

Bicentenary
of the installation
of John Constable's
Nayland Altarpiece

18-14 September 2010

Nayland's Altarpiece

1810-2010

A display in four parts to mark the Bicentenary, compiled by Andora Carver and sponsored by the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society, together with newspaper cuttings relating to the theft and subsequent recovery of the picture in 1985 and further background information not included in the display

John Constable's 3 Religious Pictures

Christ Blessing the Children 1805/6

Christ Blessing the Bread and Wine 1809

The Ascension 1821/22



John Constable (1776-1837)
Christ Blessing the Children (1805)
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Brantham PCC

Christ Blessing the Children

Constable's first religious picture was painted for the St. Michael's Church at Brantham when he was commissioned to paint an altarpiece in 1805. Three preparatory drawings, two of which remain in the artist's family, show how the artist set to work on what was the largest canvas he had yet tackled (89in x 50in).

His first thought was a single figure of Christ extending his right arm in blessing with a nimbus above his head. The next stage shows Christ holding a child with two female figures, inscribed with the text from the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel 'And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them and blessed them'. A third sketch shows the altarpiece in place in the central compartment of a reredos of five arched panels, but with three figures hardly made out. In the final version he has retained the subject of Christ blessing the children, but added to the complexity of the composition by including eight figures.

The style of the Brantham altarpiece can also be compared with the contemporary works of Benjamin Robert Haydon, whose method has been described as 'shut your eyes and think hard of Raphael'. Some of the figures were derived from his family and friends: the girl seen in profile on the right from his younger sister Mary and the child in Christ's arms from the son of his East Bergholt neighbour, John Lewis.

It would be interesting to know whether the subject of the Brantham painting was chosen by Constable or decreed by Dr. Rhudde, the vicar of Brantham church – and of West Bergholt and Little Wenham. Constable was later to marry his granddaughter, Maria Bicknell.

Constable's love of children was a conspicuous trait in his character. His biographer, C.R. Leslie, wrote that '*his fondness for children exceeded, indeed, that of any man I ever knew.*' John and Maria had 7 children. Although stilted in conception, this altarpiece expresses the tenderness for childhood embodied in the Scriptural story.

Brantham Church is one of the Livings of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and because of difficulties over storing the picture, the College has accepted the painting on loan. The picture now hangs on the landing in the College Library and a full size photographic copy can be seen in St. Michael's Church..

According to the Art Historian, Graham Reynolds, whose notes on the picture are quoted above, the Brantham altarpiece is the most notable of John Constable's early excursions into unfamiliar subject matter.



John Constable (1776-1837)

The Ascension (1822)

oil on canvas 162.5 x 127 cm

Courtesy of The Constable Trust

Charity No. 1080398

The Ascension

Constable's third and final religious painting was commissioned in 1821, the year he completed *The Hay Wain*, as an altarpiece for St. Michael's Church, Manningtree.

There is debate as to whether the painting represents *The Resurrection* or *The Ascension*. Whichever it represents, this figure of Christ floating in the sky surrounded by clouds dates from the same period as his sky studies, in which he was developing his own religious and landscape ideas. It is considered by some art historians to be the best of his religious works.

From the very beginning the painting had a somewhat chequered career. It was commissioned by Edward Alston, a brewer from Manningtree and Constable's cousin by marriage, for £200, in order to gain favour with the Archdeacon of Colchester, the Revd. John Jefferson who was responsible for licensing public houses. When Jefferson not only refused to license Alston's hostelrys but also died in December 1821, Alston re-neged on the contract at a great financial loss to Constable. In spite of this, Constable completed the painting, although the lower half shows less commitment than the upper.

It was installed in 1822 in the reredos of the newly built chancel of St. Michael's where it remained until the church was demolished in 1965.

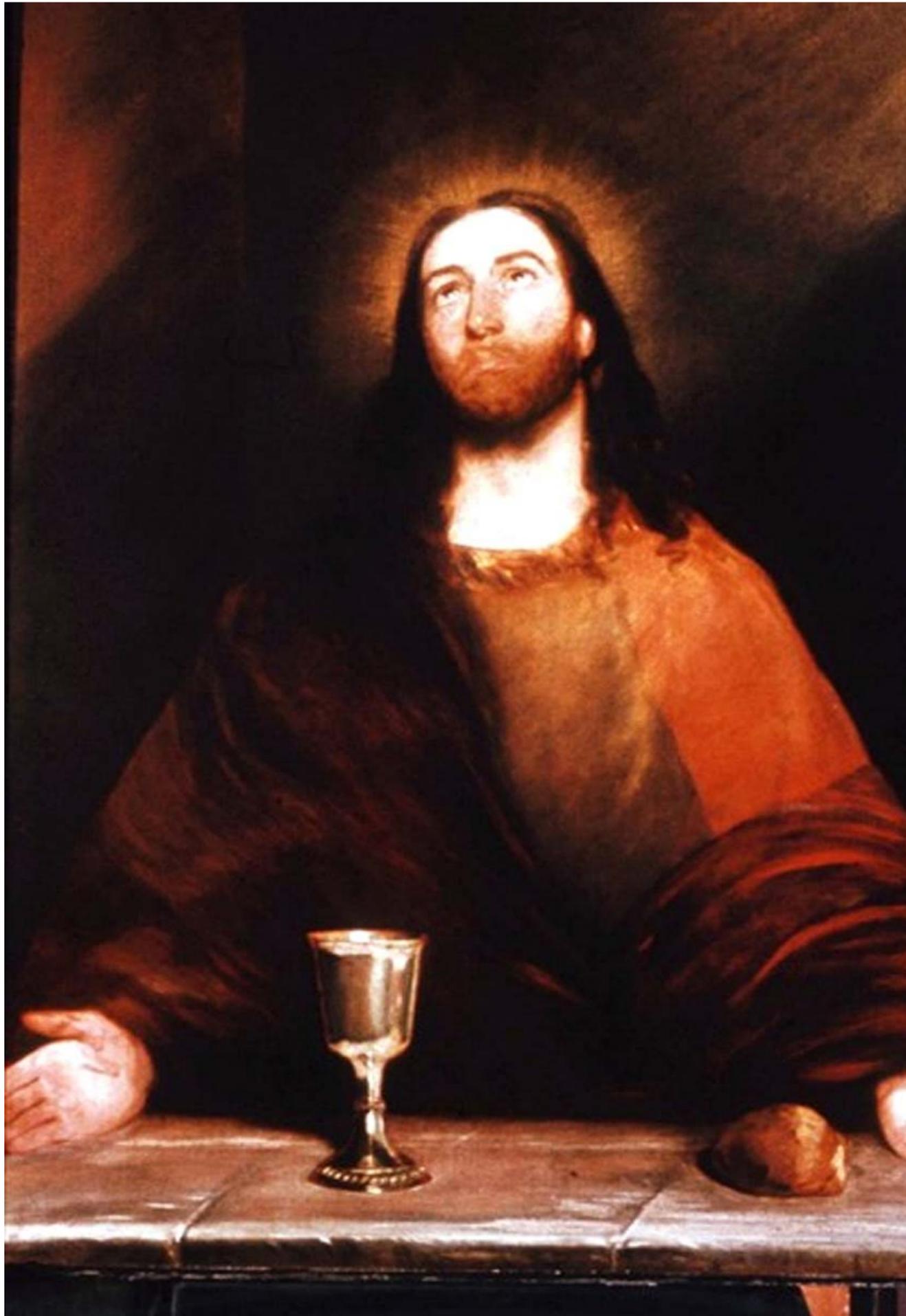
The painting was acquired by Revd Aubrey Moody for All Saints', Feering, a village which Constable knew through his friendship with Moody's predecessor, the Revd Walter Wren Driffield. The painting stayed at Feering until early 1998 when the PCC were faced with the expense of renewing the heating system.

After much heart searching it was offered to museums in Ipswich and London. They found difficulties, however, in hanging a religious painting beside the fresh immediacy of Constable's landscapes. Fortunately the painting failed to find a buyer at auction and The Constable Trust was formed in order to buy it and return it to the area for which it was painted. The picture was dedicated at a Service in St. Mary's Dedham on Ascension Day 2001.

The Trustees of The Constable Trust were honoured to be asked to lend *The Ascension* to the major Constable exhibition in Paris at the end of 2002, but it has reverted to permanent display in Dedham church as the most appropriate setting for this particular painting.

Source: The Constable Trust

Note: The Vicar of Dedham suggests that the subject is definitely *The Ascension* because there are figures watching from below. No figures were present at *The Resurrection* which took place from a closed tomb.



Christ Blessing the Bread and Wine

This is the only religious work by John Constable which remains in the place for which it was painted. It was commissioned in 1809 and installed in St. James' Church, Nayland in October 1810. Apart from a brief period when it was stolen, and then recovered, the painting has been in the same position in the Church ever since.

C.R. Leslie, in his 1843 memoirs of his friend John Constable, states that "*although from the slightness of execution, this picture can only be considered as a sketch of the size of life, it is in all respects much better than the Brantham altar-piece.*"

He continues: "*The light falls on the face from a lamp, and the colour and effect are very agreeable, broken colours partaking of purple and brownish yellow being substituted in the draperies for the ordinary blue and red. Still, such are its deficiencies, that it is evident a long course of study and practice would have been required before he could have done justice, if ever, to subjects of its class.*"

Denis Halliday (Nayland historian), in his 1992 notes on Constable's Nayland Aunts, considers it is very likely that the picture was commissioned by Constable's aunt, Martha (Patty) Smith. She was born in Bures St. Mary around 1741 and married Thomas Smith a Colchester wine merchant, Nayland maltster and feoffee (village trustee) around 1767 to 1770. Martha and Thomas lived at Longwood House, Stoke Road, from 1796 after both his parents had died.

In 1804 Thomas died, aged 67, leaving a total of over £10,000 in monetary bequests. Martha was well provided for with a life interest in his property and the residue of his estate.

In July 1809 there was a Constable family party at Longwood House, described in a letter to the artist (then living in London) by his mother. The proposal that John Constable should paint an altarpiece for St. James' seems to have been made around this time.

Denis Halliday also considers that, from the evidence of family letters, it was in fact Constable's mother who originated the idea and talked her rich sister-in-law into agreeing to pay for it. The artist, however, was evidently not keen on it and was very slow to start. His mother wrote to him on 15th April 1810: "*I hope you will soon have leisure and desire to work on your Nayland work*" and again on 8th May: "*You will now I hope find time and inclination to begin the Altar Piece for Nayland Church*", and at last on 2nd June "*I rejoice to hear you have begun your Altar piece and have no doubt it will give satisfaction to all parties.*"

Original subject changed

A letter dated July 17th 1810 from his mother shows that the original subject was to be the Agony in the Garden (but this had been abandoned on his uncle's advice). She continues: "*we are both united in the idea that adoration was more becoming in our Saviour than humiliation*" and was very pleased when Constable changed this to the Consecration of the Elements of Bread and Wine.

His mother suggested an appropriate quotation from 1 Corinthians XI 23-26 'The Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread' could be "*nicely lettered and gilt, it would not only look well but would be very explanatory to a country congregation.*" However this never seems to have materialised.

On August 7th his mother wrote from East Bergholt to Constable in London urging his visit to Suffolk and "*I hope we shall see your work before you carry it to Nayland*".

August 11th: Again his mother writes: "*Uncle David (Pike Watts) has written to me that if you finish it in the same excellent style you have begun it, he will ensure you a purchaser. Therefore don't give it away.*" Was she doubting whether Martha would really pay, or leave him in her Will the amount that had been promised or expected?

Installation of the Picture and Family Comments:

By the end of October 1810 the picture was completed and installed in St. James. (see letter to the Ipswich Journal 10 Nov. 1810).



John Constable (1776-1837)

Ann Constable, the Artist's Mother

Courtesy of the Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service



John Constable (1776-1837)

Self Portrait (1799-1804)

Pencil and black chalk heightened with white and red chalk

Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

Constable's parents went together with his sister Ann and Uncle David to view it 3 or 4 weeks later. *"Mr. Sims (the Vicar) attended – had the organ playing all the time we were in the Church ...we filled his barouche and four; so that we rather astonished Nayland. Our grandeur was transitory – but I trust our happiness will be lasting."*

Constable's (maternal) uncle David Pike Watts, however, was critical of Constable's work all his life and wrote: *"As a whole the picture has strong claims to praise. It is a fine Work impressively concerned, well designed, and the Attitude is suitable to the subject. There is no impropriety or deviation from the religious character of the Piece – its effect at due point of distance is good and it strikes the beholder with satisfaction and serious contemplation."*

He saw in the painting a likeness of the features of John Constable's brother Golding (1774-1838), and set down no fewer than 25 individual suggestions for improvement. *"It is scarcely justifiable for any picture to be shewn so raw, unless a Testimony was affix'd that the Artist died before he could finish it; no other excuse can reconcile a Picture being affix'd for Public View in so uncultivated a state."*

His mother too, was not entirely happy. A year later, in December 1811 she wrote: *"I wish the Nayland picture was highly finished and still hope that in the summer you will see it again, and varnish it at least. There always appeared to me much crudeness about it – the beard in particular and the 'tout ensemble' is certainly not rich enough in colour."*

Sarah Constable (a cousin) also commented that the Nayland altarpiece *"looks nicely when the sun shines on it. I want it to look nicely always."*

Constable made several more visits to his aunts in Nayland and Martha (Patty) Smith died in January 1820 leaving a substantial sum. All Constable's brothers and sisters and several of his cousins each received £400. So the payment for the picture must have been settled by his aunt immediately, although there is no record of it.

