

NEWSLETTER 145

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Notes and News

What was born in Loughton and sold recently for £230,000?

In 1929 a large block of Saravezza marble was transported from Paris to Loughton and deposited in the studio-shed of Sir Jacob Epstein, then living in "Deerhurst" on Baldwins Hill. There he began shaping the stone into possibly the most controversial figure he ever produced, "Genesis". Completed in 1930 in his London studio, the work outraged many, even being called "an affront to womanhood", when first exhibited.

Such was its reputation that by 1958 it was being shown by Tussaud's on Blackpool's "Golden Mile" as part of an exhibition called "Freaks of Modern Art". Eventually it was placed on long-term loan in the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. It is now regarded as an outstanding modern work and was recently sold to the Whitworth Gallery for £230,000, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Art Collections Fund.

We know from his own writings that Epstein admired and painted scenes of Epping Forest. Few of these can now be traced but one is now in the New Art Gallery in Walsall (see below). However, at least we can boast that "Genesis" the "Universal Mother of Mankind" was conceived in Loughton and now happily resides in Manchester!

(Based on information in The National Art Collections Fund 1999 Review. Grant No 4768.)

JOHN HOWES

A lost Loughton painting by Epstein found

Whilst living at Baldwins Hill in the 1930s Sir Jacob Epstein was captivated by the changes in Epping Forest through the seasons. He would often take a break from his normal artistic activity to relax by painting watercolours of the forest near his home. Most of the paintings appear now to be in private collections, but Lady Epstein gave some to, of all places, Walsall! A letter to the new art gallery there established that the collection did include one Epstein Epping Forest painting, considered by them to be one of the gems of their collection, and that postcards of the work were available.

The painting is a fine example of the artist's work and shows the forest in all its Autumn glory, albeit in an abstract style. The Society hopes to have copies of the postcard available at our meetings for a modest 35 pence.

JOHN HOWES

150 years old and still going strong!

In your change you will soon be given a 50 pence coin issued to mark the 1850 Public Libraries Act which led to the services we still enjoy today. The Act met with strong opposition from those who worried that access to free books could lead to the masses getting ideas above their station! Fortunately most local councils adopted the Act and took advantage of the offers of financial assistance to build public libraries from Andrew Carnegie or Passmore Edwards. The Central Library in Walthamstow is a fine listed example of a Carnegie library and others can be found still in use throughout the country.

Once at a council meeting in Walthamstow Dr Rhodes Boyson remarked that "the average ratepayers want only two things from their council: their library books changed and their dustbins emptied". Possibly still true today.

JOHN HOWES

Blue Plaques – José Collins

Dr Donald Pohl has kindly passed on the notes for his talk on José Collins given at the May 2000 meeting so that we may have another chance of enjoying it.

The blue plaque on the wall of the property known as "Outwood" until 1928 and then as "St Olave's" is appropriate for at least two reasons. José Collins did indeed live there during the last phase of her life, which was, unfortunately, far from stable and settled.

The property, together with a small annuity of £1,000, was the sole source of security in an otherwise precarious existence. Even so, this safe and secure haven was constantly being threatened. It is only fitting that the rocky relationship between the house and its occupiers should now be securely cemented. In her life José's ownership of the property was constantly under threat. After her death the link has been made more permanent by the unveiling of the blue plaque.

Loughtonians remember José Collins and her husband, Dr Gerald Kirkland, in their heyday with some wry humour. There are many stories of the two in various pubs and, in particular, the Royal Standard, regaling fellow drinkers with stories of José's colourful and famous past life. As the stories flowed, so did the alcohol – and José and Kirkland were frequently seen staggering home, much the worse for drink after these numerous audiences. The front steps of "St Olave's" were a constant stumbling block (quite literally) for the inebriate couple.

But not all was comic. José and Kirkland were, in their own way, as great a couple of lovers as were Antony and Cleopatra – and also, in their way, as tragic.

There are stories told of the couple being inseparable: José sitting in the car knitting as Dr Kirkland did his rounds of patients. Childless as they were, they had a dog to which they were both devoted – so much so that when José was hospitalised, hospital and hygiene rules were broken and the dog stayed in the private ward with José for the duration of her treatment.

Dr Kirkland was, by all accounts, a very good doctor but he was no businessman and many of his patients never received bills and therefore never

made payment for his services. The Kirkland coffers increasingly became more and more depleted until the £1,000 annuity bestowed on José by Lord Curzon when her earlier fortunes were failing became the only lifeline.

The property was mortgaged and remortgaged – and yet again remortgaged. The doctor wrote his memoirs and a book about African witchcraft, hoping that sales would stave off impending bankruptcy. They did – but only temporarily. In October 1954 Dr Kirkland was declared bankrupt at a time when José's health was failing. The final act was as touching as any tragedy. With José's death in December 1958, the love bond was shattered, the annuity stopped and the doctor, desolate and alone, took his own life. The setting of this final act of despair was "St Olave's".

Blue plaque, do your stuff and help us to remember José at the height of her musical career.

