

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2021

Stanley Spencer - Keith LePage

For the June meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, Keith LePage gave an illustrated presentation by means of Zoom about the life and work of Stanley Spencer. Keith, who is a custodian for the Spencer Gallery in Cookham, described Stanley Spencer as “one of the great British painters of the 20th century, who kept very much to his own style”. As Stanley said, “In order to understand any picture of mine, it means taking a seat and preparing to hear the story of my life”.

Stanley Spencer’s grandfather, Julius Spencer, was a master builder who had moved to Cookham at the time of a building boom there. He had built a pair of houses in the High Street, one for each of his sons, and it was here (*right*) that Stanley was born, on June 30th 1891. He was the 8th surviving child of William and Anne, and subsequently had a younger brother, Gilbert.

Stanley’s father was a piano teacher, and many of the family were accomplished musicians - Stanley also playing the piano. His father did not believe in state education, and so he was taught, with Gilbert and two other children from the village – in a shed in the garden by his elder sisters, Annie and Florence. This seems mainly to have consisted of nature walks and Bible stories – Stanley was not good at sums, which affected the way he coped with his finances in later life, his spelling was ‘not the best’, whilst his punctuation was non-existent. The Bible stories were to be the foundation of a lot of his paintings.



Stanley is stood just to the right of his father, with his younger brother Gilbert to the far right.

When he reached the age of 15, Stanley surprised his parents by telling them he wanted to be an artist, but they could see that he had a talent for this, and so he was sent for a year to Maidenhead Technical College. His aptitude was again recognised, and it was arranged that Lady Boston of Hedsor would sponsor him to attend the Slade College of Art in London. He was an unconventional pupil, and would miss the last lecture of the day, so that he could get the 5.08 train from Paddington to be home in Cookham in time for tea. He was, however, a star pupil, and won a number of prizes during his time at the Slade.

Another pupil at the Slade at the time, Gwen Darwin (grand-daughter of Charles Darwin) was in many ways of a similar outlook to Stanley, and “took him under her wing”, and in 1911 she gave him a copy of John Donne’s works, which explored ideas about resurrection and rebirth, writing that there were two heavens – the one in this world being of joy, and the heaven after death being of glory. These ideas influenced Stanley, who liked to consider such thoughts and link them to a place he found in his walks around Cookham. In this case, it led to his painting “John Donne seen arriving in Heaven” (*right*) – the first of many where he combined his religious ideas with the local Cookham landscape. In this case, Widbrook Common.



Stanley Spencer’s other work included many portraits – both commissioned and of himself – one of the latter aged 23 has a bold penetrating gaze (*left*), and was influenced by his work on Old Masters at the Slade. He also painted a number of landscapes – the first, in 1914, being of Terry’s Lane in Cookham. A feature of his landscapes was that they did not include any people. His artistic style in the portraits, landscapes and the creative works was so different that it is difficult to see them as the work of the same person.

It is the creative work, though, that are where he “explains himself” to himself”. He finished his work at the Slade in 1912, and things were going well for him, having won lots of prizes and become well-known, but then World War 1 broke out. He – at 5ft 2in tall – was considered too short for the infantry, so joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, and was sent to the Beaufort War Hospital in Bristol (*below*). Here he was given menial tasks to do, but was introduced to the work of St Augustine, in which Stanley could identify with the value of menial work - in his later life, he would see the religious aspect in everything.

In 1916, he volunteered to go to Salonica, where his work included transporting wounded soldiers by travoys pulled by mules. This became the subject of his only official war painting – one with many religious overtones, as he saw this as a resurrection, and a transfiguration into a state of peace in the face of war. He then volunteered to transfer to the infantry of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in February 1918, but contracted malaria. This meant he missed the final push forward by the troops, when there were lots of casualties, and so in late 1918 was returned to his native Cookham. Only then did he discover that his brother Sydney had been killed at the end of the war. However, he found it difficult to settle, as people did not recognize him, and could not understand why, although not wounded, he was home early.



