

## Gerard de Visme: 1755 and all that came afterwards

Reprinted from a PhD thesis and the presentation at the Annual Lunch in 2017. The same year, the Society's tour of historic buildings visited two of De Visme's houses.

*By Gerald Luckhurst*

### Gerard de Visme (1726-1797)

De Visme was born in London, 6 February 1726, the fifth son of an exiled Huguenot nobleman, Philippe de Visme and his wife Marianne de la Mejanelle, both originally from the region of Picardy in northern France.<sup>1</sup> He was baptised at the French Huguenot church of St. Martin Ogars in Cannon Street, London and named for his godfather Gerard Vanneck, a prominent city merchant of Dutch origin, who was to play an important role in Gerard's professional life.



**Gerard de Visme's bookplate showing his coat of arms and a gold snuff box with a portrait in enamel of Gerard de Visme as a young man.**

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<sup>1</sup> Burke, John, 'De Visme, of Devonshire & Gloucestershire'. *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Commoners of Great Britain, with territorial possessions or high official rank, but without heritable honours*, London: Henry Colburn, vol 4, 1838, pp. 320-322.

His brothers had distinguished careers at various points of the globe. The eldest brother Philip died an infant; Andrew (born 1718) was Member of Parliament for Taunton; Lewis (born 1720) trained at Christchurch Oxford, took holy orders and later became a distinguished diplomat; Stephen (born 1723) was a supercargo for the East India Company. Of his younger brothers, Leo (born 1727) emigrated to the West Indies; William (born 1729), became a director of the Royal Exchange Assurance Office<sup>2</sup> and lastly; Benjamin (born 1730) served under Clive of India in the army. He had just one surviving sister, Amelia, (born 1732) who married Jean-Emmanuel, Baron de Bondeli of Berne, Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> Gerard was educated at Westminster School (1737-1741)<sup>4</sup> and was then perhaps apprenticed to a commercial house in London.<sup>5</sup> The following years would then have been spent in a merchant apprenticeship,<sup>6</sup> and in 1746,<sup>7</sup> he obtained an appointment at Lisbon.<sup>8</sup> In 1749 he became a partner of Purry & Mellish (founded

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<sup>2</sup> 'Obituary of considerable Persons, Promotions, &c.', *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, June 1781, p. 295: 'At Beckenham, Kent, of a violent wound he received by a fall from his whisky, Wm, Devisme, esq; a director of the Royal Exchange Assurance.' He married Elizabeth Auriol of a Geneva Protestant family, also in London.

<sup>3</sup> Hauterive, Borel d', *Annuaire de la noblesse de France et des maisons souveraines de l'Europe*, Paris: au bureau de la publication, 1865, p. 226.

<sup>4</sup> Barker, George Fisher Russell, and Alan Herbert Stenning, *The record of old Westminsters: a biographical list of all those who are known to have been educated at Westminster school from the earliest times to 1927*, 2 vols, London: Chiswick Press, 1928, p.264.

<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that he was attached to the offices of his godfather, Gerard Vanneck.

<sup>6</sup> Five years, in the eighteenth century, was considered the period for an ideal mercantile apprenticeship. Wilson, Richard George, *Gentlemen Merchants: The Merchant Community in Leeds, 1700-1830*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Walford, A.R., 'Gerard de Visme, Founder of the British Hospital (1793) and Member of the British Factory', *Seventh Annual Report and Review*, Lisbon: The Historical Association, 1943, p. 430. Walford prints a transcription of a letter from de Visme written to William Burn of the British Factory dated 14 July 1786 in which de Visme states that he has resided 'forty happy years in this our British Factory.' Lima, Henrique de Campos Ferreira, 'Ex-libris de Gerard de Visme, fundador da quinta e palácio de Monserrate em Cintra', *Revista de Ex-libris Portugueses*, vol 4, 1922;

<sup>8</sup> Burke, John, 'De Visme, of Devonshire and Gloucestershire', *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Commoners of Great Britain, enjoying territorial possessions or high official rank, but uninvested with heritable honours*, London: Henry Colburn, vol 4, 1838, p. 322.

1740)<sup>9</sup>, which henceforth was known as Purry, Mellish and DeVisme. David Purry (or Pury) was a Swiss, *Baron David de Purry*, naturalised English in 1735,<sup>10</sup> who had worked as secretary to John Gore, a director of the South Sea Company. Joseph Mellish (c. 1717 - 1790) was Gore's son-in-law and nephew.<sup>11</sup> The Lisbon partnership was in essence a trading house and commercial bank, which in 1757 obtained the exclusive royal contract to trade in Brazilian diamonds.<sup>12</sup> This contract lasted for four years during which the partnership imported over 100,000 carats of rough diamonds on account of which they paid the Portuguese Crown 1,067,198\$00.<sup>13</sup> From 1766 the company was granted the monopoly of the trade in Brazil-wood, until 1790.<sup>14</sup>

Gerard de Visme retired to England in May of 1791.<sup>15</sup> During these forty-five years in Lisbon, Gerard de Visme lived in at least four separate residences: in Lisbon, firstly at the Solar dos Carvalhos and then on Rua das Flores, then his country house at Benfica, the Quinta de São Domingos, and lastly at Monserrate in Sintra. All had gardens.

