George Cottington and the Dering family portraits of 1626

by ROBERT TITTLER

IN MARCH OF the year 1625/26 Sir Edward Dering (1598–1644) of Surrenden Dering, Pluckly, Kent, paid a painter whom he referred to as 'Mr. Cuddington' for 'work done at Surrenden this Lent' as follows:

For my first wife's picture att length,	£11–0–0
for my owne picture	£6
for my wifes picture	£6
for my brother H.D. picture	£2
for frames for ye other pictures	£1 15s 0d
given to his man	5s

In addition, Dering noted that 'my father pd for Anthony's picture and ye frame £5–10–0 and for my grandfather £1–15–0', the implication being that 'Cuddington' did these as well.[1]

The sitters in question were Dering himself (1598–1644; Fig.1); his first wife, Elizabeth (née Tufton; d.1622; Fig.2); his then current wife, Anne (née Ashburnham; d.1628; Fig.4); his brother, Henry Dering (dates unknown); and his eldest son, Anthony Dering (1621–34/35; Fig.3). Sir Edward's father, who paid for his grandson Anthony's picture, would have been Sir Anthony Dering (1557/58–1636), a sometime Kentish JP and Commander of the Tower of London, who also had his seat at Surrenden Dering.[2] Three months later Dering paid 3s for the 'bringing of picture frames from London'.[3] And in August 1626 he paid 1s 4d for 'a black and white picture of my lady' (his second wife, Anne), which, at that price and with that palette, would probably have been a drawing.[4]

The references do more than identify painter, sitter and date. They add to what relatively little we know about the cost of portraits at this time and tell us something of the working practices of portrait painters: 'Cuddington' did at least his preliminary work on site in the family seat, although the prospect remains that he may have finished them in a studio or workshop elsewhere. He had a 'man' assist him in some way, perhaps in the actual production of the work, but perhaps only in delivering them from the painter's workshop to the patron's residence. Frames were purchased separately, and not necessarily from the painter.

By any contemporary standard of portrait consumption, this is a substantial spate of portrait commissions within a single family, fortuitously and helpfully recorded. But who were Dering and 'Mr. Cuddington'? The answers provide an opportunity to explore the work of a particular patron and a particular, hitherto unknown, painter at a critical and formative stage of English portraiture.

1. *Sir Edward Dering*, by George Cottington. 1626. Canvas?, dimensions unknown. (Present whereabouts unknown).

The fate of the painting of Sir Edward Dering's brother Henry is at present unknown, as is the black-and-white picture of Dering's wife. But the four paintings commissioned together in the early months of 1626, which 'Cuddington' is said to have painted during Lent of that year, did indeed survive, at least to the point of being photographed for the National Portrait Gallery, London, sometime in the early decades of the twentieth century. (They are dated 1625, but as the New Year was still conventionally reckoned as after 25th March, we may assume that they were painted

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[1] See Edward Dering's 'Book of Expenses'; Maidstone, Centre for Kentish Studies, MS. U 350 E4, fol.57r (hereafter cited as CKSM).

[2] H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds.: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004 (hereafter cited as ODNB), under 'Dering, Sir Edward'.

[3] CKSM, fol.57v.

[4] *Ibid.*, fol.60v.

[5] London, National Portrait Gallery, Heinz Archive, 'Dering file' correspondence; correspondence with Tarnya Cooper, Catherine MacLeod and Rab MacGibbon.

[6] The database, 'Painters Working in England, 1500–1640', will shortly be submitted for publication.

during Lent of 1626.) They may in fact have survived, although Surrenden Dering was razed in 1952 and all current efforts to locate the paintings or their owners have proved unproductive.[5]

Dering's accounts confirm them to have been the work of the mysterious 'Cuddington': certainly not a painter yet known to modern scholarship but, as it happens, almost certainly an active and accomplished one in his own lifetime. Although the connection cannot yet be made with perfect certainty, all signs point to the man whom Dering referred to as 'Cuddington' being George Cottington, a London freeman and prominent member of the Painter–Stainers' Company who pursued an active London-based career from at least the mid-1620s to at least the mid-1640s. No other man of either spelling appears in a database currently being constructed of all painters working in England between 1500 and 1640, including those active in the Painter–Stainers' Company, and which includes, at the time of writing, in excess of 1,300 names.[6]

