

**The Thoroughbred and the Swan:  
Aristocracy and progress towards wives' equality with their husbands in the mid-  
nineteenth century.**

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*The thoroughbred horse 'West Australian' and Cox's silver automaton swan were brilliant icons of the nineteenth century, the former bred and raced by an English nobleman and the latter purchased by his French actress wife as part of her endowment for the museum that she had begun to build close to their home and her husband's stud in County Durham in northern England. Their relations as a married couple illustrate a tipping point in laws and social attitudes governing marriage and in progress towards the equality of the sexes. This article considers their lives in the context of contemporary English and French society.*

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‘**W**est Australian' was a living artefact and Cox's silver swan was a mechanical creation, both reflecting the highest levels of human ingenuity. They were *bibelots* only available to the richest owners and presented for the appreciation of the widest public, 'West Australian' to the racing public in the 1850s and the swan ever since that period as the emblem of the Bowes Museum. John Bowes, owner of the horse, and his wife Josephine, purchaser of the swan, deliberately made their relationship one of equals in a manner highly unusual at a time when John Stuart Mill could write in 1859 that:

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances

to human improvement; and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.<sup>1</sup>

On reaching his majority in 1832, John Bowes came into possession of vast estates in the North of England assembled over many generations by his ancestors and which, thanks to the business acumen of his great-grandfather, George Bowes, would provide him with a very large income from underlying coal deposits in good years, but constraining when the coal market turned down. John proved to be a competent steward of his wealth until his death in 1885 and discharged honourably the traditional duties of a great landowner. Thus, he followed his great- and great-great grandfathers as a Member of Parliament, sitting for South Durham for three parliaments as a conscientious representative of his region, although he was never an orator in the House.

One legacy flowing from George Bowes was the stud of thoroughbred horses that he founded at his home at Streatlam Castle and which was developed by John's father, the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Strathmore, so that it was in good order when John took over in 1832. For the next half a century John Bowes built his reputation of being perhaps the most successful breeder of all time, doing so in collaboration with the famous trainer John Scott, known as the 'Wizard of the North', until the latter's death in 1871.<sup>2</sup> Success began with 'Mündig', when the horse became the first trained in the North of England to win the Derby Stakes. The summit of John's glory as breeder and owner came when his third and fourth Derby winners triumphed in successive years in 1852 and 1853. 'West Australian', the 1853 winner, also won the classic '2000 Guineas' and 'St. Leger' races, and thus became the first horse thus to achieve the 'Triple Crown', a feat only equalled by fourteen horses since then, and has been judged among the top ten racehorses of the nineteenth-century.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin Disraeli opened his novel *Sybil* by portraying the atmosphere in London's aristocratic clubs on the eve of Derby Day in this period: 'Lord Milford, a young noble, entered in his book the bet he has just made with Mr Latour, a grey headed member of the Jockey Club'.<sup>4</sup> The *Illustrated London News* picked up the anticipation at Epsom on the day itself among 'the vast concourse of persons, whose numbers were unparalleled even in the annals of Derby gatherings'. The same article builds to hyperbole:

Here are half a score of the finest horses in the world. [...] West Australian gathered up his fore-feet, and shot them out like lightning. Few things upon the turf have ever equalled that gallop of West Australian's from the

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<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'On the Subjection of Women' in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. by Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.409.

<sup>2</sup> *Streatlam Castle*, (Barnard Castle: The Bowes Museum, 2017), p.23.

