

Sir Alfred Munnings, superlative equine portrait painter, erstwhile President of The Royal Academy, is probably one of the most famous of Old Framlinghamians. This abridged article is intended to introduce younger generations to his life and work and, hopefully, encourage them to delve deeper. This can be done by accessing our website – oldframlinghamian.com – where a full version of the article may be found.

Munnings first exhibited at the Royal Academy at the age of 20. He became an independent artist with a fine reputation. He was a well known figure on Newmarket Heath and was official artist to the Canadian Cavalry brigade in the First World War. It was in this capacity that he painted the Flowerdew (VC) Charge – one Framlinghamian painting another. In 1944 he beat Augustus John in the election to the Presidency of the Royal Academy, and this heralded a tumultuous term of office in the course of which he established himself as an outspoken upholder of traditional artistic values, lambasting the arrival of modernism. His paintings have recently been sold for millions of pounds. In 2004 his Red Prince Mare sold for almost £5 million at Sotheby's in New York.

He was born in 1878 at Mendham Mill, a huge weather-boarded edifice straddling the Waveney on the Suffolk/Norfolk border. His father was the miller. Alfred had a studio in part of the carpenter's shop in the village – he bought it himself, out of earnings. Having begun to exhibit at the Royal Academy at the age of 20, he exhibited more than 300 paintings there in the course of his lifetime.

After spending some time in the village school, he was sent to Framlingham 3 weeks before his 13th birthday. His mother paid the fees. He was there for four terms only and it was not a happy experience. He left Framlingham at the age of 14 with bitter resentment. In his own words: "I hated the place. I was damned miserable there." One of his least pleasant memories was that of being severely caned by Second Master, Alfred Pretty, for drawing during prep. History was to confer on Alfred Pretty a high reputation, not least as founder of the SOF, a reputation with which Munnings did not concur. Similarly the Art Master, Edward Lynch was genially proud of Munnings' early successes as a painter, but there was no reciprocal appreciation.

After Framlingham, Munnings started work in the art room of Page Brothers, a Norwich lithography, letterpress and printing firm. He then moved to Cornwall and joined up with the Newlyn School, a group of artists around Stanhope Forbes, and settled there from about 1911. In 1917 he finally went off to the war. He had a job which involved checking the necks of horses to see whether they had "mange". Several thousand horses were checked before Munnings was sent to the front as an

official war artist attached to the Canadian Cavalry brigade. In the words of Leslie Gillett: "It is one of his earliest pictures (1919) that most closely touches the College – that of the cavalry charge in which Gordon Flowerdew won the Victoria Cross in 1918." In 1998 the majority of the 30 or so paintings belonging to the Canadian War Museum were exhibited in London, Bath and Dedham. Castle House, Dedham, to which Munnings moved in 1919, is currently open to the public and well worth a visit. Tom Slocombe, Sir Alfred's groom and gardener, and a loyal and devoted worker, was given the Dedham house after Munnings' death in 1959. He features in various Munnings pictures, and his son still lives in the village. Munnings' equine portraits and war paintings constitute the best known part of his artistic output and examples can be seen at Castle House.

Munnings fame had spread. He became a Royal Academician on Derby Day 1925. In 1944 he was elected President of that distinguished institution. His Presidential address of 1949 is remembered for his castigation of what he called "foolish daubers", artists of the calibre of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, whose influence, according to Munnings had defiled the British tradition. It was a speech for which he claimed presidential prerogative, and he pursued his theme with, at times, near incoherent vigour. His views elicited both dissent and approval. The speech was heard on the radio, and sackfuls of letters showed that a great majority approved of what he had said.

Alfred Munnings did attend several Old Boys Dinners. On one occasion he was clapped and cheered for stating in a speech that the College was a rotten place. He did, however, according to Leslie Gillett's 'The Second Sixty Years' give four reproductions of his Ascot paintings to the College in 1925. Successive Presidents of the Society hand down a fine volume of reproductions of Munnings' paintings, as accompaniment to that office. He did not lose touch. Framlingham, however, like so many comparable boarding schools, was not in those years conducive to the flowering of artistic spirits. If one could take the ghost of Alfred Munnings by the hand and lead him down the College corridors today, he would probably be thrilled to see the displays of students' work. Things have changed. The arts now flourish and enjoy a high status. Similarly, if that selfsame ghost were to see some of the offerings at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition, or indeed, witness the exhibits for the Turner Prize, he would probably again splutter indecipherable words of outrage.

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(This abridged version edited from the original by NH Porter)



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TOP: FLOWERDEW CHARGE. BELOW: SIGNING AUTOGRAPHS IN SUDBURY, SUFFOLK, 1954. BOTTOM LEFT: STRATHCONA HORSE