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Fred

Yates

The

Last

Paintings



FRONTISPIECE:
Oval Self Portrait (detail), 2008
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins

Published by John Martin Gallery in an edition of 800 copies
for the exhibition Fred Yates, The Last Paintings
ISBN 978-0-9932195-4-2
27 January – 20 February 2016 at John Martin Gallery,
38 Albemarle Street, London W1S 4JG
Opening hours: Monday to Friday 10am to 6pm
and Saturdays, 10am to 1:30pm

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Fred Yates

The Last Paintings

John Martin Gallery





To be opened
last.

To be opened last ... as I have told you, with great apprehension that they may not suit you, my latest work, still a secret, are my life absolute.

Fred Yates had a heart attack disembarking from the Eurostar at St Pancras. A few friends sat with him as he lay in University College Hospital, green paint still on his fingers and the ever-present aroma of turpentine that clinged to him; once we saw a sliver of his bright blue eyes for a moment, but he faded and was gone within a week. Fred had been travelling from France to England in early July through sweltering temperatures and two weeks before his eighty-sixth birthday. After ten years in Provence, he was hurrying to Somerset to complete the paperwork and buy a cottage in Frome. On his new passport he had listed Cathy Sayers and myself under ‘emergency contacts’ and with no relatives or other instructions it fell to us to arrange his funeral. We both felt that Cornwall was the place that meant most to him and where he would be most like to be remembered, so we asked permission to bury him in Marazion on the cliffs looking out over St Michael’s Mount.

Two weeks after the funeral I arrived at his home in La Motte Chalançon to unlock the house and start work cataloguing his paintings helped by the Mayor and Janine Yates, the wife of Fred’s cousin and his closest friend. Yates’s house had once been an épicerie with a traditional grocer’s window, an otherwise unremarkable terraced house, startling now because hanging in the window Fred had left two paintings to dry in the sun. One of these, still wet, was a landscape of St Michael’s Mount painted from memory and probably one of the last paintings he made. The Mayor thought Fred had hung it there to say goodbye to La Motte for he had never hung a painting in his window before.

He had been similarly careful inside and as we walked around the two houses Fred owned in La Motte it became apparent that he had spent time arranging and protecting his paintings in anticipation of the move to England. In doing so he had left an account of his last six months, effectively curating an exhibition in his home and revealing a final group of paintings about which he had been as secretive as he was excited and with which he refused to part: “no carrier however professional could transport my wet work,” he insisted shortly before he died, “ I would not allow it...”.

In June Fred had sent a glimpse of his latest paintings, a photograph of himself holding a recently finished canvas of Irises: here was that same painting, still drying three months later, resting on the top of his parlour piano as fresh as the day he finished it. We walked through the house entranced by these late paintings. He had carefully positioned the canvases to dry, resting them against whatever walls might catch the sun. A bedroom wardrobe opened to reveal Fred’s self portrait looking out, placed there presumably to guard against dust, but also, no doubt, for dramatic effect and to protect a horde of smaller figure paintings that lay in wait behind his back.

There were still lives, street scenes and incredible, unearthly flower paintings, built up with vast quantities of oil paint: hefty canvases constructed with the

LEFT: Outside Yates’s home in La Motte, August 2008

lightest of touch and almost effortless in his application of paint. He had become totally absorbed in the process of looping the oil paint in concentric circles and filling every part of the canvas in lines, ripples and star bursts of pure colour so that flowers and landscape fused into one pulsating rhythm of paint. They could only have been made in one sitting and Fred had been fastidious about keeping their highly decorated, fluent surfaces protected over the many months they would take to dry. In letters he wrote of the daily chore of taking them outside to catch the sun, then returning at the end of the day to lay them high up where nothing could touch their delicate filigree of paint.

Fred had laid out a private exhibition for the two of us, charting a highly charged period in his development as a painter and during a time of deep emotional upheaval in his life. From his his letters it later became clear that the excitement he found in his painting was often checked by a growing sense of isolation in the mountains and a yearning for England. Once his decision was made to quit France the paintings of his last few months in La Motte seemed to be fuelled by an extraordinary raw energy; the return of his all-important need for freedom led to painting that erupted like a brilliant volcanic explosion of paint, pouring onto the canvas in flows of jewel-like lava.

I had visited Fred in December 2007 to select paintings for a show to be held the following year. At the time there were some paintings finished but too wet to move safely, but the majority of the paintings assembled nine years later for this exhibition must have been made between December 2007 and June 2008, when Fred came to London for his last exhibition with us and after which he was distracted by preparations for his return to England. Together they give a unique insight into the last six months of Yates's life and one of the most extraordinary, energetic, innovative periods in his career. The paintings are characterised by a progressive heightening of colour and the uninhibited delight in the possibilities of paint. They culminate in those 'secret' paintings he mentioned in his letters. Always the showman, they became Fred's 'grand finale', a triumphant fanfare of happiness and hope built in paint and made in solitude. "My Life Absolute".



La Motte-Chalançon is a small town in the southwest foothills of the Alps bordering Provence and the last stop on the local bus service from Nyons, a large town where Fred Yates had lived since the year 2000. With no car, Yates relied on the bus for all his painting excursions and had been steadily gaining altitude as these trips took him further away from Nyons. In early 2003, at the age of 80, he reached La Motte. He was smitten with its landscape, the town and its isolation, and made up his mind to stay. The first house he bought was a carpenter's workshop on La Grand Rue, still crammed with an assortment of broken but immovable belt-driven lathes, drill presses and cutters, all connected to a lineshaft on the ceiling which would have powered all the tools like a chorus line. With no plumbing or heating, the workshop was barely habitable, but the first floor above gave him uninterrupted views down to the river and then the mountains beyond.

