

The Sunshine of Fortune

Dean Parkin

**POEMS FROM A RESIDENCY
IN THE STOUR VALLEY**

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Dean Parkin was born in 1969 and left school at the age of sixteen to work for a printer and then in a bookshop. He has worked for The Poetry Trust since 1999 where he is currently the Creative Director. He has previously published two pamphlets, *Irresistible to Women* (2003) and *Just Our Luck* (2008). In addition to his recent Poet of the Valley project (as part of Managing a Masterpiece), he was also poet in residence for the Beccles Festival 2012 during which he created a video poem celebrating the town. He has been commissioned to devise a similar film about St Edmundsbury Cathedral in Bury St Edmunds in 2013.
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Foreword

Welcome to *The Sunshine of Fortune*, commissioned by the ‘Managing a Masterpiece’ project. This is a new collection of poems, written in response to the rich artistic history of the Stour Valley. The Valley has been an inspiration and home to some of England’s most visionary painters and writers, and these poems have been prompted by the landscape, the artists and their creations – some will be well known and familiar, some less so.

Most are written by our Poet in Residence, Dean Parkin, who has a real affinity with the area and its subject. As part of his residency, he has visited a number of schools and worked with over 450 children. Alongside his work, we are publishing here the winners of the ‘Managing a Masterpiece’ poetry competition which produced some really impressive work from both children and adults. We thank everyone who has been involved in hosting workshops and who has submitted entries – clearly, the future creative writing of the Stour Valley is in safe and talented hands!

Our grateful thanks also go to the various funders of the ‘Managing a Masterpiece’ project and especially the Heritage Lottery Fund. We hope you enjoy reading this collection of poems and do share it with family and friends.

Tim Harris

Alex Hallows

Xceptional Productions

Managers, Arts Programme of ‘Managing a Masterpiece’

March 2013

Introduction

I feel very fortunate to have been the Poet of the Valley. It's a residency that has proved to be an absorbing and rewarding education, exciting me about where I was born and bred (albeit on the eastern side of Suffolk, just outside the Stour Valley) and where my family have lived for generations.

It's led me to explore and research the artists and writers of the area and really appreciate for the first time the work of Constable and Gainsborough and also to make wonderful discoveries like Harry Becker, who captured the last era of men and horses at work. Another find was Suffolk's very own Robert Bloomfield, now almost forgotten but the most popular poet of his day in the 19th century with an astonishing life story.

Coinciding with research into my own family history, this project has also allowed me to connect with my Suffolk roots and the lives of ancestors like my 'head horseman' great grandfather who became the subject of a poem.

Most of all, 'Poet of the Valley' has given me an understanding of the hardships and difficulties encountered by our often recent predecessors, artists and labourers alike, and the skill and dedication required to get their work done.

Dean Parkin
March 2013

Busy Day

after 'Gala Day' by Alfred Munnings

The orange seller was calm, his coat the colour
of the spring sky, his hat as white as paper,
he was smiling happily through the shadow
of his hat, his scarf was made of colours
like crayons. Kids rush to him dropping shillings
and farthings on the way, some buying two
but grabbing three, but the generous man
didn't mind. The gypsy was there, working to sell,
rich or poor, who knows her day, some people buy
some not and about her there was a black coated
black everything, but there's one more thing
and that's for you to decide.

Matthew Strellis

Age 9, Clare Community School
Childrens Competition Winner

The Poet of the Valley residency took me into seven schools in the Stour Valley to work with 450 children with the aim of inspiring them to write poems in response to individual paintings by a wide range of artists from the region. All the pupils' finished work was entered into the Managing a Masterpiece poetry competition and the winner and runner-up are celebrated here – plus the two from the adult section of the competition. All four poems offer surprising and appealing 'takes' on the work of four very different artists (two of the paintings are also subjects of my own poems) and they demonstrate the hallmarks of all good writing: pleasure in language and authenticity of voice.

Dean Parkin

Man Cycling Madly Down A Hill

after the painting by Mary Newcomb (page 34)

Nearly late for a meeting racing on his bike
up and down the hills, when will he arrive.

Time is ticking fast but the bikers even faster
will he get there on time, when will he arrive.

Hunched over the handle bars trying to pick up speed
storming down a big hill, when will he arrive.

The wind brushing through his hair but he doesn't care
nearly at his meeting point, when will he arrive.

One last hill to go down, he is nearly there
parking up and walking off he has just arrived.

