

William Callow (1812–1908)

Harriet Callow (1819–1883)

The Firs, Potter Row, South Heath, Great Missenden HP16 9LT

The artists

William Callow was born in Greenwich in 1812. He showed an early talent for drawing and at the age of 11 started work for an engraver, Theodore Fielding, where he served his apprenticeship and was taught watercolours by Charles Bentley. In 1829 he was sent to Paris by Fielding and stayed for 11 years. He was influenced by many French artists and became known for his picturesque scenes, which included commissions from royalty.

In 1841 he returned to London but continued to make regular sketching tours in Europe, his paintings of Venice proving popular. At this time watercolour teachers were in demand to teach the children of the aristocracy and young society women, who included his future wife. Harriet Smart was born in 1819 and became William's pupil in the early 1840s; she learnt by copying his pictures (several which are held by the Bucks County Museum). They married in 1846 and spent ten weeks honeymooning in the Rhine Valley, Switzerland, and Venice; further tours followed. Harriet was essentially an amateur artist, but she showed talent as a watercolourist.

In 1848 the couple moved to Buckinghamshire. Harriet suffered from ill health but once living in the countryside she improved and devoted her time to charitable work. In 1853 she started a school for women and girls, and the couple later converted a cottage near The Firs into a schoolhouse (now Hedgesparrow Cottage). William started giving lessons to the local Rothschild family, which enabled the Callows to join the elite of Buckinghamshire society.

The couple enjoyed drawing from nature, and in the Chilterns they found plenty of inspiration. Some of their work was compiled into the 'Callow Album' (given to the County Museum 1945). It contains 82 works, 41 by each of them. It is a lasting legacy and a unique record of the Buckinghamshire countryside in the second half of the C19. Harriet died in 1883; William outlived her by 25 years (*Chiltern Landscapes*, BCM). In 1884 he married his second wife, Mary Louisa Jefferay. He died at The Firs in 1908, aged 95. At the time of a retrospective held in 1907, he was the oldest living British artist, and *The Studio* noted his faithful adherence to the traditions of British watercolour art (NPG).

He was elected associate of Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1838, member 1848, trustee 1861–76 and secretary 1866–70. In 1906 Callow was described by his nephew as a man of 'high principle, noble bearing, unflinching courage, honour of the most uncompromising kind' (NPG/Marsh).

The house

The Firs is situated midway along a lane known as Potter Row, which runs for 3.5 km between Lee Common and South Heath. Great Missenden is situated 2.4 km to the south beyond the A413 (London Road) and Marylebone line to Aylesbury. The HS2 route runs between Potter Row and the A413.

Apart from increased traffic the lane is little changed from the Callows' time: there are a number of houses and rows of cottages set among mature trees and hidden from the road by mature hedges on the north-east side but little development to the south-east. The house occupied an L-shaped plot, the narrower part of the L possibly being the former kitchen garden, which follows the boundary to the corner of Potter Row with a farm track leading to Park Farm which in 2020 is used as an access point to the HS2 construction site.

The move to Bucks is described in *William Callow*, an autobiography edited by H.M. Cundall. William describes travelling with his brother John to Berkhamsted in November 1854, from where they walked the 10 miles via Chesham to view the cottage, and in the spring of the following year the purchase of the house was completed.

'We were enchanted with our new home and neighbourhood. At that time, the commons were unenclosed and covered with gorse which when in flower was most picturesque. There were lovely drives in all directions and Hamden House the seat of the Earl of Buckinghamshire famed for its woods of beech trees, Chequers Court, property of the descendants of Oliver Cromwell and other historic houses were in easy reach' (Cundall).

By 1858 the house needed much repairing, however rather than do this the Callows decided to demolish it and build themselves a new home. Both William and Harriet recorded the old cottage in their sketches: it had grown organically and used several architectural styles. While the work was done they moved into a nearby cottage, moving back in 1861 when the new house was completed, giving it the name 'The Firs' on account of the large number of firs surrounding it (few of these survive in 2020). Watercolours in the Callow Album show the new house, which they continued to make small changes to during the 1860s and 70s (*Chiltern Landscapes*, BCM).

The house was designed by local architect Augustus Frere. Victorian gothic in style, it is of red brick with a diaper pattern, with a slate roof. A photograph of William sitting in the front garden shows the house at the turn of the last century. The house has been considerably enlarged and altered during the C20 and C21 and today the front garden is largely taken up by hard standing for cars, and the building to the south-east now appears to be in separate ownership (Bucks Heritage Portal base map).

The garden

The sketches and watercolours in the Callow Album provide an excellent record of how the garden looked during the Callows' time, both before and after the rebuilding. It is a formal cottage garden style, the old cottage covered with climbing plants and creepers, with deciduous trees (possibly apple), island beds in the lawn area and herbaceous borders; there were also trellises and arches with climbing roses. The garden is surrounded by firs.

