

A view from the breakwater at Lyme Regis across the sweeping seafront, lined with rainbow-hued facades under a deepening February sky.



PASTEL HAVEN ON A JAGGED COASTLINE

Protected by an ancient harbour, the pretty seaside town of Lyme Regis in Dorset has steep, narrow streets hugging a shore renowned for its rugged beauty

ALTHOUGH THE STORM is over, the sea is still running high. Large waves explode against the harbour wall; the wintry sun turning their spray into a diamond cascade. Energy spent, the water runs off the sloping top of the wall, back into the sea. Less angry waves slap against the more sheltered side of the harbour wall. The lively air carries that delicious scent of seaweed and salt water.

This harbour wall is the famous Cobb in Lyme Regis and is an iconic part of the Dorset coastline. The Cobb offers a good view along the shore in both directions and back to the town, which sits behind the sand and pebble Front Beach. Softly hued houses rise up away from the coast, some with cheerfully coloured shutters, and Lyme's open green spaces are very evident to an observer from the Cobb. On the edge of a less boisterous tide, a host of turnstones and Ringed plovers often investigate the water's edge in search of a snack.

There are few visitors to Lyme Regis who fail to walk at least part way along the Cobb in still weather, although this is prohibited in high winds.

While its camber to the seaward side looks precarious, the walk along its wide, pitted top is reasonably easy with due care for the edges. It is an interesting, appealingly curvy structure, which was in existence by the 13th century and enabled the town to develop as a port.

“He declares himself, that coming to Lyme for a month, did him more good than all the medicine he took; and, that being by the sea, always makes him feel young again”

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Wild coastal weather has destroyed this protective harbour wall on several occasions. In 1377, the loss of the Cobb's protection also led to the destruction of 50 boats and 80 houses. The southern arm around the harbour was built in the late 17th century, destroyed a century later, and rebuilt. In 1826, the Cobb was reconstructed from a type of Portland stone.

Lyme Regis sits at the mouth of the River Lym. First documented in the 8th century and again in the Domesday Book, Lyme became Lyme Regis when it received its first Royal charter from King Edward I in 1284, although locals still refer to it as just 'Lyme'.

Down the centuries, there have been times of turbulence: the town was besieged by Royalists during the English Civil War, and later, in 1685, the Duke of Monmouth landed here during his attempt on the Crown. When his rebellion ended in failure, 23 rebels were executed on what is now known as Monmouth



The ammonite pavement is a graveyard for thousands of extinct marine molluscs, embedded into limestone and boulders, with some standing proud in the eroded softer rock. The main species found here is the dinner plate-sized *Coroniceras*.

Beach, located on the west side of the Cobb.

Lyme Regis lies on the Jurassic Coast: a 95-mile stretch of coastline that showcases 185 million years of the Earth's geological history. The beaches along this coast are beloved by fossil hunters, and the western end of pebbly Monmouth Beach is known as the 'ammonite pavement', due to the fossils exposed in the limestone ledge and boulders at low tide.

Eastwards from the Cobb, beaches stretch towards Church Cliffs at the east end of Lyme, with the tower of the parish church rising from the roofline at this end of town. It is a place of multi-layered history that often shows its face in the modern day, as revealed by the fact that Lyme Regis is, rather unexpectedly, twinned with the town of St George's in Bermuda.

Sir George Somers – an English privateer and naval hero – was credited with founding the colony on Bermuda in 1609. He hailed from Lyme Regis, where he was MP and mayor during the early 17th century. He died in Bermuda in 1610, and his legacy resulted in the present-day twinning arrangement.

Impressive buildings

Walking through Lyme, the palaeontological heritage is never far from the visitor's consciousness, as even the street lamps are fashioned in the shape of ammonites. Many private dwellings are historically interesting, and the town has a wealth of significant public buildings.

