

Introduction: Reading History and the Royal Society

Does the intellectual hinterland of men of science matter? It is accepted that natural philosophers will master technical practices and processes associated with their science: an astronomer will be adept at the workings both of a telescope and of the mathematics needed to analyse and present their results, just as a botanist will be familiar with the collecting, pressing and presentational practices of a herbarium. Should reading also be included in the technical practices expected of a natural philosopher? What do we know about the reading of natural philosophers in the eighteenth century, and how does that reading contribute to the history of science?

This Element explores the reading habits of the Hardwicke Circle, a small group of men influential in the Royal Society, and its primary publication, *Philosophical Transactions*, in the mid-eighteenth century. The principal actors are Thomas Birch (1705–66), Secretary of the Royal Society from 1752 to 1765, and Philip Yorke (1720–90), second earl of Hardwicke from 1764. It explores and measures the reading undertaken by these men and asks what books and manuscripts, and the cultural practices they supported, meant to them. They were voracious and omnivorous readers and, while some of their reading was undertaken ‘merely’ for entertainment or curiosity, they also developed a range of more studious reading practices that allowed them to survey, identify, catalogue and summarise their reading. In their hands, the practice of reading was an active and productive pursuit closely integrated into their wider intellectual culture. Unusually, perhaps, they left an organised and systematic record of their reading in their correspondence. In their letters, they not only gave notice of the texts they read and encountered; they also performed a range of scholarly and critical activities, including attribution and correction and, sometimes at heroic scale, summarisation and transcription. They also searched for texts for each other, purchased, borrowed or lent them, and sent them between their houses. Considered together, these practices amount to a distinctive Hardwicke Circle reading culture.

This Element argues that Hardwicke Circle reading practices had been established in the course of their engagement with history writing, both the writing and publication of their own works of history, but also in managing the print and manuscript resources needed for that writing. They made use of these organised and studious reading habits to measure and determine the value of their own history writing and that of their historiographical allies, critics and enemies. The power and privilege that accrued to Yorke through the influence of his father, Philip Yorke, Lord Chancellor Hardwicke (1690–1764), facilitated

the dominance of his circle in the Royal Society in the 1750s.¹ Their systems and practices of reading, the Hardwicke Circle reading culture, were subsequently deployed in processes that organised and categorised their reading in natural philosophy, especially learned journals and the publications of scientific institutions. Analysis of their reading allows us to track their pivot from history writing to scientific administration in the 1750s as they worked to reform and renovate the back-office functions of the Royal Society and the British Museum.

To investigate the reading cultures of the Hardwicke Circle, this Element makes a quantitative study of the evidence of their reading recorded in the ‘Weekly Letter’, a private correspondence written between Birch and Yorke from 1741 to 1766. It comprises 687 letters in total, 433 of which were written by Birch, together with 254 replies by Yorke (British Library: Add MS 35396–400).² Birch described his correspondence as a report on ‘the State of the Literary World’ and that of ‘the Political one’.³ Sent on Saturday, Birch’s contribution consisted of a remarkably regular weekly letter – or hebdomadal – describing the political, literary and scientific news of London. It was written on a half-folio sheet folded in two to create a four-page letter, occasionally extended by another bifolium to make a more substantial letter of five or six pages. Birch’s notebooks show that his contribution was carefully composed and revised and that the sent letter was a fine copy.⁴ Yorke’s replies, describing his literary, political and scientific responses, were less frequent, less regular, shorter and more off-hand, reflecting his more elevated status. Although a late example, the Weekly Letter adopts and imitates many of the practices of the seventeenth-century scribal newsletter, a media format that was the subject of Birch and Yorke’s own research.⁵

The research presented here analyses the Weekly Letter for evidence of the Hardwicke Circle’s reading culture. It identifies the texts they engaged with and explores the role of reading in their intellectual life by quantifying and analysing them according to distinct criteria. The research takes an expansive view of reading so as to include all forms of reading matter, including pamphlets,

¹ For clarity, this research refers to Philip Yorke, second earl of Hardwicke (1720–90), as Yorke, and his father the Lord Chancellor, Philip Yorke, first earl of Hardwicke (1690–1764), as Hardwicke.

