

Place in Wales: Reconstructing Drawings from a Sketchbook by Francis Place

ABSTRACT

Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum Wales holds eighteen works on paper by Francis Place (1647–1728). During routine conservation it became apparent that ten of the drawings were from the same sketchbook. These ten drawings form an important part of the collection as they are the earliest images of Wales carried out on the spot (dated 1678). Place was a gentleman amateur artist who was one of the earliest English artists to specialise in landscape.

On the removal of secondary supports from two works, drawings were discovered on the verso, enabling some order of the drawings in the sketchbook to be established. Research revealed, among other facts, that a second sketchbook from his tour of Wales also survives.

Perhaps the most fascinating information to be revealed during the project were the annotations and marks that Place used. Pages fold over to join up with the landscape on the verso; ink marks in the form of crosses found on the edge of a double page spread join up with sketches on the verso to extend the panorama further. These intriguing, subtle marks are an insight into Place's working techniques and his use of a sketchbook, transforming it from a simple drawing surface into an instrument that conveys space.

From this new research it will now be possible, using the manipulation of digital images, to "recreate" the sketchbook and view the panoramas as Place saw them. Through the museum's website and gallery interactive, access to the drawings will now be possible in a way that could never be achieved on a gallery wall or in a study room.

INTRODUCTION

Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum Wales has eighteen drawings in total by Francis Place (1647–1728) (although there were nineteen until one was recently re-attributed to

William Lodge). Of these, fifteen are views in Wales, ten of which are from the same sketchbook (the size of the paper and the watermarks all being the same), and it is these ten that this article centers on. The ten sketches (dated 1678) are important as they are the earliest images of Wales carried out on the spot.

The group came to the Museum in 1931, purchased from a dealer who had bought them a few months earlier from a sale at Sotheby's. The sale at Sotheby's was of the collection of Patrick Allan-Fraser Art College in Arbroath, Scotland, including drawings, prints, pottery and the only known oil (which is a self portrait) descending directly through the family from Place.

Works by Francis Place came up in my work schedule as they were going on display in the new Welsh Landscape Gallery: The Power of the Land. This gallery is a project that is part of a gallery refurbishment program that followed extensive roof repairs. This gallery marks a new approach to display by the Museum in that it is not arranged chronologically but by the regions of Wales, and works on paper hang alongside oils.

THE DRAWINGS

The drawings are all made from at least two separate sheets either joined by overlap or butted together and then strengthened on the verso by a strip of paper. Each was adhered to a secondary support that appears to be a cut-down album page of early wove paper, suggesting late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century. Some drawings that obviously extended over the page had been left 'loose' on the album page to allow the viewer to lift the page and view the verso, but others had been adhered down around all four edges to the secondary support—the sketch on the verso seen as inconsequential. Figures 1 and 2 were taken before conservation and are the same work. The secondary supports are still attached and visible. In these two images one can see how the joined sheets were attached to the album page along the centre, and

