

Chatterton’s letter To Ralph Bigland (Heraldry)

‘To Ralph Bigland, Somerset Herald’

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Original Manuscript : Missing presumed Lost

Early Transcript :

★ Samuel Seyer transcript BPL B4533 F.121 : Waiting

First Printing :

★ Gentleman’s Magazine, November 1787 : [View Panel 2 below](#)

Additional Link : [View Panel 3 below](#)

★ Account of William Canynges Feast with engraving, from Tyrwhitt, 1777 :
It is suggested by JD, the signatory to the article in the Gentleman’s Magazine, that *An Account of William Canynges Feast* matches the last coat of arms described by Chatterton in the letter.

Analysis :

★ Taylor, p.920 : [View Panel 4 below](#)

Panel 1 : Early Transcript : Samuel Seyer transcript BPL B4533 F.121

Waiting

Panel 2 : First Printing : Gentleman’s Magazine, November 1787
(The article and letter starts half way down the right hand column)

their respective charters; and, indeed, in these charters are clauses so very repugnant to the spirit of the English constitution, so detrimental to trade, and so destructive to the interest of some of our industrious fellow-subjects, that I think, if these obnoxious clauses were to be cancelled, without totally annihilating the corporations, great benefit would accrue to the state; and I do not see but, with prudence, such a measure might be accomplished, although, in the execution, some difficulties would arise unavoidably.

I have marked the extent and nature of the original institution of incorporated boroughs; I have shewn the cause of the deviations that have been made from it: I mean, I have taken this retrospect in a general view; for, were I to enter into a minute discussion of the above points, my undertaking, instead of a letter, would constitute a volume, and I should be obliged to trouble you with a number of dry extracts and quotations, that would probably, to the majority of your readers, be very uninteresting: indeed, if any other person had noticed Breunetes's very interesting and important paper, I should not have intruded myself on you and the publick at all; yet, now I have gone thus far, I will proceed further, and observe, that, great and oppressive as the evils arising from corporations are, they are far less intolerable than those produced by the excess of power intrusted to the justices of the peace. Though these gentlemen are not in any place incorporated by law, yet, in each county, they adhere so closely to the interest of their fellows on the same bench, that they in fact coalesce themselves into bodies as firm and compact as any corporation whatever; and these bodies are still more dangerous than regular corporations, because their authority is more extensive: the jurisdiction of a mayor and aldermen seldom extends far beyond their own town; but that of a bench of justices extends over the whole county in which they preside. However the members of a quorum may differ among themselves, however their several particular interests may jar, they will always unite in one general interest, which they keep always in view, and steadfastly adhere to, in all actions how unjustifiable soever, countenancing and defending one another, each justice strengthening himself by abetting his colleagues. "One good turn deserves another." "If you will do so for me, I will act thus for

you." The consequences of this procedure are obvious; a justice may do what he pleases, and no justice can be had against him: and what other conduct can be expected from men who only take out *dedimus's* for the sake of acquiring power, and of making themselves known in their respective counties, with a view to farther advantages. Such are the motives which induce our modern gentlemen to assume the once respectable, but now abused, office of a justice of peace.

For the satisfaction of your correspondent, who enquired concerning the petrification of human bones, I send the following extract from the *Life of the celebrated Peireskias*, written in Latin by Gassendus, and translated into English by W. Rand, M. D.—"Peireskias found out somewhere, not far from Aix, a great number of, not only the bones of men, but likewise of other living creatures; also of plants, leaves, flowers, and such like, *turned into a stony substance*; which he forthwith distributed all Europe over." But the book alluded to does not give any further account of the abovementioned curiosities.

Yours, &c. BRADWARDIN.

MR. URBAN,

OB. 10.

EVERY fragment of the truly ingenious and unfortunate Chatterton has a kind of prescriptive claim to literary regard. Whether this be founded on the pertinacity of opinions concerning the imposture or originality of the Poems of Rowley, or their real merit, it may be now too late to enquire.

