

THE BOOK  
OF THE  
OLD EDINBURGH  
CLUB

---

The Journal for  
Edinburgh History



Roger Marjoribanks, 'Sir John Marjoribanks, Bart, MP (1763–1833)', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New Series 10 (2014), pp. 151–156

~~~~~

This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, The Journal for Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

Content © The Old Edinburgh Club and contributors. All rights reserved.

For information about The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC), including contents of previous issues and indexes, see <https://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/boec>.

**This article is made available for your personal research and private study only.**

For any further uses of BOEC material, please contact the Editor, The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, at [editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk](mailto:editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk). The Club has a Take-Down Policy covering potential rights infringements. Please see <http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-take-down-policy>.



Digitised by the Centre for Research  
Collections, Edinburgh University  
Library from the copy in the Library  
Collection



## *Edinburgh Portrait*

SIR JOHN MARJORIBANKS, BART, MP (1763–1833)

ROGER MARJORIBANKS

MANY LORD PROVOSTS slip in and out of office leaving barely a ripple on the surface. This was certainly not true of Sir John Marjoribanks (pronounced ‘Marchbanks’), whose enterprise during his provostship in 1813–15 left Edinburgh permanently changed.

His father, Edward, a fairly junior member of what had at his birth been a large extended family, owned the estate of Hallyards near Edinburgh, but spent much of his time in London and Bordeaux, where John, his eldest son, was born in 1763. Like many of his ancestors, Edward was a wine merchant and, it was sometimes suspected, a covert Jacobite. Certainly his cousin, another Edward, had been an agent in Cadiz for James III (the Old Pretender); while his own wife Grizel was the daughter of Archibald Stewart, Lord Provost of Edinburgh at the time of the ’45 and strongly suspected of having willingly assisted Prince Charles. Be that as it may, no taint of Jacobitism remained when Edward succeeded, by a quirk of the entail, to the estate of the Lees at Coldstream, Berwickshire, in 1762, and in 1769 he returned permanently to Scotland.<sup>1</sup> He is described in later life as being a stately old gentleman of fine bearing but subject to fits of rage amounting to insanity.

Very little is known of John’s education and early life. The first evidence we have is a letter from his mother to Sir Robert Murray Keith, asking for his help in preparing John, then aged 15, for a military career: ‘I am told he is a good classical scholar, but being deficient in other branches of education which are indispensable both for the soldier and the gentleman...it will be an advantage for him to spend a twelvemonth abroad to acquire...the French and German languages’.<sup>2</sup> Keith, British envoy at Vienna and a family friend, obtained a place for the boy with General Douglas at Bois-le-Duc, who gave

him a sound pre-military grounding. On his return further family influence obtained him a commission and he eventually rose to the rank of captain in the Coldstream Guards without having to do any serious soldiering.

When not with his regiment he appears to have lived with his parents at the Lees for most of the 1780s and it was towards the end of this period of youth and relative irresponsibility, that he fathered a son by a local girl. He acknowledged the boy and set him up in a small way of business in Coldstream as a cordwainer (shoemaker), for he was never mean or lacking in a sense of social responsibility. The descendants of this family are still settled in the area today. However, in 1787 an association began which would change his own and his brothers’ lives for ever; he became friendly with Thomas Coutts (1735–1822), a rising banker, a friend and relative by marriage of his father’s, and through him in the fullness of time with John Stuart, Baron Cardiff, and later 4th Earl and 1st Marquess of Bute, an influential nobleman. Coutts, a man of their father’s generation rather than their own, acted as a kindly but firm uncle to John and his four brothers and set their feet confidently on the way to respectable prosperity.

In 1791, in a shrewd career move, John married Alison, daughter of William Ramsay, a wealthy banker in Edinburgh. He brought her home to his fine new house in Eccles, Berwickshire, fathering four sons and five daughters. He gave up army life and his third son Charles records of the next decade: ‘Among this hard-drinking set, most of them greatly his inferiors, were several of the best years of my father’s life thrown away’.<sup>3</sup> It is true that the local gentry were hardly models of propriety, but when one considers that Charles was only born in 1794 and was removed to Edinburgh for his education while still a small boy it must be questioned how much he actually knew of

his father's affairs. In fact he appears to have disliked him, and there are more complimentary marginalia inserted in Charles's Memoir of his father by his younger brother David. A lesson, perhaps, against trusting too far the validity of primary sources!