The Model: The picture was painted in London and it is therefore possible that a professional model was used for the figure. However, evidence suggests that Constable's brother, Golding, may have sat for his brother on this occasion.



A Barouche – mid 19th century

30th October 1810:

A letter to the Ipswich Journal from “Clericus” describes a visit to St. James Church to view the newly installed painting.

Ipswich Journal 10 Nov 1810

To the Printer of the Ipswich Journal.

Sir—Being on a visit in the neighbourhood of Nayland, I was at that parish church on Sunday last, where I saw a very fine painting, which they told me was just finished for the altar there. I was also informed, it was presented by Mrs. Smythe, relict of the late Thomas Smythe, Esq. a native and inhabitant, and was the performance of a respectable and ingenious artist, Mr. John Constable, her nephew, and son of Golding Constable, Esq. of East Bergholt. It is a very masterly performance, the subject most expressively sublime, interesting, and appropriate; indeed that, and the very excellent discourse, so emphatically impressed on his hearers, by the Rev. Mr. Sims, rendered the *tout ensemble* most divine. I confess myself a friend to these sacred emblems, as they excite emotions of pious gratitude; and if such representations (so well executed) more frequently occurred in our churches, it would certainly have a good effect. And as our Saviour appeared in a human form, full of divine goodness and charity, seeing him thus represented, as exerting those acts of beneficence with which he was always engaged in, would be exemplary, aid religion, and strengthen the authority of its great Founder.

30th Oct. 1810. CLERICUS.

References:

Denis Halliday, (Nayland historian & Parish Recorder 1994-97)
Notes on Constable's Nayland Aunts 1992

John Constable's Correspondence volumes I, IV & VI
Edited with introduction & notes by R.B. Beckett
Suffolk Records Office 1962-68

Dr. Slade's History of Nayland 1938 (unpublished)

C.R. Leslie, Memoirs of the Life of John Constable 1843

Later History of the Picture

Extract from Dr. Slade's notes on the History of Nayland 1938

'The picture was originally placed in an oak reredos where it remained until 1869 at which time it was in excellent preservation.

It was then decided to erect a Caen Stone reredos and the picture could have been consigned, perhaps, to the "limbo of oblivion" (put away and forgotten) – but the parishioners demanded the restoration of the painting.

The picture was then placed in the stone in the manner of glass in the mullions of a window, quite unprotected from damp at the back.

At the time of the gathering of Constable's works at the International Exhibition, (1920s or 1930s?) the Vicar was written to for the loan of the picture and it was pointed out the damage it was likely to suffer from its exposed position. The Vicar refused the loan but did take steps to preserve the painting and Mr. Charles Basket then offered to provide a lead case to lap over the back and edge of the picture.'

Christ Blessing the Elements of Bread and Wine

by
John Constable R.A.
(1776-1837)

The Three Altarpieces

Of the three altarpieces painted by John Constable the Nayland work is the only one which remains in the place for which it was painted.

His first religious picture was for St. Michael's Church, Brantham, when he was commissioned to paint an altarpiece in 1805. The subject is Christ Blessing the Children. The painting is now on loan to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and a full size photograph can be seen in Brantham Church.

His second work was the Nayland piece and the third was The Ascension which was commissioned in 1821 for Manningtree Church. When the church was demolished in 1965 it was acquired for All Saints' Feering, but in 1998 the PCC were forced to sell it. The Constable Trust was formed to purchase the picture and in 2001 it was hung in Dedham Church.

The Nayland Altarpiece was commissioned in 1809 and installed in St. James' Church in October 1810. Apart from a brief period when it was stolen, and then recovered, the painting has been in the same position in the Church ever since.

C.R. Leslie, in his 1843 memoirs of his friend John Constable, states that *“although from the slightness of execution, this picture can only be considered as a sketch of the size of life, it is in all respects much better than the Brantham altar-piece.”*

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Setting and Recent History

The picture was set in an oak reredos where it remained until 1869 at which time it was in excellent preservation.

It was then decided to erect a Caen Stone reredos and the picture could have been put away and forgotten, but the parishioners demanded the restoration of the painting.

The picture was then placed in the stone in the manner of glass in the mullions of a window, quite unprotected from damp at the back. This was eventually rectified with a lead case to lap over the back and edge of the picture.

1961: experts from the Victoria & Albert Museum examined the picture and found it to be in reasonably good order.

1976: A Constable Week was held to celebrate the Joint Bicentenary of the birth of John Constable and the arrival in Nayland of the Revd. William Jones, Perpetual Curate of Nayland, author and composer of sacred and secular music and Nayland's most famous cleric. There was a concert, wine and cheese party and exhibitions in the Village Hall and the Church. The ultimate purpose was to raise funds to repair and restore the picture. John Constable, the artist's great great grandson, visited the exhibition and spoke to the children at Nayland School.

1977: The Courtauld Institute examined the picture by infra-red camera and x-ray and identified the fact that someone had painted over the neck and hands of the figure about a hundred years previously. This work had been badly done and so restoration work was necessary as well as cleaning the picture. The work was completed leaving £40 left over from the fund (which was put towards repair of the Church fabric).

2010: The Bicentenary of the installation of the picture. This took the form of an evening celebration with Dr. Ronald Blythe, Dr. John Constable – great great great grandson of the artist, an exhibition and short organ recital of works by the Revd. William Jones.

*The printing and publication of this leaflet has been sponsored by the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society
September 2010*

Compiled by Andora Carver
Sources: John Constable's Correspondence
Volumes I, IV & VI Edited with intro
& notes by R.B.Beckett,
Published by Suffolk Records Society 1962-68:
C.R.Leslie Memoirs of the Life of John Constable 1843:
Dr. Slade's History of Nayland 1938
Denis Halliday (Nayland historian
& Parish Recorder 1994-97)
“Notes on Constable's Aunts 1992”

c. 1930:

Letter from Sir Joshua Rowley to Canon Cliff (vicar of Nayland 1924-42) concerning his doubts about the picture's authenticity, quoting from Charles Holmes' book on Constable of 1902 and relating the story of a boyhood visit to Miss. Constable in East Bergholt.

Private

TELEPHONE,
HADLEIGH 11.

HOLBECKS,
HADLEIGH,
SUFFOLK.

Constable's Picture

August 6th

Dear Mr. Cliff

Referring to your letter of the 1st Mt. my daughter-in-law (Mrs Rowley) very kindly went to the Ipswich Library to day & copied the enclosed extracts from Sir Charles Holmes late Director of the National Gallery. "Constable's Picture in Nayland Church was painted in 1809, when he was 33 years of age & hardly gives a hint of the technique associated with his

Private 2

TELEPHONE,
HADLEIGH 11.

HOLBECKS,
HADLEIGH,
SUFFOLK.

name. ~~He~~ painted absolutely in the manner of Lawrence & Hoppner" - Sir Charles Holmes says that for sometime before the Picture was painted, Constable was copying Reynolds's works & also he says that the Picture was restored about 20 years ago & apparently somewhat reduced in size & altered in shape - but still in a very fair condition - if you perchance find yourself in Ipswich & go to the Library you will find more details - This account may

in some measure explain
my reason in doubting its
authenticity -

The name of Constable always recalls
to my memory, when I was about 7 years old
& then living at East Bergholt, being sent by
my Father with a note to a Miss Constable
living at Burnt Oak in that Parish & finding
the old Lady having her dinner with a Pack of
Deers which she kept in order with a whip
I need scarcely say how frightened I was when I
entered her Room & never durst it -

Yrs sincerely
John J. Rowley

September 1961:

A Clarion report states that colour postcards of the picture are now available.

THE JOHN CONSTABLE Altar Picture, having been out and examined by an expert from the Victoria and Albert Museum and found to be in reasonably good order, has also been the centre of much interest occupying the main place in a recent Art Exhibition, is now restored back to the Church. As a result expensive plates are being processed for us, with no expense to ourselves, for Colour Reproduction Photographic postcards which will then be on sale, in the Church, to the public. Quite apart from this with the interest the picture has created, Nayland has been very much more 'put on the map' and this will probably result in more visitors to the ever increasing stream who come to see the picture together with our beautiful Church. Many have been the admirers of late and we are justly proud of our rich heritage, also most grateful to all those who help to keep it so nice - cleaners, those 'who do the brass', and of course, the flowers which are a real pride and joy.

1961:

Examination by experts from the Victoria & Albert Museum

The Parish Magazine – The Clarion – of June 1961 reports that the picture was found to be in reasonably good order.



John Constable, R. A. (1776–1837)
CHRIST BLESSING BREAD AND WINE
St. James' Church, Nayland, Suffolk, England

THE CONSTABLE PICTURE.

As reported in the June issue of the Magazine, this picture behind St. James' High Altar having been examined by an expert, was also expertly photographed for colour reproduction.

We are now pleased to report that beautiful colour reproduction post-cards (large size) are on sale to the public at the back of the Church. There are special terms to parishioners who might like to buy a quantity for use at Christmas etc. We would like to extend our very grateful thanks to Major E. Peel of the Broadway Art Gallery, Worcs. for making this possible for us and for all the care and consideration he took.

1976:

