

Wood and Salt

This is a tale of Wood and Salt. An unlikely combination of materials, you might think, but one which has bequeathed to us a priceless legacy.

Safe in the arms of the William Salt Library in Stafford there is a collection of some 400 pencil sketches and watercolour views of Staffordshire, all executed over a period of just five years. Together they comprise one of the most detailed visual examinations of a single county to be found anywhere.

If you've never visited the William Salt, let me encourage you to go. It's a reminder of what libraries (and scholarship) used to be before they believed that everything could be done on a computer. To call the place a local history library is to underestimate the extraordinary range of stuff within its walls: paintings and maps, manuscripts and stained-glass, prints and pamphlets. Yet the man after whom the collection is named never even lived in Stafford. He spent almost the whole of his life in London.

The library's eclectic mix is the result of a lifetime's collecting by William Salt, whose banking ancestors provided him with enough spare time and money to pursue his hobby indefatigably: that is, to collect anything and everything relating to the country of Staffordshire.

On Salt's death the collection came within a whisker of being sold and dispersed, but at the last minute the sale was halted, and through the good offices of William Salt's nephew, Titus Salt MP, it was preserved and left to the town.

Most antiquaries are content simply to Hoover up all they can find of historical or local interest. William Salt was more pro-active than this, commissioning artists to record aspects of the county, its towns and churches, landscapes and buildings. At the time Salt was doing so the rising tide of industrialisation was threatening to sweep much of Staffordshire's history aside. You might call it "rescue art".

The man who benefited more than any from William Salt's urgent quest was Thomas Peplow Wood, and from his hand came that large collection of views now preserved

in the library, which also keeps his diaries. A further 200 or so of Wood's pictures are in the collections of the Staffordshire Museums.

Wood himself was born on New Year's Day in 1817 in the village of Great Haywood, and spent much of his youth in nearby Colwich.

Wood perfectly fits the stereotype of the romantic artist. He was poor, largely self-taught, but innately talented. It's said that travellers on the road from London to Liverpool saw his work and slipped him a little money, which he spent on prints of Old Masters.

Wood received some local encouragement too, and the architect Thomas Trubshaw took him to London to meet the print dealer and art connoisseur, Dominic Colnaghi, who bought some of his pictures. Suitably inspired, Wood began to exhibit his work at the Royal Academy and at the Birmingham Society of Arts.

That Thomas Wood's art is largely topographical is a reflection of the people who commissioned him. Local landowners, including the Duke of Sutherland and Earl Talbot, paid for work, as well as a host of minor gentry, doctors and Anglican ministers. Wood's diaries show him shuttling back and forth across the country, sketching as he went.

But none of this could have prepared the artist for the mammoth commission presented to him by William Salt in the mid-1830s. From 1836 through to the early 1840s Salt sent him everywhere in Staffordshire, from Tipton in the far south up to Burton-on-Trent, the Potteries and the Moorlands. Staffordshire is a big county.

For each picture Wood produced William Salt paid ten shillings, along with £5 a year expenses.

Much of the world that Thomas Wood observed and captured in these years has gone forever. Many of the ancient timber houses he saw in Cannock, Penkridge and Stafford are no more, and even some of the grander country piles - Tixall Old Hall, Tittensor Manor, Manley Hall - have gone the same way. The pencil and wash sketch of Tipton from 1837 is as evocative an image as any: the crumbling ruins of the old church give way to an encroaching crowd of furnace chimneys.

Thomas Peploe Wood has gone as well, and rather sooner than we might have wished. His diaries - from 1839-44 - show him struggling with ill-health throughout this period, though the exact nature of his ailments is not as easy to discern.

In the end it was tuberculosis - a perennial favourite among romantic artists - that carried him off early in April 1844, at the age of just 28 years. He was buried in the little churchyard at Colwich, where, a few years later, his brother, Samuel carved an impressive cross to serve as a memorial to all the Woods.

No doubt all that travelling, and all that Staffordshire weather, were not ideal for a consumptive. But if posthumous appreciation is of any use to him, then Thomas Peploe Wood has that, There was an exhibition of his work at the Shire Hall in Stafford back in 2009, and the excellent catalogue, compiled by Randle Knight, is still on sale in the County Record Office.

Salt and Wood, the perfect marriage of art and antiquarianism.