

Notes for Teachers

# Turner and Venice

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JMW Turner, *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti Painting, 1833*

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# Contents

Introduction	Page 1
A Brief History of Travel	Pages 2 - 3
Journeys and Transport	Pages 4 - 5
Collecting Souvenirs of Travel	Pages 5 - 8
Turner's Visits to Venice	Pages 9 - 10
Turner in Venice	Pages 11 - 12
A Questionnaire	Page 13

# Introduction

## The Exhibition

*Turner and Venice* examines the importance of the Italian city in the work of J.M.W Turner who visited it three times during his lifetime - in 1819, in 1833 and in 1840 - spending a combined total of just under one month there. The first room of the exhibition shows Venice through the eyes of other artists, including Antonio Canaletto whose work Turner admired. Other rooms display Turner's oil paintings alongside views of his contemporaries, including Clarkson Stanfield, who was his closest rival. The bulk of the exhibition, however, consists of a succession of ravishing watercolours. The contents of the many sketchbooks on view allow visitors to see how Turner absorbed his subjects, building up an image from the slightest of pencil drawings, through colour studies to the completed, often highly-detailed work.

## The relevance of *Turner and Venice* to all teachers and students

The *Turner and Venice* exhibition is not just a specialist focus on one important aspect of J.M.W. Turner's work. It offers far more of general interest to a much wider audience. For example, the exhibition gives students of all ages an opportunity to consider the major themes of travel, sketching and how to record new experiences and new places. It also allows them to compare the contemporary experience of travel with the kind of conditions that applied during the early nineteenth century.

## Links with the classroom

At primary level, the theme of travel encompasses topics such as transport and exploration which are relevant to several areas of the curriculum and to some QCA schemes of work. For example:

- Supporting sketchbook use at KS1 and 2 (Art and Design)
- *Passport to the world* (KS1 and 2, QCA Geography unit 24)
- *Journeys* (KS1 and 2, QCA Art and Design unit 4c)
- *Citizenship* (KS1 and 2, QCA Curriculum unit 5).

At secondary level, the exhibition is directly relevant to:

- *Recreating landscape* (KS3 Art and Design unit 7)
- Using a sketchbook which is, of course, vitally important in Art and Design throughout a student's school career.

The many possible approaches to the exhibition mean that while some sections of this pack are directed at teachers to use with students at *all* levels, others, such as those containing more detailed information about Turner's visits to Italy, are intended mainly for secondary students. The intended audience for each section is clearly indicated throughout. All material is, however, designed to support teachers' subject knowledge and personal interest.

# A Brief History of Travel (for all teachers and secondary students)

## Travel before the nineteenth century

### The Grand Tour

Generations of writers recommended that artists should paint the landscapes of Italy which, they believed, would inspire viewers with elevated thoughts. The reason for this was that the study of antiquity constituted the core curriculum of the educated classes. They learnt Latin and Greek, they studied classical mythology and they admired the art and architecture of the Italian Renaissance. When young aristocrats had completed their education it was natural that they should want to visit the places they had read about and see the sites celebrated in classical texts. Sometimes they would take an artist with them so that he could record highlights of their tour, including the crossing of the Alps and the climax of their journey, the classical sites of Rome. The popularity of the Grand Tour, as this journey was called, brought the paintings of two seventeenth century French artists to prominence: Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin. Both artists had painted poeticised landscape as the setting for mythological characters and were much admired by Turner. The fact that Claude worked in Rome may help to explain why Turner spent much longer in that city than in Venice.

### The problems of travelling abroad in wartime and the corresponding growth of interest in travel within Britain

The Grand Tour was halted by the Napoleonic wars which lasted between 1793 and 1815 (from the time Turner was eighteen till he was forty). During that time, as travel was no longer possible between Britain and the continent, the British began to pay more attention to their own landscape, providing work for a flourishing school of topographical artists (painters who accurately describe the appearance of towns and country). They recorded cities, focussing on their historic buildings, as well as painting sites of historic interest or natural beauty. They also recorded people's occupations; fishermen at sea, farmers and what now seem like quaint occupations such as water-carrying.

