**Harold Percy Forster, 1895–1975 [DRAFT]**

Forster was a notable commercial artist, with no known gallery output. He was born in Brixton on 12 June 1895, as elder son of Mabel and Alfred Forster: his father was variously a clerk, a superintendent of a ladies' cloaks and mantles factory and later a manufacturer of them. The family was unexceptionally middle-class, moderately well-off and somewhat peripatetic, moving from Brixton to Herne Hill, then Willesden, and to Watford by 1911. At the age of 15, Forster was apprenticed to the renowned graphic designer Fred Taylor (1875–1963). How this occurred is unknown but possibly through his grandfather, Joseph, who was a publisher.

A very successful career followed, though his public profile then and now is surprisingly low for a man reported in a short 1940 portrait piece (*The Bystander*, 17 April) as ‘probably the highest-paid commercial artist in the country’. He features in only a handful of newspaper items between 1931 and 1939, all in mentions of his illustrations (and occasional writing) in advertisements for magazines including *The Artist* and *The Bystander*. According to the latter’s 1940 profile, he was wholly dedicated to commercial practice and, though highly regarded by artist contemporaries, proud that he had ‘never had an exhibition or sent anything to the R.A.’ He reportedly considered his work not good enough and that devoting time to the attempt would have diminished his commercial income. By that point he was married, with three children, though further details are lacking, other than that his family had evacuated from London where he continued to work in a large studio, doing a great deal of wartime poster work for the Ministry of Information. Much of it is expressly credited to him, although a famous ‘careless talk’ poster, ‘Keep mum / she's not so dumb' (of which the National Archives holds the artwork) is only attributed on style, including of its typically lissom female central figure. Between 1928 and 1947–48 he made several steadily longer visits to New York, probably to work. The last was for nearly a year going out first-class but returning more economically. He may have been been thinking of settling in America but if so decided against it. His address at departure was 143 Old Church Street, Chelsea, and the 1940 *Bystander* piece suggests he was also a member of the Chelsea Arts Club. He returned to a flat in Arundel Street, WC2, possibly where his family was living.

In the post-war period he was practically invisible until 1957, when the first of a number of dramatic views of the Abbey Steel Works appeared as a press advertisement (*Birmingham Daily Post* 5 April) for the Steel Company of Wales Ltd. Another illustrated the Abbey calendar for 1963. The originals for both, and five others related, are now in the National Museum of Wales. The only other public appearance yet found is his contribution of pictures in 1959 – one expressly painted and others lent – for the set of an amateur theatre production by the Steyning County Players in Sussex in 1959 (*West Sussex County Times*, 20 November). The report calls him a ‘local artist’ at Steyning, suggesting he then lived in the area, but his death was registered at Hillingdon, west London, in the last quarter of 1975. Lack of a probate or administration notice suggests there was then little left of his high pre-war earnings.

*Summarized from Art UK discussion on Foster’s ‘Abbey Works’ (oil on board or gouache?), National Museum Wales.* PvdM April 2021