

## Reading the Tatler in 1710

Rumbold, Valerie

*License:*

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Rumbold, V 2016, 'Reading the Tatler in 1710: Polite Print and the Spalding Gentlemen's Society', *Eighteenth Century Life*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 1-35.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Eligibility for repository: Checked on 08/12/2015

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# 1        **Reading the *Tatler* in 1710: Polite Print and the Spalding Gentlemen's Society**<sup>1</sup>

2

3

Valerie Rumbold

4

University of Birmingham

5

## 6        **I. Introduction**

7        The Spalding Gentlemen's Society (hereafter SGS), a much-cited exemplar of

8        eighteenth-century learned sociability which celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2010,

9        famously began with the communal reading of the *Tatler* in 1710, and achieved definitive

10       memorialization in 1812 in vol. VI of John Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes*.<sup>2</sup> Yet given the

11       association of SGS with two such landmark publications, it is surprising that the nature

12       and significance of these connections with polite print still remain largely unexplored.

13       This paper therefore poses the question of exactly how these connections worked, and

14       asks how a new understanding of the process and agencies involved might bear on our

15       wider understanding of the familiar – perhaps over-familiar – SGS story. Far from simply

16       starting with the *Tatler*'s arrival in Spalding and concluding with Nichols's incorporation

17       of SGS material into *Literary Anecdotes*, what is going on here is both more complex and

18       less transparent than such a model of circulation from capital to regions and back again

19       might suggest. By examining both regional contexts and textual transmission, the present

20       paper shows how the involvement of SGS with polite print worked to promote particular

21       and sometimes conflicting visions of desirable sociability.

22              The paper thus begins by focusing on the founding narrative that links the origins

23       of SGS to the *Tatler*, mapping the outlook and priorities of SGS and its members in

24       relation to the values and prescriptions so gracefully advanced in Steele's watershed

25 periodical. SGS was rooted in the established dynamism of an economically vibrant  
26 Lincolnshire town that enjoyed strategic access to the communication infrastructure of  
27 the Great North Road and the trading networks of the East Coast ports, and was buoyed  
28 up over generations by major investment in fenland drainage; but this situation was not  
29 without associated difficulties. Spalding's fenland setting still placed it at a considerable  
30 distance from London's cultural, financial, and administrative centers; it inherited from  
31 the seventeenth century a bitter history of religious division and social dispossession; and  
32 the influx of aspiring professionals alongside traditional elites made appropriate modes of  
33 sociability a key concern. The cultural connectedness and prosperity of Spalding at this  
34 time do, however, suggest that the *Tatler* is less likely to have been welcomed as a unique  
35 and transformatory intervention than as a congenial supplement to regional sociability.  
36 As to the *Tatler's* specific local relevance, while its key projections (bearing on London's  
37 relation to the regions, on religion, on politics, and on the improving potential of  
38 conversation) do indeed have resonance for SGS and its region, there are also tensions  
39 and divergences.<sup>3</sup> Some underline the wider scale of the challenges that Steele confronted  
40 in persuading the nation to polite modernity, and others relate to underlying differences  
41 within the gentry and professions about the specific directions that sociable improvement  
42 should take. Although Steele's programme engaged in potentially supportive ways with  
43 many issues facing SGS, this paper will show that it was ultimately an area of  
44 disagreement between SGS and the *Tatler*, namely the Society's commitment to science  
45 and antiquarianism, that facilitated its incorporation into Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes*.  
46 An associated issue (which would be resolved only at the beginning of the twenty-first  
47 century) focused on the restriction of SGS membership to men. These two issues, both of

48 which highlight the potential for tension between SGS and *Tatler* agendas, underline the  
49 need for a critical appraisal of the relationship between the two projects, for both were  
50 shaped by groups and individuals with important and sometimes conflicting interests at  
51 stake.

52 To begin at what presents as the beginning, even SGS's initial connection with the  
53 *Tatler* has been principally known from the 1812 report in *Literary Anecdotes*; but the  
54 testimony itself, with its strategic deployment of the reputation of Steele and his  
55 periodical, is very much older. It was first composed by the SGS founder, Maurice  
56 Johnson (1688–1755), as part of a “Historical Account of the State of Learning in  
57 Spalding, Elloe, Holland, Lincolnshire” intended as an introduction to the Minute Books.  
58 Thirty years after Johnson's death it was published by John Nichols in no. 20 of Richard  
59 Gough's *Bibliotheca Britannica Topographica* (1784); and in 1812 it was reprinted in  
60 Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes*:

61 In April, 1709, that great genius, Capt. Richard Steele, afterwards made a knight,  
62 and supervisor of the playhouses, published the *Tatlers*, which, as they came out  
63 in half-sheets, were taken in by a gentleman, who communicated them to his  
64 acquaintances at the Coffee-house then in the Abbey-yard; and these papers being  
65 universally approved, as both instructive and entertaining, they ordered them to be  
66 sent down thither, with the *Gazette* and *Votes*, for which they paid out of charity  
67 to the person who kept the coffee-house; and they were accordingly had and read  
68 there ever[y] post-day, generally aloud to the company, who could sit and talk  
69 over the subject afterwards. This insensibly drew the men of sense and letters into  
70 a sociable way of conversing; and continued the next year, 1710, until the

71 publication of these papers desisted; which was in December, to their great regret,  
72 whose thoughts being by these means bent towards their own improvement in  
73 knowledge, they again in like manner heard some of the *Tatlers* read over, and  
74 now and then a poem, letter, or essay, on some subjects in polite literature.<sup>4</sup>

75 This richly suggestive passage is particularly interesting in its elision of authorial agency,  
76 for there is ample evidence to confirm that Johnson himself, eldest son of a landowning  
77 family based at Ayscoughfee Hall in Spalding, is the tactfully self-effacing “gentleman”  
78 who first introduces the *Tatler*, and that he has prepared the ground before the coach even  
79 arrives. After education at Spalding Free Grammar School and at Eton, Johnson had  
80 entered on legal training in London, joining the Society of the Inner Temple in 1705, and  
81 was called to the bar in 1710 (*Corr. SGS*, x). In London he became deeply committed to  
82 learned and literary sociability, meeting antiquaries such as William Stukeley, Roger  
83 Gale, and his brother Samuel Gale, and taking a major role in working towards the  
84 refoundation of the Society of Antiquaries.<sup>5</sup> Like Stukeley and other future members of  
85 SGS, Johnson was probably also a freemason (*Corr. SGS*, 101). In addition, he associated  
86 less formally with writers such as Joseph Addison, John Gay, Alexander Pope, and  
87 Richard Steele.<sup>6</sup> Alongside these sociable and learned interests, he was active as a land-  
88 steward, and discharged high-profile official roles in and around Spalding as chairman of  
89 the local Commission of Sewers (responsible for the maintenance of fenland drainage),  
90 deputy recorder of Stamford, chairman of the South Holland quarter sessions, and justice  
91 of the peace.<sup>7</sup>

92 Johnson in fact attributed to Steele the original idea of founding SGS, and  
93 recorded that he had also discussed his project with others in Steele’s London circle.<sup>8</sup> As

94 he deploys the association in his origin story, the gentlemen’s approval of the *Tatler* as  
95 “instructive and entertaining” and their aspiration to “improvement in knowledge” and a  
96 miscellaneous engagement with “polite literature” construct a particular social  
97 constituency and cultural ambition for his project; and the original function of the piece  
98 as a preface to the Minute Books is a reminder of the key role that rhetoric, as well as  
99 record-keeping, plays in the formation of archives as well as published collections.

100 Johnson conjures a society of gentlemen, interested in parliamentary business and  
101 government appointments, whose responsibilities bring them “ever[y] post-day” to await  
102 the arrival of “the *Gazette* and *Votes*” in the coffee house, and who, as befits their rank,  
103 pay for periodicals as an act of “charity” to the proprietor. SGS membership lists,  
104 however, tend somewhat to qualify this picture, confirming the specific prominence of  
105 the professionals who in Clive Holmes’s words “acted as ‘brokers’, channeling the  
106 products of the national culture into the localities”.<sup>9</sup> Lawyers and clergy (the latter  
107 constituting by Rosemary Sweet’s calculation the largest occupational group in SGS,  
108 nearly a quarter of the membership between 1712 and 1760) were key constituencies, as  
109 were surveyors and civil engineers attracted by the region’s investment in fenland  
110 drainage (compare Sweet’s contention that “the most active antiquaries came from the  
111 ranks of the lesser gentry and those who merged with the professional classes”).<sup>10</sup>

112 Politeness, unsurprisingly, looms much larger, both in the *Tatler* and in this founding  
113 narrative of the SGS, than its underpinning basis in wealth and the work that produces it  
114 (*Minute-Books*, ed. Owen, vii–viii). Johnson emphasizes how “insensibly” the gentlemen  
115 were drawn into improving activities in the relaxed setting of the coffee house: in Peter  
116 Clark’s view, “Clubs were . . . umbilically linked to the arrival of coffee-houses”, which

117 in Johnson's quasi-Habermasian description replace the Gothic institutions of  
118 monasticism in almost symbolic succession.<sup>11</sup> Yet the extraordinary efforts that Johnson  
119 put into strategy, correspondence, and record-keeping for SGS belie any implication of  
120 the merely casual.<sup>12</sup> This occluded relationship between strategic effort and easy but  
121 improving conversation itself presents a significant parallel with the *Tatler*, whose  
122 politely ingratiating style, projected through the persona of the beguilingly eccentric Isaac  
123 Bickerstaff, was the effect of a gruelling commitment to articulating, to thrice-weekly  
124 deadlines, a view of life attractively but inexplicitly aligned with a modernizing Whig  
125 ideology on Revolution principles.<sup>13</sup> Johnson, however, aimed not only to combine  
126 amusement with improvement, but also, and more specifically, to build an active  
127 knowledge exchange that brought together the intellectual and social energies of educated  
128 men across Lincolnshire and beyond. Lincoln, Peterborough, Stamford, Boston, Oundle,  
129 Wisbech, Ancaster, and Market Deeping were singled out as prospective bases, and some  
130 of these towns and cities had societies actually founded; but these sister-societies  
131 generally proved relatively short-lived (*Corr. SGS*, xv–xvi). It was SGS, animated by  
132 Johnson's direct and tireless personal supervision, that proved most successful and  
133 sustainable; and by the end of the century it would be celebrated in print as a beacon of  
134 improving sociability. SGS and its members evidently shared many of the *Tatler's*  
135 aspirations, and Steele's programme demonstrably chimed with particular local  
136 challenges and concerns, but, as already noted, there were also tensions and difficulties.  
137 These not only suggest something of the sheer scale of the *Tatler's* reforming ambition,  
138 but also hint at significant disparities between the visions of improvement embraced by  
139 Steele and those that animated SGS.

