

Oxfordshire

BURFORD PRIORY

The Lenthall Pictures, by Nicholas Cooper

In the eighteenth century many visitors came to Burford Priory to see the Lenthall pictures, of which the more significant part were believed to have been acquired by William Lenthall from Charles I's royal collection.¹ Chief among these was the group portrait of Thomas More and his family.² Connoisseurs whose visits are recorded include George Vertue in 1727, 1729 and 1740,³ John Loveday in 1736,⁴ Horace Walpole in 1753,⁵ William Borlase around the same year,⁶ and John Byng in 1785.⁷ Comments were varied. Loveday felt that the pictures were in danger from damp walls, but noted approvingly that no attempt had been made to restore or to repaint them, and listed seven of the more notable ones. Walpole considered that apart from the group portrait of Sir Thomas More and his family (then believed to be by Holbein), the portraits were 'rubbish, though celebrated.' Byng thought that some of the portraits were good but was critical of the house itself, 'which is now brushing up into a modern ill taste; and contains but one tolerable room' in which the pictures were hung. When the house was reduced in size in 1808, the bulk of the collection seems to have been removed to the Lenthalls' second estate at Bessels Leigh.

The source of Lenthall's pictures is not known. Some were family portraits, but Walpole added to Camden's report that 'the Speaker, who really had a fine collection, made his peace by presenting them to Cornbury [the house of the earl of Clarendon], where they were well known, till the Duke of Marlborough bought that seat.' Some colour is given to this account by the fact that in 1852 two at least of Lord Clarendon's portraits had the royal stamp of CR and a crown on the back of their frames, though the proximate source of these is not known.⁸ Other pictures at Burford Priory in the early nineteenth century included a number of portraits of members of Charles I's royal circle as well as of the king and queen themselves, with six attributed to Van Dyck, three to Cornelius Johnson, three to Mytens and two to Van Somer.

Lenthall is not, however, among the recorded purchasers of pictures from the royal collection,⁹ although a substantial number of items was not sold but reserved 'for the

¹ Various editions of Camden's *Britannia* repeated the statement that 'in the house are said to be many of the pictures of Charles's I's collection bought by the Speaker from Hampton Court.' Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gough (1789), I, 293.

² One of six known versions of Holbein's lost original painted by Rowland Lockey in the 1590s: Lesley Lewis, *The Sir Thomas More Family Group Portraits after Holbein* (Leominster, 1998), 29-32.

³ *Hearne's Collections*, X (Oxford Record Society, 1915), 152; *Walpole Society*, XVIII (1930), 26; XX (1932), 60-64; XXII (1935-6), 180-1. Vertue recorded about a dozen pictures on each of his two later visits.

⁴ Sarah Markham, *John Loveday of Caerversham* (1984), 221, 487.

⁵ Walpole Letters.

⁶ British Library, Stowe MS 752.

⁷ C. Bruyn Andrews (ed.), *Torrington Diaries* (1934), I, 220.

⁸ Lady M. Theresa Lewis, *Lives of the Friends and Contemporaries of Lord Chancellor Clarendon*, III, (1852). The marked pictures need not, of course, have come from the Lenthall collection.

⁹ Oliver Millar, 'The Inventories and Valuations of the King's Goods 1649-51,' *Walpole Society* XLIII (1972).

Use of State'. (This included the decoration of the Palace of Westminster, where Lenthall would have had access to them.) It may be significant that although Walpole reported the loss of some to Clarendon, there was evidently no tradition that any of the Lenthall paintings were returned to Charles II, despite the activities of the king's agents to recover alienated royal property.¹⁰ Moreover some, at least, of the Lenthall paintings had come from other sources. The group portrait of More and his family was not in the royal collection, but had been borrowed by Lenthall from More's great-grandson, Cresacre More in 1642, and not returned.¹¹ An unknown visitor to the house before the 1808 alterations (when the collection was removed) considered that 'most of them [were] probably left by Lord Falkland when he sold the house, for there were amongst them Lord Chief Baron Tanfield ... and his wife.'¹² The collection also included two of William Lenthall himself, of which one – a group portrait – is probably that now hanging in the Speaker's House in the Houses of Parliament.

The Lenthall pictures were sold at Christie's in two sales in 1808 and 1831.¹³ In the first sale only twelve pictures were offered, of which nine were bought in; in the second, 73 were offered, of which all sold for a total of £367 6s. 6d. In the first sale, the More was bought in at 1,000 guineas; in the second, it was sold for £105. The More portrait made a brief return to Burford in the 1920s when it was bought from the executors of Lord Lee of Fareham by E J Horniman; he subsequently bequeathed it to the National Portrait Gallery, where it remains. It is one of several versions of Holbein's lost original, painted c.1593 by Rowland Lockety, and differs from the others in that the family members depicted are all related to Sir Thomas by blood rather than by marriage; it is confirmed as the Burford version by a sketch made by Vertue in 1727. Between the two Christie's sales, the Oxfordshire antiquary Thomas Symonds made a list of 66 'portraits etc. at Burford Priory January 3 1827 ... furnished by Mr Lenthall', in which he included the Thomas More.¹⁴

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Read more in the EPE book *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* by Antonia Catchpole, David Clark and Robert Peberdy (published 2008)

¹⁰ Stephen Gleissner, 'Reassembling a royal art collection for the returned king of Great Britain', *Journal of the History of Collections*, VI (1) (1994), 103-15.

¹¹ JB Trapp and Hubertus Schulte Herbruggen, *The King's Good Servant: Sir Thomas More 1477/8-1535* (1977), 17-18.

¹² WH Hutton, *Burford Papers* (1905), 19; Hutton's source is not given.

¹³ *A Catalogue of a Genuine Collection of Pictures ... being a choice part of the Collection formed by William Lenthall, Esq ... since which Time the Paintings have never left the Family Mansion at Burford* (London, Christies, 21 May 1808); *A Catalogue of the valuable and highly interesting portraits ... collected by The Speaker Lenthall and sold by the direction of WJ Lenthall Esq on his removal from the Priory, Burford* (London, Christies, 13 July 1833). Christie's archives contain priced copies of these catalogues.

¹⁴ Oxfordshire Record Office, Symonds II 67-8.