

# The Quest for Cooper

RECALLING WILLIAM MARSHALL COOPER (1833–1921)

SURVEYOR AND WATERCOLOUR ARTIST WHO PAINTED 65 SCENES OF OLD SOUTHAMPTON 110 YEARS AGO

by AGK Leonard

AMONG SOUTHAMPTON'S HISTORIC and artistic treasures in the keeping of the City Council is a unique series of 65 watercolours, depicting aspects of the old town in 1896–97 before many of these scenes were swept away by slum clearance and other redevelopment.

They were the work of William Marshall Cooper (1833–1921), privately commissioned to provide this invaluable pictorial documentation by Southampton's 'Grand Old Man' William Burrough Hill (1845–1941).

WB Hill conducted an extensive business as 'building surveyor, land agent, auctioneer, fire assessor and arbitrator' but also actively concerned himself with the heritage and public affairs of his native town. Over the years, he gathered an important collection of 228 works of art, forming the exhibition of 'Antient Southampton' put on display from 18 April 1898 at the Philharmonic Hall in Above Bar.

In his preface to its catalogue (dated December 1897) Hill highlighted as its special feature the works of WM Cooper, illustrative of "Disappearing Southampton", a record of "the most interesting portions of the 'slum area' now being cleared under the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890".

*At the time I was professionally engaged in placing a value on most of the properties comprised in this Scheme, I felt greatly impressed with the idea that it would be a positive loss to posterity to allow so interesting an area as this to be cleared of its houses for ever without an attempt to preserve in some form these earliest buildings of this town ... In order therefore, that such an opportunity as this should not be lost, I specially engaged an Artist of great talent to prepare these sketches. The instructions I gave him were to the effect that faithfulness of representation was to have precedence over artistic finish.*

*The works are the production of Mr. W.M. Cooper, late Government Surveyor in New Zealand and New*



PINEAPPLE INN IN ST MICHAEL'S SQUARE, DATED 17.4.96



TUDOR HOUSE IN THE 1890S

*South Wales, and I take the opportunity of tendering to him my warmest and most sincere thanks for the unceasing pains he took, under (at times) most adverse circumstances, to give effect to my desire, and although of necessity he had to pass several weeks in the haunts of people not always the most genial of companions, yet, to the credit of the 'evicted', I am bound to say that both to him, myself, and to my assistants every kindly help was given us for surveys, sketches and plans.*

*My friend and companion, Mr. Cooper, was greatly missed at the end of his labours, and so kindly did his manners commend him to the poor people among whom he worked that he was greeted with the cry "Here comes the Missionary!"*

Cooper's watercolours mostly depicted old buildings in and around Simnel Street, Castle Lane, West Quay and St Michael's Square, etc, but he also painted general views of the High Street and outside the medieval town, e.g. Polygon House and old farm buildings at Northam and Hollybrook.

Their display in the Philharmonic Hall had to end in 1909, when this 1865 building was taken over by a London developer for conversion into the Alexandra Picture Theatre – opened in 1911, demolished in 1933, replaced by the Regal/Odeon, itself closed in 1993. In 1909 WB Hill thereupon offered his entire 228-item collection of watercolours, oil paintings, pencil drawings, etchings and engravings of local subjects for sale to the Borough Council ... at the bargain price of £700, which was accepted.

Since then, the 65 Cooper watercolours seem not to have been put on show in their entirety, because of their extreme sensitivity to light. Only selections have been rotated for display from time to time at Tudor House and elsewhere. Happily, this situation changed in 2005, when high quality enhanced colour photographs of the Cooper





PART OF A PHOTOGRAPH OF WILLIAM BURROUGH HILL'S  
'ANTIENT SOUTHAMPTON' COLLECTION AT ABOVE BAR, 1898-1909

collection were taken, thus enabling 13 authentic reproductions to be presented in an attractive City Council calendar for 2006 and likewise in another for 2007.

These have accorded a measure of recognition to Cooper's watercolours – generally regarded as accurate and realistic representations of their subjects – but not to the artist himself or the man who gave him his Southampton commission to paint them.

