

Introduction

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Joseph Banks (1743–1820) is now recognized as one of the most influential Englishmen of his day. As President of the Royal Society from 1778 to 1820, as a friend of King George III from 1772, and as a Privy Councillor, he had a hand in nearly all the scientific initiatives of the time, particularly the voyages of exploration.

Joseph Banks was born of Derbyshire and Yorkshire descent at 30 Argyll Street, St. James's, London, on 13 February 1743. His extensive county estates were centred on Revesby Abbey near Horncastle, Lincolnshire, which he inherited after the death of his father William Banks in 1760, and later Overton Hall, Ashover, Derbyshire, when his uncle Robert Banks died in 1792.

Successively tutored at Revesby Abbey, prepared at Harrow, disciplined at Eton, and liberated at Christ Church, Oxford, Joseph Banks was the first of his family to enter a university with full educational benefit. He matriculated as a gentleman commoner in December 1760, and came down in the summer of 1764 in full command of his inheritance. He had no formal degree, but was a serious student in natural history with a well-developed scientific curiosity focused mainly on botany and entomology. He pursued these interests at the British Museum and became a close friend of the Keeper of Natural and Artificial Productions, Dr. Daniel Solander, an apostle of Linnaeus direct from the University of Uppsala. In May 1766, Banks was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society as a man 'versed in Natural History'. By this time, however, Banks was at sea in a 32-gun naval frigate as a sort of post-graduate biologist for a summer of fisheries patrol off the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador. He returned to London in January 1767 as an experienced collector in natural history, with the first properly documented specimens from that region of eastern America — emphatic evidence of his scientific merit at the age of 24. To accommodate his growing library of natural history specimens, he acquired a house in London, at 14 New Burlington Street.

Early in 1768 the Council of the Royal Society was preparing its "Memorial" to the King for a grant of £4,000 towards a Royal Society expedition to the South Seas to observe the transit of Venus in June 1769. Banks committed himself to the voyage in February 1768, on his own initiative and at his own expense, three months before Lieutenant James Cook was appointed commander.

On 16 August 1768 he left London to join Cook and H.M.S. *Endeavour* at Plymouth. On 13 July 1771, after their epic world voyage, he returned with the first natural history and ethnological collections from the South Seas to be seen in Great Britain. As Fellows of the Royal Society, Banks and Solander had carried the biological sciences into the South Pacific for the first time, and opened new fields of enquiry.

Banks withdrew at a late stage from Cook's second voyage to the Pacific. Instead, he embarked on his third and last maritime exploration at his own expense and, this time, under his own command. His voyage to Iceland in the summer and autumn of 1772 set the northern limit to Banks's collecting sites, while Tierra del Fuego had marked the southern — a range in latitude no naturalist before him had achieved. As an intellectual entrepreneur at 29 he had done more than most of his contemporary Fellows of the Royal Society "for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge".

For Banks his three "voyages of curiosity" in pursuit of "Natural Knowledge" were the foundation of his future as a dedicated servant of science: comprehensive in their vision; thorough in their preparation; professional in their collections; detailed in their documentation; well conserved at their end for the scientific world to study, even to the present day, notably with the botanical material. These were the far-sighted enterprises of an intellectual man of action — a man of the study as well as of the field.

In August 1777 Banks moved to a larger house, No. 32 Soho Square, and by 1778 had created there a well-organized "Academy of Natural History", pre-eminent in its botanical specimens and the conditions for their study, and backed by a library unique in its day for its coverage in natural history. Superbly catalogued in 1796–1802, and regularly updated in manuscript side-entries, it was a pioneer in scientific bibliography, and still continues as a separate unit of the British Library in London. So also the dried plant specimens at 32 Soho Square formed one of the most comprehensive reference collections available to European botanists, and became the nucleus of the General Herbarium at The Natural History Museum from 1881. The method of mounting and storage in cabinets of Banks's original design became the standard for museum collections worldwide.

The original shell collection of Banks and Solander, containing 1120 specimens of 392 species, is now lodged in the mollusca section of the Department of Zoology in The Natural History Museum, backed by Solander's descriptive manuscripts and early classification. By contrast, the original elegantly mounted entomological specimens have not survived so well. The remnants are to be found in the Department of Entomology at The Natural History Museum.

When Banks was elected President of the Royal Society of London in the old rooms at Crane Court in 1778, he had been active in its affairs for nearly seven years as a regular attendant at the meetings and as a member of Council, 1773–75 and 1777–78. In 1780, the Royal Society moved to its new rooms in Somerset House, and here Banks was annually elected President until his death in June 1820 — the longest serving of all Presidents. Here, he was at the hub of scientific

and technical progress during a most active period of geographical discovery, war and revolution — a notable figure of strong personal independence in touch worldwide with all kinds and conditions of men on matters of science, manufacture, politics and trade.

