



William Dyce, *Pegwell Bay, Kent - A Recollection of October 5th, 1858* (1858–60), 63.5 x 89.0 cms.  
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## UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara\*

Each issue of *Antiquarian Horology* shows many wonderful clocks and watches, but paradoxically, they all fail to fulfil their essential function of telling the time. Their hands frozen by the camera in a stationary position, these instruments of measurement record only the fleeting instant when they were photographed; they do not even reveal

whether that was night or day. In contrast, although painted pictures are also unchanging and two-dimensional, they can be designed to portray the passage of time—the *Tempus Fugit* (Time Flies) so often inscribed on sundials.

The picture reproduced here may look unassuming, but it is among the most famous depictions of time, science and religion that have ever been created. Despite appearing so realistic, it is deceptive. Although meticulously

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In 2018, she gave a talk to the East Anglian Section of the AHS on the theme 'Time without clocks: Capturing the invisible in science and art', in which she discussed a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock. Her lecture was reported in *AH* March 2019, pp. 126–7. This is the first in a series of short articles, each describing one of the pictures she discussed in her lecture.

detailed, it is far from being topographically accurate—and whereas the title indicates a precise date, 5 October 1858, that was not when William Dyce visited the Kent coast, and not when he finished painting. Instead, he had travelled to this small inlet with his family the previous August, when he made a water-colour sketch that he put to one side. Between then and 1860, when he first exhibited his canvas at the Royal Academy Exhibition, he incorporated evidence of two important scientific events.

The first took place on 2 June 1858, when an Italian astronomer called Giovanni Donati first noticed a new comet in the sky. Predicted to return every 2100 years, the comet inexorably ticked out the great age of the universe. Throughout that summer, it gradually grew brighter, until London newspapers reported that it would be at its most spectacular on 5 October 1858—the date that Dyce attributed to his painting. He added a brilliant light streaking down the sky (more clearly visible in the original than in reproductions), which pays tribute to this natural phenomenon and is also reminiscent of the star over Bethlehem announcing the birth of Christ. Pegwell Bay was a popular tourist resort for Victorians, but according to tradition, this was where St Augustine—the first Archbishop of Canterbury—landed from Rome in 597, sent by Pope Gregory to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.

Dyce had already started work on this picture when there was a second major piece of scientific news: on 24 November 1859, Charles Darwin published his long-awaited book *On the Origin of Species*. By then, most people accepted that some form of evolution had taken place, and that the earth had been created far longer than 6000 years ago. The most shocking aspect of Darwin's theory was the absence of any divine plan: instead of regarding human beings as the summit of God's creation, Darwin described a world in which changes from one species to another were generated by chance and competition. Just as Dyce's comet reminded humanity of the earth's insignificance within a vast universe, so the exposed cliffs of Pegwell Bay displayed the unimaginable aeons of geological time that had elapsed since the world's creation.

Like Dyce, Darwin was a keen geologist who enjoyed visiting Pegwell Bay with his children. Both men were familiar with Charles Lyell's revolutionary book *Principles of Geology* (1830–3), which had extended the time scale of the earth far far back into the distant past. Lyell introduced a new visual language for geology, explaining that slicing vertically down through different strata of rock meant going backwards in time. Studying the thickness of each layer, and the creatures embedded within it, provided a subterranean clock that measured in millennia rather than minutes. The crumbling rock face looming above Dyce's tiny people forces the viewer to contemplate time's immensity.

In this desolate scene, the figures are separated from each other and isolated from the rest of humanity—there are no fishing-boats, no sign of the handsome villas stretching along the top of the cliffs. The figure at the far right of the picture is probably Dyce himself, while the solitary boy holding a spade in the foreground is his son. Nearby, his wife is bending down—perhaps to inspect a fossil or a shell—thus distancing herself from two other women, her sisters; their warm shawls and the pink glow cast by the setting sun confirm that this is an autumn evening. Along with the strangers in the distance, they have been trapped into immobility by the artist's brush, but have also been caught in the act of moving as they explore the pebbly beach, or fish in the pools left behind by the retreating tide. Ebbing and flowing twice a day, the constantly moving water marked out the hours.

Astronomy and geology were, wrote Alfred, Lord Tennyson, both 'Terrible Muses' that forced Victorians into unprecedented recognition of time's seemingly infinite duration. Dyce's picture is the artistic equivalent of the poem Matthew Arnold wrote about nearby Dover beach, in which the perpetually crashing pebbles 'bring / The eternal note of sadness in' while the vanished 'Sea of Faith' lets out 'Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar'.

Main source:

Marcia Pointon, 'The representation of time in painting,' *Art History*, i 1978, 98-104.