

# A STROLL THROUGH TATE BRITAIN

John Constable (1776-1837)



This two-hour talk is part of a series of twenty talks on the works of art displayed in Tate Britain, London, in June 2017.

Unless otherwise mentioned all works of art are at Tate Britain.

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## A STROLL THROUGH TATE BRITAIN

1. The History of the Tate
2. From Absolute Monarch to Civil War, 1540-1650
3. From Commonwealth to the Georgians, 1650-1730
4. The Georgians, 1730-1780
5. Revolutionary Times, 1780-1810
6. Regency to Victorian, 1810-1840
7. William Blake
8. J. M. W. Turner
9. **John Constable**
10. The Pre-Raphaelites, 1840-1860



West galleries are 1540, 1650, 1730, 1760, 1780, 1810, 1840, 1890, 1900, 1910

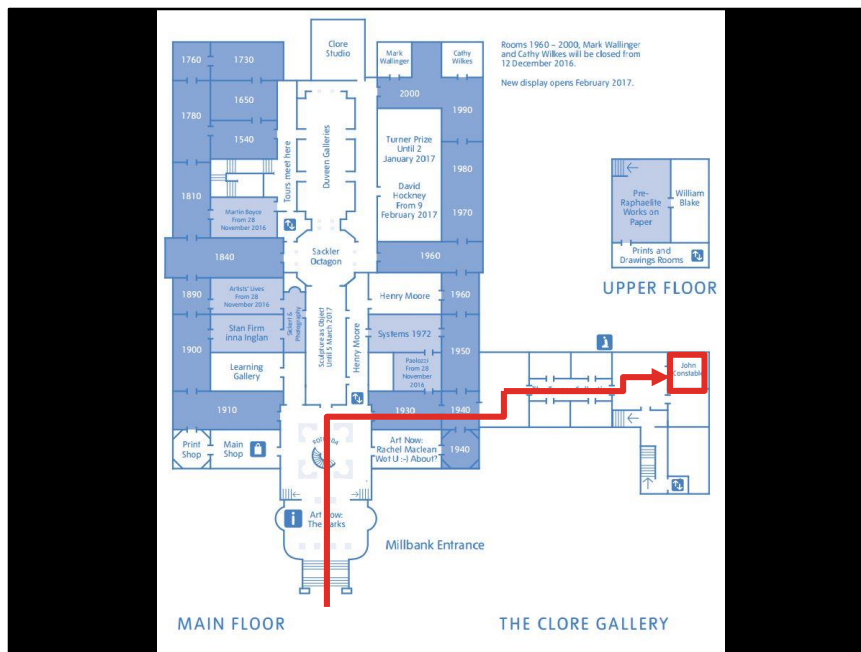
East galleries are 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000

Turner Wing includes Turner, Constable, Blake and Pre-Raphaelite drawings

### Agenda

1. A History of the Tate, discussing some of the works donated by Henry Tate and others.
2. From Absolute Monarch to Civil War, 1540-1650
3. From Commonwealth to the Start of the Georgian Period, 1650-1730
4. The Georgian Period, 1730-1780
5. Revolutionary Times, 1780-1810
6. Regency to Victorian, 1810-1840
7. William Blake (1757-1827) and his Influence
8. J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851)
9. John Constable (1776-1837)
10. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 1840-1860
11. The Aesthetic Movement, 1860-1880
12. The Late Victorians, 1880-1900

13. The Edwardians, 1900-1910
14. The Great War and its Aftermath, 1910-1930
15. The Interwar Years, 1930s
16. World War II and After, 1940-1960
17. Pop Art and Beyond, 1960-1980
18. Art in a Postmodern World, 1980-2000
19. The Turner Prize
20. Summary



This talk combines a summary of the life of John Constable with the works in this room extended by works in other galleries or not on display. The works shown are in the Tate collection with the exception of *The Hay Wain* in the National Gallery and *Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames-Morning after a Stormy Night* in the Yale Center for British Art (the sketch is in the Tate collection).

## JOHN CONSTABLE (1776-1837)

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- Early life – 1776-1799
- Early career – 1799-1818, aged 23 to 42
- Professional career – 1819-1827, aged 43 to 51
- Later life – 1828-1837, aged 51 to 60



Tate Britain has about 150 artworks by John Constable although only a few are on display at any one time. In May 2017, eighteen were on display. The following talk is based on the chronology of his life illustrated mostly by the works on display when this talk was prepared.

- A short summary of Constable's life, based on the Tate website is:
  - He was born at East Bergholt, Sussex on 11 June 1776, the son of a corn and coal merchant and farmer. He devoted much of his life to painting the local landscape, the scenes of his 'careless boyhood' which, he said, 'made me a painter'.
  - He went to work for his father in the family business about 1792.
  - In 1794 he made a sketching tour of Norfolk.
  - He made his first etchings in 1797.
  - In **1799** Constable was introduced to Joseph Farington, RA, and **entered the Royal Academy Schools.**
  - He visited Staffordshire and Derbyshire in 1801.
  - He first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1802.
  - He received a commission in 1805 to paint an altarpiece for the church at Brantham.
  - He toured the Lake District in 1806.

- In 1810 he began work for an altarpiece for Nayland Church.
  - Constable began to see his future wife, **Maria Bicknell regularly from 1809**, although they had met some years earlier. They married in 1816, despite opposition from her family particularly her grandfather Dr Rhudde, and eventually had seven children.
  - In **1816 he painted *Flatford Mill*, his first large painting.**
  - Constable exhibited regularly at the British Institution from 1808, at the Liverpool Academy 1813-14, at the Birmingham Society of Arts from 1829, and at the Worcester Institution 1834-6.
  - Friendship with the Fisher family, especially Archdeacon John Fisher, took him to Salisbury in 1811, 1820, 1823 and 1829.
  - Constable and Maria moved to Keppel Street, Bloomsbury, London in 1817.
  - From 1819, because of his wife's ill health, Constable rented a house for his family at Hampstead, making about a hundred studies of cloud formations, many oil sketches of Hampstead views, and several 'finished' works on the spot. **In 1819 he sold his first important painting *The White Horse*.**
  - He was made an **Associate of the Royal Academy in 1819.**
  - **In 1821 he exhibited *The Hay Wain* (exhibited as *Landscape – Noon*) at the Royal Academy.**
  - They lived in Joseph Farington's former house in Charlotte Street, Bloomsbury from 1822.
  - In **1824 they began going to Brighton for reasons of Maria's health.**
  - ***The Hay-Wain* was one of three of his works shown at the Paris Salon in 1824 and earned him a gold medal from Charles X.**
  - In 1826 he was awarded a gold medal by the Society of Fine Arts, Lille, France, following exhibits at its Salon.
  - **Maria died of tuberculosis in 1828.** In a letter to his brother Golding of 19 December, Constable wrote, 'I shall never feel again as I have felt, the face of the World is totally changed to me'.
  - **Elected Royal Academician aged 52.**
  - The first edition of *English Landscape*, a series of prints after his work by David Lucas, was published 1830-2.
  - Between 1833 and 1836 Constable lectured on landscape painting at the Royal Institution, the Hampstead Literary and Scientific Society, and the Worcester Athenaeum.
  - He visited West Sussex in 1834 and 1835.
  - He **died in Bloomsbury on 31 March 1837, aged 60**, and was buried in the churchyard of St John's, Hampstead.
- Biography from <http://john-constable.org/biography.html>
  - **1776.** John Constable was born on 11 June in East Bergholt, a village on the River Stour in Suffolk, to Golding and Ann Constable. His father was a wealthy corn

merchant, owner of Flatford Mill in East Bergholt and, later, Dedham Mill. Golding Constable also owned his own small ship, *The Telegraph*, which he moored at Mistley on the Stour estuary and used to transport corn to London. Although Constable was his parents' second son, his older brother was mentally handicapped and so John was expected to succeed his father in the business, and after a brief period at a boarding school in Lavenham, he was enrolled in a day school in Dedham. Constable worked in the corn business after leaving school, but his younger brother Abram eventually took over the running of the mills.

