



PROBUS RECORDER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PROBUS CLUB OF GILLINGHAM, DORSET
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Chairman's Notes - *Nick Hall*

I am sure that we are all finding lockdown a bit of a punishing experience. Although most of us understand why it is difficult to put a timeline on ending it, it is unpleasant having no inkling whatsoever as to how and when the cords might be loosened.

The greatest fillip to most of us is likely to be the fact that we have been, or are about to be, vaccinated. Whether or not this brings any physical release from the lockdown shackles, it still brings a hugely welcome and emotionally warming degree of protection. (Or so we thought before the Germans chipped in with cautionary words about its efficacy for the over 65s!!)

On a rather more whimsical note, I find it rather predictable to learn that the EU is getting uppity about Britain getting more vaccine than them. The reason is almost certainly the result of the centralised EU approach being based, not on cracking the science and speeding production, but on "getting value for money". For the sake of the vast numbers involved, let's hope that a dose of reality starts affecting the thinking of the great EU panjandrums.

And now for something completely different ... unless you are a sailing aficionado you may not be aware that the world is heading for another America's Cup showdown with New Zealand, the current holders. We haven't held the trophy since 1851, and right now there is a complicated series of elimination races taking place between Britain, Italy and America to see who takes on the Kiwis. It so happens that, after a rather dismal start, Ben Ainslie's boat *Britannia* (Team Ineos) is now in the most favourable position to be the challenger – what a turn around if it were to come good, and Britain were to lift the Cup after 170 years!



Ineos 'Britannia'
(the UK's America's
Cup challenger)



WELFARE and SOCIAL NEWS - Gordon Banks.

We offer our deepest condolences to **Richard Clarke** following the shockingly sudden loss of his wife, Hilary. Richard is beginning to come to terms with his loss, and he is fortunate to have the support of his niece who lives close by in Mere, and of course from his immediate family. We offer him our very best wishes in his onward life.

Brian Garton remains bedridden at home, and his wife Sidonie has found life a little easier after changing their live-in carer. The change provides her with better support than she had been getting.

The Good News! - it appears that over half of our Club members will have received their first Covid vaccinations by the time that you read this, and more people are in the imminent pipeline. We have no idea whether/when this will lead to a practical lightening of our restrictions, but it has to be welcome in terms of feeling protected from the dreaded virus!

And now - some definitions for today:

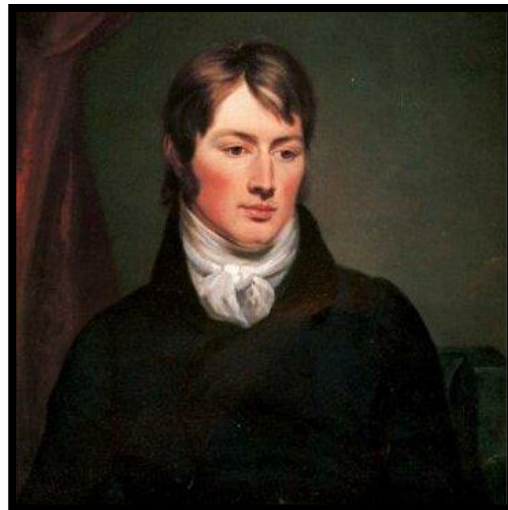
- A Barbecue:** A line of people waiting for a haircut.
Billow: What you sleep on when you have a bad cold.
Broadband: An all-girl musical group.



AN IMAGINED INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST JOHN CONSTABLE R.A.

By Sam Woodcock

In order to find out what brought him to Dorset - and to Gillingham in particular.



Mr Constable, I've been wondering how on earth a Suffolk born artist came to visit this wonderful County of Dorset and also to visit the quaint little market town of Gillingham.



Well, it's a long story but I'll be brief, but in doing so I will illustrate it with some of my paintings and some of those new-fangled photographs or whatever they're called!

It was the summer of '98 - that's 1798 you understand! I was a young man of 22 and as some would say (but I couldn't possible comment) a budding young artist. My family were millers,

owning several mills in the area the main one, and our family home, being that of Flatford in East Bergholt.

