



COLOURFUL CAREER

George Baxter's picture printing brought a world of colour to the masses during the Victorian era, on the eve of a new exhibition Duncan Phillips assesses his legacy

The best George Baxter prints are absolutely stunning. Find an example that has been tucked away from the rigours of the UV rays of daylight and the superb colours jump off the paper.

Not so many decades ago, Baxter prints adorned the walls in antique shops and at fairs everywhere. Once you know what to look for, you'll still find them, produced in their tens of thousands they were extremely popular. The legacy of George Baxter is

Above *'The Boa Ghaut'* by George Baxter, 1837. One of eleven illustrations in Baxter's showcase book *'The Pictorial Album; or, Cabinet of Paintings'*

Right *'The Ascent of Mont Blanc (Leaving the Grands Mulets)'* by George Baxter, 1855

overwhelming, he was responsible for a magnificent range of book illustrations, portraits, illustrated sheet music covers and copies of famous paintings that brought strong and detailed colour images to all aspects of Victorian life for the first time. It was a media revolution of its age.

PRINT READY

George Baxter (1804-1867) was born into the printing profession, his father being a printer-publisher in Lewes, Sussex. After a period as an apprentice engraver, probably with his father, he moved to London in 1827 to study wood engraving and the work of famous artists of the period. At that time, prints were coloured by hand, a long process dependent on the quality of the colourist's work. Though colour printing had been developed in China centuries before, it was not commercially viable. In the early 19th century, colour printing had been revived by George Savage, a Yorkshireman in London. It was Savage's methods that Baxter set out to improve.

After months of experimentation he perfected a technique using oil-based coloured ink and a succession of engraved wooden and steel blocks that produced a print "so close a representation of a painting in oils that it requires some examination before it can be discovered that it is not a product of palette and brush", as one contemporary observer put it.

The secret of his success was his ability to lay down successive colours in perfect register over an initial master engraving. This was printed from a steel or copper plate that outlined the picture in a single colour, usually grey, brown or purple. His first colour print, *Butterflies*, was produced in 1829 and the experiments bore commercial fruit in 1834 with two small vignettes published in Mudie's *'British Birds'*.

In 1835, Baxter was granted 'Patent No. 6916 - Improvements in Producing Coloured Steel Plate, Copper Plate and other Impressions', which outlined the combined intaglio and relief process he would continue to use for the next thirty years, producing large quantities of about 400 different subjects. Baxter's original patent ran for 14 years. His work was widely used by the London Missionary Society





and attracted great interest from the Royal Family, especially Prince Albert who encouraged Baxter to exhibit at the Great Exhibition of 1851.

COLOURFUL CHARACTER

Baxter prints can be identified by the characteristics of each separate technique involved in the process: the aquatint grain, the darker lines of the intaglio plate, and the squashed rims of the relief blocks. Baxter is also believed to have used hand-colouring for finishing touches, highlighting important parts of a picture to add extra clarity and interest. He is even thought to have occasionally applied a glaze over the image, augmenting his usual varnish with a 'hard drier' added to make it insoluble in water. It is also thought that Baxter glazed areas of the print selectively by hand using a glaze composed of gum arabic, egg white and Castile soap.

For a while no one could rival Baxter, but the genius printer was no businessman. So time-consuming was Baxter's process that the financial rewards were small. Before long, others adapted his secret technique to enable faster production and set up in opposition. Baxter was granted an extension of his patent in 1849, but was advised to appoint other manufacturers as licensees.

Few took up the opportunity, but one was rival Abraham Le Blond who produced about 130 colour prints of his own in the manner of the master. They are usually considered of a lesser quality, lacking the beautiful Baxter bloom produced by layers of the oil-based ink.

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Above left A print entitled 'Windsor Castle' produced by George Baxter in 1850

Right George Baxter and his licensees printed a huge range of items

Below Baxter's prints captured historical events, such as the 'Coronation of Queen Victoria', 1841

Picture Perfect

The New Baxter Society will present an exhibition entitled 'Colouring Victorian Life' at the NEC's Art & Antiques for Everyone Fair from April 4-7.