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<sup>9</sup> Roulet, Louis-Edouard, *David de Pury, 1709-1786*, Hauterive: Éditions Gilles Attinger, 1986, p. 60. Purry's first partnership in Lisbon (1736) with Michel Vienne (was founded with finance from Gerard and Joshua Vanneck.

<sup>10</sup> London: Parliamentary Archives, Private British statutes 1706-1750; (9 Geo. 2) c. 38P. Naturalization of David Purry, 1735.

<sup>11</sup> Biographical details of Joseph Mellish (c.1717-1790) obtained from introductory notes to the Mellish Collection held in Manuscripts and Special Collections at the University of Nottingham.

<sup>12</sup> Lima Júnior, Augusto de, *História dos diamantes nas Minas Gerais, século XVIII*, Rio de Janeiro: Edições Dois Mundos, 1945, p. 117: 'Contracto celebrado em 13 de Fevereiro de 1757 com João Gore, Gerardo e Josué Van Neck, e Companhia, e com David Purry, Gerardo Devisme, e David Mellish & Companhia para a Extração dos Diamantes.' This contract ran until 1761 when it passed to Daniel Gildemeester.

<sup>13</sup> Portuguese currency in the eighteenth century was expressed in thousands of reis (*mil reis*). This figure of just over a million reis would therefore become a thousand *mil reis*. Such an amount was also known as a *conto de reis*. Filho, Adonias, 'Do descobrimento dos diamantes, e diferentes methodos, que se tem praticado na sua extração', *Anais da Biblioteca Nacional*, Rio de Janeiro, vol 80, 1960, pp. 7- 45.

<sup>14</sup> National Archives, Lisbon, Torre do Tombo, Registro de Decretos do Ministro do Reino, liv. 2.º, 211, fl. 46. Brazilwood contract with Gerard de Visme. 25 Oct., 1776.

<sup>15</sup> Walford, A.R., 'Gerard de Visme, Founder of the British Hospital (1793) and Member of the British Factory', *Seventh Annual Report and Review*, Lisbon: The Historical Association 1943, p.435. Letter to the British Factory from Gerard de Visme, 19 Mar. 1793.



**Portrait of Gerard de Visme, aged 57, in 1783, by Thomas Hickey<sup>16</sup>**

### **De Visme's houses in Lisbon**

The Solar dos Carvalhos on Rua Formosa still exists, though the street is now called Rua do Século. Today it is better known as the Palácio Pombal. Famously an inflated rent of four-thousand cruzados a year was paid by Purry, Mellish and De Visme so as to curry favour with the Marquês de Pombal. Since 1760, this house has received water overflowing from the public fountain across the road, which enabled de Visme's gardens to be filled with fountains, orchards and pineapples.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ©National Trust Images. Credit - National Trust, Tyntesfield, Gloucestershire, U.K.

<sup>17</sup> Lisbon: Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (National Archives), Notários, Cartório 9 – A, Maço 101, Livro 627, fls. 59-60v. Rental Agreement between the Conde de Oyeras [Pombal] and Gerard de Visme with David de Purry, 20 April, 1786.

There is a very brief description of this garden on Rua Formosa in the travel journal of Déodat Gratet de Dolomieu, a French Geologist who visited Portugal in 1777, from which we learn that de Visme had a greenhouse and a collection of exotic plants in the centre of Lisbon.<sup>18</sup>

The Marquis de Bombelles, French ambassador to Portugal from 1786-1788, though somewhat disparaging of de Visme's opulence, admired the orange trees growing on the terraces of de Visme's later townhouse on Rua das Flores overlooking the Tagus (translated):

“... he sees from his terrace, from an agreeable distance, all the vessels that enter and leave the Tagus or that are berthed there. He enjoys this charming sight from under the shade of orange trees that, healthier than those of the country in general, reach a great height and have equally extended braches. Their golden fruits hung above our heads in such abundance that I thought myself in the garden of the Hesperides”.<sup>19</sup>



**Solar dos Carvalhos (Palácio Pombal), Lisbon**

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<sup>18</sup> Lacroix, Alfred, *Notes de voyage de Dolomieu en Portugal et en Espagne (1778) par M. Alfred Lacroix, Extrait du Bulletin de la Section de Géographie*, Paris: Impr. nationale, vol 26, 1922, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Bombelles, Marc, *Journal d'un ambassadeur de France au Portugal, 1786-1788 Marquis de Bombelles*. Roger Kann, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1979 pp 44.45.



**De Visme's townhouse on Rua das Flores, Lisbon**

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