

Elhanan Bicknell, oil merchant and shipowner

By Mark Howard

Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861) was a successful London oil merchant, shipowner and patron of the arts. He built up an impressive art collection and he is mainly remembered today as a patron of the arts and a supporter of artists, such as J.M.W Turner, the landscape painter. But it was his commercial career that occupied most of his time and when he died, in 1861, he left an estate valued at £350,000, while the sale of most of his art collection raised another £58,000.¹



Bicknell was born in London in 1788 and when he was about twenty years old his father sent him to Caus, near Shrewsbury, to learn the business of farming.² This his arrangement did not work out and he returned to London late in 1808. Soon after he joined his uncle, John Langton, who was a tallow chandler and spermaceti processor at Newington Butts in London.³ The connection between the two men was strengthened when Bicknell married Hannah Langton, the daughter of his business partner, and his first cousin. She was the first of his four wives, with whom he had total of thirteen children.



His uncle, John Walter Langton (1746-1822) was operating as a tallow chandler at Newington Butts by June 1789.⁴ He was apparently something of an inventor and developed a new and better way of processing spermaceti to make candles.⁵ He also refined sperm whale oil, the most valuable kind of whale oil and widely used as a lamp fuel and industrial lubricant. Bicknell probably spent the first few years with his uncle learning the trade and keeping a low profile. He did not remain in the background for long and on 15 November 1811 his name appears on a petition calling for a bridge to be built in the area.

He was a partner in the firm by August 1820 when a fire devastated the business. A copper cauldron boiled over at 7 pm one evening and started a fire that raged till 2 am the next day in the boiling house. That part of the complex was destroyed and the damages were estimated at £2,000.⁶

¹ *Morning Post*, 11 January 1862, 8; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 2 May 1863, 5. "By the decrease of Mr Elhanan Bicknell ... art has lost a powerful and earnest friend. The death of the gentleman terminates the career of the last of the four principal collectors of English modern art," ("Music, Arts, Science & Literature," *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 13 June 1861,7) See also, *Times*, 29 April 1863; entry for Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (ODNB)

² ODNB.

³ ODNB.

⁴ Sun Insurance policy, British National Archives (BNA) MS 11936/ ...

⁵ ODNB.

⁶ *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle, from July to December 1820*, p.176.

Bicknell was a liberal who supported a variety of progressive causes. In December 1818, he donated to a fund to help political reformer William Hone in his battle with the government.⁷ He supported Jonathan Barber of Newington Butts when he stood for the position of Registrar of the Royal Humane Society in November 1819.⁸ And in 1832 he donated funds for the relief of the Irish poor.⁹ He also had some kind of involvement in politics. On 1 December 1834 he wrote a letter regretting he would be unable to attend a meeting that morning in connection with parliamentary elections in Lambeth.¹⁰ He supported the work of authors by subscribing to their books before they were published. For instance, he subscribed to buy four copies of Thomas Beale's, *Natural history of the sperm whale*.¹¹ He is believed to have given a copy of the book to Turner who drew on as inspiration for a series of paintings and drawings on whaling subjects.¹²

Whalers by JMW Turner¹³.

His business partner, John Langton senior, was about 76 years of age when he died in 1822.¹⁴ John Bicknell Langton took his place in the firm, presumably the latter's son. Langton junior had a large house in Hearne Hill with a household that included at least four servants.¹⁵ Bicknell also had a



⁷ *Trial by Jury and Liberty of the Press; The proceedings at the Public Meeting December 29, 1817, At the City of London Tavern for the purpose of enabling William Hone to surmount the difficulties in which he has been placed by being selected by the Minsters of Government as the Object of their Persecution*, 3rd edition, London, 1818.

⁸ *Times*, 23 November 1819, 2.

⁹ *Times*, 6 March 1832, 3)

¹⁰ Letter from Bicknell, Lambeth Archives, 1v/3/17.

¹¹ Thomas Beale, *A few observations on the natural history of the sperm whale, with an account of the rise and progress of the fishery, and of the modes of pursuing, killing and "cutting in" that animal, with a list of its favourite places of resort*, London, Effingham Wilson, 1835, List of subscribers, p.13.

