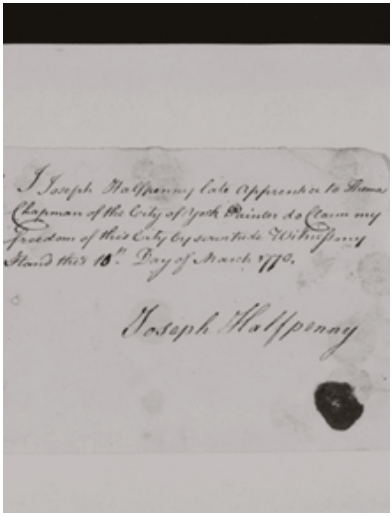
Joseph Halfpenny: Artist and Engraver

Cover photo: Micklegate Bar by Joseph Halfpenny
Source: Wikipedia creative commons

Joseph Halfpenny was born in Bishopthorpe on 9th October 1748. His father, Thomas worked as a gardener to the then Archbishop of York, **Matthew Hutton**. He appears to have had one sibling, a brother, also Thomas, who died in 1763 at Bishopthorpe. Halfpenny was apprenticed to Thomas Chapman, as a house painter around 1763, and in March 1770, with his apprenticeship completed, he claimed the Freedom of the City of York, enabling him to join a Guild and have access to certain rights. An image of his claim and signature exists (shown below).

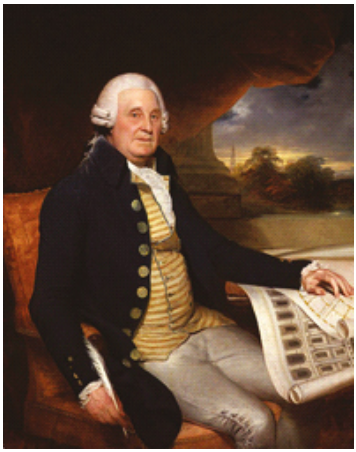

I Joseph Halfpenny late Apprentice to Thomas Chapman of the City of York Painter do Claim my Freedom of this City by servitude Witness my Hand this 18th Day of March 1770.

Joseph Halfpenny

Joseph Halfpenny's claim to be admitted to the Freedom of the City of York
Source: Records of City of York Freemen (Find My Past search)

He continued his role as a house painter but although no records of subsequent training exist, he had clearly set his sights on becoming an expert draughtsman and developed a talent in this field. In ensuing years, he raised himself to that position and began to make his mark as an artist and teacher of drawing.

In 1770, **John Carr** [1], an eminent architect (born in Wakefield 1723) with numerous buildings to his credit in York, England and abroad, was asked to survey the fabric of York Minster. From the scaffolding erected to undertake the survey, artists were able to produce precise architectural views of the building to assist those undertaking design and execution of restoration. Halfpenny was employed by Carr as his clerk of works. He painstakingly etched detailed drawings on plates showing numerous aspects of the Minster. With his reputation enhanced, Halfpenny was also taking on apprentices of his own, in the same year (1770) a record exists concerning Benjamin Lee who was indentured to '*Master Painter*' Joseph Halfpenny at a cost of £4 [2].



John Carr Architect: William Beechey (1791) ***Source: Wikipedia***

[1] John Carr (1723-1807 was a prolific architect best known for Buxton Crescent and Harewood House. He remodelled Fairfax House in York. Carr, the son of a master mason, had risen from relatively humble beginnings to become one of the leading architects of the day. He acquired substantial personal wealth, becoming Lord Mayor of York on two occasions. In later life he lived at Askham Richard.

[2] British Country Apprentices 1710-1808.

Aged 24, Halfpenny married Jane Atkinson in March 1772 at Bishopthorpe. The couple had two children, Margaret (born 1773) and Charlotte (born 1781). Jane Halfpenny died aged 34 in 1784. Two years later he married his second wife Frances Maria Barrett on July 10th, 1786, at St Olave's. Halfpenny and his family lived initially in Coney Street, later moving to 26, Gillygate (now known as 26a Gillygate, Halfpenny House).

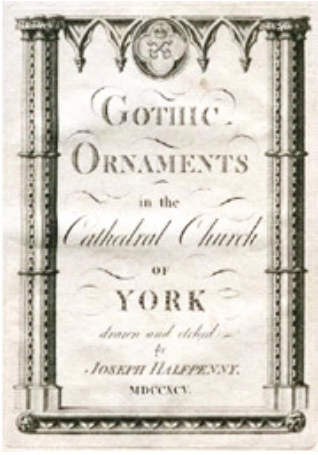
Joseph Halfpenny's former home:
26a Gillygate (Halfpenny House)

Interestingly, whilst residing there, he was subject to the imposition of 'window tax' in the years 1774-1776 [3]. Gillygate and Bootham had become fashionable areas in York to live, with many fine houses. Despite the existence of cock fighting and ale houses in and around Bootham, this was a time when the city could boast

[3] An unpopular measure, the Window Tax was applied in the 18th and 19th centuries, based on the number of windows in a house. To avoid it, some owners removed glass and bricked up their windows. Numerous examples of this can be seen in York's Georgian and Victorian houses.

a host of attractions nearby such as the York Theatre Royal (built 1744 and flourishing after 1750), shopping, races on the nearby Knavesmire (from 1731), dancing and cards at the Assembly Rooms, civic functions, and processions [4].

