

## Bicknell, Elhanan (1788–1861), art patron and businessman

Oxford Dictionary of  
National Biography

Bicknell, Elhanan (1788–1861), art patron and businessman, was born on 21 December 1788, at 8 Blackman Street, Southwark, London, the second son of William Bicknell (1749–1825) and his wife, Elizabeth, *née* Randall (1756–1821), of Sevenoaks, Kent. William was a friend of John Wesley and the Unitarian minister Elhanan Winchester, after whom he named his son. In 1789 William sold the serge manufacturing business which his grandfather had established at Taunton and Newington, and set up a school at Ponders End, moving it to Tooting Common in 1804; there Elhanan was educated, with Thomas Wilde, afterwards Lord Chancellor Truro. In 1808 he was sent to Caus, near Shrewsbury, to learn farming, but at the end of a year he abandoned that project; he returned to London and joined his uncle's firm at Newington Butts. John Walter Langton (1746–1822) had invented a process of using spermaceti, derived from whale oil, for the manufacture of candles; the company established to exploit his discovery—which became Langton and Bicknell—thived. About 1835 Bicknell foresaw how the repeal of the navigation laws, then in debate, would injure his trade, yet he disinterestedly supported the abolition of all protection.

From about 1838 Bicknell was a close friend of the painter David Roberts, and started to make a collection of modern British art. In 1845–6, probably inspired by Bicknell's business, J. M. W. Turner painted four whaling pictures. Paintings and sculptures, such as Edward Hodges Baily's *Eve*, adorned the principal rooms of Bicknell's house, which were always hospitably open to artists and art connoisseurs; visitors included John Ruskin, who from 1823 to 1842 lived opposite Carlton House, Herne Hill, to which Bicknell had moved about 1819. Apart from Thomas Gainsborough and Richard Wilson, the artists represented in his collection were those active in London about 1840, such as David Roberts, Clarkson Stanfield, William Collins, Augustus Callcott, William Hilton, Edwin Landseer, Charles Eastlake, and Turner, by whom Bicknell had choice works ranging from two small landscapes first exhibited in 1810–12 to some of his best paintings of Venice and watercolours of Switzerland of the early 1840s. Bicknell wanted to leave his collection to the nation, but for family reasons his pictures were sold after his death at Christies auction rooms in April 1863, realizing over £75,000.

In politics and in theology Bicknell was an enthusiastic and progressive liberal. He was a principal contributor to the building of the Unitarian chapel at Brixton, and gave £1000 to the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. He married four times: first, on 16 October 1810, to his first cousin and sister of his partner, Hannah Wootton Langton (1787/8–1815), with whom he had a son, Elhanan (1813–1860). He married second, on 13 February 1817, Mary Jones (*d.* 1827); their son, Henry Sanford Bicknell (1818–1880), married David Roberts's daughter and had his own art collection. His third marriage, to Lucinda Sarah (1801–1850), sister of the illustrator Hablot K. Browne, took place on 5 May 1829, and among their children were [Herman Bicknell \(1830–1875\)](#), the orientalist, Algernon Sidney Bicknell (1832–1911), author, and [Clarence Bicknell \(1842–1918\)](#), botanist. Finally, on 14 August 1851, Elhanan married Louisa Holland (1803/4–1884), widow of Henry Jones. Bicknell's health failed in 1861, and in the summer of that year he retired from business. He died at Carlton House on 27 November 1861, and was buried at Norwood cemetery on 3 December.

Selby Whittingham

## Sources

P. Bicknell and H. Guiterman, 'The Turner collector: Elhanan Bicknell', *Turner Studies*, 7/1 (1987), 34–44 · A. S. Bicknell, *Five pedigrees* (1912) · J. J. Howard and F. A. Crisp, eds., *Visitation of England and Wales*, 21 vols. (privately printed, London, 1893–1921), vol. 17, pp. 33–46; vol. 21, p. 77 · D. S. Macleod, *Art and the Victorian middle class: money and the making of cultural identity* (1996), 393–5 · E. Browne, *Phiz and Dickens as they appeared to Edgar Browne* (1913), chap. 4 · G. F. Waagen, *Treasures of art in Great Britain*, 2 (1854), 349–54 · 'The collection of Elkanah [sic] Bicknell, esq., at Herne Hill', *Art Journal*, 19 (1857), 8–10 · *The Athenaeum* (7 Dec 1861), 769 · *Christian Reformer, or, Unitarian Magazine and Review*, new ser., 18 (1862), 55–9 · P. Bicknell, 'Turner's *The whale ship*: a missing link?', *Turner Studies*, 5/2 (1985), 20–23 · K. Sim, *David Roberts R.A., 1796–1864: a biography* (1984) · 'Clarence Bicknell', *On Beacon Hill*, 2 (1996–7), 1–4 [an occasional newsletter about the Bicknell family] · *The Times* (30 Nov 1861), 1a · cemetery records, West Norwood cemetery, London

## Archives

[NL Scot.](#) · [NRA, priv. coll.](#), Bicknell sales of 1863, Christies catalogues annotated and interleaved [microfilm copy at FM Cam.] | [NL Scot.](#), Roberts MSS

## Likenesses

S. Drummond, oils, 1789, [priv. coll.](#) · S. Drummond, oils, c.1796, [priv. coll.](#) · T. Phillips, oils, c.1830, Vintners Hall, London · T. Phillips, oils, in or before 1842 · C. Bagniet, lithograph, 1864, [priv. coll.](#) · S. Drummond, group portrait, oils, [priv. coll.](#)

## Wealth at death

£400,000<sup>1</sup>: resworn probate, Nov 1866, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales* (1861)

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=2356&back=>

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<sup>1</sup> Worth nearly £6m in 2013 money (MB June 2013)