

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

BENWELL, Mary, Mrs Robert Codd

Shrivenham, Berkshire bpt 27.VI.1736 –
London, brd Cookham 31.VII.1811

Mary Benwell was born to a family with links to Cookham, Berkshire, no doubt a descendant of the Thomas Benwell recorded as responsible for the farming of swans in 1457. Her father was John Benwell (?1688–1782) of Warwick Court, London, and described as “belonging to the South-Sea House” (presumably as a clerk or officer there); he married a Lucy Davis in Caversham in 1727. Mary’s elder siblings are each named in the baptismal register at Shrivenham, Berkshire, she is almost certainly the unnamed daughter in the last entry for this couple, baptised in 1736 (an unsourced date of 1739, offered in *Sée* 1911, has been widely adopted until this discovery, published here in 2025). John appears to have been the brother of Samuel Benwell, steward to the Duke of Marlborough, and father of John Hodges Benwell (*q.v.*).

Mary is said to have been a pupil of John Russell (*q.v.*), who was her junior by nine years, but was more probably taught by Katherine Read (*q.v.*), whose style is reflected in the prints that are all that remain of her early work. She exhibited prolifically at the Society of Artists from 1762 to 1774 and again in 1791 and at the Royal Academy from 1775 to 1791, although she did not become an academician. A reviewer noted her “great facility” but criticised the “lack of correctness” in the pastels submitted to the Society in 1765; these were portraits of the “three Misses Ladbroke”, no doubt the daughters of the banker and MP, Sir Robert Ladbroke. Benwell was made an honorary member of the Society of Artists in 1769 (a response to the Royal Academy’s appointment of Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser), along with pastellists Katherine Read and Mary Black (*qq.v.*) and painters Mrs Grace and Miss Gardiner. An anonymous correspondent (PQR 1785, p. 141) in a piece on women artists in the *Artist’s repository and drawing magazine*, mentions her after Katherine Read:

In the present day Mrs BENWELL has shown much skill in her management of crayon pictures; and, indeed, I think there is something very applicable in that method of painting to the delicacy of a lady’s touch; they are free from some difficulties constantly attendant on oil-painting, are clean in operation, and perfectly inodorous.

According to Edwards, she “supported a respectable character as a painter of portraits in oil colours, crayons and miniature”. Her address was given as Warwick Court in Warwick Lane (her father’s address); 10 Duke Street, Portland Place, 1784–87 and as 49 Charlotte Street in 1791; from 1784 she appears as Mrs Code (some sources have Coode or Coad). As Edwards explained, she married an army officer for whom she purchased a superior commission, and that he was subsequently stationed in Gibraltar. In fact the marriage took place at Christchurch, Newgate, London, in .VIII.1782, and her husband was Robert Codd, not Code, a captain in the 59th regiment of foot

(*English chronicle*, 31.VIII.1782). He had been recently promoted from lieutenant (he was an ensign in the regiment to 1776) to captain-lieutenant (3.XI.1781): perhaps it was for the purpose of purchasing this commission that he borrowed £700 from an Edward Elton, for which Mary gave security over £1500 of South Sea annuities shortly after her marriage. It appears that soon after his regiment’s arrival in Gibraltar (8.X.1782) during the siege he was shot while in his boat, without any apparent reason, and that “full satisfaction was however given by the Spanish authorities.” He evidently survived, and was back in London after the siege. In 1784 he was promoted to captain of a company in the 98th Foot. In 1785 he acted as surety for the portrait painter Francesco Renaldi, who required the East India Company’s permission to travel to Bengal. Codd appears in the army lists between 1791 and 1805 as a captain of the 98th Foot on half-pay, the regiment having been disbanded in 1785, after service in India. According to Edwards Mary was living in retirement in Paddington in 1800. When her sister Lucy made her will in 1800 (from Chapel Street, Lisson Grove), she left half her modest estate to Mary “for her sole & separate use independent of her husband.” Codd’s death is not recorded, but by the time Mary made her will, 29.IV.1808, she was a widow in the parish of St Marylebone; the will was proved on 7.VIII.1811. In it she asks to be buried with her parents and sisters at Cookham: this was observed, and she was interred at Holy Trinity, Cookham, on 31.VII.1811 (no doubt having died in London a few days earlier). She left her capital of £1500 in South Sea annuities (with a codicil revealing the loan from Elton) to her three nephews, James Benwell of Bartholomew Lane (a sadler), Samuel Benwell and John Benwell of Jamaica. James and Robert Hillier of Lambeth were executors. Her surviving sister Betty and trustee Thomas Dennis are mentioned, as is her servant Hannah Butler, to whom she leaves “her picture”.

Her celebrity was indicated by a mezzotint of Miss Benwell by Henry Kingsbury published in 1779; a later portrait by Hoppner engraved as Mrs Benwell may not be of the same sitter, while the basis of suggested identifications of other portraits of young women by Angelica Kauffmann and George Romney is unclear.

