



CHERRYBURN TIMES

The Newsletter of The Bewick Society

Douglas Mennear (1935-2002)

With great sadness we have to record the death of Douglas Mennear in September 2002 at the age of sixty-seven. Douglas was one of the key figures in setting up the Thomas Bewick Birthplace Trust, in the acquiring Cherryburn, and bringing about its opening and early success as new Museum of the Year in 1989.

Douglas was born in Sunderland but when he was only three months old, the family moved to Newcastle, where he was educated at the Royal Grammar School, and at King's College, then still part of Durham University. There he studied town and country planning. He advanced to be a senior planning assistant with Northumberland County Council before moving in 1974 to the newly-formed Tyndale District Council as Deputy Chief Planning Officer, a position he retained until taking early retirement in 1991. Douglas provided a vital link between the Thomas Bewick Birthplace Trust and Tyndale District Council which gave important financial assistance during the establishment of Cherryburn. He was also important in the establishment of the Bewick Society, and in its development from a group providing both practical and academic support for Cherryburn, into the natural institutional leader in promoting and preserving the work of England's greatest wood engraver.

Douglas was particularly assiduous in bringing focus to the activities of the Society's southern members, and was effectively, though living in the north, the first London secretary. He established the series of gatherings at Camden Working Mens' College which became a familiar venue for a number of years (even despite the apparently perennial closure of the nearest Underground station - now famous for another reason - Mornington Crescent). Douglas overcame all difficulties in his determination to harness and share Bewickian interest and scholarship. On his sure foundation the splendid achievements of Robert Jones and Charles Bird have been built. It was Douglas, too, who arranged a northern visit for southern members, which many remember with affection.

Douglas met his wife, Valerie, at university, and they were married in 1963 in Val's hometown in Norfolk. They moved to Ovingham thirty five years ago. Douglas was closely involved with many of the

village's activities, including serving on the church council, campaigning for a new bridge and for improvements in public transport. As chairman of the committee he took a leading part in the renovation of the Reading Room and its wider use by the village's organisations. He was an enthusiastic local historian, producing illustrated books about the area; and he brought to his guided tours both a detailed knowledge and a wonderful enthusiasm for the village and the area with all its Bewick connections. 'He loved Ovingham,' said Val, 'and it was his nature to get involved in things which concerned the village.'



The London Secretary writes: 'Both Cherryburn and the Bewick Society were very lucky to have such a dedicated, loyal and energetic servant as Douglas. It was particularly cruel that poor health in his later years prevented him from taking as active a part in Bewick activities as he would have wished, or enjoying the lengthy retirement which he undoubtedly deserved. I would like to record my own personal gratitude, and that of the southern members generally, for his work in organising London meetings. Through them I met a good number of fellow Bewick enthusiasts. And I also enjoyed the trip which Douglas led to Bewick sites in and around Cherryburn on the Bewick Society week-end in 1993. He had a real warmth and shared his knowledge and enthusiasm very readily. I still have a couple of the postcard booklets which he produced showing the countryside around Ovingham and the Tyne valley. I also remember his using enlarged versions of Bewick's tailpieces on his walkabout. This were very useful in comparing his versions with the present-day reality and were also interesting in connection with the question of whether the tailpieces were drawn from life or were imagined compositions. Please extend all the London members' sympathies to his wife and family.'

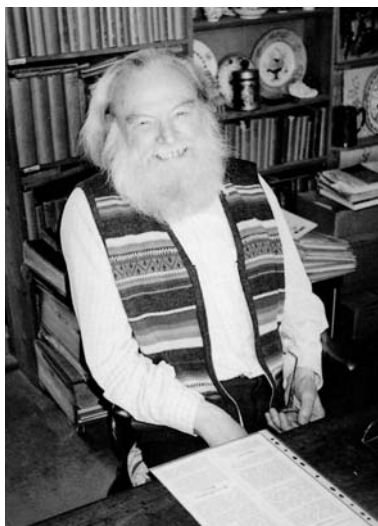
Our warmest wishes go to his widow, Valerie, and all the family.
Hugh Dixon.

For permission to use the photograph we wish to acknowledge the Hexham Courant, and for help with information we wish to thank Sarah Wilson and Patricia Gillespie of Tyndale District Council, and Mrs Valerie Mennear.

