

## Press Release

### Thomas Bewick *Tale-pieces*

### 8 April – 25 May 2009

This is the first exhibition devoted entirely to the vignettes of the extraordinary artist-engraver and naturalist Thomas Bewick (1753-1828).

Born in Cherryburn, near Mickley, Northumberland, Bewick worked in Newcastle until his death. His childhood on a small farm on the banks of the river Tyne and his love of the countryside had a profound influence on his work. He became renowned for his woodcuts of animals, hundreds of small pictures that are remarkable for their vitality through painstaking accuracy. These were illustrations for the *General History of Quadrupeds* and the *History of British Birds* (two volumes), books that also contained a great number of vignettes, or what the artist referred to as ‘tale-pieces’, intended as illustrations of “some truth or point of some moral”.

The tale-pieces provide an invaluable insight into not only the imagination and wit of the artist but also aspects of contemporary social history. Clearly Bewick was a sceptical individual, unimpressed by institutions and so-called civilisation. One vignette, for example, depicts a horse stopping on the bank of a river to avoid falling into the water, while his rider is oblivious. A dog is there too, obviously aware of imminent danger. An interpretation, written later by his daughter Jane, sums up the artist’s general attitude: “Instinct teaches these two dumb animals to walk wisely – Churches and sign-boards do not avail in teaching men to keep in the right path”. Other tale-pieces show a man urinating against a wall (perhaps a section of Hadrian’s Wall), children riding gravestones as if they were hobby-horses, a scarecrow dressed in a soldier’s uniform and a drunkard seeing two moons in the night sky.

Another small scene, with a house and a figure on horseback, is extraordinary for its aesthetic implications as most of it is obscured by the artist’s engraved thumb-print. With this unprecedented gesture, Bewick at once counteracts the effects of pictorial space, and seems to assert his authorship at the expense of a carefully wrought image. Many contemporary artists are fascinated by this tale-piece in particular.

Like his engravings of animals, Bewick’s tale-pieces were cut into the end-grain of blocks of box-wood, an exceptionally close-grained hard wood conducive to a graphic fineness. The fact that the blocks were sections through lengths of timber meant that the pictures could not be anything but small, but this restriction by no means cramped the artist’s style. On the contrary, Bewick developed a meticulousness whereby the slightest nuances could be conveyed through the tiny

lines he left in relief after engraving. As the works are small-scale, Ikon will provide magnifying glasses to help visitors view the works.

The exhibition at Ikon will include approximately 100 tale-pieces, selected in consultation with Iain Bain, widely acknowledged to be the most authoritative expert on Thomas Bewick.

A catalogue will accompany the exhibition, with texts by Nigel Tattersfield (author of the forthcoming catalogue raisonné, published by the British Museum), artist/critic Tom Lubbock and Jenny Uglow, author of *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick*.

The Bewick exhibition is supported by Patzi Haslimann, Ikon Chairman 2002-6.

**Ends.**

**Note to Editors:**

1. Press Preview, Tuesday 7 April, 12-8pm
2. A weekend of events is planned to compliment this exhibition:

**Wood block printing demonstrations with Iain Bain**

**Saturday 16 May, 2.30 – 4pm - FREE**

**Sunday 17 May, 11am – 12.30pm - FREE**

**Ikon Events Room**

Open to all ages, this series of demonstrations with Thomas Bewick expert Iain Bain, will inspire and intrigue. On a press of the kind used towards the end of Bewick's time, you can see prints being taken off original woodblocks he engraved more than 200 years ago. These tiny and extraordinary vignettes print as well now as they did when first produced. No need to book, just drop in.

**'Thomas Bewick, Artist of the North' with Jenny Uglow**

**Saturday 16 May, 6.30 – 8pm, First Floor Galleries**

**Tickets for this event cost £3 each; to book please contact Ikon on 0121 248 0708**

Jenny Uglow is an author, critic and historian, who in 2004, published her labour of love and critically acclaimed biography of Thomas Bewick, *Nature's Engraver*. A renowned and passionate speaker, Jenny discusses Bewick's life in the Tyne Valley and Newcastle, showing how his vignettes of rural life spring from his own experience. She also explores the development of his art, his passion for nature and the way that his brilliant observation of animals and birds set a new standard in the depiction of the natural world.

3. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Admission is free.
4. Ikon Gallery is a registered charity and receives core funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council.



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Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892

5. For more information, images and to arrange an interview with the curator please contact Helen Stallard on 0774 033 9604 or email [h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk](mailto:h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk)

A selection of available images are shown below. Images are also available via Ikon's online press office at [www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/press](http://www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/press). If you do not already have an account please contact Emily Luxford for registration details: [e.luxford@ikon-gallery.co.uk](mailto:e.luxford@ikon-gallery.co.uk) or call 0121 248 0708.

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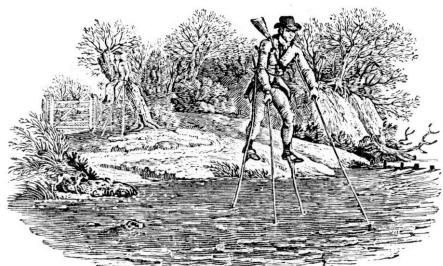
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Thomas Bewick  
*Untitled vignette*, 1818, *Tail-piece for Fables of Aesop and Others*  
Wood engraving



Thomas Bewick  
*The Churchyard Cavalry*, 1804  
Wood engraving by Luke Clennell from a sketch by Thomas Bewick and apprentice Robert Johnson, tailpiece for *History of British Birds*, Vol.2



Thomas Bewick,  
*Untitled vignette*, 1804.  
Wood engraving, *Tail-piece for the Long-legged Plover*, from *A History of British Birds*, Vol.2