

Stanley Spencer in Leonard Stanley

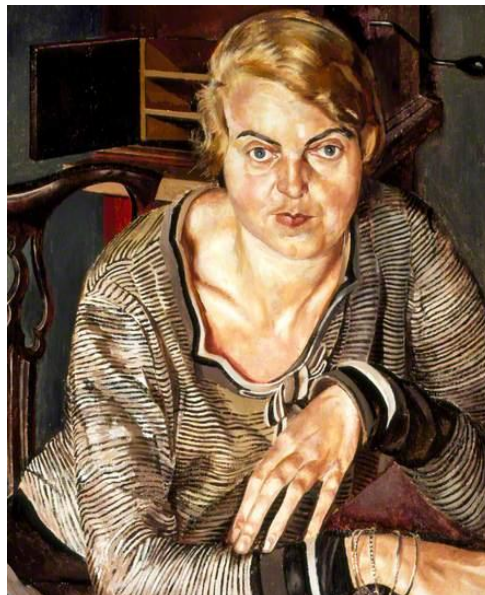
By Peter Hill

Stanley Spencer arrived in Leonard Stanley in July 1939. He was 48. He was already an accomplished painter with a national reputation, and in the year he came to the village he painted himself very much in the pose of an artist. It is a mirror image, since he painted with his right hand.



Self-portrait 1939

He had studied before the First World War at the Slade, where he had met a host of contemporary painters. He had also seen war at close hand. He served in the RAMC, principally in Salonica in Northern Greece, which inspired a group of paintings. He had married Hilda Carline, and had two daughters, but the marriage led to a divorce in May 1937, when he immediately married Patricia Preece.



She, however, was a lesbian, with whom he never consummated his marriage; on their honeymoon night she went off to Cornwall with her girlfriend Dorothy. He painted a famous picture of the two of them naked on the floor with a leg of mutton in the foreground, perhaps to emphasise that we are all flesh. And he used her as a model for several other very fleshy nudes.



Patricia Preece-nude

So by the late thirties his life was a mess. He'd had two failed marriages, he was short of money, and he had nowhere to live, after making over his house in Cookham to Patricia. His agent Dudley Tooth took over the management of his finances. It is no wonder that in 1938, at the urgings of his agent, he painted no fewer than 31 landscapes, which Tooth could sell; the following year, during which war broke out, he only did six, and in 1940, whilst he was in Gloucestershire, the number reduced to four. He had previously been living alone at Adelaide Road in Swiss Cottage – where later he noted that he had been happy by himself – and had also been staying in North London with John Rothenstein (Directors of the Tate Gallery) and his wife. His main preoccupation around this period in North London was a series of religious images of Christ. But he also painted a large landscape of Hampstead Heath.



Vale of Health, Hampstead Heath

It was about this time that he met Daphne Charlton, the wife and former student of a lecturer at the Slade, George Charlton, at a party given by another artist, C.W.R. Nevinson. George was a specialist in medical drawing, and Daphne was a good pianist as well as an artist. Stanley was writing letters to her in June of 1939. The three of them came to Leonard Stanley in July, initially for a short painting holiday. The Second World War broke out in September, and George had to lecture in Oxford during the week. Stanley and Daphne soon began an affair.



Portrait of Daphne

They were living in the large bedroom above the front door of the White Hart Inn in Leonard Stanley. The pub recently acquired a Blue Plaque to celebrate their presence.



The White Hart

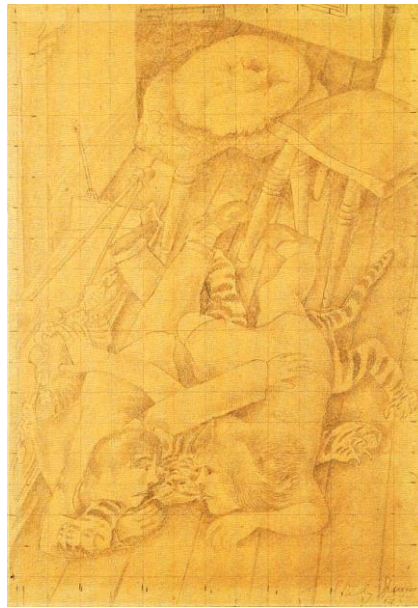


And the bedroom, or at least its floor, features in a striking painting of Stanley and Daphne, from February 1940, prostrate on a tiger skin by the fireplace.