¹² In a letter to Bicknell dated 31 January 1845, Turner says, "I have a whale or two on canvas," (Katherine Baetjer, *British paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1575-1875*, New York, Yale University Press, 2009, p.233-4)

¹³ *Whalers* by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) Oil on canvas c. 1845, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Their catalogue notes: Turner was seventy years old when *Whalers* debuted to mixed reviews at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1845. Its subject proved elusive, as the English novelist William Thackeray observed: "That is not a smear of purple you see yonder, but a beautiful whale, whose tail has just slapped a half-dozen whale-boats into perdition; and as for what you fancied to be a few zig-zag lines spattered on the canvas at hap-hazard, look! they turn out to be a ship with all her sails." Apparently Turner undertook the painting—which was returned to him—for the collector Elhanan Bicknell, who had made his fortune in the whale-oil business.

¹⁴ His will is held by the PRO as PORB 11/1662/216.

¹⁵ Langton and his household were witness to a horrific incident when one of the servants killed one of the others. On Saturday, March 1, 1828, 24 year-old footman James Irons quarrelled with 27-year-old housemaid Susan Frogett and left the house. He returned soon after with a horse pistol and shot her dead. James Irons was apprehended, sent to trial, found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. (*Morning Chronicle*, 4 March 1828).

mansion in the same suburb.

Bicknell was investing in real estate by 1825. In that year he took out an indenture for a 99 year lease on ground and buildings in Devonshire St & Mews at £40 per annum and he may have subsequently bought this land which was located at Hammersmith.¹⁶ This may have been the Dorcas Buildings, Hammersmith, on which he took out insurance cover 10 June 1830.¹⁷ Among the tenants in the buildings was Henry Paynes, a lath renderer and "rustic chair maker."¹⁸



Bicknell often found himself a creditor to other merchants who became insolvent.¹⁹ He is mentioned as the assignee of a bankrupt in 1824. Langton and Bicknell had a claim on John & William McDonald, dyers and printers of Glasgow, whose estates were sequestered in October 1832. The amount owing to them was £496/6/6.²⁰ In January 1834, Bicknell is mentioned as a creditor of Robert Hitchman Day and Richard Day, who ran the Tovill Oil Mills, seed crushers, near Maidstone, Kent.²¹ It was via his role as a creditor to others that Bicknell acquired some of his whaling vessels.

The whaling ships

Bicknell had an interest in at least six whaling vessels. He acquired shares in four of those ships in the following manner. In April 1837, the London shipowner George Birnie was in financial difficulties and he approached Langton and Bicknell for a loan of £20,000. He offered, as security, his full or part ownership in four whalers, the *Foxhound*, *Hope*, *Elizabeth* and *Anne*, at least two of which were then at sea.²²

The *Anne* returned to London on 8 July 1839 with a large cargo of oil.²³ Langton and Bicknell prepared to take control of the vessel but another creditor, provision merchant Benjamin Horton, who was owed £2,200 by Birnie, thought he had a better claim on the vessel, and her oil, as he was first mortgagee. The dispute over the vessel led to a court case that was won by Langton and Bicknell.²⁴

¹⁶ BNA, ACC/0361/024 and ACC/0361/025.

¹⁷ London Metropolitan Archives, MS 11936/523/11V3969.

¹⁸ London Metropolitan Archives, MS 11936/538/11V3969.

¹⁹ In 1853 Bicknell took legal action against shipping agent John Boulcott, who specialised in southern whalers, supervising their fitting out, finding crews and seeing the cargos were landed and warehoused at the end of their voyages. (Bicknell v Boulcott, BNA C15/16/B3)

²⁰ *Reports of Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Scotland ...*, Edinburgh, 1837.

²¹ *London Gazette*, 3 January 1834, Issue 19116, p.13.

²² Horton v Langton, in Samuel Miller, *The Law of Equitable Mortgages ...*, Law Booksellers Publishers, London, 1844, pp.159-190.