The text on the back of the City Council calendars says that Cooper's watercolours "were commissioned by the Southampton Borough Surveyor" – an unfortunate confusion about the name and role of William Burrough Hill, who was indeed a surveyor but acted as a private individual serving the heritage of his native town; he was a concerned citizen, not an officer or member of the Borough Council. As to WM Cooper, the calendars state only that "little is known about the artist except that he had previously worked as a surveyor in New Zealand".

Gathering information on his years in New Zealand and Australia was initiated in 1995 by Jill Neale, then Administrative Assistant, City Heritage Services, now retired; her efforts prompted this local historian to pursue independent researches in these and other directions. These have established at least the basic framework of Cooper's life and work ... even if he still remains a shadowy and mysterious figure in some respects.

William Marshall Cooper came from a Northcountry family identified with the Society of Friends (Quakers). Records held in its library at Friends House, London and the dedicated research of a great-niece and family historian, Mrs Adelyn Cameron of Christchurch, New



THE UPPER CHAMBER OF WHAT IS NOW  
THE TUDOR MERCHANT'S HALL

Zealand, combine to show that he was born at Doncaster on 18 March 1833.

He was the son of William Cooper (1793-1871) who was living at Stockport at the time of his marriage in 1825 to Jane Thornhill of Whitby. Between 1826 and 1848 their union was blessed with 14 children, of whom William was the fifth. In 1833 the elder William was described as a hatter but a few years later as a bank manager; he is said to have worked for 26 years at the 'Quaker Bank' in Doncaster. He retired to Southport, where he died in 1871; his widow lived on until 1891, latterly at her native Whitby.

During and before these 20 years their son was some 12,000 miles away, working as a government surveyor in New Zealand and Australia. Growing up in Doncaster, he presumably received a sound education in Quaker schools and served a form of apprenticeship for his career profession but nothing is known of his early years, until he is noted as having made his way to New Zealand in 1864 or earlier.

His parents had given him only the one name of William; at some stage before then he had adopted the second name of Marshall – perhaps to distinguish himself from his father ... or possibly to enhance his prospects? The significance of Marshall must remain unknown.

WM Cooper may have been prompted to head for New Zealand by the example of his younger brother Thornhill Cooper (born 12 December 1840). He had taken ship to Australia in 1860 and seen something of California before settling in New Zealand in 1863. There he had several occupations before making a name for himself as a photographer and painter, particularly in watercolours. He remained in New Zealand, living to reach his centenary in 1940; the family historian Adelyn Cameron is a grand-daughter.

William evidently shared his brother's artistic talent but seems to have rarely exercised it outside the context of his work as a surveyor.

From the 1840s onwards, emigration to New Zealand gathered pace; accurate land surveying and definition of plots was vital to orderly settlement. Cooper may have gone to New Zealand on his own account originally but by 1865 he was engaged in official surveying. The annual report of the Chief Surveyor, dated Christchurch 31 May 1867, gives impressive statistics for surveying thousands of 'sections' over extensive areas and shows the pressure of work for surveyors to keep pace with requirements, including cutting tracks through dense bush and laying out townships.

The Chief Surveyor reported:

*A very interesting series of sketches in watercolour has been made by Mr. Cooper, Assistant and Mining Surveyor, of the coast between Hokitika and Milford Sound, which show clearly that there are considerable tracts of country available for agricultural purposes.*

The "return of Officers employed in Westland under the Provincial Government of Canterbury" at 1 July 1867 listed WM Cooper among those in the Survey Department, then receiving a salary of £300 pa plus £200 allowances. He has been 18 months in his post since 1 January 1866.

Cooper continued working along the west coast of South Island, sometimes supplementing his surveys with watercolours of significant geographical and geological features and other scenes. The Museum of New Zealand, Wellington now holds 20 of these, dated from 1865 onwards but mostly of 1873-74. Further examples of his art work are preserved in other New Zealand galleries and libraries, e.g., the Alexander Turnbull Library has a set of four of his watercolours of Mount Cook, Hokitika and



Greymouth, reproduced as chromolithographs issued by the printers Harnett & Co about 1869 – noteworthy as early examples of colour printing in the colony.

