

**Eighteenth Century  
Coventry Silkmen:  
Masters of the City's  
Industrial Universe**

## Some issues to be tackled

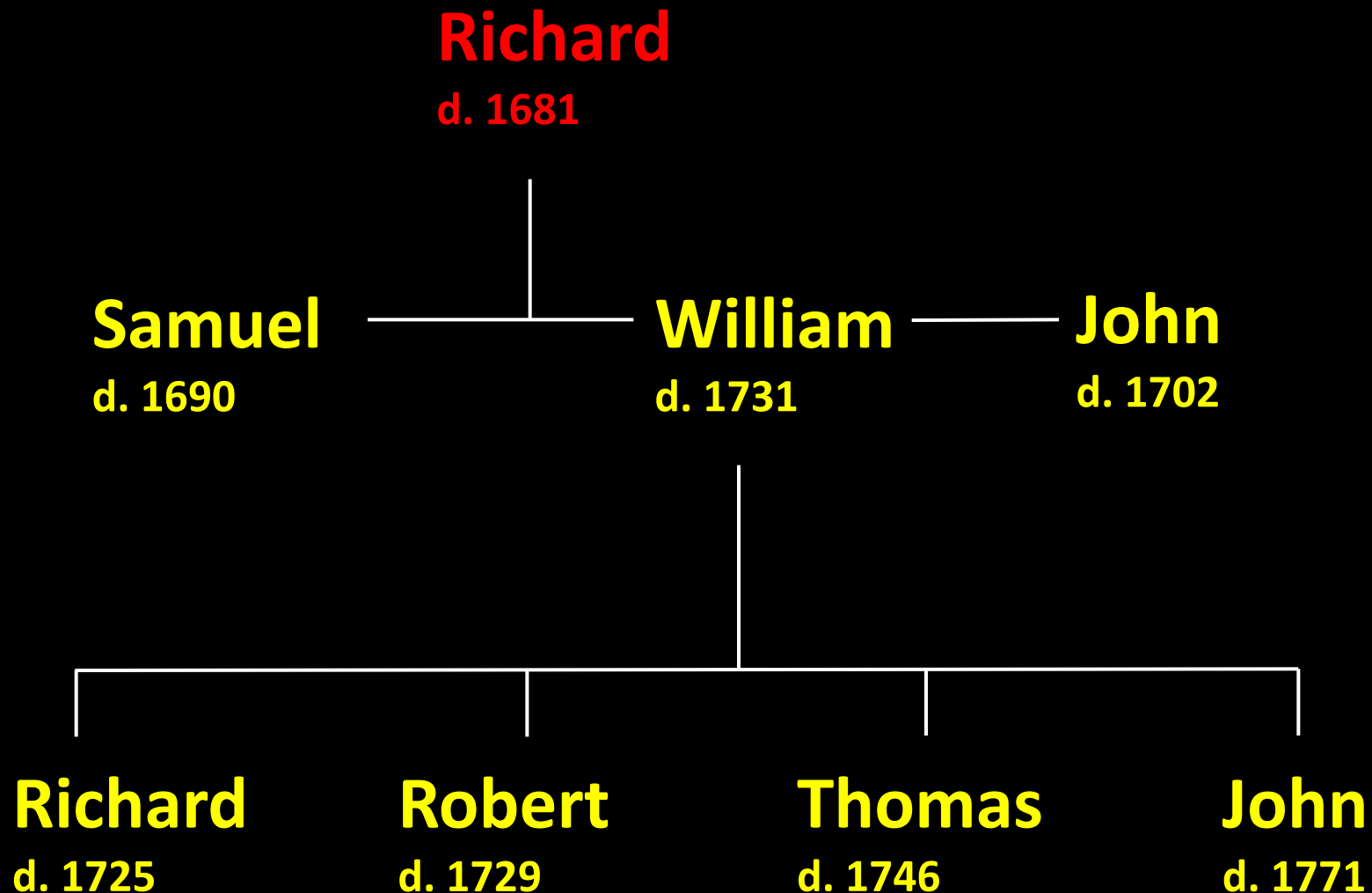
- Why silk ribbon weaving came to Coventry
- Who were Coventry's silkmen?
- What did they do?
- What status did they have in the city?
- Can Coventry's eighteenth century ribbon trade of the count as the start of its Industrial Revolution?

# Why did a silk ribbon industry begin in Coventry?

- A tradition of textile production since the medieval period
- A relatively poor unemployed population who could easily accommodate and master a single hand loom
- A sufficient distance from London to have much lower labour costs, but near enough for transport not to be a major problem to its main market because...
- A light, high value product that could be easily transported by road in the absence of water transport (like watches!)
- A significant non-conformist business class with ready access to capital

