







# HIT THE ROAD

Peter Brown's Impressionistic paintings of Bath have made him one of the UK's most sought-after artists of the last 20 years. We joined the man they call 'Pete the Street' on location in the Somerset city to find out how he works his magic

WORDS: TERRI EATON PHOTOS: GARETH IWAN JONES

Plein air painters are known for packing up their pochade boxes to scamper off somewhere new, but when it comes to the crunch, they've all got a favourite place to paint that they can turn to again and again, season after season, like a trusted old friend. For all-weather painter and devoted family man Peter Brown, the backbone of his life as an artist, a husband and a father is the historical Somerset city of Bath.

The Reading-born artist's Impressionistic interpretations of sprightly street scenes and captivating countryside make him one of our generation's most illustrious plein air talents. He works miraculously fast and captures an extraordinary amount of detail and ambience in the smallest of intervals. His schedule is full, but we were privileged to spend a day with Peter and discover what it is that he loves about Bath.

Our stint with the 46-year-old begins at 10am when Peter picks us up at the train station in his eight-seater van. Like most parents, he has already juggled his own getting ready with that of his five children – Ollie, Toby, Hattie, Ella and Edward. However, his intertwining

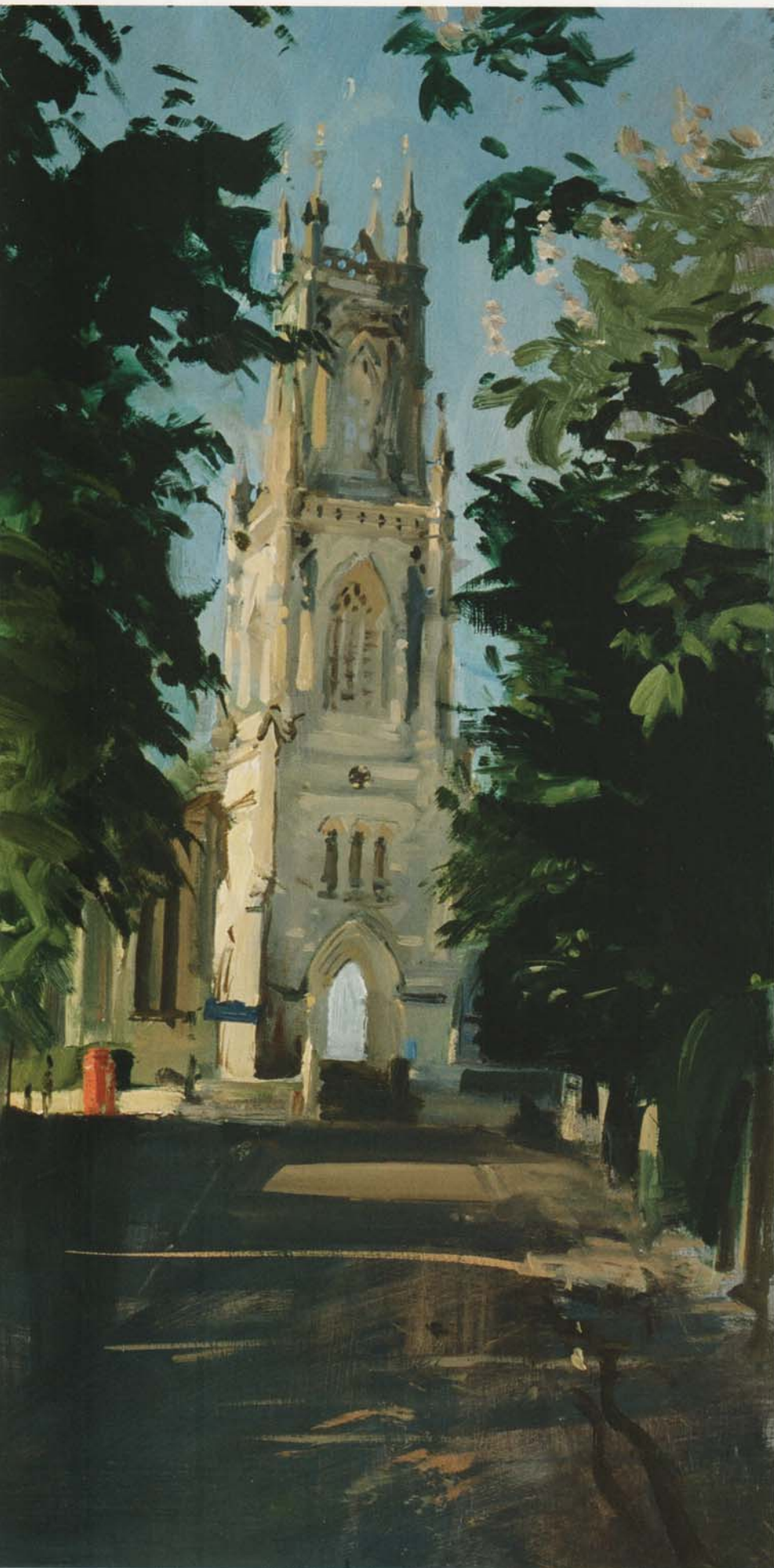
commitments as a father and an artist can make weekday mornings in the Brown household pretty frantic. "I remember one day in September when the light was really low and I was painting by 8.15am, 10 minutes before the kids had to be out the door. It changes so quickly and I wanted to get something down in case it altered," he explains. "For the first time, it was the boys telling me to hurry up!"

