A name familiar to all with any interest in eighteenth-century Britain is that of Josiah Wedgwood (1730–95). Founder of the firm which bears his name, he was a dominant personality, with his sphere of activity firmly associated with Staffordshire. His achievements there and their far-reaching effects are generally well understood. However, it can be claimed with some justice that amongst the most critical formative influences which helped shape his character, at the outset of his career, were those forged in Liverpool.

I

On 8 January 1795 Josiah Wedgwood’s nephew, Thomas Byerley, wrote a mournful letter to Mr Boardman of Liverpool:

I have the extreme unhappiness to announce to you the decease of our revered and ever to be lamented Mr Wedgwood. This mournful event happened on Saturday last after an illness of about three weeks—in which he was perfectly sensible till near the fatal and melancholy period, and to the great consolation of his friends was without much pain the last two or three days of his existence.

The letter ends,

The agitation of my own mind upon this dreadful chasm in our society has been so great to cause me to be inattentive to what I owe my friends, and I
have been longer than I ought to have been before I acquainted you with this truly sorrowful event, but I beg you will pardon me.¹

Who Mr Boardman was and why Josiah Wedgwood’s death on 3 January 1795 should have been a matter of such concern in Liverpool are matters for later consideration.

The world which Wedgwood left, at the dawn of 1795, was a very different one not only from the one which he had entered in July 1730 but also from the one which had challenged him when he had set himself up as an independent manufacturing potter at the Ivy House works in Burslem (Staffs.) on May Day 1759. He seems to have employed his last quarter’s partnership with Thomas Whieldon in the careful planning of this enterprise, early in the year formalizing the experiments and trials he had conducted at Whieldon’s Fenton Vivian factory into a meticulously recorded ‘Suite of Experiments’, as he called them, and thus becoming perhaps the first British manufacturer to engage in research conducted on a systematic scientific basis rather than by empirical investigation.²

Combined with his experience of the manufacture of the variety of Staffordshire pottery wares produced by Whieldon and by his first partners, Harrison and Alders, as well as business connections established by them in Birmingham and further afield, Wedgwood was well equipped for success as a manufacturer, at a time of significant change in British society and the British economy.³ In the 1760s the hopes and expectations of British society and its newly rising governing and commercial classes could be summed up in the watchwords Empire, Liberty, and Commerce. Weathered by three decades of wars, rebellions, and revolutions, these concepts had undergone marked transformations. An instance of the moment of transition can be seen in a passage in a

poem by Richard Glover (1712–85), which commences with a paean to commerce.

... O Commerce! Gracious Power,
Continue still to hear my vows, and bless
My honourable industry, which courts
No other smile but thine; for thou alone
Cans't wealth bestow with independence crown'd.

He then hymns Britain's struggle against the other colonial powers,

Ye mariners of Britain, chosen train
Of Liberty and Commerce, now no more
Secrete your generous valour ... 4

By the time of Wedgwood's death Empire had begun to decline into colonialism, Liberty was constrained at home by political repression and abroad by slavery, and Commerce had evolved into a giant complex of large-scale manufacture, with extensive export markets, dependent on advanced technologies, a highly developed transport and marketing system, and an efficient financial and accounting structure. In all these latter developments Wedgwood had played a significant role, and Liverpool was an important stage on which it was in part enacted.

Julia Wedgwood, in her life of Wedgwood, claimed that Liverpool had a larger place in the history of pottery than any other English city and that in the eighteenth century it was a noted seat of the industry, with its kilns on the eastern heights conspicuous in early views of the town. She explained that a successful Staffordshire manufacturer would have good reason to be a regular visitor to the town, and that Wedgwood had for some years been in the habit of riding to and fro at frequent intervals. 5

It was not until a series of Turnpike Acts was manoeuvred through parliament between 1763 and 1766 (an agitation in which Wedgwood was a leading figure) that the road from

4 'London: or, the progress of commerce', in A collection of poems, in four volumes, by several hands (London, 1770), II, pp. 65–6, 69.
Burslem and other roads serving the six towns were improved to allow carts and waggons to supplant the packhorse, although costs remained high. Simeon Shaw cited evidence of the change,

Mr D. Morris, of Lawton, kept a gang of horses, to bring Clay from Winsford, and salt from Lawton, to Burslem; these horses also had crates to carry the ball clay, seven in each; which at times were filled with Cream Colour, to be printed by Sadler and Green of Liverpool. He next used a Cart, and afterwards a Wagggon, for this purpose, when the High roads were rather improved.6

It was a consequence of the River Weaver Navigation Act of 1720 that by 1735 Winsford achieved its importance as a vital link between Liverpool and the Staffordshire potteries, both in the outward transmission of pottery wares and in the importation of the raw materials vital to their manufacture. Although the widening of the river and the straightening out of three sections by inserting lengths of canal on either side of Northwich were intended primarily to serve the needs of the Cheshire cheese and salt producers, its extension to Winsford bridge in 1734 also made a dramatic difference to the rapidly expanding Staffordshire pottery industry and its extensive export markets to America and the Caribbean via Liverpool.7 In 1734 some fifty tons of pottery wares, comprising about 1,000 crates, was sent down river to Frodsham for transfer to Liverpool, incurring a toll-charge of 1s. 3d. per ton.8

