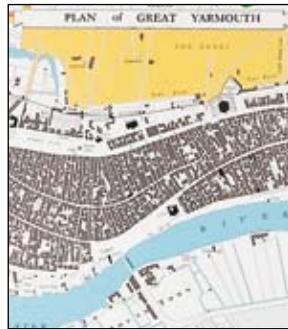


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# A passion for painting

Pictures: BILL SMITH

He is the man who taught the prime minister and royalty how to paint, but John Booth has always kept his own hand in as an artist. He spoke to **JASMINE LYNN** as his new Norwich exhibition opens.

As a teacher, John Booth nurtured young artists in the classrooms of leading private schools – with David Cameron, Prince Harry and Boris Johnson numbering among his most famous pupils.

But he is also well known as an artist himself, having created pieces that have graced many exhibitions including the Summer Shows at the Royal Academy of Art, and now Mandell's Gallery on Elm Hill in Norwich.

Originally from the south of England, John was seven when his first art appreciation class uncovered a passion for the subject.

"It was when I laid my eyes on the first picture during the class that I realised – this is not just a photo, it's a work of art that has come from an artist's hands," he explains.

John went on to Bath Academy of Art, part of Bristol University. On leaving, a trawl through the Times Educational Supplement saw him embarking on his first teaching job at a comprehensive school in Birmingham.

He taught for almost 40 years, spending 10 years as Head of Art at Oundle School in Northamptonshire before moving to Eton College as Drawing Master and Head of Art.

He says: "I never stopped painting. It's a pity that so many who teach art don't do it.

"How can you tell your students that it is a life-enhancing activity but not practise it yourself? It's like being told your chaplain doesn't have time to pray."

John frequently took his pupils out on trips to paint with them, and a dozen of the most talented students travelled to Italy with him once a year for a week to capture the beautiful landmarks and scenery.

He inspired a marked increase in the number of boys taking GCSE and A-level art and he encouraged his students to paint big and to have ambitious ideas. With his encouragement, one boy at the college painted a 40-foot high crucifix that was displayed at the Eton Chapel, attracting numerous visitors, including the Queen Mother.

His influence on the future prime



**ARTS MASTER:** Above, artist John Booth, who used to teach art at Eton College, at his exhibition at Mandell's Gallery in Elm Hill, Norwich. Below, his painting of Reedham swing bridge. Right, examples of his work in ceramics.



minister and on British art is demonstrated by a line in the prime minister's biography, Cameron: the Rise of the New Conservative: "BritArt had many fathers, but John Booth could reasonably claim to have been at least an uncle."

John greatly enjoyed his time at Oundle and Eton. He says: "Teaching is a wonderful thing, and teaching art is marvellous. I believe that to do it properly, you need to help the students in making their own statements, rather than teach them to produce the same things. Instead of thinking about what they are or are not able to draw, we gave them problems to solve.

"The boys were very talented, but

most importantly I saw energy and commitment... David [Cameron] was a keen student. His parents wanted him to give up studying art at GCSE, but, with time, he persuaded them to let him continue the subject."

While he was at Eton, John bought a house in Norfolk as his father was a parson in the county. He has now lived in Norwich for 10 years with his wife, Joan.

Currently based in Bracondale, John plans to stay in the city, professing a great love for Norwich, even calling it Utopia. He continues to paint and travels to Italy occasionally to teach as part of Painting in Italy, an organised holiday where people are able to enjoy painting and cooking tuition.

When asked about the rewards of being an artist, he replied: "I paint for myself. It's like fishing. The fisherman may throw the fish back into the sea, but still enjoy his day. You take nothing away but the memories.

"When I paint, I look to see if I can record what I can see, and I have a heightened sense of the scene. It is a bonus to be able to take something away, but actually painting it is the main enjoyment. It is nice that people want to buy my work though."

Although commercial success is secondary to John, his exhibitions, which he launches every two or three years, have been very popular with the public. For three weeks this month, he is holding an exhibition, showing paintings of both the familiar Norfolk scenery, such as views of Norwich and Cromer, and images from places such as Venice and Pompeii. The public will be able to purchase these beautiful paintings and drawings as well as hand-made ceramic pots inspired by his visit to the Etruscan city of Vulci.

John Allen, owner of the gallery, said: "I am extremely pleased to stage the exhibition. John is a very agreeable man to work with, and obviously hugely talented."

■ **The exhibition will run every Tuesday to Saturday, until November 27, from 10am to 5pm.**