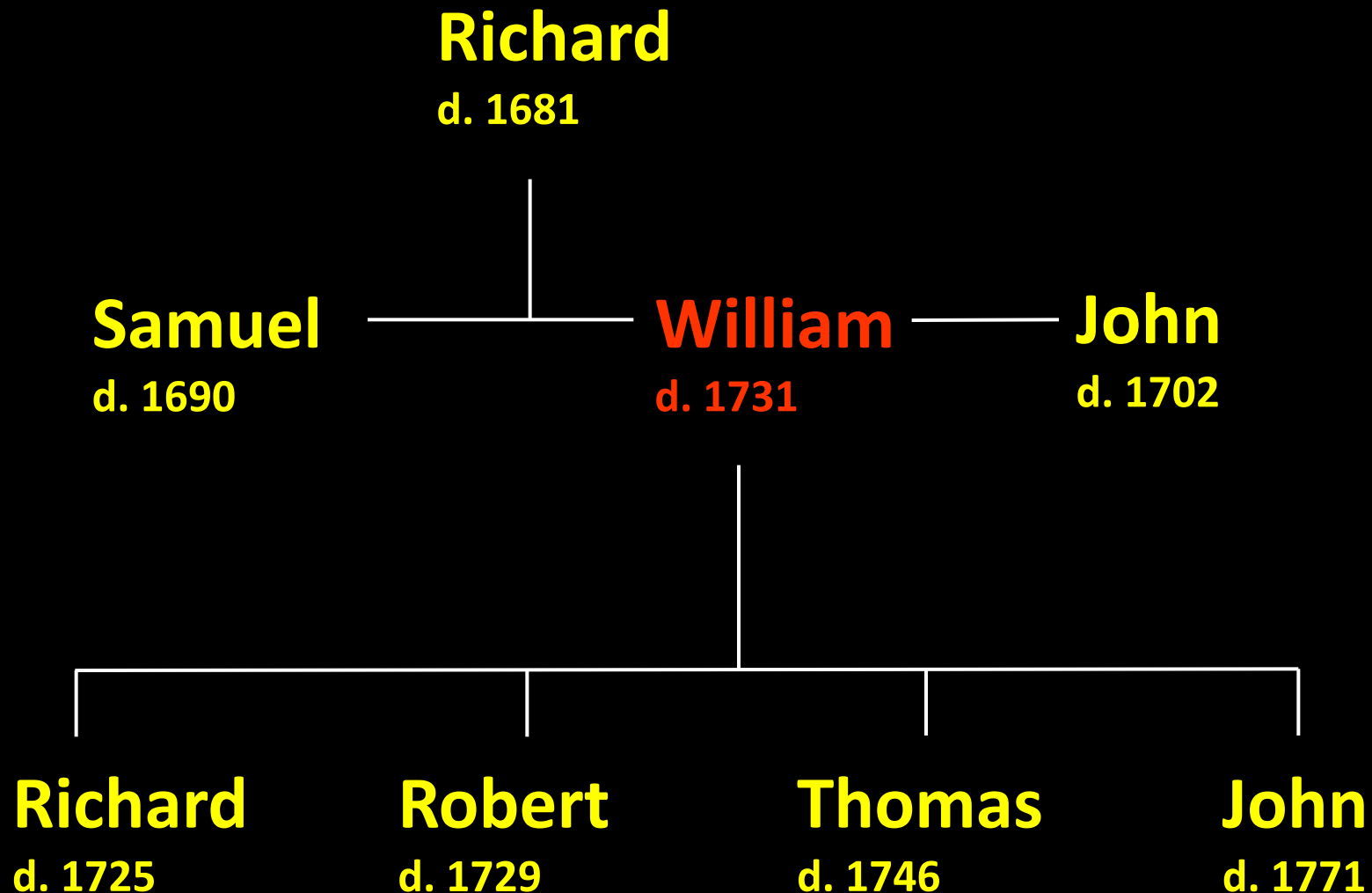
# The most prominent example of the 'Who': The Bird Family

(everyone a silkman except Richard the father/grandfather)



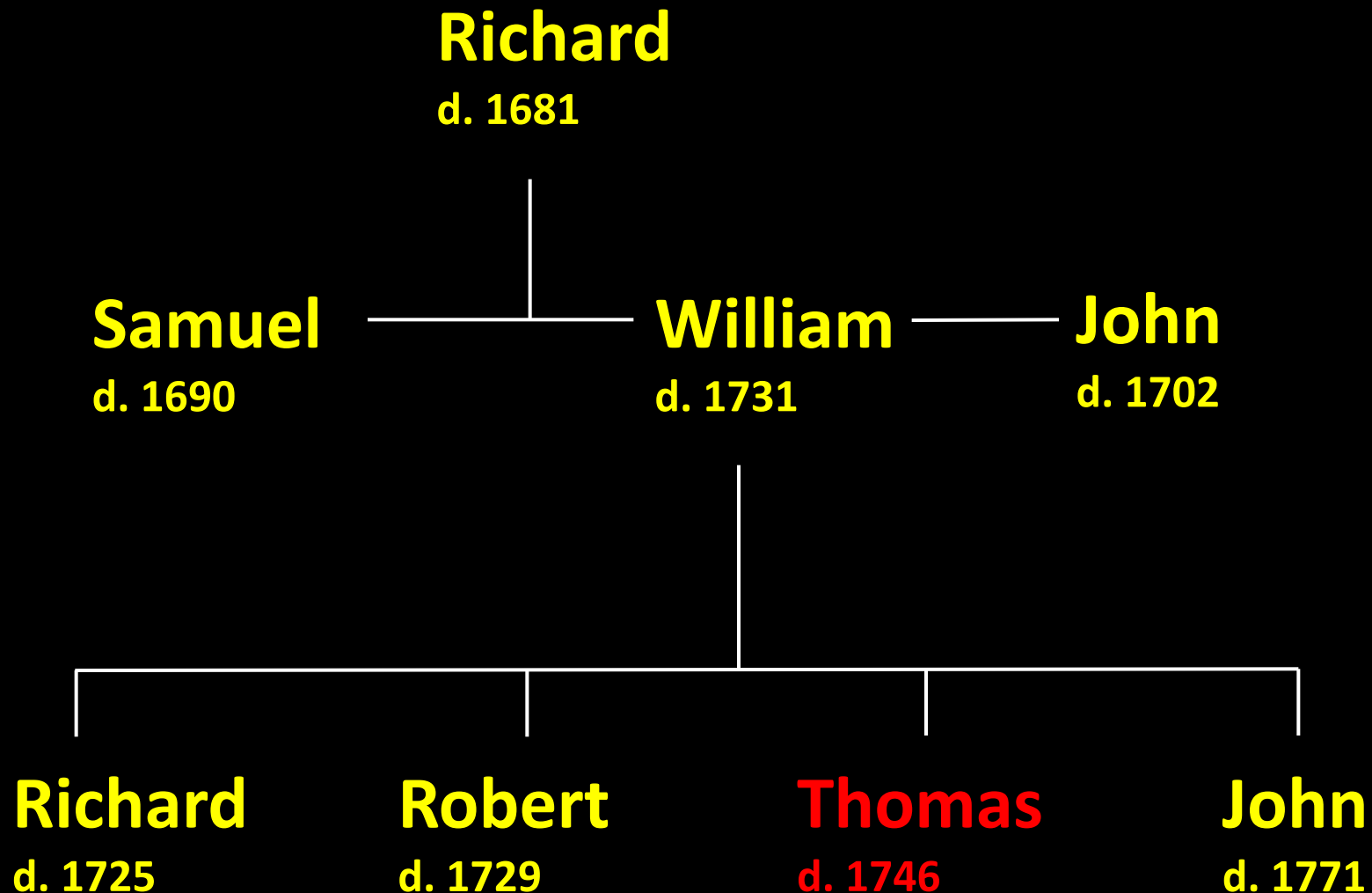
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# **‘What’ silkmen do**

