

Autobiography chapter: Interests

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The earliest interest I remember developing was brick-making! This was due to the existence of a little brick works down the lane at Alderley – I think it only employed four or five people. I excavated nuggets of clay in the garden, and initially made them into bricks by moulding them in rectangular (Rowntree's) cocoa tins and drying the resulting bricks in the sun in the yard. Like all sun dried bricks they very soon weathered of course. My first attempt to improve the process was to persuade Mum to let me bake one in the gas oven, but this produced only a smelly, steaming mess. A better product was obtained by filling square section corrugated cardboard separators for HP sauce bottles (obtained from the grocer's) and baking the whole thing (ultimately burning off the cardboard) in the dining room fire. The final development was to beg some bricks and some much bigger lumps of clay from the brick works. Then I built a brick-making machine consisting of a wooden box upside down. Over this I made a wooden bridge, with taut wires down from the bridge to the box, so that I could push a mass of clay along the top of the box (really the bottom of it, but it was upside down) and so "automatically" cut it into separate bricks with the wires. Then with the begged real bricks I built a fireplace in the garden, had a coal fire in it, and put my unbaked bricks round the top of it to bake. I suppose this activity lasted till I was about ten.

Another interest started at an early age, certainly by the age of seven, was stamp collecting, and this has remained with me throughout my life. Though I have never got very committed to it or gone into esoteric details like some people. I have always kept it ticking over, and tried to keep up to date at least with Great Britain. While Ken was alive he also kept me well supplied with Gold Coast / Ghana stamps.

Of my early hobbies of astronomy and chemistry I have said something in the section on "scientific work", so it is unnecessary to go into those here. My next interest in point of time was birds. I remember this coming about in two ways when I was about ten. One was through lectures at the Natural History Club at school, and the other was through comments made by Dad. He thought that for a boy brought up in the country I was very ill-informed about country things. He pointed to some birds sitting on the garden fence and asked me what they were. In a highly dismissive tone I said "sparrows" and he laughed and considered his point made, because they were starlings. Up to then I had supposed that all small birds that weren't robins, blackbirds or thrushes were sparrows.

I had never even noticed blue-tits and great-tits. I was so shocked by the exposure of my ignorance that I started to read all about birds. One of the first books I read was *A Year with the Birds* from the school library which I have since found to have been an early classic of ornithology. The interest has remained life-long, though I have never become a real ornithologist. I suppose I have never devoted enough time to bird watching, and have also been hampered by an unmusical ear in learning to distinguish bird-songs, and also by my weak colour vision.

With Dad working on the railway Ken and I were of course interested in trains and Ken had a gauge O Hornby clockwork train from as early as I can remember, though I think only from about the age of eleven. My first train when I was about five was a gauge OO table-top clockwork one, but it only had an engine and one or two coaches and one pair of points and I wanted a “proper” gauge O. What happened to this little set I don’t know, I saved up for a year to buy a “Bing” 0-4-0 tender engine at a price of 19/6, and gradually built up my gauge O set from the age of about seven. I suppose the last time it came out before Anthony was on the scene was when I was about 15. From about the age of 12 or so I had aspirations to building my own electric model engines and trains with realistic lines, but these ideas never materialised until 1957. Then having finished my PhD it seemed that vistas of “spare” time that were opening up and I planned to make my dreams come true. I started in a small way by building a goods brake van from a kit, and it was very successful. I then went on to build an LMS 0-6-0 4F freight engine and tender from scratch i.e. from sheet metal etc, though buying wheels, dome and funnel. This was also very successful. From about 1959-64 I was working on a layout of track intended to be on five boards that would clip together. This was much less satisfactory. It was build from bought fibre sleepers nailed to plywood track (to be covered with ballast) and the individual rails soldered to the nail heads – the solder to form the chairs. I had great difficulty in getting the rails level enough. The construction was not complete when we moved to Oxford and I never had time to continue and in any case the house did not provide any potential space ever to lay it down. I kept the unfinished boards for a further 21 years till we moved to Kidlington, and then found them to be infested with wood-worm and so had to destroy them. So then only momento that remains of this hobby is the brake-van and engine I made 30 years ago.

