

Thomas Churchyard 1798-1865

The Man

Born in Melton, the only child of Jonathan Churchyard, butcher and meat trader and Ann White of Peasenhall. The Napoleonic wars which lasted from 1799 until 1815 formed the back drop to Thomas' childhood, and the source of his father's successful business. When it became clear that Thomas was intelligent, Jonathan was happy to spend some of his new wealth on a good education, hoping to raise him above the yeoman's life of his forebears.

School - In 1808 Thomas went to Dedham Grammar School, living in the Headmaster's house as a boarder. He studied Classics, French and English poets, philosophy, religious speculation and natural history. John Constable was an old boy of this school, from two decades earlier, and was often found sketching in the Dedham Vale during these summers.

Articles - In 1815 Thomas left school and the following year became an articled solicitor with Crabbe and Cross at Halesworth. Thomas left Halesworth for London in 1820, to complete his final year of articles. There he was admitted to the Roll, an attorney, to the great pride of his parents and Grandparents.

Collecting - During his time at Halesworth Thomas learned more than the law. He travelled to Norwich and there he would have seen works by John Crome and his son John Berney Crome. He began to copy their paintings and from this study to develop his own style of natural landscapes. He also illustrated a book of botanical subjects with William Hooker, talented botanical draughtsman and later Director of Kew Gardens. He had probably already begun collecting works of his favourite artists, an addiction which never left him, even when he later fell on hard times. After qualifying he took a little free time before starting work. In London he visited the exhibitions at the Academy, in 1821 he would have seen John Constable's Haywain. He was profoundly influenced by the work of his fellow Suffolk artist.

Family - He married in 1825 Harriet Hailes, a neighbour of his family in Melton. Their first child *Thomas*, was born a few months later. They set up home in Well Street (now called Seckford Street), Woodbridge, a small red brick semi-detached Georgian house. The following year *Ellen* was born and the family had begun its expansion, *Emma* following in 1828.

Changing fortune - While his young family grew, his reputation as the Poacher's Lawyer established itself, and he began to exhibit at the Norwich Society. The works were praised and he was elected an Honorary member of the Institution. Finding himself reasonably well off, having inherited money from his Great Uncle Charles and his Grandfather Jonathan, Thomas began to think of trying his hand at painting for a living.

Acclaim - In 1830 *Laura* was born and Thomas began to exhibit in London, at the Society of British Artists in Suffolk Street. The following year 1831 sending more works. But to further his ambition he made plans to move his young family to Melton, to sell his books and some of his collection of paintings by Gainsborough, Crome and George Morland. 1832 brought child number five *Anna*, and further exhibitions in London and Ipswich. Thomas was a founded member of the newly formed Ipswich Society of Professional and Amateur Artists. Another member was Edward FitzGerald, later to become a great friend. Thomas sent works to the Royal Academy but they were not hung, he had better luck at the Society of British Artists.

Career change - He took the plunge and sold off the household furniture and set off to make his career as a professional artist in London, together with a neighbour and friend George Rowe. Unfortunately the public were not ready for natural landscapes, as John Constable could have told Thomas. He was struggling too, although he had been working for so much longer and had already gained some reputation. Perry Nurse was in financial trouble and John Berney Crome went bankrupt. Thomas joined the Society of Painters in Water-colour.

And back again - In 1833 he drew the experiment to a close, returning to his family, and recommencing his career in law. Collecting his children together once more, the family moved into The Beeches in Melton, and he opened a makeshift office in Quay Street, Woodbridge, taking newly qualified Edwin Church Everitt as his partner. Having more success as a solicitor the practise thrived and in 1834 moved to a part of Marsden House, Cumberland Street (Everitt living in the rest of the house). *Bessie* was born, child number six; and another inheritance came from Aunt Ann.

Routine - Thomas settled down into a new routine. He worked hard but he never stopped painting and drawing at every opportunity, for his own pleasure. He continued to buy paintings, which he admired and copied, from any source available. He made contacts and found many bargains as he travelled to the Courts, and he journeyed to auctions when there was a gem to pick-up. He

formed a deep friendship with the Quaker poet Bernard Barton, who lived in Cumberland Street and worked in the Bank.

Jonathan Churchyard died and once again an inheritance bolstered his finances and allowed for more purchases.

