

Ralph Usherwood 1911-2000

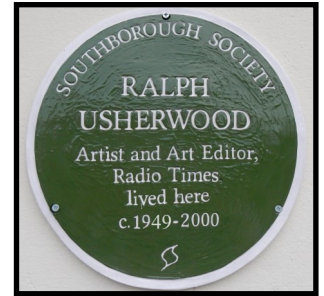
Artist and Art Editor of the Radio Times

by Michael McNay

Location of Plaque - Pennington Road

Extracted from *The Guardian*, 29 February 2000

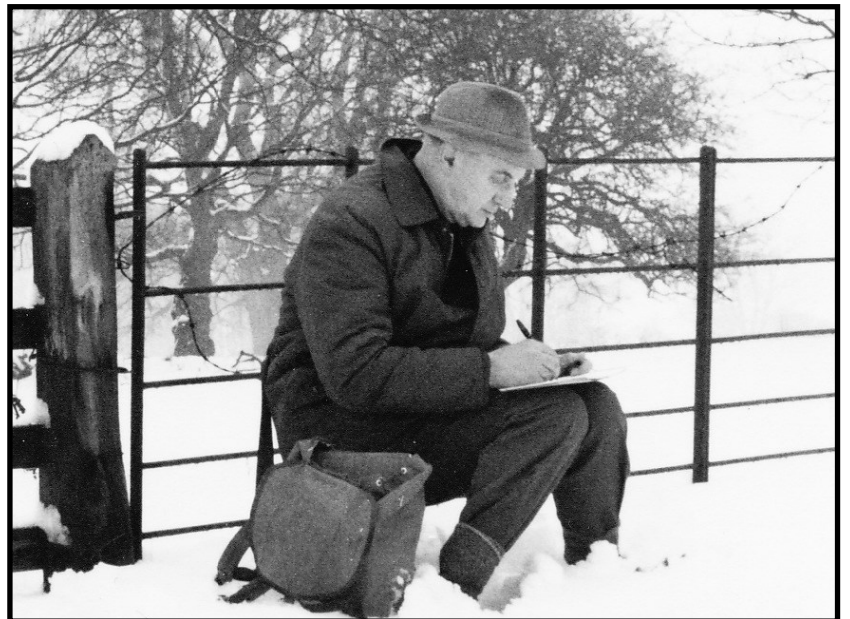
When, in 1955, Ralph Usherwood, who has died aged 88, reached the halfway mark of his stint as art editor of *Radio Times*, the magazine had reached its peak circulation of more than 8m.



It was the journal to which all illustrators aspired, illustration being the perfect partner for radio - a medium which drew on the listener's imagination counterpointed by an image which was imaginatively drawn. But in that year ITV was launched, the broadcasting monopoly was broken, the ratings battle between the BBC and commercial television became reality, and radio swiftly became the junior partner.

Usherwood had inherited a healthy tradition. In the 1920s and early 30s, *Radio Times* Christmas covers had been created by the two most brilliant poster artists of the period, the Frenchman AM Cassandre and the American E McKnight Kauffer. Edward Ardizzone began work for the magazine before the war; so did Victor Reinganum, Heath Robinson and Nicolas Bentley. Eric Fraser was beginning a 50-year career. But the great period was Usherwood's, spanning the 1950s, particularly before 1957, when television subjects started to take precedence on the cover.

Usherwood was born in West Wickham, Kent, went to school at St Dunstan's College, London, where his father was headmaster, and read classics at Worcester College, Oxford. Here he designed the scenery for *Tamburlaine*, one of the magical summer evening productions in the college gardens, drew caricatures for the student magazine *Isis*, and captained the university lacrosse team. During the war, he served in the RAF. His ability as an artist informed his perception as an art editor, and his charm - and rising circulation figures - persuaded people to work for insufficient pay. He carefully fitted the artist to the task. Usherwood was said to have read the scripts or books of every broadcast work that he wanted illustrated, and he hoped that his artists would be familiar with them as well. Quite often they were. They usually received their commissions on a Thursday or Friday of the week before publication. Leonard Rosoman recalled receiving one for Somerset Maugham's *Cakes And Ale*, and reading the book overnight before starting work and delivering on Monday - although a BBC committee threw out the work because it showed a barmaid and her lover in the same bedroom.

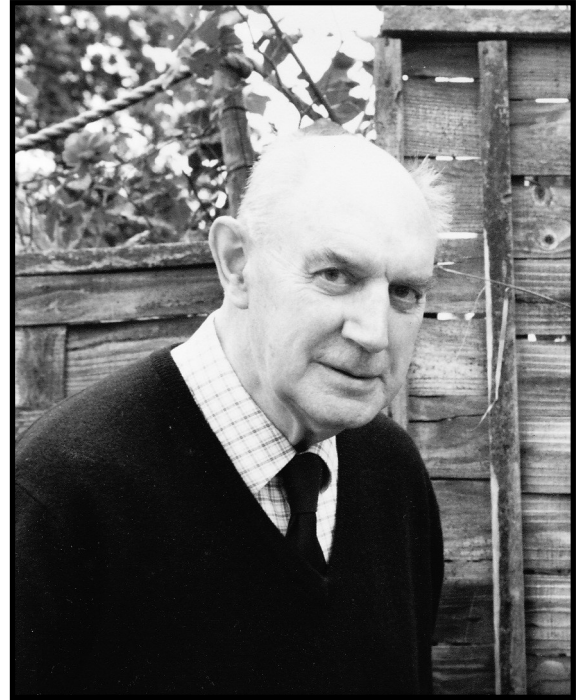


Ralph Usherwood sketching during winter 1980

Anthony Gross illustrated Anouilh and Chekhov; Robin Jacques did *The Tempest* (with Gielgud as Prospero), *Julius Caesar* and John Whiting's *A Penny For A Song*; John Minton did Ibsen's *The Lady From The Sea* in dramatic black and white; Lynton Lamb did *Tartuffe* (starring Donald Wolfit); and Ronald Searle illustrated O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*.

After Usherwood, artists as fine as Peter Brookes, Ralph Steadman, Adrian George and Peter Till carried the torch into the 1970s and 80s, but the magazine, under pressure, ceased to be the major showcase of fine illustration. The garish colours of sets and costumes from soap operas like *Coronation Street* have their apotheosis in the photographs of the current listings magazines, among which the *Radio Times* is now just another player.

Usherwood's wife, Hilda, died in 1979. Ralph Dean Usherwood, art editor, born 27th October 1911; died 2nd January 2000. His two sons survive him.



Ralph Usherwood in Summer 1985

Ralph Usherwood's plaque was unveiled on 11th September 2013 by Daphne Todd OBE winner of the BP Portrait Prize. Afterwards the gathering got to see many of Ralph's original paintings.

Examples of Ralph Usherwood's watercolour paintings



A Christmas Card featuring the front door of Ralph's house in Pennington Road. Copy of painting shown by kind permission of Chris & Pat Lake who lived next door to Ralph.



Cricket on the Common — Copy of painting shown by permission of Ian Kinghorn