

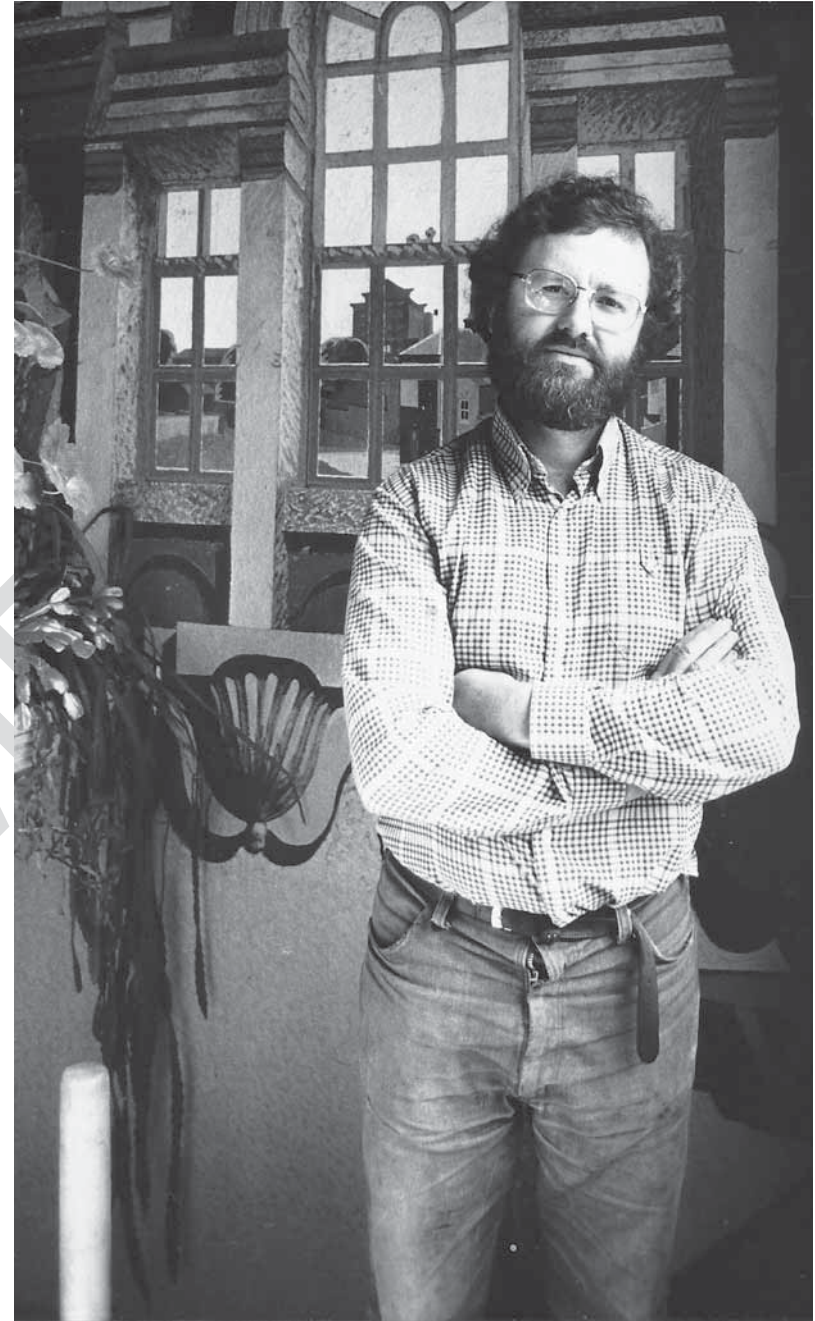
The Singularity of a Questing Eye

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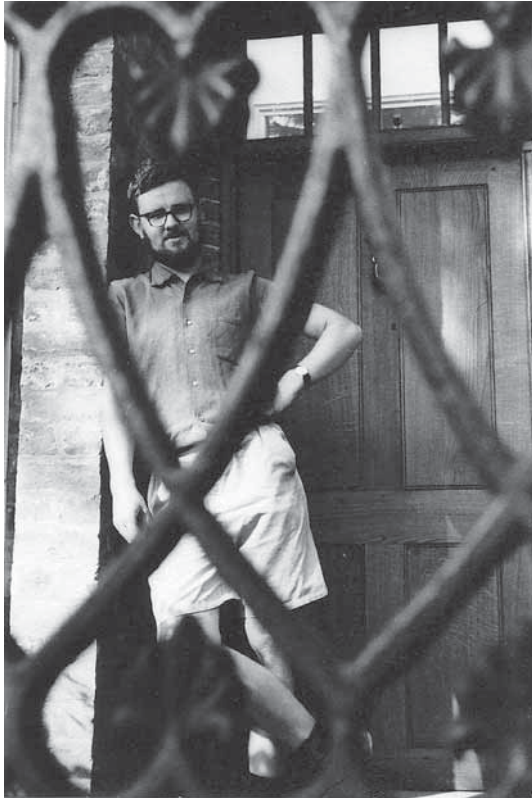
Over more than half a century Jon Harris has produced a remarkable body of work. At its heart are his images of Cambridge where he has lived and worked since 1961. This book is a selection from those images, chosen to show something of the range and quality of his roving eye. These drawings and paintings also form a unique record of the extraordinary changes, some beneficial, some less so, which his Cambridge has undergone over the past half century. Throughout the book, Harris or JH, as he signs his work, has supplied a commentary telling the story of an evolving city from the point of view of a deeply knowledgeable and passionately involved observer.

It's hard to believe that twenty years have passed since Duncan Robinson, then Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum and subsequently Master of Magdalene College, invited JH to exhibit his work in the Octagon Gallery of the Museum. From skirting board level to high above the tops of the doors, the walls were hung with ninety drawings, watercolours and oils – a mere sampling from the wealth of JH's work from his time as an undergraduate at Trinity Hall (1961-64) until 1997.

This exhibition, and an accompanying one of JH's visualizations for town planning and development shown at the nearby Department of Architecture, were warmly received. Few of those who came to see the exhibitions had had any idea of the scope of his work, the singularity of his questing eye, his range of subject matter and distinctive



The artist in his studio, 1981



JH at Clifton Hall, Ashbourne, Derbyshire, 1965, and walling in Alstonefield, Staffordshire, 1970s

mastery of pen, watercolour and oilpaint. The only surprise is that so little of this has been published, exceptions being the illustrations accompanying a series of monthly articles on villages and towns around and about Cambridge in the *Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Journals* and *Essex Magazine* either side of the millenium, and *Frontier Country* (2004), his book, written with Brian Mooney, recording a midsummer walk around the borders of Essex, from which he later learnt his remote ancestors, legal men, had emerged.

Much of JH's work is in private collections or has been commissioned as maps, ephemera and menus; but the core of his graphic work remains housed in the black-backed sketchbooks which are his constant companions – at least

forty of them, stretching from the 1960s until the present, along with watercolour- and scrap-books. We, that is the artist himself and his friends, hope that this book will open up his work to a wider world.

