

George Downing – art master

I was a pupil at the Sothern Grammar from 1934-39 and was taught by George Downing during that period. He was always referred to as “Flip” or “Flipper” by the boys because of his propensity for flipping pupils round the ear in class for often the slightest misdemeanour – not something he would be able to do today!! (**Ed:** you can say that again – and did we **really** suffer as a result?).

George himself was a product of the school in the days when it was known as the Higher Grade and was, in fact, a contemporary of my father at the school. As a teacher he gave us a very thorough grounding in art and I can honestly say that he taught me how to draw. My recollections are that we spent the best part of a year on all aspects of perspective and as a result I still find that I have no problems with the subject. I can well remember that he always maintained that a wheelbarrow was one of the hardest things to draw correctly because there are no parallel parts. We spent another year on lettering and in particular the use of script pens and as a result I have produced posters for various purposes over the years using the type of lettering he taught, until the advent of computers. Another year was spent learning the art of pen and ink drawing which became my favourite subject and which I still enjoy in the form of pen and wash. We were also taught the rudiments of watercolour painting and for this we were limited to a palette of three blues, three reds and three yellows. We were instructed to buy all our materials from a shop in Kingston Crescent, Masons I think it was called, and woe betide if you dared to come to class with a paint box from another source particularly if it had wide range of colours.

George could be quite scathing about pupils and their work. I can recall one of his favourite expressions, a misquotation from a well known hymn: “God moves in mysterious ways, his ‘blunders’ to perform” to which he would add “Note the blunder” – pointing to the unfortunate individual.

Up until WW2 the school always put on a Gilbert & Sullivan opera at the South Parade pier just before the pantomime season began. George painted the scenery for these operas and I can recall seeing the scenery hanging in the school gymnasium where George would be painting it.

George was, of course, an artist in his own right and was certainly well known in the Portsmouth area. I have two of his paintings in their original mounts and frames which are pen and wash scenes of, I think, Dutch sailing barges. They were given to me by a great friend for whom I did a special favour. It is surprising where you can come across George’s paintings. On one occasion when I was working in Devonport Dockyard I called on the captain of a R.N. survey ship which had arrived for a refit. The first thing to catch my eye was one of George’s paintings hanging on the bulkhead. Apparently, the captain’s mother had seen the painting in a shop in Portsmouth and thought her son would like it for his cabin.

Keith Thomas July 2009