



Life of John Crome

John Crome, Georgian landscape painter and a founder of the Norwich School of Painting, lived at 17 Gildengate, (83-85 St George's Street), close to this Church, between 1802 and his death in 1821.

He was born in 1768 across the river in Tombland, where his father kept "The Griffen" alehouse in King Street, before becoming a journeyman weaver. At 13 John Crome became errand boy for Dr Edward Rigby, an eminent surgeon and physician who lived at 32 St Giles. Once, the doctor's medical students put a skeleton in Crome's bed as a joke. He threw it out of his window and the incident became famous. In August 1783 he began a 7-year apprenticeship with Francis Whisler, "Coach, House and Sign Painter" who lived nearby at 41 Bethel Street. Crome started to develop an interest in painting, and made friends with Robert Ladbrooke, also a painter's apprentice. They went sketching around Norwich, particularly on Mousehold heath, and shared a garret studio. Crome is reputed to have made brushes from cat's hair and used oyster shells as palettes. He spent what money he had buying prints to copy by Masters such as Rembrandt.

Dr Rigby saw his ability and introduced him to Thomas Harvey of Catton, (who also had a house at 3 Snailgate or Calvert Street), an amateur artist and collector. He owned paintings by Thomas Gainsborough, Richard Wilson and Hobbema, which he allowed Crome to copy. Crome particularly loved Hobbema. Harvey also introduced Crome to Sir William Beechey RA, who taught him in London, Richard Wilson and John Opie, the portrait painter. Opie later married Amelia, the beautiful daughter of James Alderson, Surgeon of 39 Colegate, and painted John Crome's own portrait.

When Crome's apprenticeship ended in 1790 he took various commissions, and gave drawing lessons to the children of the wealthy, who could afford 1 guinea per half year. Dr Rigby and Mr Harvey helped him with this enterprise, so that his clients came to include Dawson Turner, the Yarmouth Banker, the Gurneys of Earlham Hall, whom he taught from 1798, and the Jerninghams of Costessey Hall. Crome made his pupils keep their pencils very sharp, reputedly so that he could profit by selling them replacements. He established a school of art at his house in 1801, and later became drawing master at the King Edward VI Grammar School, Norwich. At this time Crome still painted signs, including those for "the Man loaded with Mischief", "the Lame Dog", "the Top Sawyer" and other Norwich pubs.

In 1792 Crome married Phoebe Berney in St Mary's Coslany, and shortly afterwards their first daughter was born. They were to have 7 surviving children, of whom John Berney Crome also became a famous painter. Robert Ladbrooke married Phoebe's sister Mary the next year.

In February 1803 Crome and Ladbrooke formed the Norwich Society of Artists along with Dixon, Hodgson, Coppin, Stark, Vincent and Thirtle, as "An Enquiry into the Rise, Progress and Present state of Painting" with a view to point out the "Best Methods of Perfection in these Arts". This really marked the beginning of the Norwich School. The Society held its first exhibition in 1805 with 223 works from 18 exhibitors and the series of annual exhibitions continued almost unbroken until 1833.

In 1802 Crome joined the Gurneys for a tour of Lake District. In 1806 he exhibited at the Royal Academy. In 1807 he served as President of the Norwich Society of Painters. In 1814 he visited Paris.

Sociable, mirth loving, kind, and earnest, Old Crome (to distinguish him from his sons), was a Baptist by religion and a Whig by inclination, most often found in “the Rifleman” in Cross Lane off St George’s Street in the evening. He died in great poverty in 1821, leaving only about 300 works. Some of these can be seen at the Castle Museum in Norwich. Often unsigned, these works included watercolours and etchings. He developed a new style of brushwork, placing paint rather than stroking it on.

His memorial by John Bell, the famous Norfolk sculptor, is at the east end of the south aisle, where it was erected in 1868, close to the tomb Crome shares with Alderman Richard Lubbock (1676-1717).



Neil Hacker, Revised July 2008