

Turner Contemporary

Turner Tour of Kent

To celebrate the *Turner and the Elements* exhibition, Turner Contemporary has commissioned artist Stephen Turner to look at JMW Turner's relationship with Kent.

Stephen has selected 10 images that show the breadth of Turner's work in Kent and invite readers to travel to a number of locations around the county visited by the artist himself.

Turner in Kent by Stephen Turner

Turner professed himself to be a Man of Kent, born east of the River Medway (as opposed to the Kentish Men born to its west). In truth he was an immigrant from London's Covent Garden; but by association, affection, inspiration and residence he might be said to have fairly inherited his title.

Formative childhood years with relations in Margate led to accomplished paintings of the town made when he was just nine years old. By the age of 23 he was travelling widely through the county and was drawn to sites of historical importance, to the great spiritual centres of Canterbury and Rochester and to the architecture of the counties bridges, castles and country houses. Modern fortifications constructed to protect the channel shore from invasion, the new harbour at Ramsgate as well as the older ports of Dover and Folkestone and all of the coast in between, were scrutinised. Extensive sketching trips embracing the length of the River Medway from the Naval Dockyard in Chatham, to Aylesford and north to Allington, Maidstone and Tonbridge were planned and executed, while his habit of repeatedly drawing the skies over Thanet (and its coast and sea) confused even his champion John Ruskin;

'The beautiful bays of north Devon and Cornwall he painted but once and that very imperfectly. The finest sunsets of the Southern Coast series: the Minehead, Clovelly, Ilfracombe, Watchet, east and West Looe, Tintagel, Boscastle he never touched again, but he repeated Margate I know not how many times'

Turner began regular visits to Margate after the death of his father in 1829 to stay with his housekeeper Mrs Booth in her house on the seafront, until

they moved together to Chelsea in 1846. His relationship with Mrs Booth remains uncertain, but the view from his bedroom window provided the basis for an intense love affair with the immediate Thanet surroundings of chalky cliffs, seas and sky.

Turner also saw a more rural England of 1790 turn into the rapidly growing bustle of the industrial urban 1840s. Margate grew from a small fishing village to a resort with 100,000 visitors a year by the 1830s, as a newly affluent middle class augmented the leisured gentry. In Turner's last decade, even the poor could take a train to the coast for a cheap holiday. William Cubitt's nineteen arch viaduct in Folkestone was completed in 1844 and there are three watercolour studies of it in Turner's 'Ideas of Folkestone Sketchbook' of the following year. He was increasingly drawn to contrast the new power of technology and engineering with the strength of natural forces and in doing so, came to understand each the better.

This selection of drawings, watercolours, engraved work and painting in oil illustrate different stages in Turner's career and his deepening understanding of nature and place as expressed through the microcosm of his Kentish experience.

Stephen Turner

For more information about Turner Contemporary, please visit turnercontemporary.org.

AYLESFORD

Aylesford Bridge and Church, Kent ?1798



Gouache, pencil and watercolour on paper support: 224 x 284 mm on paper, unique
Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856 D00864 Finberg number: XXXII H

Turner first visited this upper tidal part of the Medway in 1797 when he made a sketch of Kits Coty, a Neolithic dolmen four miles away in the same parish. In 1798 he returned and made further studies in pencil and wash of the river, church and bridge as well as this finished work.