Not least among these is the Guildhall, which stands just behind the coast on Gun Cliff; the site of Lyme's

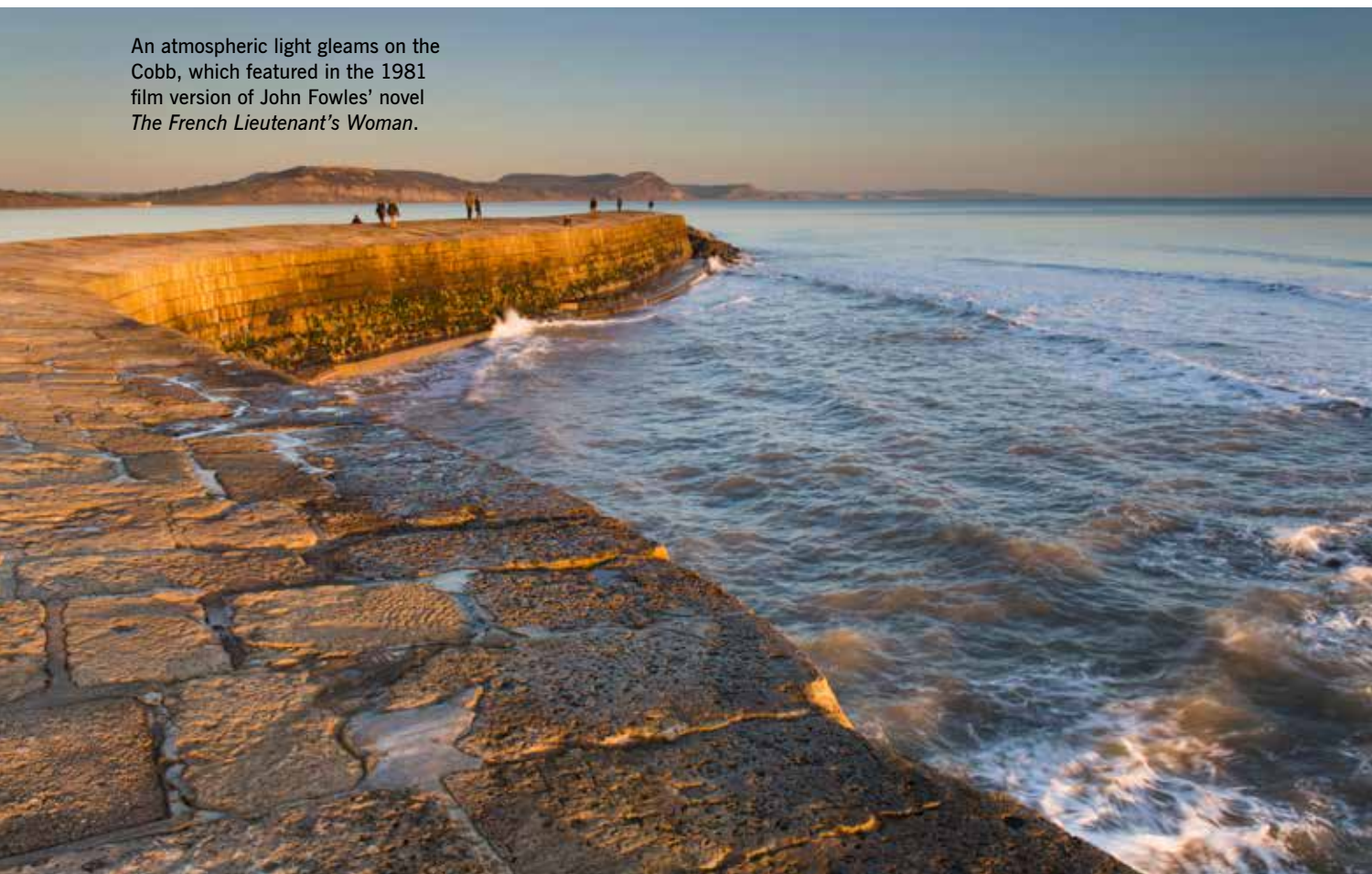
defensive cannons since Elizabethan times. Quite small by the standards of some guildhalls, the stone building is nonetheless impressive, with attractive leaded windows. Although the main body of the present building dates from 1889, the history of the Guildhall can be traced back to the 17th century. The main chamber was once the court, and the building stands on the site of Lyme's former lock-up; the old door of which can still be seen on the road side of the building.

Opposite the Guildhall is the equally impressive Lyme Regis Museum; a rather grand red-brick ➤



Marine Parade, where house styles range from seaside villas to thatched cottages, and street lamp designs incorporate the coiled shape of ammonites.

An atmospheric light gleams on the Cobb, which featured in the 1981 film version of John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.