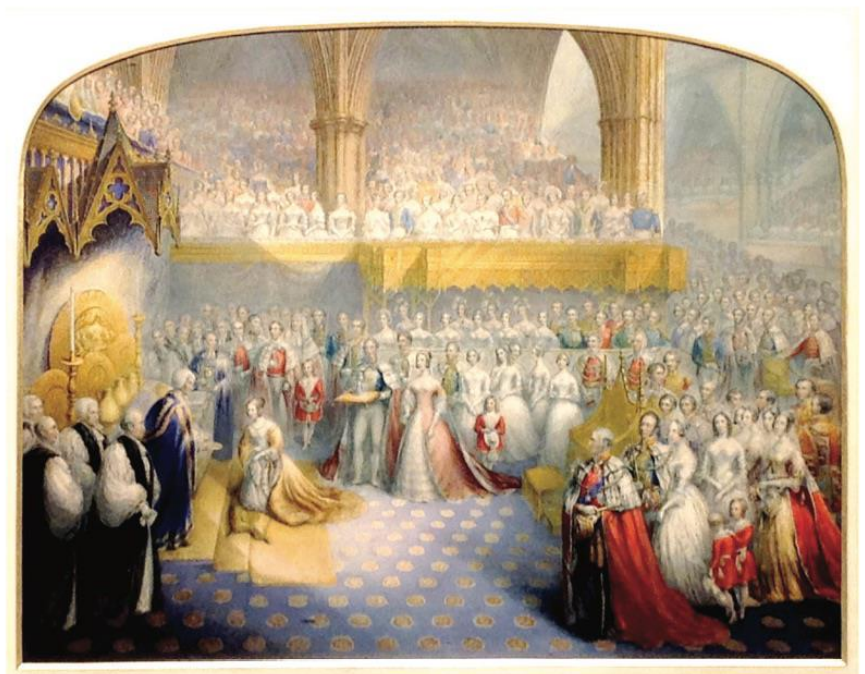
The exhibition will showcase the prints of George Baxter and his licensees, explaining how his patented 'Baxter Process' prints were produced and how they made coloured pictures affordable to the masses for the first time.

The exhibited prints will tell the story of key events throughout the mid-19th century and demonstrate how they came to be used on everyday items, from book illustrations and decorative prints, to embellishments for needle boxes, pin cushions, calling card baskets, children's picture tickets, reward cards and much more.



FALLING STOCK

Although it is estimated that Baxter produced over 20 million prints during his career, which should have brought him a stable living, even the move to license his printing process failed to save Baxter from eventual ruin. The growing popularity of photography and Baxter's own perfectionism in a laborious process





all contributed to his financial difficulties. In 1860, he held a sale of all his stock and equipment, most of which was not sold. Eventually, he sold his plates and blocks to the printer Vincent Brooks, who later republished some of Baxter's images. Baxter was declared bankrupt in 1865 and died in 1867, after an accident involving a horse and carriage.

Le Blond seized the chance to buy 69 sets of Baxter plates. From these, he produced his own cheap looking prints, erasing Baxter's signature and replacing it with his own.

Ironically enough, modern fakers have been known to cut off Le Blond's mark and add the Baxter

Above 'The Bride' by George Baxter, 1850

Above right Baxter printed a wide range of subjects, such as this 1855 'The Allied Sovereigns and the Commanders of their Forces' depicting personalities associated with the Crimean War

PRINT PARTNERS

The New Baxter Society was formed in 1983, following a successful exhibition of Baxter's work at Reading Museum and Art Gallery. Its objectives are to further interest in the work of George Baxter, his licensees and 19th-century colour printing. Members include collectors, academics and public bodies around the globe, making it a great source of information and encouragement to new collectors.

The Society produces three newsletters a year and members meet regularly to exhibit their own items or to visit public collections.

Find out more at www.newbaxtersociety.org



signature. They can be identified because they are of inferior quality and shorter in length. Some also bear the forged date October 7, 1854. That said, genuine Le Blond-Baxters are collected in their own right. The oval embossed Baxter seal is a pointer to originality (although even this is not tamper proof). Until 1848, Baxter's name and address usually appeared on the print itself.

