INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGINS of JOHN BEARD

The name ‘John Beard’ proves to be remarkably common in London in the first half of the 18th century. A list of the occupations pursued by these people, and which have so far been identified, shows their wide diversity. It includes: attorney, barber, carpenter, druggist, distiller, exciseman, gardener, labourer, musician, mariner, ropemaker, soldier, tailor, weaver and woollen draper, together with several apprentices and ‘gentlemen’.

The ‘musician’ given in this list is not the subject of this biography; but it seems that he might be a relation, and explain how and why our John Beard followed the same profession. The John Beard who at one time seemed a prime candidate for Beard’s father is proved by his Will to have died in 1742 ‘on board the King’s ship Suffolk’¹. It seems unlikely that the ship had a band on board, and so he might have been recently impressed. His wife, Elizabeth, proved the Will, and was the sole beneficiary. As we shall see, it is now known conclusively that, at this time, our John Beard had a mother called ‘Ann’, - although whether she was his actual mother, or stepmother, is still questionable. So, on the evidence, we can discount this line of research.

The date and place of John Beard the singer's birth, together with the names of his parents, have always been a mystery. When he died in 1791, the newspaper and magazine obituaries only recorded that he had been “bred up in the King's Chapel”. His origins were obviously unknown, or of no interest, to them. This may come as a surprise to a modern audience, which has grown accustomed to the media's obsession with the minutiae of a celebrity's life. However, it was not unusual in those days, and there are many other examples of famous people whose origins still remain unknown.

If John Beard's birth was to be identified, then it seemed the only way forward was to follow the dictum of Sherlock Holmes: “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth”.

Nevertheless there are certain facts about Beard, and his family, that we can readily deduce: The Public Advertiser for Tuesday 8th February 1791² carried the first report of his death:

On Friday last [i.e. 4th Feb.], at four o'clock in the afternoon, died in the 75th year of his age, at his house in Hampton, where he has resided since his retirement from the stage, John Beard, Esq; formerly one of the proprietors and acting manager of Covent-Garden Theatre.

His age is confirmed by the monument in Hampton Parish Church (now hidden by the organ) which states that he died on 4th February 1791 aged 74 years. From this we can deduce that his birth must have been thought to have occurred c.1716.

This is the only source to give any indication of the date of his birth. No other reference, during his life, has yet been found that mentions either his age, or when and where he was born. Now, at this time, there is precisely one source which will record a child’s birth, and that is the parish baptismal records - if a child was not baptised, then simply no record of the birth will exist. However, as Beard joined the choir of the Chapel Royal as a boy, it is reasonable to assume that his parents were church-goers and would have had their son baptised. Unfortunately there were

¹ National Archives: PROB10/1958 (transcript in PROB11/728)
² British Library: Burney Collection of Early Newspapers
several children with this name who were baptised in the years around 1716, so this is insufficient evidence to identify him, and it is necessary to search further:

*The Morning Chronicle & London Advertiser* for Thursday 14th March 1782 contained the following announcement: “Died - Mar. 9, aged 89, Mrs Beard, mother of John Beard esq. of Hampton”.³

The Hampton Parish records⁴ show that this was Mrs Ann Beard, who was buried in the church vault on March 15th. This lady was certainly of an age to have been Beard’s mother - she would have been about 24 in 1716. However, it is wise to be cautious, and knowing the mortality rate among child-bearing women, at this stage she could just as easily have been his step-mother.

Beard’s Will⁵ is the next source of information about his family, although it raises more questions than it answers. He had no children of his own and, after making provision for his wife, made bequests to a number of relations. It is tempting to think that these must have been his *only* surviving relatives, as there is no evidence to suggest he was alienated from any part of his family. He left bequests to the following:

- Nephew William Beard of Kenton, Devon; John & Charlotte Beard, children of William
- Niece Thomasin Jordan, wife of John Jordan of Penryn, Cornwall
- Children of late niece: Elizabeth Withycomb
- Niece Harriett Crawford, wife of William Crawford, late of High Holborn, cabinet maker
- Sister Catherine Beard

The nephew and nieces in the West Country were the children of William and Thomasin Beard of Kenton, Devon. (Kenton lies to the south of Exeter, close by the estuary of the River Exe, and next to Powderham Castle, seat of the Earls of Devon.) This William Beard, who died before 1791, was therefore John Beard's brother.

