

# HORDERN HOUSE

RARE BOOKS · MANUSCRIPTS · PAINTINGS

PORTRAIT OF SARAH BATE, MRS WILLIAM BANKS

BY JOHN RUSSELL R.A.

[BANKS] RUSSELL, John, R.A. (1745-1806).

Portrait of Sarah Bate, Mrs William Banks...

*Pastel, original gilt-wood frame; signed upper right: J. Russell R.A. / pt 1790; external 770 x 620 mm, internal 597 x 443 mm. London, 1790.*

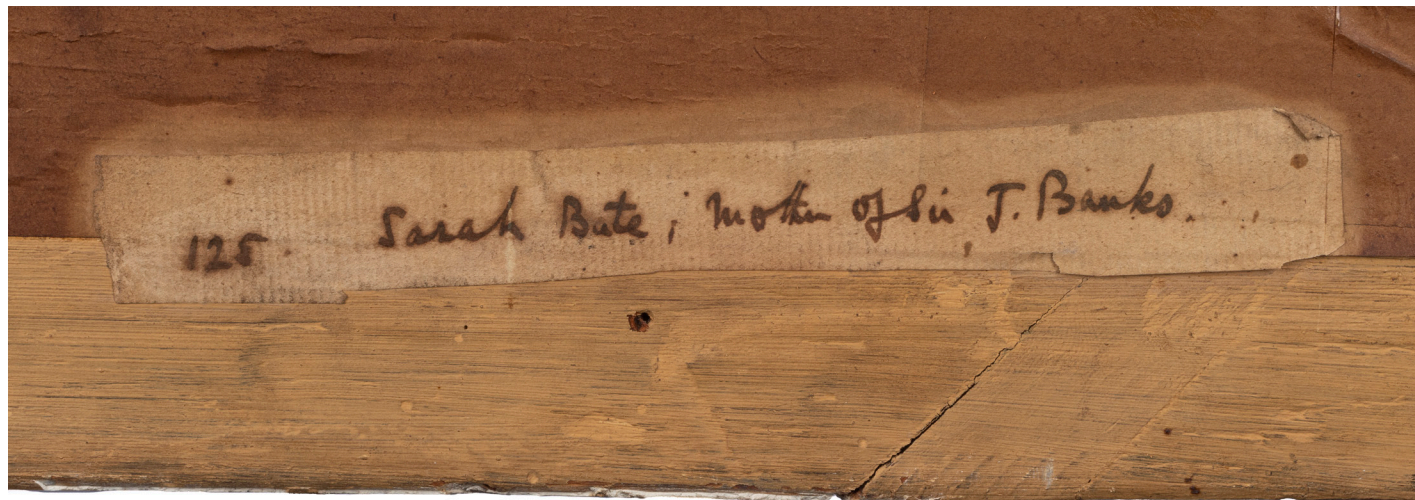
A major portrait, redolent of the age, showing Sarah Banks (née Bate), mother of Sir Joseph Banks, his greatest advocate in his lifelong passion for the study of botany.

Sarah Banks was the most formative and enduring influence on Banks's early life. The ailing health of his father William, who lost the use of his legs after contracting a fever sometime around 1745 and died in 1761, just after his son first went up to Oxford, meant that it was his mother, with the support of her brother-in-law Richard Banks-Hodgkinson, who was Banks's mainstay. He remained exceptionally close to her throughout her life, her grand house on the river at Chelsea being one of his favourite haunts and the place where he first immersed himself in the wonders of botany. Their relationship is best summed up in her charmingly informal will, which positively exudes warmth towards "my dear son... whose very affectionate behaviour and goodness to me and his sister has added greatly to my happiness."

Although overlooked by the great majority of writers on Banks, the life of his mother is overdue a reappraisal, not only for her influence on both him and his only sibling, the extraordinary Sarah Sophia Banks, but also because she was a remarkable figure in her own right, a keen botanist and gardener, a promoter of any number of social causes and, not least, one of the earliest and most practical supporters of the abolitionist Granville Sharp in his crusade against slavery. Much remains to be discovered about this indomitable woman.