Connor Crowley

Age 10, Bures Primary School

Childrens Competition Runner-up

Constable's Clouds

A washing line of lightweight t-shirts
a scruffy slice of feathery bread
a puffing bunch of chainsmokers
a grumpy sheep with no legs or head.

Bumpy, if you're in an aeroplane
as lumpy as our spines
cushions quietly dozing
long distance travellers as old as time.

Humongous doves caught mid-leap
a dragon's sneeze, light bulb bones
frothy spaceships never landing
an old lady that needs a comb.

Shaken Diet Coke froth
exploding popcorn, the inside of chips
fuzzy meringues, tasteless bubblegum
bathroom toothpaste drips.

A giant bullet in slow motion
faraway traffic jams
dizzy mist, seaside wanderers
rain trains, watering cans.

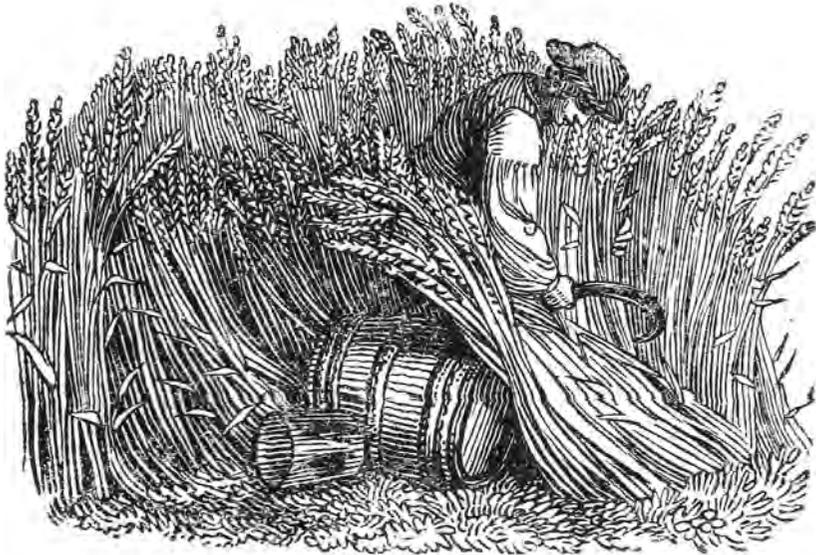
The insides of my sister's teddy bear
pillow fights that make a mess
sunsets as pink as a hippy's hair
or grey as a smudge on a wedding dress.

This 'school poem' emerged from the warm-up exercise used with each class. Every line was written by 8-11 year olds from seven Stour Valley primary schools – Bures, Clare Community, Great Waldingfield, St Mary CEVA, Stoke by Nayland, Stratford St Mary and Woodhall – and then assembled to create the poem.

The Sunshine of Fortune

Dean Parkin

POEMS BY THE POET OF THE VALLEY



Woodcut from the first edition of *The Farmer's Boy* by Robert Bloomfield who was John Constable's favourite poet.

Cultural Heritage Opportunity

Artist currently seeks traditional peasants for a variety of roles in forthcoming masterpiece. Successful applicants will have experience of the outdoors, be good with animals (especially horses), have their own dog (ideally a collie) and be willing to wear a white smock with yellow or black hat. Agricultural labourers, shepherds, anglers, barge builders, lock-keepers and solitary ploughmen are all needed. A small number of women, mainly to help with the harvest but occasionally with babes in arms are also wanted. As are young lads, often wearing red, to tie ropes around posts, drink from streams and generally help convey the essence of childhood. Successful applicants will have experience in many areas of rural life – flailing turnip-heads, shovelling manure or driving a cart through a river for another load of hay. The ability to work on your own in the far distance and be dwarfed by the power of nature is essential. Ideally, likely candidates will need to be alive and living in the Suffolk area from 1776 to 1817 – individuals from the 21st century need not apply.



