

SAMUEL WARD of Great Yarmouth (1710 -1778)

Ward's brief autobiography*, dated August 21st 1775 and possibly written to mark his 65th birthday, gives a tantalising account of his life but only offers clues as to how he came to produce these pen and ink drawings. He described a life so full of incident and hard work that it is difficult to imagine when he could have cultivated any artistic interests or skills. Although obviously educated, his occupations reflect the fact that he did not prosper. One suspects he was a man of character, with little business sense, to whom rope making and labouring were not incompatible with the practice of fine draughtsmanship.

Ward was descended, on both sides, from established Yarmouth merchant families. Although he was born in the town, as he later noted on the back of one of his drawings (83825/84) 'in Mr William Fisher's House', business interests of his father, Benjamin, took the family to Rotterdam where Samuel lived until he was about eight. A bequest from his maternal grandfather, Captain Atkins, in 1719 may have helped pay for his apprenticeship to a Yarmouth rope maker when he was fifteen. Having 'took up my freedom', however, at twenty he set sail for Boston in New England where he spent two years. Returning, he 'went to Yarmouth and sold a bit of land for £45' before returning to 'New Georgia, a part of Florida' where, on January 16th 1734 he settled, with ten other families, over whom he eventually became the 'Officer', at Skidowa (now Skidaway Island). His 'Plantation' at Skidowa seems to have failed and he records working on the river at Savanna on a 'Scout' boat, and as a land surveyor before returning to England with his wife in 1739. With money raised from the sale of property, he 'hired a house and tried shop keeping which 'turn'd out to a poor account'. Having failed to get back into rope making in London and Portsmouth he returned to Yarmouth with his growing family in 1741. He then appears to have worked as a rope maker and as a labourer on Yarmouth Jetty –whether working the capstans with which fishing boats were hauled into the harbour or maintaining the fabric of the 'peers' is unclear - before settling as a 'Watchman' at the Custom House. Colin Tooke, the Authority on Yarmouth History and author of numerous books on the area, points out that the Custom House at this date was known as the 'Town House' and was also the centre of civic activities; the 'Watchman' may have had wider responsibilities than the term now suggests.

Those of the drawings that are dated are so between 1763-1775; almost exactly the 'near eleven years' he was working at the Customs House. Possibly the post of Watchman was not too onerous and provided him with the perfect time and place - away from an impoverished house crowded with children - during which to cultivate his linear, detailed, fanciful and miniature drawing style. That Ward should be studying from the same printed sources as, for example, Gainsborough and the Sandby brothers, demonstrates how pervasive the influence of Dutch art was at that time. One can imagine that, drawn as they were by a man who in his youth had four times crossed the Atlantic, these works would have been received as considerable Curiosities in the Yarmouth of the time.

*Colman Collection, Norfolk and Norwich Record Office (Colman MS 191)
Great Yarmouth and District Archaeological Society Bulletin, No.34, March, 1974.

PROVENANCE

These drawings come from a collection of 150 that were compiled into an album with 27 prints by and after, amongst others, Brill, Callot and Hollar. Many of the drawings are clearly influenced, both in style and subject, by such prints and it is possible that the prints belonged to Ward. None of the drawings are larger than 9 x 23 cms or smaller than 3 x 4.25 cms. The subjects divide into imaginary townscapes, landscapes and some views of Great Yarmouth, and decorative cartouches. The paper and binding of the album are late 18th century. It bore the bookplate of Charles Hubert Backhouse, Faverdale Hall, Darlington. Backhouse lived at Faverdale from 1897 – 1907. His only known connection with Norfolk, probably too slight to mention in this context, is that Backhouse's Bank, of which he was a Director, was sold to Gurney's Bank of Norwich in 1896.

