

From refugees to riches – five generations of the Petit family

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Preamble

John Louis Petit was able to pursue his artistic and architectural interests because he was from a wealthy family, descended from Huguenot immigrants to England in 1685. In this essay I will consider where the family wealth came from that enabled him to pursue his interests through extensive and no doubt expensive, travel. It will be seen that the main source of this wealth seems to have been from estates in the area around Wolverhampton and these are shown in the map of Figure 1 below. An outline family tree is given in Figure 2. Readers will find it helpful to refer to both these figures in what follows.

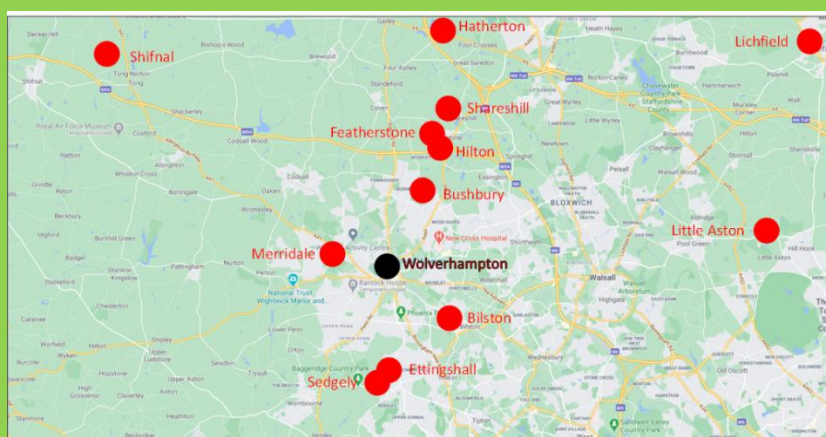


Figure 1, Places named in the text in the vicinity of Wolverhampton

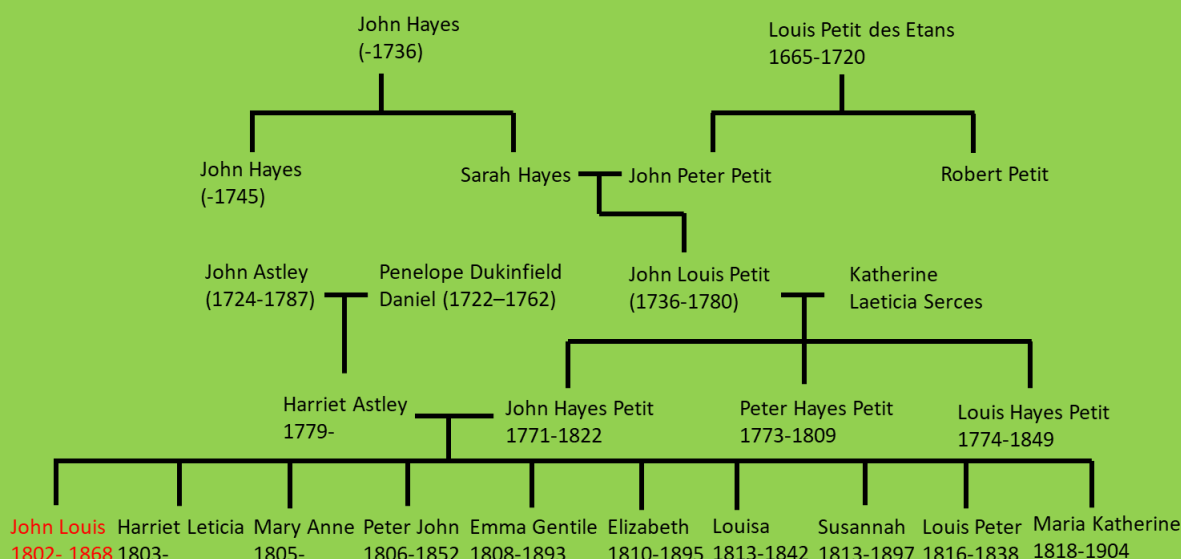


Figure 2. The Petit family tree

The Petits in England

We begin by considering the first of the Petit family to arrive in England. Louis Petit (1665-1720), a member of the ancient Norman family of Petit des Etans, fled to Holland from Caen on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, along with many thousands of others. The revocation of this edict led to severe persecution of the protestant Huguenots by Catholics, and many fled the country at that time. From there he came to England with William of Orange in 1689. He served in the British army as an engineer, rose to the rank of brigadier-general and was appointed lieutenant-governor of Minorca from 1708 to 1713. He was later involved in the suppression of a revolt by Highland clans. More detail can be found in his [Wikipedia entry](#). No doubt he was well rewarded for his services. He had two sons, John Peter Petit and Captain Peter Petit. The former married Sarah, daughter of John Hayes of Wolverhampton, the owner of the Ettingshall Estate near Sedgley, and they occupied the manor of Little Aston from 1743 to the early 1760s. John Hayes died in 1736, and left Ettingshall to his son, another John. [This John himself died in 1745](#) and the estate went to Sarah and her sister, and thus ultimately to John Peter Petit. Ettingshall was a large, originally arable estate, that even at that stage was beginning to be exploited for its coal and ironstone reserves. John Peter also appears to have owned Saredon Hall farm in the village of Sharesill.

