



Sandycombe Lodge in its infancy, by William Havell. Below: the house today

# Major BRUSH-UP

*The St Margaret's home of Britain's greatest artist has been sliding inexorably into decay. Now there's a £2m campaign to restore Turner's house to life. Rob Edwards draws back the curtain on the past*

**S**hrouded by yew trees steadily eating away at its foundations, an obscure little property peers out onto Sandycombe Lane. With its grimacing windows and peeling paintwork, the faded St Margaret's house hints at nothing beyond the routine currency of decay.

But the faded impression is a trick of history's light. For *Sandycombe Lodge* was a rateable property as far back as 200 years ago – the ratepayer, a certain JMW Turner (1775-1851), perhaps the greatest British artist of all. Away from the throbbing heart of London, this was his secluded retreat; a bucolic bolthole in Arcadia.

But the years of benign neglect have taken their toll. Now the *Turner's House Trust*, which acquired the property in 2010, has launched a campaign to restore it to its former glory and throw open the doors to the public. And, with a cool £2m required to fulfil the task, the oxygen of publicity is at least as important as letting light into the Italianate villa itself. Today, in pursuit of which, the trustees are giving me a tour.

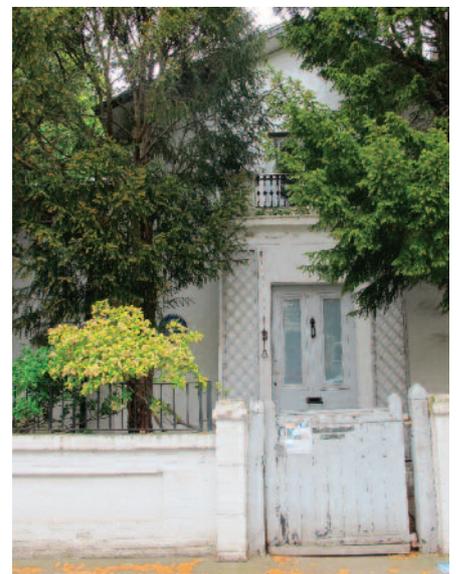
Beyond the threshold, grandeur and grubbiness compete for the upper hand, the spectacle of yawning period arches and moulding – all John Soane in inspiration, I'm told – tempered by the acerbic smell of damp.

"It's unique," says Catherine Parry-Wingfield, chair of the Trust, a lecturer in art history who is wholly captivated by the legacy of Turner. "And what makes it all the more important to rescue it is that, if anything, Turner is more famous today than he was during his lifetime."

Not that there has ever been much doubt as to the greatness of the child prodigy born in Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, in 1775. With the active encouragement of his father, William, a barber and wigmaker, Turner Junior entered the *Royal Academy Schools* at the tender age of 14.

Extreme shyness failed to hold him back. At 24, he was accepted as an RA Associate, becoming a full Academician three years later. And before long he had scaled the lofty heights of his profession, appointed the Academy's Professor of Perspective in 1807.

Lucrative commissions followed and Turner, flushed with financial success, took a townhouse and gallery in Harley Street. He also married Sarah Danby, a widow, who appears to have played something of a walk-on role in his life.



What he didn't have, however, was peace and quiet.

*"The idea behind this house was to get away from all that and just enjoy what, in those days, would have been beautiful countryside,"* says Catherine, our footsteps disturbing the resonant stillness of the drawing room.

And so, in May 1807, Turner acquired two plots of land in Twickenham – a large, wedge-shaped plot with a pond and a smaller triangular plot, half a mile from Richmond Bridge. Then he set to work, relishing the task of being *"one's own architect, the pleasures increasing day by day, strata by strata,"* as he wrote to a friend.