Although the focus of this present selection is on his home base of Cambridge, JH's prolific pen and brush have been active in Derbyshire and the industrial north, throughout East Anglia, and in forays abroad to New Orleans, Sardinia and to New Zealand from where his father hailed. (It is hoped to publish some of this work in a future volume.) For the moment it has been hard enough to choose fewer than 200 images from the wealth of his work in and around Cambridge and East Anglia.

You can't begin to say anything about the artist and his work without bringing in architecture, music and a host of other contingent matters. His friend the singer Jill Gomez once aptly said that his oils often appear to have been 'built', rather than painted with the brush. Whatever JH produces springs from his own physical experience of his subject matter. He has clambered about buildings of all sorts and kinds and is himself a good enough brickie, carpenter and dry-stone waller to know what goes into their making. Every landscape he paints has been explored under boot, every building known in his mind and muscles as though he had been there at its construction.

If this suggests an architect manqué who happens to moonlight as an artist, do not be misled. The core of his activity has always been drawing and painting – it just happens that a characteristic strength is his instinctive understanding of buildings and a revelatory insight into their life and history. To walk down any street, or through the countryside, with him is to have your eyes opened to a thousand things you would never have noticed on your own.

Born in 1943 in North Staffordshire (his father a naval engineer from a New Zealand family, his mother the daughter of a Scottish doctor), JH began painting as a scholar of Winchester College. The newly appointed art master, Grahame Drew, revolutionised several lives. Not only the handful of Wykehamist artists that he set on their way, but architects, craftsmen, printers, art and cultural historians all acknowledge an immense debt to this determined man. Having followed Drew's advice to read architecture at Cambridge, where he arrived in 1961, JH's less-than-perfect facility with the mathematics of the subject eventually led to his abandoning the course after a year or, as he would say, being abandoned by it. His subsequent academic



Brunswick Terrace, where JH spent his second and third undergraduate years at number 10 (bottom right), ink, 2017

adventures at Trinity Hall took in modern languages and, after two years under Michael Jaffé, he emerged with a useful degree in Art History.

