

Frederick Etchells – 20th July 2024

The Thatched Cottage, West Challow, Wantage, Vale of White Horse, Oxfordshire, OX12 9TN

Oxfordshire Blue Plaque: <https://www.oxonblueplaques.org.uk/plaques/etchells.html>

Malcolm Dickson

I feel very privileged to be asked to talk about Etchells. I do not feel this is inappropriate since this is even how his daughter Susan Wyatt referred to him.

My interest started after I was set an essay in my first degree in architecture.

The title for the essay was “the House is a machine for living in” based upon a quote by the then demi God. Architecture, Le Corbusier (Charles Édouard Jeanneret).

Based on a quote from “Towards a new architecture”, which was one of the first books, in all colleges of architecture reading list in the 1980s and 1990s and even before.

I heard the Chairman of the SPAB, David Heath, also had this as one of the seminal texts to read as a student, where he would sit with classmates and compare the French and English texts together. I too have done this, but it was more to boast of who knew most high-school French. Of course our Belgian classmates were not interested in this exercise at all.

I myself was not a great fan of people who were raised on such great pedestals, that is not to say I do not like his architecture. It is the status of Architect that I found a little disconcerting. I was not keen on the fact that Le Corbusier was dictating how people should be living in a set of defined and rigid parameters. Instructions on how a Home should be designed.

I don't think Etchells was either, despite becoming an expert. He was a designer in his own right.

He was convinced by John Rodker to do the translation and arrange the format photographs and typesetting, which was very difficult at that time. (I suspect this skill had developed with his publication of “BLAST”)

One of the great quotes from the book Vers Une architecture was “the plan is the generator”. It was this quote which was a pivot point. For me. Le plan est le générateur. Sans plan, il y a désordre

Lecturers were contradicting the statement. Saying the translator had misinterpreted the original statement.

I found it highly intriguing the fact that the translator should be the reason for the flaw in their demigod.

And that is what put the seed in my mind to find out more about Mr Etchells.

Since this book was being used as their seminal text.

With this seed in my head.

It was many years before I started to do my research into Etchells, and after I had started working at the survey of London the seed started to sprout.

I was working on the Clerkenwell volume of the Survey of London.

I made a passing comment about Vers une Architecture and Etchells. At which point Ros Woodhouse, one of the researchers there, told me about some designs Etchells did for St John's Gate. Which made me realise there **was** actually much more to him.

Whenever I picked up an academic book, I would look for both Marcel Duchamp and Etchells index to see if they appeared, and if they did I would eventually buy the book.

I am giving this back ground since it has impact on his progress his achievements along the way and why he is a person of significance, to the point when he came to West Challow.

Etchells was born in Newcastle upon Tyne.

He moved to London to study at the London Polytechnic, now the Royal College of Art. This was where he established his friendship with fellow artists and peers.

You have probably heard of the Bloomsbury group and the various people who painted circles, lived in squares and loved in triangles. Etchells was not part of the triangles, he did experiment with the styles.

Etchells's was part of the Omega workshop, although there is little known of his work in the group. The group ethos was a collective, not individuals, however some of them chose to sign their work, which is probably why Etchells is less well-known member since he adhered to the concept of the anonymity and the group ethos.

He was a great friend of Duncan Grant, and said that the two of them would titillate their work with provocative images. (They are probably still a bit risqué today.)

He split from the Omega Group after some of the members fell out with Roger Fry.

There is a significant signed letter known as a 'round robin', that is quoted for this breakaway group, who became the vorticists

He was obviously still friends with Fry since he visited Charleston with his sister, and they have a painting of him and his sister in the house.

Later Vanessa Bell wrote to Virginia Woolf stating that Etchells is still a bore and still working with Suffragettes. Seems Bell was rather condescending of the Suffragette movement, whilst Etchells was more of an equalitarian.

I am yet to discover who these suffragettes might have been that he was working with - my suspicions that they might include Jessica Dismorr or Helen Saunders, I have some other favourites who might be architects.

The splinter group from Omega went onto form the Rebel Art Centre, a short-lived affair, of only a month on Great Ormand Street, now replaced by the famous Hospital.

It is an intriguing coincidence that the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings SPAB had moved into a building almost opposite the Rebel Art Groups Studio at number 55 in 1936.

You can maybe see the building out of the Window if you watch the film ***The Black Windmill***, with Michael Caine.

The Rebel Art centre was a long corridor with studios off it; here they transformed into The Vorticists, what I would describe as British Dada, through their connection of other European artists especially the Italian Marinetti who was part of the Futurists.

This was a period of art when the avant-garde were working on and developing the existing trends. According to his daughter Susan, Etchells was not very keen on all the angular stuff. Despite being very well accomplished in it.

But you can see from his portfolio that he like the others tested out different themes.

The people who formed the vorticists

This might be a little boring but I am going to list the names of the Vorticists which included

Kate Lechmere
 Jessica Dismorr *
 Helen Saunders *
 Christopher Nevinson *
 Edward Wadsworth *
 Cuthbert Hamilton *
 Henri Gaudier-Brzeska
 William Roberts *
 Wyndham Lewis *

I have mentioned these names since it seems they have their own careers in their own right. It appears that Wyndham Lewis was quite happy to paint over the Woman's work, apparently none of Kate Letchmere's paintings exist. I wonder if we scrape some of the works by Wyndham Lewis we might find more of her works revealed underneath, which the Courtauld has already proven.