Raymond Watkinson (1913-2003)

Although an atheist, Ray Watkinson with his Old Testament prophet's mane of hair, generous beard and frequent allusions to the scriptures, could indeed hand down, perhaps not commandments, but certainly pearls of wisdom. These were culled from his extremely wide reading and his ability to delve back into a prodigious memory to make connections where lesser mortals would have failed miserably. He offered extraordinary insights into the lives and works of artists as disparate as William Hogarth, Thomas Bewick, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in general, and William Morris in particular. He could also hold forth, at great length and in his own idiosyncratic and hugely entertaining manner, enriched with the unmistakable accents of south Lancashire, upon subjects as diverse as the Industrial Revolution (which he claimed with some justification for the cotton spinning and weaving valleys of Rochdale), Thomas Bewick's old sparring partner Thomas Spence, 'Tim Bobbin' (the Lancashire Hogarth) and communism (of which he was a faithful adherent, albeit much of it predeceased him). All his scholarship, inadequately represented by his published works, was worn lightly. His discoveries were characterised by a pungent wit, more than a hint of against-the-grain irascibility, boundless energy, and a glittering eye which, once it held you in its grip, was well-nigh impossible to escape.

Art historian, lecturer, teacher and typographer, Ray was born at Flixton, a village on the outskirts of Manchester, into a devout Methodist household. Following Stretford Grammar School and Manchester Regional School of Art he worked as an art teacher. When the war intervened he was fortunate in finding a convivial occupation at the Avro aircraft factory at Chadderton. There he worked as a technical draughtsman under the eagle eye of the legendary Roy Chadwick (considered by many Britain's greatest aircraft designer) on a number of developments, especially the Avro York transport aircraft.



Thereafter Ray returned to teaching and lecturing at various locations in the south of England, latterly at Brighton and the London School of Printing where he was a senior lecturer in the history of art. Amongst his publications were a perceptive essay on Thomas Bewick for the Communist Party's series 'Our History' in 1962. This emphasised Bewick's sympathy for the Radicals and was later expanded to form a contribution to *The Luddites* (1971). The following years saw the publication of *William Morris as a Designer* (1967), *PreRaphaelite Art and Design* (1970), and *Ford Madox Brown and the PreRaphaelite Circle* (1991), this latter in association with Teresa Newman.

Old age held few compensations for Ray. In the last three or four years his energies flagged and his love of reading, writing and delight in visual arts were sadly curtailed by the onset of age-related macula degeneration. But his enthusiasm and generosity remained undimmed. Only recently, whilst discussing with him my own aspirations to produce a new account of Bewick and his apprentices, he brought forth an ancient box file from the serried ranks of brown-paper wrapped volumes that lined the walls of every storey of his Brighton house (which he termed a 'tower of procrastination'). Brushing off the accumulated dust he urged me to take it home. It contained notes, observations and a substantial text all composed over a number of years towards what Ray had always hoped would be his own book on Bewick. Alas that was never to be and Ray, bowing gracefully to this inevitability, pressed me to make whatever use of it I pleased. This I have done although I fear my turn of phrase is less felicitous than his. Nevertheless I should like to think that those ideas of his which have been incorporated into my text will form a more worthy memorial than this modest obituary. – *Nigel Tattersfield*.

Raymond Watkinson, art teacher, lecturer and art historian, born 17 December 1913; died from pneumonia (Ray was never known to wear an overcoat), 13 January 2003.

The Society is sad to announce the death of Miss Edna Humphrey of Alwinton Terrace, Gosforth, on the 10th January 2003. Miss Humphrey was a founder member of the Thomas Bewick Birthplace Trust and of the Bewick Society and died on the anniversary of her ninety-ninth birthday.

Bewick and *The Fate of Empire*

by Charles Bird, *London Secretary*

Dr Peter Quinn's article in the last edition of the *Cherryburn Times* (Christmas 2002) drew attention to the exposure on Television which Thomas Bewick had been given in Simon Schama's *History of Britain: Part 3, The Fate of Empire, 1776-2000*. There is now a handsome book published by the BBC (price £25, but discounts are available quite widely).

I must confess that I have not yet read all through the book which comprises some 600 well-illustrated pages. But I have looked at the Bewick references. The index lists ten references either to Bewick himself or to Bewick illustrations in the text (I noticed three other unindexed references at pages 65, 125 and 132). This contrasts, as Dr Quinn pointed out, to the sparse mentions of more famous artists (Blake has only three).

