

W J J Bolding (1815-1899)

Pioneer North Norfolk Photographer

by Richard Jefferson

Synopsis: an introduction to the work of a pioneer photographer from Weybourne. As well as giving his family background, the author traces connections with members of the Norwich School of painters.

William Johnson Jennis Bolding was the great great grandson of William Jennis (died 1766), whose account book from the 1720s and 1730s of the *William & Thomas* of Blakeney survives.¹ Through marriage in the 18th century, the Bolding family inherited considerable Jennis property in Weybourne, so in 1847 at his father John Bolding's death (aged 67) WJJB, 32 years old, found himself the largest resident landowner and farmer in the village employing eleven labourers, owner of the maltings, the brewery (employing three men) and the watermill. His father had purchased public houses right across North Norfolk, to be supplied by the family brewery. WJJB's last business deal, in 1897, was to sell fourteen to the Norwich brewers Steward & Patteson. In 1846 with his brother-in-law William Monement, a cork merchant from King's Lynn, he became the joint owner of the schooner *Enterprise* of Blakeney, thereby continuing the ship owning tradition of the family.

Evidence on William Johnson Jennis Bolding's early life is sparse, but he showed considerable talent as an artist from a young age. In all probability he would have received

tuition from an artist or artists of the Norwich School, a number of whom acted as drawing masters to supplement their income. For the first forty years or more of the nineteenth century the accepted method of learning to draw was to copy the original work of a professional artist. A pencil drawing of Cley Church survives (Fig. 1), dated 1832 when he was sixteen. It is an almost exact copy of J B Ladbroke's drawing of the church (Ladbroke and his father Robert drew 677 Norfolk churches, all published as lithographs). The Cley Church lithograph is dated 1824. It is a not unreasonable assumption that J B Ladbroke was WJJB's drawing master in 1832. Three remarkable brown monochrome drawings from the following year were almost certainly executed under the direction of his drawing master. Later WJJB painted in oils, mainly scenes in and around Weybourne, but his favourite medium was watercolour: brown monochrome, grey wash and pencil. It is recorded that in 1849 and 1853 his pictures were exhibited at the Norfolk & Norwich Fine Arts Association annual exhibitions.

Before her marriage to William Monement in 1845, WJJB's sister Esther kept a journal in which she recorded that in May WJJB usually went away with his fishing gear and sketching things. At this distance in time it is difficult to reconcile how WJJB managed his business affairs, along with the cultur-