The next interest that I developed started when I was about 16 and has remained life-long. The craft master at Derby School gave a talk on Tutankhamun, and he started by saying that a lot of people did not seem to know how to pronounce the name, but that as it was written  there could in fact be no doubt about it. I was somewhat contemptuous of such a piece of one-upmanship, though it struck a chord with the fact that we had been taught a few hieroglyphs in our history lessons about ancient Egypt in 2A some five years earlier. And then immediately afterwards I found a book *First Steps in Egyptian* by E A Wallis Budge in the public library and was hooked. I used to take this book out frequently over the next several years, and made copious notes

from it. I showed these to Dorothy the first time she came to see me in my room at Magdalen, and she has told me since that it was one of the things that made her think that I might be quite an interesting person! But at Blackwells I found and coveted the tome on Egyptian Grammar by A H Gardner. It cost £2, far more than I had ever spent even on an essential text book, but when I was given money by various relations for my 21st birthday I immediately bought it, and it is the best thumbed book investment I even made. I have worked through it three times over the years, and forgotten most of it again each time! But at least I enjoy being able to interpret bits of inscriptions in a vague sort of way (rather like owl being able to read his own name WOL) – provided they were not written before about 2000 BC or after about 600 BC of course! In 1984-5 I even made a serious attempt to learn to read hieratic and had reasonable success with one particular scribe's handwriting, but other scribes proved more difficult. I have never achieved the mastery of the subject that I would have liked, but that is probably only attainable by full-time study, and it has certainly given me much enjoyment. I have always felt a very strange affinity with everything to do with ancient Egypt, its art, architecture and language¹.

The next interest I took up also proved to be the one at which I achieved the most success, entirely contrary to my expectations. This was drawing and painting. As a child I had of course messed about with paints and crayons but shown no evidence of skill. At about the age of ten Mum let me have a go with her oil paints, and I did two copies of postcard pictures and enjoyed the texture of standing corn that I was able to reproduce on one of them, but I never tried again. Art teaching at Stockport was abysmal, and I learnt nothing except that I was no good at it. I found the facility which some people had to draw or paint a scene from life quite amazing, and I never even tried. It was around the early 50s that I found myself at a loose end one day, and Dorothy said "why don't you do some drawing?". I replied with incredulity that she could suppose such a thing possible, but she had some little books on "shade drawing" and with the help of these I was astonished that I could actually represent a face. Quite gradually I got more interested and got books out of the library. One of these I took on holiday to the Scilly Isles in 1954, and while there bought a range of drawing pencils and a little sketching block, and experimented with various strokes and textures copied from the book. I then tried to do a sketch of the harbour, but it was quite hopeless – it was much too big and diffuse a subject to start on especially on a small scale. There was no further progress until the next summer when we went to Church Bay on Angelsey, and there I did some quite pleasing sketches of the cottage where we stayed, and in 1956 or 1957 I did some more at Aberdovey. The turning point came in the late summer of 1957 when an Art Club was formed at Ferodo, which I joined. We met once a week in a conference

¹ [Note added later] In 1995 I developed this interest to the extent of going to a Summer School on Hieroglyphs and really enjoyed a week's hard work which made a major improvement in my reading ability. And I repeated this in 1996 and had some tuition in hieratic there. Further weeks in 1998 and 1999 and a rather desultory correspondence course since 1998 have further improved my abilities, and made me able to translate (slowly) some kinds of documents and inscriptions.

