

Raymond Lister

The Daily Telegraph, 30 Nov 2001

RAYMOND LISTER, who has died aged 82, was a blacksmith, an authority on the work of Samuel Palmer, an accomplished miniaturist, the author and illustrator of 67 books and pamphlets on the arts and crafts and a notable Cambridge character.

Raymond George Lister was born on March 28 1919 in Cambridge, where his grandfather had founded the engineering company George Lister & Sons in 1890. Raymond was educated at St John's College Choir School and the County High School for Boys, before entering the family company as a 15-year-old apprentice blacksmith in 1934, by which time his forceful father was in charge.

Raymond soon found that blacksmithery had "an intensity, an urgency without parallel in any other form of metalwork". His output included decorative ironwork, and many commissions were executed for colleges, cathedrals, castles and grand houses - including candlesticks for King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and chancel gates for a church in the City of London.

In his spare time, Lister frequently visited the Fitzwilliam Museum, where his former calligraphy teacher, the illuminator Albert Cousins, was on the staff. For Lister, the museum was "like an Aladdin's Cave full of treasures and marvels".

Cousins encouraged the boy to take up miniature painting, and through his mentor, Lister began to realise the beauties of manuscript illumination. Cousins also inspired in him a life-long interest in the work of William Blake.

During the Second World War, after trying to join both the Navy and Army, Lister was engaged as a specialist engineer working on national projects such as radar.

In 1945 he returned as director to the family firm, then busy with post-war reconstruction work, including projects at Coventry under the direction of its city architect Arthur Ling. He was also involved in conservation work on some of the country's finest examples of craftsmanship, including "the Birdcage", a garden arbour at Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire, which had been wrought by Robert Bakewell in 1708-11.

He also continued painting miniatures, exhibiting at the annual show of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Gravers and Sculptors (of which he would serve as president from 1970 to 1980), and began to write books on craftsmanship.

In 1953 he started his own publishing company, the Golden Head Press. Many of the books he published were limited editions and some contained line drawings elaborately coloured and gilded by Lister himself. The company lasted until 1970, and many of its publications have become collectors' items.

Lister's interest in Blake continued to grow and came to embrace the circle that sat at Blake's feet known as "The Ancients". His first book on this group was Edward Calvert (1962), which Lister was stimulated to write by Sir Geoffrey Keynes. But it was his work on Samuel Palmer, the leader of The Ancients, that would bring him most recognition.

Lister became a member of Wolfson College, Cambridge, in 1971. This gave him great delight and, following the publication in two volumes by the Clarendon Press of The Letters of Samuel Palmer (1974) which he had edited,

he was elected to a research fellowship at the college.

His expertise as an authority on Palmer led to his being called as an expert witness at the trial of the art forger Tom Keating in 1976. Lister was able to demonstrate that, while skilfully painted, Keating's copies of Palmer's works were at best a series of pastiches.

In his version of Palmer's Sepham Barn, for example, Lister revealed, Keating had mistaken the artist's rendering of a haystack for an extension of the barn itself and had added a door. He recalled how he had had seen a forged Palmer hanging on the wall at an auction house and had told an assistant that the painting was a fake "because Palmer would never have painted a full moon looking like a poached egg".

At Wolfson, Lister set to work to prepare the first catalogue raisonne of Palmer's works; this was published by Cambridge University Press in 1988. He also published eight other books on Palmer, Blake and The Ancients. This corpus of work, published over 16 years, was submitted to the university and led to his being created a Doctor of Letters in 1990 - an outstanding achievement for a man with little formal education, but one which acknowledged the great value of Lister's application to his subject and intense study of it.

Ballet was another of Lister's absorbing interests. As always when he pursued a passion, he delved into it with pertinacity, reading widely and even starting a study group to explore dance, music and the arts more generally. He was particularly keen on the Ballet Russe and wrote on Bakst, dance notation and ballet.

He recalled that he had seen in 1939 a young ballerina called Irina Baronova who had enchanted him with her interpretations of classical and modern ballets. In 1983, he published privately *There Was A Star Danced*, an essay on the art of the ballerina, including some of Lister's own hand-painted illustrations inspired by Baronova, to whom the book was dedicated. The ballerina was delighted and became a close friend.

Lister had an enormous circle of friends from every walk of life and whom he would entertain with a fund of stories which he would relate with great glee, though sometimes forgetting how often he had told them before.

Lister was a governor of the Federation of British Artists from 1972 to 1980 and a member of the Fitzwilliam Museum Syndicate from 1981 to 1989. He organised several shows at the museum, one devoted to the work of Albert Cousins, derived from his own and his wife's collections.

In 1999 he published his memoirs, *With My Own Wings*, in which he listed 67 books and pamphlets which he had written, and 100 books in which he had been involved as publisher, writer or illustrator, covering a vast range of subjects.

He married, in 1947, Pamela Brutnell, who survives him together with their son and daughter