The 'Ashbourne' Portrait

New research on the painting’s provenance by Jeremy Crick and Dorna Bewley strengthen the case that it is the lost portrait of Edward de Vere by Cornelius Ketel. All photographs by Jeremy Crick.

Foreword

Regular readers of this newsletter will recall that my research into the Trentham family proceeds on the hypothesis that, if any of Edward de Vere’s literary papers have survived until the present, following the Trentham line offers the best chance of discovering them. They may also recall the closing lines of my article in the last issue which said, “In the third and final part of this Trentham family history, we will explore all the many houses in England where these papers may have ended up as we follow the Trentham line to its extinction.” When these words were written, I never suspected that a couple of interesting discoveries I’d made in the course of this research would amount to more than a few paragraphs in the proposed essay. Yet the more that I began following this line of enquiry the more realised that two direct links I’d discovered between the Trenthams and the Cokaynes of Ashbourne offered tantalisising new clues to one of the most hotly contested icons in the intense struggle between Oxfordian and Stratfordian scholarship – the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait.

I would still be at the starting gate in this line of enquiry were it not for the remarkable efforts of fellow DVS member Dorna Bewley. We have worked jointly on this research and I cannot thank Dorna enough for her research skills, her valuable insights and for unstintingly sharing her research material. We have studied as much published information as we could find on this portrait to ensure that our discoveries take note of the research already undertaken on the subject.

We believe that the many discoveries we’ve made regarding the provenance of the painting will be of great interest to Oxfordians and, in deciding to publish our research now, it has not been possible, for reasons of space, to publish the final part of the history of the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait in this issue. However, as we contend that the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait was an important heirloom of the Trentham family, we believe it is essential to understand the family relationships of the Trenthams during the course of the 1600s and the geographical landscape in which they lived. The bare essentials of this will be provided here, but I would urge readers who are interested to visit my website where they can acquaint themselves with the full story:

www.jeremycrick.info/TrenthamFamily-1.html

and begin reading at the section marked ‘Part III’

For copyright reasons, we have not been able to publish a reproduction of the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait here. To view the portrait, visit: www.shakespeare-oxford.com/ashbour2.htm

Introduction

The ‘Ashbourne’ portrait of Shakespeare first came to the public’s attention in 1847 when the man who had discovered it, the Reverend Clement Kingston, issued an edition of a mezzotint of the painting for sale to a public that had become besotted with what George Bernard Shaw would later term “bardolatry”.

At the time, Reverend Kingston was a master at the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Ashbourne before being sacked from the school for charging his day pupils double the fee that he was authorised to do. The painting was known as the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait of Shakespeare ever since. The painting itself was never made public at this time and it took M. H. Spielmann F.S.A., a distinguished art historian, years of research to track the original down. Spielmann wrote up his analysis of the painting and provided all the information he had discovered about the painting’s provenance in the April 1910 and May-August 1910 editions of the fine art magazine, The Connoisseur. Spielmann strikes a skeptical tone throughout his two articles not only about certain features within the painting, but also about the Reverend Kingston’s account of how the painting was discovered by a friend of his languishing in an antique shop in London. Subsequent research by ourselves will more than confirm Spielmann’s doubts about the reliability of Kingston’s story.

The painting again came to the public’s attention in January 1940 when Charles Wisner Barrell published his now celebrated report in the ‘Scientific American’ of his x-ray analysis into the ‘Ashbourne’ which had by then been acquired by the Folger Shakespeare Library. Citing a mass of evidence uncovered by this method of peering beneath the surface of a painting to look at all the underpainting, his conclusion that the portrait was, in fact, of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, was both astounding and shocking to most viewers of the painting.

The great domed head of the man dressed in nobleman’s attire, Barrell announced, had been painted over a normal hairline in order to make it look like the classic Doreshout engraving in the First Folio of Shakespeare. The device on the signet ring on the thumb of the sitter’s left hand had been overpainted to hide the well-known de Vere family device of a boar underneath. He discovered the scratched-out traces of an original inscription and cast reasonable doubt upon the authenticity of the actual inscription upon the canvas. And he conducted a most convincing comparative analysis of the facial characteristics of the ‘Ashbourne’ with other known portraits of Edward de Vere. All subsequent analysis of the painting has not only confirmed but amplified these original findings of Barrell particularly with regard to the close likeness of the sitter to Edward de Vere.

But perhaps the most exciting discovery in Barrell’s published x-rays showed that, below the inscription – “AETATIS SUAE . 47 / A° 1611 (declaring the sitter to be 47 years old)” – was another inscription which had been painted over in order to make the painting look like the well-known portrait in the Folger Shakespeare Library. Barrell believed that this was a portrait of the Earl of Oxford by Cornelius Ketel. He believed that the painting was copied from a Cornelius Ketel portrait of the Earl of Oxford. No other portrait of Edward de Vere by Ketel has ever been discovered.

