

Port Talbot Teachers

ONE wintry night, before the outbreak of World War One, a man arrived breathless at the Great Western Railway Station, Port Talbot, to find that the last train for his destination—Bridgend—had left.

As there were no buses or taxis then, he sought the help of my father, a Yard (traffic) Inspector, under whose supervision the station also came on night shifts, since Station-Master Hargreaves worked only on the day shift.

My father took the stranger down to his office, a brick building, situated a few yards east of the signal box, and there before a blazing coal fire eased his anxiety by promising to transport him to Bridgend in the guard's van of the first goods train to arrive.

Waiting for that train the stranger disclosed that his name was George Howell Baker, that he was a professional artist, that he lived at Ewenny, and that he was the tutor of an evening class in art at Port Talbot County School (now Glanafan Upper Comprehensive School).

Invitation

When my father told him that he had a son keenly interested in drawing and painting, he asked to see some examples of my work, as a result of which I was invited to attend his art class.

I found Baker a "pale-face," with a black moustache and closely cropped bristling hair. He dressed like George Bernard Shaw, with a homburg, Norfolk coat, knicker-bocker trousers, with the tops of his hose turned down below the knees.

George Baker adopted the second Christian name of Howell because it enabled him to improve the design of his initials when he used to sign his work.

He often varied that design, as like most artists, he disliked repetition, but the letters G and H were nearly always inset, the loops of a larger letter B.

Enthusiastic

A beautiful artist, he appeared to be equally good in all media. The classroom in the County School, on the first floor, was full of enthusiastic amateurs, of ages ranging from my own of about eleven to the middle-aged.

There was a Mrs. Shenton, who painted above the average water-colours; and a member of a family who kept a grocer's shop at the bottom house of Penylan—Harold Whateley, who drew exquisite pen- and-ink sketches.

Baker, a marvellous tutor, brimmed over with ideas and enthusiasm. When a student brought to the class his homework, Baker saw immediately its strength and weakness.

We gave him our undivided attention, since everything he said was of value.

Advice

It was he who told us to paint what we saw rather than what convention or opinion suggested. For instance, grass, which too many amateurs always painted green, might, if they looked at it with greater attention, be rendered blue by an intervening haze; it might also look blue when shining blades reflected a blue sky on a sunny day, or golden during a sunset.

He advised one pupil to darken the light reflected in a pond since reflected light must always be slightly darker than the light it reflects.

He made perspective, a complicated subject when you became involved in it, fascinating, and he was the first tutor I heard talk of colour perspective, which, broadly speaking, meant that the foreground must be painted darker than the middle-ground, and the middle-ground darker than the background.

George Howell Baker spent his holidays on Continental walking tours, during which he drew and painted anything that appealed to him. It was a time when Continental holidays were the privilege of the well-to-do only, so that we held him in awe for having done so.

Intrigued

He told us that he arrived one night at a French town to be intrigued by an unusual cross in the market square, for when he examined it closely he found it formed by the upright figure of the Virgin Mother nursing the Infant Jesus.

After one of the classes, I stepped onto the pavement simultaneously with Baker, who asked me if I would accompany him to the railway station, where, whilst waiting for his train, he related a number of fascinating anecdotes about Lord Frederick Leighton and Sir John Everett Millais, both of whom had been Presidents of the Royal Academy, and whom he had met and conversed with during his art studentship days in London.

He took such an interest in the work of another schoolboy, Percy Trevelyan Edwards and myself that it

culminated in an invitation to his studio at Ewenny.

He lived in a large villa, not far from the pottery, and which resembled an art gallery, so full was it of pictures of all media.

Collection

To assist him in checking the vast amount of detail needed for book illustrations he had accumulated the largest collection of cigarette cards Percy and I had ever seen, and which made our own collections seem like "small coal."

Percy Edwards, whose father was the steward of the Constitutional Club, was always the first school-boy to complete sets of fifty cards, and when Baker found that he had in his possession a few cards that he needed to complete

his own sets he persuaded Percy to barter these cards for a large pack of his duplicates.

Just before we left he presented each of us with sets of his autographed etchings. Some were of picturesque Continental scenes and others were of rural scenes in Glamorgan. Among mine was a village scene in Corychurch (Vale of Glamorgan) and the famous Flemish cottage, Twyll-yn-y-Wal in Margam Road.

Baker was a bachelor, wedded to art, and he lived with his spinster sister, also an artist, who taught, among other media, pen-painting, which was immensely popular with women of those days.