² British Library [hereafter BL]: Add MS 35396–400: Correspondence of Philip Yorke, second earl of Hardwicke, with Rev. Thomas Birch, D. D., Secretary to the Royal Society; Gunther, *Birch*, pp. 45–6.

³ BL: Add MS 35396: Birch to Yorke, 29 August 1741, ff. 13–14 (14v). All Birch letters addressed from London unless otherwise noted.

⁴ BL: Add MS 4471: Private Account Books 1759–61, ff. 143–56.

⁵ On the organisation of the Weekly Letter see Ellis, ‘Birch’s “Weekly letter”’. On the scribal newsletter or *nouvelle à la main* see Moureau, *Répertoire des nouvelles à main*.

manuscripts and other written intellectual products (reports, sermons and letters), some of which were read aloud, as well as the ephemeral or quotidian world of newspapers, journals and periodicals, all of which were embedded within a series of events and assemblies such as lectures, meetings, performances and dinners. The research also explores books that circulated between Birch and Yorke and their wider circle; their antiquarian interests in seventeenth-century English, British and Irish history; and their curiosity about contemporary publication practices. It situates these reading events in the intellectual and political interests of the Hardwicke Circle and the Royal Society.⁶

The term ‘reading’ in this Element is inclusive and extended. Recent approaches to reading studies have expanded our conception of reading from the passive consumption of written material, to seeing it as an active process, encompassing a wide range of things to do with books, as Leah Price memorably phrased it. In her study, Price set out to ‘reconstruct nineteenth-century understandings of, and feelings toward, the uses of printed matter’. She establishes three ‘operations’ that happen to books: ‘reading (doing something with words), handling (doing something with the object), and circulating (doing something to, or with, other persons by means of the book – whether by cementing or severing relationships, whether by giving and receiving books or by withholding and rejecting them’.⁷ Without describing these three modes in exactly the same way, Abigail Williams’s *The Social Life of Books* (2017) further explores the diverse ways that books in the eighteenth century were the subject of collective and sociable activities, including reading clubs, reading aloud, circulating libraries and common-placing. There are some distinctive features of the Birch and Yorke reading, such as their sustained interest in reading beyond the printed book, especially manuscript, often in extensive and unpublished historical manuscript collections; and the forms of reading aloud practised at the Royal Society.

Historians of reading have described the middle of the eighteenth century as an important point of transition. An influential distinction has been drawn between intensive and extensive reading, as Rolf Engelsing was the first to argue in 1970.⁸ Intensive readers read and reread a few texts, ‘slowly, repeatedly, reverently’, such as the Bible or Livy, books that never become outdated or irrelevant to their readers. In Engelsing’s view, the latter was giving way

⁶ The term ‘Hardwicke Circle’ was not used in the eighteenth century. It was first used in Higson, ‘Lord Willoughby of Parham’, p. 172, and gained currency in Miller’s ‘The “Hardwicke Circle”’, pp. 74–81.

⁷ Price, *How to do things with books*, pp. 5–6.

⁸ Engelsing, ‘Die perioden’; Wittmann, ‘Reading revolution’.

increasingly to the former in the eighteenth century. Birch and Yorke read in both these modes, depending on the context. Robert DeMaria's *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* elaborates four modes of reading – 'study', 'perusal', 'mere reading' and 'curious reading' – the first two of which might be mapped on to Engelsing's intensive, and the latter two, extensive reading. Birch and Yorke certainly undertook reading in the mode DeMaria calls 'study' (repeated, learned and in depth) and 'perusal' (more gentlemanly, immediate and improving), although, like Johnson, Yorke was sometimes reluctant to be seen as too studious and pedantic. Birch's notekeeping, summarisation and transcription habits are part of this kind of the practice of scholarly study. Equally, Birch and Yorke enjoyed the quotidian pleasures of periodicals, novels, satire and literary gossip – forms of 'mere' and 'curious' reading, consuming many texts and books, encountered in diverse ways and consumed by 'skimming and skipping, devouring and discarding'.⁹ Although DeMaria's study of Johnson's reading as a man of letters is significant, the Hardwicke Circle's reading culture remains distinctive, especially in its preference for scholarly systems and practices.

