



David Cox The Painter - Early Life

His Time In London And Hereford Part I

David's mother was apprehensive that his career and moral character would be jeopardized by the theatrical life in London. Fortunately this did not materialize. On arrival in London Mrs. Cox and David found respectable lodgings near the Elephant Castle where

David was left in the kindly care of the landlady, Mrs. Ragg.

David soon settled down in London and began to explore every opportunity in the hope of becoming a professional artist.

He began by offering a number of sketches and drawings in sepia or Indian ink to a dealer named Mr. Simpson in Greek Street, Soho. They would then be sold on mainly drawing-masters to be used for their pupils to copy. In later life he would sometimes relate how he sold his early drawings at the price of two guineas a dozen.

With some of his earnings he subscribed to the *Liber Studiorum* (Book of Studies), a series of Turner's landscape and seascape compositions, published as prints. This established an admiration for the artist that stayed with Cox for the rest of his life.

At this time in his career David Cox purchased a series of etchings done by Gaspar Poussin, Salvator Rosa and Claude Gellee, published by Pond in 1741, 1744 and 1746. Using the pictures he would faithfully copy them in water-colour.

It was a common practice by struggling artists, including Turner, to acquire professional techniques and skills by borrowing drawings and pictures to copy from, or by making a sketch in the Exhibition in the morning and finishing at home.

The dealer, Simpson who allowed him to copy a painting by Gasper Poussin in his possession, provided a privileged opportunity for study. This represented a flock of sheep in a landscape of ruins. Cox was so inspired by this that he made a large drawing in water-colour of Kenilworth Castle. This was probably worked on around 1806 or 1807 and has been agreed by many art critics to rank as Cox's earliest important work. It is painted in pale, flat washes and suggests a lyrical mood often absent from the artist's later mature development. The

water-colour powerfully reflects his association with the theatre as the sketch is one of fantasy and the “fresh air painting ” for which Cox became so well known has not yet been developed. “He painted the castle at various stages of his career, but it had a special attraction for him as being the subject which first gave him assurance as a painter; and it is characteristic of him - and rather touching – that some twenty years later he reproduced the composition which, in youth, he had executed partly as an exercise and partly as a tribute to a famous painter of the past.

David Cox and his companions used to explore old London in search of subjects to draw, and he became particularly attracted by the Thames and its’ surrounding buildings.



When Cox looked at the works of other artists in the dealers’ windows he became dissatisfied with his own efforts and this made him determined to spend some of his meagre resources on lessons. This showed a practical sense and strength of will that stayed with him throughout his life. A chance meeting with John Varley resulted in Cox taking a number of lessons from Varley, for which he paid ten shillings a lesson. When Varley discovered that David was a professional artist he said to him, “I hear that you are an artist, Mr. Cox”. With a typical reply Cox answered, “No Sir, I am only trying to be one.” After that Varley refused to accept any further fees from Cox, even though he was usually in need of money. He invited Cox to come and watch him work whenever it was convenient.

Cox was always primarily a water-colour painter and preferred to show his work in exhibitions which specialized in that medium, particularly the Society of Artists in Water-colour.

In 1805 Cox made his first journey to North Wales, where Charles Barber may have joined him. He toured through the romantic scenery of Merioneth and Caernarvonshire which was to leave him with a constant love for the Welsh landscape.

In 1808 David Cox married Mary Ragg, the daughter of his landlady. Mary was eight years older than David and possessed a very mature outlook on life with a great interest in



literature, often reading aloud to David from biographies, travel books and occasionally a novel while he worked. Mary was also fond of drawing and David valued her opinion on his own work. They enjoyed domestic happiness, which was only marred by Mary's delicate health.

Shortly after the marriage David and Mary move to Dulwich Common, where David Cox junior was born in the summer of 1809. At that time Dulwich Common was a wild and lonely place, often used by gypsies, who camped in the woods. Cox made many studies of the people, their donkeys, caravans and trappings. He used these notes in his compositions in later life.

