



Portrait of a Falconer by James Giles

This portrait of John Pells first came to light, for me, in a simple internet search for “falconer” and whilst I was keen to find out more, I did not follow it up for a few years. It was not until I joined the British National Trust, which preserves a number of historic houses and areas of natural beauty, that I had an opportunity to visit the property where the original is held: Upton House, near Banbury in Oxfordshire. The house was formerly home to Lord Bearsted, then Chairman of the Anglo-Dutch Shell company, who was a keen art collector.

The portrait was fascinating since it was clearly from the early nineteenth century and depicted the conventional falconer’s green coat along with a number of falcons and items of equipment, notably a traditionally styled hawking bag and lure. Unfortunately, the information alongside the portrait did not shed much more light on the falconer depicted other than the artist’s name. I asked Roger Upton whether he knew anything about it, and he suggested it was almost certainly of John Pells. A little more research revealed the following in Salvin and Brodrick’s *Falconry in the British Isles* (1855), describing Pells himself and confirming Roger’s theory:

This excellent Falconer was born at Valkenswaard, about A.D. 1778. When a boy of eleven he went to assist the Falconers of the Landgrave of Hesse Cassel, who was then the greatest Falconer upon the continent. There were always some Jer Falcons [sic] in this establishment, and it was there that Pells made himself so well acquainted with the nature and treatment of this noble Falcon. Pells came to England about 1800, and for many years he was principally with John Hall, Esq., of Weston Colville, Cambridgeshire, during the game season, and with Colonel Wilson in the spring for the Heron Hawking. He was also in the service of J. Downes, Esq., of Old Gunton Hall, Suffolk. Afterwards he was engaged by the Duke of Leeds, and in 1832 by the Duke of St. Albans. He died in 1838, and was succeeded by his son John, who is at present the Duke of St. Albans’ Falconer. His Grace the Duke of Leeds has an oil painting by Giles of Aberdeen, in which Pells is represented feeding the Duke’s favourite Tiercel “the General.”

Napoleon the First presented this Falconer with a rich Falconer’s bag, which is now in the possession of the Duke of Leeds.

(Capt. F.H. Salvin and W. Broderick (1855) *Falconry in the British Isles*. London: Van Voorst, p.5)

It was quite amazing to see the portrait thus described. I had, of course, read the book on several occasions, but it never occurred to me on first seeing the portrait to look there. It seems likely that Lord Bearsted acquired the painting from the Duke of Leeds’ estate, though sadly the whereabouts of the bag remains a mystery. It might be interesting to chase this up further in case there are details of the sale: Napoleon’s hawking bag would be quite a find! Another contemporary image, somewhat cartoon like in nature, that shows Pells with his employer John Dawson Downes, and fellow Dutch

falconer Jan Daems, has recently come to light and, by coincidence, I have since seen the same image inked onto the leather binding of a copy of Latham's *Falconry* that was once owned by Downes. This image, in private hands, is depicted in *The Hamond Letters*, transcribed by Paul Beecroft and dealing with the English falconer who moved to Valkenswaard where he helped to set up the cigar-making industry.

Pells' son John went on to work with some of the most significant names in Victorian British falconry, and passed on his knowledge to gentleman amateurs who in turn instructed others of the early 20th century, a continuity of practice which has transmitted traditional skills to the present. This portrait of John Pells senior therefore represents a significant item in Britain's falconry heritage. However, it was only through chance that I discovered that there was no existing portrait of this notable falconer in his home town.

Having passed on details of the image to Jac Van Gerven, I also prepared a little information on Pells, outlining the basics of falconry, passage hawks and so on, for the benefit of the National Trust. It seemed a shame that the casual visitor to Upton House did not have this information, and a great opportunity to bring falconry heritage – and its international fellowship – to a wider audience, explaining the importance of Valkenswaard to British falconry. It was also quite fun to be able to name the individual hawk on Pells' fist, based on Salvin and Brodrick's information.

I later came to visit Valkenswaard's falconry museum with Belgian falconer Patrick Morel. We had a hectic schedule and Jac very kindly opened up the museum especially for Patrick, my then wife and I to visit. Whilst there, Jac showed us the various portraits of the falconers who came from the town, many of whom were depicted in the livery of the Royal Loo Hawking Club. He mentioned that Pells was the only falconer for whom the museum had no image, and so we agreed to contact the National Trust with a view to obtaining permission to display a copy of the portrait.

It was thus with great delight that I heard from Jac that his endeavours had been successful and that he had been given permission to display a copy of the portrait in his museum, dedicated to the sport which brought Valkenswaard such renown and prosperity. Given Pells' significance to both British and Dutch falconry, it seems fitting that a modern day co-operative venture has brought his portrait home to be shown alongside those of his fellow falconers.