One’s first reaction is that John Beard’s origins must also lie in South Devon, although, up to now, it has been assumed that he was probably born in London. There were certainly many Beard families in this area, particularly in the next parish of Dawlish. However, extensive research has failed to link them to either of the two brothers. William seems to have arrived in Kenton out of the blue, and then married the widow, Thomasin Bickford, by Licence, on 3rd August 1733 at St Thomas by Exeter.⁶ Marriage Licences were not uncommon in those days, and usually only meant that one of the parties was not being married in the parish of their birth - which could confirm that William was not a local man. The Licence describes him as a ‘husbandman’, and by 1740 he was a ‘yeoman’. The records show that he worked on the land for the Earl of Devon and several of the local Estates. This presupposes that he had some previous experience of such work, which is unlikely if he was born in London. It is also difficult to think of a reason why a man should move from London to a distant rural area: the general trend was in the opposite direction - away from the land and into the cities.

William Beard was buried at Kenton on the 7th August 1772, aged 60 - the inscription on his gravestone is still legible. This means that he must have been born c.1712. His Will was proved at the Court of the Archdeaconry of Exeter in 1775 but its contents remain unknown as, unfortunately, all Devon Wills were destroyed by bombing in World War 2. His son, also called William, and later generations, continued to farm in the West Country.

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³ British Library: Burney Collection of Early Newspapers (also in the Gentleman’s Magazine)
⁴ Parish records at London Metropolitan Archives
⁵ National Archives: PROB 11/1202/p.208
⁶ All Kenton Records at Devon Record Office, Exeter
Another beneficiary of John Beard’s Will was his niece Harriett Crawford; and this leads us to another enigma: Harriot (sic) Beard married William Crawford on the 16th May 1765, by Licence, at St George’s, Hanover Square. The Licence implies that she had not lived all her life in the parish, but she was baptised there on the 25th May 1743, the daughter of Major and Ann Beard. The parish Rate Books show that Major Beard lived in Lancaster Court from December 1741 to December 1743.

What are we to make of the name ‘Major’? Army records show that there was nobody called Beard with this rank in 1743. A James Beard was promoted to Major in 1745 after the Battle of Fontenoy, but no evidence can be found to link him to John Beard. The name cannot be found, either, in the records of other organisations which used military ranks, such as local militia or the East India Company. So, all we can tell from this source is that John Beard certainly had another brother, but his name remains a mystery. One possibility is that this was an older brother, also called John, who used the sobriquet Major to differentiate himself.

And, lastly, we come to Beard’s sister, Catherine, who he describes in his Will as an ‘innocent’. Early dictionaries define one use of this word as ‘idiot’: meaning that she must have been mentally retarded in some way; and Beard left her an annuity. It seems likely that she was in the charge of a certain Mrs Mary Morice of Long Acre, who also received an annuity in the Will.

This is all the genealogical information we can glean from Beard’s Will, but there is other information to be found in other sources.

Beard and Lady Henrietta Herbert were married in January 1739, and then lived in the Holborn area. We know this from advertisements in the papers for Beard’s Benefit performances at Drury Lane. In both April 1739 and April 1740, the advertisements gave his address (for the purchase of tickets) as New North Street, Red Lion Square, which lay in the parish of St. George the Martyr, Queen Square, Bloomsbury. Now, the parish records show that a Catherine Beard was baptised in this church on the 27th July 1740 - the daughter of John and Anne Beard of North Street. This would immediately seem to be the sister we are looking for: the address appears to be the same, yet it is clearly not a child of Beard and Henrietta.