In the way of academic discourse Simon Schama seeks to place Bewick in some category or other (untutored and faithful depicter of natural life, Romantic responder to nature, moralizer or political commentator). Similar discussions have appeared before (for example the essay by Ray Watkinson 'Thomas Bewick 1753-1828' in *The Luddites and Other Essays* edited by Lionel Munby, 1971; the essay by John Brewer and Stella Tillyard, 'The Moral Vision of Thomas Bewick' in *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the late Eighteenth Century* edited by Eckhart Hellmuth, OUP, 1990; and the chapter 'Thomas Bewick: the Poet who lives by the banks of the Tyne' by John Brewer in his book *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* Harper Collins, 1997). Dr Quinn mentions some of the earlier appraisals in his article and doubtless a scrutiny of the Bewick website (at "www.bewicksociety.org") would throw up more material.

The Simon Schama book is not free from a number of rather clumsy mistakes. For instance on page 45 he attributes the woodcuts in Ritson's *Robin Hood* to Thomas rather than John (see pages 147-9 of Nigel Tattersfield's *John Bewick*, British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2001). He consistently describes *The History of British Birds* as having been published in 1804 (which it was, but Part 1, *The Land Birds*, was first published in 1797). The Chillingham Bull illustration on page 125 is not, as said, from the cut in *The General History of Quadrupeds* of 1790 but is the large separate plate made by Thomas for Marmaduke Tunstall of Wyciffe (see Iain Bain's *Thomas Bewick: an illustrated record of his Life and Work*, the Laing Gallery, 1979) in 1789. Finally on page 135 the date of Thomas's death should be 1828 not 1829. But such criticisms are the cavils of a devotee.

It is splendid that Thomas Bewick has received such public acclaim. Simon Schama obviously warms to the man and his work. As the copious references to Bewick are scattered over two chapters it is not easy to follow or summarise what is being said. The first introduction to

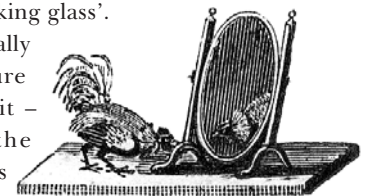
Bewick comes in the context of a discussion about children's education and the use of improving books for the young. Then Bewick's own upbringing is described and the moral commentaries to be found in his 'sympathetic' tailpiece vignettes. I do not always agree with his reading of these scenes. He goes along with the usual interpretation of the circle of people outside a public house as being spectators at a cockfight. But what evidence is there for this in the illustration itself (there is I believe a later note by Jane Bewick to that effect)? One would expect Bewick not to sympathise with the sport yet in the sky there is a rainbow, a sign of God's covenant with his chosen people and therefore one would assume an indicator of approval.



The Cockfight under a Rainbow. Engraved by the apprentice Henry Hole and first published in the 1805 edition of vol. 1 of *British Birds*.

Could it be that what is going inside the circle is not a cockfight at all? Elsewhere he describes the old man saying grace in front of a bowl whilst a cat eats out of it (the cut above the preface at the beginning of *The Water Birds* of 1804) as a 'blind old man eating gruel'. Surely the point of the scene is not that the crofter is blind (which he clearly isn't because there is a picture and a calendar on the wall of his cottage) but that he is taking too long in saying grace with his eyes shut in the act of prayer and is paying the price for this over-zealous formality by having the cat eat some of his food. The contrast is between piety and common sense. But Schama is not alone amongst academics in missing the point of some of Bewick's cuts. In the essay by Brewer and Tillyard (cited above) it is said at page 585 that the cut of the cockerel looking at its reflection in a mirror represents pride and vanity as the bird is 'bowing down to its own image in the looking glass'.

But surely the cock is actually adopting a fighting posture (beak down, tail up) as it – mistakenly – thinks the reflection of itself is another rival cockerel.



Indeed this is an old conceit. Pliny records how mirrors were thrown down by tiger hunters so that tigers could be caught when they mistook their reflection for a rival tiger and stayed to growl at the image. Indeed there is a fine monumental brass at Mugginton, Derbyshire, where the same story is depicted on the crest of a knight (though the animal looks more like a fox than a tiger).

Simon Schama goes on to raise some interesting questions as to Thomas's association with political activists such as Thomas Spence and his (Bewick's) apparent decision to be a conformer rather than a dangerous radical. The Memoir from which much of this material derives was written after the excesses of the French revolution had become well known and so it may not represent entirely faithfully Thomas's sympathies at an earlier stage of his life. At page 128 the BBC book shows a Gilray cartoon of 1809 debunking William Cobbett. The Bewick connection is not noted in the text but aficionados of Bewick will recognize how cleverly Gilray has built into the scenes elements from a number of Bewick cuts (the pigsty netty, the washing line, the steeple in the background and the cans which have been used to tie round the dog's tail). It all looks like a deliberate mélange from Thomas's work and was perhaps done by Gilray (in the Tory camp) assuming that Bewick would be sympathetic to the left-wing views of Cobbett.