- **1790s.** In his youth, Constable embarked on amateur sketching trips in the surrounding Suffolk countryside that was to become the subject of a large proportion of his art. These scenes, in his own words, "made me a painter, and I am grateful"; "the sound of water escaping from mill dams etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things." He was introduced to George Beaumont, a collector, who showed him his prized *Hagar and the Angel* by Claude Lorrain, which inspired Constable. Later, while visiting relatives in Middlesex, he was introduced to the professional artist John Thomas Smith, who advised him on painting but also urged him to remain in his father's business rather than take up art professionally.
- **1799.** Constable persuaded his father to let him pursue art, and Golding even granted him a small allowance. Entering the Royal Academy Schools as a probationer, he attended life classes and anatomical dissections as well as studying and copying Old Masters. Among works that particularly inspired him during this period were paintings by Thomas Gainsborough, Claude Lorrain, Peter Paul Rubens, Annibale Carracci and Jacob van Ruisdael. He also read widely among poetry and sermons, and later proved a notably articulate artist.
- **1802** he refused the position of drawing master at Great Marlow Military College, a move which Benjamin West (then master of the RA) counselled would mean the end of his career. In that year, Constable wrote a letter to John Dunthorne in which he spelled out his determination to become a professional landscape painter: "For the last two years I have been running after pictures, and seeking the truth at second hand. I have not endeavoured to represent nature with the same elevation of mind with which I set out, but have rather tried to make my performances look like the work of other men... There is room enough for a natural painter. The great vice of the present day is bravura, an attempt to do something beyond the truth."
- **1803**, he was exhibiting paintings at the Royal Academy.
- **1803-06.** His early style has many of the qualities associated with his mature work, including a freshness of light, colour and touch, and reveals the compositional influence of the Old Masters he had studied, notably of Claude Lorrain. Constable's usual subjects, scenes of ordinary daily life, were unfashionable in an age that looked for more romantic visions of wild landscapes and ruins. He did, however, make occasional trips further afield. For example, in 1803 he spent almost a month aboard the East Indiaman ship *Coutts* as it visited south-east coastal ports, and in

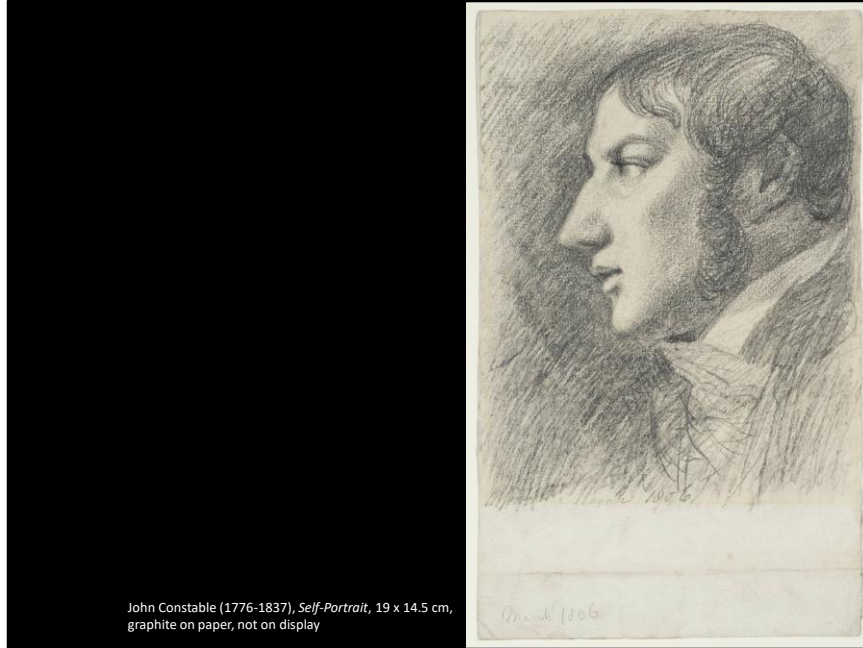
1806 he undertook a two-month tour of the Lake District. But he told his friend and biographer Charles Leslie that the solitude of the mountains oppressed his spirits; Leslie went on to write: "His nature was peculiarly social and could not feel satisfied with scenery, however grand in itself, that did not abound in human associations. He required villages, churches, farmhouses and cottages." In order to make ends meet, Constable took up portraiture, which he found dull work-though he executed many fine portraits. He also painted occasional religious pictures, but according to John Walker, "Constable's incapacity as a religious painter cannot be overstated."

- **1809.** From 1809 onwards, his childhood friendship with Maria Bicknell developed into a deep, mutual love. But their engagement in 1816 was opposed by Maria's grandfather, Dr Rhudde, rector of East Bergholt, who considered the Constables his social inferiors and threatened Maria with disinheritance. Maria's father, Charles Bicknell, a solicitor, was reluctant to see Maria throw away this inheritance, and Maria herself pointed out that a penniless marriage would detract from any chances John had of making a career in painting. Golding and Ann Constable, while approving the match, held out no prospect of financially supporting the marriage.
- **1811.** Constable adopted a routine of spending the winter in London and painting at East Bergholt in the summer. And in 1811 he first visited John Fisher and his family in Salisbury, a city whose cathedral and surrounding landscape were to inspire some of his greatest paintings.
- **1816.** Golding and Ann Constable died in quick succession, and Constable inherited a fifth share in the family business. John and Maria's marriage in October 1816 was followed by a honeymoon tour of the south coast, where the sea at Weymouth and Brighton stimulated Constable to develop new techniques of brilliant colour and vivacious brushwork. At the same time, a greater emotional range began to register in his art.
- **1819.** Although he had scraped an income from painting, it was not until 1819 that Constable sold his first important canvas, *The White Horse*, which led to a series of "six footers", as he called his large-scale paintings. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy that year.
- **1821.** He showed *The Hay Wain* (A View from Flatford Mill) at the Academy's exhibition. Theodore Gericault saw it on a visit to London and was soon praising Constable in Paris, where a dealer, John Arrowsmith, bought four paintings, including *The Hay Wain*, which was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1824, winning a gold medal. Of Constable's colour, Delacroix wrote in his journal: "What he says here about the green of his meadows can be applied to every tone". Delacroix repainted the background of his 1824 *Massacre de Scio* after seeing the Constables at Arrowsmith's Gallery, which he said had done him a great deal of good. In his lifetime Constable was to sell only twenty paintings in England, but in France he sold more than twenty in just a few years. Despite this, he refused all invitations to travel internationally to promote his work, writing to Francis Darby: "I would rather



be a poor man [in England] than a rich man abroad."

- **1825**, perhaps due partly to the worry of his wife's ill-health, the uncongeniality of living in Brighton ("Piccadilly by the Seaside"), and the pressure of numerous outstanding commissions, he quarrelled with Arrowsmith and lost his French outlet.
- **1828**. After the birth of her seventh child in January 1828, Maria fell ill and died of tuberculosis that November at the age of forty-one. Intensely saddened, Constable wrote to his brother Golding, "hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel-God only knows how my children will be brought up... the face of the World is totally changed to me". Thereafter, he always dressed in black and was, according to Leslie, "a prey to melancholy and anxious thoughts". He cared for his seven children alone for the rest of his life. Shortly before her death, Maria's father had died, leaving her £20,000. Constable speculated disastrously with this money, paying for the engraving of several mezzotints of some of his landscapes in preparation for a publication. He was hesitant and indecisive, nearly fell out with his engraver, and when the folios were published, could not interest enough subscribers. Constable collaborated closely with the talented mezzotinter David Lucas on some 40 prints after his landscapes, one of which went through 13 proof stages, corrected by Constable in pencil and paint. Constable said, "Lucas showed me to the public without my faults", but the venture was not a financial success.
- **1829**. He was elected to the Royal Academy at the age of 52, and in 1831 was appointed Visitor at the Royal Academy, where he seems to have been popular with the students. He also began to deliver public lectures on the history of landscape painting, which were attended by distinguished audiences. In a series of such lectures at the Royal Institution, Constable proposed a threefold thesis: firstly, landscape painting is scientific as well as poetic; secondly, the imagination cannot alone produce art to bear comparison with reality; and thirdly, no great painter was ever self-taught. He also later spoke against the new Gothic Revival movement, which he considered mere "imitation".
- **1835**, his last lecture to the students of the RA, in which he praised Raphael and called the R.A. the "cradle of British art", was "cheered most heartily". He died on the night of the 31st March, apparently from indigestion, and was buried with Maria in the graveyard of St John-at-Hampstead, Hampstead. (His children John Charles Constable and Charles Golding Constable are also buried in this family tomb.) (From Wikipedia)




John Constable (1776-1837), *Self-Portrait*, 19 x 14.5 cm, graphite on paper, not on display

### **Early Life 1776-1799**

- Constable's father was a wealthy corn merchant and farmer. He owned Flatford Mill in East Bergholt and, later, Dedham Mill in Essex as well as a small ship used to take corn to London.
- Constable was the second son but his elder brother was intellectually disabled and so John was expected to take over the business. He spent a short time at boarding school before enrolling in a day school in Dedham. John did work in the business but his younger brother Abram later took it over.
- Constable enjoyed sketching when he was young and went on sketching trips. The scenes he sketched, in his own words, "made me a painter, and I am grateful"; "the sound of water escaping from mill dams etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things."
- He was introduced to the collector George Beaumont (1753-1827) who showed him his prized *Hagar and the Angel* by Claude Lorrain, which inspired Constable. A professional artist advised him to stay in his father's corn business.
- In 1799, he persuaded his father to let him pursue a career in art and he joined the

Royal Academy School with a small allowance. During this period he was inspired by Thomas Gainsborough, Claude Lorrain, Peter Paul Rubens, Annibale Carracci and Jacob van Ruisdael. He also read widely among poetry and sermons, and later proved a notably articulate artist. By 1803, he was exhibiting paintings at the Royal Academy.