Moreover, the mother’s name was Anne, as expected, and it would not be unreasonable to find Beard and his parents living at the same address. So this must be his ‘innocent’ sister. However, if this is the same Mrs Ann Beard who died in 1782, aged 89, she would have given birth at the age of approximately 47. This is not strictly impossible, and may have been a contributory factor in Catherine’s mental disability. This information also gives us now a possible name for Beard’s father – ‘John’, like his son.

But it is not quite as simple as that. The 1740 baptismal record gives the address, simply, as North Street - but there were two sections to this street: New and Old North St. (They straddle Theobald’s Road). This may seem a pedantic point to make, until we examine the parish records more closely. These show that a couple called John & Ann Beard had other children who were baptised in the Church in 1737 and 1738. One of these was John King Beard, who was baptised on the 14th April 1737: parents John & Anne Beard of Old North St. The use of the second Christian name ‘King’ identifies his parents. They must have been John Beard and Ann King,

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7 Vicar-General Marriage Licence (at Genealogical Society)
8 Parish records at Westminster Archives
9 National Archives – Army records: WO64/9; London Gazette, June 1745 etc.
10 Parish records at London Metropolitan Archives –
who were granted a Marriage Licence on 16th April 1736. The Licence application shows that this second John Beard was a bachelor of St Katherine Cree, aged 27 and a druggist. He must, therefore, have been born c.1708/9. That being so, he is obviously not the father of our John Beard! But were this couple also the parents of Catherine who was born in 1740? There is no way of knowing from the entries in the parish register.

By some fortuitous chance, we can also check exactly who was living in these streets at this time because the 1739 Scavengers' Rate Books for the parish still exist, (there are no others between 1732 and 1750) These Rate Books show the occupier of each house, and were obviously prepared in advance, in ink: any necessary changes were then added in pencil. The books clearly show a John Beard in both parts of the street: Book 4 has the name of Jno Beard added, in pencil, to a previously empty house in New North Street, implying that he had only recently arrived there. Book 3, however, already has an entry in ink for John Beard in Old North Street, showing that this person had lived there during the previous year. Originally, and at a first glance, this merely looked as though Beard had moved house, but the baptismal evidence proves otherwise.

However, if we assume that Catherine is indeed John Beard’s sister, then we have the extraordinary situation where three different people called John Beard are living in the same short street at about the same time - father, son and the druggist - two of whom have wives called Ann! This coincidence would seem to be ridiculous - unless they were all related. So was this the true situation? Was John, the druggist, an older brother who later decided to call himself 'Major'? At the moment, this question cannot be answered.

We can also deduce, from a different source, that Beard’s father must have died before June 1742. On the 31st May in that year, Beard’s wife Henrietta sold part of her ‘joynture’. The indenture that was drawn up allowed Beard to draw £25 p.a. from the remaining money to set up a trust fund for his mother Ann. This implies that she no longer had a husband to support her.

Another source which threw up some unexpected information was the Folger Library in the U.S.A. This Library contains an undated manuscript entitled “An Epitaph on the Death of Miss Anna Beard” written by Beard’s friend and colleague William Havard. The epitaph refers to the “Virgin Innocence . . . . centr'd in this Maid”, and concludes:

“Thy griefs with a fond, weeping Brother join,
Lament her Death, and be prepared for thine”.

A literal reading of this suggests that Beard had another, previously unknown, sister who died young.

So we have now established, at the very least, that he had two brothers: William and ‘Major’; possibly two sisters: Catherine and Anna; a mother (or stepmother) called Ann, and possibly a father called John. Is this enough to identify the family?

The International Genealogical Index contains a large archive of transcriptions of parish records. But it is by no means complete, and there are many parishes in London which are not included.

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11 Bishop of London Marriage Licences, Guildhall Library
12 Camden Archives, Holborn Library, Theobald’s Road
15 Although I make a suggestion later in this book that Ann could have been a child from his first marriage, no Burial records have yet been traced. A further suggestion is that it could refer to Beard’s niece Ann, who died aged 31 in 1772. But, as this is after Beard and Havard’s estrangement, the composition of such a poem is unlikely.
One such is St John of Wapping. Here you can find a William Beard who was baptised on 24th April 1712. His parents were John Beard, tailor, and Ann, of Nightingale Lane. The year of this birth fits the known details of Beard's brother who lived in Devon, and the parents’ names are correct. It may also be relevant that Wapping is in the East End of London where the docks are situated. It would not be difficult to make one’s way to Devon, by sea, from there.

