

Mary Potter



Beckenham School of Art

This year – 2013 - the most famous orchestras, opera companies and conductors in 140 cities across 30 countries are celebrating the centenary of the birth of Benjamin Britten. Beckenham's links with Britten began in the 1950s and in particular 1957 when he swapped his sea front Crag House for the legendary Red House in Aldeburgh. The other party to the swop was his close friend, the artist Mary Potter, one of the foremost British women artists of her time.

Born Mary Attenborough in Beckenham in 1900, she was a colleague and friend of Enid Blyton at St Christopher's School in Rectory Road before she entered the Beckenham School of Art. From there she used an Orpen bursary award to go the Slade School in October 1918.

In 1927 she married Stephen Potter who became famous for his books on gamesmanship which were adapted for the cinema and TV in the 1960's and 1970's. They lived in Chiswick and later in Harley Street in London before moving into The Red House in Aldeburgh in 1951. By 1957 after her two sons had grown up and Stephen had left her, Mary found The Red House was too big for her and agreed with a suggestion by her son Julian that she exchange homes with Britten. He was delighted with the exchange but Mary found that Crag House was not as suitable as she had hoped. Aware of this, Britten had built for her a bespoke bungalow and studio in the grounds of The Red House. This was called the Red Studio.

Mary became part of Britten's inner circle exchanging visits with him two or three times a week when he was not away. Britten valued his relationship with Mary who became his 'mother confessor'. When he had a setback, he would consult Mary, who would rationalise the situation and calm him down.

In 1964, 129 of her paintings were exhibited in the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The catalogue had a preface by Kenneth Clark who enthused about her work and had become one of her closest friends. Kenneth became a public figure for his TV series *Civilisation* on TV in 1969. This was one of the first United Kingdom television documentary series made in colour, commissioned when David Attenborough (no relation) was the Controller of BBC2.

In 1981, a few months before she died, a Retrospective Exhibition in the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park featured 98 of her paintings chosen to span her career since 1922. Many of her works are held in public galleries and private collections all over the world. In this country, her work can be seen in 15 public galleries, including in Tate Britain.



The Serpentine Gallery

Public Collections holding her paintings are the Arts Council, the Government Art Collection and The Red House which has been extended to include the offices of the Britten-Pears Foundation. The Red House is undergoing refurbishment as part of the Britten Centenary but it will reopen to the public in June. Visitors will be able to compare "the elusive colours, fugitive shapes and textures in her pictures" with "the ephemeral quality of the spare coastal landscape around Aldeburgh" where she lived for thirty years.

This evening we celebrate Mary Potter as we listen to Jean Low, accompanied by Christian Strover, as she sings *Johnny*, one of Britten's famous cabaret songs.

I am grateful for the advice and help of Julian Potter in writing this article. Julian's biography *MARY POTTER - A Life in Painting* (Scolar press 1998) can be purchased from fine art bookshops.