

TRAVELLING AND CLUBBING

Shugborough Hall stands in a beautiful vale of the River Trent. It is a world of its own, bordered on one side by the forest of Cannock Chase. Though it may seem a secluded Arcadian landscape the vale is also a key point for canal and railway, which pass through, linking the centres of industry of Stoke on Trent and Manchester to the south.

Shugborough is both a geographical centre of England and also a centre of ideas – the revolutions in the arts and sciences of the 18th century.

Though Shugborough stands as a memorial to Admiral George Anson his elder brother Thomas Anson (1695-1773) was the man behind Shugborough. He was a self-effacing figure. The only portrait of him in the house (and it might not be him) is by Vanderbank, from 1739.

There are very few letters and documents about Thomas and the development of Shugborough surviving in the archives. There are letters from his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Yorke, Lady Anson, and from his architect friend James Stuart and letters about his sculpture collection, but but hardly anything in his own writing. He asked for no memorial when he died.

What is extraordinary is that every fragment of information or anecdote opens a new window into the life of this mysterious figure. Since 2000 new evidence has appeared and each new clue builds up a picture of Thomas as a fascinating figure, with important influence in the arts and sciences.

The botanist and travel writer Thomas Pennant wrote this about Thomas Anson in his “Journey to Chester”:

“My much-respected friend the late Thomas Anson, Esquire, preferred the still paths of private life, and was the best qualified for its enjoyment of any man I ever knew; for with the most humane and the most sedate disposition, he possessed a mind most uncommonly cultivated. He was the example of true taste in this country; and at the time that he made his own place a paradise, made every neighbor partaker of its elegancies. He was happy in his life, and happy in his end. I saw him about thirty hours before his death, listening calmly to the melody of the harp, preparing for the momentary transit from an earthly concert to an union with the angelic harmonies.”

Most people who mention him in their letters or journals imply that he was a retiring and studious person, but he had been an adventurous traveller in his early life.

Pennant’s story of the harp may seem sentimental but it is true:

There is a list of bills to be paid at Anson's death in the Staffordshire Record Office which includes:

'For hire of harp £1 13s 6d'

Thomas's will (he died in 1773) shows who were his closest friends and what were his main areas of interest.

The estate was left to his nephew and sisters but Thomas left annuities (annual payments) to the architect James Stuart, the botanist and musician Benjamin Stillingfleet, the composer Anton Kammel and the agricultural reformer Nathaniel Kent and the historian Robert Orme.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The most important influence in the fortunes of the Ansons was the family connections of their mother, Isabella Carrier and her sister Janette. The Carriers were a Derbyshire land-owning family. The Anson's mother had married into a minor Staffordshire family (William Anson was a wealthy lawyer), but her sister married a future Lord Chancellor, Thomas Parker Earl of Macclesfield, with close links to Isaac Newton and the world of science and new thought.

Thomas Anson's cousin George Parker, 2nd Earl of Macclesfield was an astronomer and mathematician – the man responsible for changing from the Julian to Gregorian calendar in 1750.

On the death of Thomas Anson's father, lawyer William Anson, in 1720, Thomas Parker (nephew of Lord Macclesfield) and Thomas Anson were joint heirs of the estate, with annuities granted to Thomas's sisters Elizabeth, Isabella, Jennet, Anna and Joanna and brothers George and William. (William seems to have died young.)

Another influential connection in their early years was the mathematician William Jones (c.1675–1749). Jones was tutor to the Anson's cousin, George Parker, and lived part of the time at his house, Shirburn Castle. Jones left his library to Parker. Jones worked closely with Isaac Newton, who died in 1727. (The first Earl of Macclesfield, the Anson's uncle, was a pall bearer at his funeral.) It was Jones who introduced the concept of “pi” into mathematics.

William Jones was a member of the Royal Society, and proposed Thomas Anson for membership in 1730. He was also known as a free thinker and an active freemason and it is surprising that neither the Ansons nor their immediate family circle seem to have had any involvement with freemasonry.

There is no record of Thomas attending Royal Society meetings but this is the first of a series of societies and clubs which Thomas joined and where he met friends and could discuss new ideas.

