

Item of Interest No 71

A Tale of Two Artists: Margaret Franklin & John Wheeldon

From the Garton Archive at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School

Compiled by Peter Harrod

February 2022

Written in memory of Mick Wall, a much-respected colleague at LCHS



THE TITHE BARN

M. Franklin, VI².

This drawing of The Tithe Barn on Greestone Stairs in Lincoln, used for many years at the School as the dining hall, is taken from the Summer 1953 edition of the magazine of the Lincoln Christ's Hospital Girls' High School (LHS). The artist,

Margaret Franklin, has kindly sent me the original drawing, and copies of others that she completed while she was a pupil at LHS.

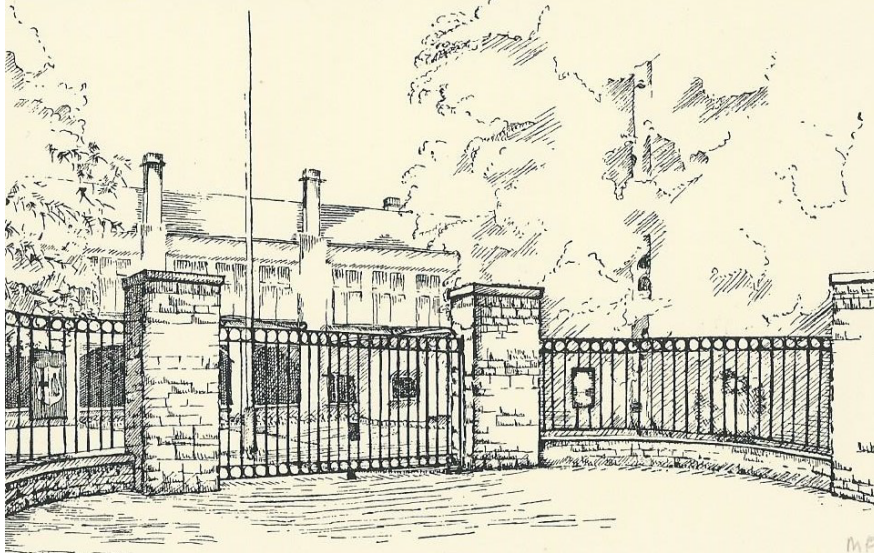
Margaret now lives in Aberdyfi, Wales, but has sent me some memories of her life. She entered the Kindergarten at LHS at the age of five and remained at the School until she was eighteen. Her brother John was also in the Kindergarten before moving to the Preparatory ('Prep') Department at Lincoln School.

Scrutiny of the magazines from the time of Margaret's long career at LHS reveals that she was an active member of the School. While in Form 2 in the Kindergarten she was awarded a Special Prize, presented by the Governors, and during the mid to late 1940s she clearly took advantage of the extracurricular lessons available at LHS and passed Grades IV, V, VI and VII of the Royal Associated Board Pianoforte Exams. Most of them were passed with Credit, and in 1947 she received the Anne Blakelock Middle School Music Prize. To have passed with Merit at Grade VII Margaret would have mastered challenging pieces such as the third movement of Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata, Brahms' Intermezzo in B flat, and Chopin's Prélude in C sharp minor.

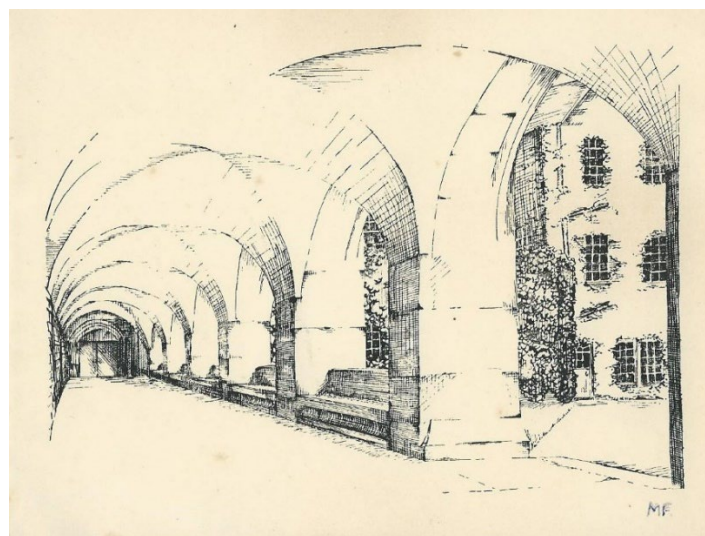
In addition to her artistic and musical talents, Margaret was a prominent member of the LHS tennis, hockey, and rounders teams, representing the School in the First VI, First XI and First IX respectively. Her position in hockey was 'left inner' and reports on her progress stated that she 'played a steady game', that her positioning and shooting were good, and that she was a 'valuable member of the forward line'. A lack of confidence seemed to have held her back from higher achievements, but she was tennis captain in 1952, the year she left the High School, and had a spell as games secretary in 1949-50, a position that would no doubt have demanded the same attention to detail as her artistic prowess. She was also a prefect during her time in the sixth form.

