



WALBERSWICK

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER NO: 70 (interim)

December 2022

A NEW DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

This is an unusual date for a WLHG talk as it is: a **Tuesday** and it is **NOT in the Village Hall** but then it is an unusual talk. We anticipate that on a Tuesday evening in February we will not fill the VH with a talk on paper conservation which is why it will be in the Heritage Hut (HH).

However, we think it will be a fascinating insight for those interested in the preservation of historic documents. Also, the HH is the home of the Walberswick scroll and is therefore the ideal place to talk about it.

Finally, we are hoping to contribute to the scroll preservation fund. This is the final unusual aspect of this WLHG talk – **we are making a small charge to attend.**

Please read on to see how you can secure your seat at this unique history group talk.

Paper conservation and the Walberswick Scroll – The Heritage Hut, The Green at 7:00 pm on Tuesday 7th February 2023. A talk by Nicola Walker

When we show the Walberswick scroll I sometimes remark that it works on two levels. Firstly, it is a piece of art to be appreciated as such. Secondly it is a snap shot of the village in 1931 and can be enjoyed purely as an historical artefact. So much is still instantly recognisable but then, as you look deeper, so much has changed. Alongside this are the stories of the people and places. Bill Ungless and I love to insert these stories into each showing. Many stories are recollections from hearing the late, great Richard Scott tell them. Richard showed the scroll for many years and was one of the people we have to thank for rescuing and preserving this unique piece of work.

The scroll is now into its tenth decade and despite a major restoration in the 1980's it is showing signs of its age. The scroll committee, with the backing of the Parish Council, have engaged the services of an expert in paper conservation so that we can hopefully still be showing the original art work for many more years to come. Nicola Walker (Paper Conservation and Collections Care Consultant, Trusted Conservators www.trustedconservators.com) will be in Walberswick to carry out her conservation work in February 2023.

During her time in Walberswick Nicola will give a talk on her area of expertise, with special reference to the Walberswick scroll. This talk is being supported by WLHG in conjunction with the scroll committee and WPC and will take place in the **Heritage Hut at 7:00 pm on Tuesday 7th February 2023.**

Please note the following:

- The talk will be in the HH and due to the seating limitation of the venue will be limited to 25 seated members.
- WLHG talks are usually free to members but in this case there will be an entrance fee of £5 with all takings going towards the scroll conservation fund.
- Tickets will be allocated in order of applications received and then money will be collected on the door. You are free to donate more than £5 if you so wish. Every penny of cash donated will go to the restoration fund.
- Should there be fewer than 25 applications from WLHG members then the remaining seats will be offered at £10 each to non-members.
- Please send your application to Edward Wright by email (ewright123@btinternet.com).

The scroll committee generally show the scroll to the public twice a year and on special occasions. Routine showings are usually during school holidays at spring (possibly 28TH May next year) and autumn and we will announce dates at the meeting. There will be a private SPECIAL SHOWING on Friday 23rd June 2023 and it may be possible to add another showing on that date should there be interest. We have always showed the scroll for free and asked for a voluntary donation. For some reason, since we moved from the VH to the HH the level of donations has dropped off. We do need to fund the restoration so in future we will, like many museums, suggest a donation.

For our newer members who may not be familiar with the Walberswick Scroll I reproduce below an extract from NEWSLETTER NO: 52, SEPTEMBER 2017 written by Richard Scott.

Alternatively, to view the whole edition go to:

http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/assets/WLHG/WLHG-news-letters/HISTORY-GROUP-NEWSLETTER-SEPTEMBER-2017_2.pdf

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THE WALBERSWICK SCROLL

This remarkable work is one man's view of Walberswick in the summer of 1931 but with some small additions in 1932, painted in watercolour on a roll of paper 123 feet long. The artist was John Doman Turner (1871-1938) who depicted every house in the village street and the riverside area in some detail, starting at the gamekeeper's cottage a mile to the west of the church. He then followed the route of the old narrow-gauge Southwold Railway, which closed in 1929, as far as the then-surviving Walberswick station building before moving across to the top of the main street. Here he continued his pictorial trail down its north side, around the Green and down to the river. Here he became engrossed with the riverside buildings, the steam ferry (dramatically scuttled in 1942) and the cluster of artists' studios along the river bank at the time. Then he made his way back to the top of the village, recording houses on the south side of the main street. The side turnings – Palmer's Lane, Leverett's Lane and Millfield Road – seem to be an afterthought, appearing as small pencil sketches inset at the top of the paper.

