

Art and Culture in the Botley area

Although Botley is not particularly well known for its association with art and culture there have been a number of interesting links in the past to major figures in several fields of the arts. We shall start with the stories of the two William Turners.

The first, and by far the better known of these Turners had William as a middle name and is most commonly referred to as J.M.W. Turner. Although born in London in 1775 he is known to have visited Oxford on numerous occasions between c.1787 and his death in 1851, his last definite visit occurring in 1839. A wide range of paintings (mainly watercolours) survive as mementos of these visits, and most show scenes within central Oxford or long distance views of the city from higher ground surrounding the city. Interestingly both the first and last paintings of Oxford produced by J.M.W. Turner, although not amongst his greatest works by any means, do show views of Oxford from near to North Hinksey. Images of both these paintings are shown below.

The third image below is a painting of Oxford from near South Hinksey (which hangs in Oxford Town Hall) by the other Turner, namely William Turner of Oxford (as he was known even in his lifetime). This Turner was born in Oxfordshire, but not actually in Oxford, and lived much of his life in London and elsewhere, so perhaps his nickname is not truly merited, although he too painted many scenes in and around Oxford including several distant views from the west. He was a contemporary of J.M.W. Turner, but younger, being born in 1789 and dying in 1862. Although not widely known he does have paintings held in major collections including the Tate Gallery.



J.M.W. Turner
A view of the city of Oxford
1787-88



J.M.W. Turner
Oxford from N. Hinksey
1839



William Turner of Oxford
A view of Oxford from S. Hinksey

The next artists of any repute to roam within spitting distance of Botley were members of the Pre-Raphaelites. Both John Everett Millais (later Sir John) and the lesser known Charles Allston Collins spent the summer of 1850 lodging with a Mrs King of Botley. Millais was obviously not impressed with the level of service provided by Mrs King, and complained so much to his benefactors living in the main Oxford Pre-Raphaelite base of Jericho that they sent provisions out to him. Both men spent much time in Wytham Woods, mainly near to Botley Lodge sketching and observing.

The main paintings known to have come out of this period in Botley were Millais' "The Woodsman's Daughter" and Collins' "Convent Thoughts" (both shown overleaf). The Millais painting was actually produced in his London studio the following year, and the only element of the Collins painting known to derive directly from Botley was the brick wall (the 'nun' was a model painted in his studio, and the flowers were painted in Oxford itself) and no-one seems certain which wall he actually painted ! Collins is better known for being the brother of novelist Wilkie Collins, and married to a daughter of Charles Dickens. When asked about the

whereabouts of his brother in 1850 Wilkie Collins said that he was “busily engaged in painting a fly’s eye with lashes to match” although this was probably not intended to be taken literally.



John Everett Millais
The Woodsman's Daughter



Charles Allston Collins
Convent Thoughts

Another man who had ties with both the Pre-Raphaelites and with North Hinksey was Art Historian and Critic John Ruskin. It would be fair to say that those ties were by no means as strong as the ones between Millais and Ruskin's wife Effie, but I digress. In 1874 Ruskin decided to use Oxford students (who would benefit psychologically as well as physically from taking part in manual labour) to provide the villagers of North and South Hinksey with a proper link road in place of their rutted muddy track. He left these students under the supervision of his gardener while he spent several months in Assisi, and only joined in with their labours himself at the very end of that year. The road was never completed, however the building in North Hinksey known as Ruskin's Cottage (which he commented on but never stayed in) does have a plaque commemorating this episode. Interestingly the labourers included a young Oscar Wilde.

Moving on to the field of poetry we meet up with Matthew Arnold (1822-88), a man who has a widely recognised connection with this area. Nowadays his rather florid and overly romanticised form of versification is not to everyone's taste, however in his time he was highly popular. The most famous of his 'Oxford Poems' are "Scholar Gypsy" and "Thyrsis" both of which mention locations such as Cumnor and the Hinkseys. The following is a verse from "Scholar Gypsy" and is typical of Arnold's style:

And once, in winter, on the causeway chill
Where home through flooded fields foot-travellers go,
Have I not pass'd thee on the wooden bridge,
Wrapt in thy cloak and battling with the snow,
Thy face tow'rd Hinksey and its wintry ridge?
And thou has climb'd the hill,
And gain'd the white brow of the Cumnor range;
Turn'd once to watch, while thick the snowflakes fall,
The line of festal light in Christ-Church hall--
Then sought thy straw in some sequester'd grange.