room, and drew either portraits of one another or of still life compositions, and the experienced ones helped the inexperienced ones like me. I was encouraged to progress from pencil to charcoal and then to oils. The club was quite a remarkable venture in that it was completely free of class distinctions (which were terrible usually at Ferodo). The most accomplished artists were a sweeper-up in the factory who did oils, and a man who worked on the heavy presses who did most delicate watercolours in spite of the fact that his fingers were thickened by heavy work. It only lasted a couple of years but it really got me going. In the winter of 1958 I tried my first oil-colour – two bananas! Then I progressed to a plate and an orange and a jug, and tried copying one or two reproductions. For my first landscape I did a canal bridge at New Mills but was very dissatisfied with the result. However in the summer the Ferodo club went outside to do landscape and I improved, and by the summer when we went to the Scilly Isles I did a charcoal drawing of the Garrison Gate which I still like and to which I still give wall-space, and an oil painting of Old Town which pleased me for quite a long time.

In the summer of 1959 I went to art classes based at New Mills and run by Mr Burgess the art master at New Mills Grammar School. We went to a variety of places round the district and he got me to try water-colour and gouache. I liked the water colours but not the gouache which gave me rather drab results. The following winter 1959-60, I started going to a class at Buxton taken by Mrs Carpenter. She was excellent at seeing what one was trying to do and showing you how to do it better, without imposing ideas of her own on how it should be done.

Different people did their own things – flowers, still-life, copying postcards etc, but I did portraits always, and we had some quite good models. I progressed from tight little paintings about 10"×8" to big ones about 36"×24" some of which I did with a palette knife. In the summer when it was fine we went outside and I did water colours which I also tended to do when we were on holiday from 1960-64, but in the latter year I got very discouraged by my efforts at watercolours in Ireland and never did any more until I went to a water-colour class at Waterperry where I found (contrary to expectations) a liking for flower painting in water-colour. I must have gone to Mrs Carpenter's classes for 4½ years, right up to when we moved to Oxford.

The next step in my artistic education was entirely due to Dorothy. In the spring of 1963 she saw an advertisement in the Times Educational Supplement (which she was taking regularly at that time) for a 3-day course at Malvern called "Demonstration Painting from Life", and she said "why don't you go to that?" I was very doubtful, but I was persuaded to write for details and eventually to book, in spite of considerably cold feet. The instructions required on to provide oneself with a canvas, and I had never painted on a stretched canvas; I thought the people there would all be much more advanced than me (and many were but by no means all); though attracted by the idea of painting the nude I was also scared of the idea (my one attempt to paint Dorothy in the nude had been an abject failure, though I had done two quite pleasing drawings of her, again after an initial abject failure). In the event I found the course stimulating, not least from

being part of some 30-40 participants in a real art studio environment. I have a very clear picture of the start of the course as we all sat in rows waiting for something to happen and facing a low platform with a chair, a small table and a large foliage plant on it. Two men behind me were discussing what would happen – one considered that painting from life implied a nude model whereas the other thought it unlikely to do so in front of an audience. The first thing that happened was that a young woman came through the room and disappeared behind a screen. She re-emerged wearing a dressing gown and a pair of shoes and went and sat down by herself in a corner of the studio. Then Miss Moody, the senior art lecturer at Malvern, came in and introduced the course and the guest teacher John Ward RA, and then said “well let’s get started”, whereupon the model bent down and took off her shoes and then stood up and took off her dressing gown and walked across the studio completely nude to the pre-arranged set-up on the platform. We sat there all morning, and on the two subsequent mornings, watching John Ward paint the picture of her, and it was very instructive to see how he did it – even though the picture was still considerably unfinished at the end. In the afternoon we painted ourselves, and he and the staff of the college came round to offer advice. The trouble was that there were far too many students for the space. We had to draw random numbered tickets to decide which numbered easel position was to be ours. Some were allocated easels in two other smaller studios (where they had different models, of course, and a less elaborate set-up), but my lot was an easel from which I had a good view of the back of the chair on which the model was sitting, with an oblique view from behind of her right hand side! It was not a very inspiring subject, and I didn’t paint it at all well, but I felt that I had learnt quite a bit and was keen to go again the next year in 1964. In fact I enjoyed it much more the second time and learned much more. It was given by John Ward again, and to start with he was much more in control of what he was doing and obviously enjoying it much more and made much more illuminating comments on what he was doing. He had not relied on the college to provide the model, but brought one of his own students. (It was very noticeable that she was not a professional model, for she was so much more prudish about being seen. The first morning we were all sent out of the studio before the start of the session while the pose was set up, and when we were allowed back she was in position. She always sat down on the stool in her dressing gown, and then let it fall down round the stool, from which she could gather it up and get into it again before she stood up! But she was very good at holding the pose. This time too I was very lucky in drawing a position for painting on a “donkey” in the front row and with a fairly similar view-point to that from which John Ward had been painting in the mornings. I explained to Miss Moody that my weak colour vision prevented me from using pale green in the half-tones on flesh (as everyone recommends, and I had made an awful mess when I tried this with Mrs Carpenter because I couldn’t see where I had put it and to normal eyes the result looked ghastly). She as apparently used to this problem and told me to use pure grey instead and this has proved very successful ever since. I learnt a lot too from John Ward, especially how to “look” at what one is painting to get the relative tones right. Also

