

# The life of Bath

**Peter Brown** talks about the joys of working *en plein air* as he captures life on the streets of Bath, working in both charcoal and oils

**B**ath is a big part of my story. It's where I was christened 'Pete the street', a nickname my friend and dealer David Messum really hates as it pigeonholes me – 'You are a painter, Pete. Full-stop.' I quite like it though; it has the air of the everyday and of not being too 'arty'. It is a bit cheesy, and when I post a landscape on Instagram I often get the comment 'You'll have to call yourself 'Pete the field'.

I have told the story over and over but after three years at art school and then two more years of pursuing modernism I came to a dead end and, for a good year, completely gave up on painting. When Lisa (my wife) and I moved to Bath in the early 1990s I walked along the Paragon, a street in Bath, thinking 'I'd love to draw these streets'. This prompted me to get a sketchbook and charcoal from a local art shop and the rest is history. I worked solely in charcoal for four years, painting the streets of Bath and after ten years I self-published my first book



▲ *Green Street*, charcoal on paper, 20×16in (51×40.5cm)

*Brown's Bath*, which shows a selection of my paintings from those first ten years. My latest book details the next ten years of painting the city: *Bath Paintings* by Peter Brown. It's great to do the books – to get your paintings in one



▲ *From the Ustinov*, charcoal on paper, 16×18in (40.5×45.5cm)

## EQUIPMENT

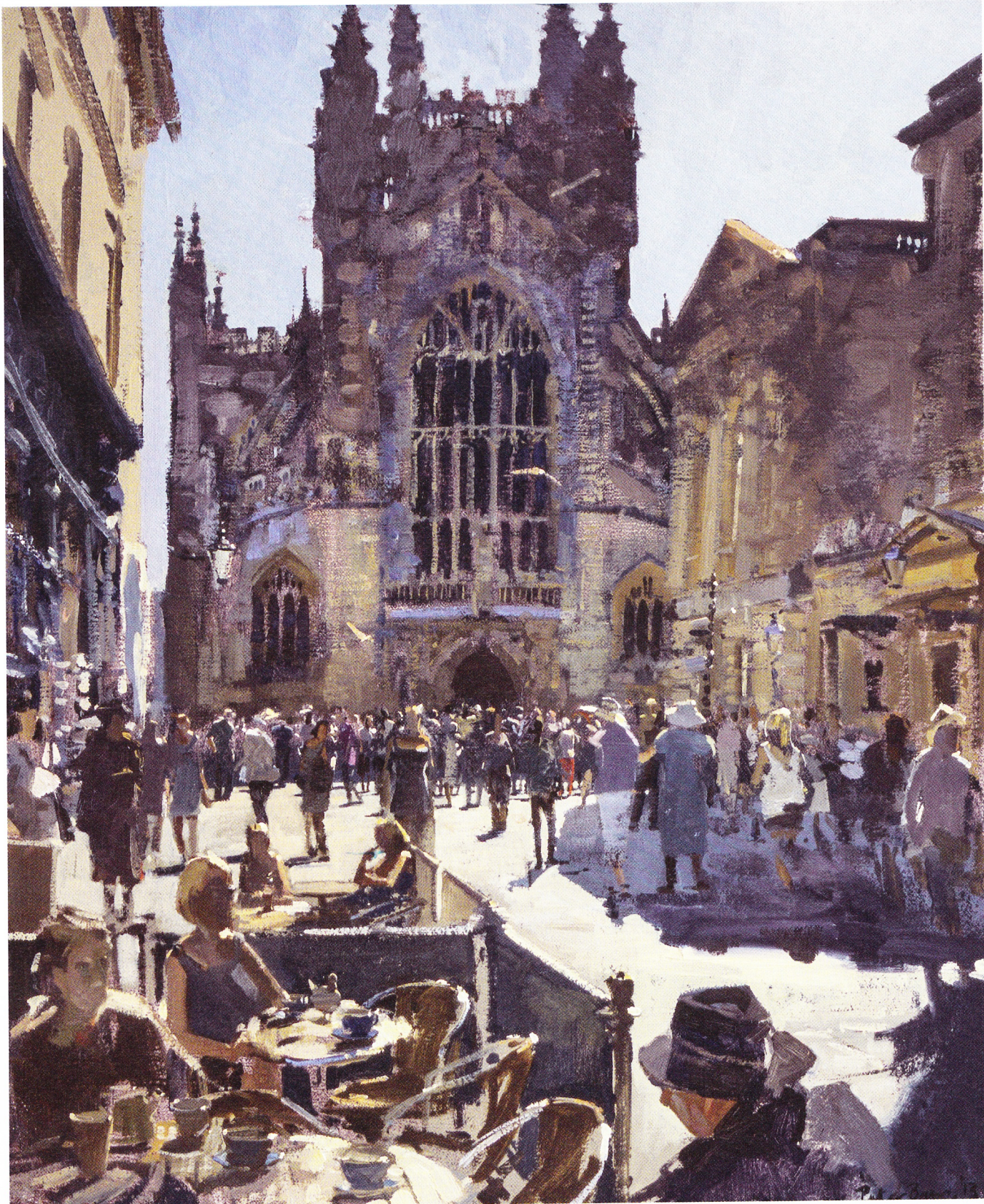
- Mabef full-size or half-box easel with a strap. I carry paints and medium in a tool box, although you should be able to fit it all in the box easel.
- Artists' oil colours in yellow ochre; raw umber; madder brown; transparent oxide (or burnt sienna); ultramarine blue (maybe a Prussian blue); Payne's grey or blue black, sap green (naughty); viridian; terre verte; umber green (I call this invisible green – it practically disappears); alizarin; cadmiums red, orange and yellow; lemon yellow; titanium white. I also have brilliant pink (Old Holland).
- Range of filbert-type hog-hair brushes – maybe a small long flat or two, and a nylon soft round for detail on board.
- Roberson's glaze medium (not matt).
- Turpentine – I now use Zest it.
- Good supply of rags.
- Palette knife and dipper.
- Jam jar for turps.
- Boards: MDF 2mm, 6×12in, 8×10in, 10×12in, 12×16in, 8×24in. I also may take a 20×25in canvas or two.
- Spare wing nuts for the easels – these always go missing.
- Sketchbooks: an A4 'Cachet' by Daler-Rowney and an A3 size. These are buff and have a smooth surface to draw on.
- 2H, HB and 2B pencils; putty rubber and sharpener, for diary notes and the odd sketch.

