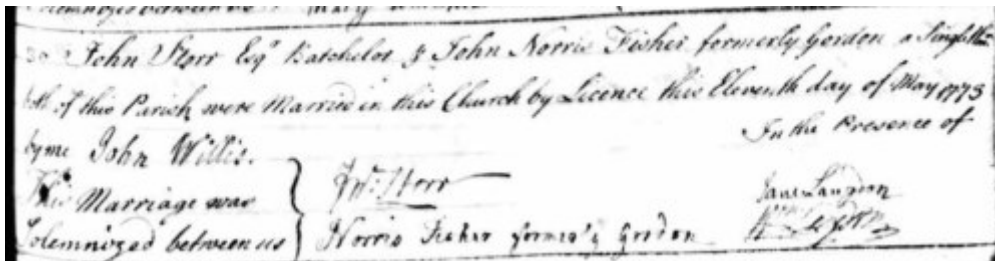


John Norris Hewett, a singular woman¹

NEIL JEFFARES

BROWSING THROUGH eighteenth century sale catalogues occasionally produces curiosities beyond the works listed for sale. Collectors themselves have long been the subject of scholarly enquiry; but you will find little about the Mrs Hewett of Richmond whose collection was sold after her death by Christie's in 1792 (she is “unknown” according to the Getty Provenance Index). As the sale included a number of pictures which she herself had made, in various media ranging from oil to watercolour and chalk as well as crayons (pastel), I was obliged to unravel the mystery of who she was. This wasn't helped by her having the most unusual Christian names, “John Norris”, and of having married three times, each to men called John: and of being absent from virtually all reference books.

My curiosity was whetted when I came across this entry in the register of St George's Bloomsbury (1773):



“A single woman” is not a standard phrase encountered in these registers. What we call a single woman is properly termed a “spinster”; the alternative is a “widow”. The entry misleadingly



suggests she was born Gordon and had married a Mr Fisher, etc. The name is so unusual that when the Law Commission researcher was compiling the lists of acts of parliament in 1999 she assumed the 1773 divorce bill I explain below must refer to some bizarre homosexual arrangement; and indeed the *Journal of the House of Lords* attempted to rectify the spelling to “Joan” in its report of one of the committee stages of the bill.

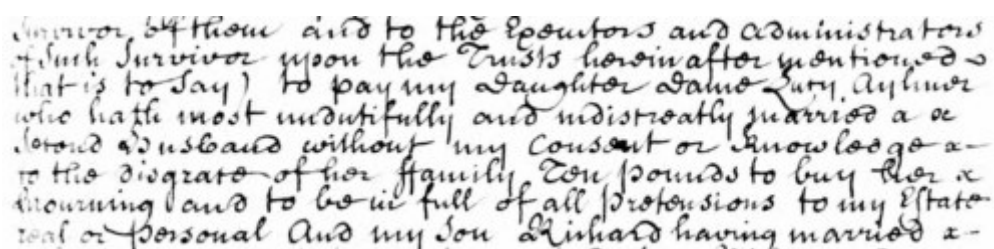
This post would be excessively long if I continue to work backwards through all the confusions I encountered, so let's start at the beginning – even if it feels as though you are being shown a solved Sudoku puzzle (you can always turn away now).

Mrs Hewett's grandfather was Sir John Norris (1671–1749), admiral of the fleet, of whose naval career there is a good summary in the

¹ This essay first appeared as a post on my blog, neiljeffares.wordpress.com, on 19 October 2016. It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, “John Norris Hewett, a singular woman”, *Pastels & pastellists*, www.pastellists.com/Essays/Hewett.pdf.

DNB (left is his portrait by Hudson from the Government Art Collection). He was a protégé of the wonderfully named Sir Cloudesley Shovell. His successes brought considerable wealth, including Hempstead Park (variously spelt) in Kent. The DNB acknowledges the obscurity of Norris's family origins: probably Irish, and connected with the Aylmers. You can follow the relevant people in my iconographical genealogy for [Aylmer](#).

