

Sir William Nicholson (1872–1949)

Mabel Nicholson née Pryde (1871–1918)

Ben Nicholson (1894–1992)

The White Cottage, Village Road, Denham Village UB9 5BH

The artists

The Nicholsons were a family of artists who married artists.

William Nicholson was a painter of portraits and landscapes; his speciality was still-life and in particular floral compositions, of which he painted several hundred. His work had an affinity with that of Whistler and Manet. He studied briefly at the Herkomer School of Art in Bushey and in Paris at the Académie Julian. In the 1890s he became a well-known figure in the art world, friends with Whistler, Max Beerbohm, Kipling and Ellen Terry. With his brother-in-law James Pryde he revolutionised poster design, although the partnership, under the pseudonym 'The Beggerstaff Brothers', was short-lived. He was also noted for his woodcuts of Victorian characters, including the Velveteen Rabbit (*Dictionary of Art and Artists*). He had a number of pupils and in the 1930s taught Winston Churchill to paint. He is now known for his iconic painting of Gertrude Jekyll in the 1920s and possibly even better known for the one of her gardening boots. William knew Edwin Lutyens as their studios were adjacent in Apple Tree Yard, St James's, and Lutyens commissioned the painting of Jekyll, which was later bequeathed to the National Portrait Gallery (*The Nicholsons/ArtUK*). Paul Nash wrote that William's work 'has an air of easy mastery and good quality, like something hallmarked and immaculate' (Boyd Hancock).

William's wife Mabel Pryde, the mother of a British art dynasty, was a little-known portrait artist of exceptional talent. As was so often the case, her development was restricted first by her father's ambitions and later by her husband's career and the needs of her children. But she was also an emancipated woman of the Suffragette age (National Gallery of Scotland). She died in the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 and the couple's son Anthony died shortly afterwards.

Their son Ben was born at Denham on 10 April 1894. He spent just one term at the Slade and then travelled between 1911 and 1918 in Europe and America. His early painting reflected Cubism; he met Mondrian in Paris in 1934 who inspired him to create his white reliefs (*Dictionary of Art and Artists*). He married Barbara Hepworth in 1930 and was a founder member of Unit One, a new group of allied artists begun in 1933 with his wife, Paul Nash and Henry Moore (Boyd Hancock).

The house

The White Cottage (Grade II) was built around 1690 and was formerly two cottages during the C17th, one of which was used as a beer house known as 'The Eight Bells'. It is situated in a Conservation Area that covers the quiet backwater of Denham Village, approximately 4km north-west of Uxbridge, 27km from London and just north of junction 1 of the M40 motorway in the former South Bucks District. Denham Village is within the Colne Valley Park, situated at the eastern edge of the Chiltern Hills in the valley of the River Misbourne. It was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, where it was referred to as Deneham (Wikipedia). The house is on the north side of the road and parallel to it with no front garden. Its most striking feature is its shaped gables at both

the east and west end. The family only lived at the White Cottage for a short time only. Ben was born there, their daughter Nancy being born in Woodstock. The family lived in London (Bloomsbury and Hampstead) and later Rottingdean (*The Nicholsons*). A plaque records the property's historical association with the Nicholson family.

The garden

The modest garden is currently made up terrace and lawns and measures approx. 0.1ha (Rightmove.co.uk). It includes a self-contained artist's studio.

Given that Nicholson senior was a prolific still-life artist it is likely that he used flowers from the garden as they provided ready material for his work, following the example of such artists as Monet with his garden at Giverny. There is a painting of William working in the garden by Nancy Nicholson (1918) at <https://www.lissllewellyn.com/pdf2016/web/viewer.php?file=SANCTUARY-Artist-Gardeners-1919-39.pdf> (page 57).

Significance to Bucks

The Nicholson family only spent a few years (1892 to 1899?) at The White Cottage, when Ben was a young child, or they may have used it as a weekend cottage. The cottage garden was relatively small and there is no record of William being a gardener. Their significance is that they were a well-known artistic family during the first half of the twentieth century and later socialised with other contemporary artists, in particular Paul Nash who was living nearby in Iver when Ben first met him at the Slade. They also knew Marion Dorn, textile artist.

