



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Jane Elizabeth Cook Artist in Residence, Wantage 1868-1920

by Margaret Prentice

In K A R Sugden's 'A Short History of Wantage School'(1924) there is a chapter entitled 'The Mastership of Henry Cook'. Cook was head from 1868 to 1884, during which time he improved the standards, discipline, numbers of scholars and buildings of King Alfred's. But it was the references to his wife within the text and especially in the footnotes which intrigued me.

"Mrs Cook was a woman of distinguished artistic and literary gifts. She was a portrait-painter, well known in her generation The Queen of Holland, the Queen of Portugal, the Countess Gleichen, and many well-known people were among those who sat to her." (1) Sugden mentions that his information was obtained from her son, Sir Theodore Cook, then editor of the *Field* and President of the Old Alfredians.

With this as my starting point I have managed to piece together an outline story of the life and works of Jane Elizabeth Cook.

Jane Elizabeth Robins was born in 1836 into a large and comparatively wealthy family, with a substantial house on the outskirts of London. Unfortunately, her merchant father invested too heavily in canals and refused to contemplate the threat posed to his livelihood by the development of the railways. Jane, the youngest, was thirteen at the time of the family's financial distress but nevertheless she was able to educate herself by frequent visits to the British Museum and the National Gallery. In 1853 she was at Coney's School of Art in Bloomsbury and beginning to sell her sketches and paintings. Friends were all important in encouraging the young artist by giving her paints and brushes and her first commissions.(2)

In 1857 Jane Robins painted a miniature of the Countess Gleichen and her first picture was exhibited and sold in the Academy Exhibition in 1861. It was a portrait of one of the young Mahratta Princes then on a visit to London from southwest India. His extensive wardrobe had been spread over the staircases of his house in Connaught Square, so that she might choose the costume she preferred. Her miniature of the young Baron Henri van Doorn, the youngest son of the Queen of Holland, was hung in the exhibition of 1863. Jane Robins had been visiting a friend at the Italian Embassy at The Hague when awarded this commission. This was quickly followed by a portrait of Maria Pia, Queen of Portugal. Her finest work in oils was done on small panels, about 6in. by 9in., and a particularly successful portrait was that of William Hunt, the water-colour artist.



Although only in her late twenties Jane Robins was a successful and well-known artist. Indeed the proceeds of her version of Vandyck's 'Theodosius and Ambrose' paid for her wedding trousseau, when in 1866 she married Henry Cook, seven years her senior and an assistant master under Rev J Penrose at his well-known prep. school at Exeter. Her eldest son, Theodore Andrea, was born the following year and in 1868 the family moved into the headmaster's house at the Grammar School, Wantage. Jane Cook then gave up her promising career to help her husband in the tremendous task of improving the standards, extending the accommodation and increasing the number of scholars at King Alfred's.

Her son remembered how when she came to play with him, he would not only listen while she sang the rise and fall of 'Jack and Jill' but watch her nimble fingers as they cut and fashioned the very personality of a favourite hero, until the nursery table swarmed with vivid little paper figures and the story lived and moved for him.(3) It appears that during the next years Jane Cook was ill and spent some time away from her family. But with every letter she sent home came a sheaf of figures with their appropriate rhymes. In fact the principle behind her designs was virtually the same as guides the maker of a silhouette, but the effect obtained is absolutely different; for instead of staining a white background with a mass of black, the artist expresses the main themes of her composition in brilliant light thrown out upon the darker shade beneath. For this reason they are often described as "Cameos". Essential details to the resulting outline were supplied by delicately marking the white paper with the fine point of a stiletto.



Some of these little paper groups came to the attention of the principal director of the recently established Autotype Company, who believed that if well reproduced they would prove attractive to buyers. Mrs Cook agreed to a trial and 'A Sculptor Caught Napping' (4)

was the result, the title suggested by the little scenes' appearance as sculpture in low relief. The nursery rhymes depicted are Rock a bye Baby, The Queen of Hearts, Where are you going to my pretty maid, Jack and Jill, and Sing a Song of Sixpence. The book appeared in December 1874, dedicated by permission to the children of Her Royal Highness, Princess Helena of Great Britain (Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein). The Preface reads as follows: "An effort is being made to raise funds for the enlargement of the buildings of King Alfred's Grammar School, Wantage, Berks. The profits arising from the sale of these designs will be devoted to this subject." Three 'Editions de Luxe' of 150 copies, priced at one guinea each, were printed privately and rapidly bought up. King Alfred's School today (1991) owns two copies of this A3 size book, neither in very good condition. Perhaps some of our readers have copies? It was reproduced by J M Dent in 1899 in a smaller and slightly different format (see below) with an explanatory introduction by Theodore A Cook.(3)