This fine pastel by John Russell R.A. was Banks's most personal tribute to his mother, privately commissioned by him in 1789; Banks took the family portraiture very seriously and worked closely with artists and engravers throughout his life. Beautifully executed, it clearly portrays her fine eye and forceful presence (she was a woman "devoid of all imaginary fear," as Banks once memorably described her in a letter to a friend). The work is also an incredibly rare insight into her life, as nearly all the private family papers of Banks are lost.





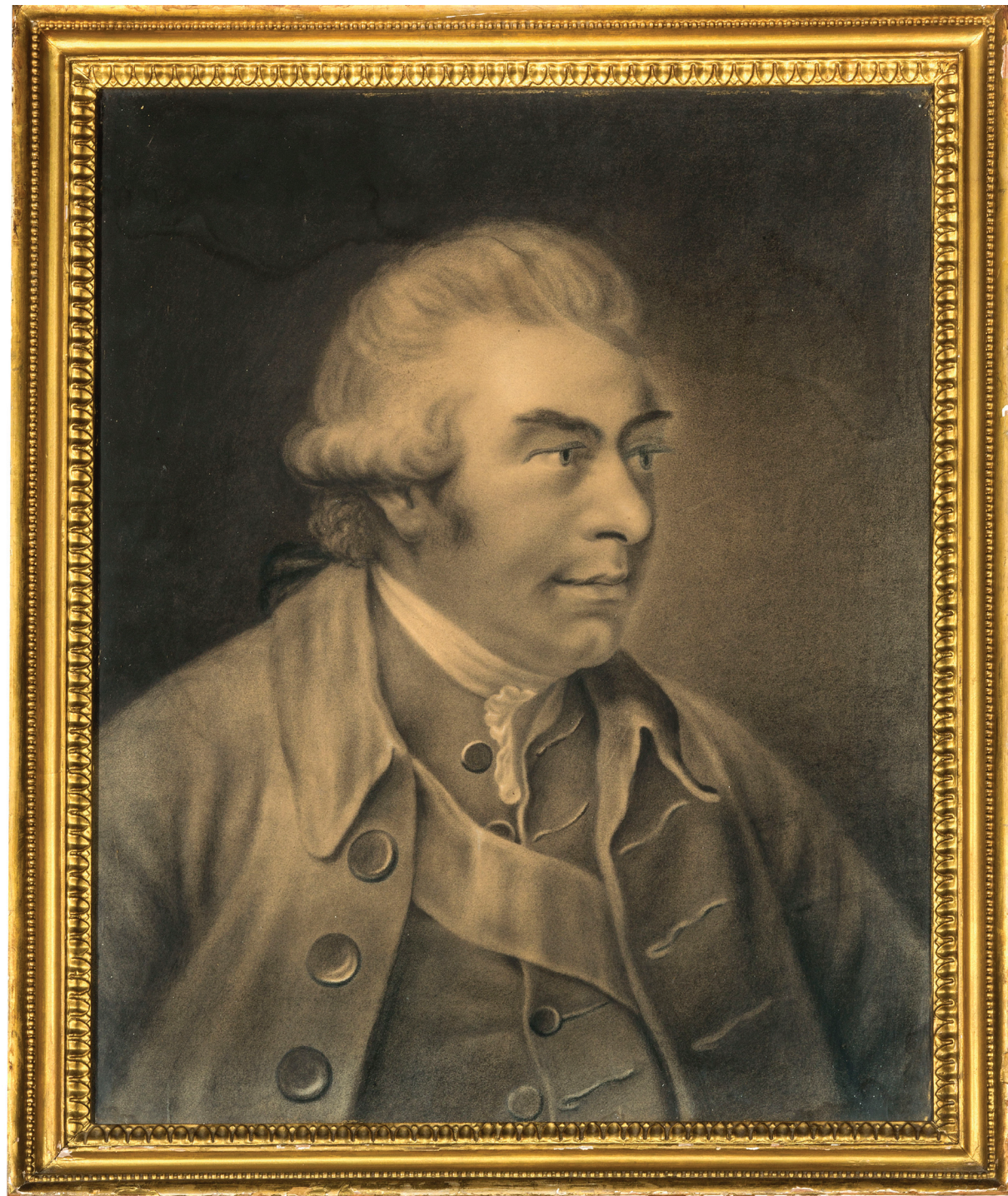
Equally, the choice of Russell for the work was testament to the close relationship the artist had with Banks. In his early career, Russell's ardent religiosity got him into arguments and lost him work, but his ability won out: indeed, the choice of Russell for the present work may also have been due to the fact that Sarah was also devout. Banks had sat for Russell in 1788 and was so delighted with the portrait ("a most decided likeness") that he commissioned this matching portrait of his mother the following year, right when Russell was at the crest of his early success. The portrait shows the artist at the very top of his game and it was immediately exhibited at the Royal Academy as one of the works marking Russell's election as an Academician, just prior to his appointment as "Painter to the King and Prince of Wales" the following year.



