

The likeness of Lucinda Sarah Bicknell (née Browne)

*by Marcus Bicknell,
great great grandson of Lucinda Bicknell née Browne*

I do not believe the portrait by Denning in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) (Annex 1) called “*probably Lucinda Sarah Bicknell (née Browne)*” (image, right) is Lucinda. It looks neither like the other image we have of her nor does it match the descriptions given of her. The sitter does, however, look like two of Sabrina Bicknell (no relation) by Denning also in the NPG (see page 4).



The bust by Baily

There are several reasons why the likeness taken from the death mask of Lucinda (1850) attributed to E.H.Baily¹ (image below) is considered a correct likeness of Lucinda Bicknell; the bust has been passed down the family line and is owned by Mark Bicknell, another of her great great grandsons; and it conforms to the written descriptions (see below) and the body language expected.

Written descriptions

“Lucinda was tiny and beautiful, with lovely hands and an elegant neck and shoulders. Talented and absolutely charming, she spoke fluent French, played the piano and the harp”². The lady in the Denning portrait (the NPG engraving) is hardly beautiful, she does not have lovely hands and she does not have an elegant neck.

Body language

According to Edgar Browne, Lucinda’s nephew and a close friend of Lucinda’s son Clarence, was “a notable woman, and managed her household affairs with a skill truly early Victorian. She had that art of organizing which comes from natural capability, and which made



¹ Valerie Lester, *Phiz – The Man who Drew Dickens* Chatto & Windus 2004 pp. ix, plates section I

² Valerie Lester, *Marvels – The Life of Clarence Bicknell* – Matador 2018

the management of a big house and wealth no more difficult to her than a cottage home would have been, and she always seemed to have leisure for various pursuits.”³

A self-confident woman with these talents holds her head high, with a benign and pleasing attitude, like the lady in the Baily bust. The lady in the NPG engraving, is hunched up, the head lowered so that the line of the eyes points slightly downward and lacking self-confidence.

Age

Lucinda (1801-1850), who was also Phiz’s aunt, was 32 years old when Denning drew the picture of her. Denning was a close friend of Elhanan and Lucinda Bicknell and is recorded by Christine Roberts as coming to the dinners with other artists there. He would therefore have had every reason to make a portrait which was a true likeness, or on the young side... not older. It is also very unlikely that James R. Mackrell engraved anything other than the Denning drawing; his job was engraving, not to create a new likeness. The NPG engraving is clearly not the portrait of a beautiful 32-year-old.

“Clarence’s mother, Lucinda Sarah Browne, Elhanan’s third wife, was born in 1801, although she always claimed a birthdate of 1804”.⁴ If Lucinda was indeed born in 1804 then she would have been 29 when Denning did the picture. All the more reason to think the portrait is not Lucinda.

Stephen Poyntz Denning (1795-1864) is involved in another portrait of disputed identity. “A portrait [of the future Queen Victoria] by Denning exists (now in New York) of a sitter once believed to be Lucinda Bicknell, Elhanan Bicknell’s third wife, but now believed to be that of the Duchess herself”⁵. This gives some substance to my contention that the Denning picture is not of Lucinda.

Turning to the Baily sculpture, we must note that Lucinda was 49 when she died. She had given birth to seven children between 1830 and 1842 and might have looked, at death, older than her 49 years. But the Baily bust looks more like a woman in her thirties. We would hope that the sculptor would have stayed true to the death mask, but he, another guest at the dinners at Herne Hill, could have been in the thrall of the mourning millionaire art collector, his patron, Elhanan. Would he have been tempted to make a bust which looked younger than the “love his life” who had just died?

The Baily bust shows a woman too young for the date (her death in 1850 at age 49). The Denning portrait on the other hand looks like a woman older than 32, her age when the image was made. Age gives no support to either being the correct likeness and in fact confuses the issue greatly.

³ Edgar Browne *Phiz and Dickens* p 55

⁴ C.G. Browne and A.S. Bicknell, *Notes to Assist the Future Authors of the Huguenot Family of Browne*. Handwritten manuscript, 1903, p. 93.

⁵ See Annex 2, excerpt from article by Brian Green of the Dulwich Art Gallery

Who could the NPG engraving be?

a) Could the Denning engraving be of Elhanan's second wife, Mary Jones?

