

“That the very important library of England’s greatest genius, a genius, be it noted, recognized even during his lifetime, who was Master of the Mint and President of the Royal Society for many years, should have practically disappeared at his death, and have only been re-discovered after nearly 200 years, appears almost incredible.” (Richard de Villamil, writing in 1931).<sup>i</sup>

No reasonable explanation for what happened to Newton’s working library after his death on March 20th 1727 has until now been proposed. Newton died intestate, and within weeks his books had been sold privately to a most improbable purchaser, the corrupt warden of the Fleet Prison.<sup>ii</sup> John Huggins had no connection with Newton as far as we know, and no interest in mathematics or science either. Why did the executors sell him the library?

When Newton died, at the age of eighty-four, he was a national hero, “the greatest of Philosophers, and the Glory of the *British Nation*”. The splendour of his funeral eight days later proclaimed his eminence:

On the 28th of *March*, the Corps of Sir *Isaac Newton*, lay in State in the *Jerusalem Chamber*, and was buried from thence in *Westminster Abbey*, near the Entry into the Choir. The Pall was supported by the Lord High Chancellour, the Dukes of *Montrose* and *Roxburgh*, and the Earls of *Pembroke*, *Sussex*, and *Macclesfield*, being Fellows of the Royal Society. [...] The Office was perform’d by the Bp. of *Rochester*, attended by the Prebends and Choir.<sup>iii</sup>

Voltaire, who was present, recorded his admiration in his *Letters concerning the English Nation*. “His countrymen honoured him in his lifetime, and interred him as tho’ he had been a king who had made his people happy.”<sup>iv</sup>

The fate of Newton’s books was however another matter. Despite the general recognition of the

importance of Newton's scientific work, his personal library, a collection of nearly two thousand volumes many containing his marginal notes, vanished from public view, apparently to languish for over half a century in an obscure country rectory. John Huggins seems to have done well out of his bribes and corruption, and in 1727 was in the process of buying a handsome sixteenth-century house, Headley Park in Hampshire, to retire to.<sup>v</sup> Headley Park was later home to the valuable book collection of his second son William (d.1761), the translator of Ariosto and friend of Smollett, which was catalogued for sale in 1776 by the bookseller J. Russell of Guildford. But John Huggins didn't buy Newton's books to grace the library in his new house. Instead, they were despatched to Chinnor in rural Berkshire, to be cared for by his youngest son Charles, the Chinnor rector. Why?

What is more, it is only as the result of a letter written by a Swedish scholar visiting Oxford that we know that Newton's library was ever at Chinnor Rectory.<sup>vi</sup> Many years later, in the autumn of 1775, Jacob Jonas Björnståhl (1731-1779) made a pilgrimage to Chinnor to see Newton's books. He had been in London in May and then went to Oxford, from where he sent three letters home to a colleague in Sweden full of information about Oxford's libraries and men of learning, which have never been translated into English.<sup>vii</sup>

At the end of the third letter he describes his visit to Chinnor Rectory, which was made in the company of his young charge, Baron Rudbeck. The interest of the letter to Newton scholars was first noticed by Joseph Edleston three quarters of a century later. He published it, tentatively and somewhat obscurely, as part of the 'Synoptical View of Newton's Life' prefixed to his edition of the *Correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton and Professor Cotes*. The 'Synoptical View' has a number of footnotes, and Björnståhl's story, taken from the German translation of his letters

published between 1780 and 1783,<sup>viii</sup> is included in the last of these, as one of a number of anecdotes. Edleston treats it as hearsay: “I have no means of confirming or impugning the accuracy of the account given by the simple-hearted Swede of the disposal of Newton’s library.”<sup>ix</sup> Years again passed before Björnståhl’s account was enthusiastically taken up by Richard de Villamil in the work quoted at the beginning of this paper. He summarised the translation that Edleston had given, and drew an important conclusion from it. “Although Newton’s library had practically disappeared, Edleston, in his *Correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton and Professor Cotes* (1850), has a most interesting note referring to the journal of a Swedish traveller, one Professor Björnstohl, who records that he made, with others, a special journey from Oxford to Chinnor, ‘about 18 miles away, to see Newton’s books...’ It is clear, therefore that the existence of this library was certainly known in Oxford in 1775; and it was also known that it was in Dr. James Musgrave’s possession at Chinnor.”<sup>x</sup>