The provenance

In charting the provenance of the Ketel portrait of Edward de Vere, it is first necessary to determine when it was painted. A convincing dating analysis of the ‘Ashbourne’ has been published by Katherine Chiljan in her Winter 2003 article in the ’Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter’ entitled, “Dating the ‘Ashbourne’ Portrait - Oxfordian evidence and recent lab analysis suggests 1597.” In this article, Katherine directly addresses – with compelling arguments - the previous attempt at dating the portrait by Barbara Burris (Shakespeare Matters, Winter 2002) who placed the work between 1579 and 1580 through a detailed analysis of the sitter’s costume. But perhaps the most exciting discovery in Barrell’s published x-rays showed that, below the inscription – “AETATIS SUAE . 47 / A° 1611 (declaring the sitter to be 47 years old)” – was another inscription which had been painted over in order to make the painting look like the well-known portrait in the Folger Shakespeare Library. Barrell believed that this was a portrait of the Earl of Oxford by Cornelius Ketel. He believed that the painting was copied from a Cornelius Ketel portrait of the Earl of Oxford. No other portrait of Edward de Vere by Ketel has ever been discovered.

The Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Ashbourne – with insets showing the plaque and, above the main door, the Cokayne family shield and crest adapted for the school badge.
brother ffrancis Trentham and Ralph Sneyd purchased King’s Place in Hackney (see the last issue) which became the family home of Edward de Vere and his Countess during the last eight years of his life. If Chiljan’s 1597 date is correct, then it would seem a racing certainty that Edward de Vere commissioned the portrait from Ketel following the move to King’s Place and, therefore, it began its existence gracing the classic Tudor long gallery at this wonderful manor house.

After Edward de Vere’s death in 1604, and following his widow’s sale of King’s Place in 1609, Elizabeth Countess Dowager of Oxford moved her family home to the recently repurchased Castle Hedingham and it is likely that all the paintings from King’s Place would have followed her here unless Edward de Vere had made any specific bequests of them to, say, his daughters.

After the Countess Dowager’s death in 1612 her brother ffrancis retained control of the estate of his late brother-in-law and retired from public life, spending his remaining years at the Trentham family seat of Rocester Abbey. After Castle Hedingham came into his possession upon the death of Henry de Vere in 1625, what then became of the Ketel portrait if it was still at the castle? The two most realistic possibilities are that it was either moved to Rocester as a memento of ffrancis’ beloved sister and noble brother-in-law, or given to one of Edward de Vere’s three daughters Elizabeth, Bridget or Susan. And this goes for any other important heirlooms of Edward and his Countess Elizabeth which had remained at Hedingham, including Edward’s papers. If the painting ever graced the walls of the ‘great dyning chamber’ at Rocester Abbey (mentioned thus in ffrancis Trentham’s will), its passage down the years before ending up at Ashbourne would seem to be lost in the mists of time. But having now charted the line of descent of the Trentham heirs (along with the family heirlooms) through the many houses in Staffordshire and down to Rushton in Northampton, at least informed hypothesis can replace pure guesswork in following the trail.

The last in the line of the Trentham family was the wealthy heiress Elizabeth Trentham (see portrait, below), daughter of Sir ffrancis Trentham who had been killed at the age of only twenty-four fighting for the King during the Civil War (and thereby hangs a tale of great treachery and avarice). It is this Elizabeth Trentham who, as sole heiress of the Trentham family wealth, has become conflated with Elizabeth Trentham, Countess of Oxford, by generations of Oxfordians thereby leading them to the misconception that the second wife of Edward de Vere was herself a wealthy heiress.

Elizabeth Trentham married Bryan Cokayne, 2nd Viscount Cullen, of Rushton Hall in 1653. Twenty years later, Lord and Lady Cullen sold the manor of Castle Hedingham and the manor of Rocester Abbey (the ancient family seats of the Earls of Oxford and the Trenthams respectively, which Elizabeth Trentham had inherited) to William Sneyd of Keele Hall and Thomas Cokayne, heir of the Ashbourne Cokaynes, the senior branch of the Cokayne family of whom the Rushton Cokaynes were the cadet branch.

It is important to bear in mind at this point just how close Ashbourne is to Rocester – it is less than eight miles.

Thomas Cokayne was the son and heir of Sir Aston Cokayne whose family had been Lords of Ashbourne since the thirteenth century. Checking the Ashbourne Cokayne pedigree to discover more about the man, I was amazed to discover that Thomas’ maternal grandmother was Anne Stanhope, daughter of Sir John Stanhope and his wife Katherine Trentham, sister of the Countess of Oxford. In other words, not one but two direct relationships have emerged between the Trenthams and the Ashbourne Cokaynes – by direct descent through the Stanhopes, and via their Rushton cousins by marriage.

