
A Gainsborough Sitter Identified: John Hobart, 2nd Earl of Buckinghamshire

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Katharine Baetjer's exemplary catalogue of British paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art has brought together much new information about the collection. Perhaps the most fruitful use of any catalogue is that it brings more information to light and encourages discussion. The sitter in one portrait by Thomas Gainsborough, described in the catalogue simply as a *Portrait of a Man* (Figure 1), can now be positively identified.¹ It is a likeness, dating from about 1784, of John Hobart, 2nd Earl of Buckinghamshire (1723–1793).²

At the age of thirty-three John Hobart succeeded his father as Earl of Buckinghamshire. His great-great-great-grandfather Sir Henry Hobart, 1st Baronet (ca. 1560–1625), Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, had purchased the estate at Blickling in Norfolk in 1616 and built a house, now in the care of the National Trust, that is one of the preeminent examples of Jacobean architecture in Britain. For use in the middle of the eighteenth century, however, it required some judicious remodeling, which Buckinghamshire's father began and which Buckinghamshire continued.

On July 14, 1761, Lord Buckinghamshire married Mary Anne Drury, who brought with her a fortune of £50,000, a sum that enabled him to continue his improvements to the property.³ With the help of the Norwich architect and builder Thomas Ivory, the main staircase was resited in the Jacobean great hall and several other rooms were improved and updated. Only a small amount of Buckinghamshire's time could have been spent on the estate, as he had a full-time career as a courtier and diplomat.

Through the influence of his father, Buckinghamshire was Comptroller of the Household in the 1750s, he was appointed a Privy Councillor in 1756 at a remarkably young

age, and, unusually, he became Lord of the Bedchamber to both King George II and King George III. His patrician manner made a diplomatic position an obvious choice, and in 1762 he was appointed envoy to Saint Petersburg, a post he fulfilled with distinction for three years. When he was recalled he was given a tapestry by Empress Catherine showing Peter the Great triumphing over the defeated Swedish army at the battle of Poltava in 1709. The tapestry copies one dated 1722 that is in the Hermitage, though the Blickling version has added borders and is better preserved. Its size, approximately 12 by 16 feet, provided distinct challenges, even for a house as large as Blickling Hall.

Lady Buckinghamshire died late in 1769, and nine months later Buckinghamshire remarried. His new bride, Caroline Conolly, "a young lady of blooming fifteen,"⁴ was the sister of Thomas Conolly (1738–1803), the richest commoner in Ireland and a prominent parliamentarian in Dublin. Buckinghamshire was sworn into office as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland on January 25, 1777. This proved to be an inappropriate appointment, for he found it impossible to balance familial loyalty and his position. Afterward, he described himself as "a man whose mind has been lacerated with a variety of embarrassments for thirty weary months."⁵ He was happy to return to Norfolk in 1780, and during the next decade, although plagued by gout, he directed his energies toward the management of his estates. He died on September 3, 1793, and is buried in a mausoleum on the estate.⁶

Buckinghamshire's three sons had died in infancy in 1775, 1776, and 1778, so at his death the title passed to his half-brother, George. The estate, however, was bequeathed to his daughter Caroline, Lady Suffield, and she in turn bequeathed it to her great-nephew William, 8th Marquess of Lothian. The break from an entailed direct inheritance—Blickling had passed from Hobart father to Hobart son for nearly two hundred years—weighed heavily on Buckinghamshire's



1. Thomas Gainsborough (British, 1727–1788). *John Hobart, 2nd Earl of Buckinghamshire*, ca. 1784. Oil on canvas, 29½ x 24¾ in. (74.9 x 62.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Lillian S. Timken, 1959 (60.71.7)



2. The Peter the Great Room, Blickling Hall, Norfolk, “hung with pink sattin, the ceiling stucco, richly but lightly ornamented, with that in the middle . . . stained with a delicate pink, which has a good effect, and harmonises with the other parts of the room” (Bartell 1806, p. 101). Gainsborough’s portrait of Buckinghamshire at Blickling Hall (Figure 3) is one of the few Gainsborough portraits that are still hanging in the position for which they were commissioned. Photograph: ©NTPL/Nadia Mackenzie



3. Thomas Gainsborough. *John Hobart, 2nd Earl of Buckinghamshire*, 1784. Oil on canvas, 91 x 57 1/8 in. (231 x 145 cm). Blickling Hall, The Lothian Collection (National Trust). Photograph: ©NTPL/John Hammond

mind, and as a consequence he was anxious to leave his mark on the house and to record his distinguished career.⁷

