

Bringing Truth to Light

Bernard Nurse FSA

In 1784, the Society's retiring President Edward King declared that one of the principal aims of the Society should be 'to bring *truth* to light' and develop the true history of mankind¹. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Society's publications of illustrations were among the most ambitious and innovative of the period. They comprised three main large-format series: *Vetusta Monumenta*, which ran from 1718 to 1906; the historical prints, issued between 1775 and 1788; and the Cathedral Series, from 1795 to 1810. At the same time, the Society was publishing its regular journal *Archaeologia*, major monographs such as William Roy's *The Military Antiquities of the Romans in Great Britain* (1793), and transcripts of source material for British history².

The origins of these publications can be traced back to the early days of the Society when the office of Director was established in 1718 to superintend all works of printing, drawing and engraving. The publication of prints was said to have been instigated by John Talman, the first Director, who was a talented draughtsman as well as a wealthy collector and patron³. He drew the subject of the first engraving, the lamp found at Windsor that became the Society's emblem (cat. 32), and also Edward the Confessor's shrine in Westminster Abbey. The Society's first Secretary, William Stukeley, was a strong advocate of the importance of accurate drawings and the value of engravings to convey understanding of historical monuments and antiquities. The Society was also fortunate in being able to employ one of the country's leading engravers, George Vertue, who was responsible for almost every print issued by the Society until his death in 1756 (cat. 88)⁴. After a few years he was succeeded by another skilled engraver, James Basire, whose son and grandson, both also called James, continued to serve the Society⁵. Among the apprentices of the first James was the artist and poet William Blake, who is known to have worked on drawings and copperplates for the Society while serving his apprenticeship from 1772 to 1779 (cat. 105).

Vetusta Monumenta

Almost 350 prints were issued in the series that was known as *Vetusta Monumenta* from 1747 but which began with the first print of the lamp issued in 1718. All were printed on imperial-folio size paper (21 ½ x 14 ½ in.; 54.6 x 36 cm). Most were published before 1842, although the series continued intermittently until 1906, and all but three related to Great Britain. The title page, issued

¹ King 1784, p. 5, quoted by Sweet 2004, p. 101

² Sweet 2007 and Sweet 2004

³ Evans 1956, p. 62, note 7

⁴ For the Society's engravers and Stukeley's views see Myrone 2007. See also Myrone 1999

⁵ Peltz 2004

in 1747, followed Stukeley in outlining the purpose of the series as the preservation of the memory of British things⁶. The Society was thinking of future generations; concerned by the number of losses of historic monuments, it included drawings discovered of buildings previously demolished that were 'thus transmitted to posterity'⁷.

The 70 engravings in the first volume were accompanied by no more than brief descriptive captions, but gradually more text was added, which developed into substantial articles. There was a great diversity of subjects and any survivals from the past were seen as suitable: coins, seals, documents, historic buildings, wall paintings and mosaics were all featured. By producing representations of ordinary objects, the Society extended the idea of what would be acceptable for publication, and some of the first illustrations showing archaeological excavations in Britain were included (cat. 88). Although drawings were often prepared in watercolour, such as those attributed to William Blake of monuments in Westminster Abbey (cat. 105), they were reproduced in black and white. Colour plates were first published in 1803, but not again until 1821–23, when Charles Stothard's recording of the Bayeux Tapestry resulted in its first complete reproduction in colour (cat. 109). Stothard's fine watercolours of the thirteenth-century wall paintings in the Painted Chamber of the Palace of Westminster (cat. 107), recorded in 1819, were not published until 1842, and hand-colouring of prints was offered at extra cost. Later in the century, the Society went on to publish high-quality chromolithographic facsimiles of illuminated manuscripts, commissioning copies from accomplished women artists such as Rosa Wallis and Margaret Stokes⁸. When *Vetusta Monumenta* was briefly revived at the end of the nineteenth century, William St John Hope, the Society's Assistant Secretary, used it to publish his research on the vestments of Hubert Walter, Archbishop of Canterbury (1193–1205), found at Canterbury Cathedral; the size of the page and use of colour allowed him to reproduce the illustrations (cat. 148) better than in the smaller format *Archaeologia*.