The name ‘John Beard, tailor’ occurs again in the records of St. Dunstan, Stepney. On the 8th July 1722, the daughter of John Beard, tailor, and Jane was baptised there - and named Anne. Although the mother’s name is different, I believe it is perfectly possible that this is the same John Beard. I have not discovered any evidence that there were two different tailors with this name in the area. I also believe that it is unrealistic to think that John had only one wife during his life, especially when we consider that we are looking at children born over a 28 year span from 1712 to 1740. This, then, could be the 'Anna' for whom the epitaph was written.

We then find that John & Jane Beard (no occupation or address given) had a son who was baptised at St. Botolph Bishopsgate on 6th October 1715: and his name was John. Perhaps significantly, this is the only baptism from this period that I have not been able to eliminate from my inquiries.

These three parishes all occur in a tightly-knit area of London’s East End. Now it is not possible, from the paucity of detail in the parish records, to state conclusively that these children all belong to the same family. But, on the basis of the evidence, I believe - at the moment - that this John could well be the person we are seeking. It would make him a year older than expected, but such a discrepancy is not unusual; it would also make his first appearance as a tenor in 1734 slightly more plausible.

Finally, in a letter of December 1st 1785 John Beard writes to Dr Samuel Arnold to thank him for the Dinner which he attended in October. It includes the following remarks:

“...that I have been fortunate beyond my deserts or expectation I own; but be assur’d I should heartily despise myself (and so would you) could I ever be guilty of affecting the least superiority over the humblest of my school-mates, excepting only the painfull pre-eminence of age; and to that alone I ascribe the extreme kindness of my brethren on the happy 21st of October; kindness that has kept my heart warm ever since, and will, as long as my (somewhat impaired) memory lasts.”

Contemporary newspaper reports state that the dinner ostensibly celebrated the 100th anniversary of the birth of Bernard Gates, who had been in charge of the Chapel Royal Choristers when Beard joined the choir. But Beard was obviously the guest of honour at this event, and it is likely that it was also a joint celebration of his own 70th birthday; thus confirming his birth in October 1715. It now looks very likely indeed that he can be identified with the John Beard who was baptised at St. Botolph Bishopsgate on 6th October 1715.

His age on his memorial tablet, therefore, which states that he died on “4th February 1791 aged 74 years”, would then be wrong, implying that his second wife Charlotte was not aware of his correct age. One source that appears to confirm that Beard was, indeed, 75 when he died can be found in a “Collection of Epitaphs” published in London in 1806 which includes the epitaph

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16 Parish records at London Metropolitan Archives
17 Parish records at Guildhall Library
18 Harvard Theatre Library, USA
19 'A collection of Epitaphs and Monumental Inscriptions...', London, 1806, British Library Ref. 1568/8945
on the death of John Beard: "Satire, be dumb!"\textsuperscript{20} The year of his death was given correctly, if not the day itself, as the entry ends: “Ob. February 5, 1791, Aetatis suae, 75”.

The tomb of Beard’s first wife, Lady Henrietta, in Old St. Pancras churchyard, has long since disappeared. However, it was sketched many times in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. One such sketch records the two coats-of-arms that were carved on one end – one was Lady Henrietta’s, and the other was obviously that of Beard. It shows a “differenced” version of the Arms granted to the Beard family of Cowfold, Sussex, in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century: the saltire in the top left-hand quarter has been replaced with a cross of St. George.

In the 1930s, descendants of Beard’s brother William still had possession of Beard’s signet ring. This carried the same design, and had come to them as a bequest in Beard’s Will. Unfortunately, its present whereabouts is unknown, but copies of the design were made at this time. The College of Arms has no record of authority being granted for the use of this design, and one must conclude that Beard merely used an appropriate existing design – much as people do to this day.

\textsuperscript{20} This will be found in Appendix 8