Our hunch about the painting coming to Ashbourne via the Cokaynes was strengthened after Dorna had contacted the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Ashbourne… school still bears the Cokayne shield of arms of three cocks for its own badge, as I discovered myself on a recent visit.

Already three working hypotheses were presenting themselves regarding the passage of the portrait from the Trenthams to the Ashbourne Cokaynes. Firstly, and most elegantly, if Elizabeth Countess of Oxford, widow of Edward de Vere, had made a gift of the portrait to her beloved sister Katherine (along with some of her expensive gowns – see the last issue) to be kept safe as a family heirloom, it was but one step away from Ashbourne Hall if Katherine had then passed the painting to her daughter Anne Stanhope who, in 1611, had married Thomas Cokayne (d. 1638), father of Sir Aston Cokayne.

Alternatively, if the painting had stayed at either Castle Hedingham or Rocester, either Thomas Cokayne (son of Sir Aston) or William Sneyd would have had the opportunity to take possession of the painting when, in 1673, they were deciding how to divide up their joint purchase of the two properties. Regular readers of the DVS newsletter will already be aware of how close the Trentham family were to the Sneyds of Keele Hall ever since Elizabeth Countess of Oxford’s father Thomas Trentham had married Jane, the daughter of the Sneyd family, and we will come as no surprise that the Sneyds and Keele Hall will continue to figure very strongly in the course of the present essay.

A somewhat less likely but, nonetheless, provable link is that the portrait travelled right down the Trentham line and ended up at Rushton Hall where the same Thomas Cokayne, as an honoured cousin, would have been a welcome, if not frequent, guest. I know beyond doubt through the discovery of the Sir Peter Lely portrait of Elizabeth Trentham Lady Cullen (after a two and a half year search) that a great number of family portraits once graced the walls of this impressive Elizabethan hall, and also that the Cullens had few qualms about squandering their joint inheritance if a reasonable cash offer presented itself.

The coat of arms on the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait

Any serious study of the painting’s provenance must resolve a tangled web of analysis arising from Barrell’s discovery of the coat of arms on the upper left of the painting. From the moment we first studied the reproductions of Barrell’s two x-ray exposures of this coat of arms and read his accompanying analysis, Dorna and I both had an uneasy feeling. Yet, faced with sheaves of new research material on all the other aspects of this painting, we merely logged our disquiet and moved on in order to get a feel for the broad sweep of the Oxfordian position on the painting to date.

Having now studied the matter at some length, we have little hesitation in declaring that much of the analysis we have read which maintains
that the coat of arms in the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait belongs to the Trentham family is in error. Although there are superficial similarities between the Trentham coat of arms and the arms discovered in Charles Wiser Barrell’s x-ray photographs published in the ‘Scientific American’ in January 1940, on close examination the differences between the two are fundamental. In Barrell’s defence, it is perhaps worth pointing out that, when he made his discovery, it was less than twenty years since Thomas J. Looney had made his own discoveries public about Edward de Vere. An understandable lack of knowledge in 1940 about the family of the Earl of Oxford’s second wife should not detract from Barrell’s great achievement.

We would hope we have demonstrated in no way invalidates the case that the true subject of this portrait is Edward de Vere. Our contention is entirely consistent with Barbara Burris’ research which proves that the coat of arms that Barrell discovered – and which many Oxfordians consider a central plank of their argument – is itself an overpainting upon a canvas and which was not painted by Cornelius Ketel but was added later. Where we differ from Burris and others is our contention that this overpainting was actually the first of three attempts to impose a new identity upon the man in the painting – the first resulting perhaps from an innocent assumption by the family entitled to bear the coat of arms that the person in an old painting they possessed must have been a forgotten relative; and the second being a dishonest attempt to claim a new portrait of Shakespeare by painting over this coat of arms and all other incongruous details including the sitter’s full head of hair. By 1979, even the Folger finally gave up claiming the sitter to be Shakespeare and, in their ‘anyone but Oxford’ campaign, attempted to impose a third identity upon the portrait, basing their assertion on their reading of the coat of arms. The Folger’s analysis, however, is fundamentally flawed and can now be revealed to be a giant red herring.

Let us first examine Barrell’s analysis of the coat of arms:

“The recovered device ... is really a double crest. To the left, the faint black pencilling of a leopard or lion appears, while to the right is the white outline of a griffin. Months of research have proved that two Elizabethan families of Staffordshire had crests that correspond to the above combination. They were the Sneys of Kell[e] Hall and the Trenthams of Rochester Abbey. The shield of arms ... would seem to make this armorial identification positive for the Trentham arms are described in contemporary records as “Three griffin’s heads, erased, sable: beaked gules.”

