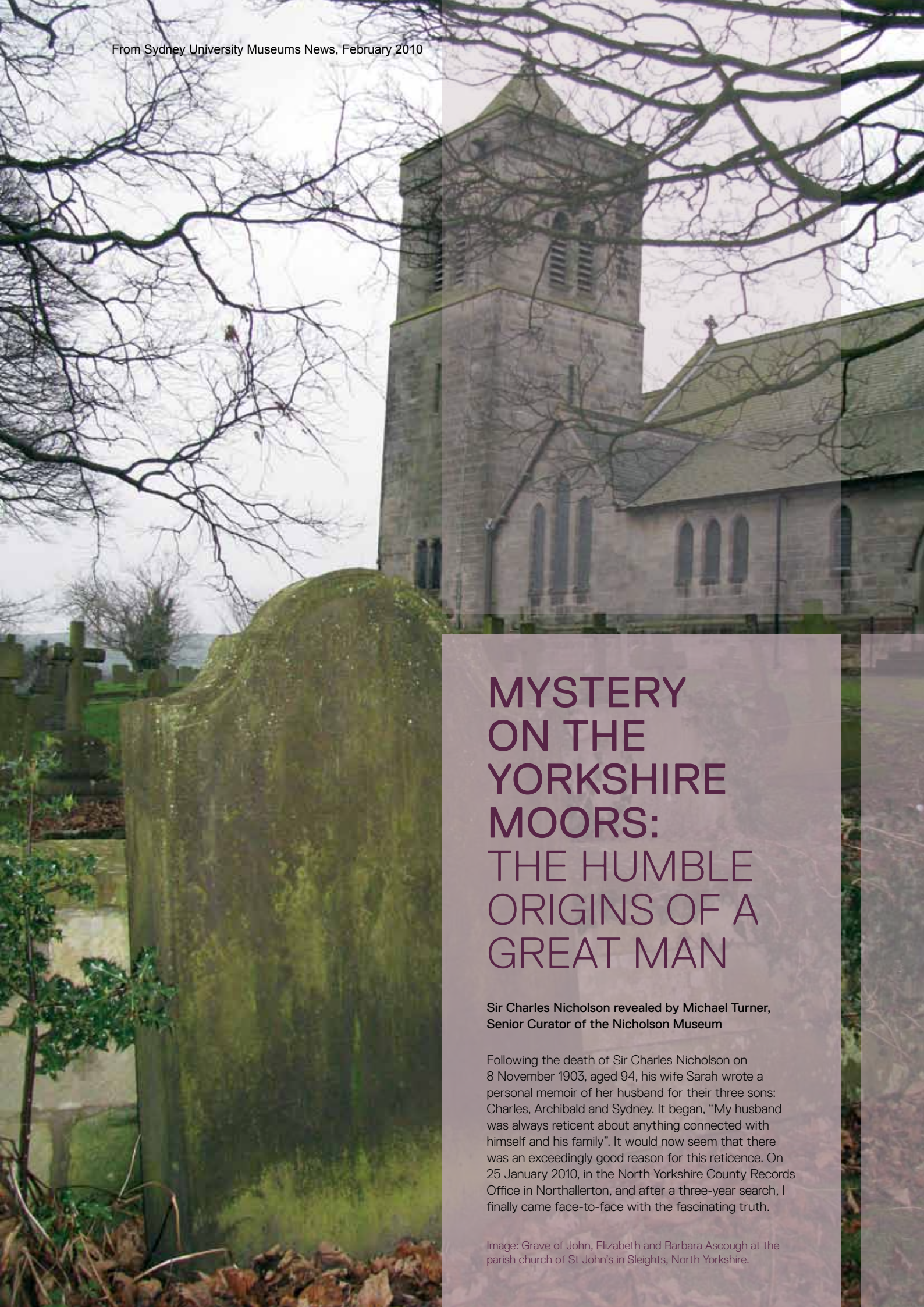
From Sydney University Museums News, February 2010



MYSTERY ON THE YORKSHIRE MOORS: THE HUMBLE ORIGINS OF A GREAT MAN

Sir Charles Nicholson revealed by Michael Turner, Senior Curator of the Nicholson Museum

Following the death of Sir Charles Nicholson on 8 November 1903, aged 94, his wife Sarah wrote a personal memoir of her husband for their three sons: Charles, Archibald and Sydney. It began, "My husband was always reticent about anything connected with himself and his family". It would now seem that there was an exceedingly good reason for this reticence. On 25 January 2010, in the North Yorkshire County Records Office in Northallerton, and after a three-year search, I finally came face-to-face with the fascinating truth.