### Self-Portrait

- This pencil sketch is Constable's earliest dated drawing from 1806, the year of his most prolific output, and one in which he appears to have worked predominantly in pencil and watercolour. That year he made numerous sketchbook drawings of young women and other members of households in which he stayed at Ipswich, Tottenham and Epsom between June and August. In September and October he made a seven week tour of the Lake District, executing a major series of drawings and watercolours. While in the Lake District he stayed part of the time with the Hardens, Mrs Harden describing him as 'a genteel handsome youth'. Some months later, Mrs Fisher, wife of the Bishop of Salisbury, described Constable's countenance as 'like one of the young figures in the works of Raphael ... His appearance is that of one "guileless"'.
- Constable made this drawing in March, when he was presumably in London. A profile self-portrait such as this requires the use of two mirrors. Although generally recognised today as the finest portrait of Constable, and frequently reproduced in recent literature on him, this drawing was more or less unknown outside the Constable family until it was included an exhibition of Constable's work in 1937.



John Constable (1776-1837), *Ann Constable*, c.1800–5 or ?c.1815, 76.5 x 63.9 cm  
 John Constable (1776-1837), *Golding Constable*, 1815, 75.9 x 63.2 cm

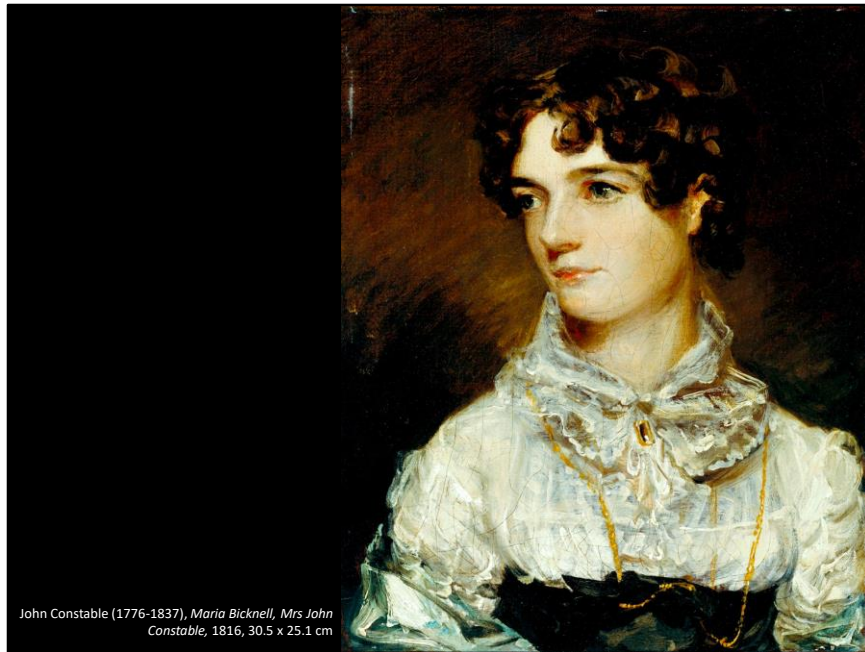
- “Constable’s mother, Ann Watts, was the daughter of a prosperous London cooper. She probably met her husband, Golding, on one of his visits to London to attend the corn market. She encouraged her son’s artistic career, especially during his early years in London, and wrote to him regularly from Suffolk. This portrait probably dates from about 1800–5 when she was in her fifties. It is traditionally thought to have been painted by Constable himself. However, **recent research suggests the artist may have been RR Reinagle.**” (Tate)
- The date of his mother’s portrait is a problem. The early date seems consistent with her age at the time and the crudity of the painting may be because of Constable’s inexperience. There is another early portrait of his mother owned by Colchester Borough Council which is less well painted and less finished. It is known to have come from the family but curiously the picture is reversed. If it was painted by someone else it raises the question of why and why was it reversed. It is possible it was painted by Constable after he painted the portrait of his father in 1815 and he reversed the earlier painting so they faced each other as a pair. His mother died in 1815 so he may have based the portrait on his earlier work. In this

case, it is odd that the style of the two portraits is different, his father's portrait is softer and his mother's portrait is harder edged and the skin more plastic although this may be the result of wear.

- "This portrait depicts the artist's father who was the son of a farmer. In 1764 Golding inherited valuable property and land in the parish of East Bergholt from his uncle Abram, a successful corn merchant. This included the tenancy of the corn milling business of Flatford Mill on the river Stour. The business prospered under Golding's direction, and by 1785 he was described by another miller as 'a man of fortune' who 'lives in the style of a country squire'. This portrait is thought to date from 1815, when Golding was already in his seventies, although he looks considerably younger." (Tate)

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-ann-constable-t03902>
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-golding-constable-t03901>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Maria Bicknell, Mrs John Constable*, 1816, 30.5 x 25.1 cm

- “Maria Bicknell was a daughter of Charles Bicknell, Solicitor to the Prince Regent and the Admiralty. Her **grandfather was Revd Dr Durand Rhudde, chaplain in ordinary to George III and the rector of Brantham and East Bergholt**, where Constable first met her in 1800. **The two fell in love in 1809** but, partly because of the rector's opposition, did not marry until 1816. Rhudde thought she should not manage on less than £400 a year, a sum Constable could not hope to secure. In 1809 he was living on an allowance of £100 a year. Rhudde had inherited his wealth from his childless sister who had married a rich man and Maria’s father obeyed Rhudde for fear she would be disinherited.
- In 1816 Constable father died (his mother had died the year previously) and Constable received a sixth of his estate. His business was managed by his brother Abrams and generated about £200 a year. John and Maria married in London in 1816 in the Church of St Martin in the Fields in London. None of the Bicknell nor Constable families attended. Maria was immediately disinherited by her grandfather but her father softened and gave his daughter an allowance of £50 per year. On his death in 1819, Rev. Dr Rhudde left all his grandchildren, including

Maria, £4,000 each.

- Constable painted Maria's portrait in July 1816, about three months before their marriage. In August Constable wrote to Maria from Suffolk: **'I would not be without your portrait for the world the sight of it soon calms my spirit under all trouble'**. Twelve years later Maria died from tuberculosis, leaving seven young children to Constable's care." (Tate)
- Maria was continually pregnant following their marriage and gave birth to seven children and had one miscarriage all of which put an enormous strain on her fragile health. She died of consumption (known as tuberculosis today) in 1828, age 41, a few months after giving birth to her seventh child.
- Towards the end, "Although Constable appeared in his usual spirits in her presence, yet before I left the house, he took me into another room, wrung my hand, and burst into tears, without speaking". (letter written in 1828 by friend and biographer, Charles Leslie)
- Constable wrote to a client dissatisfied with part of his work, **"I am intensely distressed and can hardly attend to anything."**
  - On January (2nd) 1828 Maria's seventh child, Lionel Bicknell was born
  - March 1828 Maria's father died leaving her £20,000 which put an end to the Constable's money worries.
  - April 1828, Maria's tubercular coughing became very much worse and Alfie (her sixth child) contracted whooping cough.
  - May 1828 – John sent Maria and the children (including Alfie) to Brighton for the air but after six weeks with no improvement to their health, the family returned to London.
  - November (23rd) 1828 Maria died at the age of 41.
- The final stages of were painful – vomiting, bleeding, fever and lassitude with Maria's speech becoming no more than a whisper.
- After Maria's death, Constable wrote to his brother Golding, **"Hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel - God only knows how my children will be brought up... the face of the World is totally changed to me."**



John Constable (1776-1837), *Maria Constable with Two of her Children*, verso: Copy after Teniers, c.1820, 16.6 x 22.1 cm

- “This intimate and rapidly-painted sketch, Constable portrays **his wife Maria with two of their children**. They appear to be seated at a table near a window which admits only enough light to illuminate the surroundings. The children shown are probably the couple’s **eldest, John Charles** (born December 1817) and **Maria Louisa** (born July 1819), suggesting this portrait was painted **around 1820**. At this time the family were **living in Bloomsbury** in London, but from 1819 they also rented houses at Hampstead for the summer. This sketch could have been made at either place.” (Tate)
- The verso is a copy by Constable of a painting attributed to David Teniers the Younger (1610-90). A label on another copy by Constable of the same painting, which he presented in January 1823 to William Dodsworth of Salisbury, records that the original Teniers belonged to Sir George Beaumont. Constable said he had 'grimed it down with slime & soot - as he is a connoisseur and of course prefers filth & dirt, to freshness & beauty'. Dodsworth was reported to be 'hugely delighted' with the result. It is likely the Teniers copy was painted first and Constable reused the mahogany board. Constable may have painted other copies



of the same and other Teniers.

