

JOHN NELHAM, EMBROIDERER

By John L. Nevinson

When Margaret Swain wrote to tell me of her discovery at Blair Castle, I realized that a new line of research had been opened now that we had the Christian name and surname of a pattern drawer and the address of his shop. I was able to go to the Guildhall Library in London, where it was confirmed that the Blair Castle embroidery was signed *John Nelham* (not John Helham as we had at first thought) and that the address was the Sugar Loaf (Lofe) in Newgate Market. I was recommended to search in the books recording the rates paid by householders for the support of poor persons in the City of London, in the records of the Broderers' Company and also amongst London Wills. (A)

Then it dawned on me that in 1939 when I was studying the sources of English Domestic Embroidery patterns the name *Nelham* had already come to my notice, but without a Christian name and without an address. (B) In 1638 Lady Brilliana Harley writing from Brampton Bryan Castle, Herefordshire, to her son at Oxford, urged him to have his father's agent "hasten the sending of the pease of cloth" which was drawn by Mr. Nelham (spelt Neelham also). (C) Next year she thanked her son for sending Mr. Nelham's designs for a petticoat, together with the silk and wire needed. When Edward Harley later came to London to stay with his father, the member of Parliament, he obtained designs which his mother proposed to use for working "a shute of chairs". We do not know whether she finished this work before her death in 1643, during the siege of Brampton Bryan Castle by the Royalists.

Probably this Mr. Nelham, embroidery designer, was Roger Nelham whose first marriage took place in 1625 in St. Martin's, Ludgate Hill. Roger Nelham married, secondly, Margaret Webb in St. Swithin's, London Stone, on September 18th, 1638, by license from the Bishop of London, but nothing more is known of him until he made his will in 1653. The Will was proved in 1654 (P.R.O. 1654/170) when Roger Nelham gave his principal bequests to his son John with "the halfe of my books and prints and patterns which I do use for the drawings of workes . . . all my beames and lathes and working instruments . . . which do appertain and belong to my worke house." (D) (the other half was bequeathed to his son Samuel, who evidently was not yet of age).

The Rate Book of Christ Church, Newgate Street, is in poor condition and incomplete at this date, but it shows that a Mr. Nelham (no first name given) was paying rates in 1656, two years after the death of Roger. In 1666 Newgate Market and all around it were swept by the great fire of London, and we have no more information about how much of Mr. John Nelham's business was saved. However, from 1679 onwards, his name as a member of the Court of Assistants appears frequently in the Court books of the Broderers' Company, which are now on deposit with Guildhall Library. John Nelham was a Broderer who supplied cloth, took part in Civic Functions and approved the "stand" in which members of the Company stood to view the Lord Mayor's procession in 1683. (E) The timber stand was raised above the heads of the onlookers and its front was covered with a cloth embroidered

with the coats of arms of the City of London and of the Broderers' Company. It cost £16 and John Nelham signed a note that it was "Well done and very reasonable."

At this date John Nelham was associated with Mr. Rutlish, Embroiderer to Charles II, who died in 1687 and was buried at Merton, Surrey, where his tombstone in the churchyard has been restored, and the school founded with the funds he bequeathed still continues. After 1684 John Nelham's name no longer appears in the Company's books. He must have died suddenly without making a will, but the Inventory of his estate has survived (F) with the docket "Old Bailey, at the Sugar Loaf". This shows that after Great Fire John Nelham carried on his business under the same sign, leasing a new house, which was well furnished, and contained his "working tools" which were in a garret. In the shop were "a parcel of pictures and prints, 5 dressing boxes and a parcel of printed books". The Broderers' Company administered his estate, which was divided between his widow and children. His youngest daughter was cared for "in orphanage", that is, looked after by the Company till she reached the age of 21 or married.

Encouraged by success in finding out so much about Newgate Market, I returned to the hunt for a shop, "The Flaming Sword", in Covent Garden market. Many years ago I had searched in vain for this in the Russell archives at Woburn (Duke of Bedford). The only other signed embroidery of which I had a record was a jacket (Plate 8) embroidered with Chinese birds and floral sprigs on a quilted ground. This was part of Doris Langley Moore's collection and is now in the Museum of Costume in the Assembly Rooms, Bath. In the lining of one of the sleeves is written (Plate 9) "John Stilwell Drawear at ye Flaming soord in Russell Street, Cou." Nothing has yet been found about John Stilwell, who was presumably a draughtsman working in the shop, but the type of exotic embroidery on the jacket is roughly dateable by the coverlet, completed by Sarah Thurston, who signed it in 1694 (Victoria and Albert Museum, T.223-1953). There is a similar coverlet in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The Flaming Sword, that is the mark of a large straight sword with a wavy edge, is well known as a mark of the Cutlers' Company. But I found an advertisement in the London Evening Post in 1738 which recorded it as the sign of Mr. Reinhard's Toy Shop in Russell Street, Covent Garden. At that date a toy was not something bought for a child to play with, and a Toy-shop was "a shop for the sale of trinkets, knick-knacks, or small ornamental articles". Many of the shops in the re-built Covent Garden market today have reverted to the sale of these wares.

The Rate Books of St. Paul's Covent Garden are now in the Westminster Public Library, and, as I expected, Mr. Reinhard was found to be a rate-payer. Often referred to by the Collector of Rates as *Mr. Regnier*, he had been paying various sums regularly since the early 1700's, and at first was associated with Mrs. Dorothy Bickerstaff, who took over her husband's shop in Russell Street in 1693. Edward Bickerstaff has been Renter-Warden of the Cutlers' Company and was involved in disputes about the election of the Master in 1690. He was outvoted and withdrew, probably dying in 1692. The mark of the Cutlers' Company, the Flaming Sword, was no doubt retained by Dorothy his widow in his memory after 1692, when she

employed John Stilwell as a draughtsman for embroidery which may have appealed to her more than cutlery and metal “toys.”

We feel that further examination of the margins of embroidered pictures and the hems of embroidered dresses should reveal the names of more designers and draughtsmen, and the addresses of their employers. Once we know where there was a shop in which professional needlework pieces could be bought or designs commissioned, we can search for more about other types of 17th-century embroidery. Parish registers show the dates of occupiers, rate-books will list their names; their personal titles will emerge from their wills, legal actions, and the books of the Guilds or City Companies to which they belonged.

- A. My thanks are due to Miss Betty Masters, Archivist to the City of London, and to Mr. Frank Britton.
- B. Walpole Society XXVIII (1939), p. 12.
- C. Lady Brilliana Harley *Letters*. Camden Society, 1853 (pp.35, 86, 137).
- D. *Beams* and *lathes* were the ends and sides of the heavy frames on stands used by professional embroiderers. *Beams* were the rollers on which the excess cloth was wound; *lathes* were the straight side pieces to which the selvages were lashed to keep the cloth taut while working.
Compare *nyne payre of beames for imbroderers (Hardwick Inventory of 1601, Furniture History Society, London, 1971, p.25.)* Also: *Certane werklumes for ane brodinstare* [worklooms for an embroiderer] in Edinburgh Castle in 1578. (Thomson, T. *Collection of Inventories of the Royal Wardrobe and Jewelhouse*, 1815, p.238). The same terms were also used for weavers' looms.
- E. Document printed in C.Holford. *A Chat about the Broderers' Company*, 1910, p. 306.
- F. (Inventory)
Common Sergeant's Book No.4. 1678-93. Guildhall, London.