<sup>3</sup> *Streatlam Castle*, (Barnard Castle: The Bowes Museum, 2017), app. 1, p.56.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil; or, The Two Nations*, ed. by Nicholas Shrimpton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, first pub. 1845), vol. 1, bk. 1, chaps. 1 & 2.

grand stand to the judge's chair. It was not running, but flying. [...] Few more exciting races have ever been run than the last hundred yards of the Derby of 1853.<sup>5</sup>

In due course, *The Times* would focus John's obituary on his racing success.<sup>6</sup> He had continued to breed his horses until his death, when the stud was disbursed on 29 October 1885, with all the horses being auctioned by Tattersall for the substantial total of £17,145.<sup>7</sup>

John Bowes thus possessed the attributes of an aristocrat engaged in a way of life available only to the richest of his peers, differing within glittering London society perhaps only because he chose to be an active manager of his estates. Behind this appearance, however, there was a complex personality. He evidenced his views at the age of twenty-one by standing for parliament not as a Tory, as his Durham neighbours expected, but instead in the liberal interest, arguing for the Great Reform Bill, religious liberty, abolition of slavery, and prudent national finance.<sup>8</sup> He retained his liberal views throughout his life.



Figure 1. Harry Hall (1814-1882), *West Australian with jockey Frank Butler and trainer John Scott*, 1853, oil on canvas, 76 x 58 cm. Image courtesy of Rehs Galleries, Inc. NYC

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<sup>5</sup> 'National Sports', *Illustrated London News* (London, England), 28 May 1853, p.418.

<sup>6</sup> 'Obituary', *The Times* (London, England), 12 Oct. 1885, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> 'Newmarket Houghton Meeting', *The Times* (London, England), 30 Oct. 1885, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Bowes's speeches during his electoral campaign are reported in Charles Hardy, *John Bowes and the Bowes Museum* (Northumberland: Northumberland Press, 1970), pp.36-40.

The seeds of his difference had been sown seven decades earlier when his grandfather George Bowes died in 1760, leaving his eleven years old daughter, Mary Eleanor, as 'the greatest heiress in Europe'.<sup>9</sup> She was clever, discerning and well educated by her father to a degree not normally available to girls in the eighteenth century, but she proved to be a poor judge of men, a flaw that would prove disastrous in such evidently desirable prey for fortune hunters. Her first husband, the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Strathmore and John Bowes's grandfather, was not a suitable match for a woman of Mary Eleanor's talents, but after his death in 1776 she encountered a much worse fate. She was seduced by an Irish adventurer, John Robinson Stoney. For ten years until she succeeded in obtaining a divorce, Stoney treated her with outrageous brutality, both physically and mentally, in efforts to gain access to her inheritance, which, fortunately for herself and her children, was protected by an ante-nuptial settlement. His efforts were unremitting and continued until his death, in prison custody for debt, in 1810.

The core of Stoney's case was stated in Mary's divorce proceedings in these terms: 'marriage, by the law of England, gave the husband the whole dominion over the property, and also over the person, of his wife, except as to murder, for by the old law he could not be punished for cruelty to