This latter is indeed how the Trentham arms are both described and pictured (see below, middle) in ‘The Visitation of Staffordshire, 1583’ and, in layman’s terms, this means that the three griffin’s heads are cut leaving a jagged neck (erased) and are coloured black (sable) while the beaks are coloured red (gules). However, Barrell is mistaken in identifying the Trentham crest above their shield as a griffin – the 1583 record mentioned above describes and illustrates this as, “A raven’s head erased sable.”

There is also no evidence that we can see of the crest being a double crest – the single visible figure of what is unquestionably a griffin occupies a perfectly central position in relation to the shield and, try as we might, we cannot discern a “faint black pencilling of a leopard or lion”. But more worryingly, the three charges on the shield look quite unlike the three griffin charges on the Trentham shield. Rather, it is fairly obvious that the charges are, in fact, rams’ heads – they are ‘couped’ (cut straight) and not ‘erased’, they lack the distinctive cocked ears of the heraldic griffin, and the swirling lines of a ram’s horn are visible in each charge.

Reproduced here are the full Trentham family quartered arms, their shield and also a pencil tracing which I have made of Barrell’s two x-ray exposures of the coat of arms on the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait. Before moving to a discussion of which family the coat of arms most likely represents, we will first address what is perhaps the most significant clue to be found in this area of the painting – the artist’s monogram, CK. This is important for two reasons: if this monogram can be proven to be original to the painting, it is also possible to prove that the coat of arms was a later addition and that, secondly, the identity of the sitter currently proposed by the Folger is flawed because Cornelius Ketel could not have painted the sitter they propose when the man was in his late forties because he, Ketel, had left England long before and was, by then, incapable through infirmity of holding a paintbrush in his hands.

Many examples exist (and have been published in articles dealing with the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait) of Cornelius Ketel’s use of a monogram to sign his paintings. ... contained the coat of arms now visible upon it. Another important fact about the monogram is that, between Barrell’s 1937 x-ray photographs and the Folger’s own x-ray analysis done in 1948-9, the monogram had been removed from the painting (presumably because someone at the Folger rightly concluded that Ketel could not have painted Shakespeare at the age of forty-seven) and is now no longer visible in the ‘restored’ state of the painting which reveals the coat of arms. The fact that there is now a gap in the ribbon at precisely the point where the CK monogram is shown in the Barrell x-rays also indicates that the monogram could not have be removed without also removing the painted ribbon on top of it. These two points are addressed by Barbara Burris in her Spring 2002 article in ‘Shakespeare Matters’: ‘This [the later addition of the coat of arms] would also explain Ketel expert Wolf Stechow’s comment that neither Ketel (nor any artist) would put his initials in the place they are found on this painting, as part of a coat of arms [ref, Shakespeare Fellowship News-Letter, April 1941, p4]. The answer is that Ketel didn’t place his initials within the coat of arms. Instead, his monogram was incorporated into a coat of arms that was added to the canvas.

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A pencil tracing of the two x-ray exposures of the ‘Ashbourne’ coat of arms added by Charles Barrell in his ‘Scientific American’ article in 1940. The artist’s monogram CK can be clearly seen.
Hamersley or Homersley? – that is the question
By 1790 the Folger realised that continuing to claim the ‘Ashbourne’ to be a genuine portrait of Shakespeare was futile in the face of such a wealth of Oxfordian analysis, and they finally relented by allowing the name of their revised candidate, based on their research into the coat of arms, to emerge into the public domain. We chose to reveal this was interesting, to use a neutral phrase. Desperate to get Oxfordians off their back, they invited two repented members of the Shakespeare Oxford Society, Dr Gordon Cyr and his wife Helen, to review selected photographic exhibits from their various restoration projects on the portrait. This story has been covered in great detail elsewhere and it is only necessary here to report that Dr Cyr’s article, published in the Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter (Summer 1979 Vol 15 No 3), announced that the sitter was Sir Hugh Hamersley, Lord Mayor of London in 1627.

