

# SADLEIR OF SUTTON HOUSE AND STANDON LORDSHIP: AN ICONOGRAPHY

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## *The Sadleir family*

In March 1994, the Hackney Gazette announced: SUTTON HOUSE TO HANG UP ITS FIRST FAMILY. A somewhat dramatic headline, perhaps, but nevertheless the report was of an important addition to the inventory of contents of Sutton House: three oil paintings. Research in *Burke's Landed Gentry of Ireland* and the London telephone directory had brought to light a living descendant of Sir Ralph Sadleir, who built Sutton house in 1535. Mr William Sadleir of Wiltshire and London is a direct descendant of a branch of the family that went with Oliver Cromwell's soldiers to Ireland, and settled there in the 17th century.

Through Mr Sadleir, several other members of the family were contacted, some of whom were still in possession of portraits of members of the Sadleir family. Three portraits were subsequently loaned to the National Trust, and now hang in the Great Chamber of Sutton House. A pair of portraits of Sir Edwin and Lady Sadleir were painted by Mary Beale at around the date of their marriage in 1686<sup>1</sup>.

The other portrait (*figure 1*), by an unknown artist, shows a bearded man, dressed in Jacobean style, bearing a goshawk on his left wrist, and entitled 'Sir Ralph Sadleir MP of Standon'.<sup>2</sup>

In 1987, when the future of Sutton House was threatened by plans to convert it into private flats, local residents initiated a campaign to save the house from that sad fate, and persuade the National Trust to restore it and make it accessible to everyone. Very little was known, at the time, of the history of a house which was believed to date from the first half of the 16th century. If the Trust were to be convinced of the architectural and historical value of the house then it was important that research should be carried out to establish who lived there during the 450 years of its history, and how the structure had been adapted to fit the needs and taste of its residents.

That research<sup>3</sup> has resulted in an almost complete calendar of the names of owners and occupants, but sadly very few faces. Hardly any portraits have been discovered to show

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us likenesses of the people who lived in the house, despite the fact that many were wealthy and certainly would have had their portraits painted.<sup>4</sup>

A special challenge was to find a likeness of the most prominent historical figure in the story of the house, Sir Ralph Sadleir - Henry VIII's Ambassador to Scotland and Principal Secretary of State in England.

### *Thomas Cromwell, by Holbein*

In 1521 Ralph's father, Henry Sadleir, wrote to his friend Thomas Cromwell, the then Secretary of State to Henry VIII, to say that he had bought a house in Hackney.<sup>5</sup>

Henry's son Ralph was 14 at the time, and being educated in Cromwell's house in Fenchurch Street, London. He was taught Latin by a tutor alongside Cromwell's own son Gregory. As a young man, Ralph became Cromwell's secretary, assisting him in various tasks, including translating for him the documents in the Latin language in which so much business was conducted. In 1535 Sadleir rebuilt his father's Hackney house and entered the king's service.<sup>6</sup> Did he also have his portrait painted that year?

Most of Cromwell's correspondence and papers, many of them letters from Sadleir, may now be found in the Public Record Office. They were confiscated by the Crown after

Cromwell's execution for treason in 1540. After that event Sadleir and Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of Durham, were appointed to take possession of Cromwell's property. That is, perhaps, how Sadleir came to be in possession of his former master's famous portrait, painted by Hans Holbein in 1533. At the time of the sitting, as Cromwell's secretary, Sadleir must surely have met Holbein. The inventory of Standon Lordship, Hertfordshire, in the year 1660, refers to this painting and also to a portrait of Sir Ralph Sadleir.<sup>7</sup> Standon Lordship was built by Sir Ralph Sadleir of Hackney in 1546 - possibly with a view to distancing him, to some extent, from the Court at a precarious time. Sadleir appears to have retained a great respect for Cromwell, to whom he was related through his marriage, around 1531, to Ellen Barre. He was probably proud to have possessed the Holbein portrait - though while he was living in Hackney he might have preferred to keep it out of sight. Henry's displeasure was not to be countenanced!