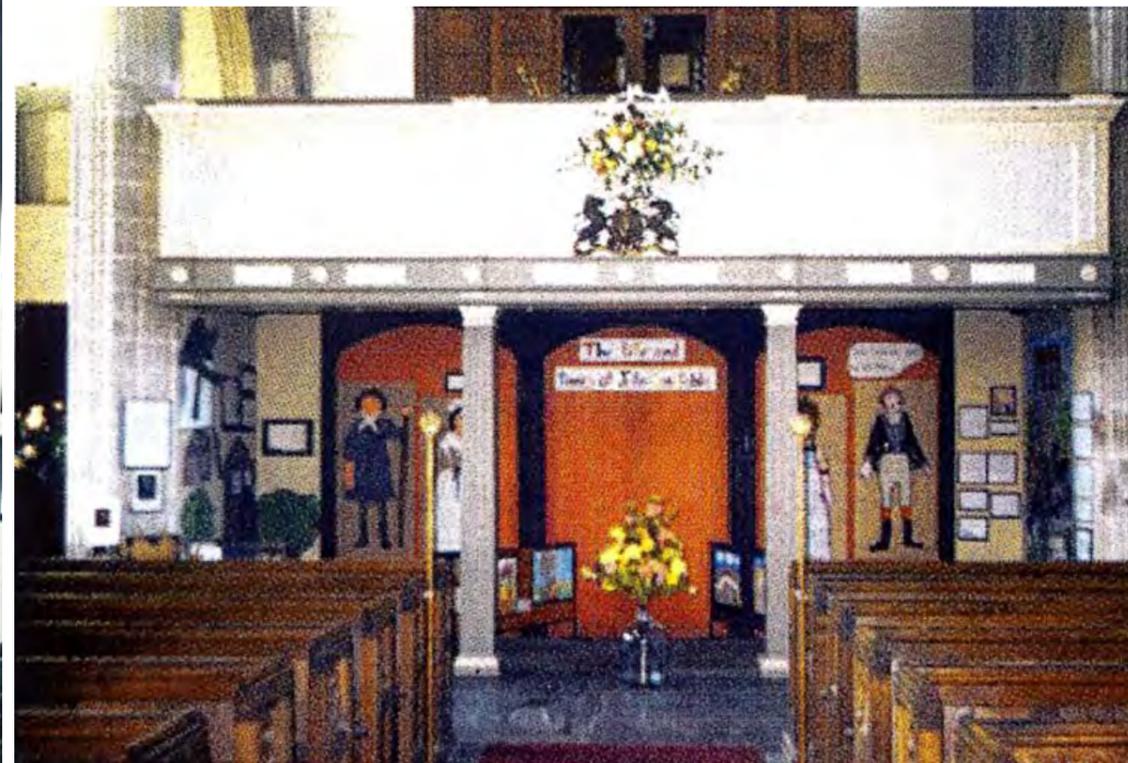
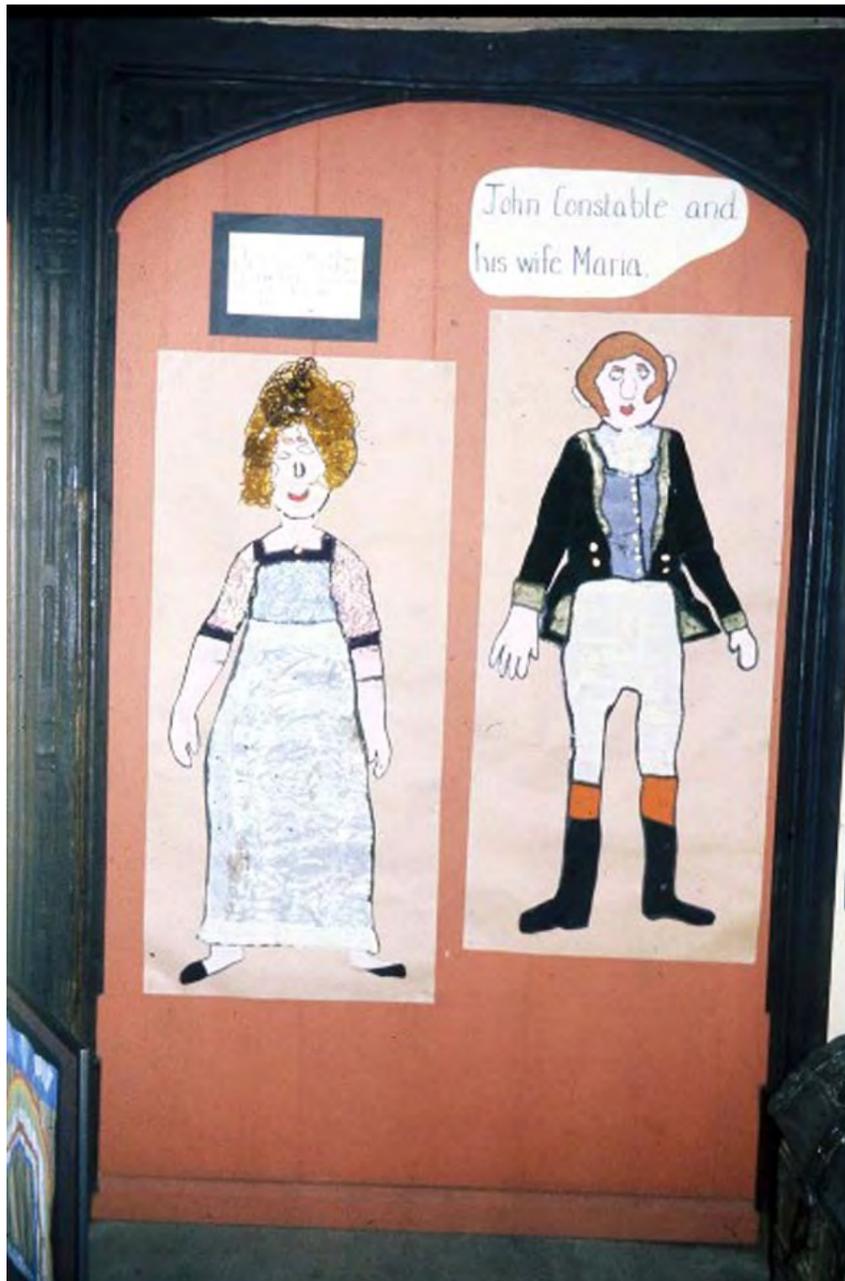
Joint Bicentenary of the birth of John Constable and the arrival in Nayland of the Revd. William Jones, Perpetual Curate of Nayland, author and composer of sacred and secular music.

These two events were celebrated in June with a "Constable Week" starting on 12th June with an Old Tyme Music Hall at the White Hart (*see programme*) and ending with a Festival Evensong on Sunday 20th.

Also included was a concert, wine and cheese party, and exhibitions in the Village hall and the Church about the Rev. William Jones and John Constable, the ultimate purpose being to raise money to repair and restore the picture. John Constable's great great grandson visited Nayland School.

Source: Nayland Record Christmas 1975, Spring, Summer & Autumn 1976

See newspaper cuttings and photographs below



NAYLAND CONSTABLE WEEK
OoOo
MISTER GRAHAM SMITH'S
EPONYMOUS
OLDE TYME MUSIC HALL
AT
THE WHITE HARTS HOTEL, NAYLAND
OoOo
Saturday 12 June 1976
Chairman: Mister George Young
Musical Director: Mister Joseph Richardson

Solo Items from:

Hilary Brunning	William Poole	Jean Summers
Jacqueline Poole	Graham Smith	Charles Kent
Charles Butler	Jacqueline Fitzsimmons	Toni Bevan
George Young	Roger Dobson	

Dramatic Sketches by:

Barbara Masters	John Churchill	Andrew Taylor
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Sketches produced by George Young

Members of the Orchestral Ensemble:

Lorna Taylor	Viv James	Don King
Joe Richardson	John Saberton	Tony Mortimer

Musical Arrangements by Joe Richardson

Stage Manager: Harry Heath

Produced by: Graham Smith

NAYLAND 25/6/76

Mrs P. Bray,
6 Birch Fall,
Nayland 262479

EAST ANGLIAN, JUNE 15, 1976

East

A John Constable Village



PUPILS of Nayland County Primary School sit beneath their collage of a John Constable village, which forms part of their "The Life and times of John Constable" exhibition being staged at Nayland Parish Church.

It was one of two exhibitions which opened at Nayland yesterday as part of the village's celebrations to mark the bicentenary of Constable's birth.

At the village hall, the local conservation society's display illustrates Nayland's connection with Constable and the Rev. William Jones, the famous churchman of the same period.

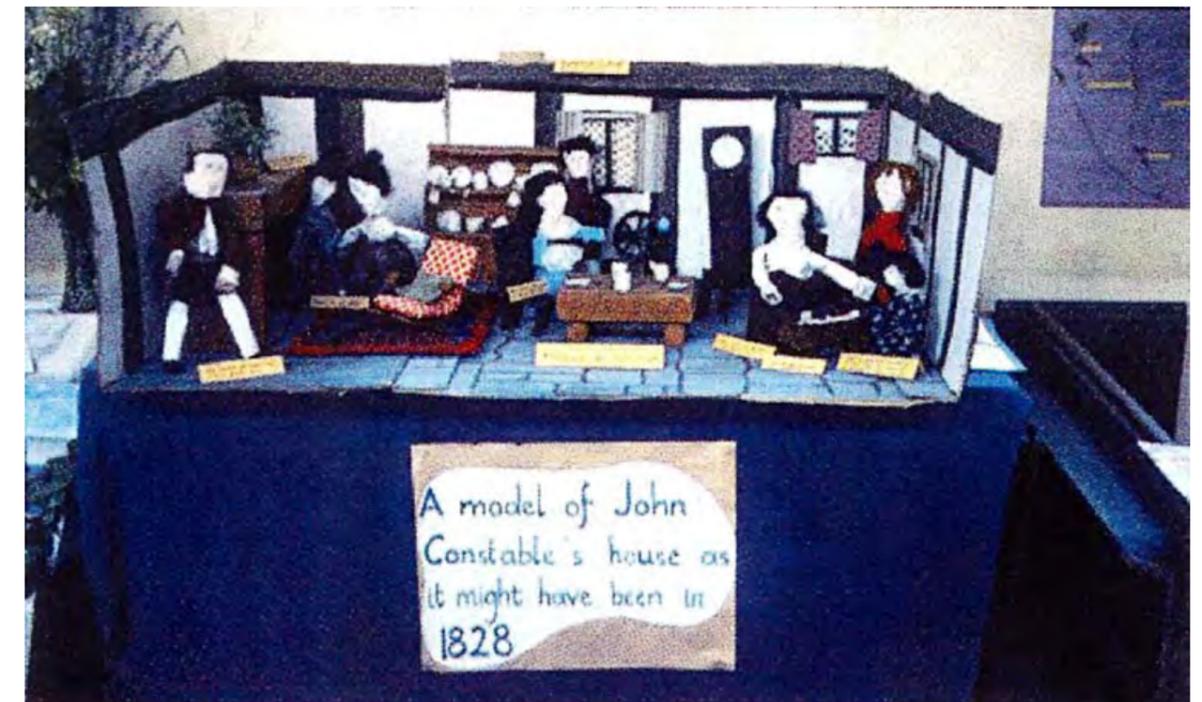
Proceeds from the events during the week will go towards the restoration of the Constable painting of Christ, which hangs behind the church altar.

● The 'Constable's Country' exhibition at Gainsborough's House, Sudbury, has already set a new attendance record for a conventional art display there.

● More than 1,500 people have visited the house since the exhibition opened on June 5, Curator Mr. Robert McPherson said yesterday. The exhibition runs until June 27.

Constable Week. — Proceeds from Nayland's week of celebrations to mark the bicentenary of John Constable's birth have amounted to more than £300. The money will be used to restore the Constable painting of Christ which hangs behind the altar in St James' church. Chairman of the organisers, Mrs Susan Wigglesworth, said they were delighted with the success of the week. "We hope shortly to obtain an expert assessment of the picture's condition and then start work on its restoration," she added. Events during the week were well supported. Exhibitions by the primary school and Nayland Conservation Society drew a stream of visitors to the church and village hall. On Friday about 150 villagers attended a wine and cheese party in the village hall. The following evening an enthusiastic audience filled St James' church for a concert of chamber music given by Susan Wigglesworth (flute), Tessa Khambatta (violin) and Geoffrey Hannant (organ). To open the programme, Mr Hannant, formerly organist at Nayland and now sub-organist at Bury St Edmunds Cathedral, played a voluntary by the 18th century Nayland churchman, the Rev William Jones, from the original manuscript. On Sunday, the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, Dr Leslie Brown, visited the village to take morning service. The church flower festival was organised by Mrs B. Horlock, assisted by Mrs J. Pitts. Visitors to the church on Sunday afternoon were serenaded with music provided by the Nayland Consort, a group of local musicians. In the evening, the final event, a festal evensong, was conducted by the lay reader, Mr A. J. Holden. Lessons were read by Father B. Nightingale, the Roman Catholic parish priest, and Mr D. Dewsbury, secretary of the United Reformed Church. The vicar of Bures, the Rev D. Mathers, preached the sermon. During the weekend many gardens, ranging from cottages to large village houses, were open to the public.

Young Wives. — A group of Young Wives went on a historical tour of the village on Monday evening. Their guide was Mr Blair Lees, local history recorder and chairman of Nayland Conservation Society, assisted by Mr Fred Hammond.



June 1977:**The Clarion**

Mrs. (Sue) Wigglesworth, as secretary of the Constable Committee, reported that the painting was still at the Courtauld Institute. Mr. Blair Lees had seen it and was delighted with the effect of the restoration work. The delay was due to the fact that someone had painted over the neck and hands of the figure about a hundred years previously. This work had been badly done and the (Church) Council was asked to give authority for it to be removed. Research would also have to be carried out as to who was best qualified to replace the portrait in its case. It seemed unlikely that the painting would be back in time for The Queen's Jubilee.

November 1977:

The Courtauld Institute (Robert Bruce-Gardner) reports on an examination of the picture by infra red camera and x-radiograph. It was also cleaned. (*See black and white photos Screen 3*)

August 1978:**The Clarion**

At a meeting of the Church Council Mrs. Wigglesworth reported that a Constable Committee had now completed its task with the fitting of a frame around the picture. A vote of thanks was also passed to Mrs. Wigglesworth and the others who had worked so hard for the restoration of the picture since 1976. The sum of £40 was left over from this fund and it was agreed that this should be put towards the urgent repair to the fabric of the church which was now well in hand.

1985:

Theft of the Picture

The Constable is stolen from the Church in October and returned a month later after a £2,000 reward was offered and £30,000 paid by the police in an undercover operation to retrieve the picture. The money was also recovered.

The Ipswich Museum repaired some damage to the outside of the picture where it had been cut from its frame and also cleaned it. The costs of this work were covered by our insurers.

1991:

Attempt to steal the picture

The attempt failed after the thieves were caught following a surveillance operation.

2000 & 2002:

Further warnings of attempts to steal the picture were received by the police but came to nothing.

2010:

Bicentenary of the installation of Christ Blessing the Bread and Wine.

The celebrations will involve a display in Church over the weekend of 18th & 19th September. An evening event in church on Sunday 19th to which Dr. John Constable, great great great grandson of the artist, has been invited. There will also be readings by Dr. Ronald Blythe and a performance of some of Revd. William Jones' music to complete the link with the earlier Bicentenary in 1976.

And finally, Constable today



"Hey Wayne — where's them big b — s suddenly spring up from?"