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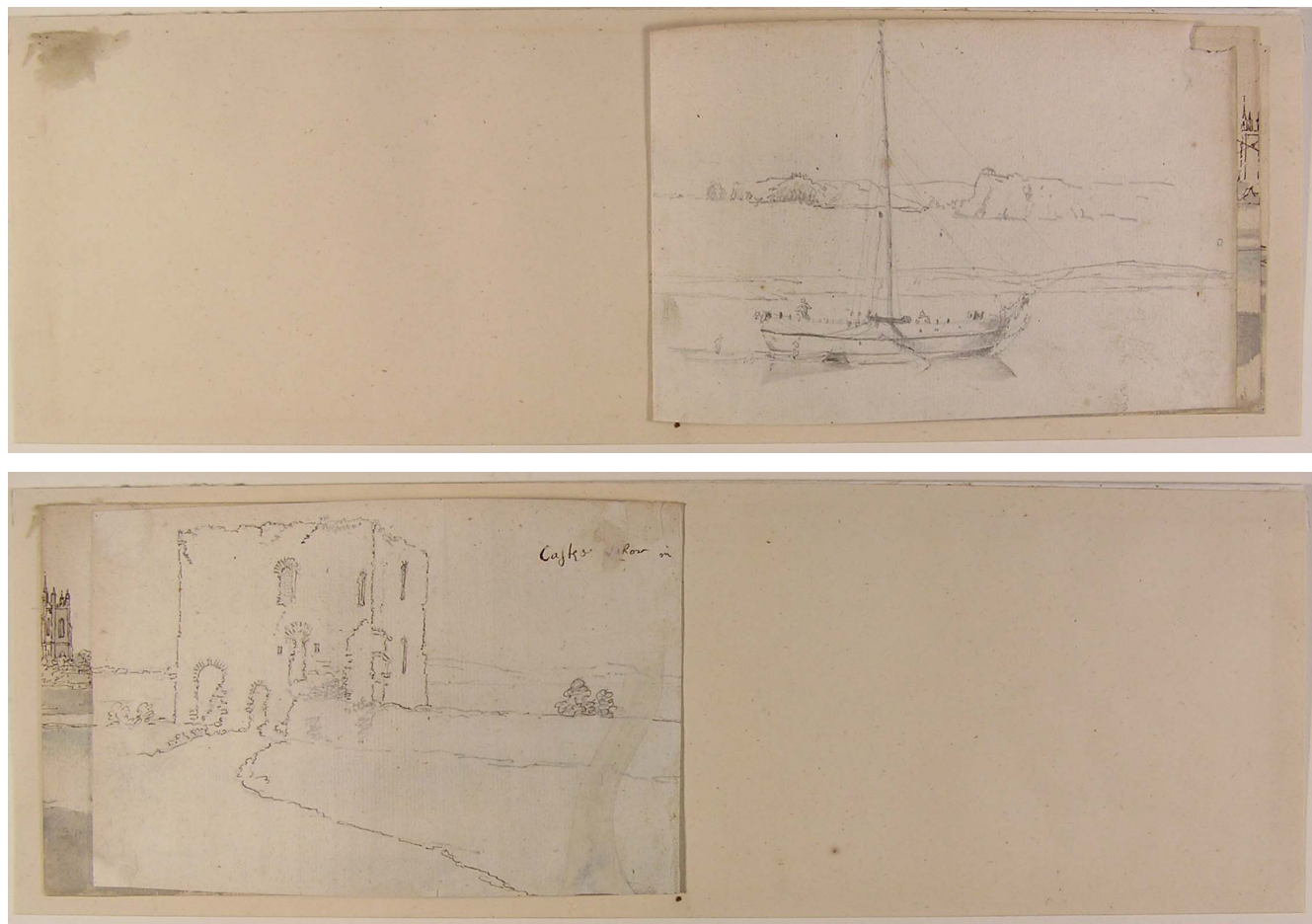


Fig. 1–2. Francis Place, *Cardiff* 1678, NMWA 16367 (verso)

