA MARIA FOX; stone laid by Lord St. Levan.' The RCPS (1901) minutes also noted that it was 'named as memorial to Anna Maria Fox and RCPS as pioneers for education in Art and Science in the County'.

The RCPS was instrumental in setting up art classes and was the precursor of the Falmouth School of Art. Anna Maria Fox (who with her sister Caroline inspired the founding of the Cornwall Polytechnic Society in 1833) was a good amateur artist and was responsible for organising the art section of the RCPS's Annual Exhibitions. Both Anna Maria and Caroline 'had won medals in the Fine Art Department (so had their brother) and were clearly interested in encouraging young artists' (Pearson, 1973). Their advocacy for art classes for children and women, did not go that far, as the RCPS minutes noted 'no success' (Michael Carver notes).

Nevertheless, perhaps inspired by Anna Maria, in 1852 an Art Union was formed in association with RCPS to run art classes. By March 9th 1896 science and art rooms had been opened in the municipal buildings (Gay, p.238). It is from these roots that the Falmouth Art School was built.

In 1902, 'Falmouth School of Art was a wholly private venture and offered classes such as Freehand Drawing, Model Drawing, Painting from Still Life, Drawing from the Antique, Drawing in Light & Shade, and Memory Drawing of Plant Form' (Wikipedia). In 1938 the Local Education Authority took over the administration and in the 1940s the School was recognised by the Ministry of Education. The consequent expansion of the School and increasing student numbers necessitated a move to Woodlane (Kerris Vean) in the 1950s.

The building has remained in use as an annexe of the University of Falmouth, until recently in use for some of the Masters Courses. Its continuous use for studio accommodation, with its original large windows letting in light, has matched its original function with its use over time, and it is this that helps retain its special character, and importance in the culture of art in Falmouth.

Additional photographs of the exterior





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