

# History of a Portrait: New information on the provenance of David Lyon by Sir Thomas Lawrence

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Fig. 1  
Thomas Lawrence  
*Portrait of David Lyon*, ca. 1825  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2  
Thomas Lawrence  
*Portrait of David Lyon senior*  
Present whereabouts unknown

Thomas Lawrence's splendid portrait of David Lyon (fig. 1) is one of the most attractive works in the Old Masters' collection of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, both with regard to the quality of this work by the celebrated painter and the fascinating and enigmatic personality of the sitter. Lawrence was a key figure in the 19th-century English School, particularly celebrated for his brilliant technical skill. His innate genius led him to devote himself to art from a very young age. In 1787 he moved to London where he studied at the Royal Academy of Arts, then held his first exhibition. In a short time, Lawrence became the favourite artist of the British monarchy and of the nobility and patrician classes. The present canvas reveals his outstanding abilities as a portraitist.

The painting dates from the artist's final phase and is particularly striking for its technical mastery and range of different textures and materials, for example, the shoes. In addition, the gloves and fur of the jacket, while only sketchily painted, reflect Lawrence's painterly abilities. Interestingly, the sitter wears the tight trousers that had been made fashionable some years earlier by Beau Brummell, the English dandy and arbiter of fashion.

In addition to the sitter's slim figure, another notable element is the face, with its captivating and extremely lifelike expression. Combined with his medium-length hair that seems to wave softly in the breeze, the image of this young landowner conveys an extremely pleasing personality. Visitors to the Museum find it difficult not to pause over Lawrence's image in the gallery in which this work is hung. David Lyon is depicted in a pose that is both natural but also elegant and distinguished. Combined with Lawrence's ability to capture the personality of his sitters and to idealise them without resorting to overt flattery, the result is to create a halo of mystery. The background conforms to the type habitually used by the artist, with the figures set in an imposing, rather idyllic setting. In this case the landscape also has a symbolic function, with the numerous trees in the background referring to Lyon's social position as a wealthy landowner. It is also to be inferred that he is the owner of the estate depicted in the work.<sup>1</sup>

Lawrence's clients also included David Lyon senior,<sup>2</sup> whom he painted ten years before executing the present work (fig. 2). The whereabouts of that portrait is now unknown and we only know that on Lawrence's death it was still in his studio. The portrait remained unfinished and was thus not delivered to the client. In contrast, it is known that in 1828 David Lyon the younger paid the sizeable sum of 700 guineas for his portrait.<sup>3</sup> Both canvases were auctioned at Christie's on 21 November 1980.

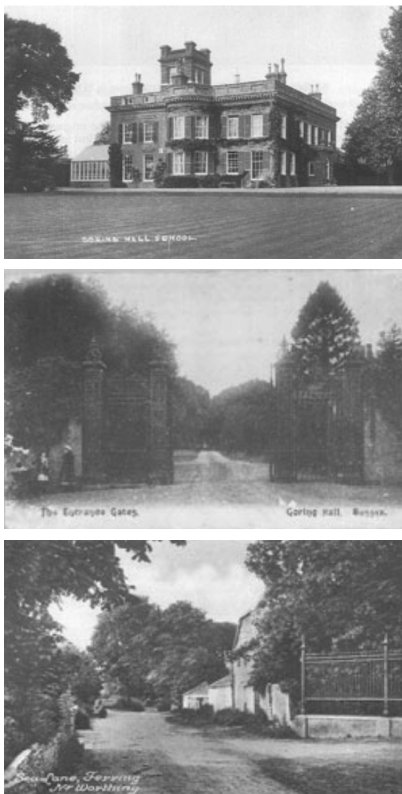


Fig. 3  
 Old postcard of Goring Hall converted into  
 a school and lacking one of the towers

Figs. 4 and 5  
 The East and West entrances to Goring Hall,  
 located at the end of the holm oak avenue  
 (Ilex Way). Above, the main entrance, and below,  
 the entrance on Sea Lane, Ferring

### Notes on the life of David Lyon the younger

David Lyon of Goring Hall, Sussex, and Balintore Castle, Forfarshire, was born around 1794 and died in Nice in 1872. He was a judge and Conservative member for Beeralston between 1831 and 1832. Late in life, at around the age of 55, Lyon married Blanche Bury, daughter of the Rev. Edward and Lady Charlotte Bury, the latter a well-known novelist of the day. In one of his letters, Benjamin Disraeli, the British Prime Minister, mentions Lyon's wife Blanche. According to Disraeli, who met her at a dinner, she was extremely beautiful and captivating, while he merely notes that Lyon was "a rich man".<sup>4</sup>