140

141 **II. London and the Regions**

142 Johnson's canvassing on behalf of the SGS project articulates his home town's relation to  
 143 the capital in terms at once confidently ambitious and rhetorically self-deprecating. The  
 144 latter strain, evident in Johnson's picture of the gentlemen waiting for the London mail  
 145 that brought them the *Tatler*, should not be taken too literally, for SGS was an energetic  
 146 and well-connected group, by no means as dependent on the importation of town  
 147 politeness and culture as Johnson's rhetoric might suggest. Steele, rather than converting  
 148 them to modern politeness by sheer force of his ingenious urbanity, presented in the  
 149 *Tatler* a focus that local aspirations were already primed to embrace (and Johnson also  
 150 records that he had already concerted his plans for SGS with Steele and his circle at  
 151 Button's coffee house in London, making it clear that there was nothing accidental about  
 152 the reading of Steele's essays that was made the occasion of founding the Society).<sup>14</sup>

153         Nevertheless, a rhetoric of rustic isolation flattering to London-based  
 154 correspondents could still be useful. In a letter of 1712 to the Spalding-born London  
 155 surgeon Dr Edward Green he contrasts "the Inhospitable Fens" with London's "Living  
 156 learned World" only to promote his plans for consolidating social and intellectual capital:

157         [I] write to you in favour of a Laudable Designe which Wee in the Inhospitable  
 158 Fens have formed for our Improvement in Literature & the passing our Lives with  
 159 more Comfort I mean a Clubb or Society of Gentlemen of all the Learned  
 160 Professions who meet every Monday And would esteem It a singular favour from  
 161 You Sr, who are a Part of the living learned World not the lest distinguished if  
 162 You would be pleased to spare a Quarter of an heure twice or thrice in a Yeare for  
 163 the communicating to Us any of the many thousand occurrences in any part of

164 Learning which You (who are every day conversant in all Parts of It) shall think  
 165 fit (*Corr. SGS*, 3–4, 227).

166 Johnson invokes colonial comparisons in imaging the fancied potential of the scheme,  
 167 promising, “Your Letters will more promote Science amongst us Fenn Men, who are  
 168 thought to labour under a very stupid Air, than the Missionarys from Rome have Religion  
 169 (truly so calld) mongst the Chinese.” Less whimsically, William Bogdani, Clerk to the  
 170 Ordnance at the Tower of London, congratulated Johnson on “the Success & Progress” of  
 171 SGS in “A Town separated from the Rest of Mankind” (*Corr. SGS*, 41, 224). At one  
 172 level, this simply recognizes that long-distance travel was indeed a significant  
 173 undertaking, and that even local travel could be slow and difficult (which early SGS rules  
 174 acknowledge as a legitimate excuse for occasional non-attendance). Yet the routine  
 175 endorsements “Turn at Stilton” and “By Caxton Bag” on letters delivered to SGS remind  
 176 us that Spalding enjoyed a highly effective communications network with London, and  
 177 with Cambridge and the East.<sup>15</sup> The postal system, whose potential Steele had already  
 178 mastered as editor of the official *London Gazette* (another of the publications received at  
 179 the Spalding coffee house), was indeed integral to his plan for the *Tatler*: by publishing  
 180 “every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, in the Week, for the Convenience of the Post”  
 181 he caught the post going out from London, facilitating a regional as well as a London  
 182 circulation (SGS copies arrived, Johnson later recalled, in their original “Single Papers”,  
 183 franked by one of the county MPs).<sup>16</sup> There is also a striking mirroring between Steele’s  
 184 Bickerstaff, who begins his *Tatler* by placing his informants in the various London coffee  
 185 houses to report on their various departments of news, and Johnson, who gathers the

186 future members of SGS around him in the Spalding coffee house to receive his friend's  
187 new periodical.

188         The *Tatler* itself early highlights the gentry and professional routines of  
189 movement between the regions and London so important to the social reach of men like  
190 Johnson. The fictitious Mr Acorn has left rather too long between visits, and comes up to  
191 town for the first time in six years only to be flummoxed by slang he can't understand  
192 and manners that strike him as rude and incomprehensible (no. 12, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol.  
193 I.106). This prompts the urbane Mr Friendly both to comfort him and to give him the  
194 benefit of his more sophisticated perspective:

195         You are to understand, Sir, that Simplicity of Behaviour, which is the Perfection  
196 of good Breeding and good Sense, is utterly lost in the World; and in the Room of  
197 it, there are started a Thousand little Inventions, with men, barren of better  
198 Things, take up in the Place of it.

199 Mr Friendly's lofty analysis rests on an indispensable knowledge of up-to-date slang and  
200 fashions: gentry and professionals who bilocate between London and the provinces, as  
201 many of the Spalding elite did at this time, are thus invited to share Mr Friendly's  
202 judicious sophistication rather than Mr Acorn's browbeaten bewilderment.

203         Readers' letters (whether genuine or not), which soon became a feature of the  
204 *Tatler*, included news from well beyond London: hyperbolic praise of the *Tatler*'s effect  
205 in Oxford, for instance, asserts that "the Manners of our young Gentlemen are in a fair  
206 Way of Amendment, and their very Language is mightily refin'd", while "a Friend in the  
207 Country" reports some newly arrived expressions "and therefore desires I would explain  
208 those Terms, as I have many others, for the Information of such as live at a Distance from

209 this Town and Court, which he calls the great Mints of Language”.<sup>17</sup> Steele comments,  
 210 “His Letter is dated from *York*; and (if he tells me Truth) a Word in its ordinary  
 211 Circulation does not reach that City within the Space of Five Years after it is first  
 212 stamp’d.” Such letters certainly enable Steele to develop his commentary on modish  
 213 language and its moral and aesthetic implications; but what if anything such letters prove  
 214 about the views of actual readers at a distance is far more elusive. Moreover, the imagery  
 215 of minting, with its connotations of authority, points, if ambivalently, to a sense in which  
 216 it is London which confers the stamp of authority, despite Steele’s critique of its  
 217 neologisms.

218 More substantial in its claims for rural life, and suggestively parallel to Johnson’s  
 219 deployment of the *Tatler* in Spalding, is a letter from the country between “Friends bred .  
 220 . . to the Knowledge of Books as well as Men”, which pays tribute to the *Tatler* as a  
 221 “fresh Topick of Discourse lately risen amongst the Ingenious in our Part of the World”,  
 222 and requests “a compleat Set, together with your Thoughts of the ’Squire [i.e.  
 223 Bickerstaff], and his Lucubrations” (no. 89, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. II.58–60). Steele’s  
 224 country readers are thus offered an aspirational model of how to incorporate into their  
 225 social lives the kinds of discussion that the *Tatler* might support. Further prompts to  
 226 aspiration are provided in no. 179, where “building and furnishing a Green-House”  
 227 enables the writer to enjoy winter and summer alike, and to confer the benefit also on  
 228 family and neighbours: “In this Green-House we often dine, we drink Tea, we dance  
 229 Country-Dances; and what is the chief Pleasure of all, we entertain our Neighbours in it,  
 230 and by this Means contribute very much to mend the Climate Five or Six Miles about us”  
 231 (no. 179, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. III.473–77). While this might “be thought somewhat

232 extravagant by a great many Gentlemen whose Revenues exceed mine”, the writer claims  
233 to have spent only what others might spend “in riotous Eating and Drinking, in Equipage  
234 and Apparel, upon Wenching, Gaming, Racing, and Hunting”. The apparent  
235 extravagance is a means to an improving and sociable end, and is in any case relatively  
236 affordable in comparison with such pleasures as the writer – and Steele – disdain. Such  
237 rural possibilities for enlightened sociability clearly overlap with the benefits that  
238 Johnson’s SGS would attempt to offer its members and the wider community. For  
239 instance, at the end of the War of the Austrian Succession in 1749 Johnson would draft a  
240 successful SGS petition for celebrating in improved style: noting the danger of “Sticking  
241 up Candles in Windows” and launching “flying fires in a Town which has Twice severely  
242 Suffered by fire within these Thirty Six Yeares and wherein many Buildings are covered  
243 with Reed”, SGS proposed “Erecting a Triumphal Arch upon the Cross, with Safe  
244 fireworks therein”, which “wee conceive will Yeild more Delight to the Spectators and  
245 do more Honour on the Occasion” (*Corr. SGS*, 178–81). The rhetoric combines taste,  
246 patriotism, and prudent professionalism, identifying SGS as the agent of responsible  
247 modern improvement.

248

### 249 **III. Religion**

250 Religious conflict had been particularly bitter in the recent history of Spalding and the  
251 fens, and the strategically moderate piety promoted by the *Tatler* had obvious relevance.  
252 As Steele demonstrates when he responds to his Tory critics in his final paper, his  
253 construction of religious moderation had been a key part of his advocacy of Whig  
254 positions based on Revolution principles:

255 But what I find is the least excusable Part of all this Work is, That I have, in some  
 256 Places in it, touched upon Matters which concern both the Church and the State.  
 257 All I shall say for this is, That the Points I alluded to are such as concerned every  
 258 Christian and Freeholder in *England*; and I could not be cold enough to conceal  
 259 my Opinion on Subjects which related to either of those Characters (no. 271,  
 260 *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.363).

261 As to what “concerned every Christian . . . in *England*” during the *Tatler*’s run, in 1709–  
 262 10 Dr Henry Sacheverell had been found guilty of preaching that the Church was in  
 263 danger, an implicit condemnation of the Whig administration.<sup>18</sup> The *Tatler* takes an  
 264 obliquely cool approach, mocking the ladies who took their picnics day by day to hear the  
 265 proceedings (“it is not to be expressed how many cold Chickens the Fair Ones have eaten  
 266 since this Day Sevensight for the Good of their Country”) – while in Lincolnshire  
 267 disaffected Tory landowners were “distributing loaves inscribed ‘Sacheverell’ to the  
 268 poor”, stoking “a popular ‘frenzy’ to which the whigs attributed their defeat in the shire  
 269 election”.<sup>19</sup> Steele, whimsical at the expense of Sacheverell’s high-church Tory  
 270 supporters, aligns his critique with Whig interests and undercuts any potentially  
 271 damaging association between Whig origins and puritan parliamentarianism by focusing  
 272 on freethinking as the common enemy:

273 These Apostates, from Reason and good Sense, can look at the glorious Frame of  
 274 Nature, without paying an Adoration to him that raised it; can consider the great  
 275 Revolutions in the Universe, without lifting up their Minds to that superior Power  
 276 which hath the Direction of it; can presume to censure the Deity in his Ways  
 277 towards Men; can level Mankind with the Beasts that perish; can extinguish in

278           their own Minds all the pleasing Hopes of a future State, and lull themselves into  
 279           a stupid Security against the Terrors of it (no. 135, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. II.280).  
 280 Freethinking is similarly a preoccupation for Johnson, who for instance deplores  
 281 members of the Royal Society “who fancy themselves not under so great Obligations to  
 282 the Allwise & ruling Providence of Almighty God, as to speak of him or hear his Name  
 283 mencioned with Awe & humble reverence” (*Corr. SGS*, 548). Similar resentment,  
 284 expressed in quarrels between clergy and what Johnson’s son Maurice would call “rong  
 285 headed” medical men, was perceived to have been at the root of the failure of SGS’s  
 286 sister society at Peterborough (*Corr. SGS*, 127). Like Steele, the Johnsons laid the blame  
 287 at the door of the freethinkers.

