

Who Painted Thomas Wood and the Riddle of the Hat?



Thomas Wood, Artist Unknown
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum and Art
Gallery

In the collection of y Gaer and now hanging in the Court Room is this portrait of Colonel Thomas Wood of Gwernyfed. He was MP for Brecknockshire for over 40 years between 1806 and 1847 and in 1809 he was also the High Sheriff of Brecknock. This article attempts to identify the artist who painted it.

My search was prompted by the discovery of a fascinating letter in *The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian* for 22nd February 1834. It describes a visit to Brecon which included the Priory, St Mary's and John Evan Thomas' Studio by an unknown writer, an art enthusiast, who signs himself as *Palomino* but who he is I have no idea.

The letter gives unrivalled first hand evidence of how the 22 year old sculptor, John Evan Thomas, was working at this time but also contains details of pictures that Palomino has seen in the Priory in Brecon, including a portrait of Thomas Wood which he describes as follows;

I cannot here close this very hasty communication without a reference to a capital picture, which I saw yesterday at the Priory, in, Brecon. It is a three-quarter-length portrait of Thomas Wood, Esq. JP. for the county of Brecon. Of the degree of likeness to that individual I cannot form an opinion, as I have never seen the living original; but of its noble general resemblance to nature I can speak with confidence. The attitude is easy, but firm and dignified, equally free from the lameness of studied common place and the ostentation of spirit. He is in a standing- posture, and the calm self possession of a gentleman is most success- fully expressed. The face is nearly in a front view; the colouring mellow and warm, of a sanguine tint in the carnations and admirably united. The left-hand holds a manuscript, but not presenting it to view; the arm falls down at ease, the scroll is held, as if not at that moment, an object of his attention his hat is under the other arm the inside of it being seen with a faint reflection on its lining. The general effect is broad and sober; the masses are powerful, and the deep harmony of tone renders it altogether a very commanding work of art. This fine portrait does honour to Hayter's pencil and adds to the celebrity acquired by his splendid picture comprising the grouped

portraits of the Fitz-Clarence family exhibited at the Royal Academy, in the year 1831.

Now this description is a near perfect match for the picture of Thomas Wood in y Gaer and gives us the name of Hayter for the artist. Sir George Hayter was a celebrated 19th century portrait artist much favoured by Queen Victoria. However there is one strange anomaly in the description. The hat is described by Palomino as being *under the arm*. In the y Gaer portrait the hat is clearly held in the hand!

Searching online revealed in the catalogue for the National Museum of Wales a picture titled “*Thomas Wood (1777-1860) by Richard Lane after George Hayter.*” Unfortunately there is no image online to compare with the y Gaer portrait so I contacted Andrew Renton, Keeper of Art at NMW and asked for his help. Within an hour he had sent me this image. As you can see it is clearly a near copy of the y Gaer portrait, in

reverse.....but with Sir Thomas holding the hat under his arm!

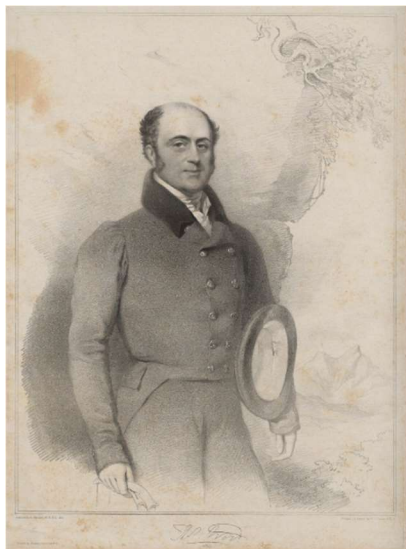
Andrew writes “*our image of Thomas Wood is in the form of the lithographic stone used for the prints after Hayter*” and he also directed me to an image in the National Portrait Gallery (which I hadn’t traced before because it is misattributed in their catalogue as being of Thomas **Ward**!).

