New Light on Charles De Laet Waldo-Sibthorp, 1783-1855

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Sibthorp is one of the best-known names in Lincoln’s history, one that has for long held the popular imagination. Indeed, some of the reasons why the name is so well-remembered belong to imagination rather than to historical fact. To begin with, a mention of Colonel Sibthorp, MP for Lincoln, might arise in almost any context from 1733 to 1855, as there were four men for whom this was the correct mode of address. Coningsby I, his nephew Humphrey II, and the latter’s sons Coningsby II and Charles were all in turn colonels of the Lincolnshire militia and MPs for Lincoln. It is not always easy to know to which of these men a reference is being made (Fig.2).

However, with the exception of the carriage accident that led to the death of Coningsby II, most of the more colourful and distinctive stories associated with the Sibthorp name derive from the life and career of Charles. He fought a duel with Dr Charlesworth; insulted Queen Victoria; hated foreigners and Catholics; and campaigned against the Great Exhibition of 1851. He is supposed to have driven a coach-and-four down Steep Hill, Lincoln; to have ridden round the market upsetting stalls; and prevented the main east-coast railway line from coming through Lincoln. Some of these stories turn out to be somewhat exaggerated, and occasionally quite wrong. The ‘truth’ is both more prosaic and more complicated.

He was the only head of his family to have held a commission with a regular regiment in the field (as distinct from militia service; see Fig.1). As an MP he was lampooned in Punch and by Charles Dickens in Sketches by Boz, yet his eccentric meanderings were normally listened to affectionately by his fellow Members. He made money out of railway construction in and near Lincoln, whilst declaring railways to be an abomination. Perhaps most intriguing in view of his dashing manner and outlandish remarks, he was the owner of a substantial art collection. When he died the debts of the settled family estate amounted to over £100,000.

This article brings forward new material about the character and personal life of Charles Sibthorp, including the legal separation from his wife, his extensive art collection and the family finances. He was a member of a ‘greater gentry’ family, as defined by Thompson, that is, those with estates of 3,000 to 10,000 acres in 1883, and the study is offered partly as a contribution to the relatively scanty literature on this class of landowner.¹

The Sibthorps of Canwick

The Sibthorps were not of ancient gentle lineage, and had no obvious connection with the Nottinghamshire village of Sibthorpe.³ For most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were yeoman farmers at Laneland in that county, but by judicious marriages became prosperous merchants and town gentry in St Mark’s parish, Lincoln. John was the first of the family to represent Lincoln at Westminster, but perhaps more significantly he married Mary, co-heir of Humphrey Browne of The Close, a wealthy merchant. John made the first purchase towards an estate the family built up in Langton and Hatton near Wragby, but they never had a residence there. It was his widow who began the Canwick estate in 1730, enabling her family, for the next 210 years, to occupy a seat symbolically, as well as physically, overlooking the city.³ Their acceptance as county gentry came in 1733, when John and Mary’s eldest surviving son Coningsby I became both sheriff of the county and MP for Lincoln.

Coningsby I died unmarried in 1779 and was succeeded by his brother Humphrey I, who married twice gaining considerable wealth and estates from both marriages, all of which passed in 1797 to Humphrey II, his only surviving son and father of Charles. One of the few complete extant rentals of the Sibthorp estates relates to the year 1797 and shows that through various inheritances and marriages they owned major properties in several counties.⁴

In Lincolnshire they owned about twenty scattered properties in the Marsh amounting to around 4,000 acres; at Hatton and Langton they had over 2,000 acres; but interestingly only 300-400 at Canwick, associated with their principal seat. In three Nottinghamshire parishes west of Lincoln there were several hundred Sibthorp acres. The Skimpans estate contained about one hundred acres at North
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<td>Susannah Ellison</td>
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<td>Maria Tottenham</td>
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<td>Charles De Laet, 1783-1855</td>
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<td>Louisa Amcotts</td>
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<td>Daughters of his brother Montagu</td>
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<td>Coningsby III, 1846-1932</td>
<td>1861-1932, initially as minor</td>
<td>Mary Georgiana Sutton, no issue</td>
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Fig. 2. The Sibthorpe heads of family, based on sources given in footnote 2.

Mynms, Hertfordshire, but was sold in 1800. Acquired through Humphrey I's second marriage to Elizabeth Gibbs was a Devon estate of about 1,000 acres, with another contiguous block of smaller size and a very modest house called Fullingcott bought by Humphrey, all in the parish of Instow, near Bideford. In Oxfordshire, Elizabeth's son, John Sibthorpe, bought over 2,000 acres, nearly all at South Leigh and Stanton Harcourt near Eynsham. On his death in 1796 most of this property passed to his father, and the next year to his half-brother Humphrey II. Altogether Humphrey II and his sons commanded about 11,000 acres, largely rural, but also mostly in fertile, lowland areas.

**Sibthorpe family circumstances during Charles' youth**

In accounting for Charles' extravagant character it is useful to look first at his grandfather and father. Both were prudent, even mean, and perhaps Charles, like many children, rebelled against the models with which he was presented. His grandfather, Humphrey I, like Charles himself, was not born the eldest son and would not have expected to become the head of the family. He had an Oxford university career, holding a fellowship at Magdalen College from his graduation in 1734 to 1741 and the Sherardian chair of botany from 1747 to 1784. He married, firstly, Sarah Waldo, heiress of a wealthy family of London merchants, in 1740 and they had eight children, of whom Humphrey II was the only son who survived them. The early births probably occurred at or near the Waldos' house in London, those of 1748 and 1749 in Oxford. 11 Humphrey had a house built in Cowley Place, now part of St Hilda's College, just over the river from Magdalen. Sarah died in 1753 and in 1757 Humphrey married secondly Elizabeth Gibbs of Instow, Devon, another heiress, with whom he had one child, John, who also went up to Oxford.

