# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)**

**Portrait miniature probably depicting John Bellenden Gawler (1764-1842), later John Bellenden Ker, wearing an Elizabeth style doublet and ruff collar, with a cloak over his left shoulder**

Circa: 1796

1796

*Watercolour on ivory (licence BK2LURVS)*

Oval, 80 mm (3 1/8 in) high

Gold frame

The reverse with label indistinctly inscribed, '-1928- / John Gawler / (…) / in f… [fancy dress?] / by Richard Cosway / … / of … / … / … - Courtenay. / given to Miss / Frances Courtenay / by Henry Gawler.'

John Bellenden Gawler, better known as John Bellenden Ker, was a noted botanist and man of fashion. The latter is evident in the Elizabethan-style costume he wears in the present portrait miniature, which was in vogue for society events during this period.

John was born to John Gawler (d.1803), an attorney, and The Hon. Caroline Bellenden (1728-1802), daughter of John Bellenden, 3rd Lord Bellenden of Broughton (1685-1740/41). At one time, he might have inherited the estates and title of the Duke of Roxburghe from his second cousin, William Bellenden Ker, 7th Lord Bellenden and 4th Duke of Roxburghe. The 4th Duke, recently having come to the title in his 8th decade, had no surviving heir and insisted John change his surname to Ker Bellenden (although John was always known as Bellenden Ker). In 1804, a royal license was granted by King George III allowing him to do so, but when the Duke died the following year, the inheritance was the subject of great dispute known as the 'Roxburgh(e) Cause'. It was ultimately settled by the House of Lords in 1812 on another distant cousin, James Innes-Ker (1736-1823).

Bellenden's career began in the military, with a commission in the prestigious 2nd Regiment of Life

Guards. He rose to a captain in 1790 and again to a senior captain in 1793, but his overt sympathy with the French Revolution soon led him to quit the army. He did take up arms at least once more however, when acting as a second in a duel for the radical Sir Francis Burdett, 5th Baronet (1770-1844). A satirical print of the episode by James Gillray (1756-1815), depicts Bellenden on the far left, recognisable from his sideburns when compared to the present miniature [The British Museum, no. J,3.60].

Bellenden's occupation for the remainder of the 1790s seems to have been exercising his charisma as a man about town. He was said to have had multiple affairs[4], most notably with The Hon. Anne Annesley (*née* Courtenay), Lady Valentia (1774-1835), for whom this miniature was almost certainly commissioned.

The inventory of Cosway's residence at 20 Stratford Place, London, taken in 1820, records this miniature among the list of works completed but not yet paid for.[5] It is noted against the year 1796 (allowing us to date the portrait) as 'Mr. Gawler – His Miniature for Lady V'. The 'Lady V' in question must surely be Anne, Lady Valentia. The commission dates to the same year that Bellenden was ordered to pay Anne's husband, George Annesley (1770-1844), Lord Valentia £2,000 in damages having been found guilty of 'Criminal Conversation' (i.e. an affair) with his wife.[6] Lord Valentia had initially sued for £10,000, a sum which was not achieved, likely due to questions of his own morality, knowledge and consent of the affair. One witness, a Mr Gibbs, told the court that Valentia had acquiesced to the affair in the hope that it would produce an heir. What's more, Mr Gibbs described how Lord Valentia and Bellenden had even gone together to a brothel, and that Valentia had 'cautioned the defendant to be careful, less he should convey disease to his the plaintiff's wife'.[7]

While Anne's husband divorced her in 1799, Bellenden remained married; his unfortunate wife also being called Ann (her maiden name and dates are unknown), whom he is thought to have

married circa 1784.[8] The affair continued and produced a son[9] named Francis John (bap. 1800). He took Anne's maiden name of Courtenay[10] and it is likely him (rather than the 'Miss Frances Courtenay' mistakenly inscribed on the reverse) that received this miniature in 1845 from 'Henry Gawler', presumably Henry Gawler (1766-1852) the sitter's younger brother.[11]

Bellenden's botanical interest first becomes evident after the turn of the century when he anonymously published *Recensio Plantarum* (1801), a review of the plants illustrated in Henry C. Andrew's *Botanist's Repository* (10 vols, 1797-1812). He also began to write descriptions of new plants in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, under the pen name of 'G'. The editor at that time, John Sims (1749-1831), clearly prized Bellenden's contributions and highly commended him in the preface to the 15th volume. Perhaps having grown in confidence, Bellenden jumped ship when a rival publication was started up, *The Botanical Register* (first published in 1815), where he was responsible for all the text in the magazine until circa 1820/23.

Bellenden's other publications included *Iridacae* (1804) *Select Orchideae* (circa 1816) and *Iridearum Genera* (1827/8), and a seemingly anomalous work was Bellenden's *An Essay on the Archaeology of Popular English Phrases and Nursery Rhymes* (1834). His contribution to botany was highly regarded and in 1810, the Scottish botanist Robert Brown (1773–1858) named the genus *bellendena montana* (mountain rocket) in his honour. In 1819, the explorer Lieutenant Phillip Parker King (1791-1856) named the Bellenden Ker Range of mountains (the Wooroonooran Range) in Australia after him.

