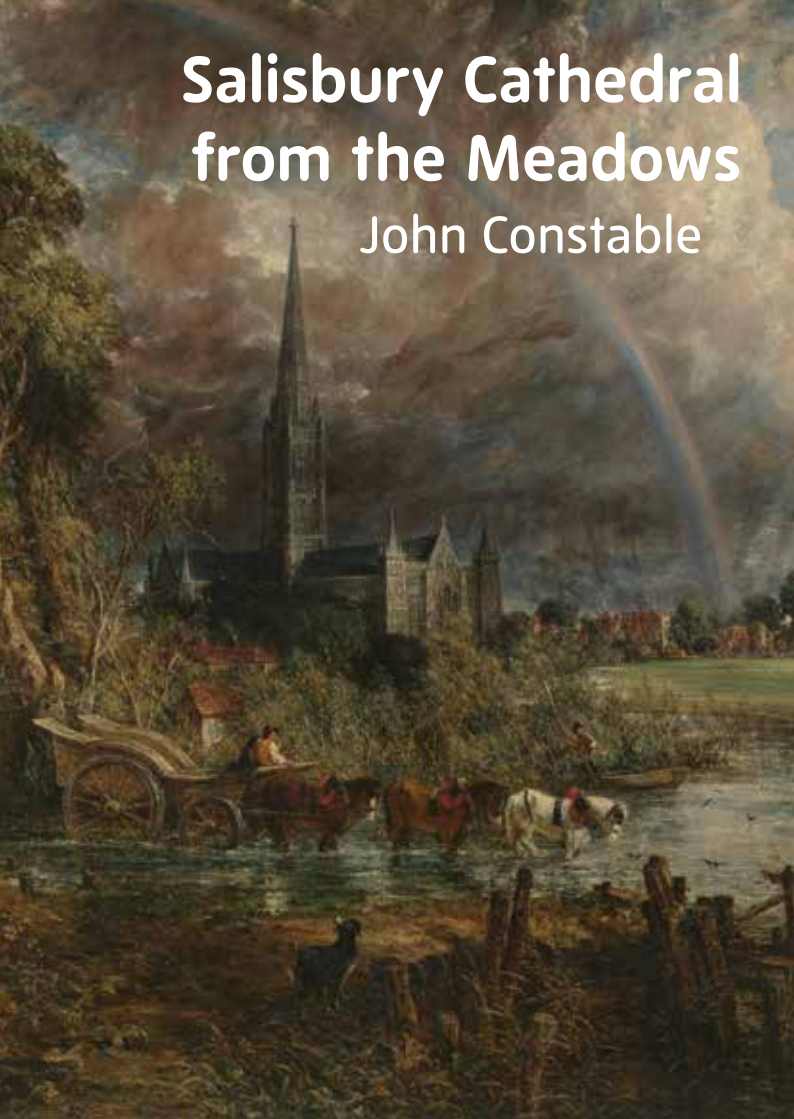

Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows

John Constable

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Introduction

In 2013 John Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831, one of the greatest masterpieces of British art, was secured for the nation through the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation), The Manton Foundation and Tate Members.

The acquisition is part of a ground-breaking new partnership, Aspire, between five national and regional galleries: Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales; the National Galleries of Scotland; Colchester and Ipswich Museums; The Salisbury Museum; and Tate Britain.

Aspire is a five-year partnership programme enabling audiences of all ages to enjoy and learn more about the work of John Constable by touring *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831. Aspire is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Art Fund.

Following the initial five year period the Aspire partners will continue to have special access to the painting for their exhibitions, whilst also ensuring that this extraordinary work is lent to other institutions so that it can be enjoyed by a wide public.

John Constable (1776–1837)

John Constable was born in Suffolk. Today he is recognised as one of the most important of all British artists, someone who changed not only how we paint but perhaps more importantly, how we look at the English countryside.

John Constable was born in East Bergholt, Suffolk, in 1776, to Ann and Golding Constable. His father was a prosperous corn and coal merchant, who expected that his son would continue the family business. However, from very early on in his life, John wanted to be an artist. The area where he was born, grew up, and painted is now world-famous as 'Constable Country'.

As a boy, the young Constable was taught the basics of painting by a local amateur artist, John Dunthorne. In 1799 he was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools in London. Three years later he exhibited his first painting there, a landscape; seeing it alongside the more traditional work of other painters inspired him to work from nature: 'the fountain's head, the source from whence all originality must spring'.

