Discovering ‘T. Leigh’
Tracking the elusive portrait painter through Stuart England and Wales

Stephanie Roberts & Robert Tittler

In a 1941 edition of The Oxford Journal, Maurice Brockwell, then Curator of the Cook Collection at Doughty House in Richmond, Surrey, submitted the following appeal for information:

T. LEIGH, PORTRAIT-PAINTER, 1643. Information is sought regarding the obscure English portrait-painter T. Leigh, who signed, dated and suitably inscribed a very limited number of pictures – and all in 1643. It is strange that we still know nothing about his origin, place and date of birth, residence, marriage and death... Much research proves that the biographical facts regarding T. Leigh recited in the Burlington Magazine, 1916, xxix, p. 374, and in Thieme Becker's Allgemeines Lexikon of 1928 are too scanty and not completely accurate. Was this portrait painter a native of Cheshire? If so, from which of the various ancient families of Leigh, or Legh, of Cheshire did he derive?

Brockwell's interest in this 'obscure' painter seems to have been driven by a personal incentive. He owned a signed portrait of the Welsh sitter Robert Davies III of Gwysaney (Pl. 1) which, having appeared at the inaugural 'Special Exhibition of National Portraits' at South Kensington in 1866, was the first work by Thomas Leigh ever to have been publicly exhibited. In correspondence with the National Museum of Wales he revealed that though he rarely purchased paintings, he had made an exception in this case due to a tenuous family link with the sitter himself. Brockwell embarked on a self-imposed task to find out about the painter of this portrait, 'T. Leigh'. But despite encouragement to publish his research from such renowned authorities on British portraiture as Ellis Waterhouse and John Steegman, nothing transpired. In a letter to Steegman, Waterhouse confided, 'I fear that Brockwell's vast amount of data may not amount to much in fact,' but both agreed that the little available information on Leigh was worth preserving nonetheless. Regrettably, Brockwell's original notes are lost to us today, and since then no real attempt has been made to further identify Leigh, until now.

Brockwell eventually sold the portrait of Robert Davies to the National Museum of Wales in 1948, thus bringing 'Thomas Leigh' to national attention as a painter of mid-17th century Welsh gentry. The Davies family claims descent from Madog ap Meredudd, Prince of Powys, and has ranked for centuries among the gentry of North Wales. Robert himself was four times High Sheriff of Flintshire; his worth was valued at £2,000 per annum at the Restoration. The Museum already owned another portrait by Leigh – that of Robert's wife, Ann, which had been acquired 17 years earlier. Both portraits had formerly hung at Ann's family estate, Llannerch Hall, near St Asaph in Denbighshire. The Llannerch collection also included a third Leigh portrait of Ann's sister Eleanor, the current location of which remains unknown.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this Welsh family group of portraits by such a little-known painter piqued Steegman's curiosity. As Keeper of Art at the National Museum of Wales he was then working on his Survey of Portraits in Welsh Houses, during the course of which he had unearthed a further five works attributed to Leigh: three at Gwyansaney Hall, Flintshire; and two at Pembsarth, Merioneth. [See...
The generally, and Thomas seems to have been the most popular day’s ride away. Caernarvonshire, Denbighshire and Flintshire, all of which resided in the northern tier of the Principality, in seems the most likely place to look. The Welsh sitters, the Gilbert Jackson and others may also have done before him.12 or, more plausibly that he travelled to Wales to paint, as perted speculation that Leigh may have been Welsh himself, [93x232]ated an oeuvre to 13 in all, [342x682]ield most of the Chester circle.24 In 1662, several of Leigh’s portraits were purchased by the 4th Earl of Oxford, with whom we can pick up his trail. [677x490]leather shop. Leigh obviously qualified for this demanding task, as it is doubtful that the Widow Dewsbury had mastered all the skills required by this demanding craft, and it is logical that she would have wanted an experienced journeyman to help her through this difficult adjustment. Leigh obviously qualified. This tells us that he must have received some sort of extended training when she hired him. And, as a member of the extended Leigh clan of Cheshire, it seems likely that he came recommended or was well known to Dewsbury. Dewsbury did not keep Leigh on beyond the one year of the normal journeyman’s contract, a common circumstance for local journeymen, but he was then taken on as a jour- neymen by another member of the Chester circle in 1638, and again in 1619.22 That new master was the young John Souch, who had just come to the end of his own apprenticeship— [342x758]chain of Golden Poems 1 The British Art Journal Volume XI, No. 2 27/12/10 13:14 Page 2

