

Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827)

Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) was the most popular artist in his time. He is also regarded as the most talented illustrator of the English way of life of the late Georgian period.

His skills as an observer and social commentator were informed by a colourful, if indulgent, lifestyle that involved travel, gambling, drinking and pretty women.

Rowlandson's first documented tour of the *Isle of Wight* was in 1784 when he travelled with his friend, *Henry Wigstead* (1760-1800). They took the crossing from *Lymington* to *Yarmouth* and returned via *Cowes* to *Portsmouth*.

It is evident that *Rowlandson* fell under the spell of the Island and he returned to paint on a number of occasions.



Cowes Harbour, Cowes.

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Yarmouth from the harbour, looking up Quay Street.

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The *Isle of Wight* was a well-documented and much painted location in Victorian times but in *Rowlandson's* time was little explored and rarely painted.

Henry Wigstead, who was himself an amateur artist, accompanied (and probably sponsored) *Rowlandson* when they toured the Island again in 1791. This time they were accompanied by *Rowlandson's* brother-in-law, *Samuel Howitt* (1756/7-1822), also a prolific artist who was heavily influenced by *Rowlandson's* work.



Thomas Rowlandson, the son of a successful businessman, was born in London in July 1756. *Thomas* learnt to draw before he could write and by the time he was ten he was spending all his free time drawing. After attending *Eton* he became a student at the *Royal Academy*. At sixteen he left for *France* where he spent two years at a drawing school in *Paris*.

In 1777 *Rowlandson* opened a studio in *Wardour Street, London* where he established himself as a portrait painter. *Rowlandson* also travelled a great deal in *Europe* where he drew pictures of his experiences. *Rowlandson* was a heavy gambler and after losing the money he inherited from a rich aunt, he paid his debts with drawings of popular and low-life subjects.

In the 1780s *Rowlandson* painted fewer portraits and tended to concentrate on drawing. *Rowlandson* had his work published in journals such as the "*English Review*" and "*The Poetical Magazine*". Some of *Rowlandson's* political cartoons got him in trouble and he was accused by his critics of being "coarse and indelicate".

In 1808 *Rowlandson* began working with *Rudolph Ackermann*, a talented lithographer, who had started publishing a series of attractive colour-plate books. This included "*The Microcosm of London*", a book published in three volumes between 1808 and 1811. "*The Microcosm of London*" was illustrated with 104 hand-coloured aquatint plates. *Augustus Pugin* supplied the drawings of the buildings; it was *Rowlandson's* task to paint the people in the pictures.

Thomas Rowlandson died on 22nd April 1827.



Portsmouth Point with Gosport in the distance.

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