Russell's portraits comprise a remarkable cross-section of London society, ranging from bankers to aristocrats, surgeons to natural historians, and a great number of serving officers of the Army and Navy. Through his long-standing friendship with Banks (the earliest surviving letter recorded by Williamson dates from 1774), he would take portraits of some of the most famous names in the history of Pacific and Australia, not only Banks himself (1788), but his family (1789); William Bligh (1791); Captain Henry Wilson of the *Antelope* (1788), celebrated for his voyage to Palau; John Meares of the Nootka crisis (1792); and, in 1793, one "Captain Hunter" (presumably John Hunter of the *Sirius*).

The portrait is a fitting memorial to this resourceful woman, whose steady guidance and passionate support was fundamental to the upbringing of two of the most idiosyncratic and self-possessed figures of Georgian England, Sir Joseph and Sarah Sophia Banks. Sarah Banks – "Mrs. Banks" as she usually signed her name – was not only a lifelong part of the exceptionally close family entourage at both her house in Paradise Row, Chelsea and his at Soho Square, but a fascinating figure in her own right.

Exhibition labels on the verso of the painting



A compelling lifetime portrait of Sir Joseph Banks at the height of his powers by Amelia Susannah Petty the daughter of a friend. The portrait is based on a pastel John Russell RA drew in 1788, showing Banks holding a lunar map.

## BANKS FAMILY LIFE.

For one of the great botanists and scientists of the Georgian period – and one of the most influential letter-writers of his or any age – surprisingly little is known about the early life of Banks. For all of the projects he encouraged, the voyages he made and the letters he wrote, his personal life remains surprisingly enigmatic: there was no autobiography (and not much by way of contemporary biography either); no personal memoir despite the adventures described in his journals of Newfoundland, the Endeavour voyage and Iceland; no children (at least none that he publicly recognised); and he outlived most of his closest friends and companions (Solander, Cook, Lord Sandwich, Jonas Dryander, Sir Charles Blagden).

It has often been remarked that among the multitudinous Banks papers, scattered since the 1880s, very little has survived relating to his immediate family. The most likely explanation is that, as commonly, it was the private correspondence that was the first to be destroyed, most likely by Banks widow Dorothea (died 1828). This gap has left a mystery at the heart of his life and one which, moreover, was compounded by the fact that he kept his family close: most of his youthful letters from school or early adulthood are lost but – more significantly – in later life he lived so close to his mother and his sister, often in the same house, that there was little need to write. In fact, what seems to be the only recorded letter between Banks and his mother (now SLNSW) is dated from Chelsea in December 1779, a note announcing that she was sending her son a barrel of oysters and a quarter of lamb, clearly, given the date, for Christmas. The letter does at least provide a hint that Russell captured her tendency to be rather austere: even given the conventions of the age, it is surely not every mother who would sign a letter to her 36-year-old son “yr. obliged humble servt.”

One of the results of this cleaning house of the Banks papers is that our understanding of the core of his life is skewed and, indeed, partially obscured: with little beyond the Russell portrait to go on, his mother has been the most obvious casualty of this distorted view. Despite her enormous influence over Banks, only a handful of scholars, pre-eminently Averil Lysaght and Patrick O’Brian – two of the more thoughtful writers on his life – have ever tried to tease out the nature of their relationship. Lysaght described her as “a shadowy but formidable figure” (she had clearly seen this portrait!) who was fundamental in encouraging and stimulating his interest in botany, while O’Brian wrote that she and her son remained very close throughout her long life and that her death at his house in Soho Square in 1804 marked a real downturn in his fortunes.

Despite this, generations of writers have tended to downplay the importance of the women in Banks’s life: there can be no doubt that Banks was very clubbable, but works like this important portrait by Russell are ample reminder that Banks had a fuller and more nuanced personal life.



