

Pictures of Hastings by Oswald Couldrey - an illustrated note

Recently received from the Oxfordshire Museums Service (OMS) were images of two watercolours (or pictures possibly in the medium of crayon or pastel) of Hastings scenes by Oswald Couldrey. Subsequent correspondence with OMS and other interested parties brought three more to light; and then several later paintings of scenes near Hastings in addition to a photograph (awaited) of Couldrey on the beach at Hastings. The pictures are in the custody of OMS but are owned by Abingdon Town Council. Of particular help have been Alex Woodward of the OMS and Dr Lauren Gale, former Curator at Abingdon Museum. Dr Gale is working on a complete catalogue of Couldrey's work.

Oswald Jennings Couldrey (1882–1958) was born and grew up in Abingdon. He attended Abingdon School from 1892 to 1901 distinguishing himself in Divinity and English. He went up to Pembroke College, Oxford, in 1901, where he read Mods and became accomplished in a number of sports (which he would later encourage among his Indian students).

In 1906 he entered the Indian Civil Service and at the age of 27 became Principal of Rajamundry College of Art in Andhra Pradesh. He was much liked and admired by the students. He did not attempt to impose Western ideas upon them but brought such ideas to bear in encouraging and releasing the talents native to their culture and language (Telugu). He had a great love of the landscapes, art and music of India (and painted many Indian scenes in watercolour) and of art and music more generally. Owing to problems with his hearing, Couldrey had to leave his work in India in 1919. He returned to Abingdon the following year.

He thought of himself principally as a teacher and author, publishing a number of (now little remembered) books of verse. His most notable work was the autobiographical *South Indian Hours* (1924). (Two copies are at the time of writing available from Abe Books, c. £35.) His great erudition make some of his literary works less accessible than the pictures into which he channelled his energies from the 1920s, especially those which recreate some of Abingdon's most well known scenes.

He had begun painting seriously soon after his Oxford years and at first glance some of his local scenes of Abingdon (and Hastings) might seem to belong to the early years of the 20th century. This effect is possibly added to by his practice of limiting (or excluding) human figures from his townscapes. We are however able to date most of the pictures of Hastings scenes from the period c. 1928-30. We do not know what brought him to Hastings – perhaps its artistic heritage - but he plainly felt drawn back to the town several times. His later pictures are in a distinctly different style.

Photographs of Couldrey are rare but one is shown below together with reproductions of the pictures mentioned.

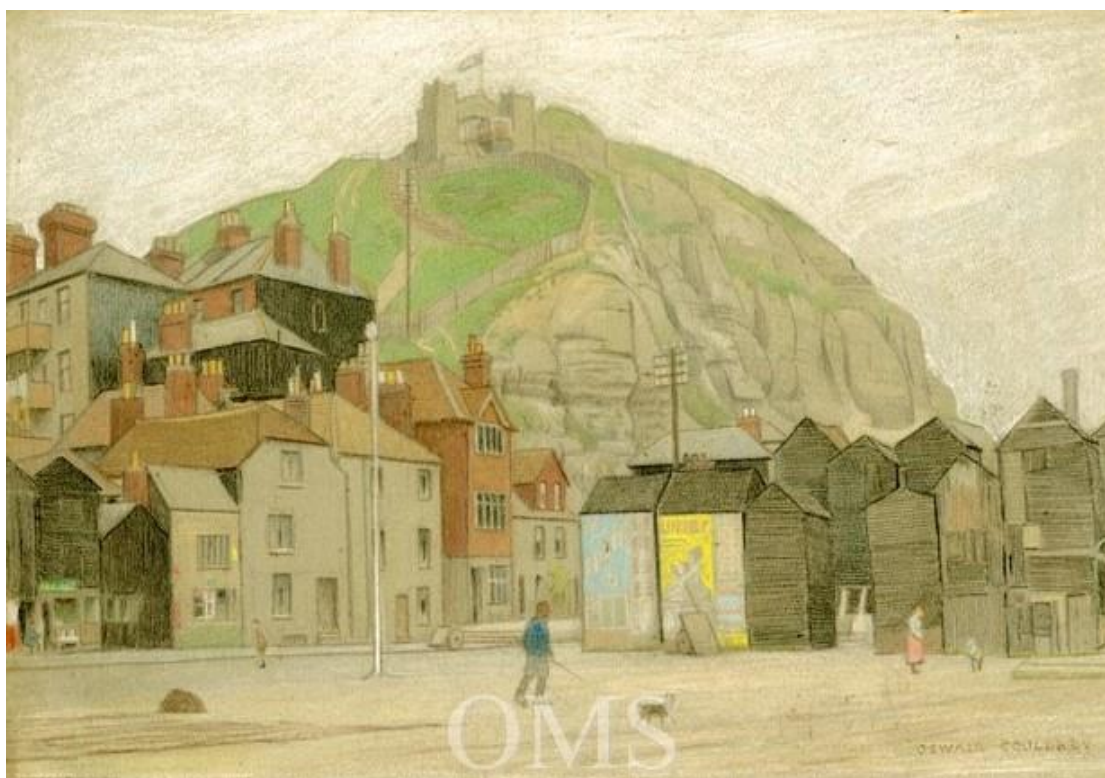
We shall be glad if any readers can add further information about Couldrey's life and work or his times in Hastings or about the subjects of his paintings of Hastings and localities nearby at the time when he made them.