In the standard work on the subject, *The Library of Isaac Newton* published by Cambridge University Press in 2008, John Harrison gives his own English version of the German translation printed by Edleston. “I shall report a circumstance which, I know for certain, has appeared in no book before. It is this, that we, along with others in this neighbourhood, made a journey for the explicit purpose of seeing the personal collection of books of the great and immortal Knight Newton. They are now in the possession of Dr Musgrave, Rector at Chinnor, eighteen miles from Oxford. It cost him about four hundred pounds sterling.”<sup>xi</sup> Harrison draws the same conclusion as de Villamil had done. “[W]e may infer that the location of Newton’s books was known to the cognoscenti of Oxford and maybe elsewhere, as well as that Musgrave was not averse to having visitors inspect his Newtonian holdings.”<sup>xii</sup> But the fact that there are no other contemporary

references is surprising—if Dr Musgrave had indeed been willing to show off the library, surely scholars would have flocked to Chinnor.<sup>xiii</sup>

There is something wrong here.

Harrison’s translation, as he tells us in his footnote, is “from the original German of Björnståhl’s *Briefe aus seinen ausländischen Reisen...* III (Rostock and Leipzig, 1781)”<sup>xiv</sup> But this of course is incorrect: the letter was written in Swedish, not German, and Björnståhl’s letters were also published in Swedish: volume II, in which the description of his visit to Chinnor occurs in the Stockholm edition, in 1780. Here is the passage in the original Swedish:

“[...] men i det stället vil jag nämna en Anecdote, som jag vet visst icke varit nämnd i någon bok ännu: nemligen, at vi ibland annat hår i Granskapet rest expès, at se den store och odödlige Riddaren Newtons eget Bibliotheque: det åges nu af Hr Doctor Musgrave, Kyrkoherde eller, som det hår kallas, Rector uti Chinnor, 18 mil, som gör vid pass 3 Swenska, ifrån Oxford, det har kostat honom vid pass 400 Pund Sterling.”<sup>xv</sup>

The phrase which is the origin of Harrison’s “along with others” (“we, along with others in this neighbourhood, made a journey”)—and before him, of de Villamil’s “with others”—is “ibland annat”, which means “among other things”. “With others”, would have been “ibland andra”. The German translation published in the following year, from which Harrison’s version is taken, in translating “ibland annat” ‘unter andern’, is less clear; but “unter andern” at that date also meant “among other things”.<sup>xvi</sup> The important conclusion that both Harrison and de Villamil draw is

based on a mistranslation. Björnståhl's visit to Chinnor was one of a number he made in the vicinity of Oxford; he did not go as a member of a party. There is no reason to believe that the presence of Newton's library at Chinnor Rectory was generally known at the time.

On the contrary. Its presence there appears to have been surrounded by considerable secrecy. James Musgrave, as he told Björnståhl, had bought Newton's books from the Huggins family when he became rector in 1750 after Charles Huggins's death. Some years later he produced a handsome catalogue of the library, which has been of invaluable help to Newton researchers. But there's no mention anywhere in the catalogue itself of the fact that the core collection was Newton's. Dr Musgrave's eldest son kept up an extensive correspondence with Sir William Musgrave, the sixth Baronet, a noted collector who left books and manuscripts to the British Museum at his death. But there is no reference to Newton's books anywhere in the letters that passed between them; no suggestion, for example, in this invitation to Sir William to spend time at Chinnor that there might be some interesting books to look at: "whenever you shall be so charitably inclin'd as to turn Monk of the Cloyster for a week or ten days; I shall readily acquaint you with the Rules of our House; and at all times be happy in your company." (12 Jun. 1777, two years after Björnståhl's visit).<sup>xvii</sup> When Dr Musgrave died in the following year, contrary to what Harrison assumes in *The Library of Isaac Newton*, he left all the books not to his eldest son but to his wife, again without making any reference to a Newton connection; and she in turn, in her will of 1784, described them simply as "all the Library of Books that are in the Catalogue" (see my 2017 article, *Mrs Musgrave of Newton Priors? Jane Austen and Sir Isaac Newton's Library*, for more about the higger-mugger surrounding the Musgraves and Newton's library, including the Jane Austen connection).<sup>xviii</sup>

