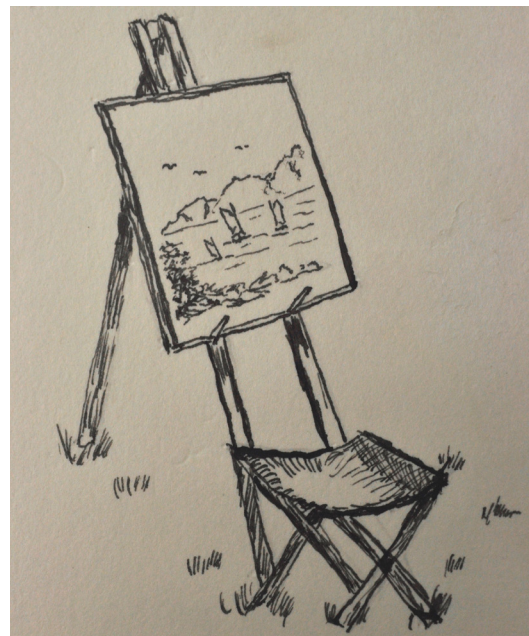


Exhibition: 21 April – 3 June 2018



## Acknowledgements

The Curator would like to acknowledge Helen Anderson from the Bass Strait Maritime Centre, who originally researched and catalogued the extensive *Kathleen Cocker Collection*. The *Homes of Devon* photographers: Brian Allison, Don Carter, Rex Direen, Allan Francis, Paul Griggs, Rod Hamilton, Bob Iddon, Peter Lord, Greg Mace and Peter Manchester. Patrick McMurray, who in 1982 commissioned the first series of photographs of the ten year series *Homes of Devon*, and Fiona Christie, Curator of the 1992 exhibition *The Homes of Devon: A Ten Year Photographic Essay, 1982-1991*.



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Exhibition drawn from the DCC Permanent Collection  
Design & Printing: Think Creative & Impress Print  
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ISBN: 978-0-6481480-2-9

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# Not Without a Trace

The Kathleen Cocker Collection  
& The Homes of Devon Collection





## Not Without a Trace

In his book *Tasmania's Vanishing Towns – Not What They Used To Be*, Michael Holmes explores the prevalence of Tasmanian towns that ‘had vanished or were vanishing be it in the physical sense – loss of buildings, vacant buildings, loss of services – post office closing, school closing or loss of their original character’<sup>i</sup>. Many of these Tasmanian towns faced a shift in key industries, which led to the closure of community services and organisations, while other towns that have grown rather than vanished have arguably lost some of the essential character that came with a time when community was central to daily life.

*Not Without a Trace* brings together a selection of works from two collections held by the Devonport City Council, *The Kathleen Cocker Collection* and *The Homes of Devon Collection*, which through watercolour paintings and photographs trace the history of the dwellings of North West Tasmania, many of which have since vanished or lost their early charm. These two collections, as well as projects like *Tasmania's Vanishing Towns*, reflect what has become a resurgence of interest in local histories and a recognition of the significance of localness, regardless of the size or location of a town. Academic Dr Jonathan Healey suggests that often ‘...when you put the word ‘local’ in the title of something, it gives it a bad name. It conjures up images of parochialism, obscurity and irrelevance’<sup>ii</sup>. However, the importance of local history, focused on the social relationships, places and events of ordinary people under ordinary circumstances, is being increasingly valued. Not only do local histories allow us a deeper, more genuine insight into the people and places that culminate in broader national histories, they also acknowledge the significance of geographic regions to the makeup and individuality of communities.

This is evident in the circumstances surrounding the creation of Kathleen Cocker's series of watercolour paintings of the buildings of North West Tasmania. In its early years, the National Trust had three branches within Tasmania, and the North West region was considered to be at a disadvantage in comparison to the other branches, due to there being fewer ‘old buildings’ in the area. In an attempt to assert the architecture of the North West as significant despite its comparative youth, the Trust undertook a unique project to record the buildings of the region. Kathleen Cocker, a member of the Trust, set about painting over 250 small watercolours of the homes and businesses of the region. Kathleen Cocker was local to the area, born in East Devonport in 1901, and was a self-taught artist who began painting in 1969 at the age of 68. Many of the buildings captured by Cocker are now demolished, and many others were already gone when she painted them, using photographs to aid her memories of these structures.

