

GUEST (SCHREIBER), LADY CHARLOTTE ELIZABETH BERTIE (1812-1895), translator, businesswoman and collector

Name: Charlotte Elizabeth Guest

Date of birth: 1812

Date of death: 1895

Spouse: Charles Schreiber

Spouse: Josiah John Guest

Child: Blanche Ponsonby (née Guest)

Child: Montague Guest

Child: Ivor Bertie Guest

Parent: Charlotte Susanna Elizabeth Bertie (née Layard)

Parent: Albemarle Bertie

Gender: Female

Occupation: translator, businesswoman and collector

Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Business and Industry; Literature and Writing; Scholarship and Languages

Authors: Angela V. John, Thomas Herbert Parry-Williams

Charlotte Guest, daughter of Albemarle Bertie, 9th Earl of Lindsey and his second wife, Charlotte Susanna Elizabeth (née Layard), was born at Uffington House, Lincolnshire, on 19 May 1812. Her father died when she was six and her mother remarried. Educated at home, Lady Charlotte's capacity for sustained study and aptitude for languages became apparent from a young age and marked her out from her two younger brothers and half-sisters. She taught herself Arabic, Hebrew and Persian. She began keeping a journal when aged nine. With just one gap (lasting for less than four years) she maintained this journal until she was seventy-nine, writing for up to an hour daily. It is an invaluable piece of social history.

After meeting (in London) the Welsh ironmaster and MP for Merthyr Tydfil, [Josiah John Guest](#), twenty-one year old Lady Charlotte married him in 1833. He was a widower and ran the vast Dowlais Iron Company that was fast becoming the largest ironworks in the world, employing about 7,000 workers. Lady Charlotte had disliked her step-father, the Reverend Peter Pegus, and viewed her move to Wales as a providential escape. She interested herself in the business, took a keen and active interest in the welfare of workmen of all kinds and their families, discussed technical matters with leading engineers and scientists such as Charles Babbage and translated into English a French pamphlet on the use of hot blast. Her most significant translation work was, however, devoted to what she called 'The Mabinogion'. Within days of arriving in Dowlais she had started learning Middle Welsh, tutored by the Rector, [Evan Jenkins](#). Working with the Welsh clerics, notably Reverends [Thomas Price](#) ('Carnhuanawc') and [John Jones](#) ('Tegid') and drawing upon the research inspired by the Romantic revival and the translation work of [William Owen Pughe](#) who had recently died, Lady Charlotte began transcribing and translating into English eleven medieval Welsh tales (from the Llyfr Coch o Hergest / Red Book of Hergest). These were the four branches of the Mabinogi, three Arthurian Romances (Lady Charlotte is acknowledged as the first to recognise their

European analogues), and four independent tales. She also translated the sixteenth century 'Taliesin'. The first of her translations (the Arthurian tale, 'The Lady of the Fountain') appeared in 1838. Eleven years later the collected tales appeared as 'The Mabinogion' in a lavishly illustrated and annotated three-volume edition. Over a century and a half later, its second translator argues that ever since Lady Charlotte's achievement, these stories have 'taken on a life of their own, and earned their place on the European and world stage' (Sioned Davies).

During the same years as she was translating and preparing her publications, Lady Charlotte gave birth to ten children: five boys and five girls. She sought to improve their social credentials (although of high birth, marrying into trade was seen as a problem even though [John Guest](#) was made a baronet in 1838). In spite of her dislike of London Society, Lady Charlotte used it to further her family's status while the acquisition of a Dorset estate complete with a house (Canford Manor) remodelled by Sir Charles Barry, helped to secure the Guest transition to the landed class. In 1880 [Sir John](#) and Lady Charlotte's eldest son was made Baron Wimborne. Sir Charles Barry also designed the Dowlais Central Schools (which cost £20,000 to build). They formed part of an impressive and progressive educational scheme for the Dowlais workforce, extending from infancy into adulthood and engaging much of Lady Charlotte's time in mid-century. She espoused various welfare schemes, stimulated by her cousin, the archaeologist, Henry Layard.

The death of [Sir John Guest](#) in 1852 saw Lady Charlotte take on the running of the works as sole active trustee. The iron trade was by this period past its heyday and in the summer of 1853 Lady Charlotte had to deal with a strike in the works, a situation in which she found herself pitted not only against the workforce but also having to negotiate with an oligarchy of ironmasters unused to dealing with a powerful woman. Two years later her life changed course again. In April 1855 she married Charles Schreiber of Suffolk, fourteen years her junior. He had been employed as a tutor to prepare Ivor Guest (the eldest son) for Cambridge and was a classics scholar who became a Tory MP for Cheltenham and Poole (though Lady Charlotte retained her Whig sympathies). The Schreibers spent much of their married life on the continent collecting ceramics. Their eighteenth-century English china is amongst the world's finest. Lady Charlotte has been dubbed 'the greatest of the nineteenth century lady collectors' (Ann Eatwell).

Lady Charlotte outlived her second husband who died in Lisbon in 1884. She spent her last years in London cataloguing and writing about her collections. Her English china went to the Victoria and Albert Museum and some of it can be seen in its Schreiber Room. She wrote the catalogue to accompany the 1800 or so pieces bequeathed in memory of Charles Schreiber. Her European china was sold at auction though some was reserved for members of her large family. The British Museum received her eighteenth-century fans, playing cards and board games. In five folio volumes, she described her many fans, fan leaves and cards, *Fan and Fan leaves* (1888-90), *Playing Cards of Various Ages and Countries* (1892-5), the final volume was published posthumously, edited by her collaborator Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks of the British Museum. In 1891 she became the first woman to receive the freedom of the Worshipful Company of Fanmakers.

Lady Charlotte died at Canford Manor, Dorset on 15 January 1895 and is buried in Canford church. In 1950 and 1952 her grandson, the Earl of Bessborough, published edited highlights from her voluminous journals. The originals are now housed in the National Library of Wales.

Authors

Angela V. John

Sir Thomas Herbert Parry-Williams, (1887)

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Wikipedia Article: [Lady Charlotte Guest](#)

Works

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Charlotte Guest, [The Mabinogion \(London 1906\)](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Lady Charlotte Guest Manuscripts](#)
NLW Archives: [Lady Charlotte Guest Papers](#)
VIAF: [66514684](#)
Wikidata: [Q272542](#)

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