Appendix A, Checklist of Portraits Attributed to Thomas Leigh The three Gwysaney portraits are almost identical duplicates of the Llanerch portraits of Robert Davies, his wife Ann and her sister Eleanor, suggesting that Leigh had followed the common practice of producing multiple copies for different members of the same family. Just why the Davies family commissioned these portraits at this particular time remains unclear, but they may signal a growing sense of familial pride and achievement. The marriage of Robert and Ann a decade earlier had been a significant affair, uniting the family estates of Gwysaney and Llannerch, and in 1643, the very year the portraits were painted, Robert’s uncle and custodian, Thomas Davies, had newly been appointed lieutenant-colonel for Charles I and Constable of Harwaned Castle.11 When the final volume of Stegman’s survey was published in 1962 no more than nine portraits had been publicly attributed to Leigh, eight of which were of Welsh sitters.13 This disproportionate concentration of portraits in Wales has fos- tered speculation that Leigh may have been Welsh himself, or, more plausibly that he travelled to Wales to paint, at Gilbert Jackson and others may also have done before him.12 Like so many native painters of this period ‘T. Leigh’ has remained something of an anomaly. But as we know so little about painterly activities in provincial England and Wales, the connexion to reconstruct his oeuvre remains strong. It grows even stronger as additional portraits may now be attributed to Leigh, expanding his known oeuvre to 15 in all, with an additional seven possible attributions [See Appendix A]. These new attributions include a three-quarter Leigh portrait of David, 1st Earl Barrymore (Pl. 2), and a portrait of the poet and playwright John Gallaway whose only known likeness prior to this was a laurel-wreathed engraving frontispiece to his Chain of Golden Poems of 1669.23 When we turn to the question of Leigh’s identity, Cheshire seems the most likely place to look. The Welsh sitters, the largest group and most securely attributed to Leigh, all resided in the northern county of the Principality in Caernarvonshire, Denbighshire and Flintshire, all of which were prominent to Chester, the largest urban centre in the area, Gwysaney, the Davies’s principal seat, lies but a half-day’s ride away. Additionally, Leighs were thick on the ground in Cheshire generally, and Thomas seems to have been the most popular male forename of the clan. Nearly a score of ‘Thomas Leighs’ (or ‘Leighs’) can be identified as having lived in Cheshire around this period.14 The various gentry branches of the Leigh family of Chester held a total of eight seats in that shire; lesser members, those of yeoman status, held seven more. These dauntingly myriad possibilities make it more likely that Thomas Leigh the painter came from one of these Cheshire branches, yet less likely that we will ever be able to identify which one.

A third good reason to place our painter in the Cheshire area lies in the status and role of Chester itself as diocesan see, county town, and headquarters of the County Palatine. It was by far the most populous and affluent urban centre in its wide hinterland of North Wales, southern Lancashire, and Cheshire. In those years it hosted a large and prolific circle of painters—painter-stainers, arms painters, herald-painters— all of them members of the active and politically powerful Guild of Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers and Stationers of that city. At least three and possibly as many as six members of that Guild [Edward Belles,10 John Souch,15 Thomas Pullford,16 and possibly the herald-painters Randle Holme, senior and junior,17] are now known to have painted portraits in the period at hand. Many of them took on apprentices and journeymen, or indeed were employed by others of the circle.

In addition to its roles as an administrative, ecclesiastical and economic centre, Chester’s ties with the regional gentry were also cemented by its position as the operational base of the Chester Herald and other officers of the College of Arms, whose responsibility it was to keep close tabs on the armiger- ous families in that hinterland. As depository heralds for most of that area both Randle Holme and his son, Randle Holme II, were responsible for assisting over, or at least recording, all of those life’s events which affected a family’s armigerous sta- tus: births, deaths, marriages, and the transfer of property from one generation to another. In that capacity they knew, and were known by, virtually all the gentry over that wide area.18

Given all these factors as well as Leigh’s documented activi- tions amongst the gentry of those areas of North Wales which formed part of the Chestershire Circuit, it seems likely that his name would appear in Chester records, and so — as we shall see — it does. Yet though Leigh does seem to be a Cheshire man, it is not in Cheshire that we first find him recorded and identified as a painter, but in the Middlesex Sessions records of 1613 and 1615.

