

“Honest John” - Charles Henry Mitchell (1821-1882) Artist and Architect

At the time of the 1861 census Charles Henry Mitchell (aged 37) was living at Beathwaite Green (Levens, Cumbria) with his unmarried sister Louisa. His occupation was given as “Artist and Architect”. Living in the same house was Basil Bradley, then aged 18, listed as his assistant and an Artist in his own right. The other members of the household were Mary Latham, Housekeeper (aged 58), and John H. Lathom (aged 31 and a native of Levens), a servant and gardener respectively. Basil Bradley was later to become an accomplished and well-known animal painter. By contrast Charles H. Mitchell appears to have achieved comparatively little of artistic merit. Nevertheless, he persisted as an “Artist and Architect” throughout his life and often associated with other better-known artists. The 1861 census does not identify the exact property in which they were living but its position in the census returns, next to Walnut Tree House suggests, with some certainty, that it was Beathwaite House. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that the household employed a live-in gardener and that the property was advertised for rental in the *Westmorland Gazette* in both 1859 and 1862 (Information from Stephen Read).

Charles Henry Mitchell was born in Birstall, Yorkshire, the son of Thomas and Mary Mitchell, and was christened on 4 January 1822. His father was a surgeon. Little can be found about his early life and he appears to be missing from the 1841 and 1851 censuses, although in 1841 his parents were still living in Birstall, but his sister Louisa, then aged 13, was away at boarding school in Dewsbury. This suggests that Charles may also have undergone a similar privileged education. Following his brief appearance in Levens in the 1861 census returns he turns up three years later in Manchester, living in the Clarence Buildings, Booth Street (Slater’s Directory 1863). He again appears to vanish in the 1871 census only to re-emerge in 1876 living at 4 Booth Street, Manchester (Slater’s Directory 1876). In both the 1863 and 1876 Directories Mitchell is listed as a landscape artist. By the time of the 1881 census, he was living as an unmarried lodger at 46 Great Russell St., St. Giles in the Field, Bloomsbury, London where once more he is recorded as “Architect and Artist”. He died the following year, aged 60, on 27 November at 121 Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, London (Anon 1882a, b).

There is strong evidence that links Charles H. Mitchell to the wider circle of Manchester Artists to which Basil Bradley later belonged, although surprisingly he does not feature in Susan Thomson’s book on *Manchester’s Victorian Art Scene* (Anon 1856, 1872a,b, Thomson 2007). His death notice in *The Morning Post* states that he was “Late of Manchester” and he features in the list of artists

who attended an “Exhibition of the Works of Manchester Artists” in 1856 (Anon 1856). Furthermore, Charles H. Mitchell was a lifelong friend of the distinguished Carlisle-born artist Sam Bough who lived in Manchester from 1843-1846. Sidney Gilpin’s book entitled *Sam Bough RSA. Some Account of his Life and Work*, published in 1905, gives us a small glimpse into Mitchell’s life and character (Gilpin 1905). Here Mitchell is described as an Architect and amateur Artist who moved in artistic circles and was clearly well-connected. In the mid 1840’s Both Mitchell and Bough were members of a life drawing group, the Manchester Academy, a self-styled association of artists and students formed for “improvements in drawing the figure, designing, modelling, and the mutual interchange of ideas”. At this time Bough was employed a scenery painter at the Theatre Royal, Manchester (Vincent, 1991, Baxter 1995).

Gilpin notes that “Bough and Mitchell were on such intimate terms that the artist used to try the architect’s patience sorely, by applying to him all sorts of cognomens such as for instance, “Honest John”, “My gifted friend”, “John the knowing” etc.” Bough, however, was renowned as an irascible character who was difficult to get on with and who was disrespectful to the art establishment. He was highly opinionated and not averse to giving anyone the rough edge of his tongue, often using abusive language and, despite all this, being highly sensitive himself to criticism by others (Vincent 1991). He is also known to have spent much of his time in local hostelrys. He had, however, several redeeming features, being scholarly and widely read, and a competent fiddle player (Gilpin 1905, Vincent 1991, Gardener 1995).