In summer Constable worked in Suffolk, painting the landscapes of his childhood. In 1802 he made his first outdoor oil studies, while continuing to study the work of masters such as Claude Lorrain and Thomas Gainsborough. By 1811 he was making rapid oil sketches to tutor his eye and train his memory. These sketches eventually served as the raw material for large-scale landscapes painted in his London studio for display at the Royal Academy.

When his father died in 1816, Constable became financially secure and married Maria Bicknell, whom he had been courting for seven years against the wishes of her family.

Constable's work was first shown abroad in 1824, in a Paris show which included *The Hay Wain*. His work proved to be hugely popular with the French, who responded to its freshness and remarkable depiction of light and shadow. Constable soon was specialising in views of the land around Flatford Mill, Salisbury and the Dorset coast.

After the birth of their seventh child in 1828, Constable's beloved wife fell ill with tuberculosis and died. However the following year brought better fortune, with Constable, then 53, finally being made a full member of the Royal Academy. Around this same time he also began a fruitful working relationship with the print-maker, David Lucas, who made mezzotints of some of his most important paintings.

Self-Portrait 1806. Graphite on paper © Tate

Working practice and the six-footers

'***I do not consider myself at work without I am before a six-foot canvas***'
– Constable, 1821

As Constable's professional ambitions increased, so did the size of his canvases. While many of his earlier exhibition paintings are small, around 1819 he began to paint on a much larger scale producing a sequence of 'six-footers', of which *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 was the last. These huge canvases would have helped draw attention at crowded Royal Academy exhibitions. More importantly by painting such vast canvases Constable was asserting his belief in the importance of landscape, then generally considered an inferior form of art.

In preparation for these monumental six-footers Constable produced full-size preliminary sketches in oil. These helped him to work out his composition and ideas before tackling the final canvas. This unique practice is unprecedented in the history of Western art, and today these full-scale sketches are admired just as much as the final exhibition pieces. The full-scale sketch for *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 is in the collection of the Guildhall Art Gallery, London. Significantly it does not include a rainbow, a key iconographical detail which Constable incorporated while working up the final piece.

Constable's lively mark-making technique contributes to the powerful impact of *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831. At a time when prevailing academic standards dictated that the surface of a painting should be smooth and refined, Constable created a varied surface where dense, craggy areas alternate with passages of subtle translucence, and movement is created by the dynamic application and flecking of paint.

His technique was criticised by some of his contemporaries. A reporter for *The Times* declared the painting a 'vigorous and masterly landscape which somebody has spoiled since it was painted, by putting in such clouds as no human being ever saw, and by spotting the foreground all over with whitewash'. They concluded that 'it is quite impossible that this offence can have been committed with the consent of the artist' (*The Times*, 6 May 1831). This 'spotted whitewash' was, in fact, Constable's method of representing light flickering across the landscape and reflecting off the surface of the water. Many critics viewed this technique with suspicion, and it was often referred to disparagingly as 'Constable's snow'.

Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows ?1829
Oil paint on canvas © Tate. Bequeathed by Henry Vaughan 1900

Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows 1831

It was friendship that drew Constable to Salisbury. He first visited in 1811 as the guest of Bishop and Lady Fisher at the Bishop's Palace, situated to the east of the cathedral. It was at this point that Constable met Reverend John Fisher, the Bishop's nephew, who was to become his closest friend and confidante. He stayed with the Bishop once more, in 1816, when passing through Salisbury with Maria on their honeymoon. By 1820, Reverend John Fisher was Archdeacon of Berkshire and had acquired a residence, Leadenhall, in the Cathedral Close; he immediately invited Constable to visit. That year, and in each subsequent visit: 1821, 1823, and twice in 1829, Constable stayed with Fisher at Leadenhall.

Remarkably Salisbury has barely changed in the two hundred years since Constable visited and painted it – one can literally walk in Constable's footsteps. Despite Constable visiting Salisbury only seven times over a span of eighteen years, the significance of Salisbury to Constable becomes evident when we consider that he made more paintings and drawings of this one region of England than any other, apart from his birthplace.

During his initial visits, Constable spent much time exploring and recording the eastern aspect of the cathedral and close from the Bishop's Palace. In contrast to the popular topographical views favoured by his contemporaries such as Hendrik de Cort (1742–1810) and John Buckler (1770–1851), Constable's early drawings explore the cathedral in bite-sized pieces, humanising the awe-inspiring edifice in lively and sensitive drawings.