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-maria-constable-with-two-of-her-children-verso-copy-after-teniers-t03903>



John Constable (1775-1837), *Flatford Mill ('Scene on a Navigable River')*, 1816–7, 101.6 x 127 cm

- **Description.** This is *Flatford Mill* by John Constable. What can we see? An idyllic scene of a summer's day in rural Suffolk. In the foreground two boys are untying two barges from the tow horse to pole them under Flatford bridge to the left, just out of the picture. We see a wonderful Constable sky with scudding cumulus clouds against a pale blue sky. Unlike earlier artists Constable showed real places, the bright colours of nature and natural skies and sunlight.
- **Hunger.** However, the scene is misleading as 1816, the year it was painted, was known as the 'Year Without a Summer'. The previous year, the Indonesian volcano Mount Tambora exploded in the largest eruption in recorded history. Forty-one cubic kilometres of ash were sent into the upper atmosphere, blocking the sun and cooling the planet. In England, this resulted in a cold summer, heavy rains, bright yellow skies and the failure of the harvest. Thousands of ex-soldiers returning from Waterloo added to the families travelling across the UK begging for food and famine was common in the north and southwest Ireland.
- **Corn Laws.** To make matters worse, following the end of the Napoleonic War, Corn Laws were introduced and these fixed the price of corn and therefore the price of

bread at an artificially high level. This favoured farmers and millers like the Constables as it meant their prices could not be undercut by cheap foreign imports. The result was famine, dissent and riots which led to the Peterloo massacre, a suspension of habeas corpus, restrictions on press, new Poor Laws which introduced the workhouse, and in the 1830s the Swing Riots and the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

- **Marriage.** In 1816, Constable has other things on his mind. In 1809, he had fallen in love with his childhood friend Maria Bicknell but their engagement was opposed by her grandfather as Constable's allowance was insufficient to maintain her and he considered the Constable's socially inferior. In 1816, Constable's father and mother died and he inherited a sixth of the estate. The marriage was approved and they married in October [at St Martin-in-the-Fields]. Their honeymoon was a tour of the south coast including Weymouth and Brighton and it was during his honeymoon that he developed a new technique of using brighter colours and freer brushwork. The summers of 1816 and 1817 were the last time he lived in East Bergholt for an extended period and the last time he painted the Suffolk countryside direct from nature.
- **A New Realism.** I have been talking about what it was like in the countryside but this painting was not intended to be about the social conditions of the rural poor and such paintings were unusual. Constable had a different aim. He had enjoyed an idyllic boyhood that he wanted to capture that feeling. He wrote that for him **'painting is but another word for feeling'**. These childhood scenes, in his own words, **'made me a painter, and I am grateful'**; **'the sound of water escaping from mill dams etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things.'** He wrote, **"When I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I try to do is to forget that I have ever seen a picture"**, by which he meant an Old Master with their prescribed composition and brown foliage and grass. Although he eventually became a Royal Academician he was not commercially successful and sold only twenty paintings in England in his lifetime. Critics found his colours too bright and objected to **'spotting the foreground all over with whitewash'** and his **'snow'**. However, he won a gold medal in Paris for *The Hay Wain* in 1824, had a profound influence on the French Romantic painters and sold twenty paintings there in just a few years.

## **References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-flatford-mill-scene-on-a-navigable-river-n01273>



John Constable (1776-1837), *The Hay Wain*, 1821, 130 x 185 cm, National Gallery

- *The Hay Wain* shows a golden age before industrialization and today is uncontroversial. However, in his day **Constable was revolutionary** in the way he depicted nature and earned a great deal of criticism. They described his **'disagreeable', 'disfigured' and 'mannered' surface** and complained his scenes were scattered with 'a huge quantity of chopped hay'. *The Times* noted his habit of 'scattering white spots over the surface of his picture', a criticism later applied to Turner. *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, May 1829, commented on a Constable as **'...an execrable taste, having no resemblance to any appearance in Nature'**. There was great resistance to Constable using lighter shades of green, there is a legend that his patron, George Beaumont, criticized him for not making the grass in the foreground the required mellow brown of an old violin. Constable, took a real violin and put it on the grass to show his patron the difference.
- However, Constable was very successful and influential in France. He exhibited three works at the Paris Salon in 1824 including *The Hay Wain* which won a gold medal. This led to his most commercially successful period when he sold about twenty paintings in France through his French dealer John Arrowsmith. He had problems early in their relationship when Constable refused to ship any painting

without being paid first. Arrowsmith promptly sent £400 and Constable sent the paintings. Arrowsmith in France his paintings were causing a sensation and one critic described them as 'a miracle'. In 1825 Arrowsmith arrived at Constable's studio to find out what progress had been made on £400 painting she had ordered. Arrowsmith was short of money at the time and spoke poor English. Constable later wrote that the French dealer was 'so excessively impertinent and used such language as never was used to me at my easel before'. Arrowsmith apologised but Constable refused to accept the apology and Arrowsmith left. Constable may have been worried about his **wife's ill-health**, he disliked living in Brighton and was under the pressure of many outstanding commissions and as a result he lost his French outlet. Arrowsmith later went bankrupt. Constable's friend John Fisher thought that Constable had been impetuous and paranoid. Better of him. Fisher wrote, '**We are all given to torment ourselves with imaginary evils — but no man had ever this disease in such alarming paroxysms as yourself. You imagine difficulties where none exist, displeasure where none is felt, contempt where none is shown and neglect where none is meant.**'

### Notes

- Constable painted *the Hay Wain* in 1821 and it was exhibited by the Academy that year where it was seen by Théodore Géricault on a visit to London. He praised Constable in Paris and a dealer called John Arrowsmith bought four paintings, including *The Hay Wain*. It was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1824, winning a gold medal.
- Delacroix repainted the background of his 1824 *Massacre de Scio* after seeing the Constables at Arrowsmith's Gallery.
- In his lifetime, Constable sold only 20 paintings in England, but in France he sold more than 20 in just a few years. Despite this, he refused all invitations to travel internationally to promote his work, writing to Francis Darby: '**I would rather be a poor man [in England] than a rich man abroad.**' A Romantic sentiment.
- The shadowy figure in the centre foreground was originally a man on a horse which was changed to a barrel and then painted out. The paint has become more transparent over time so the shadow of the underpainting can now be seen. The dog was added late in the composition but is an essential part of the balance as it leads the eye across over the hay wagon into the distance scene.
- Driving a hay wagon through water had a practical benefit as in hot weather the metal rim expanded and the wooden wheel dried out and shrank. The water cooled the metal which shrank and it expanded the wood as it absorbed water thus ensuring the metal rim became a tight fit.
- The flash of red on the fisherman (right, middle distance, in the reeds) and on the horse intensify the green by the juxtaposition of its complementary colour.
- The cottage was owned by Willy Lot a local tenant farmer admired by Constable as he lived in the cottage for 80 years and only spent four nights away. He was a deaf,

eccentric tenant farmer and the smoke from the chimney shows his unseen presence. The woman outside is probably gathering water using a jug as she is too far above the water surface to clean clothes effectively. The men in the distant field are gathering hay in a manner that had been abandoned in Suffolk 20 years earlier. Constable is presenting a traditional, reactionary view of the countryside that invokes the nostalgia of the previous century. In fact, his brother Abram wrote in 1822 about, 'never a **night** without seeing **fires** near or at a distance'.

### References

- Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art*



John Constable (1776–1837), *Sketch for 'Hadleigh Castle'*, c.1828–9, 122.6 x 167.3 cm  
 John Constable (1776–1837), *Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames-Morning after a Stormy Night*, 1829, 121.9 x 164.5 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- 'Constable made full-size sketches like this for many of his six-foot paintings. They allowed him to explore his ideas before committing them to the final canvas. The finished picture in this case was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1829. The composition originated in a minute drawing Constable made on a visit to the ruins of Hadleigh Castle in Essex in 1814, but this painting was not developed until around the time of his wife's death in 1828. The resulting image of loneliness and decay is now often seen as exemplifying his desolate state of mind at the time.' (Tate display caption)
- After the birth of their seventh child in January 1828, **Maria fell ill and died of tuberculosis at the age of 41**. Intensely saddened, Constable wrote to his brother Golding, "**hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel**—God only knows how my children will be brought up...the face of the World is totally changed to me". After that, he dressed in black and was, according to Leslie, '**a prey to melancholy and anxious thoughts**'. He cared for his seven children alone for the rest of his life. Shortly before Maria died, her father had also died, **leaving her £20,000**.



**Constable speculated disastrously with the money**, paying for the engraving of several mezzotints of some of his landscapes in preparation for a publication. He was hesitant and indecisive, nearly fell out with his engraver, and when the folios were published, could not interest enough subscribers.

### Notes

- This is a full-size oil sketch for the painting now in the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art. Constable submitted the finished work to the Royal Academy exhibition in 1829, the year in which he was elected an Academician. He began painting six-foot canvases in 1818, in emulation of the works of the past masters of landscape such as Claude, Poussin and Rubens. He saw these **large pictures as a means to gain further recognition** as an artist, and **to elevate** what many considered the mundane subject matter of rural scenery. Unable to paint from nature on this scale, he turned increasingly to invention, and these large studio sketches enabled him to work out the compositional problems he was encountering in the preparation of his exhibition pieces. The oil sketch would be made either prior to, or simultaneously with, the finished picture.
- Constable made a small pencil sketch of **Hadleigh Castle** near Southend in Essex in 1814, on his only visit to the area, when he wrote to his future wife Maria: 'At Hadleigh there is a ruin of a castle which from its situation is a really fine place - it commands a view of the Kent hills, the Nore and North Foreland & looking many miles to sea' (letter of 3 July 1814; in R.B. Beckett, ed., John Constable's Correspondence, II, Ipswich 1964, p.127). **He returned** to the pencil sketch **fifteen years later**, to develop the six-foot painting. He made a small preparatory **oil sketch**, probably in 1828 (Paul Mellon Collection, Upperville, Virginia), based on the drawing, but with the addition of a shepherd and his flock at the bottom left. In a pen and ink drawing made at around the same time (collection David Thomson), the composition has become decidedly more horizontal, having been extended on the right to include the distant Kent shore. A dog has replaced the shepherd's flock, and a tree has been added beside the castle's left-hand tower. The **Tate's large oil sketch** introduces cows in the middle-distance and gulls flying above the sea.
- Constable's wife Maria died in November 1828, and the **sombre, desolate tone** of the work is generally assumed to **reflect his mood** at this time. In a letter of 19 December of that year, he wrote to his brother Golding: '**I shall never feel again as I have felt, the face of the World is totally changed to me**' (in C.R. Leslie, ed. Hon. Andrew Shirley, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*, R.A., London 1937, p.234).