There were more than 200 merchants involved in this trade during the quarter century after 1734; prominent amongst them was William Reid of the Brownlow Hill pottery in Liverpool, who, in addition to his own products, purchased

7 Thomas Baines, History of the commerce and town of Liverpool (Liverpool, 1852), pp. 403–4; François Vigier, Change and apathy: Liverpool and Manchester during the Industrial Revolution (Cambridge, MA, 1970), p. 38; P. P. Burdett, A survey of the county palatine of Chester [1777], (facsimile edn by J. B. Harley and P. Laxton, H.S.L.C., Occasional Series I, 1974), sections IV and VI.
large quantities of pottery wares from John Wedgwood. By 1760 pottery trade on the Weaver had increased to nearly 600 tons, in about 12,000 crates, and continued on that scale until the superior opportunities afforded by the development of the Trent and Mersey canal displaced it. The full length of the canal, opened in May 1777, passed through Stoke and Etruria via Middlewich, to near Winsford, from where its course ran only a few miles to the east of the Weaver, forming a junction with the Bridgewater canal at Preston Brook, and emerging into the Mersey just north of the Weaver, at Runcorn Gap.

By the time a packhorse train had arrived at Winsford for a transfer of cargoes on to hand-hauled narrow boats, barges, or sloops (of which eighty were in operation in the Mersey basin in the 1750s), a horse-rider from the Potteries would have crossed the Mersey at Warrington, which until 1766 was the nearest place to Liverpool with roads adequate to have a regular coach service to London.

Both Prescot and St Helens, a few miles to the east, would be known to Wedgwood as towns with thriving pottery factories, enjoying established export markets and producing coarse country wares of the kinds from which he had already distanced himself. His vital concerns lay in Liverpool, a mere eight miles further along a highway improved under the 1725 Road to Prescot Act.

Water-borne cargoes, transferred from narrow boats to Mersey flats or to river-going sloops at Frodsham, would enter the Mersey access channel and be threaded carefully along the main channel, between ever-shifting sandbanks; then they would turn opposite the Sloyne (the shallows in the bend of the river, along the Tranmere shore) into one of the three Liverpool docks, or stand off the graving bank. Cargoes marked off for export by their consignors would be loaded

11 e.g. John Wyke, A catalogue of tools for watch and clock makers, ed. Alan Smith (Charlottesville, VA, 1978), p. 5.
directly and economically into their assigned seagoing vessels. Those destined for merchants' warehouses would have to be unloaded at the quayside, preferably at the Old Dock, for ease of access. A similar procession of flats would move up river: seagoing Barrow flat schooners, with 100 tons or more of Cornish clay heading direct for Frodsham and the Sankey Bank navigation for coal on the return leg, and Mersey flats carrying ships' cargoes of all kinds. In 1760 some eighty flats operated on the Mersey; Liverpool had more than 106 vessels trading with America and the Caribbean, and no fewer than 1,245 ships paid harbour dues during the year.

However, the significance of Liverpool for Wedgwood lay not only in cargoes and shipments. The invigorating effect of involvement in the expansive and heterogeneous commercial life of the town, compared to the much more restrictive experience of a working life in Burslem, would presumably have affected him greatly. Despite having been familiar since the 1750s with the rapidly developing metropolis of Birmingham and its flourishing industries, and the possibility that before 1762 he might have visited London, nevertheless the opportunities available to him in Liverpool were of particular significance; it is evident that, as Eliza Meteyard claimed, 'from the date of commencing business for himself Mr Wedgwood was in the habit of making frequent visits to Liverpool'. His visits necessarily included purchasing clays, cobalt, and other raw materials; arranging for the exportation of his products, initially the 'red China engd' teapots, flower pots, and cauliflower wares described in letters to his brother in 1765; and, significantly, the hiring of workers from Liverpool's flourishing pottery manufacturers, whose porcelains and china-painters he admired. More importantly, he entered into active business involvements in Liverpool.

12 Stammers, Mersey flats, pp. 6–7.
13 Ibid., pp. 95–6.
14 Ibid., p. 8; Baines, History of Liverpool, pp. 417–18.
16 Ibid., I, p. 292.
Wedgwood had a close association with John Baddeley of Shelton (on the south-western edge of Hanley), extending over more than a decade.\(^{18}\) As early as 1759 he was familiar with Reid and Baddeley’s recipes for their glaze and china body, and had experimented with them. At Reid’s bankruptcy in June 1761, Wedgwood was one of two trustees engaged in dissolving the estate; he actually lost £14 15s. 1d. in consequence.\(^{19}\) It may have been Wedgwood’s involvement with Reid which led to a far-reaching and highly profitable venture which continued to the end of his life. Reid occupied a house in Harrington Street in Liverpool opposite John Sadler’s printing establishment, at number fourteen, on the corner of John Street.\(^{20}\) Five years earlier, in July 1756, with the help of his assistant and later partner, Guy Green, Sadler had made ceramic history by successfully demonstrating the printing of designs on to pottery (in this case delftware tiles); he later exported large quantities of it to America.\(^{21}\)

