

SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS KCVO, PRA (1891-92)

Alfred Munnings was born on the 8th October 1878. He revealed artistic talents at a very early age, even before his school days at Redenhall Grammar School and Framlingham College.

Leaving Framlingham at the age of fourteen and a half, he was apprenticed to the firm of Page Brothers, lithographers of Norwich as a poster artist from which period date the designs of "lovely girls in large hats" for Caley's Chocolates.

After working from nine in the morning to seven at night he attended the Norwich School of art for a further two hours each evening. He was full of ideas. He persuaded Caley's to make milk-chocolate blocks and bars well ahead of the larger firms of Fry, Cadbury and Rowntree. He introduced the first fancy chocolate-boxes to the British confectionery market.



During his six years of apprenticeship he came to the attention of John Shaw Tomkins, a director of Caley's Chocolates, who was his earliest patron and who greatly encouraged him and subsequently took him on a visit to the Continent. One of his earliest commissions was of John Shaw Tomkins' father posing on a garden seat with his collie dog - the picture "Daniel Tomkins and his Dog".

Step inside an early painting by Sir Alfred Munnings and you are likely to find yourself at Mendham Mill, where he was born. The huge, white, weatherboarded edifice straddles the River Waveney on the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk. The water roars through the mill wheel under the house, foaming out the other side to greet disdainful swans. It was owned by Munnings' father, who was the miller, and the artist himself was born here in 1878. He owned the studio he painted in, part of the carpenter's shop in his native village of Mendham, on the Suffolk side of the Waveney Valley. He had bought it freehold for £50, out of his earnings. At eighteen, he had exhibited at the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours. At twenty, while still an apprentice at Pagets, he had two pictures (one called "Stranded") in the Royal Academy, the first of the three hundred and more, which he was to exhibit there, often with resounding success, in the coming years.

Apart from a period of study and painting at Julin's Atelier in Paris, he stayed and worked in Norfolk until 1911 when he went to Cornwall, attracted by the famous Newlyn School. Having established himself with stables and studios at Lamorna, it was there that he became friendly with Harold and Laura Knight.

Wishing to help two artists who were short of money, Munnings persuaded Mrs Procter to go with him to the Queen's Hotel, Penzance, for the purpose of seeking the patronage of some wealthy people staying there. Hiring a dog-cart, they put a selection of the two artists' best pictures in it and drove to the hotel, Munnings wearing a red handkerchief instead of a collar. The hotel commissioner was brusque. 'Nothing today, thank you', he told them. When Munnings, with two pictures under his arm, marched forward into the hotel vestibule, there was a scuffle in which the commissioner fell and sprained an ankle. While he was hopping around on one foot, Munnings slipped into the hotel and sold the pictures.

In Cornwall, painting among the brooding hills, the haunted woods, the sacrificial stones, he was at first happier than he had been since living in Norwich. The companionship was delightful and so was the seriousness of the devotees attending Stanhope Forbes's classes in the big converted sail-loft that was his teaching studio in Newlyn.

It was from Lamorna that he made his excursions to Hampshire where he had discovered, in the gypsy hop-pickers, a wealth of painting material. Such notable examples as 'Departure of the Hop Pickers' (National Art Gallery, Melbourne) and 'Gypsy Life' (Aberdeen Art Gallery) did much to establish his name and fortune.

He lost the sight of his right eye in an accident when he was twenty (a blow from a briar when lifting a dog over a hedge) and, rejected on two occasions by the Army because of his sight, he spent the first three years of the 1914-18 war mainly in Lamorna.

At last, in 1917, he went off to the war. With the help of Cecil Aldin, accomplished artist in black and white who specialised lovingly in drawing horses, hounds and the old houses of England, he found a lowly place in the vast military apparatus that was being created for the defeat of Germany. Aldin, sometime master of the South Berkshire Hunt, was a temporary major in charge of the remount depot at Calcot Park, near Reading, where a thousand horses were arriving each week mostly from Canada. Aldin got Munnings accepted as a 'strapper', a job that involved scratching horses' neck to see if they responded to mange (Aldin's definition).