Margaret's academic career was equally impressive. She achieved 'O' levels in 1949 in English Language and Literature, Geography, Latin, French, Maths, Biology and Music, and 'A' levels in English and Modern Languages in 1952. She won a place at St Andrew's University to read English and French (LHS magazine Summer 1953) and graduated in 1956. On leaving LHS Margaret's mother apparently paid for her to be a Life Member of the Old Christ's Hospital Lincolnians so that she could read the Newsletters herself!

Readers might think that the story would end there but there's a twist to the tale. The Admissions Register recorded Margaret's home address as Lincoln School, Wragby Road, Lincoln, and her father's name was entered as G F Franklin, Headmaster. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Margaret used her artistic talents to draw sketches of her home especially as it was such an architecturally interesting and elegant building. Below is a beautiful drawing of the Lincoln School Memorial Gates with the cloisters as a backdrop, subsequently used as a Christmas card during the time when she was a pupil at LHS and a resident in School House at Lincoln School.



However, my own favourite sketch is a drawing of the cloisters showing a view from the general direction of the Geography and Woodwork rooms and the west end of the boarding house across the driveway. I am not an artist, but it seems to my untutored eye that she has judged the perspective to perfection. Studying the picture recalls memories of be-gowned masters striding along the flagstones; French and Spanish master 'Shep' giving a two-fingered 'salute' behind his back as he disappeared through the hefty double doors towards the fifth form corridor and staff room; Headmaster Franklin crossing the scene from home to office; the room to the right of the entrance to the boarding house where we took the French and Spanish oral exams; the crate of third-pint bottles of milk on the right by the gateway, freezing in winter and sour in summer; the rush to claim one of the stone benches for a game of shove ha'penny during break; and not least the tuck shop on the left where chocolates and biscuits could be purchased for a few 'coppers' from the masters on duty. The view has barely changed since 1907 when Lincoln School opened.



A major influence on Margaret's artistic and musical development was Mrs 'Maggie' Ward. She wrote that when the Second World War began many of the male staff at Lincoln School went off to join the forces, and Mrs Dorothy M Ward, the daughter of a well-known Lincolnshire artist George Storey, was appointed to the School to teach Art. She and the school secretary, Barbara Heathcote, were apparently unable to use the staff common room, which was a male preserve be-fogged with toxic tobacco smoke, so they spent their breaks and dinner hours in School House where they became good friends of Margaret's mother. It was Mrs Ward to whom Margaret gave credit for igniting her lifelong hobbies of Music and Art, and persuaded her to act as an accompanist, and to play the piano during the boarders' concerts. She even used her as a female partner in her dancing classes with the boys. Margaret also recalled how Mrs Ward encouraged reluctant boys to develop their own artistic skills. I was one of those during the 1950s but, despite her best efforts, I confess that I remained both reluctant and incompetent in the subject! 'Could do better!'

Margaret also wrote that she remembered how much her father took to heart 'his boys' who suffered during the war. George Franklin had served in The Great War and was wounded, so he was able to identify with their experiences. One of the first to die when his plane crashed into the Atlas Mountains was David Edye. Michael 'Mick' Wall, who has painstakingly pieced together details of those Lincoln School alumni who sacrificed their lives during both world wars, recorded that he joined the RAF Voluntary Reserve on leaving school and trained in Edinburgh to become an Air Bomber. He is buried at El Alia Cemetery near Algiers. She also recalled how her mother threw herself into action 'in her quiet but active way', cooking for the boys when Cook was out, standing in for Matron, and catering because there was no-one available to tackle the challenges of the arcane rationing rules. She recalled how the boarders' ration books had to be organised, meticulously cut into tokens, and the butter and sugar, for example, carefully put out so that each boy received his fair portion. She even did the boarders' washing using a pre-historic-looking washing machine. Margaret returned home from school one day to find a table covered in socks where Mrs Clark, who had lost a son in the war, was darning them. Her mother told her that she thought it might help her with her tragic loss.