This NPG version is the finished off set lithograph, now the right way round , and also shows the hat , fully seen, under the left arm. Comparing lithograph with oil we

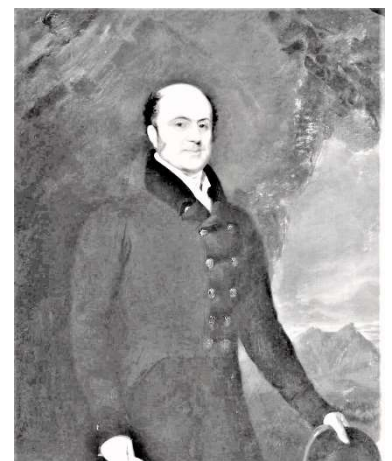
also see that the coat is much lighter in colour, more firmly waisted, the collar stands out .However if we “clean” the oil picture using the computer we can see that the lines of the coat and collar more closely resemble the engraving than does the now dark oil in y Gaer.



Thomas Wood Given by Ashford Welsh Girl's School to NMW lithographic stone James Richard Lane after George Hayter



Thomas Ward by Lane after Hayter , NPG



Computer lightened image of the original oil

So despite the difference in the composition, the features of the face and the details of the Beacons faintly sketched and convince me that this was an engraving taken from the portrait hanging first in the Priory and now in y Gaer and which, with some confidence, can now be attributed to Sir Charles Hayter.



But how to explain the hat? The lithographer was James Richard Lane, who was highly respected and became lithographer to Queen Victoria. He, and maybe the artist as well, may have decided when preparing the lithograph that the hat, as it is positioned in the oil portrait, is difficult to “read” . So perhaps the lithographer moved the hat to make it bolder and clearer.



Right hand, holding glove, oil



Right hand, holding glove, lith.



Left hand, gloved, holding hat, oil



Left hand bare, lith

There is another curious difference. In the bottom right hand corner of the oil portrait we see Thomas Wood’s left hand holding the hat is gloved .By contrast the right hand is un-gloved and holding what looks like the glove which Wood has removed from his right hand. In the lithograph the right hand is still un-gloved and holding a single glove, and a close copy of the oil. Now however the left hand is also bare but the right hand still seems to be holding a single glove! The lithographer having moved the hat and stripped the glove from the left hand has lost it !

These changes are surely quite a liberty for a lithographer to take. But there is still the difficulty of explaining how the detailed description by Palomino of the oil painting in the Priory also misplaces the hat . We know Palomino is describing the oil for he describes how *The face is nearly in a front view; the colouring mellow and warm, of a sanguine tint in the carnations.....* However

he then describes how *his hat is under the other arm the inside of it being seen with a faint reflection on its lining.....*

This seems to miraculously predict what is going to happen when the lithograph is made. One possible explanation for this error by Palomino is that after leaving Brecon, and while writing his letter, he had access to a copy of the engraving and used it to help him remember what he had seen, so describing the hat under the arm. But there is another possibility, that there are **two** portraits, one with hat under arm, once in the Priory but now lost from which the lithograph was made and a second with hat in hand now in y Gaer. Perhaps Fiona could help us!

Some Background



Marquis Camden
by William Salter, y Gaer

When in Brecon Sir Thomas Wood lived at the Priory which explains why his portrait was there. The Earl of Camden, who owned the Priory was his father-in-law and Palomino also describes how in the Priory *there is a portrait, bust size, of Earl CAMDEN, the Lord Chief Justice. I never saw that Luminary, but this likeness strongly resembles all the best prints and paintings of the Earl which I have ever seen... The execution shews the hand of a master.* This must be the picture that now also hangs in the Court Room.

To support this idea there is one further mention I have found of these two portraits which show that they have been in the Shire Hall for some time and long before it became a museum.

In 1886 Poole writes in his *History of Brecon* that the Grand Jury Room of the Shire Hall *contains fine oil paintings of "county men; "... John Jeffreys Pratt, Marquis Camden, presented by J. P. de Winton, Esqre to the county ...and the other is that of Colonel Wood, M. P. for the county, placed there by relatives*

So we now have, thanks to Palomino and Poole, both a partial provenance for these two portraits now hanging in the Court Room in y Gaer, linking them back to the Priory in Brecon and also a distinguished name, Charles Hayter, for the artist who painted Thomas Woodbut a riddle remains over the moving hat!

ⁱ Palomino(1655-1726) was a Spanish artist writer of biographical sketches on Spanish artists