He scratched the necks of several thousand horses, and applied foul-smelling mange-dressing to most of them, making himself indispensable to Aldin, who, at the end of twelve months, deplored his departure to the front as an official war artist attached to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. He had been invited by Paul Konody, a leading art critic, to join a group of painters who under the auspices of the newly established Ministry of Information were to record the war on canvas. Augustus John and William Orpen had already been posted to the British army with the rank of major. With no rank Munnings reported to General J.E.B. Seely (later Lord Mottistone), a dashing brave soldier-politician, who had succeeded Haldane as Secretary of State for War. His field headquarters were near the front line in the Arras sector, at a place called Small Foot Wood. 'But there was no sign of a wood', Munnings wrote, 'only charred stumps of trees standing in desolate wastes of mud with duck-boards about, leading to dugouts'.

With the easy courtesy that was one of his distinctions, 'Jack' Seely welcomed Munnings into his headquarters mess, jollying him about his civilian status and at the same time respecting it.

Munnings's portrait of Seely on *Warrior* went to the National Gallery in Ottawa. For Munnings there was a more important sequel. The portrait helped to fix him in the public mind as an exceptionally skilful painter of formal equestrian subjects. From it flowed the long series of commissions, which he never regarded as his life's work but which brought him money and fame in the years to come.

One of his earliest paintings was of the cavalry charge in which **Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew (1894-99)** won his VC in 1918. This painting was done while he was attached to the Canadian War Memorials Fund art program.



The last of his war commissions was to paint the Earl of Athlone, brother of the Queen, on a charger at Windsor Castle. Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, had seen and liked the Seely portrait with *Warrior*. On the day that he was to go to Windsor he was a guest at luncheon at the Hampstead home of the Sunlight soap plutocrat, Lord Leverhulme - 'a terrific affair, with much toasting and many speeches'. He left for Windsor in the late afternoon. The next morning he rose early to keep his appointment with Lord Athlone, who with the Princess, a groom and the charger, was ready for him to begin work. He then found that he had left his paint-box in London. 'What a go!'. 'This room is full of memories - mounted hoofs with all the names of the horses; racing plates, gilded; portraits of harness, and bits of all sorts. This morning the King's doctor, **Sir Frederick Willans (1894-1900)**, came round and asked me to lunch tomorrow, a nice man. He went to Framlingham and is delighted with the picture. Everyone is. Later, Mr Vanneck, the Chief Constable of Norfolk, came round and he thought it a good one. Mr Howlett, the late King's old confidential valet and Keeper of the Crown Jewels, etc., saw it and shed a tear. This picture is going to make a stir. It's alright [sic].

The posthumous portrait, 'King George V on his Pony, Jock, at Sandringham', had been commissioned by the Hon. Douglas Tollemache for presentation to the town of Ipswich.

In March 1920 he married Mrs. Violet McBride, a young widow who was a horsewoman of no mean renown, having won the Gold Cup at Olympia and many other prizes.

He was elected President of the Royal Academy in 1944 and was knighted in the same year. He did not really enjoy his Presidency, disliking intensely and finding burdensome the administrative and formal demands of the position. He did not hide his feelings about many aspects of modern art, nor did he mince his words.

The controversy surrounding him may well have diverted attention from his sheer merit as artist although this merit has been increasingly recognised in the art market with record prices being achieved in this country and the U.S.A for a 20th century British artist. His attitude to modern art, however well or badly expressed, was

founded on his belief that much of it was a confidence trick on the public and not based on what he considered to be essential virtues of craftsmanship and hard work.

It could be said of his work that his training in lithography helped him to develop his fluency and few artists have painted with greater speed and certainty. And yet the large number of studies and sketches he made bear witness to the thoroughness with which he tackled a subject.

His world-wide fame is based on his painting of racehorses, yet before 1919, when he was elected an ARA, he had never painted a thoroughbred and it is arguable that his best work was produced in the period 1898 to 1914 with his recording of the English and particularly the East Anglian rural scene in all its aspects of skies, landscapes, animal and human character portrayal. Referring to his early efforts he said "There is no sophistry about them. They were done in my twenties, before I had learned the wiles and tricks which artists are supposed to know".

Apart from his great versatility as a painter, his ability as a sculptor as witnessed by the bronze 'Brown Jack' commissioned for the Jockey Club, was of high order and he rounded off a full and exciting life by a remarkable autobiography running to three volumes of reminiscence and comments on the English scene over seventy years.