Fred said the effect of La Motte on his work was 'like an explosion'. That first winter was spent mapping out every aspect of his new landscape, painting everything with relentless energy: mountains and rocks seemed gouged out of slabs of paint, the river which passed through the centre of the town, ripped across his canvases, tumbling down in ice-edged torrents of colour. Though temperatures fell below minus ten, Fred never grumbled about the cold; he seemed mesmerised by the extraordinary, uninhibited

OPPOSITE
Flower Constellation, 2008 (detail)
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins



power he had discovered whilst making these paintings of La Motte. He painted constantly from 2003 to 2004, revelling in the muted palette of winter and the sharp, acid colours of spring in the mountains. It resulted in an exhibition, ‘On Top of the World’, which was like some seismic shift in the life of an artist who was rarely predictable. These were some of his most brilliant, brave landscapes, reinvigorating his technique and pushing his work to a new level.

The raw energy he discovered in the landscape of La Motte lies at the heart of all Yates’s late paintings. It was the one constant thread that linked every picture even when his infatuation with the landscape began to wane. It was the pattern that had characterised his domestic life for decades: he would arrive in a new town, paint his surroundings until familiarity dulled his interest and he began to rely on the inner world of his imagination. Then he would move on. Fred had rarely kept any home for longer than two years. Restless by nature he needed the excitement of new surroundings as the spark to ignite his work. Before La Motte, Yates had moved home seven times in as many years, and within a year he had moved once more from the carpenter’s workshop to 54B Grande Rue, to a more practical house closer to the river. Soon he added a second, smaller home ten minutes walk away, which provided a second store for paintings and a change of scene when needed. Here he would go in the afternoon to smoke a pipe and paint, invariably working on a completely different set of subjects than those in 54B.

All this time he painted voraciously, using up so many materials that the stationers in Nyons doubled in size to stock the quantities of paint and canvas Fred required. Each Saturday he would get up at 5:30 to catch the school bus into Nyons, buy his paints, a copy of the Times and then a cappuccino with “my lonely widow friend whose only joy now is half an hour with Fred!”, returning in a taxi laden with canvases and boxes of materials. It was a humdrum routine that was relieved by the experiments and advances he felt he was making in his work. In phone calls and letters Fred was filled with excitement about new subjects and new ways of painting: “I was going to enjoy life this year, and go easy but the same old urge of experiment took me over and it has all repeated itself - 19 at the moment 24 soon, big important paintings, very important this time. I’ve done it. They need constant handling to go into the garden for sun dry and I feel good...”

By 2007, Fred’s letters started to change in tone. He talked about taking a sabbatical and how he needed a holiday. It was clearly time for another move, but where could he go after La Motte? La Motte was the end of the road. “The trouble is I am getting unhappy with the whole year in France”, he wrote, “I need to talk to friends in English for a few months...”. Signing his letters “Lonely Fred”, he became increasingly desperate to move back to England, writing constantly of his determination to buy a cottage in Somerset. For the first time in thirty years he had lost his freedom and felt trapped: his passport had lapsed in 2006 and at 85 without transportation or the internet, he found it far from easy to get a replacement. Instead he journeyed back to England in his imagination, painting Manchester and Salford from memory, then a series of paintings of Fowey where he had lived in Cornwall. When I saw Fred that winter there was no escaping the darkness in tone amongst these paintings - every element seemed fringed in black “like the soot and grime of Manchester...” and tellingly, not a single painting betrayed any connection to his home in La Motte.

Through the winter of 2007 and 2008, Fred continued to paint views of Manchester and Cornwall from memory, but now there seemed to be more joy, more colour and more energy. Previously Fred has used his collection of drawings to give



Clockwise from top: A portrait sitting (photographer unknown); The 'Irises' drying on the piano, paintings stacked in the house, Yates's new passport, Fred painting Irises, La Motte, 2008.



a relatively accurate account of streets and towns, but now his compositions became less inhibited: terraced houses bent round the edges of the canvas in abstract arrangements, paint became increasingly dense and his figures seemed to swell in scale: raw figures, sometimes scratched into the paint, like those of his hero, Dubuffet. Yates then began a series of autobiographical ‘Window Paintings’ (see pages 54–62): a plant centrally placed on the canvas around which bold arrangements of patterned wallpaper, carpets and curtains through which was a distant scene recalling a memory of his childhood. The entire series was then photographed, the prints collated into a little book with notes on each painting. He sent a copy of the book to the gallery along with two parcels of the dried paintings in June 2008. The remaining paintings, mostly still lives, were too wet to move, so remained in La Motte.

By now Yates was using such large quantities of paint that the work needed about three to four months to be ‘surface dry’ – that point where the paint had formed a protective outer skin (although still soft if pressed too hard). This meant that he had completed all his window paintings in March or early April and now embarked on what was to be his final series of paintings made over the spring and early summer of 2008 and so carefully arranged before his departure in July.

Looking back over his letters, it is inescapable that the incredible energy of these last paintings was linked to his decision to leave France, the arrival of his new passport in March and the anticipation of his return to England.

“I have my passport now I hope to sell 54b and keep my small cottage in Rancon...I am giving myself a kind of sabbatical for 6 months getting things straight .. and hopefully soon to be paradise regained.”.