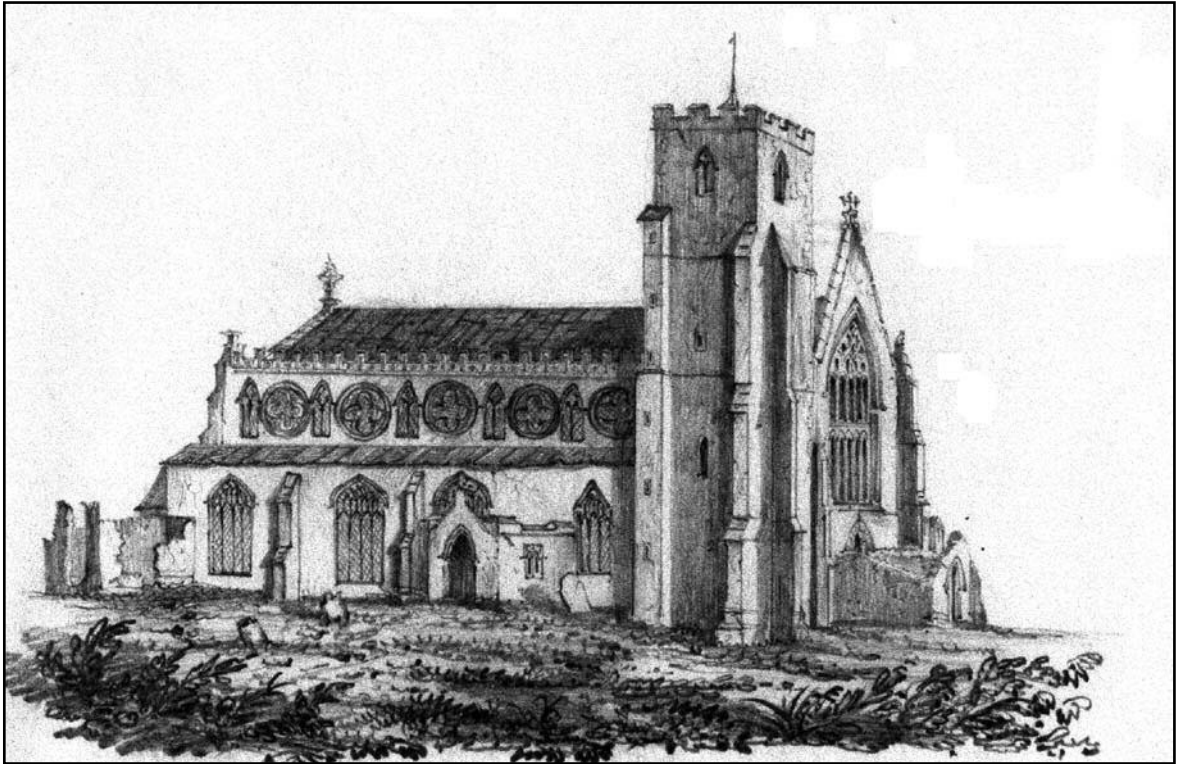


Figure 1. Pencil drawing of Cley Church, after J B Ladbrooke, executed in 1832 when Bolding was just 16 years old.

al, sporting, scientific and artistic activities he indulged in. For the best part of ten years after his father's death he was very active away from Weybourne, particularly during the summer months. In the 1851 census his mother, 'old' Esther, is described as "Land and House Proprietor". From her photograph (fig. 3) she looks a formidable person and it seems likely that she ran the businesses during her son's absences.

In 1848 he was away sketching in Wales, an extensive trip including Tintern, Harlech and Llangollen. In August 1849, with his friend Henry Harrod, the secretary of the newly formed Norfolk & Norwich Archaeological Society, and other members, he took part in a survey of Castle Rising castle, producing two drawings; one of these etched by Norwich School artist Henry Ninham appeared in Volume IV of *Norfolk Archaeology* (1855). In Volume V of *Norfolk*

Archaeology (1857) WJJB published, with sketch and diagram, his excavation of a Romano-British pottery kiln discovered on his Weybourne land. In 1850 he was in Switzerland sketching, and taking in Antwerp and Rouen either on the way out or the way back. Undated drawings survive of Land's End and Ben Nevis, showing that he really did travel the length and breadth of Britain.

As an artist he had a great ability to capture atmospheric effect in his landscapes, and his artistic eye certainly influenced his photographic work.

And so to William Johnson Jennis Bolding the photographer. It was certainly through his connection with the artistic, archaeological, scientific and cultural set in Norwich (sometimes colloquially referred to as the Norwich Brotherhood) that he was introduced to photography.

However it happened, he took to the newly invented art form like a duck to water. In Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton's book on Norwich School artist Henry Bright² WJJB is described as being one of the most important nineteenth century photographers. That is praise indeed.

It was in 1839 that Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre in France perfected his photographic process (the *Daguerreotype*), but the image produced could not be multiplied. Later in the same year in England William Henry Fox Talbot went public with his own process (the *Calotype*), where there was a negative and multiple copies could be produced. This process, however, gave a soft image and was liable to fade.

Photography came early to Norwich, and by 1843 there were professional photographic studios in the city. Two prominent local amateurs, Dr Hugh Diamond and Thomas Damant Eaton, were producing images in 1845 and must have been an important influence in the development of WJJB's photographic 'career'. The photograph of his sister Esther is a *Daguerreotype*, almost certainly by a professional photographer, and dates from the 1840s (Fig. 2). He probably experimented with the *Calotype* process, but his work really took off after the invention of the albumen print process by Louis Blanquart-Everard in 1850, and the wet collodion (negative) process by Frederick Scott Archer in 1851: this latter process used a glass negative instead of a paper one, and together these processes produced much sharper prints than the *calotype*. For the next thirty years and more these were the popular photographic processes.

The majority of WJJB's photographs are albumen prints from collodion negatives.

The first photographic processes were extremely complicated. Exposures were often measured in minutes, coating and processing the plates took time (and a portable darkroom) and involved numerous, often dangerous, chemicals such as potassium cyanide, potassium iodide, and gallic and nitric acids; collodion itself is gun-cotton dissolved in ether. Despite wearing protective clothing the photographers' skin would be stained and they would reek of the chemicals. The toner used to give the popular sepia effect was particularly noisome.