Kit Nicholson

William and Mabel's son Christopher studied at Cambridge and became an architect; his passion was gliding. Probably his best-known commission in his short career was the London Gliding Club at Dunstable. He also designed a studio for the artist Augustus John (1935) and Kit's Close (Grade II) (1936) in Fawley, Bucks, both in the Modernist style. He died in 1948 in a glider accident.

Textiles

The Nicholsons' daughter Nancy was an illustrator and printed fabric designer. Kit's wife E. Q. Nicholson (née Myers) was a painter and textile designer and Ben also designed woven textiles and lino blocks which Nancy printed.

References

Boyd Haycock, David. *A Crisis of Brilliance* (2009)

Denham Conservation Area: Character Appraisal, South Bucks District Council (September 2008)

Dictionary of Art and Artists. Thames & Hudson (1985)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1125737> (Kit's Close)

<https://inexpensiveprogress.com/tag/christopher-nicholson/>

<https://www.rightmove.co.uk/properties/36947809#/media?id=media1>

<https://www.williamnicholson.net/biography>

Nichols, Robert. *William Nicholson*, Penguin (1948)

The Nicholsons: A Story of Four People and their Designs, York City Art Gallery (1988)

See also reports on E. McKnight Kauffer (for Marion Dorn) ('B' list); Paul and John Nash ('A' list)



A Bloomsbury Family by Sir William Orpen depicts the artist William Nicholson and his family. Nicholson's wife, the painter Mabel Pryde, is standing by the door. Sitting at the table from left to right are the Nicholson children: Nancy, who became a painter and fabric designer; Tony, who died during the war in 1918; and Ben, who would become Britain's foremost abstract artist. Standing in the foreground is Christopher or 'Kit'. He became an architect. Orpen himself is reflected in the convex mirror (1907).

(National Gallery of Scotland <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/744/bloomsbury-family>)



Rear garden and studio (Zoopla)



Rightmove

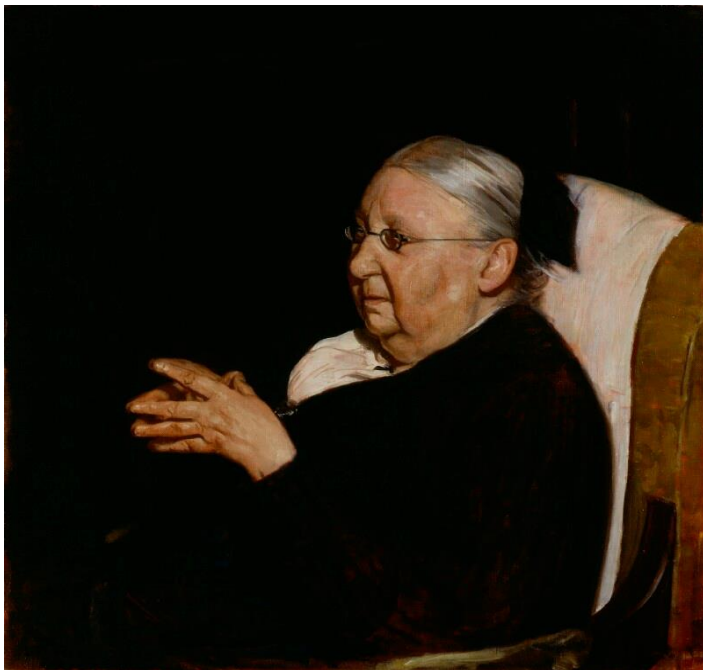


'Sunflowers', William Nicholson 1933 (Private Collection)

Photograph taken MK Art Gallery 21/03/19 C. de Carle



Kit's Close, Fawley, Bucks 2019 (C. de Carle)
Thank you to Graham Twemlow for showing us Kit's Close.



'Miss Jekyll', William Nicholson 1920 (National Portrait Gallery) (creative commons licence)

Where to view other work by the Nicholsons:

<https://artuk.org/discover/artists/nicholson-william-18721949>

https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/makers:ben-nicholson-18941982

C. de Carle 28/11/20