Left to right: The distinctive Italianate Guildhall, with its rounded tower, on the corner of Church Street and Bridge Street, offering views to the sea; equally impressive Lyme Regis Museum and lantern tower, with its rich stone; a blue plaque commemorating fossil hunter Mary Anning, who is celebrated at the museum.



The attractive Square, with its smart white buildings, and St Michael's Church and the coastal cliff and wooded hillside area of The Spittles in the background.

building, with a stone arched entrance. The building is topped by an attractive octagonal glazed lantern; each side of which has two windows. The museum is an excellent showcase for the town's history, and the building itself also has an interesting heritage.

Pioneering fossil hunter

This is one of the oldest parts of the town and was once an area crowded with private dwellings. The museum is on the site of the house in which Mary Anning once lived. She pioneered research into the fossils found in the area and also made some of our most important geological finds right here on her local beaches. She was an acknowledged expert, whose discoveries shaped the thinking on the planet's history, and her opinions were sought and respected by learned male palaeontologists. However, encumbered by the joint disadvantages of being both working class and female, Mary was prevented from joining the Geological Society and by the time she died, in 1847, still had not been awarded the full recognition she deserved.

Astonishingly, it was only as recently as 2010 that she was finally recognised by the Royal Society as being one of Britain's 10 most influential women scientists, and in 2011, she received her first entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which until then had not listed her. Today, Mary Anning's contribution to science is well documented in fact and fiction: the latter includes Tracy Chevalier's evocative and partly biographical novel *Remarkable Creatures*.

Town Mill

Just across the road from the museum, narrow Coombe Street leads away from the coast; a road of visually pleasing buildings in a variety of styles and colours that sit very comfortably together. Just along here is the entrance to Town Mill, where an enticing mix of buildings sit around a courtyard. This is Lyme's 'artisan quarter', where visitors and locals can enjoy browsing an art gallery, a microbrewery, various makers, and a good selection of cafés. One of these – the delightful Strawberry Tree – has a verdant garden beside the mill stream, and cookery classes are also on offer. Central to this area is the venerable Town Mill.

The Domesday Book documents the existence of a mill in Lyme, but it is uncertain exactly where that was sited. Thirteenth century court records indicate that a mill was situated where Town Mill stands today. The oldest wall in the present building dates to 1340.

During the English Civil War, the mill was severely damaged, but was rebuilt and enlarged within four years, using stone and oak. Most of the extant buildings date from this time, although the building was later enlarged to provide more roof space. The waterwheels were also enlarged over time to achieve more power. ➤

FOSSIL FINDS IN LYME REGIS

Ammonites are the most commonly found fossils at Lyme Regis; often encountered during a stroll along the pebbly beaches.

The palaeontologist Mary Anning had an extraordinary aptitude for finding fossilised remains. Her finds were numerous, and many of them became particularly significant. At the age of 12, after months of digging, she excavated the outline of a 17ft (5m) fossilised creature, which later became known as an ichthyosaur. Twelve years later, she was the first to discover a large marine reptile: a complete plesiosaur. In 1828, Mary found the winged remains of the first pterosaur outside Germany, which became known as a pterodactyl.

Other finds have included scelidosaurus, which was an armour-plated, vegetarian quadruped that grew up to 13ft (4m) in length, and a fossil of dapedium. The world's largest moth has also been discovered here.

Fossils found loose on the beaches here can be kept, although they should not be dug out. Lyme Regis Museum organises walks to search for fossils. More details can be found on the website at www.lymeregismuseum.co.uk



Town Mill, which is now the creative heart of the town, with a hub of independent businesses in its outbuildings (top).

The restored milling machinery, which has brought the mill back to life for visitors (above).

From the mid 19th century, Town Mill struggled as cheap imports arrived, and new technology developed. It finally ceased milling in 1926, and the site was taken over by the borough council.

Gradually, the buildings fell into disuse and were derelict by the 1970s. In 1983, the author John Fowles, who lived in Lyme, wrote of the need to save the 'historically important' water mill, but by 1991, this gorgeous old building, which had been milling since before Chaucer ever created his fictional Miller, was scheduled for demolition.

Call to arms

This threat to the town's heritage resulted in concerned locals being galvanised into action to save and restore the buildings, and the successful outcome is evident to all who visit. The mill is now run as a charitable trust, and entry is free. To explore Town Mill is to step back to an age where bread was made traditionally.