Flatford Mill 1817 (Scene on a Navigable River)

by John Constable (1776-1837)

Oil on canvas

Used with permission © Tate, London 2013

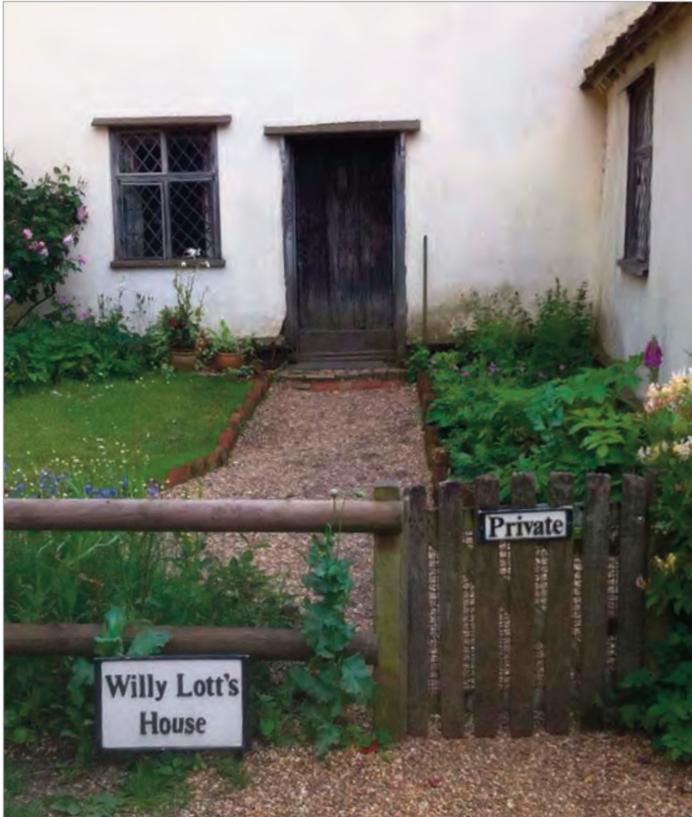
John Constable is one of England's best loved painters. Born in Suffolk, he is known for his landscape paintings of Dedham Vale where he was brought up – now called 'Constable Country'. He began this painting shortly before his marriage to Maria Bicknell, during the last period that he would paint the Suffolk landscape directly, before he left East Bergholt for Hampstead in London.

It is known from X-rays of this painting that John Constable painted out a horse on the towpath. It seems likely that the boy with the long stick (centre left) was originally shown feeding this horse which could have been removed as it was just too much of a distraction. In its place he added a second boy, this time reclining, and a third horse further along the path in the distance. However, the original horse's collar and towing gear were left behind on the grass. Constable's signature looks as if it had been scratched in the earth with a stick and in this way he put himself into the picture.

The Second of Three Horses

after 'Flatford Mill 1817 (Scene on a Navigable River)' by John Constable

You won't forget him either if I tell you
about this horse, discover his collar
on the grass by the canal, hoofprints
along the towpath. You'll find the child
(now with younger brother) and picture
that gentle plodding heavy hauler
head down, eating out of his hand one day,
the next – vanished, painted over, the way
we were all here once, like the old boy
who was the short lad with a tall stick
making his mark casually on the track.

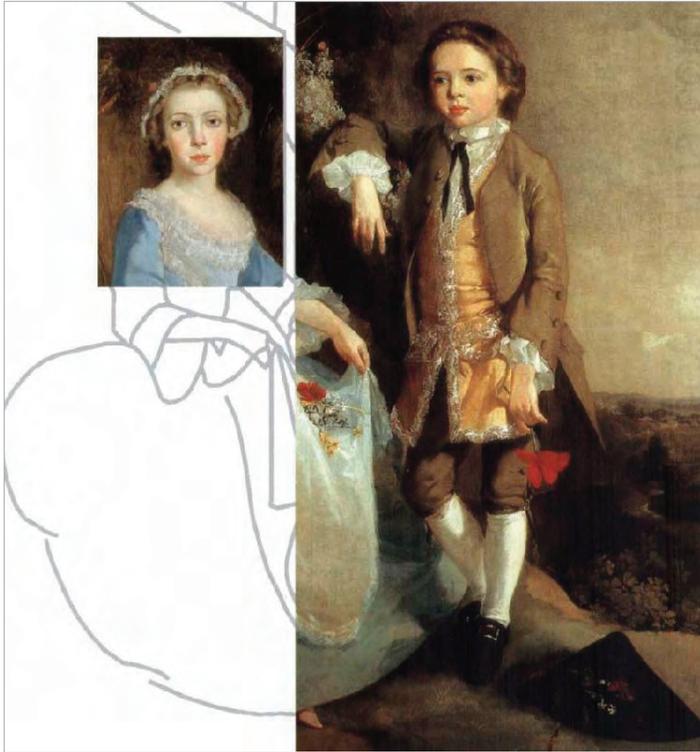


Photograph of Willy Lott's House, Flatford (2012)
Author's Collection

Willy Lott was a Suffolk farmer who lived all his life in a cottage that appeared in many Constable paintings including *The Hay Wain*. Located downstream from Flatford Mill, the building dates from the 16th century and was restored in the 1920s at a time when Constable's work was having a revival. It has been more recently renamed 'Willy Lott's House' – as this is how Constable referred to it – and is now owned by the National Trust who lease the cottage, along with other buildings nearby, for residential art courses.

