



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

ELIZABETH MOXON'S BOOK DESERVES A BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE...

"English Housewifry" represents one of the first examples of a female author being attributed as a source of expertise; the book would run for over 15 editions and be exported around the world, passing from mothers to daughters, between servants, and into historical records.

REMEMBERING

ELIZABETH MOXON

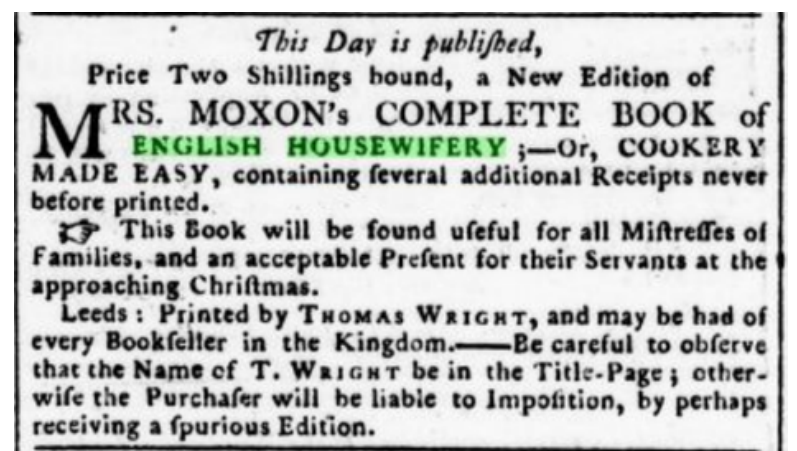
"English Housewifry" by Elizabeth Moxon

A Renowned Culinary Text Published in Pontefract



ELIZABETH MOXON

(Artist's Depiction)



Above: An extract from a print notice referring to the publication of "English Housewifry".

THE INTEGRITY OF RESEARCH

Of all our women to-date, tracking down the details of Elizabeth Moxon's life has proved the most challenging. With the invaluable resources provided by Pontefract Museum, our team of Forgotten Women researchers worked long into the night for several months hunting for clues. This has involved looking through old census records to locate where our candidates for Elizabeth Moxon were living at the time and seeing if they tallied with what could be inferred about "English Housewifry" and its Leeds publisher.

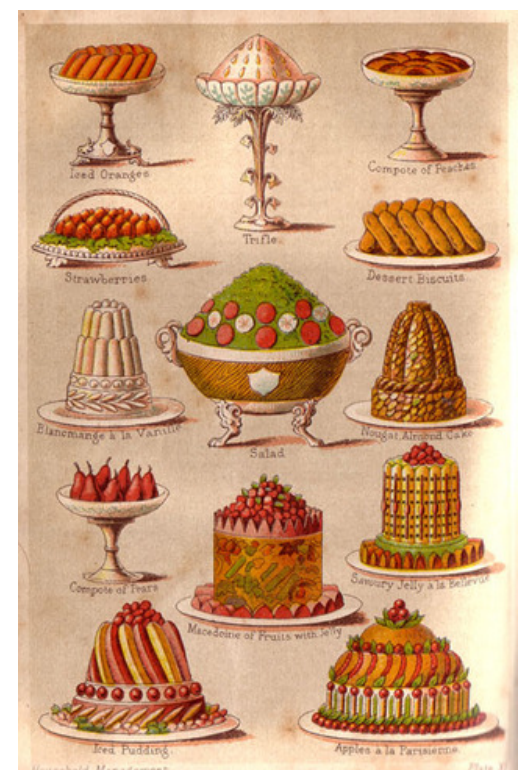
Our researchers also used a myriad of documents ranging from baptism certificates to probate wills in an attempt to find out who Elizabeth Moxon was. They collaborated with other interested parties and shared information to try to pin down which Elizabeth Moxon was the author of this famous book. Many stones were overturned and anomalies in existing research debated deep into the night. This led to the net being cast wider and it was only when other characters, the Wilsons, the Listers, and the Swales, began to emerge did the trail lead back to Pontefract.

