

THE LITHOGRAPHS OF HARRY BECKER



The Binder Team. H1016mm W1270mm.

A SELECTION OF LITHOGRAPHS
BY HARRY BECKER FROM THE LOFTUS
FAMILY COLLECTION AND OTHER LOCAL SOURCES

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FOREWORD BY SIMON LOFTUS

THE PROCESS OF LITHOGRAPHY

Lithography was invented towards the end of the eighteenth century by the German actor and playwright Alois Senefelder, who discovered that it was possible to make prints by drawing with a greasy crayon onto a slab of flat limestone, which was then washed with a mixture of gum arabic and acid. The mixture coated and etched the clear parts of the image but was resisted by the greasy marks of the crayon. When the stone was wetted and an oil-based ink applied, the process was reversed, with the ink adhering to the marks of the original drawing, but not to the coated areas, allowing multiple images to be printed.

Unlike copperplate etching, which mimicked the sharp lines of pen and ink, lithography could reproduce the effects of drawing in soft pencil, crayon or charcoal. It allowed for great freedom of expression, but the stone surface only permitted short runs before the quality became degraded. It was for this reason that members of the Senefelder Club (established in 1909 'for the advancement of artistic lithography') agreed to limit their editions to a maximum of fifty proofs.

BECKER THE LITHOGRAPHER

Becker took up lithography after moving to London in 1894 - his first dated proof in this medium is from the following year. Amongst his earliest lithographs were elegant portrait studies which he advertised at 15 guineas for three proofs, but lithography soon became an important means of expressing his lifelong passion for images of rural life. His 1905 exhibition at the Baillie Gallery was entirely devoted to lithographs on this theme ('strictly limited to 35 proofs') and was a great success, with several editions completely sold out. Becker made £600 - equivalent to about £70,000 at the present day. Subsequent shows were held at his studios and various London galleries (gaining excellent reviews in the press) and Becker participated in group exhibitions at the Royal Academy and with the Senefelder Club, of which he became a Member soon after its foundation. But he also showed his lithographs further afield - at Milan and Paris - and sold copies to many of Europe's national galleries and museums.

Becker was becoming renowned as a lithographer, thanks to his distinctive subject matter and his combination of a cursory, swiftly drawn line with effective blockings of light and dark masses to build up a tonal rather than linear composition. This development culminated in the series of prints of Dutch potato pickers that Becker executed in 1908-09, where forms dissolve in light, there is little concern for texture or detail, space is suggested but volumes remain insubstantial. The light of Holland, so similar to that of Suffolk, suffuses these wonderful lithographs, which were accompanied in several exhibitions by paintings on the same theme.

Visits to both Holland and Suffolk had long formed the foundation of Becker's art, so it was not unexpected that he moved permanently to Suffolk in 1912 – but the result was near oblivion, as far as the London critics were concerned. He continued to produce lithographs of rural life, but mostly on a smaller scale and with less frequency. Becker showed a few of these at the Venice International Exhibition in 1913 and during the First World War exhibited intermittently with the RBA (Royal Society of British Artists) and the Royal Scottish Academy, but he was rapidly becoming forgotten – except by Frank Pick, the genius in charge of the London Underground.

In 1913 this extraordinary man had appointed Edward Johnston to design a new typeface for the Underground and at the same time commissioned Becker to make a poster, advertising the tube as 'The Way of Escape to the Countryside' - an image of a Suffolk farm labourer with a scythe, walking in a country lane. There was a long lull without further contact during the Great War, perhaps because of Becker's German ancestry, but in 1920 Pick commissioned another poster, the largest lithograph that Becker ever executed. It was intended to express the same theme as the earlier work – the Underground as the route to the countryside - but this time without any printed words. The message was in the image - sheep resting on a bank between fields - for which Becker was paid £60. Three feet tall and over four feet wide, the poster is said to have caused such a sensation that crowds blocked the platforms and it had to be taken down after only a few days.