Kathryn Worrall is one of the members of an enthusiastic volunteer team. "Mills were an important source of income in medieval times," she explains. "Milling rights were usually claimed by the local Lord of the Manor for grinding all the corn which was used within his manor. Wheat was milled for bread and malt

for beer. The mill would have been an important source of work. People tended to move from farms and small villages to towns to work in mills, as well as in the many support businesses that grew up around them."

In the era when the mill was in use to process corn for the town, grain would have been measured by volume, not weight. The capacity of a sack ranged from 2-4 bushels, where 1 bushel of wheat weighed 60lb (27kg) and a bushel of barley 50lb (23kg).

The building itself speaks of time-honoured labour. Old wooden steps – up which many millers have climbed – are worn into curves by the passage of centuries of feet. Historically, the waterwheel was powered solely by the waters of the River Lym. A laudable modern addition in today's mill is the hydroelectric plant that the Lym now also powers.

Volunteer miller Michael Green demonstrates the intricacies of the traditional milling mechanism, which produces a high-quality organic flour to sell in the mill shop. The mighty millstones are driven by wooden cogs, traditionally made from apple or hornbeam wood. Michael explains that nowadays it is hard to source these woods of the right size to make the cogs, so beechwood is used, but finding people with the skills to make necessary repairs is a modern-day challenge.



The Lynch channel of the River Lym – also known as the River Lim – on the East Devon Way along tranquil streets.

"I love being able to bring the mill to life for visitors, by demonstrating the workings and explaining where terms such as 'grinding to a halt' and 'show me your metal' come from," he enthuses. "I feel very honoured to be able to demonstrate this machinery and show the building that has been on this spot since 1340."

Another skill developed by the volunteers is described by Kathryn. "Volunteers working at Town Mill get to know the sounds and vibrations of the working mill, and they can tell if there is anything not working as it should," she says. "Sometimes, elements of the mill may need to be stopped until the fault can be found and remedied. Some parts can be difficult to source, and may have to be made to order. Such an ancient building needs to be proactively maintained. I really love the history of the mill and imagine all the people who have

worked here and visited the site over hundreds of years.

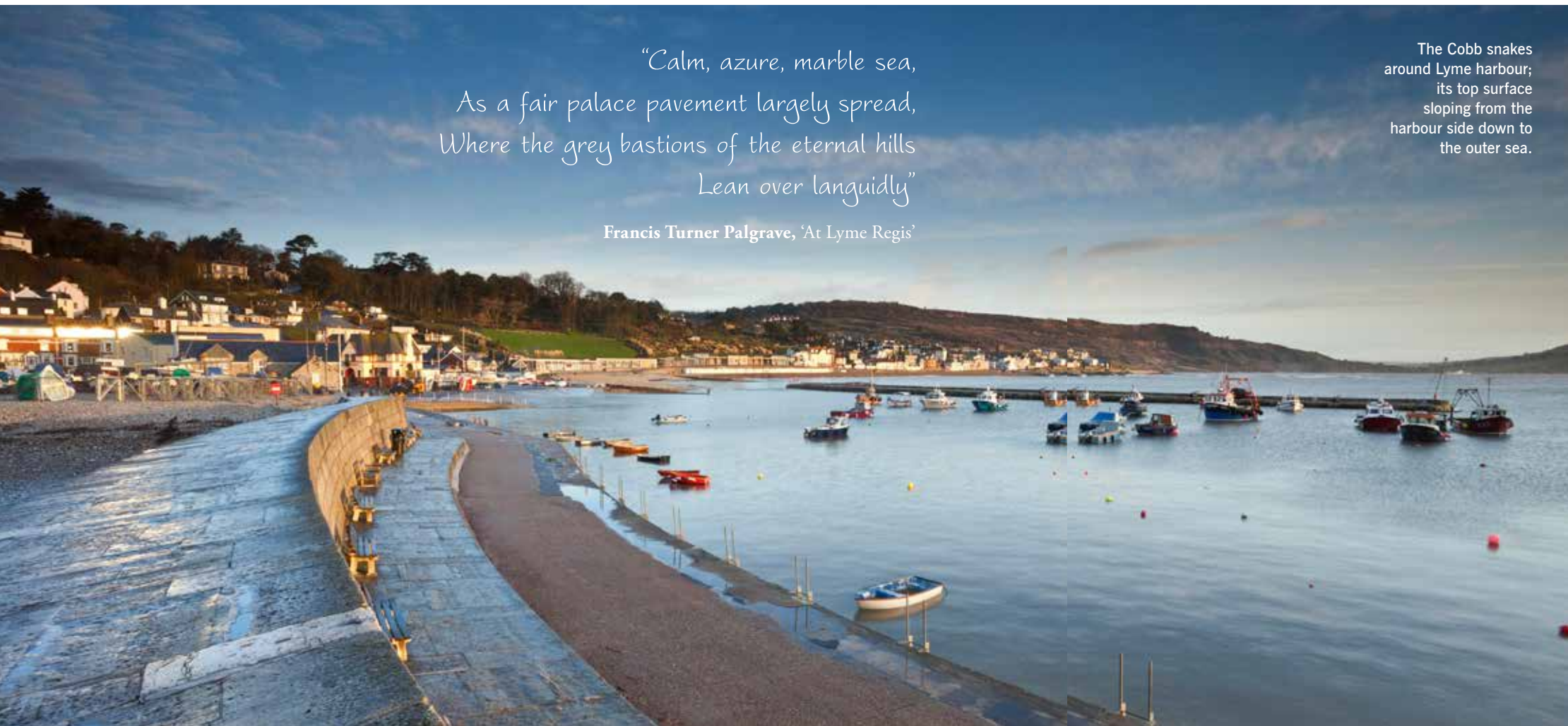
"Visitors find themselves drawn into the romantic mill, where they hear many of its stories and discover some of its secrets. We receive such joyous feedback, which is extremely rewarding and is my favourite aspect of working here. Most visitors are completely in awe of the atmospheric building, with its cobwebby mechanisms, uneven floors, crumbling brickwork and low beams. I recall an excited young boy telling me that he wanted to be an engineer, having seen the watermill in action. His parents said that before their visit he didn't even know the word 'engineer'."

