

art market

Owed to a Nightingale

■ Unusual historical subject with strong local connections attracts bidders in Essex



Alex Capon
reports

PICTURE specialists often say that the works that attract the most interest at auction are either high quality or particularly unusual in some way.

The picture section at **Boningtons' (17.5/20% buyer's premium)** first Country House sale at their new and larger saleroom on the edge of Epping Forest in Essex was their strongest selling category and a couple of works with rarely-seen subjects were duly among the most strongly contested lots.

The Decoy Pond at Grange Farm, Essex by **Robert Nightingale (1815-95)**, offered on July 15, appeared to have been a unique subject for the artist.

Nightingale, who was based in Maldon in Essex, was known chiefly for his horse portraits (see box right). However, he also won plenty of commissions from Essex farmers for paintings of their cattle and hounds as well as hunters.

A well-established artist in his day, he painted at least two Derby winners, but nowadays he is less recognised, partly because his works seldom appear on the market or in public collections.

He seems to have left behind no sketchbooks, notebooks or other memorabilia and biographical details are sketchy, to say the least. Nonetheless Nightingale produced a good body of work and it may be that many pictures are still nestled quietly in country estates.

The 2ft 10in x 4ft 6in (87cm x 1.37m) oil on canvas at Boningtons depicted an unusual historical subject for which visual



ROBERT NIGHTINGALE FACTFILE

- Painter of sporting pictures, landscapes, still-lives and portraits
- Lived in Maldon in Essex
- Orphaned at the age of eight, raised by aunts, and apprenticed to J Stannard, a painter and decorator, Maldon
- Exhibited at the RA from 1847-74
- Painted horse portraits for private patrons including Viscount Chaplin (1840-1923) with his ability to depict horses' soft coats being particularly admired. He painted Chaplin's 1867 Derby winner, Hermit
- Father of sporting specialist Basil Nightingale (1864-1940) who later became known for his popular humorous prints. Father and son are known to have worked together on certain paintings

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records are few and far between. Decoy ponds were shallow pools of water with curving and narrowing ditches dug around the banks. These ditches were then

covered with a series of hoops and netting to form pipes for catching the birds.

When a number of birds had entered the trap, the decoyman and his dogs would move to the mouth of the ditch, cutting off the birds' escape and making them fly further inside the netting, eventually leaving them trapped at the end of the pipe.

A practice that dates back to medieval

Above: *The Decoy Pond at Grange Farm, Essex* by Robert Nightingale – £7800 at Boningtons.

times, it was gradually abandoned in various areas at different times.

LONDON MARKETS

In Essex, decoy ponds were still in use in the early 1900s, supplying the main London markets with wildfowl and forming an important part of the local economy.

Grange Farm, depicted here, lies near the Essex coastline between Tillingham and Dengie. The figures shown are the squire of Dengie Manor (holding a cane), who would almost certainly have commissioned the work, and his trusty decoyman.

The decoy pond at Grange Farm covered just over an acre and had six pipes. Records show that in an average year it trapped some 2000 wildfowl, mostly wigeon but also wild ducks, as shown here.

The pond has long since disappeared and this work, which probably dates to c.1885, therefore contained a mix of local, historical, topographical and rural interest. But would it prove a commercial success?

The sporting market in general has been one of the tougher areas at the mid- and lower-level for some time. In the last significant test of the artist's market, a set of three pictures by Nightingale from the Dunrobin Estate, Sutherland, which he had painted for the Marquis of Stafford, each sold for below £4500 at Bonhams Edinburgh in November 2011.

The picture here was probably the same one that had failed to sell twice at

DEALER'S VIEW

Sporting art specialist **Stephen Pritchard**, who is based near Shrewsbury in Shropshire, told *ATG*: "Robert Nightingale's work does not come up often.

"His style is familiar as it's very close to the early works of his son Basil, who appears much more regularly and followed this approach until around 1900.