John Peter and Sarah's only son, [John Louis Petit](#) (1736-1780) was educated at Queens College, Cambridge, qualified as a doctor in 1767 and was physician to St. George's Hospital from 1770 to 1774, and to St. Bartholomew's from 1774 until his death (Figure 3). He was a Fellow of the Royal Society from 1759 and was clearly regarded as a leader in his profession. He married Katherine Laetitia Serces, the daughter of Rev. James Serces, pastor of the French Church in London. They had three sons John Hayes Petit (1771-1822), Peter Hayes Petit (1773-1809) and Louis Hayes Petit (1774-1849), but clearly lacked imagination in the giving of names. The Ettingshall Estate was inherited in its entirety by John Hayes, with financial provision being made for the other sons. In John Lewis' will there is the following rather interesting provision.

I desire my body may be opened [for medical science] if the distemper of which I may die shall not have rendered it so loathsome as to endanger the operator and that the sum of ten guineas shall be given to the person who shall perform the operation.

Of the two younger brothers, Peter Hayes was a lieutenant-colonel of the 35th Foot and died at Deal of a wound received at Flushing in Holland during the Napoleonic war. [Louis Hayes](#) became a barrister and, from 1827 to 1832, was MP for Ripon (Figure 4a). His parliamentary career ended after he voted for the Reform Act and his patron, Miss Elizabeth Lawrence, withdrew her support. He bought property at Yeading, Middlesex, and a house in Tamworth Street, Lichfield. He also acquired an estate at Merridale in Wolverhampton, not far from Ettingshall, which the sources suggest provided him with income from mineral rights. This cannot however be wholly true as Merridale is to the west of Wolverhampton, and is not in fact on the coal field. It will be seen below that he also possessed land to the east of the town at Bilston, on which there were indeed coal mines, and this was probably the source of the confusion. After ceasing to be an MP, his remaining years were largely devoted to literary and philanthropic pursuits. He owned a

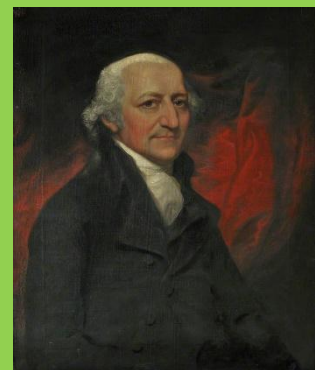
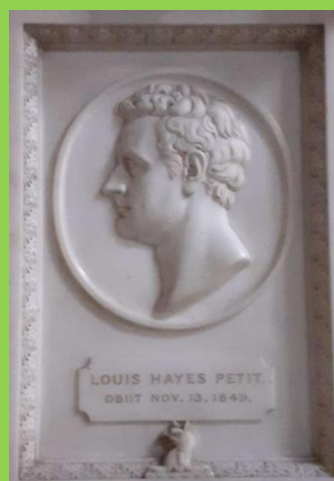


Figure 3. [John Louis Petit](#) (1736-1780)

renowned library with particular strengths in obscure languages, such as Manx. There is a monument to him at the east end of the north aisle of St Michael's church in Lichfield (Figure 4b).



