



# WALBERSWICK

## LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

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**NEWSLETTER NO: 75**

**September 2024**

### Newsletter Editor's report

#### Forthcoming Talks/Speakers

- **Shorelines: voices of Southwold Fishermen:** Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> September 2024 at 7:00 pm in the Village Hall.

Soon after Robert Jellicoe's book came out I was walking down Southwold High Street and I saw it in a shop window. I went in, picked up the book, turned to the index and seeing the name "English" I bought it immediately!

Bob, I understand, will tailor his usual talk to give it more of a Walberswick flavour. However the two communities though separated by a river, were many times linked by marriage and work. My great grandfather, George English, married a May from Southwold (Sam May's sister). According to an earlier chronicler of Southwold life, Ernest Cooper, her father, James May, "*met the headless woman on the Gunhill, the day on which he and John Hurr rescued Robert English, after his twin boys had already been drowned*".

- **History of Surnames:** Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2024 at 2:00 pm in the Village Hall.

This sees the return of Charlie Haylock. This is bound to be a "sell-out" due to the ever-popular speaker and the fact that it is our Christmas celebration event. Please book early, especially if you are planning to bring a guest. Please note the earlier time of 2:00 pm and the usual liquid and solid refreshments that are traditional for this fixture.

- **The return of Libby Purves:** Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> March at 7:00 pm in the Village Hall

These talks are free to members and £5 for guests of members and can be booked through Edward Wright at [ewright123@btinternet.com](mailto:ewright123@btinternet.com).

This is the third newsletter of the year and another fascinating edition.

My thanks this time go firstly to Edward Wright for another of his pieces on the people of Walberswick. Or, perhaps more accurately, a brief encounter with Walberswick. My thanks also go to our archivist, Pat Lancaster. After supplying the author of the second article with information from the archives she secured the permission of the author and publishers to reproduce the published article in our newsletter.

**John English – Newsletter Editor**

## The Mystery of Harry Hopwood – Edward Wright

In August 1913 the East Suffolk Arts Group held an exhibition at the Constitution Hall in Southwold. The exhibitors either lived in the area or were regular visitors and many of them came from Walberswick. Marion Seward of Old Farm showed two paintings, Francis (Fra) Newbery of Rooftree showed one. Philip Alexander, the silversmith from Millfield Road, had thirty pieces in the show and Frank Jennings, the architect, contributed a tinted drawing of a house he had designed for a client in Surrey. There was also a painting of the interior of a pottery shop - probably the Walberswick Peasant Pottery Company, run by Frank Jennings' wife Mildred. So far, no surprises; all well-known people with strong Walberswick connections.

We now come to the enigma of Henry Silkstone (Harry) Hopwood. He exhibited three oil paintings of Algeria and a critic singled them out for special praise, describing them as masterly and saying:

*They are all scenes in Algeria, and in them the artist succeeds in conveying that sense of blinding light that is so characteristic of Northern Africa, and which is so enormously difficult to reproduce accurately.*

Walberswick artists tended to exhibit local scenes; Hopwood's luminous pictures of North African buildings and people must have seemed exotic and exciting.

Little is known of this artist who in his day enjoyed as much success as any of his Suffolk contemporaries. We know he stayed in Walberswick but are not sure of the location of his house. Nor do we know anything of the events leading up to his suicide in Edinburgh one year after the Southwold show.

Harry Hopwood was born in about 1860; even his birth year is uncertain. As a young man he studied at Manchester School of Art and then travelled to Australia where he found success as a landscape painter. The painter W. Lister described him as 'A big genial bohemian who could sing and tell a yarn with the best'. Returning to Europe Hopwood attended the Académie Julian in Paris.