In the first instance we find Thomas Lee of East Smithfield, painter called up ‘for opposing a rescuer from the halff of Whitchaple’, in the second he is booked for good behav- iour after a brawl with three others.19 As the next reference to Leigh finds him in Chester in 1615, we may infer that Leigh had left his native shire at an early date, possibly after com- pleting an apprenticeship, to seek his fortune along with many others in the great metropolis of London, and when he found himself tangled up in legal trouble, he presumably has- tened back to the safety of his home shire and familiar turf. That return proved a wise decision. It set Leigh on the course which would establish his career; it also allowed his name to be recorded in several instances in the Chester records, where we can pick up his trail.

Once back by 1615, he was taken on as a journeyman by the recently widowed wife of Thomas Dewsbury, a long-time master painter and freeman of Chester.20 Widos coal, of course, wherein their deceased husband’s business as well as their guild membership. Indeed, they often helped run the family business even before the demise of their spouses. But it is doubtful that the Widow Dewsbury had mastered all the skills required by this demanding craft, and it is logical that she would have wanted an experienced journeyman to help her through this difficult adjustment. Leigh obviously qualified. This tells us that he must have received some sort of extended training when she hired him. And, as a member of the extended Leigh clan of Cheshire, it seems likely that he came recommended or was well known to Dewsbury. Dewsbury did not keep Leigh on beyond the one year of the normal journeyman’s contract, a common circumstance for local journeymen, but he was then taken on as a jour- neymen by another member of the Chester circle in 1638, and again in 1619.22 That new master was the young John Souch, who had just come to the end of his own apprenticeship— with the elder Randle Holme in 1617. Though Souch had scrapped together enough capital to set up and be accept- ed as a brother of the Company this very same year, he would have wanted an experienced man around the shop to help him get started. And, being a Lancashire lad himself he would also have wanted someone who knew the Cheshire scene on which his patronage depended. Leigh amply fit the bill in both respects.

John Souch is known to us as an important regional por- traitist, credited with some fifteen portraits of his own.21 His sitters were the same sorts of people whom Leigh painted: the largely Catholic and eventually Royalist gentry of Cheshire and North Wales. The overlap in clientele is remark- able. Souch’s portraits include a double portrait of Robert Davies III as a child with his mother Anne, the same Robert Davies that Leigh later painted as a young man (Pl. 1). And in his double portrait of Sir Cecil and Dame Penelope ‘Bafford, Souch was painting members of a family which had twice intermarried with the Leigs of Arlington, Cheshire. Margaret, daughter of Sir Edmund Trafford of Trafford, Lancashire, married Sir Uriel Leigh of Arlington,22 and Mary, daughter of Sir Edmund Trafford of Osherton would marry Thomas Leigh of Arlington, a Royalist lieutenant and Sheriff of Cheshire in 1662.23 Souch would most likely have been in touch with those families by his former master and continued friend, Randle Holme the elder. Holme had signed the funeral certificates of many of them, including Sir Peter Leigh/Leigh and Col. Thomas Legh/Leigh in his role as deputy herald.24 But the highly probable family association between our Thomas Leigh and the two Leighs whom Souch later painted cannot be overlooked as a potential source of Souch’s patronage.

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In any event, Leigh disappears from the Chester records for a substantial period between 1619 and 1642. In the latter year the well-established Chester painter Edward Belken signed Thomas Leigh on a journeyman... along with Leigh’s son! Though the son’s foregoing is not recorded, the popularity of the name ‘Thomas’ among the extended Leigh clan and the signature ‘Thomas Leigh’ on paintings long after the elder Leigh could plausibly painted makes it highly probable that the younger Leigh was his father’s namesake.

