

No memorial

BRETLAND Family

Thomas Bretland 1704 – 1773

Margaret Bretland 1712 – 1786

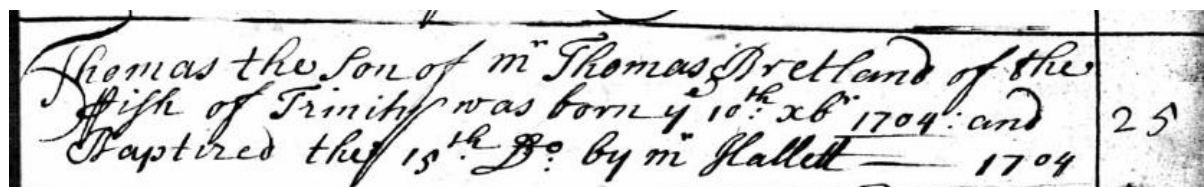
Sarah Bretland 1753 - 1818

Elizabeth Parminter (née Bretland) 1758 – 1835 - also included in the John Vowler Parminter Family biography.

Thomas Bretland was the brother of Joseph Bretland and Uncle to the Reverend Joseph Bretland.¹

Their father, also Thomas, was listed as a serge maker in 1715 when he was admitted as an assistant at Tucker's Hall.² Their mother Ann (née Hallett) may well have been the daughter of the Reverend Joseph Hallett of James' Meeting and brother to the Hallett who baptised Thomas (see image below).

Thomas was born on the 10th October 1704 and baptised at James' Meeting House five days later. He was their second child; the first (also Thomas) was born in 1699 but died soon after. He was buried at Holy Trinity, Exeter.



Times were hard for those in the wool trade and there is evidence of Thomas (senior?), as one of the poor of Holy Trinity, receiving charitable gifts of one pound in 1722 and again in 1726.³

Thomas (junior) married Margaret Powell. When and where exactly is not yet known. Her maiden name was only discovered through her burial record.⁴ Their marriage is assumed to have been sometime before 1753 when their first daughter Sarah was born.

Sarah was baptised privately on the 17th May 1753 at the Mint Meeting by the Revd Mr. William West.⁵ A second daughter, Elizabeth was born a few years after, about 1758.⁶ No baptism entry has been found for her.

A Thomas Bretland was admitted as a Freeman to the City of Exeter by succession to his father on the 6th May 1734. This would coincide with Thomas senior's death in 1732. Numerous entries in 'Exeter Freeman' list Thomas Bretland senior as a clothier.⁷ Had Thomas originally followed his father in this profession?

¹ See Memorials 5 and 35 www.edgt.org.uk

² Tuckers Hall Minutes 1698-1774 (58/7/5/4) South West Heritage Centre (SWH).

³ Clutterbuck's Charity, account book 1696-1823 (1718/1/PFA/2), SWH.

⁴ Mint burial Register accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

⁵ Mint Baptismal register accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

⁶ See details of Elizabeth Parminter (died 1835) on John Vowler Parminter's family biography www.edgt.org.uk

⁷ Exeter Freeman 1266-1967, Ed. Margery M. Rowe and Andrew M. Jackson, Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1973.

Thomas was buried on the 14th December 1773. The burial register of the Mint Meeting shows that he was 'buried at 8'Oclock Tuesday morning the 14 Dec 1773 when he died of a paralytic disorder which he long had about 5 or 6 years.' The record also states he was 'Of the Post Office in the church yard.'⁸ Five shillings was paid to 'break the ground' for his grave.⁹

| | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Thomas Brettland | of the Post office in the Church yard | St Martin | Buried Tuesday morning 8 o'clock Decr 14 1773 aged 69 within 11 days he died of a paralytic disorder which he long had abt 5 or 6 years |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

At the time of Thomas' death, the post office was situated next to The Cathedral Church of St. Peter's west front.



The image above of the West View of the Cathedral Church of St Peter in Exeter from an etching by F Jukes after W Davy, shows the Post office building tucked in just off centre of the image. It is clearer on the image below taken from the Caleb Hedgeland model of Exeter in 1760.¹⁰



⁸ Mint Burial register accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

⁹ Report and Account book of Dissenters Burial Ground 1748-1832 (DRO3693D/0/B/1) (SWH).

¹⁰ Hedgeland Model is on display at The Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter.

Until about 1714 provincial postmasters, then called 'deputies' did not stamp any letters sent or received. After that time instructions were issued to each post town to issue a handstamp. Marks were also used to indicate when the letter was posted such as the one below from the 25th of August 1767.¹¹



*'The letters were delivered throughout the city by an old woman and her two daughters carrying baskets.'*¹² Was this Margaret with her daughters Sarah and Elizabeth?

