

## Artwork of the Month October 2020

### Thomas Banks - Portrait of Henry Baines, Botanist of York (1874)

*Peter Hogarth, a member of the Friends, co-author of 'The most fortunate situation' - The Story of York's Museum Gardens, writes about a portrait of Henry Baines the botanist by the Yorkshire artist Thomas Banks (1828-1896), restored during 2020, the full cost donated by the Friends of York Art Gallery.*



Thomas Banks (1828 - 1896), *Henry Baines (1793 - 1878) Botanist of York*, 1874, oil on canvas

© York Museums Trust

The subject of the portrait, Henry Baines, has justly been described as ‘the creator of the Museum Gardens,’ a short distance from where his portrait now hangs.

Henry, in his own words, ‘was born in a small cottage over the cloisters of St Leonard’s Hospital’, within a few yards of the Gardens in which he was to live, and work, for most of his long life. The year was 1793, and the date only a few months after the marriage of his parents. Not, perhaps, the most promising start to a remarkable life. ‘The first time I put a spade into the ground’, at the age of 12, was in a private garden adjacent to the Multangular Tower. A few years later, Henry was employed as a gardener in Halifax, returning to York in 1825 with a wife and the first of, eventually, five daughters, to become foreman of the celebrated Backhouse nurseries.

When the nascent Yorkshire Philosophical Society established a small museum in its rooms on High Ousegate, Henry was appointed Sub-Curator; then, when land was acquired on which to build the present Yorkshire Museum, he carried out the initial laying-out and planting of the nucleus of what expanded into the Museum Gardens. From then until his death in 1878, Henry Baines lived, worked and, indeed, died within the Gardens.

Henry Baines was more than just Head Gardener. He was – literally – at the elbow of Sir John Murray Naesmyth, the ‘celebrity’ garden designer brought in by the Philosophical Society, as the latter paced out the Gardens, deciding on where paths and plants should be placed. Baines planned and executed an innovative public exhibition of what would now be termed Economic Botany; he – twice - persuaded Sir Joseph Paxton and the Duke of Devonshire to relinquish specimens of the recently discovered giant Amazonian Water Lily (then present only at Kew and Chatsworth) for display in his Gardens; he wrote the monumental *Flora of Yorkshire*; and was a friend of a number of celebrated botanists. A remarkable man.

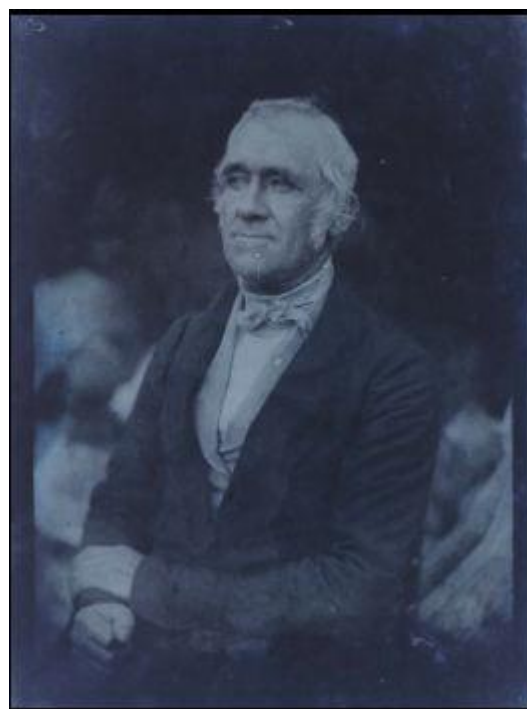
In declining health, Henry Baines retired from his post in 1870. The Yorkshire Philosophical Society allowed him to remain in Manor Cottage – specifically built for him in 1843 – on a pension equal to his salary, a privilege that demonstrated the high regard in which he was held. He no longer supervised the Gardens he loved - at least in theory. A friend visiting in 1873, describes him as hobbling about on two sticks ‘as usual’.

Thomas Joseph Banks’ portrait of Henry Baines was painted in 1874. It shows a bespectacled white-haired gentleman, formally dressed, peering

rather quizzically at obscure kite-shaped objects over his right shoulder: it is hard to see the image as representing an eighty-one year old, in declining health, a hobbler on sticks.