288           For the *Tatler* indeed, as for the Johnsons, religion is not a relic of an age of  
 289 superstition and strife, but the indispensable foundation for polite improvement. In no. 5  
 290 Steele gives a suggestive Holy Week puff for Swift’s *A Project for the Advancement of*  
 291 *Religion*, describing the author as one “whose Virtue sits easy about him, and to whom  
 292 Vice is throughly contemptible” (no. 5, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.47–48). He ends by  
 293 quoting a comment allegedly made at Will’s coffee house, the established haunt, since  
 294 Dryden’s time, of wits and would-be wits: “the Man writes much like a Gentleman, and  
 295 goes to Heav’n with a very good Mien”. There is a striking and perhaps in part satirical  
 296 indirection in assigning such a comment to a coffee house that would later reach only  
 297 “the very lowest Mark on the Glass” of Bickerstaff’s religious thermometer; and there is  
 298 also considerable personal irony in relation to Swift, who was soon to turn to the Tories  
 299 (and quarrel with Steele) in his dismay over the Whigs’ desire to repeal the Test Acts that  
 300 kept dissenters out of political office: in this instance, Swift found himself at the sharp

301 political end of issues which the *Tatler* preferred to tackle by projecting a politely  
 302 middle-of-the-road consensus (no. 220, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. III.151). But when Steele's  
 303 collaborator Addison made Bickerstaff describe his religious thermometer in no. 220, it  
 304 was given a significant provenance: the Vicar of Bray, "having seen several Successions  
 305 of his neighbouring Clergy, either burnt or banish'd, departed this Life with the  
 306 Satisfaction of having never deserted his Flock, and died Vicar of *Bray*" (no. 220, *Tatler*,  
 307 ed. Bond, vol. III.149). Far from being a figure for self-interested timeserving, the Vicar  
 308 is here an exemplar of fidelity, avoiding the controversies that terminated the tenures (and  
 309 in some cases the lives) of neighbouring clergy. Bickerstaff explains that on this  
 310 barometer "the Church is placed in the Middle Point of the Glass, between *Zeal* and  
 311 *Moderation*, the Situation in which she always flourishes, and in which every good  
 312 *Englishman* wishes her who is a Friend to the Constitution of his Country" (no. 220,  
 313 *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. III.150).

314 All this takes on a particular force in the context of Spalding's experiences of  
 315 religious turmoil over the preceding century. During the Civil War Spalding was a  
 316 Parliamentary town in a largely Parliamentary county, with a learned and zealous puritan  
 317 for its vicar.<sup>20</sup> Robert Ram re-ordered the church of St Mary and St Nicholas for a puritan  
 318 ministry, turning a room over the north porch into a library (Clarke, 8, 16, 19). Ram also  
 319 involved himself directly in political publishing, writing in 1643 to advise the Royalist  
 320 stronghold at neighbouring Croyland to submit to Parliament, and prompting a retaliatory  
 321 raid in which he and others were captured; but when parliamentary forces retook  
 322 Croyland, Ram published news of his providential escape.<sup>21</sup> It was, however, after his  
 323 appointment as chaplain to Colonel Edward Rossiter that he achieved his widest

324 influence as an army preacher, publishing in 1644 the influential *Soldiers Catechisme* (7  
 325 editions by 1645). Here he specifically justified the smashing of images and denounced  
 326 the Church of England for maintaining “a Popish Prelacie”, “an Ignominious Clergie”,  
 327 “the soule-starving Service-Booke”, “a companie of stinking Ceremonies”, “abominable  
 328 Monuments of Idolatrie”, and “unchristian liberty”.<sup>22</sup> His puritan conviction remained  
 329 firm to the end, and his successor, Robert Peirson, continued in similar vein at the  
 330 Restoration: Pierson’s offences against ecclesiastical discipline were denounced to the  
 331 Bishop of Lincoln, but he resigned before prosecution could take its course.<sup>23</sup> The  
 332 complainants, in a striking characterization of the religious and political temper of the  
 333 town, declared that “a person of soe knowne factious principles (as he all alonge has  
 334 been) was alltogether unfitt to be continued in such a ffactious Towne and parts as  
 335 Spalding, and the Nighbouring Country, hath been and to this day are”.

336         Steele’s polite vision of Revolution principles had no place for confessional strife  
 337 such as had characterized the careers of Ram and Peirson. A case in point is his treatment  
 338 of the Whig populist anti-popery astrologer John Partridge. Steele had taken over from  
 339 Swift the invented character of Isaac Bickerstaff as author of the *Tatler*; but Bickerstaff  
 340 had originally been invented, in Swift’s *Predictions for the Year 1708*, as mouthpiece for  
 341 an onslaught on Partridge, whose annual insinuations that the established church was  
 342 little better than popery were particularly galling to Swift’s high-church sensibilities.  
 343 Partridge was the kind of Whig who could only be an embarrassment to such as Steele,  
 344 and in the *Tatler* he is deftly depoliticized, cited predominantly as a hopeless predictor of  
 345 the future, a swindler of the ignorant, and a vendor of ineffective patent medicines.<sup>24</sup> In

346 Spalding too, militant puritanism was part of a violently controversial heritage that the  
347 elites of this improving town were putting quietly to one side.

348           Johnson's treatment of this past, however, is interestingly ambivalent. He  
349 expresses appreciation for Ram, "that diligent pastor", in the specific role of patron and  
350 protector of the parish library of St Mary and St Nicholas (whose conservation was the  
351 first task to which SGS applied itself), but is silent on his puritanism and his association  
352 with the army – a silence of a piece with the SGS ban on discussions of potentially  
353 divisive political and religious topics (Nichols, VI.56, 59). There was no controversy,  
354 however, about associating the Society with the ecclesiastical parish: SGS celebrations  
355 took place in church, and the Reverend Stephen Lyon, licensed to the parish in 1709,  
356 became in 1713 the first president of SGS (*Corr. SGS*, xvi). When he died in 1748 his  
357 gravestone claimed for him qualities as well adapted to the ecclesiastical ideals of this  
358 later age as the puritan zeal of Ram had been to the mid seventeenth century. Lyon is here  
359 constructed as a narrowly escaped victim of bigotry and a model of protestant  
360 moderation: "a native of France, of the city of Roan, which place he left under the  
361 guardianship of his mother, for the sake of the Protestant religion, then persecuted . . . a  
362 true lover of the Constitution of England, as it was settled at the Revolution; attached  
363 vehemently to no sect or party, an universal lover of mankind".<sup>25</sup> The reader of the slab  
364 in the church floor, like the reader of the *Tatler*, is invited to revere such shared ideals as  
365 the uncontroversial inheritance of all but a few malcontents.

366           SGS also testified to its religious moderation by expanding its range of  
367 membership well beyond the Anglican mainstream: Catholic SGS member Edward  
368 Walpole dedicated to the Society his translation of Sannazaro's *De partu virginis* (1736);

369 high-church figures such as the two Samuel Wesleys (father and son) and Charles  
 370 Jennens were members and correspondents; and Johnson corresponded with George Ault,  
 371 “the Learned . . . Teacher of the Presbyterian Congregation at Boston”.<sup>26</sup> Johnson also  
 372 encouraged an application for membership by the fossil specialist Emanuel Mendes da  
 373 Costa (1717–91), whose roots lay in London’s Portuguese Jewish community (*Corr.*  
 374 *SGS*, 168–9, 233). In addition, the West African Islamic scholar Ayuba Suleiman Diallo,  
 375 whom Johnson met after he had been redeemed from slavery and taken up by London  
 376 society, won his particular admiration: “He was an Open, Candid, humane & Good man  
 377 Spake English well enough to be understood, was Skilful in and wrote Arabic well & fast  
 378 or very readily And Six other Eastern languages . . . he could repeat the whole Alchoran  
 379 mementer, & so thrice Wrote it Over here” (*Corr. SGS*, 81–83). Johnson quickly  
 380 convened a committee of London-based SGS members to propose him for membership,  
 381 and Diallo accepted, further extending the Society’s advocacy of a sociability that  
 382 transcended some, if not all, of the confessional divisions of its time.

383

#### 384 **IV. Politics**

385 Clark suggests that in a period when party faction was liable to disrupt national and civic  
 386 government, a ban on political discussion, or a restriction on membership to one party  
 387 only, may have been the effective alternatives for ensuring a society’s harmonious  
 388 conduct (Clark, 180–81). The path taken by SGS, for which breadth of membership was a  
 389 key aspiration, was emphatically the former: like religion, the subject was banned, as in  
 390 Johnson’s view, “politics . . . would throw us all into confusion and disorder” (*Corr.*  
 391 *Stukeley/Johnson*, 95); and party politics was likewise a key topic that Steele sought to

392 play down in the *Tatler* (Nichols, VI.6–7). However, Johnson’s memorial of how he had  
 393 originally discussed his plans for the Society with Steele and others at Button’s coffee  
 394 house dates it, significantly, to a very particular moment in the development of the  
 395 politics of the age, a moment when sociability across party lines may have seemed much  
 396 more feasible than it was to become soon afterwards:

397       the Hint was taken and pursued from Conversations with Secretary Addyson, Sir  
 398       Richard Steele, Laur. Eu[s]den now the Poet Laurat, Mr Alexander Pope the Poet,  
 399       Col. Brett, Mr Jn Gay & other Gentlemen at their Clubb at Buttons Coffee house  
 400       in Cavent Garden London by me M. Johnson.<sup>27</sup>

401 Addison’s literary circle at Button’s did indeed include, in its early stages, the poets  
 402 Alexander Pope and John Gay, who would later be associated with specifically Tory  
 403 writing and, later still, with the opposition to Walpole. Pope, after his falling-out with  
 404 Addison, would cite his manipulative influence over the “little Senate” at Button’s in  
 405 lines that ultimately became the portrait of Atticus in *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*; but  
 406 Johnson, significantly, reconstructs the group at a point before this division of the ways, a  
 407 point before the political implications of Addison and Steele’s Whig programme had  
 408 become divisively explicit.<sup>28</sup>

409       Yet the period of the *Tatler*’s run saw conflict not only over Sacheverell but also  
 410 over the War of the Spanish Succession, and the political art of the *Tatler* emerged  
 411 impressively in its ability to inculcate its ideology while eliding the specificity of divisive  
 412 issues. Indeed, in relation to the War, Andrew Lincoln argues that the periodical  
 413 functioned “to reconcile readers to increasing military activity by providing them with  
 414 fictionalized alternatives to the unsettling realities of war represented in the newspapers”

415 (Lincoln, 60). Since the Tory landed interest was particularly likely to back Sacheverell  
 416 and to resent the cost of the War, one of Steele's most effective techniques was his  
 417 humorous undermining of the Tory squirearchy, developing caricatures that act as a foil  
 418 to his preferred model of politely improving and implicitly Whiggish conversation  
 419 (*Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.xxi–xxiii). In *Tatler* no. 86, for instance, Bickerstaff endures a  
 420 visit by old friends from his native Staffordshire, led by Sir Harry Quickset. For a man to  
 421 be named after a hedge does not bode well; and Bickerstaff describes how he “met him  
 422 with all the Respect due to so reverend a Vegetable; for you are to know, that is my Sense  
 423 of a Person who remains idle in the same Place for half a Century” (no. 86, *Tatler*, ed.  
 424 Bond, vol. II.43–6). The visitors are so hampered by old-fashioned rules of precedence  
 425 that they cannot agree who should leave the room first: “We were fixed in this Perplexity  
 426 for some Time, till we heard a very loud Noise in the Street; and Sir *Harry* asking what it  
 427 was, I, to make 'em move, said it was Fire.” They insist on ale (not tea) in the morning,  
 428 and refuse to drink in a coffee house that doesn't subscribe to John Dyer's by now  
 429 markedly old-fashioned manuscript newsletter. After three bottles, a somewhat fuddled  
 430 Sir Harry defers his business to the next day.