In common with most artists David Cox had to make his living by teaching. Fortunately he was in constant demand as a drawing-master. The early part of the nineteenth century was an era when a young lady was expected to have sketching as one of her accomplishments.

While at Dulwich, Cox's name was drawn for the militia. He always had a dislike for military occupation as well as being reluctant to cease his painting, which caused him to make representations to headquarters for his release. When this was unsuccessful he offered to pay for a substitute, but this was also refused; and he had to leave home for a time in case he was arrested as a deserter. On his return his finances sank very low, but fortunately he began teaching art lessons with Colonel the Hon. Henry Windsor, who later became Earl of Plymouth. He was so pleased with the standard of tuition that was provided, that he recommended him to many of his friends and associates.

During 1809 he began exhibiting with the Associated Artists in Water-colour, becoming president of the society in the following year. Three years later he was elected as a full member of the Water-colour Society.

Early Life - His Time In London And Hereford Part II

Earning a livelihood was still an uphill struggle for Cox so in the spring of 1812 he went to Hastings, a resort much frequented by painters, where he did many drawings of fishing boats and fish-people. It was at this time that Cox tried his hand at oil painting.

It is said by Trenchard Cox in his book, that the paintings had, "a simplicity designing and a breath of colour massing, making them comparable with Constable's oil sketches".

It was generally a difficult time for young artists who had not made a name for themselves to attract purchasers who were feeling the effects of trade depression caused by the wars with France. Often in despair he would destroy his work and dispose of it down a grating near the Thames.

Much to his dislike, economic necessity forced him to accept a post as drawing master at the Military College at Farnham in 1813. This meant that Mary had to go and live with her mother at Camberwell, and their son David divided his time between his grandparents in Birmingham and his aunt in Lancashire.

Cox was given an honorary rank of Captain at Farnham, a batman to wait on him and the enjoyment of the company of the senior officers. Unfortunately his easy-going temperament disliked the discipline and the atmosphere of militarism, he also found the accurate map-drawing which he had to master, disagreeable. Also his work as a teacher prevented him from carrying on with his artwork. So, in 1815 with mutual good will Cox was released from his duties at the College, and returned to his wife at Camberwell.

To keep the family David had to continue teaching, and he successfully applied for a job in The Times. This was in a school for young ladies in Hereford. The £100 a year that he earned for teaching twice a week at the school gave him the opportunity to take private pupils. Also, his son would benefit from receiving a good education at Hereford Grammar School. His departure from London was a mixture of good will and regret among his pupils, who hoped to keep in touch with him after he moved to Hereford.

In Cox's so-called "first period" of his artistic career he used a restricted palette, the main colours being crimson lake, gamboge, indigo and sepia. It has been said that, "his early water-colours showed careful

planning, a sensitive use of flat masses, giving an affect of solidity and a firm if gentle handling of colour; qualities also noticeable in the very charming early oils”.

Up to this time, the most significant event in Cox’s artistic life was the publication in 1813-14 of his

Treatise on Landscape Painting and Effect in Water-colours, in which he gave the rules and principles that he observed throughout his life.

Included in the Treatise is the water-colour “A Windmill, Herefordshire” which is now in the British Museum.

He believed in careful craftsmanship and loved nature in

all her various moods that his friends would call him “Farm Cox”

Towards the end of 1814 David Cox and his family moved to Hereford, which was to be their home for the next twelve years. Their first home at Hereford was a cottage at Lower Lyde near Ailstone Hill. This was a very primitive place and after a very harsh winter they moved in the spring of 1815 to George Cottage, near Baynton Wood, which was later burnt down in 1923.

As David Cox’s fortunes improved the family moved in 1817 to a picturesque cottage in Parry’s Lane where he built a studio, with the financial help of his landlord. He enjoyed growing hollyhocks, one of his favourite flowers, in the garden. Also in the garden was an old well where Mrs. Cox used to hang the meat, which unfortunately was stolen on one occasion shortly before she due to receive some guests for dinner. David Cox remained at this cottage for over six years, until he built Ash Tree House on a plot of land he had purchased on the brow of Ailstone Hill. This was a much grander residence than previous properties approached by a circular carriage drive.

