

# An Artist & His School

## Ardizzone and the Clayesmore Connection

*Hugh Thompson finds it's stronger than most realize*



Earlier this year Wolseley Fine Arts at 27 Cork Street in the heart of London's fine art ghetto put on a show, 'Edward Ardizzone's (EA) World'- a sale of over one hundred original pictures and prints. It was an excuse to look into the history (his dates were 1900-1979) of the school's most famous artist. The pictures were priced at between £700 and £2500-remember as an illustrator he was incredibly prolific.

EA was at the school from 1913-18. The school archive only notes his existence and that of his two brothers David and Michael\*\*. The fact that his much younger brothers came to the school shows that the family must have been happy with the results.

Edward known affectionately throughout his career as Ted was a large ungainly boy and seemed to be sapped of confidence and happiness, not least by the regular absences of his parents, his mother often and his father most of the time as he worked for the Eastern Telegraph Company (now Cable and Wireless) in the Far East. EA was born in Hiphong in what was then French Indo-China.

Ungainly, clumsy and a Catholic, Ardizzone would wonder why he was sent to such a school. In his delightful Autobiographical Fragment he speculates that it may have been because Clayesmore was cheaper than other public schools. It may also have been because under its founder Lex Devine the school had achieved a reputation for being, along with Bedales, a progressive public school. Though with starched collars and beating its odd today to see how it achieved such a legend.

In 1916 EA was joined, the school having moved to Winchester, by Freddy Mayor the son of two famous artists. Freddy would later start an art gallery, become great friend of artist author Gabriel White (who became Director of the Arts Council) who married EA's sister, Betty and become also, a great friend and patron of EA.



However at school Freddy was just envious of the older boy because according to the Mayor's son and present gallery owner "he was jealous of Ardizzone being a Catholic and along with the other barmies being let off Sunday church and ending up in the pub." Freddy's family also think costs may have played a part in his going to Clayesmore since his father died just before he came.

Ardizzone writes with warmth if not affection of Clayesmore being a school of 'some eccentricity' and Lex a great man, though an eccentric as headmasters go. In his

Autobiography there are two very lively chapters on the school. Although he made the football team (this was before the switch to rugby), was the school's outstanding middle distance and cross country runner, was in the boxing finals and won a bronze medal from the Royal Drawing Society and seemed to have the normal scrapes and japes of most school days, he concludes he was a failure.

This may be because he found it difficult to exercise authority as a prefect which involved until the 1970s beating other boys. In a meaningful passage he writes, "I simply couldn't bring myself to exercise authority. I was ragged by the boys and hadn't the quick and handy the quick wits to deal with the cheeky. Small boys had a horrid way of chanting behind my back. "Ardizzone's fat and bony" (Not a bad rhythm) When I had the unpleasant task of giving an official caning to a boy I could not for some inexplicable reason hurt him, though I tried to do so. My victim felt it was something of a joke. Finally I went back to Lex and resigned my prefecture before the sacking I felt was inevitable. He accepted my resignation kindly, knowing I suppose how wretched I felt".

"My non success(sic) at school was not due to being a rebel. I wish it had been as it would have been a more respectable reason. I was a conformist. I tried hard to do the right thing but failed." In his last term he was reappointed as prefect.

It is only a very inspired(?) minority who resented the absolute power given to the old fashioned public school prefect. In the writer's time in the 1960s there were several prefects who today are very honourable OCs, who positively prided themselves on their ability to draw blood when beating their fellow pupils. What is more we took pride in being able to handle such punishment.

Ardizzone ironically seemed to have hated the final years of the school experience, the very years of power and privilege which give most public school products that veneer of confidence and self belief which is almost their trademark. EA as a sensitive artist who preferred home life to the rough and tumble of school was not the first, nor will he be the last to be badly served by the muscularity of the boarding school tradition.

He talked of Miss Annie Hazledene the parson's daughter whom was his art teacher. "She was neither very young nor very beautiful. She wore a pince-nez and had a nose like a little boot. Yet she had a kindly enthusiasm to which I responded and which helped keep my enthusiasm alive."

Desmond Coke\* the novelist and collector, surely one of the greatest figures after Lex in the early life of Clayesmore was Ardizzone's house master but did not approve of the artist's early work "Yet he was the one man whose commendation I badly wanted."

After school which he left "with no regrets" the artist spent six years working as clerk for among others his father's Eastern Telegraph Company. At the same time he started doing art classes at the Westminster Art School. Slowly but surely the young man was acquiring a style and confidence. Not least this came from taking up rugby and joining the TA.

