chanting, general arm-waving." ("You've never been to a football match in your life," one of them observed, affably.) At the center of his composition, where in Frith's painting an acrobat crouches on one knee, his arms outstretched toward a child, Perry put a squatter-poet called Pete the Temp.

Grayson's wife of thirty years, Philippa Perry, a psychotherapist and an author, was watching. "When I first met him, he was not much of a joiner," she said, as her husband arranged people around two vehicles that were standing in for Frith's carriages: a red BMW convertible and a camper van with a flip-up roof. "He didn't like to be thought of as one of the masses. He used to have a lot of difficulty going into a service station. Look how well he's come on!"

When Perry had reached the right-hand side of his composition, a few dozen people were still unused. "They can line up here and I'll use them, in turn, like colored pencils," he said, in a mock-megalomaniacal tone. He added more chuggers, more goths, a very large man in a black suit, two middle-aged cyclists in Lycra, and his wife.

He cried out, "You're representing your country!," and took a photograph. There was applause.

Before returning to London, Perry posed for dozens of photographs taken by his subjects, and grinned more maniacally each time. The Jesus Army tried to recruit one of the hoodie-wearing teen-agers, and gave her a pink plastic cross, which she put around her neck. "I can take it out raving," she said.

—Ian Parker

SANCTUARY
SECRET GARDEN

Robert Richard Randall was a wealthy Manhattan merchant and landowner, whose family's fortune came mainly from the sea. He died in 1801, and, as a gesture of gratitude for his life's considerable comforts, left the bulk of his estate to establish a sanctuary for "aged, decrepit and worn-out seamen." His executors spent two decades defending the will in court, then bought a large farm at the northern end of Staten Island, overlooking the Kill Van Kull. In 1833, they opened Sailors' Snug Harbor—a name that Randall had specified in his will. At its peak, in 1918, it comprised two dozen substantial buildings and housed more than a thousand former seamen, each of whom was issued two new suits a year, purchased from Brooks Brothers. (An old photograph shows seven retired salts studying newspapers in the Reading Room while wearing identical light-colored straw fedoras.) Snug Harbor's governor from 1867 until 1884 was Thomas Melville, whose older brother Herman visited often, perhaps attracted by a local abundance of mentally unbalanced one-legged sailors. The facility provided much early business for another historically important Staten Island sanctuary, Liedy's Shore Inn, which opened in 1905 and is still operated by the Liedy family. Snug Harbor residents who were no longer able to hobble the five hundred yards from their front gate to Liedy's door could have their grog delivered.

Snug Harbor hasn't housed old sailors since the nineteen-seventies, by which time America's expanding social-safety net had depleted its supply of indigent former mariners. But most of the buildings are still standing. The property is now a park, known formally as the Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden. One of the oldest structures, called Building D, contains artifacts from the institution's heyday, including a re-created dormitory room and a selection of arresting photographic portraits of former residents. On a recent Saturday, Nick Dowen, a professorial figure who manages the building's collections on weekends, said, "After a certain point in the eighteen-hundreds, every sailor who came here was photographed, and many of those photographs still exist, either here or in an archive at the maritime college at Fort Schuyler, in the Bronx." Guessing even the approximate ages of those depicted can be tricky, since some of Snug Harbor's thoroughly worn-out-looking residents were in their twenties. Building D is also the home of a comprehensive collection of art work by John A. Noble, who spent much of his career drawing pictures of derelict ships in New York Harbor. (He died in 1983.) Noble's studio—a houseboat that he assembled from salvaged odds and ends—is preserved on the ground floor of the building. "It wasn't self-propelled," Dowen said. "Noble kept it first on a pier and then on a barge at Port Johnston, near the ships' graveyard, directly across the water from Snug Harbor." The houseboat's furnishings include an easel, a drawing table, a ship's bed, and several jars crammed with paintbrushes, and it may be the most invitingly snug workspace on earth.

Not all the attractions at Snug Harbor are nautical. Lady Gaga shot much of her "Marry the Night" video in the oldest structure, Building C, whose central hall has a soaring, richly decorated domed ceiling. Several other parts of the property have been used as period sets for movies and television programs, among them the HBO series "Boardwalk Empire." Near the southwestern corner of the park, beyond a row of mansard-roofed nineteenth-century brick "steward's cottages," is the New York Chinese Scholar's Garden, which has been called "the only authentic classical Chinese garden built in the United States." It was erected, without nails, by a crew of forty Chinese artisans, who used materials imported from Suzhou, on China's east coast. It opened in 1999.

Visitors to Snug Harbor recently included a group of Chinese and Chinese-American students, who chatted with one another in both English and Chinese during their brief bus ride from the ferry terminal. They wandered for an hour along the winding paths of the Scholar's Garden, and asked occasional questions of an elderly guide, who explained that the garden's builders had made the serpentine koi pond appear deeper than it is to promote a sense of mystery. One of the students, a young woman, said, "My mother read an item about the Scholar's Garden in a Chinese-language newspaper. I'd never heard of it, and I decided I had to go." There was urgency to her trip, she added, because she had been told that the garden was in financial distress and would soon be dismantled—a possibility that disturbed the extraordinary tranquillity of the setting, and of the day. A little later, though, a park employee, who was selling tickets and souvenirs at a desk on the ground floor of the southernmost steward's cottage, laughed, and promised that it wasn't true.

—David Owen