

VIEWS OF GEORGIAN DEVON:

GEORGE ROWE,

Artist and Printmaker

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My snippet today is about one of Exeter's most important and prolific lithographic printers, George Rowe, born in 1796. But before I talk about George, I must tell you what lithography was.

Lithography was a process of producing a print by drawing on special stone, rather than on metal. It was cheap and appealing and became popular with the masses and gentry alike as a way of advertising an area, or show-casing a public building or country house, or someone of importance. Lithographs were the vignettes on life. In fact, George Rowe even called one of his daughters Vignette.

When the Napoleonic Wars curtailed travel abroad or the Grand Tour, visitors flocked instead to the newly-created seaside resorts like Teignmouth or Torquay and naturally wanted a souvenir of their visit. Simultaneously, those who had made money from the wars or the Industrial Revolution sought to record their power, status and wealth by commissioning lithographic prints. These prints were effectively the postcards of the day and were an income-generating part of the vast mechanism that was the Georgian tourist industry.

We've all seen these prints hanging on pub walls or in a Great Aunt's drawing room – you know the ones, with the little black and gold beaded frames - but I bet we never really studied them. They were just there for decoration.

Lithography was a simple process. The artist went out with his drawing pad, captured the image, and brought it back to his workshop where he painstakingly drew it on to a special soft stone, scratched with a sharp tool in reverse and with the help of a mirror. There were chemicals involved, but not acids, as in etching. It is mind-boggling to realise that all that detail was done in reverse. How did they get things in the right place and so small?

If the artist was also a printer, then he ran off the required number of copies on his simple roller press. If not, then he took it to a printer he knew well and who knew his work.

It was an all-male trade, and an extremely hazardous occupation involving inks and solvents, lit candles and wooden framed buildings. It was a recipe for disaster and there were many fires. There was a saying in the trade "Printmakers die young. Printmaker's apprentices die younger".

Popular lithography lasted from about 1820 to 1850, when line-engraved vignettes – often those little oval pictures – became popular. It was eventually overtaken by photography, of course.

Lithographs were sold singly, in sets with cover papers that were beautifully calligraphed, and in books. They were highly collectible then, and are still so today.

Sometimes they were hand-coloured, and sometimes two or more colours were used. George Rowe was one of the early producers of "tint" colouring, known as chromo-lithography.

It wasn't until 1977 that there was a revived interest in Devon prints. A local historian from Abbotskerswell called John Somers Cocks compiled this incredible catalogue of "**Devon**

Topographical Prints 1660 - 1870” which included every lithographer and every print produced between those dates – over 3,500 prints.

It became the bible for every self-respecting print enthusiast - and still is. It describes the history of the trade, the artists and every print. As a random example - **on P193 “Teignmouth Lith, 100 x 209 mm, by George Rowe, publ G Collins, Teignmouth, c1835. Looking from the Dawlish Road”**.

The book also contains excellent write-ups of other artists, engravers, printers and publishers, including George Rowe. Somers Cocks was of the opinion that he was probably at his best when recording architecture. Certainly Rowe was a good draughtsman, but I enjoy him for the little caricatures of people and the expressions that he managed to give them.

So how did I get interested in George Rowe? Well, in 1997 I was living in Hastings and bought 5 High Street, a property in the historic district. The previous owner had left one small print on the wall with the instruction to find out about it. It was a seaside scene and the wording across the bottom said “Drawn by George Rowe. Published by George Wooll Printeseller 5 High Street Hastings”.

I immediately found out that George Rowe came from Exeter. Well, so did I. That was when all the coincidences began – and have gone on until the present day.

George went from Exeter to Hastings in 1824, aged 27, to work with George Wooll, who had just set up a Repository of Arts in the house. It was a small imitation of Ackermann’s Repository of Arts on the Strand, in London, and every town had one. Together the Georges produced over 100 lithographs in two years, which successfully launched Wooll’s business. **This is my own copy**, but it shows some of their work – **“Hastings and Its Environs”**. Spot the wrongly placed apostrophe!

George Rowe returned to Exeter in January 1826 and worked for John Wallis, a publisher in Sidmouth, producing 48 views of the delightful cottages ornee that still grace Sidmouth today. A set can be seen on display in Sidmouth Museum.

George Wooll emigrated to St Louis, USA, in 1837 and set up a printing business on Market Street. In 1988 I emigrated to St. Louis and worked on Market Street. George joined the Mechanics’ Institute which met at the Old Courthouse. My job was at the Old Courthouse, by then a museum. Many years after leaving, I discovered that some of the Mechanics’ Institute papers had survived in the Old Courthouse archive and when I asked former colleagues to look for them, they found papers with George Wooll’s signature on the exactly matched the signature on the 5 High Street, Hastings’ house deed. But it was where they found them that was so extraordinary. It was in the very same room that I had worked in.