David Cox began teaching at Miss Croucher’s Academy of Drawing for Girls in 1814 and continued to teach there for the next five years. The boarding school was situated in a picturesque half-timbered building in Widemarsh Street. To help with finances he also took classes at the Grammar School, but he found the whole business of teaching a drudge.



His teaching took him to schools as far way as Leominster and other market towns, and to make these journeys easier he bought a pony but found riding an even greater trial than teaching and after various mishaps he reverted to walking!

At this time he took quite an interest in Liberal politics and resented paying certain taxes so much so he drank tea made from roasted corn and even new-mown hay. His radical views mellowed as he grew older and in later years he appears to have taken very little interest in politics. While living in Hereford Cox produced number of works which were topographical and intended for publication in books of views and also continued with his writing of text books.

The drawings made by Cox in his first years in Hereford were reserved in tone, with the colour laid on in flat pale washes. The “Old House at Hereford”, now in Birmingham Art Gallery shows David Cox emerging from the more experimental style of his earlier years into a more decisive technique of his so-called “second period”, which covers years that he lived in Hereford.



During the years that he lived at Hereford, David Cox made many journeys, making sketches wherever he went. In 1816 he travelled down the Wye to Chepstow, which resulted in seven drawings at the current Exhibition at the Water-colour Society.

The following year he became seriously ill and was unable to send any of his work to London to exhibit.

As soon as he had recovered, sketching and painting trips were taken to North Wales, Devon and Bath with his companions.

Almost every year on his way to London Cox would pass through Birmingham where he would sell some drawings and enjoy the company of friends, and in 1819 he also took his son to visit the exhibitions.

When in London he would always try to visit the artist, Turner at his Gallery and for some unknown reason Turner always addressed Cox by

the name of Daniel. Cox always expressed great admiration for Turner, and often paid tribute to Turner in his own style of painting. Each year Cox continued to exhibit at the Water-colour Society where in 1826, he showed 22 drawings. In the summer of the same year he visited the Continent accompanied by young David to further his education, and while in Brussels they met the Hopkins family of Canon Frome, who were travelling “in style”, and with them he visited places of interest in Belgium and Holland. During his visit his brush never stayed idle; and many lovely drawings and sketches were produced. This first experience on the Continent broadened Cox’s outlook, and on his return to Hereford he felt drawn once again to London. He thought that being among leading members of his profession and near wealthy patrons and collectors he would make more money both as an artists and a teacher. He also felt that London would establish a better position for young David, who was now eighteen years old. Ash Tree House was sold and accommodation found at Kennington Common, London.

His Later Life - Returning To His Roots In Harborne

When David Cox, together with his wife and son arrived in London 1837 it began the arduous and most rewarding period of his life – he explored many new regions in which to paint, and new methods with which to express himself.

He made extensive journeys through Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Lake District, Kent and Wales. He also made two further visits to the continent.

During this time he also constantly exhibited his work, and changed to using a special kind of rough paper which helped the atmospheric “out of doors” effects that he was constantly aiming for.

On his arrival in London his health suffered, as he was continually worn out by the worries of combining domestic life with his artistic principle and commitments.

Cox found there was an increased prosperity and a sense of security in the City that encouraged the public to spend money on pictures.

He found that he could now take on as many pupils as he had time to teach. Society was now eager to purchase as well as learn, and it was the fashion for ladies to have albums containing drawing by recognized

artists that was to Cox's advantage. He would often illustrate his teaching method by painting a water-colour which his pupils, or her parents, would be only too pleased to buy for 5 or 10 guineas.

The Art Gallery at Dudley in the West Midlands holds several "demonstration sketches" which Cox used to illustrate his lessons.

Cox was not without a quirky sense of humour - this was displayed at an exhibition when on one occasion in a mood of "whimsical disappointment" he, himself placed "sold" labels to a number of his exhibited pictures which no one had been discerning enough to buy.