Couldrey in Abingdon in 1934. In a short note the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society tell us that Couldrey disliked being photographed, so friends had to surprise him in the street if they wished to photograph him.

The Couldrey pictures of Hastings of which we are so far aware are shown below.

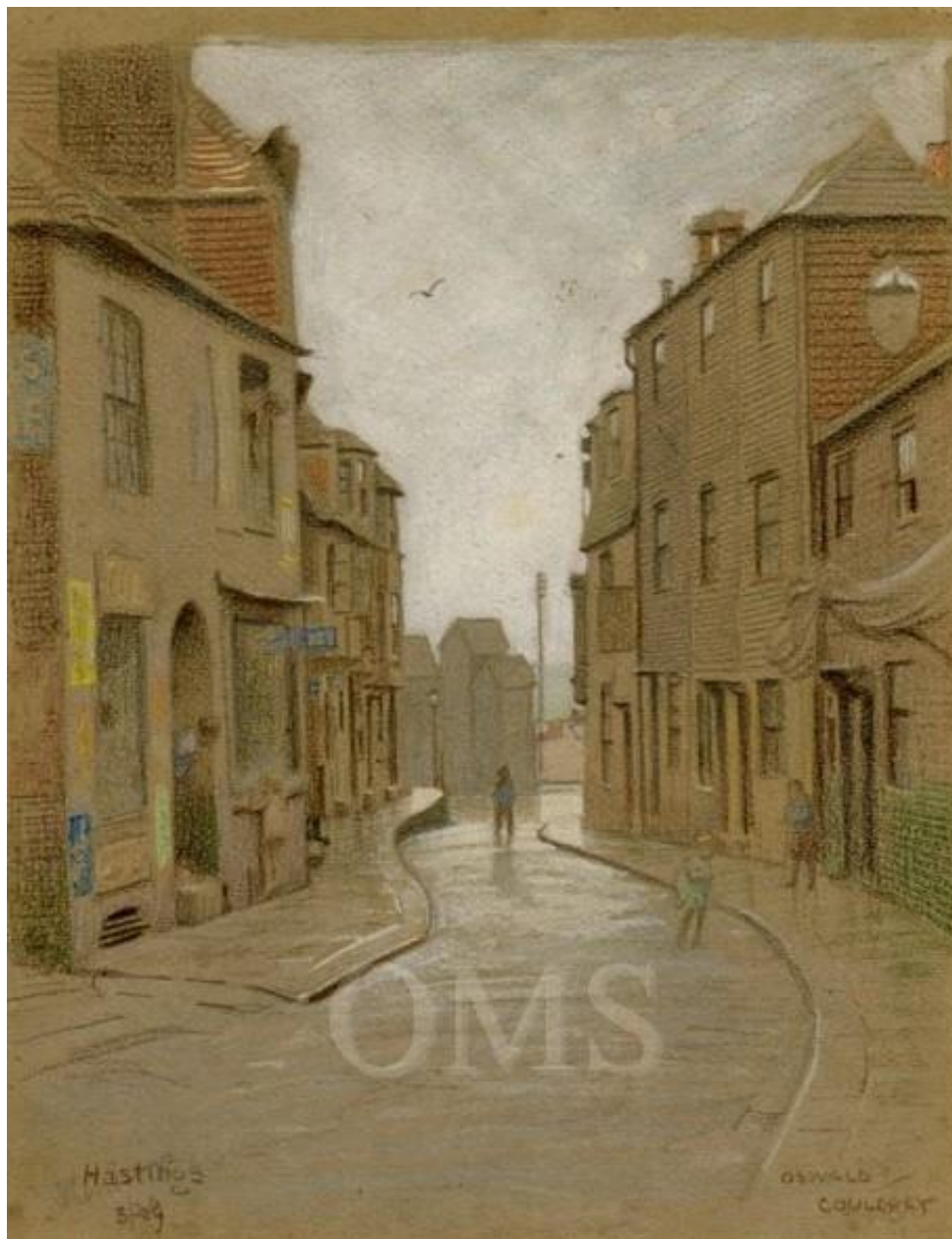
It is interesting to compare Couldrey's work with that of an artist better known for work in this locality, Leslie Badham (Edward Leslie Badham, 1873-1944). Badham, a professional painter, uses a more distinctive palette, with more definite colours. And his pictures are more peopled and active in character. Couldrey's are atmospheric and often have about them a suggestion of loneliness, even a forlorn feeling. The Badham examples shown for comparison are the familiar one of Castle Hill Road and one of a scene - equally recognisable today - of the view eastwards along Rock-a-Nore, past the Dolphin pub, only yards from the Stade, where Couldrey sketched.