In 1761, the year of Reid’s bankruptcy, Wedgwood introduced to the public the product which above all ensured the stature of his reputation and laid the foundation of his great commercial success: his superior version of the cream-coloured earthenware which he had spent some years working to improve. Whether the juxtaposition of the two premises drew Wedgwood’s attention to Sadler’s achievement might appear dubious; nevertheless it was seemingly inevitable that their discoveries should unite. As E. Stanley Price explained, ‘Wedgwood had discovered a cream-coloured earthenware that captured a waiting market; Sadler had discovered how to decorate it quickly.’\(^{22}\) Sadler had been printing his designs

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22 Ibid., p. 34.
from copper plates since 1758; the elegant and sprightly linear network of the graver proved a perfect counterpoint to the cool severity of the pale creamware surface of Wedgwood’s Queens Ware. Sadler was a man after Wedgwood’s own kind: ten years his senior, he was a capable businessman, an experimenter, who continued over a period of years to improve his printing techniques, and whose notebook includes a variety of formulae and useful records; moreover, he was a well-travelled man (and a visitor to Burslem), and his publishing background had led him to cultivate artistic and musical interests.

Between Reid’s bankruptcy and the auction of his manufactory on 5 January 1762, he took the opportunity to open a shop in his house to sell off unsold stock. On 23 September 1761 Sadler opened an account with Wedgwood for the purchase of some creamwares on which to practise his printing methods. This was no simple task: in December he sent examples of his printing on porcelain to Wedgwood and started preparations for a joint venture, which included setting up a muffle kiln, for the necessary glaze-firing following the print process, in a back yard on the other side of John Street, at number sixteen; he also put his engravers to work on new designs, spending the considerable amount of £250 on copper plates and £800 on the cost of engraving.

In March 1763, with Reid’s remaining stock sold, Sadler acquired his house as a retail outlet. Sadler’s investment in this venture was considerable, and having attained proficiency in his printing process, he hoped for a worthwhile return, pointing out to Wedgwood in January 1764,

23 Ibid., pp. 16–20, 69–71, 84–94, plates 1, 18, 19.
we have been at so great Expense in completing our Apparatus to do the Ware wth Dispatch, a good Demand is what only can make it worth our Regard. We now fire with Certainty and little loss, provided the Ware comes to us dry, which beg you will take great care of.

The following month he could claim,

we have an order from an eminent Merchant here, an old acquaintance of mine, for about £15 worth of printed ware for New York.26

The first shipment to America had been made in July the previous year.27 Arrangements for the printing and sale of creamware between the two were affected by fluctuations in the state of the market and problems of supply, the latter being crucial as output rapidly began to operate at full capacity.

In fact problems arose in maintaining an adequate supply of wares in the white from Burslem, necessitating the buying in of goods from other factories. Sadler had to reassure Wedgwood in 1763, 'You may rest assured that we never printed a piece for any person but yourself'.28 Another consequence was that inferior goods found their way into the trade, for which America was a ready market. By the end of the decade Sadler and Green’s turnover in printed creamware was approaching £2,000 a year. It was reported from Burslem in 1768, ‘they have a roaring trade at Liverpool, we cannot make bad goods fast enough for them and yet I am afraid we have made more than Mr. W. likes of that sort lately’. There were, however, faults on the other side: Wedgwood’s complaint about the poor printing of some goods brought a reply from Sadler, ‘we hope to have the opportunity of transporting those that are not so good, you’ll have little to complain of’.29

Finding suitable subjects for decoration was another problem. Wedgwood was an assiduous acquirer of engravings from the print shops, for copying and passing on to Sadler for engraving. Sadler not only employed engravers, but also commissioned designs from artists in Liverpool and London; one, Samuel Wale, exhibiting at that time with the Society of Artists of Great Britain at Spring Gardens (off Whitehall),

26 Blake Roberts, ‘We fear no rivals’, p. 247.
28 Ibid., p. 30.
29 Ibid., p. 38.
contributed the well-known Harvest Home design. However, Wedgwood found it necessary to impose his taste on Sadler’s ideas: Wedgwood had by the 1760s become a convinced adherent of a severe, correct, neoclassical taste, whilst Sadler’s sympathies, understandably since his formative years had been in the 1730s, looked back to the conceits of the English rococo style. In May Wedgwood recorded

I have had a good deal of talk with Mr Sadler, & find him very willing to do anything to improve his patterns. He has just completed a set of Landskips for the inside of dishes &c, with childish, scrawling sprigs of flowers for the rims, all of which he thinks very clever, but they will not do for us. I am afraid of trusting too much to their taste, but they have promis’d to offtrace & copy any prints I shall send them without attempting to mend or alter them.

Wedgwood continued his profitable agreement with Sadler and, after Sadler’s retirement in September 1770, with Guy Green. There were many vicissitudes and new developments over the years, but the connection ended only with Wedgwood’s death.

