

## Exhibitions

William Nicholson was among the most fashionable portrait painters in London when he bought a vicarage on the Sussex coast, in 1909. It was “a mad thing for a man to do,” the 37-year-old artist admitted, leaving him £200 in debt and “in the curiously rotten position of having more houses than food”. But to a man who passed his working week in gaslit clubs and heavily furnished drawing rooms, The Grange at Rottingdean, with its salt wind and chalk cliffs crumbling slowly into the sea, proved irresistible.

Nicholson and his wife Mabel, also an artist, initially acquired the house as a “summer nest” but neither they nor their children – Ben, 15, Antony, 13, Nancy, 10, and Kit, five – could bear to be away from it for very long. They were still there when war broke out, bringing terrible tragedy to the family; life as Nicholson knew and loved it was never quite the same again.

Perhaps you are familiar with Nicholson. Certainly his still lifes, all plump-bellied, shiny silver bowls and burnished lustreware, have accrued a cultish following in recent years, as has his illustrated woodcut alphabet, starting with his dashing self-portrait: “A was an Artist”. His landscapes, in which shadows skim and race across ridges and lowlands, are also on the up. But for an artist who was so well known in his lifetime (he was Winston Churchill’s favourite painting tutor, and knighted in 1936), he is now curiously underappreciated.

“He was sort of superseded by his son Ben,” explains Nicholson’s grandson Desmond Banks, “because Ben’s geometric abstract paintings [in the 1930s] fulfilled the great dream of British modernism.” Nicholson Sr was instead “determinedly elusive”, unswayed by the “isms” of early 20th-century art, and declining his election to the Royal Academy. That Nicholson framed an envelope addressed to him there, on which the RA’s Keeper had written “NOT KNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS”, tells you much about his sense of humour.

An exhibition about Nicholson opens at The Grange tomorrow. Organised by Rottingdean’s heritage society to celebrate 150 years since Nicholson’s birth, it has the support of his descendants, who have loaned paintings, prints, letters and family photographs as well as rarely seen personal items, such as Nicholson’s painting smock, hat and silk dressing gown. Surveying his whole life, it nevertheless makes the Rottingdean years “a



## ‘A mad thing for a man to do’

In 1909, William Nicholson was society’s favourite portraitist. So why did he run away from London?

By Lucy DAVIES

centrepiece”, curator David Bomford tells me, “which will give a different impression of him. You will see how Rottingdean was crucial for him. He painted so much for his own pleasure there.”

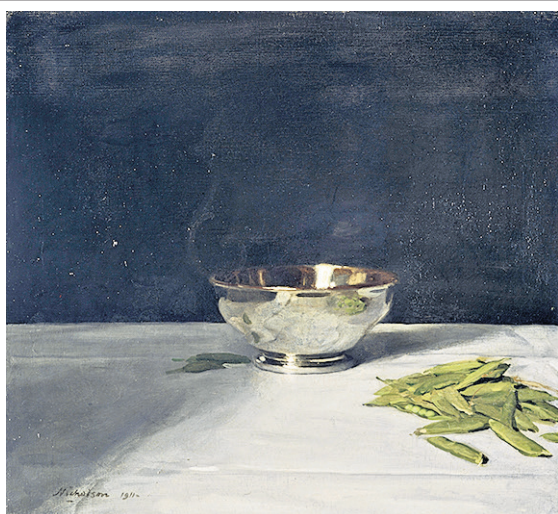
Nicholson first went to Rottingdean in 1897, to make a portrait of Rudyard Kipling. The author of the *Just So Stories* was living at The Elms, across the green from The Grange and a short walk from where his aunt Georgiana lived with her husband, Edward Burne-Jones. Nicholson stayed with the Pre-Raphaelite artist while he worked on the portrait, though he and Kipling spent far more time striding the Sussex Downs than in sittings.

The Grange is a beautiful house: Georgian, with gardens that run directly onto the Downs. “One entered a spacious sitting room hall,” Ben recalled in 1930, “and my

father had laid with his own hand a black and white Vermeer checked floor.” The artist Paul Nash, who came to stay in 1911 – he and Ben were students at The Slade together – remembered “everything bright and shiny, highly polished painted walls, stiff calendered chintzes, gay pinks and greens, and at every meal we ate highly calendered blancmange with bright coloured jam, in keeping with the brightness of the rooms”.

