

HEREFORDSHIRE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Mark Curthoys

The gorge of the River Teme looking east towards Downton Church and Castle in the distance.

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Portrait of Thomas Andrew Knight,
January 1837 by Edmund Ward Gill. Knight holds
a branch of oak in his hand.

Industrial wealth made possible the learned leisure of two brothers from Herefordshire who contributed to the West Midlands Enlightenment - the art connoisseur and freethinker Richard Payne Knight and the horticulturist Thomas Andrew Knight. Their activities remind us that the institutional settings for the West Midlands Enlightenment lay not in universities, but in the world of learned clubs and societies.

The Knight Family

The family's origins are reflected in Richard's middle name; his grandmother Elizabeth Payne was married to Richard Knight (1659-1745), who built up an ironmaking empire which, by the mid-eighteenth century, accounted for about eight per cent of Britain's pig-iron output. The Knight family's forge and furnace at Bringewood, Herefordshire, was sited on the Downton estate, which Richard Payne Knight - then still only in his early teens - inherited in 1765.

Richard Payne Knight

Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) was a member of the Society of Dilettanti, a group of gentlemanly connoisseurs who had travelled in Italy and Greece, where they studied arts and antiquities. The work which established his notoriety, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus*, was published under the auspices of the Dilettanti in 1786.

The explicit illustrations of phallic offerings were scandalous enough, but the most shocking aspect of Payne Knight's book was his identification of phallic cults with Christianity, which he presented as a religion whose origins and practices could be identified with paganism. In 1794 he was denounced by the satirist Thomas James Mathias, in a long poem whose principal target was the Lunar Society figure, Erasmus Darwin.

Although not personally connected with the Lunar Society, Payne Knight shared its members' enthusiasm for the toppling of the old order in France. In his didactic poem, *The Progress of Civil Society* (1796), he attacked the Church and oppressive governments as hindrances to the improvement of humanity. His views, like those of Erasmus Darwin, were parodied in the government-sponsored journal, *The Anti-Jacobin*.

As a Member of Parliament, representing Ludlow from 1784 until 1806, he was a follower of Charles James Fox in opposition to the regime of William Pitt. Knight made little impact in politics. His writings, though, established him as an outspoken critic of the existing order and an unrelenting advocate of free inquiry in all areas of knowledge and belief.

On the family estate he designed Downton Castle, a castellated mansion overlooking the Teme valley, which embodied his ideas of taste.

Thomas Andrew Knight

Richard's younger brother Thomas Andrew Knight (1759–1838) was a notable experimenter in the fields of horticulture and plant physiology. At his country seat at Elton, Shropshire – where he lived before succeeding to Downton Castle in 1806 – T A Knight studied the

Illustrations from Thomas Knight's *Pomona Herefordiensis*.



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grafting and diseases of fruit trees and undertook ingenious experiments to test the movement of sap in plants. His commitment to improvements in fruit cultivation, and breeding of new fruit varieties in particular, drew him into the newly-founded (Royal) Horticultural Society, of which he was the second president from 1811 to 1838. His work was assisted by his eldest daughter Frances, who helped to complete the magnificent illustrations of the county's apple and pear varieties for his *Pomona Herefordiensis*, published under the auspices of the Agricultural Society of Herefordshire between 1808 and 1811.

No Time for Universities

The younger Knight had a brief and unrewarding time at Balliol College, Oxford. Richard Payne Knight had missed university altogether, going instead on the Grand Tour. Late in life he singled out Oxford University's archaic curriculum, and idle, 'monkish' residents for one of his characteristic assaults on institutions of the existing establishment. ●

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Further Reading

See the articles on Richard Payne Knight (written C. Stumpf-Condry and S.J. Skedd), Thomas Andrew Knight (Janet Brown), the Knight family of ironmasters (Laurence Ince) and the Society of Dilettanti (Jason M. Kelly) in the *Oxford DNB*. Freely available online with your public library ticket at <http://www.oxforddnb.com>

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