A member of the New English Art Club, the Pastel Society, the Royal Institute of Oil Painters and the Bath Society of Artists, Peter coordinates the school run most days but the kids are already safely in the classroom by the time we reach his beautiful home, built in the famous Bath stone. His wife, Lisa, welcomes us kindly with an offer of tea and biscuits but, pressed for time, we head straight out in the van to paint.

With the sound of art materials rattling around in the boot of the vehicle like ball bearings in a tin can, Peter hasn't decided exactly where or what he's going to paint, but he assures us this is perfectly normal. "I don't usually plan where I'm going to paint, unless I'm doing a series of studies on a particular place, but I'm happy >

**ABOVE** Peter starts his painting day with us on George Street in Bath  
**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Towards Bathwick Fields from Holloway*, oil on board, 38x25cm





as long as it has a certain sparkle," he says. "One of the main reasons I repeatedly paint somewhere as gorgeous as Bath is that I'm lucky enough to be here already."

A UNESCO World Heritage Site in its own right, the city of Bath appears enchanting in any weather, grey skies or blue. Packed with honey-coloured Georgian terraces, it's easy to see what attracted Peter to the area from his hometown. His first encounter with its architecture was in 1986 when he came to Bath to

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study an art foundation course. In 1987, he moved to Manchester to begin his Fine Art degree at the Polytechnic (now the Metropolitan University), but he always felt an overwhelming desire to return to Bath.

In 1993, the 26-year-old made the move – and 20 years, 20 solo exhibitions and five children later, Peter is proud to call this place his adopted home. "I recall talking to people when I first arrived and locals couldn't see how magnificent it was around here because they'd grown up with it. We took the kids to see Lisa's parents in Reading and I remember one of them saying, 'Look at all the red bricks, Dad.' I suppose that's another reason I keep painting Bath – I don't want to take it for granted. It's given me a lot as an artist over the years and my paintings are a show of my gratitude."

Affectionately nicknamed 'Pete the Street', he is famed for being out in all weather. Where the prospect of sheets of rain and blizzards would have the average Joe quivering in his boots (quite literally), Peter believes







## PETE'S TREATS

The artist reveals his three favourite spots to paint in Bath

### 1 BATHWICK FIELDS

"My favourite places have varied over the years but this particular view looking west over Bath has been one of my most admired since I first came to the city in 1986. It features heavily in my new exhibition and it is also the subject of my largest painting, the 9-foot wide *Sunset from Bathwick Fields*."

### 2 HEDGEMEAD PARK

"The park is steep and offers a great vantage point down the winding Walcot Street into town then south towards Combe Down and Claverton Down. From here, you can also look east from London Street through Cleveland Place and away towards the bustling London Road. I love it."

### 3 SOMERSET PLACE

"In third place, we have a tie. Somerset Place has recently been lovingly restored and offers undulating curves at the top of Bath, but on the other hand, there are lovely coffee shops, pubs, florists and restaurants at Widcombe Parade. It seems to sparkle, especially on a summer morning."

this is when landscapes and urban settings are at their most characterful.

"Trying to imagine places in a new way can be difficult but the seasons put a different spin on things. In the height of summer when the sun is higher, it's a lot more washed out and I find it hard to paint Bath then," admits Peter. "I prefer to paint in the autumn or winter, when the days draw in and artificial light takes over. That's when I get really excited."

Looking out of the van window, the sky is grey so it's tricky to gauge what Mother Nature has in store for us on this December morning. We eventually come to a car park overlooking Royal Victoria Park and the Royal Crescent, joking that even Bath's car parks come prepared with outstanding views. We unload the van of all its plain air essentials: a box easel, a metal toolbox filled with paints and brushes, an umbrella, a selection of MDF boards primed with acrylic gesso, and a hat to keep the chill off.

After 20 minutes of gentle ambling, Peter settles on a raised part of path on George Street overlooking the buzzing Milsom Street. He wastes no time in setting up, before mixing a blob of Payne's Gray oil paint with C Roberson & Co. glaze medium so that he can use it to begin drawing out the main shapes of the view onto his panel. Within five minutes, the skeleton of a picture is already taking shape, as we witness first-hand the lightning speed of Pete the Street in action.

"I've been studying these roads and buildings for years, so I know what colours to mix and what to focus my attention on. Usually, it's a small detail, like a window, to help me figure out the scale. It's about chucking it on really quickly then correcting mistakes afterwards," he advises. "I use tonnes of Raw Umber. If you took that away from me, I'd be completely lost." >

**ABOVE** *Laura Place*, oil on board, 20x25cm

**RIGHT** *Winter Morning, Cleveland Place*, oil on canvas, 64x51cm

**OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR LEFT** *St Stephen's, Late Afternoon*, oil on board, 41x20cm

**OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT** Inside Peter's travel easel paint box





It's now 11am and Bath is wide-awake. Throngs of pedestrians meander along both sides of the street while vehicles of every sort trundle through bumper-to-bumper traffic. Presenting an extraordinarily mixed bag of opportunities, this is exactly how Peter likes it.