The subjoined authentic letter, which I respectfully offer, proves him to have been no mean adept in the science of Heraldry, his proficiency in which I do not remember to have found discussed by those who have so scrupulously examined every acquisition of knowledge he could possibly have made.

"To Ralph Bigland, Esq. Somerset Herald.

"SIR,

"HEARING you are composing a book of Heraldry, I trouble you with this. Most of our Heralds assert Files should never be born in even numbers. I have seen several o'd seals with four, six, and eight; and in the cathedral here is a coat of the Berkeleys with four.

"Curious Coats in and about Bristol.

"Barry of 6, Or and Azure, counter-changed per Fess, by Gilbert de Gaunt. Argent, a maunch Gules edged, Or, verdooy

verdoy of trefoils, by John Cofier. Or, a canton sable, by Delouvis. A seal, Quarterly, first and fourth on a bend 3 annulets, second and third a head coupé gutté, by the name of Sancto Lovis, to a deed dated 1204. Your most humble servant, THOMAS CHATTERTON."

It is observable, that this last quartering is the armorial bearing ascribed by Chatterton to William Cannyng, and exhibited in the *fac simile* published at the end of Tyrwhitt's edition of Rowley. Sir Thomas Canning, brother of William, was Lord-mayor of London, 1456, and, in Stowe's Catalogue, bears, "Argent, three Moor's heads coupé proper."

Were I at liberty to communicate, I could confirm an assertion, that Chatterton was an expert in the invention of coats of arms, as of the poems of the 15th century. The MSS. I allude to contain a history of the family of *one* of his *Bristol* patrons, which, tho' eminently dignified by him, is notoriously plebeian. In the title-page, it is said to be collected from "the heralds of *March* and *Garter's* Records." The margin is filled with references to various books of antiquity and MSS.; and one of his authorities is *Rowley*. In the course of the History, some hundred bearings are described, the greater number of which are certainly forged, and the arms of many great families entirely different from what they have ever borne. His emblazoning is in no instance faulty, but seems to evince a more than ordinary knowledge of the art. J. D.

Mr. URBAN,

OA. 6.

I MUCH admire your impartiality; but the *Gentleman's Magazine* should never be made a vehicle for *illiberal* reflections, which, somewhere or other, will surely give pain; and particularly as they must produce replies and altercation, which can afford neither instruction or amusement to your readers. In this view I blame a correspondent (p. 784), who signs himself *A Lover of Truth*. The caresses of such *lovers*, he may know, cannot be pleasing to that amiable divinity.

The Abbé Mann, with the prospect of whose correspondence your readers were delighted, had related the circumstance of Lord Montague's death, when, in your next month's publication, he finds himself, and those of his persuasion, insulted by an anonymous pen. Though myself a minister of the same religion which the Abbé professes, I own I was

sorry to see that he could conceive himself obliged, by any requests of the dying man, to publish to the world that his Lordship had lived an hypocrite, in a business of the greatest moment, from what he himself termed the *wilest of motives*. Surely, some respect for the memory of the dead (though in truth it deserved little) should have withheld a narration calculated to give so much pain to his surviving friends. The Abbé, whose religion I know to be free from all that is low and bigoted, must have been shocked at a confession which the unmanly fear of death had alone extorted. During more than three years that his Lordship had resided at Brussels, could he find no moment but the last for this important declaration? His darling passions, *libertinism*, *interest*, and *ambition*, had long ceased to operate.

Your correspondent, Sir, from this trifling incident, brings forward what he calls "one of the most pernicious *tenets* of the Church of Rome;" and against it he solemnly warns his Protestant brethren. This *tenet* happens to be the *fact* of men living in one religion and dying in another. "Experience," he says, "has taught him this lesson, — that the great drift and design of Popery is, gradually to promote ignorance, and to check the progress of knowledge." And in what school, think you, was this discovery made? Why, one day conversing with a priest, he says, that priest "absolutely withheld his assent to a fact which a bishop of that church admitted without hesitation." Therefore, Mr. Urban, the drift of Popery is, to promote ignorance! He then talks of Archibald Bower, who years ago has been laid in his grave, whose character never did honour either to our church or yours; and of Dr. Douglas, a prelate whose worth and talents the professors of every religion must admire.—"Proceed we now," continues the *Lover of Truth*, "to the matter proposed;" and he quotes the legendary *Ribadeneyra*, even in Spanish, translating him as he goes on, to prove that, in the reigns of Edward and Elizabeth, some Papists openly conformed to the religion of the prince, though in their hearts they were Catholics. He even finds a passage in that author wherein such *dissimulation* is declared to be allowable.