431         Strategically contrasted with this dysfunctional stereotype is Steele's idealization  
 432 of proper rural authority:

433         There is no Character more deservedly esteemed than that of a Country  
 434         Gentleman, who understands the Station in which Heaven and Nature have plac'd  
 435         him. He is Father to his Tenants, and Patron to his Neighbours, and is more  
 436         superior to those of lower Fortune by his Benevolence than his Possessions. He  
 437         justly divides his Time between Solitude and Company, so as to use the one for

438 the other. His Life is spent in the good Offices of an Advocate, a Referee, a  
 439 Companion, a Mediator, and a Friend. His Council and Knowledge are a Guard to  
 440 the Simplicity and Innocence of those of lower Talents, and the Entertainment and  
 441 Happiness of those of equal (no. 169, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. II.432–33).

442 Like the monarch under Revolution principles, this is an authority figure who justifies his  
 443 authority by his care for others; and Bickerstaff distinguishes him, by implication, from  
 444 squires who, in line with his pejorative view of Tory ideology, are merely “Salvages, that  
 445 know no Use of Property but to be Tyrants; or Liberty, but to be unmannerly”.

446 For Johnson, the benevolent exercise of power and influence was evidently a  
 447 source of pleasure: he describes to his wife in 1727 his success at Lincoln Assizes in  
 448 negotiating “only the small Fine of a Marke a Piece” on “my poor Riotous Neighbours”  
 449 (apparently “the Merry Wives of Spalding”, now “delivered from this Tribulation, which  
 450 I hope will be a Warning to them”) (*Corr. SGS*, 37–38). He expresses his happiness at  
 451 this “Opportunity of being of Service to my poor Neighbours in distress which is the  
 452 truest pleasure I think a Rational Man can have”. As a moderate Whig whose family had  
 453 supported Parliament in the Civil War, Johnson conceived his role very much in line with  
 454 the ideals proclaimed by the *Tatler*. Like the *Tatler* too, in whose pages political  
 455 identification is muted, and Whigs and Tories move at least potentially – if with some  
 456 shading of coded satire – within the same imagined social space, SGS enacted a  
 457 conversation between party positions, as well as between different ranks, professions, and  
 458 religious identities, that reflected a desire to put aside the bitter divisions of the past.

459 This aspiration may have been the easier to pursue in Spalding for the fact that the  
 460 town had sustained much less damage in the Civil War than other Lincolnshire towns

461 (Clarke, 45). Indeed, Johnson's family had recently re-established intimate links with  
462 previously royalist local families. Johnson's father, the first Maurice Johnson (1661–  
463 1747), had first married a cousin from Pinchbeck, Jane Johnson, whose father, John  
464 Johnson, had in 1658 bought Ayscoughfee Hall in Spalding from John Walpole, a  
465 Catholic and one of Spalding's few royalists (Clarke, 9). He married, as his second wife,  
466 Elizabeth Oldfield, a daughter of Anthony Oldfield, another of Spalding's leading  
467 Royalists, who had been appointed Lord Lieutenant of the county after the Restoration  
468 (Clarke, 28, 58); and his son, Maurice Johnson the founder of SGS, would marry the  
469 daughter of her sister Mary, Elizabeth ("Betty") Ambler (1690–1754) (Nichols, VI.24–  
470 25). Their relation Antony Oldfield (b. c.1710), a land agent who acted for the Duchess  
471 of Somerset at Petworth, would in 1746 become a member of SGS, and he would write to  
472 Johnson not only to enquire about family connections, but also to share antiquarian  
473 curiosities, including matters relating to the Civil War and Restoration (*Corr. SGS*, 173,  
474 178, 234–5). The Civil War turned out, in effect, to have been a bitter but temporary  
475 disruption to long-standing patterns of gentry sociability and intermarriage.

476         At the Revolution, in 1688, "All the gentry of the county" had indeed united to  
477 welcome William of Orange, offering "unanimous thanks for his protection and  
478 assistance of the true Protestant interest"; and Johnson's father served as captain in the  
479 militia in the 1690s (Clive Holmes, 253). Johnson's own attachment to Revolution  
480 principles as demonstrated in the SGS archives is cheerfully loyal and uncontroversial.  
481 Although he is interested in compiling the history of electoral politics in Lincolnshire, he  
482 gives little sign of any taste for current controversy: he writes happily in 1734, for  
483 instance, of a family evening spent "with Quadrille and Rost Oranges and wine" to

484 celebrate the marriage of George II's daughter Princess Anne to the Prince of Orange  
485 (having previously described the elaborate civic celebrations staged in Lincoln —  
486 unfortunately, as it turned out, on the wrong day).<sup>29</sup> Other SGS members seem to have  
487 taken a similar line: Timothy Neve, for instance, writes with pleasure of dining at  
488 Walpole's Houghton in 1729, and Stukeley, despite an early flirtation with Tory views,  
489 was by the 1720 a moderate Whig, who also enjoyed a visit to Houghton, where he tasted  
490 pineapple for the first time (*Corr. SGS*, 44–45). Somewhat more controversially, the  
491 Calvinist Grantham MP Sir Richard Ellys (1682–1742) prided himself on his descent  
492 from “the great Hambden, Libertatis Vindex” (John Hampden, 1571–1643), and  
493 commissioned a print of his ancestor which he presented to SGS (*Corr. SGS*, 116).  
494 Another controversial Whig figure invited to join the Society was Richard Bentley,  
495 formerly master of Spalding Grammar School, and now Master of Master of Trinity  
496 College, Cambridge, where he had long been embroiled in public warfare with the  
497 Fellows; but it appears from a visit Johnson made him in 1740 that he was tardy in  
498 making the book donation required of new members (*Corr. SGS*, 43, 130, 337). Indeed,  
499 in 1747 Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676–1755) saw the “Enquiries into all parts of  
500 Sciences” undertaken by SGS as a constructive application of energies that might  
501 otherwise have been turned to subversion, remarking, in the wake of the Jacobite rising,  
502 that “happy had it been for many of the subjects of G. Britain, if for these two years past  
503 they had been obliged to employ their thoughts no other way” (*Corr. SGS*, 172–73,  
504 225). The welcome that SGS gave to members from across a wide ideological range  
505 exemplified Steele's ideal of benevolent Whig modernity, and allowed members of

506 different views to unite around uncontroversial interests; but its ban on political and  
507 religious debate removed any threat to the status quo.

508           More fundamental even than party politics, however, were the structures of  
509 wealth and power that sustained the social world of which Johnson was part; and here  
510 both the *Tatler* and the SGS archives are much less explicit, though the implicit politics  
511 of their positions is clear. Clarke notes that, despite crown control of the manor, by the  
512 seventeenth century Spalding “was governed by its gentry, wealthy merchants and  
513 tradesmen, some of whom had legal training”; and she includes “the upwardly mobile  
514 Johnsons” in that category (Clarke, 14). The social role of landowner idealized in the  
515 country gentleman of *Tatler* no. 169 had, in effect, long been in tension with the need to  
516 make a profit from landholding, as Holmes demonstrates in his analysis of the  
517 seventeenth-century enclosures and engrossings that systematically reduced opportunities  
518 for Lincolnshire’s commoners and smaller tenants (Clive Holmes, 21–7, 69–75). Yet in  
519 his judgment “the ideal of the landlord’s social responsibility” could still “retain some  
520 force, serving to modulate landlord–tenant relations and preventing them from becoming  
521 exclusively dictated by the market”. Steele’s idealization effectively sidesteps the  
522 structural economic issues underlying gentry relationships with tenants and neighbours,  
523 issues intrinsically connected with the improving outlook that produced both Steele’s  
524 conception of politeness and the landowners’ and adventurers’ enthusiasm for fen  
525 drainage. Johnson’s vested interest as a specialist in the law of drainage was also strongly  
526 bound up with the ambitions of the major landowners of the district. He, like his father  
527 before him, served as steward of the manor of Spalding, which was in 1675 conferred on  
528 James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, and passed after his execution in 1685 to his widow,

529 Ann Scott, Duchess of Buccleuch (Clarke, 58). She was succeeded in 1732 by her  
530 grandson Francis Scott, 2nd Duke of Buccleuch, already an honorary member of SGS  
531 and a schoolfellow of Johnson's at Eton: Buccleuch, at this stage a Whig in politics  
532 (although he would turn against Walpole during the Excise crisis) became patron of the  
533 Society and a generous donor to its library.<sup>30</sup> Johnson formally thanks him for his  
534 "Goodness in Patronizing their Love for Literature Arts and Sciences" in "your Graces  
535 Seignioury where Arts & Sciences have ever had some Vogue & regard", and declares  
536 their ambition of "raising a Publick lending Library & storing & fixing a Musaeum". Yet  
537 despite his investment in the improving schemes of such landowners and his affinity with  
538 the protestant politeness advocated by the *Tatler*, he also concedes the damage done to  
539 his beloved antiquities in the cause of this modernity, writing enthusiastically of the  
540 monastic and aristocratic culture of Spalding in the middle ages, when "John of Gaunt . . .  
541 made frequent visits to this convent, with his brother Geoffrey Chaucer, who married his  
542 lady's sister" (Nichols, VI.45–6). Indeed, Johnson speculated that Spalding "most  
543 probably . . . was the scene of action of that severest satire of Chaucer", "The Pilgrim's  
544 Tale". (Since disattributed, this sixteenth-century satire on monasticism begins "In  
545 lincolneshyr fast by the fene": a pilgrim going to Walsingham breaks his journey at an  
546 inn near "the greate buyldyng of this obbey /. . . sum thing in ruin").<sup>31</sup> In the succeeding  
547 dissolution of the monasteries, however, Johnson conceded that "Learning suffered more  
548 than the inconsiderate can imagine or the prejudiced will acknowledge".<sup>32</sup> Other SGS  
549 members, however, were reportedly less enthusiastic about their supposed Chaucerian  
550 heritage and more interested in the claims of present improvement: "they think it  
551 somewhat Preposterous, to found modern politeness upon an antiquated Author".<sup>33</sup>