Paths of discovery

Lyme Regis is a good place for walkers. The 630-mile-long South West Coast Path travels right through the town – a route on which to discover much living wildlife alongside the fossilised remains of the area. Lyme is also the start of the 40-mile East Devon Way, as the town sits just on the Dorset side of the county boundary with Devon. The East Devon Way passes through the environs of Town Mill, following the line of the River Lym away from the mill, where it runs through a deep channel, known as The Lynch.

The Lynch offers a vertiginous drop into the river for unwary walkers, but this is a tranquil backwater of the town and worth exploring. Judging by the amount of loose change in the millstream – a result of that English desire to throw money into water – this is a popular place to stroll. On the far side of the river is the stone arched Lepers' Well. The waters of the well were thought to have curative properties, and 700 years ago, there was a nearby hostel for lepers.

At the end of The Lynch, walkers may turn back down Coombe Street, when they will soon pass a rather elegant, pebble-dashed building, with white feature stonework, which is set back from the road. This is the former Congregational Church, where Mary Anning was baptised in 1799. ➤



*"Calm, azure, marble sea,
As a fair palace pavement largely spread,
Where the grey bastions of the eternal hills
Lean over languidly"*

Francis Turner Palgrave, 'At Lyme Regis'

The Cobb snakes around Lyme harbour; its top surface sloping from the harbour side down to the outer sea.



The Lepers' Well is technically a spring and is sited in what was formerly known as the Fountain Garden.



An ichthyosaur fossil from the Jurassic period, on display at Dinosaurland Fossil Museum.

“a fine group of fossil bones... tell their story of former times with almost a living tongue”

Charles Darwin

This old church is now a private fossil museum, called Dinosaurland, boasting thousands of specimens. It is a fascinating place of exploration and discovery, and explains the vastness of geological timescales.

Writers and artists

Lyme has rich creative connections. As well as the writers already encountered, the author Jane Austen used the town as a location in *Persuasion*, having stayed here with her family in 1803 and 1804. She is said to have enjoyed the bathing – at a time when female swimmers made use of bathing machines to preserve their modesty. An Inspector Morse novel, *The Way Through the Woods*, is partly set here. Its author, Colin Dexter, regarded Lyme as his favourite place on Earth.