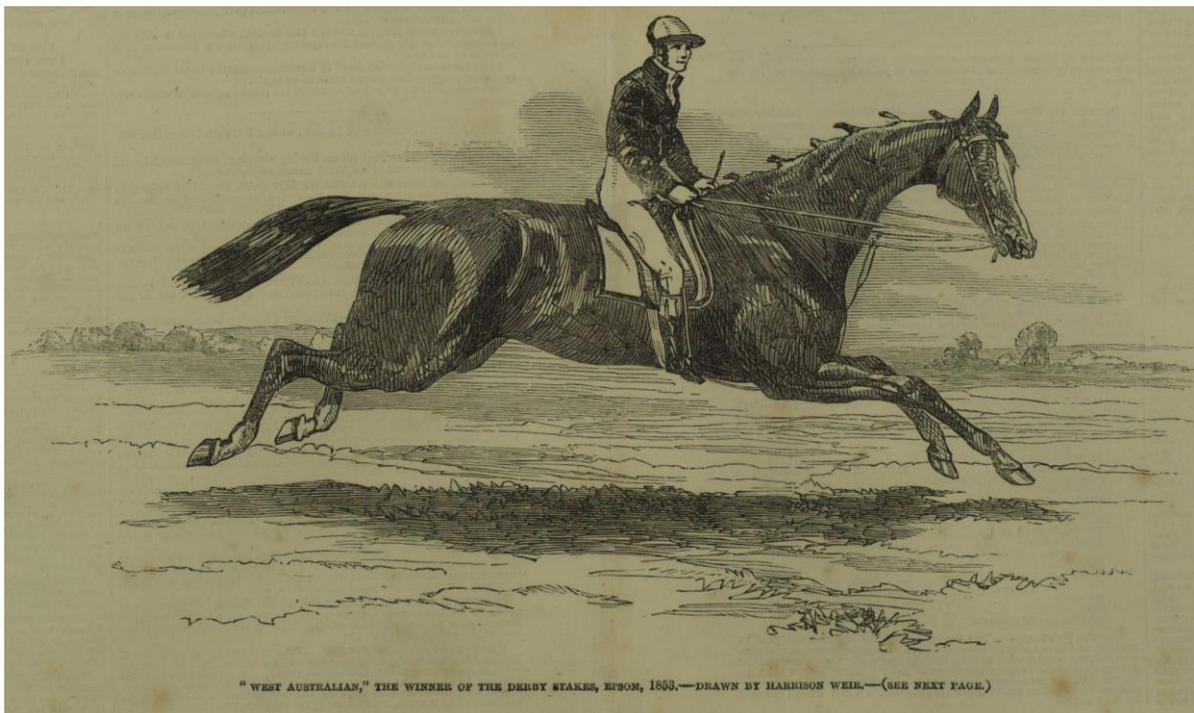


Figure 2. Harrison Weir, "West Australian" the winner of the Derby Stakes, 1853, Illustrated London News, 28 May 1953. p. 418.

<sup>9</sup> Lord Chesterfield, *The Letters of Philip Dormer, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Chaesterfield*, VI, ed. by Bonamy Daubré (London:1932), no. 2480, pp. 795-6, cited by Margaret Wills and Howard Coutts in 'The Bowes Family of Streatlam Castle and Gibside and its Collections', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 33 (1998), pp.231-43.

her'.<sup>10</sup> Change only came with the passage of the divorce and married women's property legislation of 1857 to 1882.<sup>11</sup> Thus, John Stuart Mill, speaking in Parliament on his outvoted amendment to the Franchise Bill of 1867, could still say, 'Now, by the common law of England, all that a wife has, belongs absolutely to her husband; he may tear it all from her, spend every penny of it in debauchery; [...] He can pounce down upon her savings and leave her penniless'.<sup>12</sup> Mary Eleanor was only able to gain her divorce through success in the courts against Stoney and obtaining a private Act of Parliament, possible only for the richest complainants and by way of archaic and highly stressful proceedings. Mary Eleanor was eventually able to live out her life in peace until her death in 1800. However, her son, the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Strathmore, who would turn out to be a good son and brother and a good father to John Bowes, illustrated that external pressures on married life were not only legal, but also social and bound by imperatives of class.

Strathmore had been born in 1769 and was twenty-two when he visited neighbours at Seaton Delaval as a guest at their amateur dramatics. He was enraptured by the beautiful Sarah Delaval, and they became lovers in an affair that lasted until her death in 1800 at Gibside, a Bowes family home in County Durham. They could not consider marriage because she was already married to the Earl of Tyrconnel but, fortunately for them, Tyrconnel seems to have been complaisant. Nine years later, Strathmore again fell in love, this time with Mary Milner, a village girl on his estate, and she became his companion for the rest of his life. The social status that separated them seems to be the reason that they remained unmarried, but they nevertheless lived together as man and wife. She would later give evidence that 'she dined with him always and sat at the head of this table', unless he had company to dinner.<sup>13</sup> John Bowes was born to Mary in 1811, was recognised by Strathmore and raised as his son. Shortly before his death, Strathmore took steps to assure John's heritage and to protect Mary by marrying her with due formality and by adding a codicil to his will to validate her new rights as dowager Countess of Strathmore.<sup>14</sup> John's birth was thus legitimized by this subsequent marriage, but his position was immediately challenged by his uncle, Strathmore's younger brother. The consequent peerage litigation lasted seven years and was bitter, with John being denigrated as a bastard and attempts being made to devalue Mary, which she rebuffed with dignity. The outcome was that John

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Arnold, *The Unhappy Countess and her Grandson John Bowes* (London: Constable, 1957), p.136.

