

Taken from English Writing Masters by Ambrose Heal

John Clark (1683-1736)

Armigerous writing-masters are rare. The portraits of John Clark and Martin Billingsley are the only ones which bear a coat of arms. John Clark's is prefixed to both his copy-books. The crest—a hand and anchor—was granted to his maternal grandfather, on being knighted by King Charles II, after he had distinguished himself in an engagement with Van Tromp. John Clark's father was in command of a "Guineaman" * which was lost on the Goodwin Sands.

This writing-master was born at Rotherhithe—and, in 1696/7, entered the Merchant Taylors' School; subsequently he was sent to study writing and accounts at Major Ralph Snow's school "on the paved stones in Little Moorfields" and to him he was bound apprentice.

John Clark's first book, *The Penman's Diversion*, was published in 1708 from his house at *The Hand and Pen in Wood Street near Cheapside*, but he moved from here in 1710 to *"The Hand and Pen in Warwick Lane"* where he took over George Shelley's business, as we find from the following advertisement which he inserted in the *Post Boy*, 27-29 April 1710: "MT. George Shelley, at the Hand and Pen in Warwick Lane, being elected Writing Master to Christ Church Hospital;—John Clark (Author of the *Penman's Diversion*) is remov'd from the Hand and Pen in Wood Street, and succeeds him in his House and Business: where he expeditiously teaches Writing, Arithmetick, Merchants Accounts, Shorthand and Several Parts of the Mathematicks; Youth may Board or be taught abroad".

According to Massey, Clark's second book, *Writing Improv'd*, was published from his house in Warwick Lane in 1712, and Granger's *Bibliographical History* agrees with this. No copies of such an early edition, however, have been seen, and it is noteworthy that Clark inserted an advertisement in the *Post Boy*, 2-4 February 1714, announcing that this copy-book was "shortly to be publish'd". This certainly was published and "sold by the author at his house in Warwick Lane" in 1714 and "a new impression" was advertised as "just publish'd" in January 1717. In some copies is an over-print "Remov'd to Peterborough Court in Fleet Street" and we find John Clark advertising his removal from Warwick Lane to Peterborough Court in the *Daily Journal*, 6 April 1727—Massey repeats a statement made to him by Richard Clark (John Clark's son) to the effect that no fewer than 10,000 copies of *Writing Improv'd* had been sold.

Between John Clark and Charles Snell a bitter and undignified controversy arose in the year 1712 when Snell in the preface to his *Art of Writing* made scoffing allusion to "some of our late Authors who have made Owls, Apes, Monsters and Sprig'd Letters so great a part of their copy books". Clark retaliated in the preface to his *Writing Improv'd* with an attack on "a late Author who has made a violent noise about sprigging of Letters and Pencilling of Flourishes and the scurrilous Treatment of all other Penmen on that Score". From blast and counterblast in the prefaces to various editions of their copy-books the matter was carried further into the advertisement columns of the newspapers right on till 1717,

Some years after this unseemly quarrel had died down Clark figured in another contest, this time as to the merits of two exponents of shorthand, Thomas Clayton and James Weston. In the *Private Journal and Literary Remains of John Byrom* an account is given of this affair at the Chapter Coffee House in 1725 in which Clark's name appears. From various entries in John Byrom's *Journal* about this date which mention "MT. Clark the Writing Master in Warwick Lane", it is evident that he was giving lessons in shorthand.

It is remarkable that no plates by John Clark were included in Bickham's *Universal Penman* in spite of the fact that prefixed to Clark's *Writing Improv'd* is a note by Bickham, "The Engraver to the Reader", in which he declares that Clark was "the first penman I received any knowledge from in the *Art of Writing*". In Bickham's other publications, however, examples of Clark's penmanship do appear.

John Clark's second wife was Hester Dance of Uxbridge, and when he died, in his fifty-third year (1736), he was buried in the Dance family vault in Hillingdon churchyard. John Clark had two sons—-one the Rev. John Clark, "sur-master" of St Paul's School; the other Richard Clark, writing-master to the Royal Academy at Portsmouth (q.v.).