Wedgwood’s Liverpool connections were uniquely valuable to him. He recognized its importance as a port, second only to London, in 1765: ‘The bulk of our particular Manufactures you know are exported to foreign markets, for our home consumption is very trifling in comparison to what are sent abroad’. Moreover in a town, as John Aikin described it, ‘abounding with agreeable society, and distinguished by liberal sentiments and hospitable manners’, he encountered a business and social world comparable to that of Birmingham and London; it was rich in ideas and opportunities, and he absorbed them into those confluences of ideas which stimulated him into finding solutions to the problems he set himself in perfecting and extending his manufacture. The example of Sir William

30 Samuel Wale (d. 1786), founder member of the Royal Academy and its first Professor of Perspective.
31 Meteyard, Life of Wedgwood, II, p. 63; Selected letters, ed. Finer and Savage, p. 91.
33 John Aikin, Life of Dr Enfield, quoted in Wedgwood, Personal life, p. 25.
Meredith might be mentioned: elected Member of Parliament for Liverpool in April 1761 and retaining the seat until 1779, he was one of Wedgwood's most assiduous patrons. Wedgwood was regularly entertained at Meredith's country seat at Henbury, near Macclesfield; in London Meredith collected prints on Wedgwood's behalf and acted as an intermediary for him in aristocratic circles; and he was a close associate in the public and political affairs of the Potteries in which Wedgwood became involved. Thus, even before his momentous meeting with Thomas Bentley in an inn on Dale Street early in 1762, Josiah Wedgwood had already established long-lasting relationships in Liverpool which were of value to him over many years.

II

Josiah Wedgwood's relationship with Thomas Bentley, which originated in Liverpool, was a singular phenomenon: in his personal life, next to his marriage, it was the closest and most fruitful he ever enjoyed. In his business and public life, it may be said to have transformed it; it remains a matter for debate how great a role Bentley's influence and opinions played in helping to resolve Wedgwood's ideas, in matters of belief and taste, in social life and public affairs, and in the conduct of business.

The story of their meeting is almost too well known to be worth repeating. The injury to his leg which Wedgwood sustained on approaching Warrington on his way to Liverpool, his confinement to his hotel room and treatment by Dr Matthew Turner of John Street, and Turner's introduction to Wedgwood of Bentley have often been recounted, as has the impression which the company of the urbane, gentlemanly, and well-educated widower had on the equally serious and self-improving Wedgwood. Perhaps also a mutual bond of understanding emerged between the Dissenter and the Unitarian, brought together by the atheistical doctor.34

After Wedgwood had been moved, when fit to convalesce, to Bentley’s house in Paradise Street, on the corner of Atherton Street, it appears that he met, possibly for the first time, a number of the more enlightened and public-spirited of the town’s citizens, with whom he continued thereafter to maintain friendly relations. The road having by 1762 been improved, Wedgwood was sent home in a chaise, writing on 15 May to thank Bentley ‘with a pleasing gratitude upon the many kind offices I receiv’d in my Confinement at your hospitable Town’. This was the first of that miraculous hoard of letters which provide us with the fascinatingly detailed history of Wedgwood’s personal and business life, including many aspects of his involvement with affairs in Liverpool. It also marked the beginning of their unique partnership, though it was not formalized until 1768, when Bentley left Liverpool.

Wedgwood and Bentley’s business affairs in Liverpool were a small but significant part of their relationship; at the time of their encounter, Bentley was deeply involved in the civic life of the town and had been trading in King Street for some seven years, acting mostly as a shipping agent for merchants in Manchester, where he had served an apprenticeship in a warehouse. He was also acting as a merchant on his own account, trading mostly in woollen and linen goods. Within eighteen months of his meeting with Wedgwood he was also dealing in the export of Wedgwood’s wares. In 1763 Bentley became acquainted with Samuel Boardman, a steady, sober Liverpool merchant who shared the same Nonconformist background as Wedgwood and Bentley. This was the Samuel Boardman to whom Thomas Byerley, Wedgwood’s nephew, wrote with the news of Wedgwood’s death. In the spring of 1763 Wedgwood and his nephew had been guests of Bentley in Paradise Street.

36 For an account of the discovery of the Wedgwood papers (now forming part of the Wedgwood Archive Collection at the University of Keele) by Joseph Mayer in 1848: Eliza Meteyard, A group of Englishmen (1795 to 1815) (London, 1871), pp. ix–xiii.
38 Anon. [Richard Bentley], Thomas Bentley, 1730–1780, of Liverpool, Etruria and London (Guildford, 1927), p. 23.
The following year, 1764, Bentley and Boardman became partners as proprietors of the Manchester Stocking Warehouse in King Street, and were exporting large quantities of Wedgwood’s products: cauliflower and pineapple wares, and considerable amounts of creamware, on a commission of ten per cent. 39 Before long the trade increased to include the products of other pottery factories, and in June 1766 Wedgwood proposed an agreement by which he would supply such wares, sharing the profits fifty-fifty, and continuing with his own products, of which he maintained a stock of two to three hundred crates at King Street; by 1771 turnover averaged above £2,000 per annum. 40 By contrast with the ornate decorative vases and ornaments with which Wedgwood made his reputation in the fashionable London market, the goods shipped through Liverpool were almost entirely useful wares. The transactions with Bentley and Boardman ran in parallel with Wedgwood’s trade with Sadler and Green, and he dealt with both firms on equal terms.

