

FRANCIS HENRY LENYGON 1877-1943

FROM LINCOLN TO LONG ISLAND – A TRANSATLANTIC STORY OF A LINCOLN CHOIRISTER

Francis Henry Lenygon, born in the shadow of Lincoln Cathedral in 1877, rose from the humblest origins to work as an interior decorator in some of the grandest houses in England and to hold the Royal Warrant of King Edward VII while still a young man. He first crossed the Atlantic two years before the Titanic took many of his prospective clients to a watery grave. When he died in New York in 1943, he still held Royal Warrants and was said to have worked in more than a 1,000 houses in Britain and America.

Francis Henry was born at 10 Gray Street Terrace, Lincoln, the third child of a journeyman ironmoulder in a family of thirteen. From these modest beginnings, he trained as a cabinet maker in London, and was soon in business. He was commissioned to make a writing desk for King Edward VII and to redecorate a suite of private rooms in Windsor Castle. The King granted his Royal Warrant in 1905 in the first recognition of a long record of royal service. This included refurbishment at Hampton Court for King George V and in 1938 redecoration of the private apartments at Buckingham Palace for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, for whom he had previously worked when they were the Duke and Duchess of York.

In 1910 Ogden Codman was building Berkeley Villa, Newport for his wealthy cousin, Martha, and advised her to go to Lenygons in London for interior fittings for the principal rooms. In the same year Francis Henry was invited to New York by Whitelaw Reid to decorate his home at 451 Madison Avenue. Reid, editor of the New York Tribune, had seen Francis Henry's work while serving as ambassador in London and this early American commission was to change the course of the Lenygon business.

Over the next three years the London business was to merge with the old firm of Morant & Co with a second business being set up under the Lenygon and Morant name in New York. Francis Henry became resident there and the business of decorating and furnishing, especially in the Georgina style of the 17th and 18th centuries expanded rapidly. The business included the import of complete panelled rooms and other fittings, frequently rescued at demolition sales of English country houses. These found their new home in the great mansions of New York City and Long Island (where Francis Henry himself owned a house), and throughout America.

In the 1930's John D Rockefeller Jnr retained Francis Henry to advise on the restoration of colonial Williamsburg and to supply furniture and fittings for the principal buildings. Francis Henry's versatility was demonstrated by his decoration of private yachts and the public rooms in transatlantic liners, his modification of a Rolls Royce car to provide wheelchair access and his imaginative participation in contemporary design in both furniture and building. He became President of The American Institute of Decorators and a member of the Beaux Arts Institute of Design, as well as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and of the North British Academy. He also lectured and wrote extensively.

He died in 1943. After the War, his ashes were returned to his birthplace and were interred in the cloisters of Lincoln Cathedral, the magnificent building which he had loved and supported during his long exile in America. He recalled that it was as a choirboy that he made the acquaintance of Sir Christopher Wren's work in the Cathedral Library; it was an acquaintance which he was to renew in the less familiar surroundings of Windsor Castle and Hampton Court and which was to shape his future career.

This remarkable career left its own legacy. Mrs Jeannette Lenygon continued the New York business for some 30 years after her husband's death, working on many prestigious commissions including the White House library for the Kennedys. She gave an 18th century panelled room, complete with period furnishing as a study, to the Avery Library at Columbia University where it remains today as a lasting memorial to her husband. A substantial collection of architectural fragments from the business were donated to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Three books on furniture and decoration produced by Francis Henry between 1909-1914 became standard works of reference. Many examples survive of rooms rescued by Lenygons from derelict houses and installed elsewhere; a few complete decorative schemes also survive as a valuable record of one of the most influential styles of the period.

Written by Micky Philp the great niece of Francis Henry. Micky is a member of the Friends of Lincoln Cathedral and she is the Leader of the Cathedral's Flower Guild.