I now 'fast forward' to the year 2019. I had been in touch with Margaret by phone, and she told me that she wanted to donate some of her father's mementos from his head-magisterial career. Among the items that found their way into the Garton Archive was a painting of Lincoln School, commissioned by the staff, and presented to George Franklin on his retirement (see Appendix below). This is where the second artist enters the stage, second left! The staff had decided to ask a former part-time Art teacher at Lincoln School, Mr John Denby Wheeldon, to paint the striking picture below, which now hangs on a corridor in the former Headmaster's house currently part of the School's administrative quarters. More informed Art critics than I will no doubt correct me, but it seems to have certain Lowryesque qualities, and is refreshingly different in quality and style from the more traditional drawings and paintings of Lincoln School.



I then searched for more information about the artist but found little in *The Lincolnian* magazines during his tenure. However, Professor Charles Garton's meticulously researched card index does provide some basic details. He was appointed in September 1935 as a part-time Art master; a post that was made permanent in July 1937. The Governor's Minutes confirmed his appointment on a salary of £2 2s per week during term-time only. However, he left suddenly in February 1938 owing to the fact that the Lincoln Education Authority ceased to employ his wife as a teacher, as only one income was allowed per family. What is particularly surprising to me is that it was apparently a left-wing council that had made the decision. How attitudes and practices have changed. Professor Garton recorded that John Wheeldon left for a full-time post teaching Art at Blackpool School of Art on a salary considerably in excess of the stipend he received at Lincoln School. Mr Ronald Charles Morley was appointed as a part-time Art teacher in his place (Governors' Minutes 18th March 1938). Mr Morley had previously taught at Northampton and Leicester Colleges of Art, and was appointed to teach handwork, drawing, design, architecture, lettering, fabric painting, lino arts, imaginative painting, still life, memory drawing, and commercial work, etc. (Staff Appointments Register); quite a challenge for a part-time teacher! A registered conscientious objector, he took up agricultural work in 1941, and Mrs D M Ward replaced him as a full-time teacher of Art.

It was in 1939 that John Wheeldon and his wife opened an art shop on The Strait in Lincoln, and below is a photograph kindly sent to me by the Wheeldon family, showing its position a short way above the top end of Lincoln High Street.



I then turned to the Wheeldon family, who were delighted to hear about the painting and my interest in it, for more details of John's life and work.

John Denby Wheeldon was born in Byron Street, Arnold, Nottingham on May 6th 1914. His father Jack Wheeldon was a miner, who worked at the coal face as a hewer. The family moved to Lincoln in about 1920 and settled in a property at the eastern end of Monks Road. John always remembered the journey to Lincoln in a steam wagon, stopping half-way to suck up water from a ditch to feed the boiler. He attended Lincoln Technical College at the western end of Monks Road c1928 at a time when there was a need for good draftsmen, qualified as a member of the National Register of Industrial Art Designers, and began work at Ruddocks, the printers and stationers in Lincoln. He was later sacked from the job for not meeting a work deadline and described it as the best thing that ever happened to him.

John then began working at the Lincoln School of Art with further part-time work as an Art teacher at Lincoln School. In 1936 he was engaged to make accurate detailed drawings of St Peter at Arches Church which at that time was situated in the High Street, north of the Stonebow. The church was to be dismantled and rebuilt on Lamb Gardens on the newly-built St Giles housing estate and, with the drawings completed, John visited Sir Francis Hill expecting to be remunerated for the work, but was only offered a second-hand cricket bat! Worse still he didn't even play the game! John designed a humorous cover for a booklet entitled 'The Story of a Great Adventure' describing the relocation of the church. He served in the RAF during the Second World War, and around 1943 he and his second wife Gladys decided to buy their own home and purchased a rather run-down stone building, Beck Cottage in Heighington, near Lincoln. They also set up various shops in Lincoln with John's brother Harry at 8 Steep Hill, 3 The Strait and 22 Sincil Street. In 1945 John returned from the RAF and ran his side of the business from Steep Hill offering a range of trades from artwork to printing, leatherwork and weaving. In the early fifties he

moved the business a few hundred yards down the hill to 12 The Strait, which was more convenient for customers.

John often took work home, which he carried out on the dining table after the evening meal, usually accompanied by the sound of classical music, opera or boxing commentary on the wireless. He provided a complete service for anyone interested in art: materials, books, original paintings, framing, restoration and advice. He produced a series of black- and-white pen drawings including views and postcards of Lincoln which were printed on an old Cropper treadle printing machine or made as larger prints. He was also accepting commissions for original drawings and paintings, the painting of Lincoln School being a good example. The watercolour depicts the School as seen from Wragby Road and was mounted and framed by the artist himself. The reverse side of the frame bears the signatures of the School's teaching staff in 1957, many of whom will be recognised with varying degrees of respect and affection by several decades of Old Lincolnians (see appendix below).

