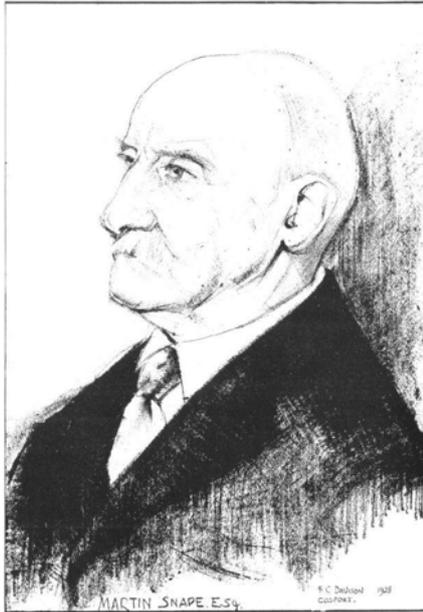


## Martin Snape

By H.T. Rogers

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Martin Snape, the Gosport artist, died in 1930 but his pictures continue to give great pleasure to many people. The son of Alfred C. Snape, himself a painter of considerable merit, Martin was one of five brothers and a sister. They all had artistic ability and as they often left their pictures unsigned, expert advice is occasionally necessary to decide



to whom to give the credit. Martin and William became the better known. William for his portraits in oils and studies in still life, and Martin, initially, for his water colours.

To quote a fellow artist Mr. F. C. Davison : 'Martin Snape's recording of the ever-changing scene in and around Portsmouth Harbour from sunrise to sunset, at low and high water, the stench of the mud and the vibrating greens, those rusty hulks against a background of yachts and the might of the Navy, has never been so vividly and honestly portrayed by any other artist of the time.'

Martin Snape was born at Spring Garden Cottage on the 31st December 1852. His father was quite well-to-do and all his sons were sent to Burney's Naval Academy in Clarence Square where the fees were fifty-two Guineas a year, which was a lot of money in those days. Later on Alfred Snape was heard to complain that the money had been wasted. Certainly it was a queer kind of training for young Martin. Parents who wanted their boys to become Naval Officers and pass the stiff examinations would send them to a 'Crammers' whose job it was to beat the required



knowledge into their heads. Burney's was designed for this one purpose and had a high percentage of success but it is to be doubted if the methods employed provided much artistic grounding or would be approved today.

Nobody could have been less service-minded than Martin Snape. He used to say when he joined the Volunteer Training Corps in the 1914/18 war that he was the world's worst soldier, yet I am told he was an ideal scout as his topography and eye for country were superb. Apart from his skill as an artist much of his popularity today rests on the almost photographic accuracy of his local scenes many of which are now gone for ever.

His fieldcraft and his knowledge of the flora of Hampshire were unexcelled. He was a botanist of distinction and a brilliant speaker. I once heard him give a lecture on the not very inspiring subject of 'Weeds' which kept his audience enthralled. He was an ideal companion for a country walk and an authority on folklore. He used to say that there was an old Hampshire saying: 'When you can put your foot on twelve daisies at once - Spring is here.' His conversation was full of such whimsy and it was always fun to talk to him.

He loved to tell stories against himself. Hanging in the Town Hall is one of his best known pictures of the old Gosport Hard. It was presented to my father for his services and the day before the great event my brother and I were taken to see it. 'Not bad' said my brother with the candidness of a fifteen year old schoolboy 'But that funnel's too high'. There was dead silence and a horrified gasp from my parents. Many artists would have taken offence but not Martin Snape. With an appreciative chuckle he held up his brush and measuring the perspective 'He's right' he agreed 'I wondered what was the matter with it', and promptly proceeded to alter it on the spot.

There is an amount of detail in this picture, including a man on a horse an oar's length from the shore at high tide, which is an allusion to the original boundary of Gosport. When the Ferry Gardens were built the land which was reclaimed was technically in Portsmouth and an Act of Parliament was necessary to move the border to the centre of the harbour. A number of Martin's pictures depict similar historic detail but you have to know where to look.

As a local historian he was held in high repute for his well-nigh encyclopaedic knowledge. His memory was prodigious and he had such a vast store of information and was able to speak with such authority that his opinion and advice were often sought. I suppose I owe to him my own love for the history of the Borough and I regret bitterly now that I did not listen to him with more attention at the time. It is surprising that so little of his writings are available today. In spite of much research I have only been able to find one which is in print and that is a potted history of Gosport written in 1923. I know he wrote much about Rowner and the Wild Grounds and also a history of Grange Farm. If they can be found they will be collectors' pieces and of great interest to the Historic Society.

Fortunately, his pictures are more numerous. So prolific was he that it is impossible even to try and estimate the number. Apart from his water colours they ranged from large oil paintings to on-the-spot illustrations such as the one of the big fire at Camper and Nicholson's shipyard in 1911 when it is said that he sat on a wall in Coldharbour sketching away oblivious of the crowds. He designed the fresco over the present Public Library and he applied his skill to internal house decoration.

In 1922 he was commissioned to design the new Gosport Borough Seal. Many will agree that it was not one of his happier efforts but he was working to instruction when no artist can be at his best. Originally the Seal was circular but in 1942, long after his death, it was decided to adopt Dr. L. F. W. White's suggestion and add the words 'God's Port Our Haven.' By chance the person chosen to design the addition was Mr. Dennis Rogers, the schoolboy who had dared to criticize the ship's funnel all those years before. Martin Snape would have enjoyed the coincidence. He was that kind of man.

Although he shrank from publicity he took a full part in the life of the community. He was Vice-Chairman of the Library Committee on which he was a co-opted member, a Governor of the then Technical School, and a Founder Member of the Rotary Club of Gosport. Late in life he married the



widow of a Naval Officer and there were no children.

As so often happens with such erudite men he gave little heed to material things. Although he gave art lessons and taught in some local schools he lived in rather straitened circumstances towards the end of his life. In the slump years of the late 1920's people did not have enough money to invest in pictures. The wise ones that did so have been amply rewarded. Some of his pictures which he was forced to sell for literally a few shillings are fetching prices today which would have astounded the old man. A number are in the possession of the Gosport Borough Council and are on display at the Lee-on-the-Solent Branch library. Even if you have seen them many times before they are always worth another visit.



Martin Snape died on the 24th November 1930, at the age of 77 and is buried in the Churchyard at Rowner the parish he loved so well. In his own inimitable way he made a unique contribution to the cultural life of his home town and is now at last becoming recognised as one of Gosport's great characters. It is good to know that this kind and gentle man will long be remembered through his pictures.

Thanks to Lisa Marie Hamill for supplying the following information:

Martin Snape's grandfather was James Guy Snape, he was a Royal Marine based at Forton Barracks, Martin's father grew up in the barracks and Martins aunt Emily Maria Snape married Henry Cook who did a lot for the poor children of Gosport. The family stayed local to Forton, Stoke road and the high street. It seems the whole family loved Gosport. James Guy Snape is also my Great Grandfather times four, he raised a large interesting family of artists. James's wife was Maria, they are both buried in the same church yard as Martin.



Snape's House in Spring Garden Lane with Railway Tavern next door



Snape's grave at Rowner church



Gosport Library



Frieze designed by Snape