WHO WAS ALFRED WALLIS?
Alfred Wallis lived in Cornwall and spent much of his life at sea. He was born in 1855 and first sailed as a cabin boy on a ship at the age of nine. Working on deep sea fishing boats, he travelled around Cornwall and the Atlantic Ocean, going as far as Newfoundland, off the east coast of North America. Alfred Wallis then become a scrap-yard merchant in St Ives in Cornwall. He never had any training as an artist and only took up painting in his 70s, to keep himself company after the death of his wife.

EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES
Alfred Wallis’ drawings and paintings are full of expression and capture the immediate and direct experiences of life at sea. Those who knew him said he would speak of his paintings as ‘events’. His love of the ships that he sailed can be felt in his artwork and in how he wrote about his experiences:

“each boat of that fleet had a soul, a beautiful soul shaped like a fish”
PAINTING FROM MEMORY
Ships and seascapes were what Alfred Wallis knew best. He never went outside to paint from life, but instead painted from his memory, recalling the boats and ships he had seen and sailed on.

“What i do mosley is what use To Bee out of my own memery what we may never see again”

Alfred Wallis in a letter to Jim Ede, April 6 1936

ACTIVITY
Think of somewhere you have travelled to and draw it from your memory. It could be a holiday, the park, or your journey to school. Let your memory shape the drawing – like Alfred Wallis, you could draw your favourite parts of the memory bigger than everything else, or choose the colours according to how you remember feeling.

Try collaging with layers of papers, different layers could be different pieces of a memory. You could draw over the paper layers, or maybe it is the shapes and colours that give the sense of the memory?

SHAPES AND MATERIALS
Alfred Wallis didn’t have much money for art materials, so he used what he had most available to him, it’s part of what makes his artwork so interesting. Most of his pictures are painted on old boards, cardboard or packaging cases, often from the greengrocers. Another artist, Ben Nicholson said:

“He would cut out the top and bottom of an old cardboard box... into irregular shapes, using each shape as the key to the movement in a painting, and using the colour and texture of the board as the key to its colour and texture.”

If the box showed through at the end, that colour would become the part of the painting too.

ACTIVITY
Find some old cardboard at home, a box or some packaging. Think about the shape you have. Does it have interesting edges? Are there bits you want to tear away? Now make a drawing or painting of the view from your window, but making it fit into the shape of your cardboard. What happens to the image?

You could even try painting around a whole box, or on an empty jar or bottle. How can you use the shape to tell parts of a story?

KEEPING IN TOUCH
Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood, two friends and artists involved in the modern art scene in London, met Alfred Wallis on a trip to St Ives in 1928. They were inspired by his artwork and shared it with many of their friends in London, including Jim Ede, the creator of Kettle’s Yard. Jim Ede and Alfred Wallis never met, but they wrote lively letters to each other over many years.

ACTIVITY
Take some time to think about someone you haven’t seen for a while, could be a family member, a neighbour or friend from the park. Think about what you would tell them if they were here – about something you’ve seen or done, a funny joke you heard, or maybe an imagined story of adventures.

Create a postcard for that person. All you need is some card, cut into a rectangle shape! On one side you need space to write their address and put on a stamp. Fill the other side with words or drawings of all the things you would tell that person. When you’re finished, pop it in the post to them!
A DAILY PRACTICE

Despite the success of his artwork, Alfred Wallis spend the final year of his life, living in a workhouse. His friends would send him art materials – sketchbooks, pencils, crayons and paints. In these sketchbooks he continued to recall and sketch his memories of the sea, shore and Cornish landscape. Although he only started painting at the age of 70, he painted every day and made many hundreds of artworks.

ACTIVITY

Most artists find it important to try and do something creative every day, even if it’s a little sketch or writing down an idea or thought. Sketchbooks are brilliant for collecting these small creative acts. Best of all they are simple and cheap to make yourself!

Have a go at making your own. Collect the experiences of the things around you: draw views from your window, the shape of leaves, map out walks around where you live or stories from your imagination. Try making sketchbooks of different sizes with different kinds of paper. Carry them with you and start a daily practice.

If you can, check online for more info and inspiration: kettleyard.co.uk
Or visit us in person to see the Alfred Wallis Rediscovered exhibition
24 October 2020 – 3 January 2021

We would love to see how Alfred Wallis has inspired you.
Share your creations: @kettlesyard
or email us with feedback:
learning@kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk

HOW TO MAKE YOUR SKETCHBOOK

You’ll need paper (a mix of colours and textures is good, but anything will do)
A hole punch
A stick (lollipop stick is good)
Scissors and String

- Gather all your papers together and make two rows of holes along one side. You need an odd number of holes, five is good for small book.
- Place the stick in between the holes and hold in place
- Thread your string through the end hole. Keep a finger length piece out so you can tie it off at the end
- Thread the string through all the holes, criss crossing it from top to bottom all the way along, like A or B. Like you would tie a shoelace
- Make sure you pull the string tight to keep your stick in place. Tie the ends together and trim.