Through meeting up with Freddy Mayor who was not only was running his gallery

but was involved in the highly influential Bloomsbury related London Group, Ardizzone was introduced to London's artistic life. Ardizzone writes of Mayor "he knew and was very popular with most of the avant garde painters of the day and it was by knowing him that we in our turn joined parties which sometimes involved Augustus John or Jacob Epstein \*\*\*with their attendant maidens."

Ardizzone and Mayor were both known for their love of life and good wine. Mayor was also an inveterate gambler. Mayor had also gone into the City after leaving school but had soon gravitated towards the art world, he had been put off becoming an artist like his parents by Arthur Rackham's despairing remarks about his work. After working for an art dealer opened his own gallery ,the first in Cork Street, aged 22. Mayor too had come under the spell of Coke and the family admits that this obviously inspirational and very interesting man "had been a great influence".

In 1926 Ardizzone's father having received some very generous bonuses from the Telegraph company shared some of the money with his children. This meant Ardizzone received £500 ,worth about £25K today. With this our hero decided to break with the City and became a full time artist. At first he got good reviews but little paid work.

He turned for advice to Desmond Coke retired from Clayesmore but a distinguished man of means, letters and arts. He advised his former pupil to go into book illustration. This led to further commissions not least a £400 one from Johnnie Walker whisky which put the artist off advertising (though he did do a very famous Guinness poster). As he says lean years were to follow and it was not until 1935 that his luck turned (as did the economy)

His son Nicholas, later commented that the start of the depression was a very bad time to start a career as a freelance illustrator and they only stayed afloat because Mrs A was a successful Lucy Clayton model.

In 1935 ,the book that he had originally written for his own children the first of the Little Tim series was accepted, he then had successful show at the Bloomsbury Gallery. After the War he exhibited at the Mayor Gallery.



There is yet one more Clayesmore connection. In 1948 after the Second World War where his service as a war artist further enhanced his reputation EA became a tutor of illustration at Camberwell School of Art-then something of a power house for commercial art. He also taught at the Royal College. In 1947 Leonard Daniels had become Principal at Camberwell .In the 1930s Daniels had been a teacher at Clayesmore .

\*In the preface to *Youth, Youth*, one of 27 books authored by Coke who is considered one of the foremost school boy novelists of the period, Coke writes a dedicatory letter to Lex. He says, "It was your kind letter about my *Novel of Life at Shrewsbury, The Bending of the Twig* (his most famous book) that first brought us into touch, it was our common interest in a boy, my nephew (Burney who died in the First War and in memory of whom Coke endowed the library) that drew us together when I was invalided out of the war in 1917. I spent a very pleasant two year convalescence as your guest and a 'war work' House Master to your senior boys.-(Box Number Six and the *Mad English* stories are based on life at Clayesmore).

\*\*David became a solicitor and was instrumental in introducing to his brother EA to the wild coastline around Deal which became an important backdrop to the *Little Tim* books. Brother Michael became a famous Reuters journalist specialising in Africa of which he wrote the book '*Mistaken Land*.'

\*\*\* Jacob Epstein's bronzes were cast at Michael Gaskill's (48-52) foundry.

### **Expert View**

We asked **Michael Charlton (1936-39)** himself a very successful book illustrator (he is still at it in his eighties) to give an expert view on Ardizzone. He wrote,

*The amusing adventures of Little Tim aboard the good ship (actually an old tramp steamer) by Edward Ardizzone made generations of post war children happy. A succession of endearing books flowed from the pen of this artist-cum-author. His name became a household word, his books a household item.*

*There is something about the style of his art which has an old fashioned flavour and yet, at the same time, giving a fresh and breezy impression. With simple line and judicious use of cross hatching, overlaid with loose washed water colour, he created a very believable world.*

*Edward Ardizzone, the son of Scottish-Italian parents, was at Clayesmore some years (20 actually) before me. We did however, both work for the same publisher, The Bodley Head. In my training marks were given for smart presentation but I remember our editor complaining mildly that EA delivered his work in loose, brown paper parcels tied up with string. I am sure no one would have dreamt of correcting him, such was his eminence.*

*He will probably be remembered best for his children's books but I recently came across an intriguing collection of his drawings for friends and relatives which remained me of *Lear* and *Hoffnung*. For me his dark, witty vignettes of Victorian clerical life in *Trollop's Barchester Towers* put him among the greats.*