After two years in London Cox returned to France for a sketching trip and although he found the French language difficult, he was able to communicate his ideas and needs by drawings.

As Cox became well known he always had many close friends in the art world – Samuel Palmer being one of his closest friends.

After returning from France Cox made an etching of the County Hall in Hereford. In the following year, 1831, he went to Derbyshire where he was commissioned to paint the homes of the nobility- Haddon Hall, Chatsworth and Hardwick.



Haddon Hall from The Park (1831)

He never asked for big sums of money, sometimes giving back some of the money if he thought that the purchaser was not well off.

Cox did not restrict his work to water-colour but sometimes used sepia wash, pencil, charcoal, black chalk and oil. He always used a limited range of pigments and for a great part of his life only used the old "cake" colours which he ground in saucers. Later, he did concede to use the more recently invented "moist" colours.

While on his journeys and expeditions David Cox would make frequent notes and quick sketches which he would keep for use in building up his exhibition pictures. Some of these finished pictures were landscape that expressed the character of a locality rather than an actual representation

of a particular viewpoint. The occasional figure drawing in a picture suggests that he could have become a successful portrait painter if he had so wished.

We are fortunate that Cox has left us a legacy of many illustrated sketchbooks, unfinished and finished works both in private collections and public galleries and museums.

In 1840 David Cox took up the serious study of oil painting after meeting the painter W.J. Muller. He was so impressed that he asked Muller to tutor him in oil medium even though Muller was nearly 30 years his junior.

The desire to become an oil painter influenced him to take the drastic decision to leave London where he felt oppressed by teaching and harassed by art dealers. His son was now married and successfully established in London, which enabled David and his wife to return to Harborne.

Cox's few possessions were taken to Birmingham by road while they went by train, accompanied by their faithful servant Ann. Cox was now looking forward to a time of "peaceful fulfilment" where he could study nature as an artist, not with the view of earning a living.

David Cox's home, Greenfield House was situated in a lane near Harborne church and vicarage. At the time that Cox lived there, the surroundings would have been still quite pleasantly rural.

As well as his painting he also busied himself with planting an avenue of nut trees and a willow tree that had been taken from a cutting from a tree over hanging Napoleon's grave at St. Helena. As well as rhubarb, Cox cultivated hollyhocks and other old-fashioned herbaceous flowers, being especially proud of his tulips.

The Coxes soon fell into retirement mode with their servant and their cat, keeping the street door always locked, with a few warmly welcomed visitors using the garden entrance.

A daily routine was soon established. After breakfast Cox would begin painting until midday. Then he would walk in the garden, visit a neighbour or occasionally go on a shopping trip to Birmingham accompanied by a boy to carry the basket. After dinner at half-past one he would work again until teatime when friends would drop in and look at his canvases and portfolios.

He often befriended artists and would sometime look out earlier works to help them with their own work.

In the evening when the lamp was lit Cox would like to make rough sketches in charcoal or water-colour which he would call “cartoons.” Mrs. Cox was now getting rather old and infirm, and would sit in her favourite high-backed chair and read aloud from the newspapers and magazines.

The day would be spent quietly on a Sunday; Cox would not paint, but visited Harborne Church in the morning, and read from the bible before going to bed. As soon as Cox was settled in Greenfield House he immersed himself in the study of oil painting, which he took very seriously. A letter to his son in 1845 gives elaborate details of his method, and even today his works in oil retain an excellent state of preservation.

He often commented that he regretted not taking up oils earlier in his life, but soon became tired when painting large pictures, so consequently the majority of his works in oils are small in size. On these smaller oil paintings Cox would often prefer to work by artificial light. He also seemed reluctant to finish a picture, and lost interest as soon as a prospective purchaser had written his name on the back of the canvas.

North Wales was the country which most appealed to Cox, especially the countryside around Bettws-y-Coed, which he made his principal centre. Although he still continued to visit the countryside around Derbyshire and Yorkshire.



