

# SIR CHARLES WHEELER KCVO

by John Blamire-Brown

*These notes have been compiled mainly from newspaper cuttings, many from the Express & Star and from information kindly supplied by the Royal Academy. So, they reveal a portrait of Sir Charles as others saw him. Sir Charles's, as he saw himself, is to be found in his Autobiography "High Relief" which was published in 1968 by Country Life Books. It seems impertinent to bowdlerise his own autobiography and these notes have been compiled without reference to that.*

*John Blamire-Brown*

## Sir Charles Wheeler KCVO (1892-1974)

### Introduction

Sir Charles Wheeler, who was born and buried in Codsall, achieved national fame by his Presidency of the Royal Academy – the first sculptor to hold this high office – his Knighthood, and local fame by his Freedom of the Borough (now City) of Wolverhampton and locally by his Presidency of the Codsall Civic Society. So, his lifetime achievements and local connections interest us.

### Childhood

Charles Wheeler was born at The Cottage, Church Road, Codsall, on 14th March 1892 and was baptised in Codsall Church by the Vicar, Reverend Oliver Dunn, on St George's Day. He was given the names Charles Thomas. His father (Samuel Phipps Wheeler) was a journalist. His mother was Annie Florence, third child of Jeremiah Crowther, a Works Manager.

The Cottage is red brick with black and white half-timbering. The family did not stay long in Codsall and moved to Goldthorn Terrace, Wolverhampton. During Sir Charles's presidency of the Royal Academy of Arts, Codsall people thought it right to place a plaque on the house where he was born as a tribute to him. The bronze plaque, previously approved by Sir Charles, was provided by local subscription including a donation from the Codsall Parish Council. Mr John Harness and his wife (the former actress Penelope Shaw) and their daughters, Caroline and Jessica, then lived at the house and readily agreed to the plaque being placed near their front door. Mr Harness was a joint managing director of the Engraving Co. Ltd. of Wolverhampton. The plaque was designed by a friend of Sir Charles, Mr Horace J Sadler, of 59 Codsall Road, Wolverhampton.

When Sir Charles came to view the plaque on 10th October 1960, he said: "Not only is my name now inscribed in imperishable bronze, but I am glad that the name of the Royal Academy, whose servant I am and which for two hundred years has encouraged the arts, should be brought to my native village. Usually a plaque is not erected until after one's death and to view one during one's lifetime is a little like a man reading his own obituary. Sir Charles was accompanied on this occasion by his wife, his elder brother John and his niece, Mrs J Baugh.

Those present included Geoffrey Woodward who was then Chairman of both the Codsall Parish and the Seisdon Rural District Councils. At one time, the planning of the route of the bypass of Codsall Square threatened 'The Cottage'. Representations at the time by the Seisdon Rural District Council urged the saving of the property because it was the birthplace of Charles Wheeler.

## SIR CHARLES SEES HIS PLAQUE



Sir Charles Wheeler, president of the Royal Academy, views the plaque on the house where he was born in Codsall. He is seen here, left, with the chairman of Seisdon Rural District Council and Codsall Parish Council, Councillor G. Woodward.

*Greeting Sir Charles, Mr. G. Woodward, chairman of both Codsall parish and Seisdon rural district councils, said Sir Charles was a person who delighted in creating things for the public to see and he had been asked to Codsall on this occasion as a tribute.*

*Sir Charles said that for him it was a unique occasion.*

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*He was glad, not only that his name was now inscribed in bronze, but also that the name of the Royal Academy, which for 200 years had encouraged the arts, had been brought to his native village and that its name should be in Codsall for "many years to come."*

EXPRESS & STAR

## Academy president returns 'home' - to Codsall

Sir Charles Wheeler, president of the Royal Academy since 1956, returned to Codsall yesterday afternoon to view a plaque erected in his honour on The Cottage, the house where he was born in Church-road, on March 14, 1892.

Sir Charles drove up to the red brick and black and white half-timbered cottage with Lady Wheeler, his elder brother, Mr. John Wheeler, and his niece Mrs. J. Baugh.

The house has been the home of Mr. John Harness and his wife, the former actress Miss Penelope Shaw, for the past three and a half years. It was they who agreed that the bronze plaque should be placed near the front door.

The plaque, subscribed for by local residents and Codsall Parish Council, was approved by Sir Charles some time ago.

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### Border predator

MARIBOR, Yugoslavia, Tuesday. A giant bear which spent his days in Austria and returned to hunt Yugoslavian sheep by night was shot on the borders of a court after shepherds in the mountainous region of Mizice found 90 of their sheep slaughtered in one night.—Reuter.