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. Louis Hayes Petit a) [National Portrait Gallery](#) and b) Memorial in St. Michael's church in Lichfield

The Ecclesiastical Petits – John Louis and his father

The eldest of the three brothers, John Hayes Petit (1771-1822) inherited the Ettingshall estate, but also seems to have followed an ecclesiastical career. He was born in Bloomsbury and graduated from Queens College Cambridge with a BA in 1793 and an MA in 1796. He was [ordained priest](#) in Chester in 1798 and served a curacy at Ashton under Lyme near Stalybridge in Cheshire. During his time there he married Harriet Astley of the nearby town of Dukinfield. Harriet was born in 1779 to the painter [John Astley \(1724-1787\)](#) and his third wife Mary Wagstaffe (1760-1832). John Astley had a colourful life, painting portraits of many 18th century notables, arousing strong passions of admiration (mainly in women) or distaste (mainly in men). His first wife was an unknown Irish lady who died in 1749. The second was Penelope Dukinfield Daniel (1722–1762), widow of Sir William Dukinfield Daniel, 3rd baronet, and a daughter of Henry Vernon, former High Sheriff of Staffordshire. Penelope was struck by Astley's appearance and the story is told that she contrived to have her portrait painted by him, and shortly afterwards “she gave him the original” and they were married with some rapidity. On Penelope's death, and the death of his stepdaughter, Astley inherited the substantial Dukinfield and Daniel estates in Cheshire and was able to lead a life of some luxury and idleness thereafter. Harriett was one of three sisters, known as the Manchester beauties, and her marriage to John Hayes would have brought him both a beautiful wife and a substantial supplement to his already considerable income.

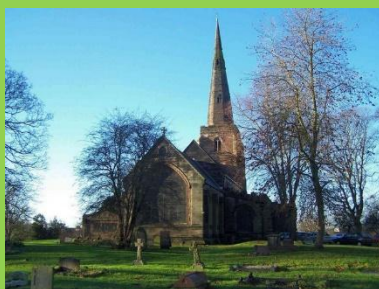
John Louis Petit, the artist, was John Hayes and Harriet's eldest son and was born in 1802. For the next few years, the family lived a somewhat peripatetic existence. The oldest sister, Harriet Letticia Petit (later Salt) was baptised in Stretton on Dunmore in Warwickshire in 1803. The next two children Mary Ann Petit (1805-) and Peter John Petit (1806-1852) were baptised at Darfield in Yorkshire. No reason for the Petit family's presence in these places can be traced. The next two children, Emma Gentile Petit (1808-1893) and Elizabeth Petit (later Haig) (1810-1895) were baptised at Donnington in Shropshire to the northwest of Wolverhampton. In January 1811 John Hayes was appointed Stipendary Curate of that parish, and then in February of that year he was appointed as a Perpetual Curate at Sharesill, to the northeast of Wolverhampton where he

already owned land. How these posts interacted with each other is not clear. The Vernon family, from whom Harriet was descended, owned Hilton Hall, which was close to Shareshill, and may have been influential in John Hayes obtaining the post. He held the Perpetual Curacy at Shareshill till his death in 1822. Their next three children were all baptised in Shareshill – Louisa Petit (1813-1842), who died after a *“life of uninterrupted suffering, which she bore with a true Christian patience and cheerfulness”*; Susannah Petit (1813-1897); and Louis Peter Petit (1816-1838). Around 1817 John Hayes leased Coton Hall at Alveley in Shropshire (Figure 5) from Harry Lancelot Lee, and it was there that their final child, Maria Katherine (later Jelf) (1818-1904) was baptised. Coton Hall was a very substantial property that once belonged to the Lee family. In 1636, Richard Henry Lee emigrated to the US, and the family became rich through the ownership of tobacco plantations with a large slave population, and from whom the US Confederate General Robert E Lee was descended. Coton Hall would not have been a cheap place to lease. After John Hayes Petit’s death in 1822, it was bought by [James Foster](#) (1786 -1853), the very successful and wealthy ironmaster and coalmaster of Stourbridge. John Hayes’ wife Harriet and her unmarried daughters moved to the house in the house in Tamworth St, Lichfield that was owned by her brother-in-law Louis Hayes Petit.