### *The Sutton House portrait*

This full length portrait, entitled Sir Ralph Sadleir MP of Standon, shows a young man with a moustache and pointed beard wearing a large silk collar and wristlet in the style of Charles I. At the top of the painting, inscribed faintly in gold, is the date 1623, and fixed to



Figure 1: Ralph Sadleir the younger (detail)

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the base is a gilt plaque with the inscription 'Sir Ralph Sadleir MP of Standon'. This is however a mistake. Whoever fixed the plaque, at some later date, was confused between the grandfather and the grandson. The master of Standon for much of the 27th century was the grandson of Ralph of Hackney, also called Ralph. Though Sheriff of Hertfordshire, he had neither a Parliamentary seat nor a title. His father was Sir Thomas sadleir, baptised in Hackney Church with thomas Cromwell attending as his godfather. Thomas Sadleir died in 1606 and Ralph the yonger inherited Standon Lordship. Ralph had no children (in fact it it said he never shared a bed with his bride Ane Paston/Coke) and his property passed to his sister Gertrude. A paint-int<sup>8</sup> of Gertrude, as a young woman, is attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the younger (who painted the famous so-called 'Ditchley' portrait of Queen Elizabeth). Could Gheeraerts have been the unknown painter of the portrait in Sutton House? Gheeraerts did not die until 1636; however, by 1620 he had become unfashionable at court, and replaced, in favour, by artists such as Daniel Mytens from Delft. Charles, Prince of Wales, appointed Mytens 'one of our picture drawers of our Chambers' for life.<sup>9</sup> The Sadleir family st this time retained close links with the court. Sir Ralph the younger must have met James I as a young man, when in 1603 his father grandly entertained the Scottish king for two days at Standon during his journey from the north to claim the English throne.

A portrait, attributed to the school of Daniel Mytens, of the 1st Duke of Buckingham shows a man in a stance and costume similar to Sadleir's.<sup>10</sup> It is an interesting speculation that the painting in Sutton House could be by this prominent court painter who, in 1628 painted Charles I.

### **The Dugdale Asteley engraving**

A Gheeraerts comes into the picture again this time 'the elder'. Research in 1990 brought to light an engraving dated 1828 by M. Gauci - a 'Portrait of Sir Ralph Sadleir' purporting to be based on an oil painting by Marcus

Gheeraerts the Elder on a panel in the Old Hall of Everley House, Wiltshire, the seat of John Dugdale Astley Esq, MP. This shows a youngish man with a light brown moustache and small goatee beard, wearing a green skull cap, an elaborate vertical ruff, a yellowish tunic with knee breeches all in one piece, white stockings and green shoes. On his left wrist he carries a hooded brown falcon, of a kind that is probably not identifiable, and looks rather unlikely. The whole is set within an arch, perhaps representing a wooden carving in 17th century style. The costume is very curious, looking more like fancy dress than something genuinely Tudor!



*Figure 2: the Dugdale Asteley portrait*

Everley (now Everleigh) House was the home of the first Sir Ralph's third son Henry, and passed into the Astley family in the 18th century. The original painting was sold early in the 20th century and it took some time to locate it to its present home in a private collection in Suffolk. We have, thanks to the owner, obtained a good photograph of this painting, which can be seen at Sutton House. It is very similar to the engraving, except that the man is clean-shaven.<sup>11</sup>

It was Professor Arthur Slavin of Louisville University, USA, who in 1966 first drew attention to the existence of the engraving, a copy of which is held in the British Museum. Sir Roy Strong, then director of the National Portrait Gallery, considered that it could have been the work of Gheeraerts the Elder, though 'defaced by a stylist in the nineteenth century',<sup>12</sup> In recent years Malcolm Rogers, of the National Portrait Gallery, has said that the portrait 'appears ... to be probably a later (perhaps 18th century) concoction.<sup>13</sup> The Hon. Mrs Jane Robert, Curator of Prints at Windsor Castle, goes further, by suggesting that the portrait looks more in the style of Watteau (1684-1721) than Gheeraerts.<sup>14</sup> In any case Gheeraerts the Elder only arrived in England in 1568, by which time Sadleir would have been 61 - this fresh faced young man could scarcely have been painted by him. It does seem likely, therefore, that the portrait was painted as a later, rather fanciful memorial to the man and is not much use in providing a reliable image of the builder of Sutton House.