Merchants who firstly buy raw silk in London where it is imported and arrange for the silk to be ‘thrown’ into threads and transported to Coventry

They hire undertakers to distribute it to weavers homes who make it into ribbons

Most Coventry silkmen had warehouses in Coventry and in the Spitalfields area of London

There would not be more than a dozen at any one time in Coventry often a lot fewer

Silkman apprenticeships were more exclusive than banking – cost up to £200 (£20,000)

They operated on lines of credit that could last for more than a year

**What the  
history books  
tell us about  
the 18<sup>th</sup> century  
ribbon trade**



## Key facts common to most historical accounts

- The trade was introduced by a mayor of Coventry in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century
- He employed a number of Huguenot silk weavers who had recently escaped persecution in France
- In 1746 a Coventry silk manufacturer employed 2000 weavers
- Coventry became the ribbon-weaving centre of the UK after the Spitalfields Act of 1773 forced silk production out of the capital and into the provinces.

**The most recent  
history of the Coventry  
ribbon trade  
published in 2007 by  
The Herbert**

# Who started it?

## The Thomas Bird Tendency

- Thomas Bird at the turn of the eighteenth century. *“It seems likely that he that he employed a number of Huguenot refugees”*  
(*History of Coventry Textiles*, Alice Lynes, 1952, Chief Coventry Librarian)
- Thomas Bird, 1703 *“set up the first recorded silk ribbon weaving establishment”*  
(*Silken Weave*, Jenny Dodge, The Herbert, 2007)

# Who started it?

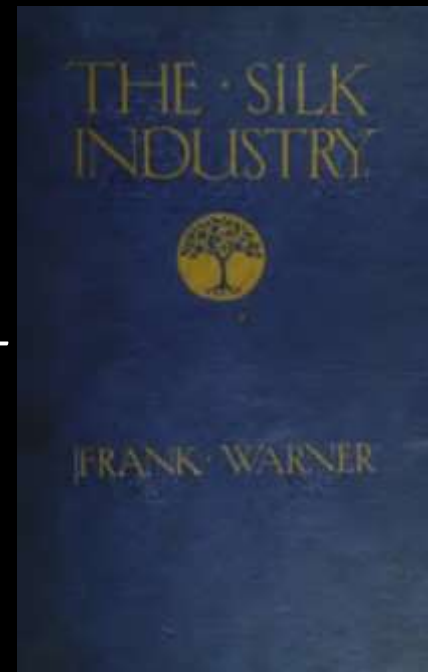
## The William Bird Tendency

William Bird at the turn of the eighteenth century *“who is supposed to have been assisted in its first establishment by some of the French refugees” (1840 Parliamentary Commission on Handloom Weavers)*