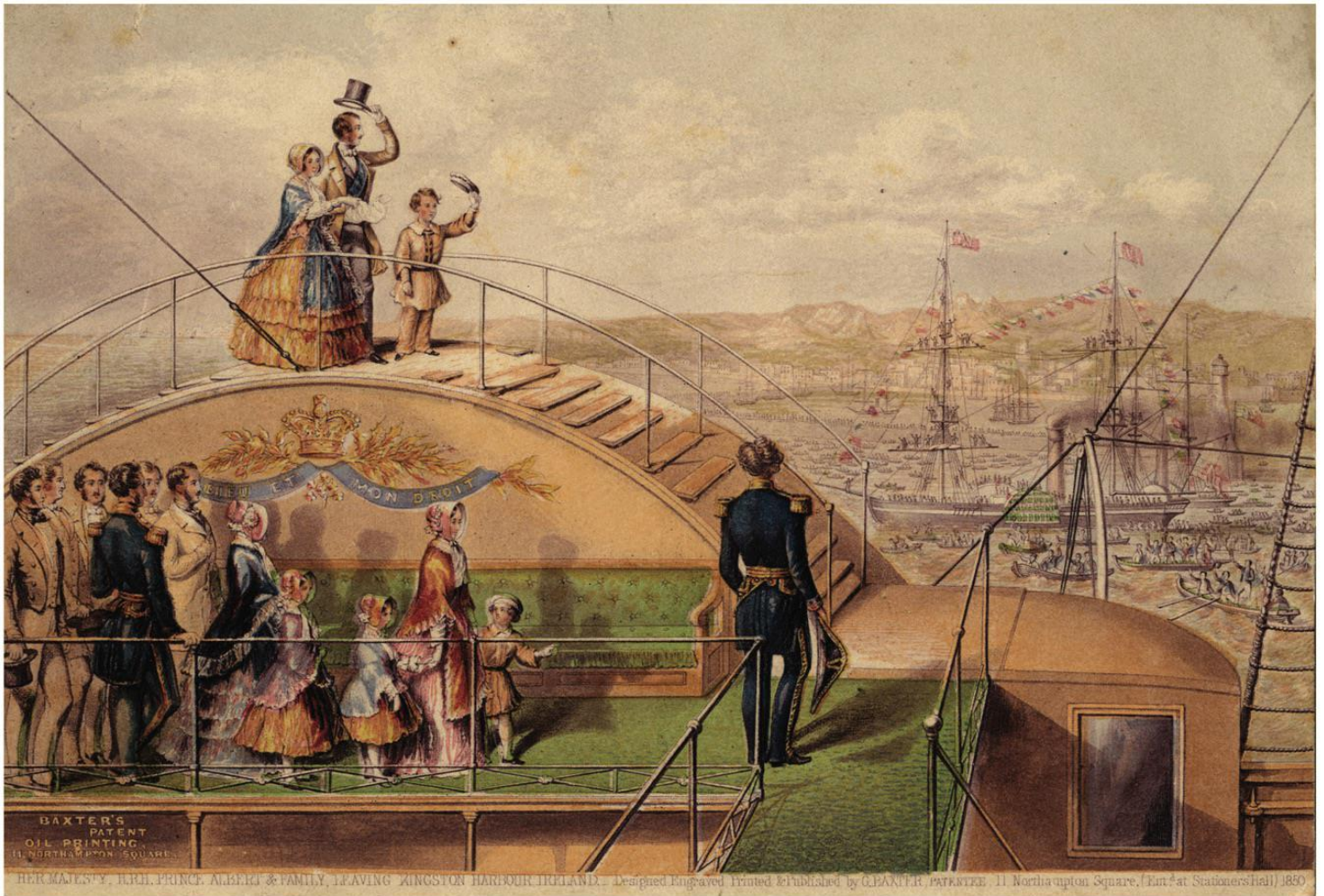
From that date, the genuine mount was embossed 'Printed in Oil Colours by Geo. Baxter, Patentee' or 'Printed in Oil Colours by G. Baxter, the Inventor and Patentee of Oil Colour Printing'. In 1849, a red printed oval seal was used for the title of the print and Baxter's name, but by 1850, this had changed to a white seal.

Six styles of seal were used in all, and the changes in his address which can help date a print were: 3 Charterhouse Square, London (from 1835-43); 11 Northampton Square (1843-51); and 11 and 12 Northampton Square (1851-60).

UNDER LICENSE

Firms who worked under Baxter's license include Bradshaw & Blacklock; Joseph Mansell; William Dickes; Kronheim & Co; and Myers & Co. Other printers known to have used Baxter's methods after his patent expired included George Baxter Jr; Edmund Evans; Gregory, Leighton Bros; Collins & Reynolds; Vincent Brooks; Moor & Crosby and William Russell.

'Today, prints by George Baxter and his licensees are highly collectable, with prices depending on rarity and condition'



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WORLD FIRST

George Cargill Leighton, a former apprentice of Baxter’s, never took a Baxter licence but became a prominent printer in his own right as the printer and later owner of the *Illustrated London News*, the first journal in the world to include regular colour plates. Leighton could not use a metal intaglio plate as a base without infringing upon Baxter’s patent, although “... the fact that he had to do without it probably helped to ensure his commercial success”. Nevertheless, it has been shown that Leighton did often use an aquatint base.

Kronheim and Dickes both used Baxter’s process from 1849 onwards, and were large suppliers of colour plates to book publishers. Baxter’s patent process was not necessarily strictly followed by his licensees – both Kronheim and Dickes were lithographic printers as well as wood engravers, and most likely mixed all of their printing methods together. In fact, it is often impossible to say exactly how a given colour print of this era has been produced. Generally, Baxter’s licensees used fewer colour blocks than Baxter himself and, in the opinion

Above ‘*Her Majesty leaving Kingston Harbour*’ by George Baxter, 1850, showing the Royal family onboard the royal yacht

Below Prince Albert encouraged Baxter to exhibit at the Great Exhibition. This print shows the event’s Belgian department

of many purists, “none surpassed him in quality, being more concerned with cheapness”.

Today, prints by George Baxter and his licensees are highly collectable, with prices depending on rarity and condition. It is very difficult to quote meaningful prices but as a very rough guide a Baxter print could range from £5 to about £2000 for the rarest prints, while a Le Blond oval could cost between £5 to £120.