Portrait of a young Joseph Banks attributed to John Opie R.A. (Trevellas, 1761-1807)

Few have put it better than John Gascoigne, who wrote that while Banks seemed to avoid salons and mixed company, and that he was often regarded as a rather glum figure when he did venture into them, that nonetheless “Banks owed much to the women of his family” (Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment*).

## SARAH BANKS.

Russell’s portrait provides the opportunity to redress what we know about Sarah Banks. While Banks came from an established Lincolnshire family, notably through the efforts of his great-grandfather the first Joseph Banks (d.1727), it was really his parents that catapulted the young man into the first circles in England (Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal*, pp. 3–5). His father William had succeeded to the estate after the premature death of his older brother (another Joseph) and although a rather reclusive figure, his sister Margaret (Peggy) had married the Hon. Henry Grenville, one of the more important figures of that highly politically influential family (a “potent” connection, as one of his biographers Harold B. Carter put it).

However, much of the family wealth and an enormous portion of their connections with the haut monde derived from William’s 1741 marriage to Sarah Bate (c.1719–1804), the eldest daughter of William Bate of Derbyshire and the heiress to a substantial fortune. The Bate family was extremely well connected, Sarah’s aunt being the wife of the eighth Earl of Exeter (and thus part of the Cecil family, pillars of the establishment since Elizabethan times) while her sister Arabella married the enormously wealthy Huguenot merchant George Aufrère.

Their eldest child Joseph Banks was born on 13 February 1743. Very little is known of his early years beyond the basic facts: he spent most of his childhood at Revesby Abbey (Lincolnshire), went to Harrow in April 1752 (aged 9) and then to Eton in September 1756 (aged 13). Doubtless the most famous foundational story of his life dates from around this period, a tale which has become the central plank of Banks’s personal mythology. As the story goes, it had been while at Eton when he was aged about 14 that he had his first epiphany about the wonder of botany. He had been lingering on the banks of the river after swimming with friends, when he suddenly became entranced with the flowers and plants around him. He immediately set out to teach himself on the subject, with nothing beyond the assistance of some of the local women who gathered plants (“simples”) for the apothecaries, paying them sixpence at a time for anything he found materially interesting. During his next holidays he happened to find a copy of Gerard’s famous *Herball* in his mother’s dressing room and



'View of Chelsea' by John Maurer (engraved by Vivares), 1744, showing Turret House (demolished in 1816), home of Sarah Banks. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

even though it was lacking one of the boards and had several leaves torn out, took it back to school in triumph where it became his constant study. No other story is more routinely quoted to explain his early interest in botany, but as will become clear the passive, almost accidental, role of his mother has been greatly overstated.

Soon after she was widowed Sarah Banks moved into the magnificent Turret House on Paradise Row, Chelsea, so close to the Physic Garden that it basically overlooked the grounds. The Queen Anne building featured a balustraded flat roof with a central hexagonal tower topped with a cupola which was taller than any of the neighbouring buildings and with an arcaded walk heading down towards the river, where a summer house fronted the Thames just along from the famous Swan Inn, a local landmark. Although Turret House was demolished in 1816 its design is known from several early views, not least the 1744-published 'View of Chelsea' by John Maurer (engraved by Vivares, see image left).

If her early years are still a little hazy, it is possible to paint quite a picture of Sarah Banks in her Chelsea life. For one, there is clear evidence that she took a serious interest in botany, most tangibly because she was one of the subscribers (alongside her son Joseph and brother-in-law Robert Banks Hodgkinson) to William Curtis's *Flora Londinensis*: or plates and descriptions of such plants as grow wild in the environs of London (1777–1798), a groundbreaking work of the era. It cannot be a coincidence that Curtis, one of the most influential botanists of the era, spent most of the 1770s at the Physic Garden.

More substantially, one of the reasons that the newly widowed Sarah moved to Chelsea was to be close to her adored sister Arabella, who had married the wealthy financier George Aufrère (1715–1801). The Aufrère family lived just a few doors down in almost impossible splendour, surrounded by fine Old Master paintings purchased during his Grand Tour and associating with artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, in a rambling house that had been remodelled by the former Prime-Minister, Robert Walpole and his wife Catherine. The Walpoles definitely took a serious interest in their gardens – the property featured a greenhouse, a grotto decorated with beautiful shells as well as extensive gardens – which doubtless explains its attraction to the Aufrères, themselves keen gardeners.

