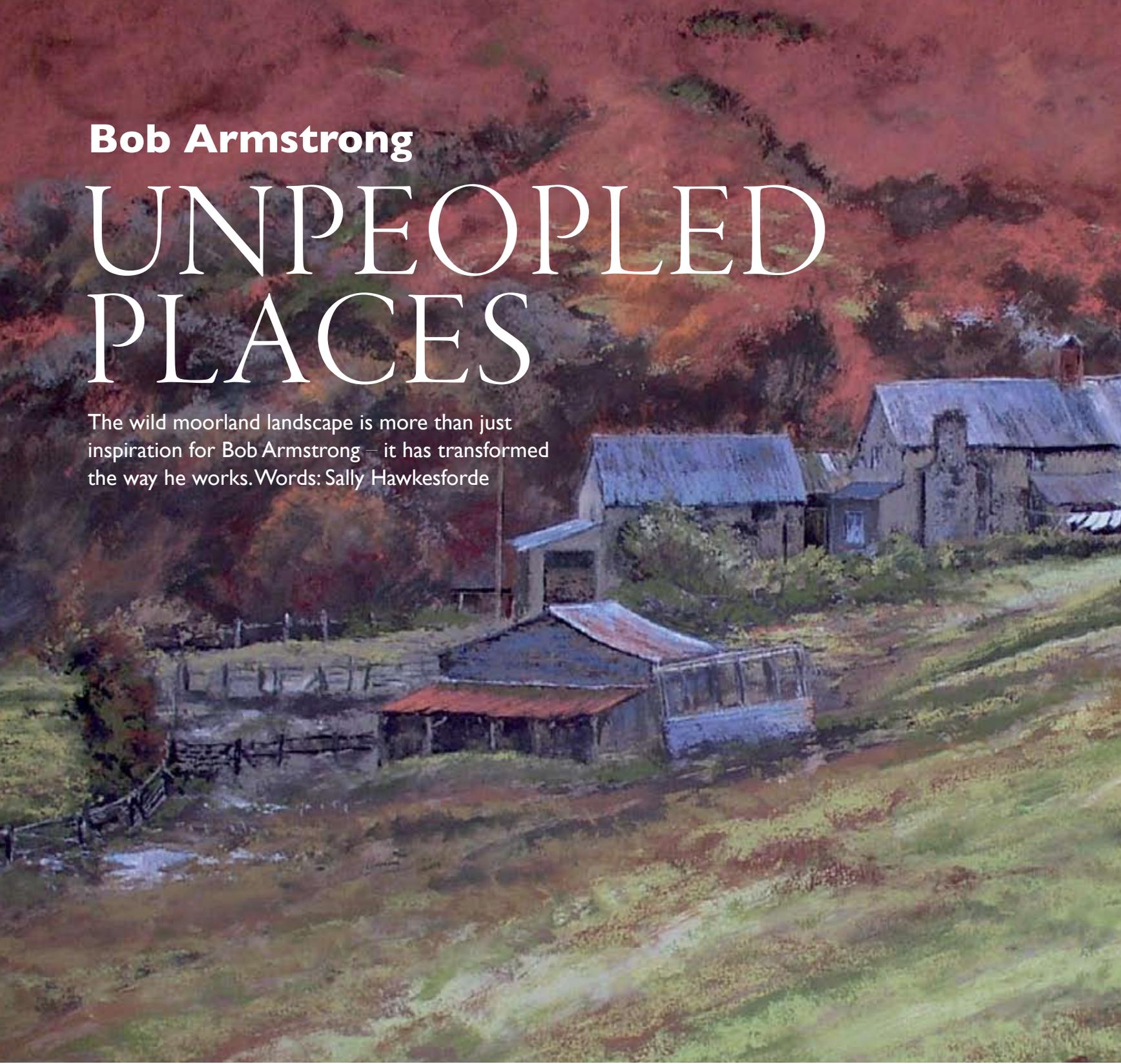


Bob Armstrong

UNPEOPLED PLACES

The wild moorland landscape is more than just inspiration for Bob Armstrong – it has transformed the way he works. Words: Sally Hawkesforde



LEFT *Black Mountain Farm*, pastel on acrylic underpainting on paper, 66x42cm

RIGHT *East Coast Gale*, mixed media on mount board, 30x18cm

BELOW LEFT *Wintry Moors*, mixed media on mount board, 40x16cm

BELOW CENTRE *Edge of the Moor*, mixed media on mount board, 32x20cm

BELOW RIGHT *Northumberland Rain*, mixed media on mount board, 30x18



LANDSCAPES CAN challenge and inspire; sparking the creative instinct, touching the soul. And for artist Bob Armstrong, landscape has changed his life.