552           The improvement of the fen was a crucial issue that underlay both the prosperity  
553 and the problems of the region. Johnson was also steward of Kirton and Croyland (for the  
554 Cecils, Earls of Exeter, of Burleigh House, Stamford), of Croyland itself (for SGS  
555 member Major-General Sir Robert Hunter, Governor-General in Jamaica), and the manor  
556 of Hitchin (for SGS member William Bogdani).<sup>34</sup> After a century in which Charles I's  
557 enforcement of court-supported investments in enclosing and draining the fens had been  
558 vigorously resisted by fenland commoners whose traditional mixed economies of arable  
559 (featuring local specialities of hemp and flax), grazing, fishing, and wildfowling were  
560 under threat, much of the drainage work once envisaged was by the early eighteenth  
561 century clearly incomplete, unsuccessful, or, given the shrinkage of the peat following  
562 drainage, in continual need of maintenance and remodeling; and consequences for  
563 navigation into local ports were also a focus of concern.<sup>35</sup> Experts in drainage legislation  
564 had become increasingly important in a post-Restoration context where would-be  
565 drainers "had to look to parliamentary statute for legal authority for their operations"  
566 instead of to the Privy Council, as they had before the Civil War; but the stakes were now  
567 correspondingly higher, as they could now hope, if successful, to gain "an irrefragible  
568 legal title" (see Clive Holmes, 226–27, 254–55). This did not imply an individual  
569 practitioner's automatic support for every scheme, and Johnson's professional  
570 correspondence with the Lincolnshire MPs in 1724–26 shows him deploring the  
571 "Arbitrary Practices of the Corporation of Adventurers" in relation to Bedford Level, and  
572 discussing a parliamentary petition by local gentry against the Adventurers (*Corr. SGS*,  
573 xvii, xxiv, 25–26; 32–33). To judge by the thanks he received from Major-General  
574 Robert Hunter for his care of Croyland property that had previously been "Nothing but

575 trouble and Expenses” to him, Johnson was indeed an effective steward (*Corr. SGS*, 51).  
576 Yet however carefully SGS might seek to avoid party-political discussion, it is clear from  
577 a reading of the *Tatler* in its contemporary contexts that such improving enterprises  
578 worked inexorably to advance particular kinds of social and economic interests and to  
579 disadvantage others.

580         Similar points could be made about the vested interests of many other early  
581 members of SGS. Johnson’s cousins Dr Walter Lynn and Dr John Lynn, though neither  
582 mechanics by profession, had a keen interest in the design of pumping engines, and  
583 Walter could, in a letter of 1721 from London, combine news of intriguing antiquities just  
584 discovered in Muscovy with discussions about pumping out water from a Newcastle  
585 coalmine (*Corr. SGS*, 21–22; 232). John Britain, master of Holbeach Free School and  
586 perpetual curate of Gedney Fen, revised William Stukeley’s map of South Lincolnshire  
587 drainage (*Corr. SGS*, 24; 224). The celebrated John Perry undertook major river  
588 management projects for Peter the Great, and in 1716–19 closed the Dagenham breach on  
589 the Thames.<sup>36</sup> Preeminent in their profession, however, as also in their long association  
590 with SGS, were the father and son John Grundy the elder (1696–1748) and John Grundy  
591 the younger (1719–83).<sup>37</sup> John Grundy the elder, a land-surveyor and mathematician, had  
592 worked in Spalding for the Duke of Buccleuch, and established himself as an expert on  
593 drainage in the fens and throughout England. He is recorded as combining service to the  
594 lord of the manor, to the town and to SGS: “He surveyed the manor of Spalding; and  
595 made a plan of the town, having then lately surveyed the lordship for the Duke of  
596 Buccleugh, lord of the manor, as a present to the Society’s Museum; to which he added  
597 perspective views of the public buildings.”<sup>38</sup> His combination of skills was formidable:

598 for a meeting of the Society on 12 April 1733 he contributed mathematical problems with  
 599 their solutions, “some Verses made by him on his projecting to dreyn<sup>e</sup> y<sup>e</sup> Fenns”, and an  
 600 illustrated talk on early modern English coins (a footnote records: “NB. This day Mr  
 601 Grundy layd his Scheme (read here 1 March last) before y<sup>e</sup> Adventurers”) (*Minute-Books*,  
 602 ed. Owen, 11). In 1737 he wrote to Johnson about his scheme for the Dee at Chester,  
 603 detailed the improvements he had made to excavating machinery, and described his  
 604 “Experiments by trying what weights will separate the Power of Cohesion in any given  
 605 Cube of Earth” towards “a Universal Theorem, to make Banks of any manner of  
 606 Different Strata’s of Earth to Resist and overcome any given Pressure” – and mentioned  
 607 in passing that “I am likewise writing a Manuscript of Algebra for the Benifit of my  
 608 son.”<sup>39</sup> This range of accomplishment suggests how closely idealizing improvement and  
 609 economic transformation ran together through the particular kind of sociability that SGS  
 610 promoted.<sup>40</sup> His son, who established himself permanently in Spalding, also maintained  
 611 an active role in SGS, reporting, for example, on discoveries of Roman coins and  
 612 pavements: his career would involve drainage projects throughout the east of England,  
 613 and in 1771 he became a founder member of the Society of Civil Engineers, moving  
 614 deftly into a further new formation of professional sociability (*Corr. SGS*, 128, 126, 228).

615 Sociability, so foundational to the ideology of SGS, was also, by its alleged  
 616 absence, a traditional complaint against the traditional fenland commoners who opposed  
 617 the drainage schemes that threatened their livelihoods. They were typically represented as  
 618 deprived of regular work and church attendance, and cut off from the conformity to  
 619 economic imperatives on which the post-Revolution world came increasingly to insist.<sup>41</sup>  
 620 The 1699 pamphlet *Strange news from the Fenns* depicts instead a distinctively

621 threatening form of sociability, declaring that “a [p]owerful and tumultuous riot, near  
 622 Spalding in Lincolnshire” had been organized under cover of “a pretended foot-ball play”  
 623 (Lindley, 232). What was at stake was property and its use, whether for traditional  
 624 subsistence or improving investment.

625

## 626 **V. Improving Conversation**

627 The very different model of sociability embraced by SGS can, at one level, be  
 628 represented as very close to the *Tatler*'s ideal: the members enter into “a sociable way of  
 629 conversing”, and, their minds being “bent towards their own improvement in  
 630 knowledge”, they go on enjoying the *Tatlers*, and later, the *Spectator* and its successors,  
 631 “and now and then a poem, letter, or essay, on some subjects in polite literature”  
 632 (Nichols, VI.58–59). The *Tatler* presented a pervasive reevaluation of social and family  
 633 relationships, not as dull and oppressive alternatives to the glamour of unfettered appetite,  
 634 but as attractive opportunities, and Steele places both commerce and family life within  
 635 this ideal. Commerce, for instance, comes about because “The happiest Climate does not  
 636 produce all Things; and it was so ordered, that one Part of the Earth should want the  
 637 Produce of another, for uniting Mankind in a general Correspondence and good  
 638 Understanding” (no. 92, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. II.75). A family life characterized by  
 639 mutual appreciation makes even the bachelor Bickerstaff regret his childlessness; and  
 640 when he describes the deathbed of the mother of the family, a correspondent writes that  
 641 he “has wept over” this particular piece “with great pleasure”, and claims that the  
 642 influence of the *Tatler* has been so great in his locality that the squire has entirely  
 643 reformed, despite having spent his entire previous life in drinking and hunting: “he has

644 sold his Dogs, shook off his dead Companions, looked into his Estate, got the  
 645 Multiplication-Table by Heart, paid his Tithes, and intends to take upon him the Office of  
 646 Churchwarden next Year” (no. 95, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. II.88; no. 118, pp. 202–03).  
 647 Even the *Tatler*’s most unpromising readers allegedly (if whimsically) find themselves  
 648 impelled towards a constructive engagement with home and community.

649         Steele is indeed eager to establish conversation, rather than rank or wealth, as the  
 650 essential criterion of sociable inclusion. Early in the *Tatler*’s run a country reader asks  
 651 what Bickerstaff means by “a *Gentleman*”, and Bickerstaff offers the definition a “Man  
 652 of Conversation”, as exemplified by Sophronius: he is “the Darling of all who converse  
 653 with him, and the most Powerful with his Acquaintance of any Man in Town”, “his  
 654 Conversation is a continual Feast, at which he helps some, and is help’d by others, in  
 655 such a Manner, that the Equality of Society is perfectly kept up, and every Man obliges as  
 656 much as he is oblig’d”, and “his Company [is] desir’d by Women, without being envy’d  
 657 by Men” (no. 21, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.164–67). With such a template to hand, it  
 658 becomes clear which merchants are gentlemen and which are not: no. 25 distinguishes  
 659 between Paulo and Avaro, the former whose hospitality declares “the Air of a Nobleman  
 660 and a Merchant”, the latter “one of the wealthiest Men in *London*, and liv’d like a  
 661 Beggar” (no. 25, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.196–97). However, the *Tatler* is also at pains to  
 662 maintain boundaries, as in the sad case of Addison’s Political Upholster, so obsessed with  
 663 foreign news reports that he neglects his primary social duties: “He had a Wife and  
 664 several Children; but was much more inquisitive to know what passed in *Poland* than in  
 665 his own Family, and was in greater Pain and Anxiety of Mind for King Augustus’s  
 666 Welfare than that of his nearest Relations” (no. 155, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.369). The

667 expansion of polite participation that Steele and Addison promote is indeed strategic and  
668 selective; and Johnson too would specify in 1712 that SGS was “a Clubb or Society of  
669 Gentlemen of all the Learned Professions”, while his son John would write that as far as  
670 societies like SGS were concerned, “Application & Industry rather furnish a Man with  
671 those Attainments that are most desirable than Birth or Riches” (*Corr. SGS*, 3–4, 165).  
672 This is echoed by the epitaph composed for John Grundy the elder: “without the  
673 advantage of a liberal education, [he] had gained by his industry a competent knowledge  
674 in several sciences” (Nichols, VI.86). Even more remarkable was the rare promotion of  
675 SGS member and schoolmaster William Burwell: “he was a common labourer, servant to  
676 Mr. Lynn of Spalding; and, without any instruction, made a pack of cards, and drew  
677 pictures; and was afterwards advanced to Tyrrington school” (Nichols, VI.77). As a  
678 refugee, Stephen Lyon had also overcome early disadvantages to become Vicar and  
679 President of SGS and a pillar of the local establishment. Such members combined hard-  
680 earned professional advancement with an ability and willingness to contribute to  
681 improving conversation.