In 1784 Humphrey resigned his chair in favour of John and although Elizabeth had died in 1780, Humphrey retired to Fullingcott, their Instow house. This was (and is) no more than an isolated farmhouse, and its size and the distances involved would have discouraged visits by Humphrey II's growing family (including Charles). Perhaps the family all went up to London for the season, possibly to the house Humphrey II was using in 1803. It seems unlikely that the family went to Canwick Hall to see grandfather, and Charles' knowledge of that seat may only have begun several years into his childhood (see below, p. 27, left hand column).

However, despite not spending much time there, Humphrey I must have taken an active interest in the Canwick estate, since a large number of exchanges within the old enclosures took place during his time as family head. They occurred in 1787 when the parish was enclosed, Humphrey acquiring a block of old enclosures surrounding the Hall, which facilitated the later removal of nearby cottages and the laying out of the grounds. 8 His memorial tablet in Instow church makes plain that he was extremely careful with money, referring to his habitual self-denial and twice using the adjective 'frugal'.

Charles' father, Humphrey II, was born in 1744, matriculated at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, just before his fourteenth birthday, graduating BA in 1762. He qualified as a barrister in 1770 and was made recorder of Lincoln in 1777. In the same year Humphrey II was elected MP for Boston (1777-84) and also married Susannah Ellison of Thorne, daughter of Richard Ellison II, lessee of the Fossdyke navigation.

Soon after their marriage, Humphrey and Susannah settled at Skimpans, about half a mile from the Great North Road in North Mynms parish near Hatfield. It had come to the Sibthorps in 1764 through the will of Gilbert Browne, brother of Mary Sibthorpe, and was probably let out, with the furniture, to tenants most of the time until c.1777. 9 Judging by dates and places of birth and baptism, the family resided there from at least 1778 to 1788. Their heir, Coningsby II, was born in 1781 at Skimpans, and Charles was born there on 14 February 1783. 10

Along with the sale particulars of 1800, an inventory drawn up in 1771 for Coningsby Sibthorp gives a good indication of the size of the house. The family rooms downstairs included an entrance and hall, a parlour used as a breakfast room, library, and drawing room, in addition to which there were domestic quarters - a laundry used as the housekeeper's room, pantry, kitchen, servants' hall, dairy, bakehouse, malt room and brewhouse. Upstairs were five chambers, two with dressing rooms. Above this floor in 1771 were a gallery and five garrets with eight beds, and in 1800 there is mention of two garrets used as a nursery. 11 This suggests that Skimpans, although it stood in less ground, may have been of the same order of size as Canwick Hall at the same date.

At this point it is convenient to consider Charles' Christian names. A neighbour called Charles De Laet (sic) lived at Putterells, a house larger than Skimpans, situated across only two or three fields from the latter. De Laet had an ancestral
connection with the Sibthorps through the Coningsbys who had once lived in North Mymms, and it was from them that De Laet had inherited Potterells (Fig. 3). De Laet died in 1792, and Charles Sibthorp, while still a boy of only nine, benefited from his will to the sum of £7,000 in cash! Although the boy must have had the money held in trust, this small fortune may have helped to set Charles off on a trail of wild spending in later life.12

There is evidence that the Sibthorps were living in Canwick during the 1790s.13 Humphrey himself went to Ireland with the militia in 1798, but had returned by the spring of 1800, when he was elected MP for Lincoln at a by-election. About this time he rather dolefully recorded his income as around £6,000 a year before necessary deductions, such as allowing for portions for his six children. In addition, he had to consider election expenses at £4,000, from which, as an independent MP, he expected to make no consequent gains. The rental of 1797 contradicts Humphrey’s estimate by showing that rents were nearly £8,000 after expenditure, in addition to which there was over £1,000 of personal income.14

It was also said that he turned down a baronetcy in 1806, on grounds of lacking the wealth to sustain this status, although owning about 11,000 acres would have been thought sufficient by most of his contemporaries. In 1804 Humphrey II adopted the style Waldo-Sibthorp, in recognition of the wealth the family, the younger members especially, had derived from the Waldos. When Charles was away in the army, Humphrey made substantial, but indifferent alterations to the Hall (1811; see Fig. 4) and the first major addition to the Canwick estate (1813).15

Humphrey died in 1815, and his heir Coningsby, who was MP for Lincoln and colonel of militia, died unmarried in 1822, as the result of a carriage accident the previous year.16 This brought Charles to the position of head of the family and life-tenant of the settled estate. He must have set out into adult life without much thought of such eventualities, for Coningsby had not been without marriage prospects, the lady in question being Elizabeth Monson; but the families had not managed to agree on an appropriate marriage settlement. According to Colonel Weston Crookcroft of Hackthorn, Coningsby’s death changed Charles into a heartless and pursecraul man, leading a life of intemperance, riot and wickedness: ‘a perfect mountebank in manner and appearance; yet I must do him the justice to say that he was a most fearless public man’.17

Charles’ early exploits

Usually described as a man of little education, Charles went up to Oxford at the age of eighteen in 1801, but got no further in terms of examinations than matriculation at Brasenose. In 1830 he was quoted as saying that he hated reading when at Oxford.18

Charles’ position as a second son made it possible for him to become a professional soldier and in September 1803 he was posted cornet in the Royal Scots Greys stationed at Canterbury, and lieutenant in January 1806, but transferred his commission to the fourth Royal Irish Dragoon Guards in May 1811. In one obituary he is said to have distinguished himself in the Spanish Peninsular campaign of 1812-14. In July 1822, shortly after the death of his brother Coningsby II, Charles sold his commission and took up residence at Canwick.19

Charles’ freeness with money was recorded by his aunt, Lady Sewell, at the time of his marriage in 1812: ‘Charles, I fear, will get deeper and deeper into difficulties as it cannot be supposed he will economise with the additional burden of
a wife, and the father [that is, Maria Tottenham's father] it is supposed will make good his threat of never giving her a shilling'.