Bentley and Boardman also acted as import agents for Wedgwood, bringing in not only Cornish clays, but also small, but expensive, shipments of clays from North Carolina, the ‘Cherokees’, the employment of which Wedgwood later suggested exploiting for publicity. He explained to Bentley in 1777,

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\text{it may not be a bad idea to give out that our jaspers are made of the Cherokee clay which I sent an agent into that country on purpose to procure for me ... A portion of Cherokee clay is really used in all the jaspers so make what use you please of the fact.}^{41}
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They also arranged the shipment of other useful cargoes, shipping enormous quantities of creamware to France, for example, and chartering return cargoes of flintstones. 42

However, Wedgwood’s correspondence makes it clear that he had a far wider concept of his relationship with Bentley, which would necessitate a working partnership in pottery manufacture and Bentley’s removal from Liverpool. The first

hint appears to have been dropped as early as October 1765, proposing that Bentley might take over the management of Wedgwood's first independent London showroom in Charles Street, tempting the widower with the prospect, in the metropolis, of matrimony. To this, Bentley was impervious, as he was to an emotional plea to join Wedgwood in Burslem as a partner in the manufactory he envisaged in his epoch-making plans for the Etruria factory. Finally, in February 1767, Bentley started to weaken, and at what appears to have been a meeting in Warrington the outlines of a partnership agreement were drafted in the following November. The next year, 1768, in part due to various crises which arose in Burslem, Bentley spent a great deal of time there assisting Wedgwood during the period when he was heavily engaged in setting up the Etruria factory. On 10 August 1769 formal deeds of partnership were signed, between Wedgwood and Bentley, between Josiah and his cousin Thomas, and between Wedgwood and Bentley and Boardman, each for their particular areas of responsibility in the business. On 13 June 1769 Bentley and Wedgwood had formally launched the Etruria works, but by August Bentley was resident in London, taking charge of the firm's affairs there.

With Bentley's departure from Liverpool, Wedgwood's involvement with the town, and his business connections with Sadler and Green and the firm of Bentley and Boardman, continued and increased, whilst on his frequent visits he often passed on news of its affairs to Bentley.

III

Wedgwood's achievements in ceramics were of a different order from those of the other pottery manufacturers of his time, and comparable to a handful only of his fellow industrialists. The finest of his works, I believe, have a power to evoke a personal response which succeeds in conveying suggestions of an underlying pattern of ideas, and bestows on them their artistic strength and quality. This power, I suggest, arises from his life-long involvement in a multifaceted world of ideas, which were mediated through the personalities of his complex social life: scientists, thinkers, artists, and divines.
He moved among, and was enriched by, such circles in Birmingham, in London, and in Liverpool.

Bentley was perhaps the closest to him of such personalities, and a consideration of three outstanding instances in which he contributed to the life of Liverpool helps to form some judgement of what it was which Wedgwood esteemed in him. Not long after his arrival in Liverpool in 1753 Bentley became a member of one of the reading societies, the Philosophical Club, which existed among Liverpool’s merchants and professional men, at which the latest books and journals were read and discussed, and he became one of the most enthusiastic supporters of a proposal which emerged among them for a more permanent form of establishment. Subsequently, in 1758, with Bentley as a founder member, the Liverpool Library was formed, one of the first subscription libraries in England. Although the entrance fee of one guinea was substantial, the library was extraordinarily successful, not only as a library, but as a meeting place and club, attended by some 200 of Liverpool’s leading citizens and freely admitting visitors to the town.

In the liberal atmosphere of Liverpool, where the various Nonconforming chapels outnumbered the Anglican churches, Bentley’s religious inclinations also found expression. In 1760 he was discussing ideas for a new form of prayer-book with John Seddon, the pastor of Sankey Street Unitarian chapel at Warrington. Two years later, in 1762, the text of the prayer-book was submitted for discussion at the Merchant’s coffee house in Liverpool, near the chapel of St Nicholas. Events followed swiftly among this circle of earnest

43 [Bentley], *Thomas Bentley*, p. 14. The club members were said to include Joseph Priestley, P. P. Burdett, John Aikin, and Sir William Meredith.
46 *D.N.B.*, s.v. Seddon.
like-minded individuals, and by the following June, in 1763, a house had been constructed and opened in what is now Temple Court: this handsome and original structure, designed by Joseph Finney, the eminent clock and watchmaker, was known, because of its shape, as the Octagon Temple, and the congregation nicknamed ‘Octagonians’; they included many, if not all, of Bentley’s intimate friends, transferring from Benn’s Gardens and the Kay Street chapel, Presbyterians and other denominations, and moving to a more enlightenment-inspired Unitarian creed.  

Several of these enlightened individuals were included in the ten enthusiasts from Liverpool and Manchester (amongst whom Bentley was a prominent member), who met in Manchester, Warrington, and Liverpool during the years 1754 to 1757 to plan what became one of the most distinguished and influential educational developments in England during the eighteenth century: the Warrington Academy. It was founded in June 1757, with John Seddon as its secretary. Its Rousseauesque motivation was summed up in number nine of its rules (which were printed by Sadler):

> Let not any Views of private Conveniency, but a generous disinterested Concern for a public and common Good, be the prevailing Motive of all Measures and Proceedings, in this great and weighty Affair.

