

THE BICKNELLS OF HERNE HILL

(Part I) by Patricia M. Jenkyns.

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In 1937 approval was given for Anstey Road near Loughborough Junction to be renamed "Bicknell Road", and on older maps. a row of shops on the crest of Herne Hill is known as "Carlton Parade". These are the only reminders of the large and interesting family who once lived on Herne Hill. Few people know much about them now. despite the entries of Bicknell and one of his sons in the "National Biography". the fact that another son founded a Museum: that he and yet another son wrote books on the flora of the Mediterranean which are still used for references purposes by the Royal Horticultural Society: that another son was one of the first Englishmen to climb the Matterhorn. and that the family vault is on the West Norwood Cemetery Tomb Trail.

Elhanan Bicknell was born in Southwark in 1778, the son of a schoolmaster. After short periods working as an assistant teacher at his father's school in Tooting. and training to be a gentleman farmer, he entered into partnership with a cousin in a business with interests in shipping and the Pacific sperm-whale industry. In a later census he is described as a "shipowner and merchant". Certainly by 1818, at the age of 30. he was successful and wealthy enough to purchase land on Herne Hill (next to the Casina House Estate) and there build the substantial "Carlton House"¹. His estate covered most the present Danecroft Road to Frankfurt Road, opposite No.28 Herne Hill. the first home of the Ruskins. He married four times and had thirteen children. By the time he was 37 he had been widowed twice, but his third marriage lasted 21 years, and produced eight children. I think that this wife, Lucinda, was the love of his life. for it was she who, despite having

¹ The house was never called Carlton House during Elhanan's lifetime, just "Herne Hill" (V. Lester 2017)

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died eleven years previously, and that he had been married for ten years to his fourth wife, was transferred from the catacombes to lie with him in the family vault in West Norwood Cemetery.

Besides being a very successful business man, Bicknell was a collector of modern English paintings, drawings and prints, many of which were bought directly from the artists. He was the friend of, and benefactor to, artists and connoisseurs, among them Turner, David Roberts and Ruskin. When he died, at the age of 72, Bicknell's art treasures were sold at Christies. His oil paintings, sold on the first day of the first three-day sale, realised £58,600, a great sum for those days (1863). The third sale, held at "Carlton House", was of its contents. Interest was so great that in the time running up to the sale, Herne Hill was blocked by crowds, and there was a row of carriages a mile long.

In common with other substantial properties in that era, his estate was largely self-supporting, with its own dairy and small herd, its carpenter's shop, green houses, stables, chickens and a beautiful garden (a gardener lived in a house on the estate). In addition, he had, what I think was a kitchen garden in Poplar Walk, where pigs were also kept.

Not only was the appreciation of art encouraged in the family, but there was also a fine library, scientific instruments (such as microscopes and telescopes) and musical instruments. The lighter side of life was not forgotten. There was a full-sized billiard table, and a very fine cellar. The house was certainly very comfortably furnished,

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with carpeting throughout, including the servants quarters. At some time there must have been an invalid in the household, for two were invalid carriages/mentioned in the catalogue of the sale.

Elhanan was very conscious of the need for his children to be well educated, and being a Unitarian, his sons went to various Universities abroad and at home, but they, and the girls, were taught privately in the first instance, for there was always a governess resident in the household.

Elhanan worshipped at the Unitarian Chapel in Essex Street, The Strand, although from time to time he probably attended the Effra Road Chapel, Brixton, for he is reported to have been a substantial contributor to the foundation of that chapel. His funeral service was conducted by the Minister of the Essex Street Chapel, as were those of other members of the family. The family vault at West Norwood is in unconsecrated ground (so are the graves of David. Roberts, Spurgeon and Henry Tate, all non-conformists). However, it would seem that at least two of Bicknell's sons were members of the Church of England, for his eldest son's funeral service was conducted by Matthew Anderson, first Vicar of St. Paul's Herne Hill, who was a very near neighbour, and probably a friend, and the grave is in the consecrated part of the cemetery. His youngest son, Clarence, took Holy Orders at Cambridge University. He later became curate at St. Paul's Walworth. Eventually, he migrated to Italy, and it was he who founded the Museum Bicknell at Bordighera, Italy. (Recently, descendants of Elhanan went to Italy to commemorate the centennial of his book "Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera and neighbouring mountains").