More of the same - *Harriet* arrived in 1836, and Thomas took on a new partner, Daniel Charles Meadows. The practise moved to the Market Hill. In 1837 Queen Victoria came to the throne and John Constable died. Bernard Barton became friends with Edward FitzGerald, living at this time at Boulge. So Thomas renewed his acquaintance with the young aristocrat and found a fellow art lover to share his passion. Baby number eight, *Charles* was born and died within a few months. Katherine or *Kate* followed in 1839.

Changes - Edwin Church Everitt moved to Yarmouth in 1841 and a couple of years later Meadows went his own way, leaving Thomas to practise on his own. The birth of their last child *Charley* in 1841 meant that the family urgently needed more room. So in 1843 they left The Beeches in Melton and moved into Marsden House. From there Thomas worked with just a couple of clerks. He preferred attorney's work and avoided taking solicitor's or commissioning work. The household also included domestic staff, including a governess to teach the children. Young Tom Churchyard had at fifteen or sixteen rejected his father's career and looking back to his yeoman ancestry, he longed to be a farmer. He stood a good chance of inheriting various tenancies from his uncles, so he went to a local academy which specialised in a scientific approach to farming. Thomas' mother died and again he inherited money.

Girls to school - At this point in his life Thomas was quite well-off, and he decided that his daughters needed to receive further education. Ellen, Emma and Laura went to Bury St Edmunds to a boarding academy. Ellen was almost too old but Thomas wanted her to have at least one term. She soon returned home to look after her Mother who was not well, and to run the busy household. As the years passed a daughter came home and another went to the academy, a relay of Churchyard maidens.

Wits of Woodbridge - At supper one December evening Edward FitzGerald coined the phrase 'the Wits of Woodbridge' to ironically describe the meetings which they enjoyed. Bernard Barton, Thomas Churchyard, Edward FitzGerald and Rev. George Crabbe (son of the famous poet) had fallen into an easy friendship. They met at each other's houses to eat and drink and chat about the local news, the arts, the great and the good. They were an odd group, ages ranging from 35 to 60 and finances ranging just as widely. Barton was a friend to all, FitzGerald an eccentric who refused to speak at all to anyone he didn't

like. Churchyard and Barton were of yeoman and trade stock, while George Crabb and FitzGerald had notable family connections and were well off.

Loss - By 1849 Bernard Barton had died, and by mischance FitzGerald found himself engaged to his daughter Lucy. He had promised to look after her and it had been misunderstood as a proposal of marriage. He was too honourable to refuse her and so followed a number of difficult years when the old friends were not so often found together.

Disappointment - In 1850 the Suffolk Fine Art Association was formed and Thomas acted as local secretary. Although he had been very disillusioned by local art associations in the past, he tried once more, and yet again he received little recognition from the critics. He never exhibited there again. After a couple of years the Norwich painters boycotted the exhibition as well and staged their own. Thomas sent eight studies to Norwich and received much praise. It seemed that Suffolk favoured the contrived landscapes of the time, not appreciating naturalistic, living landscapes. Thomas believed that quick sketches could be works of art in their own right, his trees swayed in the breeze, his leaves glistened in the rain.

Money troubles - Young Tom, disappointed at the long wait for his chance to farm, decided to see something of the world. In 1852 he set out for America for about six years. Some of the family's wealth seemed to have evaporated, and Thomas found from time to time that he hit cash problems. But the following year the Churchyards holiday'd in Weston Super Mare, a break from their usual trips to Aldeburgh, Dunwich or Felixstowe, maybe a last fling before they had to tighten their belts.

Changes - An inventory of his possessions made in 1854 lists the art collection which he had accumulated. He owned works by Gainsborough and Constable, Crome, George Morland, Richard Wilson, Turner, Stothard, Dunthorne, Rowe, Rubens and Eddy. The family had to leave Marsden House and moved back to Melton for a year or two, to retrench. But by 1856 they returned to Woodbridge, to Hamblin House a little further down Cumberland Street and almost opposite Marsden House. During this period of financial troubles his friend Edward FitzGerald had married Lucy Barton and within a year realised that he could not bear it, they had separated and FitzGerald returned to even deeper seclusion in Woodbridge.

