

This talk, and the associated one about the architect Lionel Pearson, was given at the unveiling of a Blue Plaque at *Grayflete*, North Hinksey, Oxford, now the home of Dr Mark and Mrs Katharine Payton and formerly the home of Sir Muirhead Bone, artist and printmaker, on Saturday 20 September 2025:

SIR MUIRHEAD BONE – 1876-1953

Muirhead Bone, artist, printmaker and Britain's first ever official War Artist, was born in Partick, Glasgow on 23 March 1876 and died on 21 October 1953. He lived at *Grayflete*, which he and his wife built for themselves in 1930-31, for the last 22 years of his life. It gives me great pleasure to see him being honoured with a Blue Plaque here at his much-loved home this afternoon, and I am immensely grateful to Mark and Katie Payton for the energy and enthusiasm with which they have supported this project. The timing of it is good as next year will be the 150th anniversary of his birth.

It is easy to forget that, at the time of his birth, the British Empire was at the height of its power and Glasgow was the Empire's undisputed Second City, famed throughout the world for its ship-building and manifold industrial enterprises. Despite enormous disparities of wealth it was the sixth most prosperous city in Europe, offering boundless opportunities to those citizens with ability and initiative.

Background and early life:

Muirhead's father, an ex-cobbler's apprentice from Ayr on the Scottish coast, moved into journalism via an interest in cricket, and became shipping and cricket correspondent for the North British Daily Mail. Muirhead was the fourth of eight children. Despite their modest background it is striking that two of the eight children were eventually knighted, Muirhead himself and his brother David who finished up as Naval Commander during the Second World War, and that another brother, James, followed their father into journalism and finished up as London editor of the Manchester Guardian for 33 years, being made a Companion of Honour in 1947. Clearly this was a family with very considerable natural ability.

Their mother died when Muirhead was 10. There was no money and no question of any of the children going to University. The children all attended the local Board School and as the boys reached the age of 14 they were placed in apprenticeships according to their abilities and aptitudes. Muirhead, presumably because of manifest artistic ability, was articled to a small architectural firm for four years. He completed the apprenticeship but had no further training as an architect though the architectural draughtsmanship undoubtedly stood him in good stead. At 16 he started evening classes at Glasgow School of Art and at 18 he set out to become an artist. To support himself he worked in a variety of jobs, attending Glasgow School of Art evening school. He never attended the college of art full time.

Thus he was largely self-taught and this included teaching himself print-making from books and experimentation, notably on an etching press he acquired for £25 from D.Y. Cameron

when Cameron moved from Glasgow to London in 1898. Within a year he had published his first set of prints – the *Glasgow Set* – two of which, in my opinion, are amongst the best prints he ever made.

Mature working and family life:

In January 1902 Muirhead moved to London and, though he made frequent visits to Scotland, the south of England was where he made his home for the rest of his life.

He arrived in London with a number of contacts, notably via Francis Dodd, artist, printmaker and close school friend, and two young architects whom he met via Francis Dodd, namely Charles Holden and Lionel Pearson, who were to become lifelong friends. By that time Muirhead was already engaged to be married to Francis Dodd's sister, Gertrude. Two important contacts were Charles Aitken, later Director of the Tate Gallery, and Campbell Dodgson, Assistant Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Dodgson, as well as being an avid collector of Bone's prints, went on to write the catalogues of Bone's prints and promote his work in numerous ways.

Muirhead Bone's reputation grew steadily, both as printmaker and landscape draughtsman, notably of urban landscapes. He was making prints at a time, especially in the 1920s, when there was a booming print market, until the boom came to an abrupt end following the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

He repeatedly and studiously avoided becoming involved in the Royal Academy, instead preferring to exhibit with like-minded printmakers at the newly formed 'Society of Twelve' (1904) and the New English Art Club. In 1900-11 he and his family – he had two school-age boys by this stage – spent a year in Italy, travelling and drawing or printmaking, funded entirely by him sending work to Colnaghi, by this time his dealers in London; they remained so for the rest of his life.

First World War and its aftermath:

Following the outbreak of war in 1914 he did not volunteer but chose to continue working quietly in north London where the family was living at the time. In May 1916 a new Conscription Bill was passed and he faced being called up. At this stage a Liberal politician, Charles Masterman, became involved, though it is not clear exactly how this happened. He was head of the War Propaganda Bureau, the government's main propaganda agency. It should be remembered that Britain was an Imperial Power and all the colonies were involved in supplying troops and supporting the war effort. Propaganda came to be seen as vital, to bolster this support and also to try to influence neutral states, especially the United States. Muirhead Bone was appointed Britain's first official War Artist, effective from 12 July 1916. He was seen as someone who worked quickly in black and white which could be easily reproduced in print. He worked indefatigably and was very successful in the role though he himself is said to have been disappointed with his work as a war artist. Most of his work from the war years is in the Imperial War Museum in south London.

By the end of the war he was in his mid-40s and had become an establishment figure. His family life was settled. His sons, Stephen, b.1904, and Gavin, b.1907, were becoming teenagers. Stephen was to follow his father into becoming a career artist, and was to marry another artist, Mary Adshead, in 1929. They went on to have successful careers and had two sons and a daughter. Gavin was an undergraduate and later a fellow at St John's College, Oxford, his subject being Anglo-Saxon. Sadly he was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1929 and died of this condition in 1942, which had a devastating effect on his mother.