A Welsh Funeral, Bettws-y-Coed

His Later Life - His Failing Health And Legacy

In 1843 Cox was struck down by a severe illness, and went to recuperate with his sister who lived near Manchester. Mrs. Cox died in 1845, and was buried in Harborne churchyard. She had always been one

of Cox's strongest critics, and following her death his work became "exhibition pieces" in style.

It is considered that the period between 1846 and 1856 belong to Cox's best-known oil paintings.

After Mrs. Cox's death David Cox spent much of his time in and around Bettws-y-Coed sketching his favourite subjects.

There is a very fine drawing of "The Salmon Traps" which was drawn near by using crayon and wash, hanging in the Tate Gallery.



He left a legacy in the parlour at Greenfield of a fresco painting, and in 1847 an oil painting representing Charles the second in the oak tree at Boscobel.

By 1850, sometimes called Cox's fourth period, his eyesight was failing when his work became looser and more "blottesque".

In 1852 he visited Ludlow where he painted the famous moated manor of Stokesay. He hoped to return the following year to paint and sketch more of this historic place, but was prevented by a stroke from which he never really recovered.

Cox gradually became feebler as a result of his stroke, and by 1856 he was no longer able to paint out of doors unaccompanied, so was now assisted by his house keeper and his picture-mounter, George Priest on his visits to Bettws-y-Coed.

It has been generally considered that " the work of Cox in these last years of failing health has a power which reveals that determination of his spirit but a looseness of drawing betraying the weakening hand."

In spite of being ill he still managed in 1857 to do his usual tour of the London exhibitions before returning to recuperate at Greenfield House.

His generous nature is shown when he would make presents of raisins and sugar, and send his housekeeper, Ann with little gifts for the old

people, and on the Queen's birthday a little money. On one occasion he cut the best slice from a leg of mutton and sent it to an aged villager.

Cox's last illness began with a cold that slowly developed into bronchitis. Although he was diagnosed by his doctor as being in danger, in the spring he sent seven pictures to the Water-colour Society.

By May 1859 his health began to show signs of improvement and he was allowed downstairs, and even occasionally in the garden.

Early in June of that year he may have had a premonition that his life was coming to an end, as one evening on his way up to bed from the parlour he murmured in a low, sad voice, "Good-bye pictures! Good-bye, I shall not see you any more". He never came downstairs again. On the 6th of June his son was sent for and in the morning of the next day, in the presence of his son, David his housekeeper, Ann and his sister, Mercie Cox quietly died, murmuring "God Bless you all". A week later, amid many friends, rich and poor, David Cox was buried beside his wife under the chestnut trees at Harborne.

His son David received many letters of condolence expressing appreciation of Cox's work and character, among them being one from Samuel Palmer, who described him as a "man whose intellectual and moral attainments were equally developed."

As might have been expected Cox left his affairs in good order, making generous provision for his dependents and household. His housekeeper, who had been with him for many years used to carefully gather up all the sketching and rough drawings which Cox threw away as scrap, and after his death she sold them for £8000.

As with many artists David Cox gained esteemed recognition, and his works ranked highly by his friends, but partly because of his distaste for commercial publicity the public did not pay highly for his pictures.

His work and theories were discussed, criticized and admired in wildly differing social and intellectual circles.

As the public demand for Cox's pictures grew, so did the unscrupulous intentions of the public. Pupils and lesser contemporaries produced work that was sold as authentic works by the master, often with false signatures.

It has been said David Cox's approach to nature was spontaneous rather than intellectual, being more interested in the formation of the earth and

in what grows, than the unpredictability of light and the complexities of form.

“Although David Cox appears to have been a typical product of the Victorian age, he was very much ahead of his time”.

Many of David Cox’s paintings and sketches can be seen on various Internet sites. The most comprehensive collection of David Cox’s work in various media is held in the City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham.

Harvey Sayce



**David Cox’s Grave
In Harbourn**