There were few amateur photographers in the early days as photography was an expensive exercise – fortunately, WJJB was extremely well off. As we have seen he was a talented artist with an original and enquiring mind; he must also have been a proficient chemist to be able to produce photographs of such a remarkable quality.

He converted a barn (Fig. 4) which lay behind his house, now the Maltings Hotel (Fig. 5), into a studio for his portrait photography. Sitters had to remain 'frozen' for a considerable length of time – with collodion negatives exposure time was typically between 5 and 30 seconds. Many Victorian portraits seem stiff due to this contrived positioning, yet WJJB managed to portray his sitters resting at ease in a natural pose (Fig. 6). He took several photographs of his estate workers holding a tool of their trade, some headgear or their hands in their lap. There is also the wonderful portrait from about 1855 of his mother 'old' Esther (née Johnson, from Cley) aged about

sixty-five (Fig. 3) already alluded to.

The sparseness of evidence on WJJB's links with the Norwich 'set' leave many questions unanswered, none more so than his friendship with the brilliant Norwich School artist John Middleton (1827-1856), whose life was tragically cut short by consumption. The two men were frequent companions on sketching trips, with Middleton often staying at Weybourne. A number of the artist's oils, watercolours and etchings were executed in North Norfolk. A treasured item is a Middleton scraperboard; on the back in pencil are the words "drawn expressly for Miss Bolding by J Middleton". Many of WJJB's photographs are of fallen trees and woodland scenes – typical Middleton material; though there is no evidence to support the idea, one could easily imagine Middleton returning to Norwich with copies of these photographs to help him with the composition of his paintings. Middleton, too, was a photographer; landscape images of his from a trip to North Wales are in the Norwich Castle art collection.

The Norwich Photographic Club was formed in 1854 and their first exhibition was held at the Exhibition Rooms in Broad Street, St Andrews, in November 1856 when fifty photographers showed five hundred prints. WJJB had been enrolled as a member of the society by John Middleton and he exhibited some portraits of his estate workers and village people, as well as some landscapes.

WJJB never married. His sister Hannah kept house for him until her death in 1892 (Fig. 7). His sister Esther, her husband William and growing family (Fig. 8) – there were eventually eleven children – often came to Weybourne from

King's Lynn, staying at The Cottage. His sisters, nephews and nieces were frequent sitters for his camera over many years. His niece Rose became a proficient photographer, coached by her uncle, and a number of her prints survive.

The Norfolk Chronicle & Norwich Gazette for 28 October 1899, under Weybourne news, recorded: "The death occurred on Saturday in his eighty-fourth year, of Mr William Johnson Jennis Bolding, a well-known inhabitant of the parish. The deceased, who had been in failing health for some years, will be much missed, especially by his poorer neighbours, amongst whom his kindly nature and unostentatious charity had won him universal respect and esteem. He added to considerable scientific attainments artistic powers of no mean degree, and besides having travelled a great deal in his early life, he was widely read in the literature of the day, especially as concerned archaeological subjects".

After WJJB's death his photographic output lay hidden in albums and loose in boxes and folders – literally hundreds of prints. It was in the early 1970s that these came to light: he was 'rediscovered' in 1975 when a small number of portraits were exhibited in 'The Real Thing – an Anthology of British Photographs 1840-1950', a travelling exhibition sponsored by the Arts Council.³ The catalogue stated that "Bolding's photographs of his estate workers and the village people of Weybourne are amongst the most powerful portraits in the history of photography".

Since then nothing has been heard of WJJB the photographer, but currently his reputation is in the process of being revived. An



Figure 2. Sister Esther – a Daguerreotype from the 1840s probably the work of a professional photographer

expert on early photography has recently described his portraits as being “seventy years ahead of their time”. Some of his photographs will be on view later this year in an exhibition in Norwich on early Norfolk photographers – see the next paragraph for details. Maybe his reputation as a photographer will now be permanent.

The exhibition at the Castle Museum, which runs for five months from 29th September 2003 to the 29th February 2004, is entitled “A Period Eye” and will feature the work of a number of early Norfolk photographers; there will be at least three works by WJJB included.

These images will be complemented by, and contrasted with, a number of new artworks (not all photographs) inspired by these pioneer photographers.



Figure 3. ‘Old’ Esther – WJJB’s mother c1855

Further Reading

If your curiosity has been piqued by this article you may like to read further.