This Element begins with a prosopographical account of the key players, especially Birch and Yorke, and describes the role the Weekly Letter played in the Hardwicke Circle. It scopes the dimensions of the Hardwicke Circle and surveys its successful effort to gain control of the Royal Society's higher offices in the early 1750s. Section 2 undertakes a detailed analysis of the Birch-Yorke Weekly Letter in a five-year sample period from 1750 to 1754. In this period, the correspondents exchanged 139 letters (93 from Birch, 46 from Yorke). Adopting a quantitative approach, it begins by detailing the parameters of the sample, defining key terms such as 'reading event' and exploring important caveats about the data. Section 3 anatomises the distinctive activities of Birch and Yorke's reading practices, including noticing, attributing, requesting and summarising. Section 4 explores in more detail their engagement with literature, philosophy and history, using a case study approach to explore some topics in more detail, which is extended in Section 5 to science publications and related activities, especially the distinctive Royal Society practice of reading aloud. The final section explores comparative data derived from analogous reading circles in Britain in broadly the same period and undertakes a discussion of how reading in the Hardwicke Circle helps to understand their pivot from history to scientific administration.

⁹ Price, 'Reading: the state of the discipline', p. 317.



Figure 1 James Wills, ‘Thomas Birch (1705–1766) Secretary 1752–1765’, 1737, oil on canvas, Royal Society of London, P/0008

1 The Hardwicke Circle and the Royal Society

Thomas Birch was born a Quaker and the son of a coffee mill maker in 1705 in Clerkenwell, London. He was educated in Quaker schools, including that of Josiah Welby at Turnbull Street, Clerkenwell, where he also subsequently taught as an usher.¹⁰ After the death of his wife and son in 1729, Birch was baptised into the Anglican Church in 1730 and ordained in 1731. Birch was appointed one of three chief editors of the ten-volume English edition of Bayle’s *General Dictionary, Historical and Critical* that appeared between 1734 and 1741, for which Birch completed more than six hundred new biographies. For this he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in February 1735, although his nomination also noted he was ‘A Gentleman well versed in Mathematicks and Natural Philosophy’ (Figure 1).¹¹ Having come to the attention of Philip Yorke’s father, the attorney-general Sir Philip Yorke, he was presented to the

¹⁰ BL: Add MS 4268: Andrew Ducarel, ‘Notes about the late Dr. Tho. Birch’, f. 1r–v.

¹¹ Royal Society EC/1734/25.

vicarage of Ulting in Essex in 1732, the first of a series of preferments that culminated in a wealthy city parish, the Rectory of St Margaret Pattens, in 1746. These church preferments gave Birch time to pursue his literary and historical projects.¹²

Birch published a series of well-respected and very substantial works of history in the 1740s, including *The State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq.* in seven folio volumes in 1742; the lavishly illustrated *The Heads of Illustrious Persons of Great Britain* (1743–51); *The Life of the Honourable Robert Boyle* in 1744; and *An Historical View of the Negotiations between the Courts of England, France, and Brussels, from the year 1592 to 1617* in 1749. His *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (1754) and *The History of the Royal Society of London* (1756–7) are discussed in Section 4. Having demonstrated his administrative skills as the treasurer of the Society for the Encouragement of Learning from 1736 to 1738, Birch rose to prominence in a series of metropolitan intellectual institutions. He was a director of the Society of Antiquaries from 1736 to 1747, with oversight of the institution's publications, Secretary of the Royal Society from 1752, and a Founding Trustee of the British Museum when it was established in 1753. Through these appointments and his own activities, Birch was unusually well connected in the world of learning, especially among printers and booksellers, men of science, historian clergy and the writers of *belles lettres*.

