

Franks Forage No 7A. The William Larkin Portraits



“At Charlecote Park.....hang a pair of oval portraits, head and shoulders, lifesize, painted on copper. They represent Sir Thomas Lucy and Lord Herbert of Cherbury and have been traditionally ascribed to Isaac Oliver.” So wrote James Lees-Milne in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1952¹. He then goes on to prove that the portraits were not by Isaac Oliver but by William Larkin. Cleaning had revealed indecipherable lettering in the



top corner of one portrait suggesting that they were originally rectangular and cut to suit the oval frames, probably at the end of the seventeenth century. Lees-Milne further states, “The portrait of Sir Thomas Lucy depicts a young man with fair red hair and beard, open necked, wearing an embroidered Roman toga in the classical vogue of James I’s court.”² Both Sir Thomas and Lord Herbert were wearing loose togas bunched at the shoulder.

Before James Lees-Milne identified the paintings as the work of Larkin in 1952, no surviving works were attributed to him. In his autobiography, Lord Herbert refers to a portrait of himself ordered by Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset, a “Coppie of a Picture which one Larkin a Painter drew for mee, the Originall whereof I intended for Sir Thomas Lucy.” Various Papers from the 17th century make reference to Larkin but not until the identification of the Charlecote paintings had any been known to exist. However, sixty years on some 40 portraits have been identified as by him of courtiers and gentry, including a series of nine full-length portraits owned by the Earls of Suffolk and housed in Kenwood House in London.

William Larkin was born in the early 1580s and died in 1619. He was active from 1609 and best known for his portraits of members of the court of James I, which ‘capture in brilliant detail the opulent layering of textiles, embroidery, lace and jewellery of fashion in the Jacobean era’³. In 1969, Larkin was identified as the artist formally known as the “Curtain Master.”⁴ This was because of silk-fringed curtains framing the sitter. It is probable that Larkin employed assistants in his studio to paint these repetitive details, a common practice of the time.

Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648) was the eldest son of Sir Richard Herbert of Montgomery Castle. A younger brother, George, was a well known religious poet. Edward studied at Oxford, learning languages as well as music, riding and fencing. He also wrote several historical works. He became MP for Merioneth, was a good friend of Ben Jonson and John Donne as well as William Larkin and was held in great esteem in James’s court. One of his accomplishments was to arrange the marriage of Charles, Prince of Wales to Henrietta Maria. In 1599 he married his cousin, Mary Herbert and had two sons, Richard and Edward.⁵

Notes

1. The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 94, No. 597 (Dec., 1952), pp354-356
2. *Ibid*
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Larkin
4. *Ibid*
5. http://en.wikipesia.org/wiki/Edward_Herbert,_1st_Baron_Herbert_of_Cherbury