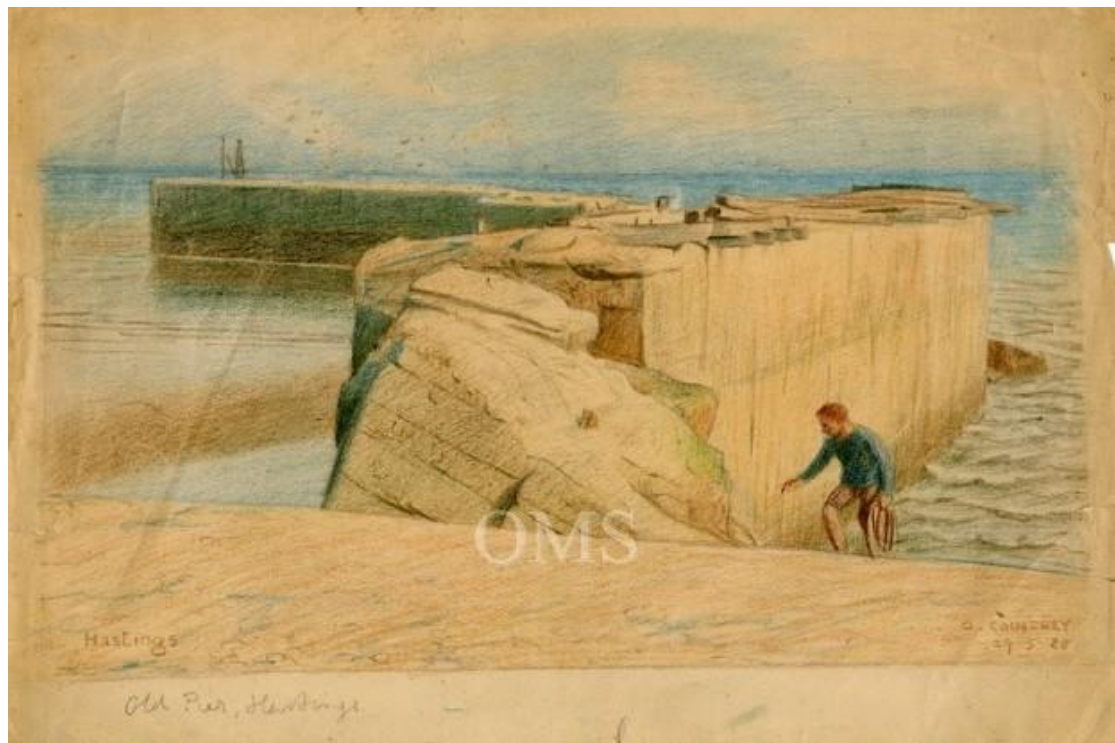
East Hill Lift and Net Shops from the Stade (wrongly identified as 'Hastings Castle', now corrected). It is a crayon drawing though it has the appearance of a watercolour, an effect achieved by the addition of water by brush to the crayoning.