Part of Rottingdean’s appeal was its seclusion. The village, five miles along the coast from Brighton, had long been popular with smugglers, who snuck in tea, gin and lace via a network of tunnels and cellars. The first room on the right as you enter The Grange had a hidden trap door that led to a tunnel, suggesting that even the vicar was involved. Mabel sometimes painted in there. It is where she made her 1911 portrait of





◀ ‘They are somehow more of a troupe than a family’: from far left, *Coronation Day at Rottingdean* and *The Lustre Bowl with Green Peas* (both 1911), by William Nicholson; Nancy and Kit in Mabel Pryde’s painting, *The Grange, Rottingdean* (1911)

▼ ‘Masher’: Nicholson’s self-portrait begins his woodcut alphabet (1899)

Nancy and Kit, which clearly shows Nicholson’s black and white floor. She hadn’t painted since Ben was born, but in Rottingdean she flourished. That year, she sold enough work to commission a thatched wooden studio from the architect Edwin Lutyens – a friend – in the back garden.

Mabel and Nicholson shared the studio, though he would paint just about anywhere, a board leaning against the back of a chair and children all around him. Photographs show him working in the garden, too. Apparently the butterflies were attracted by his scent – Bay Rum hair tonic, turpentine and Balkan Sobranie cigarettes – and alighted on him while he painted. Out on the Downs, he savoured what he saw to such a degree that his mouth would water as he laid on the paint.

Friends came to stay frequently: the actress Viola Tree, the artist William Rothenstein, the writer Max Beerbohm. “I am so glad you like the Nicholson troupe,” Beerbohm wrote to Rothenstein in 1911, “they are somehow more like a troupe than a family – Nancy standing with one spangled foot on Nicholson’s head, Ben and Tony branching out on tip-toe from his straddled legs, Mabel herself standing at the wings, holding the overcoats.” Ben recalled how Nancy had used the garden hose to soak “little Johnny Rothenstein all toggled up in an Eton suit, washed and brushed and ironed and combed and not a hair out of place and a gardenia in his button-hole”. Rothenstein got his own back when in 1938 he became director of the Tate, and made a point of suppressing abstract art.

For better or worse, portrait commissions remained Nicholson’s bread and butter. He travelled to London three or four days a week to secure work, or to paint in the stylish studios he maintained first in Chelsea, then St James’s. Around town, he cultivated a reputation for being a bit of a “masher” – a dandy – and wore immaculate white trousers and a silk dressing gown for sittings. Many sitters noted his agility. He was like a dancer, or a conjurer, always moving.

His urbanity belied his provincial roots. Nicholson came from Nottinghamshire, where his father owned an agricultural tools business. It was clear the boy’s path lay elsewhere, though, and after a lacklustre stint at Hubert von Herkomer’s fashionable art school in Hertfordshire (where he met Mabel – the two eloped in 1893) Nicholson got into his groove at the Académie Julian in Paris. Struck

by Toulouse Lautrec’s posters, he began making his own, with his brother-in-law James Pryde. They called themselves the Beggarstaff Brothers and their designs – silhouettes and outlines cut from coloured paper – were instantly, fantastically popular.



In 1896, Nicholson turned his attention to hand-coloured woodcuts. First, portraits – Kipling, Mark Twain, Queen Victoria – then his illuminated alphabet. Both caught the attention of James McNeill Whistler, who encouraged Nicholson to take up portrait painting. In 1901, Beerbohm became the first in a long line of illustrious sitters. Lutyens’s daughter Ursula Ridley, whom Nicholson painted in 1918, recalled that he would “start telling me a story and then ask me to contribute the next instalment. ‘Once upon a time there was a man who lost his yawn... Now you go on!’ At other times he would break into Cockney rhyming slang, of which he had an extensive vocabulary.”

In 1914, Nicholson went to India with Lutyens, the latter to lay the foundations of New Delhi, Nicholson to paint the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge. With Ben in Madeira for his health, and Tony away fighting at Cambrai, Mabel left Rottingdean and rented a house near friends in North Wales. There, Nancy met the poet Robert Graves – who holidayed in Harlech with his family – and in 1917, the two became



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engaged. On hearing the news, Nicholson wrote to Ben that “I didn’t sleep at all I was so shaken, having been some 18 years in love with Nancy myself.” His daughter’s engagement moved him “almost beyond bearing,” Ridley recalled. “He would pour out his feelings to me while he painted, as if he were alone and talking to himself.”

Then, in July 1918, Mabel died suddenly, from Spanish Flu. Three months later, Nicholson received word that Tony, his second son, had been killed in action.

“I live entirely by habit now,” he wrote to a friend. Kit was despatched to live with Lutyens. “I remember [Nicholson] joining us there one weekend,” wrote Ridley. “I was haunted by the look of grief in his face, and he spent hours striding over the moors alone.”