The other important influence on the Anson's family fortunes was Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke, whose daughter, Elizabeth, married George Anson. Philip Yorke was a close friend of the Parkers from his youth, and was also taught by William Jones. Yorke's daughter married George Anson (she was twenty years younger than the Admiral) cementing the close family connection. Yorke's son married Jemima, Countess Grey, of Wrest Park, Bedfordshire.

From the start the Anson's were closely linked to the most powerful people in the country – Lord Hardwicke and his family, and the Parkers.

TRAVELLING AND CLUBBING

Thomas Anson entered St John's College Oxford at the age of 15 in 1711 and then studied law at the Inner Temple, being called to the bar in 1719. (The Inner Temple database says he was entered at the Inner Temple in 1708).

He is described as a 'practising lawyer' (9) like his father, but in his will in 1771 he claimed not to understand legal formalities. There seem to be no records of his legal career though in the 1720s he travelled in Europe with fellows from the Inner Temple.

Thomas's father died in 1720. Rather than retire to Shugborough to run the estate Thomas seems to have abandoned a legal career and begun his travels.

On the day he died (30th March 1773) Sir John Eardley Wilmot, a judge, who had worked on the Midland Circuit and turned down the offer to replace Hardwicke as Lord Chancellor (10), wrote that:

“In the former part of his life” Thomas Anson had “lived many years abroad; he was a very ingenious, polite, well-bred man and dignified...his accomplishments by his universal benevolence.” (8)

Ingamell's 'Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1701-1800' gives a few clues to Thomas's travels.

In July 1723 he is said to have been in Spa, Belgium, with “Mytten” and Simon Degge. Ingamell suggests that Mytton was William Mytton, a wine trader and one of the extensive Shropshire family.

It is far more likely to have been William Mytton's younger brother James. James Mytton lived in Richmond and here are many references to him in the Anson papers in the Staffordshire Archives.

James Mytton looked after Thomas's business while he was in the east in 1740/1, visited Paris with him in 1748 and, according to comment in one of Lady Anson's letters was staying at Shugborough in 1756. He seems to have been Thomas's longest lasting close friend. Thomas Pennant, a later friend of Thomas's was Mytton's nephew.

Simon Degge, of Blithfield, was a Staffordshire friend, and a contemporary of Thomas's in the Inner Temple. He joined the Royal Society with Thomas in 1730. Curiously his brother William joined the Dilettanti Society with Thomas.

In September 1724 Thomas Anson was in Padua with Alan Brodrick, also of the Inner Temple.

In April 1725 he went from Rome to Naples with Simon Degge and Thomas Kemp (unidentified) and in May went to Florence with Degge. (13)

From 1731 Thomas began to absorb property in the village. Most of the surrounding land was owned by Thomas before George Anson's voyage and immense wealth. The village was gradually removed, though there is no sign that people were forced out, and Thomas seems to have built new cottages near the present farm as late as 1770. Nathaniel Kent, writing after Anson's death, makes it clear that Anson was a very fair landlord.

1732 THE SOCIETY OF DILETTANTI

The Society of Dilettanti was founded by Sir Francis Dashwood and a group of friends in Italy, on the Grand Tour, in 1732. (6)

Horace Walpole said that official qualification for membership of the Dilettante was that you had been Italy, but the real qualification was that you were drunk. The register of the society was kept in a box called "Bacchus' Tomb".

The Society of Dilettanti became a serious force in the arts in the 1740s when they supported Stuart and Revett's expedition to Greece to record, for the first time, genuine Greek architecture.

Thomas Anson is listed as one of the earliest members, joining before 1736 when the list was compiled. He joined at the same time as William Degge, presumably brother of Simon Degge with whom he had travelled in Italy and had been elected to the Royal Society. Another early member was Lord Harcourt, who was a lifelong friend and attended Thomas's funeral in 1773.

As with the Royal Society there are no records of his later involvement but his travels in the East show that the idea of Greece was a powerful force in Thomas's life and his long association with James "Athenian Stuart" suggests that Thomas Anson was a key figure in the spread of the Greek Revival.

1730 ROYAL SOCIETY

Thomas Anson was proposed for membership of the Royal Society in 1730, by William Jones and Rev. Zachary Pearce, then rector of St Martin's in the Fields. Pearce was supported, as patron, by Lord Hardwicke, and he was also an associate of Sir Isaac Newton, helping him with his biblical chronology. Pearce visited Newton shortly before his death in 1727 and found him sitting in the depths of his room, far from the window, without spectacles revising his chronology.(5) There was a copy of the chronology, published in 1727, as well as Newton's Principia, in the library at Shugborough.

