

Reginald (Rex) John Whistler (1905–1944)

Bolebec House, 7 Oving Road, Whitchurch HP22 4JF

The artist

Rex Whistler was born in 1905 in Eltham. He moved, with his family, to Farnham Common in Buckinghamshire in the 1920s just before he was accepted at the Royal Academy. He disliked the regime there and was 'sacked for incompetence'. He then proceeded to study at the Slade School of Art.

Upon leaving the Slade he became a professional artist. Rex's most noted work during the early part of his career was for the café at the Tate Gallery, completed in 1927, which includes impressions of the Corinthian Arch and Boycott Pavilions at Stowe. One of the Boycott Pavilions also featured in a later self-portrait.

Rex was part of a group of influential artists of the early 20th century who travelled up to the Slade art school from the commuter belts of Bucks and Berks. He painted many members of London society, including Edith Sitwell, Cecil Beaton and other members of the set to which he belonged, which became known as 'The Bright Young Things'. Rex also produced mural and *trompe l'oeil* paintings at Plas Newydd, home of Lady Caroline Paget. He and Lady Caroline became close friends and he painted numerous portraits of her, including a startling nude (Whistler). His murals for Edwina Mountbatten's 30-room luxury flat in Brook House, Park Lane, London were later installed by the Mountbattens' son-in-law, decorator David Hicks, in his own houses.

Rex also created designs for Wedgwood china and designed the scenery and costumes for Ninette de Valois and Gavin Gordon's Hogarth-inspired 1935 ballet *The Rake's Progress* as well as producing book illustrations, notably those for Hans Andersen's *Fairy Tales and Legends* (Whistler).

In 1933 Rex moved, with his younger brother Laurence (Sir Alan Charles Laurence Whistler CBE (1912–2000)) and his parents, to Bolebec House, Whitchurch. Laurence Whistler was both a poet (in 1935 he became the first recipient of the King's Gold Medal for Poetry), and a noted glass engraver: he produced work for the British Royal family and at Stowe House as well as the Rex Prism, a memorial glass engraving which is in the Morning Chapel at Salisbury Cathedral. In 1975 he became the first President of the newly founded British Guild of Glass Engravers (*Telegraph*, 23 Dec 2000; *Guardian*, 6 Jan 2001).

Shortly after the move to Bolebec House Shell asked Rex for a poster, and the result was the oil painting *The Vale of Aylesbury* which is now at Upton House, Warwickshire. It was issued in poster form by Shell as part of the 'Everywhere You Go You Can Be Sure of Shell' poster series.

The family stayed at Bolebec House until 1937 when they moved to Wiltshire.

When war broke out, although he was 35, Rex was eager to join the army. While in the army his artistic talent was greatly appreciated and he was able to continue his work, which includes a notable self-portrait in uniform, now in the National Army Museum. His unit was sent to France at

the end of June 1944, several weeks after the D-Day landings. He was killed on 18 July 1944. His body now lies in Banneville-La-Campagne War Cemetery. Reportedly, *The Times* newspaper received more letters about Rex's death than that of any other war victim.

The house

Bolebec House is situated in the village of Whitchurch, an attractive, largely stone-built village set on an escarpment six miles north of Aylesbury. It was considered by Sir John Betjeman to be one of the best Buckinghamshire villages.

It is thought that the earliest part of the house was built in the 16th century from the remains of Bolebec Castle, while other parts are believed to date from the early 18th century with later additions. It is supported by a detached thatched annexe and an additional cottage. To the south, at the rear of the property, it overlooks the Vale of Aylesbury and the distant Chiltern Hills beyond.

According to Laurence, the family moved there because they wanted a country home 'with some charm', although he describes the charm as 'nondescript' (Whistler).

The garden

Laurence says that when Shell asked Rex for a poster, he painted the view from the garden to celebrate the family's arrival in real country.

Apparently in the new garden Rex and Laurence made what Rex called 'the improvements', a short avenue of limes crossed by one of flowering cherries. They also built a raked wall of turfs designed to make a terrace of a sloping field; however, within a few weeks part of it collapsed and had to be rebuilt at a less ambitious angle. The garden ended in a crest of rook-racked elms, overlooking two fields, and beyond them was the wide Vale of Aylesbury, enclosed by the Chilterns.

By 1985 the cherries and ramparts had apparently gone, but some of the limes remained, leading nowhere (Whistler).