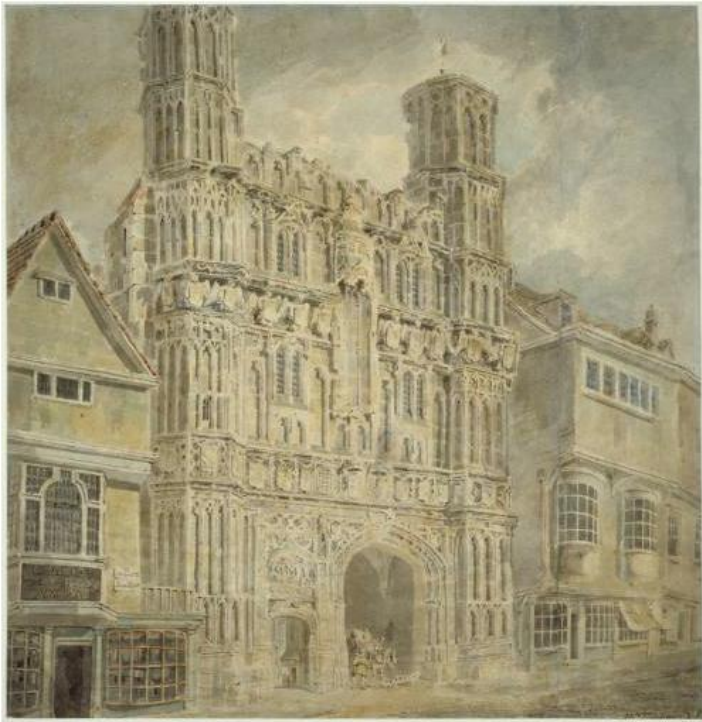
Gentle mid afternoon light falls across the mellow ragstone arches of the bridge, the white painted gables of the cottages and the sturdy little church, to be reflected upwards again in the smooth undisturbed flow of the river. In the calm and unhurried quiet of the scene, two travellers pass on the bridge and seemingly bid each other good day.

Still waters run deep on the tidal Medway however. Fresh water battles with swift saline tides twice every day on a spot where Alfred the Great defeated the Danes, where Hengist & Horsa fought Vortigern and the Emperor Claudius crossed the Medway to defeat Caractacus and capture a Kingdom in AD43; momentous moments (which Turner could be expected to have known about) implicitly remembered, in the weathered stone of an aged bridge and the timeless flow of water beneath it.

Turner has painted the original bridge constructed in 1250, before a larger central arch was added in 1810 to give us the bridge we more or less see today. The church too has swapped its tower and lost its little dormer windows, but the view retains its lasting picturesque attractiveness and all of its near legendary undercurrents.

CANTERBURY

Christchurch Gate, Canterbury 1792-3



Watercolour and graphite on paper support: 266 x 260 mm on paper, unique
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge Wilton number: 34

Turner was fascinated by the oldest cathedral city in England and made repeated visits to study the ancient gates to the town as well as the monuments, interior and precincts of the church itself that contributed to the unique and particular energy of the city. He took a last goodbye in 1845, but this watercolour is an outcome of his first documented visit.

Delicate watercolour wash and pencil are Turner's tools to delineate the stone traceries of the ornately crafted gateway, which had been chiselled by the cathedral's own artists in 1517 but had begun to be softened by the weather over the ensuing years. This work of the rain and wind had been aided by a Cromwellian mob that had torn down the original statue of Christ from over the gate in 1642.

Turner models its slightly softened and mottled contours with a sensitivity to the surface of the local stone that presages his later understanding of erosion on the chalk cliffs just twenty miles away in Dover. The noble entrance to the spiritual domain of the Church is also emphasised by Turner's inclusion of the meaner, newer and secular structures to either side.

Today's gate is newer than the one which Turner encountered, for the entire façade was restored in the 1890s, while the twin turrets Turner painted were also taken down in 1830 and only replaced in 1937. The building to the right is recognisably the same as in Turner's picture which was interestingly a tea shop in 1887 and is still a coffee shop today.

CHATHAM

from Picturesque Views in England and Wales: Chatham, Kent 1832



Intaglio print on paper image: 148 x 235 mm on paper, print
Purchased 1986, T04588 Rawlinson number: 262

When this print of Chatham, Kent was published in 1832 the town had just elected its first Whig MP, having benefited from the electoral reform Bill of that year which recognised Chatham's growing population and economic prosperity as the home of ship repair and provisioning for the Royal Navy. Turner was a great supporter of the Reform Act and he seems to celebrate Chatham's new status by bathing the town and river in light.

