PARTICULAR

Newfound Particulars of Blake’s Patrons, Thomas and Elizabeth Butts, 1767–1806

By Mary Lynn Johnson

Mary Lynn Johnson (mary-grant@uiowa.edu), a retired special assistant in the University of Iowa president’s office, has written several essays on Blake’s biblical watercolors for Thomas Butts. For help in working through her recent archival findings, she thanks G. E. Bentley, Jr., Joseph Viscomi, Keri Davies, Morton Paley, Morris Eaves, and Sarah Jones.

1 A friendly benefactor of William and Catherine Blake, the clerk Thomas Butts (1759–1845) and his schoolmistress wife, née Elizabeth Mary Cooper (1754–1825), merit an occasional spotlight in the background of Blake studies. To published profiles of the couple may now be added details of their occupations, possessions, finances, and other circumstances from previously unexplored materials in the London Metropolitan Archives, the National Archives, parish records, and miscellaneous publications of the time. Corrections of earlier errors, along with additions to core facts about Butts’s family history and Methodist heritage, are noted here.

2 Elizabeth Mary Cooper, having served a seven-year apprenticeship to a schoolmistress (1767–74), later supervised five apprentices for overlapping terms (1782–95) in her own school, beginning with her sister Elyn, and among her pupils were at least two whose parents were not married. Elizabeth’s carver-gilder father, Joseph Cooper, and her mother, Elizabeth, née Yardley (daughter of silversmith George Yardley and Winifred, née Nash), who were married in the bride’s parish of St. Olave, Silver Street (17 July 1750), baptized their two sons and four elder daughters in that parish (1751–64) and their two younger daughters...
in St. Mary, Islington (1768–70), almost two miles north.\(^3\) On 3 October 1767, Mary Blackstone "of St Mary Islington Middx School Mistress" took thirteen-year-old "Eliz. Cooper" as her apprentice for a seven-year term that began on 7 September 1767, paying a stamp duty of £0/10/6 on a premium of £21, presumably supplied by Elizabeth's father. After completing her term in September 1774, Elizabeth was qualified for employment in a school or a private home.\(^3\)  

3 On 18 July 1782, in her own establishment, "Eliz\(^{th}\) Cooper[,] South Moulton St Co of Middlesex School Mistress" accepted her sister Elyn, not quite fourteen, as her first apprentice for a premium of £70, on which she paid a £1 duty (only on the amount above £50; see note 4) at term's end on "Tues. 21 July 1782." On 6 September 1784, establishing a pattern of two-year intervals, she accepted Augusta Johnson for a seven-year term under an indenture of £71, for which both "Eliz\(^{th}\) & Thos Butts[,] South Moulton St. C\(^{0}\), of Middx" paid a £1/11/0 duty on 16 July 1789. On 28 September 1787, "Eliz. Butts[,] St George Hanover Square School Mistress" paid 15s. on £30 for two indentures for Elizabeth Parker, whose seven-year apprenticeship had begun on 13 August 1786. Running concurrently with Elyn's, Augusta's, and Elizabeth's terms was the three-year apprenticeship of Margaret Barker, 27 May 1784 to 17 May 1787, for which Elizabeth Butts had paid £1/5/0 on £50 for two indentures (23 July 1785). And finally, on 9 June 1789, "Eliz\(^{th}\) Butts[,] St James' [sic] … School Mistress," in the parish of her post-1788 school and family home on Great Marlborough Street, paid a duty of 15s. on £30 for Lydia Pitman's two indentures for a seven-year term, 16 May 1788 to May 1795.\(^4\)