Dr Cyr’s experience of the Folger in this matter was a bitter one. Dorna and I were delighted to read his reassessment of this whole episode in the Spring 2002 issue of Shakespeare Matters – all those interested in this topic should read this piece in which he says, “... it was not my fault that those whose word I trusted in good faith have now been shown – thanks to the herculean efforts of Barbara Burris – to have exploited that trust.” Dr Cyr is the only author upon this topic who has had the courage to state plainly that “Barrell erred mightily in his hasty misidentification of the arms as those of the Trenthams” and that this error, being accepted uncritically by Oxfordians ever since, has held back the Oxfordian case. But what of the Hamersley claim? It is also surprising that, hitherto, no Oxfordians seem to have taken the trouble to examine the background of the Hamersley family whose coat of arms unquestionably appeared on the portrait sometime after Cornelius Ketel had finished it. Any attempt at solving the provenance of the painting simply must arrive at a solution that accommodates this fact. Having been informed by the Folger newsletter that it was Hugh Hamersley (he was not knighted until 1628) who was granted the family coat of arms in 1614 – the only reply from Oxfordians has been that this is a raised question about the 1611 date on the painting.
The initial grant of the Homersley arms to Hugh in 1614 simply does not stand up to the scrutiny of historical examination. The published pedigree of Sir Hugh Hamersley correctly acknowledges that his family descended from the Homersley family of Staffordshire. And it is, perhaps, understandable that the compilers of the various English family pedigree reference works fixed upon Sir Hugh as the most notable early member of the family – he being a knight and a Lord Mayor of London – and mistakenly declared that it was this same Hugh who was initially granted the family arms. In search for the origins of the grant of arms to the Hamersleys, there are two extremely reliable archive sources for both the arms and early pedigree of the family which never seem to have been consulted – the Visitations of Staffordshire 1583 and 1614. And the Homersley pedigree found in the second of these shows that, during the reign of Richard II, two separate branches of the family formed and that they very quickly lost all contact with one another. These impeccable records also provide the earliest proof that it was the branch of the family who remained in Staffordshire – the Homersleys – who were granted the coat of arms. And further Staffordshire records enjoin a trove of clues regarding the family relationships of the Homersleys which link them with not one but a number of places where the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait may realistically have hung.

The subtitle of the Visitations of Staffordshire for the year 1583 makes interesting reading: “Being a list of those summoned by warrant to appear before Glover, Somerset, and record their descent and arms.” Simply declaring oneself a gentleman in Elizabethan England was not good enough, one had personally to prove it before this royal commission. Listed under the Totmonslow Hundred (which incorporated Rocester and Leek) is listed: “Thomas Homersley, de Shaw. Ignobilis.” Later on, there is another heading which reads, “Names of those who have made no proof of their Gentry, bearing no Arms,” under which is listed, again for the Totmonslow Hundred, “Thos Homersley, of Shaw.”

So we can comfortably conclude that the Homersleys had yet to raise themselves socially in 1583, yet the very fact that they answered the summons would indicate their social aspirations. A couple of earlier records are worth examining here to give us an indication of where the family actually lived. In 1530, the court of the Star Chamber recorded a case brought by the great-grandfather of the above Thomas, it begins: “Sheweth Thomas Homersley of the Shawe, co. Stafford, that whereas your suppliant and his ancestors, time out of mind, have been peaceably possessed and in title of, and in certain messuages, etc., in the manor of

William Jolly of the Botham in the Parish of Chedleton in the said County of Stafford” on 28 February 1658.

The indenture recording the sale of Westwood Grange by Bryan Cokayne, Viscount Cullen and his wife Elizabeth née Trentham to his lady being Lady Prudence Trentham. This important document proves that the Rocester manor house was cleared of all the family’s valuable possessions by this date. (Entry 12)

The inventory of the manor house at Rocester Abbey, dated 12 April 1628, following the death of Sir Thomas Trentham. The two sections shown here are “In my Ladys Chamber” and “In my Ladys inner Chamber”. The place names of Cheddleton and Botham in the above make very interesting reading indeed. Cheddleton lies about three miles south of Leek in the heart of the district’s noted pasturage. And Botham is the original name of a great hall just south of here that was for generations the family seat of the Jolly (alias Jollife) family. The first of this name married the family estate of Westwood Grange off the Cullens in 1658. When the manor of Botham was bought by the Sneyds much later, a new and very wealthy cadet branch of the Sneyds was formed and they renamed the manor Ashcombe Hall and they are still known today as the Ashcombe Sneyds. And we do not mention the Sneyds idly in discussing the family relationships of the Homersleys, as we shall soon demonstrate.

Before coming to the second record touching on the Homersleys’ place of residence, I will give a brief survey of the history of Trentham family in this area around Leek in order to establish the potential for their family heirlooms – which may have included the Ketel portrait of Edward de Vere – to have ended up here. And, if this was the case, the potential for the Homersleys to have encountered these heirlooms.

