

[Editor's Note: James Olle – an Old Secundrian - wrote this article before he passed away (date unknown). It was passed to me by Tim Syson a distant relative of G H Downing who has researched GHD's lifetime and is to produce a website dedicated to him].

George H. Downing R.B.A.: a forgotten Portsmouth artist

By JAMES G. OLLE

From the Autumn of 1927 until the Summer of 1932 I was a pupil at The Portsmouth Boys' Southern Secondary School. I soon discovered two things of interest about the all-male teaching staff. One was that several of them were striking personalities, with interests and aptitudes beyond the boundaries of the school's curricula. The other was that every master had been given a nick-name. The respected Headmaster, Dr G.J. Parks, was Mungo Park. The Headmaster's Deputy (officially called the second master), Little Mr Jones, was called Joneac. Then there was Goody (Mr Goodfellow), Piggy (Mr Ogden), Caboss (Mr Steed), Merry (Mr Merrifield), Tishy (Mr Tilney), Joey (Mr Waite) and others it would be tedious to list.

The art master, George Henry Downing, the subject of this document, was known as Flip Downing, owing to his habit of flipping the ears of the younger boys when they displeased him. But as we grew older (and taller) Downing became more agreeable. He then amused us with the latest additions to his collection of schoolboy howlers ("a papal bull is a cow, kept in the Vacuum to provide milk for the pope's children") and engaging anecdotes about his painting holidays in France, where he said he augmented the requests he made in his rudimentary French with drawings on his sketch pad. On one occasion, when he was in genial mood, Downing told us that he kept his wife, who was a chronic invalid, in a flat in the South of France. "it's expensive, boys", he said cheerfully, "but well worth it". His wife pre-deceased him. There were no children.

One of Downing's hobbies was fishing and we first for to know that he was in Who's who when he told us that since he had listed his hobbies for that illustrious reference work he had been inundated with catalogues of fishing tackle. The Who's who entry, though succinct, indicated clearly enough why Downing was regarded worthy of inclusion. He was a member of the Royal Society of British Artists and had exhibited at the Royal Academy and he Paris Salon. I know little about the portraits and oil paintings mentioned in the Who's who entry, but between 1927 and 1939 I saw originals and reproductions of many of Downing's watercolours of landscapes and ancient buildings in England and France. I own none of the originals, but I am glad to own three of the acceptable reproductions published by Messrs Haigh & Sons, Southwall, two of Cotswold villages and one of the timber-framed buildings in the centre of Rouen which are not those you will see today. The buildings Downing painted so well were destroyed during the war. All of these reproductions were purchased from the former Landport Drapery Bazaar, Portsmouth, framed and glazed, for 2s 11d each.

Although I was among Downing's more backward pupils, one of the reasons why he impressed me, in those far off days, long before I even dreamed of seeing my own name on a title-page, was that he had published two books, as we knew very well, namely, The drawing of geometrical models (Chapman & Hall, 1910), and Art applied to window display (2nd Edn., Blandford Press, 1932). But in retrospect, I think that one of Downing's major achievements, though seldom referred to by him, was the magnificent scenery he painted for the Gilbert and Sullivan and other operettas the school produced each December, from 1919 to 1938, in the elegant little theatre on Southsea's South Parade Pier. These joyous productions, in which members of the staff, some of their women-folk and many of the boys worked together in absolute harmony (except, perhaps, in the orchestra) raised money for the school library, its athletic fund and local charities. Sadly, the South Parade Pier Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1974 and was not rebuilt. What happened to the marvellous scenery by Downing (which included, in my years, brilliant support for the little-known Savoy operetta Utopia Ltd.) will be revealed later.

Downing was very much a Portmuthian. He was born in Portsmouth on July 16th, 1878. His association with the boys' Southern Secondary School, where he was in turn a pupil, a pupil teacher and a teacher, was long and unusual. From 1891 to 1904 he was a demonstrator in the chemical laboratory of the Portsmouth Higher Grade School for Boys. In 1904 he transferred to its successor, the Boys' Secondary School, renamed in 1921 the Southern Secondary School for Boys where,

thanks to Dr Parks, the headmaster, who recognised his artistic talent and encouraged it, Downing became the school's first art master, a post he held until his death in 1940.

On September 1st, 1939, following the anticipated outbreak of World War II, most of the masters and pupils of Downing's school were hastily evacuated to the New Forest. Teaching, in makeshift accommodation was concentrated in Brockenhurst. The necessary hostels were scattered among several other New Forest villages. Downing was with the evacuees. Unfortunately, in the following year his health declined and on December 10th, 1940, he died at Lymington. He was buried at Brockenhurst. A month later, on the dreadful night of January 10th, 1941, the greater part of the Portsmouth Boys' Southern Secondary School premises at Portsmouth were destroyed by fire, as the result of a particularly severe raid by German Bombers. Perhaps the worst loss, as it was unique, was the comprehensive store of Downing's scenery from the inter-war productions of the school's operettas. They live now only in a few memories. Because the site was too small, the school was not rebuilt at Fratton.

