

## PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH CASTLE RISING

### JOHN SELL COTMAN 1782 - 1842

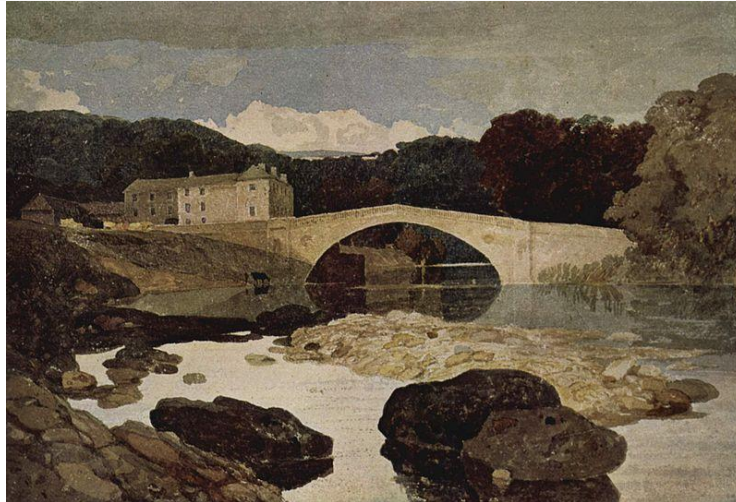


During the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries many artists visited Castle Rising to draw or paint its two most striking buildings, the Castle and the Church of St Lawrence. Many of these works are in the Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery Collections. Apart from their artistic merit, they have proved invaluable in following and dating both the gradual disintegration of the castle and the restoration of the church.

Of all the visiting artists, the most notable of all was the Norfolk born John Sell Cotman, a member of the Norwich School of Painters who is remembered especially for his beautiful watercolour paintings of landscapes and buildings. His watercolours are thought by some to have anticipated the French impressionists and were described by Laurence Binyon, the art historian as *'the most perfect examples of pure watercolour ever made in Europe'*.

John Cotman was born in Norwich in 1782 and showed early promise in art. Rather than entering his father's business, on leaving school, he moved to London where initially he made a living from commissions from various print makers and at this time he met several influential artists including Turner, Thomas Girtin and Peter de Wint (who later gave painting lessons to Mary Howard and her husband Fulke).

In the following years he toured parts of Wales and England, painting some wonderful watercolours of the River Greta in Yorkshire, and exhibiting in the Royal Academy.



Greta Bridge by John Sell Cotman

Cotman returned to Norfolk in 1806 and became one of the major members of the Norwich Society of Artists, initiated by John Chrome and Robert Ladbrook. This was a club where local artists could meet, exchange ideas and exhibit their work. In 1809 Cotman married Ann Mills, the daughter of a Felbrigg farmer. They went on to have five children. John's main source of income at this time was as a teacher of drawing. One of his pupils was Dawson Turner, a local antiquarian, who became both a good friend and benefactor.

Cotman spent time in 1811 travelling in Yorkshire and between then and 1818 he worked on a collection of sketches, etchings and paintings of the ancient buildings of Norfolk which were published in ten parts. The Castle Art Gallery in Norwich has a catalogue of over two thousand of his works.

He visited Castle Rising at least twice during this time and we have etchings and paintings dated both 1811 and 1818. His drawings of the church in 1811 show the building before the nineteenth century restoration and alterations changed its whole appearance. Renovation was obviously necessary at that time as the building was in a very poor state but few people today see the changes as improvements



Castle Rising Church, Norfolk 1811 Drawn, etched and published by J. S. Cotman.

This etching shows the original west front, porch and tower.