One of Sir John's daughters, Lucy (1705–1793), was married (like so many of her relations) into the Aylmers, to Sir Gerald Aylmer, 5th Baronet of Doneda. Their son was the oddly named Sir Fitzgerald Aylmer who was born eight months after Sir Gerald's death: perhaps his name should be taken literally rather than as merely indicating his being posthumous (the 3rd baronet was also called Fitzgerald: he also was born in the year of his father's death). In any case, Lucy, who was just 31, remarried the following year, and as we learn from her father's will (1749, 12 years after the lapse), without his approval:



...and to the Executors and Administrators of such Survivor upon the Trusts herein after mentioned (that is to say) to pay my Daughter Dame Lucy Aylmer who hath most undutifully and indiscreetly married a second husband without my Consent or Knowledge to the disgrace of her family Ten pounds to buy her a mourning band to be in full of all provisions to my Estate real or personal And my Son Richard having married a

She receives only £10 from his vast estate, having “most undutifully and indiscreetly married a second husband without my consent or knowledge to the disgrace of her family.” Little was known about this second husband, one Robert Fisher, other than that he signed one of the documents below in a literate hand and is referred to as “Esquire”. (He is glossed as the “Mr Fisher” mentioned in the correspondence of Pitt, but that is more likely to be a reference to Thomas Fisher, a regimental agent.) But two entries² in the *Scots magazine* record the birth of children to “Lady Aylmer” (a title which she should have relinquished on her marriage) and Robert Fisher of Sandieford. The earlier (March 1739) records an unnamed daughter, while the second, in January 1743, names a son, Richard. The London *Evening post* of 11 March 1738 noted that Lady Aylmer, who lately married Mr Fisher “of Sanquhar”, had arrived at Edinburgh.

Robert Fisher (or perhaps a homonymous father) of Sanquhar was first recorded as a bailie in the town in 1714; by 1730 he was described as a “dyster” or dyer in Sanquhar when he purchased some land from the local council. A few years later Robert Fisher of Sandieford or Sandefort was a member of the Royal Company of Scottish Archers. In 1738 he won the Musselburgh Arrow in a shooting competition. In 1742 he acquired the estate of Newhall in Penicuik, and was then “Fisher of Newhall”. Delusions of grandeur followed: he devised his own arms and had them painted on his carriage, but had to remove them in 1747 as a result of proceedings. It appears he guaranteed the debts of an Edinburgh merchant, Robert Baillie; in 1757 he was drawn into insolvency proceedings, and obliged to sell Newhall.

Although John Norris Hewett's year of birth should have been 1743 as implied by her age of death, such inferences are often unreliable. I suspect that the Richard whose birth was announced in the *Scots magazine* was the Richard born to Robert Fisher and “Elinor”, possibly a mistranscription of Aylmer (but not obviously of Lucy), in the parish records of Penicuik, Midlothian, on 5 January 1743 and not baptised until 11 February that year. If so, John Norris Hewett may have had the indignity of being baptised Jean (to the same parents, on 5 November 1746, after two further children since Richard).

² I am most grateful to Nicholas Kingsley for drawing them to my attention in April 2017, some time after my original blog post of this article appeared (19 October 2016).

Evidently Lucy named (if not actually baptizing) her child in a vain attempt to placate her father. Curiously by the time Lucy's mother died, in 1763 in Berkeley Square, it seems she was forgiven, as she was named as her mother's sole executrix and residuary legatee. But bizarrely (perhaps proof of dementia), Lady Norris can remember neither her daughter's name, calling her Elizabeth instead of Lucy, nor that of her husband, whom she names as "Joseph Fisher of St James's Square" when he was Robert. Fortunately the errors are corrected in the probatum, but Fisher's address is not corrected (and may be wrong). Lucy's response was to disclaim the inheritance. She was reported as arriving in Bath in November 1763, as well as various later dates; there, in 1785, her daughter Sarah married Dr Thomas Baker of Leighton Buzzard; and there she died, on 24 November 1793, as reported in the *St James's chronicle*: "relict of the late Sir Gerald Aylmer", with no reference to Mr Fisher.