For most of its short life of less than a quarter of a century it was extraordinarily successful, and attracted to its vigorous and lively academic life, as tutors, students, and visitors, a number of outstanding personalities of the late eighteenth century. Many of them became closely associated with Wedgwood in his research and in his business and family life. His son John attended as a pupil under William Enfield, ‘that most amiable of men’, who succeeded John Seddon as rector, and is known to us today as the author of An essay

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towards a history of Liverpool. Many years later, in 1793, he published an essay on education which makes today’s so-called ‘progressive educationists’ seem timid conformists.\(^{51}\)

Whilst he remained in Liverpool Bentley took a leading role in one of Wedgwood’s undertakings, of dramatic economic importance to Liverpool, the North-West, the Midlands, and the nation as a whole. This was the completion of a waterway to connect the Trent and the Mersey: the Grand Trunk canal. The inadequacy of the Weaver had long been apparent to Liverpool’s mercantile interest, especially when, as the Liverpool Guide explained in 1796, ‘the minds of the inhabitants are more turned to the exportation, than the manufacture of the different articles of commerce’.\(^{52}\) For this to succeed the improvement of inland communications was vital, and the same was no less true for the thriving industries of Birmingham and Staffordshire. A previous survey for a link between the Mersey and the Trent had been sponsored by Liverpool corporation in 1755, and then abandoned. In 1758 James Brindley surveyed a route to link the Potteries to the Trent, which was further revised by John Smeaton in 1760 and 1761, the year which saw the completion of the Bridgewater canal. It was not until 1764 that Wedgwood and others, including Thomas Whieldon, revived the project, to involve a route all the way from the Mersey to the Trent. Wedgwood promoted the scheme with vigour, whilst at the same time being heavily involved from 1763, on behalf of the pottery manufacturers, in advocating Turnpike Acts to benefit the six towns by improving their connections to the national road system.

The lengthy campaign for the Trent and Mersey canal was a complex story of political manoeuvring in the North-West, Staffordshire, and London. In all this Bentley played a crucial part.\(^ {53}\) It will suffice merely to mention a few aspects of his

\(^{51}\) William Enfield, An essay on the cultivation of taste, as a proper object of attention in the education of youth (Newcastle, 1818).

\(^{52}\) The Liverpool Guide, including a sketch of the environs (Liverpool, 1796; reprinted 1974), p. 93.

contribution. Perhaps the most important was his role in the 
authorship of the pamphlet on inland navigation which 
announced the scheme to a wide public (1,000 copies were 
printed) and sought its approval and support. Bentley 
probably drafted it in 1764, and much of the following year 
was spent in discussion and correspondence about it, notably 
with Erasmus Darwin, to whom its final form is owed, before 
its publication in November. He also acted as a negotiator with 
Liverpool corporation, and with the support of the mayor, 
John Tarleton, secured financial support for it, the following 
year obtaining further funds from the merchants of 
Liverpool. Bentley played a significant role in the discussions 
and controversies aroused by the scheme, and finally spent five 
months with Wedgwood in London, from January to May 
1766. They attended parliament to agitate for a parliamentary 
bill, along with other supporters such as Sir William Meredith 
and Granville Leveson-Gower, earl of Gower, and in April 
presented evidence on behalf of Liverpool to the Select 
Committee. Following Royal Assent on 14 May, a rapid start 
was made, with Wedgwood cutting the first sod on 26 July. 
However, the project proved to be a massive undertaking, not 
completed until May 1777 at a cost in the region of £30,000.

The esteem in which Bentley was held in Liverpool may be 
judged by the fact that in the month following the passing of 
the Act he was entrusted with corporation business before 
parliament, despite his opposition to slavery. Slavery is not a 
topic referred to so far; involvement in the three-cornered 
trade was all-pervading in Liverpool, and even those Quakers, 
Unitarians, and others in opposition had difficulty in 
extricating themselves from it. Open agitation developed only 
after Bentley had left Liverpool.

Whilst under construction the Trent and Mersey canal 
proved itself a success; in its eighth year of progress there were

55 Meteyard, Life of Wedgwood, I, p. 428; Reilly, Josiah Wedgwood, p. 51.
57 Ibid., I, p. 454.
59 Meteyard, Life of Wedgwood, I, p. 469.
thirty-six boats trading on the seventy miles of waterway open, and by 1775 this had increased to eighty boats on eighty-two miles of waterway. On its completion in May 1777, with all seventy-five locks constructed on its ninety-two mile length, vessels were sailing daily from the South Dock (now Salthouse Dock) as far as Lincolnshire, at a cost of 1 3/4d. per ton per mile against the estimate of 10d. per ton per mile by land.60

One can therefore envisage a journey from Liverpool to Etruria in the 1780s as very different from that of twenty years earlier. Incoming cargoes of clays and flints were collected by Mersey flats, either offloaded from ships or from the warehouse at Duke’s Dock, and taken up the main Mersey channel past the Weaver access and turning into the Bridgewater canal.61 The flats would proceed five miles along the Bridgewater to the junction with the Trent and Mersey at Preston Brook. This junction had been agreed with Francis Egerton, duke of Bridgewater, and his agent after much debate among the proprietors, who abandoned an earlier proposal for a direct route into Liverpool across an aqueduct over the Mersey.62 From Preston Brook the laden canal boats were able to travel through Nantwich and Leek to the Potteries and beyond. A reliable and economic transportation route had been created, offering carriage by water from Etruria to Liverpool at a cost of 13s. 4d. per ton against 50s. by land.

