

**GEORGE SMART, THE TAILOR OF FRANT** : Jonathan Christie 10 February 2022

Known not for any fine suits that he designed, George Smart the Tailor earned his fame and reputation from his artistic collages, created from cloth, leather, beads, and buttons, lately the subject of a definitive work by Jonathan Christie, our speaker.

Born in poor circumstances at Clerkenwell, London, in 1774, George Smart lived until 1846, working during the reigns of George III, George IV, William IV, and Victoria, before dying a pauper in 1846.

It appears that he came to Frant in around 1803 as a tailor, and his dwelling a house-cum-shop, now demolished, stood on the main road through Frant, opposite the village stores. Considered an eccentric, he began creating his artworks during 1815 to 1816, witnessing his fame beginning to grow. His name appeared in Tunbridge Wells guide books from 1820, with illustrations of the man himself, his shop, and the road at Frant.

“Smart’s Repository” was painted in block letters on the wall of his premises, with dummy boards [shelves] erected on the side of his house. A great self-promoter, he would run into the road offering his works for sale to the gentry passing through Frant in their carriages. Quick to place a coat of arms over his door, believing that he had sold artwork to the Duke of Sussex, he had ‘by royal appointment’ gracing the labels on the back of his pictures. These labels were produced by Clifford’s of Tunbridge Wells, complete with humorous ditties, perhaps by George, although others may have been the originators.

As an artist in cloth and velvet figures, he produced cats and dogs, but his two most celebrated 1830s works are **The Goosewoman** and **Old Bright, The Postman**. Using a template for the figures themselves, George employed a considerable variation in details and backgrounds, showing donkeys, milestones (giving, for example, the distance from Tunbridge Wells to Frant), churches, and views of common land. The postman always holds in his hand a letter addressed to George Smart.

Also an accomplished artist in a more traditional sense, George, in one of his pictures has a splendid watercolour and pencil rendition of a country house with trees. Another interesting work was his copy of an earlier subject, known as **The Earth Stopper**, on the reverse of which were plastered several labels, complete with that ubiquitous coat of arms! He also made ‘articulated works’, one of a maid, the other of a soldier, which could be made to move by pulling on tabs at the back.

Embracing modern technology, George utilised a lithograph, produced in Tunbridge Wells, allowing him to hand-tint his works instead of spending time painting them. Eccentric he may have been, but certainly enterprising, a proficient PR man, and, one presumes, able to keep his wife and unmarried daughter, even though he was to die penniless.

The Tunbridge Wells Museum contains some fine examples of George's work, including a rather forbidding-looking chimney sweep, whose eyes shine as beads. An 1815 cat example, found in Birmingham, sold for just £1, not everyone realising the unique nature and value of George's artwork. However, the Tate Gallery held a "British Folk Arts" exhibition in 2014, where 21 George Smart pieces were on show. A three-part work was stolen, two of those parts coming up for auction in 2021, the third as yet untraced.

Today, his work is well-known, not only in East Sussex but around the world. Dying a pauper, without any descendants, precious little is known of his formative years, yet he has achieved more fame in the best part of 200 years since his death than he could ever have imagined as he stood on that dirt road in Frant offering his artwork for sale when the horse-drawn carriages trundled by.

Jonathan Christie's book, published in 2016, is, and will remain, a homage to George Smart's life and work, containing 71 artworks (although a further 31 have come to light since then).

*Stefan Gatward*