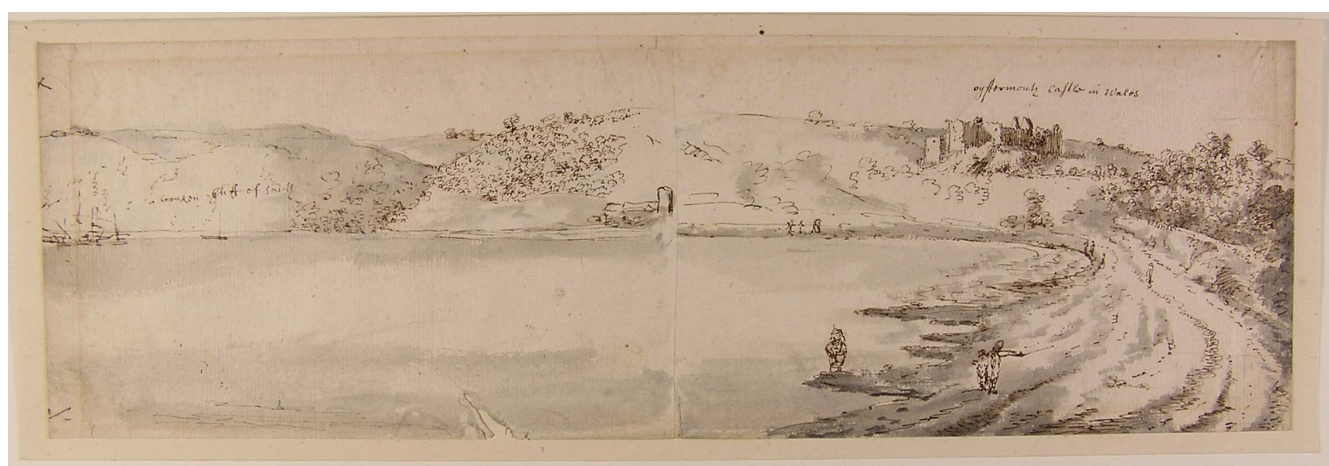


Fig. 3. Francis Place, *Oyermouth Castle*, NMWA 16368

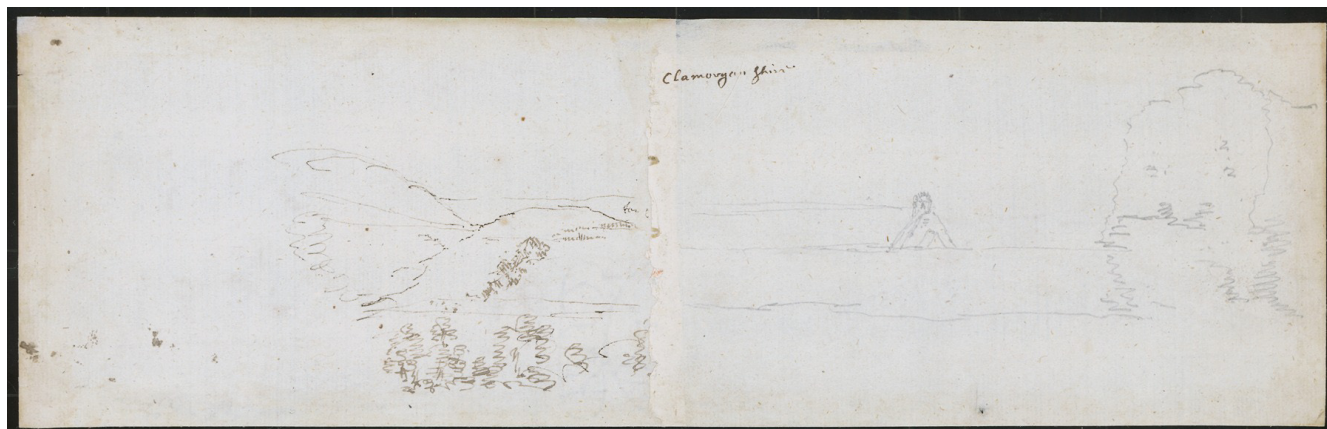


Fig. 4. Francis Place, *Tenby*, NMWA 3355 (verso)



Fig. 5. Digitally stitched image created from the versos of NMWA 16367 and 3355

by turning over the sheet the sketches on the verso can be revealed on the left (fig. 1) and right (fig. 2).

I discovered that in the last twenty years four sketches had been removed from their secondary supports to facilitate mounting. In consultation with curatorial staff I made the decision to remove the remaining sketches from their secondary supports. This then revealed further sketches on the versos.

I removed the secondary-supports/album-page remnants and adhesive residue and also decided to remove some of the repair paper only when it obscured part of the image below. On some I made no attempt to remove the repair paper as it was causing no damage or discoloration, so I saw it as important to retain as evidence of the object's history.

On removing the album page debris, some drawings were also found to have blue paper remnants beneath at the corners—evidence that they were on a previous secondary support. Some drawings had suffered from light damage and from being displayed (fig. 3). I carried out a little judicious surface cleaning but no aqueous treatments were considered, mainly because of the lightness, subtleness and wear of the shading and because the sketches are double sided and the ink

and pigments were sensitive to water. Cleaned and pressed, the sheets were scanned.

WHO WAS FRANCIS PLACE?