### The Sublime, the Beautiful and the Picturesque: how to study and record nature

Interest in landscape painting was accompanied by theories on how to look at nature. In *The Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), writer and politician Edmund Burke defined the Sublime as an aesthetic response to overwhelming phenomena filtered through art or literature, rather than experienced at first hand. Artists who evoked thundering waterfalls, erupting volcanoes, tempestuous seas and violent storms were responding to the Sublime. Many of Turner's storms at sea fall into this category.

Burke defined the Beautiful as the opposite of the Sublime, characterised by small scale, smooth surfaces and gentle luminosity. Theories of the picturesque, were current from about 1770 to 1820 (Turner was born in 1775). Central to the development of these ideas was the Reverend William Gilpin, who, in his accounts of a series of Picturesque tours of Britain, encouraged travellers to look out for views that were as pretty as a picture (that is, that resembled the paintings of

Claude or Poussin). The definition of the picturesque included roughness and unevenness. Ruins and cottages were desirable along with sandy paths peopled by gypsies or peasants. Many of Thomas Gainsborough's landscapes could be defined as picturesque.

## Travel from the end of the Napoleonic wars

Once Napoleon had finally been defeated in 1815 at Waterloo, Continental travel became possible once more and people were eager to explore the countries from which they had been cut off by war. From an early age Turner was a keen traveller. He had explored Britain when he could not go abroad and he made his first journey across the Channel in 1802, during the short-lived Treaty of Amiens. Surprisingly, he was in no great rush to see Italy, travelling instead in 1817 to Belgium, Germany and Holland. It was not until 1819 that he finally set out for Italy for the first time.

## Things to think about and do

### For all students

#### Before you visit

- Are you, like Turner, a keen traveller? Where do you most want to go?
- Do you prefer holidays at the sea or inland? What kind of landscape do you like? Are you an admirer of mountains?
- When you are in a town do you rush off to the shopping centre or are you more interested in visiting old buildings?
- Do you collect postcards? If so, have a look at your collection. Arrange the cards in categories - sea, mountains, cities etc. What category has the most cards? Is that your favourite kind of place?

#### For teachers

- Bring in a collection of postcards to school for your students to sort into categories. Encourage them to analyse the type they prefer - town, sea, mountain, scenes with people, atmospheric effects such as moonlight, sunset etc.

#### At Tate Britain, before entering the exhibition

- To get an idea of the kind of landscapes painted in and before Turner's lifetime look at rooms 6, 7, 10, 11 and 13 of the collection displays. What is your favourite painting?

# Journeys and Transport (for teachers and students of all ages)

## Compare travel nowadays and in the past

Imagine you want to go to Venice and you have the means to do so. Compared to the past, travel is now both swift and easy. If you flew there, you would make the journey in a couple of hours from London. If you intended to paint in watercolour while you were there, you could buy a small lightweight set of paints to carry in your backpack along with your clothes. Now think how different the experience was for Turner. The first time he went there it took him five or six weeks to get from London to Venice! Turner travelled by sea and overland by coach. Railways were only starting to be built towards the end of his life (in England the Southampton line, for example, opened in May 1840). This meant that Turner needed much more luggage than you would now because of the time it took him to get to his destination even before he had started to explore it! Here is the list of items he packed for one of his first journeys to the North of England in 1799. That journey was quite short: it only lasted eight weeks.

- |                            |                          |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| - 3 coats                  | - 8 cravats              | - 1 silk stockings       |
| - 3 waistcoats, white      | - 3 pocket handkerchiefs | - 1 white silk stockings |
| - 5 breeches               | - 3 boots                | - 1 silk handkerchief    |
| - 4 underwaistcoats        | - 4 coloured waistcoats  | - 1 greatcoat            |
| - 6 cotton stockings       | - 6 shirts               | - 1 overalls             |
| - 2 silk stockings - black | - 2 welch stockings      | - 1 black waistcoat      |

List from Turner's 1799 Dolbadern sketchbook

That list only includes his clothes; he also had to carry his paints and sketchbooks. To get an idea of the kind of materials he used, look at the paint box on display in the introductory room of the Clore Gallery. Turner worried about the weight of his sketchpads. (In his three brief visits to Venice he made 550 pages of pencil sketches so you can see why weight was a problem)! During his last trip in 1840 he solved that particular predicament by equipping himself with sketchbooks with soft covers which could be rolled up and were lighter and more convenient to carry.

