

Isaac Newton's Spinning Wheel

Valerie and David Bryant

The final session of the morning was something of a detective story and concerned the ongoing spinning wheel research by the Bryant's. The paper revealed their discovery of a girdle wheel purportedly made by Sir Isaac Newton. This was a rare variation that allowed a woman to tuck part of a small spinning wheel into her girdle or belt, thus enabling her to walk around while spinning; they have a clever gearing mechanism driven by a crank that did away with the need for a large flywheel.

While researching in the Science Museum they had come across a girdle wheel, c. 1760–80, by Webster, a clockmaker of Shrewsbury. At the same time, in the Museum archives, they came across a letter and a photograph from a Miss Edith Milner concerning the loan, in 1904, of a girdle wheel that had been returned to the Duke of Portland of Welbeck Abbey. On discovering that the wheel was still at Welbeck the Bryant's went to see it and found that there was an inscription on the 'gearbox' stating that it was 'Made by Sir Isaac Newton for Mrs Cumberland AD 1677'. Could this be true? The Welbeck curator, Gareth Hughes, told the Bryant's that, as well as the girdle wheel, there was a spare spinning head, some sticks of flax, an old photograph of a woman holding the wheel, a silk letter case and a mulberry-wood paper knife. There was also a booklet with the history of the wheel.

This was where furniture research crosses over into genealogical history. Briefly, Edith Milner had bequeathed the wheel to the Portland's. Miss Milner's great-grandmother, Lady Elizabeth Bentinck, had added the Isaac Newton inscription, c. 1837, as she herself had been the granddaughter of Joanna Bentley who became Mrs Cumberland upon her marriage. Joanna Bentley was the daughter of Dr Richard Bentley, an academic and friend of Isaac Newton. All this was explained in Miss Milner's little booklet that also stated that there had been a signed and dated letter from Isaac Newton stating that the wheel was made by him for Mrs Cumberland; sadly the letter was destroyed c. 1870, leaving only the silk case. Chasing female history of descent is more tricky than usual, however, but the dates of those people concerned seem to add up, but is the wheel really that old?

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