Discovery of a Wall Painting

at

Ashleigh House Farm Barby



Barby Local History Group

1999

Discovery of a Wall Painting at
Ashleigh House Farm, Barby, Northamptonshire

It is ironic that the renovation of this house, over a period of twenty or more years, should culminate in the first floor family parlour, as it was in this room that its well-hidden secret was revealed.

I chanced upon it in December 1995 whilst removing years and layers of oil bound paint from intricate woodwork around the fireplace and adjacent panelled cupboard which had hitherto lost its definition. Using a hot air tool on a reeded column next to the chimney breast, I succeeded in getting down to the original pine, which was traditionally always painted, when two daubs of yellow and orange paint suddenly appeared on the virgin pine. For some inexplicable reason it had resisted the hot air, however it was indeed fortunate that it did, otherwise the clue to what followed may have been lost. These two colours were out of context as they had not been encountered elsewhere, and their position in the order of paint layers clearly indicated a very early application.

My curiosity, aroused at this find, was transferred to some old lining paper laid horizontally across the chimney breast, the corner of which was curling away from the plaster. Easing it away slightly revealed what appeared to be dark reddish curtains painted directly onto the plaster. Without ado I soaked the whole papered area (about one third of the total chimney breast), which despite liberal layers of oil paint came away easily. These paint layers had of course been extended over the remaining un-papered breast each time the room had been decorated. Clearly the exposed area was to become part of a large painting as curtains, sky and tree tops dimly showed themselves through the heavily shellac'd surface, but at this stage it was impossible to establish the subject of the picture.

The removal of the surface paint on the remaining two thirds of the chimney breast was to prove much more difficult, and required a different approach. Suffice it to say, I was both elated and brimming over with anticipation of what might be revealed.

I shall never forget this day, and I simply wanted to share my excitement with the world, and the world happened to be in Long Buckby on that day. Within minutes of a telephone call, Colin Ivens was here at the house, and I had not underestimated how excited he would be. Colin is one of those very gifted people who is at home in most areas of the art world.

After metaphorically dancing up and down with pleasure, we decided to contain our excitement and refrain from disturbing the painting any further. Another local man was invited to view the discovery - as his work was normally with the masters, his response was subdued and somewhat dismissive in describing it as a rustic piece and probably the handiwork of a family member. His initial viewing did not stir him sufficiently to warrant a further visit. He did however offer advice on how to proceed, and this proved invaluable over the following fifteen days which were spent slowly and carefully removing the hard layers of paint, including a layer of yellow emulsion which I had applied twenty four years earlier in complete ignorance of what lay below the surface. I discovered an alternative use for a flexible round-ended dinner knife - it worked extremely effectively and as long as the knife remained on my side of the shellac, all was well. The work was tedious but far from boring.

A picture slowly emerged that was to fill the entire chimney breast (50.5 x 35 inches), but the subject matter was not to become clear until the actual cleaning had taken place. Using a mixture of mild solvents applied with cotton wool did the trick, but we refrained from total cleaning, deciding it would be best left to an expert at some time in the future.

It was clearly not a Turner or a Constable, but its quality was not in doubt when it was revealed for all to see. Certainly it took many weeks to accept

that such a splendid painting had actually emerged from an otherwise blank wall. It required frequent visits to the room for reassurance of its presence.

The picture (below) consists of rich red curtains, ropes and tassels along with ermine-like flecks behaving like gossamer, all of which provide a very definite theatrical flavour and setting for the woodland scene within a large side-on oval. Two young men are duelling with what appear to be sticks on a bank to the right, whilst two young ladies on the left are weeping and commiserating. All are in late eighteenth century costume and contemporary with the room in which it was found. It is not signed as far as can be ascertained, but it is certainly competently painted.



When all was revealed and the initial excitement was over, I set about establishing a provenance and ways of documenting and preserving the painting. I considered from the outset that such a discovery brought with it certain responsibilities in terms of the future. Three years have passed since finding it, and consistent effort over that time has taken place involving all these aspects. I am glad to report that only recently has the Secretary of State agreed to amend the listing schedule of the house. The painting is now described, and hopefully it will enjoy full protection. It has also been documented by Northamptonshire Heritage, and in September

of last year it was included in a Yale publication entitled “Building the Georgian City” by James Ayres, priced at £45.00!

I have followed many avenues of enquiry over these past three years, to the extent that a “round robin” has almost been created. Individual art historians and institutions both in the United Kingdom and the United States of America have been made aware of this painting, and whilst interest and opinions have been received, no individual has yet shown a wish to visit the house to view the picture. In all fairness it is probably down to the lack of funding, but I have no doubt that one day it will be noticed and considered interesting in its own right. Until that time, it must receive protection, and while we remain here, it will.

The response from these people in the main suggested scenes from *Hamlet* or *As You Like It* to Sheridan’s *The Rivals*. One or two thought it might have been based on paintings for theatre backdrops which were lowered between acts in order to keep a calm and orderly house. It was also suggested that it was allegorical which I warm to, but I have long felt that perhaps its provenance may well lie here in Barby. Over many years we have researched the history of this corner homestead and the Lord family, and it may well be that documents relating to them have provided a clue to the subject and purpose of the picture.

An early homestead has existed on this corner site prior to and since the Enclosure Act of 1778. At that time Richard Lord was the yeoman occupant who consolidated ninety-eight acres of his land in the Hall Field and beyond to the Rainsbrook.

The death in 1789 of Richard's uncle, John Clarke, changed his status very considerably. He was made main beneficiary and sole Executor of John's will, and was to receive virtually all his uncle's real estate, which consisted of the Home Farm (The Homestead), the Malt House (Hopthorne Farm), Barby Nortoft Farm, a farm in Kilsby Village, numerous properties in Barby and a vast acreage of land, widely scattered. As Executor, Richard supervised the payment of £2500 in legacies.

It is of particular interest to note that John Clarke bequeathed Pinfold House in Barby and its close to his great nephew Thomas Lord, a lad of fifteen years of age. His father, Thomas Lord, brother to Richard, died in the same year as John Clarke, at the age of thirty-seven years. It is ironic that his son Thomas should die almost a year later in 1790. It is uncertain if Richard took possession of Pinfold, but it was sold to William Barker of Welton in the early 1800s[1].

[1] Additional information discovered since this article was written. On young Thomas's death his sister Mary Lord became his heir, she married William Barker in 1808 and thus Pinfold House passed to the Barker family. See our article about Pinfold House on this website.
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It would be reasonable to suppose that at the time of the will's Probate in 1793, this newfound wealth elevated Richard Lord up the social ladder and enabled him to extend Upper Farm (Ashleigh) including a new west wing which contained the first floor family parlour. Prompted perhaps by the close deaths of his brother and nephew, he set aside this room as a memorial to them. We have ample evidence of the entire room being painted black which may give support to this theory. As for the picture, it would perhaps be a fitting tribute to his brother in depicting the scene of playful duelling in their youth. The grieving women may be mother and wife.

We are unlikely ever to be sure what prompted the painting and why it was covered over with paint and paper, but it is worth noting that whoever covered it up wished to protect it with copious layers of shellac!.

Here I rest my case until such time that further evidence can provide another explanation.

Peter Start Ashleigh House Barby April 1999