## Things to think about and do

### For primary students

#### Before you visit

- Do you like puzzles? If so, from the list above describing the clothes Turner packed for a journey of eight weeks, calculate what he would have taken for his first Italian tour which lasted six months. How many suitcases do you think he would have needed to carry all these clothes?
- What is the longest, most difficult journey you have ever made?
- Look at the map of Europe and plan several alternative routes for Turner to take from London to Venice. The journey itself was as important for him as arriving. He sketched at all the places where he stayed on the way, so you can understand why each time he went to Italy he followed a different route.
- Have you ever been to Venice? What makes it special as a city? Why would you like to go/prefer not to go?

# Collecting Souvenirs of Travel (for all teachers and students)

## Recording one's travels then and now

When you visit a new place you probably bring back souvenirs of your journey in the form of photos that you take yourself and picture postcards that you buy to keep your memories alive and to send to your friends. What you are least likely to do is to buy an expensive painted view - unless you are lucky enough to be able to afford it. But imagine you lived as Turner did at a time before photography became widespread (the first negative photographs were produced by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1835), what could you do then? Your only options would be to make your own sketches or to buy a watercolour or a print of the places you wanted to remember.

## Why do we gather photos and postcards of places?

We do it to remember the places we have visited but we may have other reasons as well. Our souvenirs prove to others that we have been there. The more exotic the place the more anxious we are to show our friends where we have been. Hence the pleasure of sending 'I wish you were here' postcards with their implied 'but you're not with me, so tra la la!' By bringing home a souvenir, you may feel you are bringing back a little bit of the place. It gives you a sense of ownership. You can't own a gondola but you can bring one home with you in the form of an image. You might also buy Chianti, Parma ham and pasta to continue the experience of being in Italy for a little longer at home.

## The popularity of prints

The desire to have souvenirs is not new; it existed just as strongly in Turner's time as it does now. In fact maybe even more strongly, since fewer people travelled then and so there was more glory in having been where few had ventured. Photography only became widely available after Turner's death in 1851. During his lifetime, artists could make a good living recording the appearance of places in watercolours and prints which art lovers collected and visitors bought as souvenirs. This kind of work provided Turner with his most secure income. During his long life there were periods when his oil paintings were too advanced or too 'modern' to be popular, but he did not have to worry too much about this because his topographical watercolours and the prints made from them provided him with a steady income. He could pursue his more experimental work secure in the knowledge that watercolours as well as the prints made from them would continue to sell. One of the decades when his paintings were most criticised was the 1830s. That was the very time when he produced a series of prints called Turner's Annual Tour. The first volume was published as a lavish edition in 1832. It featured views of the rivers of France with an accompanying text by a journalist - like a modern coffee table book.

## Prints as a way of getting to know unknown places

Long before he travelled to Italy, Turner would have had a picture in his mind of what the country looked like. He admired paintings by the eighteenth century Venetian artist Canaletto (1697-1768) (then sometimes known as 'Canaletti'), and would have seen his work in English collections but he would also have known some of the prints and watercolours made as copies of Canaletto's oil paintings.

The first section of this exhibition is called *Beyond Canaletto's Venice*, and features paintings of the city by a range of artists including, for example, *Venice: the Bacino di San Marco* c.1735-44 by Canaletto, as well as etchings made from his work and a drawing of *The Rialto Bridge* c.1796-8 by Turner's much admired contemporary, Thomas Girtin (1775-1802). Turner demonstrated his love of Canaletto's work by painting his first ever oil of Venice in homage to him. This was *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti painting*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1833. You can find it in Section 5 (Room 3).

## Things to think about and do

### For all students

#### Before you visit

- What is the furthest away city you have visited?
- What have you got to prove that you went?
- What was the most popular site there for tourists? (e.g. the spot most reproduced in postcards. In London that might be Piccadilly Circus or Big Ben).
- Was that the kind of postcard you bought for your own collection or did you look out for something more personal, a view that you felt you had discovered for yourself?