David Lyon seems to have been descended from a noble English family, the Lyons of Auldbar, who were related to the Bowes-Lyons, the family of the late Queen Mother.<sup>5</sup> They were direct descendents of the Hon. Sir Thomas Lyon, Knight of Auldbar, Forfarshire, Scotland, who was awarded the title of Master of Glamis. Sir Thomas Lyon was a prominent figure in the 15th century: Treasurer of Scotland and Captain of the Guard of the Scottish monarch, James IV, in Arran.

John Lyon of Castle Lyon in Perthshire and Kinnaird, Fifeshire, was the grandfather of Lawrence's sitter and a direct descendent of the 15th-century Sir Thomas. He married Jane, daughter of Sir Alexander Ochterlony. They had seven children, of whom the second, David, was the father of the present sitter. Although not the eldest son, he inherited the family fortune following the death of his brother without heir. David Lyon senior married Isabella, elder daughter of John Read of Carney, Forfarshire, with whom he had ten children, of which the present sitter, David Lyon of Goring, Sussex, was the third.

Although untitled, the family owned extensive estates and business interests in both Britain and Jamaica, where they had sugar plantations.<sup>6</sup> On his death David Lyon senior's fortune totalled almost 600,000 pounds.<sup>7</sup> His son, David Lyon, and his other sons attended Harrow school around 1809, and on leaving school the present sitter decided to pursue studies in commerce and business, amassing a considerable fortune in the Antilles.

### David Lyon and Goring Hall

From his father, Lyon inherited the relatively small estate (in comparison to other family properties) of Goring Hall, Sussex, comprising more than 600 acres, and another at Balintore Castle, Forfarshire, Scotland.<sup>8</sup> He settled at Goring Hall and had the old house demolished in order to build a splendid new one in 1840 (fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> The new residence had a splendid drive of holm oaks and magnificent wrought-iron gates (figs. 4 and 5), which, according to local legend, impressed the Queen Mother when she visited her relations for the first time. David Lyon



Figs. 6 and 7  
Present-day view of Goring Hall, and the interior  
of the house with the coat-of-arms of the Lyon  
family over the fireplace

lived between Goring Hall and his London residence at 31 South Street, Grosvenor Square.

Following his death, the Sussex estate and house were inherited by Lyon's closest relative, William Lyon, who seems to have been one of his brothers, given that David Lyon died childless. During the time of William Lyon's ownership, Goring Hall was seriously damaged in a major fire in 1888, as various documents record,<sup>10</sup> but it was rebuilt on the lines of the original in less than a year. The house subsequently passed into the hands of Fitzroy Lyon, a cavalry officer, who, from 1906 onwards, rented it out to the Molson family. Documents demonstrate that the house, estate and Lawrence's painting remained with the family until 1934, when Joy, Fitzroy's only daughter, sold the Goring, Clapham and Ferring land and properties that she had inherited. The choice of the incumbency of the church of Saint Mary at Goring, an ecclesiastical appointment that had always been the prerogative of the Lyon family, thus passed to the Bishop of Chichester, Peter Bennett. Joy Lyon retained Lawrence's portrait, however, for the rest of her life. After the sale of the house, Goring was used for a range of purposes until it became a boarding school four years later. It is now a private hospital (figs. 6 and 7).

### **New information on the provenance of the portrait of David Lyon**

The last member of the Lyon family to own the portrait, which had belonged to the family of its wealthy sitter from the date of its creation, was Joy Lyon, who married a French citizen and became Madame Claude François of Keltie Castle, Perthshire, Scotland. As noted above, in 1934 she decided to sell the Sussex estates that she had inherited but retained the portrait for the rest of her life.

Various letters in the archive of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza<sup>11</sup> written by Laura Nepean-Gubbins, a close friend of Joy Lyon, have provided new information and additional bibliography on the history of this painting, giving rise to the present text. From descendents of Mrs Nepean-Gubbins,<sup>12</sup> it is known that she, Joy Lyon and Elizabeth Carnegie-Arbuthnott remained friends throughout their lives. As a result, and following her divorce and death without descendants in sad circumstances, Joy Lyon bequeathed all her possessions, including the portrait, to her friend Betty Carnegie-Arbuthnott.