Two other poets who have mentioned North Hinksey in its Ferry Hinksey guise are Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) and Ronald Arbuthnott Knox (1888-1957). Binyon (who is better known for the lines ending "... at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them" from his poem 'The Fallen') wrote a poem called 'Ferry Hinksey' but beyond mentioning "the ferry water" it contains no description of the location, and Knox's poem 'Megalomania' likewise only mentions the village in passing. Walter Richard Cassels (1826-1907) was at least a little more descriptive in his poem Wytham Wood, mentioning the 'waving' and 'mossy' Woods of Wytham, the deer herds and many other features.

Another significant figure appearing in this revue of art and culture is the photographer Henry Taunt who lived locally from 1842 to 1922 and left a major collection of photographs and documents relating to Oxford and its surroundings mainly from the early 20th Century. Details about the collection can be found on the Oxfordshire County Council website at <http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk>. You will need to follow the links Council Services, Leisure & Culture, History & Heritage, Oxfordshire Studies, What can I find, Photographs and finally Henry Taunt Collection.

A number of photographs survive of the Botley and Hinksey area, some of obvious subjects such as Botley Mill and others of simple village views or suchlike. Included on the manuscript of one publication is a handwritten quote in Latin from an unknown, but presumably ancient source, which when translated reads as follows: "Who knoweth not the posts set up in lengthy row right all athwart thy mead, little Botley". Intriguing !

Taunt also recounts a shooting trip aged 14 with some friends in the fields behind Elms Farm, and quotes a typical bird scarer's yell which gives a good idea of the local accent around 1856.

"Shoo-all-a-way. Shoo-all-a-way. Come again another day. 'Ere's our master, ee's cum wum, Thee mun floy and oi must run, Shoo-all-way.

Shoo-all-a-way. Shoo-all-a-way. Thee maunt another moment stay, Or to skare thee oi must run, Shootee dedd wi moi old gun. Shoo-all-a-way."

Unfortunately Taunt's overall opinion was "Botley village has not much of note", a sad if probably understandable viewpoint.

A lesser known, but still relatively successful artist called James Allen Shuffrey was born in Witney in 1859, but lived in Oxford from 1902 up to his death in 1939. He painted a large number of watercolours during annual tours of Britain and Europe, but also produced a considerable body of works portraying Oxford and the surrounding area. The majority of his paintings come from the period 1902 to 1920. Two of his works featuring local subjects are shown below:



J.A. Shuffrey: Botley Mill, 1907



Hinksey Church & distant view of Oxford

Another artist of note with strong connections to the area was the delightfully named Sir Muirhead Bone. Although he was born in Glasgow in 1876 he travelled widely and ended up purchasing the property 'Grayflete' on Harcourt Hill in the late 1930s, remaining there until his death in 1953. He was particularly admired for his drawings, etchings and watercolours, many of them featuring Oxford and the area surrounding his home. His other claim to fame is that he was Britain's first official war artist, being given this title in 1916 and then repeating this duty in the Second World War. The view of Oxford below is a relatively early work and it shows that he visited the area well before moving there. No doubt both he and James Shuffrey were well aware of the paintings by the two Turners featured above and this may have influenced their choice of viewpoint.



Oxford (from Ferry Hinksey) 1905

We finish this section with three literary links. Author Meirion James Trow has no known connections with the area himself, but in 'Lestrade and the Deadly Game' (one of his Inspector Lestrade books based on the character from the Sherlock Holmes series) he introduces a minor character with the highly implausible name of 'Hinksey Botley'. For some reason the words 'road atlas' spring to mind.

Author and Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis mentions the road to Botley comically in his autobiography. Describing his first-ever arrival in Oxford as a young student, he writes:

"I sallied out of the railway station on foot to find either a lodging-house or a cheap hotel; all agog for dreaming spires and last enchantments. My first disappointment at what I saw could be dealt with. Towns always show their worst face to the railway. But as I walked on and on I became more bewildered. Could this succession of mean shops really be Oxford? But I still went on, always expecting the next turn to reveal the beauties, and reflecting that it was a much larger town than I had been led to suppose. Only when it became obvious that there was very little town left ahead of me, that I was in fact getting to open country, did I turn round and look. There behind me, far away, never more beautiful since, was the fabled cluster of spires and towers. I had come out of the station on the wrong side and been all this time walking into what was even then the mean and sprawling suburb of Botley."

Final, and even less complimentary, words go to author Michael Dibdin, who in his 1991 novel 'Dirty Tricks' wrote: "I had arranged to meet Garcia near his lodgings in Botley, a suburb of Oxford which sounds like a form of food poisoning and looks like its effects, gobs of half-digested architectural matter sprayed across the countryside with desperate abandon."