

4. 'Pen and Think'

On 1st September 1991 I became self-employed, trading as 'Pen & Think'. The name had been invented when my Devon resource team had operated as 'slaves' on a residential Humanities course, drawing and designing to order as the teachers on the course came up with ideas. The first products to emerge from Pen & Think were computer programs written by John Leedham which were well received both locally and nationally. Meanwhile I taught at Exeter University, wrote information sheets for English Heritage and designed teaching resources for the National Trust. I also produced a teacher's guide based on the lives of four individuals who had contributed to the re-building of Exeter Cathedral during the 14th Century (1) and (2).

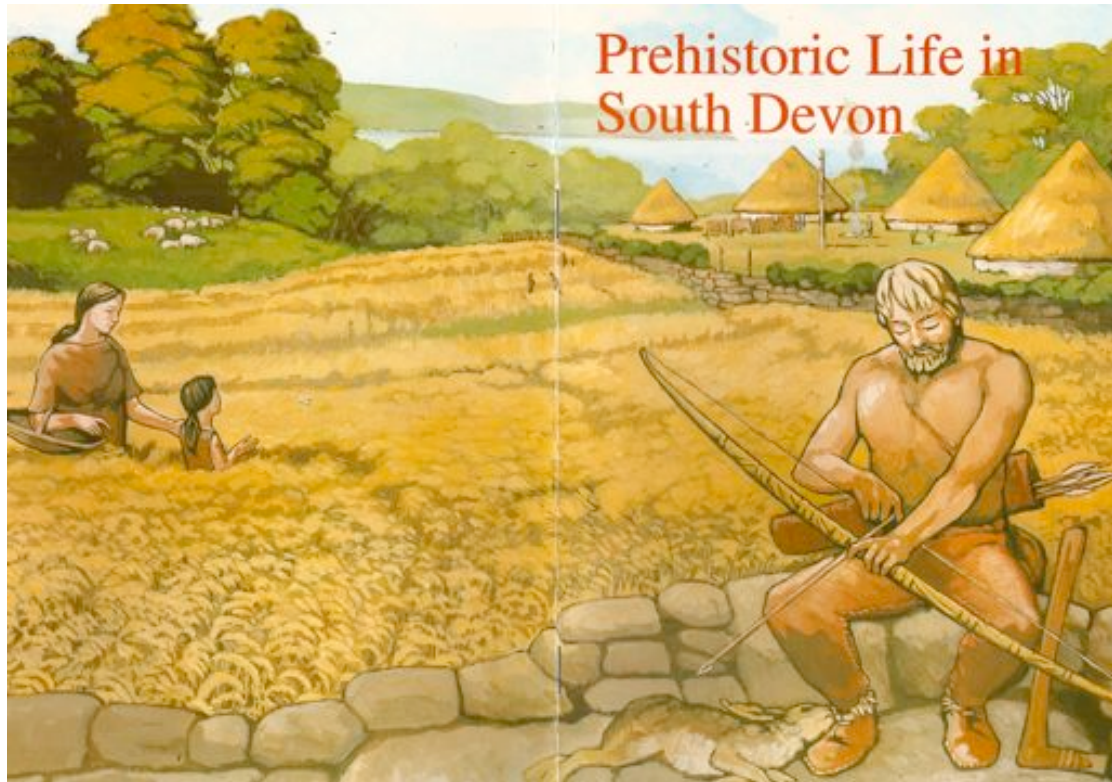


1. Exeter Cathedral: the carpenter Robert of Galampton (1994)



2. Exeter Cathedral: the clerk of works John of Sherford (1994)

One of the most interesting Pen & Think commissions was to create a series of display panels for a small museum of prehistoric finds at Capton near Dartmouth. A booklet putting the finds in context was published by Devon County Council (3). The painting used for the cover remains at County Hall in Exeter, along with the drawings that illustrated the text. Whilst none of these projects held a deeper meaning they brought my work to the attention of a wider public and many of the illustrations I produced were used in my subsequent teaching. However, my largest project at this time was entirely private: the Annunciation that still (2010) covers one wall of the dining room in my house in Torquay. In painting it I intended no statement of faith but just as my son Christopher has found it possible to write genuine religious music although he has never been a Christian so I, as an artist, found it possible to believe whilst I wielded the brush (4).