Image: Grave of John, Elizabeth and Barbara Ascough at the parish church of St John's in Sleights, North Yorkshire.

The chapel of All Saints at Ugglebarnby, North Yorkshire.

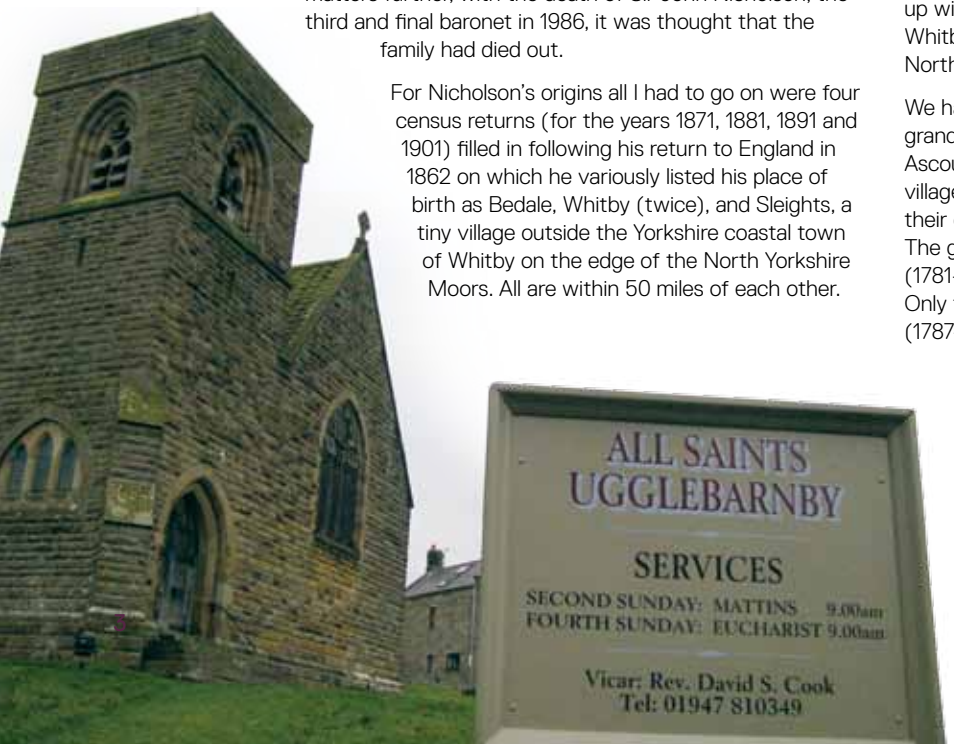
In 2007, research began on the exhibition *Nicholson: Man and Museum*. The exhibition, which opened in 2008, was to be a celebration of the 200th anniversary of Nicholson's birth on 23 November 1808 and to continue on for the 150th anniversary, in 2010, of the museum named in honour of its founder and first great benefactor. Nicholson was one of the great figures of 19th-century Australia: doctor, explorer, patron of the arts, educationalist, politician. He was both a founder of the University of Sydney and three times speaker of the NSW Legislative Council (for which he was knighted) before being created Australia's first baronet in 1859.

I was soon struck, however, that while there was abundant evidence for his life and achievements following his arrival in Sydney in 1834, there was little or none for his earlier family background. Apart from the record of his medical degree at Edinburgh University, from where he graduated in 1833, what little evidence there was, was circumstantial and often conflicting; a fact graphically reflected in the inaccuracies of his later biographies. What then had inspired the man to such greatness?

