

'Gainsborough's 'Blue boy

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On Wednesday Se'nnight Richard Nash, Esq. brought with him from London, as a Present from his Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales to the Corporation of Bath, a beautiful gilt Vase, richly embellish'd with the Arms of his Royal Highness on one Side, and the Arms of the City on the other, and his Highness's Crest on the Cover, all finely ornamented and interspersed with the Fruit of the Vine and its Leaves; the Handle composed of two Snakes, whose Tails are beautifully interwoven and twisted amidst the Grapes and Leaves. The Waiter has also the Arms of his Royal Highness on the fore Part, with a Border of Barroque Work round it, and the Arms of the City on the Back Part; the Whole of an entire New Taste, and much admired.⁴

This use of 'Barroque' to describe decoration on this cup and salver not only antedates the first *OED* entry by nearly thirty

years, but it does so in a way that signals the Baroque style of decoration to be a current and admirable 'New Taste'. Like the armorial crests and serpentine handle, the 'Barroque' border also must have been approved by Frederick, Prince of Wales, who was a patron of expatriate Continental Baroque artists such as Jacopo Amigoni and Philip Mercier.⁵ The decorative cup and salver were exported to Bath from London, received by the corporation of Bath, then reported on in Bristol a week later. Completing the circle from London to Bath and back again, the report was finally printed in a London journal, revealing a circuit through which style travelled. In this decidedly casual use, the phrase 'Barroque Work' suggests an understood compound (not unlike 'fancy work') that refers to intricate decoration consistent with this 'gilt', 'embellish'd', 'ornamented' two-piece set of cup and salver.

Gainsborough's 'Blue boy'

by SUSAN SLOMAN

SEVERAL OF THE key characteristics of Gainsborough's celebrated *Blue boy* (Fig. 18) are lost or fail to impress when the picture is seen in reproduction. One is the unusually dark and brooding quality of the sky and landscape; then there is the steadfast, full-face gaze of the sitter and his pale, somewhat sickly complexion. The colour of the costume – the defining feature of the painting – is compromised by the process of photography and printing. Lastly, a sense of scale is lost. When confronted with the picture itself, it is a surprise to find that it is painted on a child-sized canvas.

In the course of preparing their magisterial catalogue *British Paintings at the Huntington* in the 1990s, Robyn Asleson and Shelley Bennett re-examined the *Blue boy* and marshalled a host of findings that had come to light since Robert Wark's essays on the painting were published in 1963 and 1971.¹ The most startling of the new discoveries, first aired in this Magazine in 1995, was the fact that a woolly haired dog once occupied the lower right corner of the picture, nonchalantly looking to one side, away from his young master (Fig. 19).² It had long been known that something was going on beneath the surface. The painting is on a cut-down canvas that had already been used for the beginnings of an adult male portrait, a picture that was for some reason abandoned. Nonetheless the appearance of the dog, whose position shows that he belonged to the boy rather than the underlying adult, was quite unexpected. Even in

X-radiographs it can be seen that the animal's perky presence is a distraction and at odds with the seriousness of the boy and the moody quality of the setting.

Asleson and Bennett followed tradition in naming the sitter as Jonathan Buttall (1751/52–1805), the son of a London iron-monger, who carried on the family business until it failed in the mid-1790s. Robert Wark simply called the painting the *Blue boy* and his texts admit some uncertainty about what he termed 'antiquarian problems concerning the identification of the sitter'.³ Everyone now agrees that the *Blue boy* is the picture Gainsborough sent to the Royal Academy of Arts in 1770 and that stylistically it belongs to the period 1769–70. The 'antiquarian' matter of identity is admittedly secondary to considerations of the painting's merit, and its place within Gainsborough's *œuvre*, but we would still like to know who is represented in so famous a work. The *Blue boy* left England in 1921 and if not now as well-known as it once was, it remains, through reproduction, one of the most familiar portraits from the middle period of Gainsborough's life. It was painted in Bath, where the artist lived between 1759 and 1774, having moved there from Ipswich. Jonathan Buttall certainly owned the *Blue boy*, but the earliest known suggestion that he *was* the *Blue boy* dates from 1802, and the first printed notice to this effect is from 1808. This article proposes that the sitter is not Buttall, but Gainsborough Dupont (1754–97), the artist's nephew who lived with the Gainsborough

This article is derived from a chapter in *Gainsborough in London*, a book in preparation for Yale University Press. I am most grateful to Hugh Belsey, Shelley Bennett and David Tyler for sharing their knowledge of the *Blue boy* with me and to the Huntington Library Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino CA, for the Robert R. Wark Fellowship that enabled me to reflect upon the picture.