In 1923 Becker made another poster, of similar size but even more powerful. Various known as 'Harvest' or 'The Binder Team', it showed a team of Suffolk Punches pulling a reaper/binder at the edge of a field of wheat or barley, with a church tower seen in the distance through a line of scrubby trees. The finest of all Becker's works in this medium, it has a wonderful contained energy and evocative sense of place.

The myth was that the heavy, half-ton stones for these lithographs were dragged out into the fields, so that Becker could work directly from the scene in front of him – but for the Binder Team, in particular, magnificent full-size drawings survive, carefully squared-up for transfer to the stone. These works were carefully planned, often the product of a long series of sketches and paintings on related themes, allowing the composition to evolve, despite the apparent immediacy of the final execution.

Becker tried to persuade Pick to agree to one more commission – for a poster to accompany The Binder Team, and of the same dimensions. It was a scene of tree felling, based on a composition that he had already worked on in several drawings and at least one etching. A full-size sketch survives, but nothing came of it.

This marked the end of Becker's work as a lithographer. He found it difficult to afford supplies of lithographic stone and the high-quality paper needed to print the results – and in any case there was little market for such work in the depths of Suffolk. Unsold copies of earlier lithographs were stacked in chests at his cottage in Wenhaston, and then at the farmhouse at Hinton where he spent his final years. Sometimes he used the reverse side for drawings or watercolours, or allowed his daughter Janet to do likewise.

The rest of his life in Suffolk, until his death in 1928, was devoted to drawing and painting, finding a fluency and freedom of expression in paint, unconstrained by convention, that had eluded him when he was young. But there were no more lithographs or etchings, and no renewal of critical acclaim. Becker was forgotten.

Now, long after his death, he is recognised as an extraordinary and singular artist of rural life, recording the rhythms of an English agriculture on the brink of enormous change – as mechanisation replaced the back-breaking labour of men and horses. His best work rivalled that of his near-contemporaries, the French Impressionists, but went almost unseen until the late twentieth century.

Amongst that work Becker's lithographs have special value – as indeed they did, very briefly, in his lifetime. In early shows in London his proofs sold for prices close to those realised for lithographs by Renoir and Monet. Now, in retrospect, it is possible to recognise their exceptional quality, unlike anything else produced at the time – rapid in execution, full of light, linear but atmospheric, utterly true to their subject matter.

It is almost as if the medium of lithography was made for this purpose.

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*Portrait of a woman in a Hat**

H405mm W280mm

£725

* Note : this portrait is signed and dated 1904 on the lithographic plate. It is possibly a portrait lithograph of Becker's wife Georgina.