Work began at the crest of the steep, sandy, larger plot early in 1812. The original structure consists of a broad-eaved two-storey block, anchored by single-storey wings with a basement beneath. The ground floor drawing room – originally fitted with French windows – faces north-east, while the small rooms in each wing most likely served as a library

## "You can't just stick some paint on and let the public in"

and dining room. From the narrow cross-corridor rises a graceful top-lit staircase. One large bedroom – presumably Turner's – looks out across the garden to the river and Richmond Hill, while the smaller room facing the lane was probably for 'Old William', his father.

Clearly enamoured of his surroundings, the artist frequently reproduced the local vistas on canvas. His first major painting of the view from Richmond Hill, *Thomson's Aeolian Harp*, was completed in 1809. A decade later came *England: Richmond Hill, on the Prince Regent's Birthday*, followed by such watercolours as *Richmond Hill* (1825), *Richmond Bridge and Hill* (1831) and *Richmond Terrace, Surrey* (1836).

*"The river has its own identity in his work,"* says Catherine, as we meander back down the staircase.

And when work took him away, as it frequently did, Turner lamented the often prolonged absence from his beloved house.

*"Sandycombe,"* he wrote in 1815, *"sounds just now in my ears as an act of folly, when I reflect how little I have been able to be there this year, and less chance (perhaps) for the next in looking forward to a Continental excursion."*

In 1826, Turner finally moved with his ailing father back to London. Old William had been an invaluable aid in tending the property: without him it was time to let go.

In October of that year, records show that Joseph Todd, owner of *Twickenham Park*, acquired *Sandycombe* for the meagre sum of £500. Todd bequeathed the house to James Morrison, who then sold it in 1845 to the Beaumonts. It was almost certainly during this period that the upstairs extensions were added to accommodate the large family.

And then, from the mid-1880s, the house slips into obscurity. It's known that, during WWII, it was requisitioned for the manufacture of airmen's goggles – a process so damaging to the fabric that the council considered tearing it down. But about their famous former owner, the walls held their tongue. In collective memory, the marriage of Turner and Twickenham seemed dissolved.

Enter Harold and Ann Livermore: he a scholar of Iberian languages and history, she a singer. In 1947 they bought the house and began to uncover its history. Gradually, through their patience and passion, the story of Turner in Twickenham came back into focus. Yet as the years went by, the house itself slipped even more deeply into decay.

*"Had Harold lived to be 98,"* reflects Catherine, *"he and the house would have crumbled together."*

In fact, Harold passed away in 2010, 15 years after Ann. By then, however, keen to bestow the house upon the public, he had long since approved the launch of the *Turner's House Trust*.

*"Everyone who comes here is thrilled with it, including artists,"* says Jenny Pearce, a trustee and conservation specialist, who manages the Trust's fundraising. *"A lot of them come here and just want to stand where Turner stood. You can feel his presence."*

But with the yew tree's tendrils worming their way through the masonry, and damp patches seeping into the plaster, the task of restoration seems huge. Even with Richmond Council on side, a slew of charitable grants and a £10,000 private endowment, the Trust is still well short of its £2m target.

*"We need major funding now,"* says Catherine. *"Paint analysis costs about £6,000, for a start. You can't just stick some paint on and let the public in. This is Turner's house, for goodness sake!"*

*"Once restored, it's going to become a lively centre. We're very keen to invite artists. One of our problems, however, is that the house is quite small. We don't have a space that could be a messy, dedicated studio."*

*"Even so, we hope to run events in conjunction with our partners, such as Orleans House, which is great at building a hub of educational resources for local heritage. We want to be a part of that."*

The yew trees of St Margaret's may be doing their worst, but reports of the death of this faded local gem would appear to be somewhat premature.   
n [turnerintwickenham.org.uk](http://turnerintwickenham.org.uk)



*"The Pageant from City of London School in Rain,"* by Susan Wilson, which forms part of this month's Artists of the Pageant exhibition at Sandycombe Lodge. The display features work by 20 artists in response to last year's stunning Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant. Jun 4-16, 10am – 4pm. Visit: [turnerintwickenham.org](http://turnerintwickenham.org)