

# Basic Detail Report

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## The Thames at Mapledurham

### Date

1860

### Primary Maker

George Price Boyce

### Medium

Watercolour on paper

### Dimensions

18 x 27.8 cm

### Description

A landscape scene showing a broad expanse of river which recedes towards a red-brick building in the far distance. The river is enclosed by reeds and trees. In the middle distance is a boat. There are low hills in the background and the sky is filled with fluffy cream and mauve-coloured clouds. George Price Boyce initially trained as an architect but gave up after three years to become a painter. This seems to have been precipitated by a meeting with David Cox at Betws-y-Coed, in Wales, in 1849, as well as by Boyce's friendship with the landscape painter Thomas Seddon. Boyce was connected to a number of prominent Pre-Raphaelite artists, including John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt. The critic John Ruskin was aware of Boyce's work and encouraged him to move away from the sunset and twilight scenes which had interested him at first. Ruskin held the view that depictions of evening effects were, in a sense, morally inferior to scenes painted in detail in broad daylight because they could be achieved with relative ease. From the late 1850s Boyce's work became recognisably Pre-Raphaelite. His training as an architect also seems to have informed his very precise style and many of his works feature lovingly detailed buildings. His pictures from this period tend to focus on secluded corners of the English countryside, particularly places marked by human activity. A large number of Boyce's paintings from these years show scenes on or around the River Thames between Reading and Oxford. Another watercolour, *The Mill on the Thames at Mapledurham*, also from 1860 and painted in the same area as the *Hugh Lane* picture, is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Boyce also produced a watercolour of *Mapledurham House* in the same year. The countryside surrounding this stretch of the Thames was still unspoilt and popular with artists. Each of Boyce's views is carefully delineated; both the natural forms and man-made elements are painted with great sensitivity. The pictures are dominated by bright, luminous colours and, like many of Boyce's works, bring a sense of poetry to scenes of ordinary rural life. Boyce's images are often enlivened by tiny human or animal figures and this can be seen here on the left bank of the Thames and in the finely detailed boat making its way upriver. This work is typical of Boyce's output during the 1860s in the attention it gives to the expansive foreground. There are compositional similarities between Boyce's art and the sometimes radical work of Ford Madox Brown, whose unconventional subject

matter was criticised by Ruskin. As in *The Thames at Mapledurham*, paintings by Brown such as *Carrying Corn* and *The Pretty Baa-Lambs* also feature large foreground areas and small buildings. During the mid 1860s Boyce's art attracted a number of patrons and he was elected as an associate member of the Old Water-Colour Society in February 1864. Many of his pictures from this period are pervaded by an atmosphere of stillness and seem devoid of any activity. While Boyce's work never entirely lost its attention to detail and its delicate evocation of light, he adopted a looser approach from the mid 1860s onwards. Some of the pictures he produced at this time are quite similar in feeling to the work of Whistler. Like Whistler, Boyce made studies of the Thames and the built environment which surrounded it as it flowed through London. It has been suggested by several scholars that Whistler's nocturnes may have been influenced by Boyce's images. Boyce was independently wealthy and collected the work of his fellow Pre-Raphaelites. His financial stability seems to have given him the confidence to experiment with the subtle and idiosyncratic effects which characterise his best pictures. (G.P.)