High up in the Staffordshire moorlands and about fourteen miles up the River Churnett from Rocester, Leek was one of Staffordshire’s most important market towns whose prosperity was, in part, founded upon the trade in wool and the manufacture of textiles. Even today, the town still has a street named ‘Sheepmarket’ through which the market itself disappeared long ago. Since the days of Thomas Trentham (d. 1587) the family had invested heavily in pasture land to the south and west of the town and when, in 1604, his son Francis (Edward de Vere’s brother-in-law) purchased the 750 acre estate of Westwood Grange on the western outskirts of the town, it may well have sprung from a desire to facilitate getting their part-process wool to market – for it is notable that the pasture land of the Rocester Abbey estate was chiefly given over to grazing sheep and that, of the four mills that were in the possession of the Trenthams at Rocester, three were corn mills and one was a ‘fulling mill’ which is described in the OED as “a mill for fulling cloth as by means of pestles or stampers, which alternately fall into and rise from troughs where the cloth is placed with hot water and fuller’s earth, or other cleansing materials.”

The son and heir of Francis, Sir Thomas Trentham, and Lady Prudence his wife, took up residence at Westwood Grange from the date of their marriage in 1620. And the Homersley pedigree found in the second of these shows that, during the reign of Richard II, two separate branches of the family formed and that they very quickly lost all contact with one another. These impeccable records also provide the earliest proof that it was the branch of the family who remained in Staffordshire – the Homersleys – who were granted the coat of arms. And further Staffordshire records enjoin a trove of clues regarding the family relationships of the Homersleys which link them with not one but a number of places where the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait may realistically have hung.

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From page three of the Inventory of the manor houses at Rocester Abbey, dated 12 April 1628, following the death of Sir Thomas Trentham. The two sections shown here are “In my Ladys Chamber” and “In my Ladys inner Chamber”. This important document proves that the Rocester manor house was cleared of all the family’s valuable possessions by this date. (Entry 12)
The inventory deals exclusively with the various bed chambers, parlours, the kitchen, and also the number of livestock on the manor’s farm. That the larger communal rooms in the manor house had been cleared can be deduced by a comparison with some of the smaller rooms in the Chetwynds’ will in which he bequeathes to his son Sir Thomas all his books and “all those hangings which I have except such as furnishe the great dyeing chamber the mydle old dyeyng chamber & the end chamber.” There is no mention in the inventory of a library nor of books, and there is no mention at all of a great dining chamber where we might assume all the family portraits had been hung.

The reason for abandoning the manor house at Rocester is easy to establish. As Sir Thomas’ and Lady Prudence’s son and heir Francis was just eight years old on the death of his father, he became a royal ward and, while the young Francis moved to the home of his new guardian, Ralph Sneyd II (d. 1643) of Keele Hall, his mother Lady Prudence returned to Leek and saw out her remaining years as a widow living in the manor house at Westwood Grange. From this date, all the important family heirlooms of the Trenthams were most likely divided between Keele Hall and Westwood Grange. It is also possible that Sir Thomas’ younger brother Sir Christopher Trentham, who was a number of heirlooms and it is notable that he was recorded by the earliest Staffordshire historian, Sampson Ereswick, as living in another property in the vicinity of Leek – the Dairy House at Horton. (see picture, top right)

The pedigree of the Chetwynd family (who were a very notable Staffordshire family indeed) found in the Visitation of Staffordshire of 1614 makes fascinating reading and, although we cannot put an exact date upon this marriage, the very fact of it would indicate that the Homersleys were of sufficient means and public standing to have been granted their arms before this visitation. The marriage was between Elizabeth Homersley, the sister-in-law of the “uncle Sneyd” mentioned in Elizabeth Trentham, Countess of Oxford’s will.

This evidence emerged after Dorna discovered a most interesting document nesting in 1562 brought by the son of the formerly mentioned Thomas Homersley. It begins: “...whereas Hugh Hamersley of London, the sonne of Hugh Hamersley...& sonne of Richard Hamersley of Stafford in the County of Stafford, & to exemplify & emblazon the same being descended of a family and...”

“...weies of yeoman...” 13 Sir William Bowyer’s ancient family seat was at Biddulph Hall, a few miles to the west of Leek, and it was here that Elizabeth Trentham, Lady Cullen, was brought up after the untimely death of her father Sir Francis in the Civil War. And it was from here that Sir William’s son and heir John Bowyer managed the entire Trentham estate including Rocester Abbey and Westwood Grange during the long years of his niece Elizabeth Trentham’s minority.

Returning to the Homersleys, the second record is from a Chancery Proceeding in the year 1562 brought by the son of the formerly mentioned Thomas Homersley. It begins: “...Showeth me your lordship that your orator Robert Homersley, yeoman, was seized as of fee of four messuages and 300 acres of land in Kynsdale, Chedleton, Horton, Leek, Bedulph and the Border...”

And so, the Homersley senior was still listed as a yeoman but there is evidence that the family were prospering. But we can also see that Horton, Leek and Biddulph were places with long associations for the Trentham and Bowyer families.