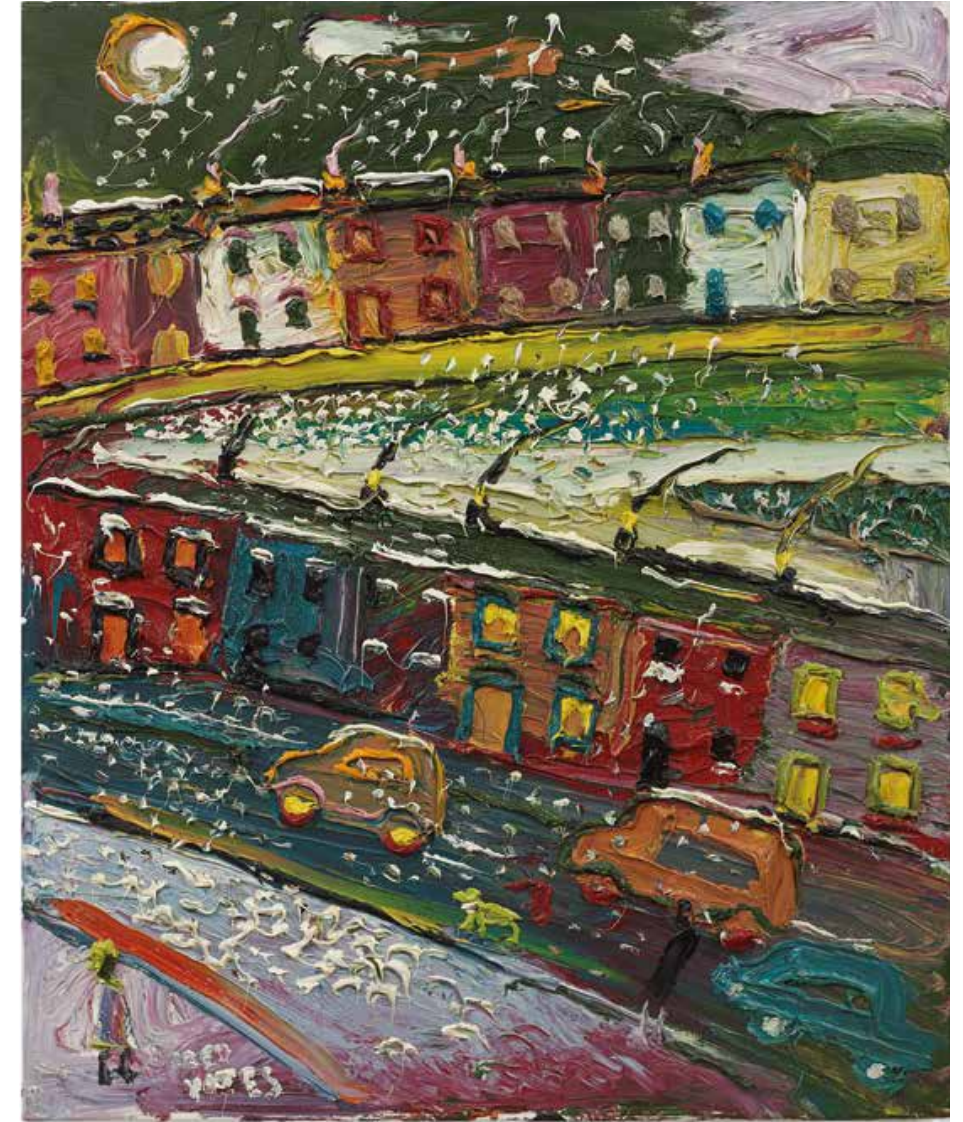
Six months later, walking once more through his home in La Motte seeing the paintings for the first time, I was instantly struck by the overwhelming sense of joy that emanated from those canvases. A profound change had come over his work, a world away from the dark paintings of the previous winter. It was another seismic shift in the life of an artist whose painting had always been so profoundly entangled with his emotional state. I will never forget the bright sunlight on that day in August, pouring in through the windows of Fred’s house, lighting up the paintings, the furniture, his scarves, belts and clothes, piles of paper and paraphernalia bought in the local brocantes. Looking at the new paintings left around his home I had no doubt that in those last six months Fred had rediscovered paradise and had sung his heart out in paint. The exhilarating development in his paintings converged with the unbridled joy of freedom and Fred Yates expressed it in a final, beautiful, brilliant explosion of colour.

– John Martin, December 2015

Top right, Oval Self-portrait in Yates’s bedroom wardrobe, below, a postcard from La Motte, arrowed by Fred showing his first home.



— *St Michael's Mount, 2008*
oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm, 21 x 25¼ ins

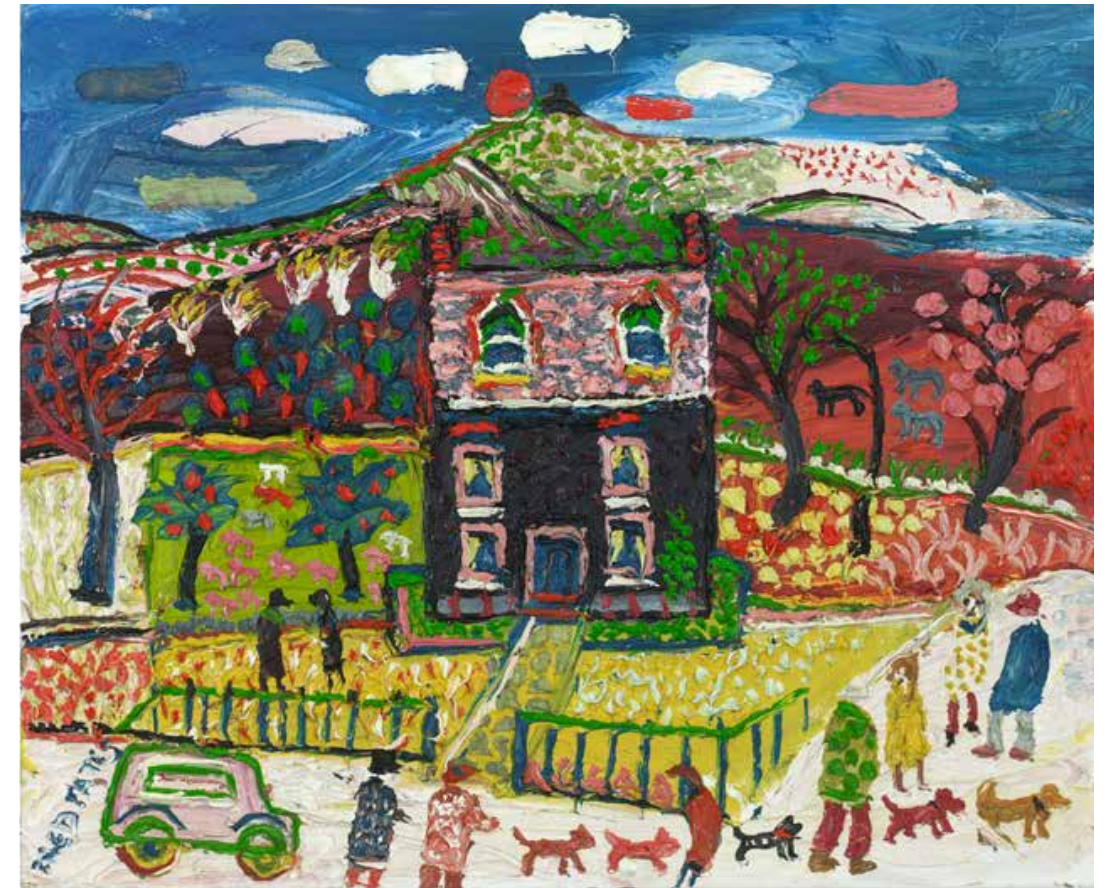


— *A Blizzard*, 2008
oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm, 25½ x 21¼
ins