Fishing area, with winching gear, Hastings Old Town. Titled by OMS 'Capstans'



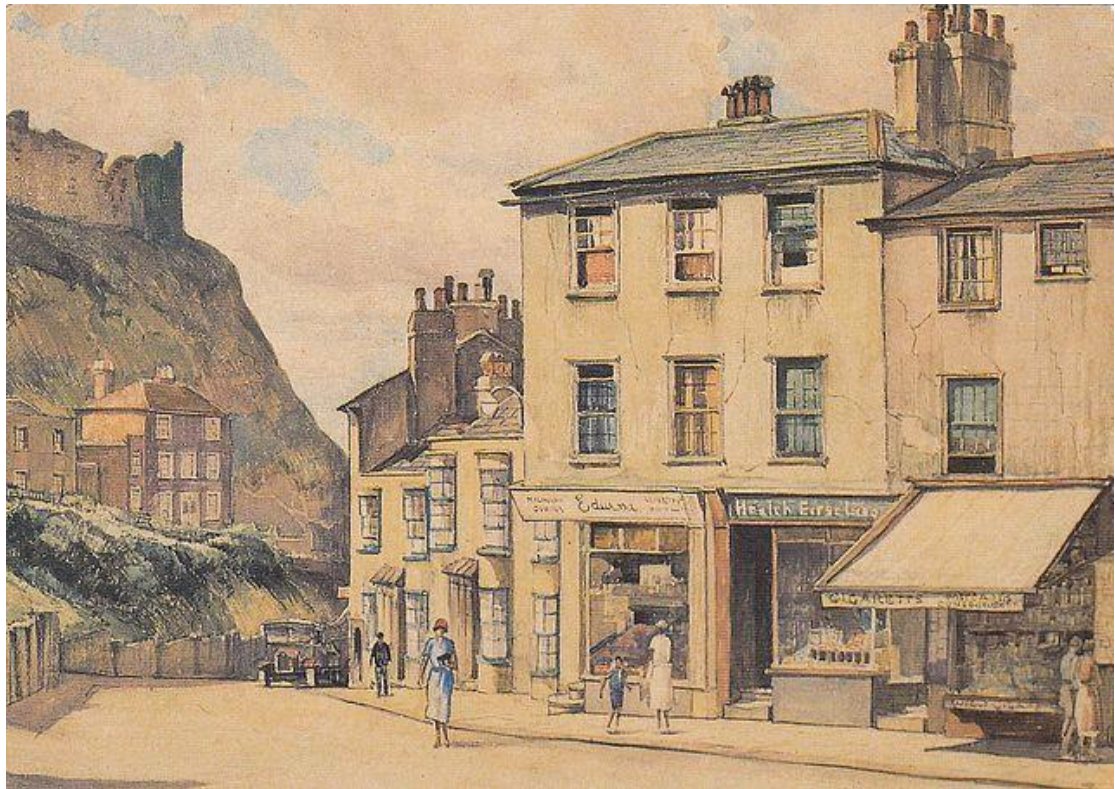
Foot of All Saints Street (May 1929) (At present titled 'Wet Street Hastings' – exact locality now provided.) Again a crayon or pastel work with watercolour effect.



