Evacustes Phipson, Croydon artist, socialist and land reformer

Edward Arthur (Evacustes) Phipson was ‘one of the most prolific British landscape watercolourists of all time.’ (Brown). He worked all over Britain, as well as in Normandy and Brittany. 1,653 of his paintings are in various libraries, archives and museums in England and the USA, including the Victoria & Albert Museum. Hammersmith & Fulham Libraries have more than 60 of his watercolours of local scenes, bequeathed by Samuel Martin, first Librarian to the Vestry (later the Metropolitan borough) of Hammersmith 1889-1919. (Hammersmith & Fulham Archives volunteer. Evacustes A. Phipson: A little-known but prolific water-colour painter. LBHF Libraries blog site. 28 March 2014.) Croydon’s Art Collection has over 340 paintings. Many of these were commissioned by the Council’s Borough Librarian Berwick Sayers. (Brown) The commissioning of art works in Croydon was part of the pioneering role of Libraries developed and advocated by Sayer’s predecessor Sidney Jast (to 1915). Phipson also donated books to Croydon libraries between 1918 and 1927.

The fact that there are so many Phipson paintings allows them to be used by Croydon Museum in relevant exhibitions, and has helped to develop interest in them. A project led by John Hickman and Carole Roberts of the Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society (CNHSS) have been working with the Museum on the collection including having high resolution digitisation which has greatly improved the quality of the images in photographic form.

John and Carole have developed a three part talk series on Phipson and his Croydon paintings, the most recent of which was part one at Norbury Library on 2 March. These talks show the images, the historic location and the changes in the buildings thorough adaptation or replacement since. An earlier talk by a member of staff of the Museum inspired Tony Skrzypczyki of Friends of Shirley Windmill and currently Chair of the Croydon Local Studies Forum, to write an appreciation in the former Croydon Citizen. (https://thecroydoncitizen.com/culture/event-review-croydon-recreated-walk-thursday-3rd-march)

In undertaking their work John and Carole have had support from John Brown, the Streatham Society historian who wrote about Phipson in 2013 because of his paintings of buildings in Streatham (Streatham Society newsletter No. 211. Winter 2012-13; summarised in Sean Creighton’s History & Social Action Diary & Supplement No 28. March 2013), and labour movement historian Steve Williams who has been researching Phipson’s politics, and whose essay about him will be published by CNHSS in its Transactions later this year.

It is to be hoped that in launching the Transactions volumes, CNHSS will be able to have Steve give a talk, along with John and Carole’s, and that the Museum will mount an exhibition of Phipson’s paintings and some of the new high resolution images.

Phipson’s life

Phipson was born at King’s Norton on 9 February 1854 into ‘a well-to-do Birmingham factory-owning family’ and may ‘may have been articled to an architect.’ (Stephen V Ward, author of The Peaceful Path. Building Garden Cities and New Towns (Hertfordshire Publications. 2014 on the Hertfordshire Genealogy blog spot site


‘He became a socialist and had contacts with William Morris.’ (Ward) ‘He believed in the rights of men to live without the bondage of the monetary system in a world where a universal type of speech might bring about a universal world of love’. (Brown.)
In 1881 he inherited £16,000 and this prompted him to put his socialist ideals to the test. He moved to South Australia about 1884 and invested it in a single tax colony there, but it did not survive.

In 1887 he was in San Diego, California. He married Elizabeth Frederica Larkin on 11 October 1888. They had two daughters Ilithyia in 1892 and Anna in 1894. (Anonymous comment on LBHF Libraries blog site. 29 December 2014. The descendants of Anna live in the USA.)

At some stage he came back to Britain. In 1892 he addressed William Morris’s Hammersmith Socialist Society on *Arts and Socialism*.

In 1893 he became the Treasurer of the land reform British Nationalization of Labour Society. He became the London agent for the Topolobarapo socialist community. (Brown)

His paintings stem from the 1890s. Ward reports that this was because ‘it was said that he has spent most of his inheritance on the Australian project and his architecturally accurate paintings may well have been to provide additional income starting in 1894.’

