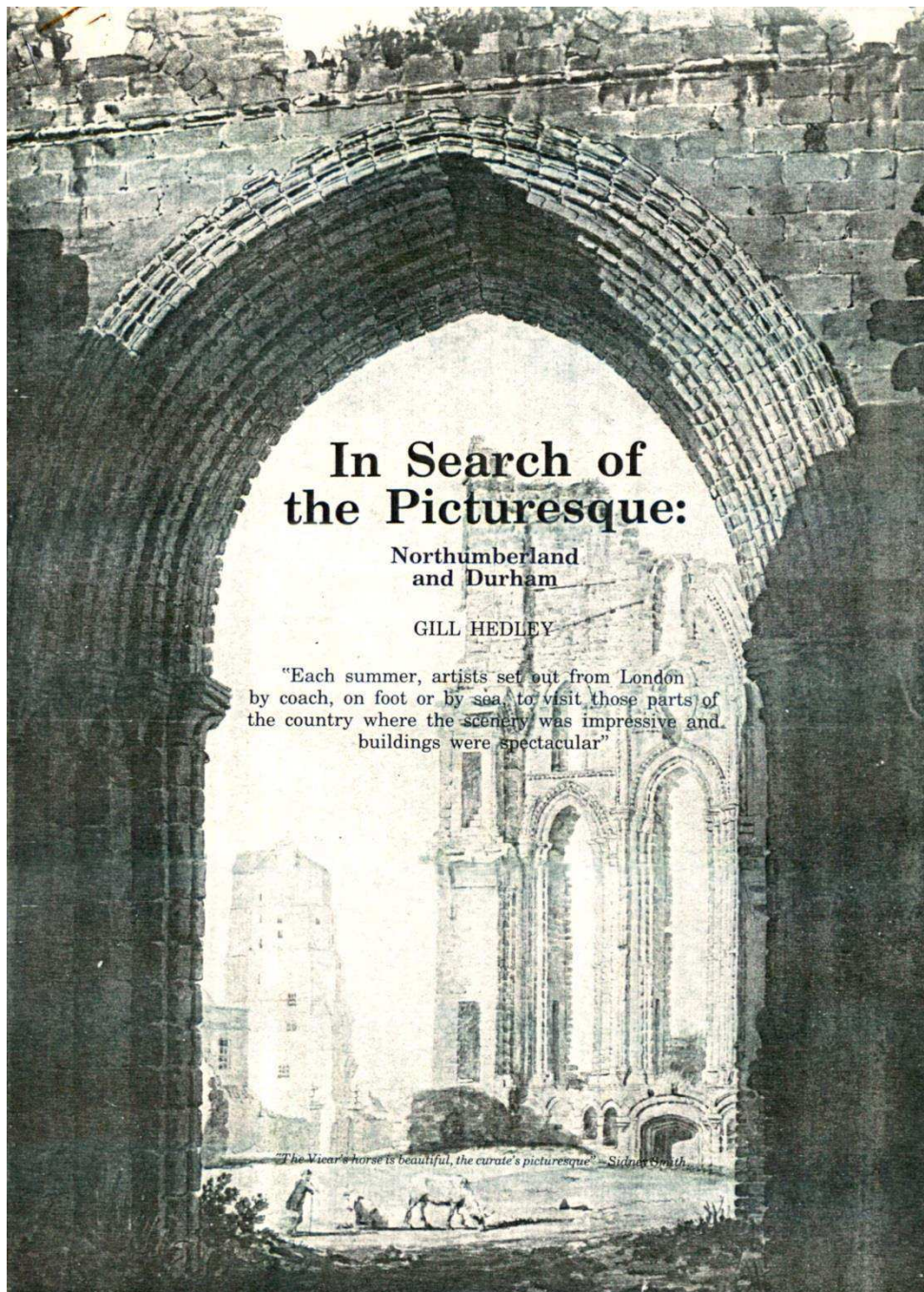


In Search of the Picturesque: Northumberland and Durham

Article by Gill Hedley for *Art and Artists* magazine, April 1982

“Each summer, artists set out from London by coach, on foot or by sea, to visit those parts of the country where the scenery was impressive and buildings were spectacular”

“The Vicar’s horse is beautiful, the curate’s picturesque” – Sydney Smith





From Rowlandson's *Dr Syntax in search of the Picturesque*.

*I'LL make a TOUR - and then I'll WRITE IT.
You well know what my pen can do
And I'll employ my pencil too:-
I'll ride and write, and sketch and print
And thus create a real mint;
I'll prose it here, I'll verse it there
And Picturesque it everywhere".*

William Combe put these verses into the mouth of Dr Syntax who became an immediate popular success. Syntax was Rowlandson's satirical portrait of William Gilpin, who, through his scholarly writings on viewing and painting landscape, popularised the whole concept of the Picturesque and made travel in search of it the height of fashion.

