

John Egerton Christmas Piper (1903–1992)

Fawley Bottom Farmhouse, Fawley, Henley-on-Thames RG9 6JH

The artist

John Piper was one of the most important and versatile British artists of the twentieth century. Born in Epsom, Surrey, the son of a solicitor, he initially joined the family firm, but left after three years to attend Richmond School of Art (and was disinherited as a result). In 1928 he was admitted to the Royal School of Art, but disliking the regime there, remained only one year before embarking on a career as an artist.

He was also a writer, critic, poet, photographer and life-long advocate of the arts, and was even an accomplished pianist. Initially a painter of abstract compositions, landscapes, and architecture, he became a household name as the result of his war artist commissions to paint bomb-damaged churches, most famously the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. He had already begun to paint ruined abbeys, old cottages and barns and undertook a number of private commissions to paint country houses; his distinctive style and sense of place made him an outstanding contributor to the wartime 'Recording Britain' scheme. In Bucks, for instance, he recorded views of Stowe, Hartwell, Dinton Folly, Tyringham and Gayhurst. His name was often linked with Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland as the leading British artists of the period.

In the post-war years he developed his career to become an exceptional printmaker and designer of stage sets, stained glass windows, murals, ceramics and textiles, collaborating with leading choreographers, composers and craftspeople. Perhaps his most famous work is the formidable undertaking of the baptistery window of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, but his personal preference was for smaller windows in parish churches; in Bucks, examples can be seen at Fawley, Bledlow Ridge, Flackwell Heath and Turville.

Having previously refused the award of a CBE and a knighthood, Piper was made a Companion of Honour in 1973 (Obituary; see also Pallant House Gallery, 2016).

The house

Piper and his wife Myfanwy Evans (1911–1997), herself a painter and an important writer, librettist and critic, settled at Fawley Bottom Farmhouse, in the south-west corner of the Buckinghamshire Chilterns (though at the time in Oxfordshire), about 6.5km north of Henley-on-Thames, in 1934. Reputedly, they needed to be in reach of London but did not want to live there, and recollecting once having stayed at Turville, they stuck a pin in the map there and drew a circle which included Marlow, Henley, Wycombe and Beaconsfield. Here they remained for the rest of their lives, raising four children. The abandoned early nineteenth-century brick-and-flint, slate-roofed building (now listed Grade II) was once a dairy farm belonging to the Stonor Park estate. It lay on the edge of a beechwood down a steep, narrow unmade road leading south-west out of the village of Fawley. Water was supplied by a well and a rainwater tank; heating came from open fires; electricity was not installed until 1957. The farmyard, gardens and surrounding paddocks amounted to about 1ha (Sale catalogue). On the opposite side of the lane were 4ha of orchard and woodland, and eventually a swimming pool.

Piper's studio was initially in the front parlour. In 1949 the cowshed at one end of the house was converted into a studio entered via a small connecting room from the kitchen. In 1958 a barn was converted to a stained-glass studio, and in the late 1960s a pottery kiln was installed in one of the outbuildings that formed part of the three-sided courtyard on the north side of the property.

The house contained a massive book collection. A pony and trap were kept during the war, along with a pig and chickens. The contents of the rustic interior tended to be Victorian or Edwardian items, often salvaged from bar parlours and pubs. According to one visitor, the impression was of 'ordered bohemianism'. The constant stream of visitors from the world of art, literature and music included Benjamin Britten, John Betjeman, Osbert Sitwell, Osbert Lancaster, John Mortimer, Kenneth Clark and Geoffrey Grigson. In 1960 Princess Margaret and her husband visited, and the Queen Mother once came to lunch (Spalding, 2009).



South front of house, 1997 (Sale catalogue)



Fawley Bottom Farmhouse from the west, 1997 (Sale catalogue)

The garden

The sale catalogue of 1997, the year of Myfanwy's death, describes the gardens. They lay to the south and east of the house, bounded by brick-and-flint walls and consisting of lawn with adjoining flowerbeds and three areas of vegetable garden. On the southern side a gap in the wall led to a further area of lawn and flowerbeds with a mature hedge beyond. Adjoining the principal studio on the north side of the grassed courtyard, a gate led to a back garden with a greenhouse, a further vegetable garden and an area of rough grass.

