

Notes on Portrait of
Sir Thomas Lane with Falcon (c.1680)



Prepared on behalf of The National Trust & Moseley Old Hall

by

THE BRITISH ARCHIVES OF FALCONRY

This portrait of Sir Thomas Lane with a trained falcon is interesting since the sport of falconry links closely to the Lanes and their role in Charles' escape after he left Moseley Old Hall. It is significant for this historical link alone, but the wider status of falconry before and during Lane's lifetime and the equipment he is shown with are also worthy of note. Falconry had already been practiced for around 1000 years in Britain by the time this was painted. It therefore carried great significance in cultural terms and had evolved its own specific terminology and equipment.

The Portrait:

Son of Colonel John Lane, Thomas Lane, was born c.1638, married Abigail Whitwick in 1667 and died in 1715. Little else is known about him, but he received an annual sum of £500 from Charles II in recognition of his father's service, whilst Thomas' aunt Jane received £1000 per annum. However, the family wealth appears to have been diminished and the family sold Bentley Hall in 1740, moving to King's Bromley. "*Jones' Views of the Seats, Mansions, Castles, Etc. of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England*" (1829) contains a list of family portraits and attributes this portrait to Sir Godfrey Kneller, who painted such luminaries as Samuel Pepys and the Duke of Marlborough. The portrait certainly bears strong similarities to the artist's other work.

The falcon depicted is an adult female peregrine and wears a typical "Dutch" hood. Hoods such as these were made and imported from Valkenswaard, in the Netherlands, up until just before the outbreak of World War II. In Lane's day, before captive breeding of falcons was practiced, falcons were often trapped on their first migration as "passagers" or as mature "haggards." Whilst they would prove better hunting partners than inexperienced fledglings ("eyasses") they were naturally wary of humans and thus needed to learn to accept the potentially alarming sights and sounds of the human world. The hood allowed the falconer to gradually get the falcon used to the sounds of horses, for example, before letting her see them close at hand. Food rewards used in conjunction with this would persuade her that such sights and sounds were no threat. Eventually, she would accept being flown from horseback.

A falcon might also become excited if she saw another flying before it was her turn to fly. Hooding therefore helps to reserve her composure and energy until the appropriate moment. The woollen plume visible in the portrait, used to hold the hood whilst putting it on and taking it off, gave rise to the phrase "pull the wool over the eyes" since it hid what the falcon was curious to see or masked some potentially unsettling sight which the falconer would prefer to spare her. To "hoodwink" has similar origins.



Photos: Mark Upton/British Archives of Falconry



Left/centre: Traditional Dutch hoods as made by members of the Mollen family of Valkenswaard for over a century until just before World War II. The design remained the same for centuries: identical hoods appear in portraits a century older than Lane's.

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Right: Building on the heritage of traditional hoodmakers, in recent years American craftsmen have led the way in improving hoods. Retaining the traditional contrasting side panels, though in snakeskin rather than baize-covered leather, this example by leading innovator Doug Pineo, is significantly lighter and more comfortable for the falcon than the old ones.

elaborately decorated lure. Most people today are familiar with falcons flown in demonstrations to such an object although this is not technically falconry, which is the art of hunting with a trained hawk or falcon. The lure's principal use is to recall a falcon that has been outflown by her quarry. This was vital since a fit falcon might easily cover a mile or more in pursuit of high-flying quarry: if unsuccessful she might seek another opportunity which could be further still from the falconer. In the absence of modern radio-tracking techniques, in the 17th century a falcon which went out of sight was very often a falcon which reverted back to the wild. The bells, visible on Lane's falcon's legs, might give an auditory clue to her whereabouts, and sometimes the behaviour of other birds such as crows, which will mob a hawk, could help with retrieval but this largely depended on being able to keep up with a falcon flying at speed. Consequently, many falcons were effectively borrowed from nature for a season or two before going back to ensure a viable stock of strong, fit falcons to breed. To at least delay this, if not pre-empting it completely, the lure would attract the falcon back for a reward from a distance and so had to be as "alluring" as possible. Lane's example here is certainly eye-catching, though seems a little ornate for everyday use. Similar examples are seen in German portraits of the 18th century Elector Clemens August and his falconers, matching their stately blue livery with silver embroidery. More workaday lures would be plain leather, albeit perhaps with some red or brightly coloured tassels to attract attention, and were often garnished with the wings of either the wanted quarry species or a similarly-sized species.