On 20 March 1764 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, Norris married a John Gordon (there are several homonyms, but he was then a captain in the 50th Foot, later promoted to lieutenant-colonel; he was the third son of an Irish family, the Gordons of Ballinteggart; his brother Thomas Knox became chief justice of South Carolina):

Married in March 1764.
 John Gordon Esquire and John Norris Gordon heretofore
 Fisher both of this Parish were Married by L. O. to this
 Twentieth day of March 1764. By me [unclear]
 This Marriage was then Solemnized Between us
 In the Presence of us. John Gordon
 Robt Fisher John Gordon heretofore Fisher

Now this should have been her first marriage, but once again the phraseology is bizarre: "John Norris Gordon heretofore Fisher" suggests that there may already have been some unofficial union. The witnesses were her father, Robert Fisher; her mother (almost invisibly small), Lucy Fisher, while the third, Lucy Fortescue, was her great-aunt. In any case, it seems that Captain Gordon went back to Ireland with his regiment, but on his return found that Norris was having an affair with a senior naval officer, John Storr (1709–1783), vice-admiral of the red.

In the absence of diaries or correspondence we can only guess how things developed from the resulting action for crim. con. and the private bill for "Gordon's divorce" brought before Parliament, passed by the Lords 31 March and by the Commons 29 April 1773.

A Petition of John Gordon Esquire, praying Leave to bring in a Bill to dissolve his Marriage with Joan Norris Fisher his now Wife, and to enable him to marry again, was presented and read, and Leave given to bring in a Bill as desired, 2d February. Presented and read, and the usual Orders for giving Notice, &c. made, 10th March. Witnesses ordered to attend, 19th March. Read a second Time, Counsel and Witnesses heard for it, none appearing against it, and the Bill was committed, 26th March. Reported from the Committee without Amendment, and ordered to be engrossed, 30th March. Read a third Time and passed, and sent to the Commons for their Concurrence, 31st March. Returned from the Commons agreed to, 29th April 1773.

For the sordid details you have to refer to the Journals of the House of Lords:

Pardon Discharge Bill.

A Message was brought from the House of Commons, by the Lord *Brouncker Bertie* and others:

With a Bill, intituled, "An Act for dividing, allotting, and enclosing, the Open and Commonable Fields, Meadows, Lands, and Waste Grounds, of, within, and belonging to, the Manor, Parish, and Liberties of *Pygdon*, in the County of *Rutland*;" to which they desire the Concurrence of this House.

Dissenters Bill.

Hodie 1st vice lects of Bills, intituled, "An Act for the further Relief of His Majesty's Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England."

ORDERED, That the said Bill be read a Second Time on *Friday* next; and that the Lords be summoned.

ORDERED, That the said Bill be printed.

Timber Trees, Preservation &c. Bill.

A Message was brought from the House of Commons, by Mr. *Pennant* and others:

With a Bill, intituled, "An Act to extend the Provisions of an Act, made in the Sixth Year of His present Majesty's Reign, (intituled, "An Act for the better Preservation of Timber Trees, and of Woods and Underwoods; and for the further Preservation of Roots, Shrubs, and Plants"), to Poplar, Alder, Maple, Larch, and Hornbeam;" to which they desire the Concurrence of this House.

The said Bill was read the First Time.

Gordon's Divorce Bill.

The Order of the Day being read for the Second Reading of the Bill, intituled, "An Act to dissolve the Marriage of *John Gordon* Esquire with *John Norris Fisher* his now Wife, and to enable him to marry again; and for other Purposes therein mentioned;" and for hearing Counsel for and against the same:

Counsel were accordingly called in:

And Mr. *Ferrys* appearing as Counsel for the Bill, but no Counsel appearing against it:

John Cocker was called, in order to prove the Service of the Order; who, being sworn, acquainted the House, "That he served Mrs. *Gordon* personally with the Order of this House for the Second Reading of the Bill; and at the same Time delivered to her a Copy of the Bill."

He was directed to withdraw.

Then the said Bill was read a Second Time.

And the Counsel was heard in Support of the Bill, and to make out the Allegations thereof; and in order to prove the Marriage, called *John Pennington*, who being sworn, produced the Original Book of Registers of Marriages in the Parish of *Saint Martin in the Fields*, and read an Entry therein, whereby it appeared, That Mr. *Gordon* was married to Mrs. *Gordon* on the 20th of *March* 1764, at *Saint Martin's Church*.

He was directed to withdraw.

Then Mrs. *Elizabeth Stayman* of *Wells Row Islington*, was called in; and, being sworn, acquainted the House, "That in the Month of *May* or *June*, a Mr.