He was able at last, however, to complete a painting of "swan upping", begun in 1914, and on his mind during his time in Salonica. Other works included "Christ's entry into Jerusalem" – except that the setting is Cookham High Street again. The picture includes more women than men – thought to be Stanley's way of



Christ's entry into Jerusalem

illustrating the vast number of men killed in the war. It did not sell, however, at that time. Another commission was for Henry Slessor, who wanted a religious room over his boathouse. Stanley Spencer painted the Last Supper – not set in Jerusalem, but in a Cookham malthouse. His "Resurrection in Cookham Churchyard", painted in 1924 – 26, is not the usual dismal view of such, but is a portrayal of the resurrection, heaven, and full of joy. It is at this time that he met Hilda Carline, also an artist, and she and Stanley feature several times in the picture. Stanley fell in love with Hilda. They got engaged, but Stanley was worried that if he was married it would affect his ability to paint, so the engagement was broken off – and this happened 5 or 6 times before the marriage in February 1925 at Warnford in Suffolk (where she had

been in the Land Army). She also had religious views, and Keith said they probably talked at each other on such topics, maybe not listening!



Stanley then received a commission from the Behrend family for the Sandham Memorial Chapel, at Burghclere. (Mary Behrend's brother, Captain Sandham, having died in WW1 at Salonica). Stanley used the opportunity to illustrate the variety of his war-time experiences, from his work at the Beaufort Hospital to service in the Royal Berkshire Regiment. It is very different to other representations of the war, having a theme of hope, peace and redemption. The chapel is now in the care of the National Trust.



Stanley Spencer is then elected as a Fellow of the Royal Academy, and all seemed set for the future. However, a glamorous artist, Patricia Preece, moved into Cookham with fellow artist Dorothy Hepworth. Whereas Hilda was a deep thinker, Patricia was more superficial, and inspired Stanley in different ways. His picture of fighting swans represented the conflict in his mind of his feelings for Hilda and Patricia. He became more obsessed with the latter, and would buy her things to 'keep her in the manner to which she was accustomed'. His "Leg of Mutton Nude" of Stanley and Patricia leaves nothing to the imagination!! Hilda became more aware of the situation, so she and Stanley were divorced in 1937. Four days later, he married Patricia at Maidenhead registry office, the honeymoon being in St Ives. Patricia went, with Dorothy Hepworth, but Stanley stayed in Cookham, and spent the wedding night with Hilda.



Outside Maidenhead Registry Office, with (left to right) Dorothy Hepworth, Patricia Preece, Stanley Spencer and Jas Wood

Patricia then decided she preferred Dorothy to Stanley, and when she returned to Cookham, it was to a different house to Stanley – they never lived together under the same roof. It was not only as an art student that Stanley was unconventional.

Having 2 wives, and 2 children by Hilda, to provide for, Stanley Spencer was advised to paint more landscapes, as they were more likely to sell, but he did make further creative works. His "Love on the Moor" had various groups of men and women excitedly opening boxes of stockings (on Cookham Moor). Alfred Munnings, later President of the Royal Academy accused Stanley of being a pornographic painter.



In 1938, Stanley gave his house to Patricia, as she thought she could make more money by letting it out, and he moved to Hampstead, where he returned to Biblical themes for his work. Soon after, he met the artist Daphne Charlton and her husband George. Daphne looked after Stanley, and their 2-year affair rejuvenated him. Whilst visiting her at Leonard Stanley, near Stroud, he painted "Village Life" (left) that included Hilda, even though she was not there. Hilda, apparently, was pleased he had found a new friend in Daphne.

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Much of his post-war work is set in and around Cookham – "Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta" being unfinished (and now in the Spencer Gallery). He was taken ill in 1958, and after treatment at the Canadian Red Cross hospital at Taplow, the vicar of Cookham and his wife arranged for his recuperation at the vicarage. He received his knighthood from the Queen Mother in 1958, but his cancer returned, and he died in December 1959.

Keith added that although Stanley had a strong faith, he would have rejected any formal sense of religion. He had his own views on resurrection - simple in his early life, but the horrors of war developed his thinking, and he was a spiritual person rather than a Christian one. His artistic style was different to his contemporaries, but his work is now viewed as having influenced later painters such as David Hockney or Tracey Emin.

The Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham High Street, is now able to open again daily from 10.30 – 5.30.