By 1820, Constable's interest had moved from the eastern to the western aspect, increasingly favouring the relationship between the cathedral and its setting, reflecting his interest in sky studies as also seen in his famous Hampstead Heath series. These low skylines became a key aspect of Constable's later Salisbury works.

Both the Bishop and the Archdeacon were supporters of Constable's work, the Bishop commissioning first a portrait and later one of Constable's best-known works *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds* 1823. Archdeacon Fisher, the more progressive of the pair, and despite his financial difficulties, acquired Constable's first two six-footers, hanging *The White Horse* in his drawing room at Leadenhall.

By the time he came to work on the last of his monumental canvases *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 in 1829, Constable had a sound knowledge of the cathedral and its setting. In many ways it is a homage to his great friendship with John Fisher with whom he maintained a regular, revealing and lively correspondence, particularly regarding their political and religious concerns. Fisher referred to the 'Church under a cloud' in a letter dated 9 August 1829, urging his friend to visit Salisbury and start 'the best subject you can take'. Although the painting received a mixed reception, Constable considered it one of his best works, calling it 'The Great Salisbury'. Fisher died a year after it was exhibited in 1831. Constable never visited Salisbury again.

Weather

In 1819, during his first stay in Hampstead, Constable began to make regular studies of the sky. These sketches were produced outside and many are inscribed with details of the date, time and the weather conditions. For Constable the sky was an integral part of landscape painting.

In a letter to John Fisher in 1821 Constable wrote:

> ***The landscape painter who does not make his skies a very material part of his composition neglects to avail himself of one of his greatest aids. It will be difficult to name a class of landscape in which the sky is not the 'key note', the 'standard of scale' and the chief 'organ of sentiment'.***

The sky within *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 is particularly dramatic, with its juxtaposition of storm-clouds and lightning against a rainbow and a small glimmer of sunlight.

Unlike the weather studies, which are depicted from life, the sky within this work is a physical impossibility. As Constable is known to have had an understanding of meteorology we can deduce that the weather components were chosen for artistic reasons.

The inscriptions on the back – '11 o'clock' and 'Noon' – indicate that this study took him about an hour to paint. *Cloud Study* 1822. Oil paint on paper on board © Tate. Presented anonymously 1952

Politics

Constable's politics were conditioned by his background as the son of a prosperous self-made miller, merchant and rural employer, and his own social and professional aspirations as an artist in London. Untouched by urban radicalism they were Tory, conventional, and generally unsympathetic to anything beyond the status quo. It might seem paradoxical that an artist so radical in his reinvention of landscape painting could be so socially conservative. However, his insistence on truth to nature can also be seen as an appeal to a natural order now threatened by change.

One reason why Constable was so opposed to the reform of the franchise brought by the Reform Bill in 1832 – which he saw as a 'tremendous attack on the Constitution of the country' – was that the Duke of Wellington and the Archbishop of Canterbury were against it. Constable shared the alarm felt by his friends the Fishers that reform would reduce the power and influence of the Church. Moreover, it seems safe to assume that Constable belonged to the traditionalists who saw 'Rotten Boroughs' like Old Sarum outside Salisbury as legitimate examples of virtual representation.

Constable's images of Sarum show it in stormy 'desolation', an exemplar of the transience of history reflecting nostalgia for the past as much as the prospect of an uncertain future. These concerns, rather than any sympathy for the agricultural unrest widespread in early 1830s Wiltshire, play out in Constable's views of Salisbury.

Religion

A supporter of the traditional partnership of Church and State, Constable was a conventional Anglican. His Christian faith and respect for the Church became more needful when, during his long courtship of Maria Bicknell, he had to fight the objections of her grandfather Dr Rhudde, the rector of East Bergholt. Rhudde was opposed to their marriage, seeing Constable as her social inferior and his art career as insecure. He threatened to disown her but they eventually married despite his objections. Rhudde's snobbishness was offset by the long friendship Constable enjoyed with Dr John Fisher (later Bishop of Salisbury) and his nephew, also John, Archdeacon of Berkshire.

Highly supportive of Constable's career and art, the Fishers also passed on their social and political conservatism. Since parliamentary reform threatened to reduce the power of the Church Constable's objections likely reflect those of the Fishers, and on more than one occasion Constable even ascribed the reform movement to demonic influence. More positively, the Fishers encouraged Constable's view of nature as reflecting divine providence.