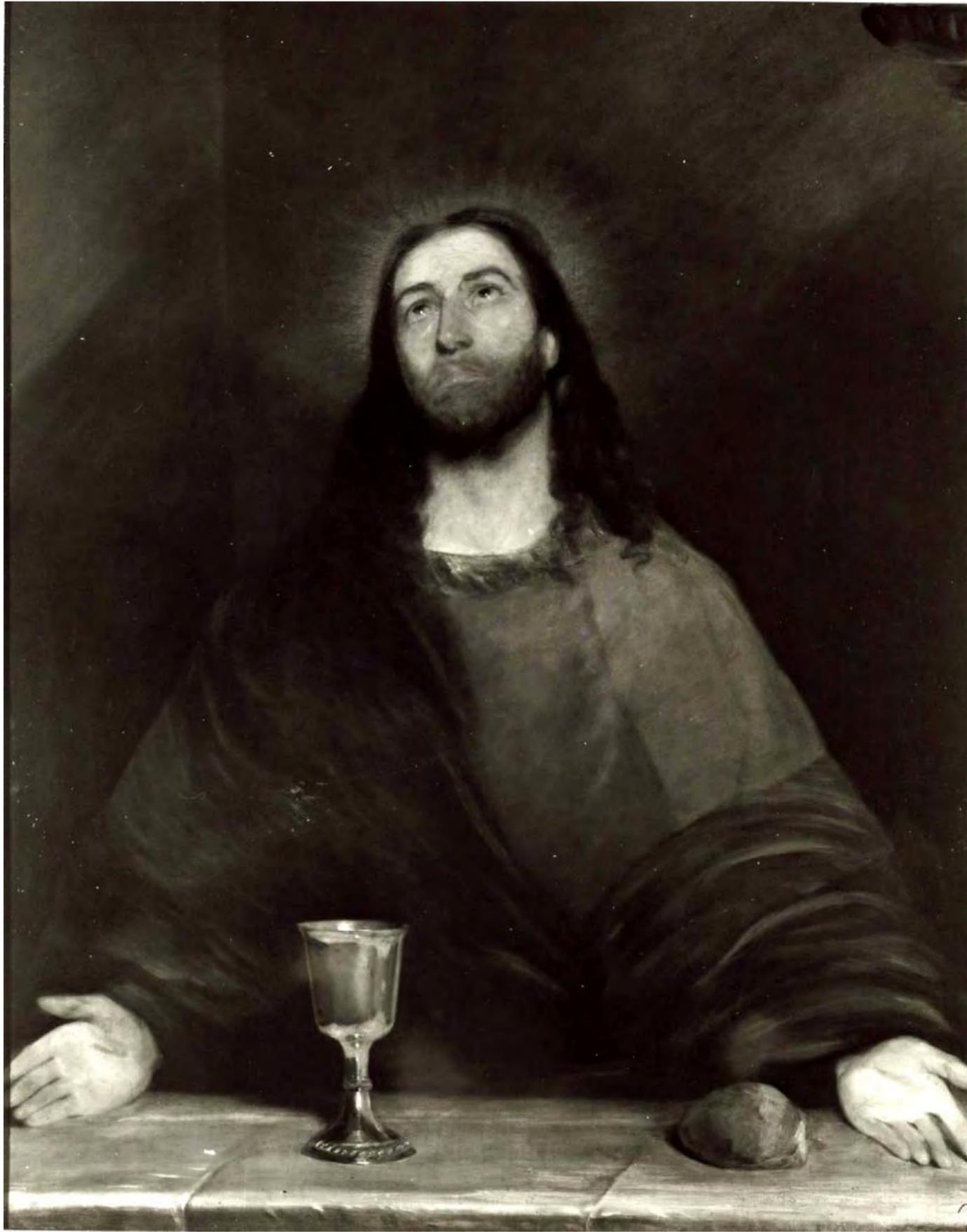
Cartoon first published 21/7/2011 in Eastern Daily Press. Reproduced by kind permission of the Editor, EDP and Tony Hall.

The Courtauld Institute Examines the Picture

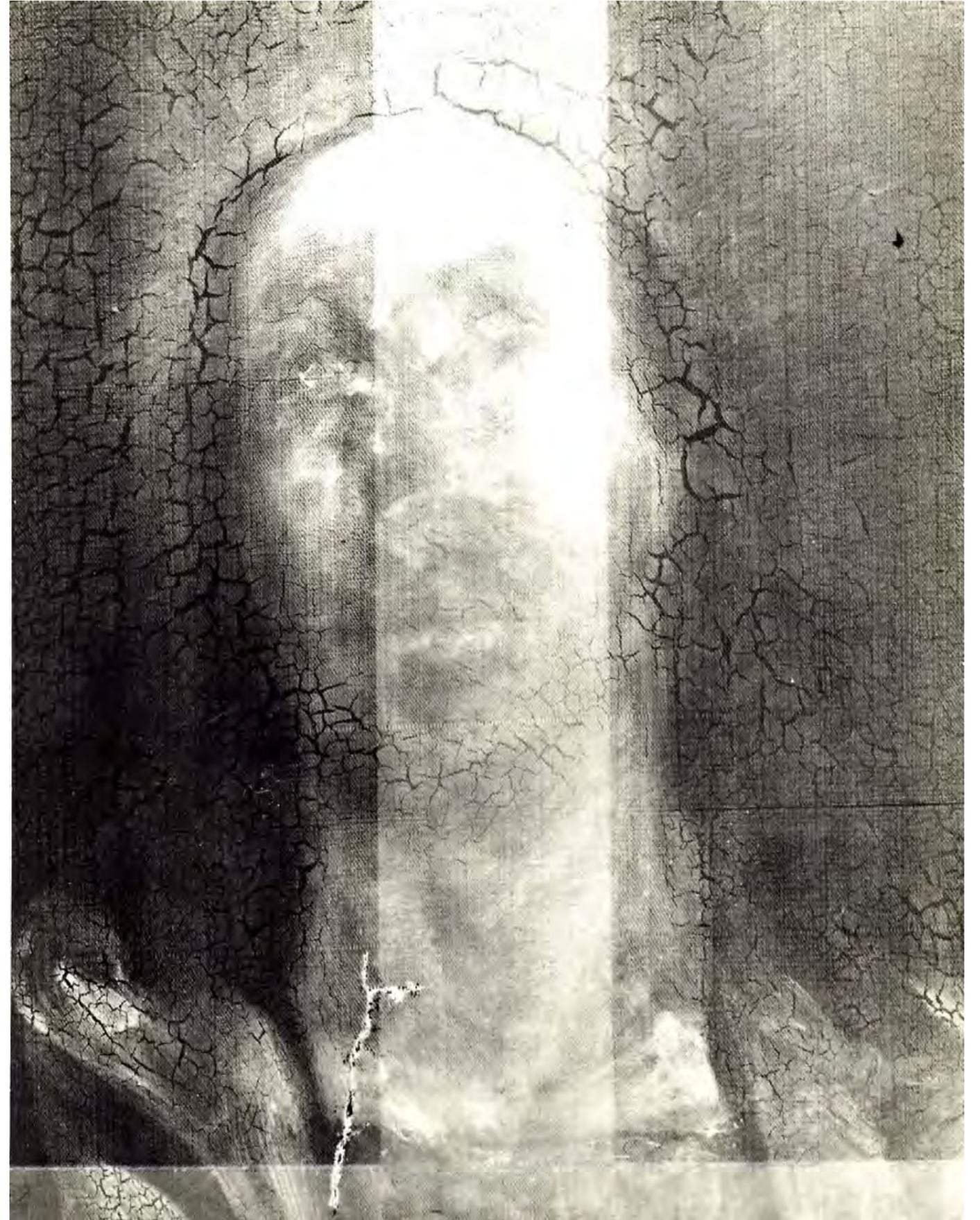
In 1976 as part of the celebrations of the Bicentenary of John Constable's birth, a committee was formed and a fund set up to raise money to repair and restore the picture.

Robert Bruce-Gardner of the Courtauld Institute duly reported on the examination and restoration work which took longer than expected due to the need to remove discoloured varnish from the flesh and foreground areas.

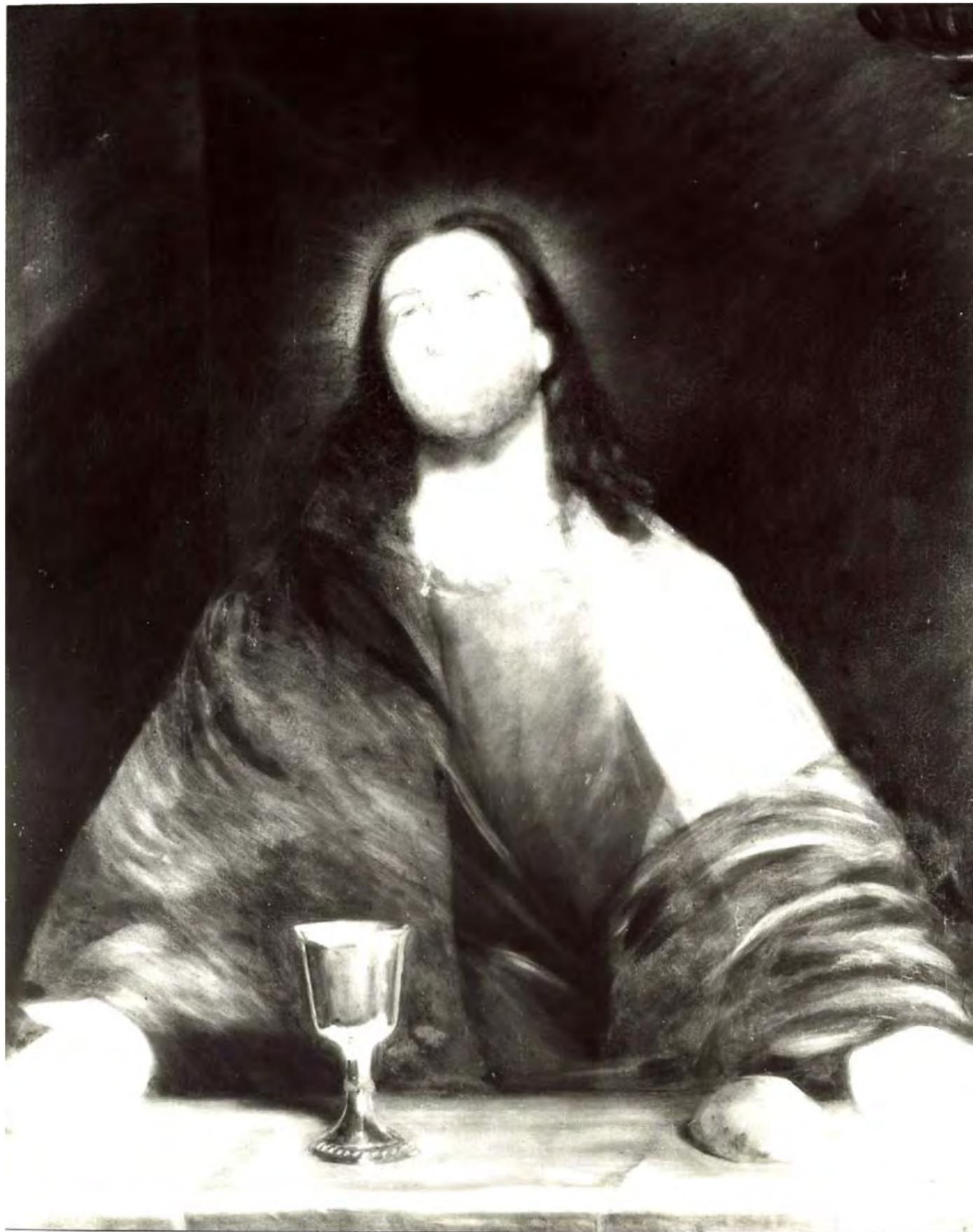
Finally, in August 1978, Mrs. Sue Wigglesworth, Secretary of the Constable Committee reported to the Parochial Church Council that the committee had completed its task with the return of the picture to St. James Church.