Francis Place was a Yorkshire man, born into a wealthy family in 1647 the last of ten children. It was his father who decided that he should follow in his footsteps and at the age of seventeen or eighteen he entered Gray's Inn in London to study Law. Francis made his dislike for law known and the Great Plague in London (1665) gave him his excuse to finish with his studies and return home. A short time later he returned to London and worked with Wenceslaus Hollar who introduced him to printmaking and print selling in London.

American colleagues may be thinking that his name sounds familiar and there *is* an American connection: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania has two small chalk drawings by Place, which they claim are the only surviving images made from life of Pennsylvania's founder William Penn and his second wife Hannah Collowhill Penn. They are signed and were bought in 1957 from the descendents of Place.

There is some suggestion that Place received some or all of his inheritance before his father died in 1681, and it would have been this that enabled him to follow his passion for art and angling. The seventeenth century was the age of the *Virtuosi*—likeminded men with money and leisure who were interested in art, science, and philosophy; many of whom went on to form the Royal Society in 1660. In the first half of the century only royalty and those closely associated learned and practised the art of drawing and painting, the main reason being that to study perspective gave them insights into fortification and painting so that they could collect.

Towards the end of the century it was then taken up by the landed gentry and their sons and daughters. There were many reasons for this including filling their time so they didn't go off the rails or slip into the abyss that was "melancholy." They always studied to acquire knowledge which was very different from men who had to make a living from it. There is evidence that, although ostensibly an amateur, Place was paid for work, particularly early on.

So Place fits in very well with the gentlemen of the time; he had the time and the money and, from what survives of his work, he dabbled in many media including early experiments in porcelain. He was a member of the York *Virtuosi* who included, among others, Martin Lister, Henry Gyles, Thomas Kirke FRS and William Lodge. It may have been through this group that he earned commissions and also learned the "secrets" of the day. A good example of one of these secrets is the art of mezzotint, which was developed by these amateurs to its full potential before it got out into the real world where it was used for more commercial purposes. It is also unsurprising to note that the earliest examples of mezzotint can be found in the collections of these *virtuosi*.

With his fathers money, Place travelled far and wide in the UK to sketch and practise the art of angling. We know from correspondence of the period that our sketches were carried out on a tour of Wales and the West Country in 1678. He was travelling with his great friend and fellow York *Virtuosi* William Lodge. Travelling at this time was not without its dangers as this was the time of the Popish plots, and it is known that while in Wales they both spent one night in jail under suspicion of being Jesuit spies.

PUTTING THE DRAWINGS IN ORDER

With all the sketches detached from the album pages it also became apparent that a drawing on the back of one joined up with the drawing on the back of another to create a new double-page spread. With this revelation I began matching up and seeing a sketch unseen since the original sketchbook had been taken apart at least 200 years ago. It was in this way that I also managed to work out the order of the sketches in the original sketchbook. Figure 2 joins up with figure 4, and figure 5 shows the two digitally stitched together.

I quickly realized that there was limited potential in showing these historical views of Wales in a traditional gallery setting, so I worked with our photography department to scan and digitally stitch the images back together again. Photography staff also gave me some insight into Place's working methods, remarking that in putting together the separate pages no manipulation was required to allow horizons to match up, as they all did perfectly. Testimony indeed to Place's ability as a draughtsman. Although as to whether he used a camera obscura—at this time being developed and used by the *virtuosi*—remains unsubstantiated.

Another interesting observation, which made it much easier to see where drawings continued over the page, was Place's use of marks and devices to extend a panorama and thus his use of the sketchbook to create wide open space. On many of our works there are crosses or arrows which show where the panorama is extended over the page on the verso. Note on figure 3 the crosses on the very left edge which show that the coastline is extended on the verso of the sheet.

On a view of Pembroke Castle (fig. 6) a section of the sheet on the very right folds over. Notice the crease where the panorama continues on the verso (fig. 7). Figure 8 shows it digitally stitched together. This image is very puzzling as the extra section on the verso is noted as St David's, which, geographically, would be technically impossible to see from this view. As a point of interest, National Museum Wales also has another version of the whole panorama—not what you would call finished, but slightly larger than the sketchbook sketches and executed on a single sheet.

