

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

BLACKBURN, Joseph

Shifnal, Shropshire 1720 – Worcester brd
11.VII.1787

Little is known of the origins of this painter whose portraits of Americans from around 1753 to the early 1760s are found in New York, Boston and Hartford. He was assumed to have been trained in a London studio because of his mastery of dress details. He was first recorded as a limner in Bermuda in 1752, and then in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Competition from Copley, whom he influenced, led to his seeking work beyond Boston after 1761, and he was in London by 1764. Oil portraits of British sitters (mainly in the south west of England and in Ireland) are found between 1764 and 1778.

Research by the Worcester Archive Service in 2015 established that he was resident in the parish of St Nicholas from as early as 1768, and he was buried in that church on 11.VII.1787. He was the son of Joseph Blackburn of Kinver, Staffordshire who had moved to Worcester by 1745. Joseph's date of birth is here published (2025) from the marriage allegation for "Joseph Blackburn, limner", of Shifnal, Shropshire, aged 26 when he was married on 2.III.1746 in Kingswinford to a Mary Taynton. Mary died in 1786 and they had two daughters, Henrietta (born 24.V.1749 and baptised St James's, Piccadilly; she married a William Hill, a brewer in Worcester, in 1776) and Elizabeth who did not marry.

Blackburn was once thought to be responsible for a number of pastels in American museums, but no pastel is securely attributed to him. The signature that appears on one was thought by John Hill Morgan to have been forged, a view supported by the reappearance of the same signature and date on an quite different work (neither bears any resemblance to the signature on his marriage allegation which corresponds to that on a property lease); both pastels are evidently far earlier than the date (*v. American sch.*).

Bibliography

Chambers, *Biographical illustrations of Worcestershire*, 1820; Collins Baker, *Huntington Library quarterly*, IX, 1945–46, pp. 33ff; Bénézit; Bolton 1923; Burroughs 1936; Grove; New York 1997; Oxford DNB; Paris 1989; Saur; Washington 1987; Waterhouse 1981; Wright 2006; explorethepast.co.uk/2015/11/explore-your-archive-finding-elusive.html

Pastels

Thomas DERING (*New York, MMA*). *Lit.*: Bolton 1923, p. 7 n.r., *v. Blyth*
??Thomas OLIVER, *inscr.* "I. Blackburn pinxit 1760" (*Boston, MFA 29.931. Acq. Archibald Cary Coolidge Fund*), *v. American sch.*
??Mrs Thomas OLIVER, *née Elizabeth Vassall, inscr.* ← "I. Blackburn Pinxit 1760" (*New Haven, Yale University Art Museum, inv. 1945.342*), *v. American sch.*