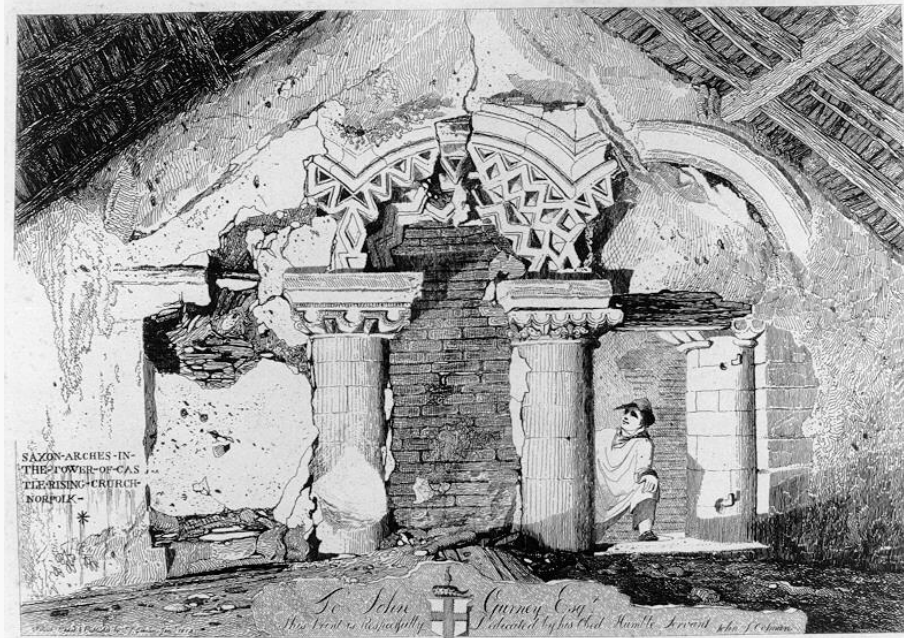
Whilst John Cotman was in Castle Rising in 1811 he wrote a letter to his friend, Dawson Turner which gives an indication of the how hard he worked, often in poor light and also of how after only two years of marriage, he was missing his family.

(The letter begins by listing some of the places in which Cotman had sketched on his present tour. They included Oxborough, Methwold, Dereham, South Runcton, Tottenhill, Holme, Shouldham, Barton and Slingham)

Sept 20<sup>th</sup> 1811

*“Castle Rising is most delightful. And I am so far fortunate to have sketched a range of Arches between the ceiling and the roof, only seen by accident from the light admitted through a small break in the roof, which is now repaired and all is once more dark. As it was I was obliged to sketch by the light of three candles (for my paper) the object itself being lighted from the aperture which did not extend to where I sat. So had anybody come unawares upon me, they must have been startled with the singularity of the scene. For this I have to thank the Rev.d E .Edwards<sup>ii</sup>. The front I have completed, also part of the Castle, which is most delightfully situated, as well as being extremely fine in itself.*

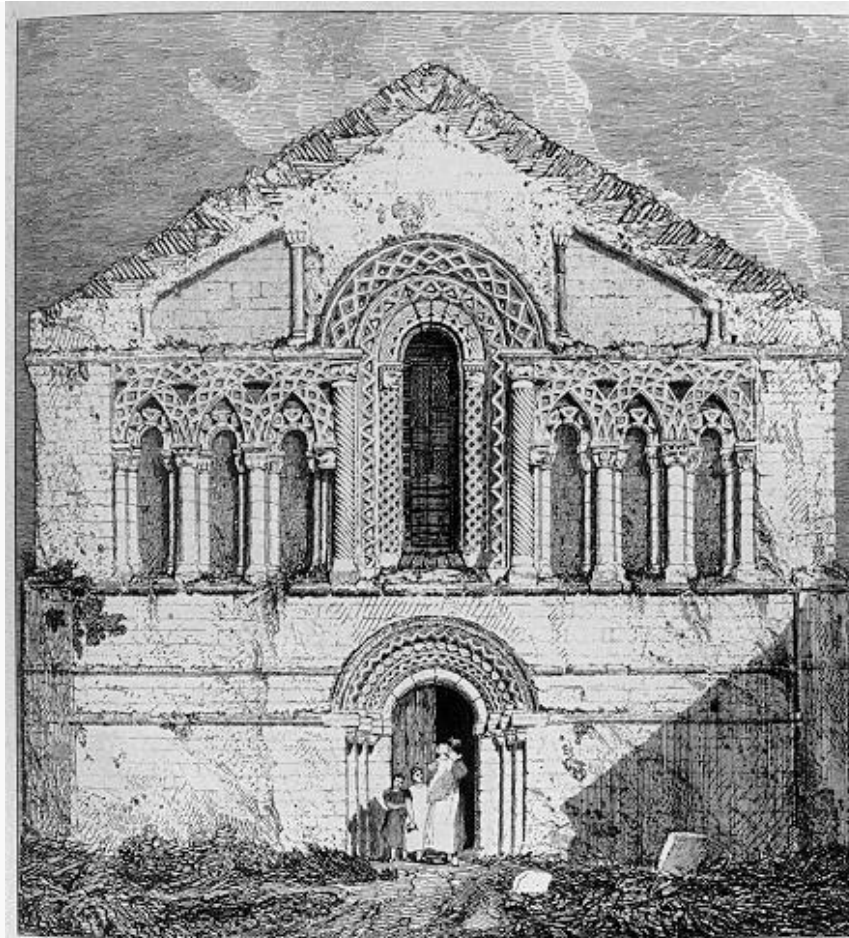
*From this place I go to Snettisham and on to Felbrigg where my present tour will end. I should have gone to Castle Acre but I cannot, for even here my thoughts strongly run on home. You must forgive my weakness. There was a time when I could have been at home anywhere and had no other attraction than what the presenting scene afforded. In Castle Acre I will take a companion and then I shall not have an inducement to hurry off. I shall now take a little relaxation, for I am really fatigued, both bodily and mentally for I have been at it invariably by 5 o'clock am till sometimes 5 pm without dining, when dinner would have interfered. On Monday I dined at Mr. T Gurney's in Lynn and a very delightful party it was.”*  
Cotman spent most of his life in Norfolk although he did teach in London for a time and later spent some time sketching in Normandy



