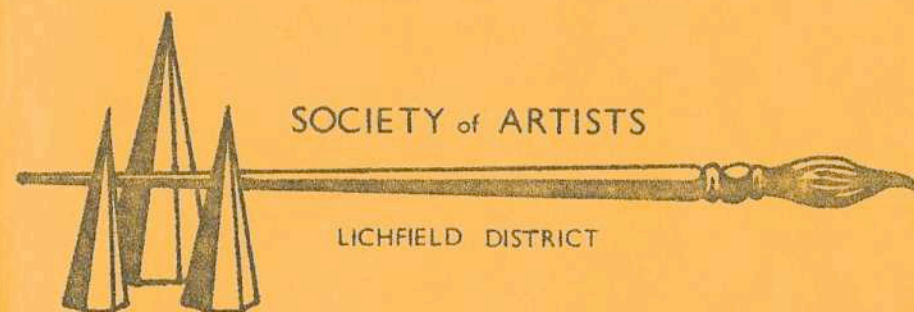


1945 - 1969

A SHORT HISTORY

OF



SOCIETY of ARTISTS

LICHFIELD DISTRICT

by

Blanche Pochin

The war was nearing its end when my husband said one day - "You know we ought to have a society of artists in Lichfield and I am going to try and start one."

It seemed he had been turning this over in his mind for some time.

So Alfred Davis Pochin - designer draughtsman, engineer, inventor, photographer and with a keen interest in astronomy even building his own telescope, and lastly artist, set to work. I put artist last for he would be the first to admit that his painting was the least of his talents. But he was a man with a strong urge to accomplish things and to encourage others to make full use of their gifts. Hence his urge to start a society of Artists, and as he enlarged on his idea I too became enthusiastic.

He then drew up a plan of action. "I shall first go and see Miss Flint at the Art School" he said, "and I'll also see if the Church will help in some way."

Miss Flint proved a wonderful help and was most enthusiastic. "I've often thought we ought to have something of the kind in Lichfield," she said.

He had a very encouraging response from the Cathedral too, the late Bishop Woods being the first President. But that is anticipating, for much hard work had to be done before we got to that stage.

It was necessary to get together some artists as a start. "We knew none but Miss Flint soon approached several at the Art School who were keen, but as she said, "If we can announce an exhibition in the near future, you will soon get some coming forward."

So an announcement was put in the Mercury calling a meeting of any one interested. Quite a few attended and it was at one of these meetings that it was suggested to include Music and Drama. This they did, each having its own committee, but it is the art side that I am dealing with now, for that was the most important section of the society to my husband.

We now had a few artists - but where to hold an exhibition was the problem. The only place suitable in Lichfield was the Museum, but this had been used as a Wardens Post in

the war and was in something of a mess. However the Council allowed us to use it and we proudly held our first exhibition from June 9th to 16th, 1945. (You will notice we could only have the Museum for a week).

Miss Flint had asked several professional artists to show some of their works to help us out.

There were several young soldiers from the Art School who joined the society and among those was one Sgt. John Ward. His name was in the first catalogue and as plain John P. Ward has been in all twenty six catalogues to date as well as exhibiting in the three years that followed the last printing.

There were in all 24 artists and 66 paintings with some pottery and sculpture and illuminated writing.

We felt it not bad for a start for remember Lichfield was a much smaller city thirty years ago.

We needed to have something in the nature of talks etc. on art to fill in between exhibitions.



Miss Flint was firmly of the opinion that the more artists we could attract with their varied styles the more the standard would improve.

"There is nothing like seeing your work hung with other artists to show you where and how you can improve," was her maxim.

We had in the meantime been going ahead with Music and Drama, the Art Council putting on concerts and also providing speakers on art. I shall have a little more to explain about the Art Council later but I want at this point to give some idea of the problems we faced in the art section.

One problem was we had no room to hold meetings in and had to rely on a room at the Friary School or the Art School. But, nevertheless, we had some very successful meetings as for example a demonstration of portrait painting by Mr. W. Cartledge, F.R.S.A. This was at the Friary.

Miss Flint was the model and the picture was hung in our 1947 exhibition and described as a "90 minute sketch". We

subscribed among the members and bought it, and presented it to Miss Flint at the official opening.

It was to a talk on Contemporary Art by Miss Marjory Lilly of the Art Council that Bishop Woods and his sister Mrs. Ricardo Williams came. The talk was illuminating - the discussions often fast and furious. I am aided in my recollection by a long press account in which the Bishop is quoted as asking, "How objects universally accepted as beautiful..... were portrayed not true to life and often ugly." It was at this point that the discussion became a free for all and very humorous. Who would not take the chance of arguing with one's bishop and members took full advantage. It was a grand evening! In spite of all, Mrs. Ricardo Williams exhibited some of her water colours at the 1946 and 47 exhibitions.

We had many meetings at the Art School for members mutual criticism of each others work. This was always an enjoyable event and ended with tea and talk.

After the first exhibition we were unable to have the Museum again so it meant scouting around to find fresh premises. Here the Cathedral helped us by allowing us to use Selwyn House in the Close. We held the next two years exhibitions 1946 - 7 there.

