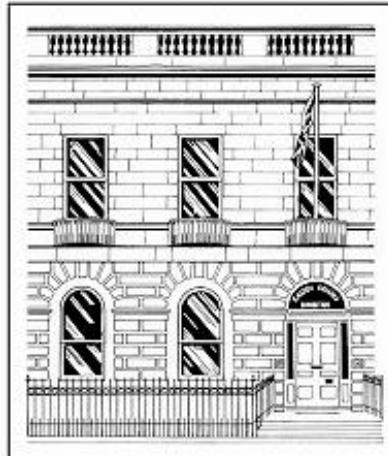


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Andrew G. Whitfield

Dealer in fine paintings and sculpture

Featured Picture: A Recent Identification

Alexander Ignatius Roche RSA NEAC RP (1861-1921)



The Ferryboat Inn at Holywell, on the Great Ouse, Huntingdonshire. circa 1917

Oil on canvas, signed lower left 'Alexander Roche';

25 x 30 (framed size: 35 x 40) inches. In original fine swept & moulded gilt frame.

Exhibited: Royal Scottish Academy, 1919, No. 208 "The Old Inn, Holywell".

This picture has been identified by Bridget Flanagan, a local historian working in Cambridgeshire, who kindly telephoned to say she was positive that our landscape by Alexander Roche "The Ferryboat Inn" (one of several English pubs to bear that name) was of Holywell, by the River Great Ouse, near St Ives in Huntingdonshire – sadly no longer a county, it's now in Cambridgeshire. What's more, she e-mailed an early 20th century photograph to prove it. The photo, taken on a wet winter's day, is a view along the flood bank footpath from the opposite direction. The pub sign leans drunkenly towards the water, exactly as in Roche's painting and the wildfowler has hung a brace of Mallard in the branches of the pollarded willow. In contrast, Roche has painted the pub around noon on a sunny spring day.



photo copyright: County Record Office, Huntingdon

Holywell was a tiny hamlet (it is not much bigger, even now) which gets its name from the Holy Well, a spring within the curtilage of St John The Baptist's Parish Church, which flows via the Holywell Brook into the nearby Great Ouse. The thatch-roofed pub, The Old Ferryboat Inn, as it's now named, is claimed to be England's oldest inn, dating back to 560 AD, with foundations dated to 460 AD. Hereward the Wake (1004-1076) is said to have crossed the River there when fleeing from William the Conqueror following the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The earliest proven, documented date for the inn is 1100 and it was rebuilt in 1485.

The pub has for very many years enjoyed the right to operate the ferry to Fen Drayton, across the Great Ouse, once an important commercial waterway. In the early part of the 20th century, the ferry was a floating bridge, mounted on a barge, capable of carrying a very large cart, together with its team of horses. The level of the river is regulated by locks and when the river is in flood, it comes right up to the path in front of the pub. The cart which can be seen between the pollarded willows in the painting would have had to have been moved to allow for this.

Around the turn of the 19th century, a popular artists' colony developed in the tranquil and picturesque area along the 6 mile stretch of the Great Ouse around Holywell including the villages of Hemingford Abbots, Hemingford Grey, Houghton and Wyton (now joined) and the town of St Ives. A dozen or more Scots stayed and painted in the area, including:

William Miller Frazer
Thomas Hodgson Liddell
Robert Little
John Lochhead
William Watt Milne
William Kay Blacklock
Robert Payton Reid
Robert Buchan Nisbet
John Muirhead
David T Muirhead
David Murray Smith
William Beckwith McInnes (from Australia)
Keeley Halswelle
Robert Walker MacBeth

Roche and his family apparently stayed with a Mrs Tabbitt in Berry Cottage, Holywell, in order for him to convalesce. (source was Mrs Wilmer - daughter of Mrs Tabbitt - both now dead) . It seems

probable that they stayed for some time in 1917, four years before Roche died. A picture has been seen inscribed 'Near St Ives, Hunts', dated 1917 and Roche exhibited "Here, Ouse, Slow Winding Through a Summer Plain" No 260 (£100) in 1918 and ""A Summer Day on the Ouse" No 350 (£45) in 1919 at The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts as well as our painting, "The Old Inn, Holywell" No 208, at the Royal Scottish Academy's Annual Exhibition in 1919. Roche seems to have enjoyed painting pubs, for among the many titles he exhibited were: The Red Lion, The Craw, The Greyhound Inn, The Inn, Corfe, Dorset and A Fisher's Inn, as well as "The Old Inn, Holywell".

Born at Gallowgate in Glasgow on 17th August 1861, the son of a milliner, Alexander Roche was schooled at St Mungo's Academy and then attended some classes at the Glasgow School of Art while working in an architect's office. His real art training came in Paris, where he studied for several years from 1881, under Boulanger and Lefebvre at Julien's and later under Gérôme at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts. While in Paris he met several other Scottish students including William Kennnedy, (Sir) John Lavery and Thomas Millie Dow, along with Dow's mentor, William Stott of Oldham. Together they painted at Grez-Sur-Loing, just south of Fontainebleau, all influenced by Bastien-Lepage (1848-84) and the plein-airistes. In 1885 Roche returned to Glasgow where he painted a number of romantic idylls of girls in gardens, interiors or in landscape, such as The Dominie's (schoolmaster) Favourites exhibited at the Glasgow Institute in 1885, No. 591, which was priced at the great sum of £250 and The Shepherdess (exhibited to acclaim at the RA 1890). He moved to a cottage on the banks of the Luggie in Dunbartonshire and there some of his best landscapes were painted.

Most of 1888 was spent in Capri, where he was associated with a cosmopolitan group of artists including Fabio Fabbi and Harold Speed. Two further trips to Italy followed, to Florence and Venice, in the early 1890s when he painted peasants in the Sabine Hills. In Florence, he met and married an Italian girl, but the marriage was not to last.

In 1896 Roche moved to Edinburgh and began to paint portraits and figure studies. His sense of colour and confident brushwork were well suited to portraiture and in his later years this became his main output and source of income. He spent some time in the USA, fulfilling portrait commissions and seeking others. Among his lucrative commissions was a group portrait for Andrew Carnegie, then the world's richest man, of his wife Louise (nee Whitfield) and their daughter, Margaret.

He won a gold medal at Munich 1891, an Hon. Mention at the Paris Salon 1892 and a gold medal at Dresden 1897. Elected ARSA 1894 and RSA 1900, he exhibited at the RSA from 1887 - 1976 and at the RA from 1890 - 1919. Roche was considered a member of the Glasgow School, but after the late 1880s he drifted to the fringes of the movement. In 1906, he remarried, to Jean, daughter of the animal painter Robert Alexander and sister of Edwin, the flower and animal painter. All four shared a friendship with Joseph Crawhall, together with a love of Tangier. They lived from 1907 until the outbreak of the Great War at 8 Royal Terrace in Edinburgh, coincidentally just two doors from the Calton Gallery's home for 23 years at No. 10.... Around this time he was struck with a cerebral haemorrhage which paralysed his right hand. He taught himself to paint with his left and was later to produce some of his best landscapes (McEwan).

The Roches later bought a house, Hailes Cottage in the village of Slateford, by the Water of Leith, to the south west Edinburgh, where he died, on 10th March 1921, aged 59.

Oil on canvas, signed lower left 'Alexander Roche', 25 x 30 (35 x 40) inches.

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