When he became life-tenant of the estates, Charles was able to enjoy access to greater funds and to take the lead in social events in Lincoln, which would have engendered a good deal of expenditure on entertaining. Thus in November 1822 he was reported as opening a charity ball at the Lincoln Assembly Rooms, and the next year he was steward at the traditional Stuff Ball, also a charity event. The following evening he entertained the principal families of the county 'elegantly', and no doubt lavishly, at Canwick Hall. As the house had been much extended a few years earlier, Charles probably wanted to show it off.

The story goes that he showed considerable spirit in driving a four-in-hand down Steep Hill for a wager. Although this story was repeated by Sir Francis Hill, we have not discovered its documentary foundation. However, it is consistent with Charles' remark in a railways debate that he was the oldest four-in-hand in the Commons, and had never had an accident. He had excluded the occasion on which he had been thrown out of his gig near the Bargates, but as a one-horse vehicle it did not count as a four-in-hand. Also in 1823, Charles was reported as having upset a stall opposite the pot-market in Lincoln with his brake and a pair of horses in training. Much later, in 1900, this event was recalled as one involving stalls (plural) and generosity on the part of Charles.

In 1824 something altogether more serious occurred. On 9 August Charles fought a duel with Dr Edward Charlesworth, well-known as having responsibility for the Lawn Asylum.

The cause was an uncomplimentary remark by Charles at a turnpike meeting, of which Charlesworth was the chairman. They met at a spot between the racecourse and Burton Plantation, but both fortunately missed.

Charles' Unhappy Marriage

In 1812, whilst still a younger son and a serving officer of dragoons, Charles married Maria, third daughter and co-heir of Ponsonby Tottenham, of co. Wexford, and a first cousin of the Marquis of Ely. They were married at Clifton, Bristol, this being the residence of the bride's family. Their first child was born at Canwick Hall on 1 January 1815, where they may have been staying because of Humphrey II's ill health - he died the following 21 April. There were three more sons, the youngest born in 1821.

In keeping with many of his generation, Charles' manner of life was not a model of moral rectitude, as shown by Greville's remark in 1829 that Sibthorp regularly slept in a bawdy house. Much later, in 1852, it was written that 'He is a notorious libertine, and we are told by excellent authority that upon the death of a favourite mistress an English bishop consoled him upon his loss.'

Perhaps Charles was unusually indiscreet, since his relationship with his wife had already reached breaking point in 1828, when she applied in the Ecclesiastical Court for a divorce a mensa et thoro (from bed and board). This was equivalent to a legal separation, where - on grounds of gross misconduct, such as cruelty or adultery - it was held impracticable for husband and wife to live together. During the separation, the court decreed a competent allowance to
the wife under the name of alimony. The 1853 Royal Commission on Divorce explained that this allowance depended on "the innocence or delinquency of the parties and is measured by the means and circumstances of the husband... when she (the wife) is innocent and the delinquency of the husband clearly established, the law considers that as she is separated by his misconduct from the comforts of matrimonial society, she ought to be liberally provided for by him." Complete divorce (a vinculo matrimonii), allowing re-marriage, could only be obtained by private Act of Parliament, an extremely costly process, although even a decree a mensa et thoro could cost in the region of £300, and such suits were quite rare.²⁶

Mrs Sibthorp's suit, heard in the Court of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, was reported in The Times on 5 December 1829, under the heading Sibthorp against Sibthorp, and the summary of proceedings provides an intriguing insight into Charles' financial circumstances:

This was a suit for separation a mensa et thoro by reason of adultery, brought by Maria Sibthorp against her husband Colonel C. de Lasa Waldo-Sibthorp, MP for Lincoln. No opposition was offered on behalf of the husband, a few passages only of the evidence was consequently read which established the marriage, cohabitation, and identity of the parties and the adultery.

The parties had cohabited until October 1827... In 1826 Colonel Sibthorp formed an acquaintance with a woman named Sarah Ward; and in May 1827 brought her to London and took apartments at Mrs Farmer's, 44 Dorset Street, Portman Square, where they continued nine weeks sleeping together. There was no doubt as to the fact of adultery and the evidence as to the identity of the parties was complete, there were letters from Colonel Sibthorp to Mrs Farmer which proved his identity and there was a witness to the fact that the person with whom he cohabited was not Mrs Sibthorp. Upon the whole the wife was entitled to the divorce for which she prayed.

Dr Lushington then on behalf of Mrs Sibthorp applied for the allowance of permanent alimony, upon allegation of the faculties of Colonel Sibthorp which set forth the amount of his revenue admitting without objection the deductions he claimed. Colonel Sibthorp was possessed of the estate at Calwnick [sic] near Lincoln which he valued at £350 per annum. The gross rental of his other property amounted to £14,817, but he claimed deductions of various kinds which reduced the net income to £8,516 per annum. Colonel Sibthorp admitted he had in ready cash £10,000, but alleged that his debts equaled that sum. He admitted the possession of other effects to the amount of £5,000... Mrs Sibthorp possessed an annuity of £300 for her separate use. The joint net income of the parties he took at £8,300.

Dr Arnold for Colonel Sibthorp observed that in this case no fortune had been brought by the wife to the husband, while £300 per annum had been secured to her separate use. Colonel Sibthorp was besides charged with the expense of educating his four sons which was continually increasing with their age. He had also to provide them fortunes as well as maintain them, and as the land from which his income arose was entailed he could not charge his real estate with any adequate provision for them. The case presented no feature of exaggeration such as cruelty or ill treatment towards the wife. He prayed that the court would allot alimony after due consideration of the circumstances of the case.