"and Mrs. *Saunders* came and lodged with her for Four or Five Weeks; that they lived together as Man and Wife, and that she had seen them in Bed together; that Mr. *Saunders* appeared to be a Sea Officer, and she then believed they went by fictitious Names; that Mrs. *Saunders*, upon the Witness's being subpoenaed as a Witness, told her, "She was unfortunately married;" That they came again to take her Lodgings last Year, but her House being full, she got them a Lodging for a Week at a Mr. *Roffe's*, at the Expiration of which Time they came and lodged with her again for Five Weeks, during which Time she has often seen them in Bed together; that they seemed very desirous of keeping themselves secret, having no Servant with them, and seeing no Company, but One Gentleman, who seemed a seafaring Person; and that Mrs. *Saunders* has since told her, "That she was the Wife of Captain *Gordon*."

She was directed to withdraw.

Then Mr. *William Wingfield*, an Apothecary, was called in; and, being sworn, acquainted the House, "That he has known Captain *Gordon* and his Lady ever since the Year 1764; that they then lodged in the House where he lived; that he knows Captain *Storr*, and attended him in *York Buildings* in a Fit of the Gout; that he was recommended to Captain *Storr* by Mrs. *Gordon*; that he also attended him in *Charlotte Row*, and at Mrs. *Stayman's* at *Islington*; and that he knows that the Persons who lodged at Mrs. *Stayman's* at *Islington*, and went by the Name of *Saunders*, were Captain *Storr* and Mrs. *Gordon*."

He was directed to withdraw.

Then *John Cocker* was again called in; and produced at the Bar, an Office Copy of the Judgement obtained in the Court of King's Bench against Captain *Storr* for Criminal Conversation with the said Mrs. *Gordon*.

He was directed to withdraw.

Then *Mark Holman*, Deputy Register of the Consistory Court of the Bishop of *London*, was called in; and, being sworn, produced the Original Definitive Sentence of Divorce in the said Court against the said Mrs. *Gordon* for Adultery with the said Captain *Storr*.

He was directed to withdraw.

Then the said Mr. *William Wingfield* was again called in; and being asked, "How long Mr. *Gordon* and his Wife have been parted?" said, "He was certain that they had not cohabited together for these Twelve Months past."

He was directed to withdraw.

The Counsel was directed to withdraw.

ORDERED, That the said Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

ORDERED, That the House be put into a Committee upon the said Bill on *Monday* next.

The Order of the Day being read for the Second Reading of the Bill, intituled, "An Act to dissolve the Marriage of *John Green* Clerk with *Elizabeth Green* his now Wife, and to enable him to marry again; and for other Purposes therein mentioned;" and for hearing Counsel for and against the same:

Counsel

If the purpose of the bill was supposed to allow Gordon to remarry, he did not in fact do so until 1780, when he made the only alliance mentioned in the standard reference works, to Elizabeth Bamfylde, daughter of a baronet. But Gordon died soon after, in Islington, in 1782.

In fact, just a few weeks after the divorce bill was enacted, "Norris Fisher formerly Gordon" married Admiral Storr, the register entry at the top of this post. Here is how the *Town and Country Magazine* reported it (providing key details which allowed me to pull this story together):

John Storr, Esq; of Hellstow, in York-
shire, to Mrs. Gordon, sifter to Sir Fitz-Ge-
rard Aylmer, Bart. at St. George's Bloomf-
bury.

Admiral Storr was by then 64. He lived for another ten years, leaving his house in Bedford Square and a life interest in his numerous estates in Yorkshire to Norris.

John - In the Name of God Amen
Storr Esq.
Admiral
of the Red Squadron
of his Majesty's Navy

I John Storr, rear Admiral of the Red Squadron of
his Majesty's fleet, being of sound mind memory &
and understanding hereby writing all Wills and Testaments
by me at any time heretofore made do make publish &
and declare this my last Will and Testament in manner
and form following that is to say Whereas I have
and do hereby make the Provision for my dear and loving
Wife Anne Storr Storr & do hereby give devise &
bequeath all and every my freeholds and copyholds
Manors Messuages lands Tenements and Hereditaments
Situate lying and being in the Kings County of Middlesex
Bartholomew Close the Messuages of the Kings County of
Middlesex the Messuages of the Kings County of Middlesex
in the County of York or otherwise in the Kingdom
of Great Britain with all and singular their Rights
Members and Appurtenances subject and receivable
with the Payment of such annuities and sums



There is a memorial (with a bust by William Tyler, left) in Westminster Abbey.