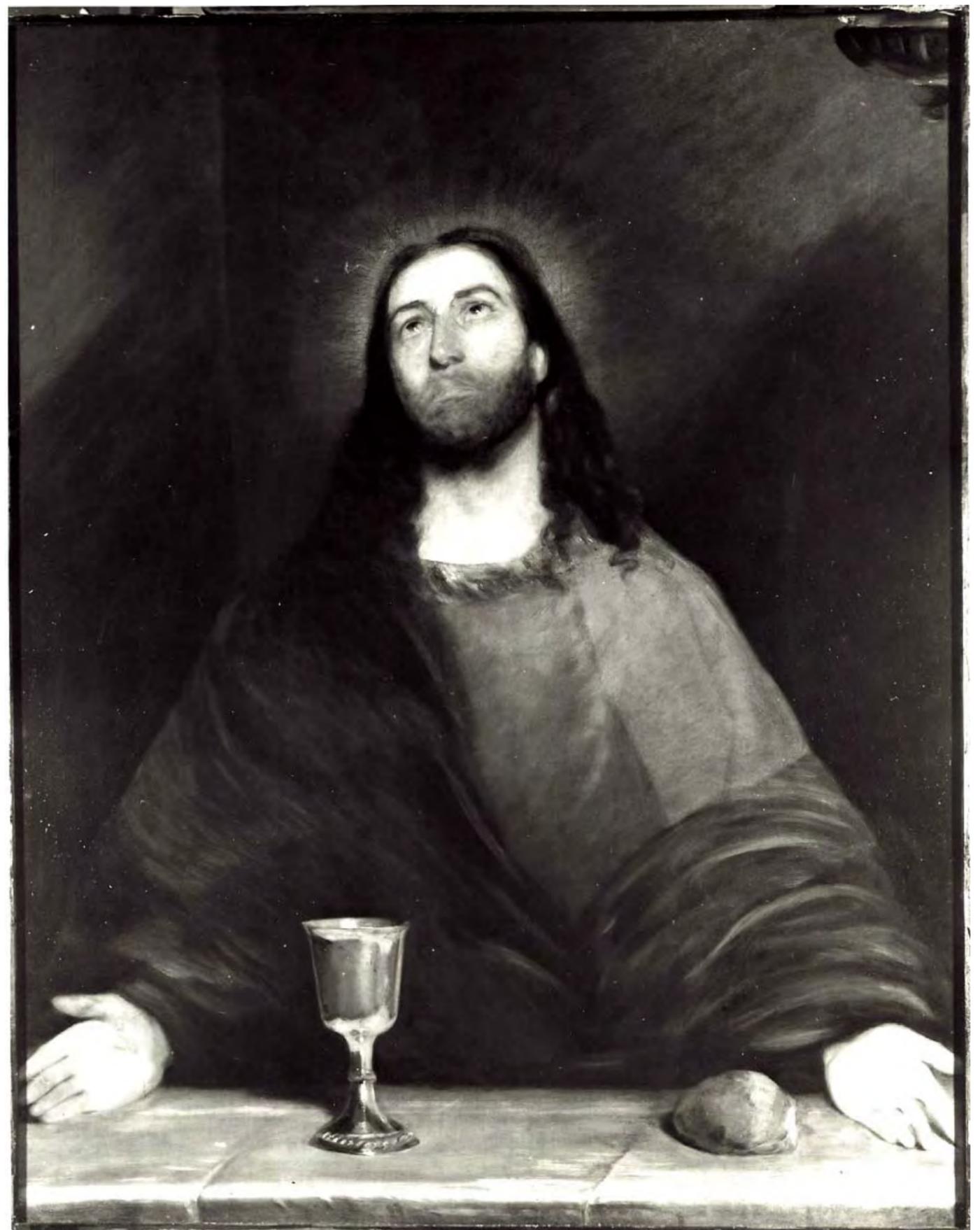
Photograph I Initial Condition



Photograph IV Head X-ray – detail



Photograph V Head Infra-red



Photograph VI Final Condition



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9.11.77.

REPORT

'Christ blessing the bread and wine'
John Constable
St. James's Church, Nayland
Oil on canvas; 46 x 37 1/2 ins.

Condition: The painting is in relatively good condition; the construction of the metal and glass box in which it has been displayed has maintained it in a reasonably air-tight state, retarding the deterioration that might otherwise have occurred. The coating of varnish has naturally yellowed, but is mostly free of surface dirt; the retouchings, particularly on the flesh and highlights of the painting, have darkened considerably. The only major damage, a tear on the neck of Christ, repaired and filled when the painting was lined, is quite prominent because of the discolouration of the retoucher. The secondary support lining canvas is in excellent condition.

There is nothing that can be done to correct or arrest the slight disfiguration of the craquelure of the paint, as this is caused by the application of one paint layer over another before the first one is fully 'dry'. Much of the darkened retouchings are attempts to suppress the worst of these cracks, but they now stress rather than conceal them. (Photographs II and III). Most of these additions are 'generous', in as much as they cover original paint as well as the blemishes.

Procedure: The painting was surface cleaned and the varnish revitalised; this improved the over-all appearance of the painting, but made the darkened retouchings even more prominent. It was photographed, and an x-radiograph of a detail of the head was taken; this confirmed the comparatively limited extent of the damage on the neck. (Photographs I and IV).

An Infra-red photograph was taken, which showed the extent of the under-drawing in the face, partially visible in ordinary light, and revealed the alterations to the drapery of Christ's robe. (Photograph V).

Solubility tests were carried out on the varnish and on the retouchings; the former proved readily soluble, the latter insoluble - suggesting that they had been applied in an oil medium and without an insulating varnish; the use of an oil medium would also explain the degree of darkening that can be observed.

The altar-cloth in the foreground has, additionally, a layer of pigmented varnish, which helped to suppress the fine network of cracks in this area.

The discoloured varnish was removed from the flesh and foreground areas, but left undisturbed in the darker areas of the drapery and background where the paint proved

- 2 -

to be potentially vulnerable. The darkened retouchings were removed with a scalpel under high magnification, revealing, in some cases, original paint in perfect condition. Around the damage on the neck, the old fill extended over much of the original paint.

Pigmented chalk and gelatin fills were applied to the areas of loss, and the surface given an insulating layer of Paraloid B72 varnish. Repainting was carried out in acrylic emulsion and the final varnish was a brush coat of AW₂.

Photographs: Black and white; 5 x 4 ins.

- I Initial condition
- II Head - detail
- III Hand - detail
- IV X-ray - detail, head
- V Infra-red
- VI Final condition

Colour 35 mm. Agfachrome 50L
Whole and details



John Constable (1831)

By Daniel Maclise

Pencil on paper (6" x 4½" approx)

Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

Constable was sketched whilst at work as a 'Visitor'
in the Royal Academy Life class

John Constable (1776-1837)

Abram Constable, the Artist's Brother c. 1806

oil on canvas 76.2 x 63.5

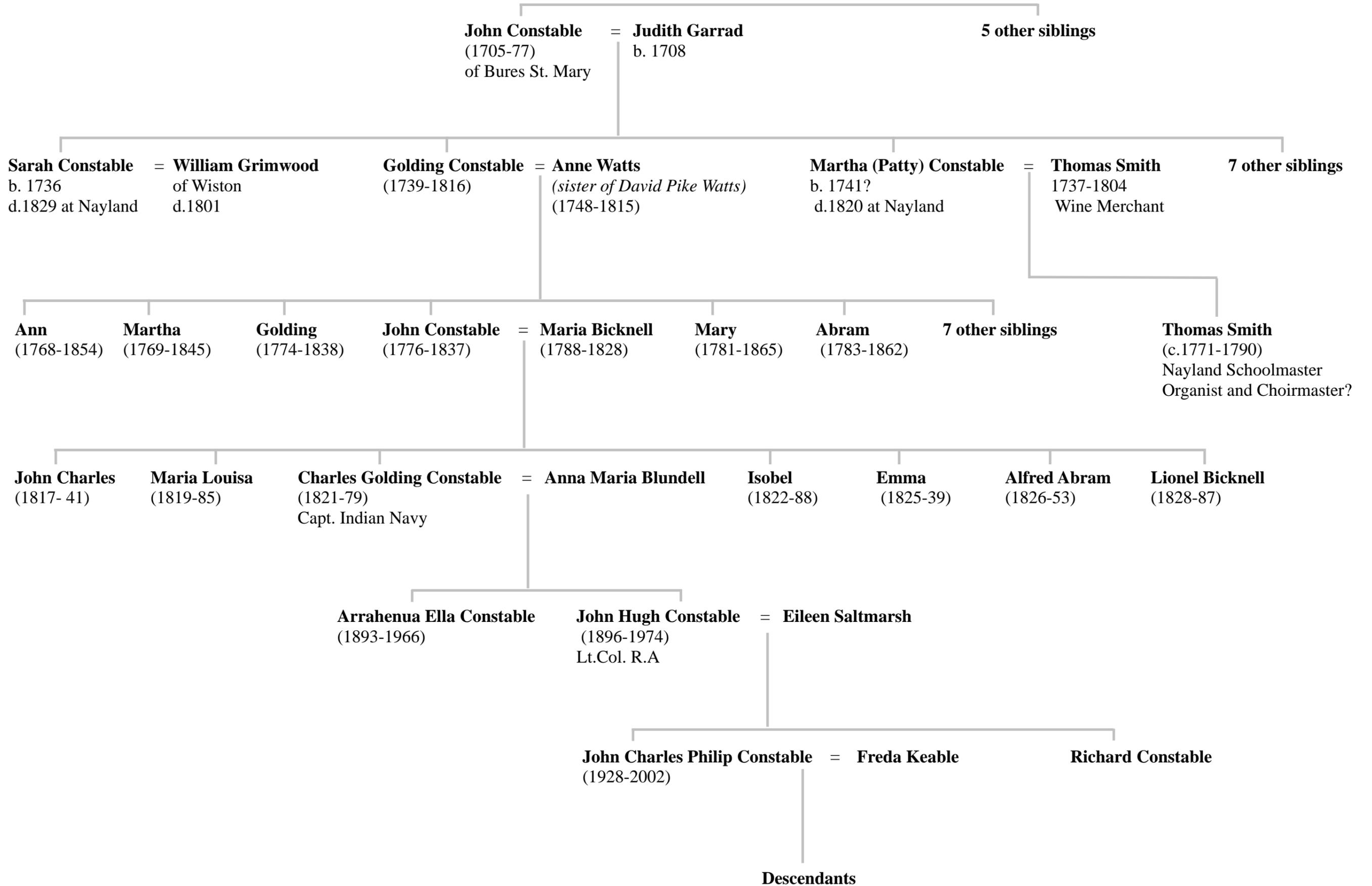
Courtesy of the Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Abraham (1783-1862) was the most gregarious of the three Constable brothers. His energy, kindness and good sense made Constable's career as a painter possible when he took over the family mills and barges from his father and provided his siblings with an income. He remained unmarried, retired and sold the businesses in 1846 living on in East Bergholt until he was almost eighty.

*Source: Constable Portraits: The Painter & his Circle
by Martin Gayford and Anne Lyles (published 2009)*



John Constable's Family Tree showing Nayland and Wiston links



Constable family links with Nayland

Two of John Constable's aunts,
Sarah Grimwood and
Martha (Patty) Smith lived in Nayland.

His nephew, **Thomas Smith** and his father,
Golding, also had Nayland connections

Martha (1739-1820)

Martha (known as Patty in her youth) was the fifth daughter of John and Judith Constable and was also born and baptised in Bures. She married Thomas Smith of Nayland, a Colchester wine merchant, sometime between 1767 and 1770. He had been baptised in St. James Church on 20th May 1737 as his parents were then living in Fen Street.

In 1757 Thomas and Sarah, his parents moved to Longwood House, Stoke Road. Thomas died in 1767 and Sarah in 1777.

Little has yet been discovered about Martha & Thomas' married life in Colchester, but it is possible that their son Thomas, born in 1771 or 1772, could have been the Thomas Smith, schoolmaster and chorister, "*with the voice of a nightingale*", who is commemorated in a memorial on the inside west wall of the north porch of St. James and who died in 1791 aged 19.

*"A man who was dutiful, calm and
skilful in holy matters
Father of the heavenly chorus
took him to the assembled gathering
of angels just like a nightingale"*

Thomas owned land and property in Nayland and in 1783 he had a family vault constructed in St. James Church near that of the Vicar/Perpetual Curate, the Revd. William Jones' family vault, beneath the vestry.

Soon after Martha's death, aged 81, the name of Thomas Smith's Head Street wine merchant's business was changed from "Thomas Smith" to "Sallows and Grimwood". The business later moved to Colchester High Street and the name was changed to "Edward Sallows". (Edward Sallows had been Thomas Smith's assistant.)

Martha's Will and Codicils show that monetary bequests to her own relations totalled £7,620, to friends and her husband's relations £370, to various servants nearly £600 and to the poor of Nayland £100 in instalments part in cash and part as blankets.

Sarah (1736-1829)

Sarah was the fourth daughter of John and Judith Constable - one of ten children, three of whom died in infancy. She was born in Bures on 7th January 1735/6 and baptised in the Parish Church of Bures St. Mary 3 weeks later. In May 1767, still a spinster at the age of 31, she married at the same church, by licence, William Grimwood, bachelor of Wissington.

Her husband was a tenant farmer of Aldams (now Wissington Grove), a churchwarden of St. Mary's, Wissington for many years and a Commissioner of the Stour Navigation. He died in 1801.

Seven years later in March 1808 Sarah moved to Nayland. The Census of 1811 shows that she had one living-in female servant or companion. She is thought to have lived at Perry Cottage which is now The Manse, Bear Street which was owned by her sister, Martha Smith.



Constable, Lionel Bicknell (attributed to)
(1828-1887)

Meadow Scene with Trees

oil on panel 26 x 35.5

Courtesy of the Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Golding Constable (1739-1816)

John's father, Golding Constable, was one of 70 Commissioners appointed under the River Stour Navigation Act of 1780, which replaced an earlier Act dated 1705. Thomas Gainsborough's brothers Samuel and John were also Commissioners whose role was to act as referees in cases of dispute between riparian owners and other interested parties and the "Undertakers".

Under the 1705 Act the Mayor and Aldermen of Sudbury and ten other gentlemen were named as the "Undertakers" and were given powers to make the river navigable.