Dr Lushington in reply urged that it was not to be assumed even if Colonel Sibthorp had no power to charge his real estate, or to sell timber, that out of so large an income he could not provide for his children. Although no aggravating circumstances were charged in this case still the adultery was not of a very venial nature. Colonel Sibthorp had cohabited with his wife from 1812 to 1826 and at the time of life when he was not in the hey-day of youth, he forgot his duty to his wife and formed an adulterous connexion with a person of low character. Mrs Sibthorp was not to sustain any loss through the misfortune of her husband. No alimony had been allowed pendente lite (during the process of litigation).

Sir H. Jenner took the amount of faculties as follows. Gross income including the estate at Calwnick [sic] £14,317, deductions £6,130, leaving a net revenue of £8,187 from real property, adding the separate income and prospective property of the wife, the joint income of the parties was £8,800... although the wife had brought no fortune she was entitled to be maintained in the same rank in which she had moved whilst she had cohabited with her husband. Taking the joint income as £8,800 he thought the court would act with liberality to the one party, and with due attention to the claims of the other, if he allotted the sum of £2,200 (including the separate income of the wife) for permanent alimony from the date of sentence.

It appears that Charles was unwilling to pay his wife, for a year later another legal report, this time from the High Court of Delegates appeared in The Times for 8 December 1829. It stated:

the usual monition for alimony had been served on Colonel Sibthorp but not obeyed. The sentence in the Commissary Court decreed costs and alimony amounting to nearly £2,000. This part of the sentence was appealed against. Dean Lushington stated that the matter was now brought to an amicable arrangement and it would be unnecessary to enter into detail. Mr Brougham on behalf of Colonel Sibthorp said that with the death of the party from whom the proceedings originated it became advisable to settle the matter between the parties themselves.

The following day the same newspaper published a correction:

In our account of the proceedings in Court on Monday in the case of Sibthorp v. Sibthorp a slight inaccuracy crept in. It appears that no injunction had been issued against Colonel Sibthorp, but that his objective was, thinking the permanent alimony allowed Mrs Sibthorp rather excessive, to bring the question before the whole court.

There was in fact no quick reconciliation between Charles and his wife. Referring to the general election of 1830, Dr Charlesworth wrote to Sir Edward Bromhead: 'He has continued to get the popular cry in his favor by coming down from London once or twice to be reconciled to Mrs Sibthorp, who refuses'. But with the passing years there came some accommodation. In its obituary, the Gentleman's Magazine was gracious: 'He married in 1812, Maria... and by her, whose attentions cheered the last suffering months of his life, has left four sons'.²⁷

It should be noted that Charles was not in a position to remarry, and this must have influenced his subsequent domestic circumstances. There is little evidence that he was regularly in residence at Canwick between the late 1820s and his death. For example, there were only five people in the Hall on census night in 1831, compared with thirteen in 1821 when Coningsby II was family head. The string of press references to Charles' exploits in Lincoln had dried up in the 1820s. An abortive attempt of 1824 to turn some lanes in Canwick into private roads to give greater seclusion to the Hall and grounds was not repeated until 1856, after Charles' death. There was no extension of the Canwick estate between 1820, when Coningsby II had added about 400 acres, and 1856. And finally, in 1855 Charles' eldest son Gervaise said rather pointedly that, unlike his father, he intended to live at Canwick.²⁴

The court case contains evidence with broader implications. Firstly, the Sibthorp estate income of about £15,000 was consistent with the estimated acreage of 11,000 acres about twenty years previously, which, although changes had been
made, was probably still more or less correct in 1820. Charles admitted the possession of other effects only to the extent of £5,000, perhaps a deliberate under-estimate. The deductions of £6,000 are difficult to interpret, but provision had to be made for four sons, as also for Charles’ siblings, and for the servicing of numerous mortgages, as will be demonstrated below.

Politics

As earlier accounts of Charles Sibthorpe’s life have generally centred on his political activities, there is no pressing need to recount them in detail. A summary, however, will help to put into perspective the new material brought forward here. Charles’ service as MP for Lincoln was continuous from 1826 to 1855, apart from the period 1832–35 following his only defeat, in the first election for the reformed Parliament when the number of better-off non-freemen voters was increased. He was often head of the poll and his success seems to have been due to his generosity in treating the working-class freemen voters; his long family connection with the city, which was old-fashioned in outlook; his plain speaking; and to his personal courage and dashingly lifestyle.

Charles opposed the Sale of Beer Act of 1830, wishing to defend the existing licensed premises from unbridled competition. Politics were then much bound up with the drink trade, because inns were used as meeting places during elections (the Lincoln Saracen’s Head in Charles’ case) and treating could take the form of standing voters a considerable number of drinks. For out-city voters travelling expenses were often paid; and Charles had a habit of rewarding poor voters with coals and help with medical bills. He regarded being an MP as a considerable privilege and was prepared to pay for it - possibly unlike his father, who sustained a riot at Canwick in the 1800 election, which might have been due to his meanness. Nevertheless, it is one of the contradictions in Charles’ views that he was always complaining about corruption and sinneres in high places.