Figure 5 [Colton Hall](#)

John Louis Petit inherited the Ettingshall estate on the death of his father in 1822 and also inherited the bulk of the estate of his uncle Louis Hayes Petit when the latter died in 1849 (under the terms of his father’s will). In total they formed a very substantial estate in the Wolverhampton area, that was being heavily exploited for coal, iron ore and limestone. He and his sisters also had a less tangible inheritance from his mother and his grandfather – the passion and the ability for painting and sketching. After he graduated from Trinity College in Cambridge in 1825, John firstly pursued an [ecclesiastical career](#) being curate at St Michael’s in Lichfield from 1825 to 1828, under the Perpetual Curate [Edward Remington](#), and then curate at Bradfield and Mistley in Essex from 1828 to 1834 (Figure 6).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6 (a) St. Michael’s Lichfield; (b) St. Lawrence, Bradfield

During his time at St. Michael’s, the [registers](#) tell us he carried out 61 baptisms, 35 weddings and 163 funerals, as well as presumably leading the Sunday worship – a not inconsiderable load. He



Figure 7 [The monument to Peter Petit in Lichfield Cathedral](#)

married Louisa Reid, the daughter of George Reid of Trelawny in Jamaica in 1828, [a slave holding family](#). George Reid died in 1827 and at the time of the marriage, his estates were held in trust. 1/13th of the income from the plantations was allocated to Louisa in the terms of George's will. When slavery was abolished in the 1830s the trustees received £2793 compensation for their lost income and presumably 1/13 went to Louisa, and thus to John Louis Petit as her husband

The lives of Petit's sisters are described elsewhere on the [Petit society web site](#). It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that his brother Peter, a Lieutenant Colonel in the 50th Regiment, died in 1852 after being severely wounded on the North West Frontier, and there is a monument to him in Lichfield cathedral (Figure 7). His youngest brother Louis Peter died aged 22 in 1838 after just becoming a barrister at Lincoln's Inn.

The Ettingshall Park Estate of John Louis Petit

The major estate that came in to the possession of John Louis Petit was the Ettingshall Park estate in Sedgley, to the south of Wolverhampton and in this section I will consider this estate in a little more detail.

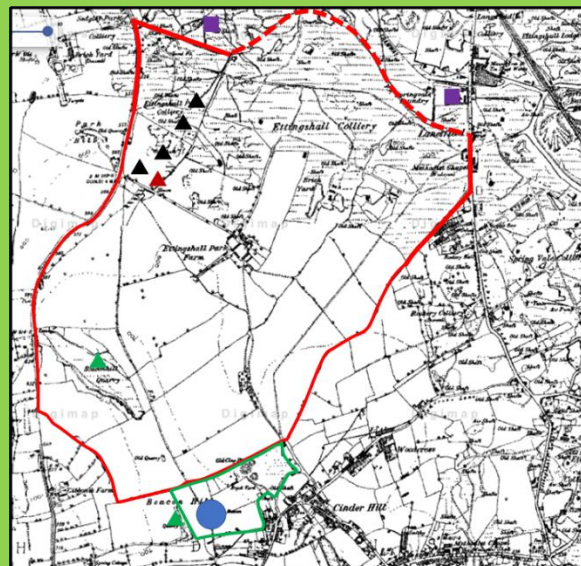


Figure 8. The Ettingshall Park estate.

(The lands owned by John Louis Petit in the 1840s are outlined in red, and those owned by Louis Hayes Petit in green. Black triangles – collieries; red triangles – ironstone pits; green triangles – lime works; purple squares – iron works; blue circle – Sedgley Beacon)

The extent of the lands owned by Petit in Ettingshall in the 1840s are shown on the map of Figure 8. The estate boundaries are taken from the Tithe Allocations and are superimposed upon the 1882 Ordnance Survey map of the area. The estate was in the north of Sedgley parish, just south

of the Wolverhampton boundary and the holding was 413 acres in total. It is centred on Ettingshall Park farm and lies west of another large estate – that of Ettingshall Hall. Note that part of the northern boundary is shown as a dotted line, as it is hard to locate the precise boundary on the 1882 map because of variations in the topography due to mining.

