

John Cotman's Watercolours of Croyland Abbey

JOHN SELL COTMAN (1782-1842) whose bicentenary year has just been celebrated, was undoubtedly the greatest of the Norwich watercolourists. He was a gifted architectural draughtsman and etcher, fascinated by the picturesque qualities of ruined buildings.

In 1804 he sketched at Castle Acre Priory and Croyland and utilised this material for watercolours and an etching. In a letter dated August 18th to his patron Dawson Turner, the Yarmouth banker, he wrote: *Croyland is most delicious, you know I esteemed by Howden. This Oh! this is far superior—Castle Acre to it is as nothing . . . I feel my pen incapable of describing it—'tis so magnificent, 'tis most magnificent. The old part full of sketches—the door, the window—in short the whole—wonderful.*

Landscape painters in the past seemed to live dangerously even being threatened with arrest for sketching (Cotman was actually jailed in Normandy). He often encountered hostile villagers who generally made life miserable for him. An artist has enough frustrations with rain, draughts, changing light, inquisitive cattle and meddling children, without threats of physical violence. At Croyland he was attacked by revellers from a hunting party who were staying at the same inn. He stood up for himself and gave as good as he got, but he had to delay his departure from the inn until the midday following, being afraid to meet 'the infamous rabble' as he described them, and hoping to 'leave with his head on'.

Croyland Abbey, ruined by the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 and later bombardment by Cromwell in 1643, stood isolated in the middle of the

Fens on an island surrounded by swamps. In Cotman's British Museum watercolour which was once owned by Dawson Turner, the abbey's ruined arches and great tower rise against a dramatic painted sky dominated by cumulus clouds. A boy wading in a pond occupies the foreground, and in shadow a dilapidated barn contrasts grotesquely with the graceful arches.

The watercolour now in the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull concentrates on the west front of the tower, and is a monumental portrait of the ruin in its Fenland marsh. There is another watercolour at Norwich Castle Museum. Watercolours such as these have ensured Cotman his highly esteemed place amongst the masters of English watercolour paintings in the late 18th century. The Norwich Mercury of 1856 discussed him as being on an equal footing with the great J. M. W. Turner R.A.

Although marvellously gifted by nature and possessing rare qualities as a draughtsman and colourist, Cotman was an unstable person, a maniac-depressive, unsuccessful in his career as an artist, except for his appointment in 1824 as drawing master at King's College London, and he died a disappointed man in his sixtieth year.

Stanley Warburton

Opposite: Cotman's pencil and watercolour of Croyland Abbey which is in the Ferens Art Gallery measures 21½ ins by 17¾ ins. Reproduced by courtesy City of Kingston upon Hull Museums & Art Galleries.

Below: The watercolour by Cotman which is in The British Museum and reproduced by kind permission.



