

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



John Inigo Richards (London 1731 - London 1810)

A View of St. James's Park with Westminster Abbey beyond

oil on canvas
43 x 51 cm (17 x 20 in)

This charming painting by John Inigo Richards, is a fascinating historical insight into London's past. In the foreground we see a number of peasants allowing their horses and cattle to graze on the parkland, whilst on the left-hand side the edge of a small pond or lake. Beyond the tree-line the unmistakable twin towers of Westminster Abbey loom over the park, on the eighteenth-century London horizon. To a modern viewer the landscape looks almost unrecognisable, but St. James's Park was historically known for its rural, ramshackle nature.

Almost a century after the present work was painted Walter Thornbury wrote 'St. James's Park retains its verdant and rural character, and in it there are spots where the visitor may sit or walk with every trace of the great city around him shut out from his gaze, except the grey old Abbey, against the tall rood of which the trees seem to rest, half burying it in their foliage, just as they must have done three centuries ago', a description which recalls Richard's painting.¹ Cows were grazed in the park during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and one could even buy fresh milk there. During Tudor times the park was a swampy wasteland, known for its farms, woods and a hospital for female lepers. In 1536 Henry VIII (1491-1547) decided to install a deer park there, as it was convenient for the nearby Palace of Westminster, and James I (1566-1625) kept a collection of animals there, including camels, crocodiles and an elephant. The park also had a particularly unsavoury and longstanding reputation for its nocturnal character, memorably described by the Earl of Rochester (1647-1680): 'Unto this all-sin-sheltering grove/Whores of the bulk and the alcove,/Great ladies, chambermaids, and drudges, The ragpicker, and heiress trudges.'² Although some attempt at gentrification was made between 1770 and 1775, 'the "rough and intolerable" manner in which the walks were still kept caused much discontent and grumbling among its more fashionable habitués'.³

Richards was born in London in 1731. He studied art at the St Martin's Lane Academy in London, where he was a pupil of George Lambert (1700-65), and from 1759 Richards was employed as a

scenery painter at Covent Garden Theatre, working as the principle painter from 1777 to 1803. From 1762, Richards exhibited landscapes and ruin pieces at the Society of Artists of Great Britain, as well as a scene from a stage setting for the *Maid of the Mill*, which achieved great popularity. Richards exhibited at the Free Society of Artists from 1769 to 1783. Additionally when The Royal Academy was established in 1768, Richards was a Foundation Member. In 1786 Richards was appointed Secretary of the RA. He died in London on 18 December 1810. His collection of paintings, drawings and prints was sold in March 1811. Included in the sale were many of his own works, along with pictures by, or attributed to Poussin, Rembrandt, Rubens and Zoffany, and various 17th-century Dutch paintings. The drawings included a sketchbook and loose sketches by Reynolds.

¹ Thornbury, W., *Old and New London*, vol. iv, (Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1873), p.49.

² Wilmot, J., 2nd Earl of Rochester, *Ramble in St. James's Park*.

³ Thornbury, p.53.

Provenance:

G. Davis, 1977.

Artist description:

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