It was perhaps somewhat out of the way but we had a steady flow of visitors daily. It meant we had to have a rota of members on duty daily but I must say I found it a very enjoyable chore.

The public often have very strong feelings about painting and seeing someone around apparently in charge gives them an opportunity to express their feelings.

I have a vivid recollection of a little elderly man rhapsodising over some of the pictures and then working himself up into quite a rage over some of the abstracts and finally advising me "Not to waste my time painting square faces - there is no such thing." Looking at him though I was not so sure, but anyway I was flattered he thought I could paint at all.

By the time we were almost ready for our next years exhibition we found we could not have Selwyn House again so we were homeless once more.

We were beginning to get desperate when chancing to meet Mrs. Bridgeman, who was Mayoress that year, I asked if she knew anywhere we could go. "Why not try for the Museum again, I do not think they are using it now," was her advice.

The Council said we could use it again, but as an exhibition room it left much to be desired.

However that was just the kind of challenge that such a man as A.D. Pochin was capable of meeting. The walls were cluttered up with old pictures and it was dirty into the bargain. The only thing to do was to conceal them as best one could. So he had some iron stands made and then we covered them in canvas and arranged them to cover all the eyesores. Well - perhaps not quite all, for peering austere over the top of the stands were several statues! These we could do nothing about and we had to try and ignore their disapproving gaze.



These stands we dismantled after each exhibition and stored them at the Guildhall bringing them out each year as we required them.

So for the next ten years we erected the stands, hung the pictures, very often only my husband and I working all out for a week to get everything ready, and when the exhibition was over dismantling the stands and packing them away for a year.

By 1957 the Museum had been enlarged and redecorated and was renamed the City Art Gallery and the society was given a firm date each year for its exhibition.

On Miss Flint's retirement Mr. J.M. Sanders became Principal of the Art School and the society gained a very loyal and valued member. It is an enormous help to any art society to have the advice and co-operation of a professional artist and Mr. Sanders gave unstintingly not only much of his time but his experience too was always at hand for anyone. I know he helped me over many a hurdle.

It is worth at this point to touch on the hectic week before each show.

LICHFIELD & DISTRICT  
SOCIETY OF ARTS  
(Music - Art - Drama)

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President:  
The Right Rev. The Lord Bishop of Lichfield

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THIRD  
ANNUAL EXHIBITION  
OF  
Paintings and Crafts  
1947

SATURDAY, JULY 19th to 27th

at

"SELWYN," THE CLOSE, LICHFIELD  
(by kind permission of the Dean & Chapter).

This is, of course, common to all societies, but our lack of any place to store the pictures posed a problem.

The pictures were left at the Gallery for judging on the Saturday. My husband acted as porter while I took particulars for the catalogue. We then spent Saturday night and Sunday preparing it for the printers.

Because of the limited time between the selection and the exhibition we had an understanding with the printers that we could only allow them a week for printing and delivery. Also counting up of the value of pictures for insurance must go off as soon as possible.

After several years of this we wondered if a more efficient way could be found. What we wanted was another week to work in, for as membership increased so did the work. The point was that the Gallery could not have our pictures around for a week before being hung, and we wanted to keep on good terms with the staff there.

So we tried to gain time by having the selection at the Art School, keep the



pictures there and have that week preparing the catalogue. Then we had several members with cars to take them to the gallery.

Here was a situation in which Mr. Sanders was so helpful as he directed a shuttle service between the Art School and the Gallery.

We only did it once! It was too cumbersome and we reverted to our old method. It was mainly the preparing of the catalogue for the printers that made the rush.

The business of the printed catalogue while attractive began to create problems. In the first few years we made a good profit on them. Then the cost of printing started to rise and as it escalated first we broke even and then started to lose money. We first charged more on the opening day but still rising costs defeated us and finally as I retired it was decided to do away with the printed catalogue. Many artists regretted it for there was nothing to take away for reference.

The last printed catalogue was for

the 26th Annual Exhibition 1970, but, no doubt, with such an increase in membership the society could make it pay or even could afford to stand a loss, and the catalogue could return.

In our early days we were eager to get some publicity and I would write to the press and we would put an advert in the local paper in the hope they would send a reporter to give us a write up. They often did, but it was a question of the society making the first approach. But as the years went on reporters started coming to the opening of the exhibition without any requests from us and then we found we were getting young men from several of the papers and not only reporters but photographers too. We were NEWS! We have even had an honourable mention in the Birmingham Post. I have one press cutting of a small article about our exhibition in the Birmingham Post. Unfortunately I did not take the date. I little thought I might in the future be writing for posterity.

One advantage we had around 1950 to 60 was the grant to Art Societies from the Carnegie Trust. Our obligations were to join up with two or three other



societies, provide a professional artist to take a week-end course of instruction and provide the room.

The Trust would pay the artist's fee and we could make a small charge for any extra expenses. We took full advantage of this for a number of years and had some very good artists as tutors.

Surprisingly to me members never seemed to avail themselves of this service in the numbers I would have expected. We always managed to have enough to hold a class, but nowhere near the response one had as for an exhibition. My part in this, was having organised this week-end, meeting members, both our own and our visitors and making and serving tea and coffee. It was fun too picnicing in the Art School and talking shop. But by 1970 the Carnegie Trust finished, presumably the Trust had used up their allotted funds.

