



Brighton Beach with Colliers, 1824, oil on paper



Brighton Beach, Early Morning After a Wet Night, 1825



Stonehenge – bequeathed to the V&A by Constable's daughter, Isabel

BEYOND THE SEA

Constable's lesser-known Brighton paintings helped win over the Royal Academy, but it was loyalty and love that inspired them, says Tim Saunders

BY the time John Constable arrived in Brighton in 1824 at the age of 48, he had established himself as a major landscape painter in the Romantic tradition; a pioneer of realistically depicting the natural world. "Flatford Mill" (1817) and his most famous painting "The Hay Wain" (1821), were already complete.

Yet landscape painting was at this time considered unfashionable, low art. Though admired in France, critics in England had only just started to praise Constable's work, and he was still an Associate rather than a full member of the Royal Academy, on whose approval artistic success or oblivion depended.

Constable and his wife Maria (nee Bicknell) had relocated to London after their marriage in 1816, but when Maria contracted tuberculosis, the family moved to Brighton in the hope that cleaner sea air might improve her health. Constable disliked Brighton intensely, describing it as "Piccadilly by the sea". The resort had been made fashionable by the Prince Regent (later King George IV), for whom Nash designed the exotic pavilion. Yet its popularity meant a regular coach service from London enabling him to



Constable by Ramsay Richard Reinagle, 1799

be with the family and at Maria's bedside frequently. He declined countless invitations to France to further his career, even after receiving the gold medal from the King of France in 1824, remarking, "I would rather be a poor man at home than a rich man abroad." Despite craving artistic recognition, Maria was his priority.

There can be no doubt theirs was a love match, though the course of true love had not run smooth. Following a spat with Constable's father, and the artist's lack of income, Maria's grandfather had thwarted their wedding plans with the pair

continuing their courtship in secret for seven years. The strain left Constable depressed and he gained a reputation for being irascible with clients. Constable painted Maria, writing to her shortly before the wedding: "I would not be without your portrait for the world the sight of it soon calms my spirit under all trouble."

In spite of Maria's illness the couple had seven children and Constable's devotion extended to them, too. In the *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*, the artist C.R. Leslie wrote that "His children were as likely to be seen in his arms as those of his mother or nursemaid" and "His fondness for children exceeded . . . that of any man I ever knew."

In his own letters, Constable expressed the view that children should be respected and he was apparently exceptionally tolerant. According to the National Trust, when one of his sons dashed into his studio with a broom and tore through a canvas, his only rebuke was "Oh! My dear pet! See what we have done! Dear, dear! What shall we think to mend it? I can't think – can you?"

Constable may not have headed to Brighton to further his artistic career, but paradoxically his time there further stimulated his observation and feeling;

the distinguishing characteristics of his best work. "His sketching style in oils gets looser and more expressive," says Anne Lyles, co-curator of the forthcoming Late Constable exhibition at the RA. Unbelievably, it's their first major retrospective of his work – nor has his late career ever been the focus of an exhibition at home or abroad.

Constable experimented with new approaches, too, such as covering his pencil sketches with layers of paint. He used different base tones and his palette included vermilion, emerald green, chrome yellow, cobalt blue and lead white, ground in a variety of mediums such as linseed oil mixed with pine resin. These can all be found on the surfaces of Constable's later works.

Quieter eye-catching landscapes and seascapes appealed to him; the kind that might also appeal to the RA. There were three walks he took regularly: westwards towards Shoreham Bay, northwards towards Devil's Dyke and eastwards to the Chain Pier. On his walks Constable sketched bays, waves, the South Downs, windmills, the beach, fishing boats and colliers as in "Brighton Beach with Colliers" (1824). He did admire "the magnificence of the sea" at Brighton and was attracted especially by "the breakers and the sky".

With painting box in hand, along with hog hair brushes, rags and palette knife, he spent his days roaming and painting. We know from a note on the back of one of his works that a single sketch would take him a couple of hours, produced on paper pinned into the lid of his painting box. A wise move – he could close it quickly when the weather took a turn for the worse.

A major oil painting is "The Marine Parade and Chain Pier, Brighton" (1827) which now hangs at the Tate. Painted in his London studio using

sketches as notes, it is the best-known local landmark he painted.

Turner also painted this structure; his painting was popular and sold well as a print. Constable's did not sell during his lifetime. If he selected this subject to impress the Earl of Egremont, a major shareholder in the pier and patron of Turner, whose patronage Constable also wished to enjoy, his plan failed.

The family lodged at 11 Sillwood Road, an unassuming three-storey semi-detached house a stone's throw from the seafront, then known as 9 Sober's Gardens. Here Constable created a painting room where he worked energetically, creating some 150 paintings of the town. Some were commissions which found their way to France where his paintings had by now even inspired the Barbizon school whose leaders included Théodore Rousseau and Charles-François Daubigny.

In 2013 Richard Constable, the great-great grandson of the artist unveiled a blue plaque on the house. "He gradually settled into Brighton life better than is generally thought," reveals Lyles. "He made a good friend of Brighton resident and botanist Henry Phillips."

Sadly Maria did not recover and her deterioration left Constable beside himself. "Although Constable appeared in his usual spirits in her presence, yet before I left the house, he took me into another room, wrung my hand, and burst into tears, without speaking," wrote Charles Leslie. She died at the age of 41 in 1828.

Constable was finally elected to the RA in 1829, just eight years before his own death. Turner broke the news to him and they spoke at length. His time at the resort had helped him to achieve his goal but in losing Maria he had lost what mattered most.

"Hourly do I feel the loss of my departed Angel – God only knows



"I would not be without your portrait for the world" – Constable's painting of Maria, 1816

how my children will be brought up . . . the face of the world is totally changed to me," he wrote.

Constable's depression can be seen in the later watercolour, "Stonehenge" (1835) with its stormy backdrop. The buyer of "The Valley Farm", his last major Suffolk painting, asked if it had been painted for anyone in particular. "Yes sir," Constable replied. "It is painted for a very particular person – the person for whom I have all my life painted."

Constable died on 31 March, 1837 having sold fewer than 20 paintings in his lifetime in England. RA approval came too late, yet the exhibition today shines a light on a lesser-celebrated, though equally vital, time in his creative life. He rests beside his beloved Maria in the churchyard of St John's, Hampstead.

Late Constable runs at the Royal Academy from Oct 30 - Feb 13, 22. Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BD; royalacademy.org.uk. Discover Constable's Suffolk views through various National Trust sites at Flatford, East Bergholt, Suffolk, CO7 6UL; 01206 298260; nationaltrust.org.uk/flatford