We first read of Ettingshall Park in 1581 when it was amongst the lands restored to Edward Sutton, 4th Baron Dudley, by Queen Elizabeth following the downfall of John Dudley, Earl of Northumberland who had taken over the estates through some morally dubious financial interactions with Edward's father John Sutton, the third Baron. The fifth Baron, another Edward, sold the Estate to Charles Cornewallys of Norwich in 1597, and by 1604 it was either occupied or owned by one Thomas Marsh, styled as a gentleman. At some time in the next century the Estate passed to the Hayes family mentioned above. John Hayes appears to have been the Steward of the Dudley estate in the 1710s and 1720s and is referred to in various documents as being from Wolverhampton and again styled as a gentleman. His son, another John, was in 1733 at the Junior Temple in London. John Hayes the elder died in 1736, and, as noted above, left Ettingshall to John the younger. This John himself died in 1745 and the estate went to his sisters. One of these sisters, Sarah was by then married to John Peter Petit, the second English generation of the Petits, and living at Little Aston. The Petits did not occupy it however, and it was leased to others – in the early years of the nineteenth century to Dudley Bagley, from 1808 around 1820 to Samuel Fereday, Ironmaster, and then to his son Dudley Fereday up to the late 1850s.

From at least the end of the seventeenth century, Ettingshall Hall was occupied by the Homers, who exploited the estate for its coal reserves. By 1780, the mining works had encroached up the estate to such an extent that it was no longer fit to be a gentleman's residence, so Richard Homer sold it and moved to [Bromley House in Kingswinford](#), which they also exploited and eventually reduced to colliery waste. The Gibbons family of iron and coal masters were also near neighbours in the eighteenth century.

But now let us return to the map of the estate shown above. In the 1840s it formed a coherent block of land surrounding Ettingshall Park that was owned by John Louis Petit. A small block at the south of the estate was owned by his uncle and former MP, Louis Hayes Petit. Most of the land, even at that stage was arable or pasture. There were a small number of collieries to the northwest, and two lime workings at Round Hill and Beacon Hill. However just beyond the estate heavy industry was beginning to encroach, with the Spring Vale Ironworks to the north east and the Parkfields iron works to the north. The former was served by basins from the Birmingham Canal (as indeed were most ironworks in the area). The underlying 1882 Ordnance Survey map shows a similar situation in the south of the estates, with most of the field boundaries being identical to those on the tithe map, but in the north mining activities have completely eliminated the fields (and indeed makes the estate boundary difficult to determine) and indeed many of the roads shown on the tithe map. In effect the area of mining in the 1880s came right to the edge of the South Staffordshire Coal Field.

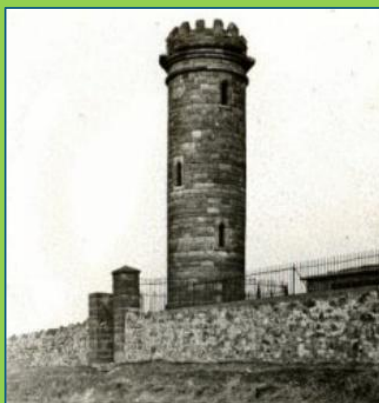


Figure 9. Sedgley Beacon

Although John Louis owned the land, he leased it to others. The central area around Ettingshall Park Farm was leased to Dudley Fereday as noted above, with smaller agricultural plots leased to Edwin Dixon, William Fletcher and Edward Jay. The mines and pits were operated by George Jones, John Neve and Co., or the Parkfields Company who operated the nearby ironworks. Essentially, we see here, as in so many places in the western Black Country at this time, the transition from a farming to an industrialised way of life.

As noted above Louis Hayes Petit owned some land to the south of the Ettingshall estate. This encompassed the highest point in the locality at Beacon Hill. It was on this hill in 1846 that the Beacon Tower was erected, which still stands in a somewhat dilapidated state (Figure 9). The [Sedgley Local History](#)

[society](#) attributes the building of this tower to “a local landowner, Mr. Petit”, although it might have been used for astronomical observations by Lord Wrottesley a well-known Staffordshire amateur astronomer. What the role of the Petit’s was in its erection is not clear.