Tragedy - Young Tom returned from America and took over farming at Byng Hall on the death of his Great Uncle Isaac. But his great expectations came to very little, Isaac died intestate and in debt. By the time his estate was

disentangled there was very little left for Thomas or Tom. In 1858 Tom married Elizabeth Bardwell, his cousin, Isaac's illegitimate daughter. They had a son in 1860, Very Young Tom; 1861 a second son Charles; and later a daughter Laura. After four years of struggling with the farm, young Tom took his family to Canada to find a new start. But the ship which they took from Liverpool to Quebec foundered on the coast of Newfoundland. Tom survived but Elizabeth and all of the children were lost.

Preparation - By 1865 Thomas was beginning to be troubled by his heart. He knew that he was not going to be leaving his family well provided for. He had sorted out four hundred or so of his paintings and had made up albums of his water-colours and sketches. These he gave to his daughters, writing their names on the back to ensure that they could not be sold as a part of his estate. He told them, *'my dears there won't be any money for you but I will leave you my paintings which will one day be worth more than any money I could ever have hoped to make.'*

Death - In August Thomas had been sketching on the banks of the Deben when he was approached by the owner of the ironmongers who asked him, *'why don't you go to your office to earn some money? - you owe enough.'* Thomas handed him the painting he had been making and replied that it was worth it all - *'here take it.'* Within a couple of days he was dead - insolvent but surrounded by an unparalleled collection of paintings.

Mourned - Sadly missed by those who knew him well, his family, his friends, his clients and the officers of the courts where he worked so hard. Less mourned by the tradesmen who were owed so much by the family and now knew that they were not likely to ever be paid. His friends immediately did what they could to help his family sort out their debts. But it was very hard, the girls had been trained for nothing and took a long while to find a way to live which befitted their sensibilities.

Obituaries - The papers praised him for his qualities as devoted father, successful lawyer, 'Woodbridge Wit', art collector, connoisseur and prolific artist. Judge Wortledge made this tribute, *'I had the pleasure of knowing the late Mr Churchyard for many years, both privately and in his public capacity. In his private capacity I have appreciated his refined mind, his genial spirit, and his courteous manner, but it was chiefly as an advocate in this court that I valued him: for while he did his duty fearlessly and ably to his clients, he never tried to mislead me or to overreach his opponents by unworthy arts; and he never wasted the public time by keeping up useless discussion. In him I have*

lost a most valuable aid in the discharge of my duty to the public in the administration of justice.'

The Suffolk Chronicle wrote: *'the public had lost a most talented man and an able lawyer; his family a most kind and affectionate parent; and those who had the pleasure of his acquaintance, a vivacious and pleasant companion and friend.'*

The Artist

Thomas sold very few of his paintings during his life-time. After his brief attempt at becoming a professional artist in London in the early 1830's he returned home to pick up his career in law, and dedicated himself to painting for its own sake. He believed in the value of his own work, but rarely sort the opinions of others, after early disappointment.

His daughters also believed in the value of his art and remained loath to part with more than a few pieces to particular friends. As each daughter died her share of the works were passed to the remaining daughters. Finally the death of Harriet in 1927 left virtually (maybe 90%) the whole body of Thomas' life's work in the hands of Charley the youngest son, and the least honourable of the family. He put the entire collection of in excess of 4000 items up for auction.

But Charley Churchyard's final disservice to the family clouded his father's true talents and reputation for many years. To maximise the proceeds from the sale he bundled up works by his sisters, along with Thomas' genuine work. People purchasing folders full of drawings and paintings naturally judged them as very variable in quality. Some were so good that they were mistaken for works by Constable, Cotman and Crome. But some so weak that collectors pronounced Thomas too amateurish to merit real attention. The whole sale, including the furniture and china realised slightly more then £600.

Since Denis Thomas wrote the first biographical and critical assessment in 1966 Thomas Churchyard's reputation has grown and finally been recognised. Now that we have a better view of the works and a clearer understanding of Thomas' life his genius has been acknowledged widely. His work is now to be found in many major public and private collections including: the Tate Gallery, London; the British Museum; the V & A Museum Library; the Ashmolean, Oxford; the Fitzwilliam, Cambridge; Norwich Castle Museum; Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich; The Alexander Turnbull Library, New Zealand; Dunedin Art Gallery, New Zealand; the Huntington Art Gallery, California; The Putnam Museum, Iowa.