Rochester Cathedral and Castle, symbols respectively of religious authority and ancestral power, are in the background. Fort Amherst, in the foreground had been declared obsolete in 1820 and its ramparts and ditches all appear appropriately shaded. The guard positioned centre, is leaning heavily on his musket and another soldier dallies with a woman. Both are seemingly indifferent to their duty and suggest a creeping neglect in the absence of threat; the war with France had been won in 1815 and Britain now ruled the world's oceans.

The view is still readily identifiable today. The fort itself is being restored and the curve of the Medway still catches the light of the morning sun. The bulwark of Fort Pitt on the left of the picture is now occupied by the University for the Creative Arts which has inherited the address and its commanding views. The peninsula of mud and marsh on the inside of the river's loop is now the City Trading Estate, but local people still remember the soggy tidal morass of the former, which was only developed during the 1970s. The Navy left in 1984 as Britain's power in the world declined in our own post-industrial age. Chatham's military past is now the heritage landscape of today. Napoleonic re-enactments are popular at Fort Amherst, but it's less well known that a locally resident Charles Dickens described similar tourist scenes there early as the 1860s.

DOVER

Shakespeare Cliff, Dover circa 1825



Watercolour and scratching out on paper support: 181 x 245 mm on paper, unique
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge Wilton number: 764

Turner relishes the meeting of storm cloud and cliff face, where dense, dark, rain laden mists, wreath the white chalky heights. The sea is driven inward by the same intense vent, scouring the foreshore in a drama of the elements worthy of Shakespeare, whose work gave the cliff its name*. Turner always claimed to share Shakespeare's birthday of St. George's Day.

Unpredictable channel weather and tall chalk cliffs, as much as the forts, towers and protective ditches which Turner painted from the 1790s onward, were the real protectors of England during the regular wars with France and Spain which had ended just ten years before Turner made this watercolour. A mildly choppy La Manche had sunk Napoleon's invasion barges when they were tested off the French coast in 1806 and capricious weather as much as Drake's navy had defeated the Armada for Elizabeth over 200 years before that.

The relentless weather has continued its daily exchange with the land and in the 1960s finally removed the brow of the cliff hidden behind Turner's clouds. The newspapers in the 1790s had reported a scheme by the French to invade England via a Channel tunnel. Today the spoil from the one we constructed together was used to create Saphire Hoe just west of Turner's view.

* King Lear, Act IV scene VI – The Country near Dover

KNOCKHOLT

A Beech Wood with Gypsies around a Camp Fire circa 1799-1801



Oil on paper laid on panel support: 270 x 190 mm painting
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

A contemporary of Turner's, the artist Joseph Farrington, wrote in his diary of 30th October 1799 to say that 'Turner called. He has been in Kent painting the Beech Trees'. The early autumnal colouring of this picture seems to fit in well with the season, but the year and the place has been subject to greater debate.

Other works related in subject, medium and format have been confidently attributed to Knockholt, Kent, where Turner was known to have visited his friend the artist William Frederick Wells who lived there from 1801. Knockholt was famous for a clump of ancient beech trees and they are named on an 1806 map, close to the centre of the village and reputedly at the highest point in Kent; occupying a small hollow on top of the hill with a dewpond, where William the Conqueror once reputedly watered his horse. According to the writer Walter Jerrold (in 1914), on a clear day 'the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral may be seen from this spot'. Such favourable geography and legendary association might have further attracted Turner.

The name knockholt is thought to be derived from Nok (corner) and Holte (Copse) which makes another connection to the large coppice trees in this work. Though such trees can live for over 800 years many of them were apparently lost in the great storm of October 1987 and only remnants can now be found along a footpath behind the Crown Pub.

MARGATE

The New Moon; or, 'I've lost My Boat, You shan't have Your Hoop' exhibited 1840



Oil on mahogany support: 654 x 813 mm frame: 960 x 1109 x 105 mm painting
Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856 N00526

Turner found himself a place to live in Margate with a balcony seat onto his favourite shoreline stage, where nature presented a new and distinctive spectacle every day. The property was almost opposite the entrance to the new Turner Contemporary Gallery and the view from his window (as well as from short walks from his front door), gave him every opportunity to explore his fascination with this shoreline, sea and sky.

