

William James Neatby (1860–1910)
– Artist and Designer and Edward Mossforth
Neatby (1888–1949)

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TODAY WILLIAM JAMES Neatby is best known for his designs for the tiled interior of the Meat Hall in Harrods department store, London. This scheme rightly enjoys a worldwide reputation as one of the finest ceramic interiors of the early 20th century. However, Neatby's colourful murals in Harrods have tended to overshadow his other numerous artistic accomplishments. His career as a successful decorative artist and designer is outlined below along with descriptions of several of his other works, highlighting his many creative talents and importance as a leading figure in British art and design in the years around 1900.

Part of the tiling in Harrods Meat Hall,
1902. Courtesy of Harrods



William James Neatby was born on 24th May 1860 at 6 Wellington Street, Barnsley, Yorkshire, the eldest son of Samuel Mossforth Neatby (1837–1910) and Mary Jackson Neatby, *née* Tomlin (1839–1911). The couple had married in May 1859 and were in their early twenties at the time of the birth of their first child. The family was relatively prosperous and active in the non-conformist religious life of the town. At the time of William's birth his father, Samuel Neatby, was a timber merchant's clerk, employed in the family firm by his father, also called William (1807–1880), who owned the timber yard.

Little is known about Neatby's childhood. The 1861 Census, taken when he was 10 months old, places the Neatby family still at 6 Wellington Street, but by 1871 census records show that they had moved along the street to number 12. Both these addresses were situated close to the family timber yard, also in Wellington Street. Although William was the eldest son, he somehow managed to avoid being taken into the timber business, this responsibility being taken on by his younger brother Walter, who at the age of 17 was already working as a timber merchant's clerk, and in the 1881 Census William is recorded as an 'Architect's Pupil'.

In an article about Neatby published in the *Studio* magazine in 1903¹, the author relates that, "No sooner had he left school than Mr Neatby, at that time only a boy of 15 years, was articled to an architect in a northern provincial town. There he remained, as pupil and afterwards as clerk of the works, altogether six years."

Unfortunately, where this work was undertaken is not recorded but Leeds or Sheffield are possible locations. The article goes on to suggest that Neatby had talents rather superior to those necessitated by a provincial architect's workload and conveys the impression that the young man toiled diligently in the office while conducting a programme of self-education and improvement in his spare time, visiting nearby churches at Woolley, Elland and Thornhill, as well as York Minster, where stained glass became an early source of inspiration for the young man.

On 28th May 1881, at the Register Office in the district of Ecclesall Bierlow in the County of York, Neatby was married to Emily Arnold, Spinster. Emily had been born in Prospect Street in Barnsley and William Neatby had probably known her for many years. The wedding took place only four days after William's 21st birthday; his bride, who had been born in July 1852, was nearly eight years older. On their wedding certificate William is described as an 'Architect's assistant'.

About this time, Neatby left his hometown of Barnsley and moved with his new wife to Whitby and "other places in Yorkshire" where "Two years longer, after leaving the office at which he was originally articled ...[he]... followed his architectural profession".² During this period he is said to have designed engine beds and the ironwork for a mill-roof. These activities were perhaps not financially remunerative enough for the young couple, nor do they seem to have provided the stimulus that Neatby required and at the age of 23 he decided on a change of career, moving to the Burmantofts Potteries at Leeds where he took a position as a ceramic tile designer.

Neatby appears to have started work at Burmantofts in the spring of 1884. His initials, as an artist with the firm, first occur as part of an inscription: ‘W.J.N. del. 17.VII.84’ on an illustration, which is entitled: ‘A few Pilaster Panels in Burmantofts Faience by Wilcock and Co. Burmantofts’ (sic) in a company advertising catalogue. This drawing is one of over 60 sheets of drawings, signed by Neatby, that exist as prints in a variety of Burmantofts catalogues.³ Many of these illustrations show figural tiles and larger decorative pieces of architectural ceramics.

The years that Neatby spent at Burmantofts were professionally successful for him. His name occurs as the artist on hand-painted specimens of Burmantofts Pottery, and as a tile designer, but he was also the leading artist in catalogue design for the company in the period 1884–1890.

