

Read and Gardner, *Some pastels of the Sturt family*

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IN THE PAGES OF THE *History of Parliament*,¹ one encounters many larger than life characters – and occasionally some whose low profile belies a story that can be just as interesting, just as informative about the social structure in which they lived. Humphry Sturt of Crichel is just such a figure. Namier & Brooke struggle to classify him as a Tory or Whig, as he never spoke, rarely voted and seldom attended parliament despite representing Dorset for 30 years from 1754. Wealth and independence allowed him to avoid abject allegiance to the administration. While Namier & Brooke cite a contemporary (1780) description from the *English chronicle*,

With many peculiarities, [Sturt] is a man of inviolable integrity and a good heart. He supports his character as one of the country Members, with great independency and respect, and votes with Opposition

they conclude with Jeremy Bentham’s observation² – when he “had some general conversation” with Sturt at Bowood – that he “saw nothing about him that made him very interesting to me.” We have no portrait of Sturt; he makes no appearance in the correspondence of Walpole, Selwyn or Gibbon. In short there is little that would catch our attention sufficient to make us pour through archives to rectify our ignorance. But his wife was a very different case: Bentham intrigues us with his report from Bowood the following day to his friend George Wilson: “With Mrs Sturt, who is a good, fine woman, at the age of forty-two, after bearing eighteen children, fourteen of whom are alive, I had a little flirtation, but left her after seeing a little more of the *ton* of the family, which I did not like.” And the recent emergence from the family collection of a group of pastels of Mrs Sturt and the three eldest of those children draws us a little further into the world of this curious family.

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Sturt’s grandfather, the son of a London merchant, made his fortune as cashier of the victualling office, making vast returns from provisioning the navy under the later Stuarts. Despite repeated scrutiny by various boards under later regimes, no action was taken against him, and he was knighted in 1713, returned to Parliament as member of Hampshire that year, and lived his remaining 28 years in retirement. Sir Anthony married the sister of a lord mayor of London, Humphry Parsons, after whom his son, the elder Humphry, was named.³ It was this Humphry, who died in 1740 (a year before his father), who established the family’s roots at Horton in Dorset by marrying Diana Napier, heiress to Sir William Napier, 4th Bt whose family had owned the Crichel estate for many generations. His great-great-great-grandfather Sir Nathaniel Napier, Kt had built a Tudor house there in 1582; it was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in 1742. When Sir William’s grandson, the 6th baronet, died in 1765 aged 26 without posterity, the



Figure 1

¹ L. Namier & J. Brooke, *The history of parliament: the House of Commons 1754–1790*, London, 1964.

² *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. Ian R. Christie, London, 1968–2006, III, pp. 101ff, 2.X.1781, letter to Geroge Wilson.

³ Both Humphry and Humphrey occur throughout the family records. I have tried to follow the pattern of usage: the first two as Humphry, but the third generation with an e.

estates devolved upon his cousin, Diana's son, Humphry Sturt junior.

Humphry, who had succeeded to his grandfather's estate at Horton in 1741 aged 16, had married in 1756 a girl half his age, Mary Pitfield (1740–1807). She was the daughter and sole heiress of Charles Pitfield, “proprietor of a considerable estate” in Hoxton, Shoreditch⁴ and his wife, née Dorothy Ashley (who does not seem to have been related to the Sturt's Dorset neighbours, the Earls of Shaftesbury). Sturt, who evidently disliked London and preferred the country, proceeded to invest all his energies to his new estate at Crichel,⁵ where enlarged the house (fig. 1) “so immensely ... that it has the appearance of a mansion of a prince more than that of a country gentleman.”⁶

Meanwhile Mary evidently took her child-bearing duties seriously. Only an incomplete account of her offspring will be found in Namier & Brooke, Burke or the usual authorities, and the pedigree on this site ([Sturt](#)) has been reconstructed from the parish records, first at Horton, and then, following Sturt's move after Sir Gerard Napier's death in 1766, from those at More Crichel. Being the proprietors of the village, they get a separate page in the register: fig. 2 shows the baptismal records at Horton. Bentham was precisely right: there were indeed 18 children; a surprising number of these survived, although mostly in obscurity, and only the eldest three appear in the pastels.

