

In a letter to Dorothy Selby in August 1932 Frances Hodgkins described Bridgnorth in Shropshire as 'my old love...'.¹ And the town with its gardens and boating facilities on the River Severn proved to be a very productive spot for her.

This particular work is just one of the memorable compositions from the several produced there that summer, including the controversial, *Pleasure Garden* now in the collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery. *Pleasure Boat* is notable for the dominant blue colouring which formed accents and featured in so many of her paintings. In this case Hodgkins has flooded the whole image with this colour creating the atmosphere of a twilight summer evening when the river can be enjoyed without the bustle of people and traffic which would have been a feature of the month of August. The overall blue is complemented and intensified by the touches of yellow on the front and lower sections of the boat shed and the top section of the structure on the left.

The River Severn divides Bridgnorth into the High town on the right and Low town on the left. Hodgkins has depicted the higher part of the town with the steeple of St Mary's church predominant on the hill. The boat shed which forms the central motif is just off centre and focuses key compositional elements of the work. The curved roof of the shed suggests a jaunty sailors cap such as might have been worn by the boatman hiring and managing the boats. The curve of the boat shed roof is echoed in the curves of the bridge linking the two parts of the town in the background. These devices lead the

eye further into the image as well as tying it together structurally. Hodgkins wry sense of humour is evident in that it is almost impossible not to discern a human face in the section of the boat shed facing the viewer. This almost comical, storybook element, carefully controlled by Hodgkins, together with the clouds above the bridge suggest the inspiration of the work of the contemporary French artist Raoul Dufy (1877 – 1953). There are gentle tensions in the implied movement of the moored craft in the lower right and how the 'face' tends to draw the floating shed back towards the viewer. Even in the quiet of the evening the water of the river is certainly not static.

This work readily displays the great gifts and sharp eye Hodgkins had for picture making. Mining the elements of the simple scene into a complex interweaving of colours, shapes and forms. Making them endlessly rich and interesting. A very worthwhile acquisition for any public or private collection.

Tony Mackle

1. Gill, Linda (ed) *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. No 446 To Dorothy Selby c. 14 August 1932. p. 454; AUP 1994.