Cooper transferred to the service of the Westland County Council, created in 1867, and may have been the unnamed surveyor involved in the curious case of the 'Mining Surveyor at Ross' suspended in 1870. A select committee of enquiry subsequently reported that "although there were certain circumstances in the case calling for rigid enquiry, the committee considered the Mining Surveyor fully exculpated from blame". An echo of this affair is in the account given in *Early Prints of New Zealand* by EM and DG Ellis (Christchurch 1978) of Cooper being "dismissed in 1870 because he refused to accept a transfer from Ross to Greymouth. He seems to have left the coast after a celebrated court case in which he successfully sued the Council for salary and field expenses due (amounting to £37 9s 8d) at the time of his dismissal".



WESTGATE HOUSE SHORTLY BEFORE DEMOLITION IN 1898

Notwithstanding this contretemps, Cooper evidently continued surveying, well regarded for his watercolour artistry. He headed the names of those providing watercolour sketches and photographs for the 17ft long screen dominating the central space of the New Zealand Court at the great international Exhibition held at Philadelphia in 1876.

The obliging curator at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington has extracted from old electoral rolls details of WM Cooper's property qualifications at Hokitika, Greymouth and Westport from 1868 onwards, then at Wellington through the 1880s, until last listed there in 1890. He evidently maintained ownership of a freehold section for citizenship purposes in New Zealand but he had left the colony after 1876, moving to Australia.

Cooper was recorded in the New South Wales Civil Service List as a licensed surveyor from June 1877, rising to become Surveyor of Public Parks in 1883 at a salary of £550 pa. His service ended on 31 December 1887 and the following year he received a gratuity of £286 9s 2d. He was then 55 and probably thinking of retiring and returning to England.

He does not seem to have made much, if any, use of his paint brushes in Australia. No examples of his watercolours seem to be held in galleries or libraries there and he is not mentioned in lists of Australia-based artists.

No documentation seems to survive for WM Cooper in respect of the years 1888–92 but at some stage he returned from Australia to England – perhaps in time to see his aged mother before she died in July 1891. He evidently decided to make his retirement home on the Isle of Wight.

The first known record of him there as "a gentleman residing at present at Shanklin in the Isle of Wight" is to be found in the single sentence will he made on 23 January 1893, witnessed by the Manager and a clerk of the National Provincial Bank at Ventnor. He bequeathed all his "property, real and personal" to his wife Annie, whose maiden name was given as Oliver. The 1901 census noted her birthplace as West Bromwich, Staffs, but how and where she and William met and the date and place of their marriage remains unknown. She was 23 years his junior, destined to outlive her husband by 30 years. They had a family comprising at least the two sons mentioned in a report of their mother's funeral in 1951.

Kelly's Directory of 1895 listed "Cooper, Wm Mrshall" at a house named Fern Bank in Castle Road, Wroxall – a substantial stone-built semi-detached house on a corner plot. In the 1901 census it headed the list of properties in Yarborough Road; its occupiers were noted as William M and Annie Cooper, whose ages at last birthday were given as 67 and 44 respectively. Mr Cooper was described as "Civil Engineer, retired". Incidentally, he would have become 68 on 18 March, so perhaps his census form was delivered early and completed well before the actual census Sunday, 31 March.

Cooper does not seem to have resumed surveying work after his return from Australia. Such professional employment would probably have involved membership of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, established in 1868 while he was in New Zealand, but its archives contain no record of him as a member at any time.

One can only speculate how WM Cooper came to meet WB Hill and reveal to him the artistic talents that led to his engagement in 1896 to make his important watercolours of old Southampton. Why did WB Hill make such arrangements with an artist rather than a photographer, who could presumably have provided plentiful pictorial documentation more quickly and easily?



A VIEW DOWN SIMNEL STREET TO THE WATER BEYOND WEST QUAY

WB Hill was, of course, a man of some artistic and historical sensitivity. Photography would then have given only black and white images, with limits on their range, detail and perspectives. Perhaps he felt – rightly – that Cooper's delicately realistic watercolours would be more evocative and historically valuable.

Cooper evidently devoted considerable professional time and application to producing his 65 watercolours, providing Hill with "artistic finish" as well as "faithfulness of representation". He must have spent several periods of weeks in Southampton, spread over a year or more, probably staying for part of the time in a hotel or in lodgings while undertaking a well organised and disciplined project.





