

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Thomas GIRTIN (Southwark 1775 - London 1802)

The North Front of Chalfont Lodge, Buckinghamshire, Seen from the Lake

Watercolour, heightened with bodycolour, over traces of an underdrawing in pencil, on cartridge paper.

Signed Thos. Girtin in black ink at the lower right.

420 x 549 mm. (16 1/2 x 21 5/8 in.) [sheet]

Datable to around 1800, this fine watercolour is one of a group of four large, finished views of the Chalfont estate in Buckinghamshire, commissioned from Thomas Girtin by its owner Thomas Hibbert (1744-1819). Hibbert had the artist produce two views of his seat at Chalfont House, which had been recently remodelled, as well as a pair of views of the newly-built Chalfont Lodge on the estate. The first two watercolours, depicting Chalfont House from the Northeast, with Fishermen Netting the Broadwater and Chalfont House from the Northwest, are both in a private collection in Herefordshire, while the pendant to the present sheet, depicting The South Front of Chalfont Lodge, is today in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

A wealthy merchant who established a successful West Indies trading firm as a slaveowner in Jamaica before returning to England in 1780, Thomas Hibbert acquired the Chalfont estate in 1791. Designed by John Chute for Col. Charles Churchill in 1755, Chalfont House had been built in the Gothic Revival manner that Chute had earlier employed for Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill. By the 1790s this style may have seemed somewhat old-fashioned, and in 1799 Hibbert commissioned the architect John Nash to remodel Chalfont House. At the same time he had Nash's colleague, the landscape designer Humphry Repton, adapt the grounds around the house, which had originally been designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. As an account of Chalfont, published in 1812, noted, 'The great characteristic feature of the place itself, and of the surrounding country, is repose...the land, the water, the trees, and, indeed, the general system of the view, seem to partake of that placidity which is equally favourable to health and contemplation...and, we may add, from the picturesque embellishments with which it is surrounded, the progress also of plantation and cultivation, rendered extremely valuable; as both ART and NATURE seem now to have combined to encircle an elegant retreat with beautiful scenery, and consequently to form a perfect whole.' After the remodelling of the house and grounds had been completed, Girtin was commissioned by Hibbert to record the appearance of the estate. His four watercolours of Chalfont, each measuring about 420 x 550 mm., are among his largest works, and were almost certainly intended to be framed and displayed together at Chalfont House.

The present sheet, drawn on Girtin's preferred heavy cartridge paper and in remarkably fine and fresh condition, depicts Chalfont Lodge, a Gothic cottage built by John Nash around 1799 for Thomas Hibbert's younger brother Robert. Since demolished, Chalfont Lodge was situated atop a hill several hundred metres to the northeast of the main house and was built to harmonize with the existing landscape of the estate, with its own ornamental lake and kitchen garden. Robert Hibbert lived at Chalfont Lodge until 1819, when he inherited the estate upon the death of his elder brother Thomas that year. As noted above, Girtin painted a pendant view of the south front of the Lodge, which is now in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. He also painted a smaller watercolour of The South Front of Chalfont Lodge, probably commissioned by Robert Hibbert, which is today in the Paul Mellon collection at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven.

All four large watercolours painted by Girtin for Thomas Hibbert remained together in the Hibbert family collection until 1909, when the present sheet, together with its pendant now in Birmingham, was sold at auction in London. The following year, this watercolour of The North Front of Chalfont Lodge was acquired by the eminent Leeds surgeon Harry Littlewood (1861-1921). It remained with Littlewood's descendants, almost completely unknown to scholars, for over a century. Previously only known from an old black and white photograph, the present sheet is a superb addition to Girtin's extant oeuvre as a painter of country houses.

Literature:

Probably Thomas Girtin and David Loshak, *The Art of Thomas Girtin*, London, 1954, no.244.

Artist description:

One of the founders of the 19th century watercolour tradition in Britain, Thomas Girtin was born in London, the son of a brushmaker, and in 1789 was apprenticed to the topographical draughtsman Edward Dayes. Like Dayes, he was later employed by the antiquarian and amateur artist James Moore, and in 1794, at the age of nineteen, he exhibited a watercolour for the first time at the Royal Academy; a view of Ely Cathedral commissioned by Moore. Between 1794 and 1797 he also was one of the artists who attended the informal academy established by Dr. Thomas Monro, alongside his close friend from youth J. M. W. Turner, whose early career was paralleled and strongly influenced by Girtin. From the middle of the 1790s Girtin undertook sketching expeditions, sometimes accompanied by Turner, to the Midlands, Sussex, the Scottish borders, Devon, Dorset and Yorkshire, all of which resulted in a series of watercolours which established his later reputation. He developed a particular penchant for architectural subjects, and produced many finished watercolours of notable churches, abbeys, castles and cathedrals in England, the Scottish borders and North Wales. Although he is known to have produced a handful of oil paintings, none have survived to the present day.

Girtin had a very short independent career of only some ten years before his early death. He became known in particular for his depictions of country houses, and among his clients were the Earls of Elgin and Essex, Sir George Beaumont, The Hon. Spencer Cowper and Lord Mulgrave. From 1798 onwards Girtin's chief patron was Edward Lascelles of Harewood House in Yorkshire, where the artist has a room of his own in which to work. He produced a large circular painted panorama of London, which he called the 'Eidometropolis', which was completed and exhibited in 1802 but has since been lost, although a number of related drawings are in the British Museum. Girtin may have planned another, similar panorama of Paris, and made a brief visit to the city in 1801; twenty views of the French capital were published as aquatints the year after his death. Girtin died suddenly and prematurely, perhaps from an asthma attack, in 1802, at the age of just twenty-seven, and is buried in the church of St. Paul's in Covent Garden.

The scarcity of his work has meant that Girtin was, for many years after his death, largely unappreciated, although an exhibition of his oeuvre was mounted by the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London in 1875.

Writing almost a hundred years after the artist's death, the English poet, dramatist and scholar Lawrence Binyon, in his essay *Thomas Girtin: His Life and Works*, published in 1900, noted that 'The

name of Girtin has scarcely, I imagine, ever travelled beyond the borders of Britain. Even in his own country he is little more than a name. He suffers, doubtless, with other water-colour artists, from the lack of opportunity for being seen and studied. Let us hope that when the centenary of 1802 comes around, it may be found possible to organize an exhibition of his drawings. To many such an exhibition would be a revelation.' In the end, it was another century before such a major exhibition devoted to Girtin's work was held; at Tate Britain on the 200th anniversary of the artist's death in 2002.