Uncle George and Aunt Arabella were therefore part of Banks's closest family, and their house was frequented by him for parties and the like: in 1778, for example, he and Solander hosted a party to watch a sailing match of the Cumberland Society from the Aufrères property (Duyker & Tingbrand, Daniel Solander: *Collected Correspondence*). One of the few family letters still extant in the Banks papers is from George regarding the death of

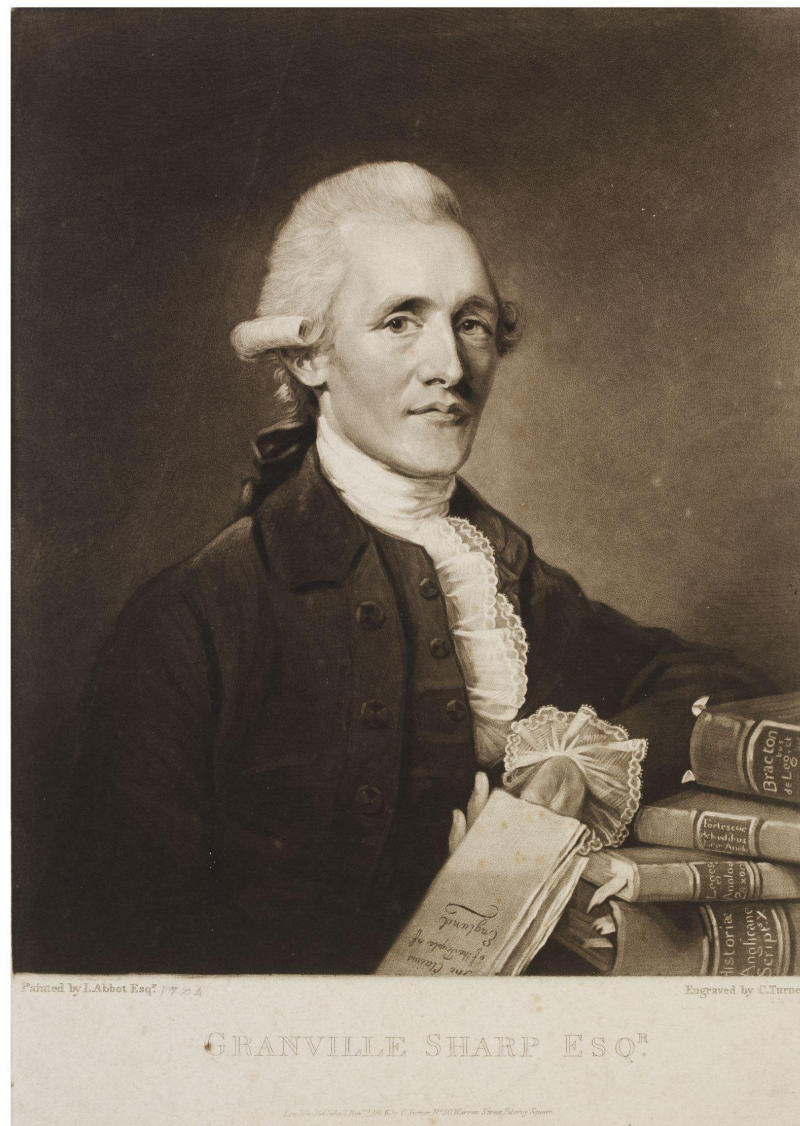


Sophia (Aufrère) Pelham, 1754 - 1787. Wife of Charles A. Pelham, 1st Baron Yarborough  
Engraving by William Dickinson after the portarit by Joshua Reynolds  
image courtesy National Galleries of Scotland

his only child, Sophia Pelham. In 1787, the year after Sophia died, Banks helped organise an engraved version of her portrait after the original by Reynolds. The beautiful plate was engraved by William Dickinson, who also engraved a portrait of Banks, also after Reynolds. The superb portrait of Sophia shows her feeding her chickens (themselves an exotic looking brood) in a glamorous gown with a distinctive botanical motif: not only does its disarming mise-en-scene tend to suggest that a love of nature ran deep in the family, but her frank gaze shows a strong familial resemblance to her Aunt Sarah.(See image left).