Neatby’s first wife having died in August 1885, he married again in October 1887. His bride was Jane Isabella Dempster, aged 20, one of four sisters whose father had been a butler. On the wedding certificate Neatby entered his profession as that of ‘Artist’, the first time that he used the term on an official document.

Neatby spent six years at the Burmantofts Potteries, years that were professionally very productive and allowed him to exercise the full range of his talents in ceramic painting, draughtsmanship and design. Among his drawings in company catalogues are numerous designs for glazed tiles, fireplaces and terracotta ornament, the latter often being executed in a highly detailed and rather delicate Renaissance style. It is impossible to know how many of these designs are Neatby’s own and how many are transcriptions of architects’ designs. However, most would appear to be Neatby’s own work. An obituary written by the architect Ernest Runtz revealed how the relationship between Neatby and his architect clients worked, when he commented: “As an architect one had only to indicate the general idea of a decorative feature, whether in modelling or in mural decorative work, and Neatby caught the spirit of the undertaking...”⁴ From this, it would seem that the architect pointed out the area to be decorated on his building plans, particularly on the elevations, suggested the general decorative style and then let Neatby formulate a detailed scheme for the specified surface. Consequently, Neatby was closely associated with a number of architectural projects at this time, designing glazed faience tile and terracotta pilasters, ceilings, doorways and wall panels for both the interiors and exteriors of a range of buildings including private houses, banks, restaurants, hospitals and hotels. With this range of experience behind him in 1890 Neatby was on the move, this time to work in London at Doulton and Co. of Lambeth, where he took charge of Doulton’s architectural department for the design and production of mural ceramics.

In the 11 years that Neatby spent at Doulton and Co. he was able not only to develop his artistic potential but also to experiment with a number of new ceramic materials. During these years Neatby was involved in a number of major architectural projects. Those recorded include several ornamental architectural details in terracotta for a building designed by Ernest Runtz, at 54–55 Cornhill, London in 1893, one of a number of private sector commissions handled by Neatby on behalf of Doulton and Co. He also worked on a variety of public

projects in the 1890s including a large Board School building in Chapel Street, Salford, by the architects Woodhouse and Willoughby, and one of the most prestigious projects of Neatby's career, when as the principal sculptor involved, he created terracotta sculpted bas relief panels for the New Physical Observatory at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich (1895).

Although terracotta sculptures and relief work remained a major part of Neatby's output at the company, his earlier experience in tile design and



FAR LEFT
Frontage of 54 and 55 Cornhill in the City of London, 1893



LEFT
Detail showing on the top of the building one of the two grotesque devils which were carved by Neatby and then moulded from terracotta



FAR LEFT
Detail of the top front window with several beasts



LEFT
Detail of gable with the second of the two devils carved by Neatby

hand-painted ceramic decoration proved invaluable in a large-scale decorative scheme for the interior of the Winter Gardens in Blackpool in 1896. Here the tile decoration consisted of both relief moulded work and hand-painted figural compositions, lining the walls of an entrance corridor and the main ballroom. Other glazed tile schemes exist, but for much of his later polychromatic work Neatby used Doulton's Carraraware for exteriors and Parian ware for interiors. The former is a stoneware with a dull eggshell-like surface that can be produced



ABOVE

Side elevation of The New Physical Observatory building at the Royal Observatory showing the gable window whose decorative features Neatby created, 1895



ABOVE RIGHT

Detail of upper panel in window showing sleeping woman associated with night, and bat above her head

RIGHT

Detail of Neatby's sculpture of Astronomia showing signs of the zodiac and signed by him in the right-hand bottom corner



in a number of colours; Parian is the earthenware equivalent, and was developed by Neatby.⁵ Buildings using these materials include the facade of the Everard Building in Bristol (1901) and the Meat Hall in Harrods, London (1902).