Drawing – particularly to record the changing built environment – and painting were already his central activity. From 1965 it was teaching that paid the rent, briefly at Bassingbourn Village College, then for twenty-seven years at Cambridge School of Art. The year of architecture, far from being wasted, had opened up a Piranesian curiosity about the ordinary fabric of the streets of Cambridge at a time of great urban change: its alleys, the time-stained native brick, the shapes of ramshackle breweries about to go under the hammer, the huge retort house as it bowed before North Sea gas. Walking round the old industrial sites of his native North Midlands yielded comparable discoveries. The robust originality of his drawings and paintings made an immediate impact on his circle of friends. This included many who were to

make distinguished careers as architects and who began to buy his work.

Two lecturers in the Faculty of Architecture had been particularly influential on the eighteen-year-old: Edward Wright, the typographer, later at Chelsea, and the painter Christopher Cornford, who went on to the RCA. They had been hired by the head of the faculty, Sir Leslie Martin, to pass on his concern with the exact distribution of graphic marks on paper, which they taught through a series of rigorous exercises akin to those of the Bauhaus Vorkurs (foundation course). Both are dead now, but JH owns a beautiful Cornford drawing and says that his first contact with Wright gave him his concern for the forms of letters and numbers and, more than that, the distinctively bold handwriting he still uses. By then he was working with one of those Rapidograph pens from which his hand seems inseparable. From around 1967 came the commitment to keeping sketchbooks and notebooks – a means of disciplining the facility and spontaneous inventiveness that characterise his drawing and watercolour work. Pages from his ‘black books’ and companion watercolour books are published here for the first time.

For his fourth and final undergraduate year (1964-5) JH found a corner in the upper half of a tall old city-centre house in Cambridge. It was shabby and welcoming, a case of the home finding the person, because there he has lived and worked ever since, sharing the front door of whatever catering business has occupied the lower floors – The Coffee Pot, Omar’s or Oasis Kebab House, Bangkok City and now Lotus Thai – and contributing menu designs and occasional carpentry, masonry and decor. What is striking from his fifty-year sojourn aloft in Green Street is that the roofscapes, visible from the windows but best explored from aboard the viewing ‘raft’ which he would often thrust out into space from the dormer window of his south-facing scullery, have been the constant study of his



The artist accepts no responsibility for the opaque green emblazoned on the ground floor and basement façade! This has been his front door to Green Street since 1964. Below him a succession of catering enterprises, currently a well-known Thai restaurant

pen and brush. Here, as in so much of his work, he has transmuted material unpromising to most of us into images of enduring vitality.

JH has constantly re-immersed himself in favoured locations; particular recurring subjects stand as primary catalysts for his imagination. A sizeable gallery could be filled with wholly divergent paintings based on a single subject: dark, brooding abstractions, essays in shadow-tone, fantasies vibrant with explosive light.

Although an omnivorous student of the work of other artists as diverse as Diebenkorn, Spencer Gore, Eurich, Sandra Fell, Ravilious, Uglow, Auerbach, Patrick Symons and his old co-exhibitor Julian Bell (not surprising in someone whose leanings, as a schoolboy, were being fought over by Piper and Bonnard), he took no formal instruction after the apprenticeship with Grahame Drew. It could be that, as an autodidact to the fibre of his being, JH would have been ill at ease as a student in the general run of colleges of art. But he acknowledges a considerable debt to colleagues and students while teaching at the Cambridge School of Art. Interactions and debates with fellow artists and former students remain hugely valuable to him.

The same eye is manifestly at work in the oil-paintings as in the drawings and watercolours, but the whole approach is different. He has used canvas only about twice and has generally worked on the flat side of hardboard. The act of battening the back of the board in order to stiffen and protect it led him to invent his own configurations of wooden frame, which he also often decorates. As an undergraduate in the early 1960s his method was to mix powdered builder's plaster into the paint on the palette with a strip of springy brass printer's rule which, held between finger and thumb, spread the textured, clinkery mixture onto the board, laid flat on table or even floor. Pen drawings or watercolours done in situ were commandeered

to create moody, rainy townscapes whose patron saints might be Graham Bell or Peter Brook (whose splendid millscapes he had seen reviewed in *The Times* in 1960), and who was later taken up by the Granada Bernsteins. So the oils were already becoming what Auden would have called a 'secondary world' of their own, closely worked-out compositions derived from the subject but by no means always 'about' it.

