

Benjamin Mordecai, later Benjamin Mountigue.

A Jewish immigrant, Benjamin Mordecai's country of origin remains unknown. On the 14th August 1767, he is recorded in Clerkenwellⁱ, when, as a silversmith, he took Levy Phillipsⁱⁱ apprentice. Three years later, on 24th August 1770, Mordecai entered a 'smallworkers' mark with the Goldsmiths' Company, although extant pieces suggest that he had been marking silver for some years prior to that – indeed, it is possible that an earlier mark had been registered in the now lost 'largeworkers' registerⁱⁱⁱ.

As the Old Bailey Sessions Papers reveal, Jewish people were very readily blamed for crimes ranging from petty theft to murder. Many, particularly from the poorer Ashkenazi community, ran small businesses trading as sellers of rags and small wares, or 'hawkers'. In court they generally relied on character witnesses from the Jewish community whose credibility carried little weight. Conviction rates were high: for example, on 6th September 1769, Abraham Barnet and Michael Hymes were charged with stealing a bar of soap and a piece of oil cloth from the driver of the Aylesbury wagon which stopped in Kensington. Their character witnesses were '*Benjamin Mordecai^{iv}, and Hymes Moses Levi, Lazarus Levi, and Samuel Arine, who said the prisoners were Jews, and had good characters.*' Both were found guilty.

Jewish people were not allowed to become apprentices within the City of London and hence were unable to obtain Freedom of the City with the right to trade within its boundaries. Although a few, particularly from the Sephardic community, became prosperous merchants, most Jews suffered prejudice and suspicion. Many chose to convert to Christianity and Mordecai was one of these.

'*The Middlesex Journal*' of 29th – 31st October 1772 [issue 560] carried the following:

'In such disgrace are the Jews on account of the horrid murders and robberies they have committed, that an honest Israelite, not a mile for Clerkenwell-Green, has by his own licence, changed the remarkable name of Mordecai to that of Montague, and wrote the latter on his door, and is labouring very hard to obtain a true pronunciation of the English tongue.'

In fact, the register of marks in the Goldsmiths' Company shows that Mordecai had decided to change his name over a year before this newspaper announcement. His Jewish patronymic name would have been Benjamin ben Mordecai and his decision to abjure his religion was surely the inspiration for a series of letters '*The Apology of Benjamin ben Mordecai to his friends, for embracing Christianity; in seven letters to Elisha Levy, merchant, of Amsterdam*', first published by the clergyman Henry Taylor, [1711-1785], in 1771. Whether the letters existed, or whether they were simply a fictional vehicle for Taylor's theological arguments, is not clear, nor is there any evidence that Mordecai corresponded with Taylor.

On 26th April 1771 Mordecai had entered a fresh mark at the Goldsmiths' Company in the name of Benjamin Mountague^v. A third mark was registered on the 9th December 1771 and a fourth on 20th June 1772 [for which latter mark his initials were reversed as 'MB']. Further marks, [with the initials 'BM'] were entered on 25th July 1772, 4th September 1772, and 26th February 1773. Mordecai, now Mountigue, then entered seven sets of 'cameo' marks as a buckle-maker, giving his address at 10, Clerkenwell Green, between 1st October 1773 and 16th June 1784.

Although the list of London silversmiths within the Parliamentary Report of 1773 describes him as 'Mordecai, alias, Mountigue, Benjamin, bucklemaker, Clerkenwell Green', his business extended beyond buckle-making into the production of larger pieces, including small sauceboats, teapots, and salt cellars, as well as sugar tongs and, perhaps, other flatware. The last pieces noted bear the date letter for 1794.

Mountigue had formed a partnership with Robert Pingston, an agent and broker of 22 Bartholomew Close^{vi}, which partnership was dissolved in 1788:

'THIS is to give Notice, that the 'Partnership between Benjamin Mountague and Robert. Pingston, of Clerkenwell-green, Goldsmiths and Silversmiths, was this Day dissolved, by mutual Consent. All Persons indebted to the said Partnership are to pay their Debts to B . Mountague, who will- pay all Debts owing by them. Witness their Hands, June 24 1788.

B. Mountague.

R. Pingston.

"N.B. The above Business will henceforward be carried on by

Mr. J. J. Mountague, the Son of the said B. Mountague, solely for his own Benefit.