<sup>11</sup> Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, 20 & 21 Vict., c. 85, being an Act to amend the Law in England and Wales related to divorce and matrimonial causes, and Married Women's Property Acts 1870, 33 & 34 Vict. c. 93, and 1882, 45 & 46 Vict. c. 75, being Acts to amend the law related to the property of Married Women.

<sup>12</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Hansard*, HC Deb., 18 March 1867, vol. 186., cc.6-94 <[hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1867/18/march](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1867/18/march)>. Mill's amendment would have led to the electoral franchise being extended to women. He was outvoted by 196 to 73 votes.

<sup>13</sup> Hardy, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Chapman, *John & Josephine: The Creation of the Bowes Museum* (Barnard Castle: The Bowes Museum, 2010), p.13.

lost the title and the Scottish Strathmore estates but he retained the great wealth of the Bowes inheritance.<sup>15</sup> Strathmore had succeeded in his efforts on behalf of Mary, and in 1831 she went on to remarry to William Hutt, John's tutor at Cambridge and his lifelong friend, who became a distinguished public servant, serving as a Member of Parliament for four decades. In accordance with his social position, John was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, and was then free to pursue a life as a local magnate in the North of England and a breeder of racehorses. This he did, but quickly disclosed other interests, notably in the theatre, seemingly inherited from his father and developed after Strathmore's death by visits with his mother to London and its then vibrant theatrical scene. In 1832, he made his first recorded visit to Paris, where he met and discussed the theatre endlessly another Trinity friend, the novelist W. M. Thackeray, who was then studying art in Paris.<sup>16</sup> They continued meeting regularly in Paris until 1849, when Thackeray wrote about Bowes that 'here he is manager of the Théâtre des Variétés and his talk was about actors and coulisses all the time of our interview'.<sup>17</sup>

John had virtually adopted Paris his home by 1847 and he lived there until his wife Josephine's death in 1874, apart from eighteen months of exile during the Franco-Prussian war and the disorders surrounding the Paris Commune. Even so, Streatlam Castle remained his principle residence and he visited it at least every summer and whenever the business of his estates required his presence, such journeys becoming increasingly practical thanks to the newly launched paddle steamers and new railways between Paris and Darlington.

As time went by, reasons to be in Paris multiplied. A letter written to his solicitor, Thomas Wheldon, records: 'I had a very pleasant journey as I fell in with a little French actress of my acquaintance going the same road'.<sup>18</sup> There is no evidence that she was Josephine Benoît Coffin-Chevalier, but by July 1847 he had met and fallen in love with her. Josephine was the daughter of a petit-bourgeois Paris clockmaker and had been employed since March 1847 as an actress by Nestor Roqueplan, lessor and *directeur* of the Théâtre des Variétés.<sup>19</sup> In May, John reached Paris in time to see her debut as the leading actress in *Mlle. Grabutot*. At about this time he agreed to buy 42/44<sup>th</sup> of the lease of the theatre from Roqueplan, paying him £15,000 in July.<sup>20</sup>

The Variétés was one of a small number at the head of the second tier of theatres ranked immediately below the national houses, and its *corps* of forty artistes offered comedie-vaudeville

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<sup>15</sup> Arnold, pp.169-72.

<sup>16</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray, 1811-1863*, ed. by Gordon Ray (London: Oxford University Press, vol. 1, p.128, cited by James Wilkinson, 'John Bowes and Mrs. Josephine Benoît Bowes: With Special Reference to their Connection with France', (uncompleted thesis held at the Bowes Museum Archive., 1961).