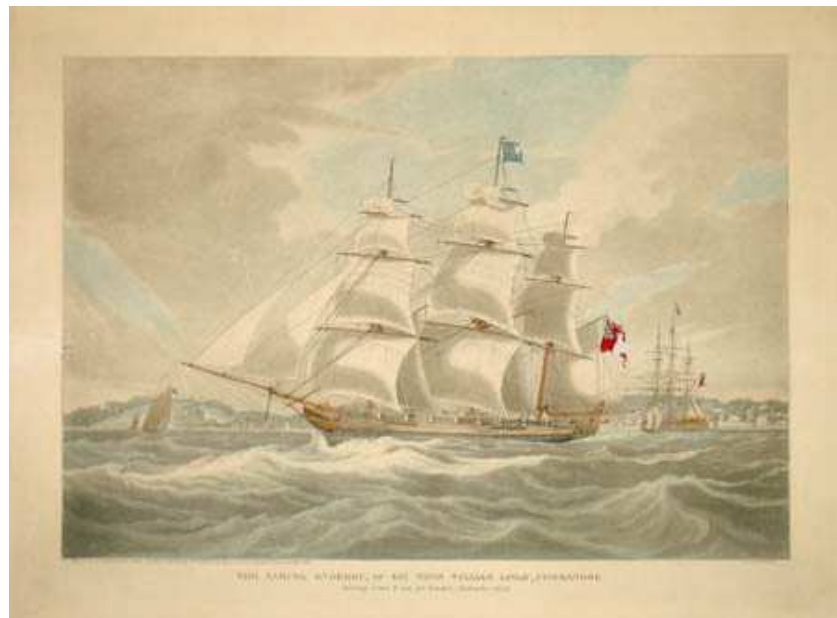
²³ Birnie was the managing owner of this vessel, but not the full owner, having a little over a half share of the ship.

²⁴ Legal Guide 8 (1842); 177-192.

The *Foxhound* returned to London in August 1837 and after selling the cargo of oil, Birnie obtained enough money to repay that part of the loan relating to the vessel. However he was still short of funds and asked Langton and Bicknell to advance another £5000 so he could pay off the crew from the last cruise, and provision the vessel for her next voyage. *Foxhound* left London in March 1838 under the command of a Captain Blake, with the lenders again accepting the vessel and any oil she took as security for the loan. By June 1838, Birnie had become "embarrassed in his circumstances" and was unable to make some kind of payment in connection with the vessel - possibly the monthly payments due to the wives and families of the married crewmen - and he asked Langton and Bicknell to make the payment. The *Foxhound* returned to London on 15 January 1841 and Langton and Bicknell took possession of the vessel and cargo at Commercial Dock. Benjamin Horton again took legal action and had the Sheriff seize the ship and her oil under a writ, claiming he was now owed £2,372 and 11 shillings, presumably the original £2,200, plus interest. The matter went to court and the judge again found for the plaintiffs, Langton and Bicknell.²⁵ The case set some kind of legal precedent and was cited by other lawyers for years afterward.

The Samuel Enderby
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Bicknell owned shares in the whaler *Samuel Enderby* (1843-1848).²⁷ One of the other part owners was the master, Captain William Lisle.²⁸ Bicknell was also part owner of the *Favourite* (1845-1849) and there were probably



other vessels in which he had an interest.²⁹ Bicknell is not mentioned as an owner of such vessels in the standard reference works on British South Seas whaling probably because he preferred to remain a silent partner, with role of senior or managing owner role left to those with the relevant maritime experience.

Advancing money to shipowners, in return for the right to buy their oil, may have been a routine part of business for oil merchants like Bicknell. So little is known about that side of the trade at the moment that this possibility must remain conjecture.

²⁵ "Langton v Horton," *English Reports full reprint, Vol 66, Vice Chancellors Courts*; 1149-1155.

²⁶ The *Samuel Enderby*, of 422 Tons. William Lisle, Commander / Leaving Cowes Roads for London, September, 1834. Hand-coloured aquatint and engraving by William John Huggins (1781-1845) after C. Rosenberg (engraver).

²⁷ Ship registration papers, BT 107/65.

²⁸ British Southern Whale Fishery web site (BSWF)

²⁹ BSWF.

The leading house in the trade

Langton and Bicknell were described as the leading dealers in sperm whale oil in London by July 1835.