On the first of January 1895 Hopwood married Eleanor Wright in All Saints' Church, Ennismore Gardens, Knightsbridge. His father's occupation was given as schoolmaster on the marriage certificate and the bride's father had been a surgeon but was by then deceased. Hopwood was living at 27 Hill Street Mayfair and Eleanor was married from Kensington Palace Mansions. The son of a schoolmaster marrying a surgeon's daughter; two conventional families coming together. Only the word 'painter' alongside Hopwood's name hints at the bohemian who could sing and tell a yarn. As well as being a schoolmaster his father was at various times a salesman, a bootmaker and a bankrupt; Hopwood seniors' biography is another family mystery.

One year after the marriage, the Hopwoods's son Henry was born. By then they were living on the coast of Yorkshire where Hopwood was a founder member of the Staithes Group of artists, of which he became chairman. These were good years for Harry Hopwood. He and Eleanor built a grand house and studio near Staithes, and he developed a close relationship with the artists Harold and Laura Knight. Laura recalled:

*The House of Hopwood was gay or sad as his work went well or ill, he was so completely engrossed in a wash flowing just as it should. His studio was filled with discarded pieces of paper that had been thrown away when the first touches had not been sufficiently exquisite.*

He seems to have been a mentor as well as a friend; he invited patrons to view the Knight's work at his studio and Laura later recalled the happiness his companionship brought them.

Hopwood's work was popular in those Yorkshire years; a Fine Art Society exhibition in 1897 sold 32 of his paintings and raised around £600 (£97,000 at today's values). Hopwood was a great traveller; as well as his time in Australia as a young man he made extended visits to France, North Africa and the Far East. His friend from the Staithes Group, J. Spence Ingall had a little house in Morocco where he spent the winter months and Hopwood stayed with him. In 1904 he took the Knights to Amsterdam. Laura said:

*People must have thought us lunatics: Hopwood would stop right in the middle of any road, gesticulating, hitching his bony shoulders and twitching his long legs while he cupped his hands in a square to frame a view.*

Hopwood was elected as a full member of the Royal Watercolour Society in 1908, a significant honour because election is by a members' vote. He exhibited at the Royal Academy as well as at most of the well-known commercial galleries. His paintings are owned by the Tate and other public galleries in Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

The Staithes Group disbanded in 1907 and in the 1911 census Harry and Eleanor were staying in Cornwall; perhaps at the invitation of the Knights who were members of the Newlyn School; a group of artists who painted scenes from everyday life, usually outdoors. Despite being in Cornwall, Hopwood was not a Newlyn member. The Knights would achieve the lasting fame that would elude Harry Hopwood. He never repeated the success of the 1897 exhibition; in December 1913 he showed pictures of North Africa and the Far East but only sold 21 of them for £232 (about £29,000 today).

In July 1913 the Hopwoods signed the visitors' book at the Seward's house, Old Farm, in Walberswick. This is the first evidence of his connection to Walberswick and was probably in preparation for showing his Algerian paintings in Southwold the following month.

In September 1914, Harry Hopwood committed suicide at 4 Belford Road, Edinburgh; a discharged revolver was found in his hand. The newspapers described this as a studio and claimed that he had been ill for some time and was suffering from insomnia. In the Probate Registry his address was given as White Cottage, Walberswick; it is only posthumously that his connection with Walberswick enters the public record. It may be significant that Hopwood's will was proved by his sister Annie rather than his widow Eleanor, but again this may mean nothing. Eleanor lived on in Walberswick and in March 1915 was advertising for a cook and a housemaid. In October 1915, the engagement was announced of the Hopwoods' son Henry, by then an army officer, to the daughter of a London architect. Henry's address was given as White Cottage, Walberswick. The identity of this house is a mystery that readers may be able to solve. In 1918 it was on the market and described as a detached cottage occupying a retired position with sea views, on the Green. There was an entrance lobby, dining room (24ft by 15 ft) with three windows and a glazed door opening on to the garden, drawing room (18ft by 18ft) with two bay windows and glazed door to the garden, kitchen, store closet, lamp room, pantry and two earth closets. Upstairs there were six bedrooms, a dressing room and a bathroom with hot and cold water. The garden was said to surround the cottage and was described as very cosy.

