

A history of Gray's Inn

IN 20 OBJECTS



NO 6: THE PORTRAIT IN HALL OF ELIZABETH I

MASTER TIMOTHY SHUTTLEWORTH

The portrait of Elizabeth I, Patron Lady of the Inn, which looks down on Hall from the east wall, is an early 19th century copy. It came into the possession of the Society in 1883 through the generosity of Master Henry Griffith. Unknown to him and everyone else, the portrait held a remarkable secret that remained buried until the end of the 20th century.

First though, a few words about Henry Griffith that may assist to make him better known. He was admitted to the Society in 1825, aged 10. The explanation for this precocious beginning may lie in the fact that between 1815 and 1861 his uncle, Thomas Griffith, was the Steward of Gray's Inn, the equivalent of the post of Under-Treasurer today. Griffith was called in 1837 and, although he never practised as a Barrister, his longevity earned him the title of the 'Father of the Bar', becoming a Bencher in 1875 and Treasurer in 1878. He was one of the country's best shots well into old age, dying at nearly 99 in 1914.

By the early 1880s, Griffith had been deeply engaged for some time in a wide search for a good portrait of Elizabeth I to present to the Society. His opportunity arose at an auction at Auchrane Castle, County Galway, Ireland, where a painting of the Queen was for sale, described as the work of Zucherro, a notable painter of the Elizabethan period who had arrived in England from Italy in 1574.

On 21 May 1883, Master Griffith wrote to the Treasurer (Master Arthur Collins QC) indicating that he had acquired the picture and was donating it to the Inn. He explained that in the weeks since the sale he had 'taken the opinion of some of the best judges of the old painter's works, including Mr. Sharf, the Keeper of the National Portrait Gallery'. While some of these experts were not convinced the painting was by Zucherro, they were unanimous that it was 'a fine old portrait of Queen Elizabeth'. The gift was gratefully acknowledged and the portrait was duly hung in Hall in its Charles II gold frame.

The portrait slumbered until 1996 when unexpectedly a newspaper reporter telephoned the Inn declaring that the Inn's image of Elizabeth I was not of the Queen but, rather curiously, a portrait of Elizabeth Knollys. This was presumably a reference to Elizabeth Knollys, Lady Leighton, an Elizabethan courtier and Gentlewoman of the Bed Chamber to the Queen.

Faced with this challenge, the Inn had no alternative but to seek advice and send the portrait for testing. The expert opinion confirmed that the portrait was unquestionably of Elizabeth I, painted in the 19th century (after the manner of Zucherro) on a panel used for a previous portrait. Was there then perhaps evidence of another image underneath?

The picture underwent further dendrochronological testing that revealed an extraordinary truth. There was indeed another portrait beneath the image of Elizabeth, quite possibly a Coronation portrait of the young monarch. The image was thought to have been painted in the 1580s being a copy of how the Queen looked in 1559. This explained the inscription on the portrait, apparently genuine, that read AD 1559 'aetatis suae 26', meaning at the age of 26. These conclusions were supported subsequently by the National Portrait Gallery.

This exciting development faced the Benchers with a unique dilemma: should the Inn remove the surface image of Elizabeth to expose the painting below or leave the portrait undisturbed? In the event the question was not difficult to resolve. As the Curator of the National Portrait Gallery observed, there was usually a very good reason why a portrait was overpainted. It might be damaged, or poorly executed. Understandably, the Benchers were not prepared to take risks merely to satisfy their undoubted curiosity.

So the Inn has preserved the portrait of the Queen precisely as gifted all those years ago. It is still a handsome portrait, worthy of our esteem, with a mystery that has been discovered though not wholly unmasked. In the 21st century, the portrait continues to symbolise the Tudor monarch's close connection with Gray's Inn, a House the Queen and many of her ministers held in high affection during the Inn's first great flowering. ■