Until now, 'Cottington' has merely been a name which runs frequently and prominently through the Company's records from the early 1620s to the mid-1640s without any indication of his activity as a portrait painter. The Dering portraits, and closer scrutiny of the Painter–Stainers' records themselves, provide that indication. The visual evidence of the Dering portraits serves to rank their author with other competent, if not first rate, English-born portrait painters of that time. The Painter–Stainers' Company records survive only from 1623; Cottington first appears in 1624. Obviously advanced in the Company's ranks and in his own career by that time, we find him demurring at the offer of appointment to the time-consuming but junior office of Company Steward.[7] He last appears in the records in 1646, at which time his brief tenure in the senior post of Upper Warden of the Company, and perhaps his life itself, had come to an end.[8]

In between those dates Cottington appears frequently in the Company records in two telling respects. First, on several occasions he joined two other fairly prominent painters, William Peake (*c.*1580–1639), son of the more prominent Robert, and Richard Greenbury (*c.*1600–70), in an effort to petition the Painter–Stainers' Company to prosecute a number of named foreign and English 'picture-makers' from taking on portrait commissions without licence.[9] Both Peake and Greenbury are more familiar to us than Cottington and were probably better established as painters and portraitists in their own time.[10] But as both were Goldsmiths rather than Painter–Stainers, they obviously depended on Cottington's well-established position in the latter Company to take the lead in asking it to lobby against the intrusion of non-freemen into the craft. Cottington would hardly have taken this on if he were not himself actively engaged in portrait painting.

Their strategy tells us that Peake and Greenbury trusted and respected Cottington, considering him a natural ally in the intense competition between freemen and non-freemen for portrait commissions both in and beyond London. Greenbury is known to have taken on numerous commissions in Oxford, although he may well have carried out the work in a London workshop.

2. *Elizabeth Tufton, Lady Dering*, by George Cottington. 1626. Canvas?, dimensions unknown. (Present whereabouts unknown).

Peake could rely to an extent on connections inherited from his prominent father, whether in London or elsewhere. But Cottington must also have taken on commissions outside London. Not only does he appear to have done so for Dering in Kent, working on the scene at the family seat to produce the four portraits of 1626, but he also succeeded in avoiding Company office on at least one other occasion on the candid plea that he was frequently out of the city on business.[11] The three of them, sometimes together with other freemen, continued their battle against non-freemen portrait painters for years to come.[12]

Secondly, as befitted a senior member of the Painter–Stainers, Cottington was sometimes delegated to carry out Company inspections of work done by others, even at the highest levels. He served, for example, as one of a committee of seven Company brethren to inspect the work done on the royal barge under the authority of the Sergeant-Painter John de Critz in

[7] See the Court Minutes of the Painter–Stainers' Company of London; London, Guildhall Library, MS.5667/1, p.6 (hereafter cited as PSCL).

[8] *Ibid.*, p.12.

[9] Noted by S. Foister: 'Foreigners at Court: Holbein, Van Dyck and the Painter–Stainers Company', in D. Howarth, ed.: *Art and Patronage in the Caroline Court; Essays in Honour of Sir Oliver Millar*, Cambridge 1993, pp.32–33, and described, *inter alia*, in PSCL, pp.28, 61, 91 and 110. Entirely uncharacteristically, Foister mistakes the 'Mr Peake' referred to in the Painter–Stainers' Court Minute Book for Robert Peake. The latter died in 1619 and the first reference to the efforts of this trio (p.28) comes in 1628. The reference there to 'Mr Peake' refers to Robert's son William, who was also a painter and a goldsmith.

[10] ODNB, under 'Peake, Robert' and 'Greenbury, Richard'.

[11] PSCL, p.108.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp.42–43, 61, 80 and 110.

3. *Anthony Dering*, by George Cottington. 1626. Canvas?, dimensions unknown. (Present whereabouts unknown).

1631.[13] He similarly served in 1632 as an inspector of work done for Lord Goring by a 'Mr. Buckit' (probably the prominent but aging Rowland Buckett).[14]

We will probably never know for certain about Cottington's origins or, in the apparent absence of any testamentary records, much about his precise life dates or family.[15] But there are some grounds on which to speculate about those origins and how he came to be commissioned to paint the Dering portraits. In none of its variant spellings was 'Cottington' a common name in early Stuart England. It barely appears at all in London; appears as a place name in Cheshire; and appears very occasionally in Lincolnshire and a few other counties. But it does appear with some frequency in the genealogical records of Somerset. Indeed, in 1617, a George Cottington, who would probably have been a young adult at the time, received a legacy from his stepfather, Richard Broughton, B.D., Canon of Wells Cathedral. Broughton had married George Cottington's widowed mother and looked after the two Cottington sons until his death and named them in his will.[16] The painter, who would quite plausibly have been a young adult in 1617, may well be one of those sons. That timing would have been right for someone who spurned the burdensome office of Company Steward, traditionally given to a junior member, by 1624.

