

John Louis Petit: *An Extraordinary* Victorian Rediscovered

John Louis Petit (1801-68) was a remarkably talented figure of the Victorian era, whose contributions are now being recognized. As an outstanding artist, a key voice in architecture, and a thoughtful poet and theologian, Petit played a pivotal role in his time. His work reached all corners of Britain, as this exhibition and symposium reveals...

“The greatest discovery
in British art for a
generation...”

Andrew Graham-Dixon (2022)

Few historical artists are from the East Midlands, or used its serene landscapes and buildings in their art. Petit visited these parts frequently from early in his career until the last years of his life. Laying claim to be one of the great artists of the century, Petit should be celebrated in the East Midlands as much as anywhere.

Often his art was simply another medium for his trenchant opposition to the reintroduction of 14th Century Gothic as a national architectural style. Petit loved the genuine Gothic and painted it incessantly, all over Europe. He despised fakery in all its forms.

Fundamentally, Petit was a progressive, while still loving the traditional. That set him apart from his peers in art (the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, for example), in architecture (the Gothic Revival), and indeed in spiritual matters too...



Above: Oakham Castle
Below: Detail from Locmariaker [Locmariaquer]



Wealth and Curiosity, Early Inspirations

1. *Leicestershire and Rutland*

Many of this selection of pictures from Leicestershire and Rutland are from earlier in Petit's career before he became a public figure and as his style was developing.

Family friends lived at Beaumanor Hall. Unlike other artists, Petit rarely painted a country house, but here we see pictures of the Hall, Bradgate Park and a folly within the park.

Almost uniquely for his era, Petit often captured industrial scenes. The very first known of these is his small sketch of Swithland Slate Pits. This is the only known picture of 'The Great Pit' renowned for its 50m depth and now fenced off and inaccessible in Swithland Wood. Petit's financial independence enabled him to freely explore subjects that resonated with him, broadening his artistic scope beyond the conventional.

The only three pictures from Rutland County known to exist are shown here. The Castle and Buttercross from Oakham, and Exton church. Petit painted over 15,000 pictures during his career and of these, so far, only 3,000 have been traced. Nearly the entire works went into family storage for 130 years. About half were lost during storage and less than half of the remainder have been re-discovered. They were dumped into auctions in the 1980s and then scattered across the world. No doubt there are more to find.



Above: Detail from Oakham Buttercross
Below left: Swithland Slate Pits
Below: St Martin's, Leicester [Leicester Cathedral]



Architectural Common Sense

2. Northamptonshire and Peterborough

In 1841, John Louis Petit became a national figure with his highly controversial book, *Remarks on Church Architecture*. It directly challenged the Gothic Revival trend, and drew intense, aggressive opposition.

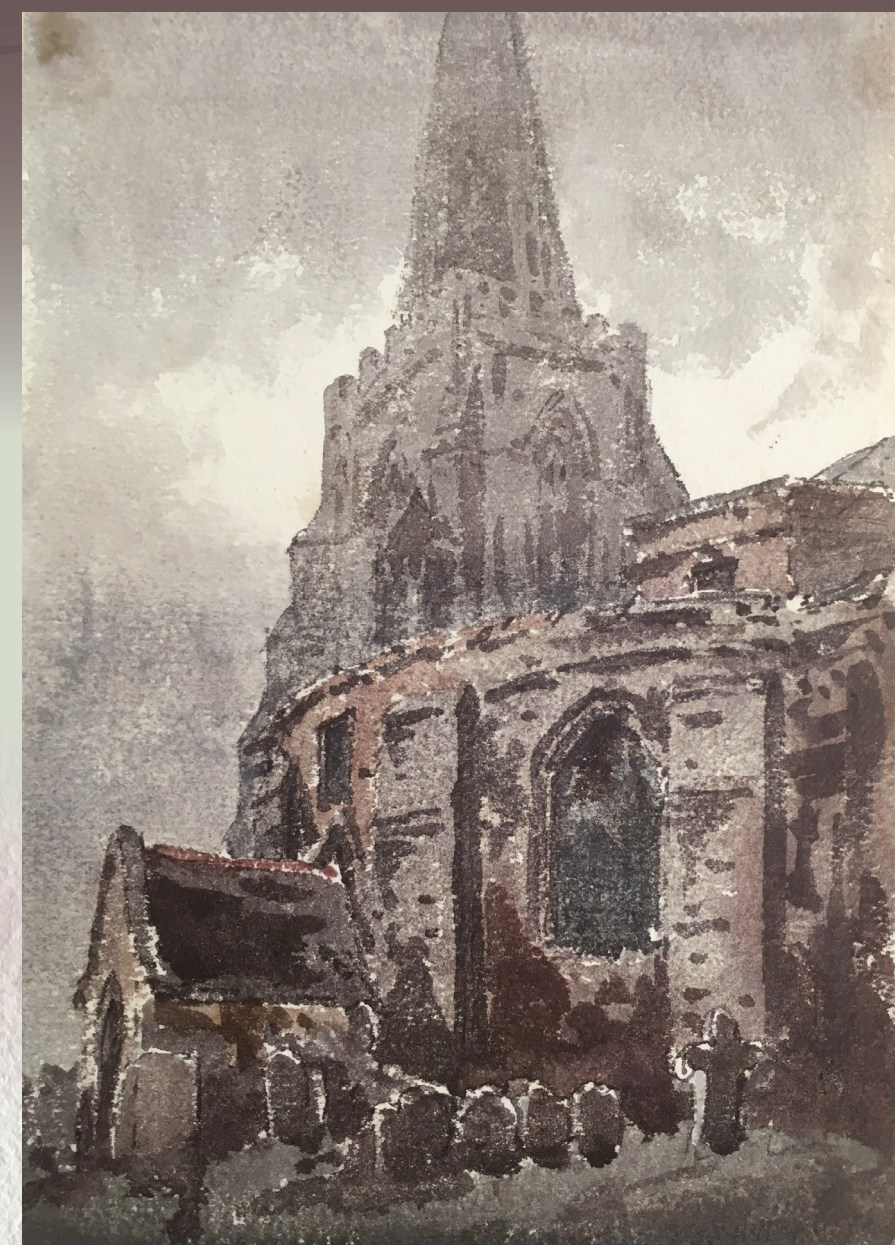
Cambridge was the centre for those leading the revival, so Petit used many examples from the East Midlands and Northamptonshire and Peterborough in particular.

