

"A Portrait of the Artist

JMW Turner in East Anglia."

A talk by Dr Richard Hoggett delivered to the SIAH on 13th January, 2018.

This lecture examines a series of watercolours Joseph Mallord William Turner made of sites along the East Anglian coast in the 1820s, including views of Orford, Aldeburgh, Dunwich, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth and Happisburgh. As well as being beautiful paintings in their own right, these images exemplify the changing artistic fashions of the early 19th century and allow us to experience East Anglia's dynamic coastal landscape through the eyes of Britain's greatest artist.

J M W Turner (1775-1851) is well known for his great paintings such as "The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons" painted in 1834/35, "The Fighting Temeraire" of 1839, "Snow Storm - Steamboat off a harbour mouth" of 1842, and "Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway" of 1844.

He recorded the emerging Industrial Revolution, its impact upon the landscape, and the continuing battle of man with the elements. Modern audiences, familiar with the French Impressionists, love the swirling seascapes, the impression of movement in the clouds and the vivid use of colour. However, at the time his style was controversial and his subject matter often thought questionable. Some artists and critics thought he was a genius, but another school of thought was that he painted like a man with no hands, or with a mop instead of a brush.

Early 19th century French Wars caused the continent to become off limits to tourists, resulting in a new interest in the landscapes of Britain. At the same time the emerging industrial middle classes had money to spare on buying topographic views to adorn their homes. The better off might buy original watercolours, while a mass market began to emerge for the sale of prints produced by engraving on steel plates which allowed large numbers of prints to be made from each plate.

Turner enthusiastically embraced this market, producing smaller than A4 watercolours of landscape views, and overseeing their adaptation into engravings by the most skilled engravers he could find.

From 1814 to 1826 he produced a series of views of the South Coast for publication in a part work, with 4 prints per issue. From 1827 to 1838 he painted 120 works for publication as "Picturesque Views of England and Wales". These included some views of the East Anglian coast. Work produced for a possible "Picturesque Views of the East Coast of England"

(1827) was never published, partly because Turner could not be satisfied with the standard of engravings being produced, but also because he either could not find a publisher, or he tried unsuccessfully to publish these himself.

In 1822 the King visited Edinburgh. Turner also sailed up to Scotland, and sketched the East Anglian coast from the sea. His sketchbooks can be seen online at the Tate gallery website. The East Anglian sketches are in book number CCIX covering Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex and he painted some studies based upon these sketches. An example is "Aldborough Suffolk" of 1825-26, which shows the Martello Tower. This view was engraved by Goodall in 1827, and included in Picturesque Views of England and Wales, volume 3.



Several Turner views exist of Orford which were subsequently engraved by Brandard, and duly published for sale. One of these is "Orford Haven" which shows Orford Ness with both the High and the Low Lighthouses. This watercolour view was painted on blue paper, one of a series of four views produced in vignette on this colour paper.

These works on blue paper were commissioned and Turner was paid 30 guineas for each one. The other three such paintings were, "Lowestoffe Lighthouse", "Haisbrough Sands" and "Great Yarmouth fishing boats," (1827)



Many of his 'seascapes' actually depicted man in trouble in a perilous sea. In this battle between man and nature the paintings show man very much on the losing side of the argument. Scenes such as "Lowestoffe Suffolk – offshore boats with lighthouse" (1835) were engraved by W R Smith for inclusion in Picturesque Views of England and Wales, part 22.

A calmer onshore scene from 1825-28 was "Great Yarmouth – Norfolk", showing the Nelson memorial isolated on a sand bar. Modern viewers know that the sand depicted would become an industrial part of a much larger town by the 20th century. This small watercolour of less than A4 size would sell in 2016 for £866,500. It was engraved in 1829 by W Miller, for inclusion in Picturesque Views of England and Wales volume 7.

"Yarmouth Sands" of 1827, shows Nelson's memorial from another angle, and in front of it a sailor is seen demonstrating the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) to a group of onlookers, using a fleet of model ships laid out on the sand. One of the lead ships in that battle was the Temeraire, and no doubt the sailor was lamenting its peacetime fate in 1827 as a floating prison, then as a receiving ship and then a victualling depot. In 1838 Turner would paint one of his best loved works showing the Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth, finally to be broken up.

In 2020 J M W Turner will be commemorated on the new £20 note, along with his "Fighting Temeraire", - a fitting tribute to one of England's greatest painters. But his prolific output included several notable East Anglian views that should not be overlooked.