

# People who influenced Constable



September 2014

# Contents

Many people had an impact on the work of John Constable and are mentioned in the National Trust website. Here is some information about each of them.

- 1. SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT (1753-1827)** page 1  
Art collector and amateur painter
- 2. JOHN DUNTHORNE (1770–1844)** page 1/2  
Artist from East Bergholt
- 3. JOHNNY DUNTHORNE (1798 – 1832)** page 2  
Artist and Studio Assistant to John Constable
- 4. THE EDMONTON CIRCLE** page 3  
Artists, JT Smith and John Cranch
- 5. JOSEPH FARINGTON (1747-1821)** page 3  
Amateur landscape painter
- 6. BISHOP DR JOHN FISHER (1748-1825)** page 4  
Bishop of Salisbury
- 7. JOHN FISHER (1788-1832)** page 4  
Nephew of Bishop John Fisher and Archdeacon at Salisbury Cathedral
- 8. GEORGE FROST (1754-1821)** page 5  
Amateur artist and drawing master
- 9. DAVID PIKE WATTS (1754-1816)** page 5  
Constable's uncle and London wine merchant
- 10. BENJAMIN WEST (1728-1830)** page 6  
President of the Royal Academy

## 1. SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT (1753-1827)

### Art collector and amateur painter

**Sir George was a physician, patron of art and literature, a very keen art collector and amateur landscape painter whose mother, the Dowager Lady Beaumont, lived in Dedham.**

In 1795 John Constable's mother arranged for John to meet Sir George when he was visiting his mother. Sir George showed Constable a picture by Claude called 'Hagar and the Angel' which impressed the young Constable and greatly influenced the style of his future painting.

Beaumont welcomed Constable visiting his home at Coleorton Hall to see his collection. In 1823 Constable spent five or six weeks at Coleorton hall much to the displeasure of his wife, Maria, who thought the visit was much too long.

Sir George was a lifelong supporter of John Constable and source of friendly and good advice which was very helpful, particularly when John was a student in the Royal Academy schools.

## 2. John Dunthorne Senior (1770–1844)

### Artist, plumber, house painter, sign writer, glazier and handy man

**John Dunthorne was a handy man but also passionate landscape painter. He lived with his wife Hannah (née Bird) and four children in a cottage very close to East Bergholt House (the Constable mansion)**

There were no artists in the Constable family so what John Dunthorne provided to John Constable included:

- inspiration and self confidence in himself as an artist
- numerous opportunities for painting expeditions in the Stour Valley
- early techniques – including the discipline of observing/painting closely from nature

Constable's mother Ann, regarded the Dunthorne's as altogether 'inferior' to the Constables, a view also held by the Rev Dr Rhudde (Rector of East Bergholt) who considered John Dunthorne to be a dangerous atheist. The rector's antipathy towards John Dunthorne together with his friendship with the young Constable was one of the reasons the rector thwarted John Constables plans to marry his grand-daughter Maria Bicknell.

In 1832, John Dunthorne's talented son, Johnny Dunthorne died age 34 of complications either due to heart disease or as Constable thought 'a dropsical complaint' known today as oedema. Johnny's distraught father told Constable that he didn't care how soon he was laid in the same grave with poor John – but John Dunthorne did not die until 1844, twelve years later.

### 3. Johnny Dunthorne (1798 – 1832)

#### Artist and Studio Assistant to John Constable

**Johnny Dunthorne was John Dunthorne's son. He became John Constable's indispensable studio assistant and a respected artist in his own right.**

- **At fourteen** Johnny was grinding up colours in Moss Cottage, Constable's East Bergholt studio
- **At sixteen** he provided Constable with sketches of the farm vehicle crossing the mill pond in The Haywain, which Constable had neglected to draw when in Flatford the previous summer
- **At twenty six** Constable employed Johnny in his studio as an apprentice and came to regard him as a son, describing him as his '*greatest gift*' who provided him with "*constant companionship, support and practical experience of painting*"

Johnny worked in Constable's London studio in Charlotte Street, where he prepared paints and palette, he completed tracing, putting in outlines and underpainting and copying. He helped lay in some versions of Salisbury Cathedral and finished off some paintings lying about the studio that Constable had abandoned. He also built his own career as an artist exhibiting at the Royal Academy between 1829 and 1832. He was highly praised for his restoration of a Reynolds portrait, a commission gained through the recommendation of Sir Thomas Lawrence.

In 1832, just as his career was taking off, Johnny Dunthorne died, age 34, of complications either due to heart disease or, as Constable thought, 'a dropsical complaint' known today as oedema. On Johnny's death Constable wrote:

*"His loss makes a gap that cannot be filled up with me in this world ..... I shall lose a sincere friend whose attachment to me has been like a sons from his infancy. He is without a fault and so much the fitter in heaven. I woke in the night about him"*

(letter written by John Constable in 1832 to his friend and biographer CR Leslie)

## 4. THE EDMONTON CIRCLE – Artists

### JT Smith (1776-1833) and John Cranch (1751-1821)

**In 1796 John Constable visited Edmonton, London, and was introduced to the Edmonton Circle and two of its members, J.T. 'Antiquity' Smith and John Cranch.**

These two artists showed John just how tough it was to be a professional artist and what hard work it entailed. In spite of JT Smith's advice that Constable would be better off in his father's business, John stuck steadfastly to his ambition to become an artist.

Subsequently JT Smith helped him develop his early technique by providing guidance on sketching by post and John Cranch prepared a list of essential books for Constable to read.

