

Some Early East Lothian Portraits

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East Lothian is a county rich in historical associations, and it is fortunate that so many portraits record the famous men and women connected with the area. One of the earliest is a portrait of Sir James Wilford which hangs in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. It is done on wood, as so many early pictures were. Wilford is shown in armour, a military baton grasped in his right hand, his coat of arms proudly displayed behind him. In the upper right of the picture is a fascinating vignette of Haddington, clearly showing its bridge and the tower of the church. Sometimes the background buildings seen in portraits are entirely imaginary, bearing little similarity to what was actually there, but on other occasions such as this there has been a genuine attempt at recording the reality.



Sir James Wilford unknown artist (SNPG)

So who was Sir James Wilford, and why is Haddington included in his picture? A Kentish man by birth, he was Provost Marshal of the English army which invaded Scotland in 1547, led by the Duke of Somerset. James V was

dead, his little daughter, Mary Queen of Scots had succeeded him, and it had been originally agreed that she should marry Henry VIII's only son the future Edward VI of England. The Scots had changed their minds, however, favouring an alliance with France instead, and so Henry ordered the series of invasions of Scotland known as 'The Rough Wooing', trying to force the Scots to abide by their treaty with him. When the English captured Haddington, they installed Wilford as Governor and for eighteen months he held the town against a combined Scottish and French force. It must have been during this time that the portrait was painted. We do not know who the artist was, but no doubt Sir James himself insisted on the inclusion of Haddington in the picture. He was held in great esteem as a commander, a contemporary praising him as 'such a one as was able to make of a cowardly beaste a courageous man'. Early in 1549, however, he was wounded and taken prisoner by the French while leading an attack on Dunbar Castle. He was exchanged for a Scottish prisoner, but arrived in York in a very weak condition and died some months later. His portrait hung for many years at Yester, until it was given to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery by the Marquis of Tweeddale in 1892.

If Sir James Wilford could be described as one of the many enemies of Mary, Queen of Scots, the 5th Lord Seton was one of her most loyal friends. His family home was at Seton Palace in East Lothian, but there is no reference to it in the painting. Instead he proudly wears his livery as Master of Mary's Household, a position he was given in 1561. Where Wilford's portrait is dark and sombre, Seton's is ablaze with colour. His scarlet cloak, jerkin and doublet are all intricately embroidered in gold with Scottish thistles, and in his right hand he holds his baton of office with the crowned cipher MR - Maria Regina.



George 5th Lord Seton by unknown artist (Scottish National Portrait Gallery)

He stands beside a pillar which has a Latin inscription stating that he was patient in adversity, benevolent in prosperity. Like the portrait of Wilford, this picture was painted on wood and at some time one edge of its panel must have been damaged, for when it is unframed it is evident that an inch or two have been sawn off the right side. This may have tidied up the picture, but it has left the inscription below the pillar tantalizingly incomplete, for the last digit of the date, 157-, is missing

The artist is unknown, but it seems most likely that it was produced in the Low Countries. After being captured at the Battle of Langside in 1568, Lord Seton was in prison for a year, then fled to Flanders, where he reputedly drove a wagon of four horses for his livelihood. (There was later said to be a picture

of him in this garb at Seton Palace.) A portrait of him with five of his children, dated 1572, was painted by Franz Pourbus the Elder, who worked in Antwerp, and it is probable that the Master of the Household picture was done at the same time, although there is argument as to whether it is also the work of Pourbus.

Interestingly, not all of it is by the same hand. The helmet and gauntlet to the left of the sitter do not appear to have been added at a later date, for they are much coarser in style than the finely worked head and costume, and likewise the coat of arms may well have been the work of a specialist herald painter. It is interesting to note that normally the griffin surmounting the shield faces left, but here it has been turned to face Lord Seton. This was sometimes done as a rather charming mark of respect for the sitter was of particular importance so that the heraldic beast would not rudely be turned with its back on him. Beneath the arms is the Seton family motto, 'Hazard yet Forward'. Lord Seton continued his efforts on behalf of Mary during her long English imprisonment until he finally died in 1585.

Another of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery's early pictures shows James, 4th Earl of Morton, one of the Protestant Lords who opposed Mary, Queen of Scots in the late 1560s. Implicated in the murders of both David Riccio and Lord Darnley, he became Lord Chancellor after the Queen's forced abdication, and led the vanguard of the army which defeated her at Langside. By the time his picture was painted, probably by Arnold Bronckorst, in about 1580, he had become Regent for the young King James VI. He stands rather grimly in his black doublet and breeches, a fashionable high-crowned, sugarloaf hat on his head, his plain leather gloves on the table beside him. The Earl was not an East Lothian man - his father was Sir George Douglas of Pittendriech - but the view through his window is often said to show an

early representation of Tantallon Castle. There is, however, an element of doubt as to this, for Tantallon did not belong to him but to his nephew. It would be most unusual for a sitter to be painted with someone else's property in the background, even if there was a family connection, and it has been suggested that the castle here is his own at Aberdour.