3. Prehistoric Life in South Devon: the cover (1994)



4. Annunciation (detail): the Angel Gabriel (1997)

Equally decorative in intention was a design that I made for a large-scale wall hanging which Kit began to make but which was abandoned when she returned to work. It was eventually realised as a painting (5). 'The Hunter and the Unicorn' depicts a kind of conversion; instead of shooting the Unicorn the hunter offers it water to drink, presumably because it has worked its magic on him. Now he sees all of Nature as holy.



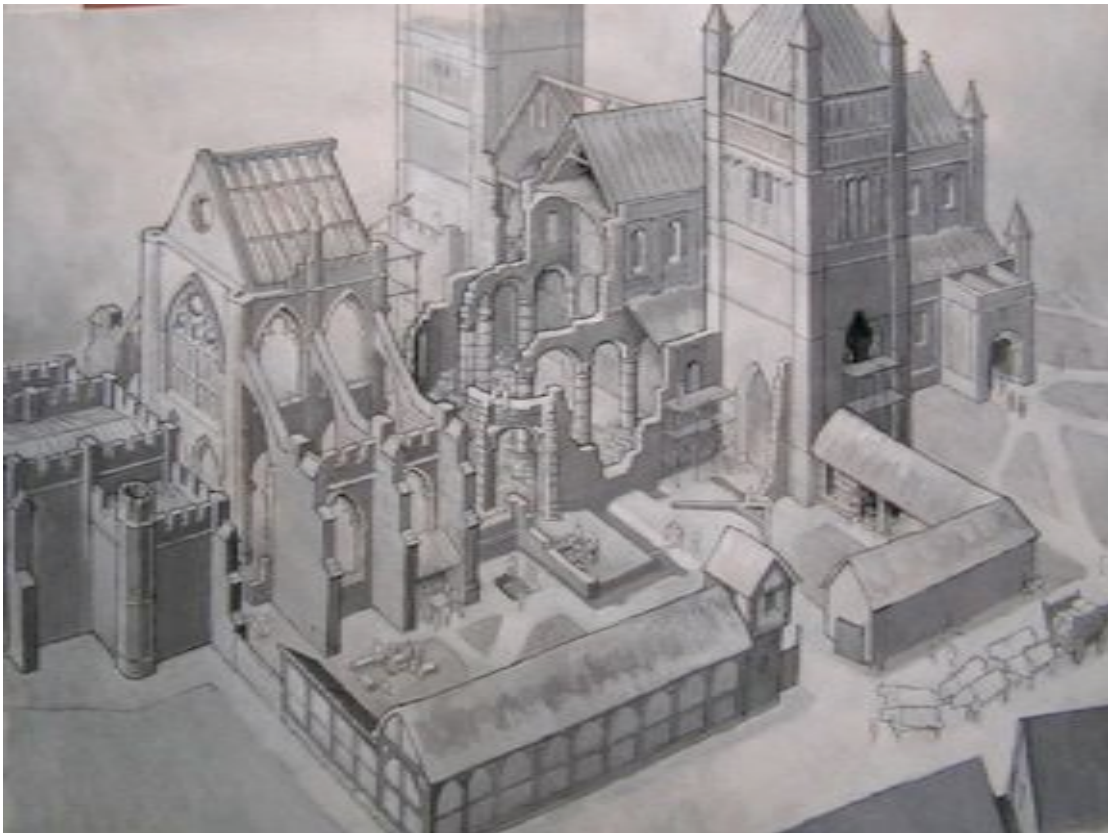
5. The Hunter and the Unicorn (1992)

Throughout this time I continued to work on materials for Exeter Cathedral, using photographs of the building today as the basis for reconstructions of its appearance in medieval times (6). As part of a project to build a large scale model I pictured the scene half way through the demolition of the earlier Norman cathedral, whose towers survive as a massive contrast to the graceful Decorated style employed in its replacement (7). The model would have shown the stage reached in the re-building process when Walter de Stapledon became bishop of Exeter in 1307 but it was too ambitious for a dean and chapter uncertain about its eventual location.