Fourteen Commissioners met at the Queen's Head in Nayland on 27th September 1781 and annual meetings continued until 1914.

Sarah Grimwood's husband, William and Thomas Smith were among those who also signed the Navigation of the River Stour document (copy below) on September 27th 1790 together with Jonathan Stammers, Nayland Mill owner.

The Minutes of the River Stour Navigation Meeting held on 30th August 1803 at the Queen's Head were signed by Golding Constable, and Thomas Stammers, the Nayland Mill owner.



Golding Constable (c.1805)

by Daniel Garder (1750-1805)

Courtesy of the Ipswich and Colchester Museum Service

This portrait was previously thought to be that of Dr Grimwood, headmaster of Dedham Grammar School but has recently been identified as Golding Constable.

Queen's Head, Nayland Sep. 27th 1790.

NAVIGATION OF THE RIVER STOUR.

WHEREAS it has been found by Experience that great Inconvenience and Mischief have arisen to the Proprietors of the said Navigation, as also to the Millers on the said Navigation, and the Occupiers of Lands adjoining thereto, by means of Barge-men, Boatmen, and others employed in towing or haling of Boats, Barges, Keels, Lighters, or other Vessels upon the said River, setting more than one Staunch of Water for the navigating one or more Gangs of Barges proceeding together, and keeping such Staunch set for a longer Time than is necessary to penn a sufficient Head of water for navigating such Boats, Barges, Keels, Lighters, or other Vessels, on the said River; for Remedy whereof, WE, the Commissioners appointed, in and by virtue of *An Act of Parliament*, made and passed in the 21st Year of the Reign of his present Majesty, entitled "An Act for appointing new Commissioners for continuing to carry into Execution the Trusts and Powers of an Act passed in the fourth and fifth Years of the Reign of her late Majesty Queen Anne, entitled an Act for making the River Stour navigable from the Town of Manningtree in the County of Essex, to the Town of Sudbury in the County of Suffolk, in the room and place of those named in the said Act, who are since dead, and for the explaining and amending the said Act, and for other purposes therein mentioned," DO in Pursuance of the said Act and in exercise of the Powers and Authorities thereby vested in us, ORDER AND DIRECT that in Case any Person or Persons employed in the towing or haling of Boats, Barges, Keels, Lighters, or other Vessels upon the said River, shall at any Time hereafter set more than one Staunch of Water for the navigating one or more Gangs of Barges proceeding together, up the said River towards SUDBURY, or on navigating down the said River towards MANNINGTREE, shall set more than two Staunches at the same Time, in which Case the lower Staunch to be set immediately preceding the drawing of the upper Staunch, so that there be but One Staunch of Water penn'd at the same Time, or shall keep any such Staunch set for a longer Time than is necessary to penn a sufficient Head of Water for navigating such Boats, Barges, Keels, Lighters, or other Vessels on the said River, every such Person or Persons so offending in either of the Cases aforesaid, shall for every such offence upon Conviction on the Oath of one or more Witnesses or Witnesses, or upon the Confession of the Offender or Offenders before any one or more Justice or Justices of the Peace for the County in which such Offence shall be committed, pay to the Person or Persons injured, THE DAMAGES; to be ascertained by such Justice or Justices, and shall also forfeit and pay to the Informer the Sum of FIFTY SHILLINGS; which Damages and Penalty shall be levied by Warrant under the Hand and Seal of such Justice or Justices upon the Goods and Chattles of the Offender or Offenders; And for want of such Distress, the Person or Persons so offending shall by Warrant under the Hand and Seal of such Justice or Justices be sent to the House of Correction, to be there kept to hard Labour, for such Time as such Justice or Justices shall order or direct, not exceeding Three Calendar Months.

Given under our Hands the Day and Year first above mentioned.

JOHN FREEMAN, *Chairman.*

GOLDING CONSTABLE	JONATHAN STAMMERS
THOMAS SMITH	JOSEPH SADLER
JOHN LAY	WILLIAM GRIMWOOD.

S U D B U R Y Printed by W. BRACKETT, Stationer, Engraver, &c.

RIVER STOUR Navigation.

AT a MEETING of Land-Owners, and other Proprietors of Lands and Mills on the River STOUR, held pursuant to public Notice, at the Queen's-Head Inn, NAYLAND, on Tuesday, the 30th Day of August, 1803, present

Sir WILLIAM ROWLEY, Bart. in the Chair,

Sir WILLIAM RUSH, Knt.
OSGOOD HANBURY, Esq.
JOHN FREEMAN, Esq.
GEORGE THOMSON, Esq.
THOMAS GIBBON, M. D.
ABRAHAM REEVE, Esq.
Mr. GOLDING CONSTABLE,
Mr. GEORGE NOTTIDGE,
Mr. ROBERT GARRARD,
Mr. BENJAMIN KENINGALE,
Mr. THOMAS STAMMERS,
Mr. SAMUEL COOKE,
Mr. THOMAS SADLER,
Mr. ROBERT KEMBALL,
Mr. PETER FIRMIN.

RESOLVED, That a Subscription be entered into by the Gentlemen now present; and that those who attended the Meeting at COLCHESTER, on the 27th Instant, be requested to subscribe to the same, for the Purposes of defraying the Costs, Charges, and Expences hitherto incurred for carrying the Purposes of these Meetings into Execution, including the Expences of measuring of the Lands on both Sides the River STOUR, from SUDBURY to CATWADE Bridges.

RESOLVED, That a new Act of Parliament be solicited for the Purpose of enlarging the Powers of the Commissioners, and for the further Protection of the Property of the Land-Owners, Proprietors of Mills, and others, lying in or near the River STOUR; and that HENRY JERMYN, Esq. be appointed as Counsel, and Mr. PETER FIRMIN be appointed Solicitor.

RESOLVED,

Constable Picture
Bicentenary Exhibition
and Flower Festival
in

St. James' Church

Saturday 18th Sept.

10am. - 5pm.

&

Sunday 19th Sept.

12 noon – 4.30pm.

Constable Celebration Event

St. James' Church

6.30pm

Sunday 19th Sept.

All Welcome

Christ Blessing the Elements of Bread and Wine
by
John Constable R.A.

Bicentenary Celebration

Sunday 19th September 2010
St. James' Church, Nayland

Welcome

The Revd. Kit Gray

Introduction

Martin Wright,
Vice Chairman of the Conservation Society

Short talk and readings
about John Constable

Dr. Ronald Blythe

Organ Pieces composed by
the Revd. William Jones
Perpetual Curate of St. James
(1776/7-1800)

James Finch
(St. James Organist & Choirmaster)

Hymn: *The Lord Will Come*
The Nayland Tune- St. Stephen
by Revd. William Jones

Everyone please join in.
Words overleaf

Conclusion

Dr. John Constable
The artist's great great grandson

After the Celebration, refreshments will be available and there will be a chance to view the display about the history of the Picture and Constable's family links with Nayland.

Old English Music for Organ
by
William Jones of Nayland
Samuel and Charles Wesley

William Jones of Nayland (1726 – 1800)

*“A priest, the like of whom
If multiplied, and in their stations set,
Would o’er the bosom of a joyful land
Spread true religion and her genuine fruits”.*

William Wordsworth

Introit to Anthem I – Arise O Lord – Psalm 32 vv 8,9

Introit to Anthem III – Lord let me know my end
Psalm 39 vv 5,6,8,16

Introit to Anthem IV – Composed for a Sunday School Festival
*Words collected from the Psalms & the
Proverbs of solomon*

Samuel Wesley (1766 – 1837)

No 1 of two pieces – An Air

Charles Wesley (1757 – 1834)

Pastorate

Willaim Jones of Nayland (1726 – 1800)

Hymn 29 “The lord will come and not be slow”
Tune – St Stephen / The Nayland Tune

St. Stephen
‘The Nayland Tune’

The Lord will come and not be slow,
his footsteps cannot err;
Before him righteousness shall go,
his royal harbinger.

Truth from the earth, like to a flower,
shall bud and blossom then;
and justice, from her heavenly bower,
look down on mortal men.

Rise, God, judge thou the earth in might,
this wicked earth redress;
for thou art he who shalt by right
the nations all possess.

The nations all who thou hast made
shall come, and all shall frame
to bow them low before thee, Lord,
and glorify thy name.

For great thou art, and wonders great
by thy strong hand are done:
thou in they everlasting seat
remainest God alone.

John Milton (1608-74) Psalms 82, 85, 86
(AM New Standard 29) (AMR 52)



Meanwhile, on the Village Hall up for Saturday's many preparations were well under and entertainment that were to start the weekend's celebrations.

Field, people were setting stalls and activities and way for the gourmet meal



Constable Bicentenary 1810-2010

It was a very special moment when Dr. John Constable and his son, John, stood in front of their ancestor's iconic picture in Nayland church during celebrations to mark the Bicentenary of the installation of Christ Blessing the Bread and Wine in St. James Church.

They had joined about 60 people in St. James Church for an evening celebration which was the culmination of a weekend of activities to mark the Nayland Festival.

During the celebration Ronald Blythe spoke about Constable's Suffolk and the importance of the local countryside in his pictures. He also praised the artist's portraits and said that he could have gone on to be as good a portrait painter as Gainsborough, but he was drawn to the simple scenes of the river and the land. His technique was a forerunner of the Impressionist Movement and was ahead of his time which is why he did not always get the recognition he deserved.

John Constable, great great great grandson of the artist, spoke about the unique quality that Constable had of painting the seemingly unimportant scenes of everyday rural life, the river, the trees, which other contemporary artists disregarded in the fashion for monumental and historical subjects.

James Finch, organist and choirmaster at St. James', played some pieces by the Revd. William Jones of Nayland and his contemporaries, Charles Wesley and his brother, Samuel. Then we sang *The Lord will come and not be slow* to "St Stephen/ The Nayland Tune", which was composed by William Jones.

After the formal celebrations there were refreshments and a chance to look at a display about the history of the Picture and Constable family's links with Nayland. A leaflet has also been produced which is available in church. The evening event, the display and the leaflet have been sponsored by the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society.

Address at Event to mark the bicentenary of John Constable RA's painting for Nayland Church

Thank you Martin, and thank you all for inviting us to be here tonight. We do in fact, come back to the Stour Valley quite often, though we are, as Ronald has just reminded us that Constable was, very definitely river people, and we rarely stop in the villages, staying close to the river in between on foot or afloat, fishing as we go. So it is splendid to have a reason to see that these are also inhabited regions, and be with you tonight to mark this unique occasion with words and music.

It is particularly enjoyable for me because it is an opportunity to hear Ronald speak on the subject of his painting and my ancestor. It is an easy matter for a writer or a thinker to be striking, it is very much harder to be sincerely so, but Ronald makes this seem like a matter of course.

Indeed, sincerity is a curious quality, not simply a question of saying what you mean and meaning what you say, but finding something that you genuinely wish to mean and then saying it.

There is no bigger problem for a writer, or, I suppose, for an artist, and the available resolutions are not always true friends.

Somewhere in his early writings, in daybreak I think, Nietzsche remarks that weaker personalities in the arts are drawn to greater subjects because they need their support. Whereas a greater mind, by which I take it he indicates one in confident possession of its knowledge, can afford, as he puts it "to intercede on behalf of simple things.

We may think of Chardin, or of Vuillard, but it seems to be quintessentially true of Constable, who preferred to paint the earth born humble beauties of his home fields and water meadows, rather than those of remanufactured history or Alpine tourism.

The strength required for such a preference is easily appreciated even today in any gallery where his paintings hang beside those of other great European masters.

And it is a contrast that goes on growing.

The humility of this approach is as distant as can be imagined from the theatrical transgression of moral boundaries or the aggressive rejection of simple personal and social pleasures that has characterized so much painting in the last hundred years.

For some, it seems, the world just isn't good enough.

But whether any of us will or can ever know enough about ourselves, or the world, to be sure that the tree turning its leaves silver side up to the wind, the "ragged scoop and burst"¹ of a rain storm, the passing sparkle on the river glimpsed through trees, the everyday hedges, the dripping bankside plants, are not up to our scratch.

However, I cannot say that the painting behind me is a humble subject. Indeed for a Christian there are few more significant. Nor is it entirely typical of Constable.

More familiar are those pictures of scenes still more familiar to you, the paintings of the river valley in which we now stand.

But there is a direct route from one to the other. Constable famously looked at the Elder flowers in the vale, and saw "the Resurrection and the life".

We, in our turn, can look at this depiction of Christ blessing the bread and wine and think of a world made up of simple beautiful things that are by any measure a blessing.

Thank you.

John Constable
19.09.10



Spurds
Southfields
Dedham
CO76AH,
0206321241
26-9-10 -

Dear Andrew,

Amie enjoyed our accidental meeting yesterday & the discussions on Constable's religious paintings. As promised enclosed is a copy of Benjamin West's painting of the Ascension (St George's Church call it the Resurrection) I think that you will agree that these are remarkably sublimities.