place, to select and to review your work over a ten-year period – but they are a by-product; it's all about the painting and really all about making the paintings rather than the finished work. I say this because when it comes to it, I am the worst judge of which paintings people do or don't like. All I can do is ignore this and just keep making and learning.

## Charcoal drawing

Working in charcoal is perfect for Bath. The stone is fairly uniform so local colour does not mess with the tone of light falling on the stone. I work quickly





and now only on hot dry days because charcoal tends to absorb any atmospheric moisture and can become almost greasy or waxy, which is hard to work with. I cover the page in charcoal with the side of a stick so it attracts the heat in the sun and also as a sort of mid-tone to work from.

I do some rough working out of where things are going to be, then I add darks and lights with charcoal, smudging and adjusting tones with the sides and palms of my hands and finger tips, with pieces of toilet paper and, of course, a hot sticky putty rubber. With the sun

behind you, which is mainly the way I seem to work in charcoal, as any *plein-air* painter will tell you, you get two or maybe three hours. Any longer and you are either making it up or undoing what you started. I don't fix the drawings as it makes the darks get a little lighter and the lights a little darker, closing the tone and losing crispness. I hang the drawings around the studio until I can get them photographed, then under glass. I remember giving my framer a pastel to frame and was horrified as she gave it four hard bangs on the workbench to remove any free pastel

▲ *Buskers, Morning Meeting, The Abbey*, oil on canvas, 25×20in (63.5×51cm)

likely to dirty the mount. I saw the headlight of a car fall off. Charcoal stays put rather better, I find.