The brass-strip paintings made for close tones, muted colour, and large-scale handling. By 1967, working smaller, and often on an easel in the open, he was beginning to swap all this for the brush with its vivid and fluid possibilities. How to register the tingle of English light on sunny – or rainy – surfaces? How to translate the luminosity of hue he experienced, working in watercolour into the light in a Derbyshire sunset, on the size of board he felt it merited? He plunged into a polychromatic, textured *pointillisme* of which the oils of the old Retort House (1964) and Coronation Street brewery (1971) on pp. 53-54 in Chapter 5 are good examples. Here, the structure of the composition and the energetic stylisation of the dance of light are locked in resonant counterpoint.

Although the effects of light had always been a central preoccupation, there had been a tendency in his oils (but never in his watercolours) to fight shy of the attempt to render it naturalistically – the light was often cooled or filtered into a brooding, even ominous atmosphere. From the late 1980s the play of light on walls, roofs, trees and gardens became translucent, more dynamic, creating a new sense of animation. This is particularly true of paintings where, exceptionally, the light source has been behind the artist. His preference is usually for subjects seen against the light; such paintings have become ever more theatrical. In these works the eye is drawn not to the light source but to its impact on surfaces and the depth and subtlety of the shadows.



JH in his studio, 1996

The power of the oils should not detract from JH's work as a watercolourist and draughtsman. Watercolour is the nearest he ever gets to a camera, which is to say that this is his means of capturing a visual impression as compactly as possible. These studies are painted with extraordinary speed and concentration after sketching in a few essential outlines with the pen. I have watched him paint four different views of our cottage, each taken from an unexpected angle or perspective, in a matter of hours, the exact times of start and finish together with a brief description of the subject recorded in pen alongside his signature. He has always been adept at managing sketchpad, paints and waterpot under the most adverse circumstances, as in wind and cold, on a tiny stool in long damp grass or straddling the ridge of a half-demolished barn. There are watercolour snowscapes in which the feathers of ice in the colour-wash are dried into the paper.

Commissioned by a friend to paint the London house of a mutual acquaintance as a surprise present, he got mineral water from a corner-shop rather than give the game away by knocking on the door – the topographical caption did not fail to mention that the aqueous medium had been Perrier.

Inevitably this is a high-risk process with a fair proportion of casualties, but in the survivors the sense of chosen place and time is captured with an enduring freshness by his understanding eye and mind. Sometimes a subject will leap across the central reservation and spontaneously become a double-spread, characteristically 10"x28" (25x70 cm). On occasion JH will juxtapose two or even more separate images (watercolours or oils) in the same mount or frame. They are usually arranged ladderwise, the idea being that they may be read together, combined or compared, thus creating an effect of visual heterophony. We are back with his characteristic interest in conjuring a dynamic relationship between a single vision and its constituent, multiple images.

What is particularly notable in the black-ink drawings is that JH seizes on cross-hatching and skills usually associated with engraving, but he says that his inspiration came from a book, now mislaid, which he found in a Hampshire bookshop around the time when, aged 16, he acquired his first Rapidograph: the book was about drawing landscape and townscape in pen and ink, its author a Sussex doctor called J.G. Garrett. The work of colleagues, whether exhibited or overseen in life-classes, can be an inspiration; or he can come on a book which he has to have, even though its artist's mastery of technique fills him 'with envy and shocked amazement': such was Anthony Mackay's book of pen-drawings, *Journeys into Oxfordshire*.

For some years after moving into Green Street he had an Albion press in the corner of the studio. A fascination with

making wood-engravings developed. These are necessarily miniature; but they were useful for clarifying the problems of the larger drawings and paintings going on alongside, and once done they could be set up together in the press, multiple images separated by plain Edwardian wood-letter and fancy borders, then printed on all manner of papers. The Albion was eventually sold on to Nick Barnham, but scorpers and spitstickers lie waiting to be taken up again.