As the end of the decade approached, and with it a new millennium, I was becoming more and more absorbed in my teaching. By the time Chris went up to Oxford (1999) I was already embarked upon a historical novel whose hero, a Roman soldier called Marcus Simplicius Vitalis, originated as an exercise in empathy which required students to supply a drawing of him with 'thoughts' (8). In time Marcus would go through a number of transformations and eventually he would figure in a whole series of illustrations, some related to the action of the novel, some not (9). As I write a sequel remains incomplete.



6. Exeter Cathedral: the medieval high altar (1999)



7. The re-building of Exeter Cathedral between 1300-1320 (2000)



8. Marcus Simplicius Vitalis: third version (2001)



8. Marcus rides north, coloured version (2001)

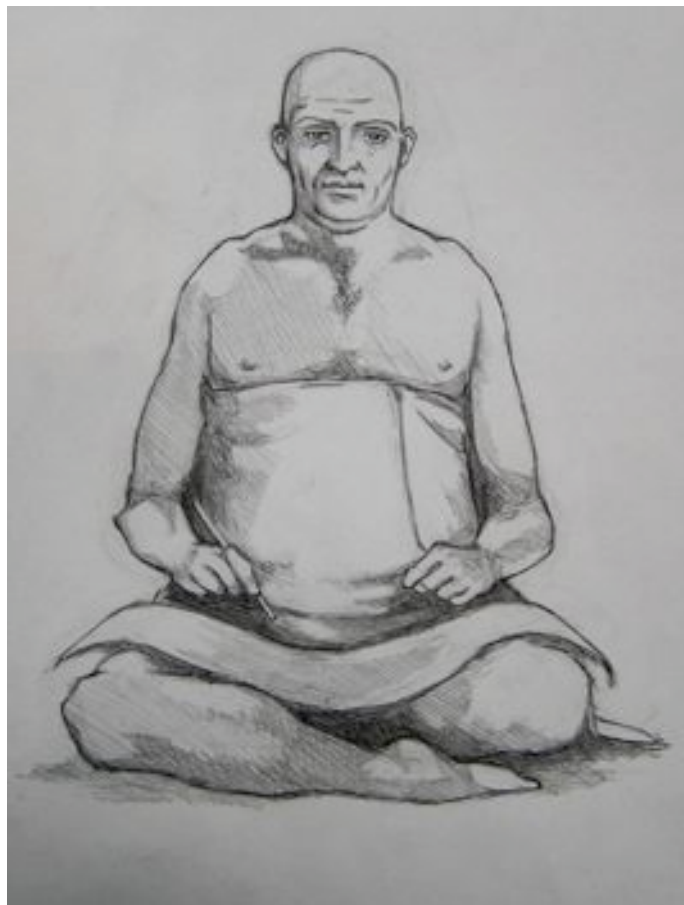
The writing of 'In Caesar's Shadow' confirmed a change in my creative outlook. Hitherto I'd always believed my imagination to be essentially visual in nature. Now I was finding increasing satisfaction in words – spoken as in a lecture and written, as in a novel or series of lecture notes. As a lecturer I was becoming something of a 'legend', famous for routines that involved role-play, visits and story-telling. In some ways therefore the Pen & Think years are amongst the least coherent in my artistic life. When I left Devon it was not just my career that seemed to be over: my progress as an artist also appeared to have been interrupted. For several years I was content to regard myself primarily as an illustrator, although the illustrations to 'The Pardoner's Tale' – a story I used a great deal in my teaching – went well beyond the requirements of the classroom, (9) as did the series of 'ordinary' people in history which I produced for a source book called 'In Their Own Words' (10).

When change came it was associated with a feeling of greater financial security. Although I remained self-employed, negotiating my main contract with the University of Plymouth on an annual basis, I was once again able to see myself as a success in career terms, doing what I wanted to do and what other people liked. Appropriately enough it was 'Hero' - my poem about self-realisation - to which I now returned. I began a second version in August 2005, completing it about six months later without revising the text in any way (11).