Nicholson is said to have been born in the north of England, in either Cockermouth in Cumbria or Bedale in Yorkshire. In her personal memoir, Sarah says that she "believed he was born in Bedale", but then adds a later note to say that following her son Sydney's enquiries in Cockermouth, "it would seem likely he was born there". Nothing, however, could be confirmed. His father was said to be Charles Nicholson Esq., of either London or Cockermouth and variously a London merchant, the agent of the vast Egremont estates in Cumberland (close to Cockermouth), and a magistrate. His mother was Barbara, daughter of John Ascough 'Esq.', and of a 'good' family of Bedale in Yorkshire. Barbara died when Nicholson was very young and his father supposedly some time shortly after. Orphaned, he was raised by his mother's brother and sister, William and Mary Ascough. Or so the story went.

The only problem was that, following extensive research including a visit to the Cumbrian Records Office in Whitehaven in 2007, I could find no record of the family in Cockermouth or subsequently in Bedale. To complicate matters further, with the death of Sir John Nicholson, the third and final baronet in 1986, it was thought that the family had died out.

For Nicholson's origins all I had to go on were four census returns (for the years 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901) filled in following his return to England in 1862 on which he variously listed his place of birth as Bedale, Whitby (twice), and Sleights, a tiny village outside the Yorkshire coastal town of Whitby on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors. All are within 50 miles of each other.



What did this mean? Surely Nicholson was telling the truth – or something close to it – on something as officially important as a census?

In the meantime I had placed a query on the message board of the Ascough family website. Nearly two years later, in October 2009, and completely out of the blue, came a response. I was contacted by Janet Gate, the wife of Martin, one of two great-great grandsons of Charles Nicholson. Living in England, the family was alive and thriving! In its possession were many unseen family papers – including Sarah's memoir of her husband and paintings of Charles, his mother Barbara, and Sarah. Intriguingly, Janet herself had spent many years researching the family coming to the same bleak conclusion as myself about the origins of Charles Nicholson. They were a complete mystery.

In early January 2010 came the second stroke of good fortune. Following contact with Janet, I had decided to have another look at Nicholson's maternal Ascough connections. His uncle William made 10 trips to the colony as the captain of convict ships, some of which he owned. In 1824, he was the first man to take a full-sized ship 30 miles up the Hawkesbury River. He became an extensive landowner before finally drowning in 1836, lost at sea between Sydney and his property on the Hawkesbury. All of his land and money were left to Nicholson – we have his will. I then discovered that several objects, presumably collected by Ascough on his travels – including a "Tropic Bird; long and handsome Spear, with numerous Barbs; a Bow, and eleven Arrows; from New South Wales", had been donated to the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Museum over several years by his wife, Susannah.

On the off-chance, I contacted the museum to see if they had any further details of the donations or perhaps still had the objects. To my amazement, I was contacted by Sue Boyce, curator of ethnography at the museum, who had been doing her own research on the voyages of William Ascough. And apart from the bird, the objects donated by Susannah Ascough were still in the museum.

A frenetic series of emails between us all saw new information coming to light almost daily. I was already on my way to England and America, so was able to meet up with Janet, and later with Sue and her colleagues in Whitby. All then fell into place on that Monday morning in Northallerton.

We had identified the grave of Nicholson's maternal grandparents: John (1747–1813) and Elizabeth (1756–1816) Ascough in the churchyard of St John the Evangelist in the village of Sleights outside Whitby. Buried with them was their daughter Barbara, Nicholson's mother (1789–1814). The gravestone is also a memorial to their son, John (1781–1813) who died serving in the British Navy in Jamaica. Only two children remained, William (1777–1836) and Mary (1787–1868), both of whom died in Australia.

In Northallerton, among the parish records for Sleights and for its neighbouring village of Ugglebarnby, I read of the baptism of William, John, Mary and Barbara Ascough (Mary and Barbara's surname is spelt Askwith, which gives a clue to the actual pronunciation of the name). All were baptised in the tiny chapel of All Saints at Ugglebarnby. In all cases the profession of their father, John,

was most surprisingly given as 'labourer', with the family residence given as the tiny hamlet of Iburndale, half way between Sleights and Ugglebarnby – a thousand light years from the landed gentry of Bedale. The burial records for John, Elizabeth and Barbara were there too (all buried at Sleights as there was no burial ground at Ugglebarnby).