Eventually they had four sons. Edward, the eldest, was sent out to India as a clerk in the East India Company, but died young, as so many young men did in India, aged 40. William went into Coutts's service as a ship's officer, but also died early, aged 42. Charles so distinguished himself with the East India Company in Macao as to become a Freeman of Edinburgh at the age of 30, and a Liberal MP, but died, broken in health, at 39. Unlike the other three, David lived to a great age, was a highly successful stockbroker, married for money, became an MP and finally became the first and only Lord Marjoribanks.

No doubt there were indeed some dissipated nights at Eccles House, but in fact John was doing quite well, although he was not as yet particularly wealthy. Shortly after his marriage his father-in-law, who had long been an associate of Thomas Coutts, had extended an invitation to become a partner in the bank of Mansfield, Ramsay, which at least secured his future. Here Charles snipes again, saying that his father had not the talents required of a banker, being inclined to an enthusiastic dash at a project rather than the steady unemotional application required in the banking business. In this case Charles was perhaps on firmer ground, for John in practice was never a very diligent banker; most of the family's traditional stock of banking talent seems to have been absorbed by his younger brother Edward, senior partner in Coutts & Co. for many years.

His father-in-law was not on the warmest terms with him – it was not in his nature – but induced him, around the turn of the century, to return to live in Edinburgh, where, after lodging for a time with Ramsay at Barnton, he bought No. 29 Charlotte Square, a fine new square at the end of George Street. Probably the need to educate his sons also influenced the move. It appears, too, that it was at this time he became a Mason, probably at Ramsay's instigation; this was to prove an important step for the future, for it brought him into contact with the most eminent men in Scotland.

By this time he was a mature man of 40, with looks and bearing rather typical of the family – stocky and square-faced. He was said to resemble the Prince

of Wales, later George IV, to whom he would in the future (1816–18) act as Assistant Grand Master of the Scottish Masons. He was, we are told, extremely intelligent although not very highly educated, but impulsive rather than methodical.<sup>4</sup> Like his father, though much less extravagantly, he was liable to fits of rage; but they quickly subsided and he never struck his sons in anger. He made enemies as a result of his methods, whether in business or politics (Charles says he was fond of proceeding by 'coup de main') but was a loyal and faithful friend – in all, a complex but in many ways admirable man. Much of his character can be gleaned from a bundle of his letters to Thomas Coutts in the archives of Coutts & Co. and another, written to the Marquess of Bute, in the collection at Mount Stuart; they show him to be a perfectly capable man of business and warmly interested both in his family – but it is noticeable that he never mentions Charles – and his own developing political career. There is, perhaps, another clue in his handwriting – sprawling, eager and hasty in style, rather confirming Charles's estimate of his general approach.<sup>5</sup>

In February 1807 he threatened to leave the bank, apparently owing to a quarrel with James Mansfield. However Mansfield retired (more likely, was forced out) shortly afterwards and his father-in-law died in May. The new partnership included Marjoribanks – indeed he, with one other, held the largest share – but it appears that he retired in 1813, no doubt because of his increasing political responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

In 1800 Thomas Coutts's youngest daughter Fanny had married the Marquess of Bute and shortly afterwards Coutts recommended John to the Marquess as suitable to manage his business affairs (for Bute had no capacity for financial matters himself). This of course involved plenty of journeying between Edinburgh and Mount Stuart, but it seems that in spite of the slow pace of travel our ancestors were more willing to face the delays and dangers of the road than we sometimes realise.<sup>7</sup> Bute was involved in politics at the highest level and John obviously impressed him in this capacity too, for in 1807 he was recommended to Lord Grenville as 'a very fit man' to consult about a Bill concerning the Bank of Scotland.<sup>8</sup> By 1808 he had bought himself a vote in Buteshire, in 1811 he joined Edinburgh Town Council and in 1812 the Marquess, failing of a suitable member of his own family, ensured John's election as Member of Parliament for Buteshire. He did this with some

reluctance for, as he explained to Grenville, he was by no means sure that John would always stick to the party line. However, Bute died in 1814, freeing John of whatever obligation he may have felt: in fact more often than not he voted thereafter with Lord Liverpool's Tory administration.

