

September 17<sup>th</sup> 1998

## **A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST; J.M.W. TURNER IN PLYMOUTH**

Richard Hoggett

The contents of this article derive from an A Level dissertation completed by the author in 1996.

*J.M.W. Turner made three visits to the South West in 1811, 1813 and 1814 in order to make water colours and preliminary drawings for a project entitled Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England with which he was involved. During the course of each of these visits he visited Plymouth and made the acquaintance of several notable locals who recorded his activities in the area.*

Joseph Mallord William Turner was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1775 in Covent Garden, the son of a barber who lived and worked there. A precocious artist, Turner entered the Royal Academy at the age of fourteen and was exhibiting the following year. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy at nineteen and an R.A. at the age of twenty seven. Although Turner is perhaps best known for the oil paintings he produced in his later career, he was also a prolific water colour artist in his earlier years. It was these water colours that drew Turner to the West Country in the early nineteenth century, although he already had strong connections in the area – both his father and grandfather came from the South Molton area, one of his uncles was a saddler in Exeter and another was the master of the poor house in Barnstable.

By the early 1800s Turner had become acquainted with William and George Cooke, two engravers who had wanted to collaborate with him for some time. In 1811 they contrived the *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England* project, a series of engravings from water colours that they hoped would eventually form a part of a larger series depicting the entire coast of Britain. Turner was requested to contribute twenty four water colours to the *Southern Coast* series and was offered £7.10s. per painting. He set about gathering material for them that same year.

Turner is known to have left London in the second week of July 1811, from whence he travelled via Salisbury to Poole in Dorset. He then made his way westwards along the southern coast until reaching Land's End, before returning along the northern coast of Cornwall and Devon into Somerset. He paid a visit to Stonehenge and finally arrived back in London in mid-September, having travelled over six hundred miles in eight weeks and producing two hundred pencil sketches in the process.

During his brief 1811 stay in Plymouth, Turner is known to have made the acquaintance of Charles Lock Eastlake, a local artist who went on to become President of the Royal Academy, a director of the National Gallery and arguably one of the most influential artists of the nineteenth century, but beyond this, very little is known about his other activities in the area. Upon his return to London Turner made the first batch of the water colours he was to contribute to the *Southern Coast* series that winter which the Cooke brothers then engraved.

Turner was heavily occupied during 1812 with other commissions and his position as Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, however he did exhibit an oil painting entitled *Ivybridge Mill*, a direct result of his 1811 tour. By the spring of 1813 the pressure on Turner had eased and he returned to the *Southern Coast* project making another journey to the West Country in the summer of that year.

Upon this occasion he based himself in Plymouth and stayed for three weeks, travelling the area widely. Whilst in the city he stayed with Cyrus Redding, then editor of the *Plymouth Chronicle*, whom Turner had met in London the year before. Redding had a cottage at Mutley that commanded views of the Sound and Mount Edgumbe. He also stayed with John Collier, who went on to become the first M.P. for Plymouth (1832-41) and with Ambrose Johns, a local artist whom Turner had probably met on his first visit.

Turner appears to have spent an eventful three weeks socialising with his friends. Fortunately Redding saw it as his journalistic duty to record these events for posterity. In his 1856 book *Past Celebrities Whom I Have Known* he writes extensively of his relationship with Turner and his 1813 stay in the city. He describes how on one occasion he and Turner were invited to make up part of a party that was taking a boat trip from Plymouth to Burgh Island. It was a combined fishing and sketching trip, their ultimate purpose being to enjoy 'a regale of hot lobsters: the fish just taken from the sea and plunged into boiling water' once they had reached their destination.

The other members of the party, which numbered six in all, included an Italian painter called De Maria and a 'military officer in a delicate coat of scarlet, white and gold', as well as the two man crew of the vessel. Unfortunately they were not all accustomed to sea travel. As the wind picked up and the sea became rougher, the officer became violently seasick and had to be physically restrained in order to prevent him from throwing himself overboard. Meanwhile Turner sat in the stern sheets intently studying the waves and sketching assiduously. Upon one occasion he was heard to mutter "That's fine! Fine!" this voyage was undoubtedly the source of the water colour *The Mew Stone at the Entrance of Plymouth Sound*, showing the Mew Stone in the midst of a gale, with waves crashing over it, that eventually appeared in the *Southern Coast* series.

