

## Sinead Holland looks at the cultural legacy left by an extraordinary woman

**A** LASTING legacy has been left to Saffron Walden by writer and artist Olive Cook.

Although much of her life's work and the contents of her Coach House home have now been snapped up by bidders at an auction on Tuesday to dispose of her effects, even at the last, she remembered the town which was her passion for 40 years.

The Corn Exchange library and the Fry Art Gallery will both receive bequests of her books and paintings, adding to the extensive collections both already hold.

But according to her friend for more than 20 years, Zofia Everett, the 90-year-old who died in May at the Radwinter Road community hospital has bestowed far more.

Mrs Everett, who is married to town librarian, author and historian Martyn, said: "She has been one of the positive forces in our small community and her death has impoverished this little town."

"Olive has been a quintessential English-woman who loved her native land in an informed and all embracing way and was prepared to fight to preserve what was of lasting value and cultural or historical importance. Her ideas and aspirations were often well ahead of her time."

Olive Cook and her husband, the renowned architect and photographer Edwin Smith, moved to Saffron Walden in 1962, living first at a home in Audley Road before moving to the Coach House of the Vineyards at Windmill Hill, which they renovated and enhanced together.

What was once an undistinguished property became, during their 17-year-marriage, an elegant dwelling, with a Regency porch designed by Edwin. Their two, long, glasshouses verdant with vines and figs were the scene of memorable lunch parties and the Coach House's interior was filled with many of their own paintings and objects reflecting their eclectic taste.

They loved "vigorous popular art" and had a fine collection of Staffordshire fairings. *Country Life* featured the home in a 1998 article.

Mrs Everett said: "They became actively involved in the town. Olive and Edwin provided a driving force behind the idea of creating an arts centre in Saffron Walden, using the old maltings in Gold Street, and initiated a special fund towards the project."

Although that idea had to be abandoned when the site was sold to a developer, Olive and Edwin helped set up a base in the Corn Exchange.

Mrs Everett said: "Many of Edwin's original architectural ideas were incorporated in the final design of the refurbished building."

In 2000, the arts centre was forced to close when Essex County Council decided it needed the entire premises for the town's library.

Although Edwin died in 1971, Olive never stopped campaigning, "always seeing the bigger picture outside personal self interest and quick profits" said Mrs Everett.

She explained: "She firmly opposed environmentally damaging developments as expressed in her work dealing with the inquiry into

● **ARTIST'S PASSION**, Olive Cook in a photo taken by her husband



● **ON CANVAS**: An Olive Cook self portrait, which sold at the auction for £220

# The artist who captured life

Stansted Airport called *The Stansted Affair* in 1967 and described by the media as a 'telling, angry indictment'."

Mrs Everett added that Olive also tried to save the only example of 1920s architecture in Walden, Raynham's Garage in the High Street, but failed. Her attempt to preserve the Vineyards at Windmill Hill was more successful and she was also responsible for the listing of the Corn Exchange, Barclays Bank, the Town Hall

● **HOME WORK**: Olive Cook's husband, Edwin Smith, designed this Regency porch at their home in Windmill Hill, Saffron Walden

and the hospital in London Road.

"We must be grateful to Olive, as without her, the town would look very different today," she said.

Olive's legacy can also be seen at the Fry Gallery, of Castle Street, which she helped found in 1985.

The "gallery in the garden" was set up to form a unique collection of works by artists from North West Essex, most notably the

community that flourished in and around Great Bardfield just before and just after the Second World War.

The couple exhibited there often and examples of paintings by both and Edwin's photographs form an integral part of the archive.

Mrs Everett said: "Olive and Edwin were involved with artists from Great Bardfield and formed lifelong friendships with many, especially Edward Bawden and Sheila Robinson, who both subsequently moved to Saffron Walden."

She detected the couple's influence in some of the work by both friends and said their involvement in an annual publications called *The Saturday Book* meant they were able to shape artistic tastes and trends.

Olive Cook was born in Cambridge in February 20 1912, and educated at the Perse School for Girls and then Newnham College, where she studied modern languages. From 1937, she was supervisor of publications for the National Gallery and became friends with many artists — prompting her to start painting too.

Soon after the Second World War, she wrote three books about her love of the countryside: *Suffolk* in 1948; *Cambridgeshire: Aspects of a County* in 1953 and *Breckland* in 1956.

She married Edwin, the love of her life, in 1954. Mrs Everett said: "Together they produced some outstanding books, which not only depict and inform about the wonders of English architecture, but also reveal the complex social and cultural forces that created such heritage."

"Edwin Smith's stunning photographs are perfectly matched by Olive's immaculately researched writing. Her prose is deceptively accessible, yet the writer has a gift of sharing with the readers her considerable knowledge of subject matter, as well as her feelings and passion for the theme she is writing on."

The couple's volumes on English cottages and farmhouses, abbeys, priories, cathedrals and parish churches are still regarded as classics of their genre.

Mrs Everett has written a tribute to Olive Cook and her work in the latest autumn edition of the *Saffron Walden Journal*.

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