

JAMES WOODFORD OBE RA FRBS (1893 -1976)

*This article by Ken Brand first appeared in Newsletter No. 150 (January 2013):*

It was most appropriate that James Woodford was chosen by local businessman and benefactor Philip E F Clay to design the bronze statue of Robin Hood, which he donated to the City in 1952, as the sculptor was born and bred in Nottingham. Indeed he was one of three Nottingham-born former students of the Nottingham School of Art invited by the then Principal Joseph Else to create with him the four sculpture groups to go around the dome of the new Council House, opened by HRH the Prince of Wales in May 1929.

Woodford was born in Nottingham on 25 September 1893. His father, Samuel, was a Levers lace designer; as late as 1934 the local press noted he was one of the few lace designers left in the city. By 1896 the family was living at 59 Alfred Street South; a few years later they had moved across the road to No. 36. In the 1901 census return, the family, still at No. 59, comprises Samuel, aged 32, his wife Harriett, aged 31, James, aged 7, and his sister Lilian, aged 5. A father-in-law and sister-in-law complete the household, all of whom were born in Nottingham.

Although almost nothing is known about his school days, James later recalled in an interview for the magazine *Picture Post* that as a schoolboy he would watch the Sherwood Foresters drilling in front of Nottingham Castle, not far from the present location of his Robin Hood statue and wall plaques.

He won a scholarship to study at Nottingham School of Art; while there he was awarded three gold medals for sculpture. The First World War interrupted his studies; he served in France for over four years with the 11th Battalion of the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment, the Sherwood Foresters. He was mentioned in dispatches. After the war he attended the Royal College of Art, where he was awarded the Prix de Rome for Sculpture in 1922 and subsequently named Rome Scholar 1922-5. This enabled him to spend three years travelling in France, Italy, Switzerland and Greece.

In 1929 he married Rose Harrison, they had one son. The Woodfords were now living in London.

Woodford's work for the Nottingham Council House appears to be his first major assignment. The first public announcement about the decoration that would grace the new building was made at the luncheon held at the Guildhall following the laying of the foundation stone on 17 March 1927. Mr W J Else, Principal of the Nottingham School of Art, spoke first of the historic panels to be executed by painter Mr Denholm Davies, then revealed that large groups of figures thirteen feet high representing Commerce, Civic Law, Prosperity and Knowledge were to be placed where the dome would rise from its square base. Later newspaper reports named the former pupils of the School of Art who were undertaking the sculptural work: C L Dolman (Civic Law), A J Woodford (Prosperity), E Webb (Knowledge). The Principal himself was responsible for the sculpture representing Commerce. Woodford's work is on the north-east corner, viewed best from Long Row East. A muscular female representing Prosperity holds a sword pointing downwards and resting on a serpent. On one side are a mother and child, on the other a figure holding the 'fruits of the earth.'

For an extension to the School for the Blind, Liverpool, which opened in 1932, Woodford designed some magnificent bronze doors with symbolic relief decoration. Then in 1934 he was commissioned to create the great doors for the headquarters of the Royal Institute of British

Architects at 66 Portland Place, London; each door is 12 ft by 6ft and weighs one and a half tons. The deep relief on the doors, on the theme of London's River and its Buildings, together with other work outside and inside the building, has long been admired.

1934 was a busy time for Woodford. He was appointed a member of the Faculty of Sculpture at the British School in Rome. For the new church of St Thomas the Apostle at Hanwell, Middlesex, his timber screens in the chancel show carved angels playing different musical instruments, while over the screen in the Children's Chapel he carved the Creation, represented by 'flesh, fruit, fish, flower, and fowl'.

Around this time Woodford was one of several artists engaged in decorative work for the Cunard liner RMS Queen Mary, which was launched in 1934 and made its maiden voyage in May 1936. His contribution was in the cabin class smoking room.

Woodford was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1937 and became a full member in 1945. He is recorded as being a regular exhibitor at the Academy, working in bronze, stone and wood.

In 1938, for the very modern City Hall in Norwich he made a set of 18 sculpted roundels showing the history and lost industries of the City set in six bronze doors. He worked in conjunction with Alfred Hardiman, the consultant sculptor for the building's architects. Woodford's other contribution was the graceful female putto clutching a sunflower, since 1954 located on a fountain in front of the Norwich Assembly House.

