

Lyme Regis Museum

People of Lyme no. 5 Sydney Jessett, Lyme Painter by Richard Bull



**Sydney James Jessett (1885-1961)
Missionary Clerk and Artist**

Sydney Jessett¹ was a prolific and gifted, but largely untrained, Lyme Regis landscape artist. His wider work spanned the period from before his service in the First World War in Flanders to his retirement in Lyme, where he produced thousands of water colours of local landscapes, seascapes and townscapes from 1940 to the late 1950s. He painted for fun, not for profit and he sold few of his works.

¹ An article, from which some of this information is drawn, entitled *The Forgotten Painter of Lyme Regis* by Colin Style appeared in Dorset Life No. 314 May 2005. The Museum has copies in its Jessett file.

The paintings of this largely forgotten artist are not as well-known as they should be in Lyme or elsewhere, despite the best efforts of his family and of the Museum to promote his memory. The Museum has held two exhibitions, one in 2005 in association with the William Pelly Gallery, and another in 2014. A treasured collection of Jessetts owned by the family is on permanent public display, filling the walls of the Jessett Room in Volunteer Inn in Broad Street, Lyme Regis. Family members retain a large collection and many other Jessetts exist in Lyme, some unframed and uncared for. Yet the quality of his landscapes surpasses that of many better-known Lyme artists. Currently, apart from temporary exhibitions, the Museum has no free space to put its collection of Jessett's work on display, but a complete digital record of the 2014 exhibition can be found under the tab "exhibitions" on the Museum's web site www.lymeregismuseum.co.uk

A web search should reveal other Jessett material, including work by his son, Alan, who was an art teacher in Twickenham, as well as items which have been sold through London galleries, some at a fair price.

We would like to thank members of his family for assistance in the preparation of this article and the exhibitions in 2005 and 2014, as well as Mike Irish for the gift of several Jessetts in 2014.

The Life of Sydney Jessett

Sydney James Jessett was born on the 3rd December 1885 in Bethnal Green, then a poor working class suburb of east London. His father, Frederick Jessett, a wood turner and carver, came from Somerset and had worked in Exeter before marrying Maud, from Spitalfields, close by Bethnal Green and nearer the City of London. The family home was at 5 Gainsborough Square, now demolished. This was near where Bethnal Green Central Line tube station was later built.



Sill Life - Stones from the Shore Lyme Bay, 1957 A remarkably realistic watercolour portrayal of typical stones from the Lyme shore 2013/100-7

Sydney was christened Sidney, but he seemed to prefer the spelling Sydney and signed his 1911 census return as Sydney James Jessett. Royal Flying Corps records and electoral rolls always have his name as Sydney. In discussion with one of his grand-daughters, Dinah Donnell, we have now adopted this spelling in the Museum.

CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1911.

Before writing on this Schedule please read the Instructions given on the other side of the paper, as well as the headings of the Columns. The entries should be written in Ink.

The contents of the Schedules will be treated as confidential. Strict care will be taken that no information is disclosed with regard to individual persons. The returns are not to be used for proof of age, as in connection with Old Age Pensions, or for any other purpose than the preparation of Statistical Tables.

NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP TO HEAD OF FAMILY	AGE (AND SEX)	FACTORS AS TO RESIDENCE	PROFESSION OR OCCUPATION		BIRTHPLACE	NATIONALITY	INFIRMITY
				of Present age (see form and schedule)	at Birth			
1 Sydney Jessett	Head	25	Married	Missionary Clerk	Missionary Society	London, Shoreditch	000	
2 Margaret Jessett	Wife	24	Married			London, Clerkenwell	1	
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(To be filled up by the Enumerator)

(To be filled up by, or on behalf of, the Head of Family or other person in charge, as in charge of this dwelling)

Write below the Number of Rooms in this Dwelling (Garden, Porch, or Apartment). Count the Middle as a room, but do not count empty, lavatory, bath, steam bath, or water-closet, etc., etc.

