

Wye Historical Society



Newsletter February 2023

The Society's Annual General Meeting will be held at the Lady Joanna Thornhill School at 7.15 pm on Wednesday 1 March 2023

AGENDA

The President will welcome members to the meeting.

- 1. Apologies for absence**
- 2. To approve the minutes of the last AGM (2 March 2022)**
- 3. Matters arising from the Minutes.**
- 4. Secretary's Annual Report**
- 5. To approve the Hon Treasurer's Annual Accounts**
- 6. Election of Officers**

The Revd John Makey is Honorary President of the Society and continues in office.

The Chair, Secretary and Treasurer are appointed to serve for one year.

The Chair (Tim Betts) is not standing for re-election owing to other commitments.

The Secretary (Jonathan Timms) and Treasurer (Anna Clark) offer themselves for re-election.

Further nominations for Officers must be proposed and seconded by members with the consent of the individual proposed and received by the Chair or Secretary by 15 February 2023

7. Election of the Executive Committee

Members of the Executive Committee are elected in rotation to serve for two years.

Maureen de Saxe continues in office for a further year.

The following members offer themselves for re-election.

Cilla Deeks, Rosie Fletcher, Ellie Morris and Margaret Bray

Any other nominations for the Executive Committee should be given to the Chair before the AGM

8. Any other business at the discretion of the Chair

Contact details; Chair: timb164@btinternet.com

Secretary: ijnitjims@gmail.com

The Terracotta Panels of the Wye College Biological Sciences Building and Russell Laboratories

by Margaret Bray

The former Wye College Biological Sciences building in Olantigh Road opened in 1964. To enhance the building the frontage was embellished with terracotta panels illustrating the research and study being done at this university institution. The panels were made by students of the Royal Academy of Arts, London under the direction of the sculptor Arnold Machin (1911-1999).¹ They also made the panels that decorate the Russell Laboratories that were opened in 1968.



Wye College Biological Sciences building designed by architect TW Harrison and built in 1964. The main frontage is embellished with five terracotta panels, with three further panels on the end building (not included in photograph). The panels were designed by students of the Royal Academy of Arts, under the direction of Arnold Machin.

The theme of the decoration on the Biological Sciences building covers several subjects including animal sciences, the growing of hops, and study of nature. Each panel generally shows a pair of complementary subjects carved on two and sometimes three or four squares of terracotta, that are inset in the wall flush with the red brick.

¹ Stewart Richards, *Wye College and Its World* (Wye College Press, 1994), p.191

The first panel (left front of Biological Sciences building) depicts hop growing, a major success story of Wye College. The delicately carved leaves and cones (flowers) of the hops create a frame around what may be alluding to study of invertebrates that may coexist with the hops and other plants, with on the left a cricket, and on the right a spider.



Hop vines, cricket and spider, Biological Sciences building

Moving to the right the next panel depicts a cockerel and unhatched chick. Ripened wheat is used to frame the birds. In the top left corner, a harvest mouse nibbles at the wheat ears. In the bottom right a rat scurries through the roots and looks up as if about to prey on the egg with the unhatched chick.



Cockerel and unhatched chick, Biological Sciences building

A wide central panel depicts Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Eve is sitting under an apple tree and Adam is sitting under a cherry tree. In the upper centre of the scene is an owl, presumably to symbolize wisdom and learning.



Adam and Eve, Biological Sciences building

To the right of the Adam and Eve scene is a panel with a newborn lamb leaping into life and a skull of one of its elders in circular frames surrounded by plants, some of which could be representing clover.



Sheep, Biological Sciences building

Further to the right is a panel depicting beetles scurrying around a field of what may be legumes (beans or peas).



Beetles, Biological Sciences building

The front of the Biological Sciences building on the corner of Olantigh Road and the North Downs Way is decorated with a wide panel within the foreground a powerful male bull running, and three other bulls in the background.



Bulls, Biological Sciences building

On the side elevation of the same building is a panel decorated to represent a flock of birds. Adjacent to this is a scene featuring small wild mammals - a family of hedgehogs, a stoat, and a family of shrews - among wildflowers. This panel could be to illustrate the study of the countryside and biodiversity that took place at the College.



Birds, Biological Sciences building



Small Mammals, Biological Sciences building

Further along Olantigh Road opposite Wye School is the building that was the Russell Laboratories that dates from 1968. The frontage of the building is decorated with four terracotta panels that illustrate plant science and horticultural research and study that was carried out here. Moving from the left to right, the first panel illustrates the development of form and structure of plants, and how this occurs in repeated patterns and interwoven spirals. To represent this phenomenon, central to the panel is what looks like a brassica, perhaps broccoli or cauliflower, and sculptured in the lower corners of the panel, are geometric spiral shapes.



Plant shape and form, Russell Laboratories

The second panel from the left represents the study of photoperiodism (the way an animal or plant responds to a change in the length of day and night). The panel is divided so one side shows the earth at night in the glow of the moon, and the other side shows the earth during daylight hours in bright sunshine.



Photoperiodism (response of an animal or plant to changes in length of night and day), Russell Laboratories

Monitoring the weather and climate is fundamental to the study of plant life and the third panel on the Russell Laboratories features equipment used in a weather station. On the left is a rain gauge, on the right a thermometer, in the middle an anemometer that measures wind speed and direction, and below the anemometer a sunshine recorder is portrayed.