It sounds lovely! Perhaps a reader can identify it from the description or has deeds naming their house as White Cottage. Our member Penny Fox lives at White Cottage, but her house was built in 1949, is on the Street and cannot have been the Hopwoods'. It was Penny whose curiosity and meticulous research prompted this article; without her it would not have been written.



Morning, 1909  
Walker Art Gallery



Grandmother and Child



Figures entering a North African House, 1910



Hauling the Sheets, probably painted on  
Hopwood's passage to Australia



Café Archway, Biskra



The WLHG would like to thank Kevin Davis, editor of *Suffolk & Norfolk Life Magazine*, for his kind permission to reprint this article by Ann Kronbergs which first appeared in the May issue, 2024.

SNLpeople

# Ruth Pitter and the Walberswick Peasant Pottery Company

By Ann Kronbergs

Over time the historic village of Walberswick has been a magnet for artists to escape the madding crowd and lose themselves in this remote coastal retreat. Such was the case in 1917 for the young poet Ruth Pitter, when she made the journey by train to Southwold from Essex to take up a post as a furniture painter at the Walberswick Peasant Pottery Company.

## The Walberswick Peasant Pottery Company Limited

The company was first established in 1909 by Mildred Jennings, wife of the architect Frank Jennings, and her sister-in-law Marie-Rose, a young woman with a colourful personal history. In the early years of the 20th century, Marie-Rose had been sent to Austria by her father, a racehorse trainer in Newmarket with exclusive acquaintances in the world of horse-racing, to stay with the aristocratic Esterhazy family at their palatial residence near Vienna. Here she had an affair with an Austrian prince, and it was



Walberswick sign

during her travels with him in Europe that she was inspired by the variety and quality of pottery produced by artisan potters in Holland, Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria. This discovery inspired Marie-Rose to return to England with the aim of importing the rustic pottery for sale in the UK.

At that time, in 1906, the newly married Jenningses had moved to a house, 'The Gazebo' in Walberswick, designed by Frank in the Arts & Crafts style. This was one of at least a dozen other beautiful Walberswick houses which he created in the village. After the birth of their son in 1907, the couple moved to another of his creations, 'Marshway', on Leverett's Lane.

Whilst Marie-Rose had the original business idea, Mildred might be said to have been the creative brains behind the WPPC. A talented watercolourist with a particular gift for representing houses and landscapes, she continued her own work as an artist and illustrator in pen and ink, while also developing the business with Marie-Rose from their premises near the village sign on the Green, now identifiable as the Parish Lantern. An early catalogue states that initially the aim of the business was "to import any quantity of pottery and other peasant crafts made in out-of-the-way places of Europe." Mildred and Marie-Rose planned to expand the business gradually, producing objects and furnishings for the home in their own workshop "with good workmanship at reasonable prices" and thus supplementing the imported goods.

One recollection from a customer in the 1920s recalled the stock offered



RUTH PITTER, JUNE 1937  
Winner of the 1937 Hawthornden Prize  
by MERVYN PEAKY

“ She had published her first poems at the age of thirteen in *The New Age*, a literary magazine edited by A.R. Orage.”

included "a variety of designs and plain colours, trays in wood ... and round or rectangular papier mâché, table-mat sets and coasters, coarse weave ties, table cloth and napkin sets and painted serviette rings...I do remember that the background of all trays, mats and coasters was black, dark blue or green with attractive floral decoration while the serviette ring I once had was light blue and orange."

The outbreak of war in 1914 spelt the end of the imports trade with Europe, and it became a necessity for Mildred and Marie-Rose to spur ahead with a new experimental line in painted furniture with many of the designs being



Dutch pots



German Stoneware

produced by Frank. As this initiative expanded, the company took on new painters and craftsmen, and it was through an advertisement placed in *The Studio* magazine in 1916 that Ruth Pitter applied for a post as an apprentice furniture painter.