Two photos of JH at his Fitzwilliam Museum exhibition, 1997

JH has since found other ways to keep Edward Wright's legacy alive. His graphic skills and superb spatial visualization have invited commissions from the National Trust, as well as from architects and planners. In such drawings the necessary element of instruction is leavened with fantasy and wit. The aim may be to lead a visitor through the important components of a historic landscape, or to disentangle (as at Houghton Mill, for the National Trust) a three-storey train of machinery to show – himself first, then you – how it all works. As he says, 'My drawings simply interpret what is well understood by mill-aficionados but is invisible to layfolk whose imagination can't, as my drawings can, penetrate floors.' What gives these drawings their special quality is that while scrupulously accurate in their mechanical detail, they also convey a palpable sense of the sight and sound of the shafts and gearwheels in toiling motion. This curiosity extends to the archaeology and reconstruction of damaged ancient buildings. Whether on his own – helping to rescue the derelict manor house at the nearby village of Croxton, working out the frame-pattern of a replaced wall and tracing the design of a missing window



JH striding out in Coggeshall

– or as a representative of Cambridge Past, Present & Future (formerly ‘Cambridge Preservation Society’), he has done battle on behalf of threatened vernacular or industrial buildings, using drawing to tell the tale, and on occasion securing a listing.

Although JH has had a sizeable number of exhibitions and has long been highly valued and collected by friends and professional associates, he has remained relatively unknown to the world at large; he is the last person to put himself forward or become entangled in any kind of promotion. In temperament he is a paradoxical blend of unshakeable dedication and self-deprecation. It is an extreme version of that watchful critical instinct which, as Baudelaire remarked, lurks in every true creator. Wherever JH leaves his mark, from his handwriting, visual wit and playful verbal intentions, his response to music, his culinary prowess, through to his work with pen and brush and framing tools, the style is instantly recognisable.

The enduring value of his work – from graffiti, maps and ephemera to sketches and finished compositions – is evident in its singularity of vision. There is a huge wealth of personality, of appetite for physical and sensual experience which drives and enriches everything to which he turns his hand.

The windows of JH’s flat in central Cambridge command views of rooftops and chimneys that are an endlessly productive obsession. They are the subject of much of his most characteristic work, as will be evident in **Chapter 1, Home Base: Roofscapes from Green Street**. The subtle – and sometimes bold – ways in which his style, his way of responding to the same subject, has changed over the years is perhaps nowhere more apparent. This chapter is also a declaration that JH’s work, like this book itself, is not about Cambridge as the tourist might like to have it – the colleges feature principally only in his pictorial maps of one or two of them – but rather about the artist’s fascination with unregarded vistas, its back-streets, characterful buildings lost to the wrecking ball, and the city’s industrial past. You could even say with its hidden heart.

Demolition and development have been the recent story of the area, roughly bounded by the Newmarket and East Roads, which is the subject of **Chapter 2, The Kite and its Satellites**. Together with the architect Keith Garbett, and in response to an open invitation from the City Council, JH came up with imaginative proposals for the reconstruction of this blighted residential, shopping and light industrial area. The proposals were published in October 1976 in *The Architectural Review*. To the city’s loss, commercial interests prevailed and the Grafton Centre was built. Here, as elsewhere in the book, JH’s drawings are historic evidence of much that was lost, but also of the vigour and charm of what remains.

As an undergraduate JH found himself quartered out

from college in 1962-4 at 10 Brunswick Terrace. This marked the beginning of a fascination with the locale of **Chapter 3, Midsummer Common**. There was a good view of Tollemache's 'Star' Brewery on Newmarket Road (demolished in 1982) from his windows. Nearby, his friend Ed Hoskins was to buy and refurbish 11 Brunswick Walk, a process recorded in much detail by JH, though sadly not included here. In the roof Ed installed a Velux light, opening up another irresistible vista framed by a pair of magnificent chimney stacks which are depicted in one of JH's most luminous paintings.