In 1957 Munnings published his "Ballards and Poems" with amazing drawings especially a series for "A Very Piggy Story" which was written at age 12 in 1891.

Few artists have achieved fame and fortune in their own lifetime and fewer still have made the Nation the beneficiary of their life's work.

He died in the summer of 1959 at the age of 80 and left his house and its contents to the Nation.

Castle House, Dedham is now looked after by the Castle House Trust – see their website at <http://www.siralfredmunnings.co.uk/index.html>



The Red Prince Mare sold for almost \$8 million (£5 million) at Sotheby's New York in 2004.

He's also the only OF I know who has had his work put on a postage stamp! His painting is the one in the top right.



A small pen and ink drawing entitled "Tink the Carrier" hangs in the College library, its provenance ratified Munnings, who, however, could not recall its date or the reason for its execution.

He is also noted for having the largest entry in 1967 register, with almost 2 complete pages. It has been mentioned previously in the OF Magazine that a book entitled "Summer in February" by Jonathan Smith paints a slightly different picture about a group of painters who settled in Lamorna Cove in Cornwall just before WW1. His painting entitled "Chick the Carrier" hangs in the Head's Office and a copy of "Under Starters Orders" hangs in the Common Room – see respective pictures below.



The photograph below was taken by the son of **Peter Scotchmer (R31-38)** of Peter's wife Grace, standing by original painting of Flowerdew's Charge. The picture was taken in the vaults of the Canadian War Museum, where over 40 Munnings paintings are stored.



His painting entitled "Derisley Wood" is a portrait of **Francis Wellsman (1888-92)**.

In a review in *The Times* it says "Their leader was Alfred Munnings, a future President of the Royal Academy but then, as a young painter of exceptional promise, a reckless, lewd, laddish tosspot, redeemed by his talent and his gift of friendship."

In another article in *The Times* on 29 April 1987, reported in the Autumn 1988 OF Magazine :

SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS (91–92)—we are pleased to reprint *The Times*' article of 29th April 1987.

'ON THIS DAY

APRIL 29 1949 The high prices recently paid for his canvases have reflected the standing of Sir Alfred Munnings (1878–1959) as one of the finest painters of animals – particularly horses. Unfortunately he had little time for those who could not see art as he did, and he was implacably hostile to modern art.

THE ACADEMY BANQUET

"FOOLISH DROLLERY" IN MODERN ART

At the Royal Academy banquet at Burlington House last night, Sir Alfred Munnings, PRA, presided. Among the speakers were the Duke of Gloucester, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chief Justice, Mr. Churchill, and Mr. P. J. Noel-Baker. Although officially described as a dinner and not a banquet, its revival as a banquet seemed to have been taken for granted by the guests.

The DUKE of GLOUCESTER referred to the many events which had taken place since the last occasion on which a banquet had been held there 10 years ago. He complimented the academy for keeping the flag flying over Burlington House during the war years.

. . . LORD GODDARD, the Lord Chief Justice, said the war had led to the destruction of many things we admired and loved. Reconstruction was slow, austerity was still the rule by day and night, but the fact that the Royal Academy had been able to restore that pleasant evening was a matter of sincere congratulation.

SPEECH INTERRUPTED

During the evening many of the speeches were made almost inaudible by a heavy downpour of rain which drummed on the glass roof of the banquet hall.

The ARCHBISHOP of CANTERBURY, Dr. Fisher, said he was the first Archbishop of Canterbury to hold the office of Chaplain to the Royal Academy, a great institution that had maintained and encouraged in this country the profession of the arts and of painting and sculpture. Referring to Mr. Churchill, he described him as a great commoner and a great amateur of painting.

SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS said that he was glad that there were people who regarded Reynolds as greater than Picasso. Some people said there must be something in this modern art and these young jugglers must be given a show. Personally, he would regard their work as violent blows at nothing. He went on to describe recent exhibits of statuary at the LCC exhibition at Battersea Park as "foolish drollery", and said that some people were disgusted and angered by them. Similarly some people had been equally affected by the work of the Madonna and Child in a church at Northampton. Sir Alfred Munnings went on to refer to the work of Matisse, at which there were some interruptions. He then remarked that he heard members interrupting him at the other end of the room. He had the right to speak and would remind them that he would not be heard next year.

