

John Wood No. 10

Update to John Wood Article 2

How an ambiguous sentence may have led to the mistaken belief that Mrs Chivers was John Wood's mother-in-law

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Evidence has already been presented in article 2 to establish that two men named Edward Shepherd were both involved in the tussle over the sale of Mrs. Chivers' garden near St John's Hospital – one being an architect and surveyor, drawn into the picture by the Duke of Chandos to redress the apparent shortcomings of a young and wilful John Wood, the other being the son-in-law of the said Mrs. Chivers. There was definitive proof that they could not have been one and the same person.

Nevertheless, such a situation did give rise to the speculative thought that confusion or ambiguity, caused by this strange coincidence of there being two men on the scene with the same name, might somehow have resulted in the mistaken idea that John Wood, architect, was the son-in-law of Mrs. Chivers and that the maiden name of his wife (known to be Jane or Jenny) was therefore Jane Chivers. At the time the article was published however, no specific evidence could be cited to account for any such misunderstanding.

Possibly the following brief extract, recently found in a very comprehensive biography of the Duke of Chandos, could provide a plausible explanation. *The Life and Circumstances of James Brydges First Duke of Chandos, Patron of the Liberal Arts*, researched and written by C. H. Collins Baker and Muriel I. Baker was published in Oxford by Clarendon Press in 1949 – a year after the first edition of Ison's *Georgian Buildings of Bath*. The Baker biography includes a very detailed account of events that took place during the somewhat turbulent time that the Duke of Chandos was masterminding improvements to the accommodation provided on the St John's Hospital site and trying to deal with a self-willed builder (John Wood), a truculent landlady (Mrs. Phillips) and the stubborn Mrs. Chivers, who would not sell him her garden. By May 1730, in an attempt to sort out his difficulties, Chandos had called in his own surveyor, Edward Shepherd, who was to oversee and report back on John Wood's work.

Chapter XIII, begins on page 296 and is headed "BATH - ANNE PHILLIPS' HOUSES". It includes the following significant extract – [Page 321. para. 2]:

*... To wind up the tale of Mrs. Degge's house, we should note that Edward Shepherd (at Shaw on 4 April 1730) was to proceed to Bath and survey Mrs. Degge's house and Mrs. Jones's, which had been building for some months. Shepherd's business at Shaw Hall was done about 15 May, so that he was soon due in Bath. **Besides having to survey Wood's houses, Shepherd had also to bargain with his mother-in-law, Mrs. Chivers, whose garden, in St John's Hospital, Chandos coveted.***

This last sentence is certainly ambiguous. It was possible that the researchers had discovered that Mrs. Chivers' daughter (incidentally named Mary, not Jane) had married an Edward Shepherd – and believed this must have been Edward Shepherd, the surveyor. Yet there is little doubt that it might well be taken to mean that Mrs. Chivers was John Wood's mother-in-law. Equally frustrating is that, although the two authors were so meticulous about detailed references throughout their biography of the Duke of Chandos, they seem to have provided no evidence to substantiate their dubious claim or confirm the true identity of Mrs Chivers' son-in-law.

It was not until the revised version of Walter Ison's *Georgian Buildings of Bath* was published in 1980 that one possible interpretation of Baker and Baker's puzzling assertion appeared in print:

*... Jane Wood's identity seems to be established by the evidence of a letter dated October 9th, 1729, wherein the Duke of Chandos instructed the architect-builder Edward Shepherd to bargain with Wood's mother-in-law, Mrs. Chivers, for her garden adjacent to St John's Hospital ...*¹

But, in fairness to Ison, his inclusion of the phrase '*seems to be established by*' possibly hints at some uncertainty about this idea. It appears to imply that he was drawing provisional conclusions, possibly based on something he'd read or heard at the time, rather than relying on evidence he had discovered or checked himself. Certainly the particular letter he referred to as evidence provides no proof of any family link between Mrs. Chivers and John Wood.² In fact, no such proof can be found in any existing letters sent by the Duke of Chandos to Edward Shepherd between the 9th Oct 1729 and the 11th July 1730.³

Whatever prompted Ison to take the unwise step of promoting this mistaken theory, it was to have serious consequences. Mowl and Earnshaw in 1988⁴ and Jean Manco in 1998⁵ clearly accepted Ison's interpretation as proven fact – even adding further fragments of speculative information to substantiate the idea. And for almost 40 years John Wood the Elder was blessed with a wife who never even existed.