Before he became President, in 1775–78, Banks had a recognized mistress in Sarah Wells, who lived at a separate address south of St. James's Park. But in March 1779, at the age of 36, Banks married Dorothea Hugessen, a 20-year old Kentish coheirress, at St. Andrew's Church, Holborn. Later that year, he leased the villa of Spring Grove near Hounslow with its 49 acres, where in time he established his experimental farm and botanic garden. His sister, Sarah Sophia, soon became a permanent member of the Banks household, to complete a childless trio well known in London society and county travels for the next 40 years. With his marriage and settlement at 32 Soho Square and Spring Grove, the pattern of Banks's life from 1779 was set, governed largely by the meetings of the Royal Society, but also by his personal service to the King.

Not since John Evelyn, and the foundation of the Royal Society under Charles II, had the Society been so close to the reigning monarch. Banks first met King George III in 1771 at St. James's Palace and the White House, Kew, to discuss the natural history harvest from the *Endeavour* voyage, and their active friendship of 40 years was stifled only by the last prolonged illness of the King from 1811. The first evidence of this friendship was the despatch of Francis Masson to the Cape of Good Hope in 1772 as the first of many Kew collectors — Anton Hove, William Kerr, James Bowie, Allan Cunningham, and Alexander Moon followed. For more than 40 years, from 1773 to 1820, Banks was in effect honorary director of what has become the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Himself a pioneer breeder of Spanish Merino sheep at Spring Grove, he also established and managed a Royal stud flock of the same breed at the King's Marsh Gate Farm, Kew, and in the Little Park, Windsor, 1787–1820. Together, these small private enterprises laid foundations for the massive growth of the 19th century British colonial wool trade and home manufactures. It was Banks also, more in his role as President of the Royal Society, who dispensed the Royal funds for the telescopes of William Herschel F.R.S. from 1781 to 1820, the survey instruments of Major-General William Roy F.R.S. from 1783 to 1791, and the first stages of the Ordnance Survey of the United Kingdom, accounting to the King directly for this use of royal wealth in the national interest.

On scientific and related matters, Banks was thus the voice of the Royal Society advising the King, in friendly conversation while walking by the Thames at Kew and Richmond, or at Windsor, and also through his written advice to the King's ministers. Informally, Banks was the knowledgeable man of affairs translating the everyday world to the King, but he was silent on matters of policy or political debate. Indeed, he felt the King was sometimes too free in their conversations, and he refused to seek Royal favours either for himself or others. He accepted admittance to the Order of the Bath in 1795 (the first civilian recipient of this honour) only for its relation to his place as President of the Royal Society, free

from political or personal elements. As such, it marked the rising status of science in the national scale of values, and as such Banks wore the red ribbon in the chair at Somerset House.

After many years as an unofficial adviser, Banks was from March 1797 a sworn and active member of the Privy Council, with all that this implied then in the affairs of the nation and in his relations with the King. His little study at 32 Soho Square became effectively another office of 'the great Council' with its own weight and influence, quite distinct from his place in the chair at Somerset House. In the Council meetings, Banks sat as the widely travelled and knowledgeable man of affairs of notable integrity on whom successive Governments relied, from the first of Pitt the younger, beginning in 1784, to that of Lord Liverpool, 30 years later. With his presence *ex officio* on other public bodies, such as the British Museum, the Board of Longitude and the Board of Agriculture, he developed a network of international communication sustained through 20 years of global war. For 30 years or more he served, in modern terms, as an honorary Permanent Secretary in a Ministry of Science and Technology.

For nearly half a century, he was closely involved with all the important voyages of Pacific exploration that followed the pioneering Royal Society venture of H.M.S. *Endeavour*. He managed in detail, 1780–84, the published account of Cook's last voyage, 1776–80. He proposed in 1779 and 1785 a settlement on the east coast of Australia. He advised on the mounting of the "First Fleet" under Captain Arthur Phillip to found the convict colony at Sydney Cove, 1787–88. At the same time, he proposed and supervised the two breadfruit voyages of Captain William Bligh in 1787–93. He was consulted on the early fur-trading ventures to the west coast of America, 1785–90, and especially the survey voyage of Captain George Vancouver with the naturalist Archibald Menzies, 1790–95. The Government and the East India Company drew heavily on Banks for advice in the mounting of the Macartney Embassy to China, 1792–94, as they had done in the developing affairs of the sub-continent since 1784. He stimulated and guided the coastal surveys of Australia, notably those of Captain Matthew Flinders, organizing for the Admiralty the voyage of H.M.S. *Investigator* to the final publication of its results, 1795–1814. He strongly supported the Arctic explorations of Constantine Phipps, 1773; William Scoresby Jr., 1807–23; Captain Sir John Ross, 1819; and Captain Sir William Edward Parry, 1819–21, in the search for a north-west passage.