And then, as I nervously came to the handful of records for Ugglebarnby for 1808, the bombshell. Why was Charles Nicholson so reticent to talk about his parents and family? He was illegitimate. But more fascinatingly, 'Charles Nicholson' was not his real name. The original parish record shows that on 1 December 1808, in the tiny chapel of Ugglebarnby, not two miles from Sleights, "Isaac Ascough, the illegitimate son of Barbara Ascough (spinster)" was baptised following his birth a week earlier on 23 November 1808.

What is certain is that the orphaned son of the daughter of a rural labourer was the subject of substantial patronage that saw him educated to a level that enabled him to obtain a medical degree from Edinburgh University with a dissertation, written in Latin, on asphyxiation. To break with his past, or to recognise this patronage, Isaac Ascough, it would seem, either took or was given the name of his father or patron.

Finally, there is a delicious irony, without doubt deliberate, in Nicholson's choice of motto on his elevation to the peerage in 1859. *Virtus sola nobiltas* – virtue is the only nobility – is taken from Juvenal's *Satire 8*. The Satire in question begins, 'Of what value are pedigrees?'.

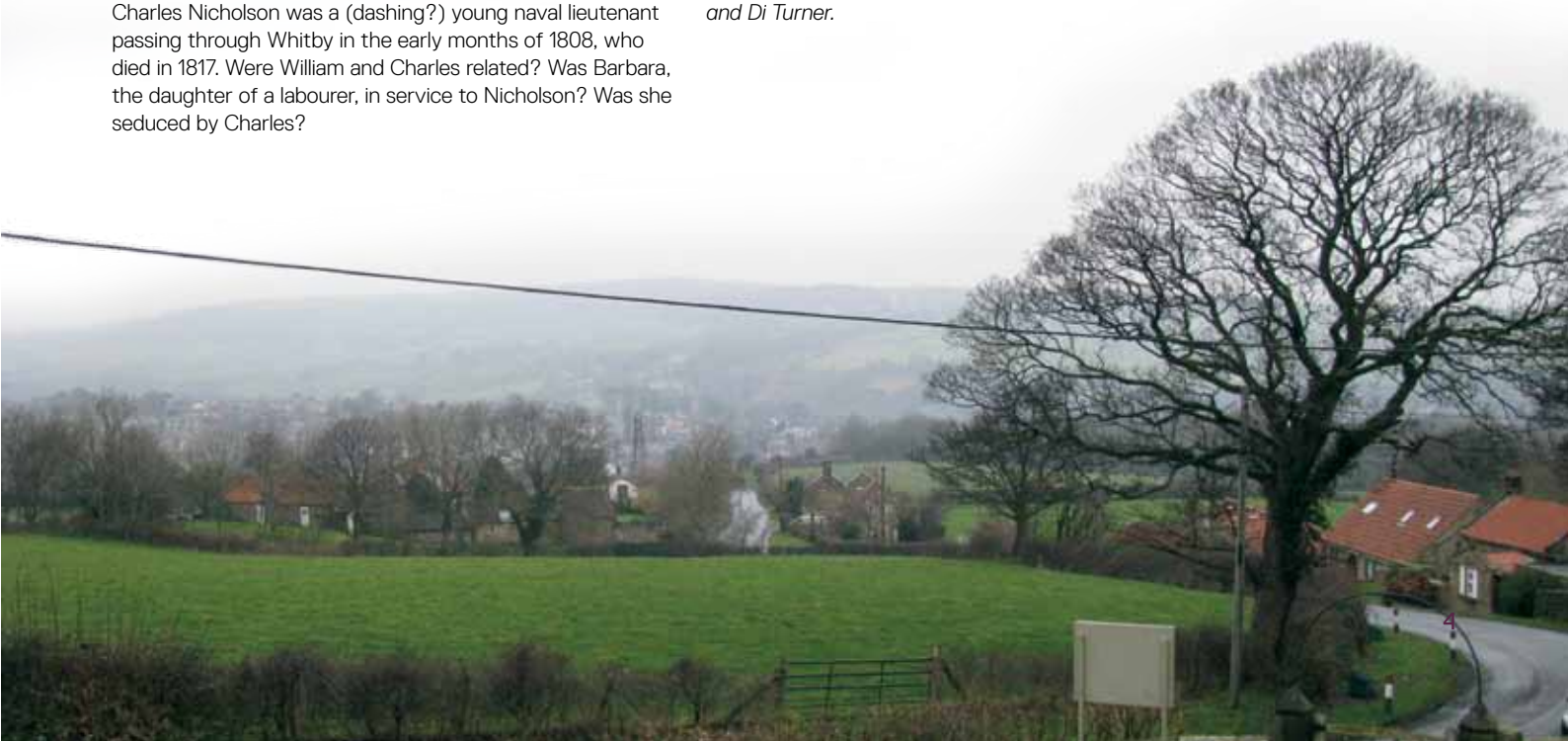
Indeed.