4 The only two pupils in Mrs. Butts's school presently identifiable by name, as recorded in their fathers' wills, were acknowledged daughters of unmarried mothers. Captain James Denty's "natural Daughter Elizabeth Denty … about seven years of age now at Mrs. Butts Boarding School in South Moulton Street" (1790) was to receive £600 on her twenty-first birthday (Johnson, "More …" 148, 164n64). And in an 1801 codicil to his 1796 will, the bachelor Benjamin Charles Collins (d. 1808) named as sole beneficiary of the residue of his estate "Maria Castle (so called) at Mrs Butts Ladies School, Great Marlbro [sic] Street, Carnaby Market the said Maria to be a ward of Chancery." Maria's mother was presumably Mary Elizabeth Goodeneye, "calling herself Mary Castle now residing with me at No. 40 New Road in the parish of St Mary le Bone Middlesex."
Particulars of Thomas Butts, 1786–1806

5 In 1786, when Thomas Butts lost a “Note of Hand,” or promissory note, for the large sum of £150, his advertised address, complete with street number, was that of his wife’s school:

LOST, between South Molton-street and Cavendish-square, a Note of Hand for 150l, drawn by Thos. Butts, No. 63, South Molton-street, payable to Edward Johns, on order, due 21st inst. and indorsed. As the note is paid, it will be of no use. Whoever will bring it to Messrs. Hercy, B[irch], and Hobbs, New Bond-street, shall receive One Guinea Reward. 6

This address is in the parish of St. George, Hanover Square, where Elizabeth had lived before her marriage and where the Buttess’ first son, Joseph Edward, was baptized in 1784 (Johnson, “More …” 146), before the family moved to Great Marlborough Street.

6 Butts’s occupation before his marriage to Elizabeth on 21 December 1782, while he was living across town in the parish of St. George the Martyr (Johnson, “More …” 145) and not yet employed by the chief clerk in the office of the Commissary General of Musters in 1783 (Bentley, “Thomas Butts” 1053), remains unknown. Perhaps he was a coal merchant. Registers of the Sun Fire Office, which record policy numbers and summarize the policies themselves, show that on 24 September 1792, “Thomas Butts No 9 Great Marlborough Street Coal Merchant” insured his “now dwelling House only Brick” for “Fifteen hundred pounds,” and his “Stable Coachhouse & Brewhouse adjoining in Blenheim Mews Brick” for “Two hundred pounds.” On 21 July 1796 this “Coal Merchant” paid 16s. to insure the family’s personal property for £750, itemized as “Household Goods” for £450, “Printed Books, Plate, & Pictures” for £150 at “Fifty pounds on each,” “Wearing Apparel” for £100, and “Prints Drawings & Needle Work” for £50. In a comprehensive investigation of the order in which Blake signed and sold his large color prints, Viscomi has proposed that Butts’s insured “Pictures” included three color prints by Blake, “Hecate, Satan, and Pity,” signed c. 1795–96, an acquisition leading up to his 1799 commission of the biblical tempera series. 7

7 In 1788, when Butts and his associate William Woodman were jointly promoted to chief clerk, each earned £91/5/0; by 1797, Butts’s official salary had soared to a three-year average of £430/14/8 (Bentley, “Thomas Butts” 1053–54), not counting the sideline coal business, which is confirmed also in the 1807 will of Butts’s maternal uncle, Thomas Witham, and doubtless accounts for Butts’s later payments to Blake in coals (Johnson, “More …” 138, 145). The “Stable Coachhouse” insured in 1792 is a mark of affluence; perhaps the adjoining “Brewhouse” in Blenheim Mews, be-

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8. Morning Post and Daily Advertiser 23 Mar. 1786, issue 4087 (Gale doc. no. Z2000954796, 17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers). This newly reported house number, with a rental value of £10 (reflected in Butts’s payment of poor rates for 1784; see “ratebook_151-15109” at <http://www.londonlives.org/formRef.jsp>), places the Buttess on the southeastern side of South Molton Street, near its diagonal intersection with Brook Street, toward New Bond Street. (When the Blakes moved to no. 17 in 1803, they were on the northwestern side, nearer Oxford Street.)