— *Flowers in Green and Yellow, 2008*
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins

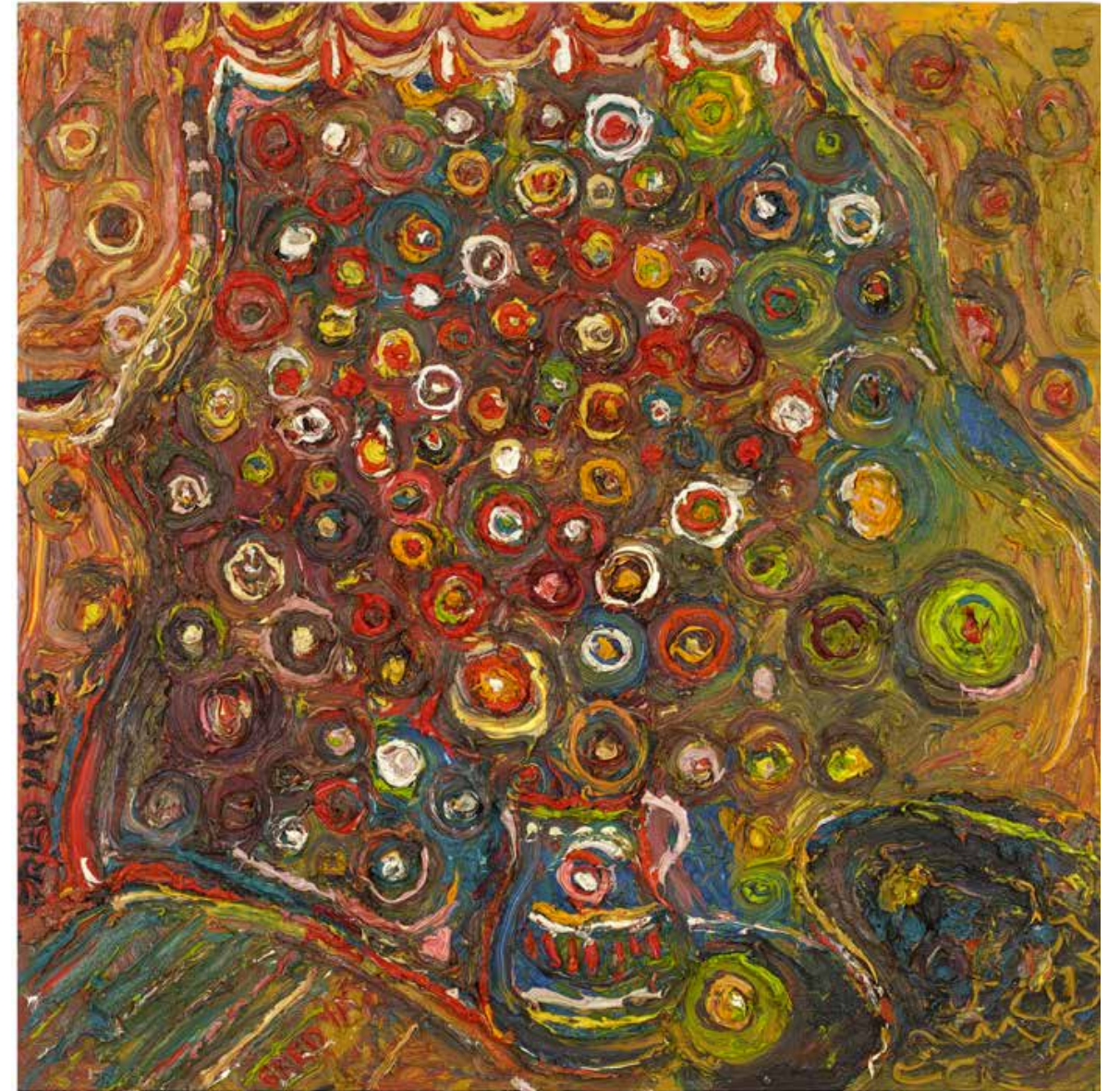
“my only conscious effort to affect my work has been to enjoy more and more Freedom & forgetfulness (forgetfulness, not of subject matter, (that has strengthened) – but forgetfulness of technique and art school and glossy painting techniques.) I seem transported to Arcady, an unrealistic and unearthly state of mind in which no-one can invade! In which no-one can invade...just me and my maker”.