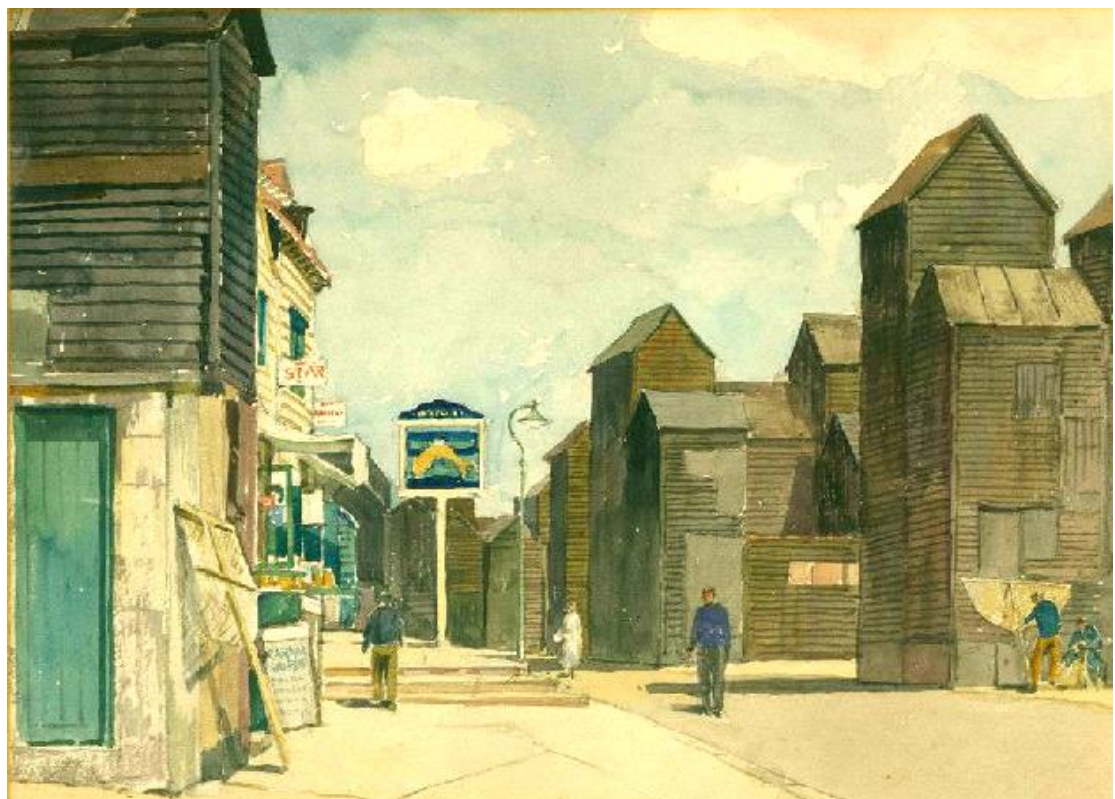
Harbour Wall (29 May 1928), titled 'Old Pier, Hastings'



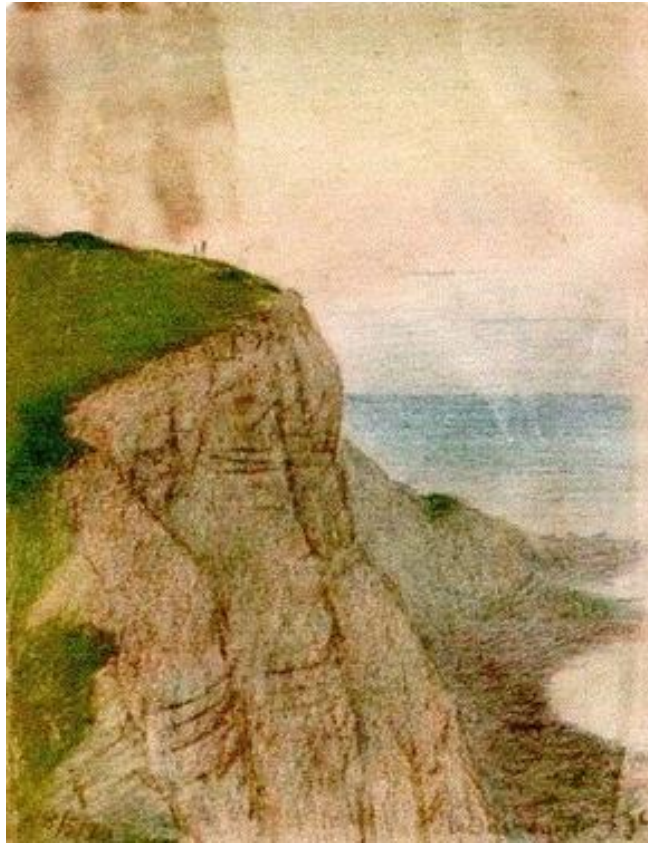
Titled 'Buildings and Sea', this appears to be a view from the lower slopes of the West Hill looking slightly to the west.