"There are those who believe that Robert was the better artist, although very little material has been seen for a long time and not too many people know about him. If you look through old sporting catalogues, his works don't feature prominently even though he clearly produced a large volume of work.

"He made his money mainly from private commissions, so stallions, racehorses and foxhounds feature prominently."

Pritchard felt that Boningtons' picture was a "strong painting" and the subject of a decoy pond made it both rare and attractive.

He felt it was the kind of picture that would appeal to the "old generation" of collectors who are probably not buying as much these days, in part due to the supply of good quality sporting works having dried up over the last 20 years.

"You sometimes see pictures of decoy ponds from the Victorian period," he added. "Back then there was more game to go at, of course."

■ stephenpritchard.co.uk

TOP PICTURES BY ROBERT NIGHTINGALE AT AUCTION

■ *Miss Florence Nickalls with her parents Mr and Mrs Tom Nickalls hunting*, 3ft 7in x 6ft (1.09m x 1.83cm) signed oil on canvas dated 1873 – £20,000 at Christie's London, May 1999*

■ *Slender and Blue Blazes, the property of Charles du Cana Esq, of Braxted Park, Essex*, 2ft 10in x 3ft 8in (86cm x 1.12m) signed oil on canvas dated 1853 – £18,000 at Bonhams London, June 2000

■ *Favourite hunters, property of W. P. Honeywood, Esq., Marks Hall, Essex*, 2ft x 2ft 11in (61 x 89cm) oil on canvas, signed on the verso – £12,500 at Christie's South Kensington, November 1990

■ *Study of a jockey mounted on a horse with trainer, Newmarket Racecourse in far ground*, 2ft 4in (71cm) x 2ft 11in (89cm) signed oil on canvas dated 1872 – £12,000 at Lacy Scott & Knight, Bury St Edmunds, December 1999

■ *Horses in a landscape*, 2ft 7in x 3ft 8in (79cm x 1.12m) signed oil on canvas dated 1876 – £10,500 at Bonhams London, June 2000

*Note: the same picture had previously sold for £18,000 at Lawrences of Crewkerne in April 1993.

**ATG understands that a painting of the Duke of Sutherland's hounds at Trentham also sold for a considerable sum in the 'pre-internet' days (possibly at Christie's), although this could not be confirmed.

Christie's – first when estimated at £5000-7000 in 1994 and then when pitched at £3000-5000 in 1996.

However, it had a good provenance, coming from a vendor in Tillingham who was the son of a former estate manager at Grange Farm. It came through Boningtons' consignment office in Chelmsford towards the end of last year.

This large painting was well conceived and executed, with good detail to the dogs, dead birds, decoy pipe and background landscape. It was in a clean and stable condition with only a minor area of paint loss just above the pond (it had been relined and cleaned by the vendor's family within the last 20 years).

Against a £5000-8000 estimate, it drew a number of bidders on the day and eventually sold for £7800 to a phone bidder, believed to be a dealer, underbid in the room.

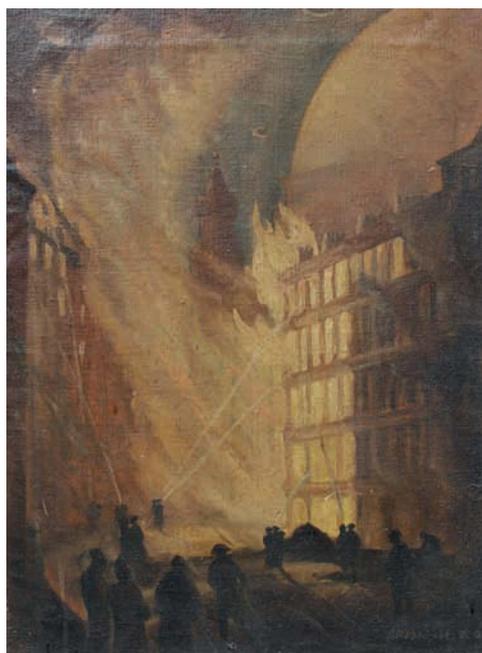
The sum appears to be highest auction price for the artist for over a decade.

