

MARGARET URSULA MEE née Brown (1909–1988)

1 ‘The Crest’, White Hill, Chesham HP5 (1909–10)

2 ‘Rosemead’ (now Culwood House), Lye Green Road, Chesham HP5 3NH (1910–14)

3 ‘The Haven’, Eskdale Avenue, Chesham HP5 3AY (1922–1929/30)

The artist

Margaret Mee was both a botanical artist and a conservationist, who specialised in painting the flora of the Amazon Forest. She also made a significant contribution to the worlds of science and conservation.

Following their marriage her parents, George and Elizabeth Brown, moved to The Crest, White Hill in Chesham. Margaret (Peggy) was born there in 1909. Soon afterwards the family moved to nearby Rosemead in Lye Green Road, where they stayed until the outbreak of the First World War. They spent the war years in Hove and Margaret was sent to a boarding school in Brighton.

In 1922 the family returned to Chesham and Margaret attended Dr Challoners Girls’ Grammar School. Her art master, ‘Bengy’ Buckingham, set weekend tasks and for this Margaret collected flowers and sketched. ‘It was my first, rather childish attempt’ (Nonesuch Expeditions).

Her first commercial venture was drawings of fairies. Her biographer (Nonesuch Expeditions) mentions that she had a good eye and remembered all the details of where and when she found the flowers that she sketched. She probably inherited this skill from her father who was an amateur naturalist, and her illustrations may have been encouraged by her aunt, Ellen Churchman, who lived with the family and was an illustrator of children’s books.

By 1926 she had enrolled at the School of Art Science and Commerce in Watford. After a short spell as a teacher she moved to Germany in 1932 and then to France. She became a left-wing activist and later an active member of the TUC. In 1945 she attended evening classes at St Martin’s School of Art and then Camberwell School of Art, full time.

Her sister Catherine had moved with her family to Brazil and when in 1952 she became seriously ill, Margaret and her partner (they married in 1980) Greville Mee, a commercial artist, joined them, later settling in São Paolo.

To escape the crowds and heat they visited the hills and forests outside the city, and it was here that Margaret began seriously to paint and sketch flowers, eventually making fifteen expeditions into the Amazon rainforest. Sixty of her works and her diaries are held by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. As well as finding and recording new plants, she became an early environmental activist, highlighting the deforestation of the rainforest.

Margaret died in a car accident in Leicestershire in November 1988, shortly before the opening of a major exhibition of her work at Kew and the launch of her third book, *In Search of Flowers of the Amazon Forest*, based on her diaries.

The houses and gardens

Chesham is situated 48km west of London in the Chiltern Hills in an AONB (area of outstanding natural beauty). Amersham is 2km to the south and Berkhamsted 7km to the north. In 1909 the area around Chesham was rural and agricultural practices were as they had been for centuries. The River Chess, a chalk stream, flows through the town which has now grown up on the steep slopes of the valley. At the time of the Norman conquest the area was heavily wooded, but most of this had been used by the 20th century. The town was famous for 'boots, beer, brushes and Baptists'. Along the river to the south-east of the town were several mills and watercress beds. There is easy access to London, as the Metropolitan Railway branch line came to the town in 1889.

All three of the houses that Margaret lived in are in the more affluent area of the town to the east of the A416 where the land rises steeply towards Ley Hill. There is no evidence available about The Crest, in White Hill; since no house survives with that name it has possibly been redeveloped. The Haven, the house the family lived in after the First World War was small and probably only had a small garden. Rosemead (now a care home, renamed Culwood House). where the family lived for four years. is probably the most significant of the properties.

Culwood House is situated on the B4505 Hemel Hempstead road halfway between the town and the hamlet of Orchard Leigh where the topography levels off. Culwood House is a Victorian villa set back from the road and screened by hedges. It has been extended and renovated in recent years. The garden has been landscaped with patios, conservatory and seating areas enhanced by planting. The outlook to the rear is across open countryside and therefore little altered since the time Margaret's family lived there.

Inspiration from the garden

Margaret Mee showed an interest in natural history and art as a child, being encouraged by both her father and her art teacher, but there is no evidence to indicate she was interested in gardens or became a gardener herself. It was not until the age of 43 when she settled in Brazil that she was inspired to take up botanical painting. In total she probably spent less than twelve years in Buckinghamshire and after the age of 20 did not live here again. Her work was invaluable to conservationists anxious to show the world what flora of the world the rainforests contained; her exquisite paintings were botanically accurate as well as capturing the feel of the Amazon basin.

Legacy

400 folios of gouache illustrations, 40 sketchbooks and 15 diaries, many now archived at Kew Gardens.

An awareness of the importance of conservation of habitat in the Amazon rainforest.

She inspired several Brazilian artists, notably the Demonte family, Marlina Baretto, Patricia Villela and Alvaro Nunes.

Margaret Mee Amazon Trust established (closed 1996), followed by a Fellowship Programme which allows Brazilian artists to train at Kew Gardens.

1994 (postmortem): 3,000 dancers paraded to a Margaret Mee theme at the Rio Carnival!

A number of plants are named after her, including:

- *Heliconia chartacea* var. *meeana*, which has vivid blue berries
- *Aechmea polyantha*, a vase-like Bromeliad discovered by Margaret Mee.

References

Horwood, Catherine. *Gardening Women* (2010), p. 200.

Mee, Margaret, *In Search of Flowers of the Amazon Forest*, Nonesuch Expeditions England (1988).

Nonesuch Expeditions, 'Margaret Mee's Amazon', <http://www.nonesuchexpeditions.com/margaret-mee/mee-story/margaret-mee.htm> (accessed 25/11/20).

<https://www.botanicalartandartists.com/about-margaret-mee.html> (accessed 25/11/20).



Culwood House 2016 (Google Maps)

S. Tricks Sept 2019, C. de Carle Nov 2020