He was a small man of sallow countenance, with deep-set gleaming eyes, who dressed with an eccentricity that included continually sporting an eye-glass. He had much unruly black hair and many unorthodox whiskers. Charles spoke frequently and at great length in the House, in a voice now resounding and shrill, now inaudible, accompanied by animated gestures. He was regarded as an amusing, rather than a serious Member, was referred to as ‘Sib’ or ‘Sibby’, and much lampooned in Punch - 345 references according to Alltec (Fig. 5).31

Charles entered Parliament not only an ultra-Tory, but also ultra-Protestant. He opposed Catholic emancipation vehemently, regarding this as a measure destined to weaken the racial composition of the country. He made an impassioned speech in 1845 during the Maynooth College debate. Neither the growing toleration of Catholics, nor the conversion of his brother, Richard, to Catholicism in 1841, did anything to soften his opinion. Richard himself, writing in 1875, gives an insight into the fear that Charles acquired as a child, and never lost: ‘You can hardly conceive the feelings about Popery at that time. My dear Mother - no unkind or austere woman - would, I believe consider Papist priests much the same as pagans’.32

Charles strongly opposed, as dangerously revolutionary, the Reform Bill of 1832. He originated an important amendment to it, which gave votes to tenant farmers above a certain standing (a clause usually attributed to Lord Chandos, who introduced it in the Lords). Charles also opposed the municipal reform of 1835, and even the New Poor Law of 1834. As a Tory of the old school, Charles intuitively opposed such Whig modernising measures. In this he probably sympathised with the line taken by the Young England movement and the youthful Benjamin Disraeli, who thought in terms of a semi-feudal coalition between the landed interest and the working man, in opposition to the middle classes and the urban, industrial interests. Charles opposed free trade in corn, which he wrongly anticipated would cause disastrous falls in corn prices, leading to calls for rent reductions which would weaken the landed gentry he sought to protect. In the same connection, he wished to have the malt tax repealed.

He was deeply suspicious of foreign influences, which helps to explain why he opposed the Great Exhibition of 1851 (which would attract a lot of foreigners), and why he disapproved of Prince Albert, a German, who made use of his position as consort. Indeed, Charles’ greatest claim to fame is that in 1840 as a private member he successfully proposed a motion reducing Albert’s annual grant from £50,000 to £30,000! To general surprise, Sir Robert Peel seconded the motion and the House defeated Lord Melbourne, the queen’s favourite minister. She was not pleased and probably kept to her supposed vow of never setting foot in Lincoln whilst Sibthorpe represented it, staying on board the royal train should it stop in the city. In 1851 Charles was protesting about the money being spent on royal residences.

Charles’ xenophobia extended to opposing the connection of England to the continental electric telegraph and to the expense of maintaining so many British consuls abroad. Anything else that would cost the country money was likely to be opposed, including the erection of the National Gallery and the setting up of the many Royal Commissions of the time. In 1850 Charles opposed further expenditure on the Houses of Parliament, on the grounds that the style of architecture was more suitable for a harem than an important
legislative body. One reform he supported was concerned with the cost of fire insurance, which bore heavily on the working man.

Charles has been commonly blamed, as a landowner, for deterring the Great Northern Railway from building a direct line from London to Lincoln, but the latest scholarly opinion is that, although Charles spent a great deal of time denouncing railways in general as morally dangerous, he had little influence on what happened in Lincoln. Instead, the city lost the chance of being on a London-York line via Cambridge for reasons associated with the national battles over routes (Fig.5).

A summary of Charles’ character was provided by Sir Francis Hill, who described him ‘as a strange mixture; a man of public principle and private vice; of great courage, good temper and consistency; a hard worker; of limited intelligence; shrewd, with flashes of wit, but a buffoon’. Altick characterised him as a man of ‘backward-looking views’, who devoted himself to the lifelong task of sweeping back the sea of change with a broom.

The Sibthorp collection of objets d’art et vertu

What has been written so far hardly prepares the reader for the fact that on his death Charles possessed an art collection worth over £11,000 when auctioned. His wild and intermittent tastes and behaviour, and his limited education are not easily associated with a leaning towards aestheticism. Did he inherit the collection, did he buy as a mere collector for the sake of amassing objects, or did he sometimes buy with taste? It appears that all three explanations are relevant, the second being predominant, since in none of the sources consulted is Charles acknowledged to have been a connoisseur. At all events, the money he spent had a connection with the family finances, both as a contribution to indebtedness, and as a means of reducing it.

Charles died on 14 December 1855, aged seventy-two years, at his elegant London home, 46 Eaton Square, in Belgravia, which housed his collection. The house was relatively small, so the objects, numbering over 1,200, must have been crammed in (Fig.6). The fashionable houses in this most prestigious area were newly built for the Grosvenor Estate between 1826 and 1855 by the architect Thomas Cubitt. They were occupied by wealthy and influential people, such as George FitzClarence (illegitimate son of William IV), W. H. Whitbread (the brewer), and Ralph Bernal, (politician).

At 6 Eaton Square, the rich Squire Chaplin of Blankney was living in the 1840s, and not far away at 8, 10 and 12 Belgrave Square were two Lincolnshire baronets (Welby and Cholmeley, the latter a cousin of Charles) and another of the richest Lincolnshire squires, Christopher Tumor.

Members of the landed classes were often expected to be patrons of the arts, and the Sibthorps and their relatives the Eillsons of Sudbrooke are recorded as patrons of J. M. W. Turner and Peter De Wint. Aristocratic patronage is illustrated by the sale of the Duke of Buckingham’s collection in 1848, a grand event staged at Stowe (Buckinghamshire), which lasted forty days and raised £75,562. The collection was described as being ‘remarkable for costly ornamental objects of display’. The sale attracted huge crowds of people who arrived by train, carriage, cart and on foot.

Charles was among the crowd and he successfully bid for about a dozen objects, including a scalloped rock crystal cup engraved with flowers and decorated with amethysts. A second rock crystal piece was in the form of an octagonal casket set with rubies and emeralds. The bulk of his Stowe acquisitions were Majolica porcelain containing some choice pieces beautifully painted.