The artist as a gardener

The Pipers were enthusiastic gardeners. During the war, shortages had encouraged a degree of self-sufficiency which continued after the return of peace. John, with the help of a gardener, planted almost every kind of vegetable available to him, and Myfanwy was a renowned cook. (Spalding, p. 253). To Penelope Betjeman, the garden at Fawley Bottom offered 'a miracle of both beauty and utility' (Spalding, p. 388).

When interviewed about his life in 1966, Piper admitted to a passion for gardening which had set in about four years earlier, as an escape from the pressure of all his commissions. 'He now kept his seed packets in a kitchen drawer, spent much time in the greenhouse, and saw his herbaceous borders burgeon each year, with vegetables growing in and behind them. In the main flower garden, the path, he insisted, had to be wide enough for two to walk abreast.' In another interview in 1987 he said that he liked a good background of well-grown trees: 'Whereas flowers have a brief, fragmentary life, trees do go on. They burgeon in the summer and die down in the winter and the change is very important. What I don't like are shrubs: they are mostly rather formalist things.' He had found that the chalky soil in the garden had proved good for lilies of the valley, pulsatilla [pasque flower], and red-hot poker; and he especially enjoyed growing giant heracleum [hogweed]

and hoary green weeds (Spalding, p. 406), and loved a sense of profusion. Other descriptions bear this out: '[I]n summer the garden glowed with huge poppies, peonies, red-hot poker, deep yellow anemones, petunias, stocks, and irises and overflowed with vegetables and herbs' (p. 387). He also had a taste for sweet peas, white daisies, sunflowers, rudbeckias and ligularias in strong colour groupings, and every year perfumed tobacco plants were planted to pick up the whites in the pale flint walls of the house (p. 492).

Inspiration from the garden

The Pipers' garden was not designed as a subject for paintings: natural growth and regeneration had been cultivated wherever possible out of respect for the *genius loci* (Spalding, p. 492). It was only when illness began to prevent him from travelling to depict other landscapes in the 1980s that he turned to paintings based on the garden at Fawley Bottom. 'Previously, flowers had only rarely appeared in his art, but now he orchestrated seemingly unconstrained, glowing compositions out of moon daisies, hydrangeas, peonies, white, orange, and red poppies, some reminiscent of firework displays for the colours burst across paper and canvas, with flair, spontaneity, and artistic judgement' (Spalding, pp. 492–3). There were several exhibitions of paintings devoted entirely to flowers and the garden in the later 1980s, and as one catalogue put it (Waddington Galleries, 1988):

'The flower paintings of this exhibition ... are a departure, for although there are occasional bunches of flowers in his interiors Piper has not before made them such a subject. The array of his work [reveals] his surprising reluctance to record the landscape closest to him, the farmhouse where he has lived for fifty years, and the valley and the woods which surround it...

The artist's garden near Henley is not large, except that it seems to extend into studios and workshops, and the fields and the woods nearby. It is most remarkable for the vigour of the plants and their concentration in flourishing clumps, so that the rogersia and Miss Willmott's Ghost [a variety of *Eryngium giganteum*, sea holly], and the poppies, sunflowers, thistles and acanthus are the largest and most emphatic, and the heraclium [sic] at the gate the most gigantic. Such an enthusiasm runs through into Piper's decorations on pottery, and into these lavishly coloured flower paintings, although discipline of abstraction marshals even the herbacious [sic] borders, where nothing is gently spread throughout, but ordered into overwhelming clusters.'

