



Rex Whistler



Rex in front of his tank with his tank crew

Rex Whistler 1905 - 1944

Christened Reginald John Whistler, but always known as Rex. He was born on June 24th 1905 in Eltham, Greater, London. From a very early age he was very good at drawing. He had a talent for drawing from memory which was quite frowned on when he was at The Royal Academy; he only lasted one term there. He was then taken on at Slade School of Art, where Professor Henry Tonks saw that he had a rare talent. He wanted his students to paint murals and that is how Rex came to paint the restaurant walls in the Tate Britain in London. Whilst at The Slade he was befriended by Stephen Tennant, son of Baron Glenconner and later on stepson of Viscount Grey. This was Rex's introduction to the rich and famous and also to Wiltshire, which he really loved and came back time and time again. It was through Stephen that Rex came in contact with Edith Olivier, who lived at Daye House in the grounds of Wilton House. This was a platonic relationship as Edith was 33 years older than him. But she became his mentor on almost everything that was going on in his life. During his lifetime because of her and Stephen's connections, Rex moved in the circle of the "bright young things" and painted for the rich and famous.

He was not just an artist; he illustrated books, designed posters and china, did stage sets as well as the costumes. In 1935 he leased "The Walton Cannonry" in The Close, Salisbury, initially for his parents, but he often stayed there and it is believed he would have come back there if he had survived the war and live there with his brother Laurence and his wife.

When war was declared in 1939, Rex although by now 35, was ready to serve in the army. It was a while before he finally got a commission in the Welsh Guards in 1940. Some of his time in training was spent in his favourite Wiltshire. It was generally thought by not only him but others, that his ability to draw exactly from memory and the fact he did so at speed would have been a great asset during the war. He however used his artistic ability to liven up every place they camped in with humorous and decorative paintings. But it wasn't until he had been with his troop for several years that he was offered the job of a camouflage artist. He refused as he had bonded with his men and he was very well thought of by them. He never stopped painting whilst he was in the army, even taking on several commissions. He then volunteered for the Guards Armoured division which meant he had to do training on tanks. His own Cromwell tank when they went to Normandy had a special little container at the back for his paints and brushes.

He was killed on the 18th July 1944 on the 1st day of the battle of Operation Goodwood by a mortar bomb exploding near his feet, hurling him into the air and breaking his neck. He was 39 years old and is buried in Banneville la Campagne War Cemetery, France.