Left: Portrait of Sir Charles Nicholson, 1891, by Herbert Olivier. In the possession of Martin and Janet Gate.

Right: Christiane Kroebel, Steve Barnard, and Sue Boyce in the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Museum, January 2010.

Who was the father? Work continues, but there are some intriguing possibilities to follow up, the very stuff of a Jane Austen novel. William Nicholson, a Whitby merchant, is an older, shadowy figure in the founding of the Whitby museum (was he the inspiration for Charles's passion for museums?). Charles Nicholson was a (dashing?) young naval lieutenant passing through Whitby in the early months of 1808, who died in 1817. Were William and Charles related? Was Barbara, the daughter of a labourer, in service to Nicholson? Was she seduced by Charles?

My ongoing thanks in this grand adventure to Janet and Martin Gate and to Sue Boyce, Mark Edwards, Steve Barnard, and Christiane Kroebel at the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Museum, also to Craig Barker (especially for the observation about Nicholson's motto) and Di Turner.



The view from Ugglebarnby across to Sleights. Iburndale lies in the valley between.

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THE TRAVAILS OF A TAPESTRY

Dr Ann Stephen, Senior Curator, University Art Gallery

The Gobelin tapestry of Joseph and his Brethren has hung in the Great Hall as a grand backdrop to the ceremonial life of the University for a century and a half, yet holds several intriguing puzzles. Originally one of six ordered in 1773 for the Papal Chamberlain Count Onesti, it was delivered to Rome in April 1779. Following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, which saw Onesti banished from the Vatican, such luxury goods flooded European auction houses. Eighty years later the Joseph tapestry was unveiled in Sydney for the inauguration of the Great Hall in 1859, initially on loan though subsequently donated by Sir Charles Nicholson.

The circumstances under which Nicholson bought the grand design and whether he even deliberately selected it for the University are unknown. Its Old Testament subject – of a virtuous man who overcame great hardships through his belief in God – was at odds with the secular enterprise of the new University. Pamela Bell, former curator of the University art collection, has speculated that its parable of brotherly love may have appealed "as a metaphor for England caring for her dependent colonies." Whether read in religious or secular terms, it is likely that it was the serendipity of the marketplace that saw it washed up on these southern shores.

The young Dr Nicholson threw himself into the cultural life of the colony, after inheriting his uncle's estate in 1836. He became the first curator of the Mechanics Institute museum, lectured at the School of Arts, Sydney, and was appointed to the first University Senate in 1850. It is probable that, while overseas between 1856 and 1859, he bought the tapestry in Rome. Nicholson was acutely aware of the need for private benefaction in the colonies. Shortly after lending the tapestry, he wrote to his friend Adelaide Ironside – the Australian-born artist then studying in Italy who had expressed her desire to paint murals for Sydney's major buildings – advising her that "to expect … an Australian parliament to appreciate artistic merit – or art in any shape, would be as reasonable as to expect to gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles."

The tapestry's role in technological advances in colour are as intriguing as the circumstances of its provenance.

New research by Sarah Lowengard reveals that its manufacture coincides with the arrival at Gobelin of a French dyer and chemist called Quemiset. He introduced a system of colour charts and new dying techniques making more beautiful and accurate colour, to quote Lowenthal's study on *The Creation of Colour in the Eighteenth Century*. This saw the development of an extraordinary palette of some 25,000 different tones that could match the subtle colours of flesh as well as represent the rich reds and blues of drapery.