## **Education**

Charles attended St Luke's Church School and the Wolverhampton Higher Grade School (the Gram-mar School). His interest in art developed and, at the age of 15, he won a scholarship to the Wolverhampton School of Art. Robert Emerson, a local artist, was his mentor and his talent turned towards sculpture. Emerson's ex-pupils were called 'the Wolverhampton School'. Charles won a scholarship to the South Kensington Royal College of Art – a clear acknowledgement of his talents, but it took time for recognition to come. He studied under Professor Edouard Lanteri. He won second prize, worth £200 (a lot of money in those days) in a competition and, he says, that enabled him to marry Muriel Bourne whom he had met in art class in Wolverhampton. Life was understandably austere, but his fortune changed when he got a commission to fashion a bronze memorial tablet to Rudyard Kipling's son, John, who had been killed at the age of 17 at Loos in the First World War. The bronze is in Burwash Church, Sussex.

## **Marriage**

Charles married Miss Muriel Bourne in 1918 – herself a gifted sculptor and painter and the younger daughter of A W Bourne. They had a son Robin and a daughter Carol.

## **The Man**

"A charmingly modest person of gentle conversational manners though he could be courageously forthright in condemning the worst aspects of modernist art. It was always a pleasure to meet him at the Chelsea Arts Club which he frequently visited"

"His personal charm and integrity of character irradiated all his actions. From the chair, his invariable courtesy and patience encouraged open discussions, but he was firm in his recommendations and in accepting the majority view. As a leader, Sir Charles had the knack of extracting support above the ordinary effort from colleagues and subordinates at all levels. The overriding sense that all who worked with this unusual personality must feel is one of affectionate gratitude."

"His physical stature was Lilliputian against his monuments. He could only be described as a dapper little man with a bow tie; however, Wheeler's unassuming charm and sensitivity transcended even his monolithic Telamons on the Bank of England."

"Sir Charles looks almost fragile until you notice his large, muscular hands."

## **Profession**

Charles Wheeler exhibited for the first time at the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1914. He became an Associate of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1934 and was advanced to membership in 1940 – he was not yet 50 years old. He was President of the British Society of Sculptors from 1945-1949. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the United States Academy of Design. He was instrumental in founding the Society of Portrait Sculptors of which he became the first President in 1953.

During his Presidency of the Royal Academy of Arts, he had to deal with putting the Academy's finances on a sound footing. This was achieved primarily through the sale in 1962 of a most treasured possession, the Leonardo cartoon of the Virgin and Child with the Infant St John. At the Academy's banquet in 1960, Sir Charles made an attack on "absurdities in modern art" which he described as "feverish" disorders.

He resigned from the Arts Council in 1959 when they arranged an exhibition by the Italian sculptor Giacometti which Wheeler described as "not genuine". He said: "if art is to be worthy, we must go back to the old masters, who never worked without supreme exertions".

Charles lived and worked for over 40 years at his studio in Cathcart Road off Fulham Road, South Kensington.

### **Freedom**

Sir Charles was admitted as an Honorary Freeman of Wolverhampton at a ceremony at the Wulfrun Hall on 21st April 1958 during the mayoralty of Alderman Mrs R F Ilsley. Dr J H Sheldon CBE, director of medicine at the Royal Hospital, was admitted at the same time. Dr Sheldon, who had been President of the International Association of Gerontology, spent his retirement at Codsall Wood.

A silver casket holds the resolution which had been passed at a special meeting of the Borough Council held on 24th March 1956 to confer this honour on Sir Charles. At the ceremony Sir Charles said: "This is a very bright day in my life. It will be inscribed in my mortal journey's log in letters of gold. This is, I suppose, a case of 'local lad makes good' a success story. Now success is a fickle jade. The clothes upon her back may be put there through hard work - I do not deny this - but her jewels are the gift of chance.

I am aware of the enormous share which the hand of benign circum-stance has taken in the writing of it. I do not think that I was especially favoured when the talents were handed out, but luck has leaned heavily on my side. The memory of today's happenings, of the concourse of people, will always remain with me and help to bind even nearer to my heart this dear home town with hoops of steel."

### **Wolverhampton**

In November 1948, Mr Charles Wheeler presented the prizes at the Wolverhampton School of Art - his old school. He advised the students "to make war on ugliness. If a beautiful building is pulled down or an ugly one put up, then know the reason why". He also said that he hoped that the students would raise their voices and hands in protest if it were proposed to despoil their countryside in any way.

In 1958 Sir Charles performed two functions in the Borough – opening the Dale Street flats on 21st October and on the next day opening at the Art Gallery, an exhibition sponsored by the Express & Star of antiques, period furniture, porcelain, silver and paintings. Lady Wheeler presented the prizes in July 1960 at Wolverhampton's Royal School and Sir Charles was himself presented with a history of the School. They were welcomed to the School by the Chairman of the Governors, Mr F L Steward.

Sir Charles was forthright and, whilst appreciative of the occasions when he was invited to Wolverhampton, it was he said, "only to make speeches". In conversation he was critical of the authorities. "Why have they not appointed a curator at the Art Gallery and why haven't they modernised the Central Library? It is a prosperous town; what do people do with their money?" That was in 1966. Five years earlier he had said that "Wolverhampton people do not appear to be interested in art! Indeed, in 1961, he urges the Wolverhampton Civic Society "to inform Wulfrunians of their town's history and traditions beginning with the founder.