Perhaps as a means to having a constant income Margaret started renting out rooms to paying guests. Whether they did this before Thomas's death or after we do not know.

Most of this information has been gleaned from Samuel Curwen, an American loyalist who came to England during the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) with England.¹³ He wrote extensive diaries throughout his life but his diaries whilst in England, and in particular Exeter give us a great insight into Exeter's life and in particular the Dissenters who worshipped there.¹⁴ Samuel arrived in Exeter on Thursday the 18th July 1776: *'set down at the Half Moon Inn forestreet where I abode some time, leaving my trunk and sourtout which composed all my baggage and after some enquiry found the house recommended by Mr Smith. I was received by the 2 daughters, young ladies of between 18 and 21 (eldest 24, youngest 19) as I suppose, the elderly Lady, mother of the 2 being absent but soon returned. Having continued there a short hour, and drunk a dish of bohea tea with the older of the young ladies, I returned back to the Inn to bring away my trunk.'*

Over the next three years he visited Exeter three times, staying a total of about 24 months. Samuel frequented the Dissenting chapels, making friends with Micaiah Towgood and Joseph Bretland. On Sunday 21st July 1776 he attended morning worship in the Mint Meeting, afternoon at *'Georges Chappell'* then at his lodging, *'the Eldest of the young ladies Miss Sally entertained us with a sermon, it being still the laudable custom among the religious Dissenters all over England to close the Lord's day by reading a Sermon and praying in their families after the P.M. service.'*

The next day along with Miss Sally Bretland and her cousin the Revd Joseph Bretland they all went to Sidmouth in a post chaise.¹⁵

In August that year after a trip to London, Samuel returned to *'my old lodgings in the Church yard Exeter, where old Mrs Bretland seem'd glad to receive me.'*

Much of his journal describes walks in and around the Exeter area. On the 3rd December 1776 as the evening was mild, he walked, *'with my young L'dy Susan Bretland.'* Another entry shows how hardy people were in those days as on the 7th January 1777 a cold, raw day with a pinching wind he walked to Honiton with Mr Bretland, *'to meet and convoy home Miss Sally Bretland my Landlady's eldest dauter (sic) who had been on a fortnight's or Christmas visit to her Uncle Powell's at Ottery, and was returning home, a distance of 11 miles on foot.'*

¹¹ Taken from a letter to Micaiah Towgood (SWH).

¹² Exeter Past, Hazel Mary Harvey, Phillimore, 1996.

¹³ Samuel Curwen (1715-1802), Judge of Admiralty was in England 1775-1784.

¹⁴ The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist. Vols I and II, Ed. Andrew Oliver, Harvard University press, 1972.

<https://archive.org/details/journalofsamuelc01curw> and <https://archive.org/details/journalofsamuelc02curw> accessed 23/04/2025.

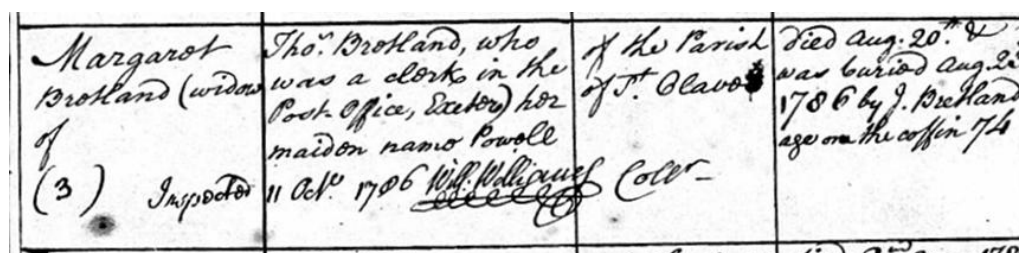
¹⁵ Sally and Susan are names that originated as hypocorisms for Sarah.

On various occasions he went to the theatre accompanied by the young Bretlands. On 29th January 1777, 'I accompanied the younger daughter of the family to the theater at half play: being very much the custom of this place.'¹⁶ They saw "The Lying Valet" a farce by David Garrick. Just two days later Sarah went with him to see, "Braganza" a tragedy by Mr. Jephson and "Hotel, a double Valet" a farce by William Vaughan. The theatre at that time was in Waterbeer Street behind the Guildhall.

Samuel spent many a happy evening with his landlady and her daughters. On 20th February 1777 he was, 'within all day: the 3 ladies vizt. Mother and 2 daughters in my room all the evening at quadrille.'¹⁷

Elizabeth married on the 17th December 1777. Samuel wrote, 'city alarmed by unexpected marriage of a Mr Parminter of 40 years of age with Betsey Bretland my old landlady's younger dauter (sic) but 20 years old with scarce a gown to her back: this probably would cease after 7 days.' This was only a year after his first wife's death. Elizabeth now became mother to five girls aged between fifteen and one. The marriage lasted until her husband's death in 1792.¹⁸

Margaret died on 20th August 1786 and was buried three days later, on the 23rd. The entry in the Mint Meetings burial register noted that she was 'Widow of Thomas Brotland who was a clerk in the P.O. Exeter (née Powell).'



