

The Boningtons and Nottingham: from Arnold to Calais

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Introduction

Richard Parkes Bonington was only fifteen years old when he left Nottingham for France and yet, given his tragically early death, this accounts for more than half his life. There is much conjecture about his childhood and there is even some lingering uncertainty as to the exact year of his birth (Dubuisson: 3; Hughes: 99; Race: 8). Nevertheless, tantalising traces of the young artist remain and on this Boningtonesque tour of Nottingham and Arnold there is much to see – and even more to imagine.

Any dearth of material charting the early years of the artist is more than made up for by the snippets of information concerning his intriguing family. Both his grandfather, Richard Bonington the Elder (1730–1803) and his father, Richard Bonington the Younger (1768–1835) served as County Gaoler. The latter, for reasons that are not entirely clear, resigned from this post in 1797. The chameleonic nature of his subsequent career meant that he was variously described as ‘a sailor, gaol-keeper, painter, printseller, drawing master, lace manufacturer and shopkeeper’ (Spencer: I, 6). Of his character there is considerable disagreement (Williams: I, 295). One contemporary nicknamed him ‘The Admiral’ for his rather florid use of the English language, apparently a result of his youthful experiences at sea (Ryley cited in Wylie: 237). For many he was an ‘alehouse radical’ (Shirley: 6) who had been obliged to resign from the county jail for

‘conversing with the prisoners on the subject of politics, and debating amongst them on questions of free government, and the reading to them of the forbidden doctrines of Tom Paine’ (Mellors, 1909: 44).

For others he occupied ‘the loftiest pinnacle of Nottingham art’ and was a respected member of the community who ‘always took a deep interest in the affairs of the town’ (Wylie: 236). In 1815 he was a Whig candidate in a fiercely fought local election which he lost by the narrowest of margins (Race: 11).

Such a personality could not but have had a considerable bearing (for good or ill) on his son. This paternal influence was tempered by the ‘accomplished, prepossessing... [and] good humoured’ nature of his mother (Ryley cited in Wylie: 236). Eleanor Bonington, née Parkes (1774–1837) was an experienced school teacher and governess from Birmingham. On the occasions when she taught in the vicinity of Nottingham she must have encountered her future husband giving his lessons in art. The brief descriptions below chart the life of this couple and the various houses in which they lived, worked and cared for their only child. The fluctuating fortunes of this teacher and artist can be traced through their movements and their final departure for France in the autumn of 1817.

1. Shire Hall and County Jail (Galleries of Justice)

Richard Bonington the Elder is buried in St. Mary’s churchyard. He was County Gaoler from at least 1768 until his retirement in May 1789, when his twenty–one year old son succeeded him. The family lived in a house adjacent to Shire Hall, the site of which has featured a court since the late fourteenth–century and a prison from at least 1449 (Brand: 1). The present Shire Hall, designed in 1770–72 by James Gandon (1743–1823) and with many nineteenth–century alterations, now forms a superb setting for the Galleries of Justice visitor attraction.

In April 1797, following his resignation from the post of County Gaoler, the younger Bonington set up the first in a series of drawing schools. In the next four years the itinerant artist moved to premises at Hounds Gate, Goose Gate, Bridlesmith Gate and Weekday Cross (Hughes: 100–101). In July 1801 he travelled to London to marry Eleanor Parkes and in November they returned together to establish themselves at Arnold.

2. Bonington House

Although we cannot be absolutely certain it seems more than likely that they occupied number 79 High Street and that it was there on 25 October 1802 (or 1801!) that Richard Parkes Bonington was born. The early eighteenth-century brick building comprised of three stories with two rooms per floor and included a stable, garden and walled playground. It was here that Mrs Bonington sought to receive ‘a limited number of young ladies’ to educate them ‘on a liberal and useful plan’ (cited in Spencer: II, viii). At the same time Mr Bonington continued to give his drawing classes.