*The Life of WILLIAM-COBETT, -written by himself-
 "Now you lying Varlets you shall see how a plain Tale will put you down!"*

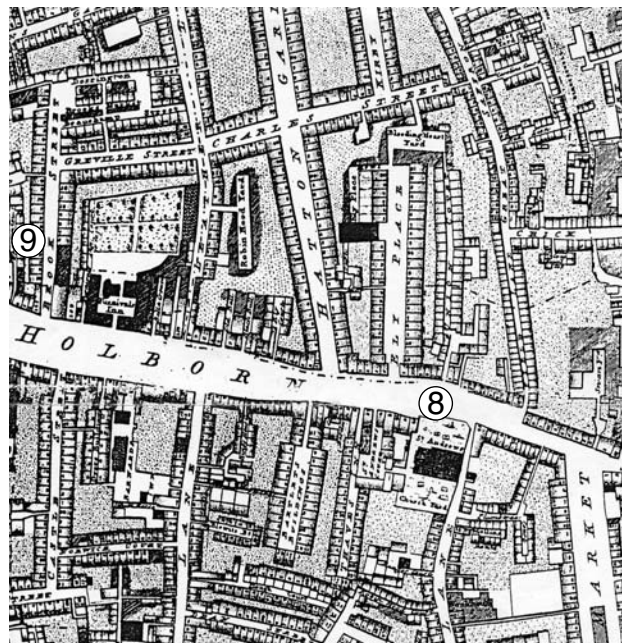
It is entirely understandable that a grand sweep of a book such as Simon Schama's will not pick up all these niceties. The book is well-written, interestingly illustrated and full of provocative ideas and conjunctions. Whether the analysis stands up is something for everyone to judge for themselves. For myself the great beauty and attraction of Bewick's works is that they can rise above academic categorization and can be enjoyed on many different levels. I enjoy them because they strike me as true to nature and as beautiful and delicate in terms of their execution. It is stimulating to read the views of others and especially of distinguished historians such as Simon Schama. But part of me at least says with John Keats:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

London Walkabout

There will be a repeat of the London Walkabout, led by Charles Bird our London Secretary, on Saturday 10 May, starting at 2 pm from the Cheshire Cheese public house in Wine Office Court (in an alley opposite a Knickerbox shop off the north side of Fleet Street). The three-hour trip will trace some of the locations connected with Thomas and John Bewick. It is hoped that some refreshments will be available at the end.

In the article in the Christmas 2002 *Cherryburn Times* a number of mistakes have been pointed out for which author and editor are most grateful. The reference to the trade card of Doughty and Wiggins should read 'Doughty and Wiggins'. A stray 't' has crept in to the 'Blossoms of Morality'. Elizabeth Newbery was the widow of Francis Newbery (the nephew of John Newbery) rather than of John Newbery. Both Francis and John had shops in St Paul's Churchyard and it was Francis's shop at no. 20 which was on the corner and was illustrated in a woodcut when taken over by John Harris. The somewhat complicated story is told by Sydney Roscoe in his *Newbery bibliography*. The reference to the Gray and Bain 'bookplate' on page 4 should, of course, be to their trade card. And it was Thomas, not John, who engraved it. Finally, there was no map extract for stops no. 8 and 9. Since no. 9 was the place where Thomas Bewick lived in Wharton's Court and therefore particularly important, and as it is also difficult to find, this omission is now remedied (see below).



Stop no. 8 was St Andrew's Church, Holborn, where Thomas regularly attended Sunday Services with Robert Pollard.

A further omission in the original article was the lack of credits for the photographs. They were taken by Hugh Dixon, Chairman of the Society.

John Bewick Engraver on Wood 1760 - 1795

An Appreciation of his Life together with an Annotated Catalogue of his Illustrations and Designs.

by Nigel Tattersfield

The British Library, London, and Oak Knoll Press, New Castle, Delaware. 2001. ISBN 0-7123-4707-0 (BL) and 1-58456-053-3 (Oak Knoll)

