

PAINT WHAT YOU KNOW. PAINT WHAT YOU LOVE

Anthony Osler has painted East Anglia's coastal waters for almost four decades... and sailed them for even longer

WORDS & PHOTOS: Mike Trippitt

“That’s a wonderful breeze; you could eat it!” East Anglian marine artist

Anthony Osler remembers fondly his aunt’s words describing a brisk northeasterly from her home on the north Norfolk coast. Having lived and worked for most of his 80 years in the region he speaks affectionately about it: “It’s not too heavily populated, it’s not too expensive. It has some fabulous places. And we do have wonderful skies,” he says at his cottage on the Norfolk and Suffolk border.

The Ipswich-born painter has a strong bond to the eastern counties, its people, places and its coastline. He says his family history has played its part: “I found out a couple of years ago that not a single one of my ancestors going back to 1701 comes from anywhere other than Norfolk or Suffolk. I am totally indigenous! It then dawned on me to some extent why I just feel at home in this area.

“I just feel of East Anglia, and one of these days when they pop me in North Lopham churchyard, I’ll think: ‘That’s fine.’” For 35 years Osler has painted the seas, rivers, coast and craft of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex but his career as an artist happened almost by chance. Having taught himself to paint in watercolour whilst pursuing a full-time career in the probation service he still managed time for some creative writing.

“I was writing articles for yachting magazines,” he says. “I thought my creative talent was in the written word. (And I still think it might be – I might still do something.) On one occasion I did a little sketch and a magazine published it. I think I got £5 for the sketch that had taken me about half an hour and £7 for the article that had taken about a month. I thought: ‘I need to

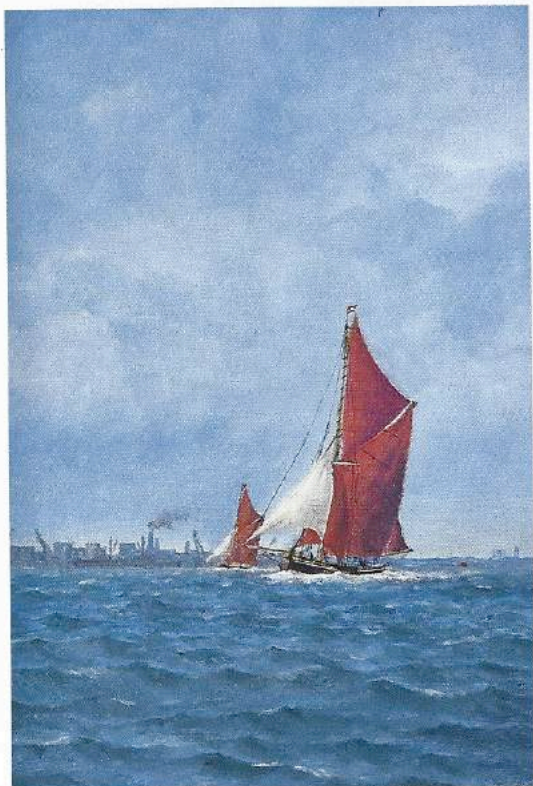
change tack here!’”

Changing direction was nothing new to him. Several years earlier, after a National Diploma in Agriculture and 10 years in farm management, he left the industry having become “disillusioned” with the way it was going, particularly in the use of chemicals and hormones. “I was becoming much more organic and against all that,”

BELOW: Anthony Osler

RIGHT: Anthony Osler





Anthony Osler

he says. "I have never regretted making the change. I loved the probation service."

Whilst preparing reports for the courts of Suffolk, and working with inmates in the regions prisons during the day, Osler honed his painting skills and his commercial acumen to develop what he called a "lucrative hobby". His choice of subject and specialism came naturally. Even today, when teaching, running a workshop or doing a demonstration he teaches what he believes. "I say to people 'paint what you know, and paint what you love. Then your knowledge of the subject and your love for the subject will come through.'"

Anthony Osler has had a love boats and sailing his entire adult life: "I have always been passionate about boats and I am surprised in a way that I didn't go into the navy when I left school.... I've owned a boat of some description since I was 16.

Painting and boating go together to some extent, because of my subject matter."

