‘What the Butler Saw’: A Fragment in Honour of Bridget Leach

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The Bankes Papyri, now in the British Museum, were acquired by the art collector and traveller William John Bankes during his voyages in Egypt (1815-1819). On his return to England in 1820, Bankes stored the papyri, along with a variety of other acquisitions, in his country house, Kingston Lacy (see Fig. 1), Dorset, where they lay forgotten for generations.

On June 20, 1952, the historian Warren Dawson alerted I.E.S. Edwards of the Egyptian department at the British Museum, to an undated draft of a letter from Professor Percy Newberry to Ralph Bankes, now the owner of Kingston Lacy, mentioning papyri. In the letter, Newberry thanked Mr. Bankes for allowing him and his colleague Rosalind Moss to visit Kingston Lacy to examine the antiquities William John had collected. Newberry warned Bankes about the stone monuments lying exposed in the grounds of the house:

‘…if they are not cleaned soon they may seriously deteriorate. I noted that the sarcophagus of red granite in the park and also the figure of Ramesses II has lichen growing on it and this will ultimately lead to the disintegration of the stone unless cleaned and treated by an expert chemist.’

Newberry advised that Sidney Smith, then Keeper of the Egyptian department, had offered to send down a lorry with a couple of expert packers, without charge, and one of his clerks would give Bankes an official receipt for the antiquities. Newberry also offered to show Mr. Bankes around the Egyptian Collections in the British Museum where ‘your ancestor Henry Bankes was one of the Museum trustees.’ He then refers to the papyri:

‘In the short time at my disposal at Kingston Lacey (sic) I could only briefly examine the fragments of papyri that you possess: one fragment I think belongs to a series of documents relating to tomb robberies in the time of Ramesses IX. Some forty years ago I published the papyri in the collection of Lord Amherst of Hackney. Only two or three years ago Professor [Jean] Capart of Brussels found amongst the antiquities of King Leopold the upper parts of the four pages of the papyrus and the document is now complete!’

Newberry sent Ralph Bankes a short account of William John’s life since he had been unable to acquire a copy of Giovanni Finati’s *Life and Adventures* (1831) in which William Bankes’s

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1 Edwards 1982, 126-133.

2 It is now recognised as a statue of the little-known god Hetepbakef.

3 Warren Dawson’s copy of Newberry’s draft letter to Ralph Bankes, copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.

4 Ibid.
travels in Egypt were related. Hoping to see the papyri himself, Edwards requested a visit to the house and was invited by Ralph Bankes ‘to see the frescoes which Professor Newberry told you about.’ Edwards promptly accepted, taking his book *The Pyramids of Egypt* (1947) as a gift. At the house, he was shown some Egyptian objects in a wooden box, of which he made notes. He was invited to return the following month to look at ‘the fragments of papyri mentioned by Professor Newberry’ but these could not be located and Ralph Bankes conjectured that Rosalind Moss might have taken them when she removed William John’s collection of Egyptian drawings to Oxford for study.5

Edwards consulted Rosalind Moss who told him that she had first visited Kingston Lacy with Professor Newberry (who had died in 1949):

‘and then again just before the War to collect the Bankes papers still on loan here [the Griffith Institute]. I remember seeing the fragments of papyri, which were I think in drawers in the library(?), but they certainly did not come here with the diaries and drawings.’

Moss had also examined the Theban tomb paintings and ‘the stelae (at that time in the coal cellar) and the sarcophagus in the garden’.6 Edwards relates the story of his subsequent ‘find’ of various fragments including two Late Ramesside papyrus letters at the Bankes’ home as follows:

‘I visited, either alone or with my family, Kingston Lacy several times, but the visit that I remember best was the one when we found the papyri. The late Professor Newberry had heard about them but they could not be found when he and Dr. Rosalind Moss went there. Dr. Moss went again accompanied by Professor [Jaroslav] Černý, who published the stelae, but again without locating the papyri. I was no more successful when I first accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Bankes on a search, but there was one cabinet in the Library for which Mr. Bankes could not find the key. We all felt sure the papyri were in that cabinet. A few days later Mr. Bankes told me the key had been found and a day was fixed for me to go there. When I arrived I learnt that Mr. Bankes had unexpectedly had to hear a case in court, so Mrs. Bankes and I went through the cabinet, seeing many interesting drawings but not finding the papyri. I told Mrs. Bankes that they might have been placed between the pages of one of the enormous number of books in the Library, but she said that she had flicked over the pages looking for letters when she was dusting them in the previous winter. Then she remembered that the stack on the right of the fireplace had not been done, so I suggested I should climb the ladder and hand the books to her for dusting. So we worked downwards and on the bottom shelf, three books from the end, was an Atlas of Athens; the papyri were between the pages. We all had tea together and in the course of it I suggested that I should borrow the

5 Fragments of Theban tomb paintings. Letter from Ralph Bankes to Edwards, 1 June 1952, AES Departmental Correspondence, British Museum.

6 Letter from Ralph Bankes to Edwards, 19 July, 1952, AES Departmental Correspondence, British Museum.

7 Letter to Edwards from Moss, the Griffith Institute, Oxford, 1 July 1952; copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.