Reviewed by Hugh Dixon

The length of the title of Nigel Tattersfield's book is itself a tribute to the style of title pages with which its subject was entirely familiar. It is important, too, in signalling the compendious nature of the work. The first quarter of the book is entitled, too modestly, an appreciation of John Bewick's life. Outstripping by ploughed furlongs anything that has gone before, this is by far the best account of the brilliant but tragically short career of Thomas Bewick's younger brother. John, seven years younger than Thomas, was his first apprentice. He was a quick learner, and soon proved to be such a brilliant engraver that he was granted his liberty early. Like Thomas he went to London to advance his prospects. Unlike Thomas, he responded with enthusiasm to the challenges and opportunities of the metropolis, and quickly established himself as an outstanding and reliable craftsman and a likeable companion. Tattersfield's research into the London of Bewick's time is meticulous, and his depiction of the city and what were then its suburbs is masterly. No less important is his knowledge of the wide range of people, many of them colourful characters, with whom Bewick came into contact. Most significant was the capital's well-developed network of north countrymen who provided support, introductions, and companionship. It was particularly strong in publishing and printing (not surprisingly in view of Newcastle's early prominence in the book trade) and very quickly John's ability as an illustrator was recognised and his services sought. The skill and inventiveness he contributed to the spread of improved illustrations, especially in the burgeoning production of children's books, has to be ranked with that of his brother (which actually came later) in the field of natural history. As Tattersfield shows, John Bewick was one of the very earliest designer-engravers in England to make his living almost exclusively by illustrating books. Fate, however, would not allow the promising start a rich maturity. John Bewick had a vulnerable consumptive constitution. It is typical of Tattersfield's care that, with acknowledged medical help, he takes the trouble to relate the development of the tuberculosis, to John's changing circumstances. It seems he suffered the fate waiting for any anxious, self-employed craftsman. Overwork in confined circumstances did fatal damage which a move to (what was believed to be) a healthier situation and northern rests could not repair. With compelling precision Tattersfield charts the awful succession of

relapses and recoveries, renewed attempts at work, and decline, and finally death at the age of thirty-five. Even so it is not this mournful progress that dominates the story but the extraordinary spirit of the young man who, despite all adversities, achieved so much and with such consistently high standards. Thomas, who undertook to complete some of John's unfinished commissions, was well aware that the wide recognition in the 1790s of the name 'Bewick' as a hallmark of illustrative quality was John's achievement quite as much as his own.

The central portion of the book is devoted to 'A Catalogue of Books, Periodicals, Broad-sides and Ephemera with engravings by John Bewick' which must be the most comprehensive catalogue of Bewick's illustrative work for which anyone could wish, with extensive back-up notes and references. He contributed illustrations and engravings to no less than sixty titles, the great majority being for children. It is sobering to realise that this was all accomplished in barely more than a fragmented decade; such an achievement would not have disgraced a career of three times the length. The catalogue entries, far from being dry bibliography, are rich with commentary and anecdote, and, like the account of John Bewick's life, profusely illustrated. Finally, the list of books and other items left to Thomas is quoted as an appendix, and there are over forty pages of notes, references, abbreviations, sources and bibliography, a chronological list of books illustrated by John Bewick, and a full index.

It was never Thomas Bewick's wish that his own reputation should eclipse that of his younger brother. He took pride in John as a master would in the success of his pupil; he admired him as a fellow craftsman, and loved him as a brother. He was always meticulous about acknowledging John's work, and, long after John's death at the age of thirty-five, collections of engravings 'by Thomas and John Bewick' continued to appear. As important was the support of his family during his northern visits, vain attempts at recovery, and later in the nursing of his final days. The devotion extended to Thomas's older children to whom we owe memories of their Uncle John whose books they cherished, and whose decline and death was a traumatic passage in their early years. Even Robert, who was only seven when John died, had reason to think warmly of John. Both were musicians. Robert, who was to become a central figure in the recognition and survival of Northumbrian pipe music, must have shown early musical promise. It is poignant that the last item listed by Thomas in his 'Schedule of Sundry Goods &c left to me by Bror. John' was 'A fiddle for Rob'.

Students of the Bewick achievement are already indebted to Nigel Tattersfield for his extraordinary Bookplates by Beilby and Bewick (1999. British Library ISBN 0 7123 4598 6 and Oak Knoll, 1 884718 91 4) which in its identification and description of hundreds of clients is as much more of a social history of the period than its title might suggest. It stands alone in its field.

This book is another landmark in Bewick publishing history and already a collector's item. In the particular study and revelation of its subject it is highly improbable that it will ever be surpassed.