In 1901 Neatby left Doulton and Co. to pursue a career as an independent designer; however, he maintained good relations with the Lambeth firm and his former employers were only too ready to use his talents as an outside designer and decorator for the Harrods interior the following year. Neatby apparently wanted to expand his repertoire, to undertake artwork in a number of different areas that interested him, such as stained glass design. In March 1899 Neatby was elected to the membership of the Society of Designers, many of whose members ran independent design practices.⁶ As a forum for the exchange of practical and theoretical ideas the Society will have proved an invaluable stimulus and must have contributed to Neatby's desire for freedom to pursue his own design concepts. However, his immediate motive for leaving Doulton's may have been his relationship with the Birmingham architects Newton and Cheatle. In 1898 Neatby had worked with this firm on their City Arcades project in Union Street, Birmingham. For this shopping arcade scheme Neatby provided designs for exterior terracotta decorations comprising anthropomorphic figures and a frieze of fantastic creatures and for the interior ambulatory, a blue and green faience balustrade formed by entwined imaginary beasts. In 1901 the architects asked Neatby to design an interior for The King's Smoking Cafe, a unit within the City Arcades. He provided designs for the stained glass, the metalwork and mural tiles for the cafe,⁷ the latter being produced by Doulton's, and in undertaking this scheme, may well have come to see the logic of establishing his own company.

Soon, Neatby joined forces with another architect designer, E. Hollyer Evans, to form the firm of Neatby, Evans and Co., with showrooms at 15 Percy Street, London. The company offered various areas of expertise and abilities in mural decoration, artistic furniture design, metalwork, stained glass and textiles; basically anything to do with interior decoration. At the inception of the company they advertised extensively in publications connected to *The Studio*⁸ and produced a small catalogue and publicity booklet, illustrating the nature of their products, called *The 1901 Book*. Whether Neatby, Evans and Co. was a commercial success is not recorded but that the alliance of the two main partners⁹ continued in some form until at least 1906 or 1907 is suggested by the appearance in *The Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art*, for 1907, of a "Fire-place designed by E. Hollyer Evans, Architect. Panel painted by W.J. Neatby, A.R.M.S."¹⁰ By 1908 the partnership may have ended as in that year Neatby is recorded as being the Art Director for John Line and Sons Ltd., wallpaper manufacturers.¹¹ However, as early as 1904 Neatby had been designing wallpapers for Jeffrey and Co.¹² and undoubtedly the partners produced individual works in addition to those made under the Neatby and Evans co-operative.

Painting was one of the main art forms that Neatby pursued. He seems always to have considered himself as an artist rather than an architect and after leaving Doulton's he widened his interests in this area. Some of his work was executed as decorative panels on Neatby and Evans furniture, but most was for



Tiles by Neatby in the ballroom at the Winter Gardens, 1896



TOP LEFT
Union Street frontage of City Arcade in
Birmingham City Centre, 1898

TOP RIGHT
Detail of the sea creatures frieze and
musicians

BOTTOM LEFT
The inside of the City Arcade as it is in
2014

BOTTOM RIGHT
Detail of the columns and decoration
above the shop units

exhibition, mural work or book illustration. As early as 1899 he had published one of his drawings, a picture illustrating a scene from Tennyson's *Day Dream*, in *The Artist*,¹³ and he was to develop from this style, presumably designed for ceramic mural decoration, into painting in either oil or watercolours. To further his career in painting, in 1906 he joined the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, first as an A.R.M.S. then becoming a full R.M.S. in 1907. Perhaps due to this association, one of only two formal society affiliations that he made (the other being his membership of the Society of Designers), Neatby has been considered by past researchers as a little more than a miniaturist. However, his repertoire was much wider, and included a number of mural schemes such as those produced in cooperation with the architect George Skipper, whose Norwich-based office commissioned Neatby to provide a mural scheme for the main headquarters building of the Norwich Union Insurance Company.

In December 1905 he took part in a large exhibition of painting and sculpture at the Modern Gallery in New Bond Street, London. Neatby contributed 60 of the exhibition's 122 entries, joining three other artists in this venture. His paintings were brought before an even wider audience in a number of book illustrations that he produced for the publishers Hodder and Stoughton for a series of books published from 1909 to 1915. The artworks, and the individual

NEATBY'S SCULPTURE



FAR LEFT
Green man from side of doorway at Manchester Municipal School of Art Museum, 1897

LEFT
Helmeted woman on frontage of the City Arcade, Birmingham, 1898



FAR LEFT
Base of chimney on the outside of the Manchester Municipal School of Art Museum 1897

LEFT
Detail of sea creatures on frontage of City Arcade, Birmingham, 1898



FAR LEFT
Sculpture on column on front entrance of Salford Education Office, 1895

LEFT
Grotesque face on frontage of Salford Education Office, 1895



Face beneath gable window on frontage of Salford Education Office, 1895

books themselves, are largely undated, but one illustration¹⁴ for the volume: *A day with the Poet Browning*, is signed 'W.J. Neatby 1906' suggesting that Neatby utilised some previous work for the project or that the books were several years in the planning stage.