682         There was, however, one major way in which SGS sociability might be thought to  
683 fall short of the *Tatler*’s programme; for Bickerstaff repeatedly and explicitly addresses  
684 himself to his female readers, declaring with typically back-handed gallantry in his first  
685 number that “I resolve also to have something which may be of Entertainment to the Fair  
686 Sex, in Honour of whom I have invented the Title of this Paper” (no. 1, *Tatler*, ed. Bond,  
687 vol. I.15). SGS, however, restricted membership to men, like other clubs and societies  
688 whose appeal Clark attributes in part to the increasing participation of women in this  
689 period in other forms of sociability (Clark, 190–91). SGS did, admittedly, aspire to a

690 form of masculine sociability that was markedly more compatible with newer norms of  
 691 polite mixed society than the hard drinking, field sports, whoring, and political and  
 692 religious quarreling caricatured by the *Tatler* as the preferred recreations of the traditional  
 693 squirearchy – even in a century when many clubs and societies continued to emphasize  
 694 the drinking and gambling that SGS was keen to avoid (Clark, 225). Intriguingly,  
 695 however, the SGS archive also shows members explicitly considering female  
 696 participation. One of the earliest members, Francis Curtis, headmaster of nearby Moulton  
 697 Grammar School, suggested a group subscription for new books and pamphlets, with  
 698 “due regard . . . to the Ladys that are lovers of Learning” (*Corr. SGS*, 6; 225). William  
 699 Draper went so far as to place gender alongside religion and politics as an unwelcome  
 700 source of division, concluding that “The Arts & Sciences have always been of all Ages,  
 701 Sexes & Opinions” (*Corr. SGS*, 255–56, 226). Johnson certainly shared the *Tatler*’s sense  
 702 of women’s contribution to sociability, and speculated in a letter to Stukeley about the  
 703 possibility of opening SGS membership to them:

704         And I am so much of my Countryman St Gilbert of Sempringhams Mind, that I  
 705         would have a Mixture of Female Members, Women sweetening and softening our  
 706         Rugged Sex and being capable of Musick and Poetry and all parts of the Arts of  
 707         designeing and It’s very rarely that at Such Meetings that are to relax the Mind  
 708         from Business & Severe Studys that any thing Occurrs which They cannot enter  
 709         into.<sup>42</sup>

710 But this rhetoric itself highlights the difficulty: SGS meetings, the archive suggests, were  
 711 typically calculated less “to relax the Mind” than to advance relatively “Severe Studys”  
 712 (which was already a disincentive, as Johnson lamented, to enthusiasts for politics and

713 gambling among potential male members).<sup>43</sup> When polite amusement was the order of  
 714 the day, ladies were indeed invited – for instance, to the anniversary concerts that  
 715 Johnson organized in collaboration with the parish church organist and SGS composer  
 716 Musgrave Heighington (1680–1764). Again, the gallant rhetoric suggests the difficulty of  
 717 progressing beyond speculative discussion of female membership, as Johnson’s ode for  
 718 1739 conflates friendship with romantic love, beginning “To Love and Social Joys let’s  
 719 Sing!” and closing with Venus rising from the waves:

720       From foaming Waves when Beauty Sprung  
 721           Tritons with vocal Shells proclaimd  
 722       Her charms, which every Lyre has Sung  
 723           Thro Greece, & thro’ Britannia fam’d:  
 724       Where all who felt her Influence own’d her Sway  
 725       Which (as our Sires) their Ofspring must Obey.<sup>44</sup>

726 His pleasure in female wit can also be inferred from the endorsement he wrote on an  
 727 epigram sent by Bogdani, noting that it contained “Just reprehension by a witty Lady on a  
 728 proud Motto VENI VIDI VICI assumed as poesy for a Wedding Ring” (*Corr. SGS*, 131).  
 729 But membership of SGS evidently remained a different matter.

730       Yet at the most basic level, Johnson’s wife Elizabeth (“Betty”) was, though not a  
 731 member herself, a fundamental support to SGS. Not everyone, after all, was keen to  
 732 participate in such a demanding enterprise, and Johnson declared that “under God, I  
 733 depend chiefly on the strength of my own children, and my near relations, whom I have  
 734 taken care to train up to a liking of it from their infancy; and, I trust, will keep it up when  
 735 I shall leave them”.<sup>45</sup> Roger Gale made a similar point, sending “my best wishes to the

736 Society, and your own family, out of which so considerable a part of it is formed, that  
737 you seem to have taken care (as far as human prudence can go) of perpetuating your  
738 Institution to posterity” (*Corr. SGS*, 139–40). Elizabeth was indeed a prolific mother:  
739 according to her husband’s nephew, Fairfax, she and Johnson produced “26 children, of  
740 whom 16 sat down together to his table”; and although daughters were not members, both  
741 sexes contributed to SGS.<sup>46</sup> According to Fairfax Johnson, “Mr. Johnson taught all his  
742 children to draw at the same time that he taught them to write”, and his daughter Anne  
743 Alethea deployed her skills to illustrate the minute books (Nichols, VI.25; *Corr. SGS*,  
744 xxi). A letter from her married sister Jane Green also demonstrates impressive skills: she  
745 gives a systematic account of the major paintings at a historic home that she has visited,  
746 specifying the subject and manner of each picture, locating it in its room, and  
747 distinguishing what is “finely done” from what is “not worth Notice”, remarking  
748 dismissively that “in the dineing room he has all his ancestors but they are mear Sinepost  
749 painting” (*Corr. SGS*, 157–58). This family letter was evidently felt to merit filing in the  
750 SGS archive.

751         As the daughter of the master of Spalding Grammar School, Betty Johnson herself  
752 seems to have been thoroughly at home in a learned milieu; and the archive suggests that  
753 she read many of the reports that flowed in. She controlled access to Johnson’s  
754 collections in his absence, and when he wrote home he included his communications for  
755 SGS in his letters to her (*Corr. SGS*, xix, 91). Although personal material was usually  
756 removed before filing, one letter to “My Dearest” from 1740 survives in full (*Corr. SGS*,  
757 125–26). It is an icy February, and having reached Stilton after “a very good and pleasant  
758 Journey hither”, Johnson sums up the events of the day: at Cowbitt the sun “so bright as

759 to induce old Mr Malsom to sit at the door on a bench in the 90<sup>th</sup> Year of his Age whom  
 760 we complimented on being so hearty”; at Croyland a visit to Mr Crawford, who was well,  
 761 although his brother “is at Bath & paralytick”; at Eye villagers “returning from the  
 762 execution of their Neighbour Elizabeth Wincely . . . for a Murther by herself  
 763 premeditated to save paying a Small Summe due to the Poor man for Wages”; at  
 764 Whittlesea “2 Horseraces runn smartly” on the frozen mere, “one for a Sadle . . . the  
 765 Other for 8 Guineas”. The warmth and detail of his engagement with everyone he meets  
 766 and everything he sees not only suggests the powerful fit of this sociable, curious  
 767 personality with the SGS project, but also indicates the continuity of these traits into his  
 768 family life. Before subscribing the letter “Your most affectionat Husband Maur. Johnson  
 769 junr.” he adds, with an eye to the next SGS meeting, “you may be pleased to Send this to  
 770 be communicated to the Gent. with myne and Bro. Services to the Society after You have  
 771 read it”. All this, however, still leaves Betty Johnson in a position very different from that  
 772 of an admitted member.

773           A key comparison here is with the institutions of masculine scholarship on  
 774 which SGS drew for influential elements in its membership. Unlike the model of  
 775 sociability being developed by Steele and Addison (with which Johnson obviously had  
 776 considerable sympathy), SGS was powerfully shaped by core members who were (also  
 777 like Johnson) members of the Society of Antiquaries, or of the Royal Society, or of  
 778 both.<sup>47</sup> SGS was thus shaped not simply to foster and refine sociability, which might on  
 779 its own have strengthened arguments for the fuller involvement of women, but also to  
 780 gather data and advance knowledge, predominantly in natural philosophy and antiquities,  
 781 ambitions traditionally construed as masculine. Natural philosophy also conferred on

782 SGS clear connotations of modernizing improvement (though of a different kind from  
783 anything Steele would have approved), and Sweet argues that antiquarianism likewise  
784 placed its enthusiasts “in the camp of the Moderns” (Sweet, 3). (Indeed, in the light of  
785 Johnson’s topic-based filing of SGS correspondence, his projected network of  
786 corresponding societies, and his recruitment of corresponding members for this “academy  
787 of Arts & Sciences” nationally and internationally, Diana and Michael Honeybone have  
788 described his project as “a form of early postal internet” (*Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*, 97).  
789 The volume of correspondence generated was such that Johnson was soon dividing the  
790 work with a second secretary (*Corr. SGS*, xvi.) This focus on active knowledge  
791 production rather than passive consumption, and specifically on natural philosophy and  
792 antiquities, set SGS decisively at odds with the programme of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*,  
793 and with its gallant promotion of women’s contribution to sociability: as Sweet remarks,  
794 “like science, the study of antiquities was often perceived to be at odds with the  
795 gentlemanly ideal”.<sup>48</sup> Addison contributes to the *Tatler* the satirical character of Sir  
796 Nicholas Gimcrack, Fellow of the Royal Society and harebrained collector of natural  
797 curiosities; and when he writes of numismatics in his *Dialogue upon the Usefulness of*  
798 *Ancient Medals*, he does so emphatically not as an antiquarian, but as a gentleman with  
799 an elegant taste for classical literature.<sup>49</sup> Johnson and such key SGS members as Stukeley  
800 and the Gales were committed to a different path, one less easily accommodated to the  
801 ideology of the *Tatler*; but it would in the end be this commitment that would ensure the  
802 transmission of SGS back into polite print.

803

804 **VI. Gough, Nichols, and the Print Canon**

805 It is clear that Johnson had a strategic rhetorical interest in linking the Society that he  
806 founded both to Steele's circle at Button's and to Steele's *Tatler*, and that there were  
807 significant resonances between Steele's agenda and the particular challenges and  
808 opportunities confronted by the improving professionals of the Lincolnshire fens. On  
809 some issues, notably conflicts over religion and land use, the sheer extremity of recent  
810 local experience highlights the ambition (not to say the tendentiousness) of Steele's  
811 evasive projections; and the comparison also highlights the vested interests at work in the  
812 SGS membership and in Johnson's shaping of the Society and its records. Yet at the same  
813 time, as suggested above, there were significant differences in outlook. While the *Tatler*  
814 (however questionable its gallantry) addressed itself to women as a key constituency,  
815 SGS did not at this point progress beyond speculation about female membership; and  
816 while the *Tatler* ridiculed scientific and antiquarian enthusiasms, both were strongly  
817 promoted within SGS. The *Tatler* may well have been, as Johnson represents it, a  
818 congenial and inspiring initial focus, but it was only one strand in the impressive range of  
819 ancient and modern reading matter discussed in SGS correspondence and purchased or  
820 donated by members for its library. Indeed Johnson's origin story itself, while stressing  
821 the role of the *Tatler*, also mentions "the *Gazette* and *Votes*", with their vital news of  
822 current affairs, and suggests members' wider interest in "a poem, letter, or essay, on some  
823 subjects in polite literature" (Nichols, VI.37, 58–59). Moreover, interested as the  
824 members may have been in London publications, they did not have to look so far for  
825 news and discussion: nearby Stamford, a major coaching link on the Great North Road,  
826 was from 1714 producing the *Stamford Mercury: Historical and Political Observations*  
827 *on the Transactions of Europe. The Whole being a Miscellany of various Subjects, Prose*