Doubtless his predilection for lofty and even perilous viewpoints has only sharpened his ability to create bird's eye visualisations of buildings, and indeed whole groups of buildings whether extant or still on the drawing board. At the end of the seventeenth century, David Loggan appeared to fly above the Cambridge colleges and get their complicated roofscapes and capricious chimneys exactly right. JH's comparable skill in this direction was quickly recognized in commissions from architects and planners eager to see their schemes and drawings brought to life on the page. The artist's architectural knowledge and creative imagination have often made their own contribution to these visualisations, and for that reason been greatly valued by his commissioners. These have included Cambridge colleges, more than happy to discover someone able to create pictorial maps that help visitors find their way through the courts and labyrinthine passageways. Three of these maps feature in **Chapter 4, Mapping Town and Gown**, together with a sampling of JH's maps of the city and meticulously detailed studies of its streetscapes. For several years he made drawings of houses that were difficult to photograph for Alex Cook of Gray, Cook and Partners, the estate agents, which regularly featured in the advertisement pages of the *Cambridge (Evening) News*.

About a quarter of a mile downstream along the Cam



JH with his Elsworth Jubilee mug, 2013

from Midsummer Common, well away from academe and the tourist itinerary, are two industrial sites that have always exercised a special fascination for JH and to which the drawings and paintings of **Chapter 5, Riverside and Industrial** bear witness. On the first of these sites, until 1961 and later, stood the immense Gas Works in River Lane which, in the (dangerous) old days of coal-gas, had helped heat, light and feed the city. On the second site still stands the former pumping station which until 1968 had helped clear Cambridge of its sewage and is now the Museum of Technology. The Gas Works was a ruling obsession of JH's work in the 1960s and 1970s, while in recent years his drawings are playing an important part in the conservation and development of the Museum and its Engineer's House.

JH's predilection for matters mechanical are further on display in **Chapter 6, The Mechanical Muse**. The intricate workings of the watermills at Houghton and Hinxton are unravelled in superbly detailed drawings commissioned

respectively by the National Trust (1994) and by the former Cambridge Preservation Society, (now ‘Cambridge Past, Present and Future’). This chapter also includes impressions of aeroplanes at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford. JH’s arrival with his sketching-stool was once questioned by staff, fearful that he might be about to use it for experiments in manpowered flight. The chapter ends with wood-engravings of the handsome Albion Press that once stood in his studio, and of images which he made and printed on it in the 1970s.

In **Chapter 7, The Wrecking Ball**, we return to JH’s recording of buildings – and indeed whole areas of the city, as in the Kite, Lion Yard and the Quayside near Magdalene Bridge – which have either been demolished or changed out of all recognition. If there is something elegiac about these depictions of buildings he loved, there is also the artist’s delight in the processes of demolition and in the distress and disruption of structures that had once seemed permanent. JH’s drawings of the reconstruction of the University Arms Hotel are exceptional in showing as much interest in the emergent new building as in the destruction of what it was replacing.

Chapter 8, Anglian Excursions, affords no more than a tiny sampling from the artist’s adventuring throughout East Anglia, its towns and villages, rivers and rural landscapes scarcely less familiar to him than Cambridge itself. Villages particularly associated with JH – and he with them – include Thriplow, previous home of his friends Michael and Lila Walton; Croxton, where he gave invaluable help to Richard Grain in his rescue and restoration of the Manor House; and Elsworth where he gave similar help to Graham Storey, his former tutor at Trinity Hall, and to Patrick Carnegy and Jill Gomez in the restoration of their respective seventeenth-century cottages on Brook Street and The Causeway. All this work was minutely recorded by JH and is already part of the fabric of these historic buildings, and of new addition to



Jon Harris and Thai friend ‘at home’

the cottage on The Causeway. In a single day in 1987 he made ten drawings, free-hand as always, for a dramatic garden-room study and music room. It was duly built and appears to be the only fully-realised building by the one-time Cambridge architectural student.

Less than totally enthralled by his lecturers, his student imagination took wing in sketching fantastical buildings ‘under the desk’. These clamoured for resurrection in **Chapter 9, Scherzi and Finale**, which is a pot-pourri of

JH's irrepressible visual (and indeed verbal) wit as glimpsed in his not always so ephemeral 'ephemera'. As well as countless cards marking significant events in the lives of his friends – cards that are kept rather than binned by their recipients – he has always enjoyed responding to requests to design anything and everything from shop-signs, china mugs, trade logos and book jackets, all characterised by the wondrous inventions of his lettering. In the end, though, this book celebrates no single corner of the extraordinary range of Jon Harris's work, but a totality in which his singularity of insight, of utterly distinctive visual invention is everywhere apparent.



This essay is partly indebted to a previous version that appeared in Modern Painters (December 1996) and subsequently in a booklet accompanying the 1997 exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum. My thanks to both publishers.