Falconry had developed great symbolic significance from the later Middle Ages onwards and, by James I's reign, was as much enshrined in society as football or cricket are today. Consequently, the works of playwrights and poets such as Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell and Jonson are scattered with references to falconry. Indeed, these references helped to popularise the sport, especially with peregrines as depicted here, in this era. Many members of the rising middle classes were influenced by literary and wider cultural symbolism to become involved with falconry – less, perhaps, for any love of the sport but more for its social cachet and the ease of association with the higher social orders it brought. Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* (1601) describes how a man unable to correctly use hunting and hawking terminology was socially excluded since they were "more studied than the Greek and Latin. He is for no gallant's company without them."

The 17th century was very much the Golden Age of British falconry. It saw titles on the sport being published by experienced falconers such as Symon Latham and Edmund Bert, whilst earlier manuscripts and printed works had largely copied what went before. It also saw the introduction of new methods of hawking, for instance flying falcons over trained pointing or setting dogs which seems to have been introduced to James I's court by a French Baron in 1624. Royal patronage by James, who ultimately died after hawking in ill health against his doctor's advice and becoming chilled, helped to boost its popularity and his falconry establishment, organised along military lines, was of great magnitude. James appointed Masters of the Hawks, under which were Serjeants of the Hawks and then falconers and under-falconers. He kept falcons and hawks for every imaginable form of falconry and despite acknowledging that falconry was "an extreme stirrer-up of passions" passed his love of the sport on to his son Charles.

Charles' falconry was inevitably curtailed by political strife but the Civil Wars yield some interesting anecdotes about the sport. Charles once recalled seeing a covey of partridge, uncharacteristically, attacking a hawk and saw this, with hindsight, as an omen of the Civil Wars. Despite the popular image of the aristocratic Cavalier and the dour Roundhead, gentlemen on both sides were passionate about hawking. Sir Samuel Luke, a Parliamentarian General, kept his hawks in work during the conflict by providing pheasant and other game for the table at a time when powder and shot was being put to more martial use. He also faced an interesting dilemma when a raiding party he sent to Kidlington, Oxfordshire, captured a number of Royalists. These included the Prince of Wales' falconer and a young falcon described as one of the highest flying falcons ever seen. Luke was torn between his desire to keep the falcon, though he knew providing for falcon and falconer would be a struggle, and his inner voice to do the right thing and return her to the son of the King he fought against. Eventually, seeking advice from his Parliamentary superior the Earl of Essex (another keen falconer) he returned both falconer and falcon under a white flag of truce to a Royalist garrison: truly a civil war.

Cromwell was another devotee. He befriended a former enemy, Sir James Long, after meeting him whilst hawking on Hounslow Heath. Their shared love of sport led to Cromwell inviting Long to wear his sword again and to go hawking with him. Cromwell is also known to have celebrated his victory at Worcester by hawking with friends. The most significant falconry link, however, must be that which relates to Charles' sojourn at Moseley after his defeat at the same battle. After leaving Moseley, Charles stayed with Colonel John Lane at Bentley. On leaving, famously riding pillion with Jane Lane whilst disguised as a servant, Col. Lane and Lord Wilmott disguised themselves as a hawking party and rode ahead and around of the party, their hawking giving an excuse to be ranging about. Ostensibly in pursuit of partridge, the quarry they sought to find was Parliamentarian scouts looking for the fugitive Charles.

This portrait of Colonel Lane's son Thomas is especially interesting since it depicts a gentleman with a falcon just at the time when falconry started to fall out of favour. As we have seen, this was not, as popularly supposed, due to opposition from a Puritan regime but rather due to a combination of different factors. The development of sporting shooting and agricultural changes, coupled to the dilution of wealth on the part of former Royalist landowners after the Civil War, led to a loss in falconry's popularity. The kind of flights which had been popular, requiring great areas of marshy, uncultivated and unenclosed land, were less practical now and it is likely that the "social climber" element, which annoyed many practical falconers of the day, would have no longer sought association with a sport so intimately linked to the Stuarts immediately after the Wars.