Known today as ‘Bonington House’ this building (listed Grade II) has for many years been the headquarters of Arnold Labour Party. In 1928 a Bonington Centenary Committee was set up to raise £200 to fund a commemorative memorial (Mellors, 1928). The subsequent work attached to the façade of Bonington House was executed by Joseph Else (1874–1955) and inaugurated by the local historian Robert Mellors. Else was the leading sculptor in Nottingham, Principal of the School of Art and co-ordinator of the sculptural programme for Cecil Howitt’s Council House (1927–29) on Old Market Square. His bronze relief of Bonington features a profile portrait of the curly haired, youthful artist and is similar to Alexandre-Marie Colin’s pencil sketch of his friend drawn around 1823–24 (Cormack: 48).¹

A further reference to the presence of the family in the area used to be a cinema on Front Street called the ‘Bonington’ which closed in 1957 (Spick: 107; Negus: 25).

¹ Alexandre-Marie Colin (1798–1875), *Portrait of Bonington*, pencil, c.1823–4, 21 x 16.9 cm, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. F.W. Pomeroy also made use of this portrait when he carved the statue of Bonington commissioned by Watson Fothergill (see section 8 below).

3. High Pavement

Richard Parkes Bonington was baptised at High Pavement Unitarian Chapel by the Rev. James Tayler on 28 November 1802 (the present, much larger chapel designed by Stuart Coleman of Bristol dates from 1874–76 (RCHME: 163) and has recently been converted into a public house). It is possible that he went on to attend the High Pavement School. These connections with the Unitarian congregation provide an indication of the radical nature of his father's politics and also the fact that his mother's schools appealed to non-anglicans (Race: 10). Also on High Pavement is St. Mary's Church where Parkes Bonington's paternal grandparents were married and where his father had been baptised.

4. St. James's Street

Soon after the birth of their child the Boningtons moved to Nottingham. The first of their three addresses in the town was 27 St. James's Street, to the west of Market Square (Williams: I, 303). The new house benefited from being more centrally located: in addition to providing accommodation for twelve students, Mrs Bonington was now able to provide day schooling for considerably more. She advertised lessons in 'English education, and plain sewing... ornamental needlework and geography' (cited in Hughes: 103). Her husband likewise re-established his drawing school and sought to further develop his standing as a fine artist by issuing engravings of his work. His confidence was so high that, in March 1806, he opened a 'Repository' at Shoe Booths behind the old Exchange Building (now replaced by the Council House). It sold 'a complete assortment of the most valuable prints and drawings' and, for 'ladies in particular... a very choice display of fancy articles' (Bonington cited in Hughes: 103). It lasted less than a year!

A short walk from St. James's Street is Angel Row, 'the fashionable eighteenth-century quarter' (Pevsner: 229), where today one can find the Local Studies Library in which there is a great deal of information relating to the Bonington family.

5. Park Row

Richard was in his seventh year when the family moved to Park Row near the corner with Postern Street in January 1809. This transfer was a clear indication that the school was thriving with the new property allowing for an increased number of boarders and day pupils. It was described by Mrs Bonington as standing ‘within a few paces of the Park’ and combining ‘every advantage of town and country’ (cited in Peacock: 22). It comprised of a playground and a large schoolroom in addition to ample space for Richard’s father to exhibit his oil paintings to prospective clients. The family home and workplace remained in this pleasant environment for a little under five years.

The house was demolished in the 1860s to make way for a Children’s Hospital and a new entrance to the General Hospital, both designed by T.C. Hine (1814–99). These along with the circular ‘Jubilee Wing’ (1897–1900) by Alfred Waterhouse (1830–1905) expanded on the existing hospital dating from the 1780s (Pevsner: 244). Recently renovated they all merit close examination.

6. Park Street (Friar Lane)

The removal to ‘a humble dwelling’ (Wylie: 236) at number 15 Park Street in November 1813 points to the fact that things were not going so well for Richard’s parents. His father, who had exhibited at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy in London during 1797 and 1808, continued his work, as did Mrs Bonington who struggled for a further three years to maintain her school. Nevertheless, in August 1817 the house and its contents were sold and by the end of the year they had begun their new life in France.

In the early twentieth-century it was aptly suggested that this, the last home of the Boningtons, should have a commemorative plaque to record the fact that they had lived there (Fry, 2001: 6). This was not realised and in any case the building was demolished in the 1920s and the name of the street changed to Friar Lane. In a happier vein it was on that very site that the premises of the Nottingham Society of Artists

were constructed and at the top of the building, completed in 1934, is Joseph Else's statue of St. Luke, the patron saint of artists (Macmillan: 1, 26–27).