The Story of Ovingham on Tyne. A Village History.

by Frank Atkinson

(2001: Northern Books for the Ovingham Village Trust.
ISBN 0 953 5730 1)

Reviewed by Hugh Dixon

As local histories go, this is heroic, over two hundred pages fully indexed, beautifully produced, and lavishly illustrated with over forty of its 120 illustrations in colour. The secret and lesson of this triumph, no doubt, is in the three pages of subscribers which make clear what can be achieved with very solid local support. The author, Dr Frank Atkinson, 'the man who made Beamish', also led the saving of Cherryburn, and is of course President of the Bewick Society. Those with an interest in Bewick and his world will find much of interest in this study of the village in which Thomas Bewick was baptised and educated, where he was married, and where he and many of his family chose are buried. It may be remembered that Bewick's earliest education, nearer Mickley on the opposite bank of the Tyne, at the hand of an ill-equipped and violent master, had been far from successful. His mother, the daughter of a Cumbrian schoolteacher, had been for a time housekeeper for the Rev. Christopher Gregson, Vicar of Ovingham from 1747 to 1791. He kept a small school in his vicarage (a building of great architectural interest, and now Dr Atkinson's home), and it was there that young Thomas received his most formative education. Under the firm guidance of Gregson, Thomas was able not only to master a clear hand and get a decent schooling, but also to channel and develop his love of the natural world and his formidable powers of observation. Apart from Cherryburn itself, it was the memories of Ovingham which provided the greatest inspiration for Thomas's country and village scenes, many of which are used to illustrate this book.

Thomas Bewick never lost his affection for the village, nor forgot what he owed to Gregson. As Nigel Tattersfield has shown, fifty years later, he engraved a block and had bookplates printed for the Ovingham Book Club in 1813. He also presented copies of his own by then celebrated books to the Club.

There is nevertheless a great deal more to Ovingham than the Bewick connection.

Dr Atkinson tells the village's story with unencumbered clarity from Bronze Age origins (and pottery identified by the great antiquarian and angler Canon Greenwell, who as a young priest occupied the vicarage between 1847 and 1850) through twelve chapters, and many colourful characters, to the present thriving community. The last chapter describes over thirty current village organisations. There seems little doubt that this book, too, will become a landmark as Ovingham progresses through the new millennium.

An Engraver's Globe: Wood Engraving World- Wide in the Twenty-First Century.

by Simon Brett

London: Primrose Hill Press, 2002. Large octavo (250 x 170 mm), pp.475, 400 illus (some in colour), £75.
ISBN 1 901648 12 5.

Reviewed by Nigel Tattersfield

Oh for the advent of time travel. Then I could make my way back, clutching a copy of Simon Brett's splendid *Engraver's Globe*, to the summer of 1781. My destination would be Strawberry Hill where that pampered egoist Horace Walpole, the nation's supreme aesthete, sat penning the immortal words 'I have said, and . . . shall say little of wooden cuts; that art was never executed in any perfection in England . . . whoever desires to know more of cutting on wood should consult a very laborious work . . . called *Traité historique & pratique de la graveure [sic] en bois*, par Papillon, Paris 1766. The author will probably not, as he wishes, persuade the world to return to wooden cuts . . .'

Back in the real world, in *An Engraver's Globe*, Simon Brett (a superlative wood engraver in his own right and a former chairman of the Society for Wood Engraving) presents us with an anthology of images from over two hundred contemporary wood engravers from twenty-three countries. They range from the Argentine to the Ukraine, Australia to the United States. This exciting cavalcade of images vary in subject matter as much as their countries of origin. Each and every one would have caused Walpole an attack of the vapours.

Nonetheless, this handsome volume is a trial for any reviewer. No sooner has the critical pen been unsheathed, the volume opened and perusal begun than the magic of wood engraving casts its spell. As the pages turn from Ruslan Agirba and Henno Arrak to Wolfgang Würfel and Hideshi Yoshida, enchanting images, uniform in their superb reproduction, rise from its pages. Progress through the book slows to a snail's pace as the wood engraver's uncanny ability to summon up atmosphere fills the reader with wonder. Each artist (all imbued with the spirit of wood engraving although working not only on boxwood but also on plywood, lino, acrylic and other synthetic materials) has supplied details of themselves, their careers and publications. Some are delightfully candid . . . 'it has been a lonely road' confesses Anna Hogan from the USA. Other entries tell of many and varied parallel occupations. Hungarian Alexander Husveti pioneered open-heart surgery; Greg Hakonson was a gold miner.

Just as it should be, this book is a feast for the eyes. Simon Brett's fourteen page introduction (although at times a little dense and cramped for space) makes telling

points. Wood engraving, he writes feelingly, 'is vernacular art at its best and wood engravers do not persist with a little-used medium lightly, nor do they use it trivially . . . for most of them, a moderate but survivable neglect is the average climate, requiring faith'. So wood engraving still springs from the heart, praise be.