Willy Lott's House

Famous for appearing in the painting
the house is renamed yours forever but
in your lifetime never belonged to you, Mr Lott,
simple tenant farmer, you knew your place
as Gibeon's Farm. Worked hard and slept there
all your 88 years, apart from four nights apparently
as it is recorded. William, son of John,
born 1761, fifth of eight children,
husband of Mary, father of nine, friend
of the Constable family who owned the mill
next door. *Rum bugger, that boy John*
I want you to say but mean no harm
before you crossed this parish one last time
in July 1849 to your second home with a view
of his 'Church Porch, East Bergholt'
leaving what's now your house, Willy Lott,
where we'll find a gate marked private
to stop us knocking to see if you're home.



Portrait of a Girl (fragment) and Portrait of a Boy (fragment) (1744-45)
by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788)
Oil on canvas
Used with permission © Gainsborough's House Society

Thomas Gainsborough was one of the late 18th century's leading portrait painters. Born in Sudbury, he was the son of a weaver and as a child showed such a talent for drawing and painting that at the age of thirteen he was sent to London to study art.

One of his most ambitious early paintings was *The Portrait of a Boy and Girl*, which he attempted in 1744 when he was still a teenager and which later ended up in two pieces with a section missing. The picture above gives an outline of what the original painting would have looked like. It is not known why or when the portrait was cut in two and it was only relatively recently that the pieces were reunited. The 'boy' was already in the collection at Gainsborough's House when the 'girl' was discovered in the early 1990s. They now hang there together, side by side again.

Like a Couple of Kids

after 'Portrait of a Girl' (fragment)

& 'Portrait of a Boy' (fragment) by Thomas Gainsborough

I could knock your heads together, you two!

Sister and brother, old enough to know better,
they won't tell who did what to who.

Families. You know what they're like. She'd sworn
it was him and he blamed her and she never
lied. *Honestly!* Before you know it, they're torn

apart, not speaking for years. Don't bother
asking why – she's tight-lipped and he won't
meet your eye. As bad as each other.

Alone, she came off best, this pink English rose,
but for him there was always something
missing. He never could forget that blue dress.

Now that it's all too late, what's left are the pieces
and us, trying to picture them as they were
before, just kids, together once.



Mr and Mrs Andrews (circa 1850)

by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788)

Oil on canvas

Used with permission © National Gallery, London

Bought with contributions from the Pilgrim Trust, The Art Fund,
Associated Television Ltd, and Mr and Mrs W.W. Spooner, 1960.

Mr and Mrs Andrews is one of Gainsborough's most famous paintings and is thought to be the masterpiece of his early years. He painted it soon after his return to Suffolk from London in 1748, shortly after the marriage of Robert Andrews and Frances Carter, near Sudbury. What is often overlooked about the painting is that it isn't finished – a space has been left on Mrs Andrew's lap and it has been open to wide debate what Gainsborough was reserving the space for.

The people in Gainsborough's paintings really come alive when he mischievously seems to be making fun of them. His letters certainly indicate that these portraits and their subjects frequently tried his patience.

Mrs Andrews' Lap

after 'Mr & Mrs Andrews' by Thomas Gainsborough

Here they are, the happy couple
their union preserved
but on her lap
Tom left a gap
the space as if reserved.

For their forthcoming children?
But which, for there were eight?
Decide which one
and I'll paint 'em on
said Tom, *let's make a date.*

Pheasants! said the husband
the self-proclaimed hot shot.
They'd make a mess
on my new dress
his wife said, *so let's not.*

He then suggested sewing
So you'd look artistic.
Or a mixing bowl?
This brought a scowl
I'm no domestic!

Gainsborough was getting desperate.
A spring lamb? A pet crow?
We can't decide
said the young bride
just leave it blank for now.

Said Mrs A to the artist
you must think we're quite hopeless!
I hate these portraits
he thinks and paints,
but who cares, who'll ever notice?