¹ R. Asleson and S.M. Bennett: *British Paintings at the Huntington*, San Marino and

New Haven 2001, pp. 104–11; R.R. Wark: *Gainsborough's Blue Boy*, San Marino 1963; and *idem*: *Ten British Pictures 1740–1840*, San Marino 1971, pp. 29–41.

² S.M. Bennett: 'New light on British paintings at the Huntington', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 137 (1995), p. 515, Fig. 46.

³ Wark 1971, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 4.

⁴ S. Sloman: *Gainsborough in Bath*, London and New Haven 2002, Appendix III,



18. *Blue boy*, here identified as Gainsborough Dupont, by Thomas Gainsborough. 1769–70. Canvas, 179.4 by 123.8 cm. (Copyright of the Huntington Library Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino CA).

family in Bath and London and was the painter's one and only resident apprentice and assistant.

The physical details of the canvas are significant. A life-sized portrait was exactly what the term implied, a figure painted the same size as the sitter. Three standard canvas sizes – a 'head' at 30 by 25 ins., a half-length of 50 by 40 ins. and a full-length adult of

94 by 58 ins. – were adhered to by the majority of English painters of this period.⁴ The *Blue boy* is not on a standard canvas, but on one that is closer in size to two of Gainsborough's fancy paintings of children, the *Girl with dog and pitcher* and *Girl with sticks*, and a portrait, *Master Francis Nicholls*, painted in 1781–82.⁵ The *Blue boy* canvas is twenty-four inches less in height than Gainsborough's

p.213. There was also the *Kit cat*, or 36 by 28 in. canvas, and a 'Bishop's half-length' of 56 by 44 ins.; see J. Simon: 'The Account Book of James Northcote', *The Walpole Society* 58 (1996), p.24.

⁵ E. Waterhouse: *Gainsborough*, London 1966, p.103, no.803; p.103, no.798; p.83,

no.515 and, for the last, *idem*: *The James A. de Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor: Paintings*, London 1967, p.44, no.8, repr. p.45. Francis Nicholls was born in 1774 and was therefore aged seven or eight when painted; his father was John Nicholls (1745–1832).

⁶ It used to be thought that Buttall was born c.1756; see [Anon.]: *The Art Collections*:



19. X-radiograph of Fig. 18.

adult full-length size, and this is the first indication that we might not be looking at a portrait of Buttall who was born either at the end of 1751 or in 1752 and was therefore seventeen or nearly eighteen when the picture was painted.⁶ The boy depicted appears to be in his early teens. The use of an old canvas also militates against Buttall being the sitter. There do not seem to be

any commissioned paintings by Gainsborough that are on second-hand canvases. The one well-known example of a portrait painted over another picture is the full-length of Gainsborough's friend and future son-in-law Johann Christian Fischer.⁷ Fischer's portrait was painted without expectation of payment, and the picture never became the sitter's property.⁸ For obvious reasons, most

A Preliminary Hand-Book of the Art Gallery and the Arabella D. Huntington Memorial Art Collection, San Marino 1930, p.20, no.21. Tyler noted that Buttall was aged 53 at his death on 29th November 1805; see 'Jonathan Buttall' in the online edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁷ M. Postle: 'Gainsborough's "lost" picture of Shakespeare', *Apollo* 134 (December 1991), pp.314–19.

⁸ Sloman, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.105.

⁹ The eighteenth-century Buttall family tree is complex, but the key relationships



20. *Gainsborough Dupont*, by Thomas Gainsborough. 1770–72. Canvas, 44.5 by 36 cm. (Tate, London).

portraits of children were painted for their parents, but Buttall's father, also named Jonathan Buttall, had died in 1768.⁹

Fancy pictures such as the *Girl with dog and pitcher* and *Girl with sticks* were not commissioned, but were painted as intellectual exercises and for the purposes of providing variety in artists' showrooms and in London's public exhibitions. They gave portrait painters the freedom to experiment, to show off their painterly skills and to compete with the old masters. The *Blue boy's* crepuscular landscape and the soulful air of the boy are factors that combine to steer the picture towards the realm of the fancy picture, and in the early literature it is frequently compared with the work of seventeenth-century and earlier Continental masters, and not just on account of the costume.¹⁰ Fancy pictures, as we know from examples by Nathaniel Hone and