Thomas did not sign the register of the Royal Society or pay his fees, though Simon Degge, of Blithfield, who had entered the Inner Temple the same year as Thomas and was proposed with him, and travelled in Italy with him, did. (4)

The Royal Society was dominated by supporters of Lord Hardwicke, and his son Philip Yorke. Thomas may have joined just because of this family interest. (4)

THE DEATH OF LORD SCARBROUGH

Erasmus Darwin, in his "Zoonomia", (1794-6) tells of an extraordinarily dramatic event in Thomas Anson's life which occurred over fifty years earlier:

"Mr. Anson, the brother to the late Lord Anson related to me the following anecdote of the death of lord Sc-. His lordship sent to see Mr. Anson on the Monday preceding his death and said,

" You are the only friend I value in the world, I determined therefore to acquaint you, that I am tired of the insipidity of life, and intend to morrow to leave It."

Mr. Anson said after much conversation, that he was obliged to leave town till Friday, and added,

" As you profess a friendship for me, do me this last favour, I entreat you, live till I return."

Lord Sc- believed this to be a pious artifice to gain time, but nevertheless agreed, if he should return by four o'clock , on that day.

Mr. Anson did not return till five, and perceived by the countenances of the domestics, that the deed was done. He went into his chamber and found the corpse of his friend leaning over the arm of a great chair, with the pistol on the ground by him, the ball of which had been discharged into the roof of his mouth, and passed into his brain."
(15)

Lord Sc- is Lord Scarborough, who committed suicide on January 29th 1740 (New Style).

The story as told here suggests that this must have been a shocking experience. Lord Scarbrough had sent for Thomas to specifically to talk about his intention of committing suicide on the Monday and it seems he shot himself only a short time before Thomas Anson arrived, an hour later than he had promised.

This would inevitably an appalling sense of guilt.

Richard Lumley, 2nd Earl of Scarbrough was a close friend of the king, a successful army officer and a man, said Horace Walpole, of wisdom but no wit. He was considered a man of honour and out of place in a frivolous age. He was a close friend of Lord Chesterfield, who, Walpole said, had wit but no wisdom.

Scarbrough visited Chesterfield on his last day, presumably the Friday.

“The morning of the day on which he accomplished this resolution, he paid a long visit to Lord Chesterfield, and opened himself to him with great earnestness on many subjects. As he appeared somewhat discomposed, his friend pressed him to stay and dine with him, which he refused, but tenderly embraced him at parting. It happened in the course of the conversation, that something was spoken of which related to Sir Wm. Temple's negotiations, when the two friends not agreeing about the circumstances, Lord Chesterfield, whose memory was at all times remarkably good, referred Lord. S. to the page of Sir W.'s memoirs, where the matter was mentioned. After his lordship's death the book was found open at that very page, several other books being piled about him, with the pistol in his mouth.” (16)

Curiously, according to “Lord Chesterfield and his world” by Samuel Shellabarger, Lord Chesterfield was called from the House of Commons in the evening and the valet told him that Scarbrough had called for a carriage at 6 to take him to Lady Hervey's. When he failed to appear the valet found him dead. Perhaps Thomas arrived slightly later than he remembered.

There are different explanations of his suicidal mood – an accident a few days before that had affected his thinking, upset at political gossip, and the fact that he was due to marry the Dowager Duchess of Manchester bringing pressure of some kind.

In his will Scarbrough disinherited his brother Thomas who was the object of a scandalous memoir by Con Phillips (probably ghost written by Paul Whitehead) published in 1749. Phillips claimed to have been raped at the age of 13 by a gentleman. Some interpreters assumed this was Lord Chesterfield but it seems to have been Thomas Lumley, later the third Earl. There is an implication that Chesterfield and Scarbrough had also been libertines in their youth. (17)

Lord Scarbrough had a vital role in the career of architect and astronomer Thomas Wright. His family seat was Lumley Hall north of Durham. Scarbrough introduced Wright to the Admiralty in 1734 which began his successful career in London.

It is possible that, through Scarbrough, Thomas Anson could have had contact with Thomas Wright as early as the 1730s, long before Wright worked at Shugborough.