The party landed with some difficulty in the lee of Burgh Island and, whilst the lobsters were being prepared, Turner made his way to the very top of the island, where he stood, heedless of the storm that raged about him, sketching the sea. Once they had eaten, Redding and Turner decided that, rather than sail back in the gale, they would cross over to the mainland at low tide and make their way to Kingsbridge, where they stayed the night. They left Kingsbridge the next day and walked the entire twenty miles back to Plymouth. A journey that caused Redding to write that Turner was ‘a good pedestrian, capable of roughing it in any manner the occasion might demand’.

This visit to Burgh Island wasn’t the only occasion during his 1813 stay that Turner’s friends wondered at his ability to remain focused on his work, despite the surrounding conditions. In the February 1853 issue of *The Gentleman’s Magazine* Redding recounted the events that occurred whilst he and Turner stood sketching outside the Royal Citadel.

“We were standing outside the works on the lines at Plymouth, close under a battery of twenty-four pounders, which opened only three or four feet above our heads. I was started by the shock, but Turner was unmoved. We were neither prepared for the concussion, but he showed none of the surprise I betrayed, being as unmoved at the sudden noise and involvement in the smoke as if nothing had happened.”

On another occasion Turner invited his friends to join him for a picnic in the park at Mount Edgcumbe. He spent the morning making the sketches that were eventually to lead to the *Southern Coast* water colour *Plymouth Dock, from Near Mount Edgcumbe* and again Redding was among his companions. He recorded that “there were eight or nine of the party, including some ladies. We repaired to the heights of Mount Edgcumbe at the appointed hour. Turner, with an ample supply of cold meats, shellfish and wines, was there before us. In that delightful spot we spent the best part of a beautiful summer’s day. Never was there more social pleasure partaken by any party in that English Eden. Turner was exceedingly agreeable. The wine circulated freely, and the remembrance was not obliterated from Turner’s mind long years afterwards.”

Turner is known to have returned to the West Country for a final visit in the late summer of 1814. As is the case with his 1811 tour, there is little documentary evidence regarding his movements. In May of that year, Ambrose Johns was exhibiting a painting in London where he again met with Turner, who complimented him on the development of his style. It may have been this reunion with his old friend that caused Turner to decide to return to Devon for a third time.

A little light can be shed upon Turner's final tour of the region by the postscript of a letter that he wrote to Johns in October 1814. The postscript reads "Give my respects to Mrs. Johns, be so good as to thank her for me. Say that I got rid of my cold by catching a greater one, at Dartmouth being obliged to land from the boat half drowned with the spray as the gale compelled the boatmen to give up half way down from the Dart from Totnes, but that upon my return home, by a little care I have got the better of both. Remembrance to all friends."

As in 1813, Turner appears to have travelled straight to Plymouth and then used it as a base from which he travelled the surrounding area. The duration of Turner's stay is unknown, but when he left he probably took the mail coach as far as Buckfastleigh, before leaving it and travelling to Totnes. His letter states that he then travelled by boat down the River Dart to Dartmouth. From there he is believed to have travelled along the coastal route to Teignmouth, then inland to Exeter before again picking up the mail coach to London.

It is difficult to ascribe drawings to individual tours, as Turner appears to have travelled the same area on both his 1813 and 1814 visits. This, coupled with the fact that Redding's accounts can only give concrete dates for a handful of the 1813 drawings, means that any number of sketches could belong to either the second or the third tours. However, the boat trip mentioned in the letter does go some way to ascribe dates to sketches that can only have been made from the middle of the river. For example, the water colour of Totnes that he eventually painted.

Redding tells us that "Turner said that he had never seen so many natural beauties in so limited an extent of country as he saw in the vicinity of Plymouth. Some of the scenes hardly appeared to belong to this island." However, despite this he never returned to the region after the summer of 1814, although he remained in contact with many of the people he had met whilst touring the area for many years, particularly Ambrose Johns.