Self-taught, Armstrong turned to painting in watercolour after being made redundant from his job in an insurance company.

“I did a bit of drawing and watercolour on holiday when I had the time,” he says. “Then I had a hand accident that kept me off work, and my wife said, ‘Why don’t you paint some pictures? We could do with some’. So I did. But they were dreadful.”

Armstrong joined a couple of art groups in the Birmingham area near where he lived.

“Eventually, the Coventry Watercolour Society took a chance on me.”

A short while later, he adds, “We decided to skedaddle on up

to the North Pennines, which were wonderful.”

However, after moving to the Cumbria border, he found himself somewhat perplexed at trying to paint the vast, barren and abstract scenery of the Pennine moors using the same watercolour technique he had learned in the Midlands.

“I spent the whole of that first winter trying to paint snow; trying to paint white over black. In the end, I learned to do what nature does – start with the black and leave the white.”

It was this epic landscape of snow-topped uplands that Armstrong says changed his way of working.

“Having learned the basic rules of composition and tone, people go different ways, don’t they?” Armstrong tried some pastels, some acrylics and eventually developed his ▷



Profile

Bob Armstrong is self-taught but has made a great success of painting landscapes using his own mixed-media technique. His work can be seen at the Usher Gallery, Lincoln, until 20 April; at Patching's Art Centre, Calverton, Nottinghamshire, until 20 April; and in a solo show at Oriol Plas, Glyn-y-Weddw, North Wales, 27 April – 2 June. His work sells for up to £1,000. To view more of his work, and learn about his garden open days, see www.bobarmstrongartist.co.uk.



BELOW *White Water*, mixed media on mount board, 24x26cm



“I spent the first winter trying to paint snow; trying to paint white over black. In the end, I learned to do what nature does”

present technique (see opposite). He believes his painting *Wintry Moors* (page 10) represents the place where his inspiration, technique and approach really came of age.

Boundaries

Armstrong feels most comfortable sketching outdoors, and says this is where art is its most exciting. His inspiration lies in the land – he loves to find places and sections of countryside where he sees man's influence in trying to tame the land, but where nature has broken through to reclaim what is rightfully hers. It is this boundary where man meets nature that Armstrong tries to capture in his compositions.

“I really loved John Blockley's work. He was a past president of the Pastel Society, and I went on the odd course or two with him. I liked his free approach to things. I'm really influenced by his ideas. He liked to paint the same places that we like to go to – unpeopled places.”

He and his wife now live in Lincolnshire where the climate is milder and they have an award-winning garden.

Armstrong has developed two successful methods of working – what he calls “dry” and “wet” painting. Dry painting comprises about 20 per cent of his artwork, and consists of pastel paintings on pastel paper, which he sometimes adds to by experimenting with other materials. However, Armstrong's main form of working is what he calls wet painting, which resembles Jackson Pollock's drip-painting technique.

Painting in a representational manner but not trying to replicate the scene as a photograph would allow Armstrong to explore such experimental techniques. He feels that these techniques and abstract approach enable him to explore the emotions he feels when working in the wild landscape.

“Sometimes I start with a sketch, but sometimes it just happens.” ▷

Paint with the professionals

ABSTRACT LANDSCAPES

Achieving a natural look is often about letting the scene virtually paint itself, explains Bob Armstrong



ABOVE *Moorland Track*, mixed media on mount board, 32x20cm

I use mount board, which doesn't hold the pastel very well, but is good for inks. I use Daler-Rowney FW inks with droppers – I like them a lot. I don't water them down like some artists; I just crash them out in two or three colours, and interesting things happen.



STARTING WITH a painted ground, I drip acrylic ink on to the wet ground, then drag PVA glue through it. When it is dry I scrub it in the sink. Gradually, out of the corner of your eye, you might see something in it. The point of the PVA glue is to add some control to what is a very unpredictable process. The hairdryer creates uneven drying and therefore the still-damp parts wash away, leaving interesting textures and lovely, random effects that you couldn't paint. Sometimes it may come out a complete and utter mess, but that's the risk you have to take when painting in such an abstract method.

The last part of the painting is correcting and refining many of the unwanted and distracting areas that occur. I never get what I want in one take, which is why I like to leave it lying around for consideration. The last stage may involve soft and hard pastel, Caran d'Ache water-soluble crayons, Inktense pencils, or acrylic or watercolour paints. In *Moorland Track* I've used them all, except for soft pastels. The scene is nowhere in particular, but I love the colours, patterns and textures of uplands, and that is what this painting is about. 