Weather station, Russell Laboratories

The last panel on the Russell Laboratories (right-hand end of building) probably represents the study of flowering plants, illustrated as a chrysanthemum, and a daily-like plant, perhaps an Aster. The plants have been sculptured to show the whole growing plant in flower including the roots visible under the soil. This idea may have been taken from plant drawings seen in traditional handbooks of flora illustration. As with previous panels the artists have added little touches of interest like the snail moving across the soil, and butterflies feeding on nectar.



Flowering plants, Russell Laboratories

At the studios of the Royal Academy, the designs would have been first developed as drawings, then sculptured in soft clay using a method called Bas-relief ("low relief"). Bas-relief is an ancient technique in which the elements of the design are sculptured so they are just slightly proud of the background, yet the design is skillfully executed so that there is light and shade to create a 3-dimensional effect, such that the final work takes on the feel and look of a painting. After the design had been sculptured in the clay it would have been fired in a kiln at high temperature.

Arnold Machin, who mentored and supervised the students who made the panels, was a renowned artist and sculptor. Machin honed his skills in his hometown of Stoke-on-Trent working in the potteries of Minton and Wedgwood and went on to study at the Royal College of Art, followed by being elected an Academician of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1956 and Master of Sculpture in 1959.² While at Wedgwood Machin designed several bas-relief pieces. However, he is probably best known for his designs of the images of Queen Elizabeth II on our decimal coinage and postage stamps, and these images too started out as designs in bas-relief sculpture.

In 1964, the same year the construction of the Wye College Biological Sciences Building commenced, Machin was invited to design an image of Queen Elizabeth II for the new decimal coinage. From photographic images and drawings of the Queen, Machin sculptured a bas-relief portrait in plaster, which was then developed into the template for the engraving on the obverse side ("heads") of the coins.

Due to Machin's success in creating the image for the decimal coinage, in 1966 he was invited to submit designs for a new Definitive Stamp (a stamp that consists solely of the monarch's head; these were the red and blue first- and second-class stamps). The cover of the October edition of our Parish Magazine displays a photograph of our late Queen Elizabeth II that was taken in 1966 by John Hedgecoe (1932-2010).³ Machin used this photograph in the work up for his Definitive Stamp design created in plaster bas-relief, as done similarly for the coin design. The bas-relief portrait of the Queen was then photographed to create the Master image from which the printed image for the stamp was created. Interestingly, Machin used a Victorian camera to photograph his sculpture in sepia because he believed this would be the best way to emphasize the three-dimensional effect of the bas-relief in the Master photograph.

Students who gained places at the Royal Academy were often trained artists who had already attended art school and had won places at the Academy because they were exceptionally gifted. Attending the Royal Academy meant they received classes from the "Masters". Arnold Machin who was considered an expert in his field and thus had become both an Academician and Master of Sculpture, taught his students sculpture and carving, but also drawing as the basis of observation, and as a prerequisite to sculpture. Machin instructed several students who showed talent for drawing and sculpturing animals. He arranged for them to visit the Royal Mews to draw the horses stabled there, to visit the Royal Veterinary College where they could study the anatomy of a whole array of living animals as well as preserved specimens, and encouraged visits to London Zoo. The students who were involved with making the Wye College terracotta panels would have likely visited the farms, gardens, greenhouses, and laboratories of Wye College and made drawings and photographs. Back in the studio the drawings and photographs would have been used to develop the designs for panels.

Machin encouraged not just academic study but also practical application of methods being learnt. In the Royal Academy Keeper's Report of 1966, it states "...It was Mr Machin's proud and justifiable

² Arnold Machin, *Machin Artist of an Icon: The Memoirs of Arnold Machin RA* (Kirstead, Frontier Publishing, 2002), pp.115-119

³ Parish Magazine: Wye, Brook, Hinxhill and Boughton Aluph, October 2022, Cover, pp.1 and 2.

boast.....that his students when they left made their living by sculpture.with the academic grounding on which he [Machin] so courageously insisted, a young sculptor who was not too proud to do work, for instance at the Mint or on terra-cotta panels for an agricultural college or fulfil in some other way the space between works of art and works of use, could lead a creative life”⁴ The reference here to agricultural college must be “Wye College” and the making of the terracotta panels.

In Machin’s autobiography the students Machin describes as particularly talented were at the Academy during the period the panels were made, and they all went on to become recognised sculptors⁵. We can only guess that the artwork we see in the terracotta panels is some of theirs. No signatures are visible on the front of the panels, although it is possible signatures may be on the rear. Whichever artists were involved, the panels provide us with an important visual history of some of the science that was performed at Wye College. The panels also show us how illustration, in this case made as sculpture, is used to portray something for us all to view and enjoy.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to fellow Wye residents and former members of Wye College who have helped in the collection of information for this project, in particular John Mansfield, and Ian and Jo Brown, and my husband Richard Griffiths, and thank you to the librarians and archivists at the Royal Academy of Arts.

The Wye College terracotta panels continue to fascinate me, and its continue to be an ongoing project of mine to learn more about them. I hope the information shared in this article provides more insight into these inspiring works of art. Above all, please go and view the panels, and I welcome any insights from fellow Wye residents and former members of the College.

Bibliography

Keeper’s Report: Schools (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1966)

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⁴ *Keeper’s Report: Schools* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1966), pp.31-32.

⁵ Machin, *Artist of an Icon*, pp.118-119