The best authority for the closeness of the connection between the Aufrères and Sarah Banks is none other than the Chelsea-born Australian collector George Suttor (1774–1859), who arrived in New South Wales in 1800 with the lukewarm support of Banks. Less well known is the fact that it was George Aufrère, who employed Suttor’s father at the Chelsea house, who was behind the entire plan. Aufrère sought detailed comments on the idea from his nephew Banks (see letter of Sir Joseph Banks, 3 July 1798, SLNSW) while Suttor clearly knew Sarah Banks personally – he passed on his best wishes to her in a letter to Banks dated from Portsmouth, 11 February 1800. This close connection is doubly important because Suttor is the source of the story that Mrs Banks was “a lady remarkable for her charities and piety; and devoted to her religious duties in the Church of England” (Memoirs historical and scientific of the Right Hon. Sir Joseph Banks), a comment clearly based on personal acquaintance.

It was presumably this piety which was behind the connection between her son and the Moravian missionaries who had established themselves near Battersea Bridge just to the west of Turret House: Moravians were some of the earliest to send missionaries abroad and they supplied Banks with an impressive number of plants collected as far afield as Newfoundland and India. It must also have motivated her to become a subscriber and supporter of more charities than one could comfortably list (small-pox inoculation, the SPCK, various hospitals, the Philanthropic Society, etc.), as well as signing herself as “Mrs. Banks, near the Physic Gardens, Chelsea,” alongside her daughter and daughter-in-law, when she gave money to one of the first specialist maternity hospitals (An account of the British Lying-In Hospital, 1785). Sarah, her daughter Sarah Sophia and her sister Arabella Aufrère all subscribed to the Rev. Sloane Elsmere, Sermons on several important subjects (1767), which would be rather enigmatic were it not for the fact that the book was particularly noticed as being printed for the “sole benefit of the Charity Girls School of the parish of Chelsea.” Elsmere was the nephew of Hans Sloane, the physician and collector whose bequest founded the British Museum and whose purchase of the Chelsea manor in 1712 had led directly to the creation of the Physic Garden in the first place, another persuasive botanical connection.



Granville Sharp Esq, an engraving by Charles Turner, 1805, after the portrait by L. Turner (1784).  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

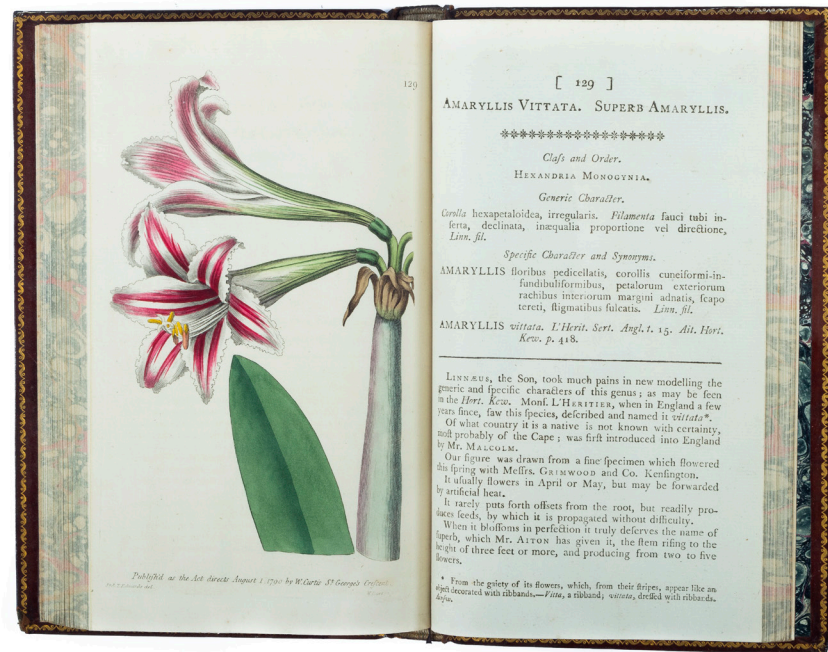
## SARAH, BOTANIST AND ABOLITIONIST.

