

**Lot 1042. Portrait of William Ashburnham, second Son of Sir John Ashburnham, died 1697. 90 in. x 55 in. Attributed to Lely School.**

**What happened to Lot 1042 a Portrait of William Ashburnham? An investigation.**



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**What do we know about this portrait at Ashton Court?**

We know from Hector Paterson's images of the interior of Ashton Court from the late 1920s that a portrait of William Ashburnham hung in the Great Hall. The portrait has a distinctive but unreadable white caption towards the bottom left of the portrait. We also know that it was sold as Lot 1042 in the 1947 sale.

Research into the Ashton Court version of the portrait led to the discovery of a very similar portrait at Towneley Hall Art Gallery & Museum. The Towneley portrait enabled identification of Lot 1042 as the portrait in the Great Hall.



Image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sir\\_William\\_Ashburnham\\_by\\_Peter\\_Lely.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sir_William_Ashburnham_by_Peter_Lely.jpg)

Additionally we know, from a letter written by Ludwig (Lewis Upton Way) to Esme Smyth, that a similar version of the portrait hung at Ashburnham Place.

Ludwig would have been well placed to comment as he was a relative of Esme and had visited Ashton Court on occasions. He referred to the Ashburnham portrait as a replica of the one at Ashton court, but of course it could have been the other way round.

Letter Ludwig to Esme 6/7/30\*:

*"I entered an enormous Georgian Hall hung with portraits the first that caught by eye being an exact replica of W. Ashburnham in the hall at Ashton".*

Ashburnham Place in Kent was the family home of the Ashburnham's up to the 1950s.

**Fast forward to the 1947 sale at Ashton Court and the 1953 sale at Ashburnham Place.**

As mentioned above the portrait of William Ashburnham at Ashton Court was sold as Lot 1042 "Portrait of William Ashburnham, second Son of Sir John Ashburnham, died 1697. 90 in. x 55 in. Attributed to Lely School".

The contents of Ashburnham Place were sold by Sotheby's on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of June and the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1953. The July sale included Lots 90-186 'Family and historical portraits and paintings and drawings of the English school'\*

### **Fast forward to the present day.**

The portrait at Towneley has limited provenance with nothing specific to link it to Ashton Court. It was purchased by the Burnley Corporation in 1956 with the assistance of the Edward Stocks Massey Bequest. Its dimensions are 218 x 135 cm and it is dated to 1643-1670, and attributed to Peter Lely. The VADs\* record describes a '*Label on back of stretcher: Thomas Agnew & Sons Ltd. no. 17342*', and that an identical portrait was previously owned by the Earl of Bathurst. The Towneley portrait lacks the white caption and has at some point been extended right with a visible join 25cms into the work.

However two additional pieces of information were discovered;

Firstly, the Hastings and St. Leonards Observer of Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1900 listed the portraits that were at Ashburnham Place. The list included in the Front Hall:

*'No.8 William Ashburnham, cofferer to King Charles I and II., by Sir Peter Lely.'*

Secondly, further investigation of portraits sold from Ashburnham Place indicated that Agnews were at the 1953 sale. They purchased and then sold on another Ashburnham portrait that of Henrietta Maria Baroness Ashburnham. This pushes the balance of probability towards the Towneley portrait being the one from Ashburnham Place rather than the one from Ashton Court.

The Earl Bathurst was contacted and he was able to confirm that they indeed do still have a portrait of William Ashburnham almost identical to the Towneley one with some slight variation in colour of the trousers and boots. This proves that the Towneley version of the portrait is not the one owned by the Earl Bathurst.



Image: courtesy of the Earl Bathurst

Earl Bathurst was also able to confirm that their portrait probably came into their possession through their Royalist connections. Sir Benjamin Bathurst (1638-1704) was treasurer to Princess Ann and would therefore have known William Ashburnham. Another connection is through Sir Allen Apsley (1616-1683) who had defended Barnstaple for King Charles. They have a portrait book dated 1908 with the annotation '*similar to one at Ashburnham*'.

### **So what happened to the portrait at Ashton Court?**

It is clearly not the version which has been owned by the Earl Bathurst since at least 1908 and it is probably not the one at Towneley as the evidence points towards that being the one sold from Ashburnham Place. So the jury is out!

### **Who was William Ashburnham and how was he connected to Ashton Court?**

William Ashburnham was M.P. for Ludgershall in 1640 but was expelled for his loyalty to the king. He was Colonel General for Dorset in the Royalist Army during the English Civil War. He was governor of Weymouth in 1644 and Cofferer to King Charles I and II. He married Jane Boteler who was the widow of James Ley, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Marlborough. William Ashburnham died in 1679. A cofferer is one of the treasurers of the royal household.

The person who provides the connection between Ashton Court and the Ashburnhams is Elizabeth Kenn. Elizabeth Kenn's daughter by her first marriage to John 1<sup>st</sup> Lord Poulett was Florence Poulett. Florence married Thomas Smyth. Florence and Thomas's son was Sir Hugh Smyth (d.1690).

Elizabeth Poulett's 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage was to John Ashburnham (d.1671) whose daughter by his first marriage (to Francis Holland) was Ann (or Elizabeth) Ashburnham. Elizabeth Ashburnham married Sir Hugh Smyth. William Ashburnham (d.1679), who is in the Ashton Court portrait, was the brother of John Ashburnham (d.1671).

A portrait of Jane Ashburnham, Duchess of Marlborough and wife of William Ashburnham also hung in the Great Hall at Ashton Court.

### **Multiple versions of the same painting.**

This is quite common in art history. There are many reasons but the most common is that the first version was so successful that the artist received another commission.

### **Who was Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680)**

Sir Peter Lely (14 September 1618 – 7 December 1680) was a painter of Dutch origin whose career was nearly all spent in England, where he became the dominant portrait painter to the court. To find out more about Sir Peter Lely [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Lely](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Lely)

The results of this investigation have been reported to the Art Detective <https://www.artuk.org/artdetective/>

### **References**

\*Bristol Archives AC/C/134

\*Catalogue of sale at East Sussex Record Office ASH 1057

\*VADs digital archive accessed 2022 <https://vads.ac.uk/digital/collection/NIRP/id/32936/rec/9>

\*email from the Earl Bathurst 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2022