Joshua Reynolds, were often painted from members of an artist's family. It is possible that Gainsborough knew the Buttalls well enough to ask Jonathan to model for him while on a visit to Bath in the winter social season of 1769–70, and most commentators have envisaged these to be the circumstances in which the picture was painted. Members of the Buttall family are recorded as visitors to Bath in 1764, 1772, 1774 and 1775.¹¹ The 'Mr. and Mrs. Buttall' who arrived in April 1764 could have been Jonathan's parents, but the couple or couples who came later were not, as Jonathan Buttall senior was no longer alive. Members of the Buttall family, which was described as being 'truly respectable in all its branches' by the mid-1760s, are likely to have registered their presence if they had been at the resort in the late 1760s.¹²

Gainsborough's biographer William Whitley, noting that Jonathan Buttall owned a property in Ipswich,¹³ speculated that the Gainsborough and Buttall families might have been acquainted since the 1750s. Papers associated with Jonathan Buttall's bankruptcy do indeed identify an Ipswich property, but it is most unlikely that this was the catalyst for an early friendship. The house, in the parish of St Nicholas, Ipswich, was inherited by Jonathan from his mother's family.¹⁴ It was rented out and does not seem to have been occupied by any of the Buttalls. It was one of a string of properties in Wrexham, Essex and London that Jonathan Buttall owned before his financial downfall.¹⁵

Apart from the listing in the Royal Academy catalogue of 1770, where the *Blue boy* is called 'A young gentleman', the earliest published reference to the picture is in the musician William Jackson's 'Character of Gainsborough', one of a collection of essays published under the title *The Four Ages* in 1798.¹⁶ Jackson writes: 'Perhaps his best portrait is that known among the painters by the name of the *Blue-boy* – it was in the possession of Mr. Buttall, near Newport-market'.¹⁷ In response, an anonymous author (said by Whitley to be William Seward) commented on Jackson's essays in the *European Magazine* in August 1798. This writer called the 'boy in a blue Vandyke dress' Gainsborough's homage to Titian, 'one of the finest portraits that [Gainsborough] ever painted, and which might be put on a par with any portrait that was ever executed'.¹⁸

The picture must have been listed in the catalogue of the sale of Jonathan Buttall's effects conducted by Messrs Sharp and Coxo on 14th and 15th December 1796, at the time of his bankruptcy. No catalogue survives, but the auction included Buttall's stock-in-trade, the lease on his three properties at the corner of Greek

(as far as the *Blue boy* is concerned) have been worked out by David Tyler and the present writer and will be published in *Gainsborough in London*; see Tyler, *op. cit.* (note 6) for the essentials.

¹⁰ On the subject of the crepuscular landscape and its use in portraits of children, see David Solkin's remarks cited in Asleson and Bennett, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 200 and 201, note 9. The portrait under discussion here is of the children of Philip Godsall, an executor of Jonathan Buttall's will, by John Hoppner RA, the buyer of the *Blue boy* in 1802.

¹¹ Asleson and Bennett, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 110, note 17; and Sloman, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 80.

¹² R. Harris: *A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Elizabeth Buttall. Preached at Hanover-Street, March 29, 1767*, London 1767. Mrs Elizabeth Buttall was the sister of Jonathan Buttall (d. 1768) and the first wife of her first cousin James Buttall (1719–92/93), ironmonger in the Strand.

¹³ W.T. Whitley: *Thomas Gainsborough*, London 1915, p. 378.

¹⁴ Kew, National Archives, John Jackson v. Jonathan Buttall, C12/652/2 and

C12/652/3, including documents dated 11th April 1793, 13th May 1794 and 6th November 1794. The Ipswich property was in the occupation of John Ellett. John Blatchly of Ipswich has kindly informed me that a John Ellett, son of another John Ellett, was a Foundation Scholar at Ipswich School in 1767.

¹⁵ Further details of Jonathan Buttall's assets are discussed in my forthcoming book *Gainsborough in London*.

¹⁶ Asleson and Bennett, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 104, give the title at the time of exhibition as 'Portrait of a Gentleman', but in the *Exhibition of the Royal Academy, MDCCCLXX, The Second*, London 1770, p. 10, the picture is no. 85 in a list of full-length portraits: 'A ditto [portrait] of a young gentleman'.