For an historical overview *Photography, A Concise History* Ian Jeffrey (London: Thames & Hudson 1981) is a reasonable alternative to the Gernsheims’ magisterial two volume *The History of Photography* (London/New York: McGraw Hill, 1970).

For the impact of photography on 19th century art and artists read *Art and Photography* by Aaron Scharf (London: Penguin 1983).

Finally, *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes (London: Fontana 1984) and *On Photography* Susan Sontag (London: Penguin 1979) give a good insight into the ‘why?’ of photography.

References

1. *The William & Thomas: Trading accounts 1726-1733*. The Glaven Historian No.5
2. M. Allthorpe-Guyton, 1986 *Henry Bright 1810-1873. Paintings and drawings in Norwich Castle Museum*. Norfolk Museums Service.
3. Anon, 1975 *The Real Thing. An Anthology of British Photographs 1840-1950*. The Arts Council.



Figure 4. Farmyard scene c1855 including the barn at Weybourne that WJJB converted into his studio



Figure 5. Monochrome drawing by WJJB of his house at Weybourne in the 1830s.

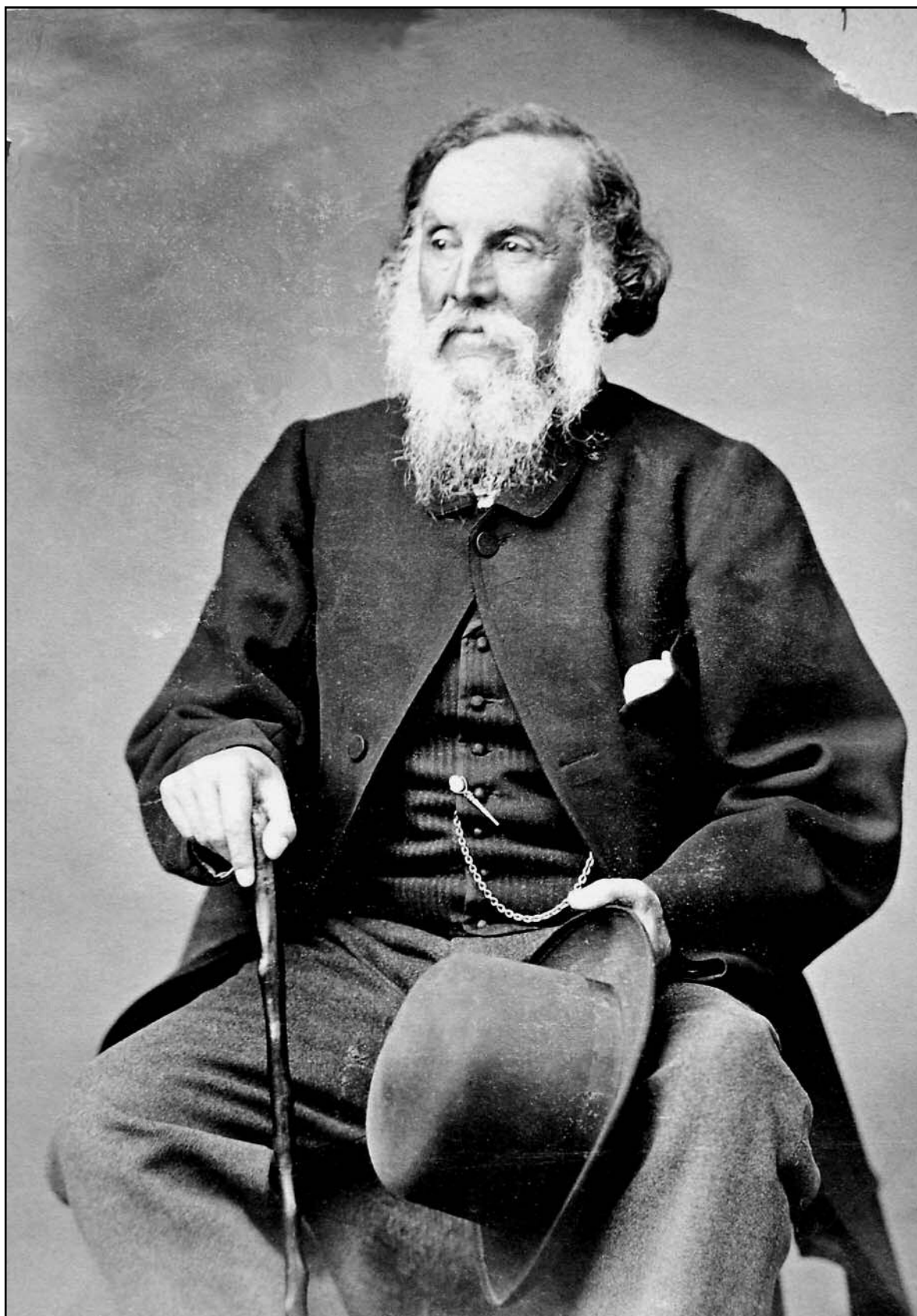


Figure 6. Portrait of an unknown villager c1854

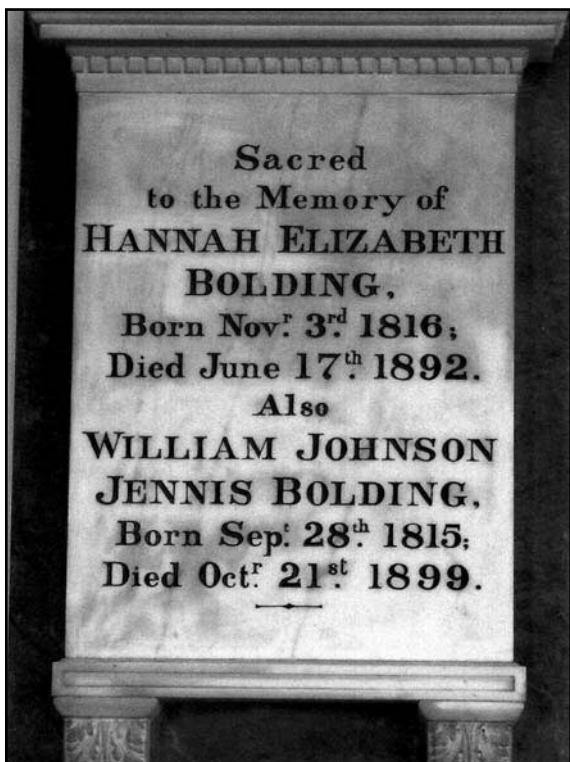


Figure 7. Memorial tablet to Hannah and WJJB in Weybourne church (photo: J Peake).



Figure 8. Esther and William Monement and four of their children. Portrait by WJJB c1855.



Figure 9. WJJB and his sister Hannah photographed by their niece Rose on the steps of The House (now the Maltings Holtel) c1890.

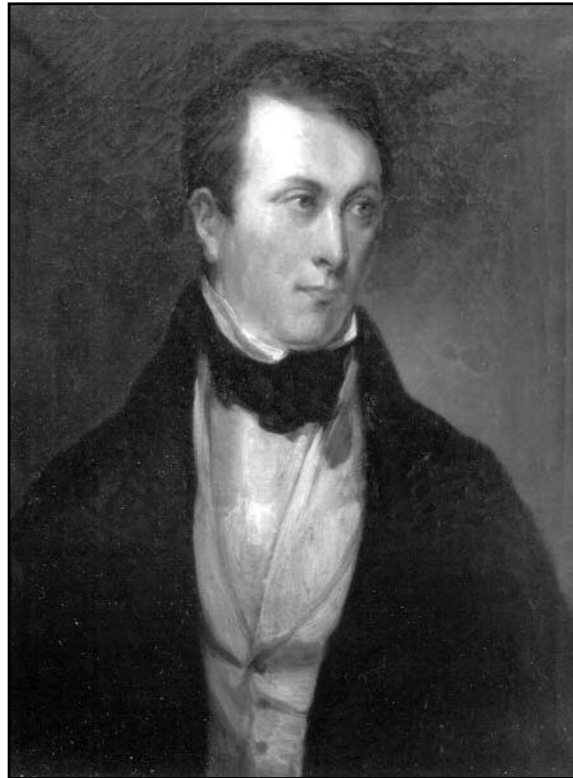


Figure 10. Portrait in oils of WJJB c1850.



Figure 11. Portrait by WJJB presumed to be of an office clerk c1860.



Figure 12. Portrait of his nephew Frank (born 1858) c1862. Frank later built 'The Green' at Cley.



Figure 13. Nieces of WJJB in the garden at Weybourne. 1860s



Figure 14. Postmill, watermill, and cottages on the beach from the farmyard behind The House. c1854.



Figure 15. The Street, Weybourne, looking east c1854.



Figure 16. Preparing to mow the barley c1860.