

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.

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 grandson of the artist, an exhibition and short organ recital of works by the Revd. William Jones.

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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
and Parish Recorder 1994-97)
"Notes on Constable's Aunts 1992":

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.*"

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, a 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.

Another aunt, Sarah Grimwood, is thought to have lived at Perry Cottage (now The Manse), Bear Street, Nayland from 1808 until she died in 1829.

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 at the Last Supper.

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:

A letter dated 30th October 1810 to The Ipswich Journal states: *“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.”

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”*.

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 altar piece *“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