### Oil painting

I was quite happy to try to get as good as I possibly could at charcoal drawing and did not feel the need to hit the oils. Eventually though I was seduced by its possibilities – you can paint with oil in sun, rain, snow and ice. I have learned over the years to try to avoid





▲ 10.30am to Midday, Gay Street, oil on canvas, 20×16in (51×40.4in)



verbalising colour. What I mean by this is trying not to say to myself 'grass: grass is green, where is my green?'. It's very hard not to do this. I have a new way of controlling it. I use what I call 'invisible green', which is very weak green umber. You see green on the palette but it seems to add very little green to the painting once applied. It's better sometimes than that naughty sap green I keep using. The trick is simply to see colour and replicate it without too much deliberation.

My colours are laid out on my Mabef easel palette but are mixed on another small palette on my arm. I use Roberson's Glaze Medium so the paint dries faster and I can paint over without it all going muddy. On the streets I work on 2mm MDF boards from 8×10in up to 12×16in. For anything larger I move to canvas – a medium-weave Belgium linen on 2¼in raised lip stretchers, which come in wonderful packages from Bird and Davies. I have worked bigger but 30×35in is really the largest I am comfortable with when working on site.

I give them all a turpsy mid-tone wash of what's left on the palette at the end of the session. If I am painting on canvas I usually take two of the same size – one goes behind to block any sun coming through the back of the canvas. I also take small boards in case I change my mind or see something juicy I can sketch. It can be a pain getting your kit on site or to have to return to the car to get something you forgot – particularly as the light is shifting.

### People, movement and cars

The whole point of painting *en plein air* is to be amongst the movement, the

◀ Snow, Bottom of Lansdown Road, January, oil on canvas, 20×25in (51×63.5cm)





noise, the smell, the people, the weather – so you have to embrace it and use a little patience. Be prepared to wait for a similar car to pass at the same spot or wait for that annoying delivery driver parked in the way to move off. People walking towards you generally are in the same pose every other step so you get a good go there, but walking across you – they are a nightmare.

Forget local colour – you don't have time. Sketch with a fluid loaded brush, mark where things are (arms, shoulders, hips' heads) and try to remember what your marks are referring to. Some figures work, most don't so get rid of them. Painting a mass of people is good, simply because you cannot do it

by painting 30 individuals. You have to paint the mass: what general shape and colour is it, are there accents, specks of light or colour? As I keep saying to myself: 'What does it look like, Pete?'. I've never really cracked any of this but it's what I aim for. I also try and make sure I don't try and answer anything I did not see. Hopefully I've answered enough in the rest of the figure for the viewer to fill in.

### The public

Frankly, I'd get really upset if I was ignored. People say funny things, interesting things and sometimes helpful things. Usually they say positive things, negative comments are rare. People seem genuinely surprised to

▲ *Morning Light on the Snow, Golf Course*, January 2010, oil on canvas, 12×36in (30.5×91.5cm)

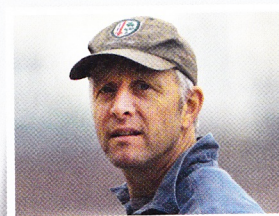
see paintings happen *in situ* and they like it. Having said that I can be a bit grumpy sometimes because I am trying to concentrate.

A couple of days ago my nose was four inches from the canvas as I tried to delicately brush a mast on a boat when 'That's really good!' suddenly boomed in my ear. I had no idea what happened to the mast, the boat or the canvas as I peeled myself from the ground, three yards away, trying to restart my heart. It was hard to rebuke him though – he was being nice, after all.

TA



▲ *6.30am, From Walcot Parade*, oil on board, 10×12in (25.5×30.5cm)



**Peter Brown**

is president of the New English Art Club, an honorary member of the Royal Society of British Artists, a member of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, the Pastel Society and the Bath Society of Artists. His next solo exhibition, 'East Anglia' is at Messums, 28 Cork Street, London W1 from May 8 to 31, 2019. Pete's latest book, *Bath Paintings*, was published on October 31. For more details see [www.petethestreet.com](http://www.petethestreet.com).

Be inspired by this video of Pete as he paints *en plein air* in oils: <https://painted.rs/2pBbixN>

Paint alongside Pete on a The Artist holiday to Istanbul from April 26 to May 6, 2019! For full details, see [www.painters-online.co.uk/courses-holidays/reader-holidays](http://www.painters-online.co.uk/courses-holidays/reader-holidays)