**William Dyce at Ramsgate and Pegwell Bay**

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William Dyce (1806-1864) took his young family on holiday to [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate) in 1858, probably from mid-September until the end of October. London, where he was working on wall paintings in the Houses of Parliament, was not good for his health. As soon as the weather became too cold and damp for fresco painting, he set off in search of sea or country air. His wife Jane must have been in need of a holiday too. They had married in 1850, when she was nineteen and William was forty-three, and she had produced four children in quick succession between 1851 and 1855.

On this holiday, they were joined by Jane’s sisters, Grace and Isabella Brand. They appear in Dyce’s painting \_*Pegwell Bay – A Recollection of October 5th 1858\_*, along with Jane and just one of the children, probably the six-year-old son, who was also called William. In the background, barely noticeable on the very right-hand edge of the canvas, is the artist himself, gazing up at the sky. What he can see there explains the unusual title of his painting. It is Donati’s Comet, which was visible to the naked eye from late August to early December in that year, being at its brightest on October 5th. Rather surprisingly, the comet is only just visible in the painting – like the artist. The other figures concentrate on collecting shells or gaze out towards the sea, seemingly oblivious of the miraculous apparition in the

sky behind them.

Pegwell Bay, a resort on the edge of [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate), was an unlikely place for a vision. In the 1850s it was famous for its shrimps, which could be consumed by the pint in the Belle Vue Tavern at the top of the cliffs. A nearby factory converted them into shrimp paste or shrimp sauce, which was sold in porcelain pots with views of the bay on their lids. Once visitors had eaten their fill of shrimps, there were donkey rides for children, shown in a painting by Dyce’s contemporary, Arthur Boyd Houghton, in 1862. Development of the resort was rapid in the 1870s, so that it did not remain a suitable site for contemplation for very long.

Dyce’s painting was shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1860, where reviewers were generally enthusiastic about it. One critic liked the modernity of the ‘minutely truthful family group in balmorals and linsey-woolsey petticoats’; another found it ‘one of the noblest pictures in the exhibition … poetic beauty developed out of familiar realities’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Dyces did not go back to [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate) in subsequent summers, having found the lodging there expensive. In 1859 their holiday was in Arran, in 1860 in North Wales, where Dyce claimed they got ‘twice as much for the money as they ever got in England’.[[2]](#footnote-2) But he could report that he had made £400 from his holiday in [Ramsgate](/19c/19c-ramsgate). We know that the painting was sold to his father-in-law, and presumably that is what he paid.

Bibliography

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Illustrations

William Dyce, *Pegwell Bay – A Recollection of October 5th 1858* (?1858-60). Tate.

Ceramic pot lid featuring \_*Pegwell Bay and Four Shrimpers\_.* c. 1860

Houghton, Arthur Boyd. \_*At the Seaside, Pegwell Bay, near Ramsgate, Kent\_* (1862). Maidstone Museum and Bentlif Art Gallery, Maidstone.

1. \_*Times\_*, no.23612. 5 May 1860.5; *Critic:*20:514. 12 May 1860. 594. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William Dyce, letter to Robert Cay, 20 October 1860. Dyce Papers TAM 54/31. The Dyce Papers is an unpublished collection of typescript and handwritten notes put together by William Dyce’s son, James Stirling Dyce. It includes transcripts of Dyce’s correspondence and writings. The original is in the archives of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museum; a microfiche is kept in the Tate Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)