But perhaps more relevant is the identity of the only other Cottington active in London at this time, and also a Somerset man by birth. Francis Cottington, later 1st Baron Cottington (c.1579–1652), had been baptised in Pitcomb, Somerset, and it is hard to ignore the possibility that he may have been related to George. In any event, Francis Cottington enjoyed a rapid ascent at court, became an active supporter of the James I's favourite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham,[17] and thus became one of that coterie. The fact that Buckingham's entourage also prominently included Sir Edward Dering of Surrenden Dering[18] adds both to the likelihood of our Cottington's identity as Francis's relative from Somerset and to his candidacy for the 'Cuddington' who painted the Dering portraits.

Whatever his origins, the four Cottington portraits of which we have at least photographic records show him to be a skilled if slightly awkward portrait painter. Cottington's forte, most obvious in his portraits of the two women, lay in his close observation of costume and his care in depicting it in fine detail, as well as in his sensitive observations of facial features. A lively palette was often employed by English contemporaries such as Robert Peake in his *Prince Charles as Duke of York* of 1613, or William Larkin in his *Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset*, also of 1613,[19] and such pictures would have brightened the gloomiest of long galleries and made an emphatic case for their subjects' status and sophistication.

But like many other English-trained painters of his time, Cottington still struggled with proportion and perspective. Torsos, especially of the two women and young Anthony, are notably elongated; small heads perch on necks whose wide ruffs fail to camouflage their striking length. The women's hands remain stiff and paddle-like, while Sir Edward's right hand seems cramped and wooden. Finally, tables and background in young Anthony's picture and Elizabeth Turton's, remain essentially two-dimensional, although not as skewed as we find, for example, in the well-known *Sir Thomas Aston at the death-bed of his wife* by Cottington's contemporary John Souch of Chester.[20] Taken together, these observations allow us to situate Cottington's work among that of contemporaries such as Souch, Larkin, Robert (if not necessarily his son William) Peake, and others of the early seventeenth-century English school.

And what of the patron? Dering was a Kentish man all his life, with his seat at Surrenden Dering. He also enjoyed a London presence and a London-based career, having been born in the Tower of London where his father, Sir Anthony (1557/58–1635), had been acting as a temporary lieutenant at the time. Young Edward had become part of Buckingham's inner circle by 1619, the year in which Buckingham secured a knighthood for him, and Dering remained close to the duke for the remainder of the latter's life. His second marriage, to Anne Ashburnham, took place at Buckingham's Whitehall residence in January 1625. And, like Francis Cottington in the same year, Edward Dering owed his parliamentary seat in 1625 to Buckingham's patronage. Long after Buckingham's assassination in 1628 Dering owned a portrait of Buckingham.[21]

[13] *Ibid.*, p.68.
[14] *Ibid.*, p.81.
[15] He should not be confused with a contemporary and namesake, an Oxford graduate who served with George Calvert, both in Spain and the New World in the 1620s; see G.T. Cell, ed.: *Newfoundland Discovered: English Attempts at Colonization, 1610–1630*, London 1982, pp.277–79.
[16] F. Browne, ed.: *Abstracts of Somerset Wills* (privately printed, 1887, no place of publication), series I, p.91.
[17] ODNB, under 'Cottington, Francis'; and M. Havran: *Caroline Courtier, the Life of Lord Cottington*, London 1973.
[18] ODNB, under 'Dering, Edward'.
[19] Reproduced respectively in K. Hearn, ed.: exh. cat. *Dynasties, Painting in Tudor and Jacobean England, 1530–1630*, London (Tate) 1995, pp.188–89 and 198–99.
[20] Manchester City Gallery, cat. Sept.30/16/3/5.

Given these circumstances, it is highly likely that Sir Edward Dering came to know the painter George Cottington through what must have been frequent contact at court with George's presumed and very prominent kinsman Francis. Though we will of course never know this for sure, it is certainly plausible that a courtier such as Dering would have come to choose a suitable portrait painter through the experience or influence of other courtiers with whom he was politically and socially connected. Almost all prominent Kentish men at that time held court connections,[22] and their reliance on London-based painters seems both likely and logical.

