

## Walter Dexter - Painter

1876 – 1958

Walter Dexter, artist.

Born in Wellingborough of a King's Lynn family, Walter Dexter returned to the town as a child.

He went to Birmingham School of Art where he excelled, and afterwards spent time in London and on the Continent. Returning to King's Lynn he lived on a converted fishing boat moored on the river Nar. Just before World War 1 he moved with his wife, to the old Toll Cottage in East Winch (on the A47 at the Blackborough End junction)

Returning to Lynn he lived at the Valiant Sailor in Nelson Street and taught Art at King Edward VII Grammar School for boys. He was a member of the Royal Society of British Artists, and the first president of King's Lynn Art Club.

Tragically he was killed aged 82, when he collided with a motorcycle whilst crossing the road on the Saturday Market Place, King's Lynn.

Several of his pictures showing local views were painted during his time at East Winch. His pictures of King's Lynn show the beauty of the town and captured views now destroyed.

His work continues to be much admired.

The following is taken from an article written in June 2011 by Charlotte Paton.

### **WALTER DEXTER RBA 1876 – 1958**

When I started to research this article, like many others all I knew of Walter Dexter was that he painted wonderful views of King's Lynn and that he died tragically as the result of an accident. Having delved a little deeper I have found there is so much more to this fascinating and unusual man.

It is correct his death was sadly the result of a collision with a 16 year old motor cyclist whilst he was walking across the Saturday Market Place.

He suffered a brain haemorrhage and died 2 days later at the age of 82, a verdict of accidental death being recorded.

At his funeral the only family members present were cousins by marriage Dr and Mrs Morley Chadwick. A solicitor acted as representative for his nearest relatives who lived on the Isle of Wight. Miss D H Smith the school mistress in East Winch and a friend of the Dexters, was so saddened when she heard that no memorial plaque was to be placed in East Winch churchyard where he was buried, that she paid herself for one to be placed just outside the east window. It is an odd choice of burial place as Mr Dexter was an avowed atheist.

Born in Wellingborough, his family came back to King's Lynn when Walter was a boy; his father returning to work in the family photographic studios. Walter was the oldest of 4 sons and one daughter, all of whom showed artistic skills and were at one time involved in the family business, which moved into the High Street in Lynn and extended its range to stationary and fancy goods. He learnt his love of Lynn and particularly the river from the time he spent there as a child with his grandfather.

Having gone to Croads school in Lynn, and been given painting lessons by Henry Baines the famous West Norfolk artist, Walter went on to Birmingham School of Art at the age of 16, and was soon making a name for himself. In 1892 when he had been in Birmingham only 4 months he won a local scholarship, he was the youngest candidate that year, and came 6th in the results for the whole country. He went on to study in Belgium and Holland. By his early 20s he was back in Lynn where he lived on a converted fishing boat moored on the river Nar.

Just before World War 1 he met his wife Helen, the daughter of John Chadwick a house decorator, who lived at 83

High Street. She helped her mother Nellie working in the North End. She was a friend of Ida Dexter, Walter's sister. They married in 1915. It would seem Walter did not fight in the World War I but worked as Art Master at Bolton Grammar School, Helen helped at a children's clinic there. They had no children of their own.

On their return to Lynn they lived at the Toll House on the A47 at East Winch. Mrs Dexter was active in the suffrage movement, and acted as their local secretary. That they were unconventional is borne out by those who remember them. A neighbour recollected calling on them one day, to find Walter painting his wife in the nude; Dexter continued to paint, Mrs Dexter continued to sit there entirely unconcerned, the neighbour, pink in face - fled. Locals recollect that they lived very modestly and one remembered that on calling at the house in winter they were muffled up indoors and the house was cold. He was often seen in the area working at his easel, recording local views. It would seem that he did not make sufficient income from his paintings alone but also worked as a commercial artist illustrating books and doing some very fine posters, the most admired advertised the railways. He also worked at one time for the Council for the Preservation for Rural England. In 1941 he joined the staff at King Edward VII Grammar School for boys.

During this time he was also writing regularly for the East Anglian Evening News and the EDP. His subject was invariably Norfolk and its beauty, and his love for his subject shines through, as it does with his landscapes of the area.

### **Dexter wrote...**

And where shall we find another port like Lynn as she sits dreaming of the past by Ouse's silent tide? Oh Norfolk, despite attacks by those whose aims do plainly manifest themselves in iron and concrete, despite the pylons that stalk across the windswept fields..... Happily the phase of uncontrolled and often one-sided development of industrial areas is now past....."

His pictures are now much sought after. Kevin Lines of Keys the auctioneers in Aylsham likes Dexter's work very much. He feels the quality of his work is superb and he has been very much underrated, particularly his still life paintings. He told me that there are avid collectors particularly of the views of Kings Lynn, an oil making between £1000 - £1500 and water colours between £100 and £400 although a Golfing scene at Brancaster sold in 2007 for £1600. Kevin was not sure whether it raised more because of the subject or the artist.

### **Published in the EDP in 1940 - the first of three verses**

#### **THE CURLEW**

If I but hear the curlew's haunting cry

I breathe the salty air, again I see

The marshes spread beneath the open sky

Again the wind comes shouting from the sea

And sweeps the banks with waving grasses clad,

The dykes half- hid by trembling reeds that sigh

While larks sing madly. O, but I am glad

To see o'er Wootton Marsh the great clouds fly.

The picture the Carpenters Workshop painted 1904 an oil 30" by 25" was sold recently for £34,655, it is arguably his best and most admired work.

My researches have led me to admire very much his skill as a portrait artist and the picture of his wife in a cloche hat in Lynn museum is a beautiful picture, showing a hint of the unconventional side of Mrs Dexter.

Her obituary says that she and her husband were regarded as having advanced social views. It also said that she was a member of the Rationalist Press Association; this is an organization founded in 1899 by a group of free thinkers who were unhappy with the increasing political and decreasingly intellectual tenor of the British secularist movement. The purpose of the Press Association was to publish literature that was too anti-religious to be handled by main stream publishers and book sellers.

She was not associated with any church which is presumably why when she was cremated at St Faiths Norwich a special form of service was conducted by the chaplain.

Mrs Dexter had been an accomplished violinist and had played with Mr F J Bones Lynn orchestra. She died in 1948 and 7 years later Walter moved back into Lynn to the former Valiant Sailor in Nelson Street. Here he continued to paint and receive recognition for his work and he became the first president of King's Lynn Art Club.

Charlotte Paton

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