During the course of his three visits, Turner made nigh on a thousand pencil sketches of various subjects from around the region and these sketches were to serve him extensively for many years to come. As well as completing all of the West Country related water colours for the *Southern Coast* project, he also went on to produce water colours of other West Country subjects for many similar series of engravings. The publications and commissions that included these works were entitled *The Rivers of Devon*, *The Rivers of England*, *The Ports of England* and *Marine Views*.

The Devon tours were also responsible for the creation of five major oil paintings. Namely *Teignmouth*, *Hulks on the Tamar*, *Saltash with the Water Ferry*, the aforementioned *Ivybridge Mill* (all of which were first exhibited in 1812), and *Crossing the Brook*, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1815 and now in the Tate Gallery.

As previously noted, Turner was originally asked to contribute only twenty-four water colours to the series, however, the Cookes soon realised that it was Turner's contribution that was responsible for most of the public interest and set their project apart from more mundane efforts. They asked Turner to contribute a further sixteen water colours, bringing the total to forty (half of the entire series), and offered him the increased sum of ten guineas per painting.

The Cooke brothers had originally intended that the eighty engravings that were to make up the *Southern Coast* series should be published in sixteen parts, each part containing five engravings. The original prospectus stated that six parts a year were to be published, giving an intended completion date of mid 1816. The first instalment of *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England* was published on New Years Day 1814, but, due to a heavy work load on the Cookes' part, the publication of the other parts soon fell behind. By 1817 only eight parts had appeared and it was to be another nine and a half years before the scheme was finally finished.

The finished *Southern Coast* series must have been a marvel to behold. In addition to Turner's contribution, it contained engravings after water colours by William Westall, Samuel Owen, Peter De Wint, William Havell, William Collins and Samuel Prout, amongst others. In 1826, once all of the engravings had been published, the Cookes gathered them all together and bound them into two volumes arranged in topographical sequence from Whitstable along the coast around to Watchet.

The water colours that resulted from Turner's tours of the south west are unusual amongst his work in that they did not constitute a part of his bequest of his work to the nation on his death in 1851 and as such do not reside in the purpose built Clore Gallery at the Tate. They are scattered amongst the museums and private collectors of the world, and the whereabouts of some are unknown, however, they do crop up from time to time. A twenty by thirty centimetre water colour of the *Eddystone Lighthouse Off Plymouth*, probably a result of the trip to Burgh Island, was auctioned by Sotheby's in November 1996 for £29,000, a far cry from the £7.10s. originally paid for it!

### **Acknowledgements**

The contents of this article derive from an A Level dissertation completed by the author in 1996. I am therefore indebted to the Art Department staff of Coombe Dean School for their support in the first instance. I am also grateful to the staff of Plymouth Central Library and Loveday Manners-Price at Sotheby's for their help in my research. Finally my thanks must go to Raymond Morris, who first drew my work to the attention of the Athenæum Society and to those who invited me to give my lecture and to those who attended it.

## **Bibliography**

In addition to those references given in the text the following titles contributed to this article.

Bryant, J. 1996. *Painting the Nation*. English Heritage.

Hoggett, R.S. 1996. *The View from My Window According to J.M.W. Turner*.

Unpublished A Level dissertation.

Lamplugh, L. 1966 'Turner in the West' *Western Morning News*, 15<sup>th</sup> December.

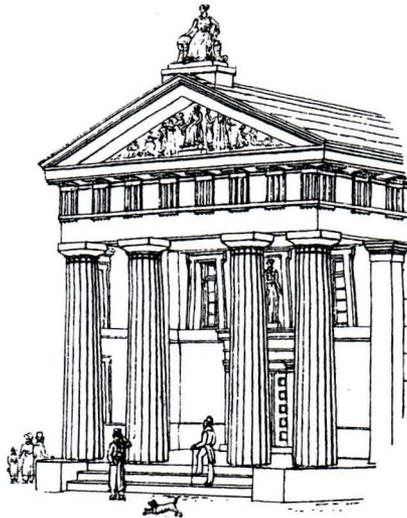
Shanes, E. 1981. *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. Chatto and Windus.

Smiles, S. 1987. *Turner Studies: His Art and Epoch 1775-1851*. Carfax.

Smiles, S & Pidgley, M. 1995. *The Perfection of England*. Djanogly Art Gallery.

PROCEEDINGS OF

The  
Plymouth  
Athenæum



Volume IX  
1997 / 2004