7. Castle

It should be remembered that during Bonington's lifetime the site of Nottingham Castle was the property of the Dukes of Newcastle. Their seventeenth-century mansion, begun by the first duke in 1674, was built on what remained of the castle following the Civil War. Despite its grandeur it was infrequently used and by the 1820s was unoccupied. The empty building was gutted by arsonists during a riot on 10 October 1831 in protest at the rejection by the House of Lords of a bill to marginally increase the number of people entitled to vote. It remained an empty shell until 1876–78 when it was transformed into the first municipal museum and art gallery outside London.

The turbulent history of the castle provides clues as to why the Boningtons decided to leave Nottingham for Calais in 1817. Some have seen fit to place the blame squarely on 'The Admiral'. Although his abortive commercial ventures (such as the formation of a 'Repository' for the sale of 'fancy articles') were indeed costly mistakes it seems unfair to conclude that Mrs Bonington's school 'was broken by the imprudent conduct of her husband' (Monkhouse: 814). The deterioration in its fortunes was more plausibly due to the 'perceptible decline of Nottingham at this time as a social centre' (Hughes: 105). It has been suggested that the increasing industrialisation of Nottingham was a reason why the Dukes of Newcastle ceased to use their mansion (Hamilton: 18). Similarly the Boningtons ran into financial difficulties due in part to 'the new mechanised factory system for the production of lace' (Ingamells: 7). This altered the social spectrum of Nottingham, reducing the number of affluent families able to supply either Mrs Bonington's girls' school or Mr Bonington's drawing classes. The impact of the industrial revolution in Nottingham resulted in social inequality and unemployment, exacerbated by the wars against France and further hindered by the machine-breaking actions of the Luddites during 1811–1816. Following the cessation of the continental war in 1815, Bonington (ever the entrepreneur) collaborated with two fellow townsmen to smuggle machinery across

the Channel in order to establish a firm manufacturing lace in the ‘very English town’ of Calais (Pointon, 1985a: 25–26; 32–35; Pointon, 1985b: 33). It was from there that they went on to Paris and Parkes Bonington’s career as an artist began.

8. Waverley Street

It was not until the early twentieth-century that steps were taken to commemorate Bonington in the place of his birth. Wishing to rectify this and also mark the fiftieth year of his connections with Nottingham, the architect Watson Fothergill (1841–1928) decided to bequeath to the city a statue of the artist. Frederick William Pomeroy (1857–1924), a sculptor with a national reputation was chosen to execute the work. In 1907 he had produced a striking portrait of Bishop George Ridding surmounting a tomb designed by W.D. Caroe in the chancel of Southwell Minister (Summers: 23). The remarkable bronze figure genuflecting before an open bible carved in granite is still visible and eminently testifies to the sculptor’s considerable abilities. This work has fared better than his statue of Bonington: carved from Carrara marble the artist was depicted in fine attire, with brush and palette in hand, standing before an easel. It was unveiled in the grounds of the School of Art on Waverley Street on 3 May 1911. Despite the fact that it was placed under a stone canopy designed by Fothergill, exposure to the atmosphere meant that it quickly deteriorated. By the 1940s the forlorn figure, much eroded and missing its right arm, was removed to the store of the Castle Museum. It is nevertheless well worth visiting the site it once occupied to admire the recently restored Waverley building (now part of the Nottingham Trent University) designed by Frederick Bakewell and opened in January 1865 (Jones: 39–40). William Philip Smith, a lecturer at the school, oversaw the decoration of the building with busts of artists and architects. Completed in 1878 they include such figures as Wren, Hogarth, Reynolds and Turner (Fry, 1999: 44–45).

9. Arnot Hill Park

Since 1994— thanks to the exertions of the then Mayor, Councillor Mrs Edna Hindle— the partially restored statue of Bonington has occupied a location rather more preferable to the subterranean stores of the castle. In April of that year it was re-erected in memory of the late Ken Negus, a long-serving librarian and a prominent figure in Arnold society, and is now visible at the entrance to Gedling Borough Council Offices in Arnot Hill Park. This is a fitting resting-place for an object that is so evocative of both the vicissitudes of time and the enduring significance of Richard Parkes Bonington.

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