

Cotman in Normandy

This exhibition charts one English artist's bid to build bridges between England and France after more than 20 years of war. John Sell Cotman embarked for Normandy in June 1817 not simply as a picturesque tourist, but as a man with a mission: one that was cultural, historical and social. Having spent the past five years drawing almost every building of note in his home county of Norfolk, Cotman was extremely well versed in the intricacies of architectural style. He had also witnessed the nationalist fervour that had ignited the debates about the origin of Gothic in England or in France. By choosing to concentrate on the earlier period of Norman architecture, he was both avoiding the most heated controversy and hoping to establish what the two nations once had in common.

Over a period of more than five years, Cotman made three trips to Normandy, in 1817, 1818 and 1820, lasting a total of more than six months. He then drew, etched and published two large folio volumes containing 97 prints of churches, castles and houses across the whole of Normandy, from Dieppe in the east to Mont St Michel in the west, from Tamerville, near Cherbourg, in the north to Évreux in the south. Once his magnum opus, *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy* was completed, in 1822, Cotman returned to watercolour painting, long abandoned in preference to his antiquarian pursuits. Inspired by the technical brilliance of J.M.W. Turner and the down-to-earth street scenes of Samuel Prout, Cotman painted the landscapes and towns of Normandy with vibrant colour and unrivalled insight.

The watercolours, drawings and prints gathered in this exhibition can be enjoyed for their sheer visual sophistication, for Cotman's strength and clarity of linear design which make him just as much a classicist as he was a romantic. They demand to be understood on many other levels, as well: as products of a desire to record structures just as vulnerable to English neglect or misguided restoration as they were to destructive revolutionary fervour in France; as attempts to decipher the vocabulary of a style spoken in two distinct dialects, by the Norman French and the Saxon English; and also as contributions to a dialogue between the artist and his

wealthy patrons, together with amateur scholars of architecture, history, and geology, on both sides of the Channel. Through Cotman in Normandy we encounter a watercolour painter who was himself a scholar, an explorer, an entrepreneur and a diplomat all in one.

1817.
'I AM IN A NEW WORLD'

Cotman arrived in Dieppe on 20 June 1817, to be met by the first of a chain of contacts provided through his employer in Norfolk, the banker Dawson Turner. His journey was also encouraged, and partly financed, by Turner's partner, Hudson Gurney, an active member of the Society of Antiquaries in London.

Cotman's task was huge. His tour could be seen as fieldwork towards a history of the buildings of the province of Normandy, but the history would not become clear until the tours were completed, if then. Existing historical sources were unreliable; a selective approach was therefore necessary, and two case studies were decided upon, the rural monastery of St Georges de Boscherville, near Rouen, and the Abbey of the Holy Trinity in Caen.

To help him make his drawings accurately and quickly, Cotman employed a Graphic Telescope, a tool that projected an image, from which the outline could be drawn onto a sheet of paper. These sketches were later transcribed as neat copies, which are exhibited here.

Cotman was advised to follow a route along the coast to Le Havre, then up the Seine to Rouen. After 10 days he left for Caen, his base for most of the next two weeks. 'Caen is called the depôt of the English. In truth, there is a remarkable number of our countrymen here', wrote one traveller. The assistance of the resident community made Cotman's stay highly productive. At Bayeux, Cotman was unable to see the famous tapestry. He sped on, determined to reach Mont St Michel. He quickly retraced his steps and returned to England from Le Havre after an absence of 7 weeks. He then wrote to his wife, 'England is the country for an

Englishman. Business may take me [to France] again, but never, oh never shall I be led there by Pleasure'.

1818.
THE ENGLISH IN NORMANDY

Following the ultimate defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, there was a great surge of English visitors to France. Most headed for Paris, but some allowed themselves time on their journey to explore the towns and cities of Normandy, especially Dieppe and Rouen. After years of propaganda, when the French were necessarily portrayed as weak and fickle, in contrast to the solid, stalwart Briton, travellers were curious to know the truth about their former enemy, and pleasantly surprised to find little animosity among the population at large; conflict, most people agreed, was created by governments, not the man in the street.

Dozens of written travelogues appeared within months. Illustrated accounts took rather longer to organise. The appearance of French scenes in London exhibitions was even slower to take off. Watercolours shown by Henry Edridge in 1819 probably inspired Prout's first short trip later that year, and Prout's responses may well have sparked J. M. W. Turner's tour in 1821. The long fascination with France endured at least until the publication of Turner's engravings of the River Seine in 1834, a high point which also signalled the beginning of its decline.