I declare that this Schedule is correctly filled up by the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature: *Sydney James Jessett*
 Dated: *1, Cornhill Road, Shoreditch, E.C.4.*

1911 Census Return (National Archives online at www.ancestry.co.uk in 2014)

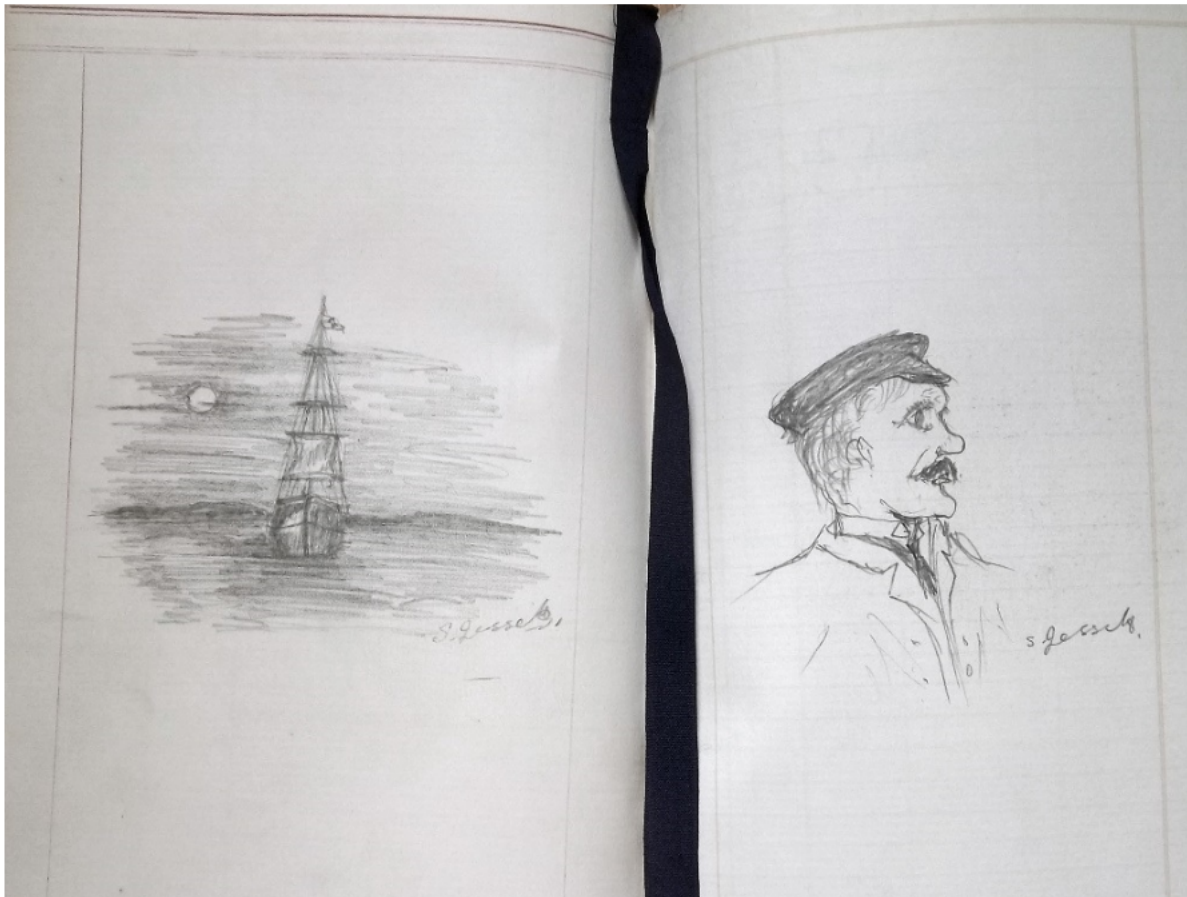
After leaving Montieth Road School in nearby Bow, aged 15, he entered the Port of London as an office lad, setting his future career in clerical work. Bow is centre of Cockney life: “born within the sound of Bow bells” is the true qualification for the tribe. He studied art at evening classes, but had to be discouraged from entering the art school’s competitions, after winning too many times. This limited training brought out his natural talent, but did not enable him to join, if he even wanted to, any formal art groupings, leaving him as an amateur painter. In a way he had parallels with Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), who had lived at Isleworth and Ramsgate for a while. Both were virtually untrained and isolated from mainstream artists, so developed their own style, often using scratch or begged materials. Both sold little or none of their prodigious output and remained impecunious, and both had a profound sense of colour and the need to experiment in styles of representation. But whilst Jessett may have been mildly eccentric, he did not share Van Gogh’s madness. Both painted night scenes but Jessett’s do not suggest the work of a deeply troubled mind.