Phipson wrote an article *Art Under Socialism* for the *Free Review*, which was published as a pamphlet in 1895 by William Reeves.


He moved to Croydon in 1914, aged 60. As well as offering him the paintings contract Berwick Berwick-Sayers invited him in 1916 to the opening meeting of an autumn lecture session of *The Redemption of Labour and Currency Reform League*, based on works of Cecil Balfour Phipson (relationship unknown). (Brown)

When Phipson lived in Croydon he wrote some letters concerning the execution of water colours (Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre. Ref: A96/18/52).

He died in Rye in 1937.

**Painting historic buildings**

On 6 August 1892 he wrote to the *Yorkshire Herald* from Selly Oak in Worcestershire

‘Sir, - A visitor to your city is surprised to find that there is not apparently so universal an appreciation of those ancient buildings which are its chief glory as might be expected. Indeed to judge from the aspect of some of the streets, the ambition of many citizens seems to have been the destruction of everything that is picturesque and beautiful in them. …’

He had similar letters published in *The Lincolnshire Chronicle* (28 August) and *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (7 September).

By early 1916 he was ‘making for the Hastings Museum a pictorial survey of the older parts of the town, finished thirty-four drawings during the year, and they were purchased on extremely favourable terms. Mr. Phipson also allowed a selection to be made from his portfolios of 105 water-colour sketches of ancient buildings (mainly houses) in the areas of Belgium and France that have suffered most from the German invasion. These sketches have been on exhibition since August and have attracted considerable attention. (*Hastings and St Leonards Observer*. 5 February 1916)

**Phipson and the United States**
In 1887 when he was in San Diego, California, he had two letters published in The Standard, the journal of the American land tax reform movement.

The first stated:

‘In this town millions have been made from almost nothing within the past few years. Investments in land have enhanced twelve hundred per cent within twelve months, and tramps and beggars have made their appearance. It is strange that the average man cannot see how much more he loses than gains by the present system. All, in fact, but a very few are injured rather than benefited, even if they have made a few hundred dollars by “building lots.”’ (The Standard. Vol. June 18 1887)

The second was published under the title AUSTRALIANS ARE THINKING. A Worker In California Sends a Clear Statement of the Situation.

‘You will be pleased to hear that my relative, Mr. Alfred Allen, has been elected a member of the New South Wales, Australia, parliament as an avowed disciple of yours. He writes in a recent letter to me: “I thoroughly indorse Henry George’s policy.”

Australia is indeed ripe for the realization of your doctrines. It is now passing through the most exhausting depression ever known there, all brought on by nothing else but the policy you so stanchly oppose.

It is true the government is a so-called “free trade” one, that meaning that the importing interest shall be untaxed while struggling manufacturers are oppressed by heavy excise duties. The old nostrum of protection is advocated by many, and as the government have borrowed all they dare and are millions sterling in debt they are half inclined to favor that. They impose license, house, and even think of adding personal property taxes — anything rather than one on the value of land, which, the land owners being the strongest party in parliament, goes scot free.

Meanwhile the entire country is at a standstill. Having no funds railways and other public works cannot be carried out. Irrigation, so sorely needed, has not even been touched, and tens of thousands of unemployed are wandering about. Retrenchment is the great cry, meaning that nothing shall be done to develop the resources of a continent bursting with natural wealth; and while even land owners would benefit from a tax which would cause prosperity to all, and while millions must be paid every year as interest to bondholders in England, not one penny may be taken from the monopolizers, who are bloated with their ill gotten gains.

How plain it is that nothing but a land value tax can be of any benefit to a country is evident from the example of Australia, where railways, telegraph, etc., belong, as you advocate, to the government, but from which no benefit results to the people, but only to the land owners, whose possessions are thus enormously and directly increased in value without any outlay on their part.’ (The Standard. September 10 1887 Vol II, No. 10) pps. 48-9

The British Nationalization of Labour Society and Land Colonisation

In 1893 Phipson was Treasurer of the Nationalization of Labour Society. The President was Rev. Arthur Potter, the Vice-Presidents Bruce Wallace, Theophilus West and D. W. McQuire. The Treasurer was S. Wade, the Hon. General Secretary John Orme, and the Hon. Organising Secretary Walter Godbold. Its offices were at 65 Barbican in London.