Baptisms—1758
 Diana Daughter of Humphry Sturt Esq: & Mary his Wife bap^d Nov: 6th
 Mary Daughter of Humphry Sturt Esq: & Mary his Wife bap^d Jan: 25th
 Humphry 1st Son of Humphry Sturt Esq: and Mary his Wife bap^d August 3rd 1760
 Elizabeth and Lucretia Daughters of Humphry Sturt Esq: and Mary his Wife bap^d March 5th 1762
 Charles Son of Humphry Sturt Esq: and Mary his Wife bap^d Feb: 5th 1764
 George Son of Humphry Sturt Esq: and Mary his Wife bap^d August 12th 1765

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Two daughters, evidently both about 12–13 years old, one slightly older, are shown in a pair of pastels (figs. 3, 4) showing the unmistakable hand of Katherine Read. Given that the 1762 vintage (Elizabeth and Lucretia) died in infancy, there can be no doubt that these are the two

⁴ According to the *Gentleman's magazine*, 1786, p. 911.

⁵ Critchill and other spellings abound in early texts, as do Moor Crichel, Crichel More etc.

⁶ John Hutchins, *The history & antiquities of the county of Dorset*, 1773, III, p. 127.

eldest girls Diana and Mary, born respectively in 1758 and 1759: a procession of boys follow in the records until very much later. Diana (whose dates are given incorrectly in many sources) is the elder girl with the cittern. Named after her grandmother, she was evidently the dominant personality, while her sister Mary (named after her mother) remains rather shadowy. Diana's subsequent iconography includes paintings by Nathaniel Hone, Lawrence and Romney.⁷ They all have the brown eyes, most clearly seen in the Hone portrait (fig. 5), together with her mother's long, distinctive nose. Mary seems not to have married, while in 1776 Diana married Sir William Mordaunt Milner, Bt, and went on to a glittering place in society.



Figure 5

Although it is difficult to date Read's children from their apparent ages, these must have been made close to 1770. This is supported by the very high quality of drawing (for Read), and by what must be a third picture in the same group, now known only from Watson's 1771 engraving⁸ (fig. 6): this shows Mrs Sturt with her third child, and eldest son, Humphrey Ashley Sturt (1760–1825). The boy wears Van Dyck costume: his mother's turban continues the lightly Eastern theme of the two girls. Their costumes, with dresses in white cotton embroidered with gold motifs (made up differently, but apparently from the same fabric), and ermine-trimmed cloaks in contrasting colours (blue for Diana, pink for Mary) come straight from the Turkish repertoire popularised in England by Liotard during his first London

trip 1753–55.⁹

Normally one would be inclined to dismiss the cittern as another artists' prop. But its reappearance in the Gardner group pastel (fig. 7) adds a real sense of individuality to the girl. And, as Lady Milner, Diana continued her interest in music, as a patron if not as a performer: a Sonata and Overture for the Piano Forte "composed and adapted by Maximilan Humble" (a composer overlooked by Grove), "humbly dedicated to Lady Milner", was registered at Stationer's Hall in 1793. Her sister it seems shared her passion, but perhaps not her accomplishment: Bentham tells his father (during his stay at Bowood in October 1781) that "Miss Sturt has been suffered to fancy she plays in a superior manner upon the harpsichord, without having the least notion of it."¹⁰

I think it is clear that the same two girls are depicted in Daniel Gardner's imposing group, and that the date has now moved on to c.1777. And just as Bentham found a few years later, Mrs Sturt is still



Figure 6

⁷ Nathaniel Hone (Sotheby's, 21.I.2004, Lot 20); Lawrence (Vienna, KHM); Romney (New York, Sotheby's, 21.X.1988, Lot 204)

⁸ Examples are in the British Museum; this state "Mrs Sturt and Master Humfrey Sturt", and "C. Read Pinxt. / Jas. Watson fecit / London Printed for Robt. Sayer, No. 53 in Fleet Street, Published as the Act directs 20 June 1771". Early states are erroneously lettered "Miss Sturt etc."

⁹ Examples include the Liotard pastel of Lady Orford (London, Phillips, 2.VII.1990, Lot 247) or the numerous drawings from the Liotard 1992 exhibition.

¹⁰ Letter of 1 October 1781. By then Diana had married, so "Miss Sturt" must be Mary (Bentham underestimates her age by a couple of years).

elegant despite having already produced 14 children.¹¹ Only three of the children are shown: perhaps they were her favourites; more likely these eldest were the ones allowed to come up to London. The parrot adds an exotic touch, perhaps symbolising the absent husband (although there is no evidence that he travelled to the Indies). The young man standing beside her, in a distinctly gamical pose apart from the cricket bat (a favourite prop for Gardner's boys), is far too young to be her elusive 52-year old husband. He can only be Read's subject again, the eldest boy, Humphry (or more often Humphrey) Ashley Sturt (1760–1825); the next brother, Charles, was four years younger.