Our Research Coordinator and Researcher Helga Fox, together with research volunteers Helen Wilby, Amy Charles and the entire research team have at every point employed rigorous fact checking to ensure that any missing links were not overlooked for the sake of finding an answer.

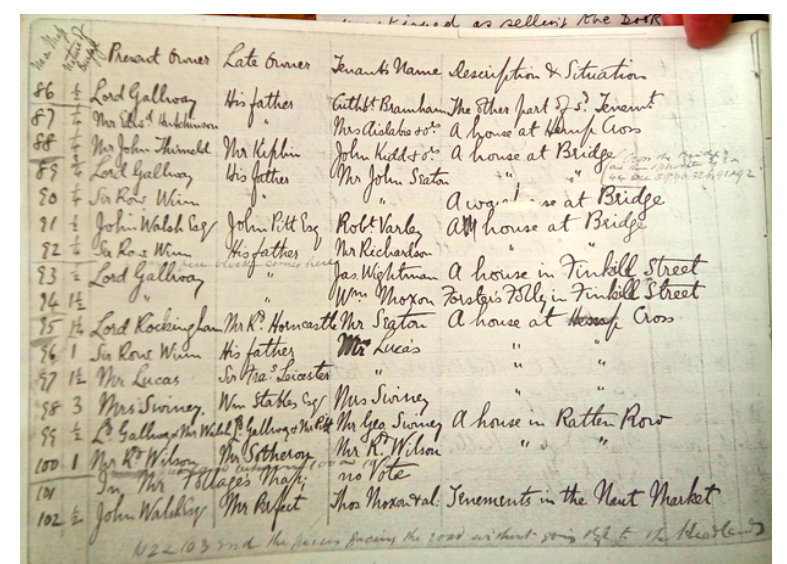
What has emerged through the course of our research is just how many women *could* have been Elizabeth. That is important because it reveals to us how, in many ways, women have historically been treated as superfluous to the narrative. An author of a landmark publication should have been relatively easy to find -- but she wasn't.

That's why Elizabeth Moxon's book "English Housewifry" deserves a blue plaque both in its own right and to highlight that Elizabeth Moxon is a proxy for many women who labored in kitchens across the world only to have their work dismissed and their stories forgotten even as their expertise was used, often without credit.

"English Housewifry", the book attributed to Elizabeth Moxon, was first published in 1741 by John Swale and printed by James Lister. It has become a landmark in culinary writing and one of which Pontefract is incredibly proud. The book is said to be among the first to have been written by a woman for women on "giving directions in most parts of cookery ... [and the] orderly placing [of] the dishes and courses". Perhaps just as critically, the book wasn't just written by Moxon but Moxon's name was allowed to stay on the text. Until this point in English culinary writing, recipes were gathered from women (usually servants) and then compiled into books without attribution. "English Housewifry" was different and while Elizabeth Moxon's existence remains a question mark for several reasons, one fact is clear: the spirit of "English Housewifry" lives on and is even celebrated today in local kitchens and in new forms, for example in programmes like The Great British Bake Off which celebrate culinary excellence using varied ingredients -- something that Moxon's book was keen to promote.



Above: A beautiful illustration of Georgian desserts, the kinds of which Moxon tells readers how to make in "English Housewifry".



Above: Our researchers searched through hundreds of documents to track down the identity of Elizabeth Moxon.

Please turn over for the full story of the different women we investigated in the search for Elizabeth Moxon.

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‘ENGLISH HOUSEWIFRY’
ELIZABETH MOXON

COINCIDENCE OR DESIGN

BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

Moxon’s cookbook, first printed by James Lister and published by John Swale in 1741, came hot on the heels of a previous cookbook, ‘The English Hus-wife’ by Gervaise Markham, first printed by John Beale in 1615. The content of that cook book was attributed to ‘an unnamed woman who was of honorable personage of this kingdome.’ Advice to women was given in the foreword: ‘When our Hus-wife shall address herself, she shall well understand that these qualities must ever accompany it; first she must have a quick eye, a curious nose, a perfect taste, and a ready ear; she must not be butter-fingered, sweet toothed, nor faint-hearted for the first will let everything fall, the second will consume what it should increase; and the last will lose time with too much niceness.’ Considering women were not legally allowed to have their names associated with public writing, the fact that the original author’s identity is now obscure is not surprising. Markham spoke for the author and claimed, as was the norm, both knowledge and expertise of a traditionally female domain. ‘The English Hus-Wife’ fell out of fashion by 1683 after nine further editions, however the seeds for future such publications had been sown.