"I don't want to be set back from the subject – I want to be in the thick of it. [The late 20th-century painter] Ruskin Spear is a huge inspiration with his eye for our everyday lives, his humour and the exquisite way he presents it with a graphic simplicity," adds Peter. "I thought of his approach while I was painting *Laura Place* in the spring last year. I actually stood in the middle of a traffic island for it. The light was pouring down the street through a veil of new birch leaves. It was fantastic."

Peter confesses that finding a place to pitch isn't always as painless as it has been today. As much as Bath has helped him over the years, it can be frustrating knowing nearly every nook of a city and he has recently started to frequent locations further afield to keep his mindset fresh.

He regularly takes his vigorous plein air style to the likes of Oxford, Cambridge, Cardiff and Dorset, while his amazing depictions of London landscapes saw him become the first artist-in-residence at the Savoy Hotel in 2006, where he stayed for a week in a suite worth £1,200.

Last year he released *My Indian Travels*, a book detailing his adventures along the baking pathways of Udaipur. "The colours in India are incredible," explains Peter, "and people would still come up to talk to me, even though I'd have no idea what they were saying."

However, there is another city hot on Bath's heels competing for Peter's affection. "I've never been one of those artists who gushes about the light, but the light in

**RIGHT** *Buskers' Morning Meeting, The Abbey*, oil on canvas, 64x51cm

**BELOW** *Full Moon, Early Evening, The Station*, oil on canvas, 64x51cm

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Peter chats to a passerby as he paints along The Paragon, Bath

## ARTIST'S BIO

### Name

Peter Brown

### Born

Reading, 1967

### Education

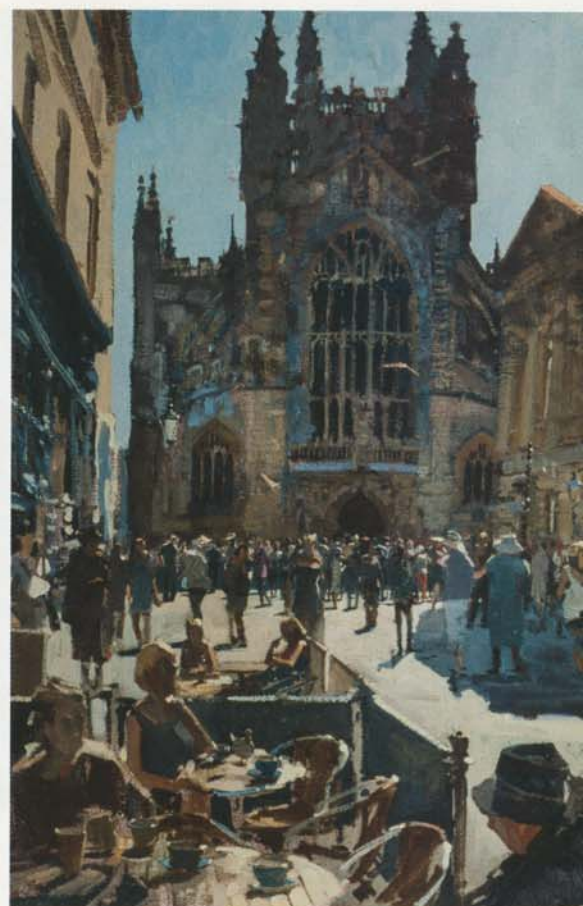
Manchester Polytechnic

### Next exhibition

*Keeping the Home Fire Burning*, 8 February to 27 March, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath

### More info


[www.peterbrownneac.com](http://www.peterbrownneac.com)



Barcelona is really strong. The family and I went there for three weeks last summer and it was great because I painted every day more or less while Lisa and the kids relaxed," he says. "Unfortunately, I haven't sold any of the paintings and it was an expensive trip, so it hasn't worked financially. When you have seven mouths to feed, this a problem."

It's unromantic perhaps, but another reason why Peter continues to produce paintings of Bath is because they sell. For his forthcoming exhibition *Keeping the Home Fires Burning*, he has produced 105 local landscapes. On occasion, the pressure prompted him to question his artistic motivations for remaining in the city. "I know I can paint a picture of the Royal Crescent every day and make a living but I don't want to do that. There have been times when I thought, 'Christ, I can't look at another beige street', but then someone comes up to you and starts marveling at your work and it reinvigorates you. Bath is beautiful yes, but it's also full of beautiful, friendly people too. That's probably the most important thing of all."

We stay with Peter until the early afternoon and by that time scores of people have approached him to chat. Best of all, he happily chats back. He explains how long he has been painting and why he's chosen this particular spot to paint, and it's clear his warm manner could thaw even the chilliest of climates.

Peter loves Bath and the feeling is mutual. His staggering landscapes bring out the best of what this picture perfect place has to offer and it brings out the best in him. Much like Dedham Vale is Constable Country, Bath is undoubtedly Pete the Street's city. 







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