In the 1950s the scroll, wrapped around a wooden spindle, was kept in a cupboard in the Gannon Room which was, in all except name, the village hall of this period. The precious document could then be unrolled for inspection on trestle tables without prior arrangement, and was lucky to survive the great flood of January 31, 1953. The Gannon Room stood approximately on the footprint of the present village hall, with its long axis running north-south. Its architectural style owed something to

the “tin tabernacle” tradition – except that it was made of wood. In 1953 it was not protected by the more recent flood defence bank, completed in the early 1960s, but it certainly got its feet wet in the flood as the water reached The Anchor sign. Luckily the scroll was safely stored in its cupboard.

Who was John Doman Turner?

In earlier life he was a stockbroker’s clerk, living on Streatham Hill in South London. He devoted most of his spare time to producing a large quantity of watercolours painted with a rare quality of almost child-like directness, honesty and attention to detail. It has been said that illness can be an artist’s friend, as it can allow time for solitude and concentration on the creative process. This appears to have been the case for Turner, except that his “illness” took the form of profound deafness, which appears to have had a similar result.

During the 1950s village elders remembered him, but generally they did not get to know him well because of his affliction. They knew he lived much of the time in London, and there were puzzling rumours that he had been a member of the prestigious but short-lived Camden Town Group, formed in 1911 but disbanded two years later. Not very likely, some of us thought, as all the other fifteen members of the group had a background of full-time art school study. There was also a whisper that he had been a pupil of Walter Sickert (even more unlikely, thought the doubters). A little research, though, confirmed that both rumours were true. For a brief outline of how all this came about, please read on!

In the early summer of 1908 the critic Frank Rutter, who knew Turner and was an enthusiastic champion of the artists who were soon to form the Camden Town group, had the inspired idea of suggesting to Frederick Spencer Gore, the group’s first president when it was launched, that he might take Turner under his wing as a pupil. Rutter felt that this kind of guidance would be invaluable for Turner, while for Spencer Gore, who had courageously set himself up as a freelance painter after his studies at The Slade (despite great family pressure to re-train for a “proper” career!) such an arrangement might provide a modest but useful enhancement of income. Because of the obstacle of Turner’s deafness, the agreed programme was a form of correspondence course. As often as he wished, Turner would assemble a bundle of work and send it to Spencer Gore, enclosing a list of twenty questions to which he sought answers, and a fee of five shillings. In due course the work would be returned with the all-important criticism and a letter with answers to the questions. The “course” continued for nearly five years, by which time the Camden Town Group had mounted its only three exhibitions, all at the Carfax gallery in Bury Street, St. James, and disbanded. Group members were allowed to show up to four works in each of these exhibitions; Turner showed his full allocation in all three. In the middle show (December 1911) one of his titles was *Walberswick*.

The Sickert connection was perhaps more easily explained. At around this time Walter Sickert was renting rooms in and around Fitzroy Street (“Fitzrovia” was a network of streets just to the west of Tottenham Court Road, known at the time as an artists’ quarter) for the purpose of running life classes. Turner had mentioned to Spencer Gore that he was struggling to draw figures and faces, and the suggestion that he might join these classes may well have come from Gore, as he and Sickert were close friends.

When the Camden Town group disbanded in 1913 some of its members formed the nucleus of the eventually larger and different-in-spirit London group, which is still active. Turner chose not to go down this route, but he and Spencer Gore remained firm friends. Sadly, this would not be for long, as Gore died in March 1914, having contracted pneumonia following an extreme cold and wet day painting *en plein air* in Richmond Park. He was in his mid-thirties.

“The Forgotten Camden Towner”

These words were used in the advertising for a Turner exhibition in September/October 1997, at the Michael Parkin Gallery in Motcomb Street, Belgravia. Michael Parkin was, like many of us, a devoted fan of Turner and of the Camden Town Group in general, and was fortunate to have secured the services of Spencer Gore’s Royal Academician son Freddie to assist with the assembly and presentation of the work and to write a short, sensitive and very informative essay to accompany the invitations.