Philip Yorke was educated at Newcome's school in Hackney and proceeded to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1737. Yorke had literary ambitions, especially in the sphere of gentlemanly satire and history writing. Yorke introduced Birch to his Cambridge scholar-friends in 1740 and immediately pressed him to serve as a kind of literary agent in London. Birch's bibliographical services included research, advice about publication and proof correction. He also searched for, acquired and borrowed books and manuscripts for Yorke. Birch assisted with Yorke's first publication, a gently ironic historical essay on Roman news entitled 'On the *Acta Diurna* of the *Old Romans*' which appeared in *Gentleman's Magazine* in early 1741. Birch also worked on *Athenian Letters* (1741–3), a collaborative fiction mostly written by Philip and his younger brother Charles Yorke, but with writing contributions from least ten others, including Birch. It anachronistically repurposed the form of the scribal newsletter to relate the history of the Peloponnesian War between Greece and Sparta in the fifth century BC, as recorded by Thucydides and Plutarch. *Athenian Letters* was printed but not published in an edition of twelve copies, one for each of the contributors, in four volumes in 1741 and 1743. By August 1741,

¹² See Gunther, *Birch*, and Miller, 'Birch', *Oxford dictionary of national biography (ODNB)*.



Figure 2 Allan Ramsay, ‘The Honble. Philip Yorke Eldest Son of the Right Honble. Philip Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain married An^o. 1740 to Jemima Marchioness Great Daughter of John Lord Glenorchy’, 1741, oil painting on canvas, National Trust Wimpole

when Birch inaugurated the *Weekly Letter*, he was closely engaged in the Yorke household’s literary and intellectual life. When Yorke was in London, on Monday mornings Birch regularly attended breakfast with Yorke at his townhouse in St James’s Square; when he was at Wrest, Birch maintained contact through the *Weekly Letter* and made an annual visit.¹³

Yorke’s personal inclinations, together with an awareness of the propriety of his father’s Hardwicke name, inclined him to eschew the public life of the writer in favour of a private life as a scholar and historian (Figure 2). His father had negotiated for him a very lucrative sinecure in the Exchequer. Yorke left Cambridge without completing his degree when, on 23 May 1740, he married Lady Jemima Campbell (1722–97), *suo jure* Marchioness Grey (hereafter referred to as Lady Grey (Figure 3)). The granddaughter of the Duke of Kent,

¹³ The Birch-Yorke relationship is described as ‘friendship as intermediation’ in Schellenberg, *Literary coteries*, pp. 25–59, and as a friendship mediated by patronage by Almagor, ‘Friendship’, 468–97.



Figure 3 Allan Ramsay, ‘Jemima Marchioness Grey Daughter of John Lord Glenorchy married An^o. 1740 to the Honble. Philip Yorke Eldest Son of the Right Honble. Philip Lord Hardwicke Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain’, 1741, oil painting on canvas, National Trust Wimpole

her inherited property included Wrest Park, a substantial country house near Flitwick in Bedfordshire. Yorke and Lady Grey had an affectionate marriage, sharing interests in landscape gardening, architecture, natural philosophy and literature. Yorke was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in January 1741; and then to the House of Commons for Reigate, Surrey, in 1741; and in 1747, for Cambridgeshire.