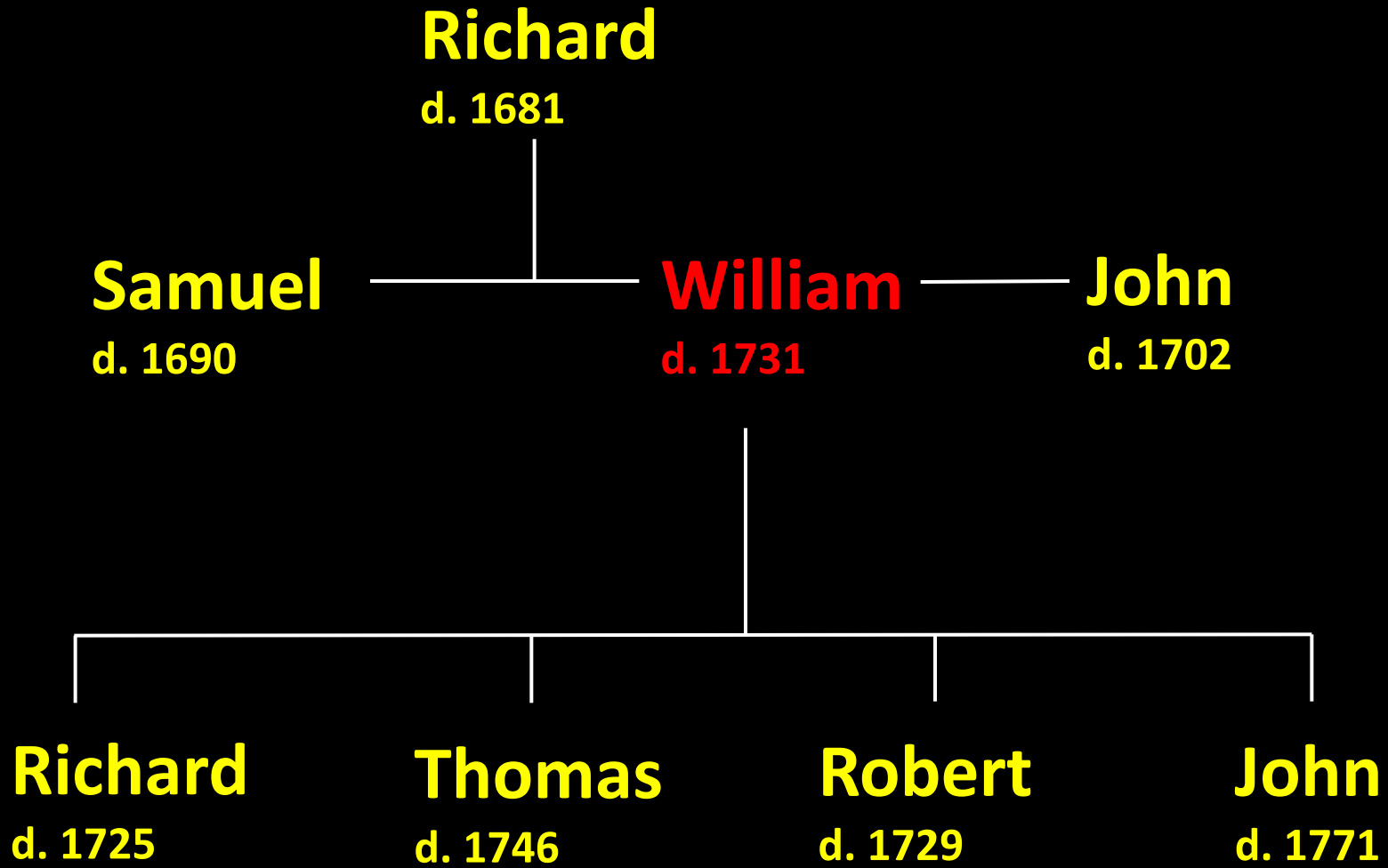
William Bird, *“who manufactured ribbons in Coventry in 1701”*

*“In bygone days a strong facial resemblance could be found in many silk-weaving families to the people of south-eastern France.*

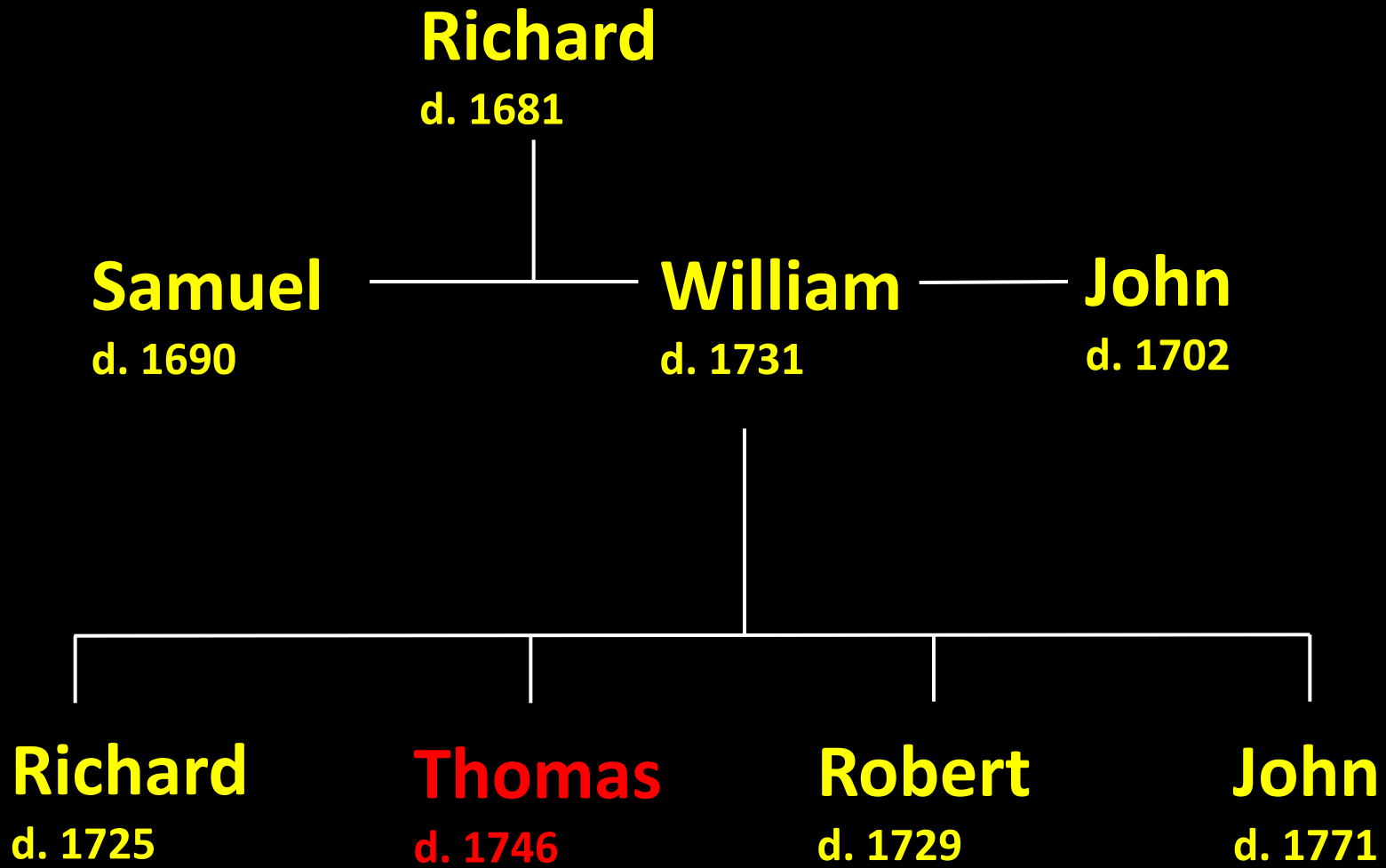
*The family names of the district are reminiscent of France” (The Silk Industry, Sir Frank Warner, 1929)*



