



# CHERRYBURN TIMES

*The Newsletter of The Bewick Society*

## *The Many Faces of Bewick*

June Holmes, the archivist of the Natural History Society of Northumbria, has prepared for publication an extended version of her catalogue of the exhibition of Bewick portraits held in 2003 to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Thomas Bewick's birth.



June Holmes with photographic enlargement of the engraving of one of Ramsay's portraits of Bewick, at the front door of the temporary office.

It was projected for publication in May of last year, but it will now be published on 26 March, 2007, by the Natural History Society. There have been many delays, mostly caused by the enormous upheavals at the Hancock Museum, where the Natural History Society has its offices and its library, and where for months everything was in process of packing up for storage during the major refurbishment of the building, which will take at least two years.

There will also be a special event at Cherryburn on 29th March immediately following the publication, to see there the Bewick portraits on loan from the Natural History Society, which owns among others the main Ramsay oil portrait. Mrs Holmes will give an introductory talk.

The fully illustrated catalogue raisonné is a major piece of research, which will publish together for the first time all the known portraits of Bewick in all media. It will include items not included in the exhibition, partly because some were not available for loan, or available only in a photo-

graphic copy. Also, new portraits have been discovered since then, one already shown in Cherryburn Times in 2005. We print below another copy belonging to the Literary & Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Owing to the upheaval mentioned (which will of course lead to a much improved Hancock Museum when it re-opens in January, 2009) the date of publication has been postponed several times. Members of the Natural History Society will receive a copy *gratis* in their next *Transactions* as part of their regular posting. It will not be in hard covers. Members of the Bewick Society not members of the Natural History Society will be able to purchase a copy at the event at Cherryburn on 29th March, and otherwise should apply to the NHS as given below. The price of copies will be £7.50 (postage & packing £1.50 for UK, £5.50 for USA).

The Natural History Society will be re-locating temporarily to Claremont Terrace in Newcastle, a few hundred yards from the Museum, but they will keep the same address and postcode at the Hancock Museum, NE2 4PT. Although the Museum is closed, the Bewick Collection of pencil and watercolour drawings will still be available for consultation - contact June Holmes at the temporary office, telephone 0191 232 6386.



Photo by Ian McKie, courtesy of the Literary & Philosophical Society

# Two Reviews of the new biography *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick* by Jenny Uglow (Faber, 2006)

by Charles Bird

Jenny Uglow hails from Cumbria but her Bewick enthusiasm dates from relatively recently and was inspired by a card showing a Bewick woodcut on her mantlepiece. She noticed how much the image drew the attention of people in the room and especially that of children. With her new book (honestly priced at £20 as opposed to the annoying £19.99) she becomes the first major female contributor to Bewick studies since Julia Boyd in 1886.

The author is an expert biographer who has written the lives of Hogarth, Eliott, Gaskell and Fielding. She has also in *The Lunar Men* evoked the society of the leading scientists, craftsmen and thinkers in a provincial town. She applies this experience in a skilful way to Thomas Bewick. Using Bewick's own *Memoir* as a basic skeleton, she has fleshed this out from a wide range of available sources. In particular her quotations from the correspondence of Bewick (in Iain Bain's own collection as well as others) has introduced an element into the account fresh even for the jaded Bewickian. She has also had access to Nigel Tattersfield's soon-to-be-published three volume magnum opus on *The Works of Thomas Bewick and his Apprentices*; and David Gardner-Medwin has been her Cicerone on the banks of the Tyne.