Bellenden lived out his days at Ramridge, Hampshire[12], which had been his father's home. He was survived by his wife, Ann, and their son Charles Henry Bellenden Ker (circa 1785-1871). Charles went on to become a law reformer, but with a keen interest in plants and science himself. He was a fellow of the Royal Society (1819-1831) and was one of the first private growers of orchids, which had been the subject of one of his father's publications. Also like his father, Charles contributed articles to the *Gardeners' Chronicle.*

Little can be gleaned about the life of Bellenden's and Anne's love child, Francis. He must be the Reverend Francis John Courtenay (1800-1859) that was given the present miniature in 1845 and is recorded as owning a number of Courtenay family miniatures at Marton House, Penrith, 1835-1859. It is through his family that this miniature descended until the early 20th century when it was sold at auction.

[1] All extant auction house records note the provenance as being 'Presented in 1845 to Miss Frances Courtenay by Henry Gawler, Esq.; Collection of the Marquis of Ripon'. However, the recipient of the gift is more likely the sitter's illegitimate son, the Reverend Francis John Courtenay (1800-1859), and it's also unlikely it was in the possession of the Marquess of Ripon. This miniature and the two other Cosways with which it was sold at Christie's in 1934, were listed as having been in the collection of the 'Marquis of Ripon', however, the Nelson Adkins Museum, who now owns one identified as William Courtenay, 3rd Viscount Courtenay, later 9th Earl of Devon (1768-1835), has since cast doubt on this: 'The miniature was unlikely to have belonged to any Marquess of Ripon, as the miniature was inherited by descent by Baker-Courtenay, and the last Marquess of Ripon, Oliver Robinson, 2nd Marquess of Ripon, died without heirs in 1923, prior to Baker-Courtenay's 1923 sale.'

[2] Some archival records mistakenly note this sale as being at Sotheby's.

[3] No such person can be found in the records.

[4] 37 Jackson, B., & Hudson, G. (2015, May 28). Ker, (John) Bellenden [formerly John Bellenden Gawler] (1764–1842), botanist and man of fashion. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Retrieved 6 May. 2026, from https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15454.

[5] Lloyd, S., 'The Cosway Inventory of 1820: Listing Unpaid Commissions and the Contents of 20 Stratford Place, Oxford Street, London', 66th Volume of the Walpole Society, 2004, pp.199, 208

[6] The action had been brought a year earlier and proceedings were recorded in a pamphlet, *The Genuine Trial of John B. Gawler, Esq. for Criminal Conversation with the Right Hon. Lady Valentia. Tried on Thursday, May 19, at Guildhall, before Lord Kenyon, and a special jury*. 1795. Printed by J.

S. Barr, Covent Garden. https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_the-genuine-trial-of-joh_mountnorris-george-anne_1795 accessed 6 May 2026.

[7] 40 Ibid, p.11.

[8] Bellenden's wife, Ann, was also painted by Cosway, probably at an earlier date than the present miniature. Her miniature, together with the present example, belonged to Charles William Fowle Baker-Courtenay, (1889-1963) and was sold at his sale of 1934 (lot 119).

[9] A child is referred to in the 1795 pamphlet cited above (pp.3, 15, 20) which could suggest their son was born 5 years earlier than the date of his baptism in 20 November 1800, or that one of her two legitimate sons - George Arthur Anneseley, Viscount Valentia (b.1793) and The Hon. William Annesley (b.1796) - was fathered by Bellenden. Alternatively, another child could have been born to the couple which did not survive infancy.

[10] Research by the Nelson Adkins Museum suggests he was probably the "Francis John" baptized in St. Mary Abbots Church in Kensington, London. His parents are listed in the baptismal register as "John and Anne Courtenay,". London Metropolitan Archives, ref. MS DI/T/047/001, digitized on ancestrylibrary.com.

[11] This identification is supported in the research by the catalogue note for Nelson Atkins Museum [F58-60/20], which states: 'The inheritance of several Gawler family portraits by their Courtenay descendants was described as follows: "This picture together with the next were presented in 1845 by Henry Gawler to the Rev. Francis Courtenay, from whom it passed into the possession of W. Bellenden Ker, who bequeathed to it Mrs. Courtenay, of Marton House, Penrith, who owned it in 1863." This narrative refers to portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds of Courtenay's maternal grandparents, John and Caroline Gawler. Algernon Graves, A History of the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, P.R.A. (London: Henry Graves, 1899), 1:353.'

[12] Possibly Ramridge House and Park, Test Valley, Hampshire.

**Literature:**

Richard Cosway Inventory of 1820, folio 226r, *see* Lloyd, S., 'The Cosway Inventory of 1820: Listing Unpaid Commissions and the Contents of 20 Stratford Place, Oxford Street, London', 66th Volume of the Walpole Society, 2004, pp.199, 208.