She worked in miniature and oils as well as in pastel (a miniature self-portrait, signed and dated Maria Benwell 1779, was presented to the Uffizi by the polymath Giovanni Fabbioni in 1780; another, of Mrs Bradney, 1772, is in the V&A). Her work is occasionally signed with her initials MB in monogram. Benwell’s image of Queen Charlotte became celebrated through the Houston engraving. Many of the works at the London exhibitions are merely described as “portrait of a lady; in crayons” (one of these was identified as of the Queen in an annotated copy) and, while some are no doubt re-exhibited, they are grouped together below indiscriminately. The typical variations are the addition of either a greyhound or a dove, and some of the portraits appear to be repeated in miniature. One

distinctive feature in all her portraits seems to be the mouth, shaped in a V-shaped grimace.

In the Royal Academy 1784, exhibition, only one item is listed, no. 46, as an unidentified lady; Graves, from an unidentified source, has added “countess of Lincoln”; but from Burney’s drawing of the exhibition, the pastel thought to be of Lady Burrell is visible. While the identification of the latter is uncertain, it is based on provenance, and the identification is not contradicted by other portraits of her (Cosway and Hoppner). Graves may also be right, however, since in the RA catalogue, two numbers are given against Mrs Code’s name in the index, one of which seems to have been omitted from the main text.

Bibliography

Bénézit; J. Doran, *History and antiquities of...Reading*, 1836, p. 63; Edwards 1808, p. 95; Foskett 1987; Florence 1971, p. 133; *Lady’s magazine*, 1782, p. 504; Oxford DNB; Pilkington 1852; PQR 1785; Saur; *Sée* 1911; John Spilsbury, *A journal of the Siege of Gibraltar, 1779–1783*, 1908, p. 112; Waterhouse 1981; Whitley 1928, p. 238; Mary Codd will, PROB 11/1524, 7.VIII.1811

GENEALOGIES [Benwell](#)

Critiques

Anon., “To the Printer of the St James’s Chronicle”, *St James’s chronicle*, 22–25.V.1762:

Miss BENWELL..

No. 1–4. *Four Heads in Crayons*. – I am glad to pay my full Compliments to a Lady. These Crayons are not without Merit, but too evidently betray the *Female Hand*, by the vast Profusion of Ribband and Blond-Lace betrothed on each Head. The Portrait of the Queen, who is drawn in a particular Dress, is not improperly adorned. It is a very fine Likeness of her Majesty; and I cannot tell what some pretended Connoisseurs mean by calling it a *Caricature*.

Crito [Anon.], “To the Printer of the Public Advertiser, Mr Woodfall”, *The public advertiser*, 5.V.1764:

Miss BENWELL..

There is great merit in both this Lady’s Crayons and Miniatures.

I.N...., *A critical review of the pictures, sculptures, designs in architecture...exhibited at the Great-Rooms in Spring Gardens, Charing-cross*, 1765:

[Of Miss Benwell’s Three portraits of ladies in crayons:] This lady has shew’d a great facility in the execution of her pieces, but it is a pity that greater correctness was not observed.

Anon., “Catalogue of pictures...now exhibiting by the Society of Artists...”, *Morning chronicle*, 16.V.1772:

[A Portrait of a Lady, and Child, in Crayons. By Miss Benwell etc.]

There is little reason to lament the perishable condition of Crayon-painting when we look at these picture; however if the lady would attend as much to her *draperies* as to the *airs of her heads*, which requires less study, it would be of service to her reputation.

Anon., *Letters concerning the present state of England: particularly respecting the politics, arts, manners, and literature of the times*, London, 1772, p. 256:

The pieces which this lady has executed in crayons, are extremely delicate and pleasing; nothing can be more natural than her draperies; in her flesh she throws however too general a tinge of red. In miniature she has also great delicacy of expression.

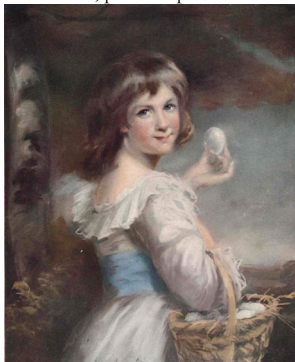
Anon., "Some account of the pictures now exhibiting at the Artist's great Room near Exeter Exchange, Strand", *Middlesex journal*, 28.IV.1774:

Miss BENWELL.

38. A portrait of a Lady, in crayons.— Capital.

Pastels

J.143.101 Miss Rose BERRY, a country girl with a basket of eggs, pstl, 71x58, Royal Academy 1786, no. 324 (Mr Johnson 1911. London, Christie's, 13.VII.1928, Lot 41 n.r., 75 gns; Pawsey & Paine). Exh.: Paris 1911, no. 5. Lit.: *Sée* 1911, p. 203 repr. Φ



J.143.103 ?Lady BURRELL, née Sophia Raymond (1750–1802), later ∞ Rev. William Clay of Westhorpe, writer, half-length, in white dress, pstl, 66x53.5 (Westhorpe Hall, Southwell, Nottinghamshire; London, Christie's, 19.XI.1985, Lot 196 n.r., with St Cecilia, est. £300–400, £702; The Clarendon Gallery). Exh.: London 1986, no. 30 repr. Φ