Ironmonger Johns also sold the “New-invented SALISBURY PORTABLE KITCHEN,” in which “a joint may be roasted, and another boiled, with vegetables and puddings all at the same time, with less than two pennyworth of charcoal”; while still hot, it could bake “a loaf in one part, and pies, tarts, cakes, rolls, or muffins in the other.” It was marketed “to those who have not proper convenience for cooking, and to Gentlemen at their country and hunting seats; also to merchants’ ships, and officers in camp …” (Morning Post and Daily Advertiser 20 July 1780, issue 2414, Gale doc. no. Z2000945565, 17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers).


The insured “Needle Work” brings to mind a piece attributed in part to Blake, the “Two Hares” embroidery by William Blake and Mrs. Butts (c. 1790–1800) (Fitzwilliam Museum).


11. Presumably Butts belonged to the “class of middle-men who are called in the trade ‘Brass-plate Coal-MERCHANTS’ … who have no wharfs, but merely give their orders to some true coal-merchant,” thereby increasing consumers’ costs (Charles Babbage, On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures [London: Charles Knight, 1832] 124).
hinder the school's long back garden, brought in rent from a tenant. In 1799 Butts's estimated annual taxable income of about £468/13/0 from all sources gave him a foothold in the upper middle class.12

8 The promotion of Butts and Woodman was retroactive to 2 June 1788, the date their employer, "George Hesse, esq.," returned from gambling at the Phillimore Club "about two o'clock in the morning," went into the library of "his house in the Adelphi," wrote letters to his mother, his wife (née Gunthrop[e], daughter of a wealthy West India merchant), and to "Mr. Agar, Mr. Crawford, and Mr. Woodman," "charged very lightly one of his own travelling pistols," and shot himself through the mouth. "His pecuniary affairs, from deep play" had "sustained a shock of the most momentous nature." When the body was discovered six hours later, a "Coroner's Inquisition" was quickly convened, with Butts and Woodman among the deponents.

9 "Thomas Butt[s] late Clerk to Mr. Hesse, the Deced[ent]," appearing "before Thomas Prickard, Gentleman, Coroner of our said Lord the King ... on View of the Body of George Adam Calcraft Hesse Esq" then and there lying dead, "on his Oath saith That he has lived with the Deced / almost five Years, Deced being Chief Clerk to the / Commissary General of Musters." Butts swore that Hesse "for about three Weeks last past has been / dejected and very low Spirited, and often in / Dep[onen][.]s" hearing said that he did not know what / he was doing, and Dep1 saw him do things / that he did not intend to do ... And Dep1 says / that the Deced was at times Disordered in / his Mind. Says that he Understood that / there were some [inserted above line] loose Papers and Letters / found in Deced's Parlour this Morning, but / none directed to this Dep1. to his Knowledge." After Woodman's corroborating testimony, the jury reached a verdict: Hesse "being a Lunatick Shot himself with a Pistol Ball ..."

10 At probate hearings on "26th January 1790," Thomas Butts, "Coal Merchant," and Reuben Smith, "Wine Merchant" (also one of fifteen jurors at the inquest), "having frequently seen the said deceased write and also Subscribe his name," authenticated Hesse's handwritten one-sentence will, dated "1 June 1788 London." The will names Woodman as an administrator of the depleted estate, "which if it were Millions I bequeath to my most beloved and adorabile Wife all &


For this first-ever income tax, imposed on 9 Jan. 1799 under Pitt the Younger to pay for the oncoming Napoleonic Wars, incomes estimated below £60 were not taxed; between £60 and £200 the rates increased according to £5 increments in income; those in the highest bracket, above £200, were taxed at ten percent. Among Butts's neighbors on the same street, only one, Culpepper Conant, paid less: £615/0, indicating an income of only £145-50 or so, according to "Scale of Ascent from £60 to £200" in Tax on Income. A Correct Abridgment of the Act for Imposing a Tax on All Income, 5th ed. (London, 1799), Gale doc. no. CW3304852647, ECCO. Married women who owed taxes were listed separately (Jackson, "British Incomes" 272-73); the absence of an entry for schoolmistress Butts suggests that her adjusted income fell below the £60 threshold.