Portrait of a Woman

H510mm W360mm

£850



Hedgecutters

H390mm W560mm

£795



Plough Team in Landscape I

H430mm W600mm

Signed on plate

£850



Plough Team in Landscape II

H430mm W600mm

Signed in pencil and on plate

£950



The Binder Team

H1016mm W1270mm

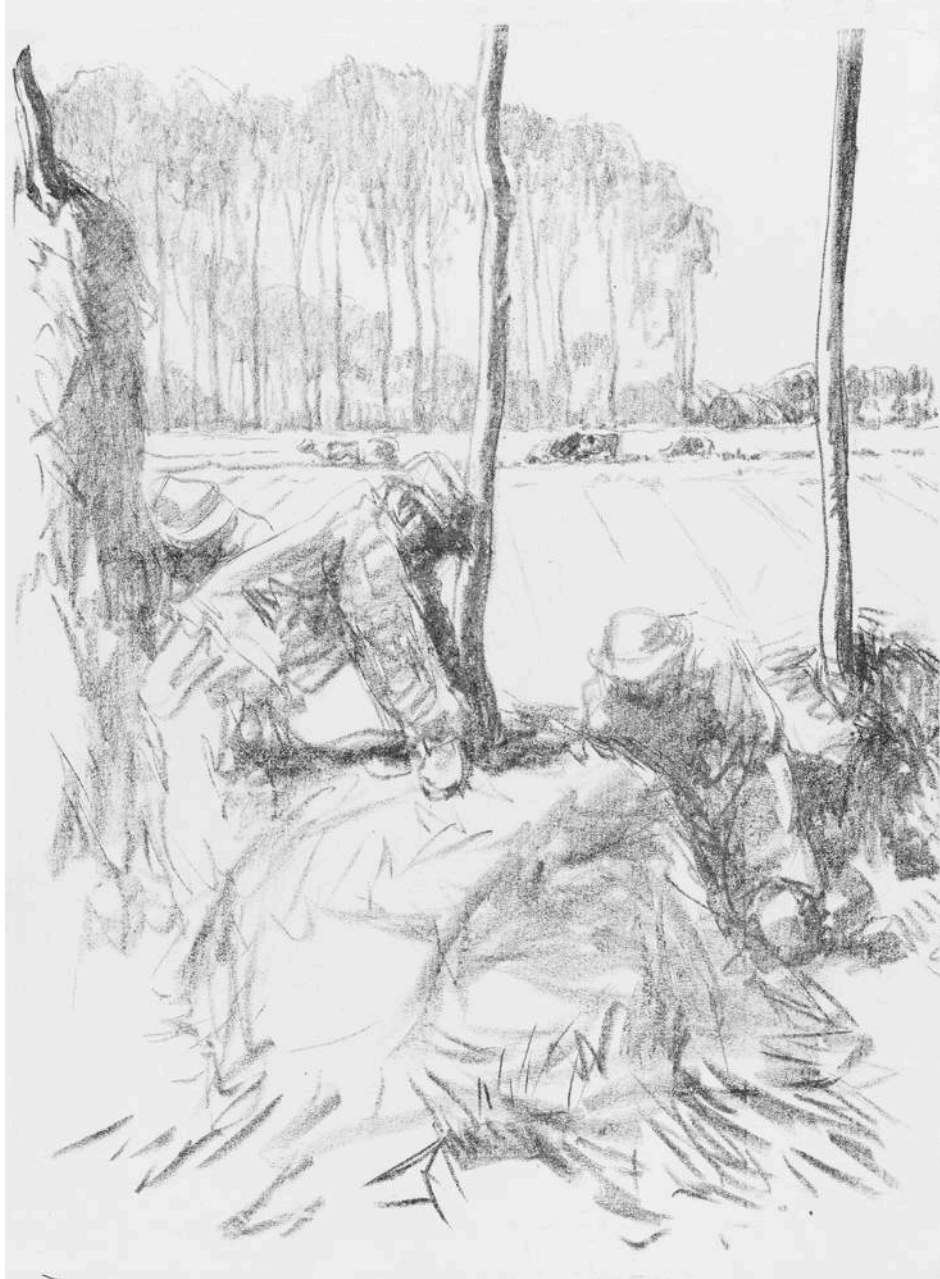
£9,500



Suffolk Sheep on a Lane

H1016mm W1524mm

£10,500 [Signed in graphite]



Three Men Building a Rick

H615mm W450mm

£950



Two Men Building a Rick

H385mm W280mm

£485



Sheep and Hayricks

H398mm W560mm

£850



Woman in Field (Holland)

H210mm W250mm

£450



Man with Basket

H390mm W560mm

£795



Two Women and Farmhouse

H390mm x W560mm

£795



Man and Woman Gathering Potatoes

H390mm W560mm

£795



Four Women with Baskets

H390mm W560mm

£795



Woman in Clogs with Basket

H380mm W510mm

£795



Two Women with Baskets and Man with Spade

H390mm W560mm

£795



Man with Basket

H390mm W560mm

£795



Two Men in the Field

H390mm W560mm

£795



Man in front of Potato Clamp

H390mm W560mm

£795



Men Digging Potatoes

H390mm W560mm

£795



Three Women in Clogs

H390mm W560mm

£795



Two Women among Trees

H390mm W560mm

£795



Three Women with Baskets

H390mm W560mm

£795



Men Digging Potatoes

H390mm W560mm

£795



*Man on his Knees** [*Illustrated impression with signature has sold.]