¹⁷ W. Jackson: 'Character of Gainsborough', in *The Four Ages; together with Essays on various Subjects*, London 1798, p. 155.

¹⁸ Anon.: 'Mr. Gainsborough', *European Magazine* 34 (August 1798), p. 98; and W.T. Whitley: *Artists and their Friends in England 1700–1799*, London 1928, I, p. 263.

¹⁹ *The Oracle and Public Advertiser* 19/492 (13th December 1796), p. 4. Very similar announcements appear in the same newspaper for 6th–9th December inclusive, in

Street and King Street, Soho, and the contents of the domestic quarters. The buildings were each of three storeys plus cellarage and attics: a warehouse, a double-fronted shop and a dwelling. The last was stylishly furnished:

Four-post and other Bedsteads, with Cotton Furniture, prime Goose Beds and Bedding, excellent Mahogany Articles of every description, a Dining-room Suite of Cabriole Chairs, Sophas and Window Curtains in Silk Damask, Pier Glasses of large Dimensions, a valuable Collection of Gainsborough's Drawings; a few Capital Pictures by Gainsborough, G. Dupont, Bartholomew, Corri, Mompert, Old Teniers, and L. Jordano; a small Library of Books, judiciously selected, Music-Books¹⁹

The next printed reference to the *Blue boy* dates from 1802, and is in the catalogue of the sale of pictures and sculpture from the collection of John Nesbitt MP (?1745–1817) then of 20 Grafton Street, Newport Market, close to the former Buttall home and business.²⁰ Nesbitt's collection was auctioned by Peter Coxe, Burrell and Foster on 25th May 1802 when he too had been declared bankrupt. Joseph Farington went to the Nesbitt sale, arriving too late to see the *Blue boy* go under the hammer, but he spoke to his fellow Academician John Hoppner who had just bought it for 65 gns. Farington called the picture 'the Boy in a Blue dress by Gainsborough which was Buthals'.²¹ He noted at the same time that the picture had sold 'at Buthalls sale' for 35 gns to Nesbitt.

John Nesbitt's sale catalogue does survive. Nesbitt owned two other pictures by Gainsborough, a portrait of his uncle Arnold Nesbitt (d.1779) and a 'Landscape and Figures – a Cottage Scene'.²² The printed catalogue entry for the *Blue boy* reads, in full:

Gainsborough [lot] 63 A whole-length Figure, with a grand Landscape in the Background. This most incomparable Performance ranks this very celebrated Master among the First Class of Painters, both Antient and Modern. It has the Grace and Elegance of Van Dyck in the Figure, with a Countenance as forcibly expressed and rich as Morillio, with the Management of Titian, and is a Picture which cannot be too highly spoken of or too much admired.

A copy of this catalogue in the Watson Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, contains the first suggestion that the person represented is Buttall. Against lot 63 the auctioneer Peter Coxe has written, in ink:



21. *Gainsborough Dupont*, by Thomas Gainsborough. 1773. Canvas, 52 by 39 cm. (Rothschild Collection, Rothschild Family Trust, Waddesdon Manor; photographed by Mike Fear).

6h. 4 ½. [6 feet by 4 ½ feet] in blue & fine – Is of Mr Buttall & sold /at Mr B. Sale 35 G^s.
Has the Grace & Elege [Elegance] of Vandyke /The Count^r. [Countenance] of Murillo or Velasq.z. /& the Landspe of Titian. /Tis the finest Port^t in y[e] Country. /In a fancy Dress. /The Song says Huzza huzza y[e] Boy in Blue /[illegible abbreviated word]
If Van Dyke w^h. [worth] 300 G^s.²³

As Asleson and Bennett pointed out, this tantalising note implies that the title 'Boy in Blue' or 'Blue Boy' was associated with a popular song.²⁴

It can reasonably be argued that the auctioneer Peter Coxe (d.1844) would have been aware of the true identity of the model

each case appearing on p.4.

²⁰ E.F. Rimbault: *Soho and its Associations*, ed. G. Clinch, London 1895, p.222, states that Nesbitt was in Greek Street in 1791. King Street and Grafton Street were demolished to make way for Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road in the 1880s.

²¹ J. Farington: *The Diary of Joseph Farington RA*, eds. C. Cave, K. Garlick, A. Macintyre and E. Newby, London and New Haven 1978–98, V, p.1781, entry for 25th May 1802.