The North West branch of the National Trust produced two books of Cocker's watercolours; *Early Houses of the North West Coast of Tasmania*<sup>iii</sup> and *Pioneer Tapestry: Buildings of Early Tasmania*<sup>iv</sup>. In these books, many of the watercolours are accompanied by personal anecdotes from the artist. Through Cocker's work, some buildings act as stages for quirky local stories, while others become characters in their own right when read alongside the anecdotes. Some have a personal connection to the Cocker family, such as number 13 Thomas Street, East Devonport, which was built in 1861 for artist Annie Cocker's aunt, Miss Catherine Dean. Annie Cocker had a small office in the house, where she served as Postmistress. The house was left to William Boswell Cocker, Kathleen's father, and the family lived there until his death. Many other stories accompany the watercolours; *Larooma*, an Aboriginal word meaning ‘open sea’, was built by a Mr. Henry John Wilson, a ship's carpenter, with some of the materials coming from the shipwrecked schooner *Satellite* in 1878; *Alta Vista* was the home of Dr. J. W. Payne,

who children believed carried newborn babies around in his black bag; and *The Gables*, at Turners Beach, was held-up by bushrangers Kelly and Dalton in 1853 when operating as *The Sailors' Return Inn*. Among the items they stole were bed sheets, used for sails on a small boat for their escape to Melbourne.

Cocker's collection of watercolours and their accompanying stories provide an alternative history to that presented in more formal historical books and documents. The story



of the North West captured by Cocker is an unofficial, nostalgic and personal history of a region since changed. Recognising the unique value and significance of this record of the communities of North West Tasmania, G. Hawley Stancombe of the National Trust said ‘We cannot, of course, savour the aroma of these lovely places nor can we recreate the sounds which once pervaded the scene. The smell of an old stone or the clink of harness seldom comes our way, yet we have a sense of gratitude to Kathleen Cocker for a moment re-lived, a vision of a vanishing world’<sup>v</sup>.



In *Not Without a Trace*, Kathleen Cocker's watercolours are displayed alongside a selection of works from *The Homes of Devon* photographic series, the first of which was commissioned by Patrick McMurray in 1982. Over the following ten years, ten photographers each uniquely captured the homes of the region. While Cocker told stories of buildings and their inhabitants, the *Homes of Devon* photographers shared their own unique approaches to the same subject – the homes of the region.

For example, Greg Mace's photographs from the *Shelters in Early Summer* series positioned homes as shelters from the seasons; buildings that have settled in to their surroundings, and have developed personality through the effects of their gradual weathering. In contrast, in *A Thin Slice of History* Rod Hamilton photographed a selection of homes built throughout Devonport in the 1981-82 financial year, capturing the stark exteriors and precisely manicured garden beds of the suburbs. In *A World Apart*, Peter Manchester moved into the more rural areas of the region, focusing on derelict structures that may otherwise go unseen. Many of these cottages are dwarfed by their natural surrounds, and leave questions as to whether they were still occupied. In direct contrast to this, in *Dogs, Pillars and Stone Monuments* Brian Allison has photographed the spacious gardens, gated entries, long driveways and grand facades of some of the region's early homes – several of which, notably, were painted by Kathleen Cocker.

In the final two commissions of the series, the residents of the *Homes of Devon* became the focus of Peter Lord and Paul Griggs, who each photographed members of the community inside their dwellings. In *Inside Out*, Peter Lord photographed interiors in ways that give hints as to the personality and life of each individual. Artist Owen Lade was the subject of one of these portraits, while Kathleen Cocker was herself the subject of another, found alongside her sister in the drawing room of their house, in an image which

*Homes of Devon* Curator Fiona Christie noted ‘documents a way of life which has now ceased’<sup>vi</sup>.

It is fortuitous that Peter Lord was to photograph Kathleen Cocker in one of the final *Homes of Devon* series, as these two bodies of work share numerous attributes. Together, these collections have traced many of the homes, businesses and people of the North West region of Tasmania, over a period spanning more than a century. These works are a lasting visual record both of homes since lost, and those still standing, and a unique insight into communities that have since vanished or evolved. The *Kathleen Cocker Collection* and *Homes of Devon Collection* will remain significant into the future, as others seek to establish their own sense of place and identity, looking back to the local history of the region of North West Tasmania.

Erin Wilson  
Curator

<sup>i</sup> Holmes, Michael. 2017. *Tasmania's Vanishing Towns - Not What They Used to Be*. Michael Holmes and Forty South Publishing, p. ix.

<sup>ii</sup> Healey, Jonathan. 2012. *Why Local History Matters*. Lecture Delivered at the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, 14 November 2012. ([www.academia.edu/2550380/Why\\_Local\\_History\\_Matters](http://www.academia.edu/2550380/Why_Local_History_Matters))

<sup>iii</sup> Cocker, Kathleen. 1973. *Early Houses of the North West Coast of Tasmania*. Stancombe, Western Junction, Tasmania. Sponsored by the National Trust of Australia (Tasmania).

<sup>iv</sup> Cocker, Kathleen and G. Hawley Stancombe. 1977. *Pioneer Tapestry: Buildings of Early Tasmania*. Glendessary Press, Western Junction, Tasmania. Sponsored by the National Trust of Australia (Tasmania).

<sup>v</sup> Stancombe, G. Hawley in *Pioneer Tapestry: Buildings of Early Tasmania*, p.16.

<sup>vi</sup> Christie, Fiona. 1991. *The Homes of Devon: A Ten Year Photographic Essay*. Devonport Gallery and Arts Centre. p.10.