

Was there a Gainsborough in the house?

Probably not!

Anton Bantock in his book* reported that Hazel Cavendish, first wife of Greville Cavendish Esme's grandson, had said:

'When money ran short she [i.e. Esme] had one of the Gainsborough portraits discreetly copied and then sold the original'.

The 1901 and the 1915 inventories do not mention a Gainsborough or an 'after Gainsborough' suggesting a copy, neither does the 1947 sale catalogue.

However, in the inventories family portraits were described as, '7 portraits' or 'various portraits', rather than being given an individual description. In the 1915 inventory the only reference to Gainsborough is a Mezzotint portrait of Richard Warren M.D. described as '*J. Jones after Gainsborough*' which hung in the Park Bedroom.

The 1947 sale catalogue, however, is more detailed and no Gainsboroughs are mentioned.

What do we know about paintings after 1915 but before the 1947 sale?

In 1930 Esme gave the portraits of Dame Emily and the Hon. Gilbert Irby to the Bristol Art Gallery. Additionally in 1930 she was known to have sold another painting "Two Ladies of the Lake Family" to Messrs Duit*, an art dealer in Old Masters. It is possible other paintings were sold at that time.

Certainly the distant relatives, the Smyth-Pigotts, who had a similar collection of portraits* disposed of some of theirs when times were hard, as reported in the Weston Museum catalogue of the Smyth-Pigott collection:

*'As a group, the portraits have considerable historical interest. Artistically, they vary in quality. The best include works by Thomas Gainsborough, John Hayls, Thomas Hill, William Hoare, William Hobday and Emmeline Deane. Others are merely copies of originals sold in 1911 when times were bad for landowners'.**

The Pigott Smyth collection included: John Pigott 1741-1816 by Thomas Gainsborough, and three copies of Gainsborough portraits. These portraits were donated to the Weston Museum by the Smyth-Pigott family in 1947. There had also been an earlier sale of paintings from Brockley Hall in 1849.

Although this date is the same as the 1947 Ashton Court sale it is a co-incidence. Further investigation has revealed that Mary Agnes Smyth Pigott died in 1947 and the portraits were donated from Brockley Hall or Cottage after her death.

Disregarding Hazel Cavendish's comment it may be possible that some of the Smyth-Pigott portraits had originally hung at Ashton Court and were taken to Brockley Hall, home of the Smyth-Pigotts, when marriages between the two families were made.

Most of the Smyth-Pigott family archive was either lost or damaged when it was moved from the Manor Office in Weston super Mare to Brockley Hall for safe keeping during WWII.

The Walpole Society* in their 1948-50 volume which includes a preliminary check list of portraits by Thomas Gainsborough only details 3 portraits with direct connections to the Smyth-Pigotts and no portraits with connections to the Smyth family.

The three (all sold May 1911) are: Rev. Wadham Pigott (c1751-1823) assumed to be Gainsborough; William Provis (d.1808); Mrs. William Provis (1766).

References

*Further research in the Duit Archives (currently held at the Getty Research Institute) might answer the question.

*The Last Smyths of Ashton Court. Part 3, 1900-1946 by Anton Bantock.

*1901 Inventory (Bristol Archives 41648/P 1/71)

*1915 Inventory (Bristol Archives 41648/P 1/72)

*1947 Sale Catalogue (Bristol Archives 44440/1)

*Portraits of the Smyth-Pigott Family: a catalogue of the oil paintings and busts in Woodspring Museum, Weston-super-Mare.

*Walpole Society. Vol. 33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41829548>. Accessed April 2022.