

Meet the artist bringing plants to life on paper

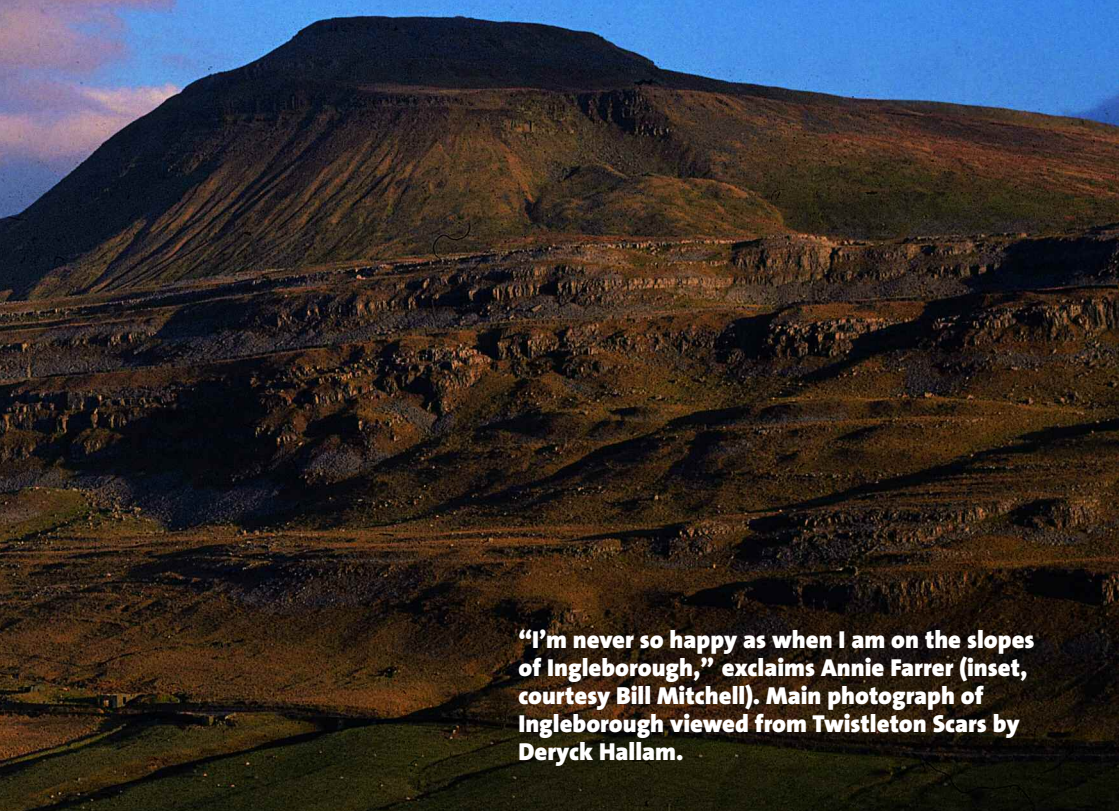


W R Mitchell meets Annie Farrer, scion of a notable Dales family who trained as a botanical illustrator and is now expanding her horizons as an artist with a major new exhibition

“THIS IS sheep’s fescue which the sheep pull up; then they just leave it on the surface and it gets tangled up with this lovely moss....”

Annie Farrer, whose career as an artist has been mainly concerned with the accurate portrayal of plants while at Kew, was describing to me, at her home in the village of Clapham, some of the grasses she recently collected on Ingleborough.

“I go slightly dotty when visiting the flanks of Ingleborough,” she says, “because of the wonderful shapes scattered everywhere.”



“I’m never so happy as when I am on the slopes of Ingleborough,” exclaims Annie Farrer (inset, courtesy Bill Mitchell). Main photograph of Ingleborough viewed from Twistleton Scars by Deryck Hallam.

It was on Ingleborough that Reginald Farrer, a much-vaunted member of the family, sought and described flowering plants.

Annie, to whom grasses have long been a major interest, likens Ingleborough to “a big black crouching Labrador. It may be a hill but it feels like a mountain, especially when a north-easterly wind is a-blowing.

“I’m never so happy as when I am on the slopes of Ingleborough. Or looking over Simon Fell to Ribbleshead viaduct. It is such open country, always different.”

When I called at her studio she was in the process of painting brambles, the leaves of which — plucked from their parent plant beside the road to Newby — were coming into their autumn colour. Each of the leaves would take at least three days to portray on paper.

