

MORTIMER MENPES

Purley has been associated with many artists over the years and several roads in the parish have been named after them including Menpes Road on the Wimpey Estate.

Mortimer Menpes was born at Port Adelaide in South Australia and attended the local grammar school. In 1874 he came to London to study under Whistler whose daughter Rosemary he married a year later. He had his first exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1880. He went to Japan for 9 months to study both the art of Japan and the techniques used by Japanese artists. This visit made a great impression on him and for the rest of his life he was surrounded by souvenirs of his time in Japan. While living in Fulham his house was decorated in the Japanese style. He acquired so much material that he had to hire a freighter to get it all back to England.

In April 1888 on his return he staged an exhibition at the Dowdeswell Gallery in Bond St which caused a sensation in the London art world. Even the Prince of Wales felt obliged to see what it was all about. It was a great success and Mortimer sold all his pictures of the visit for over £2000.

During the Boer War he was War Artist to the magazine '*Black and White*'. A selection of the works made then were included in his book '*War Impressions*' (1901) He was a first rate rifleman and a vivid raconteur. For many years he travelled widely, painting and etching wherever he went accompanied by his wife.

His daughter Maud was his partner in the Menpes Press which he founded to publish his works and his other daughter Dorothy was often employed to write the commentaries. His most famous work was probably 'The Thames' which was published in 1906 and consisted of watercolours of scenes down the Thames with commentary by G E Mitton although this was published by A&C Black.

Dorothy later married a man called Flowers and lived in a 17th Century cottage in Westwood Row, Tilehurst. and was left about 4000 of Menpes's works and books. She approached Harold Hill at the Gun St Gallery in Reading for advice on safe-keeping as she was afraid that the cottage was vulnerable to fire, which indeed it was as it later was burned to the ground. Eventually the collection was sold. Dorothy died in Minehead in July 1973 aged 89.

Mortimer developed a revolutionary new process for copying oil paintings which bore his name. He set up a company to reproduce great paintings and began issuing 'The Menpes Series of Great Masters'. He presented a set of some 50 reproductions to the Australian Government to form the basis of the Commonwealth Art Collection; but it was many years before these were put on show as some purists in the Australian art world disapproved of showing what they regarded as fakes even though they were never claimed as originals and were as close as Australia was likely to get in seeing great art. Thankfully they are now treasured.

In 1907 he bought land off Long Lane and started a Carnation and Fruit farm. He also built 8 cottages to house his foreman and other workers in his 40 glass houses. These were known for many years as Menpes Cottages and as 1-8 Long Lane, but when houses in Long Lane were numbered they became 55 to 71 Long Lane (odd nos only) with 63 missing. The foreman's house became 35 and the old office which had been converted to a cottage became 41.

For the last 30 years of his life he lived at Iris Court, Pangbourne. Rosemary died 23rd August 1936 and Mortimer followed her two years later, on 1st April 1938. Both are buried in separate graves behind Pangbourne church.

Purley Parish Council had been pressed for some years to commemorate him with a street name, especially after one was named for his contemporary, Cecil Aldin. Orchard Close which formed the entrance to the fruit farm reflected the fruit theme as did Apple Close which was built on the main site of the farm, but it was not until 1984 that Menpes Road was named after him.

John Chapman