The exhibition was a revelation, most particularly because it contained a number of life drawings produced in the Sickert classes. All had comments and criticisms from the master written in pencil around the sides of the paper. Among the fairly numerous landscapes and river views was the only Walberswick painting in the show. Dated 1911, this was Turner’s earliest painting of the area yet seen by the writer. It was a view across the river to Southwold, with an extra dimension of historical interest. Moored near the North bank was the *Pendennis*, a steam-powered, paddle-driven tug used for various duties on the river but most particularly for towing the larger fishing vessels out to the open sea on calm days, and back in again at the end of their session. Previously the process was a laborious one called warping, which involved men with ropes on the river bank. Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth both had a “Pendennis equivalent” on the Waveney and yare respectively at around this time, performing similar duties. Before many more years had passed the fishing fleets had become motorised and thus more independent.

Was the Scroll a commission, or a labour of love?

There can be little doubt that it was the latter, and it seems likely that Turner either presented the finished work to the parish council, or left it in his will. As the scroll was almost certainly drawn and painted “on the spot” we can be fairly sure that he didn’t wrestle with 123 feet of paper as he moved around, but appears to have dealt with it in a number of much shorter sections, joining them together later. There are a number of visible joins, some obviously his and some probably dating to the 1970s when funds were raised to have the work expertly restored and backed on linen. At this time there was heavy pressure to surrender the treasure to the County Archives in Ipswich, but the Parish Council, and most particularly its chairman at the time Ronald Coleman, fought a hard and eventually successful battle to keep it in the village, in a safe part of the new village hall. Several years later it was mounted in a wooden case which had housed a pub football game of the kind which was popular between the wars. The spindles were just right for the scroll and the installation was meticulously carried out by the late Tony Whittenbury. Most appropriately this particular football game had served its time in the Walberswick Men’s Club, in the building on the Green which much later became the Heritage Hut. Currently the scroll is shown about three times a year, in 1994 it was a popular exhibit at The Walberswick Enigma, an exhibition at Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich featuring resident and visiting artists from 1801 to date.

Did Doman Turner produce any other scrolls?

To the best of our knowledge, three others. The first was the Southwold scroll, very much shorter than the Walberswick work, and completed a year earlier, in 1930. In 1933, having completed the Walberswick epic, he embarked on another scroll, describing Southwold’s annual Trinity Fair on South Green. Also fairly short, this one can be viewed by arrangement. It is wall-mounted, behind UV glass, in the function room at The Swan Hotel in Southwold. Finally, in the mid-1930s there was yet another scroll, this time with a circus theme. This was until recently the subject of rumour and speculation, but thanks to some diligent research by James and Stephen Robertson – see “Acknowledgements” – we now know where it is.

The original Southwold scroll is kept in the town's museum, but unfortunately it is too fragile for public showing, even by arrangement. On display in the museum there are some photographs of parts of it. Additionally, a good collection of transparencies survives locally in private ownership, so all is not lost. Turner did not attempt to portray the whole of Southwold; he confined himself to Ferry Road, a part he found particularly quirky and interesting. This is the road that runs behind the dunes from the bottom of South Green to the river. In 1930 it was notable for its line of unusual beach chalets, no two alike, running the length of the road and backing onto Southwold marsh. A few of these survive, albeit rather altered over time, but a number of them, particularly those closest to the river, were washed away in the devastating tidal surge in January 1953, in which several lives were lost.

Where did John Doman Turner stay when he came to Walberswick and Southwold?

Most visiting artists arriving in the village in the 1920s and earlier would simply book in at Bell or Anchor, which both acted as accommodation agents. Both had one or two rooms available, but the majority of high-season visitors were farmed out to local families who had an available room (some families put their children in makeshift attic or outhouse spaces to make this modest enhancement of income possible). It should be remembered that The Anchor was, until 1927/28 when the present building came into use, a small timber-framed building standing on what is now the forecourt. This was dismantled and re-erected with very little alteration to the original structure further up the street, and renamed *Anchorlea*.

It seems likely that Turner adopted the above booking procedure on his earlier visits to the village. At the time of writing the only definite detail so far recorded is that in 1922 he lodged with a branch of the English family at Harbour View, just off the Green. At this period there was a very substantial cluster of huts, previously used as net sheds or sail lofts, on the south bank of the river between the old steam ferry slipway and the present ferry landing stage, converted into artists' studios by their enterprising owners by the insertion of glass panels in their north-facing walls. Most were let for a summer at a time, and records are very sparse. Turner was keen to have a riverside studio which could also serve as his summer home. He achieved this aim at some time before 1930. It appears on his Southwold scroll of that year, standing on the north side of the river on what is now a car park between the Alfred Corry Lifeboat Museum and the river wall. It even had a name – Jane- thought to be a reminder of a female friend.