Many of the albums which were sold on April 11 1927 by Arnott and Everett in the Lecture Hall Woodbridge remained intact, passed lovingly down through the families which had bought them. Some of these albums have recently come on the market, releasing carefully preserved examples of Thomas Churchyard's wide talent, with perfect provenance.

'He knew exactly where he wanted to put his brush, he never put it down twice and he always put it in the right place.'

He used: watery greens, black in the blues, purple distance, sometimes grey, blue thinly painted; touches of pink in the sky; blue touches in his foliage. He used oils with a fatty pigment and he scattered lights rather arbitrarily - small specks of white or yellow in trees or other masses. Often the ground was not well prepared and the grain shows through. (Intentional?) He rarely signed his work or dated it, although he sometimes initialled it on the stretcher.

Early period 1819 - 1834: In London he exhibited eleven pictures. Most like Constable, or the Norwich School, when he painted all that he could see in a simple, natural manner - almost drawing with the brush, the water-colours at this time were liquid in pure transparent colour, the oils thinly painted.

Middle period 1835-1850: Fifteen pictures exhibited in Ipswich. In 1847 Bernard Barton said, *'He will dash you off slight and careless sketches by the dozen, or score, but for touching and re-touching, or finishing, that is quite another affair, and has to wait, if ever it be done at all.'*

Later period 1851-1865: Eight pictures exhibited in Norwich 1852 and some pictures exhibited in Woodbridge 1865. The paintings tended to be darker and deeper in expression, more sophisticated. The forerunners of Expressionism. He painted as he breathed - without effort, and he painted what he saw without trying to improve it. The later water-colours became so physically light in expression - the merest touches of pencil or colour - that they were almost casual sketches, but were among his most sophisticated work - echoing with gentleness and deliberation a lifetime of painting experience.

The Children

Thomas - 1825-1896 After loss of his family off coast of Newfoundland he emigrated to New Zealand where he died.

Ellen - 1826-1909 Noted for her meticulous paintings of flowers, nests and birds. Less able in her landscapes.

Emma - 1828-1878 Died very young. No work has been attributed to her.

Laura - 1830-1891 Her painting had a dash like her father's. She was the nearest to him in style, and his boon companion in later years, often seen out walking with him. She particularly worked in water-colour.

Anna - 1832-1897 Her landscapes were often heavy-handed or impulsively slapdash. She worked in oils and water-colours, and also produced a large number of sketches.

Bessie - 1834-1913 Although she was considered rather simple, she was the first of the daughters to find herself work, and she managed to save some money from her work. Pictures by Bessie exist but are relatively unskilled.

Harriet - 1836-1927 She attended Art School and later taught art at home and at the Quaker School in Woodbridge. She was very talented at humorous caricatures and cartoons, and able to capture a likeness in her portraits. Mainly working in water-colours, she also produced genre pictures, children and animals in rural settings.

Charles - 1837-1838 Died as a baby.

Kate - 1839-1889 Her subject matter was similar to Harriet's, capturing the comic side of life, but with less talent.

Charley - 1841-1929 Failed at a number of careers. Sponged off his cousins and sisters whenever he could, ended his life at the Seckford Almshouse. His work is rather more coldly executed, hard lines and conventional.

Further reading

Thomas Churchyard of Woodbridge by Denis Thomas Published 1967

Suffolk School of Painters by Harold Day Published 1971

Painting The Day by Wallace Morfey Published 1986

Suffolk Artists 1750-1930 by Chloe Bennett Ipswich 1991

French Landscapes/Anglais Paysages exhibition catalogue Ipswich Borough Council 1996

The Search for Thomas Churchyard by Robert Blake Published 1997

Thomas Churchyard Woodbridge Artist and Lawyer Compiled by Robert Blake 1998

Thomas Churchyard An Exhibition and Sale of Original Works to celebrate his bicentenary David Messum Fine Art Research and Text by Stephen Reiss OBE 1998

Thomas Churchyard Bicentenary Exhibition Catalogue by Hugh Belsey Ipswich Borough Council 1998