

Eric Mellon (1925–2014) and Martina Thomas (1925–1995)

Derek Davis (1926–2008) and Ruth Lambert

John Clarke and Mary Mansfield

The Old Vicarage, Church End, Hillesden MK18 4DB

The artists

The Hillesden Group 1951 – 1955–7

This group of artists, which comprised three couples, lived and worked at the Old Vicarage, Hillesden which they rented for several years (it is not clear precisely when they left). Together they bought a kiln and started to make pots: 'studio pottery' was becoming popular at this time. The atmosphere was youthful and dedicated. Mellon and Davis had met at the Central School of Art and were to remain lifelong friends (*Guardian*, 2008).

Eric Mellon, although also a painter, woodcarver and printmaker, specialised in ceramics. He decorated plates, bowls and tiles and with mythological scenes, mermaids, circus performers and entwined lovers. When he married Martina Thomas in 1957, they moved to Bognor Regis where his home became 'a cell of good living dedicated to the making of art' (*Guardian*, 2014) and the couple remained in West Sussex for the rest of their lives. His oil painting 'Snow' (1953–4) (Bucks County Museum) may be a view of the landscape from the Old Vicarage.

Mellon's wife Martina Thomas (1925–1995) was a landscape painter, particularly favouring views of Cornwall. While at Hillesden, in 1955 she produced an oil painting of 'Haystacks' (Bucks County Museum).

Derek Davis (1926–2008) was also a potter and left Hillesden to live and work in Sussex; in later life he turned to painting. Examples of his work are held at Bucks County Museum. He was married to Ruth Lambert. One of the pioneers of post-war ceramics, and leaving behind traditional methods, he was internationally respected for his stoneware and porcelain. Intellectually stimulated by the work of painters such as Matisse and Picasso, sculptors, musicians and writers, Davis chose to express himself in clay for many years, but never lost sight of his fine art origins. He was one of the first artists whose work bridged the fine art/craft divide.

John Clarke was a painter who had also studied ceramics.

Ruth Lambert and Mary Mansfield were also talented artists.

The house and garden

The Old Vicarage (Grade II) is situated in the hamlet of Hillesden, in the north of the Vale of Aylesbury approx. 1km north-west of Steeple Claydon. It stands opposite Hillesden Church in Church End, with extensive north-west views across agricultural land to the rear. It was built in 1870–71 by Sir George Gilbert Scott in Arts and Crafts Vernacular Revival style using red brick and timbers infilled with brick. Gilbert Scott built a large number of rectories, including several others in Bucks.

The garden is approx. 0.6ha with a low brick wall fronting on to Church End. There is an outbuilding immediately east of the house which could have been used as a studio. Google Earth (2020) shows a

mature garden, surrounded by trees, mainly laid to lawn with a large parterre of recent construction to the rear of the garden and a small one near to the house.

In the 1960s, after moving from Hillesden, Mellon experimented with different plants and trees to produce ash glazes for the pottery. (The proportion of different chemicals in the ash from different species affects the melting point of the glaze.)

References

Derek Davis: A Retrospective – March 2013

https://issuu.com/grapevine/docs/derek_davis_catalogue_a5_web (accessed 11/01/21)

Guardian (2008) 'Derek Davis' <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/oct/09/art> (accessed 11/01/21)

Guardian (2014) 'Eric James Mellon obituary'

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/06/eric-james-mellon> (accessed 11/01/21)

<https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101214344-the-old-vicarage-hillesden#.XxcQFp5KiUm>



The Old Vicarage 2020 (Google Earth)



Front of the house from the entrance



Eric Mellon, 'Snow' (Bucks County Museum)



Martina Thomas, 'Haystacks' (Bucks County Museum)

Clare Butler 2018, 2021; Clare de Carle 2020