Manufacture des Gobelins (makers)
Jacques Neilson (dyer, low warp loom weaver), 1714–1788,
Charles Coypel (cartoon's artist), 1694–1752
Joseph and his Brethren, 1773
France. Wool, silk, linen; 530x275cm
Donated Sir Charles Nicholson 1865
UA1862.1

THE SWAN AND THE GRAPES

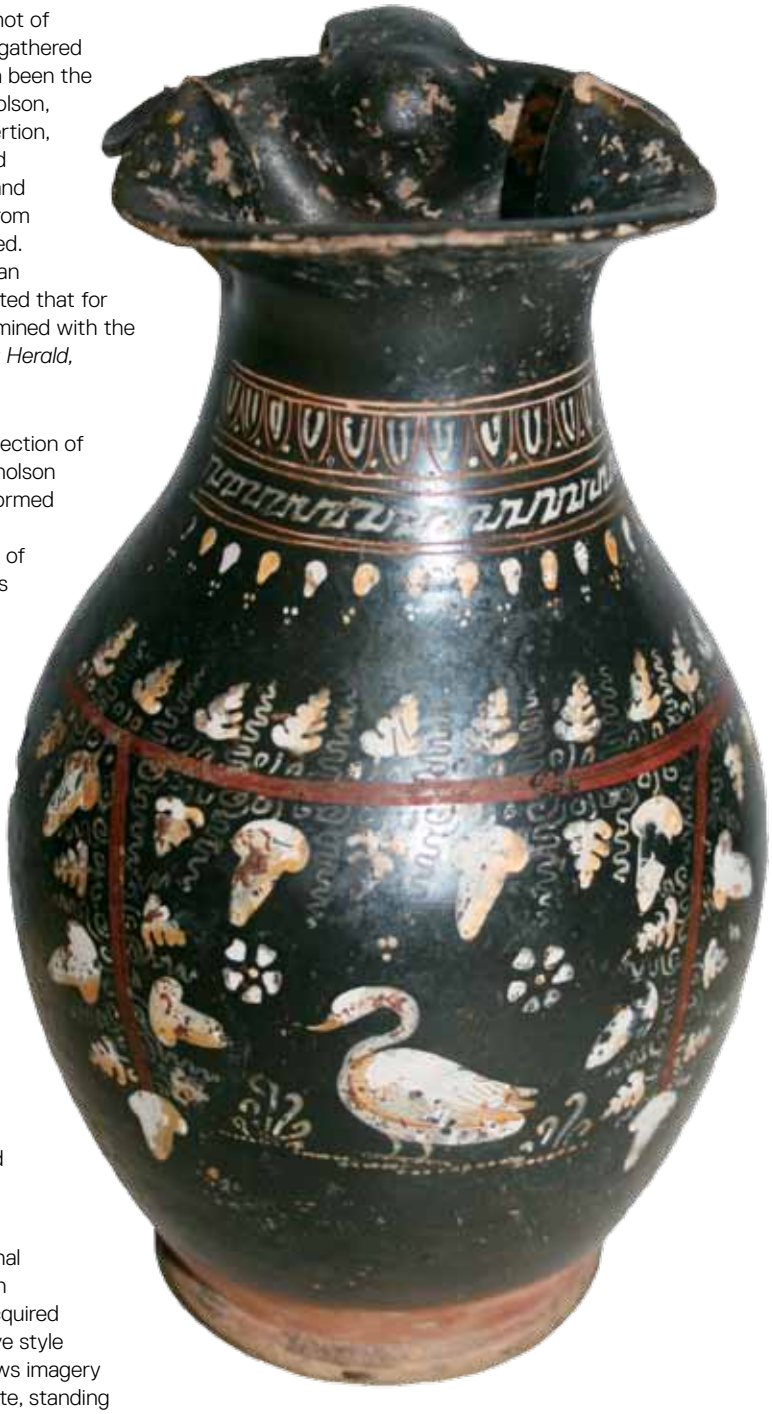
Michael Turner, Senior Curator, Nicholson Museum

"It is not generally known that within musket shot of Sydney there is a large collection of antiquities gathered from those countries, which have in succession been the seat of civilisation and empire. Sir Charles Nicholson, at a large expense and still greater personal exertion, has accumulated this treasure of which it would require a volume to describe. From the tombs and ruins of Egypt, from Greece, from Rome, and from Pompeii, valuable specimens have been gathered. Some of these specimens would interest even an uneducated person. It must, however, be admitted that for the collection to be appreciated it must be examined with the eye of a scholar and an artist." *Sydney Morning Herald,* 3 August 1859

Ironically, the beauty of Charles Nicholson's collection of over 200 Greek and Italian pots now in the Nicholson Museum is that he was collecting not as an informed connoisseur, or even with an eye to aesthetic beauty. Rather he was looking to find examples of different shapes, from the many different places of ancient production, however mundane, be it Greece, South Italy, Rome or Etruria. This has meant that the later, more informed acquisitions of the connoisseurs, and Nicholson Museum curators, Dale Trendall and Alexander Cambitoglou, sit side-by-side with pottery not normally found in collections founded in the 20th century.