References and Additional Notes:

¹ *Walter Ison: The Georgian Buildings of Bath from 1700 to 1830: Revised Edition 1980: Kingsmead Press, Bath: Appendix VI; p. 234*

² *Chandos Letterbooks: Letter to Edward Shepherd: 9 Oct. 1729: Huntington Library, California: Stowe Manuscripts: ST57: Vol. 33, f. 275/6: thought by Ison to have established the identity of John Wood's wife.*

Transcript:

Mr Shepherd

Cannons 9th Octobr. 1729

My Lord orders me to write to you to acquaint you, that by a letter he has rec'd from Mr Theobald he finds that Mr Wood has had no surveyor sent down and that he would have you tell him he thinks it is a very unreasonable thing that after all the ? and solicitation he has used to have the house surveyed he should be put to the expense of sending a surveyor down himself and Mr Wood have none there to meet him, and that he expects he will find one somewhere or other very soon. His Grace would have you stay till Mr Wood's surveyor comes, and desires you will be very particular in your survey; and to enable you the better to do it, he sends you down enclosed the 1st survey of Mrs Degge's house taken by Cope, but would not have you abide by it, but survey it over again as well as you can, he having some reason to distrust that survey. His Grace likewise desires you'll let Mr Wood know that he is not certain whether the Wall that separates Mrs. Chivers's garden from his ground belong to her or to him, but that he thinks the surest way will be for him to build without it. The inconvenience cannot be great from doing so, in regard the Wall is not thick so that the Rooms will not be much straitned by it. You'll remember too, to make particular enquiry what moves can be taken to prevent the noisyness of Mrs Degge's house and what the reason is that the necessary houses have not been long since finished. I am

Yours etc

³ *Letters to Mr. Shepherd, Surveyor; Huntington Library, California: Stowe Manuscripts: ST57: Vol. 34, p. 334 (9 May 1730); Vol. 35, f. 64, 88, 91, 105, 122, 142, 156 (June-July 1730):*

The Huntington Library holds eight further letters from the Duke of Chandos to Edward Shepherd, referenced as ST57. Seven of these (found in Vol. 35) were written June/July 1730 and are listed under the heading 'Mr. Shepherd (Surveyor)', but one, dated 9 May 1730, is included in Vol. 34, under the heading 'Mr. Shepherd at Bath. From information noted by Baker & Baker at the beginning of the paragraph containing their ambiguous 'mother-in-law' claim, it is clear that Edward Shepherd, surveyor, was at Shaw Hall (Berkshire) in April 1730 and would not proceed to Bath until his work there was completed about the 15th of May. If this is correct, it seems to imply that this particular letter was sent to Mrs. Chivers' son-in-law and

confirms that Chandos must have been aware that he was dealing with two Edward Shepherds – not only his own surveyor, but also another Edward Shepherd who was acting on behalf of Mrs Chivers over the sale of her garden. This is perhaps borne out by the tone and subject matter of the Duke's message (transcribed below):

Mr Edward Shepherd at Bath

9th May 1730

*My Lord Duke has ordered me to acquaint you that he received the Proposal you visit him from Mrs Chivers for the sale of part of her garden. His Grace says that your description of the ground is so obscure, he knows not what part of the ground it is that is proposed to be sold to him, & has therefore wrote to Mr. Wood to make a Plan of it & send it him up. As soon as My Lord has received this & that His Grace can thereby tell what it is he is to buy, he will send you an answer to your letter. I am
Yours ” ... etc.*

⁴ *Tim Mowl & Brian Earnshaw: John Wood Architect of Obsession: Millstream Books 1988; Chapter 2, p. 35*

⁵ *Jean Manco: The Spirit of Care: St John's Hospital, Bath: 1998; p. 106*

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