My Wife, My Horse and Myself (1935)
by Sir Alfred Munnings (1878-1959)
Used with permission © Estate of Sir Alfred Munnings

Sir Alfred Munnings belongs to the British tradition of great horse painters and he was a flamboyant character in the art world of the first half of the 20th century. Born into a farming family in Mendham, Suffolk, he went on to study at Norwich School of Art before rising to become President of the Royal Academy. Always a popular and controversial figure, his long-term home 'Castle House' in Dedham (pictured above) is now a museum celebrating his life and work.

The Artist's Touch

for Alfred Munnings

He was lifting a dog over a hedge
and smack – a briar caught him across the face.
He was twenty, apprenticeship
finished, a young artist blinded
in his right eye. Now
when he went to paint, brush
hit canvas, landed too hard or
fell short, stroke
after stroke dabbing the air, painting
nothing. *Cramps my style, shortens my stride*
but that didn't stop him
finding his own way
to the gala days, the country fayres,
the generals, the gypsies and always
the horses he understood exactly
and stuck to his vision, spoke out
for precision – *if you paint a tree,
for God's sake make it look like a tree.*
Always he lived in the detail
and with each picture, each horse
grew finer, the eye clearer.



The Garden in Winter (1964)

by John Nash (1893-1977)

Oil on canvas

Used with permission © the artist's estate/Bridgeman Art Library

Photo credit: Colchester and Ipswich Museums

John Nash, the landscape painter, first arrived in Wormingford in the summer of 1929, when he and his wife Christine rented a little clapboard bungalow there. They soon fell in love with the area and in 1943 they bought Bottengoms, a dilapidated farmhouse.

Brother of the more celebrated artist Paul, John Nash had fought on the Western Front and was an official War Artist. During the 1920s he was at the forefront of a new era of innovative book illustrators.

It was in Wormingford, on the Essex/Suffolk border, that John and Christine made their life and where he was able to concentrate on painting the natural subjects which he favoured. As a passionate amateur gardener, he created the garden of his dreams at Bottengoms, a legacy lovingly maintained by his friend Ronald Blythe that can still be seen in all its glory today.

Nash was particularly drawn to winter scenes. 'John had a passion for snowscapes and the two kinds of life they displayed,' says Ronald, 'the immaculate life of the snow itself, and the brown green vegetable life thrusting through it.'

The Garden in Winter

after the John Nash painting

On a day for making essential journeys only
it seems necessary to be out and about, satisfied to find
a trail of wheels and footprints down my lane, underlined
by the flourish of a solo cyclist's track. Tonight more snow

will once again be immaculate, drifts predicted,
the landscape already braced. It's a brittle picture
as the temperature drops, daylight bleak, 3pm drab,
silence but for blackbirds in a flap.

This is the dead of winter, hunting for the brown-green
at the edge of fields, any reassurance of life beneath.
For the morning's impassable roads we'll have gritters
and snowploughs for those who must pull through.



Ronald Blythe in his Study at Bottengoms (2008)
by Toby Wiggins RP (1972–)
Oil on canvas
Used with permission © Toby Wiggins

Ronald Blythe, born in 1922, is one of the UK's leading rural writers. *Akenfield*, his brilliant portrait of an English village, was published in 1969 and became an instant classic. In a life dedicated to the written word, he has produced novels, short stories, poetry, literary criticism and social history. He has lived for many years at Bottengoms Farm, an Elizabethan yeoman's house on the Essex/Suffolk border, which he inherited from the painter John Nash.

Off the Beaten Track

for Ronald Blythe, Bottengoms Farm

On this unmade road
there's only one place
you're heading. You'll find him

at work each morning (evenings too
if necessary) on the business
of writing. One man and his words.