### References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-sketch-for-hadleigh-castle-n04810>





John Constable (1776-1837), *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, exhibited 1831, 153.7 x 192 cm

- This is Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* of 1831. His beloved wife **Maria had died** of tuberculosis in **1828** and it seems like a personal statement of his turbulent emotions and his changing states of mind. They had only been married **12 years**.
- When it was **exhibited** at the Royal Academy he **included** nine lines from a **poem** about two young lovers out walking. As they walk through a wood a thunderstorm kills the young woman and she dies in her lover's arms.
- A simply interpretation is that Constable, like the **wagon driver**, is moving **away from death**, represented by the **grave marker**, towards a symbol of **resurrection** and faith, the Cathedral, and **renewal**, the **rainbow**. I can almost see a woman dressed in black alongside the wagon driver.
- In 1834 he gave a series of lectures on the history of landscape painting. Alluding to *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* he stated: "*I mean more than the rainbow itself, I mean dewy light and freshness, the departing shower, with the exhilaration of the returning sun.*" The rainbow then generates feelings of "freshness" and "exhilaration"

- Possible political meanings have been attributed to it, one of which being the **clash of industrialization and nature** represented through the **clash of elements**.
- The rainbow ends at **Leadenhall** where **John Fisher lived** and Constable stayed. The church of St Thomas is on the left.
- The painting was bought in May 2013 for £23.1 million as a partnership between the Tate, National Museum Wales, the National Galleries of Scotland, Colchester and Ipswich Museums and the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum.

### **References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-salisbury-cathedral-from-the-meadows-t13896>



John Constable (1776-1837), *The Valley Farm*, 1835, 147.3 x 125.1 cm.

- This was painted two years before his death and shows Willy Lot's cottage from the other side. It came to represent the 'natural' way of life of the Suffolk countryside.
- Tate: "Constable devoted a large amount of time to reworking *The Valley Farm*, and there is, in this painting, a sense of the aging artist attempting to revive old images and past emotions. Constable himself was extremely enthusiastic about the results, but when the picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1835 it was not well received and one critic wrote, 'He ought to be whipped for thus maiming a real genius for Landscape' (quoted in Parris and Fleming-Williams 1991, p.378). Nevertheless Constable sold the picture in the same year to the notable collector Robert Vernon (1774-1849) for his new house at 50 Pall Mall. Vernon paid him £300, the largest price Constable had ever received for a picture. It was later included in Vernon's gift to the National Gallery, London, in 1847."

### **References**

For more information see <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-valley-farm-n00327/text-summary>

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-valley-farm-n00327/text-summary>



*Malvern Hall, Warwickshire, 1809, 51.4 x 76.8 cm*

*Dedham from near Gun Hill, Langham, c.1815, 25.1 x 30.5 cm*

*A Lane near Flatford, c.1810–11, 20.3 x 30.5 cm*

*Dedham Lock, c.1820, 16.5 x 25.4 cm*



*Cloud Study*, 1822, 47.6 x 57.5 cm

*Yarmouth Jetty*, after 1823, 32.4 x 50.5 cm

*The Grove, Hampstead*, c.1821–22, 35.6 x 30.2 cm

*Hampstead Heath, with the House Called 'The Salt Box'*, c.1819–20, 38.4 x 67 cm



*The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817'), exhibited 1832, 130.8 x 218 cm*

*Hampstead Heath with a Rainbow, 1836, 50.8 x 76.2 cm*

*The Glebe Farm, c.1830, 64.8 x 95.6 cm*



*The Church Porch, East Bergholt*, exhibited 1810, 44.5 x 35.9 cm

*Dedham from Langham*, ?1813, 13.7 x 19 cm

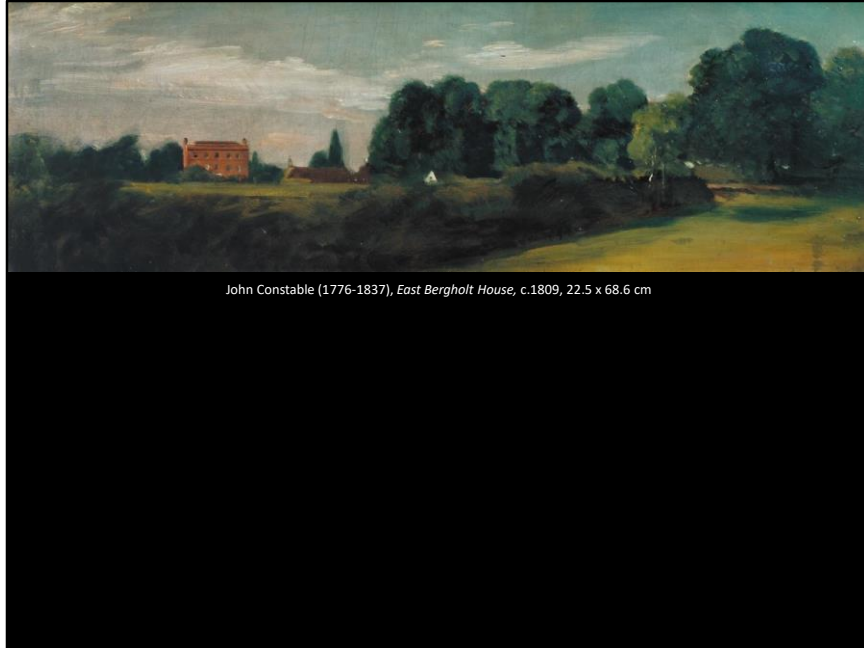
*Fen Lane, East Bergholt*, ?1817, 69.2 x 92.5 cm

*East Bergholt House*, c.1809, 22.5 x 68.6 cm





Summary by Date



John Constable (1776-1837), *East Bergholt House*, c.1809, 22.5 x 68.6 cm

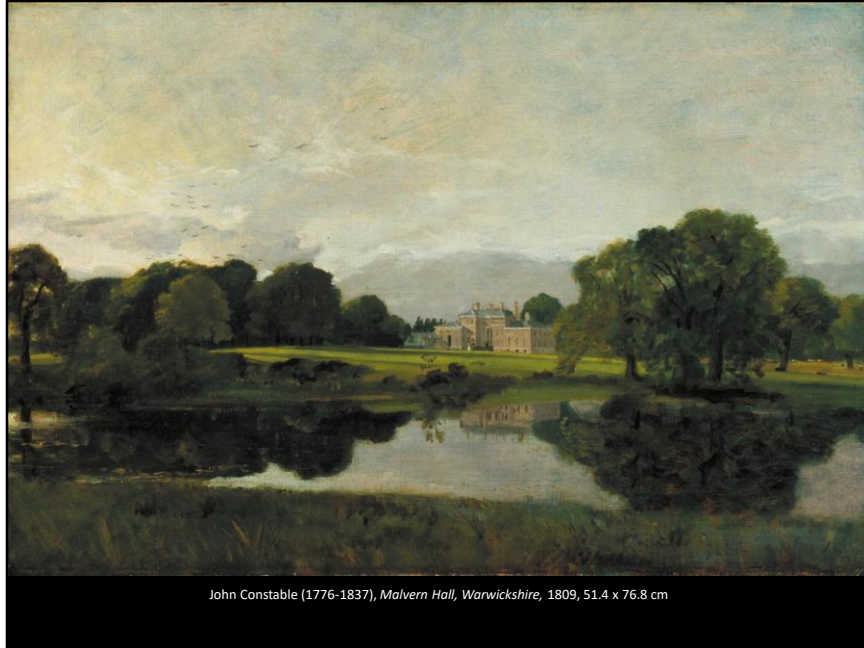
- Constable believed that an artist could only paint honestly and convincingly the landscape in which he had grown up. This belief was an aspect of his general belief that everyone's character is determined by the climate and geography of their childhood. For Constable, this explained cultural differences and it also meant that everyone should retain a house and plot of land where they were born as geographic relocation implied a loss of identity. He grew up in East Bergholt, Suffolk and his geographic boundary was the distance he could walk and return home for dinner. At first sight Constable appears to accurately represent the East Bergholt countryside but it is clear that Constable disapproved of the changes taking place and his observations select and exaggerate the nostalgic yearnings of childhood and a past that never existed. He wrote to his friend the Reverend John Fisher, **'I should paint my own places best—painting is with me but another word for feeling. I associate "my careless boyhood" to all that lies on the banks of the Stour.'** Although he moved permanently to London in 1816 he relied on his notebooks filled with sketches for the rest of his life.
- Ironically, the landowners of Suffolk including his own family were among the most radical adopters of new technology and agricultural change. From 1816, when his

father died, he became financially independent and his income did not depend on painting. This is lucky as he sold fewer than two dozen paintings in his lifetime.