She was buried by her nephew the Revd Joseph Bretland for which the graveyard records note that they 'Rec'd for opening grave for Mrs Bretland 2/6 paid 24 Aug 1786'¹⁹

Miss Bretland's Academy

At least one year before her mother's death, Sarah started a school for young ladies in the Mint area of Exeter.

The first newspaper advertisement for Sarah's school that has been found appeared in 1785. She obviously had success with the day school and intended taking a few 'young ladies' as boarders. In 1803 her sister Elizabeth joined her and with larger premises by then in Bartholomew Yard, they were able to take on 'a few more young ladies.'²⁰

¹⁶ Audience members had the option of paying half-price admission after a certain point which would entitle them to see the second part of the performance. This is one of the reasons that farce was thought of as a lesser performance style as the lower, poorer classes would often pay half-price admission and just come for the farcical afterpieces. The proposed abolition of the half-price tickets instigated the Covent Garden Theatre riots of 1763. <https://loversandliarsmedley.wordpress.com/about/a-dramaturgs-perspective/18th-century-theatre/> accessed 21/03/2025.

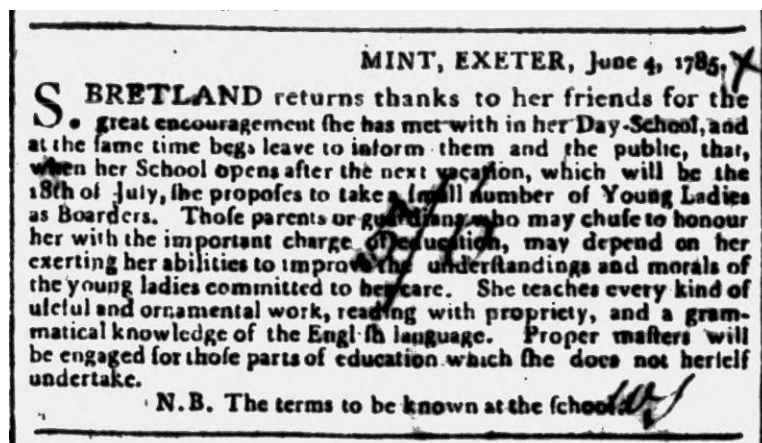
¹⁷ Quadrille was a four handed variant of the card game Ombre. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quadrille_\(card_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quadrille_(card_game)) accessed 21/03/2025.

¹⁸ As note 6.

¹⁹ As note 8.

²⁰ Sherborne Mercury, 10th January 1803. Accessed via www.findmypast.co.uk

In the 1791 Universal Directory there were six schools for ladies listed:
 Miss Braddock – Ladies Boarding school, Peter's church yard.
 Miss Louis – Ladies Academy, Magdalen Street.
 Bridget Moore – Boarding school for young ladies, St. Peter's church yard.
 Mrs Pinckstan – Ladies Boarding school, St. Sidwells.
 C. Sanderson – Day school for young Ladies, Fore Street.
 Elizabeth Bretland – Boarding school for young ladies, Bartholomew Yard.²¹



Sherborne Mercury (13th June 1785)

In 1693 John Locke in his *'Some Thoughts on Education'* stated that he believed educating girls in the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic was a sensible thing to do, not least because such an educated woman would be able better to manage household accounts, converse with her husband's associates and, as she had primary care of the children, she could help them in the early stages of their own educations.²² In the second half of the eighteenth century there was an influx of writings on the education of girls and young ladies.²³ In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had, *'inveighed against the custom of confining girls to their needle, and shutting them out from all political and civil employments; for by thus narrowing their minds they are rendered unfit to fulfil the peculiar duties which nature has assigned them.'*²⁴ Had any of this changed when by the 1830 Pigott's Directory there were many more private schools in Exeter?

We know that at the *'Miss Louis Academy'* in Magdalen Street, John Louis the father was a dancing master, and it is true that many of these places prepared young ladies for marriage and confidence in 'society.' Advertisements of the period list many subjects covered such as plain and fine needlework, Dresden embroidery, filigree, artificial paper flowers, ribband work, drawing and other fancy work. Writing, arithmetic, music, and French were also being taught.