Nicholson never visited Greece, later writing that, "the whole of the classical antiquities were obtained in Italy and were acquired by me during successive excursions made in the valley of the Arno, of the Tiber, at Rome, and at Naples". As well as purchasing direct from dealers, he was even buying, as far as we know, off stalls in the weekend flea market in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome. In the 1850s, he was acquiring whatever he could find in a hurry (his time in Italy was limited) and at a price he could afford, to fulfil his intention of bringing ancient European culture to the colony.

One of the more beautiful pieces from his original collection, and a personal favourite, is this south Italian wine jug from the late 4th century BC acquired by Nicholson in Italy in the 1850s. In a decorative style involving polychromy, known as Gnathia, it shows imagery of a swan, an iconographic identifier of Aphrodite, standing inside an arbour of grapevine, identifier of Dionysos. The two gods were central figures in concepts of a funerary belief in the afterlife. It should come as no surprise therefore that the jug has survived intact, for over 2000 years, from a grave (before making its way to Sydney).



A wine jug from Apulia, south Italy. Decorated in the style known as "Gnathia" and attributed to the Circle of the Rose Painter. 325-300 BC. NM62.809

NICHOLSON: THE WHOLESALE COLLECTOR

Dr Elizabeth Bollen, Curatorial Assistant, Nicholson Museum

In the 1860s, Sir Charles Nicholson donated over 1000 objects to the University to begin the Sydney University Museum of Antiquities – later renamed in his honour.

Above: 6 of the 15 metal spoons collected by Nicholson. NMR.1332.

Right: A selection of the 88 buckles and "other small items collected in London." NMR.1301

To this day, many of the Nicholson Museum's highlights include pieces that were acquired by Nicholson on his travels in Egypt, such as the three mummies Merruah, Pediashaikhet and Horus. However in addition to the beautiful pieces, Nicholson donated "worn out" and "ill-formed scarabs" and numerous shabtis, some more authentic than others.

Nicholson's travelling and collecting continued in Italy, where he seems to have bought broadly and without discrimination from dealers and antique stores. In addition to some run-of-the-mill red figure pots, Nicholson bought numerous pieces of Etruscan bucchero, the plain black vessels often ignored by connoisseurs. Among these acquisitions are listed 26 Roman tesserae, sundry fragments of bronze plate – most likely portions of ancient armour, the "fragment of a Roman brick with impressed eagle" and finally, the purchase of a "curious headless, armless and footless female figurine," a Greek doll currently on display. He was after "European culture" for the new "European University" that he had helped establish in Australia. Everything would do.

Nicholson had an interest in the emerging discipline of archaeology. Some pieces he collected during visits to excavations. For example, the 1890s catalogue notes that a piece of Roman glassware was excavated at Ostia (the port of Rome) in the year 1848, in the presence of Charles Nicholson.

Back in London in the 1860s, Nicholson kept a close eye on the construction of Cannon Street Station. Built on top of a medieval steelyard and trading centre, the excavations for the London Underground turned up all sorts of material from the past. It is likely that the "15 metal spoons" and over 88 pieces "of small objects found in London" – chiefly consisting of buckles – were collected by Nicholson during his visits to the site.

Nicholson himself directed an excavation near his residence in Essex. He oversaw the excavation of mounds set along the River Crouch. He hoped the mounds were Romano-British burial tumuli, but right at the middle of the tumuli, some rough pottery was found that was very similar to contemporary pots. A local resident working on the excavation gave the following explanation of the mounds: "Oh, they say as Oliver Cromwell kept soldiers there." The conclusion was drawn that the mounds were fortifications hastily built to protect the area from a mid 17th-century Dutch landing, and were then just over 200 years old.