By 1812 John was therefore a distinctly eminent man, except that as a member of the mercantile rather than aristocratic class he would still, in that class-conscious age, defer to such noblemen as Lord Bute. The distinction in class meant little to the councillors of Edinburgh, who were of (or perhaps more often aspired to) John's own social level and in 1813 proposed to him that he should become Lord Provost. Perhaps owing to the sense of deference mentioned above, before accepting he wrote both to Bute and Thomas Coutts to ask for their approval. This was granted and he duly took and held for two years the chief magistracy of Scotland's capital (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup>

He did not occupy it idly or merely for its prestige (let alone his allowance of £800) but revived a project which had originally been proposed some 30 years before, that of building a new jail to the east of the city, where there was more room for large-scale development: the Old Town was cramped and unhealthy, the New Town far too respectable for this particular project, while the newly completed Princes Street pointed like an arrow towards the lower slopes of Calton Hill where John intended the new jail to go. There was just one major problem: there was little room between the lower Canongate in the Old Town and the Hill for the new building and access would have to be by a bridge built over a rather narrow and deep valley. However, if this new road could be completed it would not only provide access to the jail but make possible the development of the lower slopes of Calton Hill and the broad acres beyond and also very considerably shorten the main road east, to East Lothian and eventually England via Berwick-upon-Tweed.

This was a challenge which John's impulsive energy and forceful personality were well adapted to driving through – qualities which were officially recognised by the Council at the end of his first year of office in a vote of thanks praising his 'zeal and ability in promotion of objects of public utility'.<sup>10</sup> The same qualities were mentioned when, on his leaving office in 1815, the Council ordered a fine portrait to be painted. It is said that, in order to keep costs to



Fig. 1. Lord Provost Sir John Marjoribanks, holding the 'Plan of the Regent Bridge and New Jail', from *Kay's Original Portraits*. (Courtesy Andrew Fraser.)

the city and other institutions within reasonable limits he invested a substantial part of his personal fortune in the building project – an investment which did not in the event bring reward. Even so, the financial arrangements were complex and were not finally in place until early in 1815 – his second year as Lord Provost.<sup>11</sup> The rather confused Council minute appears to show a total capital cost of some £20,000. Finally the foundation stone of the Regent Bridge over the valley was laid in his presence shortly before he left office later in that year and the great project was at last under way (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> He was present when the new road was opened in 1819. The bridge still stands, with an inscription recording the rank of Baronet (1st of Lees, in the County of Berwick) which had been created for him in 1815.

It had been an intensely busy two years, for not only had he been involved in a very wide range of activities in Edinburgh but he had had his

responsibilities as a Member of Parliament to attend to, and his voting record shows that he did not neglect them – although an MP’s job then was much less onerous than today. He happened to be in London in June 1815 when the news of the victory of Waterloo arrived and it was he who commissioned a fast coach to take the news to Edinburgh. Nor was this his only care in that year, for it was the year of his father’s death.

Lees (together with other Scottish properties) was valued at £5045 and naturally passed to him under the terms of the entail; however his father must have had substantial investments for John was instructed to make sizeable provision, approximately £10,000, for Edward’s other children and his widow. He was in no haste to complete the formalities; his father’s will was not published until 1817.<sup>13</sup> When he did turn his full attention to his inheritance he rebuilt Lees as a fine modern Regency-style house; unfortunately, after the entail was broken in 1931 it became derelict and little of it now remains (fig. 3).

In 1818 there was another Parliamentary election

and, as this time it was not Buteshire’s turn to return a member, Sir John cast about for another seat. The natural one for him was Berwickshire (the division in which Lees was) but it had a sitting member who was not inclined to retire. However, by a series of manoeuvres which were thought by some to be somewhat underhand, John persuaded him to vacate the seat and took it for himself. It is noticeable that, although John on the whole supported the Tory government, when his son Charles took the seat in 1832 he did so as a Liberal, as his memorial column at Coldstream proudly states.

After about 1820 John is less heard of in public life, although he continued to perform his parliamentary and Masonic duties until 1826. He took part in the festivities surrounding King George IV’s visit to Edinburgh in 1822, organised by his friend Sir Walter Scott. He remained in Parliament until 1826, but no major activities or initiatives are recorded. Charles, ever waspish, suggests that his mind was giving way under the influence of dissipation in early life, and there may indeed have been some deterioration



Fig. 2. The Regent Bridge under construction, 1817, by Patrick Gibson, *Select Views in Edinburgh*, 1818. (Courtesy Andrew Fraser.)

during his final years, but it also appears that he was giving much time to his estate at Lees, whose value he certainly increased and where he was well liked and esteemed by his tenantry.

He died in February 1833 and his memorial is in the family mausoleum at Coldstream. He outlived his eldest son Edward by a few days, so the estate and the baronetcy passed to his second son William; he had won an excellent reputation in Coutts's service but, no doubt worn out by the hardships of life at sea, he too was dead within the year, as was Charles. William's two sons died childless, so the baronetcy became extinct. Meanwhile David lived until 1873, having changed his name to Robertson on marriage. He was created 1st Baron Marjoribanks of Ladykirk but died within a week of the title's creation, it is said knocked over by a horse-bus, and since he had outlived his only son that title too became extinct and John's male line died out.