# The Bird Family



# The Bird Family



# Why can't anybody agree on exactly when the industry started and by whom?

- Poorly referenced secondary sources repeating earlier publications/traditions
- Plenty of contemporary references to **silk** but hardly any specific reference to **ribbons** – important because traditional broadlooms were very different to single hand looms used to weave ribbons. There is evidence for limited use of the former in 17<sup>th</sup> century Coventry
- Few contemporary commentaries as no local newspapers until 1741 (*Jopson's Coventry Mercury*) and no surviving business records for any ribbon firms

# Here is one of the first contemporary writers to refer to ribbons in Coventry – Daniel Defoe in the early 1720s

- *“Coventry is a large and populous city, and drives a very great trade; the manufacture of tammies (a fine cloth made of mixed textiles for lining coats) is their chief employ, and next to that weaving of ribbons of the neatest kind, chiefly black”*  
(as noted in Volume 2 of the Warwickshire VCH)
- What Defoe actually wrote:
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# Evidence from St Michael's Church

## Register of Burials 1705-7

- Of 300 burials **silk weaver** recorded 32 times and **weaver** (assumed to be wool trade) only 19 times
- Remarkable given the dominance of the wool trade over the previous centuries and its supposed prominence still in the 1720s
- Surely it indicates a greater prominence for silk woven products at this time, probably ribbons?

**But perhaps the confusion is not  
so surprising when we have to  
wait until 1761 for the first  
surviving evidence of an actual  
Coventry ribbon**

# From the Herbert Collection

- A Coventry ribbon commemorating the Coronation of King George III 1761
- It's a 'figured' ribbon (i.e. patterned not plain) which could only be woven one ribbon at a time unlike plain ribbons (easily produced by now eight or more at a time on an 'engine loom')
- An advanced product that also includes silvered metal thread

# **More Coventry silkman evidence from the V&A via the USA**

**(The Winterthur Museum & Library Delaware)**

# What the de Brissac Account Book tells us

- de Brissac's account book refers to a number of his ribbon patterns that he sold to a Mr. J Bird of Coventry
- one of these ribbons was a commemorative one:  
*"to a pattern for a riband, a dove with an olive branch and the words Peace and Plenty in a Lawrel reath"*.
- This presumably dates this entry in the account book for 1762 to the end of the Seven Years War (1756-1763)



*“To a pattern for a riband, a dove with a olive branch  
and the words Peace and Plenty in a Lawrel Reath”.*

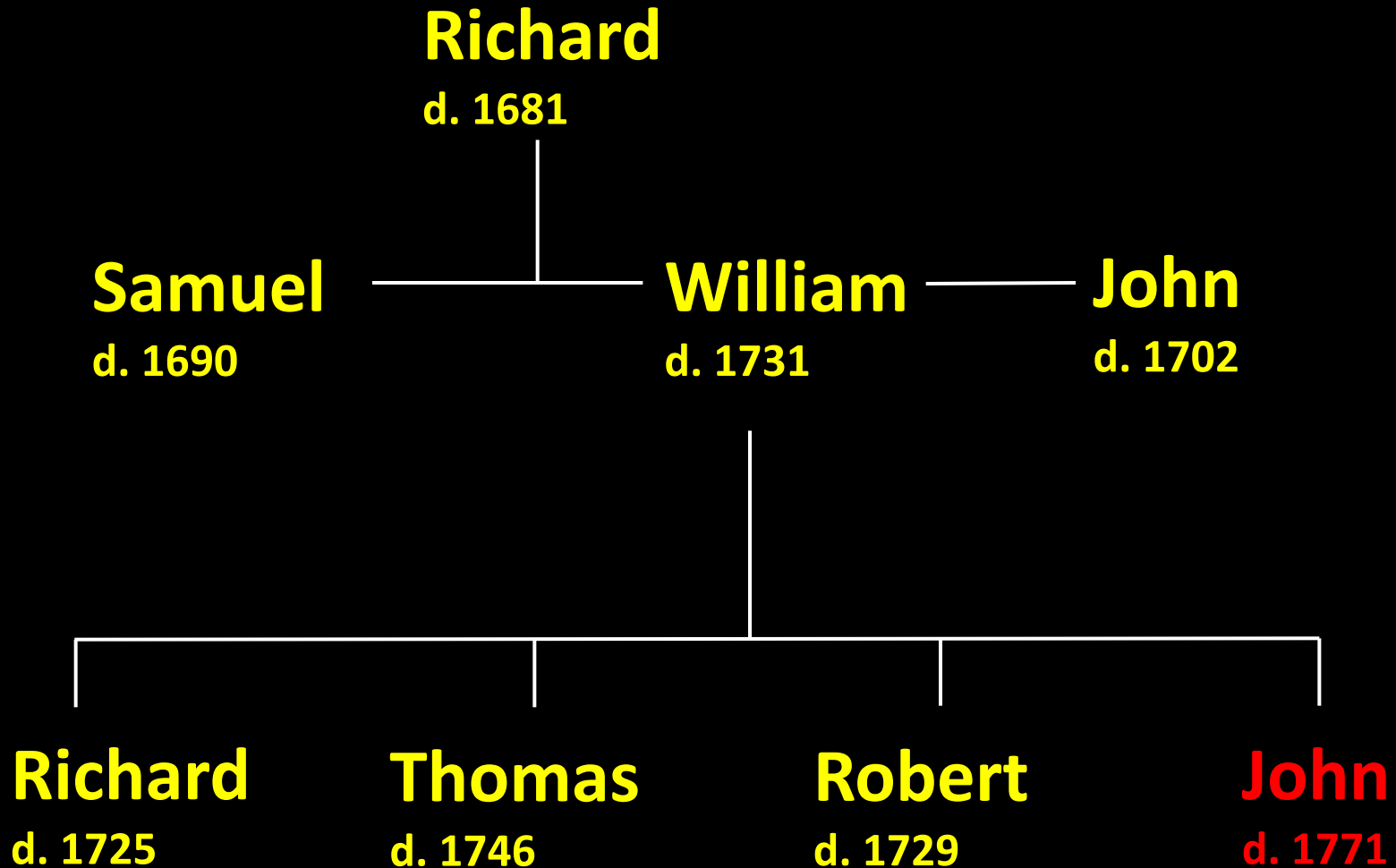
But there is also another page from de Brissac's account book for a whole range of designs from 1761 – 1762 for 'Mr Bird'