Amongst the letters which breathe life into the author's account of Bewick's life is the one (at page 102) from Bewick's mother to him whilst he was working in London in 1777:

*If fancy if you had Dy'ed, I was to be cept in the secret ... you may be well assured that nothing givs me more Pleasure then to hear of your well dooing, and, as your acquentance gets those news, I think it would be as proper that a Father and Mother had the same, who spends many an Hower in talking about you, I think I never seed your Father so discomposd at any one thing, as he was at your long Silence.*

The parental concern and affection are reciprocated by Bewick himself in 1791 in a letter from Wycliffe, where he was studying the Tunstall collection of ornithological books and specimens, to his wife Bell:

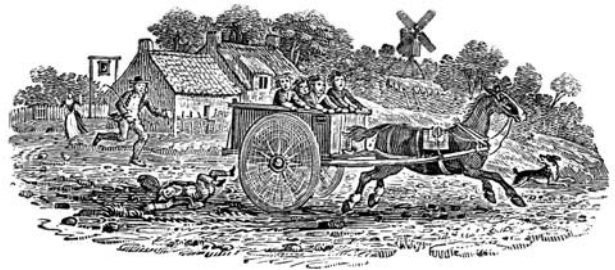
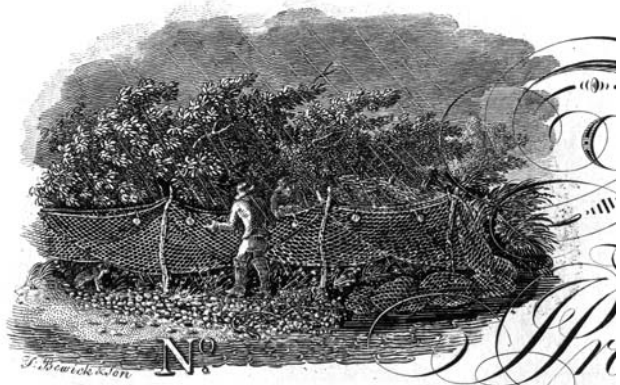
*tell Jane & Robert that if they behave well I will let them see a vast of little pictures of Birds when I come home - I hope my little Bell will be able to say more than dadda when I see her again.*

Other features brought out by Jenny Uglow are the important position which Jane took in running the Bewick business towards the end of Thomas's life; and the amount of time which the family spent in holidays by the seaside at Tynemouth, and in places such as Buxton.

There is no stunning reappraisal in the author's treatment of Bewick and his world. But this is not necessarily a criticism: perhaps there can be no true revision. The book rather concentrates on setting Bewick in his context and describing all his friends and associates in and around Newcastle. There has been a considerable expansion on what has gone before. Moreover, Jenny Uglow has clearly travelled to most of the scenes she describes and writes with a real sense of place.

The new (non-Bewickian) use of woodcut illustrations in the middle of a chapter works well and they are appropriately

chosen. The reproduction of the Bewick bank note on page 274 is really too indistinct to be of much use (a selective view of the fishing net vignette might have been better). The description of the story told by a woodcut is occasionally inaccurate. For instance, the man rushing out from the tavern in the 'Runaway Cart' is surely the carter, not the innkeeper (first set of colour plates). The woodcut of the 'Bear Troupe' (page 183) is printed on an incline. The acknowledgement of sources sometimes lapses. On page 393 there is mention of how the text to 'Waiting for Death' anticipates Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, but no reference is made to the article about the possible connection in the *Cherryburn Times* (Spring, 2004).



But these are minor niggles. It is a splendid book to have and to hold (a kind of dumpy Octavo with 458 pages), full of illustrations and with many new facts and sources even for a Bewick enthusiast. It would make an ideal present in a Bewickian Christmas stocking. Jenny Uglow's delight in Bewick and his world leaps off the page but avoids being either sentimental or eulogistic. In short we can perhaps take a line from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and say:

'with Uglow on my knee, I was then happy.'



by D W S Gray:

It is more than 50 years since Montague Weekley published his biography of Bewick for the bicentenary of his birth. When in 2003 Northumbria University marked the 250th anniversary by conferring the honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Laws upon Iain Bain for his work on Thomas Bewick there were voices within the University who had never heard of Thomas Bewick. Jenny Uglow's new biography *Nature's Engraver A Life of Thomas Bewick* (Faber) was greeted by newspaper reviews also assuming that their readers hadn't heard of him. The illustrations chosen by the picture editors were rather odd too (maybe influenced by copyright problems), this being more noticeable since the new book is rather better illustrated than any previous biography of Bewick, with 100 vignettes, 50 figures and 33 colour illustrations, including some of Bewick's watercolour artwork. The vignettes and figures are well keyed to the text, and the colour illustrations contain some surprises for readers who thought they knew it all already.