Between 1795-1800, Halfpenny used his etchings for a book, published by subscription in 20 parts. This notable production was entitled 'Gothic Ornaments in the Cathedral of York' and Halfpenny's modest preface read: *'I have been induced to exhibit this selection of Gothic Ornaments'.* Another edition was printed in 1831, twenty years after his death. A second book entitled '*Fragments Vetusta, or the Remains of Ancient Buildings in York*' was published in 1807. This had over 175 specimens of ornaments illustrated, and it subsequently achieved recognition as one of the earliest contributions to the revival of Gothic building in England. Importantly some of his recorded drawings included parts of the Minster that were later damaged by fire, helping the restoration effort afterwards. Five views of other churches in York were published posthumously by his daughters.



Front Cover: Halfpenny's publication

[4] A History of the County of York: City of York. Drake. Ed P.M Tillot (London 1961). British History on-line.

In 1798, alongside many other men, Halfpenny volunteered to join the **York Armed Association** [5]. This was one of many such organisations set up across the country. Composed of male civilians they were formed to support national defence in the event of an invasion during the Napoleonic Wars. This possibility was a considered a real threat during the time.

Halfpenny's second wife Frances died on November 12th, 1800, aged 54. In 1806, he was elected Sheriff of York. Although an honour, he chose not to take up the position, for which he was fined £70 [6]. The post of Sheriff was an expensive undertaking; the occupant was expected to hold a civic feast for the mayor and dignitaries alongside other civic functions and roles, the cost of which was partially borne by the individual. Not surprisingly, some elected to the post preferred a fine to the risk of bankruptcy.

Chapter House: York Minster - J Halfpenny 1795

[5] Source: York Infantry: Copy of the enrolment with names of persons enrolled. 1798.

[6] British Newspaper Archives – York Herald: Weekly summary citing the Joseph Halfpenny fine. October 1806

Further information about Halfpenny's later years is sparse. Without doubt he was a seriously gifted artist and draughtsman who influenced architecture appreciably during his lifetime and beyond. His work was accomplished and prolific. It is significant that some of his works are held by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Grenville Library (at the British Museum) as well as York City Art Gallery.

The Bridge: Fountains Abbey - J Halfpenny 1793 *(V&A)*

Scaffolding: West end York Minster – J Halfpenny

Joseph Halfpenny died at his house in Gillygate on 11th July 1811. He was 63 and died intestate. However, the Borthwick Institute holds a record proved in the Prerogative Court of York (17th August 1811) indicating that his goods and the sum of £600 was granted to *'Margaret and Charlotte Halfpenny, the natural and only children of the said deceased'*. He was interred, with his second wife Frances, on July 13th in St Olave's Churchyard. Although Halfpenny's burial place is confirmed in parish records [7], the grave inscription is not dedicated to him individually; rather he is referred to as the husband of the deceased Frances. Dates of his birth and death are not visible. It is assumed that since his name was already inscribed on the stone, no further action was taken by his daughters to mark his death. The Halfpenny grave is close to the burial place of his wife's mother, Ann Hesletine, (who remarried after the death of her first husband and Frances's father, John Barrett [8]). She died a year after her daughter in 1801.

Frances Maria Halfpenny Grave (and Joseph Halfpenny): St Olave's

[7] York, St Olave's Burial Register: 1770-1812. Record states that he was a *Drawing Master* living in Gillygate and that he died 11th July 1811 and was buried 13th July 1811, aged 62. No cause of death was entered.

[8] John Barrett is described as 'deceased' on the marriage record of Joseph and Frances in 1786. He came from Barnby nr Doncaster.

In an obituary published in the **Gentleman's Magazine 1811** Halfpenny was described thus:

> *Aged about 70, Mr J Halfpenny of York, eminent draughtsman. Mr Halfpenny published in 1795, his etchings of the interior of York Cathedral 'Gothic Ornaments' which for taste and execution, few artists have excelled. He also published in 1797 'Fragments Vetutsa' which met with patronage and approbation from a discerning Publick, which every lover of graphic taste must approve. His instruction in drawing was in great request. He was distinguished not more by his professional talents than by his disinterested loyalty and patriotism, in which latter instance he will be deeply regretted by many of his fellow citizens* [9] *'*

Margaret and Charlotte Halfpenny published some of their father's work after his death. The only record concerning their subsequent lives appears in the City of York Deeds Register 1718-1866, indicating both sisters had left the house in Gillygate and were unmarried in 1824. In that year they would have been 51 and 43 years old respectively.

Written by Helen Robb – August 2022

[9] The article refers to Joseph being about 70 years old at his death but since he was born in 1748, the parish record confirms that he was 62.

St Olave's Church, Marygate, York
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This booklet is part of the St Olave's Church "History Revisited" series

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