

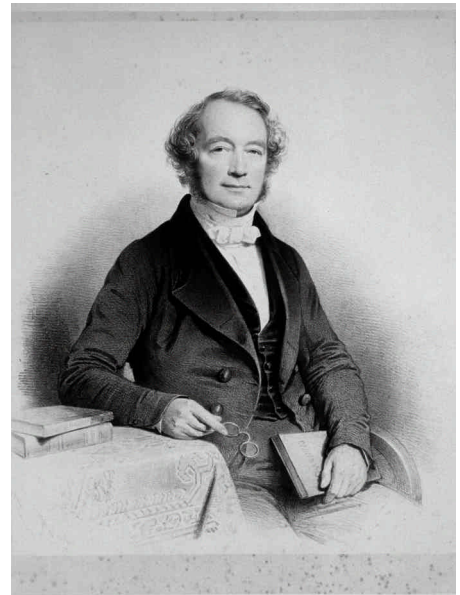
Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861)

Whale Oil Magnate and Patron of the Arts

BICKNELL, ELHANAN (1788-1861), patron of art, was born 21 Dec. 1788, in Blackman Street, London, being the son of William Bicknell, serge manufacturer there, and of Elizabeth Bicknell, previously a Miss Kandall, of Sevenoaks, Kent. Elhanan Bicknell's father had been partly educated at Wesley's school at Kingswood, Bristol, and always entertained John Wesley in Blackman Street when he came to preach at Snow's Fields. Another divine among the most cherished friends of Elhanan Winchester, author of 'Universal Restoration' (*Christian Reformer*, xviii. 56). William Bicknell bought the copyright of this work in the year of his son Elhanan's birth, and on finding that his bargain was profitable, he generously surrendered it to the author in 1789, with a characteristic letter (*ibid.*)

Elhanan Bicknell was educated by his father, who, having established a school at Ponder's End in 1789, when Elhanan was an infant, removed it to Tooting common in 1804; and there among Elhanan's schoolfellows, was Thomas Wilde, afterwards Lord Chancellor Truro. In 1808 Elhanan was sent to Cause, near Shrewsbury, to learn farming; but at the end of a year this project was abandoned. He returned to London and joined a firm at Newington Butts, engaged in the sperm whale fishery, into which, for over half century, he threw all his active energies and financial aptitude. About 1835 he foresaw how the repeal of the navigation laws, then in agitation, would injure his individual trade, yet he magnanimously supported the movement, together with the abolition of all protection; and when the inevitable crippling of his undertakings and his income came, he cheerfully accepted it.

In 1838, having occupied his residence at Herne Hill, Surrey, since 1819, Bicknell commenced there his magnificent collection of pictures, all of the modern British school. In the course of twelve years, 1838-50, he became the possessor of masterpieces of Gainsborough, Turner, Roberts, Landseer, Stanfield, Webster, Collins, Etty, Callcott, &c. (WAAGEN, *Treasures of Art*, ii. 359; *Art Journal*, 1862, p. 45); and, in default of a gallery, these splendid works, with many pieces of sculpture, such as Baily's 'Eve,' enriched all the principal apartments of his house, and were always hospitably open to the inspection of art connoisseurs. Bicknell, moreover, became acquainted with artists themselves, as well as with their works; he was munificent in his payments, and generously entertained them. Bicknell had bought many of Turner's best works before Mr. Ruskin's advocacy had made their beauties



known. He had a strong desire to leave his collection to the nation; but for family reasons his pictures, which numbered 122 at his death, were eventually sold at Christie's auction rooms, realising a sum little short of 80,000*l.* (*Times*, 27 April 1863). The Marquis of Hertford bought about one-third for his own gallery.

In politics and in theology Elhanan Bicknell was an ardent and advanced liberal. He supported Unitarianism consistently and warmly, was a principal contributor to the building of the Unitarian chapel at Brixton, and gave 1,000*l.* to the British and foreign Unitarian Association (*Inquirer*, 7 Dec. 1861, p. 895). His remarkable business powers, which were recognised on all sides, led to his being invited to become a partner in the great firm of Maudslay, the eminent engineer, but this offer was declined. In 1859 his health began to fail, and he retired from business. He passed the rest of his time at Herne Hill, where he died 27 Nov. 1861, aged 72 (*Inquirer*, 30 Nov. 1861). He was buried at Norwood.

Elhanan Bicknell married four times, the first in 1810 to Hannah Wootton who bore him three children of which the last, in 1815, died as a baby and precipitated her own death. His second wife Mary Jones (married 1817) bore him two children including Henry Sanford Bicknell 1818-1880 who married Christine, the daughter of the painter David Roberts.

Thirdly, in 1829 Bicknell married Lucinda Browne, a sister of Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz'). Lucinda's 8 children by Elhanan included Herman Bicknell (1830-1875 Army Surgeon and first Westerner to enter Mecca undisguised), Sydney Algernon Bicknell (1832-1911, family historian) and Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918 curate, author, artist, botanist, archaeologist). After Lucinda's death in Elhanan married Louisa Holland in 1851 with whom there was no offspring.

He left 13 children, and several of his sons, in succeeding to his fortune, made names for themselves in the various departments of art patronage, travel, and reform, in which he himself had taken constant delight.

Waagen's Treasures of Art in great Britain, i. 36, ii. 349; Christian Reformer, viii. 55 et seq.; *Inquirer*, 1861, p. 895; *Art Journal*, 1862, p. 45; *Athenæum*, 7 Dec. 1861; *Times*, 27 April 1863; private information.]

Adapted from

[Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 05](#) Bicknell, Elhanan by [Jennett Humphreys](#)



The watercolour ‘The six children of Elhanan Bicknell Esq’ painted in 1841 by Stephen Poyntz Denning, (1795 -1864) most likely depicts 6 children of Elhanan and his third wife Lucinda. 7 were alive at the time of the painting but the youngest (also named Lucinda) would have been barely one year old and might have been excluded from the sitting on these grounds. Clarence Bicknell, Lucinda’s last child, was not born until 1842. The children in the picture would therefore have been, from left to right,

Edgar, aged 7
Percy, aged 5
Herman, aged 11
Ada, aged 10
Matilda, aged 3, and
Sydney Algernon, aged 9