The sun has set and is gracing the moon with just sufficient light to stand out in the dusky sky and to glisten on wet sand. A ship has left Jarvis's Jetty (1824-51), having brought a few hundred more people to holiday in town. It is steaming out to sea with smoke from its tall stack bending against an opposing northeasterly breeze, and suggesting the threat of some weather to come. People paddle, dogs bow wow, fractious children shout, whilst waves swish and suck at the sand. There is much about transience in the picture and symbolism about people and nature in a restless, interconnected flux.

Present day sea defences, the lifeboat station and the brand new art gallery might now occupy or obscure Turner's station point for the view, which is somewhere at the eastern end of the Rendezvous site, but natural erosion alone over the last 179 years would make actual comparison difficult. Around the time of sunset though, and on the first quarter of the moon, the inspiration for Turner's perceptive vision can be glimpsed anywhere along Margate's open seafront.

RAMSGATE

from The Ports of England 1826-1828 Watercolours
(D18142-D18143; D18150; D18152-D18154)



Ramsgate circa 1824, Pencil and watercolour on paper support: 160 x 232 mm on paper, unique. Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856
D18150 Finberg number: CCVIII Q

A storm is approaching Ramsgate Harbour from the Channel, but the ships within its two protective granite arms are shielded from its grip and the lighthouse shines out a welcome to those still offshore. A variety of craft are heading into the port, but the weather is not so inclement that a small collier brig, caught up in the large breaking wave, should have thought to postpone its voyage. There is no panic to be found here, and it is an example of how Turner could depict the routine skill and great seamanship of local sailors and fishermen and the sturdiness of their craft.

Nature and the works of people compete; sailors with the sea, hard cut, granite stones of the new harbour against battering spray, canvas with wind and sunlight against forbidding cloud in the artist's own unique figure of eight composition, where all is presented intimately and endlessly intertwined.

Designed by the architect John Shaw (and his son) the construction of the harbour had begun in 1749. Its shape is much the same today, and given the right combination of wind and state of tide, turbulent seas still collide in the same old fashion.

The entire harbour was being remodelled and was not completed until 1850, the year prior to Turner's death. The current lighthouse was finished near the end of the project and replaced the earlier tower which Turner depicted. The Shaw's also designed the harbour clock tower which Turner sketched around 1832 and shows his interest in the development of the port.

RECVLVER

Sunset over a Calm Sea with a Sailing Vessel, and the Coast of Kent with Reculver Church in the Distance 1796-7. *Wilson Sketchbook [Finberg XXXVII]* (D01118-D01174; D01177-D01246; D40762-D40763; complete)



Gouache, pencil and watercolour on paper support: 113 x 93 mm on paper, unique
Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856, D01231, Finberg number: XXXVII 114

The sun rises through banded cloud in the sky over Reculver on the north Kent coast as a small ship heads west toward the Swale and the Thames, a journey Turner himself would have made many times en route from Margate. This small study (the sketchbook pages are only 113mm x93mm) is a complete composition in miniature looking out from low cliff tops along the foreshore over an empty looking and unpopulated Herne Bay.

The low cliffs made of soft Eocene clay and Thanet Sands have been eroding at up to five feet a year since Turner's day and the bay has been much altered as a result. The twin-towered church of St Mary's at Reculver picked out against the sky was already in the process of being abandoned to the sea in the 1790s. It was only saved when purchased by Trinity House in 1810, to preserve its distinctive outline as a navigation aid for mariners.

The towers mark the western end of the Wantsum Channel, a navigable waterway until the Middle Ages, which separated the Isle of Thanet from the rest of Kent. Though by Turner's day it was long silted up, the name was retained and it is here he professed to find the finest skies in Europe. The little study of the sunrise made in 1796 might have early confirmed him in this opinion.

ROCHESTER

Rochester: The Cathedral Seen beyond Buildings from the South 1792



Pencil on paper support: 275 x 214 mm on paper, unique
Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856
D00117 Finberg number: VIII C

Positioned on the lowest crossing of the Medway, on the route of the old Roman road to Canterbury, Rochester was a convenient staging post between London and the heart of Kent. Turner visited on more than one occasion to examine both castle and cathedral, as well as the river down stream which was home to the Royal Navy in Chatham.

