

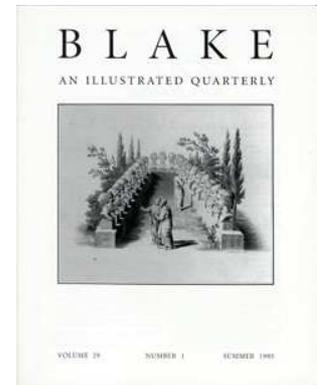
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

The Arlington Court Picture

Jacqueline E. M. Latham

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 29, Issue 1, Summer 1995, p. 24



MINUTE PARTICULAR

The Arlington Court Picture by Jacqueline E. M. Latham

David Bindman, discussing Blake's *Arlington Court Picture* (Butlin no. 803) of 1821, found by chance in 1947 at Arlington Court, North Devon (Keynes 196-99), wrote that there was "no record of any association, however remote, between Blake and the Chichesters" (Bindman 207). There is, however, a possible association through Colonel Chichester's third wife.

In 1822, Colonel John Palmer Chichester, owner of Arlington Court, which he was rebuilding, married in London by special license Sophia Catherine Ford, who was half his age. He had commanded the Cardiganshire Militia and had printed a small volume of "Rules and Regulations" with a short preface (Chichester 101). He died in November 1823 and, having in his will left his widow the jewels and trinkets he had given her during his life, he revoked the gift in a codicil, made three days before his death, leaving the jewels and trinkets to his daughter and £300 in lieu to his widow; there are no expressions of affection. Certainly, there seems little likelihood of any association with Blake.

The case for Sophia Chichester, however, is persuasive. She was born in 1795, the daughter of a Barbados plantation owner, Sir Francis Ford, Bart., and niece of Thomas Anson, the first Viscount and rising Whig grandee. In spite of the conventional upper class background, in the 1830s while she was living at Ebworth Park, her sister Georgiana's country house in Gloucestershire, she supported by correspondence and with large sums of money many of the ultra-radical preachers and prophets who were trying to build a new society on the basis of counter-enlightenment modes of thinking and feeling. She is best known as the friend and patron of James Pierrepont Greaves, the mystic and "sacred socialist," founder of the community and school at Alcott House, Ham Common, 1838-48, but she also, more controversially, supported and sought spiritual guidance from John "Zion" Ward, who had declared himself to be the redeemer Shiloh whom Joanna Southcott had expected to bear before her death in 1814. Ward died in 1837, corresponding with Sophia Chichester to the last, and at about the same time she was funding both James "Shepherd" Smith, who was preaching his new religion "Universalism," and Richard Carlile, who had turned from Paineite freethought to a form of symbolic Christianity. (Greaves, Ward, Smith and Carlile are all to be found with their individual beliefs and anti-establishment views in the *DNB*.) In 1841, Sophia Chichester made her political position clear by translating from the French the socialist work of the Fourierist Madame Gatti de Gamond, *The Phalanstery*. In 1844, only three years before her death, she was diagnosing the breakdown of Henry James

Senior, on a visit to England with his family, as a Swedenborgian "vastation" (Latham).

Sophia Chichester was clearly a woman searching for spiritual guidance, dissatisfied with the established church and its alliance with an oppressive state. Though nothing is known about her beliefs and attitudes in 1823, when the Blake painting is believed to have come into the Chichester family, judging by the evidence of her later activities, she shared with Blake an alienation from formal church structures and a need to embrace a more mystical and less conventional vision of reality, whether expressed in the varied tradition of dissent or the personal symbolism of Swedenborg. Like Blake, Sophia Chichester was excluded from the privileged classical education of the universities and never seems to have found a political or religious organization which fully met her inner needs. Unlike the genius Blake, however, she was not able to gain the satisfaction of creating and expressing her own symbolic truths.

We cannot know why *The Arlington Court Picture* was bought by the Chichesters. But it is possible to see that its much disputed subject, a choice involving spiritual revelation, as least finds an echo in what we know of Sophia Chichester's later years. Whether she lived at Arlington Court after her husband's 1823 death in Weymouth is not known, but if my hypothesis is correct, that the painting came into the family through Sophia Chichester, then it is surprising that she did not take it with her when she joined her sister at Ebworth Park. Perhaps the coldness of Colonel Chichester's will suggests an explanation.

Works Cited

- Bindman, David. *Blake as an Artist*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1977.
Chichester, A. P. B. *History of the Family of Chichester*. London: Privately Printed, 1871.
Keynes, Geoffrey. *Blake Studies*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971.
Latham, J. E. M. "Henry James Senior's Mrs Chichester." *Henry James Review* 14 (1993): 132-40.

D I S C U S S I O N

with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought

David Simpson's suggestion that the bending figure in Blake's color print *Newton* may be a conflation of Sir Isaac Newton and the Rev. John Newton, the reformed slave-trader, is indeed interesting. It leads by an almost irresistible imaginative progression to the further surmise that the "mighty Spirit ... Nam'd Newton" who "leap'd from the land of Albion" and seized from Orc the "Trump of the last doom"