Wyndham Lewis was apparently the lead, but William Robert's painted Etchells holding a copy of BLAST and wrote to him to inform him of this as the most significant character from the group. It seems that he was the one that was most involved in the printing and publication of their manifesto, despite being reluctant to sign it.

In 1916 Etchells spent time in a French prison suspected as a spy, by the way he looked with a huge beard.

He published BLAST before he was involved in the war.

The last point of the manifesto is

Item 10

The nearest thing in England to a great traditional French artist, is a great revolutionary English one.

These could be the Vorticists

The first edition of "**Blast**" is full of difficult print setting, and this style is attributed to Etchells hence later getting involved in translating "Vers Une Architecture" and other book publishing.

Etchells switched career to focus on becoming an architect, which led him into working for the Grosvenor estate which was mainly focused on the repair of buildings on the Estate in Mayfair.

And some new buildings including Mount Row, where all of the contents are listed with the building is a rare occasion.

It is probably some form of convergent evolution that Etchells got involved with Corbusier's translation, since there are great similarities between Roger Fry's treatise "**The Architectural Heresies of a Painter**", Roger Fry, 1921, full of similar analogies to Le Corbusier, not only that but Etchells was taught by, and did a bit of teaching under William Richard Lethaby. In the end of Lethaby's Book "**Mediaeval Art**" (1904) he broaches the beginning of "Vers Une Architecture".

And Etchells' translation:

I suppose I must touch on the topic of John Goodman's re-translation, apparently correcting some of the very specific text. I did pick up a copy in 2007 and had a look and I think I remember realising there were some subtle differences. But came to my own conclusion that language moves on. More than anything else Etchells already caveats the French of Corbusier in his introduction. I probably would not be so bold when I was younger to make this statement. That Etchells interpreted it his way at that time, he had a whole host of other architectural writing to lean on. Not only the works of Lethaby and Fry, but he also wrote under the pseudonym of Batty Langley a fascinating Georgian author, with exquisite architectural drawings.

Mainly Mass and volume are the controversial parallels, but a mathematician an architect and a sculptor just might interpret these differently. In planning terms the mass is interpreted as the bulkiness of any new addition.

Regardless my comment is more in line with the recognition of scholarly translation. It was only in 1999 that Seamus Heaney won an award for translating "**Beowulf**". Etchells should be seen to have done a great job. And for the pedants they might want to learn French to read the original.

His translation was hugely influential but not many people acknowledge him as the translator. There might also be some adverse publicity from Edwin Lutyens who was not a

fan of Corbusier, who contributed to some misunderstanding in his review in ***"The Architectural Review"***.

Whilst working for the Grosvenor estate, Etchells and Hester Sainsbury lived in one of the houses on the estate. They took on a lodger who you might be more familiar with, and that was namely John Betjeman. Betjeman shared time in the house and the Etchells became very fond of him, thinking of him as their prodigy.

Over breakfast and dinner they made short poems – one being three windows and a door is all I need and nothing more.

In 1932 Frederick marries Hester Sainsbury, she was a poet, illustrator and dancer. She put on plays and illustrated various books for the Golden Cockerel Press and Etchells had some involvement with these whilst publishing works for the Hazelwood Press.

There are a few buildings in Mayfair and Belgravia that Etchells worked on. At the time of my essay one of them was within the demise of the American Embassy, on Culross Street.

I never managed to get close to that because of the armed guards. And the robust fencing across the street. A fine Georgian Style Muse house.

He was able to embody the Georgian ethos in his new designs to match the street.

My favourite quote of Etchells appears in the *Architectural Review* where he refers to a modern man living in an Elizabethan style home.

In 1938 Etchells buys a house in West Challow. It could be Another house before they moved into Holmlea, which he began to renovate, and not revovate as I have it written in my thesis. Etchells was 53 and Hester was 49 when they started the renovation. Whilst there Etchells became the head warden of the village during the 2nd world war. Susan has recounted how hard it was for the children who were evacuated to the country and they took in a young girl who became a friend of Susan Etchells. Susan told me that Etchells destroyed all of his architectural drawings, claiming that it was all in various archives. This is no doubt true. As I have discovered for myself. But I always keep an eye out for searching Etchells in any archive.

Etchells a highly important figure in the planning of buildings in their environment:

He was highly important in the development of British Avant Garde art with the vorticists in reaction to the Bloomsbury Set, with What I would term British dada.

And he was highly important with developing his and his wife's protégé Sir John Betjeman.

In the last days of my thesis I discovered Etchells was responsible for saving houses and in the hamlet of Letchcombe Bassett which he passed onto Betjeman.

Now I realise that I have missed off many publications of the Hazelwood Press and the publication of ***"The Architectural Setting of Anglican Worship"***, by G. W. O. Addleshaw and Frederick Etchells, published in 1948.

I conveyed to Patrick that I regretfully missed a conference on the topic just in November of last year in Canterbury. It was a 75-year celebration of the book.

A whole day conference was spent on this book, which is great evidence of its importance.

Alas I never managed to hear about it until after the event.

There is still much more to be known about Etchells and his activities not least his book publications.

Thank you for listening to my ramblings and it is a delight that we can see some of the efforts of his labour in this house the Thatched Cottage here in West Challow.

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/17-november/features/features/the-dean-and-the-vorticist>

<https://www.pbs.org.uk/event/the-architectural-setting-of-anglicanworship-revisited-conference-at-the-university-of-kent-canterbury/>