One fact I never got round to mentioning in the history of the Trentham family is that, in 1579, Thomas Trentham (d. 1587) purchased “8 messuages, 6 cottages, 4 tofts, 8 gardens, 8 orchards, 16 acres of land, 500 acres of meadow, 200 acres of pasture, 20 acres of wood, 100 acres of furze and heath and 40 acres of moss” in the area between Leek and the Bowyers lived at Biddulph. All this land would have been tenanted. And Thomas Trentham is not the only person we have encountered in the history of the Trenthams to have invested in land in this area. Also in 1579, Sir Thomas Stanhope purchased “common of pasture for 400 sheep” from Sir Thomas Cokeyne of Ashbourne in the area south of Cheddleton where the Homersleys lived. And Westwood Grange – the most significant estate on the western outskirts of Leek – was for many long years farmed and occupied by tenants of the Trentham estate, first under Lady Prudence Trentham and then, following her death, under John Bowyer.

This corner of moorland Staffordshire was a fascinating reading and, although we cannot put an exact date upon this marriage, the very fact of it would indicate that the Homersleys were of sufficient means and public standing to have been granted their arms before this visitation. The marriage was between Elizabeth Homersley and Robert Chetwynd and, when we look at some of the family relationships involved, a couple of very interesting facts emerge. Robert Chetwynd was the second son of Sir Thomas Chetwynd and his wife Jane. Also from this marriage was born a single daughter, Mary. Upon Thomas Chetwynd’s death, his widow Jane married another none other Sir William Sneyd of Bradwell and Keele as his second wife. Mary, daughter of Jane from the Chetwynd marriage, then married Sir William’s son and heir Ralph Sneyd who built Keele Hall. So we now have a member of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of...”

The inventory of a library nor of books, and there is no mention at all of a great dining chamber where we might assume all the family portraits had been hung.

The reason for abandoning the manor house at Rocester is easy to establish. As Sir Thomas’ and Lady Prudence’s son and heir Francis was just eight years old on the death of his father, he became a royal ward and, while the young Francis moved to the home of his new guardian, Ralph Sneyd II (d. 1643) of Keele Hall, his mother Lady Prudence returned to Leek and saw out her remaining years as a widow living in the manor house at Westwood Grange. From this date, all the important family heirlooms of the Trenthams were most likely divided between Keele Hall and Westwood Grange. It is also possible that Sir Thomas’ younger brother Sir Christopher Trentham, who was a number of heirlooms and it is notable that he was recorded by the earliest Staffordshire historian, Sampson Ereswick, as living in another property in the vicinity of Leek – the Dairy House at Horton. (see picture, top right)

The pedigree of the Chetwynd family (who were a very notable Staffordshire family indeed) found in the Visitation of Staffordshire of 1614 makes fascinating reading and, although we cannot put an exact date upon this marriage, the very fact of it would indicate that the Homersleys were of sufficient means and public standing to have been granted their arms before this visitation. The marriage was between Elizabeth Homersley and Robert Chetwynd and, when we look at some of the family relationships involved, a couple of very interesting facts emerge. Robert Chetwynd was the second son of Sir Thomas Chetwynd and his wife Jane. Also from this marriage was born a single daughter, Mary. Upon Thomas Chetwynd’s death, his widow Jane married another none other Sir William Sneyd of Bradwell and Keele as his second wife. Mary, daughter of Jane from the Chetwynd marriage, then married Sir William’s son and heir Ralph Sneyd who built Keele Hall. So we now have a member of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of the Homersley family being the sister-in-law of...”

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of his colours, a demi Griffin sargent, Or, holding A Cross crosslet fitchie guules.” (italics added for emphasis).

There is one final piece of evidence regarding our contention that the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait somehow came into the possession of the Staffordshire Hamersleys through their relationship to known relations of the Trentham family. And having done so, that a later relative assumed that the portrait must have had an ancestor and their coat of arms to the picture in the way of taking possession of it. This came to light quite early in our research, but it was Dorna’s discovery of a comprehensive Hamersley/Hammersley pedigree chart in the archive of the Haberdashers’ Company that has added the detail of the Hamersley family’s gentrification.

John Hamersley, mentioned above in the Chancery Proceeding, and Margaret Rowley his wife, had a son named Thomas. This Thomas has a most interesting inscription in the pedigree chart: “Thomas [Homersley] of Homsley or Wood House, and Botham near Cheddleton. He married 61 yrs old to Anthony Rudyard of Dieulacres in 1640.”

Botham, remember, became the mansion house of the Jollys who purchased Westwood Grange from the Culens in 1658, and which later became Ascombe Hall in the possession of the Sneyds. Thomas Hamersley’s property then passed in the next generation to William Hamersley who married Mary the daughter of George Sneyd. The inscription under his name reads: “Sold Cheddleton Grange [another Grange like Westwood, set up by the monks of Dieulacres Abbey] and the tythes of Botham to Anthony Rudyard of Dieulacres. Will proved at Lichfield 1665.”

