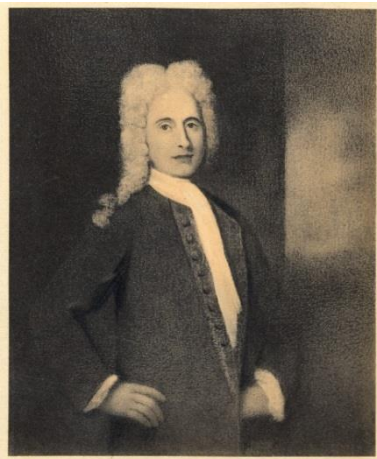


The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



Henry Skillicorne (about 1678-1763)

Henry Skillicorne, a former Bristol sea captain, is considered to be the founder of Cheltenham Spa. He recognised the potential of a salt spring at Bayshill and set about marketing its medicinal properties, encouraging visitors to 'take the waters'. A long memorial tablet describing his life and achievements is in Cheltenham Minster, formerly known as St Mary's Church (just behind The Wilson).



Henry Skillicorne in a lost portrait

Skillicorne's early life

Henry Skillicorne was born in Kirk Lonan on the Isle of Man in 1678 or 1679. The draft text for the memorial states that he 'was taught Christianity, navigation and 'useful knowledge' by the Bishop of Sodor and Man. He must have had a gift for languages as the memorial claims he could 'do business in seven Tongues'.

His career at sea

Skillicorne went to sea as a young man and was employed for many years by Jacob Elton, a Bristol merchant. He worked on galleys, a merchant ship capable of defending itself against pirates and other enemies. Seafaring had its dangers; he was once taken prisoner and wounded, and on another occasion he had to ride out serious storms in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. By 1719 he had risen to the rank of Captain, commanding the *Elton Galley*, a ship of 200 tons with 16 guns and 32 men. He traded in the Mediterranean and the Netherlands, and also made voyages across the Atlantic to New England.

The oil portrait recently purchased by the Friends of The Wilson must have been painted sometime between 1720 and 1730, probably after Skillicorne had risen to the rank of Captain, and shows him posed with a seascape in the background. After some years Skillicorne ran into serious financial differences with Elton, even asking the High Court of Chancery for a ruling between the two of them. We do not know the result, but these difficulties may be one of the reasons he decided to start a new career in Cheltenham when the opportunity presented itself.

His marriages

In 1719 Skillicorne married Anne Goldsmith, a Quaker relative of Elton. She died in childbirth in 1721 and was buried in Bristol. He then became acquainted with Elizabeth Mason, another Quaker, and the youngest daughter of William Mason of Cheltenham, a hosier. Henry and Elizabeth married in 1732, when he was about 52 and she was in her early 20s. They had four children. Two died in infancy, but William succeeded his father as proprietor of the Cheltenham Spa, and Elizabeth married a local vicar, Revd Thomas Nash. Their descendants adopted the surname Skillicorne in 1803.

The Bayshill Spring

William Mason bought Bayshill Meadow (land now owned by the Ladies' College) in 1716, and noticed that pigeons were pecking the salt deposits left by a spring. He had the water tested by local doctors and, finding it had medicinal properties, opened the spring for people to 'take the waters'. Mason took some steps to enclose the spring, and began to charge for its use, but it was not until after his death, when the land passed to his daughter Elizabeth that the spa was really put on the map.



A detail of the new spa well painted by Thomas Robins, 1740

In 1738 the Skillicornes moved to Cheltenham to enhance the spa. In his diary Skillicorne writes 'In the winter of 1739, I made the upper walk planted elms and lime to the number of 37, and made a new orchard adjoining. The winter of 1740 I made the lower walk, planted 96 elms, at the expense of £56. Had that summer 414 subscribers at the Wells at 12d per piece.' He also erected a brick building over the spring, installed a pump, and established 'conveniences' nearby. (The waters exercised a purgative effect on the body!) He leased out the day-to-day business activities, preferring to concentrate on developing and promoting the spa facilities. He bought up land adjoining the well, and elsewhere in Cheltenham. He also worked with other landowners such as Norborne Berkeley MP, later Baron Botetourt, to design (and redesign) the walks and facilities.

Memorial

Skillicorne died in 1763 and is buried in St Mary's Church. His son, William, took over his business interests and arranged for the memorial to be erected in his father's honour and in 1876 his great grandson, William Nash Skillicorne, became the first mayor of the newly formed Borough of Cheltenham.

Thanks to Steven Blake and James Hodsdon for their research on this information sheet.

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