Of course, we might always say, 'What!?! Another biography?!' What need any, since Bewick wrote his own autobiography *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick written by himself* and published by his daughter, Jane, in 1862? Jenny Uglow tells the story of the writing and the publication of the *Memoir*, not hiding the contribution made by Jane, who had edited the text with a scrupulous (if not ferocious) attention to her filial loyalty and very Victorian ideas of propriety. In fact, it was not until Iain Bain republished the *Memoir* in 1975, fully restored to the state that Thomas Bewick left it, that we could see how much Jane had changed it. Uglow remarks that Jane 'was determined to immortalise her father as the lone reviver of wood engraving.' Her treatment of this episode shows just why an autobiography is not enough. We have had the real autobiography for more than thirty years, and it has been republished several times, including an OUP paperback. But we still need an account such as Uglow's to help us to see the life and the work clearly. For this reader it was enlightening to learn how Bewick's own view of what he was writing developed from his early conception that it was just written for his family, to the realisation that it would be published and therefore needed a more 'philosophical' treatment.

Uglow's biography has been able to take advantage of all the recent Bewick scholarship, which has retrieved so much of the Bewick canon and set it properly in its context. The author's debts to Iain Bain, Nigel Tattersfield and David Gardner-Medwin are handsomely acknowledged in the very helpful appendices – indeed, the proper scholarly apparatus. It is notable that so much friendly cooperation was forthcoming. But Uglow has produced a masterly summary, written in a fluent, accessible, unadorned, but yet penetrating style that would have delighted Bewick himself. Her title emphasises that Bewick was more concerned with nature than he was with art. When Royal Academician E.H. Baily came to do his bust in 1825, Bewick refused to be done in a toga, which was the artistic convention of the time. (Poor old George Stephenson did not escape this 'honour' 40 years later!)

If there is something that I missed in this account, it is nothing to do with the man himself, who is ever-present as a

robust, hearty, slightly intimidating figure, who may, for example, have rather over-awed his own son, Robert. In order to understand Bewick's importance I would have liked just a bit more about the general state of book illustration in the period 1790-1820 – that situation where the very phrase 'book illustration' was invented by a printer/publisher in London around 1796, so that title pages stopped saying 'embellished by' or 'ornamented by' engravings or cuts, and came simply to say 'illustrated by...' This did not happen overnight, and Bewick's own title pages did not use the phrase. But he knew what he was doing and exactly how it would change the book trade, and Uglow does indeed show this. She quotes Bewick's letter to Samuel More at the Society of Arts of 1788, where he shows his full awareness of the commercial value of his innovative technique:

*Considerable progress is now being made in the Work, in a Style, I think, not inferior to the choicest piece of typography. Its novelty (and I hope I may add without vanity its elegance and utility) cannot fail attracting the notice of the Curious – if I am not mistaken, it is, the first modern attempt in letter press Printing, to unite with the description a decent Figure of the Animal described, a plan which while it lessens the price, will enable the publishers to introduce more abundant materials.*

