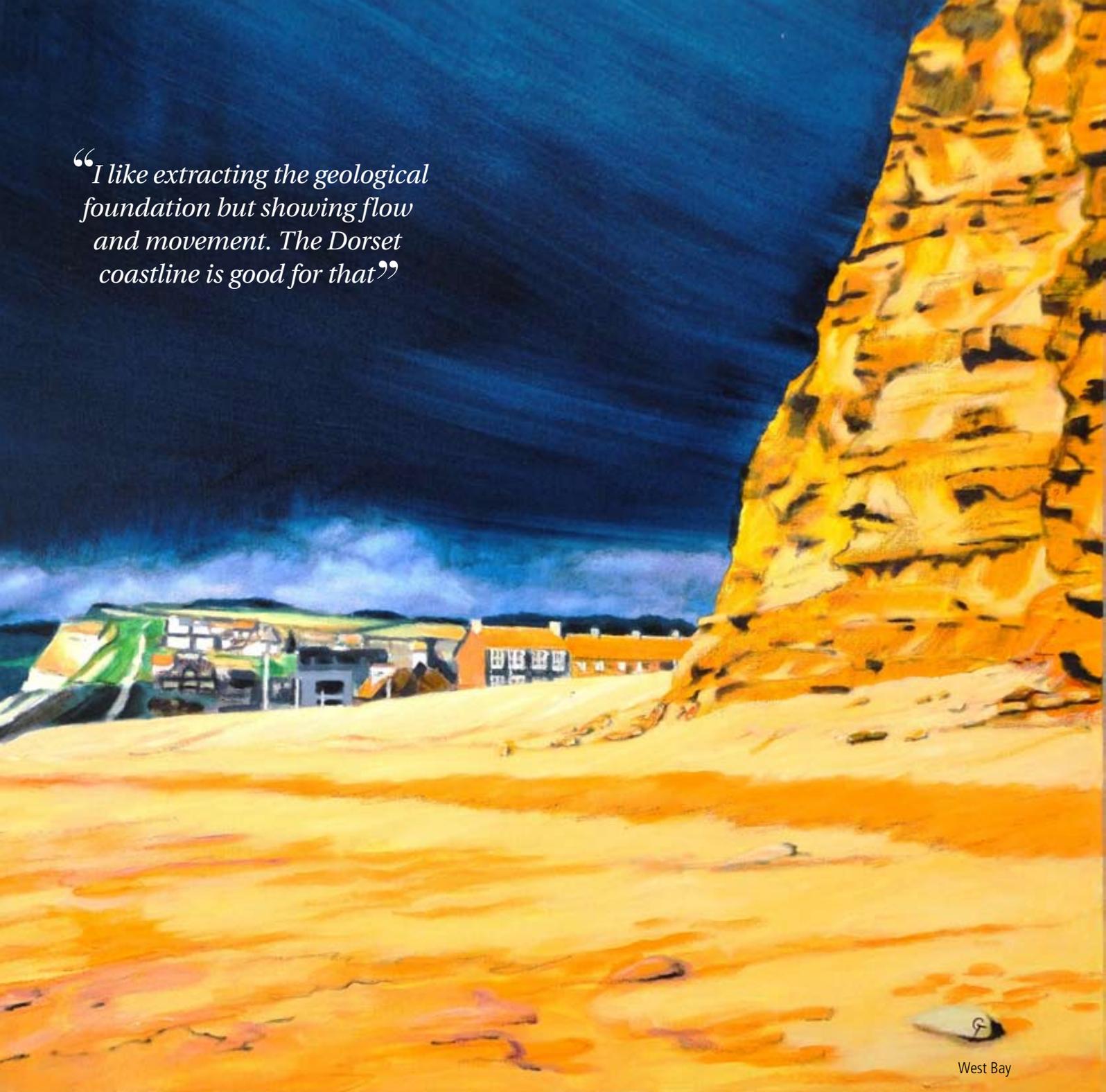


*“I like extracting the geological foundation but showing flow and movement. The Dorset coastline is good for that”*



West Bay



## A Geologist's Eye

Robin Capon meets artist Geoff Townson who has drawn on his passion for the underlying structure of the land in his colourful canvases

Geoff Townson first visited Dorset on a geology field trip in 1965, later followed by three years' doctoral research. He returned many times after that and in 2001, with his wife Jane (who had spent many happy childhood holidays camping at Charmouth), decided to buy a second home there, eventually settling in Charmouth full-time in 2010.