Petit believed that there was beauty in all styles of church architecture and that any rules, such as those the Cambridge Camden Society (the Revivalists) were trying to establish were absurd. Common sense to us now, but not then. At one point, in 1845, John Mason Neale, their leader, argued that he would pull down Peterborough Cathedral if it could be remade in the 'correct' English Gothic.

At an 1852 lecture in Northampton on *Architectural Principles and Prejudices* Petit took aim at the Ecclesiologists:

You may know a principle by your difficulty in expressing it, by your difficulty in giving a reason for it, and by your difficulty in working up to it. And you may know a prejudice, by your readiness to give it a good name, by the amount of thought that it saves you, and by the ease and satisfaction with which you carry it out.

The wide variety of styles is on full display with the churches of Northamptonshire. Northamptonshire was also the home of a close friend, Charles Hartshorne, a historian. Over half of the known letters written by Petit are preserved in the Hartshorne papers, in the Northamptonshire archives.



Above left: Peterborough Cathedral
Above right: St Sepulchre, Northampton
Below: Detail from Strixton, Northamptonshire



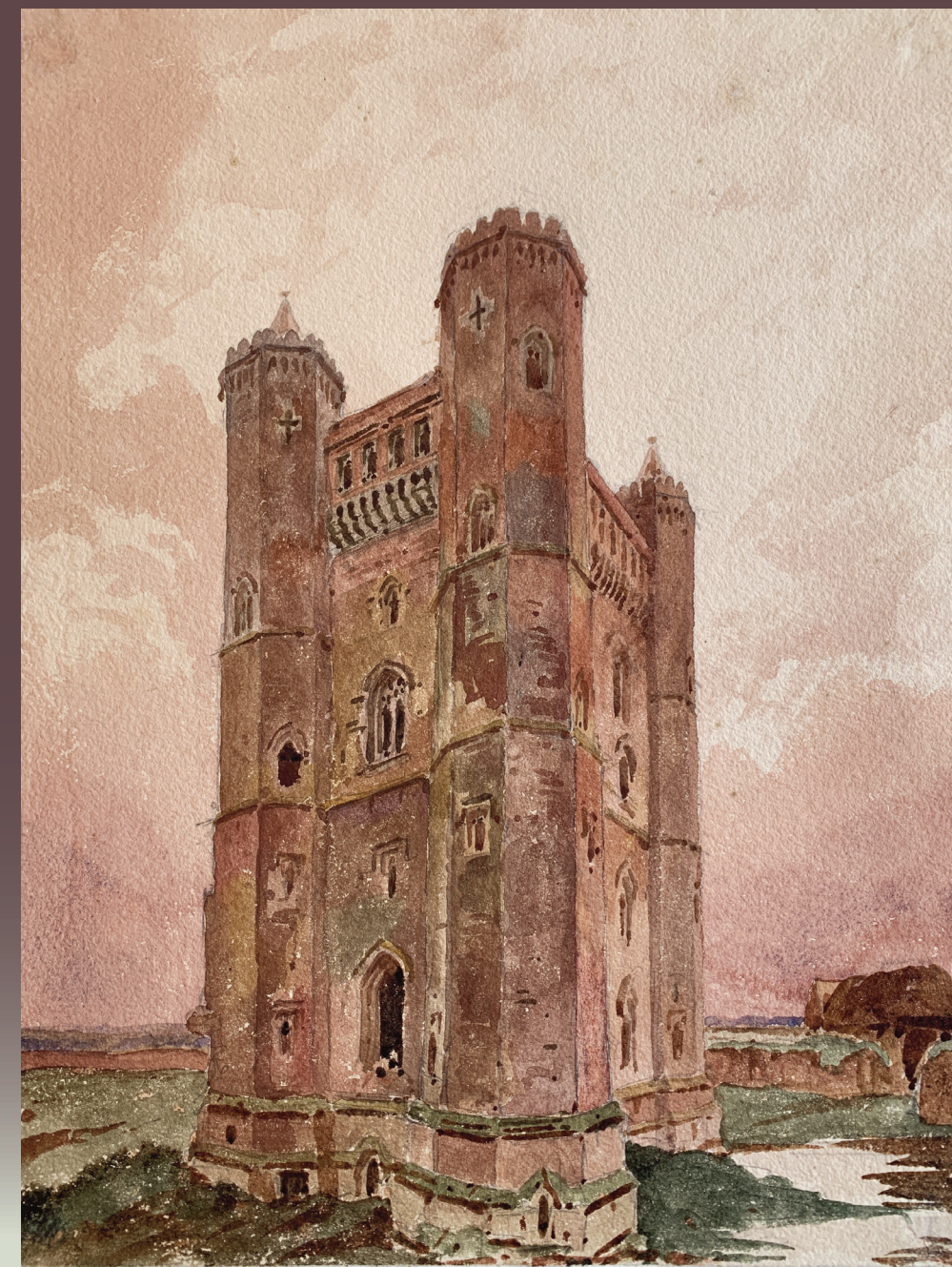
The Battle for Architectural Freedom

3. Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire

In the 1840s Petit fought against the most restrictive rules and the most destructive restorations. In the 1850s 'High Victorian' Gothic was much broader and there was a much wider variety of alternatives. Petit was a leading influence for both developments.

In this Eastern section of the East Midlands we see a microcosm of this variety: ancient Lincolnshire castles, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire churches as well as two Cathedrals.

Lincoln was the setting of one of the big annual conferences of the Archaeological Institute, an important forum for architectural debate.



Petit's Crowland Abbey, long a subject for romantic artists, stands out for showing the savagery of Gothic society:

"...Our is not the age of Gothic art, but only of imitation..."