He became a missionary clerk in the Church (of England’s) Missionary Society. At this time the Society had its large headquarters in Salisbury Square in the City of London, where Jessett worked in its big and complex administration. He kept the post until retirement, apart from service in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War. It would have involved arrangements for sending and supplying missionaries at home and abroad and promoting the organisation, but it is not thought that he had any special religious conviction other than possibly what was normal for an Englishman – for example, there is no sign of any religious paintings or illusions in his work other than the posters he painted for the Society. Through



these he developed the medium of poster paint, which he later turned into an expressive art form for night-time paintings, giving a greater density of darkness and colour than possible with ordinary watercolours.

In October 1910 he married Harriett Ethel, who was born in Clapton, a short train ride on the Chingford Branch of the Great Eastern Railway from Bethnal Green, and they lived at 1 Connaught Road, Leytonstone, Essex, before moving to more well-to-do parts, 36 Mountfield Road, Finchley, Middlesex and later to Welwyn Garden City. She was known as Ethel and was two years his senior.



Opposing pages from a Jessett sketchbook – a trading ship and his father, Frederick

Sketchbooks from his London times contain colouring and painting notes and a lot of compositional sketches. They clearly demonstrate his in-born ability as a draughtsman. Two samples are included here, a sketch of his father and another of a Thames spritsail barge, such as would have been seen in the Pool of London (and sometimes even in Lyme Cobb on coastal cargo runs from the south east of England). Mostly the book contains ship and barge pictures, with drawings at Benfleet, Westcliff on Sea, Canvey Island and on the Medway.



A Thames spritsail barge from the same sketchbook
Pictures courtesy Sarah Rawlins

First World War Service in the Royal Flying Corps

Jessett had the unusual opportunity of serving in the observation section of the Royal Flying Corps. The RFC, then a branch of the Army, was the fore-runner of the RAF. The work involved servicing balloons and dirigibles (semi-rigid inflatables), which carried observers aloft to peer over enemy lines along the western front – and to provide barrage balloons to frustrate enemy aircraft.



Sydney Jessett in RFC uniform in 1917

His pencil sketches and watercolours illustrate a RFC camp and balloon filling station, undamaged Flemish towns and countryside back from the front and, more dramatically, the danger of going aloft in a balloon from attack by enemy aircraft. Two of the latter paintings have recently been sold in London for good prices and demonstrate high technical artistry, showing balloonists baling out from a balloon for an uncertain fate, although attached to their static line parachutes. Compositional pencil sketches for these paintings are retained in Lyme by the family. *The Throne* is a delightful sketch of a makeshift chair at camp, or maybe in a trench, at Ouderdom in Belgium, a place on the front line, which now hardly exists amongst Flanders fields and cemeteries.



The Throne, Vlaanderen Ouderdom, 1917 Balloonists baling out, 1917
(Both pictures courtesy Sarah Rawlins)



Filling a dirigible (courtesy Denise Burton)

Retirement and the move to the South West

In 1939, at the outbreak of war, Ethel was so worried about the prospect of German air raids on Welwyn Garden City that Sydney retired at the age of 54 and the family took a taxi to the south west to retirement. It ran out of petrol at Thorncombe, between Crewkerne and Lyme Regis, where lodgings were found. Soon more permanent accommodation was found nearby at Pipe House, on the north-western edge of the nearby hamlet of Kittwhistle. It possible that the Jessetts' intention had been to get to Lyme. Whatever, they evacuated their three young grand-daughters with them, who all still live locally.