It is evident that Liverpool and the North-West were the earliest and most vital of the theatres of activity in which Wedgwood moved among individuals whose practical, intellectual, and artistic interests provided him with the means to achieve the ends he set himself. These involved solving problems in three spheres of activity. The first lay in making significant improvements in the marketing and transportation of goods. In marketing, his association with Sadler and Green and Bentley and Boardman were of fundamental importance; for transportation, Bentley’s services and the collaboration

60 Baines, _History of Liverpool_, pp. 446, 457–8.
61 Stammers, _Mersey Flats_, pp. 113–32.
with Sir William Meredith, the duke of Bridgewater, and James Brindley proved essential. Secondly, Wedgwood needed to further his grasp of taste and fashion and enrich his mental horizons. In this the stimulus and guidance of Bentley and his circle among the Octagonians were a decisive influence. Finally, in continuing the pursuit of his ‘Suite of Experiments’, Wedgwood needed to consult with fellow scientists and deepen his scientific knowledge. In this he obtained invaluable support in his long association with two outstanding scientific figures whom he first met in Liverpool, Dr Matthew Turner and Joseph Priestley.

Wedgwood’s travels into the North-West also involved his family; at various times several of his children were educated at boarding schools in Hindley and Bolton. He took advantage of accompanying them there to take them on trips to his acquaintances. He also visited the Dee coast in 1782, when his daughter Susannah was convalescing. She wrote to her father in October, from Parkgate,

Spring tide begun the morning we came & as that is so much better than the other tides I only drank the salt water one day before I ventured into the open sea which I did this morning & very courageously too . . .

Family and personal relationships therefore played a decisive role in Wedgwood’s experience of Liverpool and the North-West, as brief observations on a mere handful of such acquaintanceships will demonstrate.

IV

Dr Matthew Turner of John Street might be considered a typical figure. His friendship with Wedgwood began with the summons to attend him after his accident in 1762, and Turner’s epochal introduction of Bentley. Three years later, as a consequence of his lectures on chemistry to the Warrington Academy, he was instrumental in arousing a keen interest in the

subject by Joseph Priestley, with the dramatic outcomes familiar to all.\textsuperscript{64} Priestley, however, had previously, whilst a minister at Nantwich, been introduced to science as a subject of study by Wedgwood’s brother-in-law, the Revd William Willet.\textsuperscript{65}

Many years later Turner, as an atheist, published a refutation of Priestley’s religious ideas.\textsuperscript{66} In the interim he played an active role in Liverpool’s social life, being, for example, one of the foundation members of the Liverpool Society of Artists in 1769, and lecturing to them on anatomy.\textsuperscript{67} It has been claimed that he was responsible for encouraging Wedgwood to refine his experiments from empirical investigation to systematic research,\textsuperscript{68} and himself conducted experiments for Wedgwood into varnishes and enamels, perfecting a brown varnish which Wedgwood used as a ground on the black basalt vases to which he gave a bronze finish; the first pair of these was presented to a Miss Tarleton of Liverpool in 1769.\textsuperscript{69}

It was probably at Bentley’s home in Paradise Street that Wedgwood first met Joseph Priestley. As Priestley recorded of his regular visits to Liverpool,

I was always received by Mr Bentley, afterwards partner with Mr Wedgwood, a man of excellent taste, improved understanding, and a good disposition, but an unbeliever in Christianity, which was therefore often the subject of our conversations. He was then a widower, and we generally, and contrary to my usual custom, sat up late.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{64} Autobiography of Joseph Priestley, intro., p. 94; McLachlan, Warrington Academy, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{66} William Hammon [pseud.], An answer to Dr. Priestley’s letters to a philosophical unbeliever (London, 1782).
\textsuperscript{67} Darcy, Encouragement of fine arts, pp. 25–6, 29; D.N.B.
\textsuperscript{68} Autobiography of Joseph Priestley, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{70} Autobiography of Joseph Priestley, p. 91.
This would have been in 1761, when Priestley was appointed to the Warrington Academy, where he stayed for a further six years. Their intimacy continued, at first in London, when Wedgwood and Bentley were regular visitors to Lansdowne House, where from 1772 until 1778 Priestley spent the winter as librarian to William Petty, earl of Shelburne. Later, when Priestley settled in Birmingham in 1780, he attended meetings of the Lunar Society; Wedgwood was present as an honoured guest, and assisted Priestley in his scientific pursuits. Priestley acknowledged, ‘Mr Wedgwood . . . besides his annual benefaction, supplied me with everything I wanted made of pottery, such as retorts, tubes, &c. which the account of my experiments will shew to have been of great use to me.’