Likewise, Fraser Jenkins (2016, pp. 399-400) noted:

'...women and flowers were unusual subjects for John until his new exhibition in 1986, whose subject-matter consisted entirely of flowers. He had been ill, and unable to work outside, and he began this series in the late summer of 1985, using flowers from his garden. To an extent these works are portraits of Fawley Bottom, since he was keen on his garden, which was now seen as if coming into the house. Piper had long favoured extravagant-looking garden plants, such as tall thistles, sunflowers, and giant hogweed, and in these paintings the flowers seem even to outgrow their own large scale. But now he was turning from his own coloured vision of buildings to things that were themselves inherently coloured. The paintings were no longer static in design, and the flowers looked as lively as fireworks, some in circular wheels and radiant sun-heads, and the shoots of some reaching into the black background.'

Fraser Jenkins (p. 401) documents the way Piper's pictures reflected his declining physical and mental state (he was diagnosed with dementia in 1988):

‘Two later exhibitions of Piper’s flower paintings of a rather different kind were to come ... Many of his subjects were outside in the garden, but their composition is quite wayward, with little perspective. ... In one, an aged and half-dead pear tree seems to dance in front of a wall. In another, morning glories and a convolvulus cavort around the brick sections of a flint wall, which resemble a medieval painted cross.’

In the final exhibition in his lifetime, in 1989, the paintings ‘Fawley I–X’ are characterised by loose brushwork and abstract flowers and vegetation, not recognisable scenes.

The garden today

As mentioned above, Fawley Bottom Farmhouse was sold in 1997 when Myfanwy died, five years after John. The sale catalogue, describing the property as ‘a most attractive country house’ although ‘in need of some modernisation’, makes no mention whatsoever of its previous illustrious owners. Today, the boundaries of the garden appear unchanged, but clearly no attempt has been made to maintain it, and although various views of it recorded by John Piper are still easily recognisable, it is now entirely grassed over. A few shrubs and trees may remain from the Pipers’ time, such as the pear tree depicted in his painting *Pear Tree and Wall* (1988) (see quotation above).



South front, 2018 (Photo: Google Earth)



East front, 2019 (Photo: John O'Dwyer)
The single-storey building, previously a cowshed, once served as a studio.

Despite this sorry state of affairs, we are extremely fortunate that this towering figure in twentieth-century British art – perhaps one of the greatest polymaths of all time – not only left fabulous paintings of gardens and buildings across Bucks, but found the time to be devoted to his own garden and make such glorious images of it.

References

- Fraser Jenkins, David and Fowler-Wright, Hugh, *The Art of John Piper*, Unicorn/Portland Gallery, 2016.
- Obituary (n.d.), Epsom College archive <http://extranet.epsomcollege.org.uk/>
- Pallant House Gallery, *John Piper: The Fabric of Modernism* (Exhibition Notes), 2016.
- Spalding, Frances, *John Piper, Myfanwy Piper: Lives in Art*, OUP, 2009.
- Waddington Galleries/David Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper* (catalogue of flower paintings exhibition), 1988, pp. 5-6.
- Sale catalogue Fawley Bottom Farmhouse 1997, Centre for Bucks Studies SC/255/1
- National Heritage List: Fawley Bottom Farmhouse, List Entry No. 1125739

Where to see John Piper's artworks

For copyright reasons it is not possible to reproduce any of Piper's artworks here, but to see a good selection of thumbnails, including Piper's paintings and photographs of Fawley Bottom, search Google Images for 'John Piper artist Fawley Bottom'.

Many thumbnail images including flower and garden paintings (numbers 2, 3, 5, 8, 12, 148) can also be seen at

<https://artimage.org.uk/search/?AdvancedSearchModel.terms=John+Piper&AdvancedSearchModel.worksbyartist=03c1e4ae-2a32-4338-92dd-d2cfef527952#1>

Hartwell Church is included in those available to view at

https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/makers:john-piper-19031992/page/5

The main Piper archive is at the Tate but very little can be viewed online.

Bucks County Museum owns a screenprint of Dinton Folly, and Piper's many drawings and lithographs of Stowe.

The River and Rowing Museum, Henley opened a dedicated John Piper Gallery in December 2016.

Clare Butler July 2020