Previously, the subject had been an intellectual bone of contention tussled over by two Shropshire squires, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, (see February issue) but it was Gilpin who produced a more easily understood definition of the Picturesque as those rough, uneven and diverting elements in a picture that give interest to the eye. So he believed, cows were more

picturesque in May when their coat was being shed, squinting shepherdesses more picturesque than nymphs, ruins more picturesque than elegant mansions. Sydney Smith's famous summing-up was "The vicar's horse is beautiful, the curate's picturesque". The picturesque became a cult and the Picturesque Tour the "*ton* of the hour". Interest grew up at the same time as the developing interest in the British countryside: a shift of taste away from the Grand Tour and Italianate landscapes.

Since the beginning of the 18th century, there had been a new, scholarly interest in recording the British countryside and its monuments: the Buck brothers started their great survey of castles, cathedrals and cities in the 1720s. The parallel strands of antiquarianism and topography were pulled together into the weave of the picturesque. The public demanded illustrated books showing "scenes, situations and antiquities" and so a valuable source of income for water-colourists evolved.

The widespread use of water-colour in Britain dates from only the middle of the 18th century and it was always treated as the poor relation to the developing school of painting in oil. Water-colours were hung so badly at the Royal Academy's summer shows that water-colourists could not hope to sell much work speculatively. Almost all the major British water-colourists of the early period were obliged to earn their livings as teachers and by supplying designs to topographical publishers. So, it was not just a fashionable few who were making Picturesque tours each summer but the professional water-colourists, too. Each summer, artists set out from London by coach, on foot or by sea, to visit those parts of the country where scenery was impressive and buildings - whole or in ruins - were spectacular. Sketches were worked up later into watercolours from which engravings were published the following spring.

The Lake District is usually thought of as the archetypal picturesque region, but Northumberland and Durham's combination of scenery and historic buildings provided an equal attraction. Sir John Vanbrugh, the architect and playwright visiting the area in 1721, wrote: "If I had had good weather on this expedition I should have been well enough diverted on it, there being more valuable and agreeable things and places to be seen than in the tame South of England". From Barnard Castle and Durham Cathedral in the south of the region to the castles of Dunstanburgh, Bamburgh and Lindisfarne in the north, the area is still noted for its magnificent buildings and dramatic settings especially along the Northumbrian coast.

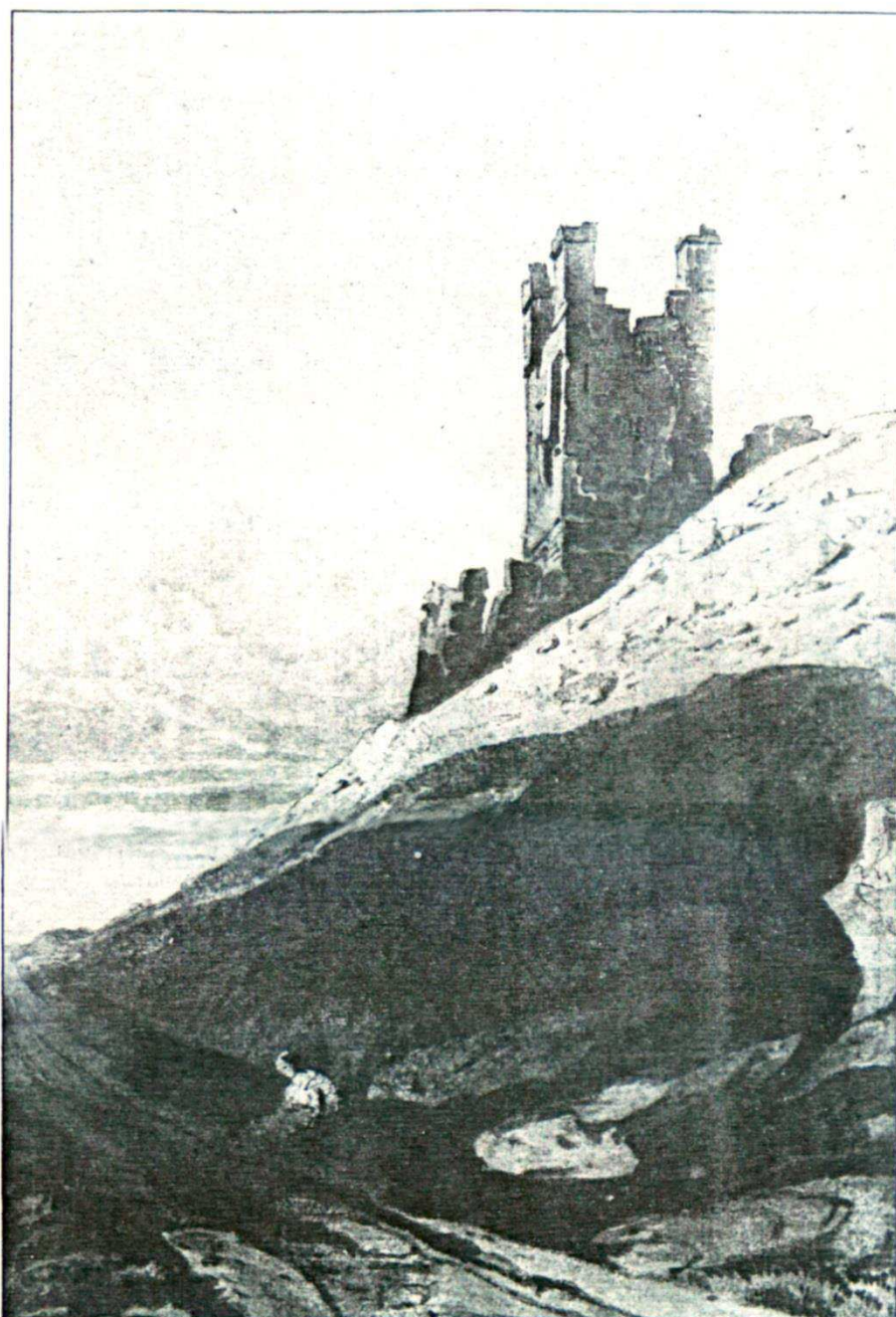
Felicity Hunters entering Shiney Row in search of the Picturesque by an amateur artist in 1828.