My parents at that time were very friendly with the Rev. Brook Hurlock and his wife who was a curate in the nearby village of Langham. (Not to be confused of course with your own hamlet of the same name just outside Gillingham!)

The Rev. Hurlock, (a somewhat nervous character as I recall) took care of the parish on a day-to-day basis, the actual Rector making only a rare appearance. It was on one such occasion in that summer of '98 that I gained his acquaintance. I was invited to tea especially to meet him, for I was told he was particularly interested in art and artists.



Sorry to interrupt, but could you clarify something for me?



Yes of course.



I'm a little muddled as to the relationship between the Curate and the Rector, surely as Rector he would have been in full time residence there.



Ah! In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a vicar or rector could hold several livings or parishes and commute between them all as he wished.



Oh, I see - do go on.



Well, I was a little apprehensive to say the least at the thought of meeting this Rector as I'd heard so much about him.



This intrigues me. Who was he?



He was Dr John Fisher, a Doctor of Divinity, Master of St. John's College Cambridge and private tutor to Prince Edward Duke of Kent who was later to become the father of Queen Victoria.



Yes - I can see why you may have been a little nervous!



However, I need not have worried as Dr Fisher soon put me at ease and before the afternoon was over we seemed like old friends. We met up several times during the next few days and he appeared most interested in some of the rough sketches I had done, especially the one with the hay waggon in the water – I must finish it sometime.



Well after a few years Dr Fisher was appointed Bishop of Salisbury in 1807, and after repeated invitations to visit I eventually made it in 1811. This was to be the first of many such occasions.

This was an ideal situation, for in the times that were to follow I was able to sketch many views of the Cathedral and the surrounding water meadows. The Fishers were fine hosts and always made me welcome. Not only that, but Dr Fisher took time to escort me in my explorations of the area, visiting Stonehenge and even arranging a visit to Stourhead where we spent a couple of days as the guests of Sir Richard Colt Hoare.



The Bishop's Palace, Salisbury



Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds

It was during this time that I first met the Bishop's nephew John Fisher who was a gifted amateur artist. We struck up an immediate friendship which was to last the rest of our lives!



Ah - tell me a little more about him as it can be a little confusing, there being two John Fishers!



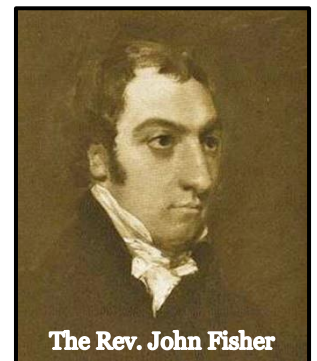
Yes of course. John 'the younger' graduated from Christ's College Cambridge in 1810, and was immediately ordained by his uncle the Bishop, who appointed him to Salisbury Cathedral Deaconry and as Rector of Idmiston, Wiltshire.



Ah, thank you; that begins to clarify it, but you haven't mentioned how you came to be in Gillingham right up at the north of the County.



Ah sorry, nor I haven't. Well, you remember I explained earlier that a vicar or incumbent could hold more than one living. Well, in April 1819 my friend John Fisher was appointed Vicar of Gillingham while still retaining his living at Osmington. This was a very lucrative offer as the living was worth £1000 a year which was then worth more than double of all his other church appointments put together! He had also recently been appointed Archdeacon of Berkshire, which permitted him to acquire a house within Salisbury Cathedral Close.



The Rev. John Fisher



Goodness! (Thinks – I wonder how much that would have been in 2021?) Sorry, did you say Berkshire?



Yes - at that time it was part of the Salisbury Diocese. Once established in Gillingham he soon became aware of the picturesque mills and rivers in the area, and lost no time in writing to me, inviting me to visit, knowing my keen interest in capturing the images on my canvas.



So you made haste to go?