Over the next 35 years Muirhead became fairly well-to-do, and was widely honoured with honorary degrees from St Andrew's, Oxford, Liverpool, and Glasgow universities. At different times he was a trustee of the Imperial War Museum, Tate and the National Gallery. To the end of his life he continued working as an artist, though he did not produce any prints after 1939. He was a war artist again in the Second World War. He died of leukaemia in Oxford in October 1953 and is commemorated with a tablet in the crypt of St Paul's. He was highly esteemed, kind, supportive of artists who were less fortunate than he was, and was seen as a man of integrity. I believe he was a great man and he is someone I would dearly like to have known.

Links to Oxford:

I have no idea what led Muirhead Bone to visit Oxford for the first time nor indeed when he first did so. What I can say is that he was definitely here in 1905 because it was then that he did the first of the drawings of Oxford buildings – *Exeter and Brasenose Colleges from the Radcliffe Camera* – that were to adorn Oxford Almanacks over many years. Again I have no idea how he came to be commissioned to do these drawings but what we do know is that he did more of them than any other artist – 15 in all spanning the years from 1906 to 1951. The original drawings for many of them can be seen in the Western Art Print Room at the Ashmolean – it is simply a matter of phoning or emailing to make an appointment and the Print Room supervisors will make them available. Muirhead Bone also did his first Oxford drypoint in 1905, interestingly a distant view of Oxford from North Hinksey – almost the identical view that he would have had from this house, but taken from lower down the hill; it is tempting to think that he fell in love with this view of Oxford at that time and 25 years later was able to buy the land to enable him to build his home on this site.

Because of his work on the Almanacks he would have been a regular visitor to Oxford before the First World War. As a consequence of his son Gavin's position at St John's College, he developed close ties with the college. Through the years he did numerous drawings of the city and also a small number of prints. In 1937 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters (D.Litt.) by Oxford University, in the same year that he received his knighthood for services to art. In 1953 his wife's book *Came to Oxford*, with illustrations by Muirhead, was published.

LIONEL PEARSON:

Before I finish I want to say a few words about the house and the architect, Lionel Pearson.

Pearson, born in Liverpool in 1879, studied architecture and worked in Liverpool and Manchester before moving to London in the early 1900s. From 1904 he was working in a practice in central London based at 28 Woburn Place, Russell Square, with Harry Adams and Charles Holden.

His architectural work included a number of hospitals, but he is best known perhaps for the Grade 1 listed *Royal Artillery Memorial* at Hyde Park Corner which he designed with Charles Jagger, and also for being the architect for Stanley Spencer's *Sandham Memorial Chapel*, at Burghclere, off the A34 just south of Newbury, and well worth a visit for those who don't know it. Spencer's extraordinary murals cover the interior of the chapel and were inspired by his experiences in Macedonia in the First World War.

Muirhead met both Pearson and Holden in about 1898 and remained very friendly with them for many years, as attested by the fact that Muirhead sent drawings to Pearson at Christmas for 50 years; he was in the habit of doing this with close friends, and the drawings date from the early 1900s to the last, a little drawing of the *Strikers on the Clock at Carfax*, which was sent to Melinda and Lionel Pearson at Christmas 1952. Rather poignantly it was the last Christmas for both of them; Lionel died in March 1953 and Muirhead a few months later, in the October.

Incidentally the printmaker Francis Dodd, Bone's brother-in-law, did an etched portrait of Pearson in 1909. The Ashmolean holds impressions of all three states of the print, which can be viewed in the Print Room.

Turning to the house, *Grayflete*, which draws on the Arts and Crafts tradition with some influence from the country houses designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. From the outside the noteworthy features are the facing with beautiful hand-made brick and a Cotswold slate roof, finely graded from tiny slates at the ridge to a larger slate at the eaves; so used are we to consistently-sized tiles that we don't immediately notice how strikingly elegant is the graded slate. An unusual feature is the covered loggia on the first floor facing south and east, specifically designed to enable Gavin, already suffering from the tuberculosis that was to kill him in April 1942, to sleep outside when the weather allowed. The gardens and terrace were carefully laid out with the terrace leading down to a lawn and several garden walks, which Mark and Katie, to their credit, are making much effort to restore.

Harry Dickinson
20 September 2025

Selected bibliography –

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OXFORD ALMANACKS done by MUIRHEAD BONE, 1906-1951:

- 1906: Exeter & Brasenose Colleges from the Radcliffe Camera
- 1907: Catte Street, looking towards the High: late Afternoon
- 1908: A View of Kettel Hall and Broad Street
- 1909: Worcester College
- 1910: Tom Tower under Repair
- 1918: The Hall of Christ Church from the South
- 1932: The Examination Schools
- 1934: The Centenary of the Oxford Movement, Christ Church, 18 July 1933
- 1937: The Canterbury Quadrangle, St John's College
- 1938: The Clarendon Building from the Gate of Wadham
- 1940: The Ashmolean and Balliol College from Beaumont Street
- 1944: The River, Autumn
- 1946: St Giles's Fair, 1945
- 1948: View of Oxford from Ferry Hinksey
- 1951: Building Nuffield College

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