A diligent examination of other hitherto 'anonymous' portraits of others of Buckingham's coterie may well turn out to have a lot in common with Cottington's surviving work for Dering. Taking up such commissions, and travelling outside London to complete them, is precisely what Cottington would have been doing when unavailable to serve as Steward of his Company in 1624. It is certainly why he would have found himself in constant competition with others, especially non-freemen and the fashionable foreigners, who competed for the same patronage. (It is also worth noting that Cottington lost the battle against non-freemen's competition in personal as well as general terms: Dering's next portrait, done in the 1630s, was commissioned from the much more illustrious and fashionable Cornelius Johnson, just the sort of painter Cottington had railed against with his Company.)[23]

Finally, one must ask why Dering should have wanted portraits of himself, his brother, his first two wives and his son in the early months of 1626. The rest of Dering's accounts offers clues. Like many other aspiring courtiers of his day, Dering was obsessed with his standing in society, with his origins, and with ways of promulgating that information to others. He certainly typifies what Lawrence Stone has termed 'the frenzied status-seeking and ancestor-worship of the age'. 'What patrons demanded', Stone continued, 'was evidence of the sitter's position and wealth by opulence of dress, ornament, and background'.[24]

Dering's financial accounts testify to his purchase of all sorts of cloth and clothing so that he could keep up with the latest fashions. They also record the remarkably frequent purchase of books and charts of heraldry pertaining to both historic and contemporary families, foreign as well as English. For substantial periods he even employed genealogists and arms painters in his household to provide such research. A Mr Taylor, perhaps the London Painter–Stainer John Taylor, who would, by dint of his training, probably have been an arms painter as well;[25] a Mr Kimby, no doubt the London Painter–Stainer and arms painter Richard Kimby;[26] and a Mr Woodenett, all served at one time or another in such capacities.[27] And Dering was constantly concerned with visual imagery in his residence at Surrenden Dering, commissioning or purchasing scenes (possibly, considering the price, mostly prints rather than paintings) appropriate to distinct rooms of his house: of feasts for the dining room, piety for the chapel, marriages and children for the chambers, and so forth.[28] In both these contexts, and at the juncture between the death of his first wife, Elizabeth Tufton, in 1622, and his marriage to his second, Anne Ashburnham, in 1625, such portraits recorded his genealogical progression from one marriage to the next.

4. *Anne Ashburnham, Lady Dering*, by George Cottington. 1626. Canvas?, dimensions unknown. (Present whereabouts unknown).

A second clue to Dering's purpose lies in the paintings themselves. The fact that he had Cottington paint both his dead and living wives, the prominence of the skull and the hour glass on the deceased Elizabeth's table and the withered branch on her crest, all speak of his preoccupation with *memento mori* themes. Piety and a respect for education in the form of a book (a prayer book?) embellish Anthony's image, while his own presents the fashionable and newly created baronet.

Cottington may not have been a Rubens or a Cornelius Johnson, but these portraits certainly show the mastery of ornamental display and genealogical detail that the rising courtier of 1626 required. The prestige of having a Johnson portrait, and perhaps the income to pay for it, would come a decade later. In the meantime, in their ornate presentation of costume and fashion, these four portraits affirmed Dering's social and economic position to all his Kentish neighbours and anyone else who would come to see them at the family seat. Others of Dering's ilk must surely have employed Cottington to the same end, and it remains entirely plausible that more of his work may now be awaiting attribution.

[21] Dering's Pocket Diary and Account Book; London, British Library Add. MS. 47,787, p.15.
[22] S.T. Bindoff, ed.: *The House of Commons, 1509–1558*, London 1982, I, p.113.
[23] ODNB, under 'Dering, Sir Edward'.
[24] L. Stone: *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641*, Oxford 1965, p.712.
[25] A. Borg: *The History of the Worshipful Company of Painters, otherwise Painter-Stainers*, Huddersfield 2005, p.210.
[26] J.H. Parker Oxespring: 'The Painter-Stainers and their Dispute with the Heralds', (3 parts, typescript; London, College of Arms, MS. Her/BH, no date), I, p.28.
[27] Document cited at note 21 above, fols.28r, 67r, 71v and *passim*. Woodenett remains unidentified.
[28] *Ibid.*, fol.30v.