**Ruth Pitter and the Peasant Pottery Company**

Almost certainly it was her unusual c.v. that made Ruth, aged 19, the right fit for

this unusual job opening. Daughter of schoolteachers and brought up in Essex, Ruth had a passion for nature and the countryside and a talent for writing poetry. She had published her first poems at the age of thirteen in *The New Age*, a literary magazine edited by A.R. Orage. In addition, Ruth had experimented with her own watercolour paintings of the Essex landscape and she was ambitious to develop her painting abilities. After two years of working as a clerk in the War Office since 1914, she leapt at the chance to escape the tedium of office life by



LEFT: Illustrated Catalogue Cover  
BELOW: An Essex watercolour: by Ruth Pitter





## SNLpeople



Hungarian pots

moving to a different job in this remote spot and starting a new way of life.

The terms of her employment laid down that she should live with the Jennings family at Marshway, receiving free board and lodging in lieu of a weekly wage. Once she had mastered the skills required to paint and decorate furniture, Ruth would earn a small payment for her services.

At evenings and weekends Ruth continued to write poetry. Through the Jennings household she came into contact with other artists, architects and illustrators. It was in this creative space that she learned the importance of revising and editing her poetry, taking her work to a higher level. For Ruth the period of time spent working for the Company in Walberswick was certainly formative for her as a poet, as well as giving her the training to earn a living as a skilled painter and craftswoman.

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Ruth Pitter Circa 1925

### Move to London - 1919

After the war, in 1919 the Jenningses decided to expand the business by setting up a workshop at 20 Portobello Road, London and a showroom for the stock at 12 Holland Street, Kensington W8. Offered work in London for the company, Ruth left Walberswick and moved temporarily to an uncomfortable two-roomed flat on the Portobello Road. In the autumn she met a co-worker, Kathleen O'Hara, on her first day. Kate remembered the meeting years later in a reminiscence:

*I shall always remember my first day... [when] Ruth, whom I had not hitherto met, opened the door to my knock. She was wearing a most unbecoming khaki-coloured woollen jumper... We no sooner met than ... [we found] we have the same notion of what constitutes a good joke, of the kind that lurks around the cockles of the heart...*

Kate helped Ruth to find a more

comfortable flat in Kensington at 28 Mall Chambers which, in a strange twist of fate, was the mansion block of flats where the parents and elder sister of Eric Blair (better known in later years as the writer George Orwell) also lived at this time. On one occasion the young women were invited to supper by Margery, Orwell's older sister, and Ruth Pitter recalled her first encounter with the young Etonian:

*The moment our hostess let us in I saw a tall youth, with hair the colour of hay and a brown tweed suit, standing at a table by the window, cleaning a sporting gun. There was something arresting in the way he looked up. His eyes were blue and rather formidable... He was, of course, still at school, and I can't remember if I saw him again before he joined the police in Burma. But the idea of Orwell as an interesting person was indelibly stamped in my mind.*

After Orwell resigned his role as a

policeman in Burma in 1927, Ruth and Kate helped him to find a room on the Portobello Road, where he tried his hand as a writer. Ruth commented in later years:

*At this time I don't think any of his friends believed he would ever write well. Indeed, I think he was unusually inept... we used to laugh till we cried at some of the bits he showed us. But the formidable look was not there for nothing... he had the persistence to go on... until he became an acknowledged master of English prose.*