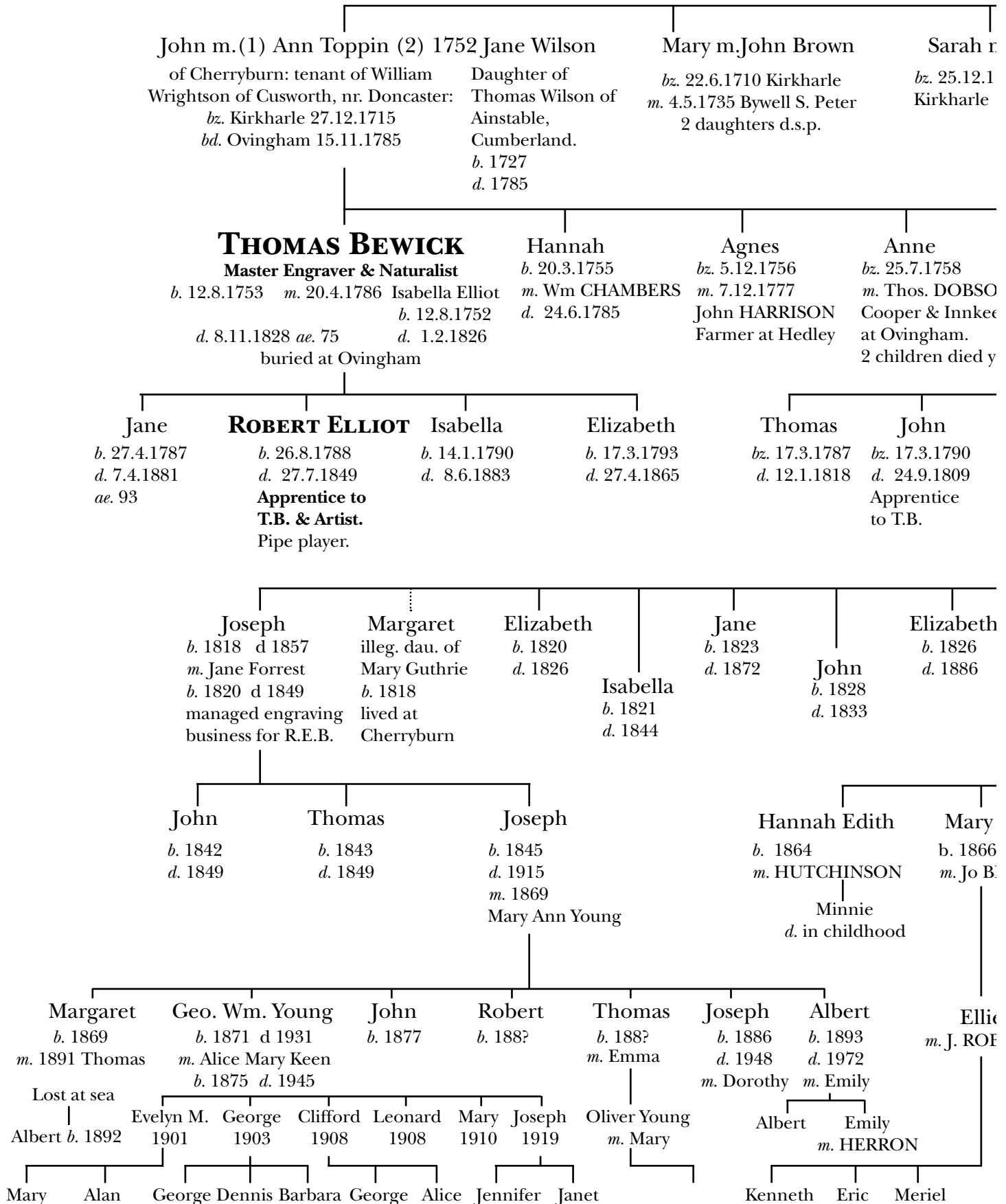


Jane Bewick should not have cut out the apprentices from her father's *Memoir*, since it was they who carried the Bewick techniques into the expanding field of book illustration in the nineteenth century – they, in fact, who immortalised her father as the founder of the popular engraving which came to dominate not only book publishing, but newspaper publishing too, and to spread to America, France, and other countries in Europe. It might not be too much to claim that these techniques created that peculiar cultural hybrid which challenged the old print culture of two clearly opposed values: the luxury, sophisticated, expensive end of the high-quality print market, and the popular, ephemeral, low-quality end of broadsides and chapbooks. The new print culture appealed to people of the new middle classes, people with a certain amount of leisure and disposable income, and above all, people who believed, like Bewick, in the value of education. This was an actual cultural revolution. Bewick intended his illustrated books to educate young people, and was not always pleased to find himself having to deal with book collector types, whom he stigmatised as 'bibliomanists'.