It is proof of the commissioning of complex designs and of the continuing importance of the Bird family in Coventry and its links to the Spitalfield silk trade

NB The maths does not look too good, but even at £10.10s (£1,050) this is an expensive investment by Bird



# The Bird Family



# The Wealth of Non-Bird Silkmen

It is too easy to get caught up in the story of the prominent Bird family and forget the other Coventry silkmen – all wealthy individuals. But the city could only support the activities of a few such merchants at any one time

There were only 23 silkmen who left wills at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and 12 at the Diocese of Lichfield & Coventry over the whole of the eighteenth century almost 10 of the former are accounted for by various generations of the Bird family

# Apart from wills there is other evidence of silkman wealth

*1728 Thomas Pool sentenced to death and his brother to  
transportation for robbing Mr Birch's Coventry warehouse of  
£1500 (£150,000) of ribbons*

**Stamford Mercury 29 August 1728**

When Birch father died two years earlier he left all his  
property to his eldest son but also gave £1000 (£100,000) to  
his married daughter and £4000 (£400,000) to his unmarried  
daughter

*In September 1762 'In the night between Monday and Tuesday last the warehouse of Messrs Sherwood, Abney and Reynolds, silkmen of this city were broke open (by forcing one of the pins in the bar that went across the inside window shut) and out of a desk therein, which was likewise broke open, upwards of £90 (£9,000) in cash was taken'*

**Coventry Mercury 27 September 1762**

**How wealthy were the Bird Family?**

# The Bird Patriarch

William died in 1731 having already passed on much of his wealth to his eldest son, Richard, who pre-deceased him in 1725 but then passed the wealth out of the immediate family.

Even so William's will contained a number of bequests for one or two thousand pounds (£100,000/£200,00) and his remaining properties to his son Thomas

# The Bird Patriarch

*References in other wills gives some idea of the property William had already amassed and passed onto his eldest son Richard before 1711*