Neatby obviously enjoyed the life of the Bohemian artistic set, dressing and behaving accordingly. In 1904 he apparently outraged the guests at his cousin Thomas's wedding by attending the ceremony wearing a velvet jacket with a yellow cravat. By 1906, when he exhibited two works at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition,¹⁵ Neatby had moved into a studio at 56 Glebe Place, Chelsea. He obviously appreciated the area, one of Whistler's haunts, and well known for its artistic traditions and occupants.

Neatby died of a heart attack on 20th April 1910 at 36 Devonshire Street, the home of his cousin Edwin Awdas Neatby, an eminent London physician. He was 49 years of age. His cousin Edwin certified the death and his son Edward registered it. Notification of the death appeared in *The Times*¹⁶ for Saturday April 23rd 1910 as follows:

NEATBY – On the 20th April 1910, WILLIAM JAMES NEATBY, R.M.S., of Wentworth Studios, Chelsea. Funeral Hughenden Church, High Wycombe, today (Saturday), 1.15 p.m.



TOP LEFT
'The Nereids' by Neatby from Hodder and Stoughton's volume on Shelley

ABOVE
'The Cloud' by Neatby from Hodder and Stoughton's volume on Shelley

LEFT
'The Nightingale' by Neatby from Hodder and Stoughton's volume on Keats



William Neatby at work in his studio
 Courtesy of Scott Anderson



Some years before Neatby had taken on a second home in the countryside at Bowood, Walters Ash, near Hughenden, and it was near this home that he chose to be buried. Today he lies buried, alongside his wife who died in 1936, in Hughenden Church cemetery in a grave marked out by four low stone kerbs, one of which bears the inscription:

W.J. NEATBY RMS 1860–1910
 YEA SAITH THE SPIRIT THAT
 THEY MAY REST FROM THEIR
 LABOURS AND THEIR WORKS
 DO FOLLOW THEM REV 14.13

and around the corner:

AND HIS WIFE JANE ISABELLA
1868–1936

A number of Neatby's architectural works remain extant and can be visited and admired. Similarly many of his smaller decorative works such as metalwork, book illustrations and wallpaper designs can be evaluated against the wider field of Victorian and Edwardian decorative art. In Neatby's obituary, written by the architect Ernest Runtz, which was published in both the *Architect* and *The Journal of Decorative Art and British Decorator*,¹⁷ he comments on Neatby's modesty and gentlemanly conduct in his business affairs, his artistic originality and versatility. He mentions his recent employment at Doulton's and as chief designer for Messrs Line and Son, wallpaper manufacturers, but this biographical detail takes second place to Neatby as a man and as an artist, as when in his designs for wallpaper he is credited with possessing "a keen sense of line and pleasing colour which in some of his work was reminiscent of William Morris". In terms of two-dimensional design there can surely have been no greater compliment paid to an artist in the early years of this century. Runtz concludes his eulogy with the words: "He was a true artist, and a man of fine character, and he pursued his art with a direct and single purpose."

