

Primary Teachers' Notes

The Hay Wain by John Constable

John Constable, who completed this picture in 1821, was famous for his landscapes. His sketches, both in pencil and oil paint, were done in the open air as he observed the natural world and the effects of the weather and changing seasons on the countryside. However, he would 'compose' his final paintings back in his studio, using the sketches as component parts. The resulting landscapes have a very spontaneous appeal, despite the fact that they have been so carefully arranged.

The dog and the fisherman and boat in *The Hay Wain* exist as separate sketches, often reappearing in other works by Constable, and the artist made several changes to the composition of this painting before deciding on this version. In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a full-size, swiftly painted oil sketch shows another figure group – a horse and a rider – to the right of the dog, but Constable has painted them out in the National Gallery's finished painting.

The buildings give the scene its specific location. In *The Hay Wain* we can see, on the left-hand side, a mill-house, rented by a farmer called Willy Lott from Constable's father, who owned both the house and surrounding land. The house is often referred to as 'Will Lott's cottage' to reinforce the quaintness and rusticity of the scene, but it was in fact a much more sizeable property. To the extreme right, beside the fisherman's boat on the far side of the river, we can see the beginning of a red brick wall belonging to a water-mill, just out of sight in this view.

Before Constable was born his parents lived in the mill-house and afterwards the family continued to live in the Suffolk countryside – the setting for this painting. Constable drew much of his initial inspiration for scenes such as this one from memories of the childhood he had spent in the area.

The wisps of smoke curling from the chimney of the house, and the woman beside it, drawing water from the river, give the scene a harmonious, domesticated atmosphere. In the background, in the yellow and green fields, dappled with sunlight, we can see workers, one sharpening his scythe, others pitchforking hay onto an already laden wagon, and one man stacking the load from the top. The time of year must be between June and early August – haymaking season. The cloudy, wind-swept sky would seem to indicate the possibility of rain and certainly evokes English summertime weather. Constable actually made many of the cloud studies for this painting on Hampstead Heath in London. The hay wain itself ('wain' is an old word for 'wagon') is crossing the river at a ford to continue into the fields. The driver has stopped for a moment, perhaps to let the horses drink. The usually steep wooden sides of this type of vehicle have been cropped and we can see the two workers riding on the wagon. Constable has also introduced a note of colour in the red fringes of the 'housen' or leather collars which the horses are wearing, to stop their harnesses from chafing against their hides. Usually

houses on working horses are dark in colour, but Constable has used red, a colour generally confined to ceremonial or festive occasions, to add a bright touch to the centrepiece of his composition, making it stand out against the green vegetation, and thereby attracting our attention and drawing us into the painting and the rural scene.

Constable's innovative technique, with looser brushwork and the use of white paint to suggest reflections of light upon the water, was not very popular with contemporary English critics, who preferred a more traditional style of painting and more 'serious' subject matter. He did, however, achieve considerable success in France, winning a Gold Medal at the Paris Salon of 1824 with this painting. Just as Constable had admired Rubens's skill at depicting natural phenomena in his landscapes such as *An Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen*, the French Impressionists were to be very much influenced by Constable's ideas about sketching outdoors and observing the effects of nature.

Introducing the picture to children

There are many different ways of doing this: here are four ideas to start you off.

- You could put the picture up in the classroom and let the children live with it for – say – a week before discussing it.
- You could produce the picture as something new and special – allow them perhaps one minute to look at it before covering it up and asking them to remember what they saw.
- You could cover the picture with a large piece of thin card in which you have cut windows – rather like an advent calendar – and open one each day to reveal an interesting detail – the dog, or the fisherman or the smoking chimney – only revealing the entire picture after a week.
- You could allow one or two children only to see the picture. Get them to describe it in as much detail as they can to the rest of the class. Let each member of the class do a picture *from the description* and only show the children the print when their pictures are finished.

Art across the curriculum

There are many ways of incorporating this picture into subjects across the curriculum. Here are a few.

English

Pictures make an excellent stimulus in the teaching of literacy:

- Word work: alliteration, rhyming words, etc.
- Sentence work: nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.
- As a stimulus for imaginative writing – for example: Who might live in the house? What if the hay wagon was magic? If you got into the little boat and floated downstream where might you end up and what might you see on the way?

Science

- Pond and river life.
- The difference between fresh water and sea water.
- Water purification.
- Rain/ rain clouds leading to weather generally. The seasons. Plant growth and response to seasons, including things like deciduous trees, annual and perennial plants and so on. Seasonal farming/ gardening activities.
- Different ways of using water: drinking, cooking/ washing, to make the crops grow, fishing, water mills (how they worked and what they were used for), bridges and fords. Floating and sinking.
- The wheels of the hay wain are made of wood encased by metal strips. Possibly it is standing in the water to allow the wood to expand, ensuring that the metal hoops do not fall off the very dry wheels (the wood contracts in hot weather). This might be used as a way of introducing the idea of expansion and contraction caused by changes in temperature.
- Modern environmental matters: water power today (hydroelectric power stations); pollution of rivers – would we drink from or swim in our local rivers now? Modern water purification – for drinking and swimming pools. Chlorination. Water-borne diseases. Reservoirs. Piped water to houses. Sewage.

Maths

- Sorting: plants, animals, man-made things, things which make a noise, things which can move – and so on.

History

- What methods of transport can we see? Boat, hay wain. History of the wheel.

- What would life have been like in that house? No electricity, no gas, no running water or drainage. Visit an old house?
- How did people get their food in those days? How did they store food? How did their diets differ from ours? No imported food, no tinned or frozen food. Old farming methods.
- How do we get across rivers these days?
- Researching place names – for example: the mill is known as Flatford Mill and ‘Flatford’ is named because of the shallow or ‘flat’ crossing or ‘ford’ at this point on the River Stour.

Geography

- Rivers. Where do they come from and where do they go? Why is a river fresh water and the sea salt? The River Stour.
- The weather.
- The use of rivers as commercial waterways, transporting goods from one place to another. Canals.
- The geography of England and East Anglia in particular. You can visit the site of the painting. It still looks quite similar today. (Go to Flatford, Suffolk.)

Art

- Talk about making space in pictures. Introduce words like **foreground**, **background** and **horizon**. How much of the picture is sky?
- Landscapes. Making pictures of places. Places we remember/enjoy etc.
- How do you paint/draw moving things? Look at cloud studies by Constable. Out of doors try making your own studies of clouds, recording the date, time and wind direction as Constable did.
- Do leaf/bark rubbings. Make a large collective picture of a tree.
- Look at different ways artists have painted moving water and still water. Look at reflections in water – puddles in the playground will do. Try doing pictures showing reflections.
- Primary, secondary and complementary colours. How has the artist used red to contrast with its complementary colour green?

Music

- What sounds might be heard in this scene? Birdsong, water, dog, ducks, men. Make a musical soundtrack to go with the picture.