

## PICTURE IN FOCUS

By Madge Dresser

This lovely if naïve watercolour is entitled 'A member of the Pole family at her desk c. 1806 at 14 St. James's Square Bristol' and if its painter is unknown, a little bit more about its context has recently emerged. The picture shows a plainly dressed young woman studiously writing at her desk surrounded by books. She is probably either Eliza or Rachel Pole, one of the daughters of Dr. Thomas Pole a Quaker minister and reformer who pioneered reforms in adult education in Britain. The books in the picture (whose titles are tantalisingly absent) show the viewer that this was clearly an intellectual household. Dr. Pole's son was said to have been a promising young scientist who tragically died in his late teens.



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The picture indicates that at least one of the girls had academic interests—interests which were still uncommon amongst even genteel young women at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Both sisters later married, both to Bristol men (W. Temlett) and Eliza survived both her siblings and her husband at least until 1871. The residence itself was in an upper-middle class part of Bristol, St. James's Square—or 'James's Square' as the staunchly Protestant members of Bristol's Society of Friends preferred to call it. Built in 1707-1716, it was an elegant little square whose houses were graced by the shell doors typical of the period. The Square was destroyed in the 20th century, partly by the blitz and partly by the philistinism of planners in the late 1960's determined to make room for the city's Inner Circuit Road.<sup>1</sup>

Number 14 had previously been owned by Sarah and Charles Fox. Charles Fox, a Plymouth

banker, married Sarah Champion (whose life history and diary extract appears above), the middle aged sister of the porcelain manufacturer Richard Champion. Husband and wife were active Quakers who did much to promote and support various charities in Bristol. They were on friendly terms with the Poles and it is through Sarah Champion Fox's diary that we know what we do about the Pole family.<sup>2</sup>

Like the garden in the painting, both the Foxes and the Poles were cultivated, austere elegant and in terms of the fruits they bore, true ornaments to their city

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Mowl, *To Build the Second City: architects and craftsmen of Georgian Bristol*, (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 1991) pp. 14-15; Gordon Priest and Pamela Cobb (eds.), *the Fight for Bristol: planning and the growth of public protest* (Bristol: Bristol Civic society and the Redcliffe Press, 1980), pp29-31.

<sup>2</sup> *The Diary of Sarah Champion Fox, 1745-1806: as extracted in 1873 by John Frank of Bristol*, M. Dresser (ed.), the latest forthcoming volume of the Bristol Record Society is due to appear in 2003.