In 1939 he produced two sculptures symbolising Art and Literature for the entrance to Huddersfield Library and Art Gallery, and stone figures and panels for the interior. The building was formally opened in April 1940.

During the Second World War Woodford became a camouflage officer with the Air Ministry. After the war he prepared a single pillar entrance sculpture of a lion killing a hydra for the Imperial War Graves Commission's British cemetery at Bolsena, Italy.



*Illustration 1: Robin Hood Statue in the Nottingham Castle Grounds*

About the time he was completing his interpretation of Robin Hood, Woodford received the commission for which he is best known. This was for the ten heraldic beasts, which were positioned at the entrance of Westminster Abbey for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, and for which he was paid £2,750. The beasts were cast in plaster, which meant they could not be left exposed, and were about six feet high. These ten Queen's Beasts were: the lion of England, the griffin of Edward III, the falcon of the Plantagenets, the black bull of Clarence, the yale of Beaufort, the white lion of Mortimer, the white greyhound of Richmond, the red dragon of Wales, the unicorn of Scotland, and the white horse of Hanover. After the Coronation the beasts had an uncertain future until they were accepted by the Canadian Government in 1959, finally settling in the Canadian Museum of Civilisation in Gatineau. In this year he was awarded an OBE. Replicas of these ten beasts, carved by Woodford from Portland stone, were presented to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, where they stand on the Palm House Terrace.

In 1954 Woodford's Second World War memorial for the British Medical Association's building in Tavistock Square, London was unveiled. It consists of a bronze statue of Asclepius, the Greek God of Healing holding his staff, together with four figures in Portland stone: Aspiration, Cure, Prevention and Sacrifice.

Between 1954-7 Woodford made a set of relief panels for the Lloyds Building at 51 Lime Street, London, representing the four elements. They were originally positioned very high up; when the building was demolished the panels were preserved and later placed at street level as part of the landscaping of the Willis Building erected on the same site. The DEFRA building of the 1950s at 3-8 Whitehall Place, London was restored in 2004. The contractors, Kier Build, carefully preserved and refurbished the facade, which had a number of carved keystones by James Woodford. He also produced the two figures at the entrance to the building.

One of Woodford's most prestigious assignments was to design a more modern version of the royal coat of arms, details of which were revealed at the end of 1962. Latin instead of Gothic characters was prescribed and the floral emblems of the United Kingdom were to be introduced. He produced designs at three different sizes. The largest at 4ft 2in was intended for British Embassies, High Commissioners' residences and other important missions. The second size at 2ft 10in was for display in Courts of Justice and other Crown buildings. Finally a miniature at 6in was for official furniture, such as Judges' chairs. His work was vetted by the Garter King of Arms. The work was to be cast in aluminium, iron or bronze.

The Carpenters' Hall, London, had been blitzed in 1941. For the rebuilding, which took place 1956-60 Woodford produced the carved wooden doors for the main hall. Another commission about this time was for the new Devon County Hall in Exeter, built between 1954-64; Woodford was commissioned to execute a large coat-of-arms for the building.

On 10 July 1964 Woodford's memorial to Ebenezer Howard, the founding father of the Garden City Movement, was unveiled in Welwyn Garden City. It had been commissioned by the Development Corporation. His design was a splendid circular bronze memorial, with the head of Howard in bas relief, set at the centre of a broad ring of cobbles.

An unexpected commission came from the newly independent Swaziland, independence coming formally on 1 January 1968. Woodford was appointed to design the entrance doors for the new parliamentary buildings. On 31 December 1968 he was elected a Senior RA. In the following year statues of a lion and a unicorn were executed for the new County Court buildings at Wandsworth, an indication that he was still in demand well into his seventies..

Woodford received numerous commissions, often small-scale, whose locations have yet to be traced. The destinations of some of his many exhibition pieces are also unknown. Here most of his major works have been considered.

He died on 8 November 1976, aged 83 years. With the agreement of his widow and as an RA, six of his works were displayed posthumously at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition in 1977. He had been one of the Academy's most consistent exhibitors, missing only the years 1928 and 1943.

James Woodford RA, Fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors, the boy from St. Ann's, was the most distinguished Nottingham-born sculptor of the twentieth century and pre-eminent nationally in his chosen field.

*Illustration No 1 by kind permission of: <https://picturethepast.co.uk>*