### ***Holbein's 'unidentified gentleman'***

In the search for a more acceptable image of Sir Ralph, the possibility that he was drawn by Holbein was put forward.

Hans Holbein the younger first came to London in 1527, and one of his first commissions was a group painting of the family of Sir Thomas More, who lived, at the time, by Bishopsgate. Cecily More, who features in the painting, was Thomas's youngest daughter. She married Giles Heron of Hackney. His father, Sir John Heron, was Henry VIII's fi-



Figure 3: the 'unidentified gentleman' ('Parker 33')

nancial administrator,<sup>15</sup> and also responsible for the rebuilding of Hackney Church in 1519. This is worth mentioning because Sadleir purchased Giles Heron's lands between Sutton house and the churchyard in 1537, and later took on the wardship of Giles' children after Giles, like his father-in-law, was executed for treason. Sadleir may already, through his contacts with the More family, have met Holbein.

Holbein drew beautifully, mainly in coloured chalks, many members of Henry VIII's court. Some of his sitters have never been identified. Most of these drawings are now in the queen's collection at Windsor. In the collection is a fine drawing of an unidentified man which has been given the reference 'Parker 33',<sup>16</sup> This drawing was used as the basis of a painting, probably by a member of the school of Holbein, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The year of the painting and the age of the sitter are inscribed on the painting: they are 1535 and 28 respec-

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Figure 4: the New York copy

tively. Sir Ralph Sadleir was born in 1507 and was therefore 28 in 1535! The man is shown with a reddish brown beard, a well fed face with high cheekbones, a broad nose that looks as if it might have been broken, and a reddish-brown beard. Could this be a portrait of Hackney's Sir Ralph, or just coincidence of dates?

Dr. David Starkey of the LSE, an authority on the Tudor period, was intrigued with this idea. He has written -

Mike Gray's suggested identification of Parker 33 with Ralph Sadleir is a new one on me. But the dates do fit - and perhaps more than you realize. For not only was Sadleir 28 in 1535 but 1535 was also the year that straddled his service to Cromwell and the King

Indeed there is an intriguing possibility that the portrait was painted on the royal progress of 1535 (in the West Country). Henry was accompanied

by both his new Queen, Anne Boleyn, and his minister, Thomas Cromwell. In Cromwell's train as his secretary and confidential assistant was Sadleir... the host of the royal couple on the 23rd to 16th August was Sir Nicholas Poyntz (of Iron Action, Gloucestershire). Poyntz commemorated the visit by commissioning his portrait from Holbein. Both the drawing (Parker no. 34) and various painted versions survive - the best being dated 1535. The details of dress, in particular the upturned collar, and the trim of the moustache and beard, are very similar to the (possible) Sadleir portrait. My guess is that they were done at the same time by the royal painter who accompanied the court on a progress that would bring not only the Reformation to the localities, but the Renaissance as well.

It is a lovely, seemingly convincing story.<sup>17</sup>

The Hon. Mrs Roberts, Curator of the Print Room at Windsor Castle, was fascinated by the evidence, particularly by Dr Starkey's suggestion. However, she has pointed out that

one problem of identifying Parker 33 with Sadleir is that most of the drawings in the collection had been identified by Sir John Cheke (tutor to Edward VI): but not Parker 33. King Edward owned the collection of drawings which had been bound in 'a great Booke of Pictures doone by Haunce Holbeyn'.<sup>18</sup> The implication is that Cheke could not recognise the face. However, Sadleir was one of a group of courtiers acting as advisors to the young King Edward - so Cheke must have known him.

There is, however, no absolute proof that it was Cheke who identified the drawings; and, curiously, some of those identifications have been shown to be wrong. Nevertheless Susan Foister (author of *Drawings by Holbein from the Royal Library at Windsor*<sup>19</sup>) writes that it 'is *probably* (my italics) correct (to say) that the identification of the sitters was made by Sir John Cheke'. Foister goes on to say however that the inscriptions appear to have been added some time later, leaving scope for inaccuracies and omissions to creep in. Further, she says that 'it must not be assumed that the drawings now at Windsor have always been a defined group, even while they were bound as a book. There may have been more additions



Figure 5: the Standon memorial

and subtractions than has often been assumed'. All in all, the lack of an identification for Parker 33 could be explained by a number of circumstances.

