

Newton St Cyres History Group

February Meeting

The subject of our meeting on Thursday 20th February was landscape painting and its history, particularly in relation to Devon. Peter Howard, our speaker, explained that he is a geographer, not an art historian, and he came to the Art School in Devon in 1974 to look at the link between geography and art through landscape paintings.

His basic premise was to show how perceptions of landscapes change, and that over periods of roughly 40 years the subjects of views, and the way in which the view itself is depicted, change. Different things become fashionable, and although some ingredients of a view disappear, generally it is an additive process with elements being added all the time. In other words, "views have histories".



In his researches, Peter Howard decided to take a quantitative approach. He took as his starting date the opening of the Royal Academy in 1760, and used the well documented lists of the Summer Exhibitions to map out what areas of England were painted and when. Strong clusters of favourite places at different times then emerged, and also empty areas with no views taken at all. One of these is the area around Winkleigh, geographically a high wave-cut platform, and thus flat with no particular features seen as worth painting. Other areas, such as the Dart Estuary, were painted many many times. Changes over time were also clear, with Devon hardly painted in 1800, and then the most popular county by 1860. Cornwall was also very low on the graph but this changed greatly in the 1870s with the rise of the Newlyn School.

The Classical period from 1760 to about 1790, was a time when many artists became drawing masters in country houses, and taught the daughters of the house to paint. Houses such as Killerton were frequently painted up to about 1830, often with stock images such as a group of deer in one corner, the same arrangement being repeated in many paintings. The Grand Tour of the times was not always abroad, but often in Britain, and usually in August and September, and again the views reflect this. It is even possible to work out the places frequently recorded en route during the daily carriage journey, where a lunch stop would be sketched. The countryside was seen as an idealised pastoral place of peace and innocence, where artists, usually living in urban areas, would go to seek inspiration.

An interesting local connection was that between Thomas Gainsborough and the Exeter cathedral organist, William Jackson, who lived at Cowley House. Gainsborough made a visit to Devon in July 1779 and stayed with Jackson, teaching him to paint, whilst Jackson taught him to play the cello. Interestingly, Gainsborough painted a landscape of Bodmin Moor with glaciers, which neatly illustrates the way in which most landscape artists were not recording a particular view faithfully, but incorporating the elements which were fashionable at the time. Switzerland was popular, with Chillon Castle over Lake Geneva a favourite view, and so these elements appear again and again. Thomas Walmsley painted a picture of Okehampton Castle, a very popular subject, but added a lake to make the picture attractive.

Turner considered himself a Devonian, as his family came from North Molton originally, and he made several tours here, also painting Okehampton Castle. However, his view of Gunnislake Bridge is another example of how views were manipulated, as it amalgamates at least 4 different sketches to make a pleasing painting, but not a real view.

During the Picturesque period, from about 1790 to 1830 the finest water colours were painted. John Swete was a local proponent, also John White Abbot. He painted 'Lime Kilns on the Exe' and made the scene picturesque, even though it was in fact a hard and dangerous industry. This was also when vertical scale would be exaggerated to heighten the dramatic effect of views in, for instance, the Valley of the Rocks in North Devon.

The Romantic period was from about 1830 to 1870 and the Dartmoor valleys and Devon coastline became popular. Depictions of Holy Street Mill at Chagford were recorded 46 times over 10 years at the Royal Academy, because a mill and stream were a standard motif. Coastal views also were made for the first time, and river and coastal views would be sold to the big houses built along them. Trees, water, a bridge and a group of peasants were standard features.

The Heroic period, from 1870 to 1910 brought a fashion for more challenging and less scenic views. Marsh and moor, fell, fen and heath painted in autumn and winter were now considered good subjects. There was also a change in the market from the landed gentry, who liked to see idealised pictures of the rural peasantry, to industrialists, who were happy with more realistic pictures of the dignity of labour. Locally, William Widgery and later his son, F.J. Widgery were very well-known for their views of Dartmoor.

During the Vernacular period from 1910 to 1950 the Royal Academy was no longer representative of the many paintings being made, by amateurs as well as professionals. Village scenes were fashionable, and the arrival of motor transport made rural farms and landscapes much more accessible. Devon villages of cob and thatch (Otterton, Newton St Cyres) as well as stone and granite (Widdecombe and Buckland), and fishing villages such as Clovelly, Brixham and Dittisham were painted in the 1930s.

The Post Modern period is one in which landscape is replaced by 'no place', or the landscape of the every day, subjects being doors and windows, old tractors, barbed wire and nettles, the backs of gardens and sheds.

Clearly the history of landscape art is a huge subject, but the tour through it led by Peter Howard was full of information, and the Devon connections most interesting.

Next meetings

Meetings are usually on Thursday evenings in the village hall club room and start at 7.30pm. We have no special membership arrangements. Everyone is welcome. There is a small charge of £2 which includes tea and biscuits.

For further information contact Jean 851337 Isobel 851351

Apr 10th Judi Binks Devon on WW1 : impact on farming, communities and women

May 15th Chris Southcott, Tim Sedgwick and Malcolm Brooks will be presenting an evening on 'Newton St Cyres and the Exeter Crediton Railway' and would be glad if anyone has photos, information or memories they would be able to contribute before that date. They will soon be giving details and contacts in the Newton Wonder.