

## Sir Thomas Lane of Bentley



This portrait of Sir Thomas Lane carrying a hooded peregrine is in the National Trust's collection, along with memorabilia recalling a significant part of British history, at Moseley Old Hall, near Wolverhampton.

The Lanes, who lived at Bentley near Walsall in the West Midlands, were a family with an interesting falconry and general history linked to the English Civil War. After the Battle of Worcester (1651) the Prince of Wales (later Charles II) was a wanted fugitive, hiding at the homes of his supporters. He famously hid in an oak tree at Boscobel House (hence pubs

called *The Royal Oak* all over the UK) and stayed at Moseley Old Hall, both near Wolverhampton.

From Moseley, Charles went to the home of Colonel John Lane (Thomas' father) at Bentley, leaving there disguised as a servant to Lane's sister, Jane. Colonel Lane and Lord Wilmott travelled ahead, carrying their hawks and looking out for enemy troops: if stopped their intention was to say they were hawking and buy Jane and the future king time to avoid the troops. They eventually arrived at Bristol, the prince leaving for France where he stayed in exile until the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660.

Little remains of the Lanes' home now but a cairn on the Bentley Estate: a housing, as opposed to a sporting, estate. It seems the most inauspicious location for hawking with peregrines today – less than a mile, as the hawk flies, from Junction 10 of the M6, said to be the busiest stretch of motorway in Europe, and a concrete jungle. However, in Lane's day it was open heathland which survived until the mining industry began to take a grip in the Industrial Revolution. The nearby Jane Lane school, and an area called Lane Head nearby, recall the family. Descendants, perhaps, of the peregrines flown by

the Lanes are often seen nearby: working in the local town, I once stepped in front of a car watching a young tiercel gaining height on a thermal!

There is, however, a little more to be seen at Moseley Old Hall which is a few miles further north and just off Junction 1 of the M54. Having visited the property many years ago, I'd forgotten the hawking connection and was surprised to see an engraving, dating from fairly soon after the event, on display in the property. Unfortunately, I've never managed to trace its origin or found a copy online as it is an interesting piece of falconry heritage, showing John Lane and Wilmott with hawk as well as the prince and Jane Lane.

On concluding the tour, late on a winter's evening, it was dark and, in the last room, I had a feeling a very dark portrait in the background. We couldn't get too close to it: they were closing and pressuring visitors to buy raffle tickets, but I had a strong feeling it showed a hooded hawk. I eventually convinced myself it was wishful thinking: it really was too dark to see. Years later, finding this image online, I made some enquiries to find that my eyes hadn't been deceiving me and made arrangements to see it: all that time it was only a few miles from home!

It is in need of a good clean (the image here is much brighter) but the artwork is very good indeed and the lure interesting – it is of the same ornamental type we see in other portraits, notably that identified as Sir Thomas Monson. The peregrine is approximately life sized and rendered effectively, with accurate depictions of furniture and a nice hood. Given the relatively late period – an era in which falconry, it is believed, had started its decline in popularity – this is quite an unusual portrait. Does it merely relate to the family's links to the sport, one wonders, and was it intended to show both this and Lane's status, or did he actually fly hawks at a time when others had given up the sport, as we are led to believe? The lure looks archaic and impractical and could have been taken from other examples in art (witness later paintings based on Renaissance originals showing the sitter as a falconer) but yet the hawk is compelling – it feels right, as if painted from life. Was Lane, perhaps, one of the few who preserved our heritage for future generations?