



Constable's *The Cornfield*: A Bicentenary Harvesting

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20 January 2026

John Constable began work on his painting *The Cornfield*, in his London studio, in January 1826. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in the spring of that year, under the title *Landscape; Noon*. In spite of several subsequent public exhibitions over the following decade, it never found a buyer. On Constable's death in 1837, it was bought by public subscription and gifted to the nation, finding its home in London's National Gallery where it has remained ever since.

This lecture explores the painting's roots in Constable's biography, its topography, and the influences that helped to shape his artistic practice as a landscape painter, and its changing reception over the last two centuries. The latter part of the lecture speculates on the value of *The Cornfield* for us today, at a time of acute environmental anxieties, and heightened preoccupation about the relationship between the natural world and the human presence.

The scene is a Suffolk lane near East Bergholt, familiar to Constable since it was his route to school as a boy. He drew on his memory, on several sketches taken over many years, and on the compositional structures favoured by some of his favourite landscape paintings, from the seventeenth-century Dutch school and from the works of Claude Lorrain. To these models he added his own distinctive loose handling to this 'close lane, kind of thing', as he described it, in order to bring out the feel of the 'pleasant and healthfull [sic] breeze – "at noon".' Constable's idiosyncratic handling and his concentration on an unspectacular English countryside made his work unpopular with the art establishment of his time; but both these signature traits have ironically proved to be his greatest legacy, aligning him in technique with Impressionism and some Modernist modes as well as acclaiming him as the painter of an essentialised 'Englishness' in terms of landscape and national identity. A 1996 survey of the popularity of *The Cornfield* undertaken by Colin Painter (in association with the National Gallery -- see Recommended Reading) revealed the extraordinary degree to which the imagery of this painting had become part of people's domestic lives.

Now, in our environmentally anxious age, we might have a different take on this landscape painting. Our age has been labelled 'post-nature', Anthropocene, in the belief that we have fundamentally upset the balance of that human-nature relationship. Amidst much

contemporary talk about ‘reconnecting with nature’ for purposes of mental, physical and spiritual therapy, about legalising ‘Rights of Nature’ and a new respect for the animism of indigenous cultures, about re-wilding and other practical environmental interventions, how might we see *The Cornfield*’s two-hundred-years-old portrait of the relationship between the human and the natural world?

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References and Further Reading

On Constable’s legacy in C19 and C20

Fleming-Williams, Ian, and Parris, Leslie. *The Discovery of Constable*. 1984.

Daniels, Stephen. “John Constable and the Making of Constable Country”. *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and The United States*. 1993.

Painter, Colin. *At Home with Constable’s Cornfield*. 1996.

On the constructions of ‘Englishness’ in landscape terms in C19 and C20

Malcolm Andrews. *A Sweet View: The Making of an English Idyll*. 2021.

David Matless. *Landscape and Englishness*. 1998.