828 *and Verse*, a newspaper of aspirations far beyond the local and utilitarian; and the  
 829 correspondence of Johnson and other SGS members demonstrates news-gathering and  
 830 networking at social hubs such as the Lincoln assizes.<sup>50</sup>

831         The fact that both John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* (1691–97) and Addison and  
 832 Steele’s *Spectator* (1711–14) purported to record the proceedings of a society of  
 833 gentlemen suggests the potential appeal of this kind of authorization – or mock-  
 834 authorization – of published information and opinion.<sup>51</sup> The Society of Antiquaries and  
 835 the Royal Society, meanwhile, were prominent among actually existing associations that  
 836 used publication series to disseminate their activities and achievements. SGS, however,  
 837 relied instead on correspondence among its sister societies and other contacts, and had no  
 838 such foothold in print culture. It subscribed for publications from the Society of  
 839 Antiquaries and received copies of the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*, but  
 840 had no equivalent of its own; and the potential implications are spelled out in a letter of  
 841 1738 from Cromwell Mortimer, Secretary of the Royal Society (*Corr. SGS*, xv).  
 842 Mortimer explains that the Royal Society has “order’d me to send the Philos. Transact. as  
 843 they come out to your Society; and they desire you will favour us with a Transcript of  
 844 your minutes . . . & then the most remarkable & useful things may be usher’d into the  
 845 world in the Phil. Trans. which otherwise, as you print nothing yourselves, would always  
 846 have lain dormant in your Registers” (*Corr. SGS*, 112). According to a complaint by  
 847 Richard Gough prefaced in 1784 to his “An Account of the Gentlemen’s Society at  
 848 Spalding”, Mortimer had himself undertaken to publish the history of the SGS in  
 849 *Philosophical Transactions* for 1744, but, despite privileged access to the Minute Books,  
 850 had failed to deliver, furnishing Gough with the occasion of producing his own account.<sup>52</sup>

851 Gough was well aware of the importance to such societies of appropriate exposure in  
852 print. A Fellow of the Royal Society since 1775, he had become Director of the Society  
853 of Antiquaries in 1771, overseeing and contributing to its journal *Archaeologia*: its very  
854 first issue had published reports by Maurice Johnson taken from the SGS archive.<sup>53</sup>

855 Gough was a relative outsider to SGS (though one extensively networked among  
856 its members) who would work on the history of SGS with a leading London publisher,  
857 and the results were very different from the strategic lightness of touch with which Steele  
858 had advanced the cause of modern politeness in the *Tatler*. Gough, “arguably the most  
859 single-minded antiquary of his day”, found his scholarly vocation on a trip to Stamford  
860 and Croyland in 1756 (the year after Johnson’s death); and he met the publisher John  
861 Nichols (1745–1826) in the early 1770s. Sweet points to “the undisputed place which a  
862 knowledge of history and antiquities held amongst the reading public” in the later  
863 eighteenth century, and it was this public interest that Gough and Nichols would develop  
864 (Sweet, 31). Nichols himself had been apprenticed to William Bowyer, the outstanding  
865 learned publisher of his generation, who had been a member both of the Society of  
866 Antiquaries and of SGS.<sup>54</sup> In Sweet’s judgment Nichols “occupied a similar position to  
867 Gough in the antiquarian world as a focal point in a network of antiquaries”; and  
868 although “he lacked Gough’s expertise in scholarship”, he was “the main antiquarian  
869 publisher and the editor of the *Gentlemen’s Magazine*” and, as such, “a highly regarded  
870 source of information, advice and patronage” (Sweet, 63). By 1780 Gough and Nichols  
871 would be engaged on their most ambitious project, Gough’s eight-volume *Bibliotheca*  
872 *Topographica Britannica*, which Nichols published in 52 numbers between 1780 and  
873 1790; and it was this work that would enshrine SGS in British antiquarian lore.

874           Research for the account of SGS had commenced in earnest by 1781, when  
875 Gough wrote to Robert Uvedale, vicar of Parham, near Spilsby in Lincolnshire, “a  
876 valuable Correspondent in the Gentlemen’s Magazine” (Nichols, VI.123). Uvedale  
877 provided some contact information, but reported that SGS appeared to be no longer  
878 active. (In fact, SGS was still meeting as a discussion and book club until at least 1800, as  
879 its treasurers’ minutes and library loan book attest, but was not maintaining the Minute  
880 Books – nor is it clear that it still pursued its former scientific and antiquarian  
881 programme.) Having received Uvedale’s report, Gough approached Fairfax Johnson,  
882 nephew of Maurice Johnson, who invited Gough and Nichols to Spalding in 1782 and  
883 1783; and these visits “led to the most satisfactory and unreserved communication of the  
884 Minute Books” (Nichols, VI.124–25). Nichols published Gough’s “An Account of the  
885 Gentlemen’s Society at Spalding” in 1784 as no. 20 of *Bibliotheca Topographica*  
886 *Britannica*; and in 1790, when title pages and instructions to binders were issued for the  
887 whole work, no. 20 took its place at the beginning of vol. III, “Antiquities in  
888 Lincolnshire”.<sup>55</sup> In his account Gough concedes that SGS is no longer functioning on “its  
889 original more extended plan”, but explains that its present representatives “wish to revive  
890 it as a philosophic and experimental Society” (Nichols, VI.4). In July 1786, however, a  
891 much less sanguine view was given in a letter from “R. D.” in the *Gentleman’s*  
892 *Magazine*: R. D. reported that “the Society is now in a state of dilapidation”, described  
893 the poor state of its collections, and expressed a wish to see them auctioned or donated to  
894 “a public or private museum”.<sup>56</sup> It is not impossible that Gough, himself a frequent  
895 contributor of such antiquarian notes, had written or procured the letter himself in order  
896 to bring the issue to the attention of a wider audience of polite readers; but he responded

897 in tactful terms by lamenting the decline of SGS as an instance of “the natural mutability  
 898 of all sublunary undertakings”, and noting the health problems of Johnson’s surviving  
 899 son, Colonel Maurice Johnson, which made him, in contrast with the “affability and  
 900 readiness of communication” of his nephew Fairfax Johnson, “an incommunicable,  
 901 inaccessible man” – and, by implication, an obstacle to the revival of the Society whose  
 902 premises and collections had devolved to his care (Nichols, VI.161–62). As Honeybone  
 903 records, over its long history “the SGS has experienced surges of activity and  
 904 development, alternating with times of comparative decline”, and when Colonel Johnson  
 905 died in 1793, a period of regrouping and refocusing ensued (Honeybone, “Three Hundred  
 906 Years”, 3).

907         The state of SGS described by R. D. contrasted painfully with Gough’s earlier  
 908 celebration of the Society as part of the “progress of Literature” (in the broad and  
 909 miscellaneous sense then current), which he distinguished as “one of the interesting parts  
 910 of History”.<sup>57</sup> SGS would, in the event, change and survive; and after Gough’s death in  
 911 1809 his “Account” too would gain a new lease of life when Nichols republished it (with  
 912 some omission, some additional information, and notes on the account’s composition and  
 913 textual transmission) in vol. VI of *Literary Anecdotes*. Nichols’s series again highlighted  
 914 in its title the notion of national progress, promising “an Incidental View of the Progress  
 915 and Advancement of Literature in this Kingdom during the Last Century”; but there were  
 916 also important differences (Nichols, title; VI.1–162). *Bibliotheca Topographica*  
 917 *Britannica*, an antiquarian product of the 1780s, was an eight-volume work in large  
 918 quarto, designed to fill an imposing eighteen inches of shelf-space in a gentleman’s  
 919 library. In comparison, the more compact *Literary Anecdotes* comprised seven octavo

920 volumes that took up no more than a foot; and even after Nichols had added two more  
921 volumes to accommodate readers' further suggestions, it maintained its relatively  
922 comfortable and unassuming scale. Moreover, while the two projects had signaled  
923 topographical antiquities and literary history as their respective concerns, Nichols seems  
924 to have judged that SGS qualified as well under contemporary understandings of  
925 literature as of topography; and although *Literary Anecdotes* was still a densely footnoted  
926 antiquarian compilation, it had the effect of bringing SGS into a declaredly literary work  
927 (if by modern standards a highly miscellaneous one) that became a standard point of  
928 reference. Among other benefits, it furnished a permanent reminder of a claim to fame  
929 that local elites would prove loath to see extinguished.<sup>58</sup>

930         Johnson had used the *Tatler* not only to focus the early meetings of SGS, but also,  
931 in his narrative of the Society's origins, to connect it advantageously with his admired  
932 friend's influential formulation of polite sociability. Yet the differences that distinguish  
933 the SGS project from the *Tatler* are crucial, notably the commitment of SGS to scientific  
934 and antiquarian learning, and its long-term persistence as an exclusively male society.  
935 Towards the end of the *Tatler*'s run, in September 1710, Mr Bickerstaff had indeed  
936 reported the death of the virtuoso Sir Nicholas Gimcrack, in whose hapless person  
937 Addison had caricatured the virtuoso pursuits of antiquarian and scientific collection and  
938 enquiry: in the end, Gimcrack's widow is left trying to dispose of a miscellaneous  
939 accumulation of implicitly worthless specimens (no. 221, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. III.153–  
940 56). The SGS's attempted union of literary, antiquarian, and scientific interests had also  
941 proved unsustainable beyond its founder's lifetime; but Gough's shaping of the account  
942 disseminated in *Literary Anecdotes* turned out to have considerable staying power,

943 conferring on Johnson's ambitious programme a permanent presence in the history of  
944 polite sociability – a presence particularly valuable during periods when the SGS archives  
945 themselves were less readily accessible.

946           In the twenty-first century SGS continues as a society focused on social meetings  
947 and a general interest lecture programme, with women finally admitted to membership in  
948 2007 (Honeybone, "Three Hundred Years", 6). Given the *Tatler's* dismissive attitude to  
949 antiquarianism and natural philosophy, and its highlighting of women among its  
950 imagined readers, Bickerstaff might well have counted this transformation among the  
951 triumphs of improving sociability.

952

953

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Diana and Michael Honeybone and to Matthew Sangster for their generous assistance in the preparation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century; Comprising Biographical Memoirs of William Bowyer, Printer, F.S.A. and many of his Learned Friends; an Incidental View of the Progress and Advancement of Literature in this Kingdom during the Last Century; and Biographical Anecdotes of a Considerable Number of Eminent Writers and Ingenious Artists; with a Very Copious Index*, 9 vols. (1812–15).