A few years after Gardner's pastel, in 1781, Humphrey Ashley married a parson's daughter, Mary Woodcock, to the great displeasure of his family. Unable to disinherit him from Horton, which was entailed (but whose value had been greatly depleted by the move to Crichel), his father settled all the disposable estates on his second son Charles Sturt (1764–1812), who also inherited the family seat in parliament. The reasons for the dislike of the Rev. Edmund Woodcock, DD, vicar of Watford, are not recorded, but can be found in the pages of Jane Austen: he may have been as much a gentleman as Sturt, but as one of 11 children Mary Woodcock's fortune was very unequal.¹²

Humphrey Ashley found that Horton was so run down that he was obliged to sell the estate to his neighbour, the Earl of Shaftesbury. He travelled to India, and later settled in Suffolk, where he died without posterity. Charles's wealth ensured that he



Figure 7



Figure 8

could, in 1788, marry the Earl's daughter, Lady Mary Anne Ashley-Cooper. At around the same time as the Gardner pastel of the Sturts, Gardner had portrayed her as a child, with her brother, in an oval pastel now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 8). Both these portraits show Gardner at the height of his art.

Horace Walpole provides us with a brief glimpse¹³ of Diana, who it seems was a friend of her contemporary, the celebrated Countess of Derby, née Elizabeth Farren: Gardner's portrait of her seems also to date from around the same time (although long before Walpole's reference, so this may be pure coincidence). In the same letter, Walpole also refers fleetingly to Diana's sister-in-law Mrs Sturt and the Marquess of Blandford: this was not Humphrey Ashley's wife,¹⁴ but the wife of Charles Sturt, Lady Mary Anne. Charles Sturt shortly after took a sensational action against Blandford for criminal conversation, but his case was somewhat undermined

¹¹ Mrs Sturt could have rivaled Mrs Casamajor in the fertility stakes: Gardner's portrait at Yale shows 8 of her 22 children. Perhaps he charged by the number.

¹² One of her sisters married the Bedlam physician Dr Thomas Monro; their son was the painter Henry Monro.

¹³ Letter to Mary Berry, 13.XI.1790.

¹⁴ As the note in the normally impeccable Yale edition mistakenly suggests.

by his own affair, with the celebrated French harpist, Anne-Marie Krumpholtz.

The Gardner and possibly the Read pastels were likely to have been made in London. The costumes and activities all have a theatrical flavour which was more than the mere contrivance by these two, very different, artists. Mrs Sturt is known to have occupied Brandenburgh House in Hammersmith (also known as La Trappe, the name given by Bub Dodington, Lord Melcombe, who developed the pleasure house; in 1792 it was bought by Elizabeth Craven, Margravine of Ansbach; fig. 9 is an engraving by Bury and Dubourg showing a festivity there for Queen Caroline in 1821). There is not enough detail in the pastels to make a specific identification. However there are reports of her entertainments there, including several reports of a masquerade on 12 June 1789: a letter by one of Gardner's patrons, Sir Gilbert Elliot, who wrote to his wife "Last night we were all at a masquerade at Hammersmith, given by Mrs Sturt. It is the house that was Lord Melcombe's, and is an excellent one for such occasions. I went with Lady Palmerston, and Crewe, Windham, and Tom Pelham. We did not get home till almost six this morning. The Princes were all three at Mrs Sturt's, in Highland dresses, and looked very well."¹⁵ Betsy Sheridan's longer description in a letter¹⁶ of 14 June to her sister, Mrs LeFanu, paints a picture of just the sort of scene that Mrs Sturt loved:

We went to Hammersmith about ten o'clock — Mrs and Miss Bouverie, a Mrs Stanhope (a very beautiful Woman), Mrs S: and I all as Gypsies and our dress, which I thought ugly enough, was however very much admired. Mrs Sturt's House formerly belong'd to the famous Lord Melcombe. The Hall and Stair case very lofty and ornamented with colour'd Lamps. The Duke of York's Band playing. We enter'd first a very fine Gallery paved with different sorts of Marble and ornamented with some uncommonly fine pillars, lighted with colour'd Lamps and ornamented with a transparency representing the Prince's Crest and devices of the professions of the Two Brothers, Natural flowers in abundance — from thence we went through two or three pretty Rooms to a very Spacious Ball Room and then through small rooms again Round to the Gallery, so that tho' there was a great deal of company there was no unpleasant croud. I stuck close to Mrs S— and we unmask'd very soon. She was of course accosted by a great many with abundance of fine things and I came in for a share of civility.