— *House in the Mountains*, 2008
oil on canvas, 60 x 73 cm, 28¾ x 28¾
ins



— *Manchester Street Party*, 2008
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins



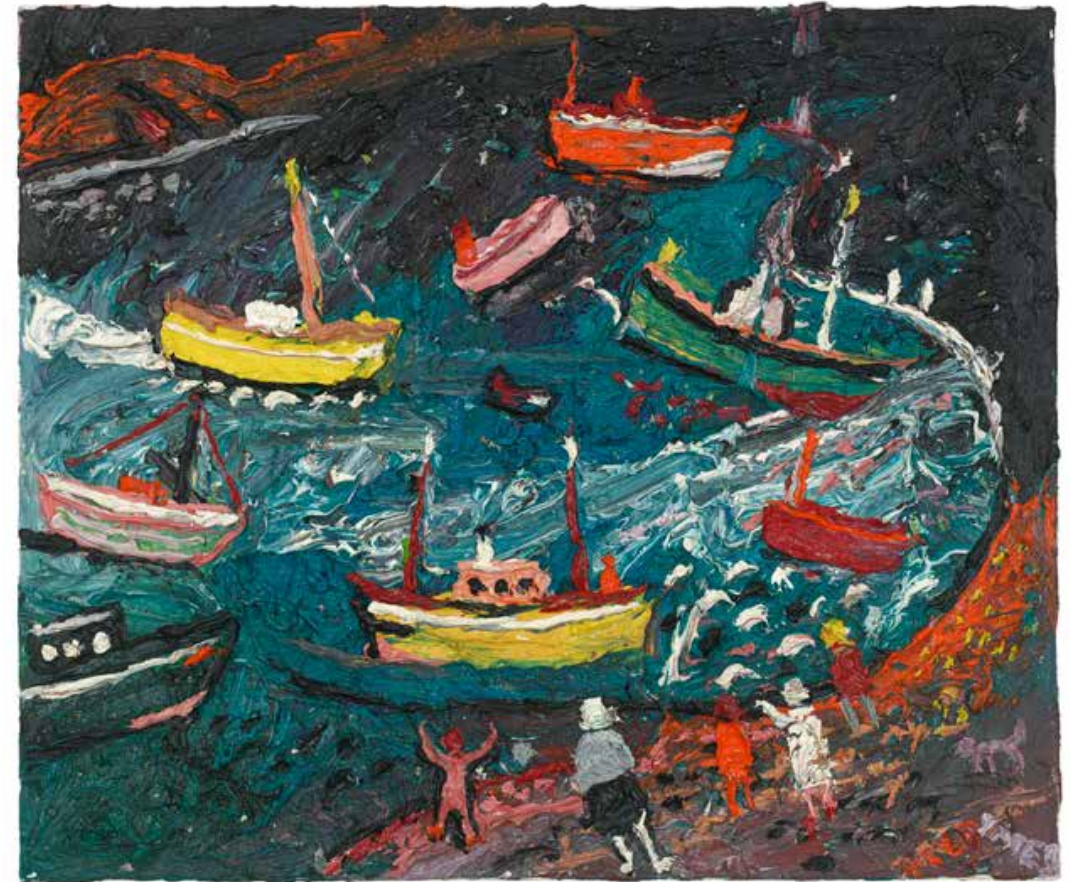
OPPOSITE
Flower Constellation, 2008
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins



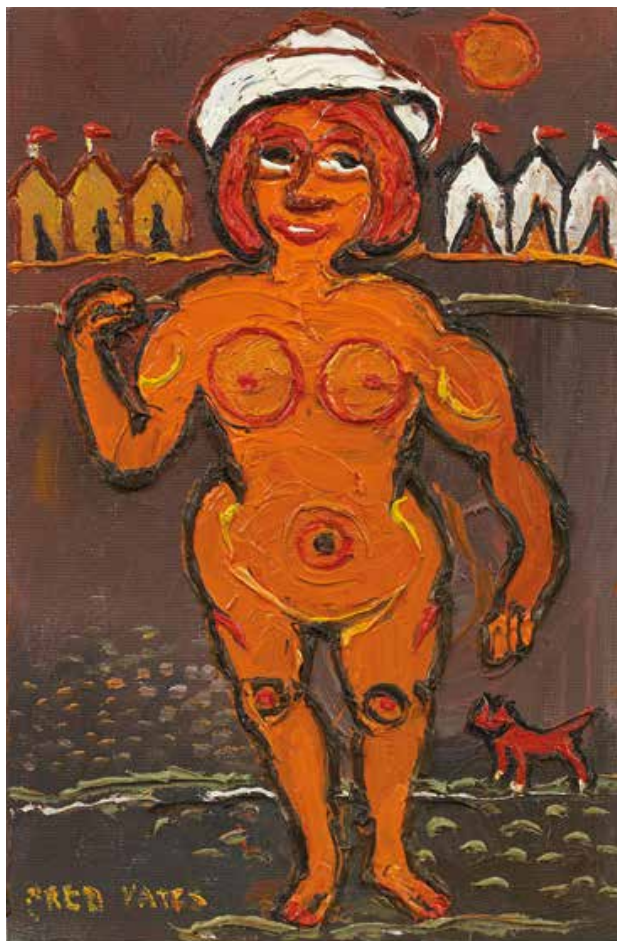
The Boating Pond, 2007/8
oil on canvas, 97 x 146 cm, 38½ x 57½ ins