J.143.105 Hannah BUTLER (–p.1811), the artist's servant, m/u (artist; legs: sitter 1811)

J.143.106 Queen CHARLOTTE (1744–1818), crayons, Society of Artists, 1772, no. 4

~grav. Richard Houston, head and shoulders, in an ermine-trimmed cloak, ropes of pearls, jewelled choker and earrings, a lace veil over the hair, c.1770

J.143.108 ?Queen CHARLOTTE, m/u

~grav. Charles Spooner, as The studious fair c.1765

J.143.11 Miss Jane HOWARD, pstl, 68x55, Royal Academy 1787, no. 427 (Mr Howard 1911. Boston, Skinner, 23.I.2015, Lot 309 repr., est. \$2–3000; Boston, Skinner, 20.XI.2015, Lot 1146 repr., est. \$800–1200). Exh.: Paris 1911, no. 6. Lit.: *Sée* 1911, repr. p. 197 Φ



J.143.112 Three Misses LADBROOK [?daughters of Sir Robert Ladbroke, lord mayor of London, MP: Elizabeth (a.1747–1777), ∞ 1763 Felix Calvert, Mary (1748–p.1803), ∞ 1769 Sir Walter Rawlinson, and N (1752–), ∞ 1776 Rice James, of Berner Street], Society of Artists 1765, no. 7

J.143.113 Countess of LINCOLN, née Lady Frances Seymour-Conway (1751–1820), crayons, Royal Academy 1784, no. 46 [=?Lady Burrell; visible in Burney drawing of exh.]

J.143.114 John Orfeur YATES (c.1753–p.1814), of Skirwith Abbey and Penrith, Cumberland, pstl (sitter; legs; son, John Yates, Jefferson County, Virginia). Lit.: Anne Elizabeth Terrill, *Memorials of a family in England and Virginia, 1771–1851*, 1887, p. 255 n.r., referred to in sitter's will, 14.V.1809

J.143.115 Child playing with a greyhound, crayons, Society of Artists 1769, no. 6

J.143.116 Boy, with his hand on a greyhound, crayons, Society of Artists 1770, no. 15

J.143.117 Child with a dove, crayons, Society of Artists, 1772, no. 42

J.143.118 Young gentleman, crayons, Royal Academy 1782, no. 108

J.143.119 Lady, crayons, Society of Artists 1763, nos. 10, 11; 1764, nos. 8, 9; 1765, no. 7; 1770, no. 14; 1773, no. 8; 1774, nos. 37, 38; 1791, no. 43

J.143.12 Young lady, crayons, Society of Artists 1766, nos. 11, 12; 1767, no. 9; 1771, nos. 14, 15; Royal Academy 1775, no. 22

J.143.121 Young lady, with a lamb before her and a basket of flowers on her arm, crayons, Society of Artists 1768, no. 6

J.143.122 Young lady, with a greyhound, crayons, Society of Artists 1773, no. 10

J.143.123 Boy, with his hand on a greyhound, crayons, Society of Artists 1770, no. 15

J.143.124 Lady in black, crayons, Society of Artists 1769, no. 5

J.143.125 Lady, crayons, Royal Academy 1776, no. 22

J.143.126 Lady, crayons, Royal Academy 1777, no. 22

J.143.127 Young lady, crayons, Royal Academy 1778, no. 15

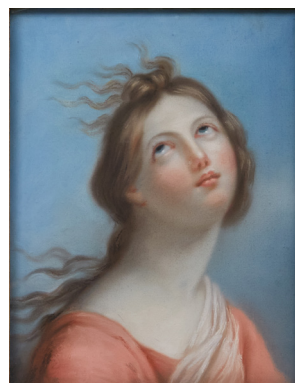
J.143.128 Two young ladies, crayons, Royal Academy 1781, no. 92

J.143.129 Venus nursing Love, crayons, Royal Academy 1778, no. 16

J.143.13 Madonna and child, crayons, Royal Academy 1779, no. 15

J.143.131 Portrait in the character of St Cecilia, crayons, Royal Academy 1780, no. 323

J.143.132 =?Head of Saint Cecilia, crayons, 38x29.5 (Westhorpe Hall, Southwell, Nottinghamshire; London, Christie's, 19.XI.1985, Lot 196 n.r., with Lady Burrell, est. £300–400, £702; The Clarendon Gallery. London, Bonhams, 23.IX.2003, Lot 97, est. £250–350; London, Bonhams, 25.XI.2003, Lot 129 n.r., £150. Norfolk, Keys, c.2003) Φ



J.143.133 Meekness, crayons, Royal Academy 1781, no. 120

J.143.134 Venus with doves, crayons, Society of Artists 1791, no. 42

J.143.135 Girl making lace, crayons, Society of Artists 1791, no. 44

J.143.136 Four heads, Society of Artists 1762, no. 4

J.143.137 Lady and child, crayons, Society of Artists 1772, no. 41