BACK OF WESTGATE HOUSE

Against this professional background, it is therefore very curious that Cooper seems not to have followed it by painting local scenes on the Isle of Wight, which attracted so many other artists. Enquiries to Island galleries, libraries and other sources have all failed to produce any examples or records of paintings by WM Cooper. Reference to Robin Mylles FRSA, who has researched Island artists for many years and compiled a biographical dictionary of Isle of Wight artists and engravers, could only elicit "regret that I have been unable to trace any information about this artist through all my archives ... fully investigated but unfortunately no results". Likewise, the archivist of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours could not find any reference to WM Cooper in any of its archives or reference books.

So, the question remains – why did WM Cooper seemingly cease painting after 1897, when he was not yet 65 and still active? Again, one only can only speculate.

Mrs Adelyn Cameron, the Cooper family historian in New Zealand (to whom the writer is much indebted) recorded the long-held belief among his relatives that William had gone to America and there been killed in a street accident. Is it possible that he had indeed crossed the Atlantic but in the late 1890s, after his commission in Southampton, and been thus injured – obviously not fatally but perhaps seriously enough to have incapacitated him from pursuing artistic or other activities?

Whatever the reason or his state of health, WM Cooper evidently spent the last quarter of his life very quietly, not active in artistic or public affairs, other than associating himself with Wroxall parish church.



Southampton's Old Veteran Wishes You  
A Happy, Prosperous and Peaceful  
New Year  
His Motto  
There will always be "An England."

*WB Hill*  
in his 95th year  
1940

WB HILL AT HIS WRITING DESK IN HIS 95TH YEAR – FEATURED ON HIS HAND-LETTERED 1940 NEW YEAR GREETINGS CARD

About 1904 the Coopers moved from 'Fern Bank' to a stone and brick semi on Clarence Road, Wroxall, which may have been newly built for them. It was styled 'Friedenheim' – German for "peaceful home" or "home of peace". There they lived for the rest of their lives.

When WM Cooper died on 20 March 1921 the two Isle of Wight weekly newspapers, *County Press* and *Mercury*, carried only a formal two-line notice of his death; neither published any obituary or account of his funeral on 24 March at the Church of St John the Evangelist, Wroxall. This had been built in 1877 to cater for the growing population of the village. Originally a chapel of ease within the parish of Newchurch, it became a parish church in its own right in 1907. WM Cooper was evidently a benefactor, to the extent that he was later commemorated there by two stained glass windows featuring St Michael and St Luke; below them is the inscription "To the Glory of God and in Memory of William Marshall Cooper, died March 20th 1921. Aged 88 Years. R.I.P."

When his estate was settled his effects were valued at £963 2s 2d; all went to his widow, who lived on at 'Friedenheim' into her 90s. Her last days were spent in the Home Hospital, Ryde, where she died on 26 January 1951 – "at the great age of 95", as reported by the local correspondent of the *County Press*.

Its account of her funeral on 30 January identified her as the widow of Mr WM Cooper but said nothing about him; "the Vicar paid tribute to Mrs Cooper's devotion to the church and the village". The chief mourner was her son, Captain Claude Cooper; another son, Sidney Cooper, was noted as being in Canada.

Mrs Cooper's body was interred alongside her late husband in consecrated ground beside the church. On the gravestone, a brass tablet records, in simple Quaker-like style:

WILLIAM MARSHALL COOPER  
20-3-21  
AGED 88

ALSO ANNIE COOPER HIS WIFE  
26-1-1951  
AGED 95

The stained glass windows in his parish church are the only public memorial to a man who seems to have been of modest disposition, while earning personal and professional respect. He can be more significantly remembered for his personal heritage to posterity, the unique collection of watercolours he painted 110 years ago, as the most important product of his rarely exercised artistic ability.

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Articles about WB Hill include two by John Edgar Mann published in *Hampshire Magazine* May 1990 and March 1991; and another by AGK Leonard in *Picture Postcard Monthly*, December 2002.

A shorter version of WM Cooper's life and work, with illustrations of some of his Southampton watercolours, is included in *Southampton: The Third Selection* recently published in the 'Images of England' series (Tempus Publications Ltd, £12.99).