Ralph Bernal, an art connoisseur and one of Charles’ neighbours, died in March 1855. The art sale that followed lasted twenty-two days and raised the enormous sum of £71,000. Competition between wealthy collectors and representatives of the Louvre, the British Museum and Marlborough House resulted in very high prices. However, Sibthorp was able to purchase a number of items, including a miniature of Charles II (lot 638). This appeared first at the Stowe Sale (lot 277), where it was described as ‘a most exquisite work of art’ painted by Thomas Cooper c.1651. Charles also obtained the Thomas-a-Becket reliquary (an odd choice for a Catholic hater), a small copper gilt container richly enamelled in blue (lot 704) and a cabinet in the form of a temple (lot 1185). He only lived a few further months in which to enjoy them.

In contrast to these objects purchased in later life, some of the items in Charles’ collection were family heirlooms, like the silver snuffbox inscribed ‘Samuel Waldo 1745’. However, because Charles could have been collecting over a thirty-year period, it is possible that the bulk of the collection was by purchase.

In April 1856 Christie and Manson auctioned Charles’ collection by order of the executors of the Sibthorp Estate, their catalogue containing over 1,260 lots, sometimes more than one item in each lot. Column 1 of figure 7 ranks the bid prices, with porcelain first. This heading also had the highest number of lots, raising about £2,600 or twenty-three per cent of the total sum. The average (mean) price for individual lots of porcelain was approximately eleven guineas. Among the porcelain were three Dresden vases (lot 1010) which went for £127 to Lord Kimarly and two oriental vases (lot 880) from Princess Sophia’s collection which reached £101.

A pair of beautiful vases, seagreen, with plants in colours, elegantly mounted with en-moulu, with figures of infant satyrs at the handles - glass shades and stands - 13 in. high.

One of these vases appears to be featured in the engraving in the Illustrated London News (Fig.8, no. 2).

The silver cutlery and tableware rank second in the summary table, and in some cases there were from twelve to thirty-six
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R.O. by £s</th>
<th>Types of objets d'art</th>
<th>No of lots</th>
<th>£s raised</th>
<th>Previous column as % of total</th>
<th>Mean price per item, £s</th>
<th>R.O. by mean price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Porcelain</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>2641</td>
<td>22.87</td>
<td>11.58</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Silver cutlery &amp; silver tableware</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>16.38</td>
<td>10.01</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ornamental furniture</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>11.04</td>
<td>12.37</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Antique silver</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>1171</td>
<td>10.14</td>
<td>11.04</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Paintings, drawings, miniatures and engravings</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>1023</td>
<td>8.86</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>7.30</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ornamental objects</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ivory carvings</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>12.52</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Clocks and watches</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>10.28</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Oriental curios</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Guns and arms</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Wood carvings</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tryptics</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Snuff boxes</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1262</strong></td>
<td><strong>11544</strong></td>
<td><strong>99.03</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.13</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 7. Summary of Christie’s sale of works of art and vertu belonging to Charles Sibthorp, 1856.

R.O. = rank order. Prepared by Joan Mills, from Christie and Manton’s catalogue, 9-14 April 1856.

Items of silver cutlery in a single lot. The dinner service contained a number of silver bowls, such as a handsome soup tureen which sold for £58 (lot 75) and a punchbowl (lot 133) which went for £67, said to have come from the Kit-Kat Club. The latter was named after Christopher Catling and frequented by members of the Whig Party - a strange source for such a dyed-in-the-wool Tory as Charles Sibthorp.

Third in rank order was ‘ornamental furniture’, which was highly prized by Sibthorp’s contemporaries, because ‘ornament to many Victorians was the beginning and end-all of design’. Some of the most expensive items in the sale fell into this group. A ‘magnificent Spanish Cabinet’ in the form of a temple, and made of tortoise-shell, which Sibthorp had bought at the Bernal sale, went for £160 (lot 1185). Likewise a cabinet (lot 1034), which consisted of a deep tray with a tea service decorated with painted flowers on a spotted background, raised £102.

Within the Sibthorp collection were nearly one hundred drawings, paintings and watercolours, plus eight miniatures and twenty-two engravings, which sold for over £1,000. Charles had bought some of the paintings in his collection by attending the exhibitions of the Old Watercolour Society. Their sale book of 1844 records that Mrs V. Bartholomew’s ‘Piony and Camellias’ was purchased by Sibthorp for 18 guineas, plus £5 10s. for the frame and glass. Likewise in 1845 he bought Alfred Fripp’s ‘The Cabin Door’ for 15 guineas. In 1852 for 30 guineas Sibthorp obtained ‘The Stonebow, Lincoln’ which now hangs in the Mayor’s Parlour in Lincoln Guildhall, the generous gift of the Wells-Cole Family (Fig.9).

Roughly a third of the paintings in the Sibthorp Collection were the work of contemporary artists, such as Copley Fielding, William Hunt, Mrs Margetts and John Varley, a point worth noting in view of Charles’ dislike of ‘things modern’. The subjects he selected were landscapes containing mountains, lakes, cattle and figures, or still-lifes of fruit, flowers or birds’ nests. Some of these paintings were auctioned at his sale for less than the purchase price, but there were at least two exceptions: the price bid for Thomas Creswick’s landscape painting entitled ‘Lynn Gwynant, North Wales’ was £93, whilst ‘Girl with a Pitcher at a Spring’ by Poole was sold for £65.

The highest price paid for a single item in the Sibthorp collection was £218 for lot 315, and this was described as:

A magnificent carving in ivory in the form of a pedestal, with Silenus and attendants in high relief and highly finished, mounted with or-molu – glass shade and stand.
Silenus was a Roman deity, usually portrayed as a drunken old man attended by young satyrs. Unfortunately the Illustrated London News chose not to illustrate this item, but featured an ivory cup (Fig. 8, no. 8). High individual prices helped to push the mean price per item for 'carvings in ivory' into first place, although they represented only seven per cent of the total sale proceeds.