²² B.B. Fredericksen, ed.: *Index of Paintings sold in the British Isles during the Nineteenth Century, I, 1801–1805*, Santa Barbara 1988, pp.303–04. The portrait of Arnold Nesbitt was lot 3 (bought in at 1 gn); 'A whole-length Figure, with a grand Landscape in the Background' [the *Blue boy*], lot 63 (sold for 65 gns); 'Landscape and Figures – a Cottage Scene', lot 66 (sold for 80 gns). It appears that the 'Cottage Scene' was the painting now at Cincinnati; see J. Hayes: *The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, London 1982, II, p.473, no.121 (although Hayes does not include this first chapter in the painting's history).

²³ *Catalogue of the Capital Collection of Uncommonly Choice Paintings, the genuine property of a gentleman [.] on the Premises, 20, Grafton Street, by Peter Coxe, Burrell and Foster, on Tuesday May the 25th, 1802*, Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, rare book cage, call no.199.6 F97. I am most grateful to Constance McPhee of the Metropolitan Museum for her assistance in locating this catalogue and interpreting the annotations. On the opening page, above lot 1, are notes apparently drafted as a guide to introductory remarks at the beginning of the sale: these identify the writer as Peter Coxe. The catalogue is also marked with secondary pencil annotations: circumstantial evidence proves that these date from after 1827. Coxe has written the name 'Mr. Offley.' in the left margin as the buyer: Offley was presumably acting for Hoppner.

²⁴ Asleson and Bennett, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.110. By a slip of the pen the authors mistakenly refer to the 1802 sale as Buttall's. They do not identify the writer of the annotations.

²⁵ Anon ['an amateur deceased']: 'Anecdotes of Artists of the last fifty years', *Library*



22. *Tristram and Fox*, by Thomas Gainsborough. c.1770. Black and white chalks and stump on prepared paper, 21.3 by 18.5 cm. (Private collection, Australia; copyright of Christie's Images Ltd.).

for the *Blue boy*, since he twice had a hand in selling the picture. The fact remains that people closer to Gainsborough, such as William Jackson, Hoppner and Farington do not seem to have known who was represented. Coxe was of a younger generation, he was a very busy man and, as history shows, auctioneers sometimes get things wrong. On both occasions he was dealing with bankruptcies, circumstances that typically make for strained relations between seller and auctioneer.

The first publication to call the *Blue boy* a portrait of Buttall is the artist Edward Edwards's *Anecdotes of Painters* which appeared in 1808. Edwards certainly knew Gainsborough, and it is on record that the two painters viewed the Raphael Cartoons at Hampton Court together.²⁵ The identification of the *Blue boy* as Buttall is not, however, in the main body of Edwards's text, but in a footnote, and the name of the supposed sitter is

misspelled 'Brutall'.²⁶ Edwards died in 1806 before delivering his *Anecdotes* to the printer and it is known from Farington's diary that the final text was prepared for Edwards's sister by Mr Sotheby, a partner in the publishing house of Leigh and Sotheby.²⁷ It is quite possible that this all-important footnote, the one that informed all later writers, was inserted by someone who did not know Gainsborough or Jonathan Buttall. By 1808, when the book came out, Gainsborough, his wife, Dupont and Jonathan Buttall were all dead.

If the *Blue boy* was not Buttall and was not a commissioned portrait one has to look for a sitter closely connected with the artist. Gainsborough Dupont is the obvious candidate. He was the right age (his fifteenth birthday was on 24th December 1769) and had 'been fostered under [Gainsborough's] wing from a child'.²⁸ He was to all intents and purposes treated by Mr and Mrs Gainsborough as a son and was buried in Gainsborough's tomb at Kew following his early death in 1797. Other likenesses of him as a youth are comparable. Dupont had neat, almost feminine features with a small mouth whose lower lip is slightly fuller than the upper. He wore his wavy hair long, with a fringe, until 1773 and possibly later. His eyebrows are distinctive, rising sharply from the bridge of the nose. The oil likeness of the young Dupont in the Tate collection (Fig.20) shows his head lit and angled in imitation of that of Lord Bernard Stuart in Van Dyck's double-portrait *Lords John and Bernard Stuart*, a painting Gainsborough copied twice.²⁹ The small-scale oval likeness at Waddesdon Manor, painted c.1773, shows Dupont wearing a blue Vandyke suit very similar to the one in the *Blue boy* portrait (Fig.21).³⁰ So, on two other occasions, Gainsborough associates his nephew with the work of Van Dyck, or 'Vandyke' costume. 'Vandyke' masquerade dress bore little resemblance to the real clothes worn by Van Dyck's sitters; nonetheless it was popular in portraits of artists and in self-portraits. Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97), Richard Cosway (1740–1821) and Reynolds's pupil William Doughty (1757–80/82) painted youthful self-portraits in Vandyke dress.³¹ If the sitter is Dupont, it might be expected that the overpainted dog would have been one of the Gainsborough family's pets, and this indeed appears to be the case. The English water spaniel that is so clearly defined in the X-radiograph appears to be Gainsborough's dog Tristram, or at least a dog of the same breed, as Asleson and Bennett observed (Fig.22).³²