The writer recalls an unresolved disagreement in the Bell, circa 1975, between two village elders on the subject of "Jane". One said that she was a hut, while the other insisted that she was a caravan; they eventually agreed to differ. Sometime later there was a slide show in Walberswick of the Southwold scroll of 1930, depicting not only the "beach houses" along Ferry Road but also those on the north bank of the river. Jane was featured and it was clear that the elders were, in a sense, both right. She had started life as a caravan of the type popular in the 1920s, with a raised section along the middle of the roof, which allowed occupants to stand at full height. Her draw-bar and wheels had been removed and she had been mounted on a solid plinth. A "carahut" invented, perhaps?

What makes the Walberswick Scroll so special?

Quite simply, Turner just loved Walberswick, and portrayed everything he saw in searching detail. This even extended to recording carefully the many signs and advertisements he encountered during his progress around the village, and the very comprehensive tariff of charges for the steam ferry – rich sources of material for historians trying to construct a detailed record of life in the village in 1931. One sign which always causes some amusement at scroll showings is to be found at the junction of Leverett's Lane and The Street. Parking was forbidden between that point and the Green – surprising to most of us, who had assumed that this was a much more recent problem.

Turner's almost child-like attention to detail can also be found in the numerous flint and brick walls. A rather special example of the latter can be found at the Freud stables, where not only is every brick lovingly portrayed but he includes the carefully tapered course of bricks inserted during the build process to correct an accidental departure from the horizontal by the bricklayer (another example of this situation can be found on a cottage on the Green (see if you can spot it). Weathervanes were another source of interest, and they were apt to be drawn oversize (this is particularly true of those on the Southwold scroll).

One cannot help noticing that the architectural details of the church and of the Methodist chapel do not seem to excite Turner's curiosity as much as one might expect. A good example, next to the chapel, is a telegraph pole complete with carefully observed foot-pegs, ceramic insulator bobbins and a turned finial at the top (we are told that these were there to prevent the perching of pigeons; quite a number survive in parts of Suffolk).

We all come away from a scroll showing with our own impressions and memories. For more than 25 years I was involved in showing the Scroll, and even at the end of this time I found that I was spotting details not previously seen.

Acknowledgments

This is the tricky bit. For many years I absorbed snippets of information about Turner and the scroll from village residents, long before thinking of writing about them. Methodical notes of who said what, and when, were not made, so some omissions seem inevitable.

Village residents, now deceased, who provided information included Derrick Allen, Ronald Coleman, Vida Connick, Blucher English, Leslie Goodwin, Peggy Rogers, Bertie Stannard, Roderick Winyard, and also Pat Wythe, who enhanced showings of the scroll in earlier times by providing a side show of archive photographs and other relevant material. The most prolific contributor was Michael Parkin, who was most generous at the time of the "Forgotten Camden Towner" exhibition at his London gallery in 1997.

More recent contributors include John English, who has deep family roots in the village and now leads the small scroll-showing team, backed up by Pat Lancaster and William Ungless, while Luke Jeans produced the excellent scroll video, now converted to DVD. Julia Reisz frequently adds greatly to the interest of the showings with her first-hand memories of the village as a child in the 1930s, and Philip Kett, our official Village Recorder, has been a frequent and helpful source of useful historical detail.

Finally, our endeavours have been helped recently by the arrival on the scene of a father-and-son team, James and Stephen Robertson, who have devoted much time to in-depth research into Turner's life and work, which has included tracking down the hitherto mysterious fourth scroll.

Richard Scott

Editor's note: Since Richard wrote this some things have changed – for example the Trinity Fair Scroll is no longer 'wall-mounted, behind UV glass, in the function room at The Swan Hotel in Southwold'. You may read a small "rant" about this if you click below

<http://walberswick.onesuffolk.net/assets/WLHG/WLHG-news-letters/HGnewsletterFeb2018.pdf>

Also, since Richard wrote his piece we have been fortunate to have had a high-definition scan of the scroll made. This has allowed us to zoom in and out of the scroll and examine it in detail. We have since questioned some minor details in Richard's understanding of how the scroll was painted and some of his recollections. But this is all "nit-picking"! Richard was a stickler for detail and accuracy and I am sure that if he was around now he would have revised his text.