(Samuel Ward Autobiography overleaf)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY* of SAMUEL WARD

'Went over to Holland 1713 and lived with my Parent at Rotterdam – returned from Holland to Yarmouth 1718 – my Grand-father Capt. T. Atkins died 1719 – I went to live at Norwich 1723-4 – Was put Apprentice to a Rope maker at Yarmouth June 24th 1725 – went to live with my father at Carrow Abbey about Christmas 1727 – went to London in August 1729.- went to Yarmouth and took up my freedom May 11th 1739 – took shipping at London for New England July 24th 1730 – left Falmouth Aug.17th – saw Capo Samboura in Novia Scotia, sailed along shore to Cape Sable, where we were in some danger, stood over for New England, saw the Blew Hills, Cape Porpus and Casco Bay, arrived at Boston the beginning of November. During my stay in this Country, I travelled by land 120 miles, that is to say from Piscataway to New Bristol, saw many good Towns and a fine Country and a very civel people – took shipping for England at Boston November 17th 1732 arrived at London December 25th following where I staid some months – went to Yarmouth and sold a piece of ground for £45. Saw my two brothers at London, we had not been all of us together for 17 years, we soon parted, one went to Guiney (Guinea), another aboard a Man of War. I took shipping at London for New Georgia a part of Florida – parted from South Carolina by River Savanna, which is navigable for large boats more than 300 miles; there is fine country on both sides. We left London Sept.26th 1733 and arrived in Savanna River Jan.2nd 17(34). Landed at Savanna town Jany.4th – Landed at Skidowa where I was to settle Jan.16th having with us 10 or 12 famillies – Mr Will. Johnson Dalmass being our Officer, a very worthy Gentleman with whom I lived in great friendship till he died, when I was appointed in his place – this Island is surrounded with salt water rivers and creeks, it contains about 8000 acres of Woodland and 1800 of Marshes, a very pleasant place.. In Dec. 1736 I entered on board the Carolina Scotch (P.A.? Scout) Boat to be stationed at Amelia Island in the south most part of Georgia near the River of St John's, where the Spaniards kept a garrison. Jan. 21st 1737 I was married to Mary Toovey at Fradirica, I was discharged from the Scout boat at Savanna in July following. I lived at Savanna some time then went to my Plantation in Skidowa planted the next Spring, but the crop failing I went to Savanna again, where I worked at sundry employments, sometimes in surveying land for many miles about this Country, sometimes by water as far as Charles Town Etc – Sept.23rd 1738 I had a daughter born at Savanna. Jany.4th 1739 I went to Port Royal in South Carolina to see for business where I happened of a job to row a Gentleman to the River May lying between Port Royal and Savanna River being further employed there I went twice to Savanna Town & brought away my family – at Port Royal I was befriended with a Passage to Charles Town where with a very small quantity of money I lived till I found a friend who helped me with a passage to England with Capt.Killpatrick, a Gentleman in Charles Town being bound for me – in going near the Banks of Newfoundland we saw several Islands of Ice, some of which were a prodigious height out of the Water and of great extent. May 1st we made Cape Cornwall, the 6th we got to Cowes in the Isle of Wight from thence we went to London in another vessel – where we arrived May 11th 1739 – the same night we went to see my Wife's father a Cow Keeper and Farmer near Bethnall Green, who received us kindly – my Sister Ward lent me £30 to pay our passage Etc after which we went to Norwich and joined with my Sister in selling some houses in Yarmouth – paid my Sister, went to London with about £70 paid for some goods that were sent to me when in Georgia – hired a house and tried shopkeeping which turned out to a poor account – Work'd in India Warehouse. Nothing to do all the hard Winter 1739-40 – after several trials to get a Living amongst Ropemakers both in London and Portsmouth without success and being afflicted with Illness I resolved to leave London and go to Yarmouth – I set out Dec 16th 1741. Jan.2nd I began to work at Yarmouth Peers (sic) – my Wife soon came to me with 6 Children I continued in this employ June 7th 1745 – after working at Ropemaking and other Labours about 7 years – Then hearing that the labourers at the P(i)er were to have 10s a week I made friend to be employ'd & continued at this work with but little interruption about 13 years since which I have been employ'd in the Custom House as a Watchman very near 11 years. My Wife has had 8 children. 3 are alive and 5 Grand Children.

Aug. 21 in the 65 year of his age – 1775'

*Colman Collection, Norfolk and Norwich Record Office (COL / 7/13).

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