It was probably the presence of the *Blue boy* in Gainsborough's showroom that prompted several other sitters to be painted in the same costume. The first may have been Sir Charles Holte

of the *Fine Arts* III/17 (June 1832), p.461, 'Gainsborough, looking at the Cartoons of Raffaele at Hampton Court, after an attentive observation turned to Edwards, who accompanied him . . . '.

²⁶ E. Edwards: *Anecdotes of Painters*, London 1808, p.140.

²⁷ Farington, *op. cit.* (note 21), IX, p.3316, entry for 20th July 1808.

²⁸ P. Thicknesse: *A Sketch of the Life and Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, London 1788, p.45.

²⁹ S. Sloman: "'A Divine Countenance": Gainsborough's portrait of his nephew rediscovered', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 146 (2004), pp.319–22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, the artist has not painted the narrow silver braiding on either side of the buttoned front, but otherwise the costume is identical.

³¹ For Joseph Wright in Vandyke dress c.1753–54, see J. Egerton: exh. cat. *Wright of Derby*, London (Tate) 1990, p.34, no.1 for his *Self-portrait* in Derby Art Gallery; for Cosway c.1770, see S. Sloman in K. Hearn, ed.: exh. cat. *Van Dyck and Britain*, London (Tate) 2009, p.205, fig.54, for his *Self-portrait* at Attingham Park; for Doughty, see J. Ingamells: *National Portrait Gallery: Mid-Georgian Portraits 1760–1790*,

London 2004, p.52, under no.NPG 2513.

³² Asleson and Bennett, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.110, note 22. A similar dog accompanies Gainsborough's two daughters in their full-length double-portrait of the early 1770s; see Waterhouse 1966, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.69, no.288.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.74, no.374.

³⁴ Wark noted in 1971 that Gainsborough painted Mrs Graham, the Hon. Frances Duncombe and Lady Margaret Fordyce in what is essentially the same female Vandyke costume, although it is painted in different colours; Wark 1971, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.32.

³⁵ An unfinished full-length of an unidentified boy wearing the same suit is generally dated to c.1770; see M. Rosenthal and M. Myrone, eds.: exh. cat. *Gainsborough*, London (Tate) 2002, p.35, fig.34. Waterhouse 1966, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.100, no.771, called it 'late'. The boy's pose is closely related to *Captain William Wade* (*ibid.*, p.94, no.697) painted 1770–71. Gainsborough painted his nephew Edward Richard Gardiner (b.1764) in the suit, probably between 1772 and 1774; see Sloman in Hearn, *op. cit.* (note 31), pp.222–23, no.125. For subsequent portraits, see Waterhouse 1966,

(1721–82) of Aston Hall, Birmingham (Fig. 23).³³ Holte's suit is brown rather than blue but the detailing is so close that it does seem to have been painted from the same garment. An artist as professional as Gainsborough was quite capable of fitting one person's head on to the body of another and altering the colour of the clothing: the evidence is that he did such things routinely.³⁴ Holte must have been painted in 1770 when he inherited his title, or soon afterwards. The suit appears in other portraits of c.1770, 1772, 1773–74 and of 1775–76, which suggests that the *Blue boy* moved from the Bath showroom to that in Gainsborough's London residence, Schomberg House, Pall Mall.³⁵

If the *Blue boy* was Dupont, it is a moot point as to why it should have belonged to Jonathan Buttall, but Gainsborough did on occasion part with paintings of his family. *Gainsborough's daughters chasing a butterfly* (National Gallery, London) was given or sold to his Ipswich friend Robert Hingeston, probably when the artist moved from East Anglia to Bath in 1759.³⁶ The Rothschild oval of Dupont was given by Gainsborough to Philip Thicknesse, the artist's long-time friend and first biographer.³⁷ If he received the *Blue boy* as a gift, Buttall must have been as well known to the painter as were Hingeston and Thicknesse. The fact that he was one of the select group that attended Gainsborough's burial tells us that he was a close friend, at least by the end of Gainsborough's life.³⁸