Pontefract’s famous cookbook ‘English Housewifry’ did name the author as being female, possibly as a result of new laws passed in 1709 which enabled copyright to remain with the author rather than the bookseller or the printer. This was at odds with the usual practice of the foreword to any text continuing to be written by the printer or bookseller. Moxon is described as ‘the author’ to be found ‘at Pontefract’ on the title pages of the first four editions, and whilst it appears to be her voice in the foreword, describing how she has ‘thirty years of experience’, it is worth remembering that it was unlikely that the author, whomever it was, had written the foreword itself. Who this woman is remains a mystery--this despite the cookbook being reprinted a further 15 times over the next 100 years. ‘English Housewifry’ travelled the world on ships full of people intent on both gentrifying dinner tables in the colonies as well as keeping memories of home alive via their household meals.

Gifted from mothers to daughters, mistresses to servants and maids, the content, not just a cookbook but also a way of life, was sold to support health and well-being. It was ‘useful, substantial and splendid’ as reprints continue to show. Ingredients such as walnuts, imported by the Romans, are used liberally in the recipes for their health properties, whilst oysters, claret and anchovies can be found in the shoulder of mutton recipes. At first glance we assume these ingredients to be exotic, unavailable to the common person, but Pontefract was, at that time, a thriving market town with strong connections to the trade routes from Hull and London. Indeed, Finkle Street, where the Moxon family lived, is at the heart of this ancient and historically royal strong hold and its residents, both rich and poor, had access to every sort of ingredient. All that was missing, was a cookbook, from which to inform others, about how to use them. The year 1718 saw James Lister, whose father Francis Lister was from Wakefield, using the first printing press in Leeds to print the Leeds Mercury. It was this very printing press that issued the first edition of ‘The English Housewifry’ only 23 years later. Three further print runs, the second in 1743, the third in 1746 and the fourth in 1749, all by Lister and sold by Swale, suggest the text was popular.

Having married Rachel Jackson in 1734 in a Quaker meeting house in Bradford, Lister found himself plugged into an existing and established world of printers, publishers, book sellers and distributors. Rachel was the half- sister of one William Jackson, who started Jackson’s Oxford Journal Newspaper. This marriage immediately linked James to a renowned, influential, wealthy and well-connected Quaker family based in Leeds and Bradford with established networks throughout England. It was the perfect super highway along which the Moxon text could travel.

But who was Elizabeth Moxon? Or rather, who was the woman who inspired James Lister and publisher, John Swale, to put the name of a female on the front of their text and take the revolutionary step to give ‘her’ a voice, albeit in the third person? Elizabeth, being the most common name for a woman at that time, William being the most common name for a man, and Moxon as a surname being the equivalent to Smith today, has all conspired to make finding the actual author of this text nigh on impossible. Faced with multiple baptism registrations of Elizabeths who married Williams around the same time, scant records due to historical documents being lost or destroyed, and those documents that remain being housed in different archive centres across the land, so far, there is no factual evidence to categorically either prove or disprove any one theory.

And there are many...

Pontefract Museum’s archive room smells of polish, history and reverence. The heavy cardboard Moxon box, containing bits of suspected family trees, photocopied diary entries from 19th century ladies and scribbled notes from 1979 researchers, is battered and it makes a thud as it is put on the ancient oak table in the centre of the room.

Opening it signals the beginning of a tantalising story. Many others have been here before us: The Pontefract Civic Society, The Pontefract and District Family History Society, Rev Don Moxon along with the historian Peter Brears, but the commissioned Dream Time Creative, Forgotten Women of (Wakefield) Pontefract research team, Helga Fox, Helen Wilby and Amy Charles were on a mission to find, absolutely, definitely and categorically, THE Elizabeth Moxon, author of the cookbook ‘English Housewifry’.

