Artwork of the Month January 2026

‘Our Lowrys’

Jane Eddleston, a member of the Visitor Team at York Art Gallery, reflects on the two paintings by L. S. Lowry in the collection, both currently on display in the Burton Gallery, and the reasons for Lowry’s popularity as well as the disdain sometimes shown towards him by the art-historical establishment. She also explores his association with York and its Gallery, and explains how these two paintings entered the collection.

For copyright reasons we are unable to include images of the two paintings. Please click on these links to see them on Art UK:

Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887 – 1976) *The Bandstand, Peel Park, Salford,* 1931. Oil on canvas, 43.2 x 62.2 cm. YORAG : 687

Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887 – 1976) *Clifford’s Tower, York*, 1952-53. Oil on canvas, 35.6 x 50.8 cm. YORAG : 664

I am part of the Visitor Team at the Gallery, and part of my role here is to deliver talks and tours on artworks and exhibitions in the gallery. With some I do, particularly in connection with the more obscure or niche ceramicists, I always ask my audience if they are familiar with that artist and their work. However, with Lowry I never need to do that. In fact, of all the pictures in the Burton Gallery the Lowrys are the ones most people could recognise or identify. Although *Clifford’s Tower* is relatively small, its wall power is tremendous, and it definitely holds its own amongst the larger paintings with more ornate frames.

Laurence Stephen Lowry was born in 1887 in Stretford. Today Stretford comes under Greater Manchester, but in those days it was in Lancashire. As a fellow Lancastrian, I have always liked and admired Lowry’s work. I am from a very ordinary, Northern, working-class family; ours was not in a house filled with art, books, and culture, but we did have two Lowry prints on the landing at the top of the stairs, so the work has a sense of familiarity and comfort for me.

And not just me - another Lancastrian, Noel Gallagher from the rock band Oasis, once said: ‘I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know about Lowry.’ He then went on to compare Lowry to the Beatles, as just a part of everyone’s everyday life. This shows how Lowry’s reach into popular culture is enormous, and covers much more than just his art. There is the Lowry Exhibition Centre in Salford; there has been a play about him, films, and pop songs; and a Google Doodle was done in 2012 to commemorate what would have been his 125th birthday. Even the words ‘Lowryish’ and ‘Lowryesque’ have entered the Oxford English Dictionary. However, one could argue that the flip side of this popularity is that Lowry is not taken very seriously in the traditional art world. This is something that Ian McKellen explored in his 2011 documentary *Looking for Lowry*. In that year none of the Tate’s 23 paintings by Lowry was out on public display, and today that has not changed much, as there is only one, *Coming Out of School,* currently on show at Tate Britain as part of the Historic and Modern British Art display.

Clifford’s Tower is not the only Lowry in the Gallery’s collection. We also have *The Band Stand, Peel Park, Salford,* currently on display opposite. This came to the Gallery in 1953 as a gift from Mrs C. Grey. Mrs Grey was an early member of the committee of the Friends of York Art Gallery. In those days the membership fee was five shillings for an associate member, £1 for full membership, or, to become a Benefactor, one must donate upwards of £50 or artworks to that value, so she was very generous with that painting and others. In *The Band Stand* the viewer’s eye is drawn to the focal point, that is the band stand, by the figures standing round to enjoy the music. Lowry and figures are synonymous, and to him these were real people - no one is more or less important than another and everyone is different.

It is often pointed out that there are no shadows or weather conditions in his paintings, and Lowry had this criticism made to him in his lifetime too, but for whatever reason he preferred not to, and now it is part of his signature style. For me, this gives his paintings a sense of permanence. Shadows are so transient that it is impossible to recreate a shadow as there are so many factors involved; so in the paintings there is no sense of the passing of time.