Bewick certainly had a rather moralising, sententious streak in his character, and this shows in his writing. But his pictures are free of attitude, and the dominant effect on readers has always been one of unalloyed delight. It was perhaps especially in his vignettes, which are gratuitous in relation to his texts, that this appeal engaged his readers with unexpected sights. Jenny Uglow is equally free of attitude in her writing and her new *Life* is replete with telling details that marry instruction with pleasure. This biography provides abundant delights for those who already know something about Bewick, and will convert many a twenty-first century reader into a Bewick fan.

*The Bewick Family Tree*  
*from a drawing by Nora Hancock*  
*on view at Cherryburn*

**Thomas Bewick**  
*bz.* 1685 - 4 Oct  
 Farmer: Tenant at Cherryburn,  
 Painshawfield, Birches Nook and  
 Mickley Colliery. Buried at Bywell, 17

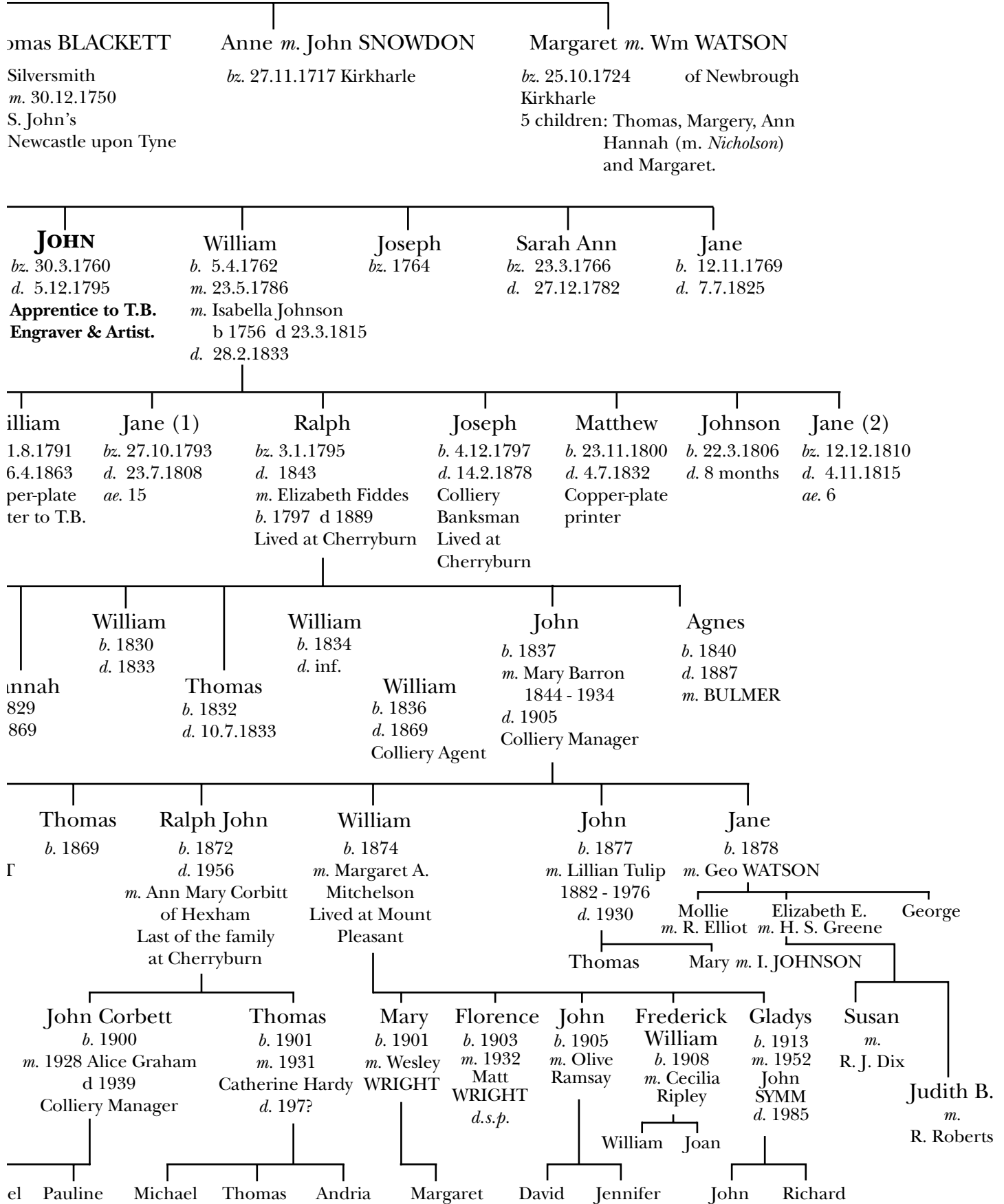


*v.* Agnes Arthur

*b.c.*1683

Daughter of the Laird  
of Kirkheaton.