The Petit estates in the 1840s

Details of the holdings of John Louis and Louis Hayes at the time of the tithe apportionments in the 1840s can be obtained from the tithe maps for Staffordshire. These are shown in the table below. It can be seen that the estates around Ettingshall and Wolverhampton were far from all their holdings. John Louis also held land in Wolverhampton itself, and in Hilton and Featherstone in the north of the town, and in Shareshill, Hatherton and Acton Trussell further to the north. At the time he lived in a house at Shifnal in Shropshire. Louis Hayes, as well as the land in Wolverhampton also had holdings in the vicinity of the town at Sedgley and Bilston, as well as at Bushbury and Hatherton to the north. He also held the property in Lichfield where Harriet and her daughters lived. A photograph and a sketch of this rather imposing property, Redcourt House, is shown in Figure 10. It was situated on Tamworth Street downhill from the junction with George Lane, and its grounds extended a considerable distance behind it between what was then Back Lane and Frog Lane. In total John Louis held nearly 1100 acres and Louis Hayes nearly 450. This would have put them amongst the major landowners in the Midlands. Whilst the lands around Wolverhampton and Sedgley can be explained as an expansion of the Ettingshall and Merridale estates and the family had held land in Shareshill for several generations, there is no obvious reason why the lands at Bushbury, Hatherton and Acton Trussell came into their possession. One possible reason might be that these were holdings of Penelope Dukinfield Daniel through her descent from the Vernon family who held land in that part of Staffordshire. This might explain why John Hayes and Harriet made their home at Shareshill and the former became the Perpetual Curate in the parish (vicar in modern terms).

	John Louis	Louis Hayes
<u>Ettingshall</u>	413	36
<u>Wolverhampton</u>	166	349
<u>Featherstone</u>	20	
<u>Hilton</u>	9	
<u>Bilston</u>		12
<u>Bushbury</u>		4
<u>Shareshill</u>	323	
<u>Hatherton</u>	56	41
<u>Acton Trussel</u>	103	
<u>Lichfield</u>		1
Total	1089	444

Table 1 Petit land holdings in Staffordshire in the 1840s. Numbers indicate the area in acres

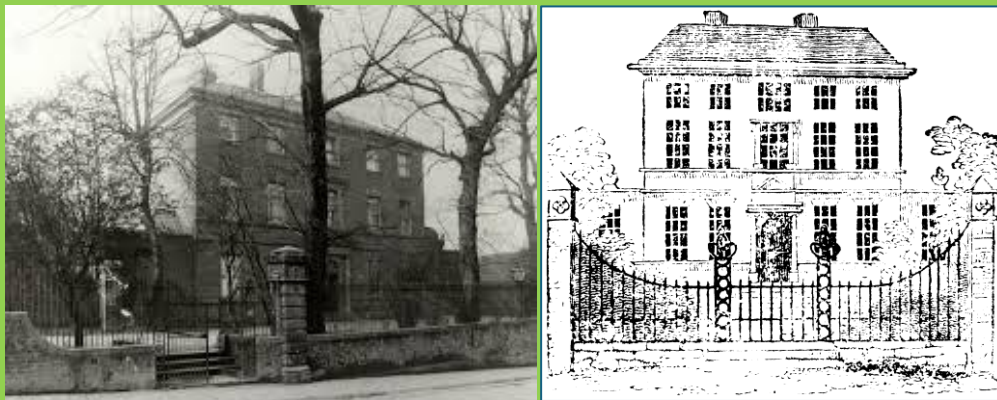


Figure 10. Redcourt House in Lichfield

But there is yet more. In Staffordshire Archives, there is an index record that states ” [Abstract of title of late John Louis Petit in Staffordshire and Hereford, Radnor and Brecknock](#) “. It would appear that the property in Hereford was the estate of [Bollitree Castle](#), a large house with mock fortifications, with Louis Hayes owned at the time of his death. I have not been able to identify any properties in Radnor and Brecknock.

Epilogue

So to return to my original query, it would seem that the Petit wealth derived in the main from a series of very advantageous marriages – and in particular those between John Peter Petit and Sarah Hayes, which brought the Ettingshall estate into their positions. In addition, the family were clearly successful in the professions in which they worked as a result of their very considerable talents. John Louis was thus financially independent and was able gave up his post as a curate in Essex in 1834. From the mid-1830s onwards he devoted his time to his painting and architectural criticism, and his story is told elsewhere.