As time marched on, restricted by the sheer complex nature of unravelling a mystery 300 years old, and time-limited funding, the team cracked on and were quickly faced with the realisation that Elizabeth could have been one woman, or one of many women or, indeed, no woman at all. Undeterred they forged links with other researchers, engaged with local community groups, visited numerous archive centres and came up with the following.

Potentially, an inspiration for the name of the book, although there is scant evidence this Elizabeth is our author, is an Elizabeth Moxon (nee Fenton) from Hunslet, Leeds, who married a Thomas Moxon in 1693 who was the landlord of the King’s Arms. This public house was associated with the Leeds court where a Thomas Moxon, a Joshua Wilson and a Thomas Horner were appointed as overseers of the poor. This Elizabeth (nee Fenton) and Thomas Moxon were one generation above Lister but her name appears as a guest at the marriage of a Rebecca Wilson and Joseph Lister in Holbeck in 1715. Were Joseph and James, our printer, related? And was Joshua Wilson the same person who seemed to move in and out of all our characters’ lives throughout this story? Certainly, the ambitious James would have known of the strong connections the Quaker community had to high society and would have been well aware of Rebecca nee Wilson’s father’s legal involvement with Lady Elizabeth Hastings.

Lady Elizabeth resided in Ledstone Hall near Castleford. ‘Lady Betty’, as she was known, was an influential, high society woman who loved to give great dinner parties. She was also a woman who suffered with her health but whose charitable work and donations impacted greatly on the educational and spiritual landscape of Leeds. To this day, her legacy thrives through a cluster of Leeds and Wakefield district primary schools, all bearing her name and benefiting from her initial patronage. An ancient document, a stock check taken by James Spencer and held in the Spencer Stanhope Manuscripts, in the Bradford archives, and viewed by the Dream Time Creative team, shows the sale of goods needed to be raised as a direct result of debt accrued by Lister, a ‘printer and chapman,’ in 1746, of 275 books of ‘The Life of Lady Hastings’ authored by Thomas Barnard and printed in 1742. These, alongside 154 Moxon Cookery books and Lister’s printing press as well as other goods and chattels, were sold to clear Lister’s debt. Perhaps the recipes in the Moxon book that ‘calculated upon the preservation of health’ alongside the elaborate table settings for extensive dinner parties included in the cookbook were designed to preserve, albeit, anonymously, the Lady Elizabeth’s influence in the great kitchens at that time.

Lady Hastings had, however, passed away in 1739, just one year before James Lister used his own newspaper, the Leeds Mercury, to announce that the text ‘English Housewifry’ was ‘ready for the press’ and two years before the book about her own life was published. The advert for the Moxon text reads, ‘All persons that are inclined to favour the publication of this book are desired to send in their names as directed by Michaelmas next, otherwise they may miss the opportunity of buying it.’ In other words, Lister was attempting to crowd-fund finance for the book by raising subscriptions in advance. It was considered a vulgar thing for a women to put her name to such a venture, which might explain the remaining text on the very first advertisement in 1740. ‘Printed by James Lister, by whom subscriptions are taken in, and by Mr Swale, Bookseller in Leeds, and the Author at her house in Pontefract.’ Usually, the names of anyone who subscribed to a book would be printed in the back. There is absolutely no sign of this in any early editions, which begs the question, who paid for the book’s publication? What we do know is that the first edition was printed in Leeds, and was sold by John Swale, a bookseller in both Leeds and Wakefield and one Joseph Ogle (former apprentice to John Swale, a bookbinder, 06/05/1723) and Samuel How(l)gate (also a former apprentice to John Swale, 17/09/1725). This, with ‘the author at her house in Pontefract’ as advertised in the initial advertisement in 1740, ensured at least four opportunities for local people, across the district, to buy the book.