#### At the gallery

- Make a souvenir of your visit to Tate Britain. Draw something that will prove to your family back home that you really have been there. Think carefully about what to choose. You could make a quick sketch of a painting but you could have got that from the internet. What can you draw that you could not see in a guidebook or on the internet?

### For teachers

#### At the gallery

- Teachers - bring blank postcards with you for your students. They should draw their gallery sketch on one side and write a message to a friend on the other telling them what they thought of the exhibition.

N.B. Primary teachers, the use of postcards is encouraged in the KS1 and 2 QCA geography scheme of work *Passport to the world* unit 24.

### For secondary students

#### In the exhibition

- Compare Canaletto's painting in Section 1, *Venice: the Bacino di San Marco*, with Turner's imitation in the style of the artist, *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti Painting* in Section 5 (Room 3).

## The difficulties of making sketches in Turner's day

If you were a girl in the nineteenth century and were sufficiently wealthy to travel, the chances are that you would have had some skills in sketching and making watercolours as these were considered to be part of the education of a genteel young woman. However, this advantage



would have been outweighed by the fact that you would not be allowed to explore unknown places on your own. In any case painting out of doors was less easy than it is now. (There were less ready-to-use paints and so further preparations for painting had to be made on the spot). There are all kinds of modern devices which allow today's artists to carry lightweight equipment around with them. Developments in chemistry have produced a wider range of colours, and sketchbooks come in all shapes and sizes with a wide range of coloured papers available.

## How Turner went about his sketching

If you look at one of Turner's detailed watercolours in Section 5 (Room 3): Contemporary Approaches to Venice you will realise that it must have taken a long time to paint and could not have been done on the spot. Because he had to do much of his painting in the studio, Turner developed a method which allowed him to make the kind of observations on the spot which he would need to jog his memory later. The two aspects of any given scene which were most important for him to remember were line and colour. Even an artist with as good a visual memory as Turner would not have remembered the contours of buildings set against the sky in a city seen for the first time. Section 4 (Room 2), Sketching the City, includes a selection of the sketchbooks he used in Venice, as well as a monitor allowing you to turn the pages of one of them. If you look at the pencil sketches in his notebooks you will see that they provided him with simple outlines of the architecture. You will also find watercolours where colour is clearly his prime concern. In other works again outline and colour are combined.

Look out for watercolours on coloured paper. (There are many of them on blue, grey and brown papers in the exhibition). By using a coloured background Turner created a warm or cool mood for his work which he could then modify through the colours he applied. The coloured background also allowed him to use white as contrast. The toned papers may also have protected Turner from glare while he sketched in bright Italian sunlight.

## Things to think about and do

### For secondary students

#### In the gallery

- Choose a painting/a visitor/a corner of one of the rooms in the exhibition. Make two sketches of your chosen subject. One should be a simple outline drawing, the other a record of colour - you can do it with coloured crayons, coloured pencils or oil pastels. (Paint and chalks are not allowed in the gallery).

#### Back at home or at school

- Work up your sketches into as finished a work as you can. This will show you both how skilled Turner was and also how good your visual memory is. If you find that your memory is poor, do not despair, it will improve if you work at training it.

## In the gallery

- Find examples of Turner's watercolours on coloured paper. What colour has he chosen to work on? Why has he chosen this particular colour? Is it the paper similar to the colour of sky, water, buildings or a time of day like dusk? Does he use white paint against it as contrast?

## At home or school

- Select a coloured sheet of paper as your base to work on. Think carefully before choosing its colour. It must work well with the subject. If, for instance, you are painting a landscape, don't choose too strong a colour. It will be difficult to evoke rolling hills against a bright red background! Choose your subject and use your coloured base carefully, allowing it to show through your areas of watercolour or crayoning where appropriate. Green or blue paper could be allowed to show through as the colour of sea, for instance, and white could be added for foam.

## Turner's visits to Venice (for all teachers and secondary students)

Turner visited the city three times: for five days in 1819; for a week in 1833; and for a little under two weeks in 1840. On the first two trips, even an alluring city like Venice was just a stop on a fact-finding working tour. In 1840, by contrast, Turner aimed specifically for Venice, and allowed himself two whole weeks there, which is a remarkable instance of him concentrating so much energy in one place. By that date it took only a week to ten days to get there, depending on the route and the means of transport (steamers up the Rhine improved access).