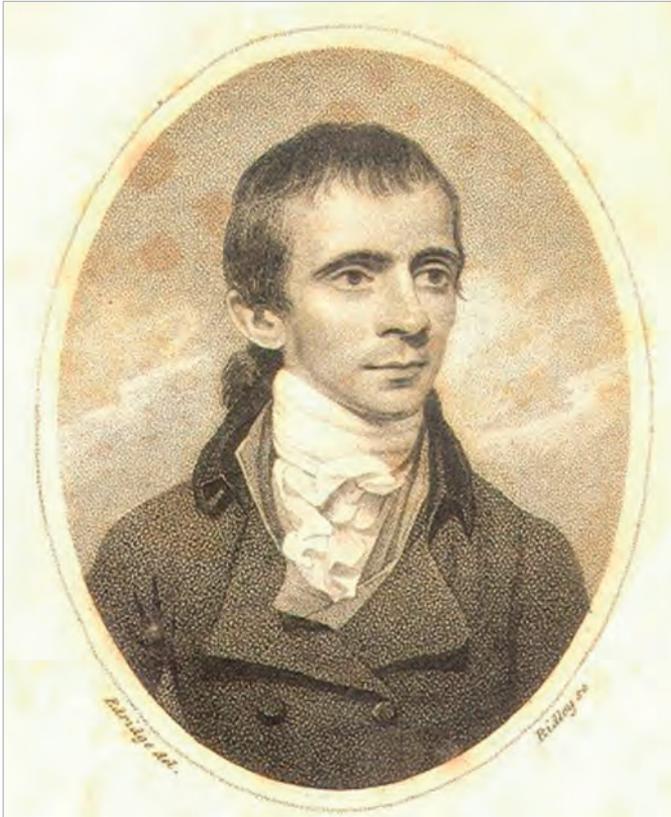
Afternoons are when visitors
are welcomed. Even the ants swarming
on the doorstep are entertained –

They're okay, they don't stay long.
A pleasure to meet him, he's happy
to answer questions, sift through

the years, thoughts like books
correctly shelved, so he reaches
the required fact or phrase.

From Suffolk, living in Essex,
I'm an East Anglian he says,
at peace. Even the wasp comes

and goes, easy through a window
like everything else here –
no fuss, a job to get on with.



Robert Bloomfield (1802)
Portrait engraving by William Ridley (1764-1838)
after a painting by Henry Edridge (1768-1821)
Used with permission © The Robert Bloomfield Society

Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823) was born in Honington, Suffolk and in the early 19th century was England's most popular poet. Admired by Wordsworth and Clare, Bloomfield belongs to a long line of English 'peasant poets' and his most successful work *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) was still one of the country's best selling poetry books in the 1890s.

'The sunshine of fortune' which is the title of this collection, is a quote from one of Bloomfield's letters to his brother George and is used, in full, in the poem opposite.

The Cobbler Laureate

for Robert Bloomfield

26,000 copies. Twenty-six thousand
sold within two years, *The Farmer's Boy*
by Robert Bloomfield, Suffolk-born
self-taught peasant poet. *Blum*-field.
Too weak to work on the land, he left

for London to learn a trade and wrote
the verse that made his name. Hero to John Clare
who treasured a scrap of his handwriting,
for Byron he was *The Cobbler Laureate*
whose success robbed us of a great shoemaker.

Poor Bob. He couldn't forget his poverty, writing
to brother George, *The sunshine of fortune*
may require an umbrella. And the downpour
was constant. He buried a daughter,
his family exploited his kindness, his wife

gave their money to a religious sect, his publisher
went bust, his income dried up, his health (never good)
grew worse – headaches, rheumatism, eyesight
failing. His words though, hammered out
to the rhythms and din of the workshop

were re-read for a century or more,
became poems people found on their tongue,
recited from, they memorised reams, lines
he had carried in his head, given his mind to
until he could nail them down for good.



A Man Hedging (circa 1912)

by Harry Becker (1865-1928)

Oil on canvas board

Used with permission © Colchester and Ipswich Museums

Harry Becker was Suffolk's very own Impressionist who devoted the last fifteen years of his life to painting the last generation of men and horses working on the land. Born in Colchester in 1865, he studied at the same academy in Belgium as Van Gogh (missing him by a year) and arrived in Suffolk in 1913, via London, to live in Wenhaston and then in Darsham. He painted continuously but was so poor he couldn't afford simple artist's materials and his wife, who taught art at St Felix School in Southwold, would often recycle her students' canvases so he could use them for his work. He found his inspiration here in Suffolk and became something of an artist-in-residence before his time, working alongside the farm workers and depicting them and their everyday working lives. He died in 1928 and is buried in Blythburgh churchyard.

The Family Portrait

for my great uncle Jack Wilson (1901-1985)

It's the face you can't see I recognise –
cap pulled down, big lugs, roll-up
bobbing on his bottom lip. Jack's alive

in every painting – the young version
of the old man I knew, animated again,
treading earth under oversized boots.

I could add his Barley Water bottle of cold tea,
the orange twine, teeth for special occasions –
Wunt have em in for goin t'work!