ENDNOTES AND SOURCES

1. Valance, A., 'Mr W.J. Neatby and His Work', *Studio*, xxix (1903).
2. Valance, A., 'Mr W.J. Neatby and His Work', *Studio*, xxix (1903), p.113.
3. These catalogues are held at the Abbey House Museum, Kirkstall, Leeds and are: *Catalogue of Designs* (Leeds: Burmantofts, 1886); *The Burmantofts Portfolio of Faience* (London: Batsford, 1889); *Burmantofts Firesides* (Leeds: Burmantofts, c.1890); *Catalogue of Burmantofts Faience* (Leeds: Burmantofts, 1890).
4. Runtz, E., 'The Late W.J. Neatby', *The Journal of Decorative Art and British Decorator*, xxx, (1910), p. 248.
5. 'W.J. Neatby's work and a new process', *The Artist*, xxv, (1899), pp. 88–98.
6. I.B., 'Designers' Jottings', *The Artist*, xxiv, (1899), pp. 213–214.
7. Valance, A., 'Mr W.J. Neatby and His Work', *Studio*, xxix (1903), p. 117.
8. For example in Holme, Charles (ed.), *Modern British Domestic Architecture and Decoration*, London: Studio Publication, 1901.
9. A third member of Neatby, Evans and Co. was a Mr Eddison, whose name is given in *The 1901 Book*.
10. Colour plate opposite page 106.
11. *Franco-British Exhibition, London, 1908, Official Catalogue*, p. 8, London and Derby, 1908.
12. Jeffrey and Co. production log for 1904.
13. "Rest". From the "Sleeping Palace", Tennyson's "Day Dream". From a design in colour by W.J. Neatby', *The Artist*, xxv, 1899, between pages 72 and 73.
14. The painting is titled: *My Last Duchess*.
15. *Royal Academy Exhibitors 1905–1970*, volume v (1981), p. 214.
16. A further notification appeared in the deaths column of the *Barnsley Chronicle* of April 30th 1910: 'NEATBY – On April 20th, 1910 at 36 Devonshire Street, London W. William James Neatby, of 4 Wentworth Station (sic), ? Chelsea, aged 49, eldest son of the late S.M. Neatby of Barnsley'.
17. *Architect*, lxxxiv, (1910), p. 55; *The Journal of Decorative Art and British Decorator*, xxx (1910), p. 248.

OTHER SOURCES

Scott Anderson has written three further pieces on Neatby as follows:

‘William James Neatby, artist and designer 1860–1910’ – a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Art and Design of De Montfort University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. (2000) [Online] <https://www.dora.dmu.ac.uk/handle/2086/2388/browse?value=Anderson%2C+Alastair+Scott&type=authorB> [Accessed: 5th December 2014]

‘William James Neatby: Designs for Furniture, Metalwork and Interiors’. (2002) *The Decorative Arts Society 1850 to the present*. (26) pp. 40–59

‘The South Building, Royal Observatory, Greenwich – The Meeting of Art and Astronomy’. (2006) *Journal of the Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society*. (12) pp. 31–37

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Scott Anderson MA, PhD, ASFAV, FNAVA

Scott has spent most of his life working in Universities or in the commercial world of art and antiques. For ten years he worked as a professional archaeologist in the Department of Archaeology at Leicester University before his interests shifted to the world of art, antiques and auctioneering. In 1994 he joined the team at Southampton Solent University as a Lecturer in Fine Arts Valuation, then the only BA (Hons) degree course of its kind to look at the commercial art world. He also has a particular interest in architecture and in recent years has taught courses on the history and theory of interior design. Now, as a Senior Lecturer, he concentrates on teaching, research and publication. Scott has written extensively, in learned journals and popular magazines, on both ancient and 19th-century ceramics, and Victorian and Edwardian art and design. As well as working in the Higher Education sector, Scott has lectured to many adult audiences for a variety of University Extra-mural departments, NADFAS groups and local antiques societies and hosted numerous cultural and heritage tours in the UK and abroad. He has extensive theoretical and practical knowledge of a wide range of fine and decorative arts objects and their valuation. In 2003 he was made an Honorary Associate of the Society of Fine Art Auctioneers and Valuers and in 2005 he was made an Honorary Fellow of the National Association of Valuers and Auctioneers. For the last few years Scott has also worked as a consultant valuer for the BBC television programme *Flog It*.

APPENDIX

Barnsley Art on Your Doorstep have added the following brief information obtained from the Suffolk Painters website about William Neatby's son Edward Mossforth Neatby (1888–1949) who was also an artist (<http://www.suffolkpainters.co.uk/index.cgi?choice=painter&pid=466>).

He was born at Leeds in 1888, son of artist William James Neatby (1860–1910) and his wife Jane Isabella, *née* Dempster, who married at Leeds in 1887. Edward studied at the Royal College of Art, receiving his diploma in 1910 and also at Slade Art School. He became an associate of the Royal Miniature Society in 1912. He painted portraits and landscapes and exhibited widely. He variously lived at Birkenhead, London, High Wycombe, Ipswich and Yorkshire. It is said that he married firstly at Wandsworth, London in 1930, Hilda Mary Fletcher and secondly at Claro, Yorkshire in 1947, Vivienne L. Corker and he died at Claro in 1949, aged 60.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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