Historical Prints

The engravings published in *Vetusta Monumenta* had their critics among the Fellows. Sir Joseph Ayloff, a barrister employed in the State Paper Office, wrote in 1778 that the common run was taken from originals 'of little consequence and less amusement'⁹. He credited Philip Yorke, 2nd Earl of Hardwicke, with the idea of engraving historical paintings that commemorated remarkable events in Britain's national history. At a time of imperial and domestic crisis, the proposal gained strong support in the Society as contributing towards a sense of patriotism and national identity; and it complemented the vogue for history painting within the Royal Academy.

⁶ Stukeley 1724, preface: 'It is evident how proper engravings are to preserve the memory of things and how much better an idea they convey to the mind than written descriptions.' See also Evans 1956, p. 117, and Bruce-Mitford 1951, pp. 21–20.

⁷ For example, *Vetusta Monumenta*, vol. 1, plates 33, 42 and 48. See Lolla 1999

⁸ See especially *Vetusta Monumenta*, vol. 6, plate 43, for Margaret Stokes's copy of a page from the *Book of Kells*

⁹ BLAdd MS 35615, fol. 45, letter to Lord Hardwicke, 25 September 1778

Most of the subjects chosen concerned Henry VIII's fluctuating relations with France, which paralleled the changing attitudes of George III's governments. By 1769, Ayliffe was telling Lord Hardwicke that the painting of *The Field of Cloth of Gold* in the Royal Collection was 'indisputably the most capital antiquarian picture now extant' and would pursue the attempt to have it engraved¹⁰. The following year he read a paper to the Society describing some of the important works of art showing major events in British history, from the Bayeux Tapestry to sixteenth-century wall paintings at Cowdray House in Sussex, to help members consider suitable subjects for reproduction.

Between 1770 and 1780, the Society concentrated on this new series of historical prints and no engravings were published in *Vetusta Monumenta*. Seven prints were engraved by James Basire and published between 1775 and 1788. Two of these reproduced twelve-foot-long paintings in the Royal Collection at Windsor, painted in the mid-sixteenth century of events that had taken place in 1520, *The Field of Cloth of Gold* (Le Champ de Drap d'Or) (cat. 112), and the *Embarkation of Henry VIII at Dover* (fig. 23). Five prints reproduced wall paintings from Cowdray showing scenes from the war with France from 1544 to 1545 (cat. 113) and the coronation procession of Edward VI of 1547 (cat. 114). A new large size of paper, 'Antiquarian', had to be devised on which to print *The Field of Cloth of Gold*, and the effort and expense of producing detailed and reliable reproductions of such large-scale originals was so great that the last three paintings from Cowdray were copied and engraved in outline only.

The Society never recovered its costs despite financial support from Lord Hardwicke. Four hundred copies of each subject were printed, of which about 230 were given to Fellows as part of their subscription for the year and the rest were sold to the public at varying prices over a long period of time. Restrikes have been made from the copperplates according to demand, and three of the plates still survive, two in remarkably good condition (cat. 112)¹¹. However, the publication of historical prints was a triumph in terms of raising the Society's profile at a crucial time when it was campaigning to obtain apartments in the new Somerset House with the Royal Society and the Royal Academy. The copies commissioned by the Society of the Cowdray wall paintings provide the only record of their appearance, as the interior of the house was destroyed by fire shortly afterwards. Thus two of the best-known images from the mid-sixteenth century – the City of London at the time of Edward VI's coronation and Portsmouth at the time of the sinking of the *Mary Rose* – have been preserved.