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‘ENGLISH HOUSEWIFRY’
ELIZABETH MOXON

COINCIDENCE OR DESIGN

BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

If Elizabeth is our central character and assuming she was a married woman who took her husband's name, who was Elizabeth Moxon?

The title of Mrs did not become fashionable to use until around 1790 and even then it did not often denote a marriage status, but rather a social one. Therefore, looking for clues as to her marital status in titles (or lack thereof) was not helpful. Indeed, an advert for one of the later print runs, in 1798, referred to Elizabeth as 'Mrs Moxon', which was merely a trend of the time and not indicative of her marital status. This had us researching what was *deu rigeur* for ladies titles and led us on a merry dance. This dance led the research team to realise that the death of an Elizabeth Moxon, believed to be the sister in law of Elizabeth Moxon (nee Shaw) in Stanley, Wakefield in 1748 and shared with us from research done by The Moxon Society, was a red herring. Spinsters that share the same name as our protagonist can often add to existing conundrums. Some theories are weightier than others. One such theory is that Elizabeth, author of the cookbook, was Elizabeth Shaw who was baptised in 1696 in Leeds. Elizabeth Shaw married a William Moxon in 1922. He was born in 1691 and died in 1762 and was originally from Stanley, Wakefield. This William was part of an established Wakefield Moxon family, whose family records, traced through burials and baptisms, clearly link this line of Moxons to All Saint's Church in Wakefield as far back as the 1660s. This Elizabeth and William Moxon settled in Kirkgate Leeds and when she died in 1761 she was referred to as the 'wife of Mr. William Moxon of Kirkgate'.

This theory posits that she was the daughter of a baker named George Shaw from Vicar Lane, Leeds, and a talented confectioner. William was an Attorney, having migrated from Stanley, Wakefield, where his family had strong associations with the trade of baking. Could this be the Elizabeth Moxon, author of the cookbook, married to a man who eventually had offices of Law in Wakefield and Leeds? This Elizabeth and this William were born at the right time, were in the right professions and were married (1722) at a time that sits well on the several time lines on several bits of scraps of paper in the dusty box in Pontefract Museum. This pair leave a trail of children, all baptised in Leeds, who then themselves rose to high social status. They also had money to finance the printing of a book. However, there is no evidence to support the theory that Elizabeth Shaw's father George was, in fact a baker, and thus far there is no evidence that she herself was a confectioner. There is evidence that William was an Attorney and there is much speculation about the family moving to Pontefract to raise their family, however it is exactly that: speculation. At this time there is no actual evidence to place this Elizabeth Moxon (nee Shaw) or this William Moxon in Pontefract. The Moxon Society points to the information given by the author herself in the preface of the first edition as evidence of where she lived and as a woman who was known, educated, moved in appropriate social circles and was old enough to have amassed plenty of recipes. The author 'is stated to have knowledge of over 300 'receipts' as 'the result of 30 years of practice and experience'. If Elizabeth Moxon (nee Shaw), they argue, is the author of the book then in 1741 she would have been baking and cooking for up to 30 years prior. This would have meant, the argument continues, that she would have 16 years old in 1711 when she first started. As the daughter of an alleged baker, she could legitimately claim that she'd had that length of practical culinary experience – especially if she had also found related employment in the home or kitchen of a wealthy merchant. But there's a problem.

Few women could read or write at this time, and as having this skill was connected to status, there is an assumption in this theory that this Elizabeth was from a social class that was educated and therefore able to write down the recipes, much as we do today. What is forgotten in the midst of all this is that the majority of cooking skills and knowledge were passed down through the skill of storytelling, or learning by rote, within the women's community. It would not take much for an educated man such as Lister to listen and take notes of the recipes from the women within his own community, or indeed from one woman in his community. Bear in mind that a lot of recipes in the text are not just for the production of food but are also have healing properties. It's also worth remembering that all women lived under the long shadow of the witch burnings from only 80 years earlier and that much of the women's medicines linked to herbs and food had gone underground. Being caught with written recipes that might be misconstrued by the witch hunter, who it is worth remembering had condemned the Pendle Women to be burnt at the stake for being witches, was a dangerous position to be in, even in the more enlightened Georgian times of Elizabeth Moxon.

