

ARTISTIC ISLAND

MORE CHAPTERS IN THE STORY OF ART AND LITERATURE INSPIRED BY THE ISLE OF THANET

A local history book by Richard Lewis

CHAPTER ONE

Turner's Margate

As Turner stood on the hill above Margate harbour, studying the beach, the boats, the sea and the sky, so he stood at a crossroads in European art. And this short, stumpy, solitary figure on the hill, surveying one of his favourite seascapes, was to point art in a completely new direction.

A master of topographical drawing and lifelong observer of nature, Turner nonetheless transcended mere realism and sought to convey through light and colour the essential truth, beauty and symbolism of the scenes that inspired him. His unique genius in rendering landscapes and seascapes made him the hero of the great art critic, John Ruskin, who went on to call him the ‘father of modern art’.

The road that brought Joseph Mallord William Turner to his exalted position was long and fascinating, but the first steps in this journey were made in Margate. In 1786 William, as he was known to his family, was sent to stay in Margate with an uncle, a fishmonger in the town, when he was eleven years old. Family life at home in Covent Garden had become truly traumatic. His mother was prone to violent fits of temper and mental instability (culminating finally in her being committed to an asylum and in an early death) and his younger sister was entering the last stages of terminal illness. These traumas were to mark William permanently, and certainly affected his relationship with women in later life. They also help to explain his later obsession with the violently convulsive moods of nature. Meanwhile, his father, also William, who had to cope with the tragedy of his family life while running a successful barber’s business, decided to send the boy away to a more normal life.

First, in 1785, William went to stay with an uncle in Brentford in Essex, on the Thames estuary. He attended a school here and showed his first interest in painting. Then the following year, the year in which his sister died, he went to Margate. In Margate, the sight of the open sea was a complete revelation. He had clearly loved going down from Covent Garden to look at the Thames, taking in all the associated river life, absorbing the effects of weather and light on the daily river bustle. A new, picturesque angle on the Thames had opened for him in Brentford. But in Margate the vast, pacing sea, the breaking waves, the ever changing open skies and life around the harbour and beach made a profound and lasting impression, allowing him to enter a totally new world.