This incident stands out as the most dramatic and tragic of Thomas's life as far as we know. Perhaps there is a psychological link between Scarbrough's shocking death and Thomas's decision to set off on his tour of the Mediterranean alone in September 1740.

1740 – TRAVELS IN THE EAST – THE EGYPTIAN SOCIETY and THE DIVAN CLUB

Thomas left a sketchy journal of his travels in 1740-1. (1) Rather surprisingly he set off with his brother at the start of Admiral Anson's circumnavigation in September 1740, but they separated on September 29th. Thomas sailed, in naval ships, as far as Egypt, visiting Alexandria, Rosetta, Cairo and Aleppo, returning with Admiral Haddock. The diary notes 'Mr Mytton to answer my bills'.

Thomas is mentioned in letters from Francis Congreve, a merchant in Cairo, who was one of a Staffordshire family. Congreve sent a parcel of coffee to his brother in Minorca with Thomas and wrote that 'Mr Anson's stay here has been nothing but hurry.' (14)

Thomas's notebook is peculiarly uninformative about his trip but it does contain some notes about preserving seed. This is evidence that botany was one of Thomas's deepest interests – eventually leading to his creation of a greenhouse at Shugborough and his friendship with botanists Benjamin Stillingfleet and Thomas Pennant.

Philosopher James Harris tells an anecdote about Thomas's travels in the Mediterranean in his "Philological Enquiries":

WHEN the late Mr. Anson (Lord Anson's Brother) was upon his Travels in the East, he hired a Vessel, to visit the Isle of Tenedos. His Pilot, an old Greek, as they were sailing along, said with some satisfaction, "There 'twas our Fleet lay." Mr. Anson demanded, "What Fleet?" "What Fleet?" replied the old Man (a little piqued at the Question)—"WHY OUR GRECIAN FLEET AT THE SIEGE OF TROY". This story was told the Author by Mr. Anson himself. (18)

Tenedos is indeed the island, off Turkey, where the Greek fleet was harboured according to the Iliad.

This excursion does suggest that Thomas Anson, apparently travelling alone, was unusually adventurous. It also shows that the legend of the Trojan War had a very strong attraction indeed to make a single English traveller make a long diversion to visit a place where he could feel in touch with the very roots of Greek civilisation.

Could this be one of the inspirations that led to the Society off Dilettante supporting Stuart and Revett's work ten years later?

Thomas was not alone in visiting Egypt at about this time. In 1741 Lord Sandwich started a possibly short-lived Egyptian Society, inviting William Stukeley to join him with others who had explored Egyptian remains, including Martin Folkes, Dr Pococke (who had brought a mummy back and wrote journals of travels) and the Danish explorer Nordem. The club's symbol was "the so famous Egyptian rattle" of Isis. (12)

Thomas's signature is on the minute book of the Egyptian Society, now in the British Library, establishing that he was a member.

The figure of Isis in the dining room ceiling must commemorate Thomas's visit to Egypt and his membership of the Egyptian Society.

Isis is clearly identified by the rattle, or sistrum, she holds. Isis faces a plaster roundel of her partner Serapis (with a corn measure on his head). These are the later Greek versions of Egyptian deities as described by Plutarch. The other figures on the dining room ceiling are Confucius, celebrating George Anson's visit to China, and a maenad, with vines in her hair, which may refer to Walpole's comment about the real qualification for membership of the Society of Dilettante.

Thomas's travels also qualified him for membership of another club which shared several of the same members as the Egyptian Society, including Lord Sandwich and Dr Pococke. This was the Divan Club.

Sir Francis Dashwood founded this club after travelling to Smyrna and Constantinople in 1738-9. Membership was limited to people who had travelled "in the Sultan's dominions", the area ruled by Turkey.

Dashwood was painted by Knapton as "Il faquir Dashwood Pasha" in about 1745.

The presence of Sir Francis Dashwood and the element of fancy dress might suggest that the Divan Club was another excuse for a party but it does appear that the members had a serious interest in travel.

