

# REVEREND D'EWES COKE, HIS WIFE HANNAH, AND DANIEL PARKER COKE, MP, BY JOSEPH WRIGHT, C. 1780-82

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Reverend D'Ewes Coke (1747-1811) was Rector-Patron of Pinxton and South Normanton in Derbyshire, a landowner, artist, and naturalist.

He is the lead figure in Joseph Wright of Derby's acclaimed group portrait of the family; a painting he commissioned just a year or so after his inheritance of Brookhill Hall, in 1780. It is perhaps within the grounds of his new home that Wright portrayed him, with his wife Hannah, and distant cousin, the independent MP, Daniel Parker Coke (1745-1825), engaged in conversation over a drawing. D'Ewes is confirmed as the creator of the drawing by the presence of a mechanical pencil, or *porte-crayon*, in his hand, and by the portfolio on which his wife leans. The corner of one sheet reveals a tree study – perhaps a design for the landscaping of the new estate.

## Botany and Gardening

D'Ewes Coke's known pleasures included art, particularly etching, and botany. Like other rural clergymen, most famously Gilbert White, D'Ewes was a parson naturalist. Among the family archives are lists of trees and flowering plants intended for the garden borders and parkland of Brookhill, as well as detailed notes on their progress, and experiments in cultivation from seed.

In 1789, D'Ewes contributed 'a catalogue of some plants growing spontaneously in Derbyshire' to James Pilkington's scientific survey of the county, in which his passion for natural history found a wider value in his descriptions of the medicinal uses of various wild plants and their benefits, or toxicity, to farm animals.



*The Rev. D'Ewes Coke, his wife Hannah and Daniel Parker Coke, M.P., by Joseph Wright of Derby, c.1780-82.*

## Wright's Artistic Eloquence

It is perhaps no accident that D'Ewes and his family appear at one in their surroundings; the iridescent silk of Hannah's sumptuous silk gown, the green umbrella at her side, and the buff coloured coat of Daniel Parker Coke seem to reflect and blend with the autumnal hue of the woodland glade and landscape beyond.

In his colour palette and skilful arrangement of figures, gestures and gazes, Wright emphasises a sense of deep kinship and harmonious whole, and in doing so, reflects man's place within God's wider ordered system. For D'Ewes, the study of the natural world was akin to the study of its Creator – eloquently described in Wright's portrait by the inclusion of a church tower in the distance: a feature to which D'Ewes himself might appear to be pointing.

## Legacies

D'Ewes Coke's passion for landscape was to find a more commercial outlet in his sons.

D'Ewes Coke junior developed the family's mineral and mining interests, and John established the Pinxton Porcelain Manufactory with William Billingsley, a former painter for their rivals in Derby. Happily, Brookhill, along with the remains of the Reverend's beloved parkland and gardens, stands to this day. Wright's painting is in the collection of Derby Museums, and remains a lasting testament to the vision of an artist and owner whose lives and works were inextricably bound up with the landscape of their native county. ●

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## Further Reading

Stephen Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, (Tate, 1999).  
Benedict Nicholson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Light*, (Yale University Press, 1971).  
Brookhill Hall and its gardens:  
[www.parksandgardens.org/places-and-people/site/5075/summary](http://www.parksandgardens.org/places-and-people/site/5075/summary)  
Museum and Art Gallery, Derby:  
[www.derbymuseums.org](http://www.derbymuseums.org)