We do not know exactly what Sarah Bretland taught at her school, but we do know two of her pupils. Anna Wilhelmina Merivale and Louisa Heath Drury. Louisa, the daughter of Joseph Drury, the then Master of Harrow School was sent to Miss Bretlands when she was just eight, in 1795. Anna Wilhelmina would have been about thirteen when they met. Louisa would eventually marry Anna's brother John Herman Merivale. Family correspondence shows a few insights into 'Miss Bretland's. Charles Drury writing to his

²¹ This is a mistake as Elizabeth did not come back to Exeter until after her husband John Vowler Parminter died in 1792.

²² <https://juliabrannan.com/historical-articles/education-in-18th-century-girls/> accessed 24/04/2025.

²³ *The Governess; or, The little female academy. Calculated for the entertainment and instruction of young ladies in their education.* By Sarah Fielding 1749. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Mary Woolstonecraft, 1787 and

²⁴ *A Vindication of the rights of women*, Mary Woolstonecraft, 1792.

sister in 1803, *'I am happy to announce my convalescent state myself, but shall still receive the greatest amusement and entertainment from a letter from yourself, if it is only a bill from Miss Bretland's Academy. Happy as I am to hear how vastly you improve in your music, I would recommend purse making and watch ribbon twisting by way of recreation at intervals... Your knowledge of history, is I hope, greatly improved.' 'I think have deserved a little of Miss BRETLAND'S wholesome Discipline & Chastisement.'*²⁵

Extant drawings by Louisa under the tutelage of Francis Towne show a competent hand. Were these undertaken at Miss Bretland's?

Sarah's cousin the Revd Joseph Bretland also ran a school from the early 1770's. He, however, was instructing boys the *'Greek and Latin classics..... English language, mathematics and many other branches of polite literature.'*²⁶

In the summer of 1813 Sarah stepped down from the school. A note in the *London Gazette* on 19th March 1814 stated that, *'Notice is hereby given, that the partnership lately subsisting between Sarah Bretland, Elizabeth Parminter and Sophia Parminter, as keepers of a Boarding School, in the City of Exeter, was dissolved at Midsummer last by mutual consent.'*²⁷ Sarah would have been sixty. Elizabeth and Sophia continued with the school which was still going in 1816 but not listed in Pigot's Directory of 1830.

Sarah died on 2nd May 1818 at the age of sixty-four. The *Exeter Flying Post* reported that, *'On Saturday last, after a short illness, at her lodgings, in Exmouth, Mrs Sarah Bretland, who, for nearly forty years, kept a very respectable seminary for young ladies, in this city, which she conducted with great reputation to herself, and advantage to her pupils, whose mental and moral improvement were the first objects of her concern and attention, and by the survivors of whom she will be gratefully and affectionately remembered.'*²⁸ Her burial took place on 7th May 1818. The burial register recorded, *'Opening cave for Miss Bretland 10/- paid on the day.'*²⁹ The mention of a 'cave' here indicates that she was not buried with her parents, perhaps her sister Elizabeth interred her in the Parminter cave, but we may never know.

Sarah's Will was brief. Stating that *'As during my last illness I destroyed my will my property by that act coming to my sister wholly she promised to give any Legacies I might bequeath I here asert my intention to give to my relatives Grace Sarah and Frances Powell and Mrs E Froade and her son's widow and to Mrs Wickett five pound each To my kind companion and attending friend through several illnesses Elizabeth Henley I bequeath fifty pounds which I wish her to sink immediately as she has done more for her family than her situation required of her satisfied I am doing what I think right as my wish and desire so depend on my sisters principles to see it performed. Sarah Bretland Dated March 1st 1815.'*³⁰

Margaret Bretland's family

Margaret's maiden name was Powell. No record of her birth or baptism has been found but her brother was Thomas Powell, an apothecary living in Ottery St. Mary. Thomas married a Mary Chave and together they had one son, Thomas and four daughters, Grace, Sarah, Frances, and Elizabeth. Thomas junior died in his fourth year, but the daughters survived into adulthood.

²⁵ Anna Wilhelmina writing to Louisa from Barton Place on January the 4th 1804. Private letter courtesy of Rachel Knowles.

²⁶ Exeter Flying Post July 1773.

²⁷ London Gazette <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/> accessed 24/04/2025.

²⁸ Exeter Flying Post 7 May 1818 accessed via www.findmypast.co.uk

²⁹ As note 8.

³⁰ PROB 11/1605/29 accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

Only Elizabeth married. Her husband John Froad was a sailor from Bristol. Mrs Froad took in paying guests one of which was Samuel Curwen on his visit to Bristol. John Froad died in 1782.

The Powell sisters also set up a boarding school in Plymouth sometime in the second half of the 1700s.



Sherborne Mercury (14th July 1788)

It was these cousins that Sarah Bretland remembered in her Will.

Anne Amosford
May 2025