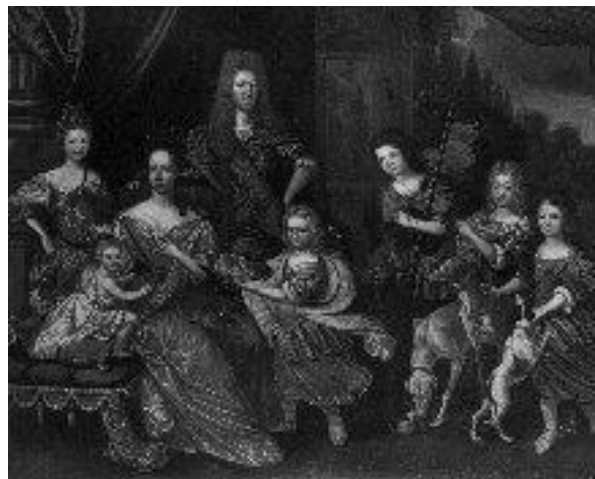


James, 4th Earl of Morton attributed to Arnold Bronckorst (Scottish National Portrait Gallery)

Whether the water we see is the North Sea or the River Forth remains a mystery. It must be said that the castle does not particularly resemble either Tantallon or Aberdour, so perhaps we should conclude that it must have been painted by an artist who had seen neither, but had been given a verbal description of a fortress by the edge of the water, with a causeway leading over to it. In any event, the detail was not particularly important to contemporaries, since the building was included as an indication of the Earl's wealth and status rather than as a piece of specific topographical evidence. Ironically, Morton fell

from power soon after the portrait was painted, and was executed in 1581 on The Maiden, the guillotine which he himself had introduced into Scotland.

When the impoverished Alexander, 5th Lord Blantyre sat for his portrait to J. de Geest more than a hundred years later, in 1698, he did not have an impressive property to show in the background, and so he chose to surround himself with his family. In part, this was a conventional demonstration of the power and influence of kinship in a country where it was still a source of support, but there may also have been an element of personal satisfaction. for Lord Blantyre's first marriage had been childless. By his second wife, Anne, the sister of Lord Belhaven, however, he had five sons and four daughters, and so Lady Blantyre and six of the children are grouped around him. The boys on the right can be identified as Walter, Robert, John and James. The girl on the left is presumably the eldest daughter, Marion, while the baby may be their fifth son, Hugh, or one of their younger daughters.



Alexander, 5th Lord Blantyre (The Blantyre Family) by J. de Geest (The Hamilton Collection, Lennoxlove)

Lord Blantyre was a professional soldier and a keen supporter of William of Orange, but he is not portrayed in the accustomed armour of the day. Instead, he wears a curious ornamental garment with short, tabbed sleeves, mostly concealed by his cloak. He and his relatives are wearing what seventeenth-century artists considered to be the garb of Ancient Romans. Strange as this may seem to the modern observer, it was a favourite device at the time. Realising that that their own costume would look old fashioned to later generations, people believed that classical dress would lend them an air of timeless dignity. This might have been more convincing had Lord Blantyre not worn his full-bottomed wig with his classical outfit.

Four years after his portrait was painted, Lord Blantyre inherited £50,000 from his aunt, Frances Stuart, 'La Belle Lennox', one of the beauties of the Court of Charles II. She was the model for Britannia on the British coinage. He used the money to buy Lethington Tower, formerly the home of John, 1st Duke of Lauderdale, and renamed it Lennoxlove, after his aunt. *The Blantyre Family* then hung at Lennoxlove for nearly three hundred years, until the sad night in May 1997 when it was irrevocably damaged by a fire in one of the castle's reception rooms, less than a week after the present writer had included a slide of it in this talk to Haddington's History Society. Photographs at the scene showed it being carried from the Castle, completely unrecognizable but for the remains of a figure near one edge.

The Blantyre family continued to own Lennoxlove until 1900, when it became the property of the Bairds of Newbyth, and then, in 1946, it was purchased by Douglas, 14th Duke of Hamilton, as a home for his family and for his fine collection of ancestral portraits. These include Sir Godfrey Kneller's painting of Anne, 3rd Duchess of Hamilton,

the strong-minded lady who saved the family fortunes after the Civil War. Her second daughter, Susanna, was for some years chatelaine of Yester House in East Lothian. Susanna had originally married the Earl of Dundonald, but he died not long afterwards, leaving her to bring up their two young sons and a daughter. After ten years of widowhood, Susanna accepted a proposal from Lord Yester, the future 3rd Marquis of Tweeddale, and as his wife had a second family of four sons and four daughters. A three quarter length portrait at Lennoxlove painted by Sir John Medina about 1703 shows her with her arm protectively round the shoulders of John, her eldest son by Lord Tweeddale. Born in 1698, John was to study law, became Secretary of State for Scotland, and was known as a great planter and improver of his estates at Yester.