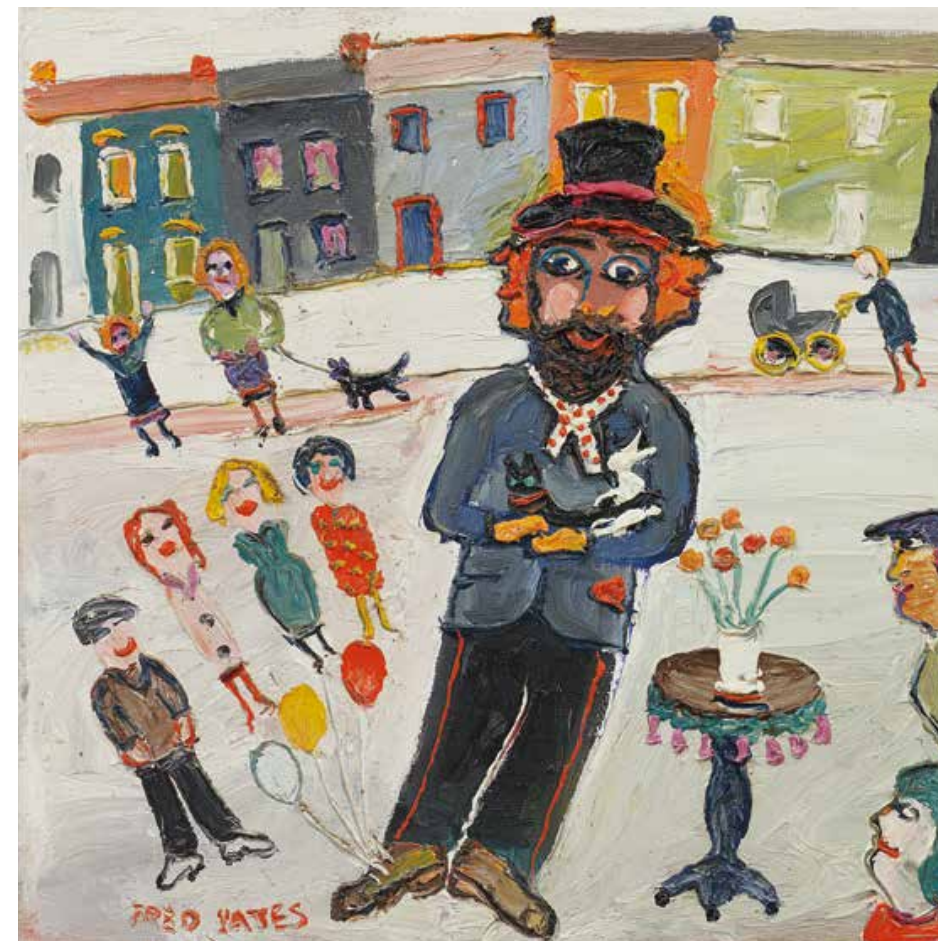
— *Vase of Flowers with Moon*, 2008
oil on canvas, 24 x 41 cm, 9½ x 16¼ ins



— *The Storm*, 2008
oil on canvas 43.5 x 54.5 cm, 17½ x 21½ ins



ABOVE
Body Beautiful, 2008
 oil on canvas, 41 x 27 cm, 16¼ x 10¾ ins



OPPOSITE
The Magician, 2008
 oil on canvas, 40 x 40 cm, 15¾ x 15¾ ins



— *Manchester Garden*, 2008
oil on canvas 50 x 61 cm, 19½ x 24 ins
Signed and titled on reverse

“... It is the man in the street that I'm after, whom I feel closest to, with whom I want to make friends and enter into confidence and connivance, and he is the one I want to please and enchant by means of my work”

Dubuffet, quoted by Yates in a letter from 2006



—*Hanging About*, 2008
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins



— *The Passing Train*, 2008
oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm, 15 x 18 ins



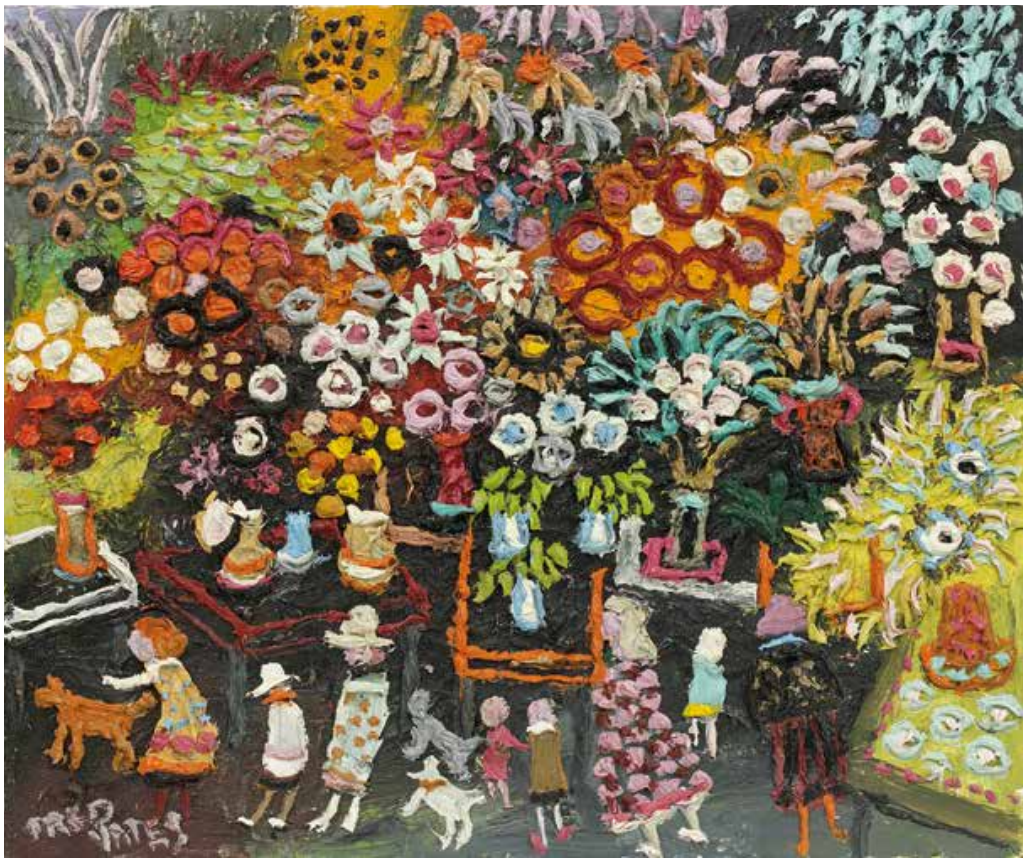
— *Irises*, 2008
oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm, 23½ x 23½ ins
Private Collection



Paintings are not material objects. However clean they are they are not sterile. They are the products of experiences, inner most feelings of happiness and yes, sadness sometimes even depression, but when they come from the soul they are indeed the very essence of the artist.