towards the end of the third afternoon he came round and said quite nice things about my picture and recommended what to do in the last quarter hour – which was quite different from what I had intended but gave a much more finished effect. The result was a picture I still like and have hung on the wall off and on for many years.

The next year I would have gone to Malvern again but it was not possible as it would have been in my first few weeks at Oxford, and in the following two years I was busy examining at that time, so it was not until 1968 I went again. This was much less useful – it was a different demonstrator, it was my lot to paint in another room where we had a very strange-looking model (half Red Indian), and at the end we had a show and criticism of the work done and mine was slated for cutting the model off below the knees instead of doing full-length (but Renoir often did this!). Anyway it was a very unsatisfactory picture. The next year I did not receive any particulars of the course and eventually rang up – too late. However, there was shortly to be a week's "marathon painting course" run by a relative newcomer to the College, Brian Baxter, so I persuaded Lionel Clowes to come with me and we had a marvellous time. We painted from life in the mornings and again in the evenings (with a different model) and in the afternoons did landscape, so painting about 5-6 pictures in the weeks and working from 10 am to 9 pm with minimal breaks for meals. He and I went to these courses thereafter until they packed in about 1980 owing to staff cut-backs etc – though I had to miss out in 1971 due to a clash with Anthony's wedding and in 1978 when I was due to go to Russia at that time. We also went to occasional weekend courses at Malvern. In the later years I usually did still life paintings in the afternoon instead of landscape and enjoyed these very much – I was usually the only person doing them so could set them up to my liking.

Apart from Malvern I also went to courses at Oxford Tech from 1965 till about 1970 – winter evening classes. These were mostly portrait classes with about four weeks per pose, though twice over these years we had a nude pose – one of which led to a painting I still like, but the other was terrible, as I tried to do it with a palette knife which I think is quite unsuitable for that subject. Few of the portraits made paintings worth keeping, but they were good practice. One year I went to life drawing instead, which probably improved my anatomy but was not as enjoyable as painting.

Since 1970 I have only been to a very few local courses. In 1975, while on sabbatical leave I went to a morning life-drawing class at the College of Further Education – it proved impossible to find life-painting². About 1980 I went to an evening portrait class at Cherwell School, and in the autumn of 1983 to life drawing and painting at the Ferry Centre in Summertown (but the painting only applied to the last three weeks). In the

²Actually we were finally set an exercise to do a painting at home, based on past drawings or paintings of our own, to illustrate one of several choices of classic painting titles. I chose *Susannah and the Elders* using a nude figure in front of a mirror that I had done at Malvern and setting it in a modern bathroom. The elders I introduced by means of two men's heads seen, by reflection in the mirror, looking in through a window – and therefore actually standing where the viewer is situated.

autumn of 1986 I thought I had found a really good life painting class at Chesterton but it packed in after two weeks for lack of support.