What would Thomas Bewick have thought of this comprehensive showcase of the art he did so much to revive? He could not but have appreciated it. First, because all these engravers are artist-engravers, not reproductive engravers. Second, because they constantly push against the boundaries or 'think outside the envelope' as the current phrase has it. By doing so they admirably fulfil his prediction that 'there is still room for great improvements in wood engraving: and when sufficient encouragement is given for its more extended use, greater nicety and skill will be displayed'. For a global snapshot of the present flourishing state of this vernacular art this volume cannot be surpassed.

Looking again at the Chillingham Cattle

By June Holmes

Honorary Archivist - Natural History Society of Northumbria.

On Easter Sunday in 1789 Thomas Bewick set off on foot to fulfil a commission for Marmaduke Tunstall, the antiquarian and an ardent naturalist. His quest was to produce an image, drawn from life, of a bull from the celebrated and rare herd of Chillingham 'wild' white cattle. His friend William Preston, a local printer, accompanied him on his fifty-mile trek from Newcastle via Morpeth and Alnwick to the small Northumbrian hamlet of Chillingham. They stayed that evening at the home of John Bailey, land agent to Lord Tankerville, who was the then owner of Chillingham Castle, its 365 acre park and its ancient herd.

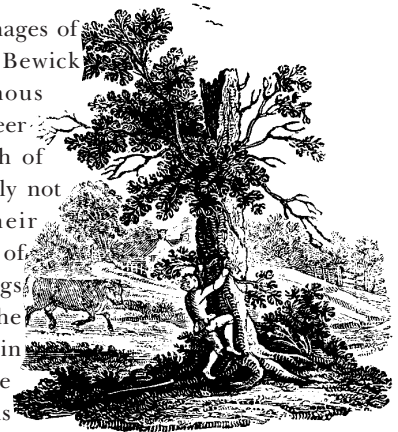
The next day, crawling on his hands and knees through the undergrowth in Chillingham Park, Bewick made his sketch of a lone defeated Bull seeking shelter in the woods, the King bull and his harem of cows having been too aggressive to approach. (Bain, 1975 pp.109-10). The resulting woodcut image of a Chillingham bull, majestically pawing the ground, became Bewick's most famous engraving and he is believed to have considered it his masterpiece.

It was the enclosure, in the 13th century, of the picturesque Chillingham Park to provide food and hunting, which corralled the sole survivors of the herds of 'wild' white Cattle that once roamed the forests of Great Britain. There they have remained since c.1220AD isolated and, as far as is known, consistently in-bred with the minimum of human contact.

Chillingham cattle are beautiful creatures, small and of a slender build in comparison to domestic cattle, completely white in colour with black hooves, eyelashes and black tips to the upturned horns; their muzzles, in

contrast, are dark brown. They are generally timorous but can be very fierce when confronted. Their acute sense of smell makes close observation an extremely hazardous occupation, as many an unfortunate park keeper has found to his cost, having hurriedly to climb the nearest tree.

Very few artistic images of the cattle exist, with Bewick and one another famous artist Sir Edwin Landseer capturing the strength of the animals but possibly not the beauty of their surroundings. In one of Landseer's oil paintings, the magnificence of the king bull is captured in an aggressive pose holding court over his herd.



So it was in the year 2000 that another famous local artist followed in the footsteps of Bewick, irresistibly drawn to the beauties of Chillingham. James Alder, like Bewick an artist and naturalist, considered that a more pastoral view of the cattle was appropriate, which he has achieved in his painting entitled 'Chillingham'. A serene scene of a newborn calf gently introduced to the herd by its mother, the king bull watching from a sunlit corner of the park. His experience of the herd was also very similar to Bewick's, drawing and sketching from a safe vantage point, not behind bushes like his predecessor but safely sheltered in the back of a Range Rover ready to make a quick exit if the need arose. The result is a painting completely different from Bewick's engraving but just as compelling and evocative, a truly magnificent work.

James describes his thoughts before commencing his painting 'Bewick's exquisite wood engraving captures the bull's power, but it could be any park. Landseer's magnificent family portrait of bull, cow and calf, with a dark hill for a backdrop, could be Scotland . . . the painting must capture the mood of the environment as much as its fabled herd . . . this almost untouched relic of Ancient Northumbria, Chillingham, over which Cheviot broods and enchants all who visit, also needs our nurture.'

During the recent devastation caused by the foot and mouth epidemic in Northumberland concern mounted for this vulnerable relic population. James, a born conservationist, generously offered to produce a signed edition of a hand-produced lithograph of his painting with all monies raised donated to Chillingham Wild Cattle Association in order to preserve this unique park and its inhabitants.

