

George Bickham Sr.

George Bickham The Elder (~1684~1758). The records of George Bickham the elder and George Bickham junior are a good deal confused. As to the date of the birth of the former, the D.N.B. does not commit itself to a more exact statement than that he was born "at the end of the seventeenth century", although Massey indicates plainly that he was born in 1684. The year of his death also is variously given. The D.N.B. puts it at 1769. Massey, however, tells us with convincing detail that "he yielded up his breath May the 4th, 1758, aged 74 years. He was buried in St. Luke's churchyard, Old Street, near the Vestry door without any monumental inscription". Massey was a contemporary of Bickham and he published this statement in the year 1763-a few years after the date which he gives for Bickham's death.\* (See also under G. Bickham junior.) It would appear, therefore, that the compiler of the article on Bickham in the D.N.B. had been misled. The same biographer states that Bickham "was the most celebrated penman of his time" - an opinion which it is difficult to share when one remembers that among his contemporaries were such highly accomplished writing-masters as Shelley, More, Snell, Clark, Snow and Ollyffe. The same writer states that Bickham's stock-in-trade was sold at Richmond in May 1767 and that he died there two years later. These statements are apparently repetitions of those made in Strutt's Biographical Dictionary of Engravers and in Horace Walpole's Catalogue of Engravers and are more likely to refer to George Bickham junior who died at Richmond in 1771 - Unfortunately it has been impossible to verify Massey's statement as to the burial of George Bickham at St Luke's, Old Street, in 1758, as the burial registers there, from 1752 to 1765, are missing.

Bickham attained a much higher position as an engraver of calligraphy than as a practitioner of the art. As the former he may be said to have been pre-eminent, excelling even his master John Sturt. Joseph Champion in the preface to his *Parallel* says, " G. Bickham was the first English Engraver who rightly dared to cut the letter through on the wax on the Copper (without first tracing it over as was the common Practice) and thereby transmits the Ease, Spirit and Nature of the Master's Original".

That he was an expert penman is true and as evidence of this we have the fine series of plates signed " G. Bickham fecit " in his *Universal Penman* and in other works; but it is not always easy to attribute his work rightly for he was known to sign his plates, at times, with a pen-name, as in the case of *The British Penman* said to be written by " George Johnson ". Here Massey lets us into the secret of the mild deception. "Upon my enquiry about this George Johnson, I was informed that it was only a fictitious name ... it seems this was a little piece of fraud of our celebrated engraver George Bickham, who being the son of John Bickham assumed this name of 'George John'son' meaning the son of John Bickham his father ". There may have been some reason for this dissembling in the fact that Bickham would not wish to appear to emulate the performances of his clients, the practising writing masters. It is possible also that confusion may have arisen between the work of the father John Bickham and the two George Bickhams; and to add to the complication we find two plates in the *Universal Penman* (Nos. 134 and 165) signed "G. J. B." and " G. J. Bickham

No. 167 is signed " George John'son ".

Of George Bickham senior's early life little is known except that he was a pupil of the famous engraver John Sturt.

His pictorial engravings are of small account. His portraits of contemporary writing-masters, however, have an interest for us. These included George Shelley, John Clarke, Robert More, and "Six Heads of Eminent Writing Masters of the Day". A portrait of George Bickham the younger may be by his hand. Other engraved portraits he produced were of Sir Isaac Newton, Bishop Blackall and Stephen Duck, the poet.

It is as an engraver of calligraphy that George Bickham's name will be forever famous. His fellow writing-masters owed a great deal to his skilful rendering of their copy-books upon the copper plate. His monumental work *The Universal Penman*, which appeared in 52 parts between 1733 and 1741, presented the work of 25 contemporary writing-masters on 212 finely engraved folio plates, "The whole Embellish'd with beautiful Decorations for the Amusement of the Curious". The first collected edition was published in

book form 174 1. Eighteen of these plates appear to have been written by George Bickham himself. From these, and odd plates in other publications of his, one judges that he was no mean calligraphist.

Indications of other activities are given in the following advertisements of Bickham:

A trade-card: "All Sorts of Picture-work I and I Writing in all hands I are I Engrav'd after y. best Manner on Copper-Plates I By GEORGE BICKHAM I At his House in Hatton Garden near Holborn I London I Where Young Gentleman and Ladies are carefully taught y Whole Art of Drawing".

An advertisement in the Frontispiece of Drawing and Writing Tutor: "Rooms, Ceilings fitting up with Paper in the English and Chinese Tastes".

A George Bickham, engraver, of the parish of St Paul, Covent Garden, was the object of a bill of complaint in Chancery, filed on 9 January 1743-4 by "Alexander Pope of Twickenham, Middlesex, esquire ". Whether this action was taken against George Bickham senior or his son of the same name is not clear, for both of them were living in Covent Garden at this time. Pope applied for a writ of injunction against the engraver on the ground that he had printed, published and sold an edition of the poet's work *An Essay on Man* (originally published in 1733) printed "from plates engraved and not from types". Protection was sought under "An Act for the Encouragement of Learning", which had been passed in the eighth year of the reign of Queen Anne, by which the sole right and property of books was vested in the authors and proprietors of such books. Pope claimed to enjoy the benefit of this book without interruption; and the defendant was stated to have "every intention of publishing more editions and impressions of the poem pretending sometimes that the plaintiff never was the author of the same... ; at other times pretends that he himself has some right or interest in the poem, and again that he is employed by others -whose names he refuses-to print the book".\* On 23 January the plaintiff succeeded in his suit and an injunction was obtained against Bickham who had filed no answer to the bill of complaint brought against him. From Pope's evidence it is clear that copies of the first book of the poem had been printed and exposed for sale, but reference to *Alexander Pope-A Bibliography*, by R. H. Griffith, 2 Volumes, 1922 and 1927, does not disclose the fact that this edition was printed, nor is any mention made of Bickham in two or three lives of Pope which have been consulted.