While it is impossible accurately to gauge Mitchell’s own character one suspects he must have been a bit of a rogue himself to get along with Bough. A couple of examples support this viewpoint. Gilpin describes Mitchell accompanying Bough on his first visit to Anstruther on the coast of Fife in Scotland, an area that Bough was frequently to grace with his presence in the future (Baxter 1995). Apparently the pair of them were staying at Mr Robertson’s Commercial Hotel and they attempted to persuade the proprietor that they were “...two english clergymen searching for the lost sheep of the flock among the people of Fifeshire and trying to do good to the heathen in these and other distant parts!” (Gilpin 1905). They often recounted the story among their friends but were not invariably believed. Mitchell remained single all his life but a letter from William Percy, another member of the original Manchester Academy, to Sam Bough, dated 30 November 1872, discusses relationships among mutual friends, suggesting that Mitchell had a way with the ladies. It notes that “I see my gifted friend Mitchell is still forward: and has taken another to his Harem, the blessed old Turk”. Mitchell at the time was in his early fifties.

A water-colour portrait of Sam Bough as a young man aged 24, now in Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle was painted by William Percy and given to Charles H. Mitchell (Gilpin 1905). It remained in Mitchell's possession throughout his life and was eventually sold amongst his effects by the auctioneers Cape Dunn and Pilchard in London. Mitchell also had at least one Sam Bough painting in his collection. A list of Sam Bough paintings exhibited at the Royal Manchester Institution in 1860, when Bough was living in Edinburgh, included a watercolour of "Oaks - Cadzow Forest"... "The property of C.H. Mitchell Esq." (Gilpin 1905).

Charles H Mitchell, despite his association with noted painters, does not appear to have been a particularly prolific or gifted artist. There is a lack of evidence that he exhibited his work widely and he did not exhibit at any of the major London venues such as the Royal Academy or the Royal Society of British Artists, the normal outlets for aspiring artists (Graves 1901). Similarly, he does not feature in the any major dictionaries of Victorian artists (e.g. Wood 1978) and few of his paintings have appeared at auction. The titles of the five examples known from 1984 to the present (2012), all of which sold for under £500, give some indication of his subject matter. They are *Marple Old Hall, Cheshire, A River, Cattle and Sheep Resting by a River, Scarborough Castle from the North Shore, and a Farmyard in Kenilworth* (Blouin Art Sales Index, 2012, Findartinfo 2012).

Why Charles H. Mitchell moved to London towards the end of his life to live alone in a lodging house remains a mystery. The move appears to have taken place around 1876-77. Slater's Directory of Manchester for 1876 lists him living at 4 Booth Street but his absence from a subsequent Slater's directory in 1877-78 suggests that he had already moved. However, he is not listed in the Post Office London Directory for the year of his death (1882).

Charles Henry Mitchell's will, dated 25 November 1882, contains little that would interest the art historian other than two legacies of £100 and £200 (out of a declared total of £6517) respectively to fellow artists Thomas Armstrong of London and William Morton of Salford. Mitchell's address on his will is given as "46 Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury Squarebut late of 121 Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square."

Perhaps far more interesting from a Levens perspective is the legacies that Mitchell left to his former neighbours in Levens, long after he had departed the area. His will states "I bequeath all my wearing apparel to John Squire...now or late of Beathwaite Green, Levens near Milnthorpe, in the County of Westmorland Labourer. I bequeath to Margaret the daughter of the said John Squire the sum of two hundred pounds". John Squire and his family lived at

Walnut Tree Cottage in 1861 when Mitchell and Basil Bradley were living at Beathwaite House. The residue of Mitchell's estate was left in trust for his sister Louisa but on her death Margaret Squire was to receive a further share of the inheritance. It is interesting to speculate, given Mitchell's unmarried status and obvious attraction to the fair sex, why Margaret was a named beneficiary twenty years after Mitchell lived in Levens. In this context it may also be significant that he left a legacy of £200 to Kate Brady, a young servant girl at the Brazenose Club in Manchester. It is not known, however, whether Mitchell retained contact with the Squire family.

Margaret Squire, born in 1839, was 35 years younger than Mitchell whom she presumably met around 1861. She had lived all her life up until then in what is now Levens village. She married Thomas Sadler, a shoemaker, in 1878. He was born in Ireland but by the time of their marriage was living in Levens. Three years later, just before Mitchell's death, the couple were living at Pear Tree Cottage, Levens.

Margaret Squire died in 1911. Louisa Mitchell was alive in 1881 but then disappears from subsequent census returns. She may of course have been any one of the several hundred Louisa Mitchells who married or died during this period, making her difficult to trace, and it remains uncertain whether Margaret ever received the second part of her inheritance. Nevertheless, Margaret was sufficiently wealthy in 1888 to be able to purchase in her own right, two properties known as Mountain View, Levens where she was living at the time of the 1891 census. She then moved, with her family, before 1901 to live in Kendal where she died. Margaret's father passed away at Causeway End, Levens in 1890 so it is highly likely that he received his due inheritance.

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