<sup>3</sup> The key editions of SGS correspondences are *The Correspondence of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society 1710–1761*, ed. Diana Honeybone and Michael Honeybone, The Lincoln Record Society 99 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010; hereafter *Corr. SGS*), and *The Correspondence of William Stukeley and Maurice Johnson*, ed. Diana Honeybone and Michael Honeybone, The Lincoln Record Society 104 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014; hereafter *Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*). See also David Boyd Haycock, 'Johnson, Maurice (1688–1755)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2010 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14908>, accessed 2 Oct 2015]; and, for the recent expansion of access to and publication from SGS archives, see Michael Honeybone, "Three Hundred Years of a Lincolnshire Archive: The Spalding Gentlemen's Society", *Annual Bulletin of Historical Literature* 2–7, The Historical Association, 2013. For current SGS activities, see <http://www.spalding-gentlemens-society.org/>, and for planned online publication of the eighteenth-century minute books, *Corr.*

*Stukeley/Johnson*, xii, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gough, *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, 52 parts in 8 vols. (1780–90: No. 20 (1784), which first presented the SGS material, was designed as the first item in vol. IV, "Antiquities in Lincolnshire". Quotations are, unless otherwise stated, from Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.37, 58–9. For early rules of SGS, see *The Minute-Books of The Spalding Gentlemen's Society, 1712–1755*, ed. Dorothy Owen, with the help of S. W. Woodward, The Lincoln Record Society 73 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1981), x–xi.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Corr. SGS*, xii; SGS Minute Book 1, fol. 16.

<sup>7</sup> For the origins of the Commission of Sewers, see H. C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, Cambridge Studies in Economic History, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 1–5, and for Johnson's letters on drainage issues, *Corr. SGS*, xxiv and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> *Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*, xxii; *Corr. SGS*, xii; SGS Minute Book 1, fol. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire*, History of Lincolnshire VII (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 1980), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 45, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, 40. See Alan Downie, “The Myth of the Bourgeois Public Sphere”, in *A Concise Companion to the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cynthia Wall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 58–79, critiquing Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989; originally published 1962). For coffee houses, see Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), and Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeeshouse* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Honeybone, “Spalding Gentlemen’s Society (act. 1710–1770)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2013 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/59225>, accessed 3 January 2014].

<sup>13</sup> Isaac Bickerstaff was Swift’s supposed author of *Predictions for the Year 1708* (1708), subsequently taken up by Steele. For an overview of scholarship on the *Tatler*’s ideology, see Andrew Lincoln, “War and the Culture of Politeness: The Case of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*”, *Eighteenth Century Life* 36 (2012), 60–79. Johnson had Bickerstaffs among his ancestors (*Minute-Books*, ed. Owen, viii).

<sup>14</sup> *Corr. SGS*, xii; *SGS Minute Book 1*, fol. 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Corr. SGS*, xiii, 129; Caxton (near the Earl of Oxford’s estate at Wimpole, and the late twentieth-century new town of Cambourne) and Stilton (south of Grantham, and a noted distribution centre for East Midlands cheese) are both on major roads to London. For sending books by water and luggage by wagon, see *Corr. SGS*, 119, 185.

<sup>16</sup> No. 1, *The Tatler*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. I.15–16; *Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*, 98, 168.

<sup>17</sup> No. 71, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. I.494 (and for the genuineness of letters printed, see no. 91, vol. II.71); no. 88, vol. II.53.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> No. 142, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. II.310. Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire*, 261; Geoffrey Holmes, *Trial*, 240, 251–2.

<sup>20</sup> For the Civil War in Lincolnshire, see Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire*, 141–76; for Spalding’s particular experience, and for the role of Robert Ram, see Rose Clarke, *Spalding 1625–1660: A Fair Town in a World Turned Upside Down* (Spalding: Rose Clarke, 2006), *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> *Divers Remarkable Passages of Gods Good Providence in the Wonderfull Preservation and Deliverance of John Harington Esqu., Mr. Robert Ram minister, Mr. William Sclater, and Serjeant Horne, all of Spalding in the county of Lincoln who were taken prisoners by the Cavaliers of Croyland and kept there the space of five weekes: but are now lately rescued by the Parliaments forces, the town taken with little losse, the forenamed prisoners set at liberty, and many of their adversaries taken in the same net they layd for others: whereunto is annexed a copy of a letter sent by Mr. Ram to Croyland, which they pretended to be the cause of that their madnesse against him* (1643); Clarke, *Spalding 1625–1660*, 29–30.

- 
- <sup>22</sup> Robert Ram, *A Sermon Preached at Balderton March 27. 1646* (1646); Robert Ram, *The Souldiers Catechisme: Composed for the Parliaments Army* (2nd edn, 1644), 16–17; Clarke, *Spalding 1625–1660*, 38.
- <sup>23</sup> Clarke, *Spalding 1625–1660*, 53–5; *The Letter Book of Sir Anthony Oldfield, 1662–1667*, ed. P. R. Seddon, The Lincoln Record Society 91 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), xxxii–xxxiii, 56–62.
- <sup>24</sup> Valerie Rumbold, “Burying the Fanatic Partridge”, in *Politics and Literature in the Age of Swift: English and Irish Perspectives*, ed. Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 106–09.
- <sup>25</sup> Grave slab in the parish church of St Mary and St Nicholas, Spalding.
- <sup>26</sup> *Corr. SGS*: Walpole, 104, 238; the two Samuel Wesleys, 42, 56–57, 61, 328–29; Jennens, 176, 230; Ault, 32.
- <sup>27</sup> *Corr. SGS*, xii; *SGS Minute Book 1*, fol. 16.
- <sup>28</sup> Alexander Pope, *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, lines 193–214, in *Imitations of Horace*, ed. John Butt, vol. IV of *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt and others, 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939–69), 109–11.
- <sup>29</sup> *Corr. SGS*, 22; 88–89, 167. For wider interest in the Prince’s visit see pp. 85, 87.
- <sup>30</sup> For the Duke of Buccleuch, see *Corr. SGS*, 69, 113–15 (and for hopes that he might endow a museum for SGS, p. 73); for the Cecils’ dominance of nearby Stamford, see Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire*, 35–36.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Court of Venus*, ed. Russell A. Fraser (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1955), 82–3.
- <sup>32</sup> For the potential appeal of antiquarianism both to Whigs and to Tories, see Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 78–9; Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.37–55 (p. 46).
- <sup>33</sup> Timothy Neve to Johnson, 1717, *Corr. SGS*, 16–17.
- <sup>34</sup> *Corr. SGS*: for correspondence from Hunter relating to drainage, p. 38; for Bogdani, pp. 224, 229.
- <sup>35</sup> For traditional crops, see Clarke, *Spalding 1625–1660*, 12; for the hopes of profit that underlay seventeenth-century investment in enclosure and drainage projects, the resources traditionally relied upon by commoners, and the consequences of seventeenth-century drainage, see Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, 23–116; for rising population in the seventeenth century, and fenland commons as an inducement to migration, see Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire*, 19–21; for seventeenth-century court-backed schemes (particularly under the personal rule of Charles I), commoners’ resistance, and the limited eventual success of such schemes during the Civil War and beyond, see Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire*, 121–30, 153–56, 208–12, and Lindley, *Fenland Riots*, *passim*.
- <sup>36</sup> *Corr. SGS*, 101; John H. Appleby, “Perry, John (1669/70–1733)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, January 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21997, accessed 19 September 2014].
- <sup>37</sup> *Corr. SGS*, 228; A. W. Skempton, “Grundy, John (*bab.* 1719, *d.* 1783)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, October 2005 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47144, accessed 19 September 2014].

<sup>38</sup> Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.86. Francis Scott, 2nd Duke of Buccleuch, had succeeded his mother in 1732, the year of Grundy's *A Plan of the Town of Spalding in South Holland Lincolnshire*, reproduced in *Corr. SGS*, fig. 2, p. 206. See also *Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*, xxv; *Minute-Books*, ed. Owen, 8–11.

<sup>39</sup> *Corr. SGS*, 100–101; and, for associated correspondence, 103–04.

<sup>40</sup> For further instances of the skills and knowledge displayed, see *Minute-Books*, ed. Owen, xiii–xvi.

<sup>41</sup> For disparaging comments from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, see Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, 58, 90, 112–13, 174; Lindley, *Fenland Riots*, 1–22.

<sup>42</sup> See *Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*, 75. Gilbert of Sempringham, also in Lincolnshire, founded the Gilbertine Order, whose houses unusually included both women and men.

<sup>43</sup> Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.9. For the “highly gendered” world of antiquarianism, see Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 69–78.

<sup>44</sup> *Corr. SGS*, xviii, 119–21. Roger Gale comments on the ladies' enjoyment, p. 124. For further concerts attended by ladies, see *Minute Books*, ed. Owen, xii–xiii.

<sup>45</sup> *Corr. SGS*, 260–61; for a current appraisal, see *Corr. Stukeley/Johnson*, xxxi.

<sup>46</sup> Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.25. Eleven children are detailed in the Honeybones' family tree (*Corr. SGS*, 260–61).

<sup>47</sup> For the overlapping interests of the two, see Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 8–11.

<sup>48</sup> For Addison's critique of antiquarianism as pedantry, see Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 4–5, and for parallel disapproval of science and antiquarianism, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> No. 216, *Tatler*, ed. Bond, vol. III.132–35; no. 221, pp. 153–56; Joseph Addison, *Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals. Especially in Relation to the Latin and Greek Poets* (1726); Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Celebrated as the oldest continuously published newspaper in Britain, the *Stamford Mercury* continues as a local newspaper: for the extensive archive curated by the Stamford Mercury Archive Trust and images of early issues, see <http://www.stamfordmercury.co.uk/news/features/mercury-archives> (consulted 7 July 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert D. McEwen, *The Oracle of the Coffee House: John Dunton's Athenian Mercury* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1972), points out that the Athenian Society, so called, was not part of Dunton's original formula, but was adopted after being invoked in responses by Swift and Gildon (p. 24); Bond suggests that the members of the Spectator Club, despite being given “an elaborate introduction” by Steele, “fail to play any very lively role as contributors or stimulants to conversation in subsequent numbers” (*The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), xxxii–xxxv).

<sup>52</sup> Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.2–3; for the first appearance of Gough's account in *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica* (1784), see n. 4 above.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. “A Letter from Maurice Johnson Esq; to Mr. New, relating to the Registers of the Bishops of Lincoln”, *Archaeologia* 1 (1770), 30.

---

<sup>54</sup> For Bowyer, see *Corr. SGS*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> This is the order prescribed in the directions to the binder, which makes sense of the claim that no. 20, the history of SGS, serves as introduction to the *Reliquiae Galesianae* in no. 2. The *Reliquiae* comprise the papers of Roger and Samuel Gale, SGS members whose correspondents include Maurice Johnson. This order is not followed in the copy of vol. III inscribed to Gough by Nichols and further annotated by Gough (Bodleian Library Gough Gen. top. 105), which begins instead with no. 2.

<sup>56</sup> “Memoirs of the Spalding Society”, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, lvi.560 (1786). There is no evidence in Emily Lorraine de Montluzin, *Attributions of Authorship in the Gentleman’s Magazine, 1731–1868: An Electronic Union List* (<http://bsuva.org/bsuva/gm2/index.html>) to confirm that Gough was the author. (Since the index of pseudonyms in this resource is not currently accessible online, I am grateful to the author for providing this information.)

<sup>57</sup> Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. VI.1; Sweet, *Antiquaries*, xiv. See ‘literature, n.’, sense 1, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2015 [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109080?redirectedFrom=literature>, accessed 24 July 2015].

<sup>58</sup> For the antiquarian preference of documentary footnotes to elegant narrative, see Sweet, *Antiquaries*, 6–7.