Unfortunately, the words in the preface are unlikely to have been Elizabeth's own, so looking to use that as proof she was a woman of note is unreliable as it was common practice that the prefaces of 18th century books were neither written nor controlled by their authors, be they women or men. What was printed cannot be taken as being a true representation of Elizabeth Moxon's voice or, indeed, situation. Then, as now, fiction presented as fact was often used to sell things in a new way to the reader. Perhaps it was Elizabeth Moxon (Shaw) who lived in Leeds and who wrote the book but whose printer and publisher decided to invent a home for her in Pontefract to extend the sales base, or perhaps it was a different Elizabeth Moxon who lived in Pontefract with a different background, different 'receipts' and range of experiences. Bearing all that in mind, the team went back to the box.

And so to Forster's Folly, Finkle Street, Pontefract and the second theory. Sitting in the lee of Pontefract Castle, a royalist stronghold since 1070 and the scene of many civil war battles in the 17th century, the long established fertile gardens stretch into the town and butt up against the city walls. Records suggest that the family first settled on Finkle Street when a Mr. Wm Moxon, baptised in 1618 in Pontefract (married Margaret Walker 1640/41), and Mr Wm Needham 'rented a garden near the castle lying a the back of the hospital' in 1650. This land was part of the liquorice field, liquorice being well known for its healing properties long before it became commercialised 100 years later. The burgage plot, established long before the total destruction of the castle by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, had upon it three dwellings clearly visible in Thomas Gent's print from 1741. The year 1758 sees William Moxon, Elizabeth Moxon's (nee Hasleton) eldest son, buying the house from William Crewe and the burgage rolls of 1767, a mere 27 years after 1746 and the death of Elizabeth Moxon, shows a William Moxon living and working there. William Moxon, alongside his brothers, were all Freemasons and men of wealth and influence. This Moxon line, beginning with land on Finkle Street, went on to become heavily involved in the production of Pontefract Liquorice, first selling it for its health benefits.

William Moxon, baptised at St. Giles Church Pontefract on the 9th March, 1683, was the son of William Moxon and Prudence Howdle. Records indicate he was a mason and married Elizabeth Hasleton on the 20th November, 1709, in the same church his parents had wed. Elizabeth was also from an established Pontefract family, her father suspected as being Thomas Hasleton and her mother being Maria (Mary) Merrin who also married in St. Giles Church in 1682. Elizabeth and William went on to have nine children, one of whom was called William and married a Sarah Varley. He died in 1778 age 67. Is this the William living on Finkle Street in 1767, twenty one years after his mother died? Thomas, the fourth child, married a woman called Elizabeth Moudy in 1748, just two years after his mother died. This meant that a woman with the name Elizabeth Moxon was recorded as living in Pontefract in 1749. This daughter-in-law who shared the same name as the woman who may have been the author of the Moxon cookbook first published in 1741 may be the reason why the fourth edition still said, 'sold by the author at Pontefract'. One thing we do know is Elizabeth Moxon (nee Hasleton) was a widow in 1741, her husband having died in 1737. Whilst she was a widow, there is nothing to suggest she was impoverished, and as a member of two established and well linked families living in Pontefract, there is no reason to suspect she did not thrive, having turned her hand to providing the content for a best seller, with Lister and Swale at the helm, until her own death in 1746.

Perhaps the truth about who Elizabeth was does lie in the title pages of each edition of the cook book. The first print run in 1742, as well as the second edition in 1743 (which was edited) and the third print run in 1746 all reference the book as being sold 'by the author in Pontefract'. The first advertisement in 1741 had the sale of the book 'at her house.' Remembering that James Lister, 'printer and chapman' went bankrupt in 1746, the year Elizabeth Moxon died, and sold all those copies of old print runs alongside his printing press to pay off his debts, it is worth thinking about what happened to the blocks of letters and printing plates (from plaster cast) he had made using the technique first introduced in 1725, known as stereotyping. Given that Lister went on to publish the fourth edition in 1749, also referencing the author being in Pontefract, it is evident he did not sell what was quite possibly his only future means of earning a living. Printing presses could be hired and with all four editions having John Swale as the publisher and bookseller it is clear that this relationship continued beyond Lister's bankruptcy. Re-casting plaster plates would be costly and time consuming but a new print run was not.

