

**Dr Howard Oliver is former lecturer in geography at University of Oxford.**

Clouds and Constable

Look out and raise your eyes: You may see a sky of even white, grey or blue, but more often than not a mixture of clouds – fogs of water drops floating in the air. Lots of different shapes and sizes, some high, some low. Look carefully and you may see different levels of cloud moving across the sky at different speeds.

In the year 1802 a Quaker chemist called Luke Howard gave a talk at a London scientific society where he described and gave names to the clouds. Using Latin words he named the even sheets of clouds *stratus*, heaped clouds *cumulus* and the thin curl clouds *cirrus*. These names stuck, and with the addition of *alto* (high) and *nimbo* (rain) they are still used today, alone or in combination to describe almost all common cloud formations.

*Stratus*, when found at ground level, is called fog. If it is higher up and thick and dark it becomes rain cloud. The simplest fair weather small clumps of *cumulus* and layers of *stratus* are around half a mile up, but *cirrus* can be over 5 miles above the ground (well beyond normal aircraft flight paths). In between are the common *altostratus* and *altocumulus* clouds two or three miles up. The violent storm cloud *cumulonimbus* can spread through the whole height range.

The most common type of rain happens when warm damp air meets and rises over colder air. This produces thickening *cirrostratus* then *altostratus* then *stratus* and finally rain from *nimbostratus*. There are often heavy rain showers again after the warm air moves away.

Luke Howard wrote his ideas in a scientific paper which was then soon used in a text book, a copy of which was owned by John Constable. He became very interested in painting all types of clouds in all weather conditions, especially when he lived in London by Hampstead Heath. Many of his paintings are just of skies and they often carry details of the weather he observed at the time.

Constable became famous for the inclusion of wonderful exciting skies in his landscapes. In 1820 he visited Salisbury and painted several sketches of the cathedral from its grounds which included his friends the Bishop and his wife. He made several paintings over the next couple of years with different weather conditions. The first version had rather dark and threatening clouds so the bishop asked him to produce another with a “more serene” sky!

A second, more famous, painting is “Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows” which has a more Constable-like scene of a cart in the water in the foreground. He made several sketches, including a previously unknown one recently bought for a few thousands, but later authenticated as an original Constable and sold for over three million pounds! The main painting, exhibited in 1831, shows the cathedral in the sun with a marvellous sky clearing after a storm. Constable added a rainbow above the cathedral to the final version as a symbol of hope. There were none in any of the sketches and although he thought it artistically necessary there could not in reality be such a rainbow in that position.