When I returned to Exeter from Hastings, I wanted to fill in the gap about George Rowe’s early years, and so I wrote an article for the journal of the **Devon History Society** entitled **“George Rowe, Exonian Lithographer: the Hastings Years”** a copy of which is held here in the DEI. The last time I saw the article, it was in a magazine, but it has now been beautifully bound into this book and made into something rather special. The Devon History magazines cover a huge range of topics and are an excellent source for research. Many members of the Institution have been contributors to it.

Before we look at any of the other DEI resources, I want to give you a brief outline of George Rowe’s life. He was born in Dartmouth, but christened at St. Sidwell’s church in Exeter. Nothing is known of his early life.

He turned up in Hastings where George Wooll taught him all there was to know about print-making, print selling and the Georgian tourist trade. Rowe returned to Exeter in January 1826, set himself up

at 38 Paris Street, and did his 48 views of Sidmouth for John Wallis. He also became a drawing master at Mount Radford College, near St. Leonards.

He left Exeter in 1832 and went to Cheltenham, having produced 177 views of Exeter and area between 1826 and 1832 – that’s a rate of one a fortnight! In Cheltenham he set up a print business and eventually became publisher and printer of the Cheltenham Examiner. He continued as a drawing master and print maker, took a lively interest in the town’s affairs, held various offices, and was a Liberal. He had also married and he and his wife had 10 children, of whom nine survived.

In 1849 the business got into trouble because Rowe’s partner had made some unwise investments. The debtors closed in. Rowe decided the answer lay in the gold fields of Australia, and so went alone in 1852. He didn’t find gold, so he fell back on his drawing and painting. He recorded scenes of the gold diggings and because they were so un him great acclaim in Victoria. He exhibited them at the London International Exhibition in 1861 and won a medal.

George returned to Exeter in 1859 and lived at 3 Midway Terrace, now 152 Heavitree Road, with his wife and children. Some of the children had followed him to Australia and had stayed out there.

He died there on 2 September 1864. He is buried in Heavitree Churchyard and I must have walked past his grave hundreds of times without ever knowing who he was. Heavitree church was my church – I was confirmed there.

In January 1975, an article appeared in **Devon Life** magazine entitled **“A Nineteenth Century Romance”** written by Dr C.W. Marshall, of Exeter, who was George Rowe’s grandson. Unfortunately, the Institute doesn’t have a copy of the article, so I have provided one for you to see. This marked the beginning of a renewed interest in George Rowe. By this time, Dr Steven Blake, of Cheltenham Museum, was beginning his research into Rowe’s story, and would eventually become the leading expert. He organised a touring exhibition for both Cheltenham Museum and RAAM in 1982 of many of Rowe’s prints, and Dr Marshall was an advisor.

The article describes the family’s version of how George met his future wife, Phillipa Curtis. I must just mention another coincidence. Until her death last year, Dr Marshall’s daughter – George’s great granddaughter - lived down the road from me in Bishopsteignton. Are they following me or is it the other way round?

Anyway, as well as running his Paris Street business, George supplemented his income as a drawing master at Mount Radford College. In 1827 Philippa Curtis was one of his pupils and was so exceptionally talented that he found it necessary to give her extra tuition. Philippa’s guardian, Mrs Gardner, was not at all happy about this arrangement and whisked Phillipa away to Lynton in North Devon.

Undaunted, George turned up in Lynton, heroically rescued Philippa from some mischievous boys, and was forever in Mrs Gardner’s good books. George and Philippa were married at Heavitree church on 22 December 1828.

George never forgot those romantic times in Lynton. 16 years later in 1835, he returned to Lynton for a visit. Following this he published **“Scenery in North Devon”** from Cheltenham, which Somers Cocks says was a late series published in booklets – this beautiful book.

A couple of years ago, I came into the Institution on World Book Day, when there were damaged books lying on all the tables. I immediately spotted this book on the far side of the table – I just knew

that it was a George Rowe. It had a broken spine and I was able to adopt it under the Adopt a Book scheme here, and it has been repaired. There should be a plate inside . . .

The book shows Rowe's wonderful handling of views, rock formations etc round Lynton, Lynmouth and Ifracombe. However, when I looked at it again very recently, I noticed that the title actually reads "**Scenery in the ... of North Devon**", and I think that the printer has made a mistake and missed out the word "area" or "district". Printers were not necessarily the most literate of people and mistakes were made, as you saw on my Hastings book title earlier.

George did several portraits as well as his bread and butter views, but he is not as well known for these.

However, this is a copy of "**Devonshire Characters and Strange Events**", first published in 1908 and written by that quirky and well-known character, the Reverend Sabine Baring Gould. Opposite P 79 was a print of the "Noted John Cooke of Exeter", and underneath the words "Published in Exeter at No 38 Paris Street by George Rowe". Reading that was a light bulb moment for me, because I suddenly realised that I knew where the original was. It was here in this room, hanging on the wall over there. I had walked past it a hundred times.