Miss Carnegie-Arbuthnott and Laura Nepean-Gubbins shared a rented house known as Hampton House at Hampton Court (East Molesey, Surrey). The house was the venue for celebrations and events, some of a family nature, and the portrait of David Lyon hung in the drawing-room for many years.<sup>13</sup> The two friends were eventually obliged to leave the house and moved to a smaller one named The Coach House. Not having sufficient room to display the portrait,



Fig. 8  
The drawing-room at Daylesford,  
at that time the UK residence of Baron  
and Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza  
© Christopher Sykes

Miss Carnegie-Arbuthnott regretfully decided to sell it and it was auctioned at Christie's London on 21 November 1980, as lot 114. The painting was acquired by P. & D. Colnaghi and Co., of London, and the following year, in 1981, was purchased by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza. The Baron displayed the painting in the drawing-room at Daylesford (fig. 8), and subsequently in his residence at Lugano. In 1993 it became part of the collection of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Following its sale at Christie's, both Elizabeth Carnegie-Arbuthnott and Laura Nepean-Gubbins attempted to locate the whereabouts of this remarkable work of art that they had been able to enjoy for so many years, but without success. By chance, in 1987, and after the death of Miss Carnegie-Arbuthnott, Laura Nepean-Gubbins read an article in the July 1983 issue of *House & Garden* on Daylesford, the English residence of Baron and Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza.<sup>14</sup> The article included a photograph of the drawing-room with Lawrence's great portrait (fig. 8).<sup>15</sup> For this reason Mrs Nepean-Gubbins wrote a letter to Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza with the aim of passing on information regarding the provenance of the work and of communicating her "satisfaction on knowing that the canvas had fallen into good hands."<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

- 1 David Lyon's personal and financial situation is discussed in more detail in the section on his life in this article.
- 2 See Garlick, Kenneth: *The Thirty-Ninth Volume of the Walpole Society 1962-1964. A Catalogue of Paintings, Drawings and Pastels of Sir Thomas Lawrence*. Glasgow, 1964, p. 135.
- 3 Garlick, Kenneth: *Sir Thomas Lawrence. A Complete Catalogue of the Oil Paintings*. Oxford, Phaidon, 1989, p. 232.
- 4 Disraeli, Benjamin: *Benjamin Disraeli Letters: 1838-1841*. Conacher, J. B. and Wiebe M. G. (eds.). Toronto, 1987, vol. 3, p. 188.
- 5 Burke, Bernard: *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Peerage and Baronetage, the Privy Council, and Knightage and Companionage*. London, 1921.
- 6 Burke, Bernard: *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Commoners of Great Britain and Ireland. Enjoying Territorial Possessions or High Official Rank but Invested with Heritable Honours*. London, 1838, vol. IV, pp. 592-593.
- 7 *Portraits Publiques. Portraits Privés. 1770-1830* [exhib. cat. 2006-2007]. Paris, Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais; London, The Royal Academy of Arts; New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2006, pp. 358-359.
- 8 Thompson, F. M. L.: "Life after death: How successful nineteenth-century businessmen disposed of their fortunes". In *The Economic History Review*, n.s. 43: 1 February, 1990, p. 54; Thompson, F. M. L.: "Stitching it Together Again", in *The Economic History Review*, n.s. 45: 2 May, 1992, p. 373.
- 9 Fox-Wilson, Frank: *The Story of Goring and Highdown*. UK, 1987, pp. 60-62.
- 10 Ibid. pp. 62, 73-75.
- 11 Dated: 12 October 1987, 8 November 1987, 3 January 1988 and 3 December of that year.
- 12 The author would like to thank Una-Mary Parker and Baba Hobart (daughter and granddaughter of Laura Nepean-Gubbins) for their generous and disinterested help with this text.
- 13 Unfortunately, no photograph from this period is known.
- 14 With thanks to Condé Nast Publications, in particular the director of the Library and Information Service, Mrs Cynthia Cathcart, for their assistance.
- 15 Bowes-Lyon, John: "The English country house of the Thyssen-Bornemiszas". In *House & Garden*. New York, July 1983, pp. 50-66 and 161.
- 16 Letter dated 12 October 1987. Documentary archive of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Department of Old Master Paintings.