Other highlights at Boningtons

Right: this 2ft 3in x 19¾in (68 x 50cm) painting of firemen fighting a fire in St Paul's Churchyard after a bombing during the Blitz was signed by **Brian Montagnol Gilks (1902-67)** and is believed to date from c.1940.

Little is known about the artist, although he is thought to have designed furniture and studied at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art before serving as an auxiliary fireman during the war. A photograph of him carrying a casualty can be found in the Imperial War Museum. His work was displayed at the firemen artists exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1941 – in aid of the London Fire Service Benevolent Fund – which later toured the US.

Consigned to Boningtons by a local vendor who apparently found it in the cellar after buying his house, it was not in the cleanest condition. The painting nevertheless attracted decent interest against a £500-800 estimate and it sold at £1900 to a private collector on the phone.



Right: in untouched condition, *Still life of flowers within a vase upon a table* by **John Maclauchlan Milne (1886-1957)** came to auction at Boningtons from a local deceased estate along with a few other Scottish pictures.

The 2ft 2in x 2ft 9in (65 x 85cm) signed oil on canvas was dated '31 and pitched at £3000-5000.

Prices for Milne's still lifes are more variable than his higher-selling landscapes and coastal scenes, but this attractively coloured composition drew admirers at Boningtons and the estimate was not deemed excessive.

It sold to the London trade at £13,500, among the highest sums for a still life by the artist sold at an auction outside London and Edinburgh.



Left: a portrait of Willem I (1533-84) Prince of Orange, believed to be by a 17th century Dutch hand, attracted interest both on the phone and internet at Boningtons. Catalogued as 'Circle of Michiel Jansz van Mierevelt (1566-1641)', it had a good likeness to known works of the leader of the Dutch Revolt who became known as 'William the Silent'.

The 2ft x 19in (61 x 48cm) unframed oil on canvas was estimated at £2000-4000. It attracted two internet bidders who carried it over estimate, including the European trade buyer who secured it at £7000 with underbidding on the phone.



Above: *Leo and Jo in Green Shorts*, 1976, by Charlotte Johnson Wahl, oil on canvas, 2ft x 1ft 6in (61 x 46cm), on loan.

Boris Johnson's mum in focus



Anna Brady
reports

YOU may never have heard of the artist Charlotte Johnson Wahl.

But you will certainly be familiar with at least one of her famous children – she is the mother of Mayor of London Boris Johnson, writer Rachel Johnson, environmentalist Leo Johnson and MP Jo Johnson.

"I love all the Johnsons, but I feel that Charlotte is perhaps the most talented of the clan," says Nell Butler, organiser of the first large retrospective of Johnson Wahl's paintings and drawings. Titled *Minding too Much*, this is set for September 7-12 at the Mall Galleries in London.

Butler, a TV producer who came up with the idea for *Come Dine with Me*, first saw one of Johnson Wahl's bold, uncompromising paintings when she was 19 in the house of a friend's parents. He later became friends with Rachel, Boris and their mother.

Johnson Wahl was never represented by a gallery, instead taking commissions from, and selling to, her friends, so she is little known as an artist outside her circle.

Her life has been tumultuous. Born in 1942, Johnson Wahl had little formal training but has painted throughout her life, through divorce, mental breakdown and then early onset Parkinson's disease. But she continues to paint and draw daily.

The exhibition includes some 120 works, the majority of which are on loan, although there will be some drawings available to buy.

They chart the various phases of Johnson Wahl's life. Starting with a painting from 1964, the show includes some of the 80 raw images painted while she was a patient in Maudsley Hospital in 1974, progressing through humorous depictions of 1970s dinner parties.

Then there are portrait commissions from the 1980s following her divorce from Stanley Johnson, and still-lives and scenes of New York from the 1990s, where she moved after remarrying.

■ charlottejohnsonwahl.com