Just a year later, on 13 February 1784, at St George, Hanover Square, Norris married for the third time, again to a figure whose lineage is obscured by changes of name: John Hewett (1720–1787). He was in fact born John Thornhaugh, but by another private act of parliament, 29 George II. c. 53 (1756) he changed his name to inherit an estate. He was subsequently sheriff of Nottinghamshire and an MP. In 1744 he had married Arabella, daughter of Sir George Savile, 7th Bt, and his political affiliations remained entwined with those of the Savile family. His daughter Mary Arabella married Francis Foljambe (who it won't surprise you didn't have that surname at birth), and when Mary Arabella died, Francis was remarried to the daughter of the Earl of Scarborough and his wife, yet another Savile.

But of John Hewett's remarriage to Norris Storr there is no mention in the *History of Parliament* nor any of the standard volumes. His signature on the 1784 marriage allegation (now conventionally worded as between "John Hewett Esq", a widower and John Norris Storr, a widow") is sufficiently shaky to suggest that he was already ill, and indeed he died three years later.

gates, and all other his Officers and Ministers whatsoever, by reason of the Premises; then this Obligation to be void, or else to remain in full Force and Virtue.

Sealed and Delivered
in the Presence of

John Hewett

Mark Holman

As the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported, on 22 December 1790 Mrs Norris Hewett, relict of John Hewett Esq of Shire Oakes, Co. Nottingham, died at Richmond. She was buried at St Peter's, Petersham, 29 December 1790, aged 47:³

W^m John Norris Hewitt, Widow aged 47 of the Parish of Richmond was buried December 29th 1790 Registered Decem: 29th 1790 by me James Messenger Clerk

She had made her will a few days before, and was hoping to make it to Christmas day where it seems a half-year payment was due. The document (too long to reproduce in full) gives a glimpse into her final state of mind:

John Norris Hewett

Being extremely ill and not capable to survive but yet thank God in my last will and Testament I have left all that I have in property in this house and about it as well as my house on the north side of Bedford square with all the furniture it contains to my dear sister Dame Margaret Scott and Richard Scott my attorney jointly or trust for the purposes after mentioned first that they pay all my just debts for which purpose if I die before Christmas day and my half year's jointure unexpired will be necessary to sell all my effects in Richmond except such articles as shall be hereafter mentioned my book & would have all returned to Mr Holcombe with my diamond hoop ring and lock with a diamond pill and a feathered hair and diamond comb and of silver to Mrs Holcombe with any part

And so on. Her “dear Sir Andrew Ward and Mrs Ward” (who were they? why not Lady Ward?) were to choose four of her best pictures on condition that “they are not to be placed in Bed Chambers” (the usual fate of so many pastels).

of plate she wishes to mention to my dear Sir Andrew Ward and Mrs Ward four of my best pictures which they may think upon condition they are not to be placed in Bed Chambers but not to become the property of Lady ... or any particular friend ...

³ I am grateful to Megan Doole (comment on blog post, 24.V.2017) who has pointed out that the *Gentleman's Magazine* provided a different age at death, 45. That is still one year older than the Jean Fisher whose name appears in the Penicuik birth register for 5.XI.1746.

The rest were “to become the property of Lady -“, the name omitted. One of the trustees of the will was Norris’s niece, Margaret, Lady Holt; the residual legatee was apparently another niece, called Harriet Hunt, of whom I can find no other trace nor any obvious connection: could it be that “niece” was a euphemism? Unsurprisingly the omission of the name led to litigation between the two nieces (notwithstanding Norris’s plea to Lady Hort “to feel for Harriet’s desolate situation in point of protection and if it be possible may she find protection with or near” her), as this disguised account of the resulting case of *Hunt v Hort* ([3 Bro.C.C.311](#)) in an 1804 *Treatise on the law of legacies* (by the admirably named Roper Stote Donnison Roper) indicates-