He tucked himself out of the way on the southern side of the Cathedral to draw its tower and transept from the vicinity of the old cloister gate. It is a delicate and tentative study in fine pencil from an unaccustomed view, conveying the solidity of cathedral stone as well as the lighter pattern of trees, leaves and shrubbery. It's the kind of drawing he might have coloured, such as the painting of Christchurch Gate in Canterbury of about the same year.

Though the scene has changed more than it initially appears, it's still possible to recognize the accuracy of his observations. The curve of the street is the same and the old ragstone cloister gate is still perched on the corner pretty much as Turner drew it (though the building behind has gone). Turner's transept is without the two decorative pinnacles and slightly raised roof added by Gilbert Scott in the 1880s, but the window arrangements below are carefully seen. The octagonal spire on a square unadorned tower looks like that of today, but in fact this was an earlier construction demolished in 1824 and the Cathedral was then without a spire until 1904 when a similar design was reinstated. Turner himself in an engraving of 1832 shows he was abreast of developments, by correctly showing the cathedral with a tower topped by four pinnacles but no spire.

WHITSTABLE

from Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England
(T04370-T04427; complete) Whitstable, Kent 1826



Intaglio print on paper image: 166 x 249 mm on paper, print
Purchased 1986 T04426 Rawlinson number: 127

Turner sought out Whitstable as a subject for an engraved work in the series 'Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England', for which he made an original watercolour in 1824. This engraved work was published in 1826 with the intention of making the sentiment of the original available to a great many more people.

Twin rows of rotting posts mark a disused track down a slope toward the intertidal flats of Whitstable Bay where people have gathered at low water to dredge for oysters by hand. A heavily laden cart heads up toward the firmer cliff top path but it's hard going on the claggy ground and one man has to push whilst a second hauls on the horse's bridle. Others, who have seen that the tide has turned and are ending work for the day, follow them. It's extremely hard work for little reward and Turner has thrown the entire dejected work force into the downcast shadow of a passing storm. Whitstable alone is bathed in light, as a fast moving front crosses over the coast from the sea. A cyclone, a cycle of the tide and the daily round of the poor, mark a meeting of the picturesque, with the counterpoint of an early sort of social realism.

Whitstable is still synonymous with oysters today, though the industrial change of Turner's nineteenth century almost saw it off with an inheritance of water pollution, disease and neglect by the end of the Second World War. Only in recent years have the beds been restocked and the more expensively raised oyster, become a delicacy.

The windmill on top of Borstal Hill in Turner's painting, is still standing like a small echo from the past, facing out to its offshore cousins on the Kentish Flats as we grapple with our post-industrial future and look again to harness the natural and renewable power of the wind so evident in Turner's vision of Whitstable too.

Stephen Turner

Stephen Turner is an artist whose work is concerned with aspects of time and the relationship between transience and permanence. His work often involves spending long periods, noting changes in the complex relationship between nature and the man-made. He is a graduate of Leeds University Department of Fine Art (1976) and the University of Regina, Canada (1979). He was Fellow in Painting at Exeter College of Art & Design from 1980-82 before moving to London where he worked with the arts and environment charity Common Ground.

He has been working principally as an artist since 2003 with project partners including Stour Valley Arts, Turner Contemporary, Solent Centre for Architecture and Design, SAFLE (Public Art Wales), The Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland, University College Falmouth and Fermynwoods Contemporary Art. He has also initiated personal works such as The Seafort Project (www.seafort.org) in 2006. He is currently a consultant for the public realm commission agency Artlands in north Kent and is a director of the Whitstable Biennale.

His most recent work includes 'Sedimental' in 2011 (for Medway Council Art Development) a reflection on a fifteen year relationship with the River Medway and 'Konský Gaštan Strom', for the Bridge Guard Art & Science Centre in Sturovo, Slovakia where he is investigating the cultural importance of the horse chestnut tree across Europe, until April 2012.