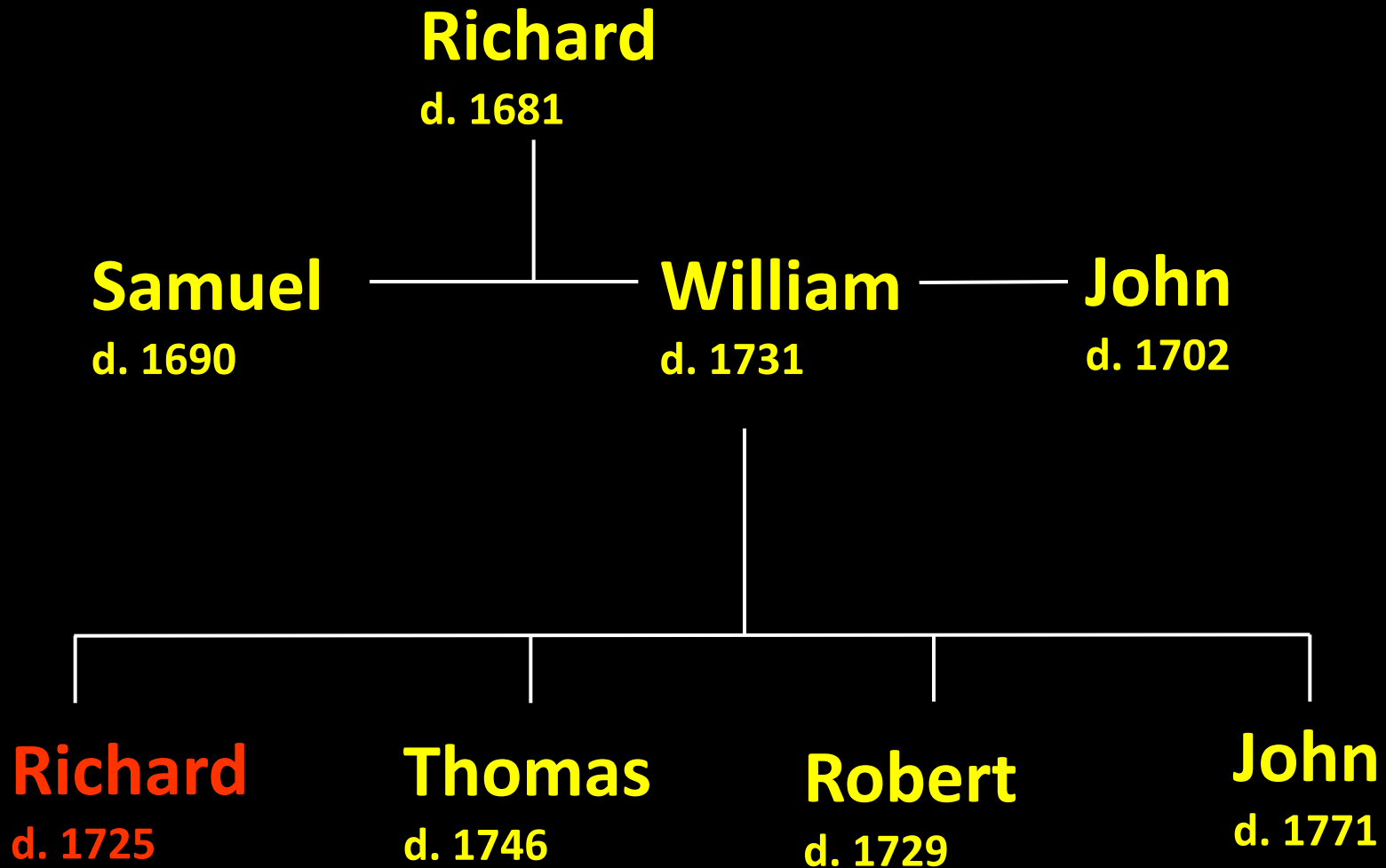
*e.g.*

- The premises in High Street, near Broadgate
- Lands in Exhall, Foleshill and Keresley including the manor of Newlands
- The Horseshoe Inn at Spon End with several tenements and lands there
- The house in Little Park Street originally occupied by Lady Bridgeman

Bridgeman's House, Little Park Street, Coventry:  
Built 1610, Demolished 1817



# The Bird Family



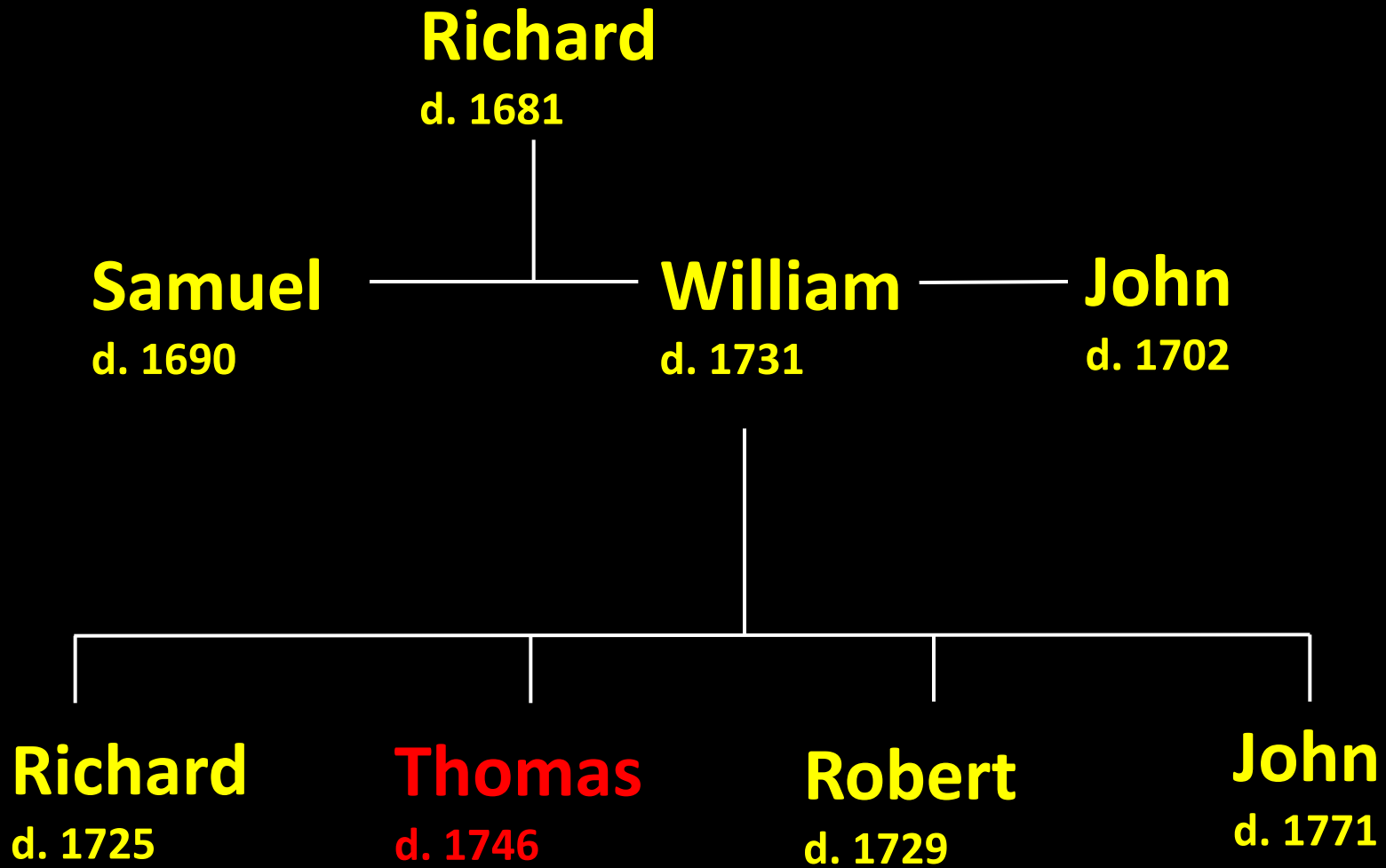
# The short lived Bird Patriarch

**Richard** died in 1725

*“I give and devise my messuage in Little Park Street where I now live”*

16, Little Park Street, Coventry Built c1725 by Richard Bird

# The Bird Family



# The most historically valuable Bird Patriarch

**Thomas's** death in January 1746 gives us a rare, personal look at what life was like for Coventry's most prominent silkman;