*d.c.* 1756. Buried at Ovingham



# Bewick's White Owl

by Bernard Robinson

This is a watercolour and ink study on paper (10.5 x 9 cm) by Thomas Bewick of a white, or barn, or yellow owl (the bird now known as *Tyto alba*). Linnaeus treated all owls as a single family, hence Bewick's designation of this owl as *Strix flammea*. Today the barn owl, as it is most often called, is assigned to a different family from the others. The first edition of the *Land Birds* calls it The White Owl, and sub-titles it Barn Owl, Church Owl, Gillihowlett, or Screech Owl. The 1826 edition (the last in Bewick's lifetime) calls it The Yellow Owl, with the sub-title Barn Owl, White Owl, Gillihowlet, Church, or Screech Owl. The 1847 edition follows this, but omits the term White Owl altogether.



The first annotation (in TB's hand?) says that this bird was shot by Mr Hawks [or Hawke] on 17th March 1792. That day was a Saturday, but I have not been able to find out anything about Mr Hawks/Hawke. As shown in Bewick's *Memoir* (p. 122), he preferred to represent recently shot rather than stuffed specimens; the results (as here) tend to be superior.

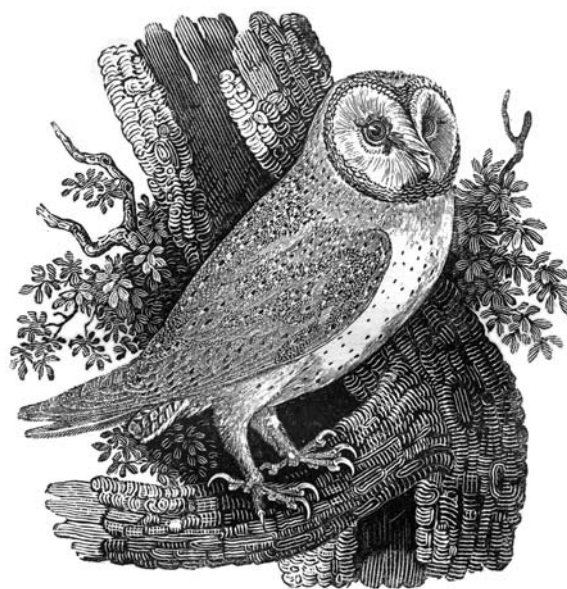
The second annotation reads 'The gift of Isabella Bewick to Joseph Crawhall, 1883.' Isabella was the second of TB's daughters; she was born in 1790 and died in 1883 at the age of 93. This Crawhall was Joseph Crawhall II (1821-1896). His father, Joseph Crawhall I (1793-1853), was an industrialist who ran a ropery business, and this, his eldest son, was born at West House, Newcastle. As well as working in the family business, he was a gifted illustrator and maker of wood cuts, as was his son after him, Joseph Crawhall III (1861-1913). He was friendly with the Bewick family and acted (jointly with J.W.Barnes) as executor to Isabella Bewick.

The drawing was exhibited at the Bewick Exhibition in London in 1880, and was praised in warm terms by F.G.Stephens (not F.S. Stephens, as given in Glendinning) for its delicacy, precision and truth to nature.