If, Sir, it be worth while to be serious, I readily grant the fact, which is known to apply with equal truth to some Protestants in the reign of Queen Mary. But had your correspondent been so ardently

in

THE ACCOUNT OF W. CANYNGES
FEAST.

THOROWE the halle the belle han founde;
Byelecoyle doe the Grave beseeme;
The ealdermenne doe fyttē arounde,
Ande snoffelle oppe the cheorte steeme,
Lyche asses wylde ynne defarte waste
Swotelye the morneynge ayre doe taste,

Syke keene theie ate; the minstrels plaie,
The dynne of angelles doe theie keepe;
Heie styllē the gwestes ha ne to faie,
Butte nodde yer thankes ande falle aslape.
Thus echone daie bee I to deene,
Gyf Rowley, Iscamm, or Tyb. Gorges be ne seene.

T H E E N D.

(170) *To Ralph Bigland, c. 31 January 1769*

- MS. BPL, B4533 (Samuel Seyer), f. 121.
Pub. *GM*, lvii (November 1787), 954. 1803, iii. 408.
Text. B4533. Collated: *GM*. The holograph has not been traced. Seyer appends this note to his transcript: 'The above Letter I transcribed from the Orâl. It has unfortunately no Date, but the Post Mark of Jan 31.' The *GM* text, sent in by one 'J.D.', and used in 1803, may derive from the holograph, though accidentals are normalized and the address is incomplete.
Auth. Seyer's testimony and contents.
Date. Ralph Bigland (1711–84), created Somerset Herald 1763, first advertised his proposed work on heraldry in 1766 (John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1812–15, viii. 714). C would seem to have taken up heraldry some time after being apprenticed 1 July 1767 (*Life*, pp. 70–4). The letter then can be dated c. 31 January 1768, 1769, or 1770. Since the letter on 'Saxon Tinctures' is dated 4 February 1769 and that on 'Saxon Atchievements' 15 May 1769, I date this letter in that year.

The arms may be genuine. Several Berkeleys have memorials in Bristol Cathedral with the arms shown: see *Bristol*, pp. 295, 303, 305. Guillim, p. 374, gives Gilbert de Gaunt, Earl of Lincoln (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) 'Barrey of six pieces, Or and Azure, a Bend, Gules' and Heylyn, p. 782, gives him the same arms except that it is barry of eight. There is a Newton St. Loe in Somersetshire and there apparently was a Somersetshire family named St. Lo in the time of Henry IV: see F. W. Weaver, *Visitation of the County of Somerset . . . 1531 and 1573* (Exeter, 1885), p. 51. Furthermore, Berry gives St. Loe 'Ar. on a bend sa. three annulets or; over all a label gu.—Crest, a blackamoor's head, side faced, wreathed on the forehead ar. and sa.' I have not found the name Dilouvis, but it may be related to Sancto Lovis.

The curiosity of the last four coats lies, perhaps, in the following: counterchanging barry per fess rather than per pale or per bend, thus presumably leaving a gold field with bars of blue in the second and fifth

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To Ralph Bigland

sixths of the coat; in Cosier (meaning seamster or tailor) bearing a mantle; in the simplicity of the Dilouvis coat; and in quartering a coat as early as 1204.

3. *Files*. Heraldic labels, used to signify sons.
9. *Verdoy*. A border charged with leaves, flowers, or fruits.
Address. St. Bennet's Hill, location of the College of Arms.

End :

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