Also featured, in monochrome, on the same sheet, would be dried grass of the type that had been growing among them. Some parts of the finished painting would have as many as twelve layers on it, which, she adds amusingly, “is the same number of coats of paint on a Volvo”.

My visit was prompted by news of an exhibition, *Plant Forms on Paper: a Fresh Approach*, to be held at the Folly in Settle from 21st March to 6th May.

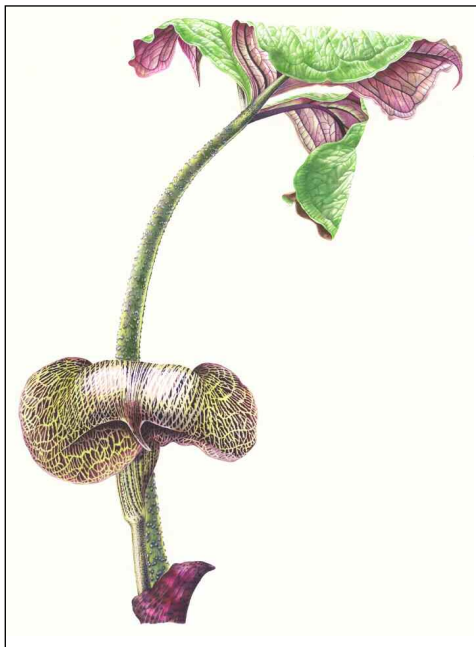
Annie had attempted to look beyond the pure world of botanical illustration — to expand her horizons as an artist.

A course in landscape painting, held at Malham Tarn House by Katharine Holmes, was stimulating, including “mixed media, such as earth and grass, pastels, inks and all the things I have never used before”.

We looked closely at the several specimens of grass laid out in her studio. One specimen had some wool caught up in it.

Annie has long been accustomed to peering hard and long at a plant through a microscope.

Examples of Annie’s floral artwork: *Arisaemi griffithi* (top), and *Arisaemi speciosum* (right) “which represents best how I am painting now,” explains Annie, “as I have chosen to omit colour in quite an experimental way — normally, for botanical illustration, everything would be completed in a very traditional manner.”



Her delight at viewing the centre of a plant, close up, was evident.

“I can scarcely believe the colours, the textures and shapes that are there. When I am teaching, I am keen for students to look hard at what is before them.”

Annie has a flat in London and a home at Clapham, the village in which she grew up.

“My head is in London and my heart is in Clapham. I love the village, the district and the people.

“In London, I scuttle along for my newspaper, knowing that in five minutes I will be back home. At Clapham, when I go to the shop it might be an hour and a half later before I return. I have to adjust my timing.”

Knowing that she has worked for Kew for thirty-four years, it was a surprise to be told that her chief delight, when visiting Ingleborough, is in the native grasses, sedges and rushes.

“The names of plants do not really matter to me. I admire their shapes and colour, and the way in which species co-exist.”

She is thrilled by the way light falls on moss that clings to a piece of limestone or even a dried-up piece of moss that has become detached from a drystone wall. For Annie, there is beauty even in a torn leaf of grass.

Katharine Holmes, an artist with a broad vision that Annie greatly admires, suggested she might try drawing with a twig rather than a brush. So Annie broke a small piece from a twig and applied it to paint and paper very much as she had always done — neatly. She then reached for a longer twig.

“Instead of being totally in control of everything I do, I worked at arm’s length.”

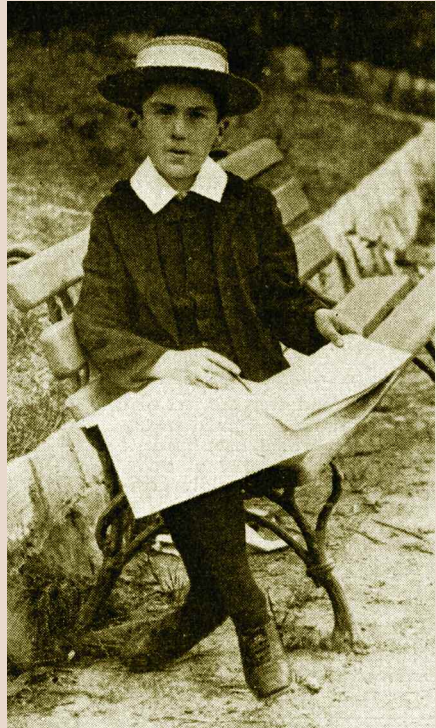
It might lack precision but hinted at possibilities she had not previously considered.