It is rather comical, with the tiger's nose between the heads of the lovers. The floor boards are bare, probably because he used the room as a studio, and a large white cat sleeps on the chair behind them. Stanley imbued this picture with religious elements, saying it could be a Resurrection picture "...how near is the meaning of resurrection and sexual union".

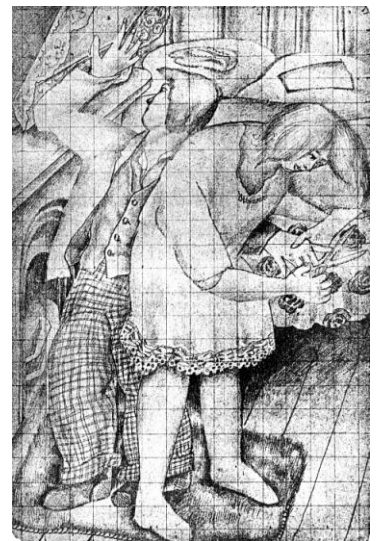
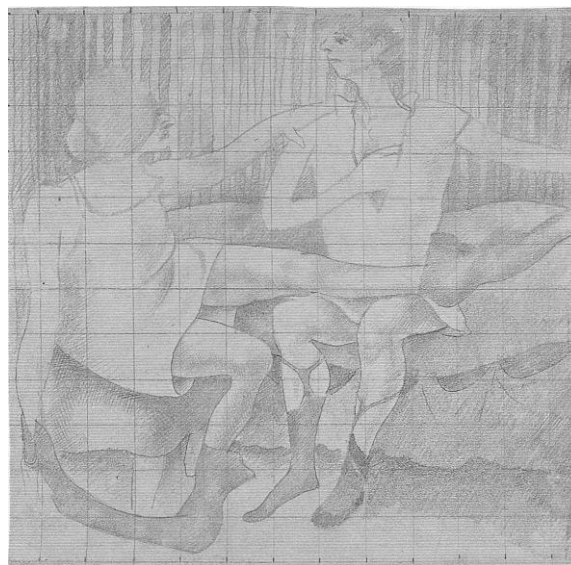
On the Tiger Rug

He also bought some Derwent notebooks in the stationer's shop in Stonehouse, and made many drawings during his time in the village, one of which is a preparatory sketch for the Tiger Rug picture.



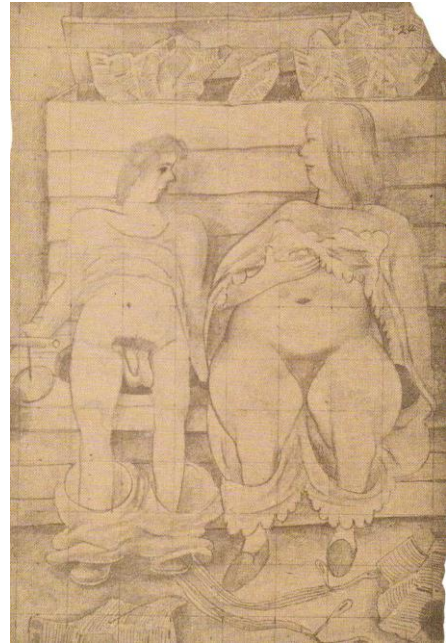
Drawing of 'On the Tiger Rug'

There were several intimate pictures of the pair in the Scrapbooks, such as the two putting their shoes on, or Stanley measuring up Daphne for a skirt, or Daphne cutting Stanley's fingernails.