At the time Smith was preparing a book '**Remarks on Rural Scenery**' for which John Constable drew some sketches of Suffolk cottages as possible illustrations. Constable's drawings were not used but they are amongst the earliest known drawings of his to have survived.

## 5. JOSEPH FARINGTON (1747-1821)

### Amateur landscape painter

**Joseph Farington had been a pupil of Richard Wilson. He held the very influential position of The Secretary of the Royal Academy which meant he was aware of everything that was happening within the academy and future plans. This made him a very powerful person.**

Farington was also a keen diarist who maintained very detailed and accurate records of his conversations with other artists, functions he attended including the seating plan of dinners he attended.

In 1799 John Constable was introduced to Farington who immediately saw that Constable was a person with great potential. Farington encouraged and guided Constable throughout his time as a student at the Royal Academy. Afterwards he became Constable's confidante, providing advice on his professional development, which of his paintings he should exhibit and on many other matters especially during Constable's bouts of depression.

For a number of years the Farringtons and the Constables were near neighbours in Charlotte Street in London and following Farington's death in 1821, Constable bought Farington's old house.

## 6. BISHOP DR JOHN FISHER (1748-1825)

### Bishop of Salisbury

**Dr John Fisher was appointed Bishop of Salisbury in 1807 and before that, he was both Rector at Langham church, a parish near to Dedham and a Canon at Windsor.**

Dr John Fisher was a prominent member of London society, an amateur artist and well known in the arts world. As Canon of Windsor, he was known to royalty and advised on the education of the royal children. Most of his time was spent in Windsor or in London, so his Langham duties were carried out by his curate, the Rev. Brooke Hurlock. The Hurlock family was friendly with the Constables and in 1798, John's mother arranged for her son, to be introduced to Bishop Dr John Fisher.

Bishop Dr John Fisher took an immediate interest in Constable's talent and ambition, helping wherever he could. He later asked Constable to copy some portraits for him and to paint views of Salisbury cathedral and its surrounding area.

## 7. JOHN FISHER (1788-1832)

### Nephew of Bishop John Fisher and Archdeacon at Salisbury Cathedral

**Constable first met John Fisher when visiting the Bishop at Salisbury and they became lifelong friends and confidantes.**

Much of what we now know about John Constable's life is from the correspondence between him and John Fisher. When Constable experienced distress, Fisher provided support. Examples include Constable courting Maria Bicknell (and getting rejected) and when standing for election to the Royal Academy (and getting rejected).

In 1816 Fisher suggested to John Constable that he should marry Maria Bicknell, regardless of the disapproval of her family and he offered to officiate at their wedding. His suggestion was accepted and that same year, John Fisher conducted the marriage ceremony for them in St Martins-in-the-Fields, London. John Fisher himself had married, only three months earlier and the Constables spent their honeymoon with John and Mary Fisher at Osmington, which was John Fisher's parish in Dorset. The advice to get married was good advice. Once married John became settled emotionally and this stability enabled him to develop his painting.

Fisher and Constable remained very good friends and corresponded frequently and openly about their opinions and problems. John Fisher also bought some of Constable's paintings and introduced some friends of his who became Constable's customers. It is said John Fisher always wanted to buy **'The Hay Wain'** after it was first exhibited in 1821 but not sold, but he never managed to do so.

## 8. GEORGE FROST (1754-1821)

### Amateur artist and drawing master

**George Frost was a keen amateur artist and recognised drawing master.**

He was very enthusiastic about Gainsborough's paintings and owned a number of his works. Although he was nearly thirty years older than Constable, they got on well and in the 1790s and early 1800s they took trips out together to paint and sketch local scenes. Frost's employment was as a clerk in the offices of the Blue Coach Company which ran coaches from Ipswich to London, a job that seemed to allow ample free time for sketching.

Constable's early style of pencil sketching was very similar to George Frost's and with some of the sketches they did together in Ipswich of the docks and shipping, it is difficult to distinguish which artist is responsible for the sketching.

## 9. DAVID PIKE WATTS (1754-1816)

### Constable's uncle and London wine merchant

**David Watts was John Constable's uncle, his mother's brother, wealthy wine merchant and brewer who became a prominent member of London society and Governor of the British Institution, which was a very important venue for exhibiting art work.**

Watts was often critical of Constable's paintings making comments about them being too sombre, lacking in brightness or that they were unfinished and often followed these criticisms up with a long list on how the paintings could be improved. Constable disliked Watts' observations but often agreed that Watts was correct.

Watts supported Constable through troubled times and was generous with offers of help. In 1806 he persuaded Constable that he should see other parts of the country to widen his experience, a suggestion that Constable accepted – Constable's sketching holiday in the Lake District in that same year was paid for by Watts. Watts also arranged for Constable to be present at many banquets, dinners and other social functions where he had the opportunity to talk to people of influence in the art world.

## 10. BENJAMIN WEST (1728-1830)

### President of the Royal Academy

**Benjamin West encouraged Constable from the time he first joined the Royal Academy School and many times after he had graduated from there.**

Whenever Constable was depressed by the rejection of a painting he had submitted for exhibition or at harsh criticism that had been levelled at him, Watts would offer comforting and encouraging words. He also gave him much valuable advice on how he should develop his career.

When Dr John Fisher told Constable about a vacancy at the Royal Military College for a drawing master, it was Benjamin West who advised him against taking it saying that 'he must give up all hopes of future distinction' if he did.