Poet Francis Palgrave, of *The Golden Treasury* fame, had a holiday home here, and he, in turn, introduced Alfred, Lord Tennyson to the town. It has been a destination for many other literary luminaries, including Oscar Wilde, Beatrix Potter, J R R Tolkien and John Betjeman.

Lyme Regis is also associated with many artists. J M W Turner painted at least two watercolours of the town, and John Gould, the celebrated ornithological lithographer, was born here in the 19th century.

And it continues to inspire. Julie Oldfield is a member of the Society of Women Artists and has been shortlisted at the Royal Academy. The huge skies and seascapes of the Lyme Regis coastline are inspiration to her wonderfully dramatic and elemental contemporary paintings. “Being brought up on a farm with wide-open spaces has influenced me working with open spaces on the beach,” she says. “I draw inspiration from my daily dog walks – looking at the coastline in all weathers and seasons – with the roar of the waves and the contrast of the stillness.”

Although she started painting on canvas, Julie’s extraordinary paintings are now mainly on copper and brass sheets, after she became interested in using various textural materials and site-specific elements. Burning and verdigris are the main media with which Julie creates her seascapes.

“Walking on the beach near Lyme approximately 15 years ago, I noticed the town’s old rubbish tip was falling down the Blue Lias cliffs and collapsing onto the



Walkers at low tide along the breathtaking beach at Lyme, with the Jurassic Coast stretching to the 627ft (191m) Golden Cap hill rising beyond.

THE DORSET LASSIE

It is an accepted fact among the folk of Lyme Regis that the dog Lassie – star of books and screen – was actually based on a family pet from Lyme Regis.

Lyme’s Lassie belonged to Tommy Atkins and his wife. They were landlords of the Pilot Boat Hotel, which still exists in Bridge Street. On New Year’s Day 1915, the battleship *HMS Formidable* was torpedoed by a German submarine off the Lyme Regis coast. Loss of life was great, but some survivors came ashore, and the Atkins welcomed them into their premises. These men were in a very bad way and, despite the best efforts of the locals to administer aid, some perished, so the hotel’s cellars became a makeshift mortuary.

One of the ‘dead’ men was Able Seaman John Cowan, and during his spell in the cellar, he was discovered by Mrs Atkins’ dog, Lassie, which sensed something that no human had realised: John Cowan was still alive. After half an hour of canine administration, Lassie’s licking aroused the man to consciousness, and her barking alerted those in the hotel. John Cowan was transferred to the local cottage hospital, where he made a full recovery, and Lassie stayed by his side throughout.

This wonderful dog became famous. Lyme Regis presented her with a medal, and she later appeared at Crufts in the Canine Heroes section. The heart-warming story was reported around the world.

The original *Lassie Come-Home* novel was written in 1940 by Eric Knight, although he never admitted to its being inspired by what had become the world-famous exploits of the Dorset Lassie. The film of the same name was made in 1943, but although Knight was involved in production, he never lived to see it screened, as he was killed in a plane crash in the January of that year.

beach with bits of rusty metal,” she explains. “I really liked the colour of the metal and wanted to incorporate it into my paintings of trees, so I used sheets of metal that I had rusted.

“I did this for a short period, but I couldn’t get the rust to stay that colour permanently. I started working on galvanised steel, which doesn’t rust and was quite



Artist Julie Oldfield uses bonfires to give a dramatic surface to the metal she works on.

matt with no luminosity, and then I tried stainless steel, which works better. I decided to save up and buy a piece of copper, as I’ve always loved the colour verdi, which you can’t get with paint. I love to achieve effects that just aren’t possible using ordinary paint.”

Julie’s first sheet of copper was accidentally put on a bonfire, and the effect of that on the metal was so pleasing that she has carried on using fire and the elements as part of her technique. “I sketch the ragged, jagged Jurassic Coast, where the sea meets the land, then put my sketched ideas into spontaneous and intuitive metal work,” she says. “I work on the beach with fire, sand and seawater to create drama and emotion on the metal sheets. I work with science and nature to achieve some unexpected results from ‘sea weathering’ and from the uneven heat of fire. Every painting is very individual.”

Julie’s work has been in many prestigious exhibitions, including that of the Royal Society of Marine Artists.

For centuries, this area has produced abundant riches for those of creative or scientific inclinations. It will undoubtedly continue to do so for centuries to come. ■

• Words: Simone Stanbrook-Byrne