Fred Yates's last letter, written in Avignon, July 2008

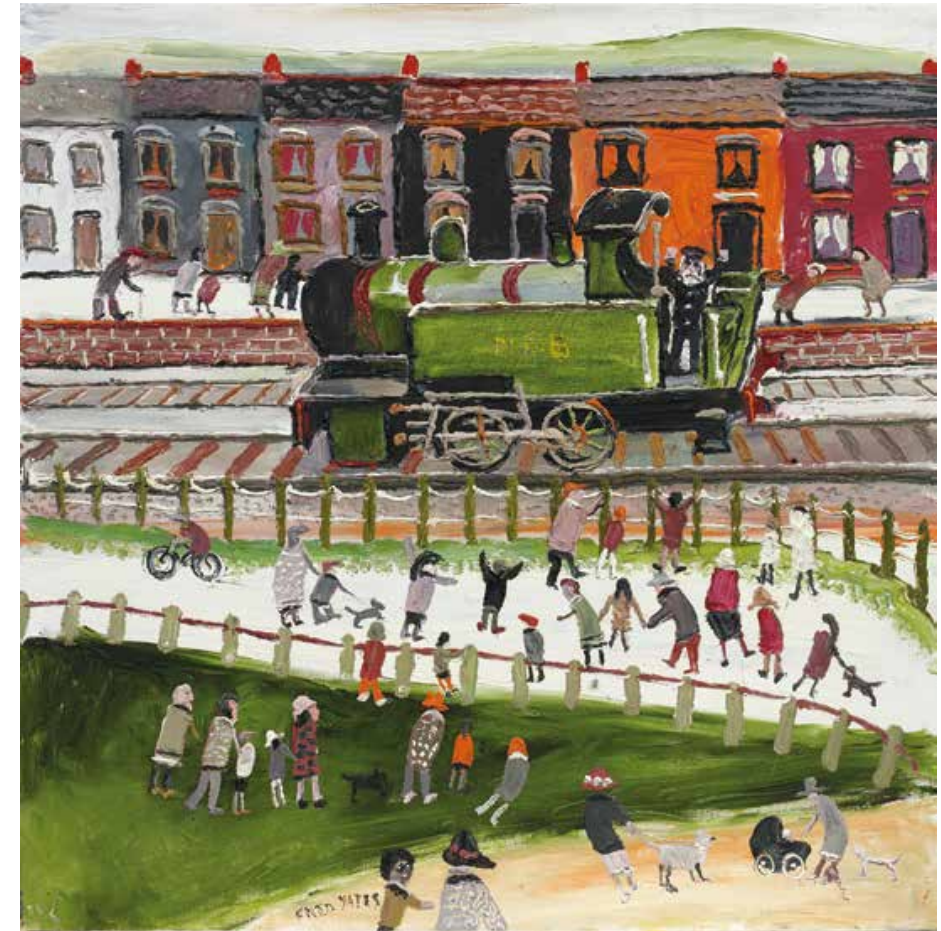
—*Manchester houses in Winter, 2007*
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins



OPPOSITE
The Flower Show, 2008
oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm, 21¼ x 25½ ins



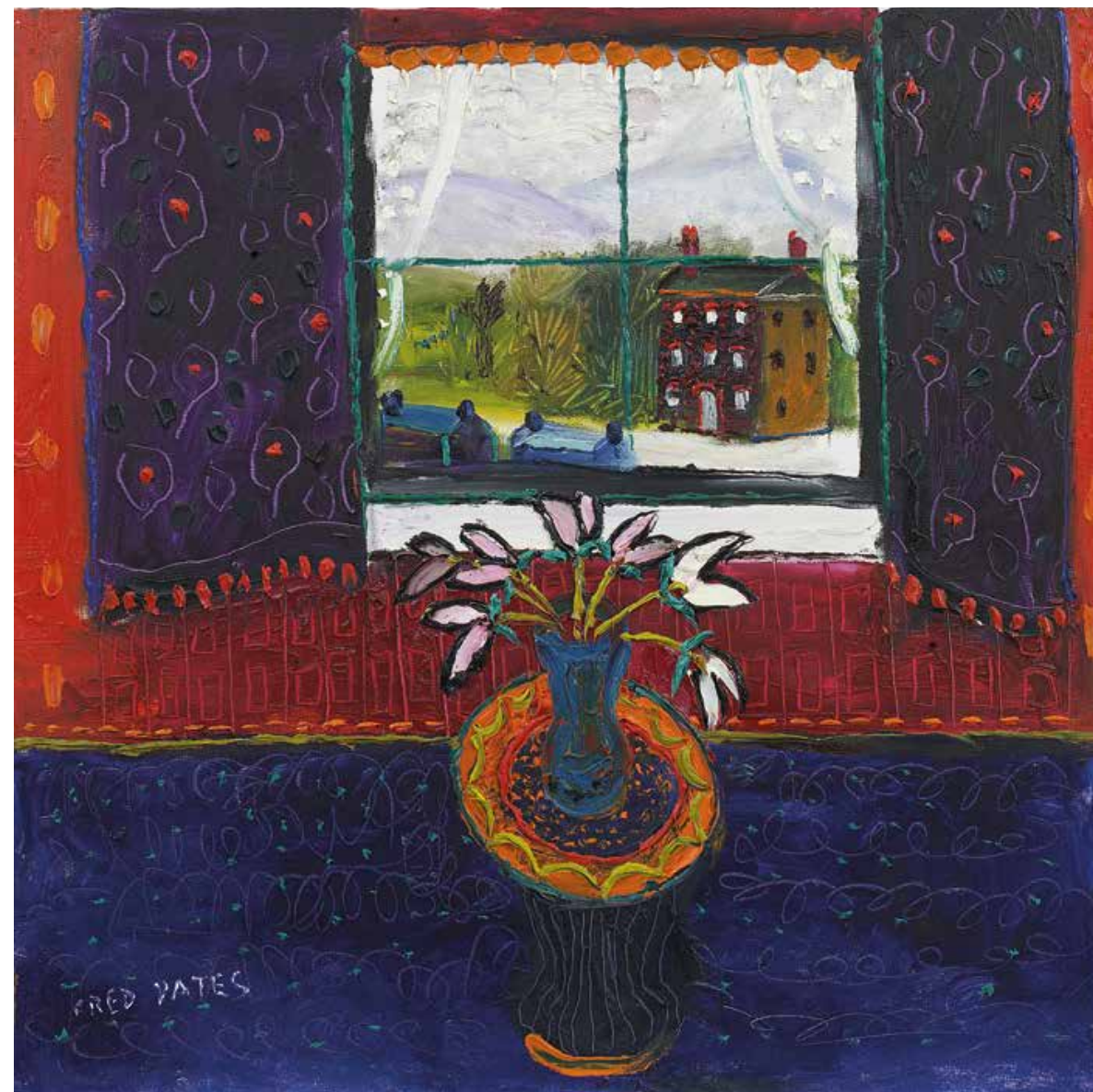
The Edge of a Town, 2007
oil on canvas, 81 x 116 cm, 32 x 45¼ ins