- “Constable was deeply attached to his birthplace, East Bergholt House, which his father had built when Flatford Mill became too small for his growing family. Although the house no longer exists (it was pulled down in 1840 or 1841), the stable block and an outbuilding survive. Constable painted views from the front and back of the house on many occasions and chose it as the frontispiece for *English Landscape* (1832). He wrote in the accompanying inscription: ‘This place was the origin of my Fame’” (Tate)
- Constable painted his parents house many times and also painted views from the house, such as *Golding Constable's Flower Garden*.
- Golding Constable, the artist's father, built East Bergholt House in Church Street, East Bergholt when Flatford Mill became too small for his growing family. He acquired the tenancy of the plot in 1772 and, according to Leslie (1843, p.2, 1951, p.2), moved his family to the new house in 1774. Two years later John Constable was born there.
- The house was sold to a family friend, Walter Clerk of East Bergholt, and was vacated by the Constables after a sale of the contents in March 1819.

### **References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-east-bergholt-house-n01235>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Malvern Hall, Warwickshire*, 1809, 51.4 x 76.8 cm

- “This view of Malvern Hall in Warwickshire, seen from raised ground across a stretch of water, recalls a long tradition of country house portraiture which goes back to the seventeenth century. Yet it appears to have been painted for Constable’s own interest rather than being a formal, commissioned work. The sun is sinking below the trees to the left, which cast long shadows across the lawn at the back of the house. Above them hovers a flight of rooks. Many years later Constable wrote that the cawing of a rook was a ‘voice which instantaneously placed my youth before me.’” (Tate)
- Although Constable claimed not to get on with aristocracy he formed a number of friendships with the nobility. One such family was the Dysarts who owned Malvern Hall and had originated near East Bergholt. Constable stayed at Malvern Hall in 1809 and 1820 and on his first visit painted this landscape which shows his ability to create a balanced composition that conveys a sense of serenity and timelessness.

## References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-malvern-hall-warwickshire-n02653>



John Constable (1776-1837), *The Mill Stream. Verso: Night Scene with Bridge*, c.1810, 21 x 29.2 cm

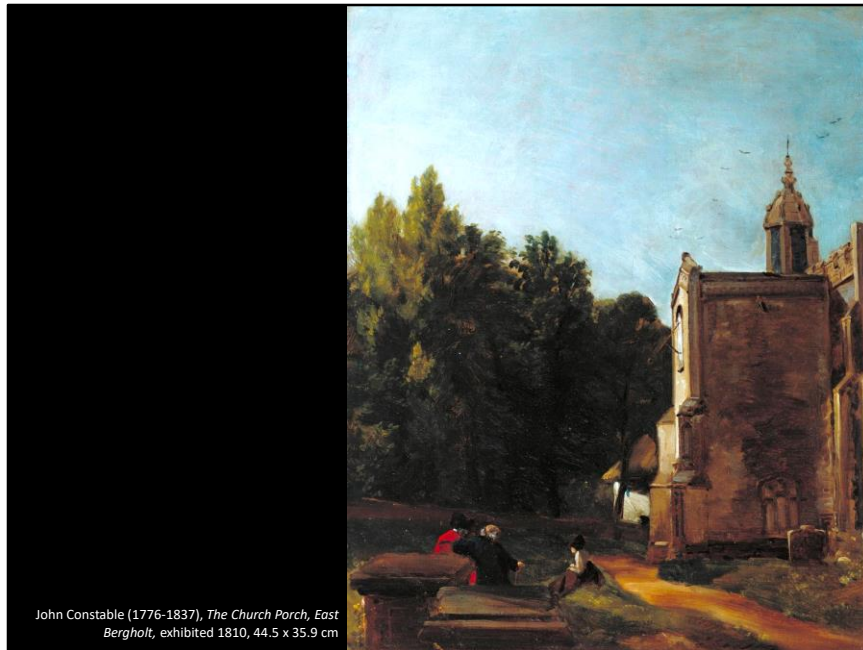
- “**This study** shows the view from the **forecourt of Flatford Mill** across a side stream of the river Stour in Suffolk, which had been diverted under the mill to work the water-wheel. The water churned up by the water-wheel left the mill through an archway below the forecourt, which explains the turbulence seen in the foreground of the sketch. The house is Willy Lott’s House, named after the tenant farmer who lived there for over 80 years. It appears in several of Constable’s finished paintings, the most famous of which is *The Haywain* 1821 (now in the National Gallery).” (Tate)
- The Constable family owned two corn-grinding watermills on the river Stour, at Flatford and at Dedham. This depicts the mill stream at Flatford, seen from the forecourt of the mill. The tail water left the mill through an archway below the forecourt at this point, hence the turbulence shown in the foreground. In the distance the junction of the mill stream with the main course of the Stour can be seen. A short way down the right-hand side of the mill stream there was also a smaller channel through to the Stour, which was used by a ferry plying between

the left bank of the mill stream and the fields on the far side of the river. The building at the left is Willy Lott's house, a recurrent motif in Constable's art, appearing first around 1802 and finally in 1835 ('The Valley Farm' discussed later).

### **References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-mill-stream-verso-night-scene-with-bridge-n01816>





John Constable (1776-1837), *The Church Porch, East Bergholt*, exhibited 1810, 44.5 x 35.9 cm

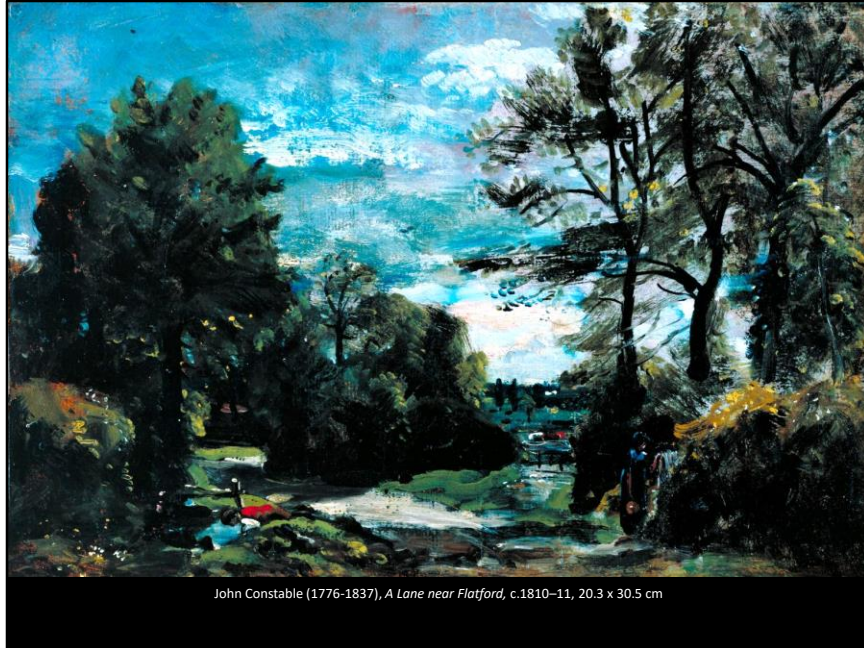
- “This view of the church in Constable’s native village of East Bergholt was **one of the first works he exhibited. The stillness of a summer’s afternoon is broken only by the voice of an old man, talking to a woman and a girl sitting on one of the tombs.** The inclusion of people from **three generations** acts as a reminder of the passage of time and of human mortality, whilst the church offers hope of salvation. Pensive figures in churchyards would have reminded contemporaries of Thomas Gray's famous poem, *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*, 1751.” (Tate)
- Gray's famous poem begins,  
*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

## References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-church-porch-east-bergholt->

[n01245](#)





John Constable (1776-1837), *A Lane near Flatford*, c.1810-11, 20.3 x 30.5 cm

John Constable (1776-1837), *A Lane near Flatford*, c.1810-11, 20.3 x 30.5 cm

- “Constable probably made this vigorous sketch on Fen Lane, which leads down from East Bergholt to Dedham Vale. With its animated brushwork, suggesting the movement of scudding clouds and of trees bristling in the wind, he successfully conveys the impression of a breezy summer's day.” (Tate)
- The figure of the drinking boy at the left of this sketch appears again in ‘The Cornfield’ of 1826 (National Gallery). Because of this some writers have assumed that the lane is Fen Lane, leading from East Bergholt to Dedham but the sketch offers few real clues to a precise identification of the site. There is a girl with a blue shawl by the hedge on the right.