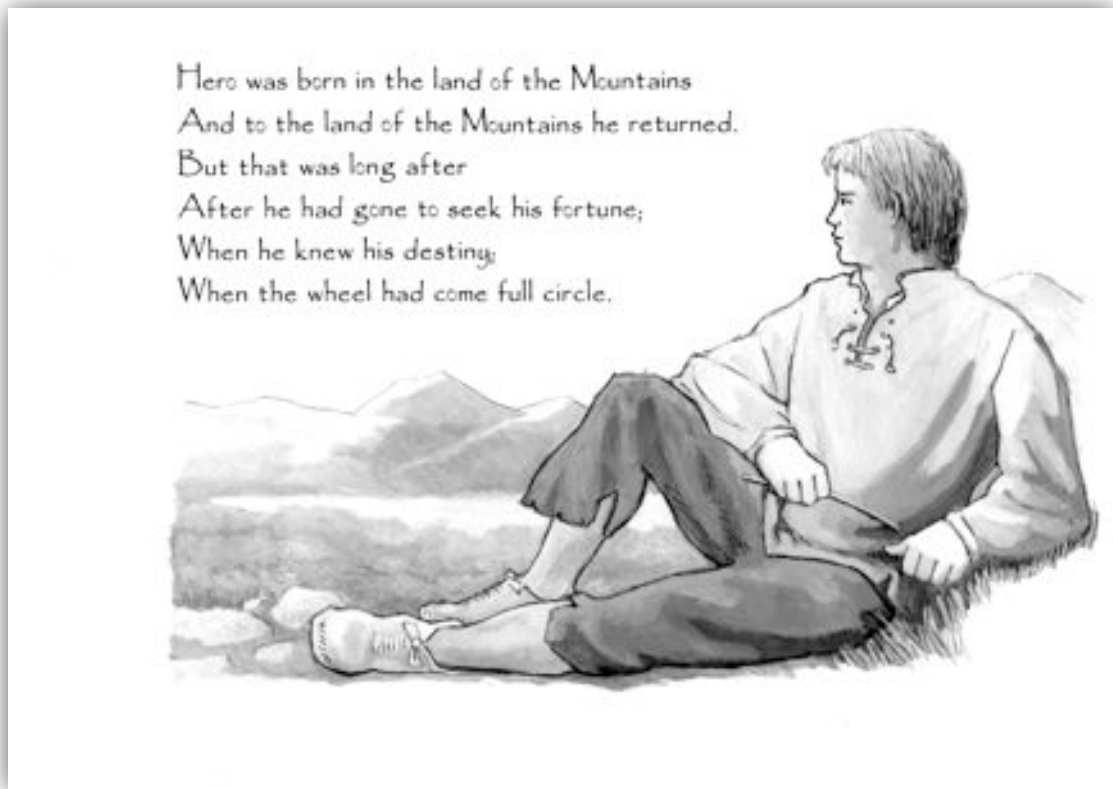


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9. The Pardoner's Tale: the three thieves (2004)



10. 'In Their Own Words': the scribe Khaemwese (2003)



11. Hero, second version: opening lines (2003)

I can end this section with one of my few oil paintings of this period, apart from further work on the Marriage Box. Nothing touches oils for their brilliance and for my third version of the story of Piero and Francesca I turned again for inspiration to the painters of the early Netherlandish school. Here, once again, is the moment suggested by the line from Browning's poem when the lovers are about to be confronted by Francesca's jealous husband. A small bird symbolising transience alights on a book – the romance of Sir Lancelot which Piero blames for their fall - and a snake slithers from a golden cup, the poison of jealousy and possession. The setting is Stourhead whose magical gardens have a special meaning for all my family and the message is 'Carpe Diem' for who knows what Fate has in store? Love and Death between them constitute life's absolutes, each a form of annihilation, each promising a kind of resurrection.

As so often with my paintings the drawings from which the final composition emerges demonstrate a command of form that is lost in the working out of the final design. In the sketch (12) Francesca leans forward with a greater sense of urgency than in the finished painting whilst Piero seems more stockier and less refined. A great deal of effort was required to get the classical architecture of the Pantheon right: there is no more obvious sign of the amateur than lack of attention to such details (13).

In the Autumn of 2008 the foolish closure of the Rolle College site in Exmouth brought my teaching career in Higher Education to an end. As I said to a colleague who was also 'retiring', this was happening just as we were beginning to be good at our job. However it was also a result of my wish to stop rather than experience a decline in my effectiveness or popularity. In the months that followed I was able to summarise my approach in a long reflection made available on my website: the website also acts as a 'virtual gallery' for my painting.



12. Piero and Francesca: preparatory sketch (2004)

Released from the need to prepare lectures and mark work I now had my first opportunity to put painting first since entering teaching.



13. Piero and Francesca: completed version (2005)