The scarf round the neck of the lady in the Denning portrait could be a fashion statement or it could be the habit of someone with poor health who is concerned about catching cold. Elhanan had married his second wife Mary Jones in 1817 but she "had never been strong, and she died of heart failure, April 9, 1827"⁶ This argues that the Denning portrait could be of Elhanan's second wife Mary,

At her death, Mary was only 32 years old having had her children Mary Ann and Henry Sanford at 22 and 24 years old. Is it possible that the engraving is of a lady 32 years old or younger. The engraving by James R. Mackrell is of 1838, but the original picture by Stephen Poyntz Denning was done in 1833. Indeed, Elhanan had married Lucinda in 1829, so the Denning painting was done not only after Mary Jones died but after Elhanan's marriage to his next wife. Is it possible that he or Lucinda wanted some monument to Mary and asked Denning to do a post-mortem picture from some available image of her?

Unlikely.

b) Could the Denning engraving be of Lucinda's mother Katherine Browne née Hunter (1775-1856).

This is the lady who adopted her eldest daughter Kate's illegitimate son Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz) as her own son so that shame would not be cast on the family⁷. There nothing written about social contact between Elhanan and his parents in law, but he did a lot to further Phiz's early career and would have been fond of Lucinda's family.

The age factor works better in this case. Katherine was 58 in 1833 when the portrait was done by Denning and this looks much like a lady of 58 years. She had 14 children between 1793 and 1816, of which six died quite young. If this portrait is her then we can feel she has weathered her maternal duties well even if the stooped head shows some tiredness with life.

Unproven. There are no other images of Katherine.

⁶ If Sidney Bicknell, *Excerpta Biconyllea*, Vol. II. Barcombe House, 1907 in the East Sussex Record Office at The Keep, Brighton. Marcus Bicknell has a second copy, also handwritten but not as extensive.

⁷ Valerie Lester, *Phiz – The Man who Drew Dickens* Chatto & Windus 2004

c) **Could the Denning portrait be of Sabrina Bicknell (1757-1843).**

Yes. There is a picture of Sabrina Bicknell also in the NPG (right, upper image) described as follows... “*Sabrina Bicknell* by Richard James Lane, after Stephen Poyntz Denning, lithograph, 1833 (1832), 11½ in. x 8⅝ in. (292 mm x 220 mm) paper size, given by Austin Lane Poole, 1956.”⁸.

Sabrina Bicknell by Richard James Lane, after Stephen Poyntz Denning, 1833 (1832) NPG D21782



If we now juxtapose the image called “probably Lucinda Sarah Bicknell (née Browne)” (right, lower image) we can see that it is the same sitter.⁹ Facial features, hair, expression, body language and clothing all confirm that this portrait is also of Sabrina Bicknell.

The likenesses are so similar that one wonders why NPG experts did not immediately see the similarity and change the title. The portrait allegedly of Lucinda was “acquired from an unknown source” in 1950; if the provenance is unclear then it’s title was (and is) also open to doubt.

Probably Lucinda Sarah Bicknell (née Browne) by James R. Mackrell, after Stephen Poyntz Denning, 1838 (1833), NPG D31758



In conclusion, the Denning portrait D31758 in the National Portrait Gallery is not Lucinda Bicknell, but Sabrina Bicknell.

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⁸ Note that there are two images of Sabrina Bicknell in the NPG, their reference numbers NPG D21782 and NPG D22174. Both pictures are described the same, and are essentially identical. For the purpose of this paper, we treat them as one.

⁹ I am grateful to Amy Adams who alerted me to the image of Sabrina Bicknell in the NPG

Annex 1

“Probably Lucinda Sarah Bicknell (née Browne)”

by James R. Mackrell, after Stephen Poyntz Denning, stipple engraving, 1838 (1833), 17 3/4 in. x 14 in. (451 mm x 355 mm) paper size, acquired unknown source, 1950, NPG D31758

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw125645/probably-Lucinda-Sarah-Bicknell-ne-Browne>

Sitter [Lucinda Sarah Bicknell \(née Browne\)](#) (1801-1850), Third wife of Elhanan Bicknell. Sitter associated with 1 portrait.