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The only anomaly in the argument that this Elizabeth Moxon was in fact Elizabeth Hasleton, is that Hasleton is recorded as having died in 1746, the same year Lister, the printer of her cookbook, went bankrupt. The title page of the 4th edition still has her selling her book in Pontefract, however her daughter in law, Elizabeth Moxon (nee Mounday), who was also was living in Pontefract, may have stepped into that role for the sake of an impoverished family friend who had kept the printing plates of the cookbook named after her mother in law. By the 5th edition, the final print by James Lister in 1752, the list of names on the front page had changed. John Swale (publisher) was no longer there but instead an Elizabeth Swale had taken his place. John Swale had died. No longer was an author mentioned. Instead, a Mr. Moxon in Pontefract was on the list. This could not have been Elizabeth's husband as he had died in 1737. Instead it may have been one of her surviving sons. Sadly, just one year later in 1753 both James Lister 'of Leeds' and his wife Rachel died.

It was at this point the printing and publishing of Moxon's Cookbook fell to others, most notably, Griffith Wright, who printed the 6th & 7th editions with S How(l) gate and J Wilson in 1755 and 1758. Is this J Wilson in fact Joshua Wilson Junior? The son of the Joshua Wilson who signed Lady Elizabeth Hasting's deeds and now apprenticed a legal junior of Crofton Hall with John Hepworth, attorney of law? Griffith Wright also founded the Leeds Intelligencer in 1754, a rival publication to Lister's own Leeds Mercury. It was The Intelligencer that flourished until 1866. The Intelligencer, through various reincarnations thereafter, eventually became the Yorkshire Post. In Wright's 7th edition (1758) for George Copperthwaite several additional 'receipts' (recipes) had been added by 'a person of note' which enabled the text to be bound in two separate entities. 'Hereafter, when it is bound together with the original, it is known as 'Part 2' and the original as 'Part 1.' It does seem that by this edition the calibre and content of the original was being watered down, perhaps to suit a changing palate as goods from recently colonised territories began to make their way onto English dinner tables. Rather fascinatingly, the advertisement that launched the sale of the 13th edition in 1790 reads, 'Printed by Thomas Wright, and may be had by every bookseller in the kingdom - be careful to observe that T Wright be in the title page; otherwise the purchaser will be liable to imposition, by perhaps receiving a spurious edition.' William Moxon, Elizabeth (nee Hasleton's) eldest son, had died just 12 years earlier and left a substantial amount of money and property in his will. The executor of that will was a Joshua Wilson Jr, an attorney of law for John Hepworth of Crofton Hall and the son of the man who had signed the deeds of Lady Elizabeth Hastings who had published through James Lister 50 years before.

Memory swirls and transports us to that first wedding between Rebecca Wilson and Joseph Lister some 300 years before. And, as the clink of glasses is raised to a new Georgian Age, the guests at that wedding bearing the names of our key players, the Moxons, the Wilsons and the Listers invite us into their world and tempt us with intriguing connections. Were they at that wedding by any chance? Did a casual conversation lead to a meeting with a woman who was renowned district wide for her recipes? Did that meeting lead to the eventual publication of the 1741 edition of 'English Housewifry'? The beginning of this Elizabeth Moxon trail is as tantalising as it is at the end, and the speculation that goes with it intrigues, frustrates and delights. Closing the lid on the box in Pontefract Museum, weak winter sunlight picks out the knots and whorls on the table older than this tale and, with the click of the door as it closes behind us, signals an end of this chapter, the Dream Time Research team write up their notes, file letters and receipts, pack up their bags and say their goodbyes.

At time of print evidence to support all theories explored in this piece is available for discussion via Dream Time Creative. Copyright © sarahleahcobham @dreamtimecreative February 2019.

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