Lowry's palette was very restricted – he only ever bought five colours of oil paint. Winsor and Newton was his brand of choice, and the colours were ivory black, Prussian blue, vermillion, yellow ochre, and a white - usually flake white, but occasionally zinc or titanium white as a mixer. Obviously he mixed the colours to get the full range, for example the lovely greens. Pure flake white as a base came about after a disagreement with his teacher Bernard Taylor at Salford School of Art, who said he thought his pictures were too dark, so he started using the flake white. One should remember that when it is fresh, the white would be much lighter and brighter than we see here. Over time it matures to a lovely creamy grey white. Lowry liked the idea of this, and commented: 'the pictures I've painted today will not be seen at their best until I'm dead.' Flake white is a lead-based paint, so therefore toxic. It is still available to buy, but only in small quantities, and must be used under very careful studio practice. It is very durable and flexible, especially good for bases and in fact conservation tests show flake white can stand the test of time better than other paints.

Lowry used no mediums with his paints – he used them straight out of the tube. That way he was more in control, and he got a stronger effect – giving a lovely texture and saturation of colour. He didn't limit himself to just brushes either, he would also use his fingers, sticks, and bits of card to get the paint on the canvas. He also had a very worn-down kitchen knife amongst his kit.

I heard a great interview with Lowry where he explains his method of working:

> I start on an empty canvas, I prefer to paint from the mind's eye often not having the slightest idea what I'm going to put on the canvas. In that case I suggest something, call it a chimney or a church, going along slowly and adding things and it just comes. I work like that until the canvas is completely filled with intricate detail and is balanced. Not working too often or too rapidly until the time comes and you can do no more and you're satisfied. Then leave it as complete.

Wise words there from Mr Lowry, as all too often the temptation is there to add just a little bit more, and it ends up being too much.

Some of Lowry's paintings like *Clifford's Tower* and *The Band Stand* are obviously real places, but others are compositions. He'd take one thing he had seen somewhere, and put it alongside something else from another place. He called these made-up paintings his 'Dreamscapes'.

Lowry worked all his life as a rent collector, and walking round the streets collecting the money gave him the ideas for his paintings. The fact that he worked full time, combined with his rather naive style, often makes people think that he was self-taught. but that is not the case at all. He started off at Manchester Municipal School of Art in 1905 aged 18 under the tutelage of Adolphe Valette. Valette was a well-known French Impressionist painter in his time, but is now probably better known as Lowry's teacher than for his own work. Lowry showed great admiration for the man and his work:

> I can't over-estimate the effect on me at that time of the coming into this drab city of Adolph Valette, full of French Impressionism, aware of everything that was going on in Paris. He had a freshness and a breadth of experience that exhilarated his students.

After ten years in Manchester with Valette, Lowry moved over to Salford School of Art to be taught by Bernard Taylor, respected art critic for the Manchester Guardian.

Lowry was a modest man and turned down five honours in his lifetime, including an OBE, a CBE, and a Knighthood in the 1968 New Year's Honours list. In fact, he holds the record for the most honours turned-down. This was not a political or anti-establishment act, he was just a modest and private man, and he didn't want that, or his life, to change. Funnily though, this modesty did not stop him accepting other awards:

- 1934: Elected Member of the Manchester Academy, and also the Royal Society of British Artists
- 1962: Elected Royal Academician
- 1965: Given Freedom of the City of Salford
- 1975: Awarded Honorary D.Litts from the University of Salford and the University of Liverpool

Clifford's Tower is a prominent York landmark. I'm not going to recount the history of it here. The painting shows a York that is both historical and industrial: we have Clifford's Tower in the middle, with a Medieval parish church to one side, and a modern power station to the other. St Mary's Castlegate dates from the 11th century, but the current building is mostly from the 15th century. It went through restoration in the 1860s by William Butterfield, and was in use until 1958 when it was declared redundant and converted into an exhibition space by the York-based ecclesiastical architect George Pace. York Power Station on Foss Islands Road opened in February 1900 and was in operation until October 1976 – coincidentally the same year as Lowry's death; it was demolished between 1977 and 1981.The painting is composed so that the two buildings are of equal distance away from Clifford's Tower even though in reality they would not have been. Lowry has used artistic licence here to suggest that the past and the present – the historical and the industrial – are of equal value.