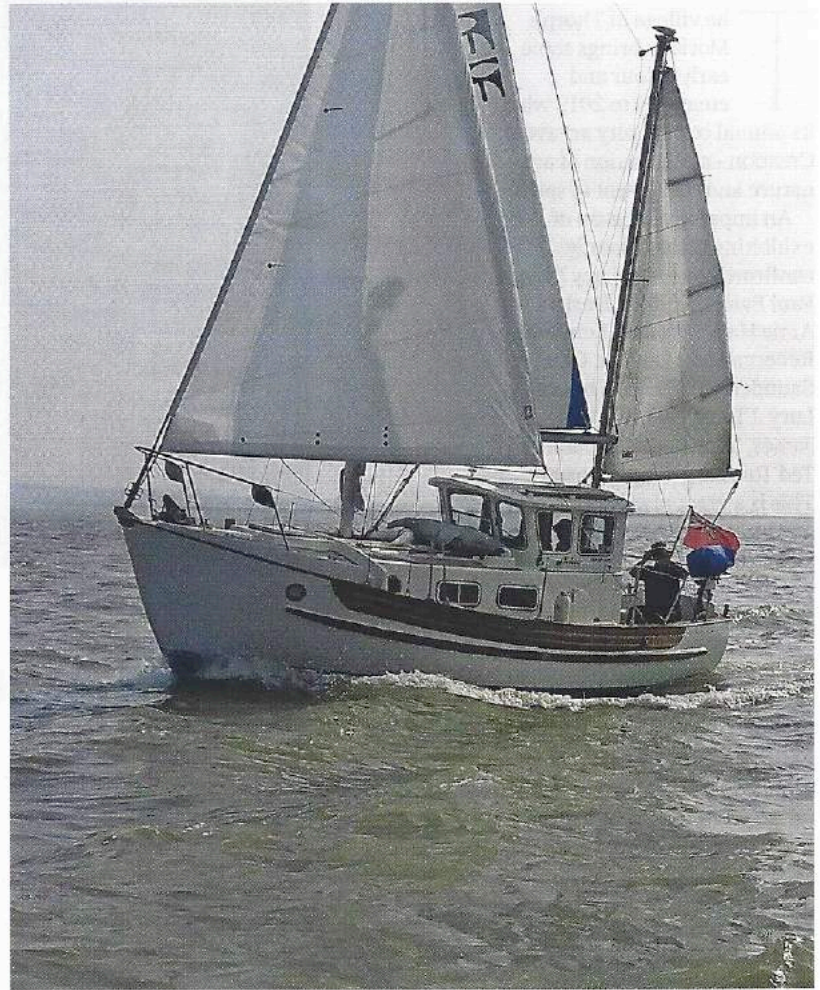
After five years of combining painting with part-time probation work he retired from the probation service to paint full-time. Although he was well established with his work hanging in several galleries in the region, he says it was then, at the age of 58 that he felt he had become a professional artist. Osler's work, either in watercolour or oils, is characterised by subtle light, often-stormy skies and wide vistas across calm or troubled waters. Smacks, gaffers and modern sailboats feature regularly as do majestic Thames barges.

But he does not seek to create photographic records of his subjects; his paintings depict atmosphere and mood. He says: "I have never been a slave to total accuracy. What I strive for is for someone to look at [a painting]

and to think 'Yes, that strikes a chord in my heart'. I am more interested in what people feel in their heart than what they feel in their head."

Over the years Anthony Osler has sailed thousands of miles around the estuaries and creeks of the east coast taking it all in, immersing himself in its rich maritime heritage. "When I am sailing I do have a sketchbook with me, but I do not use it that much. In a way, I am just absorbing the atmosphere." So where does inspiration come from and how are ideas for new work born? Anthony says: "I think some of it is continually striving to improve. I've never looked upon myself as having got as far as I am going to go in my painting ability. I am hoping it's improving, but it is up to others to judge that."

Osler's work, typically a moonlit Pin Mill or a brooding sky off the Suffolk coast, often features Thames barges resting at anchor, sometimes sitting high and dry after the tide has dropped, or making way under full sail. Does an observer see a representation of the present or a statement of the past? "That is an interesting question. I would say a bit of both. There are a lot of people around whose grandfather or great uncle worked on the barges, and there are people around whose father worked on them. So to some extent I'm



ABOVE: Anthony Osler

looking back, but at the same time I very rarely paint a barge that is fully-laden. I generally paint barges as they are today, which is sailing light and well out of the water.

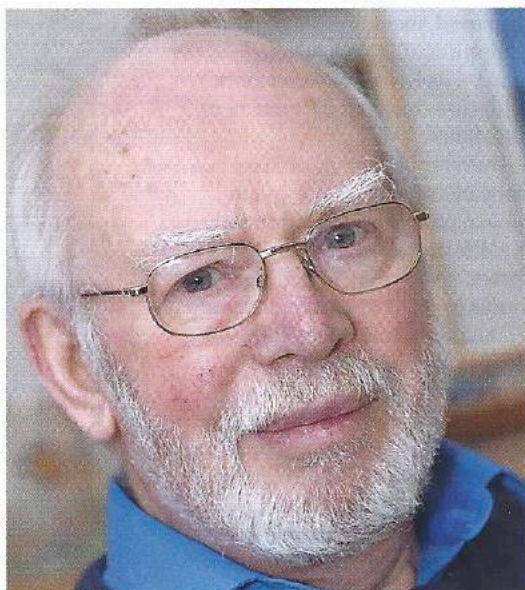
"Am I trying to preserve the past? Up to a point," he says answering his own question. "I am nostalgic about the past." Anthony Osler lives alone since his late wife Gill passed away in 2015. Surrounded by paintings and books, his ginger cat keeping him company, and his two daughters and five grandchildren living in Suffolk and Essex he says he has had, and is having, a good life.

"I've always been one to do things my own way. I have not been good at taking advice and I'm not a good team player. I will stand or fall by my own mistakes and learn by them. I like the old public school motto 'Do different; be different.'" Although it is over 50 years since Osler worked in agriculture he remains acutely

aware of the changes in that time, how bigger farms with fewer people have affected the people of Suffolk and Norfolk.

"One of my great regrets in life is the way the countryside has been denuded of workers," he says before pausing reflectively. "We've lost an awful lot really." But as to the future, Anthony Osler still has work to do, words to write, watercolours to paint and his boat, Selene, to sail.

When the time comes for him to wash his brushes for the last time, to switch his studio light off for good, Osler's paintings will remain a testament to East Anglia's maritime heritage: "One of the nice things about being an artist, and it might be by chance, is that in a couple of hundred years time there will be someone with one of my pictures on their wall. I quite like the thought of that." But for his daughters, he says, he will leave something else behind. "I think they'll have had an interesting dad." ♦



Anthony Osler