STRONG VIEWS

Mr. CHURCHILL said that no one could doubt that their president held strong views (laughter). It was fitting that a President of the Royal Academy should have a properly

pronounced opinion and he congratulated him on having revived the banquet. Everything should be done in this country to make sure that art should not lack the constant and steady support of an organized and developing intellectual society.

Art should be sustained by all the resources of the nation. We could not afford, he added, amid cheers, to lower any flag at the present time. We must keep them all flying . . .'

In "The Englishman – a biography of Sir Alfred Munnings", published in 1962, the author Reginald Pound wrote:

"Three weeks before his thirteenth birthday he was sent to Framlingham College, founded in 1864 as the Suffolk county memorial to the Prince Consort. He was there four terms only. The fees were paid by his mother. She had gone into stock-farming in a small way on her own account, hiring land for the purpose between the mill and Walsham Hall, where two of her sisters still lived.

"He left Framlingham at the age of fourteen with 'bitter resentment', his own words. 'I hated the place. I was damned miserable there'. He could not forget a particular experience during a preparation period. 'I was drawing something or other. Suddenly the master spoke. "Will Munnings come here to me and bring with him what he is drawing?"' Disapproving of what was shown to him, the master gave him a caning before chapel. "There in his room did I bend over a chair, receiving in spite of my "Please, sirs", six vicious cuts, all on the same spot. How I sat in chapel I can't tell. This was villainous treatment for what I had done.' The villain of that account was the second master and second modern languages master, Alfred Pretty. Young Gainsborough, over at Sudbury, a few miles away, had been more fortunate in his day. When he played truant from the grammar-school to fill his exercise-books with sketches from nature, his father proudly, exonerated him with the boast: "Tom will be a genius!" John Munnings watched his son's development as an artist with little curiosity and even less encouragement.

"At Framlingham, alma mater of the sons of Newmarket trainers, well-off farmers and successful tradesmen, Pretty was the outstanding personality next to the headmaster, the Rev. Dr Oliver Digby Inskip (1852-1934). Pretty incurred Alfred Munnings' lasting dislike as 'a cross-grained fellow' who inflicted other chastisements upon him with a severity their victim forever after thought unjust. 'One day we rushed up the corridor a minute late for breakfast in the large hall. For this slip he ordered us to get up each morning at seven, fill his cold bath, and then parade up and down the school drive from the statue [of the Prince Consort] to the gates and back before breakfast, and until further notice..... We cursed that fool of a master'. Not every Framlingham old boy of that period would have endorsed Munnings's unyielding verdict. Alfred Pretty, who died in 1950, was considered by many to be a successful deputy headmaster at a time when the College prospered in numbers and repute.

"Art teaching at Framlingham consisted of the symmetrical free-hand drawing from copies that was the usual form of school art instruction. The art master was Edward Walter Lynch, who was genially proud of Munnings' early successes as a painter. Munnings never acknowledged any benefit from the art teaching at the College, an omission not entirely due to his brief tenure as a pupil there.

"Visiting Framlingham years later with Mr and Mrs Marshall Sisson, he told them how he used to stand in front of the school gazing at Framlingham Castle in the sunset, imagining it as Torquilstone Castle in Ivanhoe. 'I really thought it was.' He recalled his father, on his regular Wednesday visits to Framlingham Corn Exchange, bringing with him 'a cardboard box full of cakes and pies from home, all tied up with odd bits of string'. He spoke of the College as 'a rotten place', and said that he had been 'clapped and cheered' for stating as much in a speech at the only Old Boys' dinner he ever attended."

The other day I was out walking and visited the parish church in Mells, Somerset. In the church was a memorial/statue to Edward Horner who died in WW1. Glancing at a book nearby, I was surprised to read the following "The statue of Edward Horner is the work of Sir Alfred Munnings and is said to be the first horse sculpture by this famous painter of horses. As a result of this work he was asked by the Jockey Club Members to make a statue of Brown Jack for the Epsom course." It is a very fine sculpture, see the following pictures :-