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Elhanan Bicknell is largely forgotten locally, as is Henry Bessemer. They both deserve better. They played , significant roles in their particular fields of interests, Bessemer in the scientific and industrial worlds, Bicknell in the early Victorian art world, for he compiled one of the largest private collections of British art in the country, and had helped many a struggling artist by his support and friendship. There is not even a mention of the house, or the Bicknells, in "Ye Parish of Camberwell", by Blanche.

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Judging from a picture painted in his 40's, Elhanan Bicknell was a very attractive man; its not surprising to find that he had four wives. These days four wives might seem excessive, but in Victorian times, the death rate of women in childbirth, and from other causes, was much higher than now, with our modern medicine and improved public health measures. There were no efficient birth control methods practised, and families were often large, and extended over the woman's child-bearing years. This was not good when circumstances were poor, but in well-to-do circles large families were often considered a blessing. The Bicknell family was one such. Elhanan married for the first time in his early twenties, his wife (Harriett) died five years later, only one son survived; his second wife (Mary) only had two children in the first couple of years of marriage. She died after ten years, thus, Elhanan was twice widowed by the age of 37. But Elhanan and Lucinda Browne were married for 21 years, and had eight children. When the youngest was born the eldest was 12 years, but Elhanan's eldest surviving child was 29 years old (there were no children of the 4th marriage).

Lucinda's brother was 'Phiz', the illustrator of 'The Pickwick Papers' and 'Nicholas Nickleby'. His real name was Hablot Knight Browne. His son, Edgar, wrote a book called 'Phiz and Dickens', in it was one chapter about the Bicknells and the home on Herne Hill. (Thus we have a picture more complete than any we could hope to obtain from the assumptions' based on the sales catalogues of 1863). He describes Elhanan as 'a biggish man, with a florid complexion, and a slight speech impediment'. (Some of the children inherited speech difficulties, all had elocution lessons to help overcome the defects, and they showed no sign of this when adult, although one grandson was completely deaf).

Edgar thought his aunt Lucinda managed the house with 'early Victorian skill', but that she always had time for other interests. (How she found time for other interests is hard to imagine. There were three children in the household when she married Elhanan, she had eight

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more, and would have had to supervise the servants and the running of the household, and of the home farm, for food provision was a matter of forward planning. Elhanan and she were a convivial couple, who often entertained a wide circle of friends. Elhanan kept a good cellar, he was, after all, a Warden of the Worshipful Company of Vintners. Edgar said that John Ruskin was very attached to Lucinda, he is described as a 'vehement young man', who read long screeds of his writing to Lucinda, and who set the household running for colours when he saw a flower in the conservatory that he wished to draw.

The house on Herne Hill was relatively modest when Elhanan and Mary moved there in 1819, but it grew apace with the years, the art collection, and, later, when Elhanan married Lucinda, with the size of the family. The children were well educated, and, as so often happened when admission to Oxford and Cambridge was debarred to non-conformists, several of the boys were sent to foreign Universities. The boys early education was at home, the censuses show that a Governess was in residence over the years, and this could also mean that the girls were educated at home. Elhanan would have been aware of the advantages of a good education, his father and brother ran a school in Tooting, and he, himself, had some teaching experience. Little is known about the girls, it seems that all but Matilda married, for they did not appear on later census returns, and were not buried in the family vault. We know that one, Ada, was a forceful character, an attractive, somewhat imposing non-conformist, who enjoyed organising social events. She married a Canadian, and certainly visited his home in Hamilton, Ontario, on at least one occasion.

Several of the boys made a mark in their fields of interest. Henry Sandford², the son by the second marriage, went into his father's shipping business, and followed him in his art interests. He was the executor of his father's will, and arranged the record breaking sales of the art treasures. At the sales he bought 15 of the lots, including three Turners. He married Christine, the only daughter of David Roberts, the Scottish artist, who had been the first painter of note to work on a

² Henry Sanford not Sandford (MB 2017)

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commercial basis in Egypt and the Holy Land in the 1830's.

Christine's father, who had been Elhanan's closest friend, gave her many of his works, and she inherited his remaining works (all 1004 of them) on his death. Henry Sandford, in turn, inherited them after her death. The couple lived on Tulse Hill before moving to Cavendish House, Clapham Common. There, in their principal rooms, were displayed 154 watercolours and oils painted by David Roberts. There were eight children from the union of Christine and Henry. Henry was treasurer to the Unitarian Church, Effra Road, the foundation of which church, his father had contributed towards in the 1830's. Henry was a friend of many artists and authors, and when he died he left a substantial fortune in money and works of art.