But the real coup d'état was the quotation on P82. Baring Gould says of the picture of John Cooke, "**A portrait or profile is prefixed to his pamphlet 'Old England For Ever', but there is a much finer one of him in colour. This is in the Library of the Institution in Exeter**". Here I stand, 110 years later in the same room, telling you about the same picture, all because Baring Gould was a member of this Institution. The original has no legs, because they've faded, but print shows John Cooke wearing stripy stockings! My thanks to the Institute for getting the original conserved quickly, so that I could share it with you today.

John Cooke was a saddler who became captain of the sheriff's troops. Coincidentally, a member of staff here recently found a beautiful water colour showing Cooke "Reviewing Javelin at the Assizes". It's here to see as well, although remember it wasn't painted by George Rowe. It's anonymous.

Opposite P 114 of Baring Gould's book is a print of "The Wrestling Champion of England Abraham Cann", also published by George Rowe, on 10 August 1826. The image appeared regularly in the magazines and broadsheets of the day, because Abe Cann became a national figure, so it's possible that George Rowe's work had a country-wide exposure.

The DEI only has a small number of **loose prints** by Rowe. These are all catalogued in Somers Cocks, except a print that I have never seen before which was uncatalogued by him, called **The Exeter Deaf and Dumb Institution**. Because of recent reorganisation of the prints here, I can't show it to you, but there are good examples of the sort of work George Rowe did, and all are referenced to Somers Cocks. Thanks to the lithographers, we have some idea of what these grand buildings look like and it helps us to understand the growing social conscience of the reformers of the time. The prints show a wide variety of Rowe's talents.

Both George's brother and his father were builders, and were both called Joseph. Joseph Jr – Joseph Hyde Rowe - built Pennsylvania Park, still there today, and George did the artwork, presumably to advertise them. The print appears dimly on the front of this little booklet by the **Exeter Civic Society**, with an explanation about the houses inside, and I have provided a larger photo. A modern photo appears in the booklet on P9, coincidentally opposite a photo of Rowe's print of John Cooke, and there is a piece about him.

The Todd Gray book **“Exeter Engraved Vol 1”** has five prints by George Rowe. These are general views, the River Exe, and High Street buildings. A sixth one is by Philippa, credited as Mrs George Rowe, showing a shop in the High Street called “George”. Whether this was her sense of humour, or there really was a shop called George, I don’t know. Her work is indistinguishable from George’s in quality. Philippa continued to paint and draw to support herself and the family during the seven years that George was in Australia.

These depictions are not only pleasing to the eye, but provide invaluable pictorial records of clothing, buildings, tree planting, road conditions, crescents, the cathedral, the unspoilt hinterland, and landscapes which do not survive. Todd Gray’s book tells Exeter’s history through its images, both lithographs and etchings, and it is part of a very informative series of three called **“Devon Engraved”**.

Artists like George Rowe travelled for miles, either walking, or on horse back or by stage coach in order to do the initial drawings for future prints.

I found a reference in this delightful book from 1883, a book in the collection here, by George H. Pycroft, with title of **“Art in Devonshire with Biographies of Artists Born in the County”**. Pycroft wrote the details about George Rowe 16 years after Rowe’s death which were given to him by a friend of Rowe’s, Exonian lithographer, George Townsend.

Pycroft confirms that Rowe was born in Dartmouth, but raised in Exeter. He says, **“His published works have perhaps done more than any similar effort to exhibit pictorially the beauties of Devon and Somerset. He commenced the publication of lithographic views, which became the most popular means of attracting a host of tourists to localities of picturesque beauty, unknown until thus. With charming accuracy, the scenes were brought before the eye of their admirers. Their fidelity was curiously tested by the fact that certain innkeepers gave the artist free quarters as an acknowledgement of the service rendered to them in bringing strangers to their localities”**.

It is good to know that the publicans understood and valued George’s contribution to the tourist trade.

Next time you look at a print, I urge you to really study it in detail. Think about why it was done, what it’s trying to tell you and what its legacy is to us today. What does it show us about a lost way of life?

Notice the empty hillsides devoid of buildings; notice the artistic licence that makes Devon hills look like Himalayan mountains; notice the various modes of dress; the boats, carts, trees, plants, buildings, people. Above all, look for the flashes of humour shown in people’s gestures. You can almost guess what they are talking about.

Next time you hear the word vignette, think of George Rowe creating all those different ones. Remember him christening his daughter Vignette! The Rowe family still christened their daughters Vignette until the end of the Second World War.

George Rowe was a man with a zest for life, a great sense of fun, and was a master of his craft. He produced 650 lithographs in his 67 years of life, 300 of which were of his native Devon, so we owe him a debt of gratitude. It is thanks to him and other artists like him, that we can look back and see Georgian life as it actually was. His lithographs provide us with a snapshot in time before photography had been invented.