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> John Bowes to Thomas Weldon, 11 April 1846 (Bowes Museum Archive, JB/2/1/15/28).

<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson, p.156.

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, p. 82, and Wilkinson, p.153.



Figure 3. Benjamin Ferrey, *Théâtre des Variétés and the Panorama Buildings in Paris*, 1829, watercolour on paper, 14 x 20 cm. Image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

performances to the haut-monde, demi-monde and bourgeoisie of Paris. Its atmosphere was racy, to say the least, as would be graphically described by Emile Zola three decades later in the opening pages of *Nana*.<sup>21</sup> Roqueplan had built audiences up to the theatre's capacity of 1,500 seats and the theatre was profitable, thus seemingly offering a good investment for John. Managing such an establishment and its 150 employees would nevertheless prove a demanding challenge for him, particularly in competition with such Parisian professionals, as portrayed by Zola in the character of Bordenave as *directeur* of the Variétés in *Nana*.

Under the conventions of the time, John's investment permitted him to be *placeur* for leading roles and he duly *placed* Josephine over the coming four years. Unhappily, his tenure was dogged first by the 1848 Revolution and then by a succession of unfortunate choices as *directeur*, the first of whom was Josephine's dramatic teacher. Unhelpfully in addition, Josephine's talents came under repeated hostile criticism from Charles Mahurel de Fiennes, writing for the journal *Le Siècle*. Over five difficult years, Bowes had to subsidise ever larger losses and he eventually closed the theatre in 1852.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1980, first pub. 1879), ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Wilkinson, pp.53-185.



Figure 4. Eustace Lorsay (1912-1871), 'Les Acteurs du Théâtre des Variétés', *L'Illustration*, vol. VIII, 17 October 1846, p. 101.

John and Josephine's love nonetheless survived and remained robust until death. Departing from aristocratic conventions, John chose to marry his mistress and introduced her as his wife and hostess to the highest levels of Parisian society, to which his wealth and celebration as a breeder of racehorses qualified him for entry. Such a transition from mistress to wife would have been less acceptable in London, but Paris under the Second Empire was a social melting pot, illustrated once again, but savagely, by Zola in *La Curée*.<sup>23</sup> John's decision at this period was rare although not unique. His English neighbour in Paris, the immensely rich connoisseur and collector, the reclusive 4<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Hertford, treated Richard Wallace, born in 1818 and thus a contemporary of Bowes, as his son, employed him as his agent and bequeathed him all his unentailed wealth. However, Hertford never admitted his paternity nor married his mother, nor would he allow Wallace to marry his mistress, said to have been a perfume seller in a Parisian boutique, so that their marriage had to wait until Hertford's death.<sup>24</sup> Making another parallel with John and Josephine, Wallace's will, written in November 1890, instructed: 'I bequeath to my dear wife, Amelie Julie Charlotte Wallace, [...] all my estate absolutely,' and hers, in July 1895, directed, 'I bequeath to the British Nation my [...] collection to be styled "The Wallace Collection"'.<sup>25</sup>

On marrying Josephine, John bought in her name a small chateau formerly owned by Louis XV's mistress, Madame du Barry, as their summer residence. They lived there and in his house in Paris as members of high society throughout the Second Empire, with Josephine being a successful hostess

<sup>23</sup> Émile Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1980, first pub. 1871).

<sup>24</sup> *The Wallace Collection* (London: Wallace Collection, 2014), p.12.

<sup>25</sup> Wills of Sir Richard and Lady Wallace (Wallace Collection archive, AR/34).

and, imitating the Empress, buying her dresses from Worth. She also sought to become a recognised artist, taking lessons as she had done when an actress, but this time from a fashionable painter, Karl-Joseph Kuwasseg. She succeeded well enough to exhibit four times at the Paris Salon in the late 1860s, offering landscapes in the manner of Courbet, her preferred subject and one typically appropriate for genteel female artists.