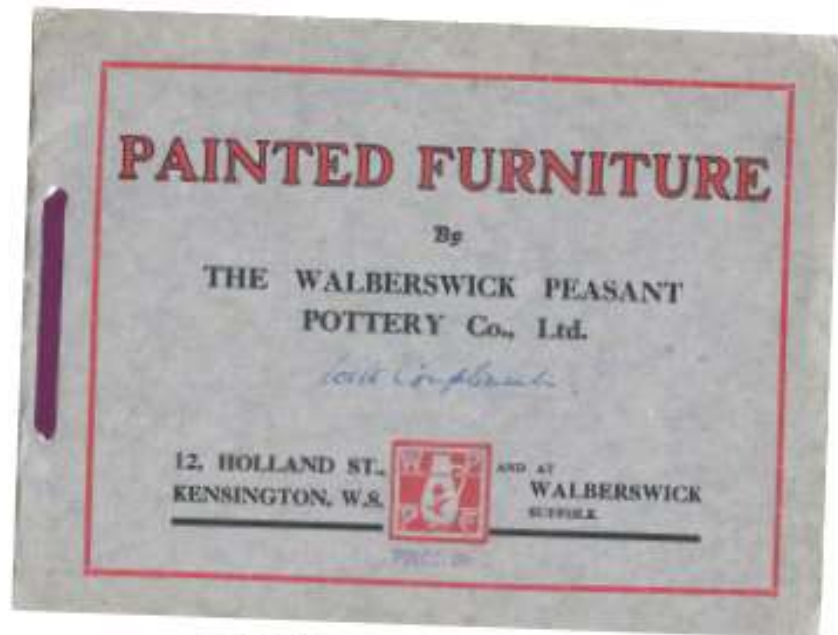
Perhaps acting on Ruth's recommendation, Orwell's parents moved to Southwold from London at this time, and in the late 1920s Ruth and Kate used to spend the summer months working from the company's premises in Walberswick. They were on visiting terms with the Blair family and Ruth remembered:

*...we saw Orwell fairly often, one way and another. He was very good company in the countryside. I remember so well his taking me straight to a nightjar's nest in a featureless sea of vegetation. The nest was just a little hollow in the ground, with one egg and one young bird... with an enormous mouth, funny whiskers, and a valiant hiss. Seeing the nest was a nice change from squabbling about DH Lawrence...*

The two writers continued to see each other from time to time over the



Ruth standing on a piling



Painted Furniture



Tea tray



Tea tray: back

next few years, until their lives and work led them in different directions.

Ruth's reputation as a published poet continued to grow. In 1920 her collection *First Poems* had been published and with this her work began to reach a new audience of readers, even attracting the attention, and the patronage, of Hilaire Belloc, well-known writer and historian, who financed her following collections of poetry, *First and Second Poems* (1927) and *Persephone in Hades* (1931).

In 1930 with Kate as her business partner, the two women purchased a Chelsea-based painted-furniture business, Deane and Forester, which flourished during the 1930s until the outbreak of WWII when they decided to

join the war effort and work in a local factory.

Ruth continued to develop as a poet, publishing three collections in the 1940s. She formed further influential literary friendships, one with the eminent scholar and historian, Lord David Cecil, who introduced her poetry to C.S. Lewis, scholar and children's writer. The mutual admiration of these two led to a long-running correspondence over many years, and C.S. Lewis became a major influence on Ruth's outlook and philosophy of life. In 1953 she published *The Ermine Poems 1942-1952*. This was her most celebrated collection, for which she won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1955, becoming the first woman ever to receive this honour.

Ruth Pitter's career as a writer blossomed in the following decades with broadcasting engagements with the BBC, contributing to programmes such as *Woman's Hour*. She also wrote articles for newspapers and magazines and made occasional appearances on television. She returned to poetry in the late 1960s and published several more collections up to her death at her home in Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire in 1990.

■ All pictures of Ruth Pitter, along with quotations of Ruth Pitter's and Kathleen O'Hara's words, are taken from *"Hunting the Unicorn: A Critical Biography of Ruth Pitter"*, by kind permission of Don W. King.

I should also like to thank Pat Lancaster, archivist of the Walberswick Local History Group, for her valuable assistance in the writing of this article and kind permission to use images from the WLHG archive.