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papyri and take them to the British Museum for conservation and mounting between glass. At first they were a little reluctant to let them go, telling me about unfortunate experiences which had resulted from letting things go out of their possession. However I had known them for many years and they soon agreed to my proposal that they should remain in the British Museum for one month while Mr. Baker mounted them between glass and the binders made the box in which they are kept.  

When Rosalind Moss took the Egyptian drawings away to the Griffith Institute to be identified, Edwards related, ‘the Bankses feared they were never going to see them back, she and her assistant Mrs. Ethel Burney took so long over the identification. The results are embodied in the later volumes of the Porter and Moss Topographical Bibliography.’

Having renewed his work on the tomb-robbery papyri in 1973, twenty years after his first visit to Ralph Bankes’ home, Edwards wrote to Rosalind Moss again, explaining that ‘When I went to Kingston Lacy, Mr. and Mrs Bankes said they had no knowledge of any papyri and, in fact said they did not know what a papyrus looked like.’ The fragments of papyri which he then discovered in the atlas were not part of the tomb-robbery papyri corpus, so Edwards realised that the fragments Newberry had seen must still be hidden. He asked Moss:

‘If there is a chance of your having seen a different lot I shall probably go to Kingston Lacy again and have another hunt. I feel it is straining your memory to ask you these questions so long after the event, but I know how much more reliable your memory is than my own and whatever you recall will certainly be true.’

Rosalind Moss replied:

‘My impression is that we were left in the library to search for the drawings, and that from time to time Mr. Bankes looked in to see how we were getting on. There were a few fragments of papyri loose among the drawings, and Professor Newberry made a cursory examination of them, which he later reported in the letter you received from Warren Dawson. I think he showed them to Mr. Bankes and asked whether there were any others, but as the latter didn’t realize what they were it may well have left no impression. It is possible that it was Professor Newberry who put them in the Atlas to keep them from getting damaged: if so he would certainly have told Mr. Bankes where they were, but again it probably didn’t register. I was busy sorting the drawings, of which there were a large number in various drawers while Professor Newberry looked at the papyrus fragments, but he didn’t spend long over them, as we had very little time. It was the butler who really knew about everything, supplying useful information about small Egyptian objects in “the cupboard outside the nursery”, the colossal statue of “a

8 Letter from Edwards to the National Trust, 15 July 1986; copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.

9 Letter from Edwards to Anthony Mitchell of the National Trust, 14 August 1986; copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.

10 Letter from Edwards to Rosalind Moss, 28 August 1973; copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.
woman” (i.e. Ramesses II) and an inscribed sarcophagus “in the shrubbery”, and the “Egyptian Stones” in the basement, which Mr Bankes had never even heard of. We did not examine anything in the library except the drawers in the cabinets, so if Professor Newberry did not put these papyri in the Atlas, it must have been done by William [John] Bankes himself, which seems unlikely. Certainly we only saw one set as we went through the cabinets. On the whole I think that those you have must be the only ones, and that Professor Newberry looking at them hastily may well have thought that they seemed to resemble his “tomb-robbery” ones. I doubt if another visit to Kingston Lacy would help. I gather there are difficulties in the family since Mrs. Bankes’ death.”

Ralph Bankes died in 1981, bequeathing Kingston Lacy to the National Trust. In a 1986 letter to Edwards, Anthony Mitchell of the Trust described the handing-over of Kingston Lacy, when additional papyri were indeed found:

‘…the Ushabti were scattered in various parts of the house, the papyri were by no means easy to locate in the library, there was a fine sculpture lying abandoned out of doors in the Fernery, the wall paintings were hidden at the bottom of the back stairs precariously located near to a radiator and in general one had the feeling that the generation of Mr. Bankes’ mother did not look on this important part of William Bankes’ acquisitions with any great favour!’

Edwards wrote to Mitchell that he was pleased to hear that the Trust planned to display the Egyptian antiquities from the Bankes collection as ‘It will be such an improvement on anything which has been done in the past and I am sure visitors will find it most impressive. The Bankses were certainly interested in the collection and were anxious to hear what I could tell them about it, but I think they felt it was rather foreign to them.’

All the Bankes Papyri were subsequently given to the Egyptian department of the British Museum where they were conserved by Bridget Leach and studied. What Newberry had seen were Late Ramesside Letters from the same period as the Tomb Robbery Papyri, but not part of that corpus. Harry James, Edwards’s successor as Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities, was a special advisor for the Egyptian collection at Kingston Lacy and copies of Edwards’ correspondence about the papyri were sent to him by Anthony Mitchell. James pointed out that throughout his search Edwards never knew ‘that there was another substantial portfolio of papyri which came to light when the house was cleared.’

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11 See note 6.
13 Letter from Anthony Mitchell to Edwards, 8 August 1986; copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.
14 Letter from Edwards to Anthony Mitchell of the National Trust, 14 August 1986; copy sent by Anthony Mitchell to T.G.H. James, now AES Ar.1873, British Museum.
16 T.G.H. James’s papers were kindly donated to the AES archive, British Museum, by his son Stephen James.
17 Letter from T.G.H. James to Anthony Mitchell, 12 August 1986, AES Ar.1873, British Museum.
Perhaps they should have asked the butler.

**Bibliography**


Fig. 1: The Library at Kingston Lacy, Dorset.