Saxon arches in the tower of Castle Rising Church, Norfolk.

The sketch above shows the arches in the tower which Cotman mentions in his letter. There must have been a ceiling in the nave of the church at that time concealing both the arches and the roof of the building. The arches certainly seem to be in a state of great disrepair: they have since been well restored. It seems very strange however that Cotman should have labeled the arches as "Saxon". They carry all the hallmarks of the Norman style.

Cotman also sketched the elaborate Norman West Front of the church shown below in 1818.



WEST FRONT OF CASTLE RISING CHURCH.

*To the Rev William Fawssett  
This view of his Church, which is indebted  
perfect state is dedicated, with every*

*MA Rector of Castle Rising  
to his knowledge & liberality for its present  
sentiment of respect by  
his much obliged servant John Sell Cotman.*

Drawn & Engraved by John Sell Cotman. Norwich. Dec 20<sup>th</sup> 1833.

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### WEST FRONT OF CASTLE RISING CHURCH

The inscription below the picture says “*To the Rev William Fawssett MA Rector of Castle Rising. This view of his church which is indebted to his knowledge and liberality for its present perfect state is dedicated with every sentiment of respect by his much obliged servant John Sell Cotman*”.

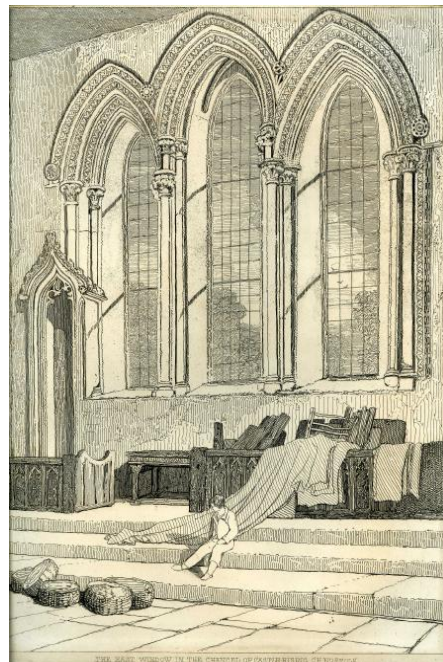
Cotman also painted the same view in watercolour.