J. J. Mountague.

B. Mountague'

Mountigue's purpose in dissolving his partnership may have been to enable his son, Isaac James Mountigue, to carry on the business alone but Isaac James soon ran into difficulties. 'The Whitehall Evening Post' of the 10th -13th December 1791 informed readers of his bankruptcy:

'James Montague, late of Clerkenwell-green, silversmith; to surrender Dec. 14, at ten, 24, at twelve, and Jan. 21, at ten, at Guildhall. Attorney, Mr. Annesley, New Bridge-street, Blackfriars.'

A few years later, The London Gazette of 1st July 1794 recorded that James was then a prisoner in the Kings Bench, Surrey, petitioning for relief:

'James Mountague, formerly of the Parish of St. James Clerkenwell, late of Bedford-court New North-street Red Lion-square in the County of Middlesex, Gentleman.'

Trade directories for the period do not mention any of Benjamin Mountigue's partnerships, nor were any partnership marks registered with the Goldsmiths' Company. 'The New Complete Guide' of 1783, the 'London Directory' of 1788, and the 'Wakefield's Merchant and Trade's Directory' of 1793, all list 'Mountague, Benjamin, working-goldsmith, 10, Clerkenwell-green.' The land tax assessment of 1783 for St. James and St. John, Clerkenwell, lists Benjamin 'Mountague' as ratepayer on two adjacent properties in Clerkenwell next door to Sarah Evance and a few doors from the silversmith John Moliere – the proximity with Moliere is of particular interest because a Tea Canister of 1768/9 in the Ashmolean Museum collection has the mark of Moliere and his partner Dyal Jones *overstruck* by that of Mordecai.^{vii}

Mountague's integration into society included membership of a Lodge of Freemasons. He is listed as a member of the 'Moderns Grand Lodge', which he joined on 2nd December 1778. Despite his son's losses, he appears to have prospered sufficiently to retire to Camberwell in 1795, where he is listed as ratepayer for a rented property [of the yearly value of £30] until 1806. He wrote a will in 1801 describing himself as a 'Gentleman' and died in 1806, leaving 'to my son Isaac James Mountague, who has had much money of me, and who has also greatly displeased me, one shilling and no more'. The rest of his estate was to go to his widow, Elizabeth, and his daughter Susannah, with an annuity to a servant.^{viii}

From 1794, when Mountague retired to Camberwell, his premises at 10, Clerkenwell Green were taken by the silversmithing partnership of Naphtali Hart and Duncan Urquhart. The succession is intriguing and the partnership between Hart, a Jew, and Urquhart has parallels with that between Mountague and Pingston. They had first registered a mark [on 18th October 1791] as buckle-makers but, like Mountague, progressed to the production of larger wares – notably teasetts. Their second mark was registered on 20th May 1795, around the time of Mountague's retirement: possibly there had been a business connection between Mountague and Urquhart and Hart in the intervening years after Isaac James's bankruptcy.

ⁱ In April 1763 the London Gazette announced the bankruptcy of a Benjamin Mordecai, ‘silversmith, dealer and chapman’ of Portsmouth. This may be a different individual.

ⁱⁱ See National Archives IR1 26f139. Levy Phillips later entered a mark with the Goldsmiths’ Company [Grimwade 1960] on 9th May 1770 as a buckle-maker.

ⁱⁱⁱ Grimwade suggests that mark 3490, ‘BM’ in an oval cartouche, as seen on salt cellars of 1767, may have belonged to Mordecai but the mark ‘BM’ in a rectangular cartouche has also been found prior to 1770.

^{iv} There were at least two others bearing the name Benjamin Mordecai in London at this period.

^v Mordecai chose the name Mountigue. However, it appears variously as Mountague and Montague.

^{vi} Pingston died aged 85 in 1823. For his will see the National Archives, Prob. 11/1665/224. My thanks to John Culme for directing me to that information. He was, like Mountague, a Freemason. He was also, from 1774, a member of the Honourable Artillery Company. In 1790 Holden’s London Directory lists Pingston at 22, Bartholomew Close as a broker and at 23, Bartholomew Close as a ‘Working Silversmith’. He is listed in Directories at 22 Bartholomew Close from at least 1779.

^{vii} See Schroder, Timothy, ‘British and Continental Silver in the Ashmolean Museum, Vol. 2, cat. 306. The date confirms that Mordecai was already using a maker’s mark before that first recorded in the Goldsmiths’ Company registers.

^{viii} The will was proved on 17th June 1806. The burial of a Benjamin Montague is listed in the parish registers of St. Giles Camberwel on 21st June 1806.