Although Downing was not the equal of his Portsmouth friend, the celebrated marine artist W.L. Wyllie, R.A. (1851-1931), I am convinced that he deserved the reputation he gained during his lifetime and I regret that, since his death, his reputation has waned. His paintings were far superior to those of most of the members of the Portsmouth and Hampshire Art Society, which he had helped to found and of which he was the first Honorary Secretary. It must be conceded that much of his work was dominated by the application of a pet theory, but in this respect he was not unique. Downing's theory was that a picture of a landscape pleases the eye most if there is a mass on the left four times as great as a mass on the right, a notion he presented to us in class as a four-pound weight in relation to a one pound weight.

The three reproductions of Downing's watercolours I own illustrate what he meant. But there was much more to Downing's picture than the exposition of a theory. It would take another artist, however, to analyse the unique virtues of his style.

A few years ago I wished to have a word with a colleague in the Loughborough University of Technology. Directly I entered his office in my eyes lighted upon a picture on the wall, the framed reproduction of a watercolour depicting York Minister and the red roofs of houses near it. I knew who the artist was before I got near enough to the picture to read the familiar signature, "Geo.H. Downing". I suggested to my colleague that he should sell this picture to me. He refused. I do not blame him.

Although most of Downing's pupils passed the art paper of the Oxford School Certificate Examination (even I did), he was not an ideal teacher. He spent most of his class periods working on his own pictures and during our first year we did little more than copy on plates in his textbook The drawing of geometrical models. Or his various wall-charts I recall (without malice) that he boxed my ears because I had failed to copy precisely his impeccable drawing of the Roman letter "I". My version leaned towards Mecca.

The brightest part of a class period with Downing was likely to be the ten minutes or so when we gathered round his desk and he pithily assessed our work with comments more satirical than complimentary. I remember well the day he lighted upon my gloomy soft pencil drawing of a woodland glade. Having carefully displayed it to the rest of the class, with a caustic smile he gave it a verbal blasting then added to it, with indelible pencil, two story-book bandits wearing long cloaks and broad-brimmed hats, peering hopefully from behind my trees. But having made this ingenious adornment to my sombre landscape, to the accompaniment of anticipated laughter from my school-fellows, Downing was so pleased with his neat embellishments that he awarded me forty marks out of fifty. I was therefore more fortunate than one of my friends in the class, whose daub of a watercolour was greeted by Downing with the acidulous observation "I could do better than this with a stick of rhubarb stuck up my bottom!"

It is a well-known but remarkable phenomenon that one can see and hear, in one's mind, persons one knew who quitted this earth many years ago. I can recall George H. Downing more vividly than any of his colleagues. As to his appearance, he was sun-tanned and ruddy. He has a small, neatly trimmed moustache, dark like his hair, which was groomed and combed back over his head. His

voice, resonant and commanding, would have served him well in the Army. Downing was, in fact, a formidable personality. But he was not disliked. We all had enough wit to realise that he was a man of unusual talent and achievements and that he was utterly devoted to the school which had given him the opportunity to shine. Like most of the staff, Downing did more for the school than teach. Apart from painting the scenery for the school's annual operettas, it was he who cheerfully sold it to its pupils the school's caps and blazers.

Although there was a streak of crudeness in Downing which could be hurtful, he was one of the most admirable and versatile men I have ever known. When he died, his friend and colleague J.H.Gardener ("Gussy" Gardener, who taught me all I know about English grammar and most of what I know about British history) paid a worthy tribute to him in the Journal of the Portsmouth Branch of the National Union of Teachers. "G.H.D's horizon", he said, "was not limited by the four walls of his classroom, or by those of his studio. He was a man of wide and varied interests and he pursued whatever he took up with characteristics thoroughness and flair. Some consolation for his death, at the early age of 62, is to be found in the fact that he lived his life full to the full and enjoyed it.

As a teacher, Downing was a hard man to please, but as an artist I hope that he still gives pleasure to those fortunate enough to see his drawings and paintings, or even reproductions of them. As I write, the Portsmouth City Museum and Art Gallery does not possess a single example of his work, although over the years he has rightly found a place in several standard reference books of art and biography. I have been reliably informed, however, that this strange gap in the Art Gallery's collections will shortly be made good.

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