Born in 1893, the daughter of Lottie Collins of "Ta Ra Ra Boomdeay" fame, José possessed a fine singing voice, hailed and trained briefly by Caruso himself. In America she was feted, became a Gaiety Girl and had a brief and promising film career in Hollywood, earning a salary of £1,500 per week. Hollywood, still in the silent era, could not yet exploit her voice and José gave it all up to return to Britain to star as Teresa at Daly's Theatre in *Maid of the Mountains*. In this she was fulfilling one of three youthful ambitions – more of the other two later. Her salary was £50 a week.

The show was an astounding success, playing to sweethearts and married couples about to be separated by the First World War. The show had a positive message in those dark times – the most famous of its songs claiming that "Love Will Find a Way".

José was the star and lived like a star – in a life filled with glamour, money and excitement. Gerald Kirkland was around even then, very much in the wings and very much in love from a distance, hardly being noticed by José. They nearly met when Kirkland had the opportunity of administering an injection to her, but could not bring himself to do so, passing on the honour to another young colleague.

José visited children in hospitals many times and the doctor and the star made the rounds together. Romance did not yet blossom, however, and José went on to marry her impoverished aristocrat and acquire her string of pearls – the two other great ambitions of her youth.

A string of successful shows followed, taking José into the thirties as a star. But stardom is a transitory thing. José spent money as fast as she earned it, generously helping worthy (and unworthy) causes and when her type of show faltered and became old-fashioned, she had nothing to fall back on. When her earning capacity failed, bankruptcy, divorce and illness followed.

Re-enter Dr Kirkland who gave the failing star a face-saving get-out: "stop performing or you will kill yourself." José took his advice, accepted his proposal and so began the marriage already described.

Before settling in Loughton, however, José accompanied the doctor on his war time work in Britain, adjusting to her new life as the doctor's wife with remarkable ease, and much humour. Read Dr Kirkland's autobiography, *Ninety-Nine and All That*, for the hilarious details. He wrote under the pseudonym Frederick Kaigh.

Now you know the story behind the blue plaque – stardom, love, ridicule and double bankruptcy. Spare a moment when you pass to ponder and think about the fame, the love and the tragedy that lies behind it. And always remember, as José herself reminded us, that “Love will Find a Way”.

DONALD POHL

The Nathan sisters – Christian martyrs from Loughton

The Nathan sisters were two missionaries from Loughton Union Church who were killed on 13 August 1900 during the Boxer Rising in China. The account below has been written by the Reverend Nigel D Howarth, Minister at the Church, on the occasion of the recent centenary of the event.

Edith and May Nathan were two sisters in a family of six sisters and two brothers of James and Emma Nathan who lived at Claremont, Upper Park, Loughton. They were members of Loughton Union Church.

Edith joined the church in 1883 and took an active role working among the young people and visiting the poor and the sick. She felt called to missionary work in the early 1890s, initially believing that she should serve in Africa, but it then became clear that she was called to China. She was accepted by the China Inland Mission, sailing on 28 September 1894. Her posting was to Taning (or Daning) in Shansi province, beginning her work there in 1896. The mission station was not only a centre for evangelism but was also a teaching centre, enabling people of all ages to read and write. The church also ran a Refuge in one of the villages where people addicted to opium had the opportunity to overthrow their addiction and find support for themselves and their families.

May Nathan was six years younger than Edith and served in the church as a Sunday school teacher and worked with the younger people. Her school education was followed by college training which led to success as a teacher – gifts and training which were to be put at the disposal of the church in China. The call to missionary work in China came in a powerful way which overcame her reluctance to leave home and mother, to whom she was very closely attached. She departed for service in China in January 1899. She learnt Chinese quickly and was delighted to be sent to the same station as her older sister, where she continued to assimilate the language and culture.

As the Boxer Troubles erupted during 1900, the main centres were in the capital and the surrounding areas. Shansi Province remained peaceful but then became caught up in the conflict. On 12 July the sisters, accompanied by their colleague Mary Heaysman, a missionary from Australia, had to flee for safety. They went first to a village supported by the local Christians and later, on 23 July, they fled hurriedly further into the mountains as the searching Boxers were reported near at hand. Following a hard climb, they took shelter in a ruined temple where three local Christians took care of them. On 12 August one of the three, a young man, was caught as he brought food to the missionaries but on refusing to reveal their hiding place he was killed. The three women were captured shortly afterwards and brought to the city. They were held in a temple on the edge of the city without food and water and

where it was difficult to stand, sit or lie down. At early dawn on 13 August they were taken to the edge of the river and killed.

About a week after the missionaries had died a new governor of the province issued an edict protecting Christians and bringing rebellion in that area to an end. On 1 November the bodies of the missionaries were placed in coffins and deposited in a temple in the western suburb of the city. Mr A Orr-Ewing visited the mission stations of Shansi during August 1901 and on 21 August was present when they were buried in a field in the east suburb within sight of the house of a Christian woman.

A plaque to the memory of Edith and May Nathan was placed in Loughton Union Church and when the present building replaced the chapel it was sited facing the front entrance. The plaque reads:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF FRANCES EDITH NATHAN AND
MAY ROSE NATHAN
WHO, LEAVING THIS CHURCH FOR THE MASTER'S SERVICE
IN CHINA,
SUFFERED MARTYRDOM AT TANING, SHANSI, 13 AUGUST 1900
"FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH"

REV. NIGEL HOWARTH

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