The Banks house at Paradise Row was clearly a local landmark, nowhere more clearly than with her close involvement in one of the most far-reaching events of the period. In July 1770 Sarah Banks and some of her servants heard screams coming from the river at the foot of her garden: it was the yelling of Thomas Lewis (alias George August), an escaped slave, whose 'owner' Robert Stapylton along with some local watermen was bundling him into a skiff to smuggle him out of the country on a Jamaica-bound trading ship: they were, that is, attempting to sell Lewis back into slavery. At the time Stapylton and Lewis were living nearby, Lewis later testifying that Stapylton tricked him into going down to the waterfront by telling him that he had "some Gin and Tea down by the water side by Mrs Banks's wharfe and I am afraid there is a Custom house officer has notice and intelligence of it."

The evidence suggests that Lewis knew Sarah – "I called to Mrs Banks for help," he would later attest – and that she was appalled by the scene which had taken place at the foot of her garden. Roused to action, she immediately contacted Granville Sharp, at the time just beginning his career as an abolitionist and, just as quickly, set her own servant 'Peter' to the task of freeing Lewis. She pressed Sharp into action, shirt-fronted various officials and magistrates in different parts of London, commissioned her own solicitor Lucas and an attorney Dunning to take on the case, took on all the costs, and within days had Lewis released from the ship on which he was being held, having had Peter chase it all the way to the Downs.

Stapylton decided to fight the charges of kidnapping and wrongful imprisonment, having the case removed to the King's Bench, where costs were likely to be high and the case would be tried by Lord Mansfield, who was ambivalent on the issue of slavery. Sharp was so worried that he pressed Sarah to relinquish her financial support, which she steadfastly refused. When the trial was finally convened early in 1771 Sharp not only attended but wrote to Mrs Banks diligently throughout, these letters becoming one of the most important set-pieces in his later *Memoirs*. One of the most significant aspects of the *Memoirs* is that it also includes an important snippet from one of her written replies: "I am afraid T. Lewis will contract an idle habit by continuing so long out of place, but can hear nothing for him at present. He was for some time prevented attending your kind bounty by illness, but got quite strong and hearty some days ago, when I found he still neglected to attend his school-master" (Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq.*, pp. 86–87). Not only is this a rare example of Sarah Banks's authentic voice, but it is evidence that she had clearly taken Lewis into her household. This case has since been much studied, not least because it is now con-





William Curtis's influential *Botanical Magazine*, 1793. This set covers for the first time the botany of the Pacific region newly explored by European expeditions including the three voyages made by James Cook.

[5000254 at hordern.com] or for details click 

sidered the most important rehearsal for Somerset vs. Stewart the following year, a socially profound case in which the slave James Somerset argued that despite having been formally purchased by a customs officer called Charles Stewart in Massachusetts, that the contract was void in England because, as Lord Mansfield would reluctantly state, slavery was not “allowed or approved by the law of England.” Although legal writers continue to debate the case’s true precedent, it was popularly held to be a confirmation that no one could be a slave in England and was the first major victory of the anti-slavery movement.

Sarah Banks was a real personality in Chelsea. This is additionally important because Banks is now so completely associated with Soho Square and Revesby Abbey that it is easy to forget that he was also an habitué of his mother’s house, and that few locations held more attraction for him. In fact Chelsea and the river were inordinately dear to Banks: it was here that he took in all the latest discoveries of the nurseries clustered in the district, but also here that he spent his younger days fishing with Lord Sandwich, their rods so placed that as they quaffed “Champaigne and Burgundy” little bells would ring to warn them of a bite (Faulkner, *An Historical and Topographical Description of Chelsea and its environs*, vol. II, p. 190). More, his association with the Physic Garden at Chelsea was fundamental to his career, not only through his connection with William Curtis, but also because while “on vacation from Oxford he spent time in the company of their wise old gardener [Philip Miller]. He remained his friend to the end, and when Miller died he sent his librarian, Solander, to buy the old man’s herbarium of exotic plants to add to his great collection.” (Wall & Cameron, *A History of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London*, p. 170). His connection with Chelsea therefore gave Banks the perfect milieu from which to improve his botanical knowledge.