There are plenty of inspiring subjects to paint right on Geoff's doorstep as he explains. "We can see the cliffs and sea from our house and from our garden studios where Jane creates work from yarn. Every day is different. Whether it's Evan's Cliff landslip, the river, the gravel delta or Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre - every subject is influenced by the time of year, the weather, the sea, the sky and the tide. The elements are always in motion, with the passage of time measured by the seaweed and driftwood tidemarks, from neap to spring tides." As well as painting, Geoff also runs geology courses for the Lyme Regis U3A, "I enjoy helping people see rather than just look," he adds.

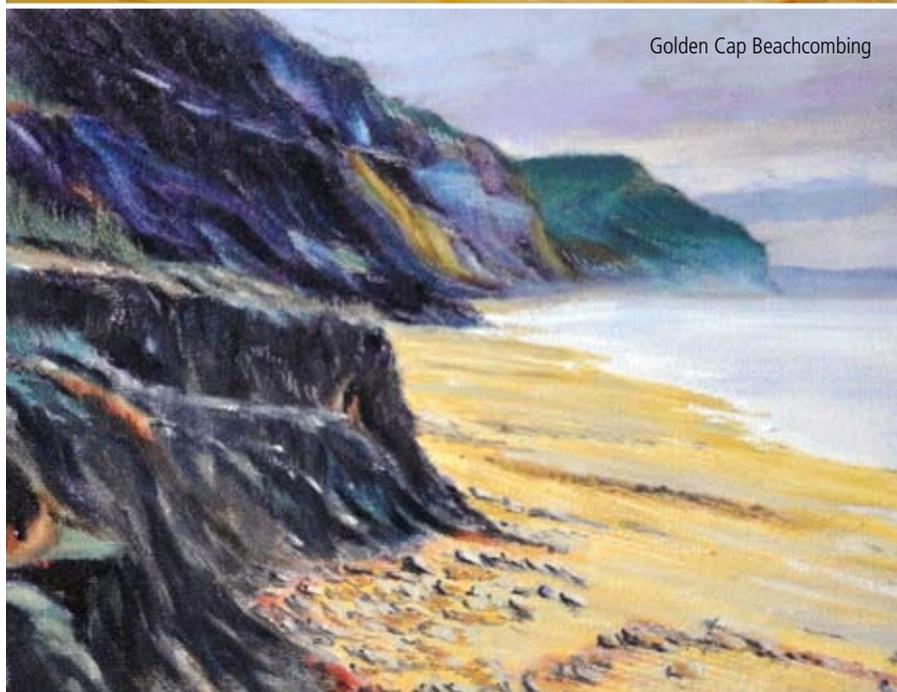
In fact, Geoff did not start painting in colour until the 1990s and only started to paint full-time in 2000 after he retired from a 29-year career with Shell as an international oil and gas geologist. This work took him to all over the world, including the Shetlands, the North Sea, Brunei, Australia, The Hague and several countries in Africa and the Middle East. But Geoff had always harboured an interest in painting and so rather than opting for a quiet retirement he embarked on a career change.

Whilst resident in Australia, and then The Hague, Geoff pursued evening art classes, culminating in six years of painting and art history courses with the Open College of the Arts (OCA), which he completed after his retirement from Shell. He sold his first paintings at an exhibition in 1999 at the Black Swan Gallery, Frome, which was organised by his OCA tutor. Since then his work has been shown in group and solo exhibitions in Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, as well as in several open studio events including Hampshire Open Studios and Dorset Art Weeks.

Geoff's work is always varied, appealing and strong in impact, with a bold sense of design and structure which is no doubt influenced by his experience as a geologist. Above all, his work is distinctly his own. He comments: "I remember seeing an interview with Picasso in which he said one must always try new things and not fall into the trap of "making



Evans Cliff from the Beach



Golden Cap Beachcombing



Charmouth East Beach

endless little teacakes for the rest of your life". I like to try new projects, series or themes as a springboard for avoiding that 'teacake' trap."

At the moment Geoff's main interest is in local landscapes and seascapes. "I like extracting the geological foundation but showing flow and movement. The Dorset coastline is good for that and equally the patchwork fields draping the inland hills. I like a bit of distortion to emphasise things and I use colour to please myself! If the viewer experiences the same feeling that I did, then I have achieved my aim."