About One the Princes arrived all dressed alike as Highland Cheifs; nothing could be more Ellegant or becoming than their dress. The Prince came up to Mrs S: to enquire for Dick and gave such an enquiring Stare at me that She thought it best to introduce me, for he has his Father's Passion for knowing who and what every one is.

At two the Supper Rooms were open'd. The Etiquette is always to have a Room for the Prince who chuzes his company, So that neither Rank nor the Lady of the House decides that point. He as usual ask'd Mrs S— and She kept fast hold of me 'till we got in to the Room. The Duke of Clarence took the head of the Table and the Prince placed himself on one side, Mrs S— at his right hand, The Dutchess of Ancaster (as *Hecate*) on his left. I sat next and le Cher Frère next to me (who by the bye is always particularly civil to me in Public, unlike a certain sneaking Puppy of our acquaintance). Opposite to us Lady Duncannon as a *Soeur Grise*, casting many tender looks across the table which to my great joy did not seem much attended to, A Young lady with her in the same dress; Lady Jersey and her Daughter (very pretty Women) as black veil'd Nuns; Dutchess of Rutland in a Fancy sort of Dress without powder and not looking Handsome; then Duke of Clarence, and then Mrs Fitzherbert in a White dress and black Veil but unlike a Nun's dress. These were all the Women. There were a good many Gentleman at table and several standing behind.

When Supper was near over Some excellent Catch Singers belonging to the *Je ne sais quoi* Club sang some very good catches. After a little time the Prince call'd them round and proposed to Mrs S— to join him in a Trio, which She did at once tho' She has not practised any thing of the kind for many months and was taken quite by Surprise. The Company as you may suppose



Figure 9

¹⁵ *Life and letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot, first Earl of Minto*, 1.

¹⁶ *Betsy Sheridan's journal: letters from Sheridan's sister, 1784–1786 and 1788–1790*, ed. William LeFanu, Oxford, 1986; pp. 167ff.

were all delighted with this unexpected pleasure. The Prince proposed a couple more and then gave over for fear of tiring Mrs S—. He has a good voice and being so well supported seem'd to me to sing very well.

We sat about an hour at table and then return'd to the Gallery. We intended going home at first, but Dick who came in a black domino put on a disguise after supper and made a great deal of diversion, as he was unknown to every one but us; having plagued several people sufficiently he resumed his Domino and return'd to the company, pretending he had just left a party at supper, and at length at a shamefully late or rather early hour we return'd to Town. I saw Miss Cholmondeley there in very bad preservation. Time has used her but scurvily and She has unluckily retain'd all her little affectations.

I could not help thinking while I was Supping with Princes and great people that my situation was a little like poor Gil Blas at the Court of Madrid, but mine is only temporary and I look beyond it to real comfort and happiness. I have had a peep at the Raree Show of the great world without trouble or risk, and not being young enough to have my brain turn'd shall enjoy my broil'd bone in Cuffe St with as much pleasure as ever, and shall have the advantage of having a great deal of talk to myself as I expect to be as much question'd as dined when I get among you.

There was also a Room for the Duke and Dutchess of Cumberland and a third for the company at large. After we all unmask'd Dick walk'd about a good deal with us and several of the masks remark'd that having such a Partner it was no wonder he kept by her: I think I never saw Mrs S— look handsomer. As Mrs Sturt had given out Dominos were not to be admitted, it enliven'd the scene very much, for those who did not venture to assume a character at least wore handsome dresses; she admitted Friends however in Domino's.

You see that I could not have been sufficiently awake to write you all this yesterday and perhaps you don't thank me for such a long account — the intention however is good so at least I shall be forgiven.

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These pastels by Katharine Read and Daniel Gardner, hitherto unpublished, each typical examples of their art, remind us of the taste for ladies of the highest society to dress up – as in the National Portrait Gallery's recently acquired Gardner of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Melbourne and Anne Damer as the three witches from *Macbeth*. They tell us a great deal about the society in which they were made.



Figure 10

Charles Sturt's grandson became the 1st Baron Alington, and the estate and its collections descended to his great-granddaughter Mary Marten (1929–2010), a trustee of the British Museum. A photograph in *Country life*, 25.v.1925, shows the pastels in the boudoir at Crichel House (fig. 10).

Neil Jeffares