On Saturday 11 February 1893 the Society held a meeting at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street to consider the question of the formation of a home colony. ‘It is Felt by the Promoters of this Project, of which a Very Short Outline is Sent Herewith, that the Carrying Out of Such an Object Affords a Means of Uniting Many of the Great Moral and Social Movements of the Times, as These Can All Find Expression in the One Endeavour’. The draft proposals for the formation of a co-operative land colony were signed by John Orme, J. Hyder and E. Howard. Later that year Phipson was talking about the possibility of setting up a colony at Champions Farm, Woodham Ferris, near Chelmsford, but this came to nothing.

Howard was the initiator of the idea of the Garden City, which is discussed by Stanley Buker in *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community (Oxford University Press. 1990).*

At first it appears that Phipson had reservations about Howard’s ideas as ‘not socialist enough’. (Ward). Authors of books on the garden city movement suggest tensions as a result between them. By 1903 Phipson appears to have changed his views because that year he corresponded with the American Albert Kinsey Owen asking him to offer his services in the building of Letchworth. The following year he wrote a letter about the Australian plans for a Federal Capital saying ‘Having studied for many years the subject of ideal cities, and taken part in the founding of several, from Topolobarapo, on the Gulf of California, to the Garden City now building 60 miles from London ...’ ‘In 1907 he wrote in the February Edition of Garden City comparing Letchworth with the English Fairhope’. (Chris Reynolds. *Evacustes Phipson & the origins of Letchworth Garden City. December 16 2017 on Hertfordshire Genealogy News website*)

In 1909 Phipson’s letter supporting Alfred Wallace Russell’s views on Colonisation was published in *The New Age* (4 March 1909. p. 390)

‘The critic who has the temerity to throw ridicule on Dr Wallace’s perspicacious endorsement of the Rev. H. V. Mills’s well-reasoned scheme of State Colonisation surely proves the immeasurable inferiority of his own intellect to that of the great philosopher.

If the scheme is not Socialism in the sense that it does not directly attack the present order, confiscate anybody’s property, or generally nationalise any proportion of the land or capital of the country, with all the fierce opposition and practically invincible hostility such a proposal would arouse, it is yet Socialism in the best and most essential meaning of the word, inasmuch as it carries out a complete scheme of independent, self-sufficing co-operation upon a definite area, the mere size of that area being immaterial, a question not of kind, but degree. If the orthodox Socialist’s idea is that the boundary of a Socialist State must coincide with some existing political frontier, that proves him to be swayed by arbitrary, not scientific, considerations. Doubtless, the advantages of communal methods in a labour colony would be less than if extended over a larger region, but so they would if confined to one country instead of spread through the world.’ (*The New Age. 4 March 1909. p. 390*)

In 1911 the *Land Values* journal of the movement for the taxation of land values, published under the heading *Municipal rating on land values in the city of Prince Rupert, British Columbia*, a letter from Phipson in Worcester about a letter he had received from British Columbia.

‘Sir,—As two paragraphs have appeared in your paper, one declaring that the rates in the new city of Prince Rupert were levied on land values and the other that this plan had been abolished, I wrote to the mayor asking to be furnished with the true facts. In reply I received the following, which I hope will settle the question finally and to your readers’ satisfaction.’

‘I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 4th ult., having reference to the system of taxation prevailing at Prince Rupert.

The policy of last year’s Council, as well as that of the Council of 1911, is to tax land values only, and not levy any taxes on buildings or other improvements made within the limits of the city. The sentiment of our people seems to be strongly in favour of that policy and I think it likely it will be continued for many years to come.’ (William Manson, Mayor) (*Land Values. July 1911. p. 50*)

*Art, Socialism and Land Ownership*
Phipson had very clear views about the damaging effect land ownership could have on the ‘living arts’ as reflected in architecture, capture and decorative painting. In March 1895 The Single Tax, journal of the Scottish Land Restoration Union published a letter from him from Coventry.