Was Lane an active participant in falconry, or was this perhaps a more symbolic portrait, the falcon representing his noble status and perhaps linking to his father's part in helping Charles escape? Whilst many early 17th century gentlemen had their portraits painted with falcons, this certainly seems an old-fashioned image in Restoration society. Indeed, Charles II himself greatly downsized the royal hawking establishment, having more interest in racing and, after his reign, there was little royal involvement with falconry. The peregrine is an iconic falconry species – indeed the term "falcon" originally meant the female peregrine and no other hawk – yet requires a great deal of open space to be flown effectively. Certainly the local countryside is too enclosed today to fly peregrines with any success, though the land around Lane's estate at Bentley, subsequently mined and now urbanised, was originally heathland so may have been more suited to flying falcons at quarry. Lane's lure seems a ceremonial rather than a practical one, though there can be little doubt that the artist painted the falcon from life as the detail is so accurate. It is hard to tell with the ageing on the canvas but there is a suggestion of brown paint amongst the slate grey of the falcon's wings, giving an impression of a falcon in her transition to full mature plumage. For all this, it would be hard to establish the sitter's level of active participation in the

sport. We can merely conclude that it meant enough to him to have chosen to be portrayed as a falconer in an era when falconry was declining in mass popularity.

Images of contemporary falconry, engraved by Wenceslas Hollar, from Francis Barlow's *Severall Wayes of Hunting, Hawking and Fishing, According to the English Manner* (1671)



Partridge hawking could be carried out with falcons or goshawks and, whilst it seems a falcon is intended here, in reality she would be at a disadvantage in such heavily wooded country. A goshawk would be slower but better able to follow the partridge in cover here.

Some 60 years earlier, French falconers had introduced a much more spectacular form of partridge hawking using falcons trained to climb and "wait on" above setting dogs – later pointers. It seems this method, though aesthetically superior, was slow to catch on. However, it allows the falconer to see the falcon's breathtaking vertical stoop, attaining immense speeds, and eventually developed into modern gamehawking. In more recent years falconers developed this style of flight to hawk red grouse, which became the premier form of falconry when the old high flights at heron became less possible due to agricultural improvements and the loss of suitable countryside.

The method shown here, by contrast, employed small packs of spaniels to find and flush partridge and flying the hawk from the fist. It would have been more effective at putting partridge on the table but did not allow a falcon, as distinct from a hawk, to show her full potential on the first flight. Compare this to the image which shows Charles and Jane Lane, with Col.



The aim of heron hawking was to achieve a high “ringing” flight rather than to kill the heron. The heron was capable of climbing much faster, with little effort, than the falcons. The falcons would have to work hard to get above it, when their superior speed could be used. This resulted in a contest amid the clouds which could cover great distances and necessitated fast horses to keep up. If the falcons succeeded in bringing the heron to earth, it would frequently be only dazed and would later be released.

In later years falconers would ring herons with a light copper band engraved with the date and location they were taken and released. This enabled naturalists to find out more about the heron’s lifestyle and longevity – one was caught three times over nine years at Didlington, Norfolk, in the early nineteenth century. Heron hawking was considered the most dramatic form of falconry, inspiring Shakespeare and other poets, but even by Lane’s day was becoming harder to pursue due to loss of suitable country in which both heron could be found and the flights followed on horseback. Drainage of wetlands coupled with land enclosure meant that, by the 1850s, British falconers had given up but, for a short period, formed the Royal Loo Hawking Club at Het Loo in the Netherlands where conditions were more suitable. Older readers might recall the silver knight sculpture on Anglia TV productions – this was in fact a trophy for horse races organised by the Royal Loo Hawking Club during the hawking season!

You may see the falconers’ lures in this image, carried looped around the shoulder in the traditional manner as in Lane’s portrait. These are more practical versions, perhaps garnished with pigeon or mallard wings.



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