

The Creators of the Dioramas

First - What is a diorama?

We've seen various descriptions in dictionaries but perhaps the best, in this case, was in *The Art of the Diorama* by Ray Anderson. In it he says "No other kind of modelling grabs and holds viewers like a diorama, because it tells a story. In fact the roots of the word diorama mean a story in the round."

The Royal Borough Museum Collection has quite a few dioramas and we have taken a particular interest in six of these. There are four in the *Town and Crown* exhibition at 24 High Street, Windsor and two are in the museum store in Tinker's Lane.

The creators of the dioramas were Judith Ackland and Mary Stella Edwards. Judith Ackland was born in 1892 in Bideford and died there in 1972. She was the daughter of Dr Charles Kingsley Ackland of Stowford House, the Strand, Bideford. She painted in water-colours and her earliest exhibition was in Bideford in 1922. Her paintings were also exhibited at the Royal Academy and other prominent art galleries. In 1945 she patented a form of model making in cotton wool and called it "Jackanda".

Mary Stella Edwards was born in 1898 in Hampstead and moved to Staines at an early age. We believe she died there in 1989. She was the daughter of Richard Cromwell Edwards, an architect, and her family lived at 12 Fairfield Avenue, Staines. She also painted in water-colours and was a talented poet, writing five books of poems.

They met, in 1919, at the Regent Street Polytechnic where they were art students and became life-long friends. After leaving art school they set up their working home called The Cabin in a village in North Devon near Bideford. For the years up to World War II they travelled the country painting scenes wherever they stayed, including the Lake District, Yorkshire, Wales and the Quantocks. After the War the ladies turned their attention to the second part of their life-long working collaboration, the creation of the dioramas.

In 1949 came a commission from the British and Foreign Bible Society for their first diorama which was of Alexander Mackay with his printing press on the shores of Lake Victoria.

Other commissions were to follow in 1952 and again in 1953 when the British and Foreign Bible Society placed commissions for five more. These were eventually displayed in a travelling exhibition called *They Triumph*.

In 1954 came the all-important Florence Nightingale commission from the Nursing Mirror for a Centenary Exhibition in the Seymour Hall. The fortunate loan to the Windsor Guildhall resulted in the dioramas we know today.



Mary Stella Edwards - from a diorama by Judith Ackland