Another whom Wedgwood very probably first met at Bentley’s home was the prominent Liverpool horological manufacturer John Wyke, famous as a clock and watchmaker and, more especially, as a tool manufacturer. Until the building of a manufactory next to his house in Dale Street in 1765, his business premises, like Bentley and Boardman’s, were in King Street. His earliest involvement with Wedgwood was not as an horologist, but as a pot merchant. Prior to his removal to Liverpool in 1759 he had been offering for sale, at his warehouse and shop in Prescot, a ‘stock of Toys, Books, Stationery, China and Hardwares’. His acquaintance with Wedgwood and his move to Liverpool led to his becoming by 1763 a large-scale exporter of pottery to Portugal. He sold not only Wedgwood’s creamware and other

73 The Liverpool Directory for the year 1766 (reprinted Liverpool, 1987), pp. 51, 63.
74 Wyke, Catalogue of tools, p. 5. ‘Toys’ almost certainly does not refer to playthings, but small metalware items such as buttons, buckles, snuffboxes, etc.
products, but also virtually a complete range of Staffordshire wares of the time, in creamware and stoneware, supplied by Wedgwood from other manufacturers. This trade may have continued only until the end of 1764, when he began the planning of Wyke’s Court on Dale Street. Having introduced the use of the lathe for finishing and decorating pots in 1763, Wedgwood had by 1767 become preoccupied with employing the rose lathe for eccentric turning, and Wyke was amongst those who advised him, during the years 1767 to 1769 supplying him with a variety of cutting tools and punches, some of which, under pressure of work, were subcontracted to Joseph Finney. Like Finney and Bentley, John Wyke was a member of the Octagon chapel and a prominent and philanthropic Liverpool citizen: another fitting contemporary of Wedgwood’s.

A person of a totally different character, who deserves mention if only by way of contrast, was the flamboyant figure of Peter Perez Burdett. Curiously, but perhaps understandably, no full-length study of this ‘still half-obscure and exceptionally interesting figure’ appears to exist. Surveyor, cartographer, engraver and artist, and close confidant of Joseph Wright of Derby, he arrived in Liverpool from Derbyshire in 1768 and settled in Old Hall Street. It is a measure of the impression he made, and perhaps of his reputation, that although a newcomer he was elected president of the newly-formed Liverpool Society of Artists, and entered into the intellectual circle which Bentley had recently left for Etruria and London. Whilst working for Sadler and Green as well as providing designs for Wedgwood, and having acquired a knowledge of etching in aquatint, he interested Sadler and Green in its possibility for ceramic printing, and in November 1771, at
Matthew Turner’s, brought it to the attention of Wedgwood,\textsuperscript{80} who reported to Bentley,

we Dined with Mr Boardman, Drank Coffee with Mr Burdett and supped with Mr Green, and we are all to dine with Mr Burdett today and try if we can conclude upon anything respecting his new method of ingraving.\textsuperscript{81}

At the same time he demonstrated to Wedgwood a way of ornamenting the rims of plates, using his surveying instruments.\textsuperscript{82} Wedgwood was much impressed, and negotiations with Burdett over the adoption of his methods continued until the following March, when the whole exercise was clearly proving impractical.\textsuperscript{83} Burdett, however, later worked in London in Wedgwood’s decorating studios. Eventually, in 1774 he left for Baden, but before leaving Liverpool he had contributed eight superb plates to William Enfield’s \textit{Essay towards a history of Leverpoole}.\textsuperscript{84}

Finally, a brief mention must be made of a father and daughter. John Aikin was appointed to Warrington Academy in 1758, serving as tutor in divinity until 1778, two years before his death. He proved to be a mainstay of the institution, renowned for his hospitality, not infrequently shared by Wedgwood and Bentley,\textsuperscript{85} who exercised a widespread influence among a numerous circle of fellow spirits throughout the country. One of his descendants described them thus,

In troubled, bigoted, and often cruel times, these people were Liberals of Liberals, and advocates of Civil and Religious Liberty when such views involved social ostracism, pains, and penalties, which nowadays have disappeared...\textsuperscript{86}


\textsuperscript{81} Selected letters, ed. Finer and Savage, p. 116; Letters, ed. Farrer, II, p. 53.

\textsuperscript{82} Letter of 23 Nov. 1771: ‘We supplyed Mr Burdett with some colour and he edged a plate before my face, with a steel pen out of his case of instruments’.

\textsuperscript{83} Selected letters, ed. Finer and Savage, pp. 119–20.

\textsuperscript{84} Burdett, Survey, p. 6; Egerton, Wright of Derby, p. 89; Wyman, ‘Burdett’, p. 312.

\textsuperscript{85} McLachlan, Warrington Academy, p. 83.

\textsuperscript{86} A. L. le Breton, Memories of seventy years, ed. Mrs Herbert Martin (London, 1883), p. iv.
Aikin arrived in Liverpool with his fifteen-year-old daughter Anna Laetitia (later Mrs Barbauld). Within a year of Joseph Priestley's arrival he, himself a writer of verse, had encouraged her to exercise her talents in writing poetry, and also introduced her to Wedgwood. A few lines from her poem on the Warrington Academy may perhaps also summarize Wedgwood and Bentley's views on art and science.

Here nature opens all her secret springs,
And heav'n-born science plumes her eagle wings:
Where science smiles, the Muses join the train;
And gentlest arts and purest manners reign.

During the last few hundred years Liverpool has been a lively meeting place of men and ideas. One of the most fertile episodes in that period was the remarkable conjunction of enlightened, enterprising, and liberal-minded personalities who flourished throughout the later eighteenth century. It was in his intercourse with this gifted circle that it may be claimed that Josiah Wedgwood's native abilities first found the means to flourish. I believe that in an age when nobility and disinterestedness in public life, and the corruptions of power seem everywhere evident, it is salutary, two hundred years after his death, to recognize the enlightened idealism of Josiah Wedgwood and his partner Thomas Bentley.

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