Whilst the statue of the Prince Consort was good and greatly added to the attractiveness of Queen Square, a statue of the Lady Wulfruna would add even more. Public art should not be confined to the visual, but include good social services, cooking, transport, manners and neighbourliness - the art of living as a whole. The battle is on and if intelligence is to win against apathy, ignorance and low self-interest, we must take up arms at once – the time is short – before it is too late and this city set on a hill is spoilt beyond saving."

As art and design found its place in modern society, the Wolverhampton School (later College) of Art was translated into the Faculty of Art and Design at the Wolverhampton Polytechnic and Sir Charles presided over the opening ceremony in 1970. The Polytechnic is, of course, now the University of Wolverhampton.

### **Codsall Civic Society**

Sir Charles was invited in 1966 to become the first President of the Codsall and District Civic Society which had been formed that year. He gave his presidential address at a meeting of the Society on 31st October 1967. He spoke for 45 minutes and was received with great acclamation. He spoke of his early life in Codsall. He saw the three main objectives of the Society to be the preservation of trees, the battle against litter, and education. He highlighted the "Three Ps" -

*PAROCHIAL:* communal concern for the village and its neighbourhood

*POSTERITY:* preservation of trees and monuments for future generations and replanting of new trees to replace those which have been lost

*PERSONAL:* the right to defend one's home

Sir Charles attended the Society's dinner at Pendrell Hall in 1973.

### **Retirement**

In 1968 the Wheelers had to move from their house at Merstham, Surrey, because the enormous four-level intersection between the M25 and the M23 was to be constructed nearby. The Merstham house, set in four-and-a-half acres of wooded land, was timbered and 400 years old. They moved to a little Sussex farmhouse where "we hope to get the peace and quiet we have been enjoying for the last 20 years."

### **Funeral**

Sir Charles Wheeler lived at Five Ashes, Mayfield, Sussex, before his death on 22nd August 1974 aged 82. Was it the expressed wish of Sir Charles or the decision of his widow and family that he should be buried in the village of his birth? But after such an outstanding career and a life-time 'centre stage' in London and as an international figure, the fact that he should return to Codsall is appealing in its simplicity.

The funeral, conducted by the Vicar of Codsall, Reverend Gilbert Smith L.Th, took place in St Nicholas Church on 29th August. An address was given by his old friend, Rev Leighton Thomas, Vicar of Chelsea Old Church. Lady Wheeler was not able to be present owing to ill health. The family mourners included Mr and Mrs Robin Wheeler (son and daughter-in-law), Miss Carol Wheeler (daughter), Mr and Mrs S W Wheeler (brother and sister-in-law), and there were also present representatives from the Royal Academy of Arts, Society of British Sculptors, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, University of Keele, Express & Star and other Wolverhampton associations and, from Codsall, the Civic Society, Women's Institute and Parish Council.

The grave is by the path leading from the Church to the Old Church School and the fine headstone records that Lady Wheeler is also buried there.

### **Gift to Village**

Sir Charles Wheeler graciously bequeathed to the village of Codsall his sculpture - a bronze statue "The Lone Singer". Sir Charles had hoped to do a work especially for the village and had visited sites with members of the Parish Council in the Spring of 1973 but he fell ill. He was then over 80 years old. The statue was officially unveiled by his son, Robin, in December 1975 – European Architectural Heritage Year. (See photographs overleaf)



\* "Mother and child" at the Civic Hall, Wolverhampton.

\* A Peter Pan statuery – three animal groups cast in bronze – unveiled by Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, in New Zealand.

\* Bishop Jacob Memorial Church, Ilford; Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle; Rhodes House, Oxford; Haileybury College Chapel; Royal Empire Society; Church House, Westminster.

\* "Earth, Air, Fire and Water" (1952), each over 13 feet high, at the Ministry of Defence.

*The Lone Singer*

## Statues & Sculptures

Works by Sir Charles Wheeler, as well as 'The Lone Singer', (left) include:

\* A marble bust of Her Majesty the Queen (commissioned by the Royal Academy and taking six sittings), of Yehudi Menuhin, and of Lawrence of Arabia.

\* Lady Wulfruna, which stands at the top of the steps leading from the Civic Centre to St Peter's Church, Wolverhampton. It was commissioned by the Express & Star to mark the newspaper's centenary in 1974.

\* Works at the Bank of England (sculpture on the facade), India House (where he carved huge blocks of Portland stone), South Africa House, Westminster Bridge.

\* The bust and fountain which form the Jellicoe Memorial in Trafalgar Square.

\* One of his first commissions was 'Madonna and Child' as part of the War Memorial in the Cloisters at Winchester College. This commission was awarded by the eminent architect, Sir Herbert Baker, and led to a close working relationship for over 20 years.

\* "Spring" (1930) described as one of the most beautiful works achieved by any sculptor in this century. A bronze bust "Infant Christ" (1924) – modelled on his son. Both were purchased under the Chantry Bequest and are in the Tate Gallery.