The early paintings of the new house show a similar garden style, which includes shrubs and standard roses. The late C19 photo of William shows a mature garden with an arch in front of a conservatory, which would have been used to house orchids, pots of which stand on the narrow terrace.

Today the house has a formal garden (parterre) to the north-east, while the rest of long rear garden is laid to lawn with trees and shrubs (Bucks Heritage Portal AP). To the south-east of the house is the possible site of a former kitchen garden, an area within a brick and flint wall which contains a large shed and an old timber glasshouse, probably dating to the mid-C20 (now in separate ownership).

The artist as a gardener

The Callows employed a gardener to maintain their garden, although they probably liked to potter in it themselves and they certainly took an interest in its appearance. They obviously both enjoyed sitting in the garden and depicting it in watercolours as a form of relaxation: William still commuted up to London frequently and they also travelled together extensively up until Harriet's death in 1883.

Inspiration from the garden

William Callow was a professional watercolourist; however, he also enjoyed painting in watercolours as a pastime, something he and Harriet could undertake when they were travelling both at home and abroad. William's personal paintings are more relaxed than his commissions and works that he produced to sell they show a love of gardens, nature and landscape. The Art UK website has several of his seascapes which show his skills as a finished artist.

Significance to Bucks

William and Harriet Callow were passionate about the Buckinghamshire countryside and the watercolours and sketches in the Callow Album are a lasting testament to their enthusiasm for the Chilterns area (especially the locality of Great Missenden), its buildings, its landscapes and its history. Thanks to Harriet and William we have a record of their beautiful garden which gave them inspiration as well as peace and tranquillity. Their watercolours give us a real feel for the cottage garden that blossomed around their home: it is even possible to make out some of the plants. The garden of their new house was slightly more formal, reflecting the fashion for villa gardens of the 1860s. Like other artist-gardeners, such as Alexander Jamieson and Car Richardson, they provide us with a record of a fast-disappearing world – changes to agricultural practices, a decline in labour and the onset of two world wars meant that this way of life would soon be lost for ever.

Watercolour

During the C18, watercolour became popular as the preferred medium of artists creating mementos of sites visited on the 'Grand Tour'. The three artists associated with popularising its use are Paul Sandby (1730–1809), Thomas Girtin (1775–1802) and J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). Its use was particularly fashionable among amateur artists and it was seen as a suitable hobby for middle-class women.

References

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Watercolours from the Callow/Missenden Album at Buckinghamshire County Museum:
AYBCM, 1945.223.3, 1945.223.4, 1945.223.5, 1945.223.7, 1945.223.9, 1945.223.11, 1945.223.13,
1945.223.15, 1945.223.45, 1945.223.57, 1945.223.71.

The old cottage pre-1858 (All watercolour images from the Missenden Album in the collection of Buckinghamshire County Museum)



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Below: View of the garden through the porch (replacement image awaited) WC
Right: Tree in the garden, 1864 WC



The Firs, 1861 onwards



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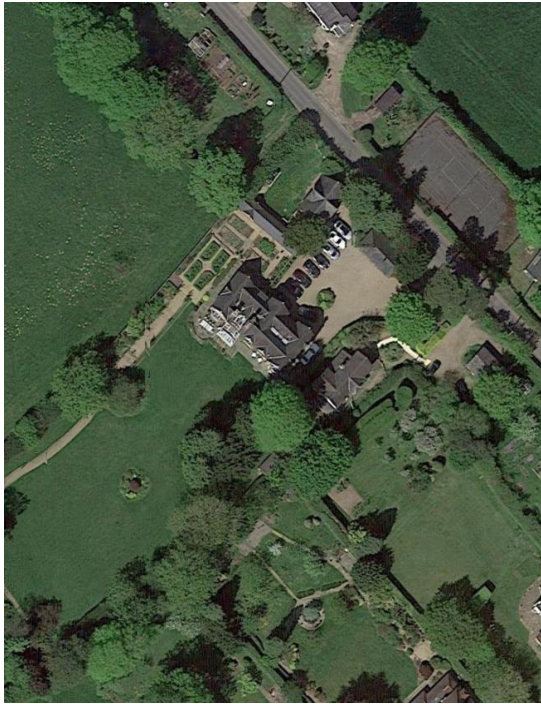
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Hedgesparrow Cottage, 2020 (C. de Carle)



Left: The Firs, Potter Row, 2020
(Google Earth)

Below: The Firs, 2020 (C. de Carle)



Left: William Callow in the garden at The Firs, early C20 (image from the Cundall biography of the artist)



Right: The artist's chair and easel; Sketching in the rain (from the Missenden Album 1875, Bucks County Museum), images taken from S. Gray's lecture