Herman, the eldest son of the third marriage, achieved a place in the Dictionary of National Biography, as did Elhanan. After studying in Paris, Hanover and University College, he 'walked the wards' at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London, later becoming a military surgeon with the 39th Regiment in Hong Kong and in India. While in these regions he studied oriental dialects and explored Java, Tibet and the Himalayas before returning home in 1861, eventually to resign his Army Commission. He devoted himself to the study of oriental languages and travel. He was the first European to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, quite undisguised, and visited the sacred shrine of Kum in Persia. He travelled in the Arctic and the Andes, in the Americas and in the Far East. While in Persia he made a study of the Persian poet, Hafiz, translating his odes into English. Some of these were published posthumously. He was said to be a linguist of un-surpassed ability. He attempted an ascent of the Matterhorn in 1870, but had a serious accident, which left him permanently damaged hands, but two years later he made a successful ascent. He died in 1875, at the age of 45. Ruskin said it was of cancer of the tongue, but it was thought his death was hastened by the hardships and constant exposure he endured during his expeditions.

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It was Sidney, his younger brother, who arranged and saw through, the publication of the translations of the odes of Hafiz, the Persian poet, after Herman's untimely death. He had many things in common with his brother, and although David Roberts thought him a 'young lout', he, too, was an adventurous traveller and mountaineer. He was lucky enough to possess sufficient means to pursue his interests of botany, astronomy and alpine exploration. He crossed the Andes four times, and went on a expedition in the Everest regions. He made ten ascents of Vesuvius, six during eruptions, and one alone by moonlight. He also made a winter ascent of Mount Etna. He was in Naples shortly after Garibaldi's triumphal entry, and having seen some of the fighting in the region, wrote a book 'In the Tracks of the Garibaldians through Italy and Sicily, 1861'. He witnessed at first hand many of the battle in the Franco-German War, and was one of the first Englishmen to make an ascent in a balloon. Later in life he retired. to the country, and contented himself with adventures of the mind, studying archeology, astronomy and fungi. He had a well-equipped observatory (I think in Sussex) and compiled a very good collection of books about fungi. In 1887 he staged a large exhibition on fungi at the Royal Horticultural Society. He had memberships a number of scientific societies, such as the Royal Geographical Society, and he was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society. The results of the work that he did in the latter part of his life can still be seen at the Royal Horticultural Society. He also compiled a study of his family's history.

Another brother, Clarence, was the youngest member of the family. From an early age he had a passion for plants and flowers, which he collected and illustrated. He was 19 when his father died. Maybe the Unitarian influence was not so strong towards Elhanan's end, for he took Church of England Holy Orders at Cambridge in 1865. After a period as Curate at St. Paul's, Walworth, where he was assiduous in his care of the poor of the Parish, he joined a Church of England Order in Shropshire, but

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while there he was able to travel extensively in Ceylon, New Zealand, Morocco and Majorca. After the closure of the Shropshire centre, he went to Bordighera, in Italy, where he acted as Chaplain to English visitors. He began to feel he could serve humanity as well outside the Church as in it, and that a common language rather than religion would unify humanity. He was an early enthusiastic exponent of Esperanto. He left the Church, and bought a house in Bordighera, where he lived for the rest of his life. In 1885 he published a volume on 'Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and Neighbouring Mountains'. It contained 80 plates, each showing two or three species chosen from 1,100 drawings he'd made during his studies. Shortly afterwards he provided illustrations for H.S. Thompson's book 'Flowering Plants of the Riviera', and 11 years after his first publication Clarence published a further volume called 'Flora of Bordighera and San Remo'. He had a summer house in Val Casterino, and while exploring one day he discovered an extensive series of prehistoric rock drawings. He studied these, and later published 'A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps'.

Clarence always cared for the poor people of the Bordighera region among whom he'd made his home. When he died he left his house to the Commune, where was established the Museo Bicknell and an International Library for the study of the languages of the area. His collection of European plants went to the Institute of Botany in Genoa, to which in his lifetime, he had contributed many of his specimens

I think that you will agree that the Bicknell's were a remarkable family, well worth researching and remembering.

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