So how did Björnståhl come to hear about it?

Harrison's mistranslation has been universally accepted, and has prevented scholars from looking more closely into the circumstances of Björnståhl's apparently unique visit to Chinnor.

He had arrived in Oxford with a letter of introduction from the Dutch scholar H. A. Schultens to a fellow orientalist, the gifted twenty-eight year old William Jones.<sup>xix</sup> The letter, dated January 6th 1775, was published by Teignmouth in his *Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Correspondence, of Sir William Jones*. "I cannot refuse a few lines to the most learned Björnståhl, both for the purpose of introducing him to you, and to shew that I have not forgotten you. You will find our Philarabic Swede, a most agreeable companion. He has not only travelled much, but is deeply versed in Oriental literature, of which he is very fond."<sup>xx</sup>

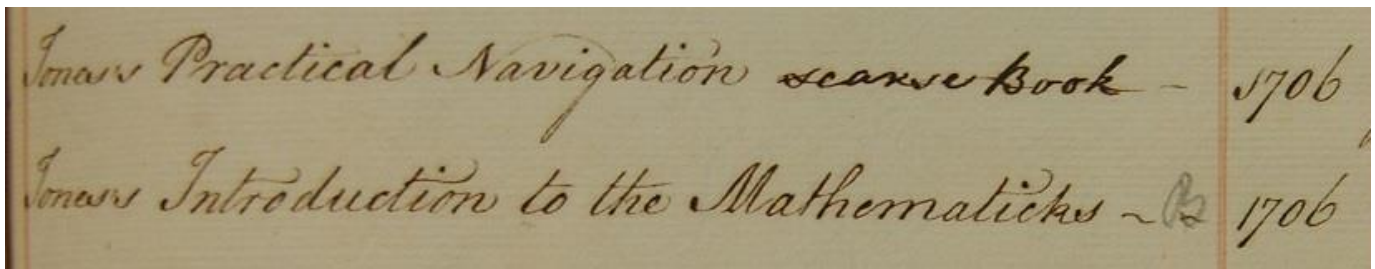
In Björnståhl's third letter from Oxford (24th October) he describes William Jones at length, and with considerable admiration. "It would be too much of an undertaking", he writes to Carl Christoffer Gjørwell, who edited the letters for publication after Björnståhl's death, "to attempt a description of all the learned men, or all the good writers, at Oxford. But I should tell you about Mr. William Jones. This man possesses what is known as *genie superieur*, and, young though he is, has already distinguished himself in a variety of remarkable publications [...]. He writes poetry in several languages; when he was still a child he was composing poems in Greek, Arabic, English, and Latin. I can praise him no higher than to say that he is to London, what Ansse de Villoison is to Paris. [...] I have the honour to have become an intimate friend of Mr. Jones."<sup>xxi</sup>

Björnståhl's intimacy with William Jones led him to spend time with his mother and his sister, who 'show Baron Rudbeck and me many kindnesses'. And from the son, as he tells Gjørwell, he learnt about the father, whose name was also William Jones. "His father, whom he lost in childhood, was a great mathematician and friend of Newton. His books are so rare, that even the

son does not have copies of them all; he plans to publish a grand edition of them. His father was particularly known for his part in the dispute with Leibniz over the *Methodus Fluxionum*.<sup>xxii</sup>