Three drawings from sketchbook

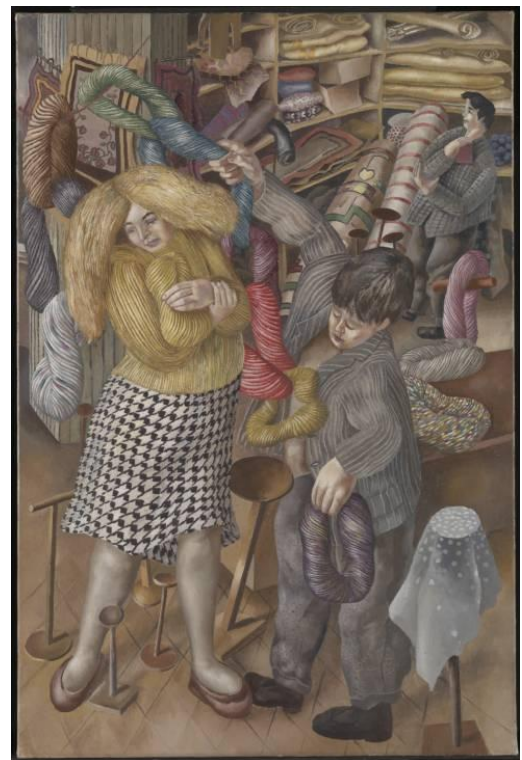
There are also others, for instance of them having tea in bed, though sometimes Hilda pops up as a memory in "Trying on Stockings", perhaps to illustrate the autobiography which he was beginning to write. Spencer had a wonderful visual memory, and apparently could remember both images and music very well. Among the other sketches in the notebooks are explicit ones of himself and Daphne seated on an old double lavatory in the grounds of Priory Farm, which still exists.



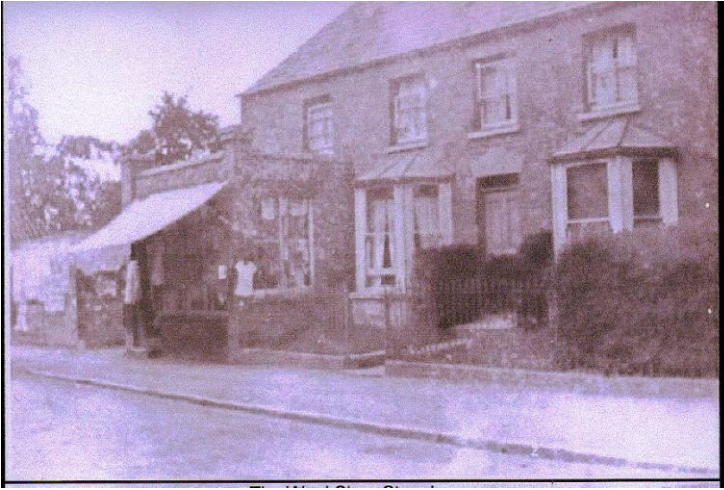
Sitting together on Priory Farm Lavatory

It is one of Spencer's traits that he often puts himself into his own drawings, often with others. In 1950 Sir Alfred Munnings, the highly conservative President of the Royal Academy, instituted a prosecution of Spencer for obscenity. In October of that year the owner of some of the drawings was reported to have destroyed what the Daily Express called "these saucy pictures", and Stanley hid the famous 'Leg of Mutton' nude under his bed.

Also among the sketchbook drawings is one of the woolshop in Stonehouse, which Spencer made up into a painting. In it the large figure of Daphne takes centre stage, comparing some wool with her sweater, with a younger Stanley nearby, while she is surrounded by skeins of wool like an embroidered border. It is probably Stanley at the back as well.



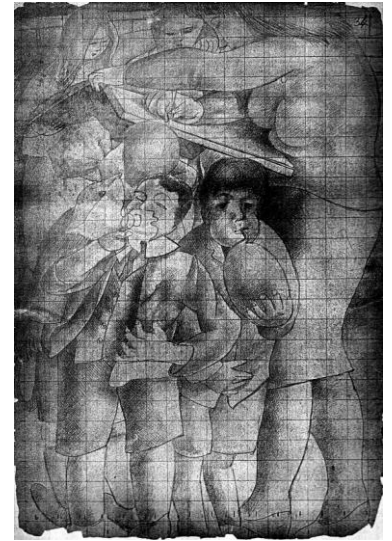
The Woolshop



A photograph of the original Woolshop in Regent Street in Stonehouse still exists.