Best wishes

Richard Brown

P.S I enjoyed your exhibition & found it v. interesting

The Resurrection

One of the treasures of [St. George's Church](#) which hangs over the altar is the beautiful Resurrection painting *Rise to Power* by Benjamin West R.A., the only American to become President of the Royal Academy, a post he held from 1792 until his death in 1820. King George III was a patron of Benjamin West, many of whose paintings hang in Buckingham Palace.

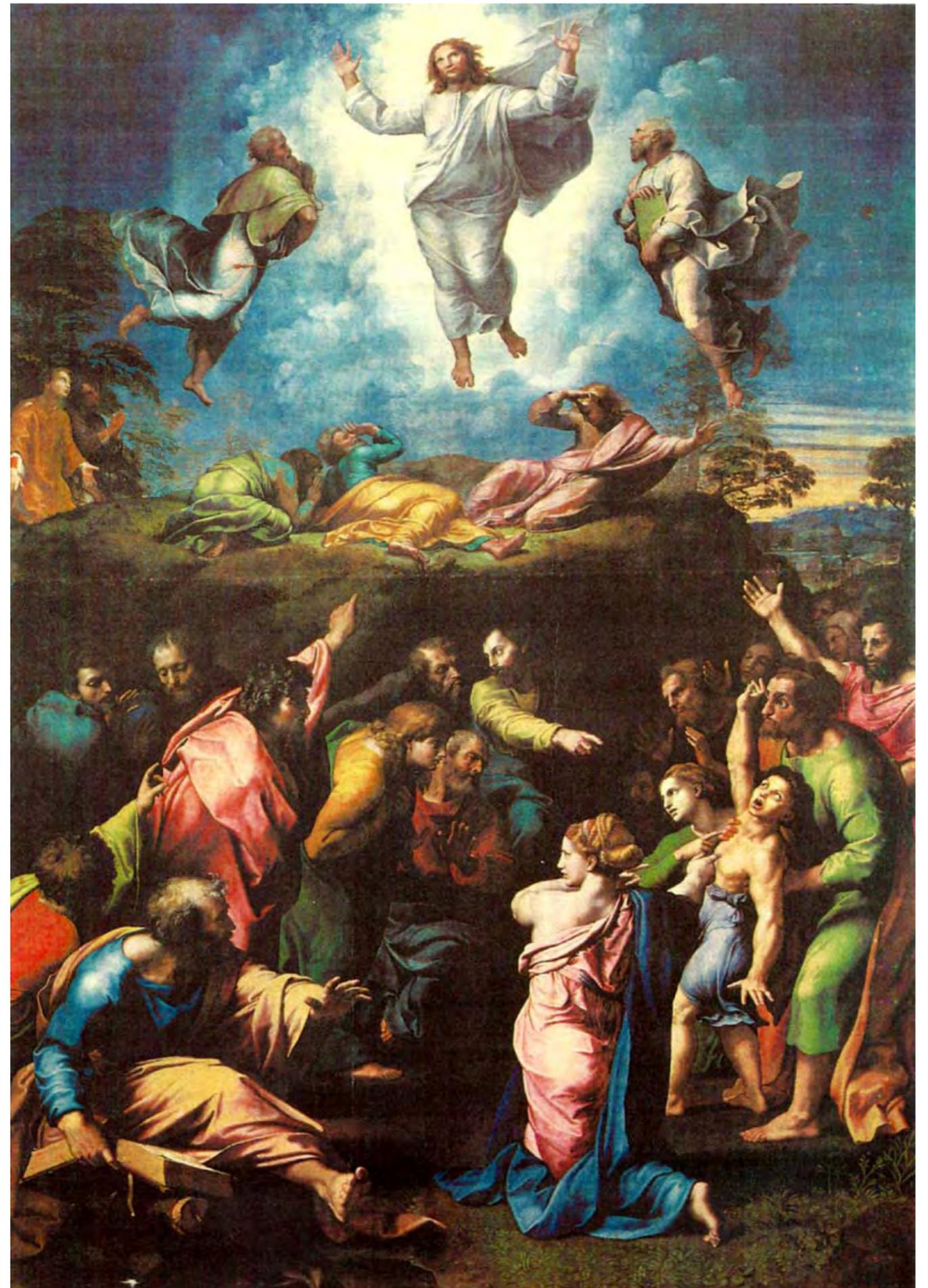
During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Hon. Henry Frere of Lower Estate, President of the Legislative Council, commissioned the painting for St. George's Church. It was exhibited at The Royal Academy in 1786, labelled "Not For Sale". When it arrived in Barbados, the Hon. Henry Frere and the then Rector, the Rev. John Carter, had "fallen out", and as a result, this masterpiece was relegated to an outbuilding at Lower Estate Plantation, where it remained for more than 30 years.

The story goes that a thief, hiding in the outbuilding, was so unnerved by the accusing gaze of the centurion, that he poked his eye out. The damaged painting was eventually placed in the church in 1820. Sixty years later, an effort was made to have the damage repaired, but no artist would attempt to repaint the eye, which was covered instead with a "pirates patch".

Visit [St. George's Church](#). Hanging above the altar one can see this American painter's masterpiece. Probably one of the most beautiful paintings in this world which immediately brings to mind the famous song "you light up my life, you give me strength to carry on!"



Rafael's *The Transfiguration*
c.1518-1520 may have
influenced Benjamin West
and also Constable.



Divinity in the Suffolk fields

Although Constable was an accomplished portrait-painter, it was in painting landscapes that he was able to discern the divine in nature, says Anne Lyles

ON 3 JUNE 1813, Constable wrote a letter to his sweetheart, Maria Bicknell, from his lodgings in London. The couple had been in love since 1809, and, despite opposition to the match — especially from Maria's grandfather, the Revd Durand Rhudde — the pair were, by now, regular correspondents.

Constable told Maria that he had recently been refused an interview with her father. They must continue to depend solely on themselves, he said; for "it was in vain to combat the world or its prejudices." He then updated her on the latest progress in his work, always a favourite subject. "I am quite delighted to find myself so well," he wrote, "although I paint so many hours — perhaps too many — but my mind is happy when so engaged — not only being occupied with what I love, but I feel I am performing a moral duty."

John Constable was born in 1776 in the Suffolk village of East Bergholt — where Dr Rhudde was rector — to respectable, prosperous, and pious parents. His father, Golding, had inherited land and a mill at Flatford, which he turned into a flourishing business. This enabled him to raise six children in comfortable circumstances, and also to support his second son, John, in his ambition to train as an artist in London.

The Constables were a devout family, their lives revolving not only around the milling and agricultural businesses, but also the church, which was the focus of the community. The Constables had their own pew in East Bergholt church, and Golding was a churchwarden there for 13 years.

Young John was a frequent sketcher of the church, both inside and out. One of Dr Rhudde's stated reasons for objecting to any match between the artist and his young granddaughter was his belief that Constable had mocked him in church by drawing caricatures of him.

Constable's sketches of the church exterior were to be put to more profitable use, however, and formed the basis of his first securely identified exhibited picture, *The Church Porch, East Bergholt* (Tate Britain, London), shown at the Royal Academy in 1810. It features a woman and a girl sitting on a tomb, listening to the voice of an old man while the evening light illuminates the sundial on the church porch, marking the passing of time.

Churchyard imagery was especially popular at this date, thanks to its association with Thomas Gray's famous poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751). Constable's picture also evokes the theme of the three ages of man. The motto on the church sundial — *Ut umbra sic vita* (Life is but a shadow) — was one that Constable adopted, many years later, to accompany a vignette in a series of prints after his

work, *English Landscape Scenery*.

The sundial's bracing message would have been instilled into Constable's mental landscape since childhood. His mother, Ann, who was prone to disseminate pious admonitions to her children, impressed on them the value of hard work. If, as she once wrote, "man was not intended for idleness" — and given that time in this world was short — then industriousness was a means of expiating sin.

At one stage, Constable's parents had hoped to groom young John to enter the ministry, but the idea was abandoned when it became clear that he was "disinclined to the necessary studies". Although they would, in due course, capitulate, and allow him to train as an artist, Constable's youthful lack of bookish application appears to have diminished with the passing years. There are frequent references in his voluminous adult correspondence to his love of devout literature — not just the Bible, or published sermons, but also the work of a variety of Christian poets, Milton in particular.

The artist's greatest confidant in matters of religion, especially the state of the Church of England, was his close friend the Archdeacon John Fisher, to whom Constable would also air his prejudices about Nonconformists, his particular *bêtes noires* being Baptists and Calvinists.

IN THE early years of his artistic career, when still under pressure from his parents to earn a living, Constable would accept commissions to paint portraits of sitters from his native Suffolk, or even altarpieces; both types of work offered

better remuneration than landscapes.

A recent survey of his portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery and Compton Verney revealed how accomplished a portrait painter Constable could be, especially if there was a good rapport between artist and sitter. Constable's altarpieces, however, do not generally show his powers at their best.

Christ Blessing the Children, c.1805, for St Michael's, Brantham; *Christ Blessing the Elements*, 1810, for St James's, Nayland; and *The Risen Christ*, 1822, for St Peter's, Manningtree — all are dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on compositional formulae absorbed from other painters such as Raphael, Guido Reni, or his contemporary, Benjamin West.

Despite his pious upbringing, Constable never confessed a true feeling for this sort of work. Rather, as he was to confide to Fisher in 1821: "I associate my 'careless boyhood' to all that lies on the banks of the Stour. They made me a painter (& I am grateful!)"

Painting, then, not the priesthood, was destined to become Constable's true calling, and not just any painting, but landscape in particular. Indeed, it soon became clear that Constable's aim, his mission, was to reform the very character of landscape-painting itself: to render it more honest and, above all, more "truthful" — a word with strong moral connotations.

In 1802, dejected by the quality of the work shown by his contemporaries at

the Royal Academy exhibition, Constable made his now famous declaration about returning to East Bergholt and painting "some laborious studies from nature". The landscapes he had seen at the Academy were, he felt, "lacking in truth"; that is, derivative, modelled on the work of previous artists. His proposed solution was a return to nature, "the fountain's head, the source from whence all originality must spring".

From this date onwards, Constable was effectively committing himself to

representing landscape — especially the Suffolk landscape — as accurately and "truthfully" as possible.

At first, progress was slow. By 1809, however, he had developed a confident and highly expressive sketching technique, working in oils directly from nature. His rapidly executed sketches of views across the Stour valley, or in the vicinity of Flatford Mill, or his more closely observed studies of natural details began, in turn, to inform the character of his exhibited pictures.

What is especially remarkable about Constable's Suffolk landscapes is not only the accuracy of observation they reflect, but also their intensity of feeling. If Constable's landscapes demonstrate his familiarity with, and passion for, the natural world, in later years they also reflect his powerful recollection of, and nostalgia for, the scenes of his boyhood, imbued with an almost Wordsworthian sense of emotion recollected in tranquillity.

WE KNOW from Constable's letters that an unexpected display of beauty, such as the appearance of blossom on a tree, could move him to an outpouring of reverential feelings. Writing from East Bergholt, in May 1819, to Maria — now his wife; for they had married after seven years' courtship, despite her family's opposition — he describes how "every tree seems full of blossom of some kind & the surface of the ground seems quite lovely — every step I take & on whatever object I turn my eye that sublime expression in the Scripture 'I am the resurrection & the life' etc., seems verified about me."

Interestingly, this particular biblical analogy appears first to have been made by Wordsworth to Constable one springtime, when the poet found himself captivated by the branches of a hedge just putting out their first green buds.

Like Wordsworth, Constable was a pantheist, seeing evidence of the divine in nature. Since we know that Constable was familiar with William Paley's collected *Sermons* — John Fisher sent them to him in 1825 — he would surely also have known Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), where the author argues that the inherent sense of order and uniformity in the natural world is evidence of a divine purpose (an idea more familiar today through the notion of Intelligent Design).

Constable's studies from nature, whether of trees, clouds, plants, or flowers, suggest a powerful sense of wonder, as he tries to find a visual language capable of doing full justice to God's handiwork. On the one hand, they are also accurate studies of particular cloud formations, made at

Self-portrait: John Constable by John Constable, c.1799-1804



'Constable's Mission was to reform the very character of landscape-painting'

a specific time of day, or faithful records of the appearance of an identifiable species of tree — such as, perhaps, the bark of an elm. Yet, in the power and intensity of their rendition, they also read as powerful acts of witness.

Constable's landscapes, for all their religious resonances, never have the "visionary" or overtly symbolic ramifications that are found, say, in German Romantic landscapes of the period — in particular in the work of Caspar David Friedrich. Rather, they reveal a complex mix of different strands in his personal and psychological make up: Constable's motives in pursuing a new style of landscape-painting were at once moral, aesthetic, religious, and autobiographical as well, even, as political, albeit with a small "p".

CONSTABLE was a Tory who believed in the time-honoured "rightness" of the English countryside and its practices. He felt that a prosperous, stable agriculture was the sure foundation for a prosperous nation and a stable society, and was thus wary of change.