When, a paragraph later, he describes his visit to Chinnor to see Newton's library he is fully aware that he is a privileged narrator. He passes over, as he says, such well known sights as Blenheim Palace, Stowe, and the Marmora Oxoniensia, "descriptions of all of which have been published at great length in many books. Instead I shall tell you a story that to my certain knowledge has not appeared in any book up to now."<sup>xxiii</sup>

He describes Newton's library in general terms, praising its scope and commenting on the interest of the books with his annotations. But he mentions only two books by name—and both are by the mathematician William Jones. "I also saw here the rare book by Mr Jones's father that, as I noted earlier, even the son did not possess. The title is: *Epitome of the Art of practical Navigation, containing the Elements of plane Trigonometrie, Astronomie, Variation of Compass &c. By William Jones, Esquire. London 1706, in 8vo.*<sup>xxiv</sup> Another very scarce book by the same Jones (N.B. this one is extraordinarily rare): *Synopsis Palmariorum Matheseos; or a new Introduction to the Mathematics etc. etc. by William Jones: London 1706, in 8vo.* The title is so long that I shall not fill up the page with it, since it shows that the book contains Equations, the Infinite Series, Logarithms, Conic Sections, Trigonometry, Perspective, the Laws of Motion, Mechanics, Artillery etc."<sup>xxv</sup> The entry in the Musgrave catalogue for Jones's *Art of practical Navigation*, as Harrison had noticed,<sup>xxvi</sup> now carries the additional note "scarce book", perhaps as a result of Björnståhl's visit; it is the only entry so marked.



It is apparent from the context that Björnståhl knew that Newton's library was at Chinnor from his new Oxford friend, the son of the mathematician William Jones. Indeed, it seems that the chief purpose of Björnståhl's visit was to see copies of the mathematician's books.

Was he perhaps interested in the son's publication project? In his previous letter from Oxford, dated the 7th of October, he had described the Oxford University Press, concluding "Och sannerligen är icke Oxford bästa stället i verlden för at utgifva böcker?" 'After all, is not Oxford the best place in the world to publish books?' But if this had indeed been the idea behind his visit it came to nothing – a "grand edition" of the works of the mathematician William Jones was not forthcoming.

It is worth reiterating at this point how misleading the reliance of modern scholars on the German translation of the letters can be. Björnståhl comments that Jones's books are so rare that even his son doesn't have copies of all of them, and tells us that "han tänker utgifva deraf en prågtig Edition", which the German translator had rendered, rather longwindedly, "dieser is Vorhabens, eine prächtige Ausgabe davon zu besorgen" 'he plans to attend to a grand edition of them'. But in today's German "besorgen" primarily has a different sense, 'procure': to a modern reader the immediate sense is 'he plans to get hold of a grand edition of them'. The son's project to publish his father's works, clear in the original, has as a result gone unnoticed.



But I digress. How can any of this offer an explanation for why John Huggins, Warden of the Fleet Prison, bought Newton's library?

The significant fact which has escaped notice is that Chinnor Rectory, which was jointly owned by the Huggins family, is less than five miles from Shirburn, where Newton's friend William Jones was living at the time of Newton's death. Shirburn Castle was from 1716 the seat of Thomas Parker, the first Earl of Macclesfield, and, as Teignmouth tells us, "After the retirement of Lord Macclesfield to Sherborne Castle, Mr Jones resided with his lordship as a member of his family, and instructed him in the sciences."<sup>xxvii</sup> I suggest that the reason the executors sold John Huggins Newton's library was purely geographical. Richard Westfall, in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, describes the two themes of Jones's life, 'tutor to prominent figures and disseminator of Newton's writings'. The intention was that the library should go to Chinnor and be accessible to William Jones. Jones died in 1749, after many years of living within walking distance of Newton's library. Given this, Harrison's assumption,<sup>xxviii</sup> "I do not think that... Jones... ever saw Newton's books after they were transferred to Chinnor" seems unlikely to be correct.