Robin Wheeldon, one of John's sons, recalled his father describing the painting:

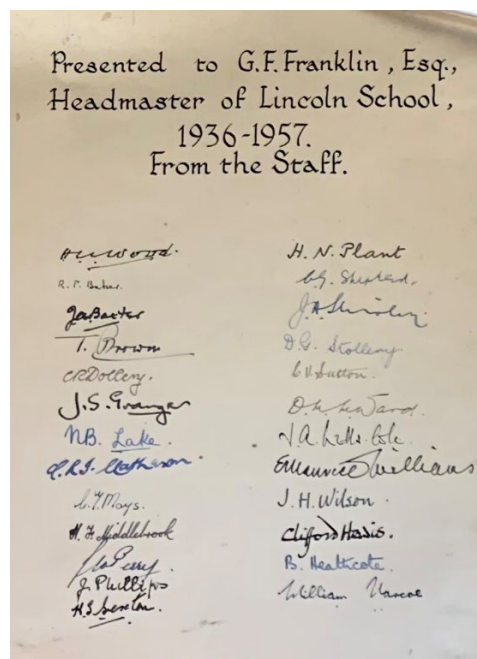
"A few years ago my father described the painting of the 'school picture'. After arriving at Wragby Road he searched for a suitable viewpoint. From ground level a hedge and trees blocked the view. Looking around he noticed a bedroom window at 122 Wragby Road, almost opposite the main school gates. He spoke to the homeowner who was sympathetic to the task and was shown the bedroom. John was then able to complete his drawing. The homeowner turned out to be Mr. William Rigby, at that time (1957) a director of the famous Lincoln engineering company Foster-Gwynne Ltd. Rigby was apprenticed to Wm. Foster & Co. Ltd. in 1903 and became chief draftsman in 1914. Working alongside William Tritton and Walter Wilson the team was responsible for the design of the world's first fighting tank. Rigby spent all his working life (sixty years) at the Wellington Foundry, Firth Road, finally retiring in 1963. Fifty-eight years after the meeting on Wragby Road I was designing a silhouette of William Rigby for the Tank Memorial on Tritton Road roundabout."

They do say that Lincoln is a small place and this tale of two artists proves the point, for there is another twist to the story. After the death of Gladys, John married Marjorie, the widow of Robert Blatherwick, who from the 1940s had taught pottery at Lincoln Art School before becoming a freelance. The two couples had known each other for years. In fact, Gladys had taught Marjorie at South Park High School for Girls in the late 1930s. John and Marjorie enjoyed another nine years together with many trips in their newly acquired camper van notably to Ireland, visits to art galleries, exhibitions etc. Sadly, particularly for an artist, John's eyesight was increasingly affected with macular disease which became more serious as years went by. Marjorie died in 2007 and John carried on although almost blind for another year. He died on 31st August 2008 aged ninety-four. Robert and Marjorie's nephew, David, was in the same form at Lincoln School as I was, and we would both have been at the presentation of the painting to Headmaster George F Franklin in 1957. Small world indeed!

I am most grateful to Margaret Franklin for so kindly donating the painting and some of her own artwork, and to Robin and Tim (Jeremy) Wheeldon and their family for their interest, and for allowing me to use the biography of their father's fascinating life. The painting of Lincoln School by John Wheeldon now hangs proudly in the former Headmaster's House, where the Franklin family lived for twenty years.

Appendix

Appended to the reverse side of the frame of John Wheeldon's painting of Lincoln School are the signatures of the staff who commissioned it.



The signatures are relatively easy to decipher, and include the secretary Barbara Heathcote, an LHS alumna, and William Varcoe who taught piano lessons and gave recitals with Music Master Clifford Hewis. Tom Brown was the former head teacher of Bracebridge Junior School, and did some part-time teaching in the lower school following his retirement. 'Shrubby' Plant and 'Weary' Williams were former member of staff who would have known John Wheeldon during his tenure at the School.

Acknowledgements

The Wheeldon Family for their interest and help with biographical details.

Sir David Blatherwick for providing me with information about his family's relationship with the Wheeldon family, and for editing some of the text.

Geoff Eastgate, a boarder and contemporary of mine at Lincoln School, who kept in touch with Margaret Franklin, and transported the Wheeldon painting from her home to Lincoln.

Sian Parker, who used her professional photographic skills to provide a stunning image of the painting.

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