Stanley's affair with Daphne continued through 1940. Her affection for him galvanised his creativity. In his mind it was an aspect of divine love. He wrote in later notes that he and Daphne had made love out in the fields and 'among the elm trees'. 'We did as we had just done in bed, so that our private life was public. I liked having trees and grass and puddles and chickens and the sun in the same association as bedclothes'.

They exchanged letters at least up to 1944, but by then she was obviously haranguing him, and he was pleading with her to stop her tirades. Daphne, of course, was a painter herself, and Mrs Pam Reynolds, of Midland Road, Stonehouse, remembers that she sat as a 9-year-old schoolgirl for a portrait by Daphne. It was in the open barn at Pullin's Farm. She believes it hung in the Tate for a while. In Stanley's notebooks there is a sketch of Daphne drawing some village children, of which he wrote: "The children being drawn are seen above the sketchbook. The ones below are a group of children blowing out bags as they like to do. Daphne did many drawings of children at Leonard Stanley & the scene here takes place by the stable wall facing the village pond."



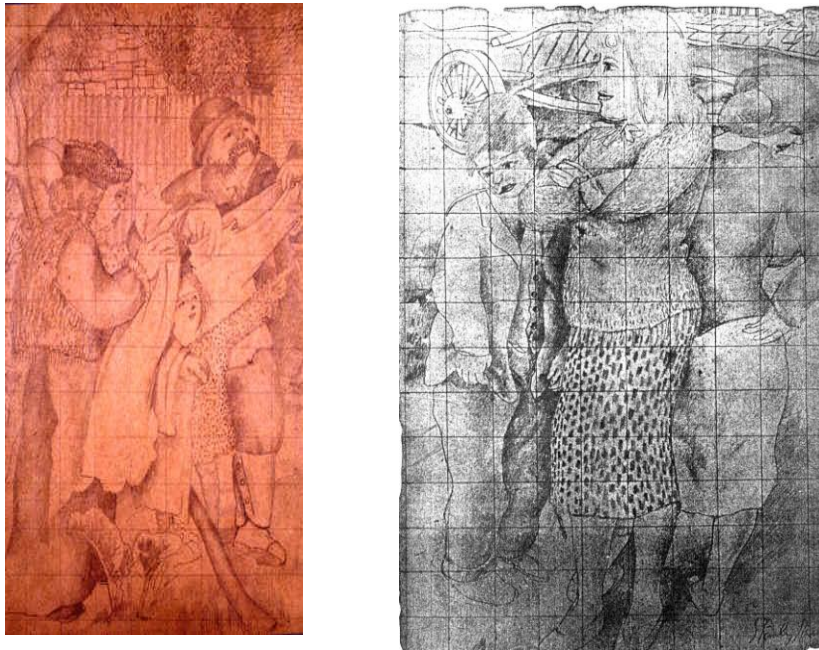
Mrs Reynolds said that Spencer and Daphne were very friendly with the local baker, named Watkins, who had a daughter called June. Unlike others, Mrs Reynolds said "the village folk liked Stanley".

A picture which became famous was Stanley's "Village Life". The villagers on the left gathering washing, appear to be pointing and looking up at the large figure of Daphne; Stanley is in the middle with his head down, holding his pocket, and curiously, Hilda appears on the right, turning away. The locals appear to be reproaching them, with Daphne dominant and confronting them.



Village life

It is, however, made up from two pictures joined together on the line of the central shed wall. As we can see from two drawings in his notebooks, it was originally a separate group, of a villager and an old lady gathering in the washing, and a young girl pointing up towards a vision in the heavens.



Two drawings, 'Old Couple' and 'Us in Glos'

He wrote that the drawing on the left was “of an old couple witnessing the coming of God in the sky while they and a grandchild were in their garden taking in clothes”. And in the second drawing, entitled “Us in Glos.”, Hilda appears on the right with Stanley and Daphne: he wrote to her that she had “gatecrashed” the scene. Put together, they make “Village Life”.