This striking discovery affirms that there were in fact two Thomas Leighs painting during this period: father and son, working in succession. As a journeyman he would presumably have had to be past the age of apprenticeship, and thus in his early twenties, we may conclude that the Leigh who signed on with the Waldo Denby and John Soosch in the 1619s must have been born prior to 1595. His son, who signed on in 1642, must have been born prior to 1620 or 22.

The idea that there may have been two Thomas Leighs is not entirely new. In 1916, when as little as three portraits were attributed to Leigh - those of Robert Davies, Eleanor Mutton (Pl 6), and an unknown lady called the Countess of Derby – JD Milner, then Director of the National Portrait Gallery, expressed doubts that all three were by the same artist. 

Though they seem impervious to the influence of Van Dyck, English painters active outside the London metropolis. It is significant to note the clustering of portraits painted in 1643. The unravelling of the identities of the two Thomas Leighs, and the discovery of something about their lives, offers a rare perspective of portrait painting in England that same year. He suggested that Leigh, who might previously have been employed as an assistant to Johnson, was now established as the master’s departure from England to assert himself as an original portrait-painter. 34 Current research has not uncovered any further evidence to support this claim, but it is enticing to consider that both Leighs appear in Chester after a long absence around the time that Johnson left London for the Continent in 1643.

In the case of artist Thomas Leigh, 1641. The affinity between the Leighs’ works and Johnson’s oeuvre is striking, as with the portraits of Thomas and Sir Aston Cokayne seem to have been taken directly from Johnson’s 1643 portrait of an unknown gentleman (Pl 9), though the former corpus lacks Johnson’s subtle and sensitive handling of paint. And while Johnson’s work is often described as wistful and skillfully restrained, the Leighs’ have been deemed rather less finesse (or as competent, but light and timid.)

JD Milner even proposed that Leigh’s apparent change of signature in 1645 may correspond with Johnson’s departure from England that same year. He suggested that Leigh, who might previously have been employed as an assistant to Johnson, was now established as the master’s departure from England to assert himself as an original portrait-painter. 34 Current research has not uncovered any further evidence to support this claim, but it is enticing to consider that both Leighs appear in Chester after a long absence around the time that Johnson left London for the Continent in 1643.

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Appendix A

Checklist of Portraits attributed to ‘Thomas Leigh’

1 Portraits signed ‘T Leigh’


3. Robert Davies III of Gwyseen. This portrait was probably painted for the Davies family of Gwyseen and Llannerch, along with nos. 2 and no. 3. Inscri: ‘Mr Tittler B A 1943’. Current location unknown. It may have been sold at Christie’s, London, 1961 (lot 102). In inscri: ‘front of the lower varnish layer on the face; however the additional costume details appear to be original’.

4. Eleanor Mutton (later Eyton) (Pl. 4); 1643. 66 x 56 cm. Private collection.


6. The Brooke Children (Pl. 7); 1634. 69 x 56 cm. National Museum Wales, Cardiff, 1949. Inscri: ‘Mary Cokayne (nee Kniveton) the Muttons of Llannerch, along with no. 2 and no. 3. Provenance: By descent at Llannerch Hall; Foster, London, 24 June 1908 (lot 98). It is possible that the sitter’s link with Chester’s network of painters.

7. Unknown Lady (called Anne Wigley) (Pl. 5); 1643. 66 x 56 cm. Private collection.


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10. Unknown Lady (called Countess Of Chester) (Pl. 6); 1644. 65 x 51 cm. Current location unknown. Inscri: ‘Lord B A 2097’.

II Portraits signed ‘T’ (in ligature)

1. Unknown Lady (called Countess Of Chester) (Pl. 6); 1644. 65 x 51 cm. Current location unknown. Inscri: ‘Lord B A 2097’.

2. Portrait of a Lady and Gentleman, nd. 92 x 113 cm. Current location unknown.

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5. Tomos Williams, Lord of the Chester Guild and painter Thomas Leigh for seven years to the Chester Guild. Witt Magazines (Autumn, 2008), pp3-11.


7. A Known Lady Called Eleanor Mutton, ibid, no. 8.


11. Hereafter NMW or the National Museum Wales.


34. John Steegman, National Museum of Wales.


42. John Steegman, National Museum of Wales.


44. John Steegman, National Museum of Wales.