It becomes possible to construct a picture of Buttall's place in London society and to understand how and why the two men knew one another in the 1770s and 1780s. The Buttalls came from Wrexham, North Wales, where they were prominent in the local Presbyterian community.³⁹ In London their ironmongery and gunsmiths' businesses were situated in the Strand, near the Tower of London and in Soho. Jonathan was the son of Jonathan Buttall (d.1768) and his wife, Elizabeth Higgins (d.1780).⁴⁰ Jonathan had two brothers, Thomas, who died in the south of France in 1786, and Joshua (the youngest) who died in 1777. Crucially, as far as their relationship with Gainsborough was concerned, Jonathan and Thomas Buttall belonged to a musical set centred on the Drury Lane theatre band which, from 1776, was led by Gainsborough's friend from Bath, Thomas Linley.⁴¹ Another habitué of this circle was the Revd Henry Bate, the newspaper proprietor who kept Gainsborough's name in the press from 1777 until his death. Bate had been taught music by John Charles Newby (d.1781), principal cello at Drury Lane.⁴² In the mid-1770s the auctioneer Thomas Skinner (c.1740–1806), a close friend of Jonathan



23. Sir Charles Holte, 6th Baronet (1721–1782), by Thomas Gainsborough. c.1770. Canvas, 75 by 61 cm. (Copyright of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery).

Buttall, was joint proprietor of the *Morning Post*, the paper Bate then edited.⁴³ It is this musical connection that accounts for Buttall's ownership of the *Blue boy*.

If Gainsborough himself remained tight-lipped about the identity of the person represented in the *Blue boy* it was because he wished to focus attention on the painterly qualities of the work. No-one would have been interested in a portrait of Gainsborough Dupont, a shy young man who lived in the shadow of his uncle and was hardly known beyond the doors of Schomberg House. (Even Edward Edwards had no idea how old Dupont was, believing him to have been 'about thirty' when he died: in fact he was forty-two.)⁴⁴ A picture that was seen as an exercise in old-masterly painting skills, which is how the *Blue boy* is construed in all the early literature, was a far more desirable object than a portrait.

op. cit. (note 5), p.55, no.76, *Hon. Edward Bouverie*, 1773–74; and p.81, no.482, *Paul Cobb Methuen*, 1775–76.

³⁶ J. Egerton: *National Gallery Catalogues. The British School*, London 1998, pp.92–97.

³⁷ Sloman, *op. cit.* (note 29), p.319.

³⁸ David Tyler established that a 'Mr Buttall' attended the funeral (Sloman, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.232, note 26). Despite my earlier doubts, new information on the Buttall family and its businesses has now convinced me that this was Jonathan 'Blue boy' Buttall.

³⁹ A.N. Palmer: *History of the Older Nonconformity of Wrexham and its Neighbourhood*, Wrexham 1888; and *idem: History of the Town of Wrexham*, Wrexham 1893, provide much background information on the family, its land ownership and its philanthropy in the town in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

⁴⁰ Asleson and Bennett, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.104, give the name of Jonathan's mother as Sarah Loader. In fact, as David Tyler established in *op. cit.* (note 6), Sarah Loader married Jonathan Buttall (1717–54) of St Botolph, Aldgate, in 1739. Jonathan Buttall

of Aldgate was a first cousin of Jonathan Buttall (d.1768) of St Anne's, Soho, 'Blue boy' Buttall's father.

⁴¹ W.T. Parke: *Musical Memoirs; comprising an Account of the General State of Music in England*, London 1830, I, pp.16–17. William Parke (1762–1847) played second oboe at Drury Lane. His brother John Parke (1745–1829), another oboist, was a neighbour of the Buttalls in King Street, Soho; see Rimbault, *op. cit.* (note 20), p.121.

⁴² Parke, *op. cit.* (note 41), I, p.14. It was at a Sunday concert at Bate's house in Buckingham-Street, York Buildings, that Parke first heard the infant prodigy William Crotch perform.

⁴³ Several members of the Skinner family, including Thomas, were left personal mementos in Jonathan Buttall's will; Kew, National Archives, PROB 11/1442/366, proved 21st May 1806.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *op. cit.* (note 26), p.143.