It is perhaps significant that the distant horizons of Constable's Suffolk landscapes are so often punctuated by a church tower, usually that of St Mary's, Dedham, as if expressing his belief in the importance of the Established Church as a focus of order in the traditional rural world.

Hence his apparent anxiety when that order was threatened, as he felt it to be after the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, and, in the early 1830s, during the agitation for, and subsequent passing of, the Parliamentary Reform Bill that was to restrict the traditional part played by the Established Church in public life.

Even then, the great *Salisbury Cathedral*, 1831 (Private Collection, on loan to the National Gallery, London), is an ambiguous picture whose "meaning" is as much personal and autobiographical as political or symbolic. Although often interpreted as a work that signifies Constable's critical concern for the changing fortunes of the Established Church, it reads just as persuasively as a homage to his close friend John Fisher, who was now a canon at Salisbury Cathedral, and who had been so supportive since Maria's death from tuberculosis, three years before.

It was also in the early 1830s that Constable was working on the prints for *English Landscape Scenery*, to which he drafted his own letterpress. The following lines, composed to accompany the frontispiece, can perhaps serve to stand as a summary of his professional and personal beliefs: "... where is the student of Landscape, who in the ardour of youth, would not willingly forego the vainer pleasures of society, and seek his reward in the delights resulting from the love and study of Nature, and in his successful attempts to imitate her in the features of the scenery with which he is surrounded; so that in whatever spot he may be placed, he shall be impressed with the beauty and majesty of Nature under all her appearances and, thus, be led to adore the hand that has, with such lavish beneficence, scattered the principles of enjoyment and happiness throughout every department of the Creation."

Anne Lyles is curator (18th- and 19th-century British art) at Tate Britain. "John Constable RA, *The Raptured Mind*", an illustrated talk on the painter's spirituality as expressed through his art, will be given on 10 October at 7 p.m. in the nave of Southwell Minster. Tickets, £8 each, are available from Charles Leggatt at Southwell Minster on 01636 817282, or email charles@southwellminster.org.uk.



Rural order: above: *Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree*, c.1821; left: *The Risen Christ*, painted for St Peter's in Manningtree, Essex c.1822

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INTERPOL JOINS ART THEFT HUNT

INTERPOL has joined the search for a £100,000 painting by John Constable which was snatched on Tuesday from the church altar where it had hung for over 170 years.

The painting of Christ blessing the bread and wine was wrenched from its setting in St James' Church, Nayland, some time on Tuesday afternoon.

Yesterday, Vicar of Nayland, the Rev David Stranack, described the picture as "priceless", and made a desperate appeal for help in getting it back.

But there were growing fears that it could already have been taken out of the country.

Nayland villagers were

By Barbara Eeles

heartbroken at the loss of the picture which was specially commissioned for the church by one of Constable's aunts.

It is known to have disappeared between 11.45 am and 5.40 pm.

The theft was discovered by Nicholas Pitts, son of churchwarden William Pitts, when he went to lock the church for the night.

Perspex

A devastated Mr Stranack said: "To us the painting was priceless and irreplaceable. This is absolutely tragic."

The painting was prised out of its setting above the High Altar, and is believed to have been taken away still attached to its wooden backing.

"It was set in a stone surround and covered by a thick sheet of perspex. The theft must have taken some time," said Mr Stranack.

"The church is in the centre of the village, so perhaps someone may have noticed something suspicious."

"We would be so grateful for any information that could lead to the painting's recovery. We just want it back."

"I suppose it is possible

that the thieves already have a buyer in mind.

"But it is such a well known painting that all they would be able to do is sit and look at it on their own."

"And it seems strange to me that anyone would want to sit and look at a painting of Christ knowing it had been stolen," said Mr Stranack.

The picture was painted in 1809 and is one of only three religious works by the artist. It measures 3½ by 4½ feet. It was insured for only £2,000 to cover possible damage.

Mr Stranack's wife, Felicity, said: "There was no way we could have afforded to insure it fully — and anyway what would have been the point? We couldn't have bought another one."

No security alarm was fitted to the painting.

"Some years ago the parish decided against it. They thought that no thief would have time to remove the picture as there are usually people in and out of the church all the time."

"But in any case this looks like a professional job and they would probably have just cut the alarm wires anyway," said Mrs Stranack.

A police spokesman yesterday asked for anyone



● The painting which has been stolen from St James Church.

who visited Nayland between 11.45 am and 5.40 pm on Tuesday to contact Sudbury police station. They are especially keen to talk to anyone who went into St James' Church.

All British police forces, ports and airports will be contacted asking for assistance, and a description of the picture will be circulated abroad with the help of Interpol.

House to house inquiries are in progress in the Nayland area, he said.

Vicar's appeal over painting

A further appeal for information about the theft of the Constable painting from St. James' Church, Nayland, was made by the Vicar, the Rev. David Stranack, yesterday.

At morning service Mr. Stranack appealed to anyone who saw anything unusual in the village on Tuesday afternoon, when the picture was taken, to contact him, or the police.

The theft of the picture, "Christ Blessing the Bread and Wine", was a great sadness to the community, he added. Yesterday, the space behind the altar where the painting normally hangs was covered by a curtain.



● A devastated Vicar of Nayland, the Rev David Stranack, surveys the damage.

Church gets painting back

THE much-loved Constable painting stolen from Nayland church last month has been recovered intact in London.

A few small scratches are the only signs of damage to the £100,000 painting, said vicar of Nayland, the Rev David Stranack.

Two men have been charged in connection with the disappearance of the picture from St James Church on October 22.

Mr Stranack said: "The police called on Saturday evening to tell us the painting had been found. Everyone in the village is absolutely thrilled. It means so much to the whole community because it was painted specially for our church."

The picture — Christ Blessing the Bread and Wine.

for the church in 1809 by one of John Constable's aunts. It had hung there ever since in a special setting above the High Altar.

Mr Stranack said he was not sure when the painting would be returned to Nayland. "We could have to wait for the court proceedings to be completed," he said.

But he thought most villagers would want the picture to be displayed again in the church. "Of course, we will have to improve our security," he said.

Nayland bellringers celebrated the recovery of the painting on Sunday night with an impromptu quarter peal.

"I always believed the picture would be found eventually — but I thought probably not for many years," said Mr Stranack. "I had a feeling it had not been taken out of the country and would be back in Nayland one day."

East Anglian

Father and son accused over Constable art theft

A FATHER and son have been charged in connection with offences relating to the alleged theft of a £100,000 Constable painting from Nayland church.

The painting of "Christ Blessing Bread and Wine" has been recovered in London intact, say police.

Last night church bellringers performed a spontaneous 45-minute quarter peal at St. James's Church to celebrate the recovery of the Constable.

The two men, who were arrested in

London in connection with the incident, were charged at Sudbury police station yesterday and will appear before Mildenhall magistrates today.

Police said Stephen Flanagan, 26, self-employed bricklayer, of High Street, Ventnor, Isle of Wight, had been charged with burglary at Nayland on October 22 and taking a painting and a plaque.

His father, John Flanagan, 58, a BBC commissioner, of no fixed address, is charged with dishonestly

assisting in the retention of the painting.

Soon after the painting disappeared last month, an anonymous local woman offered a £2,000 reward for information leading to its recovery.

Church officials were called to Sudbury police station yesterday to inspect certain items.

The painting was commissioned by a Nayland aunt of John Constable in 1809 and had hung above the altar almost without interruption up to its disappearance.

12.11.85

Feb. 26

Constable painting man jailed

BRICKLAYER Stephen Flanagan was jailed for three and a half years yesterday after confessing he had been trying to find a buyer for the £100,000 Constable painting stolen from a Suffolk church.

His father, former BBC commissioner John Flanagan, was cleared of receiving the oil canvas after a three-day trial at Bury St. Edmunds Crown Court.

Stephen Flanagan, 26, of High Street, Ventnor, Isle of Wight,

admitted dishonestly receiving the painting entitled "Christ Blessing Bread and Wine", an altar cloth and a plaque, which were stolen by unknown thieves from St. James's Church, Nayland, last October.

Mr. Graham Parkins, prosecuting, said that the painting, valued at up to £100,000, had hung above the altar in Nayland Church since 1809. Thieves took it from behind a perspex cover.

There was a "country-wide police operation" in Nov

ember a surveillance team of detectives kept watch on an address in Lawn Road, Hampstead, the home of Flanagan's 90-year-old grandmother.

The Flanagans were seen to approach the address, Mr. Parkins said. Stephen Flanagan was carrying a plastic bag, clearly containing the plaque detailing the painting's history. A minicab had been called to convey the pair to an address in St. John's Wood.

The police moved in as Stephen placed the painting back

had retrieved from an alleyway next to the house, on the back seat of the cab.

After a short struggle Stephen was arrested, Mr. Parkins said. In interviews Flanagan said that "of course" he knew the painting was stolen, but his father knew nothing about it.

"A man asked if I could get rid of it," Stephen Flanagan told police. "I contacted a couple of people who said the price was too high, so I went back and the price was agreed."

He had been asked to for £70,000, but he had told that he would have to on it for a year because it was "too hot", Mr. Parkins said.

He wanted to get rid of the price came down £60,000 and then £3: Flanagan said that the "was sinking like tele numbers", but he was because he would still get £5,000 share.

Det. Con. R McMurray, the officer

The Nayland Record – Spring 1976

(3)

1776 AND ALL THAT!

The Parish Recorder writes:-

If all goes well, life in Nayland will be busy and exciting next year because of two bi-centenaries which are linked in a curious way. John Constable was born in East Bergholt on June 11th, 1776 and the Reverend William Jones took up his residence in Nayland in the same year upon his appointment as Perpetual Curate.

Through the good offices of his aunt, who lived in the Nayland area, we got the Constable painting of Christ in Saint James' Church which is one of the only three religious paintings which he did. Where Constable's aunt lived we do not really know, for the lady is not well documented and elusive, a bit reminiscent of the Scarlet Pimpernel. But there was a Mr. Constable who is listed as an "Outsetter" in the Parish Rate Roll of 1768. He paid an annual rate of £8. 10s. and a rent for his property of 8/6d. and may well have been an uncle of the painter. Constable's aunt may thus have been an aunt-by-marriage, but more research is needed and I hope to have something definite to say about her later on.

William Jones died in January, 1800. He may well have met Constable's aunt. At the very least she listened, probably, to some of his great sermons and the painter himself could have been her escort to church.

So, as I say, the bi-centenaries are quite possibly linked, and in my opinion something should be done about them. Nayland does not want to be swamped by tourists but we should make ourselves ready to play our part in what could be an exciting and profitable year for the Dedham Vale as a whole. My family is connected with John Constable at both ends, as it were, and I would like some attention paid to his bi-centenary. I live in Nayland close by his reredos painting and my sister's family reside in Church Row, Hampstead, within two hundred yards of Constable's handsome grave in the churchyard of Hampstead Parish Church. We both feel that something should be done.

We have a chance to put Nayland on the map without doing any harm whatever to the village. Let us take it!

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THE CONSTABLE ALTARPIECE

An account based upon Doctor Slade's notes

On the 6th April, 1767, £35 18s. 3d. was paid out in Nayland Charity money towards half the cost of an altarpiece. This consisted of four panels of black stone, probably marble, on which were inscribed the Commandments, with a painting of Moses in the centre. Constable's picture, of which a full description may be found on page 21 of R.C. Leslie's "Memoirs", was painted in 1809 and placed in an oak reredos, where it remained in a state of excellent preservation until 1869.

It was then decided to erect a reredos of Caen stone, and the painting appears to have been temporarily consigned to a limbo of oblivion. After a while, however, there was a public demand for its restoration, and the late Mr. Humphrey Blake, architect and stonemason of Colchester, was given the job of designing and constructing a new reredos. The picture was replaced in the stone in the manner of glass in a mullioned window - quite unprotected from the elements at the back.

At the time of the gathering of Constable's works for showing at the International Exhibition the Vicar was asked for a loan of the painting and, in the same letter, it was pointed out to him that it would suffer serious damage if left as exposed as it was to the elements. The Vicar refused to lend it, but did take steps to preserve the painting.

The picture is described in Constable's Memoirs in this fashion:-

"In this year (1809) he painted his second and last attempt in sacred history - an altarpiece for Nayland Church - a single figure of the Saviour blessing the Bread and Wine. Although from the lightness of its execution this picture can be considered as a sketch ... it is in all respects better than the Brantham altarpiece. There is no originality in the treatment, but a subject so often painted almost precludes originality.

"The light falls upon the face from a lamp and the colour and effect are very agreeable, broken colours partaking of purple and yellow, brown tints being substituted in the draperies for the ordinary blue and red. Still, such are its deficiencies that it is evident that a long course of study would have been required before he could have done justice, if ever, to subjects of this class."

(The reference to the painting of Moses is interesting. I would like to know who painted it, what it is like and where it is now. Does anyone know? - EDITOR.)

--oOo--