He was a central figure in founding: the Linnean Society of London, 1788; the African Association, 1788, later to become the Royal Geographical Society, 1832; the Board of Agriculture, 1793; the Smithfield Club, 1798; the Royal Institution, 1799; and the Horticultural Society, 1804, also known as the Royal Horticultural Society since 1861.

As a Privy Councillor from 1797 to 1820, he was a tireless member of the Committee for Trade and Plantations on matters affecting trade in general, agriculture, coinage and the affairs of the Royal Mint. As a county landowner he was involved from 1762 to 1820 in the embankment, drainage, navigation, survey and accurate mapping of Lincolnshire, and as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries from 1766 he was an ardent historian and student of the county antiquities. The

estate of Overton Hall, near Ashover, and the family investment in the nearby Gregory Mine, ensured his continuing concern with the coal and lead mines of Derbyshire and their geological mapping, hence his strong support of William Smith and the growth of stratigraphical geology in Great Britain.

With his voyage in H.M.S. *Endeavour*, Banks provided a role model for several later biologists, such as Robert Brown, F.R.S. 1811, who sailed on the tragic but productive voyage of H.M.S. *Investigator*, 1801–03, and opened new vistas of botanical science. Brown links with Charles Darwin, F.R.S. 1839, whose voyage on H.M.S. *Beagle*, 1831–36, was to extend the intellectual boundaries of the biological sciences. Two of the voyaging biologists became Presidents of the Royal Society: Joseph Hooker, F.R.S. 1847, P.R.S. 1873–78, pre-eminent as a botanist, sailed on H.M.S. *Erebus*, 1839–43, in the Southern Hemisphere; and Thomas Huxley, F.R.S. 1851, P.R.S. 1883–85, on H.M.S. *Rattlesnake*, 1846–50. Finally, there is the voyage of H.M.S. *Challenger*, 1872–76, with Henry Moseley, F.R.S. 1877, on board.

Banks's scientific reputation in his own time is derived from his long tenure as President of the Royal Society, and from the material evidence of his collections, manuscripts and library. He wrote few scientific papers and no books, but his influence was immense, and was exercised in no small part through his correspondence. Probably no man as an independent private citizen ever gathered so many far-flung correspondents into his sphere of influence on so many subjects and to such widespread practical effect — they ranged from crowned heads and ministers of state, through those eminent in public affairs, science, manufacture, the arts and literature, to those who are known to us only as names.

It was a long time before the interest and importance of his correspondence was appreciated, and many letters have been lost. For more than a century, the main source was the sample transcribed for Dawson Turner from originals loaned to him between 1832 and 1845. These copies were not generally available until lodged in the Department of Botany library at The Natural History Museum. Known as the Dawson Turner copies, they comprise the text of the Banks *Endeavour* journal and some 2032 individual letters, of which 504 are written by Banks himself. After the original manuscripts had been offered to the British Museum and largely refused, there were sales in 1880 and 1886 which dispersed much of the correspondence.

In 1958, Warren Dawson in *The Banks Letters* summarized the texts of a little over 7000 letters of the general correspondence to be found at that date in United Kingdom repositories. The global total has now grown to more than 20,000, of which about 6000 are by Banks himself, covering the years 1766–1820.

The average length of a Banks letter is about 400 words. Over three-quarters of his letters are of less than 500 words, and only about one in 40 above 1000 words. He wrote almost always in English, occasionally in French, rarely in Latin. In the surviving correspondence there are very few letters to or from women, even of his own family, though in his last 10 years he wrote quite often to Charlotte, eleventh Duchess of Somerset.

His correspondence was organized by himself as a business operation, not as a self-indulgent literary pursuit. This systematizing began in 1771, but it was not

until August 1777, with his move to 32 Soho Square and the arrival of Jonas Dryander, that a firm working regime was established. This was consolidated in or about 1780 with the engagement of William Cartlich as his office clerk and copyist for the next 35 years.

The pattern of Banks's working year, and hence of his correspondence, was dominated after 1778 by his Royal Society engagements after his election as President. After the end of the Royal Society year, usually in June, he would travel to his estates. Thus his letters are mainly from 32 Soho Square during the winter and early spring each year; from then until the end of August often from his estate of Spring Grove in Middlesex; in September/October from Revesby Abbey in Lincolnshire, but also from Overton Hall in Derbyshire in September over the years 1793–1813. Wherever he was, his correspondence followed him through the diligence of Jonas Dryander as his curator and secretary at Soho Square. Banks replied from where he was at the time, often immediately, so that his reply was received in London mostly within a week of the mail coming to his hand.