

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

SHIRREFF, Charles

Edinburgh 1749 – London 1829

The miniaturist Charles Shirreff, or Sherriff, also produced pastel portraits in his early years. The son of Alexander Shirreff, a wine merchant of Craighleith, he was deaf from the age of three and did not speak. In 1760 his father engaged Thomas Braidwood to teach him (Braidwood later opened his Academy for the Deaf and Dumb, visited by Dr Johnson). A letter of 28.VII.1767 appeared in the *Scots magazine* (XXIX, p. 421) noted that—

the boy is now studying the limning-business. He reads any English book distinctly, and understands both the meaning and the grammatical construction of the English language thoroughly. He either composes or makes an answer to a letter equal if not superior to most people of his age. He writes with elegance, is thoroughly master of arithmetic, book-keeping, geography, &c., and converses with ease.

Charles arrived in London in 1768, where his father asked Horace Walpole's advice on whether to send his son to Italy: Walpole discouraged the idea, emphasising practical difficulties (letter of 17.I.17868 to Sir David Dalrymple). He was however taken up by the Scottish wine merchant and diplomat Caleb Whitefoord. He entered the Royal Academy Schools on 9.VIII.1769 (as Sherrif in the register, Sherriff in the council minutes), and exhibited at the Free Society from 1770 to 1773 and the Royal Academy from 1771. His handicap perhaps encouraged his interest in the theatre, and he was a fervent admirer of Garrick, celebrated for his dramatic gestures. His submissions to the Free Society in 1772 included both works “in crayons” and “in chalks”; they were sent from Mr Burgess's in Bloomsbury, the address of the painter Thomas Burgess, presumably his teacher; he exhibited portraits and subject pictures in oil and chalk at the same time. He is recorded in Cambridge, Brighthelmstone and Bath (1791–96: he was mentioned there in his father's obituary notice in the *Gentleman's magazine*, 1796, p. 531). Burgess taught other pastellists such as Martha Isaacs (*q.v.*) and, like her, Shireff travelled to India. Permission for his trip was granted on 11.V.1796, and he travelled to Madras, remaining there from 1797 until 1799 or 1800, then settling in Calcutta before returning to England c.1808. On 11.I.1810 at St George's Hanover Square he married Mary Ann Brown (1783–), sister of the artist, William Berry Brown (1779–1855). He was living in London, in Upper John Street, Fitzroy Square, when he made his will on 13.XII.1824 (witnessed by W. B. Brown and George Augustus Atkinson), leaving everything to his wife Mary Ann. A codicil of 18.XII.1826 revokes a previous intention of leaving £500 to Louisa Honoria Brown (another sister of W. B. Brown), his circumstances having become so much worse. The will was proved on 5.XI.1829, Shirreff having moved to 5 Upper Frederick Street, Connaught Square.

Bibliography

Archer 1979; Foskett 1987; Hofstetter 2008; Raymond Lee, *Charles Shirreff 1749–1829*, 2015;

Basil Long, “Charles Shirreff the deaf-mute”, *Connoisseur*, XCI, 1933, pp. 83ff; D. G. Pritchard, *Education and the handicapped 1760–1960*, Abingdon, 1963, p. 11; Sloman 2002, p. 202; Waterhouse 1981

Pastels

J.6764.101 SELF-PORTRAIT, crayons, Royal Academy 1771, no. 186

J.6764.102 Gentleman, crayons, Free Society 1772, no. 176