Artists [Stephen Poyntz Denning](#) (1795-1864), Artist. Artist associated with 8 portraits and [James R. Mackrell](#) (circa 1814-1866). Artist associated with 1 portrait.



Annex 2

Excerpt from

Artist in Residence - Stephen Poyntz Denning and the Herne Hill Art Set

by Brian Green

December 2014

It is not known how or when precisely, Denning came to the notice of the Royal Family, but the association certainly had started by 1823 when he painted the famous portrait of Princess Victoria aged 4. The painting was never engraved despite its significant popular appeal and remained in the artist's possession. It was purchased by Dulwich Picture Gallery for 30 guineas in 1891 and immediately became the most popular picture in the collection.

Another commission for the Royal Family, possibly by Denning, took place in 1825 when a miniature (6cm) of the future Queen Victoria was painted and inscribed: "Presented by the Princess Victoria to her dear old General Wetherell". Wetherell was the ADC and equerry to the Duke of Kent, Victoria's father. It seems likely that Denning was actually engaged by the household of the Duchess of Kent, which was at Kensington Palace, as a portrait by Denning exists (now in New York) of a sitter once believed to be Lucinda Bicknell, Elhanan Bicknell's third wife, but now believed to be that of the Duchess herself.

<https://www.dulwichsociety.com/2014-winter/1071-stephen-poyntz-denning>

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Annex 3

Sabrina Sidney (Sabrina Bicknell)

Born	Manima Butler (baptised), Ann Kingston (orphanage renamed) 1757 in Clerkenwell, London
Died	8 September 1843 (aged 85/86) in Greenwich, London. Cause of death, asthma. Resting place Kensal Green Cemetery
Nationality	British
Other names	Sabrina Bicknell
Known for	Subject of a 'perfect wife' experiment by Thomas Day
Spouse(s)	John Bicknell
Children	John Laurens Bicknell and Henry Edgeworth Bicknell

Sabrina Bicknell (1757 – 8 September 1843), better known as **Sabrina Sidney**, was a British woman [abandoned](#) at the [Foundling Hospital](#) in [London](#) as a baby, and taken in at the age of 12 by author [Thomas Day](#), who tried to [mould her into his perfect wife](#). She grew up to marry one of Day's friends, instead, and eventually became a school manager.

Inspired by [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#)'s book *[Emile, or On Education](#)*, Day decided to educate two girls without any frivolities, using his own concepts, after being rejected by several women, and struggling to find a wife who shared his ideology. In 1769, Day and his barrister friend, [John Bicknell](#), chose Sidney and another girl, Lucretia, from orphanages, and falsely declared they would be [indentured](#) to Day's friend [Richard Lovell Edgeworth](#). Day took the girls to France to begin Rousseau's methods of education in isolation. After a short time, he returned to [Lichfield](#) with only Sidney, having deemed Lucretia inappropriate for his experiment. He used unusual, eccentric, and sometimes cruel, techniques to try to increase her fortitude, such as firing [blanks](#) at her skirts, dripping hot wax on her arms, and having her wade into a lake fully dressed to test her resilience to cold water.

When Sidney reached her teenage years, Day was persuaded by Edgeworth that his ideal wife experiment had failed and he should send her away, as it was inappropriate for Day to live with her unchaperoned. He then arranged for Sidney to undergo experimental vocational and residential changes—first attending a boarding school, then becoming an apprentice to a dressmaker family, and eventually being employed as Day's housekeeper. Having seen changes in Sidney, Day proposed marriage, though he soon called this off when she did not follow his strict instructions; he again sent her away, this time to a boarding house, where she later found work as a [lady's companion](#).

In 1783, Bicknell sought out Sidney and proposed marriage, telling her the truth about Day's experiment. Horrified, she confronted Day in a series of letters; he admitted the truth but refused to apologise. Sidney married Bicknell, and the couple had two children before his death in 1787. Sidney went on to work with schoolmaster [Charles Burney](#), managing his schools.

In 1804, [Anna Seward](#) published a book about Sidney's upbringing. Edgeworth followed up with his memoirs, in which he claimed Sidney loved Day. Sidney herself, on the other hand, said she was miserable with Day and that he treated her as a slave.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