If the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait ever made its way to Rocester after the death of Elizabeth, Countess of Oxford, the two most likely places to which it could have been moved following the abandonment of Rocester Abbey in 1628 were Kecle Hall, along with the wardship of young Francis Trentham, or Westwood Grange with the widowed Lady Prudence Trentham. We have been able to demonstrate, in our brief survey of the Hamersley family history, that they had provable links with both of these houses.

If the portrait did come into the possession of the Hamersleys, and if it was a later generation of this family who had their coat of arms painted upon it in the innocent belief that it was a portrait of an old member of their family, it will be necessary to establish whether later members of this family ever moved to Ashbourne. And on the principle that a picture is worth a thousand words, we publish here three photographs which I took at a village called Osmaston about a mile and a half from the centre of Ashbourne. The photograph on the left shows two gravestones (the middle photograph is a close-up of the stone in the background of the one on the left). The white marble gravestone records the burial of Albert Hammersley aged 61 in 1910, and his wife Hannah. The weather-eroded gravestone in the middle photograph records the burial of their children, John, Elizabeth and Ernest who all died young. The third photograph records the name of ‘A. Hammersley’ on the 1914-18 War Memorial. Tracing this family back through the preceding century will be just part of our continuing investigation into the provenance of the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait.

Conclusion

What we have sought to do in this article is to present a raft of new evidence on the provenance of the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait which we believe to be the ‘lost’ portrait of Edward de Vere by Cornelius Ketel. We make no apologies that this presentation of evidence might appear like a complex ‘join the dots’ picture for which we have not provided the solution upside down at the back of this newsletter. The work of picking a way through this evidence – which we acknowledge is likely to contain as many bland turns as it does actual routes the painting took on its journey – will be the work of many months of further research.

For most Oxfordians, the ‘Ashbourne’ portrait is the most iconic artefact symbolising the intense struggle between Stratfordian and Oxfordian scholarship. How appropriate that we should have a painting of the Earl of Oxford – who, we believe, was the author of Hamlet and the rest – which has been overlaid with the likeness of Shakespeare! Oxfordians believe, was the author of Hamlet and the rest.

Oxfordians have smelt blood ever since 1979 when the Folger finally gave up claiming the portrait to be Shakespeare. Yet still the Folger refuses to allow the ridiculous overlaid forehead on the painting to be removed – even though they know that the only proven portrait of Sir Hugh Hamersley, in the Haberdashers’ Hall in London, depicts him as an older man with a full head of hair. Could it be that the Folger fear that, in removing the overpainted forehead, the sitter would bear just too startling a likeness to Edward de Vere?

Can there be any reason why the Folger would want to hold on to a painting of a minor Jacobean knight with no connection to literature? The only reason must be that they are hedging their bets that one day Edward de Vere will triumph over Shakespeare in the Authorship Question and they will have a valuable portrait on their hands once again.

Once Oxfordians manage to dislodge the Folger’s Hammersley claims – in hope of which we offer our new discoveries – perhaps the Folger should think about making a gift of the painting to the National Portrait Gallery in London and we can then see how a respectable institution goes about the task of restoring an important Elizabethan painting to its original glory.

Notes

1 Licence to purchase King’s Place, PRO C46/1476
2 Purchase of Castle Hedingham, House of Lords Record Office, HL/PP/PR/1/16N9/771a/3; Her residence at Hedingham PRO SP/4/65, f 767c
3 The will of Francis Trentham, Lichfield Record Office, Catalogue under probate date 10 June 1628.
4 Sale of Castle Hedingham and Rocester Abbey, 24 November 1903, University, Sheffield Papers S8528.
5 The Visitation of Staffordshire, AD 1585, Collections for a History of Staffordshire (CHS), Vol III, 1882
6 The Visitation of Staffordshire, AD 1614, CHS, Vol V, 1884
7 Star Chamber Proceedings, 1516-49, CHS, Vol 1910
8 Sale of Westwood Grange 28 Feb 1658, Cokayne (Rashdon) Papers, C 2494, Northampton Record Office
9 Purchase of Westwood Grange, Final Concors 1603-7, CHS Vol XVIII, 1897
10 Rocester Mills and Trentham estate, Inquisition Post Mortem of Francis Trentham of Rocester Abbey, 3 July 1627. PRO C142/7065

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”Back to the Ashbourne”, Shakespeare Matters, Fall 2004
”Folger Displays Ashbourne portrait in exhibition on fraud”, Shakespeare Matters, Fall 2003

The names of three generations of Hamersleys carved in stone at the parish church of Osmaston, about a mile and a half from the centre of Ashbourne – see the text below for details.