The enigmatic kite-shaped objects images are in fact the insect-trapping devices of a tropical carnivorous Pitcher plant, probably *Nepenthes* or *Sarracenia*. Their presence is not fortuitous. Carnivorous plants, and other 'stove plants' such as orchids, were a particular interest of Baines. Less so of his employers, the Yorkshire Philosophical Society. Perturbed by the heating bill, they periodically instructed Mr Baines to close the hothouses and dispose of the plants. Somehow this never actually happened; so it is entirely plausible that Henry Baines, in 1874, posed against a background of actual pitcher plants; and equally plausible that their appearance in the portrait is symbolic. As, possibly, is the sitter's suspicious – or protective? – glance.

There is only one image of Henry Baines with which the Banks portrait can be compared. This is one of a series of photographs – strictly, calotypes – made by the pioneering Scottish photographers, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, at the 1844 meeting, in York, of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Most of Hill and Adamson's photographs were of the grandees of the British Association – Sir David Brewster, Sir John Herschel, and sundry other bearers of knighthoods, professorships, and doctorates. Henry Baines, significantly, was the only lesser mortal captured in the lion hunt.



Hill & Adamson: Henry Baines, calotype, 1844

The 1844 calotype, made 30 years before the Banks portrait, shows Baines aged 51, in a similar posture, identically dressed, and not looking markedly younger than his eighty-one year old self. The background vegetation in this case is certainly authentic. Because of the exposure times required, photographs of the time were often taken in daylight (even if the sitter was posed with props suggesting an indoors setting). In the case of the Baines

calotype, the actual background was of the Museum Gardens: authentic as well as being symbolic.

The 1844 calotype was a sign of the wide respect for Baines - 'we all know to whom we are indebted for those beautiful gardens' – publicly acknowledged on the occasion of the British Association meeting. How did the Banks portrait come to be? Henry Baines certainly did not stem from the portrait-commissioning classes: much of his salary of £100 was probably spent on plants, books, building greenhouses, and botanising expeditions, while, as his daughter Fanny attests, he 'died a very poor man having been put to constant and great expense in his family'.

The simple answer is that the artist happened to be Henry Baines's son-in-law, having married his third daughter Annie in 1855. Thomas Joseph Banks (1828-1896), born in Tadcaster and subsequently a student at the York School of Design, was a moderately well-known landscape artist, who produced numerous pictures of the area round Goathland, where he lived, as well as views of his travels in Scotland and further afield. Portrait-painting was something of a novelty for Banks, and the Henry Baines portrait was presumably undertaken for the family, possibly, given Baines's age and state of health, conceived in some sense as a memorial.

Banks painted two other portraits, both in 1860, of the antiquary Thomas Bateman and various members of his family. Thomas Bateman (1821-1861) was a Derbyshire antiquary, who seems to have had an almost compulsive interest in the excavation of barrows and tumuli. In his portrait he is shown in a similar posture to Henry Baines, with a symbol of his trade: in this case, a skull. Possibly fortuitously, both posture and skull echo an earlier representation of Bateman, in this case a sketch by Llewellyn Jewitt c1855. Did Banks' knowledge of this sketch influence his painting of Thomas Bateman, as the 1844 calotype may have influenced the painting of his father-in-law? This portrait, like that of Henry Baines, was produced shortly before Bateman's death, although as Bateman died fairly suddenly, it is unlikely that the portrait would have been conceived as a memorial.

In his *Ten years' diggings in Celtic and Saxon Grave Hills in the counties of Derby, Stafford, and York from 1848 to 1858* ... Thomas Bateman describes, in exhaustive detail, virtually every barrow and tumulus he excavated. He spent much time in Yorkshire, and certainly visited Goathland. There is no mystery as to how Bateman and Banks might have become acquainted. Intriguingly, it is also clear that Bateman also visited the Yorkshire Museum, in search of artefacts excavated from other barrows: in which case it seems inevitable that he would have met his fellow sitter, Henry Baines.



Thomas Joseph Banks (1828-1896),  
*Thomas Bateman and His Son*, 1860.  
Photo credit: Museums Sheffield

## Sources

Direct quotations from Henry and Fanny Baines come from MS documents in the archives of the Yorkshire Museum, and from the *York Herald* of 3 December 1859; Baines's hobbling from a letter from Robert Davies to John Phillips, in the Oxford University Museum; and information on births, deaths, and marriages from parish registers. For further information about Henry Baines, see:

Hogarth, P. J. and Anderson, E.W. (2018), *'The most fortunate situation': The Story of York's Museum Gardens* (York, Yorkshire Philosophical Society).

With thanks to York Art Gallery, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and Sheffield Museums for use of the images, respectively, of *Henry Baines, Botanist of York*, *Henry Baines, Curator of the York Museum*, and *Thomas Bateman and his son William*.

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