### Why Venice?

Apart from the Venetian artists that Turner admired like Titian, Tintoretto and Canaletto there were literary reasons to attract him to the city as well. The poet Byron had settled in Venice in 1816 although he was away from it during the time of Turner's first visit. His *Childe Harold*, the fourth part of which was published in 1818, compared Venice to London, seeing in the decline of Venice's power a warning for London. "In the fall/of Venice think of thine" he wrote. There were obvious parallels between England and Venice because their source of power was the sea. The comparison also interested Turner because the decline and fall of empires, as of individuals, was one of his major themes. Later on, in 1851 the year in which Turner died, the critic John Ruskin had *The Stones of Venice* published in which he linked together three major kingdoms which derived their fame and fortune from the sea. They were the Phoenician port of Tyre (now in the Lebanon) known as the *Queen of the Seas* from the start of the third millennium BC, Venice and England. Ruskin pointed out that Tyre had long since lost its greatness, Venice was in decline and England should take care that it did not suffer a similar fate. In addition to these artistic and literary sources there was the visual appeal for Turner of an island city, whose streets were waterways, since he was an artist who loved painting water and sky.

### Venice's troubled history

Until 1797 when Turner was 22, Venice was a republic but in that year it became part of Napoleon Bonaparte's empire. Later that year, Napoleon gave it to the Austrians in exchange for other countries. By December 1805 it was back in French hands until, after Napoleon's defeat in 1815, it became part of Austria again. Venice suffered particularly badly in Napoleon's hands when it was looted and vandalised and its economy failed. (See Giuseppe Borsato's oil painting *The Arrival of Napoleon in Venice* 1847 in room 1).



*The Sun of Venice Going to Sea, 1843*

According to Ruskin, Turner was profoundly pessimistic. If this is so, his outlook may have induced him to take up the parallel that Byron had drawn between the fate of London and of Venice. Ruskin also said that Turner would "constantly express an extreme beauty where he meant that there was most threatening and ultimate sorrow." An example of this is *The Sun of Venice Going to Sea, 1843*, one of Ruskin's favourite paintings. *The Sun of Venice* is a sailing ship which is shown moving across water as dawn breaks over Venice behind it. In the poem that Turner adapted to accompany the picture, he implies that the boat may seem a symbol of hope, but its occupants are blissfully unaware that they face shipwreck ahead.

*Fair Shines the morn, and soft the zephyrs blow,  
Venezia's fisher spreads his painted sail so gay,  
Nor heeds the demon that in grim repose  
Expects his evening prey.*

# Turner in Venice

## The first visit in 1819

Turner was forty-four years old by the time he made his first visit. Venice does not seem to have been any more important to him than any other city on this visit and he only stayed there five days. Like many other tourists he got to know the intricacies and intimacies of the city by exploring it at close quarters from a gondola. Unlike most of them he made pencil sketches as he travelled. He may also have made breathtakingly beautiful watercolour sketches early one morning - see *San Giorgio Maggiore - Early Morning*, 1819 and *Venice looking East towards San Pietro di Castello - Early Morning*, 1819 shown in *Sketching the City*, Section 4 (Room 2) devoted to Turner's sketchbooks and watercolours of Venice.

## The second visit in 1833

By the time of his second visit in 1833 he was a plump fifty-eight year old who bore all the "marks of feeding well". He may have returned to the city in a spirit of emulation because paintings of Venice were selling well and making money was important to Turner. He was keen to outdo his contemporaries and one of these painters of Venice, Clarkson Stanfield, was also considered to be his rival in the field of marine paintings. (There are paintings in oil and watercolour by Clarkson Stanfield in Section 5 (Room 3), *Contemporary Approaches to Venice*. It was just before he set out on this visit that Turner exhibited the painting of the Bridge of Sighs (already mentioned) in homage to Canaletto. During his visit in 1833 (and again in 1840) he stayed at the Europa Hotel, a gothic palace near the mouth of the Grand Canal. His room seems to have been high up at the back of it, looking out over the city, rather than down on the canal. A similar elevated view was taken up in his 1836 painting *Juliet and her Nurse*. (You can see a line engraving made after it by George Hollis in 1842; shown in Section 7 (Room 4). It was the Reverend John Eagles' attack on this painting that caused artist and writer John Ruskin, to take up the defence of Turner, a defence which eventually occupied several volumes of his *Modern Painters*).