*This is one of the best of the drawings, for which distinction the subject offered the great advantages in possessing a delicacy of colour which, in some respects, is almost Japanese. The example is remarkable for the felicitous manner in which the softness and downy quality of the plumage are [sic] represented and the fineness of the russet, brown, grey, white, and black feathers*

*given. The colours are mainly in spots of brown, russet, and grey on white or black, or interchangeable tints of a very refined kind. Like the majority of the northern feathered population of this island, the white owl is soberly but, as to colour, very harmoniously clad. In thus depicting the bird Bewick did his best to reproduce the enamel-like purity of the tints, the perfect softness of the textures, and the serious variety of the expression of its features. As to the last, admirers of fine drawings may turn heedfully to the radially-arranged feathers which enclose the eyes. They deserve examination of the most careful kind, and with the aid of a lens. The extremities of the shield-like groups of feathers unite to form a line which is the outer margin of the disc, and, doubling on itself, this line reminds one of a pair of spectacles. The extremities cross each other over the beak, and form a sort of penthouse over the breathing holes or nostrils of the bird. These apertures are very large, and thus serve the needs of one who relies for his supper on his sense of smell; they enable him to take prey in twilight. The outlining of these radiating feathers, whether they surround the nearer eye, which is almost flat before us, or whether they enclose its fellow-organ, and are on a plane which vanishes sharply from the middle line of the owl's countenance, is one of the most fortunate illustrations of Bewick's skill, the delicacy and precision of his touch. (Stephens, p.19).*

Robert Robinson, the Newcastle bookseller who was on familiar terms with the Bewick daughters, records that Miss Jane Bewick pronounces the plumage of this bird to be 'the perfection of art' (Robinson, p.xxii). The drawing ended up, framed, in 1901 in the Pease collection (the bequest of J.W.Pease) at the Newcastle City Library. (Accession number 283; NCL 2003.12. This is not accessible for the next two years, owing to the building programme of the Library.) It is not represented in Iain Bain's two-volume *Watercolours and Drawings of Thomas Bewick*, though two other watercolours from the British Museum, the Short-Eared Owl and the Tawny Owl, are given.



The bottom left of the Pease Collection drawing reproduced here shows a castle, faintly drawn but not coloured; and to the bottom right, farm buildings. The lines around the drawing are similar to the marks around all drawings that have been transferred to woodblocks – essentially, fold marks which stabilised the positioning of the

paper during transfer to wood.

The White Owl appears also in the wood-engraving [cm 8.1x 8.2] in *The History of British Birds*, vol. 1 (*Land Birds*), 1797, p.51. The foliage is not identical with that found in the drawing, and the background features are absent. It was normal for Bewick to edit his work during the cutting, and details were often added or deleted as seemed appropriate at that stage. It is likely that Bewick has copied the image of the bird from his drawing made five years before, though he may have been influenced by a specimen seen more recently (one of the several which we know him to have possessed).

Stephens expressed a clear preference for the drawing over the wood-engraving:

*The woodcut [in the 19th century the term covered wood-engraving too] of the 'White Owl', although a good example of Bewick's craft, and especially admirable for the rich textures and varied tones of the wood, shows much less skill than the drawing. As to this, compare the crescents of a dark colour at the outer extremities of the radiating feathers in the two examples. In the cut these minute elements are nearly if not wholly mechanical, and severally have very little character; whereas in the drawing each touch at this point is absolutely idiosyncratic and independent in its perfect significance, and, for our wonder, renders the facts proper to each feather, which are its inclination to right or left, up or down, its length, width, thickness, and position with regard to its neighbours.* (Stephens, p.20)

It is hard not to agree that the engraving lacks some of the subtlety of the drawing, especially in regard to the feathers. Thompson, however, thought that

*This block and the Tawny Owl show the greatest skill that any worker with the graver has yet attained.* (Thompson, p.184)