— *The Locomotive*, 2007/8
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins



— *Still Life with Passing Train*, 2007
oil on canvas, 100 x 65 cm, 39½ x 32 ins



— *A Trip to the Brontë's Home*, 2008
oil on canvas, 81 x 80 cm, 32 x 31½ ins

I went to Hawarth with a friend who was well off. He had worked hard all his life starting at some unearthly hour for Leeds covered market and boasted a Rover and wore a tailored suit. I was charmed by the house and the feeling of antiquity, the sombre yet dignified atmosphere which I hope I have portrayed here.



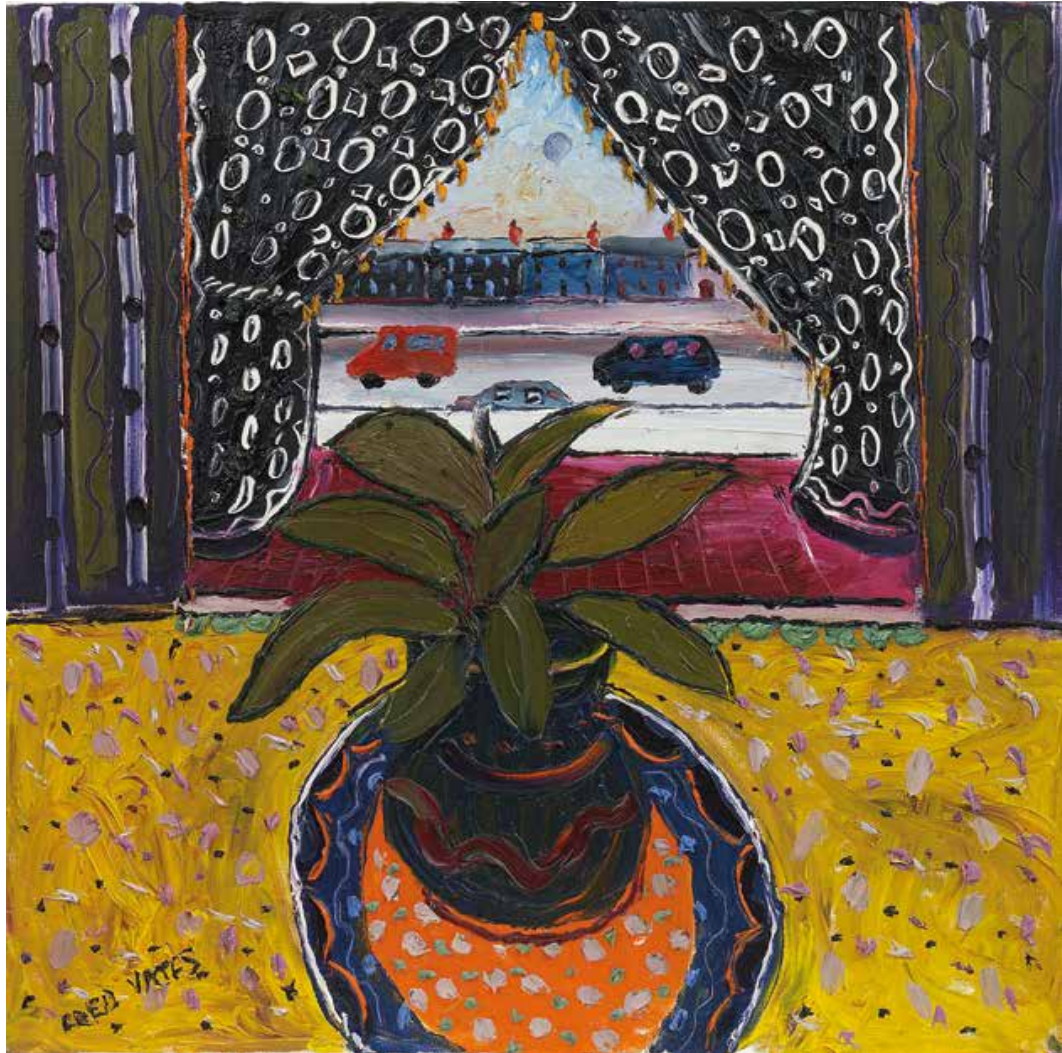
— *The Puffer Train*, 2007
oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm, 32 x 25½ ins

Cheadle Hulme, my childhood, Our childhood. (My twin brother). Cheadle Hulme School and the puffer train. It travelled left to right, – we knew where it came from but it never occurred to me to enquire where it went to.



— *Memories of Falmouth 2008*
oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 31½ x 31½ ins

Falmouth, memories of Gaiety, fun, boats. And even the colours reflect the mood of Fam'l'ies on holiday (for 7 days only) happiness, release and a spending spree...



— *Aunt Aggy's House, Ancoats, 2008*
oil on canvas, 81 x 80 cm, 32 x 31½ ins

My Aunt Aggy's terraced house in Ancoats. She was always dressed in black, the kitchen range spotless and 'blackened'. On one visit I recall she gave me one peppermint cream ... that was a freak, and one never dared to ask for another.

Auntie Aggy, lived with Uncle John her brother. Uncle John was a mystery to all the family because he retired at a very early age, wore spats and pin striped trousers and visited the library daily to study stocks and shares. My Aunty believed he won his money on the horses, but his secret died with him.