Anne, 3rd Duchess of Hamilton

Another enthusiastic planter was Lady Helen Hope, who was also painted by Medina when she was sixteen. She is gracefully posed as a

young lady of fashion, in a loose fitting gown with draperies, a flower in her left hand. Two years later, she married her cousin, Thomas, 6th Earl of Haddington, and in 1700 they moved to the family home at Tynninghame, in East Lothian. The estate had been let out for some years to neglectful tenants, and the Countess noticed at once that there very few trees in the vicinity. When she made enquiries, the local people said that there was no point in planting saplings, for the salt sea air and cold east winds would destroy them.



Lady Helen Hope by Medina

The Earl would have been happy to do no more about the problem, for sport was his only interest, but his wife persuaded him to allow her to supervise some planting, and as he saw her improvements he began to take an interest himself. He was doubtful when she proposed a scheme for enclosing the Muir of Tynninghame, a piece of rough ground extending to more than three hundred Scots acres, for everyone seemed to be against the idea, saying that it was far too ambitious and that the Countess

would never finish it. Nevertheless, she persuaded him to let her go ahead, and before long he was planning walks through the new plantation, which they named Binning Wood. Moreover, the Earl himself became such an expert on planting that he published a learned treatise on the subject, and he never failed to pay tribute to his Countess, who started it all.



Lord and Lady Belhaven
Studio of Sir Anthony Van Dyck (SNPG)

The Earls of Haddington are a branch of the Hamilton family, as were the Lords Belhaven, whose home was at the Biel in East Lothian. The Scottish National Portrait Gallery has an intriguing portrait of John, 1st Lord Belhaven and his wife Margaret Hamilton, an illegitimate daughter of the 2nd Marquis of Hamilton. This currently hangs at Duff House. It is by an artist of the studio of Van Dyck, and shows the elegant couple seated together, he in black, she in red, his left hand on her right shoulder. The atmosphere is peaceful, for this picture dates from before the Civil War, which was to bring them all manner of troubles.

Not only did Lord Belhaven join the army led by his brother-in-law the first Duke of Hamilton in an attempt to rescue Charles I

from his captors, but he acted as surety for large debts contracted by the Duke. When the Duke was captured and beheaded for his royalist activities, it seemed likely that his creditors would have Lord Belhaven arrested and at least imprisoned if not condemned to death. Lady Belhaven, however, came to the rescue.

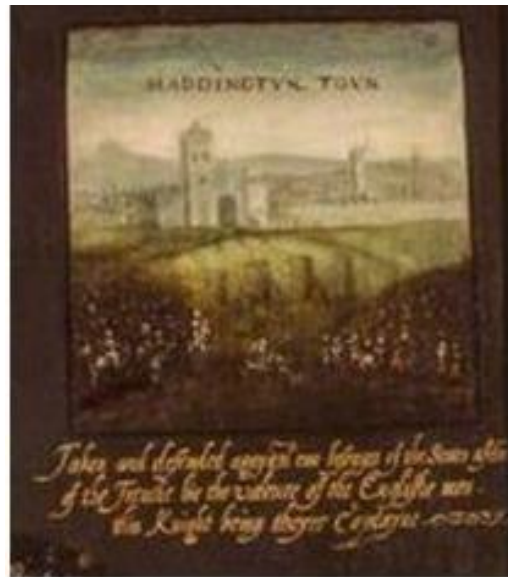
Described by a contemporary as ‘a very cuthie woman’, she was sensible, energetic and much relied upon by all her family and friends for her medical skill with herbs. Following her instructions, her husband let it be known that he had to travel to England, and set out accompanied by only one servant. He would he said, take the western route, which involved crossing the Solway with its dangerous tide. He was last seen riding towards the firth. Some time later, his distraught servant returned, leading his master’s horse and carrying his sodden hat. Lord Belhaven, it seemed, had been drowned trying to cross the river.

Lady Belhaven made a great display of grief, all the legal documents of the time referred from then on to her husband as the ‘late Lord Belhaven’, and of course, his creditors were foiled. Lady Belhaven was entitled to retain the estates for herself and the children. Nearly seven years passed. Occasionally there were odd stories about lady Belhaven entertaining a secret male visitor, but this was passed off as idle gossip. She stayed quietly at home at the Biel with her son, seeing her married daughters frequently. Then came the Restoration, and to the amazement of all, ‘the late Lord Belhaven’ reappeared. He had, in fact, kept his true identity secret and, just occasionally, visited his wife in Scotland. He had been her mysterious caller.

Staring serenely from their canvases, Lord and Lady Belhaven and all those other sitters associated with East Lothian give little hint of their turbulent lives, but their portraits bring

them before us in a particularly vivid way, reminding us that they were men and women with their own problems, hopes and aspirations, not merely names on the pages of history books.

From Haddington’s History Society Proceedings, 1997-99



The fanciful image of Haddington from Wilford’s portrait. The text reads, “Taken and defended agaynst two beseages of the Scots alise of the Frenche bie the valeure of the Englishe men this Knight being theyre Captayne.”