Thorncombe and Kittwhistle are set in very beautiful countryside which must have provided much inspiration for an artist, but as an outsider he could have been sketching for the enemy and was liable to be reported! But this marks the start of a great flourish of brilliant landscapes in watercolour and, increasingly water colour enhanced with the denser colours of poster paint.

In those days a direct bus from ran from Crewkerne to Lyme through Kittwhistle and it could have taken him to the town for more inspiration - but movement on the coastal strip, even Lyme's Marine Parade, was sensitive and would have required a pass! Nevertheless he must have talked his way past the sentries, for the first coastal scenes appear from 1940. So, whilst the idea of a move to Lyme might have formed in his mind, the move had to wait until the end of the war in 1945 before it became possible. Nevertheless he painted *Devon Sea* (2013 100 2) at Seaton in 1940 and *Dowlands Landslip* (2013/100-9) in 1942.



Devon Sea, 1940 Watercolour on paper



Dowlands Landslip, 1942 Watercolour on paper

The move to Lyme

Finally moving to Lyme Regis in 1945, Sydney became known as something of an eccentric - in some respects he was loner who liked to tramp miles with his small dog for a good scene to paint, and on the other hand, he was a voluble Cockney who welcomed a stream of visitors to his kitchen and tiny, dark studio. He was happy to talk to anyone about anything as any old-fashioned Cockney would, but he was bound to have been marked out as a bit strange, being so different in speech from the local Dorset folk. There was no established colony of artists in Lyme at that time from which he could gain support and solace, if he wanted it, unlike those in St Ives or Newlyn, but nevertheless he endeared himself to Lyme folk. Arguably he was Lyme's most gifted, most prolific and most forgotten painter. Jessett had painted in St Ives, but Lyme ensnared him: it has that effect on people!

In his studio in Coombe Street, lit only by a small window and a bare bulb, he produced bright watercolours from rough field sketches in coarse pencil; Pinhay Bay and Golden Cap being favourite viewpoints. As his style matured in Lyme his work became more impressionistic and less detailed, but always showing wonderful colour, light and reflections on sea and water.



The Jessetts lived at 33 Coombe Street, above this shop that is now Lyme's Coombe Street Gallery.



Gun Emplacement at the Spittles, 1947 Watercolour on paper. 2005/72-2

Most of his painting are faithful, but some pictures are completely impressionistic, made up from Lyme or West Country elements. Some pictures appear truly representational, but have some imaginary detail – Jessett was just trying things out! Some of his best representations are snow scenes, the texture of stone or concrete walls, particularly sea walls, reflections, sunsets and dawns over brooding skies, night scenes, woodlands, mists and clouds, for which he developed his own effective and economical methods, with remarkably few brush strokes. He used poster paint to great skill and effect. In using the medium, and with his economy of

brush strokes, he produced brilliant skies, deep blue seas, wonderful reflections and the illusion of detail. Yet his effects do not require the viewer to stand well back: his paintings “work” at close range.