It is hoped members of the Bewick Society will be inspired by this new image of the cattle and purchase a copy or alternatively support the Association by visiting the park which is open from the 1st April until 31st October. Contact the warden on 01668 215250 for further information or look at the website www.chillingham-wildlife.org.uk

The Life and Work of Robert Gibbings.

by Martin J. Andrews

Bicester, Primrose Hill Press, 2003. Quarto, pp.446, 8 colour plates. Casebound with dustjacket, £45. ISBN 1901-648-31-1.

Reviewed by Nigel Tattersfield

Private press-man, artist, wood engraver, book illustrator, journalist, television personality, traveller, adventurer and raconteur, Robert Gibbings was a dominating presence in the arts in England from the 1920s until his death in 1958. At over six feet tall and tipping the scales at 23 stone (which he humorously described as 'filling out a little'), Gibbings, with his many-faceted talents, his bonhomie, good fellowship, wit and sheer delight in life, is simply too big to ignore. Equally it seems his protean nature has rendered him a daunting figure for any putative biographer. Unabashed, Martin Andrews, whose interest in Gibbings goes back over a quarter of a century, has boldly gone where others have perhaps feared to tread, and produced this, the first full scale biography.



Best remembered today for his gentle, anecdotal travel books – *Sweet Thames Run Softly* for example – which with their calm delight in landscape and vernacular traditions touched an answering chord amongst a wartime population riven by the horrors of the Blitz, the Holocaust and the Bomb, Gibbings has been undeservedly neglected of late. Perhaps our familiarity, real or imagined, with his designs, has engendered a contempt of sorts. One of the joys of Andrews' book, with some 400 black and white illustrations, is that it supplies a salutary corrective. It must also be emphasised that this is a biography and Andrews, enthused by his subject, and having had unparalleled access to a substantial corpus of Gibbings memorabilia – including unpublished letters and photographs – has used his sources intelligently to create a sympathetic, rounded account. It is in some measure a hagiography for Andrews has barely a bad word to say about Gibbings. On the other hand that may well have been the case: Gibbings does seem to have been exceptionally companionable and blessed by a generous disposition and a sunny temperament. Nonetheless Andrews skates around the breakdown of Gibbings' marriages as though on thin ice.

When Gibbings and a few like-minded wood engravers founded the Society of Wood Engravers in 1920 it was initially entitled the Bewick Club. Indeed the parallels between Thomas Bewick and Gibbings are significant for they both shared a delight in the countryside, in fishing and rambling, in friendship with local (usually eccentric) characters. Both were perfectly attuned to their age, both animated by a lively spirit of enquiry, both happiest when illustrating their own writings. Again like Bewick, Gibbings possessed a deep spiritual belief 'which rested more in a broader sense of the power of nature, not confined to the strictures of any dogma'. Unlike Bewick however, Gibbings at least in later years, did not draw directly onto the block but had his designs photographed upon them, a disappointing development. In addition the wood engravings in his popular, mass-market books (*Sweet Thames, Coming Down the Wye* etc.) were not printed from the original woodblocks but from electrotypes.

As this book makes clear, although not in so many words, Gibbings' later designs, albeit appropriately decorating or amplifying the text, never rival the powerful visual statements of his earlier work for the Garden Cockerel Press. It might in fact be argued that Gibbings' delicate pencil studies for his mass-market titles – especially *Coming Down the Seine* – are more evocative than the comparatively heavy-handed engravings which derived from them. Unlike Bewick, Gibbings found it difficult or unnecessary to infuse his designs with a pictorial wit, moral narrative or an earthy pungency. Consequently it is easier to warm to Gibbings the man, loveable and larger than life, than it is to his later wood engravings which, for all their technical expertise, were attacked (by Nancy Spain) for being 'exquisitely meaningless'.

It is also easy to warm to Andrews' book. Handsomely produced, elegantly laid out, profusely illustrated, perceptively written, generously endowed with that scarcest of all commodities – white space – and available at a distinctly moderate price, it deserves every success. There are, to be sure, a few minor blemishes and omissions. A sharp-eyed copy editor might have eliminated the exclamation marks, smoothed over one or two non-sequiturs and curbed the occasional purple prose – such as 'Gibbings . . . enjoyed a touch of decadence – good food, good wine'; decadence? Surely not. A technical glossary would be an advantage . . . what are 'first smoke proofs', what is 'pochoir'? The running titles to the notes should carry the page as well as the chapter numbers. A bibliography of sources would be pleasant; a check-list of books illustrated by Gibbings (since Robert Gibbings, a Bibliography of 1962 is long out of print) would have been most welcome. But make no mistake, this is an impressive piece of work and unlikely to be surpassed.

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