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-a-lane-near-flatford-n01821>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Dedham from Langham*, ?1813, 13.7 x 19 cm

- “Constable included a version of this view in his series of prints known as *English Landscape*, published in the 1830s. In a draft for the text to accompany the print, he described the subject as follows: ‘This view of the beautiful valley of the Stour ... is taken from Langham an elevated spot to the NW of Dedham, where the elegance of the tower of Dedham church is seem to much advantage, being opposed to a branch of the sea at Harwich where this meandering river loses itself. This tower from all points forms a characteristic feature of the Vale.’” (Tate)
- This viewpoint shows Dedham church and a gully separates a foreground meadow from a group of trees and a building in the right-hand middle-distance. This type of the composition appears to have occupied Constable especially in the years 1812–13.
- Although no large painting is known to have materialised, the subject is clearly one that fascinated Constable at this time, and it remained a favourite with him, being chosen, as already stated, for inclusion in *English Landscape*. In a draft for the text with which he intended to accompany Lucas' mezzotint, Constable wrote: **‘Nature is never seen, in this climate at least, to greater perfection than at about 9 o'clock in the mornings of July and August, when the sun has gained sufficient**

**strength to give splendour to the Landscape “still gemmed with the morning dew”, without its oppressive heat, and it is still more delightful if vegetation has been refreshed with a shower during the night’.** ‘This view of the beautiful Valley of the Stour - the river that divides the counties of Suffolk and Essex- is taken from Langham an elevated spot to the NW of Dedham, where the elegance of the tower of Dedham church is seen to much advantage, being opposed to a branch of the sea at Harwich where this meandering river loses itself. This tower from all points forms a characteristic feature of the Vale’

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-dedham-from-langham-n02654>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Dedham from near Gun Hill, Langham*, c.1815, 25.1 x 30.5 cm

- “This view, looking eastwards towards Dedham and the Stour estuary from near Gun Hill in Langham, was one of Constable's favourite subjects. In most of his representations the tower of St Mary's church, Dedham forms a conspicuous feature in the distance. As Constable himself once remarked, the church looked especially striking from this elevated viewpoint. Yet, in his later work in particular, Constable often included a church in the distance of his landscapes for its symbolic associations. It represented for him a religious and social focus in the traditional rural world.” (Tate)
- The views eastward down the Stour valley from the hills between Langham church and Gun Hill were favourites of Constable's from an early date. His first depiction of such a view is a watercolour of 1800.

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-dedham-from-near-gun-hill-langham-n01822>



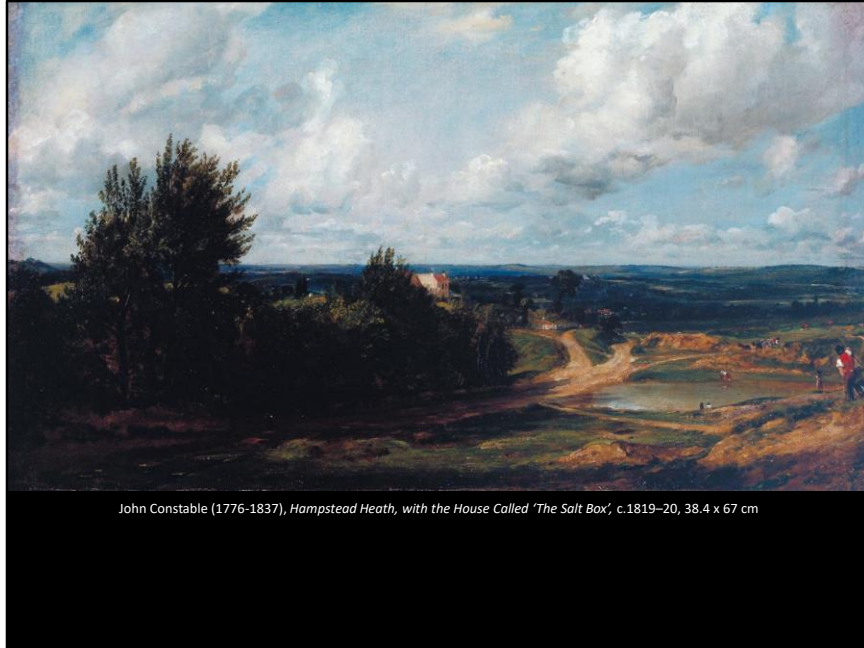
John Constable (1776-1837), *Fen Lane, East Bergholt*, ?1817, 69.2 x 92.5 cm

- “Constable and his wife Maria took a long holiday in Suffolk in 1817. **This was to be the last time he painted directly in oils in the vicinity of East Bergholt.** Constable began several canvases outdoors without finishing them, perhaps in order to secure as much fresh material as possible in the time. Some parts of this canvas are painted to a fair degree of finish, whilst others are left in a more sketchy state.” (Tate)

### References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-fen-lane-east-bergholt-t07822>





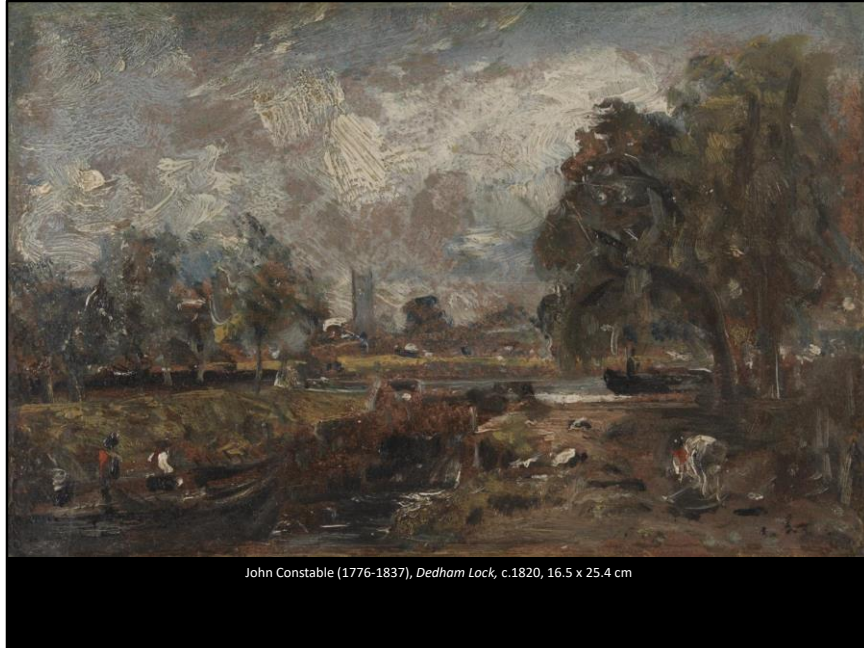
John Constable (1776-1837), *Hampstead Heath, with the House Called 'The Salt Box'*, c.1819–20, 38.4 x 67 cm

- “Constable began his annual summer migrations to **Hampstead**, then well out in the country, in 1819. **In 1827 he took up more permanent residence**, leasing a house in Well Walk. His wife Maria was already showing symptoms of tuberculosis when Constable first rented a house there for her health, joining his family as often as he could. The Constables maintained a residence in London in Charlotte Street, and the artist wrote to his friend Archdeacon Fisher on 28 November 1826 that he was 'three miles from door to door - can have a message in an hour - & I can get always away from idle callers - and above all see nature - & unite a town & country life'. In **Hampstead** Constable made **numerous studies of cloud formations**, many oil sketches of Hampstead views, and several 'finished' works on the spot. This painting is **one of his earliest Hampstead views**. The viewpoint was close to Albion Cottage, rented by the Constables in 1819. The view looks north-westwards, from near the junction of Judges Walk and the Branch Hill Road, which enters the picture at the left. The road runs past Branch Hill Pond and the house known as 'The Salt Box', a prominent residence located on Branch Hill, before leading off towards Child's Hill. Harrow appears in the distance at the extreme

left.” (Tate) Today it is high walls, thick bushes and obscured views.

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-hampstead-heath-with-the-house-called-the-salt-box-n01236>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Dedham Lock*, c.1820, 16.5 x 25.4 cm

- This is one of a small group of sketches of Dedham Lock that Constable made around 1820. Here the view seems to be taken from the upstream end of the lock. No finished painting is known to have resulted from the new studies.

#### References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-dedham-lock-n01820>





John Constable (1776-1837), *The Grove, Hampstead*, c.1821-22, 35.6 x 30.2 cm

- “The house known as ‘The Grove’ was occupied in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by Fountain North, a former lieutenant in the navy. North made alterations to the building so that its flat roof resembled the quarter-deck of a man-of-war; from here he is said to have fired a cannon on special occasions. By the time Constable came to stay regularly at Hampstead in the 1820s, the main relics of this eccentric arrangement seem to have been the railings round the edges of the roof.” (Tate)

### References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-grove-hampstead-n01246>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Cloud Study*, 1822, 47.6 x 57.5 cm

**References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-cloud-study-n06065>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Yarmouth Jetty*, after 1823, 32.4 x 50.5 cm

- “In the early nineteenth century Yarmouth, like Brighton, became a favoured middle-class resort, and was often painted by Norwich School artists, such as Crome and Cotman (see the Romantic Landscape exhibition). It is not known whether Constable ever visited Yarmouth himself, but this subject was evidently popular with collectors, as he made three, slightly different versions of the scene. One of them was acquired by his doctor, Robert Gooch who, according to Constable, used to place it ‘on the sofa while he breakfasted, as he used to say, on the seashore enjoying its breezes’.” (Tate)

### References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-yarmouth-jetty-n02650>



John Constable (1776-1837), *Chain Pier, Brighton*, 1826-7, 127 x 182.9 cm

- Tate display caption, 'Constable first went to Brighton in 1824, taking his wife Maria in an attempt to restore her failing health. He visited her there frequently in the mid-1820s and made many drawings and sketches, but this is his only large painting of a Brighton subject. The 1820s were some of the busiest years of Brighton's development as a fashionable seaside resort. Here Constable shows the bustling life of the beach against a backdrop of Brighton's new hotels, residential quarters and the Chain Pier itself. The pier opened in 1823, shortly before Constable's first visit, but was destroyed by storm in 1896.'
- Constable had mixed feelings about Brighton and this is the only 'set-piece' he painted although he did many sketches. He thought the town was 'the receptacle of fashion and offscouring of London'. He thought the magnificence of the sea was 'drowned in the din & lost in the tumult of stage coaches'. He thought there was an 'endless & indecent confusion' of 'ladies dressed and undressed', gentlemen, footmen, nursery maids, dogs, boys, fishermen, rotten fish and old bathing women whose 'language both in oaths and voice resembles men'. 'The genteeler part, the marine parade, is still more unnatural - with its trimmed and neat appearance & the dandy jetty or chain pier'. He found the fishing boats picturesque but the

subject 'so hackneyed in the Exhibition'.