As one reads through the catalogue and attempts to absorb and evaluate some of the material it contains, there is an obvious difficulty. Apart from the Lincoln painting, the pleasure of viewing the items first hand is missing, because it has not been possible to trace them to their present owners. Therefore, imagination and informed guesswork come into play. The question arises as to how far this collection of furniture, china, silver and works of art can reveal something...
of the character of their owner. Sibthorpe was said to be 'a constant attendant at auction rooms' and also 'a collector by habit', and to this was added the scathing comment that he bought indiscriminately.44

Charles' brother Richard recorded that all their siblings (four brothers and a sister) had a taste for collecting porcelain.5 Is it really just by chance that porcelain raised the greatest sum of money in the sale? In these areas of the collection, Charles was probably knowledgeable and may have chosen with discrimination, but without further evidence, such as family letters or actually seeing the collection, it is impossible to reach a firm conclusion. Finally, it is worth noting the possibility that to some extent Charles was 'keeping up with the illustrious Joneses next door'.

Maddison's history of the Sibthorps mentions family portraits kept at Canwick Hall now mostly in the Usher Gallery, but there is no reference to Charles' personal collection. However, there was a wide range of British and foreign porcelain belonging to his grandson, Coningsby Charles Sibthorp, when he died in 1952.45

**Conclusion - indebtedness**

In 1828 Charles had stated that his income was £15,000 per annum. This was spent on maintaining his estranged wife and allowances to four sons, as well as the cost of a London lifestyle, his houses, and expenses incurred as MP for Lincoln. One of his obituaries records that Charles' visits to Lincoln in his later years had been infrequent, because 'he was harassed by the numbers who used to take advantage of his generosity'.46 After his death his executors needed to raise a loan of £106,700 and to sell off some of his assets to pay outstanding debts and commitments to the family, and this explains the expeditious way in which the art collection was sold off. However, the problems were much deeper than extravagance in that direction. Nor need all of them be laid at Charles' door, since the landed property of the settled estate was in the hands of trustees, and not solely those of Charles as life-tenant. Nevertheless, in some measure he must be held responsible for the Sibthorp financial crisis of 1856.

Figure 10 contains some details of the problems faced at that time. Mortgages amounting to £45,000 had been eating up a large amount of income over a very long period - over fifty years in the case of Hatton, and probably the Oxfordshire estate at South Leigh, which John Sibthorp had bought in 1791-92. An average debt of, say, £35,000 being serviced at five per cent per annum would have required £1,750 in interest payments each year; in twenty years at this rate, the interest payments would have been equal to the capital sum, which was still outstanding. This helps to explain why so many bonds given by Humphrey II, who died in 1815, and many of the charges on the estate under his will had not been dealt with, even on the death of his eldest son, Coningsby II in 1822. Indeed at that point the estate was getting into further debt.

In addition to buying Village Farm, Canwick, with a mortgage of £7,000 in 1813, the trustees bought Hall Farm in 1820, paying £28,000 or about £70 an acre. This compared with about £28 an acre at Village Farm when land prices were at a wartime high, and £17 an acre in Oxfordshire in 1791-92, when land prices would have been lower. The importance of Hall Farm was that it contained a block of 400 acres immediately to the east of the Hall, hence the name they gave this new acquisition. As Village Farm lay to the west of the original Sibthorp block they now had a continuous area of about 1,000 acres under their control, which was still not a large amount for the principal seat of a family owning about 11,000 acres. They had bought at a level which was nowhere

---

*Fig. 9. Photo of painting of The Stonebow (or Guildhall), Lincoln, by William Callow, 1852 (Courtesy of Lincoln City Council).*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mortgages</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Amounts, £s</th>
<th>Sub-totals, £s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hatton</td>
<td>1792</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wainfleet</td>
<td>1810</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canwick, Village Farm</td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canwick, Hall Farm</td>
<td>1820</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxfordshire</td>
<td>1791-92</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>45,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bonds issued by Humphrey II**

- Six bonds, all before 1815
- 9,300

**Charges in favour of Humphrey III**

- Marriage settlement of Humphrey II
- Legacy, under will of Humphrey II: c. 1815
- Outstanding debt of Humphrey II to Lady Sewell, under her will: 400
- Legacy, under will of Coningsby II: 1821

- 15,900

**Charges in favour of Richard**

- Marriage settlement of Humphrey II: 1777
- Legacy, will of Humphrey II: c. 1815
- Legacy, will of Coningsby II: 1821

- 17,500

**Charge under will of late brother, E. W. Sibthorp**

- c. 1807
- 5,000

**GRAND TOTAL**

- 92,700

**Additional charges under will of Charles**

- To wife: 1855
- To brothers Humphrey III and Richard: 1855
- Portions for younger sons: 1855

- 16,000

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**Fig. 10.** Charges on the Sibthorp estates in the Counties of Oxford and Lincoln and the City of Lincoln, drawn up 22 March 1848, in the Indenture for the Settlement of the Sibthorp estates after the birth of Charles grandson, Coningsby III, which is incorporated in L.A.O., BRA1643/1/14, 1873.

Notes to Figure 10.

1. E. W. Sibthorp is probably a clerical error for Henry who died in HMS Ajax in 1807.
2. By 1855, when Charles made his will, some of the £92,000 had been paid off, but this was partly by further borrowing.
3. In 1857 the trustees borrowed £106,700 at 5% (p. 103); in March 1868, £102,378 was still owing (p. 119) and £70,000 in 1872 (p. 123).
near sensible in purely agricultural terms. Moreover, as if to pay for this excess, they soon selling the Devon estates: 2,000 acres for £23,000, or about £11-12 per acre. This was possibly a fair price, considering that most of it was pasture exposed to the full force of Atlantic gales, but they were obliged to give the purchaser a mortgage.