Outside of classes I have in fact done some of my best pictures – a few still lifes, half a dozen local landscapes at Hampton Poyle and Kidlington, and a few on holiday at Chenonceau in Brittany, in Turkey, and in mid-Wales, though most holidays are not really conducive to spending the amount of time involved on an oil painting. The most prolific holiday of all in inspiring paintings was Greece but these (seven of them) were all done over the following four years from slides taken at the time – the only occasion on which I have used this technique.

I put pictures into the exhibitions held by the Ferodo Art Group and the Buxton art classes, but the first more formal exhibitions were in the late 60s of members' work at Halifax House. There I was particularly chuffed when one of the tea ladies started talking about the pictures and insisted on taking me into the other room to see her favourite – and quite unknown to her it was my still life! This picture was also much admired by a member of Halifax House who wanted to buy it, but I didn't want to part with it. In 1973 I was asked to put on a one-man show at the Institute of Education, where I showed about 17, I think. One (of Ledbury Church Street) was bought by an anonymous American lady, and two others by my next door neighbours – the Hurrens. My Canadian friend Bob Ferguson also wanted to buy one, but I insisted on giving it to him. A few years later the Hurrens insisted on buying one of Hampton Poyle church even before it was finished, and in 1984 I was commissioned to do another of that subject for a presentation to one of the churchwardens, Mr Bremner Milne, when he left the village. I did not exhibit again until 1989 when I had four pictures in the Kidlington Artists exhibition as part of Oxfordshire Art Week, but no sales!

The last major interest that I took up was genealogy. Ken and I had often talked of trying to find out who we were descended from, and thought vaguely of going over to Sutton Bonnington to consult the parish registers. I knew the names of Mother's ancestors back to my great-grandparents and several great-great-grandparents, but of Dad's I knew nothing beyond my grandparents and he professed total ignorance except that "there had always been Whittakers in Sutton". Quite a lot of my information about my maternal ancestors came from Auntie Edie, and in view of her well-known imaginative powers I was a bit sceptical of some of it, but in fact it all turned out accurate as far as I could check it. Of collaterals on that side Ken was much more knowledgeable than me, having known them personally pre-1924, so when he died in 1970 I thought I must start immediately before any more first hand knowledge died out.

My first steps were at Somerset House finding marriage and birth certificates of my grandparents and hence the identities of their parents and their marriage certificates. The first surprise was that my grandfather William's marriage certificate was in the name of Whitaker – in spite of my father's insistence that we were Whittakers. The second surprise was to find that William was illegitimate, which explained my father's

reluctance for us to investigate. I subsequently asked Uncle Sam whether my father had known about it, and he said he had. Apart from Auntie Edie's reminiscences the only family traditions I got were from a short write-up *The Haslam Tradition* written by my great uncle Wilfred, and verbally from cousin Eric (his son), Cousin Kitty and her mother Auntie Ethel (my father's younger sister), but not all of the latter proved to be accurate.

The next steps were the census returns for 1841, 51, 61 and 71. These revealed some great great great grandparents living with their grown-up children, and their places of birth. Then it was back to parish registers. Quite a lot of these were still at that time in the possession of local vicars, and it was necessary to make appointments to see these. However, quite a lot were in County Record Offices (as they virtually all are now) and so visits were needed to Nottingham, Derby, Matlock, Leicester, Lichfield, Guildford, Canterbury and (for Dorothy's ancestors) Lincoln. To my surprise it was possible to do a lot of preliminary work in Oxford from the printed Phillimore Marriage Registers prior to 1813 in the Bodleian. Then the Mormon IGI became available on microfiche, which permitted wider ranging surveys to trace movements from parish to parish. Eventually various other records such as tax returns, Protestation Returns (1642), poll books, settlement certificates and family deeds all proved useful. The results are voluminous and cannot be detailed here. At the time of writing (1992) about 250 ancestors have been identified with at least substantial probability – some of them going back before 1600. Curiously my maternal ancestors about whom I started off by knowing most have proved the most difficult to trace – partly because they moved about more.