## The last visit in 1840

Now sixty-five, Turner stayed in the same hotel as before. (A painting of his bedroom is included in the exhibition in Section 7 (Room 4) *Venice after Dark*). When he exhibited them, he accompanied the oil paintings resulting from this visit by quotations from Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*. He charged 250 guineas for each of these paintings. (A guinea was one pound one shilling and charging a guinea suggested that the objects in question were luxury goods).

The later the date the more atmospheric Turner's paintings become. As early as 1816, the essayist William Hazlitt had talked of his "representations not so properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they are seen... someone said of his landscapes that they were pictures of nothing, and very like." John Constable described paintings of 1836 as "painted with tinted steam". In 1844 the artist told the young John Ruskin who admired his work that "atmosphere is my style." Two examples of this kind of painting, included in the exhibition,

are *The Dogana, San Giorgio, Citella, from the Steps of the Europa*, 1842, exhibited in Room 5 and *Approach to Venice*, 1844 in the last room. Various interpretations have been made of Turner's atmospheric manner. Is it a way of showing a city in the process of change, in becoming rather than in being? Does the indistinctness mirror Turner's decrepitude in old age? Was his sight so bad that he could only see blurred forms? As he was aware of criticisms of the indistinctness of his style, why did he do little to respond to them? Did the crumbling palaces seem to him an echo of his failing body?

## Things to think about and do

For secondary students

### In the exhibition

- Can you see the sorrow underlying the beauty in Turner's paintings of Venice? Do the buildings look in need of repair? Can you any find symbols of trouble such as heavy clouds in the skies?
- Look at the engraving made by George Hollis from Turner's *Juliet and her Nurse*. Can you see what critic John Eagles meant when he said that it is "a composition as from models of different parts of Venice, thrown higgledy-piggledy together, streaked blue and pink and thrown into a flour tub"?
- Look at Turner's painting of water in oil and watercolour. List some of the effects that he enjoyed painting

For all students

### In the exhibition

- Turner painted Venice at all times of day and night, examining the range of colours produced by different light effects. Can you find pictures done in moonlight/sunset/sunrise/twilight and night?
- Can you find studies of lightning and of fireworks?

### Outside the gallery

When you leave Tate Britain you can cross Millbank to the new pier. If you walk on to the landing stage you will be able to look closely at the moving water of the river Thames with its reflections. This is the water Turner knew best. He lived close to it as a child in Covent Garden. It was looking at ships on the river that made him want to paint the sea.

- Make your own sketch of the water, drawing (or even painting) the reflections or, if you can afford it, travel on the boat with your small sketchbook making pencil outline drawings like Turner.

### Back at school

Back at school try painting a landscape, concentrating on light and atmosphere rather than solid forms.

# Turner and Venice



## Notes for Teachers

### A Questionnaire

We would greatly appreciate it if you would fill in this brief questionnaire to help us develop our teachers' resources in the future (please at any time use the back of this questionnaire)

1. How helpful did you find the *Notes for Teachers*? (Please circle)

Excellent      Very helpful      Helpful      Satisfactory      Unsatisfactory

2. How did you use it?

a) To support your lesson planning

b) To give directly to students

c) As additional material to the Tate Britain Teachers' Kit (which gives ideas for planning and structuring a group visit to any exhibition or display at the gallery, and is on sale at £12.99 in Tate Britain shops. To order call 020 7887 8869/70)

d) Other (please describe)

3. Please describe how you structured your exhibition visit.

4. On average, how much time are you prepared to spend reading/working with your *Notes for Teachers*?

5. What did you think of the level the notes were pitched at? (Please circle and note your key stage)

Too high

Just right

Too low

Your key stage

6. Do you have any suggestions for future developments of *Notes for Teachers*? (Please use the back if necessary).

Many thanks for filling in this questionnaire.

Please send it to Miquette Roberts, Tate Britain, Millbank, London SW1P 4RG.