

# **Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows by John Constable (1776-1837)**

**Date:** 1831

**Medium:** Oil on Canvas

**Size:** 147cm high by 189cm wide

## **Information about the painting**

John Constable was devoted to the idea of painting landscapes as they appear to the artist in nature. He was skilled in the technique of chiaroscuro – using paint to balance light and shade within a painting. Constable created some very large oil paintings, often referred to as his ‘six-footers’, for public exhibition and ‘Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows’ is a late example of one of them.

Constable painted places of personal significance to him. Following the death of his wife Maria in 1828, he was supported in his grief by friend and confidant Archdeacon John Fisher, nephew of the Bishop of Salisbury. It was during a visit to Fisher in 1829 that Constable made studies of Salisbury Cathedral, sketched outdoors in natural light from the banks of the River Nadder, overlooking nearby meadows. Based on these sketches, the ‘six-footer’ was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1831.

## **Overview description of the painting**

The painting is a wide landscape view looking across from the banks of the River Nadder towards the north-west elevation of Salisbury Cathedral and open water meadows, edged by distant buildings, tall trees and distant hills. The Cathedral is set against a cloud-filled stormy sky. Birds are silhouetted against patches of blue sky. A rainbow arches down from the sky around the west end of the Cathedral to the top of the buildings that edge the meadows. A single bolt of lightning drops from the stormy clouds onto the roof of the Cathedral’s quire near the east end.

In the foreground a large cart is pulled by three horses, one behind the other, emerging from a shallow stream into the River Nadder. A woman and boatman go about their business nearby. A dog watches the scene from a bank of the stream.

## Detailed description of the painting

A little more than half the top section of the painting depicts sky. In the landscape below, covering one-fifth of the painting, stretching from left to right in the foreground, is the bank of a stream. To the far left of the bank, on a bed of brown soil and small rocks, lies a tangle of long grasses and brambles. Towards the centre a path leads to the stream. Standing at the end of the path, facing towards the water, is a sheepdog, its tail and muzzle tipped with white and a bright pink tongue protruding from its mouth. To the right of the dog are decayed wooden posts and planks, remnants of a wooden bridge. Close to the dog the wooden posts are upright in the ground, becoming increasingly submerged in river water towards the bottom right hand corner of the painting.

Left of the dog there are two more posts in the undergrowth. Just above the far post is a loosely painted figure of a stooped woman cloaked in red, close to the bank of the stream. In the shadows beyond her, close to the opposite bank, is the dark figure of a cow drinking in the water. Just above the stooped woman is St Thomas's church in the distance, framed by low trees.

Above the bank the stream curves from the left edge of the painting into the centre foreground from where it flows into the River Nadder to the right. Above the stream on the far bank are tree trunks. In front of them a large, open, wooden cart is being pulled by three horses through the water. The lead horse is white, the two behind are chestnut brown. They wear red padding draped across their shoulders, tucked into their collars. Harnessed together in single file, the horses and cart fill the centre of this area of the painting. The stream is shallow, the cartwheels submerged by a few inches of splashing water. The cart is moving: water coats wheel rims and drips as the wheels turn; the horses' heads bow towards the water as they strain to pull their load towards a patch of bright sunlight in front of them. Curved wheel arches on the cart slope down to where the driver sits in front. His body faces the far bank of the stream while his head is turned towards the horses. He wears a dark hat, red flash in its rim, a mustard yellow waistcoat and a white puffy sleeved shirt. Draped behind him is a dark shape - perhaps a black cloth or a cloak.

On the edge of the far bank of the stream, behind the white horse, a man stands by a small wooden boat floating in the water. He is just right of centre in the painting, where the stream curves abruptly to the left. He wears a pale smock and dark hat with wide rim. He looks towards the cart, planting a punting pole into the riverbank with his right hand, steadying the boat with his left.

To the right of the horses the stream extends to the limit of the right side edge of the painting where waterfowl fly above the surface of the water as if recently disturbed. Beyond them is the far bank of the stream in the water meadow. Here stands a gnarled tree, a few sprigs of new leaves stretch into the sky from the top of its almost barren trunk.

Immediately above and beyond the cart is woodland, stretching into the distance towards Salisbury Cathedral. Protruding from scrubland to the right of the woodland is a small group of single-storey buildings, red roofs highlighted by patches of sunlight.

To the right of the boat, the stream meanders into the distance along the edge of the sunlit water meadow to meet the horizon line. On the far side of the meadow at centre is the west front of the Cathedral, its pointed gable flanked by two tall towers, a group of town houses set amongst mature trees and, at the right edge of the painting frame, a distant hill.

Just below the extreme top left corner of the painting the crown of a tall tree rises from the bank of the stream near the rear of the cart. To the right of its leafy branches is the spire of Salisbury Cathedral, pinnacle silhouetted by a patch of bright cloud. The Cathedral is in shadow, occasionally highlighted here and there with flecks of light.

Dwarfing the Cathedral is a dramatic, cloud filled sky. The Cathedral spire reaches into the sunlight through a vast dark cloud from which fingers of dark rain are falling. A bright streak of lightning strikes the quire roof at the base of the spire. Another storm cloud hangs over the town houses. From the top right hand corner of the frame, shards of rain sweep diagonally down towards the Cathedral. From left to right across the sky, billowing white clouds form a backdrop to the storm. Here and there white clouds are highlighted by sunlight breaking through from patches of blue sky.

One-third in from the left of the top edge of the painting a rainbow appears, passing through the dark storm cloud above the Cathedral. It curves across the painting from left to right, dramatically framing the Cathedral within its arch, coming to rest on a townhouse; 'Leadenhall', Archdeacon John Fisher's home.