

Ancestral Portrait Engravings

Notes on the Value of Ancestral Portraits

by

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Finding Ancestral Portraits

In the era before photography, which means before television and cinema, portrait engravings provided the only means of distributing images of famous people — kings and queens, diplomats and politicians, eminent physicians and distinguished scientists, and notable artists, penniless musicians, hungry poets and desperate authors. Most of these portraits were engraved from oil paintings, but some were based on sketches from life.

Historians now value them for their insights into the contemporary interpretation of character, but for family historians they represent often the only opportunity to possess tangible links with their ancestry. Very few can afford to pay the price good paintings demand, and if one can be bought there is little chance of acquiring a second. The purchase will hang alone, emphasising the absence of others. Portrait engravings offer an economic alternative, and a hall or dining room featuring a row of these, attractively framed, will add to the charm of any residence and enable hosts to enliven their guests' conversation if it grows dull.

When families first begin to research their ancestry they too often concentrate on their paternal line, usually because it seems to be the most important, and often because it appears easiest, but when they stop to consider their options seriously they then recognise that only eight generations back, say at the beginning of the 19th century, they have a horizontal line of 256 ancestors. Cousin marriages may have created some duplication, but there will be some two hundred lines worth exploration, and any of these could, perhaps very surprisingly, link to a famous man or woman who sat for a portrait that was later engraved. He or she may be a direct or collateral ancestor, or perhaps a near kinsman.



The family of one Baronage client had a paternal line of no great distinction seemingly originating with a long sequence of tenant farmers, none of whom appeared likely to have the style of life that would justify the expense of commissioning artists to paint their portraits, but in the 18th century the family founded a successful shipping line and in consequence married with ladies from political, artistic and academic backgrounds that brought with them ancestral links to a very important group of portrait sitters, all of whom had interesting histories attached to them, and most of whom were the subjects of engravings we could trace and buy. Many families are unknowingly in this position.

The Baronage Press has acquired part of the famous David Home collection of portrait engravings of eminent people, of which three are illustrated on these pages, and they are available for purchase by the families of their descendants or by readers who are interested in these specific sitters. Of greater importance, however, is that The Baronage Press is now able to trace the existence of portrait engravings and can confirm to readers who wish to buy pictures of their ancestors whether these are available for purchase. [An enquiry form](#) has been uploaded for readers to specify the names in which they are interested, and they will be notified when relevant items are found.

The engraving featured on the previous page is not typical of the 17th century style, but it has a certain charm that appeals immediately to those who see it. The script directly below the picture states (the spelling is unaltered) that it is —

“The lively portrature of Mr John Bastwick, Dr of Physick, Late Captain of a foote Company”

— and below that is annotated in pencil: “no other copy of this drawing from a rare print in Mr Brindley’s Collection.”



Lord Rochester's armorial portrait on the previous page is well known. As John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, he first achieved fame by attempting to kidnap Elizabeth, the heiress daughter of John Malet of Enmore in Somerset, a great beauty, Samuel Pepys reported, who would at her mother's death be worth £2,500 per year. He succeeded in marrying her eight months later, which is why in this picture his arms, *Argent on a fess Gules between three eagle's heads Sable as many escallops of the field*, bear on an inescutcheon *Azure three escallops Or*.

Although today remembered principally as a rake, wit and poet, Rochester's character had more dimensions. His father, who died young, had been a great royalist soldier, and the tales of his bravery in action drove him to emulate them. In his first sea battle notice was taken of his bravery and industry, and in his second, as a volunteer aboard the flagship Dreadnought, in a fight famous for its carnage, he undertook at least one duty for which no one else had the courage. On account of his father the King took special care of him and adopted him as a foster son, so he spent much of his short adult life amid the debauchery of the court where, he confessed, he was drunk for five years, but before his premature death he ordered all his "profane and lewd Writings, and all the obscene and filthy Pictures, to be burned."

Another great wit, born in 1686 six years after the death of Rochester (a pity they never met), appears in the portrait on this page. Catherine, heiress daughter of Sir Charles Sidley, Bt, and granddaughter of John Savage, 6th Earl Rivers, was mistress for many years of King James II, the brother of Rochester's patron, but he abandoned her on his succession, granting her the titles of Countess of Dorchester and Baroness of Darlington together with a pension of £8,000 per year. Of her many royal bastards only one survived, a future Duchess of Buckingham. Her fame



as a wit was based on an often inappropriate and quite indelicate sense of humour perhaps best exemplified at her meeting with the Duchess of Portsmouth and the Countess of Orkney in a royal drawing room when she observed ironically how strange it was that "we three whores should have met here!"