"... the dominion of sperm oil is irrevocably fixed at Newington Butts. L. and B. have gained it in competition with the united efforts, tact, talent, and resources of the "old trade," who were banded against them. If I feel pleased with their triumph, it is no unfriendly disposition towards the old nobility; but I cannot help admiring the moderation with which the Newington people seem to exercise their power. The young gentlemen of the old trade may learn from them how to be rich without pride ... they are, amongst the dealers in sperm oil, what England is in the scale of nations. Insulated and remote as they are, by their moral energy they give tone to the councils of all the rest ... Although the heroes at Newington could do without any assistance, yet I am glad to see them allied with a good hearty fellow, whose exertions have always been favourable to his colleagues."³⁰

Sperm whale oil was the most valuable kind of whale oil and Langton and Bicknell specialised in refining and selling that commodity. They also made spermaceti candles, which burned longer and brighter than tallow candles or tallow dips. In other words, they were at the high-end of the industry where the real money was to be made, catering to the rich and privileged. Their high standing and good reputation probably meant they were able to charge a premium for their products.

They also sold the oil for commercial use. Pocket watches and other fine machinery were lubricated with sperm whale oil, but it had to be well refined. Even the oil used as a lamp fuel had to be carefully refined to ensure there were no impurities that might cause lamps to gutter and go out. This was particularly important for lighthouses. Langton and Bicknell was one of a handful of preferred suppliers to lighthouses in Scotland by 1822.³¹ The famous Scottish lighthouse builder Robert Stevenson - the grandfather of the author Robert Louis Stevenson - "used their oil and swore by it."³² The high quality of their oil was mentioned as late as 1874.³³

Bicknell was something of an inventor himself. On 25 March 1840 he submitted a letter to the London Patents Office indicating his intention to lodge a new patent for an improved way of separating the liquid parts of tallow and other fatty substances from the solid component.³⁴

³⁰ Thomas Blyth, *The Oilman No.1, A series of letters to a few friends unveiling the defects and suggesting improvements in the London Oil Trade*, printed for the Author, London, July 1835, p.50-1. Although described as his first letter, it seems to be the second in the series.

³¹ *Report from the House of Commons Select Committee appointed to consider the means of improving and maintaining the foreign trade of the country*, Vol 20, No. 591, No. Lights, harbours and pilotage, 1822, p.236;

³² Franny Moyle, *Turner; the extraordinary life and momentous times of JMW Turner*, Penguin, 2016, p.?

³³ J. Coleman, "Methods in use for determining the value of vegetable and animal oils," *The Chemical News and Journal of Industrial Science*, Vol 29-30, 1874, p.158.

³⁴ W. Newton, *The London Journal of Arts and Sciences and Reporting of Patent Inventions*, Vol XVI, London, 1840, p.118.

South Sea whaling from Britain started to decline in the 1820s when the high customs duties on colonial caught whale oil was removed and allowed Australian producers to export to Britain. More free trade legislation in the 1840s allowed American oil to be imported, and made it hard for British vessels to compete. Bicknell showed some support for efforts to revive the trade. He attended a dinner in London in April 1849 to support a project by the Enderby family to revive the southern whale fishery by establishing a British colony and whaling settlement on the Auckland Islands, south of New Zealand.³⁵ Unlike the Enderby family, Bicknell did not squander his fortune by trying to revive a trade that was approaching its natural end.

Elhanan Bicknell, Master of the Vintners in 1853, oil painting in the Vintners Hall by T. Phillips

Toward the end of his life, Bicknell supported a number of other small commercial ventures. He had some kind of business partnership with Joseph Hogarth, printseller and publisher, at 5 Haymarket, Middlesex, which lasted till August 1854.³⁶ Another partnership was with the jeweller, A. M. Futoye, from premises in Beak Street, an arrangement that ended in January 1856.³⁷ It is tempting to see these ventures as an indirect way in which Bicknell used his money to help family or friends



Bicknell died in London on 27 November 1861. When his house at Herne Hill, Dulwich, was sold, it was advertised as being near the railway station and as having a lodge house at the entrance. The main building included reception rooms, a picture gallery, billiard room, ornamental conservatory, stables and offices. It was set on nine acres and surrounded by gardens and timbered land. The sale was to include several adjacent villas, one of which was being rented out for £110 a year, and thirteen cottages, rented out for £260 a year.³⁸ There was some kind of a court case in connection with his estate in 1868.³⁹

³⁵ *Times*, 12 April 1849, 1.