By 1860 it seemed clear that the couple would be childless, John perhaps being rendered infertile by an 'unfortunate little disease' in the 1830s, and Josephine needed a new project.<sup>26</sup> True to her lifetime efforts of self-improvement and the concept of 'moral responsibility' that had been a plank of John's electoral campaign in 1832, they chose to found a museum to promote the cultural education of the population in John's home region of County Durham. In doing so, they echoed the philosophies of the time expressed by Sir Henry Cole when he opened the South Kensington Museum in 1857 and John Ruskin in establishing his St. George's Museum in 1875 for the working men of Sheffield. Education was considered by John Stuart Mill and others to be the key to social progress for citizens not members of elite ranks and of women in particular, so John and Josephine were pioneering social equality. Accordingly, they were not primarily collecting art treasures for themselves and as a bequest to perpetuate their family name, as was more typically the case with benefactors of their rank and as exemplified by Lady Wallace's bequest to the nation.<sup>27</sup>

John began to buy land near Streatlam from 1865, once more in Josephine's name, to provide a domain for the museum and its encircling public park. Four years later Josephine laid the foundation stone for the museum building, which in due course she would name the *Josephine and John Bowes Museum*, an '*edifice, massif, impressionnant, dans un style "Renaissance française" inspiré à la fois des Tuileries et du l'hôtel de ville du Havre*'.<sup>28</sup> Josephine, meanwhile, had begun, with John's support, to deploy her good bargaining powers and excellent taste to assemble a vast number of over 15,000 predominantly contemporary artworks from France but aiming to represent the whole of Europe. She continued to collect vigorously, particularly ceramics of which she was an early and distinguished collector, until the early 1870s, when her health, always fragile, finally deserted her. Reflecting the scale and purpose of the collecting, the prices they paid tended to be relatively low, with items typically costing less than ten pounds. One, however, at two hundred pounds, was a notable exception. Visiting the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, they saw a magnificent silver automaton swan, swimming on a lake of glass, likely to have a particular attraction for a clockmaker's daughter.

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<sup>26</sup> Chapman, *John & Josephine*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Waterfield, Giles, *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain, 1800-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2015). Waterfield sees ambivalence in the foundation, but Josephine's collecting policies seem to demonstrate her purpose as presented above.

<sup>28</sup> Veronique Powell, 'Un Musée Français sur les bords de la Tees', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, (June 2006), p.151- 3.



Figure 5. John Joseph Merlin for workshop of James Cox, 1772-1774, swan automaton in silver, glass, metal, 80cm high.  
Courtesy of Bowes Museum

The swan had its origins a century earlier. It had been created for the richest customers of the Asia trade in 1772 by an entrepreneur jeweller James Cox and his mechanic, John Joseph Merlin. It is one of the most magnificent survivals of its type, perhaps rivalled only by the Peacock clock bought for Catherine the Great and now in St. Petersburg. The Asia trade went into crisis before the swan was sold and it was therefore included in a lottery of Cox's stock in 1773. The catalogue attached to Act of Parliament that authorised the lottery described it thus: 'A swan as large as life. It is made of silver, the plumage finely copied, and the whole so nicely and artfully as at a distance to deceive the most accurate observer. [...] It turns its neck in all directions and moving round on each side to the very tail, as if feathering itself'.<sup>29</sup> Like Josephine, Mark Twain also saw the swan in working order at the 1867 Exhibition and wrote in almost Cox's own words of a century earlier, while adding, 'I watched him seize a silver fish under the water and hold up his head and go through all the elaborate motions of swallowing it'.<sup>30</sup> The swan impressed him so much that it was the only exhibit among the displays that he considered worth recording.