The early story of Banks happening across his mother’s copy of Gerard’s *Herball* is, therefore, little more than an arresting fiction: as with so many aspects of his private life, the stories of Banks’s youth are only known from second hand, never more so than in this case, which was told by Sir Everard Home (the physician, brother-in-law of John Hunter FRS and notorious plagiarist) in a public eulogy he gave in 1822. Banks had died two years earlier, and it is telling how in Home’s telling that Mrs. Banks was given a remarkably passive role, quite out of kilter with what is known of her character. It is almost as if Home’s readers were expected to believe that she had managed to buy the next block to the Physic Garden and have a much-used copy of Gerard’s expensive folio in her dressing room, by some sort of strange accident. By this argument, she must have subscribed to the revolutionary botanical work of William Curtis, frequented the gardens of her sister Arabella Aufrère and taken a personal interest in the collector George Suttor in the same casual way.

In short, the received story is wrong. All of the evidence points to Sarah Banks being keenly interested in botany and, far from being prim or pious, that she was a warm, passionate and formidable figure. Nowhere is this clearer than with her firm support for the anti-slavery campaign of Granville Sharp, for which she was one of the earliest supporters at a critical juncture: her paying of the costs in the case and her dogged pursuit of a result (she was implicitly warned at one point by Lord Mansfield that she and Sharp were trying the court's patience with their persistence) are testament to her character. It was Banks's mother who had the most direct influence on his character; who moved the recently bereaved family to Chelsea and into the purview of the Physic Garden and the nurseries; who just happened to have a copy of Gerard's Herball to lend to her son; who was the woman "devoid of all imaginary fear" who supported his botanical studies at Oxford, at a time when he was paying for his own private tutor in the subject.

Sarah Banks died at her son's house in Soho Square on 27 August 1804, 15 years after this portrait was taken. In her will she left her personal estate to be split between Sir Joseph and Sarah Sophia, not forgetting some smaller gifts to some of her long-serving staff and to Dorothea, "whose alliance has made us all happy." She left a token 50 guineas to her brother-in-law George (who actually pre-deceased her) "as a small acknowledgment of the uncommon marks of friendship received from him and my sister Aufrère in the time of my affliction" (presumably a reference to her widowhood). Most of the many printed obituaries in the newspapers of the day said that Sarah Banks was aged 84 and eight months when she died.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- David C. A. Agnew, *Protestant Exiles from France* (1886)  
J.C. Beaglehole, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks* (1962)  
Reginald Blunt, *Paradise Row* (1906)  
Harold B. Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks* (1988)  
Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African Slave-trade* (1808)  
'Correspondence with Sir Joseph Banks, relative to the Toad,' *Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1823)  
Edward Duyker & Per Tingbrand, *Daniel Solander: Collected Correspondence 1753-1782* (1995)  
Thomas Faulkner, *An Historical and Topographical Description of Chelsea and its environs* (1829)  
John Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment* (1994)  
Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq.* (1828)  
Everard Home, *The Hunterian Oration* (1822)  
Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800* (online)  
David Le Lay, 'Three Mansions' (Chelsea Society 2010)  
Andrew Lyall, *Granville Sharp's Cases on Slavery* (2017)  
Averil Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador* (1971)  
Patrick O'Brian, *Joseph Banks: A Life* (1987)  
George Suttor, *Memoirs historical and scientific of the Right Hon. Sir Joseph Banks* (1855)  
Cecil Wall & H. Charles Cameron, *A History of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London* (1963)  
George C. Williamson, *John Russell, R.A.* (1894).  
Edlie L. Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free* (2009)

Provenance: This painting was one of Russell's exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1789, the year of his election as an Academician, was kept at Soho Square until Banks's death in 1820, then went to his wife Dorothea (1758–1828) who left it to her nephew and Banks's major beneficiary, Sir Edward Knatchbull (1781–1849). At the time of Williamson's catalogue raisonné of Russell's work the painting was still the property of Knatchbull's daughter-in-law, Lady Brabourne, remaining in the family by descent until 2020.

[5000547 at [hordern.com](http://hordern.com)]



*Banksia spinulosa*

# HORDERN HOUSE

RARE BOOKS · MANUSCRIPTS · PAINTINGS

2/255 Riley Street, Surry Hills Sydney, NSW 2010 · Australia

(+61) 02 9356 4411 · [www.hordern.com](http://www.hordern.com) · [rare@hordern.com](mailto:rare@hordern.com)