

OBITUARY: Robert Whitmore

From Newsletter 103, August 1993

I want to take you back and remind you, and myself, of Robert my father, as we would all like to remember him. Not that the last four or five years have been all unhappiness; dad was very well cared for in Southlands Hospital, and has been loved and looked after by all at the Norman Lathan Home in the last two years.

But, as he grew frailer and declined, the younger and more active Robert faded behind the more immediate problems for my mother, missing him and trying to visit him, for all of us, but most of all for him when he was unable to walk, then read, then draw, and ultimately to talk.

In this country, someone has said we do not have a climate, we have weather. I think of this as a wonderful description of my dad – you could describe him as generally temperate but capable of roaring like a lion at everyone, of great Atlantic depressions. But he was also a man of great warmth like the English summer with his irresistible jokes, his honesty, honour, loyalty and love.

He was brought up in Kings Lynn, Norfolk, and from somewhere early on he acquired a wonderful ability to draw and paint, with the strength of purpose to leave Norfolk at the age of 17 and make his way, on a scholarship, to art college in London, the Regent Street Polytechnic, and the Slade.

Almost immediately on graduating he landed a good job as art master at Kilburn Grammar School in London. Although the artist in him was often deeply frustrated by this role and demands that conflicted with his art, the job gave him security, good friends and colleagues. Kilburn 'Old Boys' I meet from time to time (we now live near there) speak of him with great affection – *"You're not Twit's daughter are you?"* A few went on to become artists or keen amateurs in their own right, as I did. The most eminent being **Ken Howard**, RA, who remains a loyal friend and still honours my father as his early mentor. I have books which Robert and his boys illustrated, printed and bound, and photos of the sets he painted for the school's annual Shakespeare plays, where old boys like **Richard Baker** first trod the boards.

He spent nearly forty years at the school and, for someone of his temperament, I can think of worse professions.

His artistic life was arguably more disrupted by the War than anything else, coming as it did when he was at the height of his powers and regularly exhibiting at the Royal Academy. In the RAF he ended up in the prairies of Alberta in Canada and he has left us with a unique pictorial record of places and events in the War.

However, one good thing did result from the dislocations of war. Robert was evacuated with his boys to Northampton at the same time as a certain Marjorie Trist with her NW London charges.

It is typical of my father that his courtship of my mother, diffident but determined, consisted of a prolonged and (according to her) not very good portrait of her – the opposite of the story of *Scherezade*. But without it, my sister Jane and I would not be here, nor would ultimately the five grandchildren.

After the War they settled at Richmond, then Highgate and finally Hampstead. A good musician, he sometimes played the organ at St Michael's in Highgate, St John's, Downshire Hill in Hampstead and latterly at St Nicholas in Brighton.

With artists friends he regenerated the Richmond Art Group after the War and, when we moved to Hampstead, he was a regular exhibitor with the Hampstead Artists Council there.

But it wasn't until he retired from teaching in 1967 that he was able to put into effect dreams he had always nursed. My parents left London and moved to Sussex, a part of the world that he had always loved painting, opened a small gallery in Lewes selling his own and many nineteenth century watercolours and oils.

Since that time he spent the last nearly twenty years of his life moving house up and down the south coast from Brighton to Littlehampton, settling happily but finally in Shoreham, painting all the time. In 1986, just before his good health began to go, he had a much appreciated retrospective exhibition at the Tricycle Gallery in London.

This brief picture of his life doesn't begin to touch on the rich complexity of the man. Underneath his massive size 7½ homburg hat which, like the layers of vests, shirts, pullovers and jackets, was worn winter and summer, a hat which typically he had named *'The Glory that was*

Greece, was an inexhaustible fund of knowledge and an almost equally inexhaustible sense of humour, usually accompanied by a broad grin. He was a man of deep, sometimes dark, feelings and passions, but also a contagiously warm person. Only a few years back, a neighbour's little grandchild referred to him as *'my friend Robert'* – this sums up the man.

He was modest about himself and rather lacking in confidence though he knew an enormous amount about the arts in general and was a great and informed collector of pictures. He could write wicked spontaneously humorous verse. He had travelled and read widely, and gave himself wholeheartedly to family, work and ideas. It's hard to believe that the whole of a long rich life has all gone - which, of course, it hasn't because there are hundreds of beautiful paintings and some marvellous memories to celebrate, when the sadness has passed.

When the scales are balanced for all of us, we shall be doing well if the side that holds the good humour and wit, artistry and erudition, affection and loyalty weighs as heavily as Robert's.



Robert Whitmore

1908 – 1993