- partly from a newspaper comment
- partly from his gravestone in Stoke parish church
- but mainly from his detailed will

# The valuable Bird Patriarch

**He needed his status to be confirmed with a coat of arms:**

*The search has revealed the record copy of the original grant of arms to Thomas Bird in 1742.*

*This shows that his family had long borne arms blazoned: A Cross Flory between four Martlets , but without the College's authority; he and his descendants were therefore granted a version of these arms with suitable differences. The genuine blazon of these new arms differs slightly from the description of those on his tomb; it is: Argent a Cross Flory Vert between four Martlets Gules a Chief dovetailed Azure , while the crest is blazoned: On a Wreath of the Colours A Greyhound's Head Vert erased Gules collared dovetailed Or .*

*Adam Tuck, College of Arms 2019*

# The next Bird Patriarch

*"On Monday last died at his house in this city, Thomas Bird, Esquire, one of the most eminent silk **manufacturers** in England, in which branch of business he daily **employed over two thousand** workpeople."*

**Jopson's Coventry Mercury of 13 January 1746**

# Silkman Wealth: Thomas Bird's Will - 1

I give and devise my own dwelling house lately erected with the warehouses and appurtenances thereto belonging in Little Park Street in the said City of Coventry and my Coachhouse and Stable in the said Street with the appurtenances and all my real estate whatsoever within the said City unto my said Son Henry Bird his heirs &

*"I give and devise my own dwelling house, lately erected with the warehouses and appurtenances thereto belonging in Little Park Street in the said city of Coventry and my coach house and stable in the said street with the appurtenances and all my real estate whatsoever within the said city unto my said son Henry Bird his heirs"*



7, Little Park  
Street,  
Coventry  
Built c1735 by  
Thomas Bird





## Three Bird houses all in the same street

In eighteenth century Coventry it was claimed that. . .

*“The bulk of the better class houses, however, were erected in Little Park Street, where, in spacious buildings far removed from the main roads, with their numerous inns and noisy coach traffic, the Caves, Stratfords, Bridgemans, **Birds**, and others took their pleasure; walked in the prim gardens attached to their residences”*

**The Parliamentary Representation of the City of Coventry from the Earliest Times to the Present Date (1894) T.W. Whitley**

# Silkman Wealth: Thomas Bird's Will - 2

amountable to whereas I lately purchased the inheritance  
of an estate at Barton on the Heath aforesaid in the said  
County of Warwick late belonging to Thomas Overbury  
Esquire deceased for the sum of thirteen thousand pounds  
and upwards in the names of myself and Charles Eggleton

*“Whereas I lately purchased the inheritance of an  
estate at Barton on the Heath in the said county of  
Warwick late belonging to Thomas Overbury esquire,  
deceased for the sum of £13,000 (£1,300,000) and  
upwards”*

# Barton on the Heath

## Manor House

# Silkman Wealth: Thomas Bird's Will - 3

my freehold messuages and lands with the appurtenances in Stoke in the County of the said City of Coventry and the impropriate tyths of Stoke aforesaid and all other my real estate there which premises I purchased of Gilbert Malcher and others to my said eldest son Robert Bird for and during

*"...my freehold messauages and lands with the appurtenances in Stoke in the County of the said city of Coventry and the impropriate tyths of Stoke aforesaid and all other my real estate there which premises I purchased of Gilbert Malcher and others to my said eldest son Robert Bird for and during the term of his material life."*

## Silkman Wealth: Thomas Bird's Will - 4

Six gifts of sums ranging from £3,700 (£370,000)  
to £5,500 (£550,00) for his sons and daughters



# Silkman Wealth: Thomas Bird's Will - 5

that is to say to those which shall be then employed in my  
Warehouses in Coventry ten pounds a piece and to those which  
shall be then employed in my Warehouses in London thirty  
pounds to be equally divided between or amongst them the

*“...that is to say those which shall be then employed in my  
warehouse in **Coventry** ten pounds a piece and those which  
shall then be employed in my warehouse in **London** thirty  
pounds to be equally divided between them”*

# **The London Connection**

# 18<sup>th</sup> Century London Directories

1768 John Bird Jnr Silkman  
1 Wood Street

1802 William Wilberforce Bird Esq M P,  
Wood Street Cheapside

**Wood Street**  
**Cheapside, London**

# Wood Street, Cheapside



**Wood Street  
Spitalfields, London**



Wood Street  
(now known as Wilkes Street),  
Spitalfields



Wood Street interior,  
Spitalfields





# What happened to the silkmen?

- References to Coventry silkmen tail off from the beginning of the nineteenth century
- Some London silkmen set up warehouses in Coventry and deal directly with the undertakers
- After the disruption of the Napoleonic Wars a class of half-pay apprentices had appeared who could be exploited in workshops separate from the home.
- Workshop operators could also deal directly with London, developing into the factory operations by the 1840s

# So does this 18<sup>th</sup> century activity add up to an Industrial Revolution in Coventry?

## For

- Coventry population 1694 = 6,710  
1801 = 22,801 with ribbon trade employing most
- Urbanisation filled up space within the old walled city

## Against

- Almost all production based on full time weavers in their own homes – a simple extension on the city's medieval craft based working
- All hand powered, no use of water or steam power
- No new technology beyond the introduction in 1760s of the engine loom (capable of producing multiple ribbons)

**The End**