- It was painted by Turner two years later and Turner would have seen the painting when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy. Constable has painted the pier from the shore with an interesting collection of boats and people. However, like most of his paintings Constable's it was criticised for its bold colours and it never sold. Turner painted the pier from the sea looking back towards the beach.
- Various alterations were made during the painting of No.32 at Hampstead in the winter of 1826–7, and these can still be traced on the surface of the picture. The pier was originally shorter, ending at the point now occupied by the last of the towers. The angle of the sail on the boat seen between the third and fourth towers of the pier was also changed.
- It did not sell when exhibited at the Royal Academy or again when exhibited at the British Institute. It remained with Constable until his death. *The Times* critic was enthusiastic but other writers complained about the colour and handling of the picture and one critic thought the subject inappropriate for Constable. Even his friend Fisher advised him to 'mellow its ferocious beauties'.
- The painting was later cut down on the left by about one eighth of its length, i.e. by about nine inches (23 centimetres): originally the composition was more emphatically closed at the left by a large sail on the beached boat; a second boat and several figures have also been lost. We know the reduction in length was made before 1888 as its size was then recorded and is its present size.

### **Notes**

- This is *Chain Pier, Brighton*. Originally Brighton was a tiny fishing hamlet until the Prince Regent made it his summer residence. From then on it grew in prestige and popularity every year. The chain pier opened in 1823 and was one of the wonders of the age. It was built to enable the cross-channel ferry to berth easily and Brighton became the most popular location for crossing the channel particularly after the railway opened in 1841. People would pay 2d to walk along the pier to get the benefits of sea air without the need to hire a boat and in 1828 up to 4,000 people a day would walk along the pier. It is reported that during one storm thirty or forty people stood at the end and were covered by waves breaking over the tower.

### **References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-chain-pier-brighton-n05957>



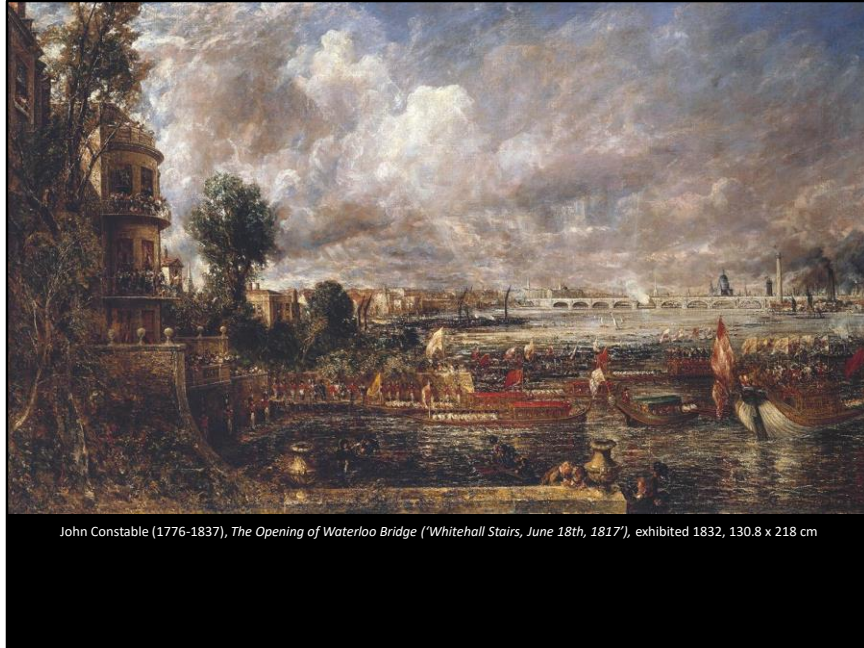


John Constable (1776-1837), *The Glebe Farm*, c.1830, 64.8 x 95.6 cm

- “The cottage nestling in woodland was a stock motif in early nineteenth century art, appearing even in the work of an artist as technically daring as Constable. Indeed, the relatively conventional character of this painting suggests that the painter may have had the marketplace in mind. However, this picture has an additional, personal significance. The image originated with an oil sketch of the rectory of Langham, where Constable’s old friend and supporter, Dr Fisher, had once lived. Fisher’s death in 1825 prompted Constable to return to the sketch and produce a number of oils of the scene.” (Tate)

### References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-glebe-farm-n01274>



John Constable (1776-1837), *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817')*, exhibited 1832, 130.8 x 218 cm

- “Over seven feet in length, this is the largest of Constable’s exhibition canvases and the result of thirteen years of planning. It commemorates the opening of Waterloo Bridge - and the second anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo - on 18 June 1817, an occasion celebrated with tremendous pomp and ceremony which Constable attempted to recapture in a whole series of drawings and oil sketches, dating from 1819 onwards.” (Tate)
- Constable moved from Suffolk to London in 1817 and presumably witnessed the festivities, but it was another two years before he conceived the idea of capturing the event on canvas. The subject offered Constable, a staunch royalist, the opportunity to record for posterity a significant historical occasion. The picture shows the Prince Regent about to board the Royal barge at Whitehall stairs. The Lord Mayor’s barge is situated prominently in the right foreground, its billowing red standard leading the eye back to the pale horizontal line of the bridge and the distant dome of St Paul’s Cathedral. Beyond the left-hand end of the bridge is Somerset House, the home of the Royal Academy, where the picture was exhibited in 1832.

- Towards the centre of the bridge a puff of smoke indicates the firing of a gun salute. In the foreground is separated from the main scene by a long parapet surmounted by urns, and Constable draws the viewer's attention to two small boys, engrossed in some activity of their own, oblivious of the day's events.
- One of Constable's later works, the picture owes a debt to the Thames pictures of Canaletto and the great 'historical' landscapes of Claude Lorrain. Technically, the picture is distinguished by its animated surface and variety of handling. The thin brown underpainting is visible in places; elsewhere Constable has used the palette knife to build up a thick impasto. The vigorous application of paint is particularly obvious in the foreground of the picture, where bold touches of red, green and white bring the picture to life. On witnessing the brilliant colour of Constable's painting, hanging beside his cool-toned seapiece, *Helvoetsluys* (private collection, London), at the Royal Academy exhibition, **Turner is said to have added a bright red buoy to his own work**, in order to redress the balance.
- Constable's married life was begun in Holborn at 1 Keppel Street, within convenient walking distance of the Royal Academy, then at Somerset House. The new Waterloo Bridge was opened in the same reach of the Thames and on his frequent visits to the Academy Constable was able to watch the progress of its construction. He also saw the opening ceremony and, after years of procrastination, finished his only large painting of a central London scene, *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge Seen from Whitehall Stairs, June 18th, 1817*. But Maria was showing signs of an inherited tendency to tubercular consumption, and the air of Keppel Street did not suit her. So from 1819, in a first attempt to find healthy conditions for her and the children, Constable took lodgings in Hampstead. It was then a small village in fairly rural surroundings, about three miles from his London studio, on a low ridge overlooking the Thames Valley to the south and open country to the north and west. On the London skyline the dome of St. Paul's was a prominent landmark. Due west about seven miles away, Harrow Hill with its church was another feature that Constable included again and again in his sketches. The position of Hampstead made it an admirable observatory for the study of cloud formations, and it was here that Constable embarked on the systematic recording of skies and their related weather that became such an original and important part of his practice.

## **References**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-the-opening-of-waterloo-bridge-whitehall-stairs-june-18th-1817-t04904>





John Constable (1776-1837), *Hampstead Heath with a Rainbow*, 1836, 50.8 x 76.2 cm

- “This is Constable’s last treatment of one of his favourite Hampstead subjects. To the usual ingredients of his Branch Hill Pond composition, this time he added a windmill that never existed there, and also a double rainbow. Rainbows are often included in Constable’s late work, either for symbolic reasons or for their associated physical properties. He admired the way Rubens, when painting a rainbow, could combine ‘dewy light and freshness, the departing shower, with the exhilaration of the returning sun’.” (Tate)

### **References**

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-hampstead-heath-with-a-rainbow-n01275>

NEXT WEEK

The Pre-Raphaelites 1840-1860