Cotman's second tour in 1818 was also his longest. For part of the time he travelled with Mary Turner, his employer's wife, and two of their daughters. Dawson Turner himself eventually joined them. Again, the main focus was on Rouen and on Caen, but the journey also took in Gournay, the town from which the ancestors of Hudson Gurney took their name. After the departure of the Turner family from Caen, Cotman headed west to meet Charles de Gerville who planned to guide him around the further reaches of the province.

1818.

IN FRANCE WITH THE TURNER FAMILY

Cotman's tours were not solely of interest to the English. Scholars in France were beginning to study their own regional heritage. Auguste Le Prévost, the young aristocrat from Rouen who later claimed credit for suggesting Cotman's whole itinerary, sought advice from Dawson Turner:

Would you be so kind as to suggest the best works in English on Gothic architecture and the means of recognising the date of a building of this period purely by its manner of construction? This type of research has not really been much studied and the results would be especially apt when looking at buildings in Normandy which are so comparable to ones in Great Britain.

His friend Charles de Gerville was delighted by the arrival of a skilled draughtsman like Cotman. The two set out on a breathless two weeks circuit from his home south of Cherbourg. An extract of his letter to Le Prévost reads:

After finishing breakfast at 7, the horses arrived and we set off for Briquebec. By midday, three sketches of the castle; two of the church were done before we came back for lunch at half past two. At four in the afternoon we were en route for St Sauveur Le Vicomte. The abbey had been drawn by nightfall, and the castle before breakfast on Monday. A second attack on the abbey was completed in the next hour and at ten we were off to Barneville. The sketch of the church was done by 4.

On his return to England, Cotman busied himself with etching the plates and trying to find a publisher. He was warned that without support in the right places his cherished project could prove ruinous; and so it turned out.

1818.

‘A PICTURESQUE TOUR OF NORMANDY’

Cotman was too busy preparing his *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy* for publication to visit France in 1819. The final journey was delayed until 1820. De Gerville had been out on horseback for weeks, hunting down out-of-the way village churches to add to Cotman’s haul. In the event, this trip of ten weeks resulted in only five new subjects for the book.

Cotman had neglected the south-west of the province, and had to now make that a priority. The architecture was hardly noteworthy, but the unusual landscape captivated him. ‘Oh this ! I had been told the depart of the Orne was the Switzerland of France -- I shd. say the Wales of France & the town of Mortain, Dept. de la Manche, the Switzerland.’

Now that he had seen the street scenes exhibited by Edridge and Prout, Cotman was moving his focus away from architecture. He wanted to create a Picturesque Tour of Normandy; as the artist who had travelled more widely in the province than any other, he was ideally placed to do it. His brown wash studies were presumably made with this end in view, intended to be printed as aquatints. Cotman never fulfilled this goal, but he kept the drawings in a special album until his death.

The first instalment of the *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy* was ready by January 1820. Cotman found a co-publisher in the Arch Brothers of Cornhill in the City of London, but he was still making all the plates himself, with some involvement of assistants. A last-minute decision to have Dawson Turner write a text to go alongside the etchings failed to provide the explanation they deserved. Rather too expensive at 12 guineas (the equivalent of about £800 today) a copy, and without the ready-made local audience that other luxury antiquarian publications relied on, the book struggled to find buyers.

THE LEGACY OF THE TOURS

Once he had completed the *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy* in the autumn of 1822 Cotman returned to watercolour painting, an activity he had largely put on hold for ten years. Among 19 works exhibited in Norwich in 1823, 15 were scenes in Normandy, including Dieppe, Falaise and the two views of Domfront included here. He contemplated a move to London, but when the sales and reviews of the book were disappointing, had to settle for Norwich.

In 1825, Cotman was invited to join The Society of Painters in Watercolour, and made his début with watercolours of Dieppe, Mont St Michel and the Abbatial House of St Ouen, Rouen. While the prints of French architecture published by other artists and draughtsmen were tending to become increasingly dry and technical, Cotman maintained an appealing balance between buildings and their social setting, eye-catchingly presented with bold patches of pure colour.

For all the apparent precision of his drawing style, Cotman had always been willing to take considerable liberties with the monuments he drew. After 1830, the boundaries between fact and fiction were blurred still further in a number of capriccios or fantasies, based on real or imagined Norman buildings. The actual experience of Cotman's tours of Normandy may have been receding further into memory, but the bold, solid style of the architecture which inspired him to go there in the first place remained as captivating as ever.