It is likely that Nicholson appreciated the wealth of knowledge held in the everyday objects of the past, the material with which most archaeologists work today. His collecting style has left the Nicholson Museum with a collection of great depth. The storeroom is full of objects of interest, even if some are unlikely ever to be selected for display.

TEACHING WITH THE NICHOLSON COLLECTION

Dr Craig Barker, Manager, Education and Public Programs, Sydney University Museums

Students learning in the Education Room as part of the University of Sydney's Compass program.

"Is it really thousands of years old?" the students will often ask incredulously. Following it up with "Have they really been in Australia for 150 years?" Before finally asking "Is it really OK for us to hold it?"

Inevitably the Education Officer on duty will answer "yes", "yes" and "yes".

Under the watchful eyes of our trained education officers, one of the highlights of any school visit to Sydney University Museums is the chance to take part in hands-on workshops, where students can learn from the collection by actually engaging directly with it. By drawing, photographing and describing the objects in the education boxes, students learn to approach the material as an archaeologist and historian would do. Often undergraduate students of the University tell us it was their first experience with this material at Sydney University Museums that inspired them to follow their interest through to an academic level. It is a policy of 'Look and DO touch', and provides an ultimate educational experience for the students.

In 2009, over 8500 school students took part in organised excursions, as well as thousands more visitors in adult education groups and tutorials for undergraduate students from a wide range of subject areas. Most of these visitors were unaware, however, that among the archaeological artefacts they were handling, were objects that Charles Nicholson himself purchased for the University.

Nicholson stated in 1860 that he saw his collection as being suitable in the "illustration of various branches of historical, philological and classical enquiry". In other words, his collection was to be used for teaching visitors to the museum. A century and a half later, the formal Education Program is just one aspect of the realisation of his vision.

While organised school trips to the Nicholson Museum have existed since the 1860s and formal school programs for decades, it is now over 20 years since formal artefact workshops were first developed, allowing students of archaeology and ancient history (and of all ages) the chance to learn by touching actual artefacts. The ability to use the collections in this way continues Nicholson's dream of using the material to "illustrate ... enquiry". Holding the material allows students to interpret up close, and to critically analyse and question what the artefact can tell them about the ancient culture that produced it.

Among the items from Nicholson's original donation handled by visiting school students during the past decade is a bronze tap from Pompeii (NM R460) that was probably acquired by Nicholson when he was in Italy in 1857. Dating to the first century AD, it is indicative of Roman skills not only in metallurgy but also in civil engineering. It is an important part of the collection, but an especially important teaching resource as every HSC Ancient History student in NSW studies the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and most will study aspects of Roman civic infrastructure. At the Nicholson Museum, they are actually able to hold an example of something they would have otherwise only known about from textbooks.

One area the students love to hear about is ancient Egyptian mummification and so the limestone lid of a canopic jar depicting the god Hapi (NM R47) is a highlight of the education boxes and again part of Nicholson's benefaction. Canopic jars were used to store and preserve the viscera of the mummified body for the afterlife, with each of the four jars used to preserve a different internal organ. Hapi was the baboon-headed god representing the north, and his jar contained the lungs. This canopic lid dates to the New Kingdom period (16th to 11th centuries BC).

Another popular artefact from Nicholson's donation is a ceramic aryballos from Corinth, Greece (NM R838). An aryballos is a small globular flask used to contain perfumes and oils; our example is of the 6th century BC and is beautifully decorated. Many students make the comment that the shape is very similar to a modern perfume bottle.

Of course the materials from the Nicholson and Macleay museums that are used for teaching must be handled sensibly and carefully at all times. But in doing so, the students are learning about the value of the objects and the collections, as well as the correct way to handle objects. Most importantly, they are given the chance to rediscover cultures and specimens that they are studying in a classroom – now seeing them in a whole new environment whereby they can actually hold and touch history.

One would think that Charles Nicholson would approve of his acquisitions providing joy to a new generation – 150 years after he first held them, and felt exactly the same thrill.

A canopic jar lid (NMR.47), a tap from Pompeii (NMR.460) and a Corinthian aryballos (perfume jar) (NM98.3) from Nicholson's collection, currently accessible in the teaching collection.