"Let us aim to go beyond our predecessors, let us aim at some standard of perfection above any which they reached...I may be describing an impossibility; but if we try to reach it, we shall be sure to do something."

During the Victorian age over half the public buildings built were non-Gothic, despite the efforts of Gilbert Scott and others to make Gothic a national style. It was Petit's heroic, sometimes lone, defence of other styles that provided the intellectual underpinning for such variety. Eventually he was proven right, but he did not live to see it.

Top right: Tattershall Castle
Middle right: Ely Cathedral
Left: Detail from Crowland Abbey

Petit: Britain's Lost Impressionist Pioneer

4. Further Afield

In this last section we illustrate why Petit should be considered one of the great artists of the century.

While his paintings in remote parts of France, Germany, Italy and from far-reaching voyages to Greece and the Middle East are often the only known historical art of those locations, of greater significance is his progressive, even modern, approach. Town views, or his picture of a fishing boat off Torquay, for example, can be matched with Impressionist views 20 years later. Rock studies can be even more modern. Creating rough sketches, outdoors, was something whose time had come. The Impressionists 'were striving to liberate painting from the stifling tradition of exactitude.' Turner went some way towards that, especially in depicting light, Petit went a stage further.

Underneath all this innovation, however, Petit was fundamentally a spiritual artist, a factor rarely found in our more cynical age. Often his art intended to demonstrate God's agency in the landscape. Only now in our era of climate change can this start to be appreciated again. Petit responded to the challenge from John Ruskin, Britain's greatest 19th century art critic, who had challenged landscape artists:

"Landscape art has never taught us one deep or holy lesson; it has not recorded that which is fleeting, nor interpreted that which was obscure; it has never made us feel the wonder, nor the power, nor the glory of the universe; it has not prompted to devotion, nor touched with awe..."



Above top: Detail from *Crystal Palace*
 Above: *Near Pau, Pyrenean landscape*
 Below: Detail from *Caerleon*