Both these aspects might be seen in *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 – in the storm and lightning playing over the spire, and the rainbow promising their passing. The unstable weather reflects the changes buffeting a once ordered Church and State, but also pictures the more personal despair Constable had felt since Maria's untimely death from tuberculosis in 1828, and, via the rainbow, its gradual lifting through the comfort of a more enduring faith.

The emotional landscape

The Salisbury landscape held a deep personal resonance for Constable. In 1812 Fisher, cultivating their friendship, had written colourfully of the 'life of Arcadian or Utopian felicity' waiting for the artist at Salisbury; Constable would spend many happy days there in the company of his close friend. Much had changed by the late 1820s, however. This carefree Arcadia, which Constable had shared with Maria on their honeymoon, was now a place of solace in the wake of her death at only 40 years old. Grieving, he wrote: 'The face of the world is totally changed to me.'

This change is felt in the drama of *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831: Constable harnesses his emotions to cast Salisbury as a landscape of sublime beauty battered by a raging storm. The painting was still in progress when Constable received news that his friend Fisher, too, had died. It is perhaps no coincidence that the rainbow appears to rest on Fisher's house, Leadenhall, where Constable and Maria stayed during visits to Salisbury. Crucially, however, the rainbow – along with the lush, fertile landscape – offer hope that life's storms can be weathered.

David Lucas and the mezzotints

Keen to circulate and ensure the longevity of his masterpiece, Constable employed the talented mezzotint engraver, David Lucas, to make a print of the composition. Lucas had worked with Constable for a few years already on *English Landscape Scenery*, a portfolio of prints after Constable's paintings; the print illustrated here was originally conceived as part of the set and takes a small sketch for *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* as its basis. Although he trusted Lucas, appreciating his input and patience, Constable was rarely satisfied that an image – be it a painting or a print – truly matched his vision. As a consequence he was beset with anxiety, constantly changing his mind. Unhappy with the progress of this print, the 'little Salisbury', it was set to one side. In December 1834, work began on a new engraving, the 'great Salisbury', to reproduce the final, exhibited version of *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*.

The 'great' Salisbury was the largest of all prints after Constable's paintings – a reflection of *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*'s importance – and he was perhaps more anxious than ever that Lucas's reproduction did his painting justice. Lucas worked in mezzotint, a printmaking technique which came closer than linear engraving to the texture and finely gradated tonality of painted brushstrokes (the lighter areas are the result of scraping and burnishing away at a pre-inked metal plate; the more scraping and burnishing, the lighter the area prints). It took Lucas a painstaking six months to create the initial proof; at first, this was to Constable's liking. Months later, however, Constable worried about 'Our Rainbow', writing to Lucas that 'if it is not tender – and elegant – evanescent and lovely – in the highest degree – we are both ruined'. He continued to instruct Lucas to tweak and perfect the print over the following two years. On 29 March 1837 Lucas was told to 'Go on as you think proper'; Constable died two days later. To the end, Constable was striving to perfect the print of his masterpiece, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831, in the hope that a wide public would see the very best he could offer. The Aspire partnership, the painting's acquisition and national tour sees that hope made manifest.

John Constable 1776–1837, David Lucas 1802–1881
Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows
From English Landscape Scenery, ed. H.G. Bohn
Published 1855. Mezzotint on paper. © Tate

Aspire

Aspire is a partnership programme enabling audiences of all ages to enjoy and learn more about the work of John Constable by touring *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831. Aspire is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Art Fund.

The Aspire partnership is comprised of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales; the National Galleries of Scotland; Colchester and Ipswich Museums; The Salisbury Museum; and Tate Britain. The partnership is comprised of three national institutions across England, Scotland and Wales, and venues in 'Constable Country' and Salisbury, areas that are of particular significance to Constable and his work.

Each partner will display the work in the context of their collection, accompanied by an inspiring programme of activities enabling audiences of all ages to enjoy and learn more about the work of John Constable.

As part of Aspire *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831 will be on display at the following locations:

National Museum Cardiff
Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich
Oriel y Parc, St David's, Pembrokeshire
The Salisbury Museum
Scottish National Gallery
Tate Britain

Painting is but another word for feeling

Constable, in a letter to John Fisher, 1821

Page 10–11: *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* 1831
Oil paint on canvas © Tate
Purchased by Tate with assistance from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, The Manton Foundation, the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Tate Members

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