It is curious that John Marjoribanks was the last of his family (known as Marjoribanks of Lees by contrast with the senior branch, Marjoribanks of that Ilk) to live and make his living in Edinburgh. By the time he died it was well over three hundred years since five brothers had settled in the capital and taken their places among its leading citizens.<sup>14</sup> Their descendants had been a prolific group of prominent citizens, but there were now far fewer of them. Of Sir John's brothers, three made considerable fortunes in England and one in India; neither they nor their descendants returned to Edinburgh to live or work apart from occasional visits. Of the senior branch, Sir James resided in Edinburgh for many years of the twentieth century, but his career was in the diplomatic service. His flat at the base of Calton Hill is still in his family; but most of the descendants of both families are scattered throughout Scotland, England and the world.



Fig. 3. The Lees, Coldstream, from an old postcard.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

Much of the information for this essay has been picked up in bits and pieces over some 20 years of research into family history and it has not been thought necessary to give specific references to such miscellaneous sources as Old Parochial Registers, memorials, testaments, passing mentions in other works, etc. Much has been gleaned from the National Records of Scotland (formerly National Archives of Scotland).

Among primary sources, the most interesting is the manuscript Memoir (now in the Signet Library, Edinburgh, MS 929.2 M33) written by Sir John's third son Charles and dated 7 April 1831, shortly before his final return from Macao, from which I have taken a number of illustrative details. However, close examination shows that the Memoir is not entirely reliable when it can be checked against other sources. Even within the work itself it is often contradicted by marginalia contributed by Charles's younger brother David. It does seem that Charles, although of quite outstanding ability, was to some extent motivated by dislike of his father.

More reliable as evidence of character are the two bundles of letters archived at Coutts Bank in the Strand and in the Bute Archives at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute; the latter are purely on business and show John's steady approach to his job, while the former are more personal and display more of his character. The other main primary source is the Edinburgh Town Council Minutes, which give a full account of the problems involved in constructing the road and bridge to Calton Hill. For an earlier account see R. J. Marjoribanks, 'Sir John Marjoribanks, Lord Provost of Edinburgh', *The Marjoribanks Journal*, no. 4 (August 1996): <http://marjorib.awardspace.co.uk/1Issue4.html>.

The main secondary sources are *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, edited by R. G. Thorne (London 2006), and the text accompanying the caricature of Sir John in vol. 2 of *Kay's Original Portraits* (Edinburgh 1838), reprised and a little expanded in M. Wood and T. B. Whitson, *The Lord Provosts of Edinburgh, 1296-1932* (Edinburgh 1932).

- 1 The process by which the inheritance came about is described by James Hardy in *History of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club*, 2 vols (Alnwick 1872-79), II, pp. 275-277, though there is some confusion over dates. The following traditional verse was recorded by Charles Marjoribanks :

While summers glow, while winters freeze  
Ye'll see a braw lad at the Lees;  
And Tweed's fair mirror as it passes  
Shall aye reflect its bonny lasses.

- 2 Thorne, *House of Commons*, p. 546.
- 3 Charles Marjoribanks, 'Memoir'.
- 4 *Idem*.
- 5 John Marjoribanks to Thomas Coutts, 29 August 1808, letter in archives of Coutts Bank, London.
- 6 Zella Ashford, 'From James Mansfield to Ramsays, Bonars & Company: Some Notes on the Story of a Private Bank', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, NS 6 (2005), p. 31.
- 7 He writes of 'a very pleasant excursion to Mount Stuart': John Marjoribanks to Thomas Coutts, 13 May 1811. In the same letter he mentions the Isle of Bute's suitability for 'the turnip husbandry'.
- 8 Grenville was Prime Minister at the time, but throughout John's period in Parliament leader of the Whig Opposition.
- 9 *A Series of Original Portraits...by the late John Kay*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1838), II, pp. 294-296.
- 10 Edinburgh City Archives, Town Council Minutes, 14 September 1814.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2 March 1815.
- 12 Marjoribanks was also responsible for restarting work on the half-built University building; Andrew G. Fraser, *The Building of Old College: Adam, Playfair and the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1989), pp. 138-140.
- 13 Probate of the will is archived at Coutts Bank, London.
- 14 Roger Marjoribanks, 'Marjoribanks in Edinburgh', *Scottish Genealogist*, December 2010, pp. 182-189.