So Humphrey II, Coningsby II and Charles presided over estates bound up in a web of debt and inter-related mortgages. This was not an unusual state of affairs for a landed family and it has been suggested that life tenants did not have a big incentive to clear up mortgages, because this would have reduced their immediate spending power. Moreover, the Sibthorp estates were ‘settled’ and therefore the proceeds of land sales could not be freely used.

The family overreached themselves during a period when the fortunes of farming went through a wartime period of high profits (1790-1815), followed by an agricultural depression that lasted until the late 1840s. This may also help to account for the long period of inactivity in Charles’ time as life-tentent, when to sell land at the bottom of the market would not have been an especially good strategy. In the booming period of High Farming, his successors were able to pull the family finances into shape. This improvement would be related to increases in rents, one of the chief reasons why the gross annual value agreed for estate duties purposes on Charles’ death in 1855 was £9,656, but £16,301 in 1861 on the death of his son Gervase.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr J. E. Lord of the University of Lincoln and Miss Jenny Allsopp for comments on drafts of the section on the art sale; and Christine for supplying a copy of the 1856 Sibthorp sale catalogue, with explanation of its format. The penultimate draft of the article benefited considerably from comments made by Michael Edgar. Our thanks go also to the staffs of the Lincolnshire Archives Office and Lincoln Central Library, along with private persons and out-county libraries and record offices we consulted.

Notes

1. F. M. L. Thompson, English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century (1963), p.114. Our article arises from work on Charles Sibthorp’s court case by Michael Trot and on the art sale by Joan Mills. Mills provided the framework and produced the first complete draft.


4. Lincolnshire Archives Office (hereafter L.A.O.), 2SB 3/3, and more generally from BS1, BS16, LCC Deeds A/267/A, 2SB 2/1, and FL. Deeds 93 and 207; Victoria History of the County of Oxford, XII, edited by Alan Crosley (Oxford, 1999), pp.228-29 and 280; and Alison Grant and Others, The History of Instow to Mark the Millenium (Instow, Devon, 1999), pp.22, 63, 70-71, 97.

5. L.A.O., 4SB 3.


8. L.A.O., 4SB 3.

9. Sale particulars 1890 and other data supplied by Mr W. J. Killick, North Mymms.

10. L.A.O., 4SB 3.

11. Our thanks to Mr W. J. Killick for the transcription of the 1771 document now in Herefordshire Record Office. The hall was 22 by 200 and 108 high (6.7m by 5.8m by 3.3m) and the gallery 30 by 100 in 1856 (11.7m by 3.3m).


13. The youngest of Charles’ siblings, Richard, was born at Canwick in 1792, and this event may approximately mark the beginning of the family’s residence there. Humphrey Sibthorp was paying a substantial amount in poor rate throughout the 1790s, again a suggestion that he was actually occupying the Hall; but there were only two people in the hall on census night 1801 - L.A.O., Canwick Par 13/2 and 3/1.


15. L.A.O., BS1/1/5.


19. Frederic Boase, Modern English Biography (1665, first edition 1901), III, pp. 566-67; Lincolnshire Times, 18 December 1855, reprinted in L.R.S.M., 7 March 1853 and 6 June 1823; and Hill, Victorian, p.49; the second account seems to have enjoyed some embroidering.

20. L.R.S.M., 13 August 1824; Hill, Georgian, p.278, however, thought the disagreement concerned the Asylum.


23. L.R.S.M., 13 August 1824; Hill, Georgian, p.278, however, thought the disagreement concerned the Asylum.


27. Hill, Georgian, p.230; Gentleman’s Magazine, N.S., XLV (January 1856), pp.84-86.

28. L.A.O., Canwick Par 21/3 and 14/1; BS1/1/3 and BS/S3/Canwick 2; Hill, Victorian, p.31.


30. On his defeat, a ring was presented to Charles, inscribed ‘The ornament and reward of integrity presented to Charles De Laet Waldo-Sibthorp by the grateful people of Lincoln, Christmas 1823’). Usher Gallery, Lincolnshire Collection, UO7/118.

31. Adopted by an earlier generation, the Sibthorp motto was ‘Nil concerere sibi’, the last word representing Sibthorp, not the Latin sibi - hence the meaning is ‘none can gainay Sibthorp’.


35. B. Webster and C. H. Hibbert, The London Encyclopaedia, (revised edition 1993), p.259; Oborne, Lincon Politics, p.22. Charles had not been in Eaton Square for many years, since he is known to have been living at St Albans in 1825; 2 Delalay Street in Mayfair in 1841; 27 Chester Street, Grosvenor Place in 1845; and in Stepney in 1846 - these addresses were recorded when he bought paintings at exhibitions of the Watercolour Society - see Antique Collectors’ Club, The Royal Watercolour Society: the first 50 years 1805-55 (Woodbridge, 1992), pp.72, 102, 192, 250, 263 and 298-99.

36. Selby Whittingham, ‘Turner’s Lincolnshire connections: prospects,


40. See above, note 35.


42. Fowler, *Life and Letters*, p. 280. Richard had his collection photographed a few years before his death; upon the latter it was sold and the proceeds given to his favourite charities - *A Catalogue of Porcelain and Pottery, the Property of the Rev. R. Waldo Sibthorp* (Nottingham, 1874, copy in Nottingham Central Library) and his will, L.A.O., BS18/13/2/2.


44. See above, note 19. *The Lincoln Date Book* records on 19 February 1855 that Charles headed the subscription list for the poor made necessitous during a recent storm; he gave £100 and G. F. Henegar came second with £50.

45. L.A.O., BS1/135; BS1/Cranwick/3; BS3/Oxon1; and North Devon Record Office, 1142B/T30/11.

46. Ex info. R. C. Wheeler; the latter also informs us that, for example, the Harmston branch of the Thorolds went bankrupt in 1848.

47. L.A.O., LCC Deeds A/267/A - the increase was very steep, but the document confirms that like is being compared with like.