Charles Huggins, John Huggins's youngest son, was appointed rector in March 1728, the burial of the previous incumbent having taken place on February 9th.<sup>xxix</sup> We don't know exactly when Newton's books arrived at Chinnor, but we do know that Charles's appointment was made on the 20th March 1728—the anniversary of Newton's death.<sup>xxx</sup> Not a coincidence, surely. The date chosen for his appointment as rector marked his appointment as custodian of Newton's books.

However, no manuscript material by Jones, the 'disseminator of Newton's writings', referring to the library has come to light. There's a troubling story told by Teignmouth which may in the

context be relevant. “The compilers of the Biographical Dictionary, in their account of Mr. Jones, have asserted, that he had completed a mathematical work of the first importance, and had sent the first sheet of it to the press, when the indisposition, which terminated in his death, obliged him to discontinue the impression; that, a few days before his demise, he entrusted the manuscript, fairly transcribed by an amanuensis, to the care of Lord Macclesfield, who promised to publish it, as well for the honour of the author, as for the benefit of the family, to whom the property of the work belonged. The Earl survived his friend many years; but The Introduction to the Mathematics (the alleged title of the work) was forgotten, and, after his death, the manuscript was not to be found.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

The detail lends the story credibility, despite the fact that “the alleged title of the work” replicates the subtitle of the *Synopsis Palmariorum Matheseos* described by Björnståhl. What could have been the cause of this negligence? And why, after all, did Lord Macclesfield, one of the pall bearers at his funeral, not buy Newton’s library himself? Macclesfield’s remarkable book collection, which contained much important Newton material, was by 1727 well under way. Had there been some falling out between him and the executors? Or between him and Newton himself by the time of his death? Perhaps something to do with Macclesfield’s impeachment two years earlier for corruption in office—the sale of Masterships in Chancery, a vexed case?

The circumstances of the sale to John Huggins may be difficult to unravel. The Chinnor estate had been bought in 1723 by his eldest son, also John (d.1736), jointly with a Clerk of the Treasury called Christopher Tilson.<sup>xxxix</sup> Also in that year, 1723, the same partnership acquired Kendal Castle: Christopher Tilson bought it in trust for John Huggins Junior, to whom it was legally transferred in November 1727, not long after Newton's death.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Huggins and

Tilson families were close—William Huggins, the second son, married Christopher Tilson's niece.

There is no known connection between the Huggins family and Isaac Newton, but Newton and

Christopher Tilson knew one another, and corresponded on Treasury matters.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> *Newton: The Man* (London: Knox, [1931]) p. 2.

<sup>ii</sup> See John Harrison, *The Library of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p. 30.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Political State of Great-Britain* vol. XXXIII (London: T. Cooper, 1727), pp. 328, 330.

<sup>iv</sup> (London: Davis, 1733) p. 96.

<sup>v</sup> John Owen Smith, *A Timeline for Headley* <[www.johnowensmith.co.uk/headley/calendar.htm](http://www.johnowensmith.co.uk/headley/calendar.htm)> [accessed 16 July 2018].

<sup>vi</sup> Thomas Birch recorded the sale of Newton's books to "the late Mr Huggens [...] whose son was a little while ago possessed of them" (see Harrison p. 35 footnote 2), but he doesn't say which son—Huggins had three—or where the books were housed. There is no indication in the purchase document in the British Library (MS.Add.25,424) that they were to be sent to Chinnor.

<sup>vii</sup> There was considerable interest in Björnståhl's letters at the time, and translations had appeared in German, Dutch, and Italian by the end of the 1780s. The German scholar Paul James Bruns, who was awarded an Oxford MA in 1773 and had good Swedish, had offered to produce an English version but nothing seems to have come of it. The letters describing Björnståhl's time in England cry out for a modern translation.

<sup>viii</sup> Jacob Jonas Björnståhl, *Briefe auf seinen ausländischen Reisen an den königlichen Bibliothekar C. C. Gjörwell in Stockholm. Aus dem schwedischen übersetzt*. 6 vols. (Rostock: J. C. Koppe, 1780-83).