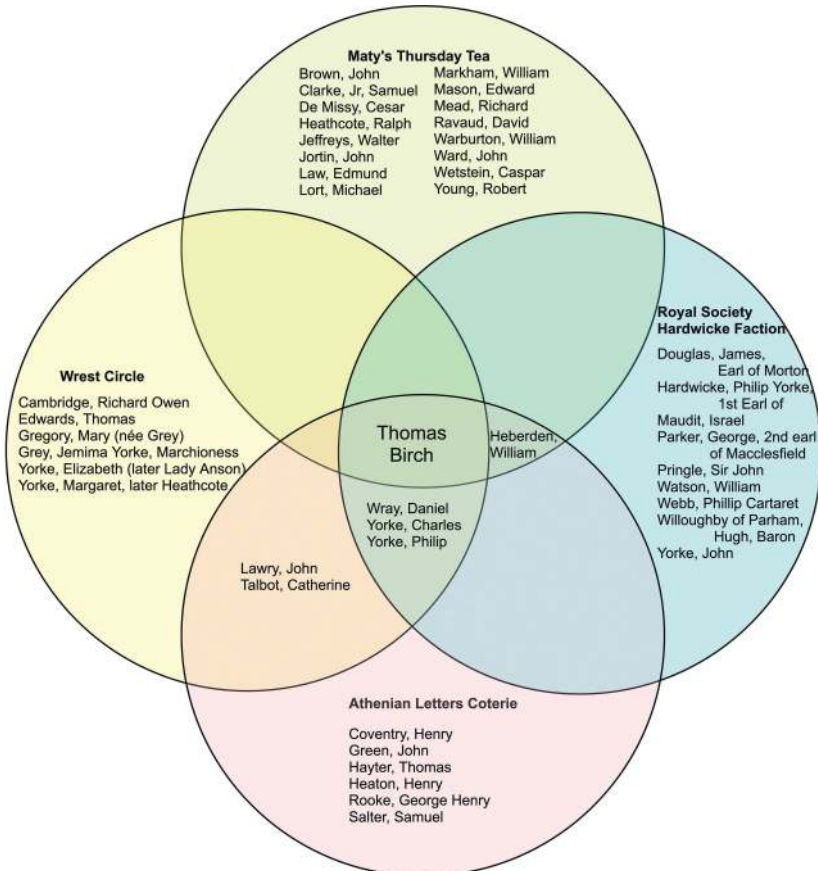
Both Birch and Yorke benefitted from the political and financial power of Yorke’s father, Philip Yorke, the first earl of Hardwicke (Figure 4). Trained as a barrister, he was elected a Member of Parliament in 1719 and was appointed attorney-general in 1724. In 1725, he purchased the estate of Hardwicke in Gloucestershire for £24,000, and, in 1740, that of Wimpole in Cambridgeshire for £100,000. Sir Robert Walpole appointed him Lord Chancellor in 1737,



Figure 4 John Wills, engraved by James McArdell, ‘The Right Honble. Philip Lord Hardwicke, Baron of Hardwicke, Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain’, 1744–54, engraving, Rijksmuseumn Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-32.445

a post he occupied until 1756. He was created first earl of Hardwicke in 1754. As well as being a powerful and active judge, he was a politician of great ability affiliated with the Court Whigs as the Duke of Newcastle’s most trusted advisor. Hardwicke’s post as Lord Chancellor made him, as the chief law lord, a man capable of considerable patronage and largesse. He was very concerned to advance the interests of his children. As Horace Walpole said of the Yorkes in September 1757: ‘That family is very powerful.’¹⁴ Birch and Yorke channelled his influence to their own local and institutional purposes in the Hardwicke Circle. In so doing they promoted the cultural programme of the Court Whigs: firmly supporting the Hanoverian succession, the rule of law, constitutional monarchy in the model of 1688, orthodox Protestant and Anglican theology, the

¹⁴ Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 3 September 1757, *Walpole’s correspondence*, Vol. 21, p. 129.



Wrest circle as defined by Jemima Hubberstey, 'The Wrest circle: literary coteries and their influence on landscape design, 1740-1760' (Oxford: unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2022), pp. 2-3

Athenian Letters Coterie as recorded in *Athenian Letters* (1741-1743).

Maty's Thursday Tea according to Gunther, *Birch*, p. 53; Janssen, *Matthew Maty and the Journal Britannique* (1975), pp. 30-31.

Royal Society Hardwicke Faction as defined in David Miller, 'The "Hardwicke circle"', (1998), pp. 74-79

Figure 5 The Hardwicke Circle, 1740–66

value of trade, credit and the commercial system; and a distrust of popular democracy, riots and mobs, sexual libertinage, Catholic superstition and Jacobite revisionism.¹⁵

The *Weekly Letter*, written by Birch and Yorke, was an important conduit of information for the Hardwicke Circle in the Royal Society. Birch and Yorke's letters operated as the mediating connection between a series of overlapping but discontinuous social circles and intellectual networks, as shown in Figure 5. As the only point of contact between these circles and networks, Birch acts as

¹⁵ Browning, *The court Whigs*, pp. 151–74.