After Becker, after horses, Jack had nothing
but the land, had no truck with tractors, stuck
to hoeing, hedging, ditching, then

an allotment down our garden, our shed
was his. I broke into crusted tobacco tins
for the magic pink runner bean seeds.

Permanent he seemed – like the heavy iron roller
corroded, stalled in a corner, like the age
he took to chuck a sprout stalk on the heap.



Photograph of John William Wilson with Horse (circa 1903)
Used with permission © Sylvia Rouse

Although I've known for many years that my great grandfather was a head horseman, it was only through reading the books of Adrian Bell – the farming trilogy *Corduroy*, *Silver Ley* and *The Cherry Tree* – that I was able to really appreciate his working life and the stamina and abilities it required. Bell had seen this at first hand, having been sent to Suffolk in 1920 at the age of nineteen to learn about farming. And he wrote with relish about these men, their knowledge and their skill – how they would be up at five in the morning, feeding and grooming, before they took the horses out to plough at dawn, returning for breakfast and then out again in the fields at ten until late afternoon.

Head Horseman

for my great grandfather (1869-1923)

Not the stern family portrait
with Alice, his churchgoing wife
and four children. The other photo –
just him with the Shire horse
is as close as I'll get to his smile.

We know that she was trouble
(an accident, a man killed)
enough so that a picture of this mare
at ease was something rare, worth catching.
He was the only one who could handle her –

John William Wilson, father unknown,
mother, Mary Ann, a milkmaid, dead at 25.
Brought up by his grandfather (who died),
his uncle (who died), his aunt who re-married
a thief who was jailed. From bareknuckle boxer

to head horseman, a man of few words,
we do know his last, from his sick bed
growled at the parson, sent for by his wife
I dunt wunt see no sky pilot.
Thirty years a widow, she never spoke of him.

Without him though
they could do nothing with the horse
but sell her. It was something about his calm
hand on the bridle, the other gentle on the shoulder
that steadied her down.



Man Cycling Madly Down A Hill
by Mary Newcomb (1922-2008)
Used with permission © Mary Newcomb's estate

Mary Newcomb, who spent much of her life in Suffolk, was a lyrical painter in the English naïve tradition. Born at Harrow-on-the-Hill in West London, she studied Science at Reading University but after the Second World War she became a student helper at the Flatford Mill Field Studies Centre and lodged at Willy Lott's Cottage (see page 17). Following her marriage in 1950 she settled in Suffolk, living on small farms in the Waveney Valley, and ran a pottery until she found her vocation as a painter in the mid-1950s. Her pictures often have imaginative and quirky titles (which work equally well for poems!) and it's no surprise to learn that she would write maxims or short poems – to help focus her mind – before she started to paint.

Man Cycling Madly Down A Hill

after the painting by Mary Newcomb

For once, he was not late, no chicken charring in the oven
He was not trying to make it back before dark without lights

There was no early kick-off to catch (only the Europa League)
He was not out of condition, this was nowhere near top speed

He had not just remembered the place he had left his phone
He was not busting a gut to get to the shop before it shut

There was no chip-pan fire, no lifeboat to be launched
No dash for the post or sudden rush to confess before she went

He was not avoiding the man next door who wanted a word
nor worried about the old bloke on the bike behind pedalling fast

He was not attempting to beat his best time to Bennett's corner
(8 minutes, 22 seconds), not hurrying at the first fat drops of rain

His performance was not drug enhanced or wind-propelled
This was not him picking up the pace to shake off a loopy wasp

He was cycling madly simply because he likes it this quick
And for every lovely downhill there'll be the struggle up.

During the research and writing of these poems I found myself identifying with Robert Bloomfield and John Clare, as if I were myself a modern day ‘peasant poet’. Like them, I am uneducated – having left school at sixteen – and self-taught and modern in the sense that I come from a generation freed from having to work on the land and who as a result have turned their backs on country ways.

Rooted

after ‘I Am’ and ‘The Peasant Poet’ by John Clare

Pleased to be free
of the family occupation –
ag lab, ag lab, ag lab
one census to the next
crosses for signatures
unmarked graves.
Peasants. Hard old lives.
A printer’s compositor
may have escaped
but even my uncle
was a cowman.
University not for us.
Though I know
a few long words
I left school at sixteen
can’t name tree or bird
the countryside
something you drive through.
Escaped but not gone far
still here, just
part of the scenery
I’m at home with
that’s grown on me.