³⁶ *London Gazette*, Issue 21593, p.2813.

³⁷ *The Morning Post*, 30 January 1856, p.1.

³⁸ *The Solicitors Journal and Reporter*, 4 April 1863, p.424.

³⁹ BNA C16/477/B298.

The firm of Langton and Bicknell continued to operate for years after Bicknell's death. They were still making spermaceti candles in 1882, one of only two London firms to do so by that date.⁴⁰ The firm was still in existence in 1883 when it donated £2/2/- to a lifeboat charity.⁴¹



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⁴⁰ Article about lighthouses, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol 30 (1882) 48.

⁴¹ *The Life boat or journal of the National Lifeboat Institute*, 1883.

Mark added this note in an email to Marcus Bicknell of 29 Nov 2014

Elhanan Bicknell's involvement in the whaling industry as a ship-owner is something of a puzzle. His entry in the DNB says he owned more than thirty whalers and dominated the trade. Yet he is not mentioned in the standard reference works on the subject, which include extensive lists of ship-owners. His name does, however, appear in secondary works and in contemporary newspapers.

On 14 January 1842, the case of *Langton v Horton*, was heard in a court in London. The suit was brought by John Bicknell Langton and Elhanan Bicknell as the 2nd mortgagees of the ship *Ann* against Benjamin Horton, the first mortgagee, and George Birnie, the owner, to obtain the accounts for the ship and compel Mr Horton to pay the balance of money owing. (*The Morning Post*, 15/1/1842) Langton and Bicknell claimed ownership of 32/64 shares, or a half share in the vessel.

Ann was a ship-rigged vessel of 426 tons built at Topsham in 1809 or 1810. She is first mentioned as a whaler in 1818 when she was owned by Birnie & Co. (A.G.E. Jones, *Ships employed in the South Seas Trade, 1775-1859*, Vol 2, p.70, also, Vol 3, p.115). She seems to have returned from her last whaling voyage around 1842.

Bicknell is also mentioned as part owner of the *Samuel Enderby* in 1844. (Dale Chatwin, "A Trade so Uncontrollably Uncertain;" A study of the English Southern Whale Fishery from 1815 to 1860, MA Thesis, Australian National University, 1996, p. 55.) The Enderby family are perhaps the best known owners of British South Sea whalers. One of their vessels pioneered whaling in the Pacific and others made important voyages of discovery to the Antarctic. Bicknell was present at a dinner in London in April 1849 to farewell Charles Enderby who was about to sail to the South Seas as Governor of the Auckland Islands colony. (*Morning Post*, 19/4/1842) His attendance at the dinner suggest he was a supporter of the enterprise and perhaps a shareholder in the British Whale and Seal Fishery Company that was funding the venture. The company was headed by Thomas Baring, banker and MP.

Joan Druett says that, "Elhanan Bicknell, [was] an oil merchant who made his fortune from woollen mills and whaling ship shares." (Joan Druett, "Rough medicine; Surgeons at sea in the age of sail, p.215). While he may well have been part owner of many vessels, he does not seem to have been the managing owner of any of them. That is, he would have had little or no say in the selection of captain, which whaling grounds to visit, etc. He might be best described as an investor in shipping rather than a ship owner.

The prolonged nature of whaling voyages, three years or more, and the uncertain nature of the outcome, probably meant his main source of income was from his business as an oil merchant and spermaceti processor. This seems to have started in 1808 when he set up in partnership with his cousin John Langton at Newington in London.

He seems to have been successful as an oil merchant. However the business had its share of setbacks. In August 1820, a fire was reported at the boiling-house of Messes Langton and Bicknell opposite Newington Church, Surrey. Part of the premises was destroyed, causing damage estimated at £2000. (*Hampshire Telegraph Chronicle*, 14/8/1820). And in August 1846 a destructive thunder storm rained down hailstones that smashed windows so that, "the extensive premises of Langton and Bicknell have scarcely a pane left." (*Glasgow Herald*, 7/8/1842). He was still involved in June 1849 when Henry Clark, a colour merchant of Red Cross St, became bankrupt, owing Langton and Bicknell £536. (*Morning Chronicle*, 2/7/1849)