We visited surrounding exhibitions - Leek on one occasion and also Birmingham, but we found it often difficult with a small society as we were then to get enough people all available on the same day.

Occasionally we ran some films on famous artists and their work, but this never attracted many members. But there again we were handicapped by not having a comfortable room to hold any of our events, in this case it was the Art Gallery in Bird Street. What we needed was a room where we could have coffee and a talk.

When somewhere around 1968 a meeting was called to form an Art Association, I attended in common with most other organisations in Lichfield. I soon found I was on familiar ground for this was a new approach by the Art Council and this society had been working in association with it way back in 1946.

In proof of which I have an account of the work of the Art Council of that year in which it says, "Of the 35 societies that worked with them four were in the Midlands and the Lichfield and District Society of Arts was mentioned as one of the four." It was this Art Council that helped us with the music and drama when they arranged concerts etc.

But these on the whole did not attract very big audiences and it was because of the poor response that music and drama was dropped.

I have a Christmas card with a special design of the Art Council sent to us and signed by the representatives of the three arts. One of these, Keith McGregor, who arranged exhibitions of pictures, saw the announcement of my husband's death and wrote to me, remembering his visits to us at Lichfield.

I have reason to remember an exhibition of paintings which Mr. McGregor brought from Birmingham Art Gallery and shown in the Friary School hall during the August holidays.

When they were hung and we were left with these valuable treasures plus masses of postcard reproductions the full impact of our responsibilities hit my husband suddenly and looking quite shocked he said, "Do you realise we have thousands of pounds of pictures in our care." This was a sobering thought and he promptly went round to

THE ARTS COUNCIL



OF GREAT BRITAIN



1971-10-27-1971



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the police and asked them to keep an eye on the Friary. But perhaps the pictures were safer then than they would be these days.

But we did a roaring trade with the postcards - sold the lot! Perhaps there is a lesson here!

Between 1961 - 3, my husband was unable to take any active part in the society but I managed to keep the exhibition going. I felt if I could do that the society would survive.

He died just two months after the 1963 exhibition and in memory of his work in starting and maintaining the society, the members and myself subscribed to a memorial.

It was decided in committee to have a silver salver, and this was designed and made by Mr. N.R. Nicol of the Art School. It is presented and held for a year to the member who either produced the best painting or had given good service to the society.

I suspect that they added the latter

incentive that they might make me the first holder. Although I would have liked it to go to an artist I was proud to hold it the first year.

Nevertheless I am grateful that the clause is in the ruling for I know it would have pleased my husband to know the field was open to any sincere worker for the society.

I remained secretary for another six years and as well as the exhibitions we had some films and I arranged four more Carnegie week-ends of painting until they finished.

It was in 1966 that the council held an exhibition of Leisure Time Activities in the Friary School when 23 organisations were represented. The L.D.S.A. was well to the fore in the centre of the hall. We arranged an artists studio with paints, brushes and an unfinished picture on an easle and general abandon everywhere.

Miss Susan Williams who held the trophy that year brought it for display, and then with pamphlets describing our activities we framed the whole with all our catalogues to date.



Applause as the Pochin award is presented to Mr. George Newman.

## GENERAL PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE LOCAL ARTISTS

"Lichfield's M.P., Major General Jack Goldsmid, kept a date at the City Art Gallery on Friday when he opened Lichfield & District Society of Artists' 29th Annual Exhibition".





It was all very imposing and crowds were milling around all day.

I feel I must mention Susan Williams who gained the award that year for general merit and her good painting. She was so encouraged that she went on to gain a scholarship to an academy up north, and I have heard she has gained a teaching diploma.

I like to think that the Pochin award started her on her chosen career for she said that, "Getting that award was the most exciting thing that had happened to me."

We have always had co-operation from the City Council in allowing us to have our exhibitions in the Art Gallery and there has always been a good relationship between the School of Art and the society as will be seen by the way we have been able to hold meetings and week-end painting sessions in the school. This is mainly due to the support we have had first from Miss Flint and for many years now from Mr. Sanders, who as Chairman of the Society, has been so helpful.

So to 1969 and with 25 years association with the society behind me it was time that I retired. In that time it had more than doubled its membership. I am not an artist, but I kept the society going during my husband's illness, when it could so easily have slipped away and I revived things a little after his death so that when it was handed over to the new secretary, Mrs. Castelow, and later Mr. George Newman the society could look forward to a good future.

I went with gifts of a picture, pottery and flowers from the members, not because I did my job very well but because I was there at the beginning. I accepted these gifts too as a tribute to Alfred Davis Pochin for his vision and faith in encouraging all forms of creativeness.

This is only the end of one era in the history of the society. The story should be taken up again later for it would seem to be heading for an even more prosperous future with facilities far greater than were available in its early days.

BLANCHE POCHIN.

Hon. Secretary:

Mrs. V. Cracknell,  
208 Beacon Street,  
Lichfield.

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Wm. Brewster

Wm. Brewster  
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