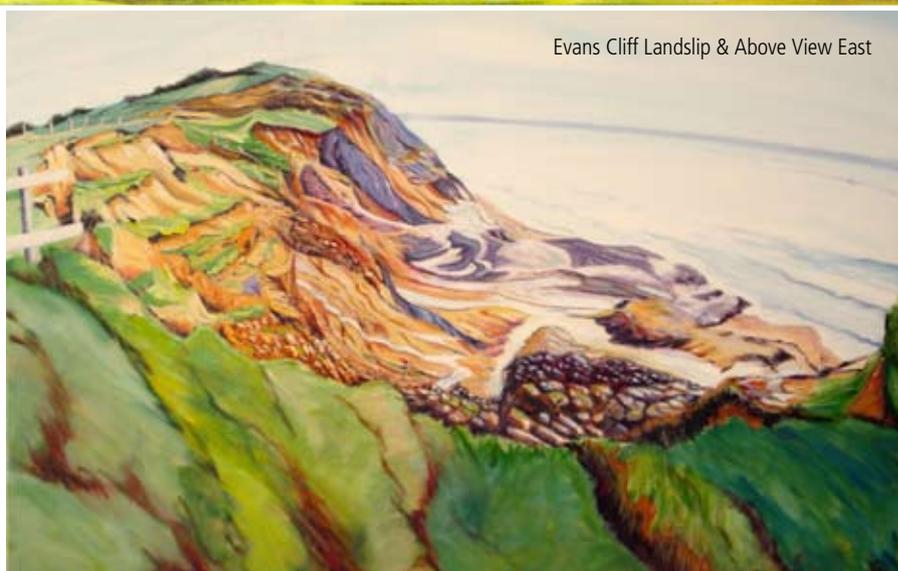
Geoff's locations and subjects include Golden Cap, Portland, Lulworth, Durdle Door, St Oswald's Bay, Stair Hole and,

further east, Chapman's Pool. Inland, he has painted Pilsden Pen, Maiden Castle, Stonehenge, Avebury, Bridport from Quarry Hill and Longcombe Bottom near Compton Abbas among many other subjects. His exciting and colourful panoramic scenes encourage the viewer to scan from side to side and recreate the experience of being there.

On site, Geoff makes charcoal studies and sometimes takes photographs and video film as additional reference. His drawings are sensitive and bold, with an emphasis on the character and underlying structure of the landscape. Occasionally he also works on small paintings in situ: "Larger canvases can be a pain to secure



Evans Cliff Landslip & Above View East



Bridport from Quarry Hill



and carry. I once dropped a wet oil painting face down on Mousehole quayside. It got covered in sand – I still have it!” he laughs. “This can be the disadvantage of working in oils, they dry slowly. However, it can also be an advantage. Conversely, an advantage of acrylics is that they dry quickly, which can also be a bad thing.

“There is a tremendous challenge in representing a three-dimensional subject in a two-dimensional form. It’s very exciting. With the Dorset seascapes I strive for movement, structure and a sense of instability – the passage of time. The coastline subjects are about the interaction of earth, air and water, while away from the coast I enjoy the more sensuous forms of the chalk downland.” As well as trying different subjects Geoff has worked in a variety of media, although he says he now prefers to use acrylic and oil on deep-edge canvases. “This process has the practical advantages of not requiring any mounting, glazing or framing,” he adds.

Having decided on a subject, Geoff usually starts with some charcoal studies to establish the key compositional elements, sense of movement and tonal distribution. He doesn’t worry about so-called rules of composition. What matters, he says is: “Does it work as an interesting composition? If it doesn’t work tonally, in black and white, then it won’t work in colour. My aim is for a design that grabs and holds your attention – invites your eye to wander round, rather than just give a quick glance.

“If you observe people walking round an exhibition you will notice that they walk straight past some paintings, hardly pausing. But at others they stop briefly, and at others they stand in front for a long time. It’s about engagement: art is about communication.”

For Geoff, charcoal is a good medium to use at this stage because it is so flexible, forgiving and loose. For the painting, he generally starts with washes of acrylic colour applied to the canvas to block out

the white surface and, at the same time, indicate the main areas of the composition. He works over this with oil paint to develop the mark-making, colour and impact of the painting, sometimes also using oil bars and oil pastels to add more energy. His colour palette is very limited – just three pigment primaries – cyan, yellow and magenta – plus white. This ensures that the colours are harmonious. “Some people get lost with colour if they use loads of tubes of paint, lots of greens, browns and so on.

“I sometimes describe the way that I

work as ‘the helicopter approach’. It’s as if I am approaching the painting from a great height at first, with a consequent focus on the main forms, and then descending and adding an appropriate level of detail. Knowing when to stop is always critical. With commissions the client may want a more photographic level of detail than I would normally consider, but I can still have fun with the colour and flow!” ■

For more details about Geoff’s work visit his website at [geofftownson.co.uk](http://geofftownson.co.uk).

*“His exciting and colourful panoramic scenes encourage the viewer to scan from side to side and recreate the experience of being there.”*