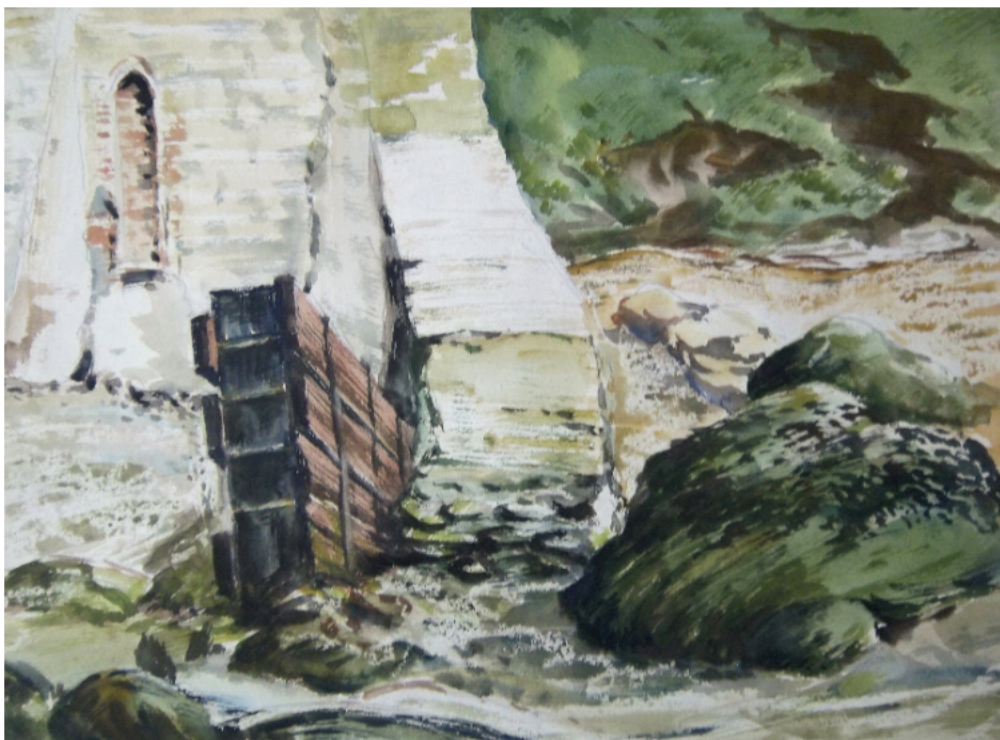
North Wall The Cobb, 1956 Watercolour on paper. 2003/4-6a

Jessett painted on any material he could find cheaply or free – the back of old Church Missionary Society posters (probably also his work), wallpaper (analglypta for its texture), mount board, notebooks and the backs of previous work that he had rejected, but never those expensive papers designed for watercolour. Just one scraper-board drawing is known. Earlier paintings are pure watercolour, done with accurate and close detail, but later he blended in the poster paint he had used for Missionary Society posters to give density – and, no doubt, to save money, for he was not rich, living on a small pension.

His paintings are usually named – as well as signed and dated in the form *S J Jessett 1956 or '56*. Unfinished or pictures he disliked were not signed and some have a wavy pencil line striking them out. He usually signed in pencil and sometimes the names and dates are very clear, sometimes they are not readily legible. The watercolours are generally around 34 x 43cm, depending on the size of paper he had available. Sketches are much smaller, fitted into pocket sketchbooks or notebooks or just small scraps of paper.



Sea Walls, 1957 Watercolour on paper. Jessett painted several pictures of these then new walls – perhaps he was fascinated by the dramatic curves the raw walls imposed upon the natural scene. *From a digital image in the collection.*



Untitled, the walls and groyne below the Marine Theatre, Lyme Regis, undated. Watercolour on paper. Only the top of the small brick arch can still be seen above the new promenade. 2006/45-2

Painting was his hobby – he rarely sold paintings and even if he did, it would only be for 2/6d (12.5p), or, to a lady, for a kiss. Thousands were not sold and remain with the family. In recent years some of his paintings have fetched reasonable sums in gallery sales in London, but not in Lyme, where his work remains a much undervalued asset of the town.



Moon Beams – The Cobb – Lyme Regis, 1952 Poster and watercolour.
2013/100-5

Further Reading

Other than the article in the footnote on page 1, there are no known on-going references to Sydney Jessett's work, although a web search might be worthwhile.

Acknowledgements

This paper and the associated research and exhibition in 2014 could not have been put together without the help of Denise Burton, Dinah O'Donnell, Mr & Mrs Coward, Sarah Rawlings, William Pelly, Barbara Bull and Thea Hawksworth.

Richard Bull
October 2014