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<sup>29</sup> James Cox, *A Descriptive Inventory of the Several Exquisite and Magnificent Pieces of Mechanism and Jewellery Comprised in the Schedule annexed to an Act of Parliament, made in the Thirteenth Year of His present Majesty, George the Third; for enabling Mr. James Cox, of the City of London, Jeweller, to dispose of his Museum by way of Lottery* (London: M. Hart, 1773).

<sup>30</sup> Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad; or, the New Pilgrims' Progress* (Hartford, Connecticut: American Publishing Company, 1897), chap. 13, p.124.

The equality with himself that John Bowes established for his wife is clearly reflected by their wills, with Josephine writing in 1871 setting out her bequests:

Whereas I am possessed of a great number of rarities of great value and I am desirous that the same should form one collection and be placed in a Museum and be dedicated to the public and whereas I have commenced to erect certain buildings which when completed to form of the Museum for the preservation of the collection aforesaid.<sup>31</sup>

John confirmed Josephine's ownership in his own will in 1878 when he bequeathed additional funds both to complete the then unfinished building and to provide an endowment fund for the maintenance of it and of the collection it housed.<sup>32</sup>

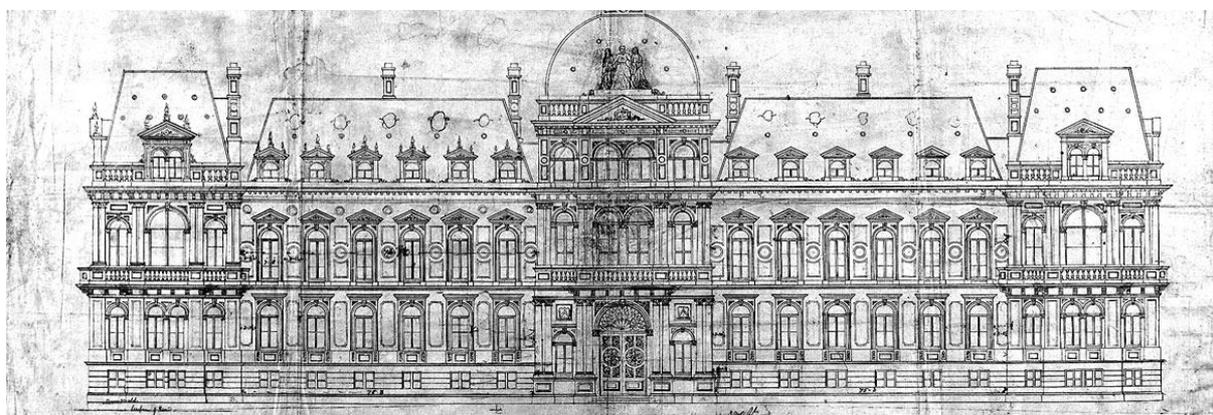


Figure 6. J. E. Watson, Architectural Drawing for the Boves Museum, 1869, Image courtesy of the Boves Museum.

The Bowes estates reverted to the Earls of Strathmore on John Bowes's death without an heir. The great houses of Streatlam Castle and Gibside were sold, stripped of all their features and their carcasses destroyed, in the case of Streatlam, or left a roofless skeleton in the case of Gibside. Meanwhile, the *Josephine and John Bowes Museum*, true to its founders' egalitarian vision, survived to become ranked one of the great smaller museums in Europe and flourishes today as a national repository for the fine and decorative arts.<sup>33</sup> Arguably, it reflects John's wish to erase the social inequality imposed on his mother and grandmother and Josephine's willingness to live her marriage as a partnership of equals.

<sup>31</sup> Josephine Bowes, *Will of Josephine Bowes* dated July 1875 (Bowes Museum Archive, item TBM/2/1/1-2).

<sup>32</sup> John Bowes, *Will of John Bowes* dated June 1878 (Bowes Museum Archive, item TBM/2/1/1).

<sup>33</sup> James Stourton, *Great Smaller Museums of Europe* (London: Scala, 2003).

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