(y) *C.* devised her houses in town, and at *R.* to her niece, Dame *Margaret Hort*, and *R. B.* her attorney, in trust, to sell; she then gave some pictures specifically, and proceeded thus, “My other pictures to become the property of Lady —, (leaving a blank after Lady). My linen and clothes of all kinds, except laces, I give with 20l. to — Scott,” her servant, and made her niece *H. Hunt*, residuary legatee, whom she recommended to the care of Lady *Hort*, and appointed Lady *Hort*, and *R. B.* executors. One of the questions was, whether Lady *Hort* was intitled to the pictures under the bequest to Lady —? and against her claim it was insisted, that though it was probable Lady *Hort* was intended, yet her name being omitted, could not be supplied by parol evidence, there being no case where a blank had been so supplied. And the *Chancellor* said, that as to this point, he had entertained a doubt whether as the first gift of the whole was to Lady *Hort*, in trust, and then part of the pictures taken out, and the remainder to become the property of —, (in opposition to a trust) he could not supply Lady *Hort*’s name, without a reference to the master: but upon consideration, he was of opinion, that he could not supply a blank by parol evidence, that where there was only a title given, it was the same as a total blank; that by a blank added to a general legacy, no person was referred to, and therefore he thought it would be too much to give the pictures under these circumstances to Lady *Hort*.”

The furniture was sold three months after Norris’s death, by Christie’s, but it was not until the following year, after the litigation was settled (the bequest to “Lady -” being declared void, so the pictures fell to Norris’s niece, Harriet Hunt) that her pictures were sold, on 16 and on 20 January 1792:

A catalogue of a collection of genuine and valuable pictures; drawings and miniatures; consisting of a variety of pleasing, historical and other subjects in crayons, the property and performance of the late Mrs. Hewett, deceased, celebrated for her refined taste in the polite arts brought from her late residence at Richmond; the most of which are rich, and elegantly framed and glazed, with large plates of glass. Which will be sold by auction (by order of the Executors) by Mr. Christie, at his Great Room, Pall Mall, on Friday, January the 20th, 1792, at twelve o’clock

Her collection included landscapes by Hubert Robert and Dietsch, an unknown oil of her second husband by John Russell, numerous anonymous flower pieces, landscapes, portraits etc.; copies after Stubbs, Kauffman and Cipriani. Her own work in unspecified media included copies after Kauffman, Reynolds, Guido Reni and several after Matthew William Peters. (Peters was a painter patronised by Norris’s cousins, the Fortescues – as was Cotes.) Subjects such as “a girl feeding a rabbit” might well be after Russell, and the many works for which no medium is indicated might well include pastels. A head of Christ and several sets of oval portraits are mentioned as in crayons. Everything is now lost without trace, including the portraits of Mr and Mrs Hewett.



Or is it? One of the copies after Peters was described as a “very large of angels and spirits ascending” (lot 48 sold or bought in at £11, the highest price for any of her pictures): it sounds as though it might be a copy of his *Resurrection of a pious family*, an enormous canvas which hung in Totteridge Church in the nineteenth century, and of which a large anonymous pastel copy (123×90 cm) was sold by Bonhams recently. It is not the only recorded copy, and I hesitated to put it forward as Norris’s work, but I recall that the pastel came from Hooton Pagnell. (I was quite sure that it was not by William Peters himself, but had no idea who the copyist might be.)

And then finally the penny dropped: Norris’s dear friends were not Sir Andrew, but the (yet again curiously named) St Andrew Warde (1745–1822) and his wife, née Anne Cooke. (The writing is perfectly clear once you know what you’re looking for.) Who owned Hooton Pagnell at this very time. St Andrew Warde’s mother was the sister of Norris’s third husband, John Hewett,

né Thornhaugh.⁴ The pastel, which did not make it into the bedrooms, had hung in the stairwell probably since its arrival until last year.

Perhaps someone out there has a stash of letters, or some enterprising social historian will find this outline of an unusually obscure life worth investigating further. But for the moment this pastel will have to suffice for the Resurrection of a not-so-pious lady.

Neil Jeffares

⁴ I am again most grateful to Megan Doole for pointing this out (see note *supra*).