

Stanley Spencer

Spencer was the seventh son of 11 children and grew up in a semi-detached house built by his grandfather in Cookham. He was 17 when he attended Slade School, an art college. As a skilled artist, by 1912 he had created a number of pieces that were displayed in galleries. However, he was unhappy at college and preferred to commute from Cookham to the Slade School, earning him the nickname of Cookham from his fellow artists.

At the start of the First World War, Spencer's brothers Sydney and Percy both enlisted and Stanley felt that he should also join up. He considered it 'necessary for people like me to join'. What he was referring to was the fact that he was small and quite unsuited to hand-to-hand combat. Having done some training in the Maidenhead Civic Guard and St John's Ambulance, he left his unfinished work *Swan Upping* and enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). In 1915, he was sent as an orderly to Bristol's Beaufort War Hospital, an asylum that had been taken over to become a military hospital for the casualties arriving from the Western Front. During his time at the hospital, he spent his time scrubbing floors, carrying and fetching items and cleaning rooms and surfaces.



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<https://stanleypencer.org.uk/aa/a/>

Spencer would look for places to hide himself away to read art books and take in quiet reflection from his job. He would look for cupboards or space between bath tubs to rest and read. It was while at the hospital that he met Desmond Chute, a fellow artist and also a Catholic priest. Chute gave Spencer a religious text, which taught him to find God and solace in everyday tasks and routine. This very philosophy would come to be replicated in his paintings at Sandham.

On 12 May 1916, Spencer left Bristol to train at Tweseldown in Surrey for his next destination, which would be the battle front of Salonika in Macedonia. He was assigned to the 68th Field Ambulance, working again as an orderly, transferring the wounded to mule-drawn travoys (carriers). Spencer used mules to help to transport the wounded to hospitals, and these would be a prevalent feature within his painting.



Image: source unknown

In October 1917 he was transferred to the 7th Battalion of the Royal Berkshires, which meant actively serving on the Western Front. The Salonika campaign took place in Greece and Macedonia from 1915 to 1918, and it involved soldiers from Britain and its Empire fighting against Bulgarian, Austro-Hungarian and German forces. Spencer had realised at this stage that he was essentially a pacifist in his outlook, and he did not have a quarrel with the Bulgarians or Germans whom they were fighting. During the offensive by the Royal Berkshires against the Bulgarians, his friends back home wrote to the War Office to find a way to get their friend out of the front

line. Muirhead Bone, a prominent member of the Official War Artists and backed by Spencer's former professor, tried in vain to get him released. Unfortunately, a front line regiment could not release a soldier on active duty. It was noted that Spencer showed exemplary bravery by standing by his officer when wounded. He was hospitalised after contracting malaria, and during his stay in hospital, the Bulgarians called an armistice in October 1918. He returned home in December 1918 with a great sense of hope; he leant on his faith and the concept of Biblical stories and everyday things. He was understandably devastated to hear of the news of his brother Sydney's death and struggled to return to work as an artist in Cookham.

He was commissioned by the War Office to paint a picture based upon his wartime experiences. This would become *Travoys with Wounded Soldiers Arriving at a Dressing Station at Smol, Macedonia*. Spencer identified a night in 1916 following an attack on a machine gun post. It took part in an old Greek church, which had been turned into a makeshift dressing station and operating theatre. Travoys were crammed with wounded men, but the way in which Spencer painted them showed a calm, peaceful grandeur, with the little light coming from the dressing station offering hope in the darkness outside. The mules feature as part of the piece, as does a removal of the pain and horror that you might imagine.



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Spencer's artwork followed a religious theme, which began with a picture of *The Last Supper*. In 1927, the fabric of Sandham Memorial Chapel was completed and he began work on painting the images for the chapel until 1932. The chapel was dedicated to Mary Behrend's (the patron) brother Harry Sandham. He enlisted in the Army Service Corps in 1915 and was a driver during the War. He served in France on the Western Front but was later posted to Macedonia. He contracted malaria, like Spencer, but fell more seriously ill in 1920 and died from his illness.

The paintings at Sandham were created between 1927 and 1932, representing Spencer's time at Beaufort Hospital Bristol and his time training at Tweseldown and then on the Western Front at Salonika.

Spencer was married twice, but having divorced his first wife, Hilda, they remained good friends; he even wrote letters to her after her death. He was elected Associate of the Royal Academy, resigned three years later and then rejoined in 1950.

He continued to work as an artist and, during the Second World War, was made an Official War Artist, where he constructed *Shipbuilding on the Clyde*, a series of paintings looking at the workers constructing ships for the war effort.

In 1959, Spencer returned to Cookham and was knighted in the same year. He died in December 1959 after succumbing to cancer. His work lives on in museums across the country, and a large part of his collection is housed in a museum in Cookham.