Rachel Finnegan's recent research has shown that Thomas Anson had far more of an involvement with the Divan Club than he appears to have had with the Society of Dilettante, in spite of his later close connection with James "Athenian Stuart". Both he and his brother George were members and Thomas attended seven "Divans" after his election on 1st March 1745. (2)

Among other members were Richard Owen Cambridge (whose father had been a "Turkey merchant") who remained a friend until Thomas's death, and a "Mr Wright" who may have been the architect Thomas Wright.

(For detailed information on Thomas's travels and the Divan Club see Rachel Finnegan's study, reference below)

There is no trace of the Anson's involvement with Dashwood's riotous Monks of Medmenham (often referred to as the "Hell-Fire Club"), though Admiral Anson's friend and colleague Lord Sandwich was involved with most of Dashwood's enterprises including his more riotous activities.

1745 THE JACOBITE REBELLION

The Jacobite Rebellion came alarmingly close to Shugborough. Bonnie Prince Charlie's forces marched to Derby and Thomas Anson kept his brother George informed of events, riding himself to Stone to hear news from Newcastle-under-Lyme, and sending agents up towards Ashbourne.

(Letters from Thomas Anson to George Anson, in the British Library)

December 4th '45 Wednesday

Dear Brother

You will share my disappointment when I relate the sequel after your alarm of your midnight march and most positive assurances that the Rebels were at Newcastle. I went to Stone in the morning full of the battle I was to see and met Crowds of People coming back in great Consternation who cry'd out 'it was begun'. I heard no firing, when I came I found all the Troops in and about the Town upon heaps. I forc'd my way to the Duke's (Cumberland) Quarters where I learn'd that the Rebels were at Leek. Having been long tir'd to death I got home as fast as I could, and find the Rascals left Leek at one this morning and tis suppos'd will be at Derby tonight.

Shugborough, 7 December 1745

...the rebels yesterday marched out of Derby and lay at Ashburn and the adjacent villages. A person I sent to reconnoitre saw the whole body pass along a valley at the other side of Weaver Hills, the road to Newcastle or Leek.

The rebels exceed 7,000: 3,000 or 4,000 good troop, the rest rabble and boys. The Pretender's son marched at the head. He is something under 6 feet high, wears a plaid, walks well, speaks little, and was never seen to smile. My situation is still the same - between two fires.

Shugborough 9 December 1745

They marched out of Leek yesterday, and are probably returning by the same route they came.

The rebels are greatly exasperated at their reception in Derby: their leader was observ'd to be much more gloomy than usual; their ladies wept; and their whole body marched out with visible dejection and despair. They have plundered and ravaged, murdered two or three people, and wounded others, so that their name is in horror and detestation. Their cruelty will probably increase, if they have time to exert it, which I fancy the Duke will not give them.

Shugborough 14th December 1745

The rebels marched out of Preston yesterday, our horse marched in that afternoon, and it was thought would be up with them by noon today. (11)

1747 MP FOR LICHFIELD

Thomas Anson was MP for Lichfield from 1747 to 1770. He was a whig MP in the interest of George Anson. He had little interest in what he called (on the 8th February

1748) the “cabal, intrigue, and...huddle of politics.” (8) He very rarely voted and in 1764 was referred to as one of “the deserters this session”. His only recorded speech was on an enclosure bill concerning Lichfield Cathedral. His last recorded vote was 29th March 1768 (9)

References:

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 - (3) John Martin Robinson: Shugborough, The National Trust, 1989
 - (4) Royal Society records of Fellows are accessible on <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/>
 - (5) Frank E Manuel: Life of Sir Isaac Newton
 - (6) J Mordaunt Crook: The Greek Revival
 - (7) Lucas Papers, Bedfordshire Record Office
 - (8) Romney Sedgwick: The House of Commons, 1715-1754, HMSO, 1970
 - (9) Sir Lewis Namier & John Brooke: The House of Commons 1754-1790 (HMSO 1964)
 - (10) Oxforddnb.com
 - (11) Captain S W C Pack CBE MSc ADC RN: Admiral Lord Anson, Cassell 1960
 - (12) Stuart Piggott: William Stukeley, an eighteenth century antiquary, Thames and Hudson, 1985
 - (13) John Ingamells: A dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1791-1800, Yale UP, 1997. I am very grateful to Rachel Finnegan for this information.
 - (14) Staffs Record Office – Congreve letters D1057/M/G/4
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 - (18) <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=FYsPAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA320&dq=james+harris+anfon#PPA321,M1>
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