H390mm W560mm

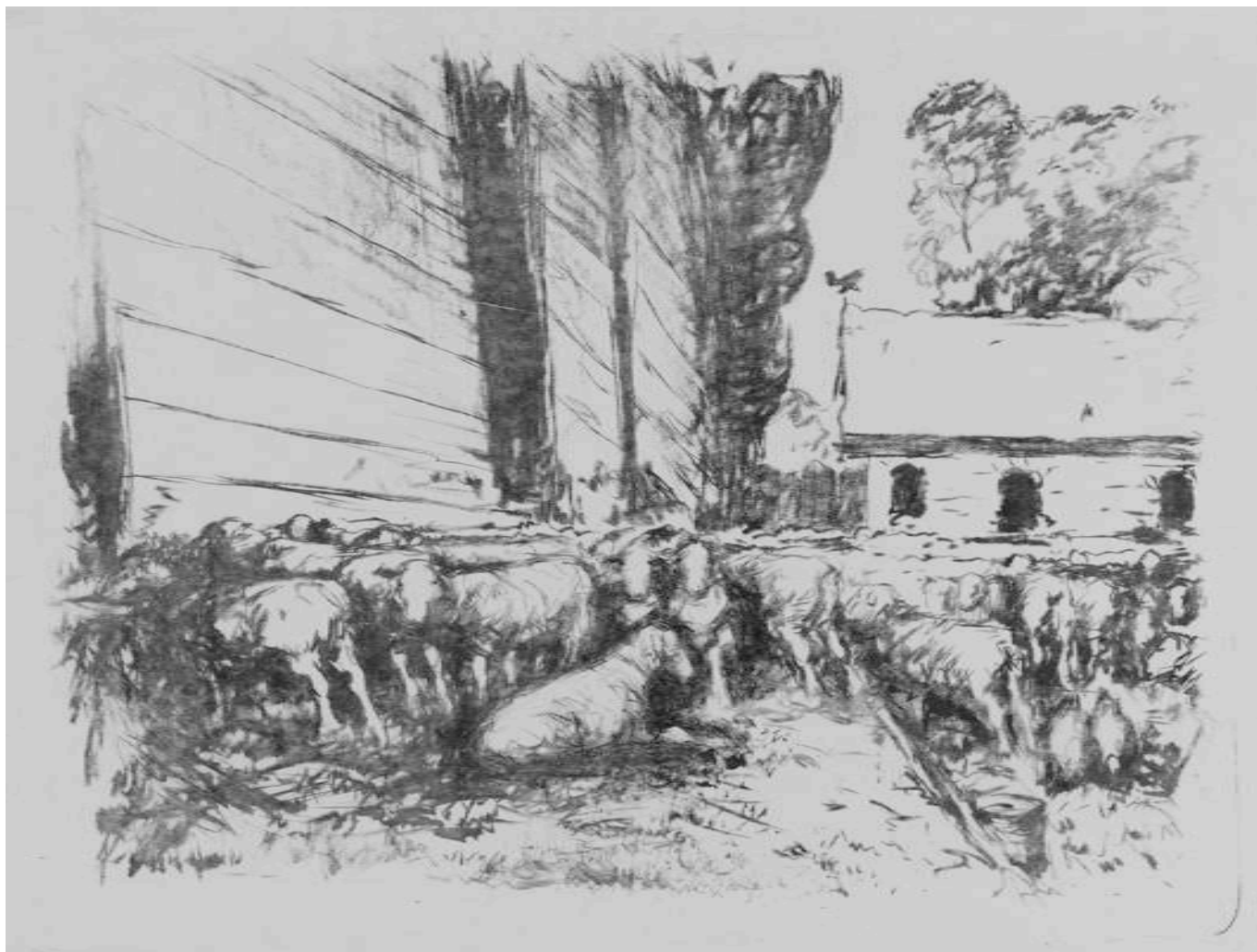
£750



Man on his Knees with Basket and Spade

H390mm W560mm

£850 [Signed in pencil]



Sheep Beside Barns I

H490mm W700mm

£850



Sheep Beside Barns II

H290mm W400mm

£580

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