Well not exactly, for by this time we had a two-year-old little boy, John Charles, and my wife had just given birth to our second child. However, Fisher was very persuasive, arranging for us to stay at his Salisbury residence. I quote from his letter –

“----- Mrs Fisher is delighted with the thoughts of seeing Mrs Constable and her little boy. We have a capital nursery for him. Bring some good drying oils with you. – You are to stay as long as you find it convenient.”

So how could I refuse? At least Salisbury was not quite as far to travel with the encumbrance of a small baby as it would have been to go on to Osmington or even Gillingham, where I gather the vicarage was rather damp and needed much improvement. Even so, it was a 16-hour journey with an overnight stay.



So you didn't visit Gillingham?



Yes, I did actually. We arrived in Salisbury at the beginning of July 1820. The Fishers by that time had children of their own, so with our two little ones you can imagine the noise and disruption that took place! – So much so that Fisher and I decided to leave the ladies to it and seek refuge in the peace and quiet of the countryside! We made a number of day trips out to places such as Stonehenge, the New Forest and various villages not too distant from Salisbury; this may have included Gillingham, but I am uncertain. I do recollect however that Fisher and I stayed in the vicarage in Gillingham for a long weekend between Friday July 28th and Tuesday August 1st.

During this visit I made a number of sketches and was so impressed with the area that I was determined to return for a longer stay whenever my diary and domestic commitments would permit.



.....and did you?



I did indeed, but unfortunately not until 1823 when I was able to stay for about a month. That visit gave me ample time to explore the area, make several sketches of a wonderful old mill, and complete an oil painting of the Bridge at Gillingham.



For the first two weeks the weather was appalling, but fortunately I was able to make full use of Fisher's art studio in the vicarage. Towards the end of August, the weather cleared and we experience several weeks of balmy sunshine and autumn tints.



Did your family accompany you?



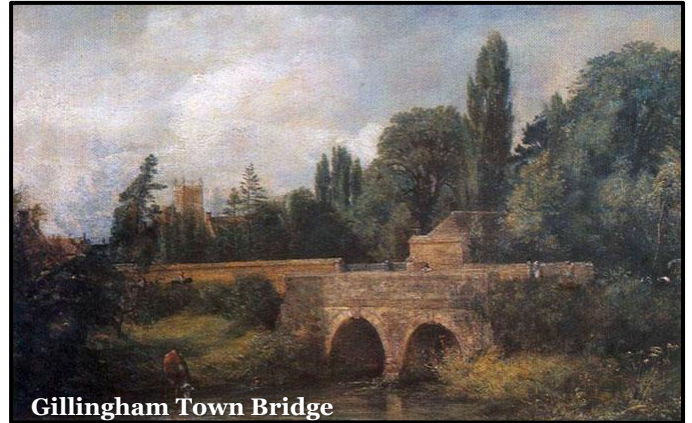
Sadly no, my little boy was not too well so they remained in London. This was unfortunate, for due to the inclement weather at the outset I needed to extend my stay for a further two weeks in order to complete my projects.



..... and were you successful?



Well, I needed all my diplomatic skills to placate Mrs Constable and Mrs Fisher, but yes - in the end all turned out really well. Although I missed my own children the Fishers have 5 children of their own so there was never a dull moment! I can quote from a letter Fisher wrote to his wife who was suddenly called away to Bath to visit an elderly aunt.



Gillingham Town Bridge

I quote. “---- We had all of us a delicious walk beside a pretty stream on the left of the Mere road on Friday evening. There a tree thrown across as a bridge. Over this Osmond ran, & Frank skipped to their great delight. Belineen was seized with a pain in the middle & cried “Oh I shall fall in come & help me Papa.” Mr Constable painted; Harriet gathered flowers, & Christie hunted water rats ----“

So you can see what a wonderful time we had. While the children were enjoying themselves I did a sketch of Matthew Parham’s Mill known as ‘Pernes Mill’

Sadly this turned out to be my final visit, a most memorable one. I fully intended to return but unfortunately never did.



Parham's (Purns) Mill



Thank you, Mr Constable, for a most interesting and informative interview.



The pleasure was all mine. Shall we take tea?

Sam Woodcock
February 2021



“Stay Safe”