The comparison of drawn originals (some with watercolour additions) and printed cuts can scarcely avoid comparing artistic values. Other kinds of value come into play when such objects appear in the market, the saleroom or on the Antiques Road Show. The unique watercolours and drawings are mostly in public collections, so they are unlikely to come on the market. If they do, one of the most important questions is about the provenance of the piece. How did it get into the possession of the seller? The White Owl watercolour has some useful inscriptions of assistance here. The engravings are valued on a different scale altogether, since they are available in multiple editions printed from the woodcut blocks – and in uncountable further editions reproduced by photography of various kinds, including the latest digital versions. The best possible reproduction is not necessarily the first edition. It all depended on the paper and ink used, and on the care exercised by the pressman. Bewick used to supervise the printing very closely, looking over the pressman's shoulder. However, many collectors find that the eighth edition of 1847 has the finest impressions, though printed nearly twenty years after Bewick's death. There is a flourishing market in copies of all editions, but it is well-nigh impossible to give a general figure of monetary value. In the last analysis, it depends on whether there are buyers who badly want it. Recently in Newcastle, the same auctioneers sold two sets of the 1826 *Birds*, six months apart. In February, with several bidders the winning bid was £300; in September, with fewer bidders, £100 won it. This tells us more about auction sales than about the value of the work.

## POEMS INSPIRED BY THOMAS BEWICK

The two poets, Keith Armstrong and Simon Curtis, have submitted recent works to *Cherryburn Times* because they appreciate that here is an audience guaranteed to have an interest in and a knowledge of Bewick. We are very pleased to feature their homages here and on the next page.

### THOMAS BEWICK *by Simon Curtis*

Your graver's tempered steel  
From dead grain yields its line;  
Fur-soft, smoke-lithe or exact  
As a brim's stir in your Tyne.

You 'stuck to nature closely',  
Despite laborious means,  
Cutting your peacock's fan –  
Your drunk, who sees two moons –

Your unconventional  
Unclassical thrush and lark;  
'Beautiful aerial wanderers',  
Immediate and life-like.

And so – a temperate,  
God-fearing, dyed-in-the-wool,  
Individualistic,  
Northumbrian provincial –

You revived the lost skills  
Of the craftsman-engraver;  
Both deviser-designer  
And populariser.

Can revolutionary art  
Have been ever so modest  
As yours, Thomas Bewick?  
Who in 'kitchen-work' traced

On blocks inches square  
'Nature up to nature's God',  
Creating an Empire from  
One parish neighbourhood,

To establish the mystery  
Of boxwood engraving –  
That fine-as-leaf-vein craft,  
Demotic, moral, loving.

From *Reading a River*, (Shoestring Press)



## FOUR POEMS *by Keith Armstrong*

### AMEN CORNER

The starlings en masse  
roost here now.  
They blend with the dark trees  
in the twilight  
by Bewick's shadowy workshop.  
Under the Cathedral spire,  
they shriek and gossip  
in the chill;  
chit-chat of more weather.

I think that Thomas  
you could speak to birds,  
knew them as you drew their words  
in woodblocks.  
You coaxed them from their very eggs,  
uncaged them –  
let them sing on the page.

### RETURN TO CHERRYBURN

Drawing  
clear of the city,  
you carved your name  
in dog barks  
and bird cries.  
Your infant eyes  
kept seeing  
the devils in bushes  
and the gods  
in thrushes.

You loved  
to scratch a living.

Avoiding the faces  
of strange places,  
you dreamed of always  
being a boy,  
a bird or a fish,  
awash in the light  
of a dark wood:

a cherry burn.

Footprints home  
to remember.



## THE BROTHERLY SOCIETY

London  
depressed you  
with its 'blackguard places',  
its streetwalking ways.  
They called you 'Scotchman'  
and you itched for home,  
reading the Geordie papers  
at the Hole-in-the-Wall.  
And your heart trilled like a blackbird's  
when you rejoined your Whig mates,  
putting a world to rights  
in the Lion Lounge.

You were back  
herding sheep in your roots,  
smiling down to your boots  
in that Brotherly Society  
of Northumbrian cronies:  
the wild fields  
of Tyne.

### 'TALE PIECES'

You spent your life  
perfecting it,  
crafty as a fox  
forging a frantic path  
across the fields.

To the sound of the Pipes,  
you worked your way  
to a quiet glade,  
died contentedly  
devising  
'tale-pieces':

a tuneful ending  
to a drawn-in day.



Thomas Bewick's last vignette: the funeral ferry at Ovingham

Cherryburn Times is normally published twice a year. Contributions are invited particularly (but not only) from members of the Bewick Society.

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