The Autotype Company had patented a revolutionary new process for reproducing images. It employed the action of biochromated gelatine and Joseph Swan christened the process 'Autotype'.(6) It received enthusiastic press coverage and the company soon began reproductions of original drawings in the British Museum and in Oxford. The Autotype Company, whose International headquarters are now in Wantage, produced other books illustrated by Jane E Cook, who returned to her easel to add to the family's finances when her husband lost nearly all his personal capital in the crash of the West of England Bank in 1880-81. These included Richard H Barham's famous 'Ingoldsby Legends' and Robert Browning's 'Pied Piper of Hamelin', which both retailed at one guinea.(5) Browning wrote to Jane Cook to express his pleasure at her pen-and-ink illustrations of his book.(2)



During the 1870's the Grammar School buildings were enlarged. In 1872 the 'New School Room', now the library, was built using a loan of £1000 from the Charity Commissioners, which was soon repaid. Then the whole of the north wing, which included more dormitories, and the extension to the headmaster's house were built. These were financed partly by public subscription, partly by the energy and enterprise of the headmaster and Mrs Cook, and by the joint gift of £1000 from Lord Overstone and Col Loyd Lindsay. Harriet Loyd, the future Lady Wantage, was to become Jane Cook's greatest friend.

Jane Cook was very much involved in school life especially in the amateur dramatics. She produced the Christmas play, usually a scene from Shakespeare preceded by a 'Curtain Raiser'. For six weeks in late autumn, Mrs Cook designed and helped paint the scenery, made the costumes and rehearsed the boys. The plays were performed in the dining room but later they used the new schoolroom, where a stage was constructed at one end. One of

the star actors was her son Theodore, who was a pupil at the school 1876-81, then at fourteen he moved to his father's old school at Exeter for a year before winning a scholarship to Radley and later to Wadham College, Oxford. The Cooks had another son, Arthur, who was six years younger than Theodore, and in the 1881 Census he is listed as a pupil at King Alfred's, not a family member. He appears to have been a very handsome child with golden curls and blue eyes. He grew very tall, like his father, and was a keen amateur boxer and was in training for a championship bout when he died at the early age of twenty-one. His brother, in his autobiography, gives not the cause of death, only passing the comment that "He lived at full speed, as those do whom the Gods Love."

There was a fifth member of the Cook household: Miss Louisa Margaret Robins, Jane's sister, lived with them. She was eleven years Jane's senior and appears to have held a preparatory class for boys in a house at the corner of Newbury Street and Ormond Road, which is now part of St. Mary's School. In the 1881 Census she is resident at King Alfred's as the Matron and later lived at 'Highfield' with her sister until her death aged 75 in 1899.

'Highfield', a large house opposite the school on the corner of Priory Road and Portway, was to have been the retirement home of Henry Cook. He had purchased the land and the Old Boys of the school subscribed the money to pay for the house in gratitude for his amazing achievements in the 16 years of his headmastership. Unfortunately his health broke down and he died on 3rd April 1885 in Field Cottage, which stood where the Sixth Form building is today. Henry Cook was buried in Chain Hill Cemetery and his widow designed the stained-glass window in the north wall of Wantage Parish Church in his memory. Jane Cook went to live in 'Highfields' for which she herself had produced the architectural drawings and resided there until her death in 1920.

Mrs Cook continued to show interest in, to encourage and counsel the pupils at the Grammar School and she also corresponded with Old Alfredians in the distant outposts of the Empire.(7) She kept in close contact with her son, Theodore, who had inherited her artistic appreciation and went on to write many books on such diverse subjects as 'Twenty-five Great Houses of France', J M W Turner's 'Water-Colours', horse-racing, rowing, fencing, the Olympic Games and humorous verse. Sometimes, Jane Cook illustrated his books. 'The Story of Rouen'(8) contains a drawing by Jane Cook of the brass of Sir Christopher Lytcot, from West Hanney Church, near Wantage. Christopher Lytcot, the High Sheriff of Berkshire, was knighted by Henry IV of France at the siege of Rouen in 1591. Prompted by her son, a former captain of the British Fencing Team and one of the organisers of the London Olympics of 1908, she designed the silver panels in high relief which made up the pedestal for the cup presented to the winners of the International Team Tournament (Fencing) at the 1908 Olympics.

Mrs Cook's most important design in metal was for the shield which Cecil Rhodes presented to the Bulawayo Light Horse. On Rhodes's death this shield was hung above his coffin in Bulawayo Town Hall before the coffin was removed to the mausoleum in the hills.(2)

Although nearly blind and eighty years of age, Jane Cook was keenly interested in the events of The Great War. Her long religious poem 'The Wings of the Wind' illustrated by her niece Muriel Perrin was published in 1915 in aid of the Red Cross.(9) She died on 23 January 1920 in her 85th year and was buried in the family plot in Chain Hill cemetery.

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