

The Witter Family

Walter Witter was born on April 10th 1863 in Cheshire. He and his elder brother Arthur, were involved in the building enterprises of their father, William Preston Witter, during their youth, but both were more interested in drawing and painting in their free time and they would often skip work to go to the nearby woods to paint. Arthur Witter actually had some of his works exhibited at the Royal Academy, Liverpool and in other exhibitions between 1882 and 1904.

Walter met Marian Gaskell, who was also from Birkenhead, Cheshire. Her father was a cotton broker: her mother came from a large, talented family, many of whom made their names in the arts, literature, legal and stage professions. Her uncle, Jonathan Carr, acquired land at Turnham Green railway station in London and developed the renowned residential area of Bedford Park there. Jonathan Carr also built a School of Art, which became known as the Chiswick School of Art. The art school, together with a community clubhouse, helped to establish the reputation enjoyed by Bedford Park at the height of its popularity and many leading artistic and literary figures of the day used to live and visit there.

The School of Art opened in 1881 with the aim to offer courses in "...freehand drawing in all its branches, practical geometry and perspective, pottery and tile painting, design for decorative purposes as in furniture, metalwork, stained glass...". This is where Walter trained as a teacher of Arts and Crafts.

On January 4th, 1900, Walter and Marian (Marie) married and went to lodge in Freewaters Cottage in Ickleford, Herts. Walter took up a teaching post in Hitchin – probably at the Literary and Mechanics Institute whilst Marie, who was an expert needlewoman, carried out orders for embroidered trousseaux. She began teaching embroidery and needlework to the village schoolgirls at weekends and during holidays. As the girls left school they went to work full time with Marie. During this time Walter interested local boys in the art of making beaten brass and copper work. Their son Carr was born in 1902 and gradually the cottage began to bulge with school-leavers, needlecraft and metalwork so, in 1904, a workroom was put up in the meadow beside the cottage to house the 25-30 men and women employed in the business. A second building was added in 1906 to create a workshop for the brass and copper work and a forge for the wrought iron. The tapestry workroom was built with a platform at one end dressed with large curtains. Examples of the tapestry work was hung on the wall of the workroom.



Walter Witter



Marian (Marie) Witter



Alfred Witter



The Witter family punting

"It seems that ten years ago Mr. and Mrs Witter came to reside at Ickleford. Mr. Witter is an artist by profession, and Mrs Witter is the niece of Mr. John Carr, who originated at the Bedford Park estate, which was the first attempt to provide London with a picturesque suburb. Both were in deep sympathy with movements to create a taste for artistic work among the people, and thought they saw an opportunity of introducing occupations which might be at once elevating and profitable to those round them. So Mr. Witter began to teach metal work to a couple of village boys, while Mrs Witter began to train eight little girls who came twice a week to learn art needlework. At first, and for some years, the workroom was the living room in the old-fashioned cottage in which these idealists were living, and as their school grew larger, the children had to come in relays, commencing in the early hours of the morning and going on throughout the day and well into the evening. What with the materials for work, the embroidery frames, and other appliances, it may readily be imagined that the accommodation was somewhat congested, and the time came when Mr. and Mrs Witter found it necessary to hire a piece of ground at the end of their garden and build the workshop in which the exhibition was held last weekend.



Freewaters Cottage (above) and the workshops behind it (below)

Mrs Witter's eight little girls have increased to sixty, and they are of ages varying from fourteen to young womanhood, some of them having been with her during the past ten years. They come as children, after they have left school, and we gather that it is the custom to make them a small payment from the first, the rate of pay increasing with their proficiency. The girls earn from 4s to 14s a week, and the lads can earn up to 19s a week, which cannot but be regarded as very satisfactory in a rural village, where the workers are living at their parents' homes. Indeed, it is hinted that they might earn even more but for the modesty of their wants and the satisfaction that comes from pride in the beautiful work in which they are engaged. So successful is the School of Industries, and so considerable the demand for its output, that employment could be found for more trained girls and a few more beginners. By those competent to judge, the work is pronounced excellent. No doubt much is due to Mr. Witter's artistic designing, but there are also adaptations and reproductions of any antique objects of art. The great achievement on which Mr. and Mrs Witter are to be congratulated is their success in education, in the true sense of the term, the artistic faculty of the children of agricultural labourers and local workmen. Last winter for the first time, evening classes in drawing, etc., at this institution, were helped by the Herts. County Council, but apart from that the Ickleford School of Industries is absolutely and entirely the creation of private effort and enterprise."