13. Almost verbatim accounts appeared in such papers as the Times (4 June 1788, with "Further Particulars" on 5 June), the Morning Post and Daily Advertiser (4 June 1788), and, quoted here, the June issue of Gentleman's Magazine (58, pt. 1 [1788]: 563-64).

Hesse also kept company with the Prince of Wales and with political satirist Caleb Whitefoord, who corresponded with Benjamin Franklin's grandson about extending hospitality to Mrs. Hesse on her 1783 visit to Paris (The Whitefoord Papers ... [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898] 190-91; see also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedNames.jsp>). For a searching analysis of the case, with further citations of insiders' gossip in the English Chronicle (3 June 1788), General Evening Post (5 and 7 June 1788), and elsewhere, see Donna T. Andrew, Aristocratic Vice: The Attack on Duelling, Suicide, Adultery, and Gambling in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 99-101.

14. All quotations from these depositions are transcribed, via <http://www.londonlives.org>, from City of Westminster Coroners: Coroners' Inquests into Suspicous Deaths, 5 Jan. 1788–29 Dec. 1788, WACWIC652280332 [Butts's and Woodman's testimony; 2 June 1788] and WACWIC652280323 [jurors' names and verdict].

Hesse's name is inserted by hand into a printed form in which coroner Prickard's name appears in italics. Butts's oath that he "lived with" Hesse for "almost five Years" (1783-88), surely referring only to the workday, indicates that his clerkship had begun in the second half of 1788. Hesse's home at 1-2 Adam Street in "the Adelphi," designed by the Adam brothers, was about a mile from the Musters office at Horse Guards on Whitehall. Hesse was also "Computer of Off-reckonings," at £80, in the Office of Paymaster General (London Calendar [1788] 165), among several sinecures obtained through his well-connected father, John Adam Frederick Hesse (1716–83). The younger Hesse, "by his interest with the then paymasters-general of the forces, Lord North and Mr. Cooke, in whose office the elder Mr. H. held a situation of considerable emolument," received £600 a year after sixteen years there, augmented by the Musters appointment, "which, in time of war, has attached to it considerable advantages"; by 1788 his "official income amounted annually to the sum of 1500l," not counting the "liberal fortune" of his wife (Gentleman's Magazine; see note 13, above).
everything in my power to give & grant I trust she will have both real and personal.”

11 At some point, perhaps as a way of managing and dividing perquisites and emoluments after their joint elevation to Hesse’s vacated position, Butts and Woodman formed a private partnership. On 3 July 1802, as Woodman’s retirement approached, they terminated the agreement: “Notice is hereby given, that the Copartnership between William Woodman and Thomas Butts, of Whitehall, Westminster, Army and Half-Pay Agents, is this Day dissolved by mutual Consent. All Debts owing to or from the said partnership Concern will be received and paid by the said Thomas Butts only.” And at last, under “Monies paid by” in “An Account of the Income of the Consolidated Fund of Great Britain, for the year ended the 5th day / of January 1806,” “Thomas Butts, on Account of the late George Hesse, Esq.,” discharged what must have been Hesse’s final obligation of “£1,351/16/7.”

12 As Bentley and Viscomi have shown, Thomas and Elizabeth Butts’s residences, occupations, and expenditures have a bearing on the formation of their Blake collection. The present collection of minutiae is offered in the hope that some oddly angled fact, spotted by a foraging scholar, will jibe with another fact at just the right point to nudge a worthy project forward, toward the general advancement of Blake studies.


16. London Gazette, issue 15494, p. 709. When the Musters office was abolished on 25 Sept. 1818, Woodman received a pension of £200, on the basis of fourteen years’ service (1788–1802), while Butts, having served thirty-five years (1783–1818), received £430, and his sons “1st Senior Clerk” Joseph Edward, appointed in 1799, and “3rd” clerk Thomas, appointed in 1803, received £140 and £99 (Estimates and Accounts: Army; Navy; Ordnance; Civil List … &c. 11 [21 Apr.–23 Nov. 1820]: [203 (handwritten p. 195)]).