Nicholson went on to re-marry – Edie Stuart Worsley, a family friend – and have another child, Liza. He took them to Rottingdean, to stay in Burne-Jones’s old home (by then, The Grange had been sold to Sir George Lewis, a famous criminal lawyer), but soon moved to Wiltshire, where Edie’s wealthy father bought them a house. Nicholson was still the life and soul of every party he gave, but when exhausted or depressed, he seemed “wistful for the past, for lost loves and children”, Liza later observed.

After his second marriage, Nicholson’s formerly easy relationship with Ben suffered – not helped by Ben setting his course toward abstraction. “My dear, I am old-fashioned,” wrote father to son, in 1927. “Try not to patronise me.”

At 63, Nicholson became the companion of the novelist Marguerite Steen. They lived glamorously, and travelled frequently, but after his studio was destroyed in the Second World War, there followed “endless shifting... nowhere seemed there to be a suitable studio or accommodation. He painted on kitchen tables where meals were being prepared, in little rooms where the light was blotted out by thatch or mattress, by lamplight or inadequate electricity,” said Steen, in her 1968 autobiography. He “never painted another of his poetic ‘landscips,’” she added, though until his death, in 1949, she often returned to their house in Blewbury, Berkshire, to find him “hanging on the gate, gazing at the... tree shadow streaming across the paddock. He was painting it with his eyes.”

*‘A Was an Artist’ is at the Grange, Rottingdean (rottingdeanheritage.org.uk) from tomorrow until July 31*



## Simon Heffer

# Hinterland

TV executives infantilise older viewers with trigger warnings – then revolt us with non-stop profanity

A friend who shares my admiration for *The Sweeney*, possibly the best police drama ever on television, once told me that an episode had been expunged from the endless daytime re-runs because some of its dialogue was deemed too offensive for modern viewers. This was a decade ago, long before the introduction of the now-ubiquitous trigger warnings, allegedly brought in to protect the sensitive and deflect grandstanding, virtue-signalling militants. I thought this was an urban myth: almost everyone who watches re-runs of *The Sweeney* is middle-aged, remembers the series from the 1970s – and is not easily shocked by the barbarities of an earlier age.

However, I monitored the schedules, and my friend was right. In one series, the sequence jumped from, I think, episode four to episode six. I have no idea what was considered so offensive in episode five, but it struck me as infantilising to remove it. The best Carry On film, *Up the Khyber*, isn’t shown on television now because Kenneth Williams and Bernard Bresslaw black up to play the Khasi of Kalabar and his henchman Bungdit Din. The past is a foreign country, as people must understand – or so, naively, I thought. I am writing a book on interwar Britain and see the films of the period as historical documents. Given we now have 70 years of TV behind us, programmes in that medium should be treated with similar care. We don’t, or shouldn’t, censor history: events happened and words were uttered that would now shock some people; but that is no reason to suppress them.

Every generation has its taboos: two of the most offensive words in the English language are now heard on television almost every evening, and none of us is supposed to bat an eyelid. My parents’ generation would have been horrified and disgusted to hear them, and so I suspect would many reading this column. However, they are words regarded without disapproval by TV executives and their friends in the coke-snorting inner suburbs of London, people who consider it too bad if the rest of us have to put up with a barrage of profanity.

By contrast, that same subculture deems the slightest hint of racism, homophobia, sexism and now transphobia entirely abominable, if

presented without warning and denunciation. Viewers are simply not trusted to make up their own minds about these things.

Programmes on my favourite TV channel, Talking Pictures, are routinely preceded by the warning that what we are about to see contains language and outdated attitudes that may offend. I don’t blame Talking Pictures, or any of the other enormously popular repeat channels (popular because so much contemporary television is garbage that reflects only the language and attitudes of those who commission it); they have been advised to do this after brushes with Ofcom.

My wife and I recently watched a re-run of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, and were warned about the attitudes of the era we were about to see depicted. The series is almost faultlessly historically accurate. Sadly, the dictatorship has become so fierce that these warnings now precede virtually all 20th-century programmes, just in case some poorly educated

Every generation has its own taboos. Can’t we be trusted to make up our own minds?

snowflake accidentally watches one and has a seizure.

I did see, only a year or two ago, a screening of *The Dam Busters*, in which the now-distasteful name of Guy Gibson’s dog was, remarkably, not removed. However, the same word – spoken by both Joan Greenwood and Dennis Price in one late scene – has been edited out of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, which I consider not just the greatest film in British cinema but a landmark of our culture to rank with a great cathedral or a Vaughan Williams symphony. The removal of the exchange in which the word is twice uttered is an entirely shameful act, like slashing a painting in a gallery as a political protest.

Some elements of the past were horrible and we have no need to be proud of them: but sometimes they can still be part of the integrity of a cultural work. Like the Victorians, we have taken to covering up our table legs again. How shall we ever reconcile ourselves to our past if we insist on eliminating it?