

Portrait of a Lady on the Stairs at Whittington Court, Gloucestershire

Helen Allingham



Description

Helen Allingham R.W.S. (1848-1926)

Portrait of a Lady on the Stairs at Whittington Court, Gloucestershire

Signed lower right

Watercolour heightened with white

36 by 27.5 cm, 14 ¼ by 10 ¾ in.

Helen Allingham (née Paterson) trained first at the Female School of Art, Bloomsbury, before entering the Royal Academy Schools in 1867 (her aunt, Laura Herford, had been the first female to be admitted to the Schools in 1860). While studying she started working as an illustrator, to support herself whilst studying - and in January 1870 was employed as a founding staff member, and the only woman, on *The Graphic*, a new illustrated weekly magazine. By 1872, with sufficient commissions to support herself, Allingham left the R.A. schools to concentrate on her illustrations.

On her marriage to the Irish poet, William Allingham (1824-1889), Helen was able to abandon her career as an illustrator and devote herself to watercolours. The Allinghams were at the centre of artistic and literary London life; they knew many of the leading lights including Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones and William Morris, as well as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin who was a particular champion of her work. In 1881, the Allinghams moved to Sandhills in Surrey, near the renowned garden designer Gertrude Jekyll, who became a close friend. Her fellow artist Miles Birket Foster was also a near neighbour. It was whilst in Surrey that Allingham began to produce the cottage subjects for which she became particularly renowned.

In 1886, she was invited to hold an exhibition of her Surrey Cottages, at the Fine Art Society. It was so successful that she held a second exhibition just six months later and thereafter exhibited twice a year, most years until 1913. With the rapid industrialisation of Britain at the time, its expanding population and the growth of the railways, many of the traditional country cottages were being demolished or modernised and there was a desire to capture these before they disappeared completely. Following her husband's death, Allingham had to work hard to support her three children. She was able to charge high prices for her work and received regular commissions, exhibited widely, travelled and collaborated on several publications including Marcus B. Huish's *Happy England*, published in 1903 and Stewart Dick's *The Cottage Homes of England*, published in 1909, for which she produced 64 watercolours. After World War I, her work began to be viewed as old fashioned and sentimental and although she shifted emphasis and embarked on different subject matter, these were not as popular as her cottages had been previously.

The present watercolour depicts the oak staircase of the Tudor manor, Whittington Court, which lies about five miles east of Cheltenham. The staircase predates 1637 and the dog-gate which can be seen at the top of the first section of steps, a rare early example of such a feature. From about 1880, the house was lived in by Cyrus Dobell, one of the brothers of the artist Briton Riviere's wife, Mary Alice, who along with her husband were close and long-standing friends of Allingham's. Allingham visited the village of Whittington in 1873 and 1880 and there are several ...