### ***The Sadleir Memorial at Standon Church***

Sir Ralph Sadleir died at Standon Lordship in 1587, at the grand age of eighty. A substantial memorial in his honour was erected in the parish church by his son Thomas (who also has a memorial in the church). It shows a bearded, recumbent knight in armour. The face (*figure 5*), which is finely carved, has all the appearance of a real man rather than of a generalized effigy, and is perhaps based on a death mask. A comparison between this and Parker 33 is very compelling, despite the 50 years' difference in age. The features, such as the broad nose and the high cheekbones, are present in both, although, as would be expected, the flesh has shrunk somewhat.

### ***Sadleir kneeling before Edward VI, 1547***

The only other image known of the first Sir Ralph Sadleir is to be found in the Bristol Record Office. Sadleir was granted, by Edward, a large package of former monastic land in Gloucestershire. The illuminated letters patent show Sadleir kneeling in front of an enthroned Edward VI as he is presented with the deeds. Although it is little more than a caricature, Sadleir is shown, in profile, with a reddish beard and a flattened nose!<sup>20</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Perhaps we shall never know for certain if Holbein's 'Parker 33, an unidentified gentleman' is in fact Sir Ralph Sadleir of Hackney; but if some day the experts agree to add 'probably Sir Ralph Sadleir' to the catalogue description, it will be very gratifying, particularly to the writer of this article! The further possibility, that his grandson was painted by a court artist of a later generation, whether Gheeraerts or Mytens, adds another historic layer to the mystery surrounding the Sadleir family portraits.

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### Notes

1. Mary Beale, 1632-1699, is considered to be the first female professional portrait painter and was associated with Sir Peter Lely. An exhibition of her work was presented at the Geffrye Museum in early 2000. the two portraits at Sutton House are no loan from Mr Randal Sadleir. There is a portrait, attributed to the school of Lely, of a Lady Anna Sadleir in a private collection in Devon, but it is uncertain where she fits into the family tree.
2. On loan to the National Trust from Mr Harry Sadleir.
3. Undertaken by Vistor Belcher and Mike Gray, for a forthcoming monograph (see page 59).
4. For example, miniatures were painted of Nicholas de Ste. Croix and Sarah his wife, occupiers of Ivy House (the east wing of Sutton House) at the turn of the 18th century. Charles Pulley, Hackney vestry clerk, who lived in the same house in the 19th century, also had his portrait painted. If these portraits have survived, they have not been located.
5. PRO SP 1/66 fo. 47. Henry Sadleir to Thomas Cromwell 11 July 1521, originally given in the calendar as 11 July 1531 (but see Slavin, op.cit., note 12 below).
6. The evidence for this date will be given in the forthcoming monograph on the history of Sutton House.
7. The inventory is printed in Chauncey, *The antiquities of Hertfordshire* I. 419. This portrait can currently be seen in the National Portrait Gallery (Ondaatje wing).
8. In the National Gallery of South Australia.
9. Daniel Mytens circa 1590-1647. See R. Strong, *The Elizabethan image: painting in England 1540-1620* (1969).
10. Reproduced in B. Worden (ed.). *Stuart England* (1986).
11. Information from David Napier of the National Trust, who viewed the original Painting in Suffolk (letter to William Sadlier, 13th November 1991).
12. See A. J. Slavin, *Politics and profit; a study of Sir Ralph Saler 1507-1547* (Cambridge, 1966). a copy may be consulted at Sutton Huose.
13. Private letter, 23 March 1994, Malcolm Rogers, National Portrait Gallery to Lissa Chapman, Sutton House.
14. Private letter, 2nd June 1993, the Hon. Mrs. roberts to Mike Gray, Sutton House.
15. Holbein's original drawing of Cecily Heron is reproduced in J. Roberts, *Holbein*, 1979.
16. See J. Roberts, *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII* (National Galleries of Scotland, 1993) which includes a fine reproduction of Parker 33.
17. Dr David Starkey, private letter to Margaret Welles, National Trust, 5th march 1992.
18. The Hon. Mrs Roberts private letter to Liz Eccleshare, Sutton House, 19th March 1993.
19. 1983.
20. Bristol Record Office, ac/as/1/2.