"Among the most deplorable effects of the fierce struggle for existence caused by land ownership is the total extinction of architecture, sculpture, and decorative painting as living arts. This, though so incontestable a fact, does not appear to have been noticed by Single Taxers, or in Henry George’s works, so much as its importance deserves. And nothing renders it so-evident as a comparison between modern buildings and those grand old structures of which so many still exist in the ancient city whence I am writing.

Coventry contains a larger number of mediaeval buildings than any city in England, Chester not excepted. They date from a time when land was still the recognised property of the State, when certain specified dues, representing the Single Tax in a crude and unscientific form, were rendered by the holders for its use, and when poverty as at present understood was unknown. There was no such desperate competition for a bare living as now exists; and the workmen having abundant leisure, and no fear of being deprived of employment, was able to put his whole soul into his work, and did it with the loving effort of a true artist. There was, consequently, none of the scamped work, flimsy material, and tawdry decoration which distinguish modern erections. All the houses were constructed of well-seasoned heart of oak, which, where reasonable care has been exercised, remains hard and sound to this day. The main timbers were from nine inches to a foot, or even 18 inches square, and in stone buildings the mortar is so good as to have withstood the elements even better than the rock itself. The carving on beams, doorposts, and gables, ceilings and mantels, though bold and often very elaborate, is of the utmost delicacy and grace, and infinitely diversified. The general design of very house is highly picturesque, though there is none of that straining after effect or finicky ornament which seems inseparable from modern villas in the so-called antique style. From main outline to the minutest detail everything exhibits at once a breadth of conception, combined with a pains-taking workmanship, which would be the despair of a present-day designer.

And although the stone had to be quarried, the timber felled, and both transported, carved, and moulded entirely without steam, or any but the rudest machinery, time was found not only for making each private house a marvel of art, but also for building and decorating magnificent palaces, massive and stately castles and fortifications, and glorious churches, all profusely carved and coloured. How is it that in these days, when every man’s power is multiplied fifty-fold by science and invention, ninety-per cent. of our buildings are utterly hideous, while the remainder owe whatever beauty they possess the imitation of by-gone styles?

Is the art instinct in human nature dead? This is incredible; the love of beauty, though crushed, is still latent; and if that slavery which, in whatever form, has sounded the knell of art, were destroyed, we should soon be surrounded by loveliness and splendour than past ages ever dreamed of." (The Single Tax. March 1895. p. 6)

In 1895 his pamphlet Art and Socialism was published.

In 1896 he visited Alfred R. Wallace, the President of the Land Nationalisation League, who had lived at Parkstone in Dorset, but had lived in Croydon earlier in his life. On 14 June Wallace wrote to the German economist and Vice-President of the League, Michael Flürscheim telling him about ‘a visit from a very enthusiastic social reformer. Mr. Evacustes A. Phipson, & he sent me a few days back a paper on “Art Under Socialism” which is very well written & should have to have considerable literary power. He is a man of small independent means & some years ago he spent several thousands in trying to establish a Socialist Colony, which of course failed. But he is not disheartened, & means to try again with a few more thousands. He is a fair artist, & has been over a good deal of England sketching old houses &c.

After seeing you I wrote to him (through the Ed. of the “Free Review” for which he writes) suggesting to him that Union is Strength, & that he should communicate with you & if possible, work together.
He is rather self-opinionated, but if you can persuade him that he will do more good by working with you than by himself I think he will be a useful coadjutor.’ (Letter held at Natural History Museum)

Michael Flürscheim (1844-1912) promoted an improved currency system (the Commercial Exchange). When in Britain between 1896 and 1898 he promoted mutual exchange. He then went to New Zealand campaigning on land nationalisation and currency reform. From about he was in California promoting railway tracks toward Mexico. (Wikipedia)

Further information

Phipson and Hertfordshire


Land Reform and colonisation

Phipson is mentioned without much detail in several books, including:


John Field. Working Men's Bodies: Work Camps in Britain, 1880-1940. (Oxford University Press. 2016)