RESEARCH

The curator of prints and drawings, Beth McIntyre, and I embarked on research into Place and the history of these drawings. The original Sotheby's sale in 1931 is where the bulk of his original work, now in institutions, comes from. Various lots from this sale found their way to the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. We were particularly interested in a number of mounted drawings and two sketchbooks from their collection.

The first sketchbook consists of eighteen sheets that are exactly the same size as ours and bearing exactly the same watermarks. Were our drawings from this sketchbook? We think so. Tantalisingly, there is a list at the front of the sketchbook that corresponds to the views in the sketchbook (missing a few irrelevant or unidentifiable places), and the list continues with places in Wales that correspond with the order I have established from our sketches. Unfortunately, the list is in someone else's handwriting but is still of some age. Maybe it was a descendant of Place who made the list before they extracted the best sketches to mount in their prized album?

More evidence to back up our claim is found in the second sketchbook where there is a sheet pasted onto the back

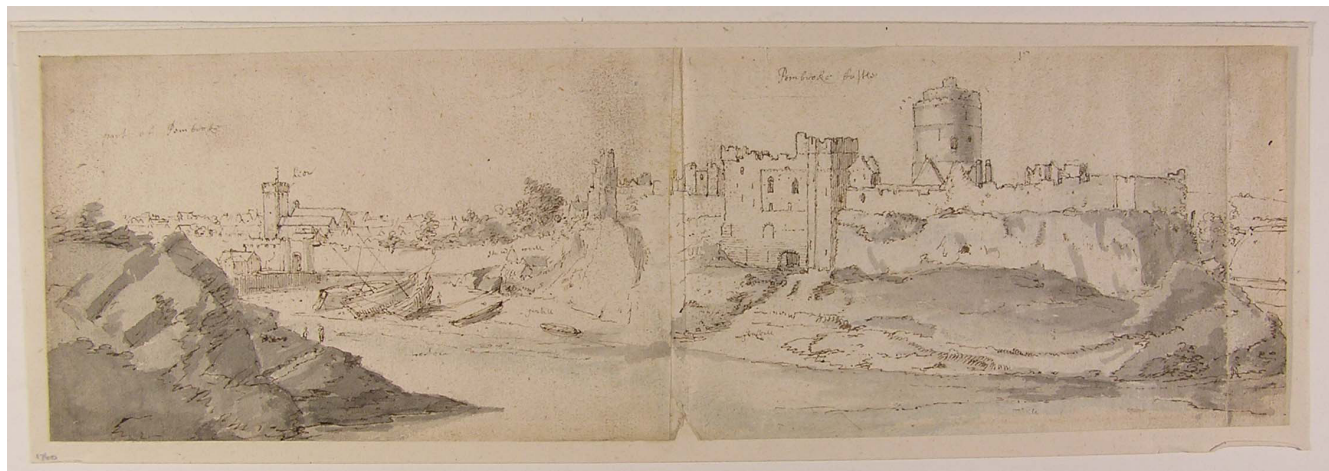


Fig. 6–7. Francis Place, *Pembroke*, NMWA 16371, recto (top) and verso (bottom)



Fig. 8. Digitally stitched image created from recto and verso of NMWA 16371

inside cover. This sheet joins up with the last sketch in the first sketchbook. Unfortunately, one third of this last page is pasted down but on the small part that can be lifted a definite pencil line can be seen—potentially this pencil line, or horizon, matches up with that on one of our sketches.

In the larger, second sketchbook there is evidence of how Place used a double page to create his panorama. The horizon is drawn across from one page to the next, and presumably the potential is to then fill the drawing in, but this piece is unfinished or abandoned.

CONCLUSION

It has been a very pleasing project to work on and immensely satisfying. I have a few blank pages, but I have been able to establish the order of our sketches in a sketchbook and even fit them into an existing sketchbook.

Digital technology has been imperative to this ongoing project. Only a few years ago we would have been physically cutting out photographs to put these sketches back together. Technology, though, has not changed the way in which I

treated these objects but it has greatly enhanced our knowledge of the works by giving deeper insight into the working methods of the artist.

Technology has also allowed us to make this knowledge available and accessible to our visitors. We are working on a computer interactive available in the gallery and also an article for the “virtual museum” on our website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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