<sup>ix</sup> *Correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton and Professor Cotes* (London: Parker, 1850), p. lxxx.

<sup>x</sup> de Villamil, p. 4.

<sup>xi</sup> Harrison, p. 37.

<sup>xii</sup> *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>xiii</sup> Dr Scott Mandelbrote of Peterhouse, Cambridge, helpfully pointed out that Samuel Horsley, whose edition of Newton's works began to be published in 1779, sought out a good deal of unpublished Newton material but there is no evidence that he visited Chinnor.

<sup>xiv</sup> p. 37 note 3.

<sup>xv</sup> Jacob Jonas Björnståhl, *Resa til Frankrike, Italien, Sweitz, Tyskland, Holland, Ångland, Turkiet, och Grekland. Utgifven af Carl Christof Gjörwell* (Stockholm: Nordström, 1780-1784) II p. 212.

<sup>xvi</sup> I am grateful to Hans Hagelberg and Andrew Eriksson for their help with the Swedish, and to Professor Katrin Kohl of Jesus College Oxford for explaining the eighteenth-century German usage ("I would interpret it as meaning 'among other things' - the grammatical endings in this period are unstable and don't always conform to what we would now consider correct.")

<sup>xvii</sup> Sir William Musgrave, 6th. Bt.: Correspondence. MS. Gloucestershire Archives, D2383/C2-4.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Persuasions On-Line*, Vol. 38 No. 1, Winter 2017.

<sup>xix</sup> Schultens and Björnståhl shared an interest in Arabic and in the translation of the Hebrew Bible, and Schultens had himself spent time at Oxford between 1772 and 1773.

<sup>xx</sup> (London: Hatchard, 1806) I p. 272.

<sup>xxi</sup> Björnståhl, pp. 209-10, my translation.

<sup>xxii</sup> *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid.*, p. 211-12.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *A new epitomy of the whole art of practical navigation [...] London* : printed for Rich. Mount, and Tho. Page, 1706. The only copy of this edition on ESTC is at Trinity College Cambridge, not described as Newton's copy by the TCC Library catalogue or ESTC but in the list of books known as the Huggins List, and Harrison (858) identifies it as Newton's. The first edition [was published in 1702 as *A new compendium [...]* (not *A new epitomy* as

---

given in the TCC catalogue and quoted by ESTC). Another, described as “the second edition; with additions” was published in 1705.

<sup>xxv</sup> Björnståhl, pp. 212-13. He’s wrong in fact about this one, it is not particularly rare.

<sup>xxvi</sup> p. 44 note 2.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Teignmouth, I p. 5.

<sup>xxviii</sup> p. 35 note 2.

<sup>xxix</sup> Parish records for St.Andrew’s church in Chinnor. With thanks to Anna McNeil at the Oxfordshire History Centre.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Clergy of the Church of England Database* <[db.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/locations](http://db.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/locations)> [accessed 16 July 2018] (1410). According to The Clergy Database the patron at the time of Charles Huggins’s appointment was “Huggins Armiger John of Hampton Court, Middx”, which I believe describes John Huggins Junior. (For the modern revision of these dates see Christie Thony, *Calendrical confusion or just when did Newton die?* <[thonyc.wordpress.com/2015/03/20/calendrical-confusion-or-just-when-did-newton-die](http://thonyc.wordpress.com/2015/03/20/calendrical-confusion-or-just-when-did-newton-die)>[accessed 2 February 2019].)

<sup>xxxi</sup> I p. 7.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See Harrison, p. 30. Christopher Tilson had no children.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *British History Online* <[www.british-history.ac.uk/kendale.barony.vol3/pp308-312](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/kendale.barony.vol3/pp308-312)>[accessed 16 July 2018].

<sup>xxxiv</sup> William A. Shaw *Select Tracts and Documents illustrative of English Monetary History 1626-1730* (London: Williams & Milne, 1896) pp. 196-7.