Today the garden and grounds extend to about 22 acres (9ha) in total with areas of formal gardens laid to lawn, a terrace, a small orchard, and the copper beech tree under which Laurence Whistler sits in 'The Vale of Aylesbury'. There is also a vegetable garden with greenhouses and a sunken water garden believed to have once featured at the Chelsea Flower Show. Beyond is a ha-ha and three fenced paddocks with small areas of coppice and woodland. Part of the garden where the picture was painted no longer belongs to Bolebec House; two new houses have been built therein (OS), and the view that Rex painted is not quite the same, a large wind turbine and the former Bucks County Council offices, locally known as Pooley's Tower, now forming part of it. The elm trees at the bottom of the garden have fallen victim to disease and the lime avenue is no longer evident.

The Vicarage, Berton

In 1939 Rex Whistler's parents returned Buckinghamshire, to live with his mother's sister and her husband, Canon William Henry Hatchard Elliott, at the Vicarage, Berton and Rex stayed with them while on leave. William Elliott was the vicar of Berton from 1935 until 1951 (Griffin and Thurston). While staying at Berton, Rex produced three pictures of the church and the Vicarage which are now owned by the Buckinghamshire County Museum. One is a watercolour of a nun walking through

Dovehouse field behind the Vicarage in Bierton. Painted in 1940, the field is in the foreground with a nun walking on the far right; behind in the distance are the garden walls and the trees in the Vicarage garden with beyond them the house and church with spire and weather vane; in the middle distance to the left there are children playing (Bucks County Museum).

The second picture is an oil painting on board, of two ladies taking tea in the Vicarage garden at Bierton, done in 1940 by Rex, as a memento for his mother (Griffin and Thurston): the ladies in the picture may be his mother and aunt. The Vicarage is shown in the background with a trellis supporting shrubs, possibly climbing roses, in front of it. The garden is in the foreground and the two ladies are seated at a table in the middle distance to the right of a large island bed containing shrubs, again possibly roses. On the right of the picture is a path bordered on both sides by low-growing flowers. On the far right is a garden wall with flowering climbers on it and the tower of the church. There are what may be standard roses in the flower bed to the left of the path. On the left of the picture the branches of a large tree can be seen.

In Rex's time the garden extended south from the house and then around the southern wall of the churchyard, where there was a tennis court and orchard (Griffin and Thurston). This is where the third oil painting, of Canon Elliott in the garden of the Vicarage at Bierton, appears to have been done, also in 1940. Canon Elliott is standing on a lawn and holding a rake; behind him is a garden wall with bushes and flowers and behind the wall are the church and the Vicarage (Bucks County Museum).

The fact that Rex completed three pictures of the garden and his relatives in 1940 would suggest that he took inspiration from the garden and environs of the Vicarage at Bierton while on leave from his duties with the army, although he did not go to France until 1944.

In 1994 the garden was much as Rex portrayed it (Griffin and Thurston); however, the garden has now been subdivided between the Old Vicarage and a new Vicarage. Canon Elliott would now be in the garden of the new Vicarage, 5 St James's Way. The orchard and tennis court have gone. The other picture of two ladies taking tea in the Vicarage garden at Bierton is of the garden now attached to The Old Vicarage, 74 Aylesbury Road, Bierton; the island bed and large tree are still there. The other features have disappeared.

Rex's father died in Aylesbury in 1940 (*Bucks Herald*, 11 Oct 1940) and his mother remarried at Bierton in 1942 (*Bucks Herald*, 30 Oct 1942).

Rex Whistler's significance for Bucks

Laurence describes *The Vale of Aylesbury* as 'A perfunctory landscape' but says it has 'a certain historical interest'. He also says that a copy of the poster, hung up in the Piccadilly Hotel where the Commission met when considering proposals to build the third London Airport at Cublington in the 1970s, was influential in defeating the idea. Laurence states that another painting done at about the same time, *The Buckingham Road in the Rain*, shows the view towards Cublington and the skyline that the airport would have 'defaced' (Whistler). *The Vale of Aylesbury* also provided inspiration for a more recent work of art, *After Whistler, the Rape of the Vale* by Shirley Bradford, watercolour, 2007 held by Buckinghamshire County Museum.

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Gill Grocott January 2019

Edited C de Carle July 2020

The images are from the Buckinghamshire County Museum collections.



Nun Walking in Dovehouse Field



Canon Elliott in the Vicarage Garden, Bierton, Buckinghamshire



Two Ladies Taking Tea in the Vicarage Garden at Bierton, Buckinghamshire