LAING ART GALLERY

Even the early developments of the Industrial Revolution were considered picturesque and worthy of a visit or a sketch: the pit village of Shiney Row in Co. Durham was subjected to a visit from some members of the county set in 1828, captured in Felicity Hunter's *Entering Shiney Row in Search of the Picturesque*, September 1828. This is one of the 150 drawings, sketches and prints collected together by Tyne and Wear County Museums for the exhibition *The Picturesque Tour in Northumberland and Durham, c.1720-1830* to be shown at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, from 17 April until 31 May 1982. Paintings are being borrowed from most of the major watercolour collections in the country including the British Museum, Victoria and Albert, Fitzwilliam and Ashmolean Museums and from many private collections. Tyne and Wear County Council's own extensive collection is the basis of the exhibition but major loans of works by Turner, Girtin, Cotman and others have guaranteed a superb display of watercolours.

J.M.W. Turner first visited the area in 1797 and returned in 1801 and 1817. He produced sketches, water-colours and oil paintings from all over the region and his views of Tyne-mouth, Durham, Newcastle, Shields, Warkworth, Brinkbum and Lindisfarne are also on show. Thomas Girtin visited the North East in 1796, 1799 and 1800 and did some of his finest work at Durham and Morpeth. The last paintings of his tragically short career was Morpeth Bridge, 1802. Eighteen of Girtin's watercolours will be a highlight of the exhibition, emphasising how important an inspiration the North East was to Girtin.



John Varley: *Lilburn Tower, Dunstanborough Castle, Northumberland, 1810.*

LAING ART GALLERY

John Sell Cotman was persuaded, against his will, to visit Durham in 1805 where he made some magnificent watercolours of the cathedral: "My chief study has been colouring from Nature many of which are close copies of that fickle Dame consequently valuable on that account". Works by Samuel Hieronymous Grimm, Thomas Hearne, Edward Dayes, John Varley and many other well-known members of the water-colour school are included in the show. Because of the practicalities of the picturesque sketching-tour, we are able to trace the development of many artists' ideas from the first sketch through the finished water-colour to the published engraving. As the North East was such a popular area and the same picturesque sit*® occur in each artist's output there is the fascinating opportunity to see how, for instance, Dayes, Hearne, Girtin, Turner, Cotman and Varley all saw and interpreted Durham Cathedral.

It is always interesting to know the background to a painting, why it was painted and under what conditions, so it is intriguing to see Grimm's two water-colours of Picturesque tourists on a picnic on the Fame Islands: the family on one rock, servants on another! John Glover's horrified note under a sketch of Newcastle in 1805: "I was more interrupted and annoyed while making this sketch by drunken vulgar peoples than I ever was at any other place in my life", whereas Thomas Gray wrote in 1753 of Durham: "One of the most beautiful vales here in England to walk in with prospects that change with every ten steps, and open something new wherever 1 turn me, or rude and romantic; in short, the sweetest spot to break your neck or drown yourself in that ever was beheld".

Why not make a Picturesque tour yourself to the North East during April or May?

John Varley: *Lindisfarne*, 1808.