Castle Hill Road, by Leslie Badham (Hastings Museum and Art Gallery)

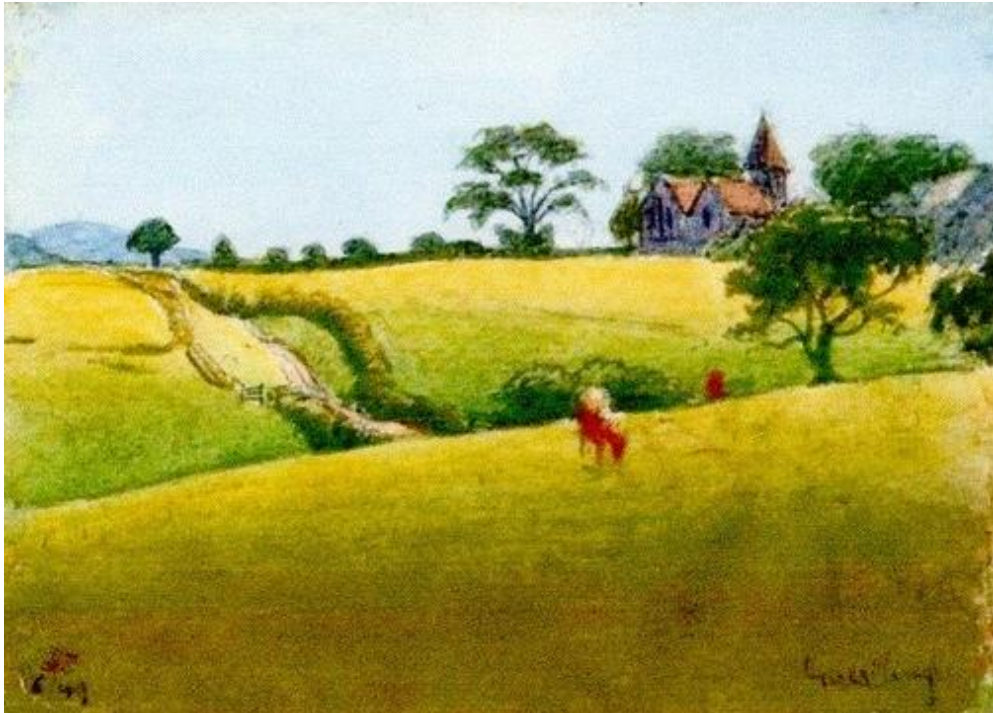


Dolphin Pub and Net Shops, Hastings Old Town, by Leslie Badham



Couldrey's 'Cliff Scene', dated 1930 (at about the time when he was painting frequently in Hastings). At first, the locality may seem to resemble the cliffs west of Eastbourne (Beachy Head to Seven Sisters) but if so, Couldrey has not brought out the whiteness of the chalk which characterises that stretch of coastline. Couldrey's palette is indeterminate but this may be in the locality of Ecclesbourne Glen-Covehurst Bay. If so, it is painted in the same area as Holman Hunt's famous 'Our English Coasts (Strayed Sheep)' (1852) which looks south-west from a similar point (below).





Couldrey's painting of the fields and church at Guestling (1949). His style has changed from the earlier pictures, as will be seen also in one of his last paintings (shown below).



*Titled 'Sea and Coastal Field' (1958).
The locality could again be east of Hastings or west of Eastbourne.
It has been suggested that Couldrey may have been influenced by the work of Eric Ravilious although this is less than immediately evident. See the next picture.*



Cottage in Sussex (c. 1928) by Eric Ravilious (1903-1942)

Much of Ravilious' work is of settings in the South Downs. He is closely associated with Eastbourne, where the Towner Gallery holds a significant collection of his work.

If we receive further information about Couldrey's work and influences (including the image of him on the beach at Hastings), this will be added to the present note.

*Chris Joyce (for the Hastings & St Leonards Society)
February 2021*