

## **Art, Artists & The Old School**

### **Contribution by Nigel Surry (1947-55)**

#### **Messrs Downing, Rimmington & Jefferies**

During my researches on artists working in Portsmouth in the last centuries, I was pleasantly surprised at the School's involvement with the Portsmouth & Hampshire Art Society, founded in 1909 under the auspices of the celebrated marine painter W.L. Wyllie. Today it boasts over 200 members and continues to provide opportunities for them to exhibit, take part in classes and workshops and visit exhibitions all over the country.

The Society's first Secretary and later one of its first Vice-Presidents was George Henry Downing (1878-1940) a student at the School of Art (later Portsmouth College of Art) in 1904 and who taught at the Southern Secondary School from 1915 onwards. One of his best known pupils is Eric Rimmington, another Old Secundrian (1934-42) responsible for the splendid mural *Trafalgar House Mural* - wrongly known as "*Southsea Station*" (no doubt because of its subject matter) that can still be seen at the former Trafalgar Services Club, Edinburgh Road, now a Wetherspoons pub.

It was interesting to discover that W A Jefferies (1903-70) art master at the School from 1945 until his retirement was also a member of the Society and had been Head of Drawing at the College of Art in the 1930s. He had an adventurous life studying architecture at Bristol College of Art, then later painting in London and Paris. Despite his undoubted abilities and enthusiasm for art I do not think he found teaching small boys a particularly rewarding experience especially when their aptitude for the subject was as limited as mine! (Ed: He did, however, have a fund of highly improbable stories that he would often relate – hence his nickname "Buller" - and the pranks that boys got up to with him as a target are the stuff that legends are made of!!).

There are only a few examples of Downing's work in the City Museum. Yet, surely, as the first secretary of the Portsmouth & Hampshire Art Society, let alone his work as a teacher, he deserves to be remembered; perhaps a commemorative plaque on his home at 102 Frensham Road would be appropriate. In contrast, W. Jefferies' widow donated many of his paintings to the Museum, where they may be seen today.

Between 50 and 60 people turned up to the book launch of "A Portsmouth Canvas, the art of the City and the sea 1770 – 1970", held at the Trafalgar on 17th November 2008. We were fortunate in having Eric Rimmington to introduce the book, and unless appearances are deceptive, a good time was had by all, including other old Secundrians present, Frank Harfield, Dave Sherrell, John Lee and Jim Riordan.

If you want to find out more about Portsmouth and its artists why not begin by reading a copy of my book (or better still, buy a copy!)? For further details see my website [www.fortes.org.uk](http://www.fortes.org.uk)

### **Nigel Surry (1947-55)**

Additional entry from Nigel (October 2009)

After a year in which, to misquote Evelyn Waugh, ‘ I have tried to apply the ideals I learned at the old school, to the great world of commerce, ‘ you will be pleased to hear that *A Portsmouth Canvas* has been selling steadily, leaving just about half the print run still available.

The book launch at the Trafalgar on 17<sup>th</sup> November was well attended by friends and well wishers, including the painter Eric Rimmington, who introduced the book to such effect that I walked away with more than £500 to the good! It was fortunate that the *Portsmouth News* did not catch up with me until the New Year, when on 15<sup>th</sup> January they printed a splendid double page feature profusely illustrated with paintings taken from the book that resulted in a second boost for sales. By March *A Portsmouth Canvas* was available, not only from the City Museum and Hiscock Gallery, but also the Dockyard Museum Bookshop and Baytree Books, Waterlooville.

If this tempts you to dust down that novel or retrieve those early poems from the attic and venture into the world of self publishing, do bear in mind those words of the dying Oscar Wilde, ‘It’s not my extravagances I regret, but my economies.’ Above all, avoid short cuts on quality and presentation and shop around for a good designer and printer who know what they are about, and are prepared to discuss ideas with you at every stage of the book’s production. You may or may not choose to have a website, but it would be foolish not to apply for an ISBN number (even though they are sold in blocks of ten!), as this in turn gives access to Neilson’s Book Data Base, opening a national market, whose potential can’t be over estimated.

In the course of time you may become a member of the Society of Authors, whose benefits are numerous, but in the very early days, Anna Crosbie’s *How To Publish Your Own Book* (Oxford 2006) will take you step by step in the right direction, and with the *Writers and Artists Yearbook*, are indispensable tools of the trade.

It’s probably true, that in writing and self publishing, as with many other activities, it is better to travel than to arrive. But whatever the outcome, I can guarantee an interesting journey.

( For further information about *A Portsmouth Canvas The Art of the City And the Sea 1770-1970* please log on to my website [www.fortes.org.uk](http://www.fortes.org.uk))

**Nigel Surry**