Stanley became well known locally, though viewed with suspicion by some villagers. Doris Hale, of ‘Vron’ in Bath Road, was in her early twenties at the time. She often used to chat to Spencer in the road, or when he was painting, but she had been warned: *“Mother used to say, I don’t want you talking to people you don’t know”*. She recalled: *“having a great chat with him outside the gate”*, and she invited him inside, where he met her mother, who was sitting in an armchair, and they had a conversation. Doris remembers Spencer as friendly, *“a bit of a wanderer”*, and *“just an ordinary chap, nothing very special”*. He would set up his easel and paint what he called “potboilers”, well-executed landscapes and village scenes, such as one of Priory Farm.



John Pullin, the local farmer, was 10 at the time. He and his friends would stand around behind Spencer as he painted. He remembered particularly, *"the farmyard one with the manger in"*, and says Spencer was drawn to the old buildings in the farmyard, and to the Saxon church and tithe barn. It is not too different today, though the pond has receded.



Priory Farm

Another view of the farm in the same area shows Spencer's mastery of landscape.



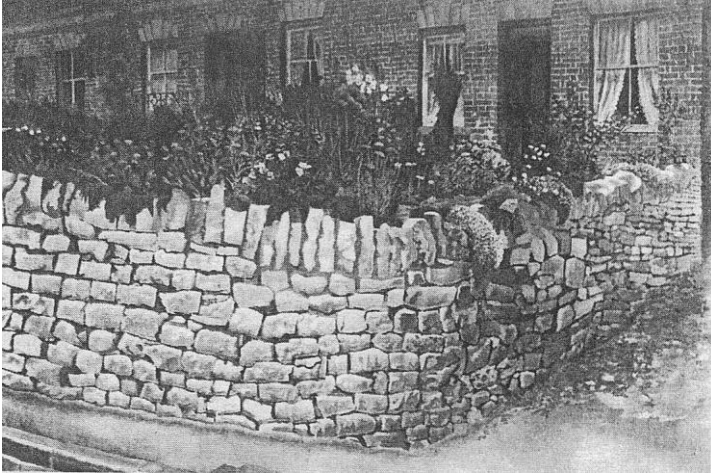
Priory Farm 1941

Spencer would often draw portraits of the local children, and John Pullin remembered that he did one of his sister, which she always kept. And how did the artist strike him? *"Well, very peculiar.. we were country people... he had come down from London with his large glasses, as I picture him. This funny little man would mumble away..."* And he said Daphne was with him most of the time. *"It caused quite a bit of comment, and I remember my parents talking among themselves how they would get off together....they just smiled and laughed about it"*.

Ray Wyman, a former railwayman, of 10 Tudor Court, The Street, was 15 at the time, and he remembers Spencer's long hair, trilby hat, and large horn-rimmed glasses. He says he often wore a big white panama hat while painting: *"He was always walking round with an easel for painting purposes...I saw him painting at Priory Farm, and in Seven Waters - that was one of my grandmother's garden....it was the house next door to where I was born, because my grandmother lived in the one at the front which the picture shows, and I lived in the one at the back."* And his sister Enid (Mrs Scrivens) also saw Spencer painting a picture of her granny's house 'down in the dip' at Seven Waters, because he said *"the pretty garden attracted him"*. Her father, who used the White Hart as his local *"loved a natter, and would have had loads of stories of Stanley Spencer"*

Mr Wyman also remembers Spencer painting the old Tannery, and one of the *"Jump"*, now demolished. He said there were rumours in the village about Spencer: *"Well, the rumours said that he was arrested in the early days of the war ,suspected of being a German spy. Whether that's correct I don't know"*. There is some truth to the rumour.