¹⁰ BL Add MS 35608, fol. 370, letter to Lord Hardwicke, 12 June 1769; see also Sweet 2004, pp. 96–8

¹¹ Nurse 1989

The Cathedral Series

The historical prints did not find favour with the Society's Director, Richard Gough, who complained about their cost and their neglect of the medieval period¹². Ironically, the next series, which he supported, proved even more expensive. Sir William Chambers, the architect of Somerset House, urged that the Society of Antiquaries 'undertake a correct publication of our own Cathedrals ... before they totally fall into ruin, it would be of real service to the Arts of Design'¹³. The idea was taken up with vigour by Sir Henry Englefield and his fellow member of the Society of Dilettanti, Sir Joseph Windham. The Dilettanti were publishing a lavish series of architectural surveys of Greece in the *Antiquities of Ionia* (1769–97), and, in 1792, Englefield proposed that the Society should commission artists to make architectural drawings of British cathedrals and religious houses. They found an outstanding draughtsman in John Carter, who had previously been employed by Richard Gough and the Society. The following year Carter submitted drawings that he had begun in 1790 of St Stephen's Chapel at the Palace of Westminster, and it was decided that they should be engraved. Over a five-year period, from 1794 to 1798, Carter was employed to survey Exeter, Bath, Wells, Durham and Gloucester, and the Society appointed Englefield and Windham to form 'The Committee for superintending the publication of drawings of the ancient ecclesiastical buildings of this country'. They acted with considerable efficiency, publishing Carter's drawings of St Stephen's Chapel in 1795, Exeter Cathedral in 1797, Bath Abbey in 1798 and Durham Cathedral (cat. 115) in 1801.

The series was the first to attempt accurate, detailed and measured drawings of the religious houses of England. Carter was responsible for nearly 70 drawings and the accompanying text of five of the sets. He has been acclaimed as 'the principal creator of a series which in detail and scholarship was unique in Europe ... in range, scale and consistency of purpose there was nothing in its generation to match Carter's Cathedrals'¹⁴. He was elected a Fellow in 1795 but made many enemies with his outspoken remarks on the destruction of medieval features in the name of restoration. Englefield and Windham managed to secure the publication of the Durham drawings but those of Wells (cat. 116) were never engraved and remained unpublished until 2006¹⁵. Carter was refused entry into St Stephen's Chapel to carry out drawings of the wall paintings uncovered in 1800 and the Society sent Richard Smirke in his place (cat. 106).

The format, at atlas size, was smaller than the historical prints, and the plates were issued folded into volumes similar in size to *Vetusta Monumenta*. As with the historical prints, the cost of continuing proved prohibitive, especially as Fellows were entitled to a free copy of each set.

¹² Sweet 2007

¹³ Chambers 1791, p. 24. He claimed it would 'preserve the remembrance of an extraordinary style of building now fast sinking into oblivion, and, at the same time, publish to the world the riches of Britain in the splendour of her ancient structures'.

¹⁴ Crook 1995, p. 23; Carter 1803

¹⁵ SAL Council Minutes, 10 May 1799, contains their progress report on the series and proposals on its future. For Wells see Rodwell and Leighton 2006

Drawings by J. A. Repton of Norwich Cathedral purchased by the Society in 1806 were finally published in 1965¹⁶. Drawings of Tewkesbury Abbey commissioned from Frederick Nash about 1817 were eventually published in *Vetusta Monumenta* and no further sets were published. There was some criticism that the format was too large, the print too sharp and the production too extravagant¹⁷. It was left to another Fellow, John Britton, acknowledging his debt to Carter, to take up the challenge in his more affordable series of Cathedral Antiquities (1814–35)¹⁸.

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¹⁶ Repton 1965 includes 'A note on the Cathedral Series' by the editor

¹⁷ Evans 1956, p. 214; Crook 1995, p. 23

¹⁸ Sweet 2004, p. 266; Britton 1850, part 2, pp. 72–85

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This text is a revised edition taken from 'Making History: Antiquaries in Britain 1707 – 2007' exhibition catalogue published by the Royal Academy of Arts, London – all catalogue numbers referenced can be found in this publication