Unlike *The Band Stand* where the focal point of the painting is emphasised by his customary figures, in this case there are far fewer figures than usual. Those that are there are used to enliven the scene and give it an everyday feeling. Instead, he draws the viewer's eye to Clifford's Tower by the use of strong, bold, dark outlines for the building and the distinct colour of the stonework, whereas the flanking peripheral buildings are much weaker and more hesitant, very much paler. Therefore, Clifford's Tower comes forward to dominate the scene, and the other buildings recede into the background.

Now a word on the Gallery's acquisition of the painting. When the Gallery reopened after the Second World War, it was under the care of a new and dynamic curator – Hans Hess. He was responsible for the acquisition of many of the modern 20th-century British paintings in the collection. With the rise of photography, topographical painting was very much in decline; so Hess was looking for a way to bring the Gallery's collection of paintings of York up to date, and in 1950 the Evelyn Award was established. This was named after Dr William Arthur Evelyn, a medical doctor who was born in Wales and moved to York in 1891. Alongside his medical practice he was a pioneer of conservation and an avid collector of prints and paintings of views of York. In his lifetime the Gallery hosted exhibitions of pictures

from Evelyn's collection: 'York Views and Worthies' in 1905, and in 1927 'Old York Views'. The year before his death in 1935 the Friends raised funds to buy the collection for the Gallery, which kept it in York and saved it from going to America, as Yale University were also interested in purchasing it. Since then pieces from the Evelyn Collection have featured in several exhibitions in the Gallery.

Clifford's Tower was commissioned in 1952 for the 1953 award entry. You can currently see on display in the Burton Gallery other paintings from the award: John Piper's *York From Clifford's Tower* - this was the first one from 1950 – Russell Platt's *York Minster (Cathedral 5)* from 1956, and William Townsend's *St Helen's Square* from 1954. The award ran from 1950 to 1962, and each artist was paid the Gallery's standard fee of £50. At the end of the run in 1962 the Guardian reviewed the award thus: 'One can only admire York's audacity in approaching some of our most established artists with so modest a sum.' In fact, the fee was so low that Hans Hess suggested to Lowry that he use watercolour instead of his usual oils, but Lowry refused. Fifty-five years later in 2017 the Friends organised a contemporary response to the historical Evelyn Award. The Italian artist Marianella Senatore was chosen. Her practice focusses on collaborative work and public participation, so she ran a series of conversations and workshops with people from York which resulted in a whole exhibition in the Upper North Gallery called 'A York Symphony'. These pieces included video, collage, text, paintings, and live performance.

Lowry came to York in October 1952 to start work, and finished the painting in February 1953. It is interesting to look at what else was going on in his life around that time:

1952

Lowry retires, as you could do in those days, on a full pension from the Pall Mall Property Company. This gave him the time to travel and paint, and also the money to do so.

The first Monograph on him was published: *The Discovery of L.S. Lowry* by Maurice Collis, in which he is promoted as one of the champions of modern art.

Another first – Lowry buys his first D. G. Rossetti painting. He had always been an art collector but usually more modest pieces. Maybe again this was helped by a pension pay-off.

1953

This was year of the Coronation of our late Queen, and Lowry was one of a number of artists commissioned by the Government to record the occasion. As part of the Government Art Collection, after the event the painting was sent to Moscow to go on display in the British Embassy there until it returned for the Golden Jubilee in 2002.

Whilst in York, Lowry painted two pictures to offer the Gallery – *Clifford's Tower*, and also *A View of York from Tang Hall Bridge.* Again, this is a view that shows both historical and industrial aspects of York, as you can see the Minster but electricity pylons and workers' housing dominate the scene. *Clifford's Tower* was chosen by Hess for the collection, so Lowry offered to sell him the second painting for his usual fee of £85, but it was rejected and subsequently sold privately. A third painting was also done – *Wilson's Terrace,* a terrace long since demolished but which was in the Layerthorpe area of the city. This was commissioned by a local solicitor who met Lowry and offered to show him around the sights of York. He bought it off Lowry for £75, and said at the time that he wished he had been able to afford the Tang Hall picture too.

The Gallery underwent substantial refurbishment over ten years ago, and to mark the occasion of the re-opening in 2015 all three paintings were brought back together again, alongside a preliminary pencil sketch of Clifford's Tower borrowed from the Lowry Estate. All together they made a very handsome display.

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