Spencer, of course, arrived in the village before the war broke out. But his biographer records that he, George and Daphne were once caught sketching too near an aircraft factory, and were arrested and put in police cells in Stonehouse. The local vicar was called round to vouch for them, which caused ‘general hilarity’ in the village. His biographer also says villagers were astonished by how little he ate or slept: he would often work at night, and his main needs were warmth and quiet. Spencer’s painting of the corner house in Seven Waters, with its curved wall, compares fairly well with the modern scene.



Seven waters – corner wall

Wyman said the local kids used to say, “He’s got a bit of spare!” and found the contrast between this “bigish woman” and “a little short man” quite funny. He also recalls that the landlord of the White Hart, Walter Stafford, was a bit of a character who ran “a proper country pub...if he didn’t want you in there he would just tell you to drink up and get out”. Also living in the pub was his daughter Violet, married to the village butcher, Raymond Cave, who was away in the services.

In the spring of 1940 Spencer got friends to persuade Sir Kenneth Clark to commission him as a War Artist. He was awarded £300, and the idea was to portray the work of men on the home front.

Stanley was sent to Lithgow’s Yard in Port Glasgow, where he stayed with a local family, and soon produced large panels of shipbuilders at work, such as “Burners”, “Riveters” and “Laying the Keel”. Some of these he finished off in his upstairs room in the White Hart. The first one, “Burners”, completed July–August at Leonard Stanley, was much approved of, and after being shown at the National Gallery in London, the panels were sent off to America to be shown in the Museum of Modern Art (this was before the Americans entered the War in December 1941). Stanley was given further money for his work, and produced many other large works. The project lasted six years in all.





Burners

In the central panel of 'Burners', at the top right, Stanley portrayed himself drawing. Before the picture went off to London, Stanley set it up in the pub for the villagers to see.

In May 1941 he moved away to Epsom. Dave Camm, of 10 Marsh Lane, told an astonishing story. As a small child he would go round to the White Hart to play with John Cave, the son of Raymond and Violet Cave and the grandson of landlord Walter Stafford. *"I would go round to the White Hart in the mid - 40s, 44-45, and play with John. And I can recall quite distinctly visiting Stanley Spencer's room, and in there were reams & reams of paper with rough sketches on, and John and I being of that age, and being brought up in wartime, used to draw battleships, planes and explosions on these pieces of paper and what have you, as paper was very difficult to get hold of in the white variety, so we would proudly take them home to mum, who would promptly light the fire with them the following day."*

Local mothers took a strong moral view of the way Stanley and Daphne were carrying on. Dave admitted as time went by he realised it was a silly thing to do, watching these priceless drawings by a great artist going up in smoke, but *"hindsight is a wonderful thing"*. But he said Spencer was treated with great suspicion by villagers. Dave said also that Spencer would occasionally touch up black and white photos with colour, and he was still looking for one of himself aged two which Spencer had coloured in.

The portrayal of Leonard Stanley, however, did not end with Stanley's departure in 1941.



The Resurrection with the raising of Jairus's Daughter

In 1947 he painted a large religious triptych, '*The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter*', a miracle which appears in St Mark's Gospel, chapter 5.

The miracle is portrayed indoors in the central canvas, but the street scenes at either side, in which the dead rise from pavements on the left, and villagers come out to greet each other- with Stanley and Daphne prominent on the right side - were all drawn when he was in Leonard Stanley. Over one door on the left is a Union flag, as put out at the end of the war to greet returning soldiers.

When Spencer left Leonard Stanley he joined his ex-wife Hilda and their children. She had a breakdown in 1942. In 1944 Stanley had an affair in Glasgow with Charlotte Murray, a Jungian analyst. He painted a portrait of her. His correspondence with Daphne continued intermittently.

Among Stanley's papers is one headed "When I liked my life..." dated December 1942. The list includes ten separate occasions when he was with Hilda. The other seven are all when he was alone – in Macedonia, in Adelaide Road, in Cookham. None relate to Patricia. And none relate to Daphne, or to his time in Leonard Stanley.

He lived on until 1959, when he executed a moving self-portrait, before succumbing to cancer. Before he died, he re-joined the Royal Academy, was awarded the CBE, and was knighted.



Spencer self-portrait

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By Peter Hill

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