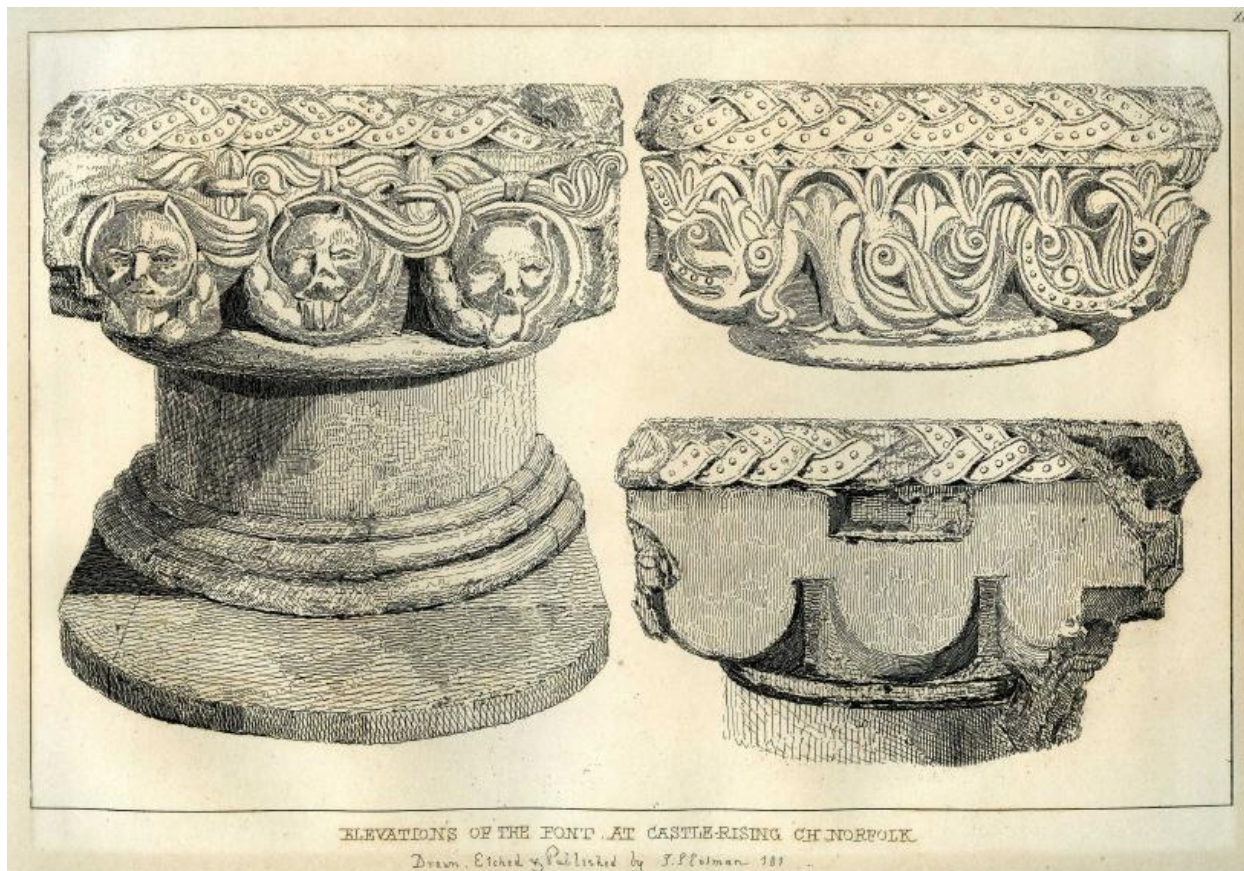


CASTLE RISING CHURCH WEST FRONT

Below is a Cotman sketch of the East Windows of the church from the interior. It appears that the furniture of the chancel was piled up against the east wall. This is not one of Cotman's best sketches. The figure on the steps is not to scale.



CASTLE RISING CHURCH EAST WINDOW



ELEVATION OF THE FONT AT CASTLE RISING CH. NORFOLK

Drawn, etched and Published by J.S. Cotman 1811-

The etching above is of the ancient font in Castle Rising Church. It is believed to be from a corner of the early church which was built in the castle precinct which is the reason that the detailed carving around the bowl occurs on only two sides.

As well as his sketches of the Church, Cotman also depicted the castle in several views which he later made into etchings for publication in *Excursions through Norfolk*.





## REMAINS OF CASTLE RISING CASTLE NORFOLK

Engraved by W Walbis from a drawing by J.S. Cotman



These views of the castle clearly show some of the damage to the building made by the squatters who lived there in the 17<sup>th</sup> century





CASTLE RISING CASTLE

Cotman spent most of his life in Norfolk although he did teach in King's College School in London, for a time and later spent some time sketching in Normandy. Throughout his life he seems to have been frustrated at his lack of financial success and his dependency on teaching for a living. Although the Norwich School of Painters were well respected both in Cotman's time and later when two of his sons, Miles Edward and John Joseph, among others, continued its success, it was not well known outside Norfolk, partly because the bulk of their work was bought by J.J.Colman (of Colman's Mustard fame) then later given to the Norwich Castle Museum.

John Sell Cotman died in July 1842. Certainly he is now seen as an outstanding British artist and Castle Rising is fortunate for the legacy he left.



PORTRAIT STUDY OF J.S.COTMAN BY HORACE BEEVOR LOVE 1826

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<sup>i</sup> Norfolk Record Office ref MC 2487/7 977 x 3

<sup>ii</sup> The Rev Edwards was probably the curate as Rev Wm Fawssett was the Rector of Castle Rising at this time.