The exhibition which is to be held at the Folly concerns natural forms, with a difference. Annie used more water than usual when preparing a watercolour. She plans, when the exhibition closes, to spend about six weeks painting a specimen, then to add water and observe the reaction.

Says Annie: “It’s a liberation thing — a desire to paint with the old discipline, then escape from its confines.”

In the exhibition are three illustrations of

From the family album



The young Reginald Farrer in the grounds of Ingleborough Hall, Clapham, where he was born in 1880. Through his books, paintings and plant-finding expeditions to the Far East, he pioneered the art of rock gardening in England.

Arisaema. “They are smudgy, with purples and maroons and gold — the colours I like.” She pauses. Smiles. Then says: “People at Kew used to threaten me with a blue daisy.”

I glanced through some of many books about plants that contain illustrations provided by Annie. The most recent book dealt with the grasses of Arabia.

I was shown sketches of hawthorn trees — impressions recorded as an interlude on a walk to Ingleborough Cave. Her interest did not end with the gnarled trees. As in Chinese art, she

was interested in the space around growing things. And also in the moss on the rocks. "Moss does well in our nice wet climate."

Annie was born in Australia and, at the age of three, travelled with her parents to Clapham where her father, Dr John Farrer, had inherited the family estate. An early experience of art came at Marshfield School, Settle. At the age of seven, she was told by a teacher that she was mixing muddy colours.

"The colour was green with red in it. I was banned from using a colouring book."

Fine lines, using extremely fine brushes, have been used extensively through her career.

Art having been a feature of her education at Manchester, she was determined to take it up as botanical drawing.

Her persistency and increasing experience got her noticed at the Natural History Museum in London, where eventually she was invited to select a subject from the herbarium. For the nine months it took to do the work, she was continually but helpfully criticised.

Her technique improved to the extent that the botanist who was the main critic taught her to use the microscope and other aids. He invited her to visit Kew and inquire about work. A consequence was a spell of illustrating the plant life of tropical East Africa.

Annie struggled for recognition at a time when there were few courses on botanical art.

"So many people said I would never make it that I was all the more determined to prove them wrong."

Self-taught, floundering in time-consuming ways, she perfected her art. After about eight years of pen-and-ink work at Kew, her botanist critic suggested she might take up colour. She did so hesitantly, but with increasing confidence.

Inevitably, during her career and with the surname Farrer, she became aware of the

INFORMATION

Annie Farrer's exhibition *Plant Forms on Paper: A Fresh Approach* is on show at the Folly, Settle, from 21st March to 6th May inclusive, opening on Tuesdays, Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays from 10.30am to 4.30pm. For more information, telephone 015242 51388 or visit the website at www.ncbpt.org.uk/folly.

distinguished if quirky Reginald. Pictures by him that adorned the Clapham house were said by visitors to be good.

"Years later I realised that he was not attempting botanical illustration. He was recording, on the spot, plants in their habitat."

Annie formed a respect for him when, on a scholarship in 1977, she travelled overland and worked on illustrations for a book relating to the Himalayas. The terrain he must have worked in was rough and the climate frequently wet.

"Out there, when I was trying to draw, I realised what he went through."

Years later, asked to become a trek leader for the Himalayas, Annie succeeded in entering Nepal, where Reginald had not been able to go.

"We never coincided in the places we visited. But it was all his sort of countryside."

Having been inspired on Katharine Holmes's course to use whatever is required to get the effect she wants, Annie enjoys making interesting and dynamic pictures of botanical subjects that are normally beneath consideration, such as grasses or dying leaves. She has recently been doing so in an individualistic way, as visitors to the exhibition will discover. ●

Magnificent Seven

Dalesman author and respected artist Ashley Jackson was one of the first seven inductees into the Hall of Fame at the inaugural Yorkshire Icons event held last month at Yorkshire Bank's headquarters in Leeds. Others honoured at the ceremony were Sir Michael Parkinson, Fred Trueman (another Dalesman author), Dame Judi Dench, William Wilberforce, Ken Morrison and Jane Tomlinson. Ashley's book *Fifty Golden Years* is still available in both a regular and limited edition (telephone 01756 701033 for details).