In 1778, the same year that his last son, George, died at age eighteen months, Buckinghamshire engaged the architect James Wyatt to design a room at the back of the house, sited in the center of the north front. The dimensions of the room, “forty-two feet by twenty-five feet, and twenty-two feet in height,” were determined by the huge Peter the Great tapestry.⁸ Buckinghamshire engaged the sculptor John Ivory to carve a chimneypiece in white and Sienna marble at a cost of £105.⁹ John Ivory’s cousin William, son of the Thomas Ivory who had worked on the house in the 1760s, also designed the ceiling decoration, which was executed by William Wilkins.¹⁰ By 1782 the building works were advanced enough for Buckinghamshire to commission Solomon Hudson to supply frames and mirrors, at a total cost of £406.6s.6d, for the new room and the adjacent State

Bedroom, which was being remodeled at the same time.¹¹ An equestrian portrait of George II of 1732 by John Wootton and Charles Jervas, which had been commissioned by the first Lord Buckinghamshire as the centerpiece for a group of full-length portraits, was moved from the long gallery to the east wall. The room (Figure 2) thus marked both the earl’s ambassadorial post in Russia and his position at the court of George II. A portrait by Gainsborough (Figure 3) illustrated his association with Ireland.¹²

At the same time he was commissioning frames from Hudson, Buckinghamshire approached Gainsborough to provide full-length portraits of himself and his second wife. Gainsborough took some time to complete the commission, and the pair of portraits were finished only in May 1784, when they were to be exhibited at the Royal Academy.¹³ That year Gainsborough famously withdrew his exhibits and instead chose to show them in his own studio at Schomberg

House in Pall Mall. The newspaper critic the Reverend Sir Henry Bate-Dudley, who had the opportunity to see them there, called the painting of Lady Buckinghamshire “an admirable portrait, in which her ladyship has called forth all the powers of *Mr. Gainsborough*.” He continued: “His Lordship is represented in his *Regal Portrait Robes*, as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The likeness is strong. The drapery is finished in a rich stile, and well disposed.”¹⁴ Buckinghamshire is shown in a brilliant blue suit of ribbed silk embroidered with floral sprigs along the edge of the waistcoat. The gold-embroidered red velvet and ermine cloak of the Lieutenancy is draped around his shoulders.

At the time he placed the commission for the paintings of himself and his wife, Buckinghamshire also ordered a less elaborate three-quarter-length portrait of himself in the same ceremonial dress (though there are differences in the embroidery of the costume) and another, smaller head-and-shoulders version—the portrait now in the Metropolitan—in which he wears a very different costume. All three portraits show the sitter’s head in the same position; they must have been painted at the same time and produced from the same sittings.

The three-quarter-length portrait, which may have been intended to hang in Buckinghamshire’s London house, descended in his family.¹⁵ The early provenance of the head-and-shoulders version is not known, however. The canvas was first recorded in 1894, when it was in the collection of Sir Joseph Benjamin Robinson, 1st Baronet (1840–1929).¹⁶ In 1923 Robinson sent his collection for sale, but the day before the auction at Christie’s he increased the reserve on each lot to ensure that few sold.¹⁷ The portrait was described in the sale catalogue as “General Bligh,” and despite the high reserve, it was bought by the dealer M. Knoedler & Co., who shipped it to New York and included it in an exhibition later that year. In the exhibition catalogue it was described as a portrait of “General Thomas Bligh (1685–1775).”¹⁸ Stylistically the Gainsborough portrait cannot be as early as 1775, and besides, it shows a sprightly man in his sixties, not a man twenty years older.¹⁹ To emphasize the point, a

portrait of General Bligh painted in about 1730 by the Irish artist James Latham shows a sitter with very different features.²⁰ Nonetheless, the attachment of the name Bligh to the Gainsborough portrait may be significant. Bligh is an Irish name, and this may hint at an early Irish provenance.

The assumption that the sitter was associated with the army or, given the blue color of his coat, the navy, is an indication that the costume he is wearing is at best unusual. The dark blue coat lined in red has a complex and eccentric arrangement down the front of gold braiding forming panels that are buttoned back at the collar. The colors are those of the Windsor Uniform, a costume designed for the court of George III and its servants in about 1780. The design of the costume was not uniform at all, however, but subject to much variety. No doubt in its early days its use was cavalier, and the intention was to give the wearer a certain panache.²¹ There is perhaps one further hint. In a list of “Amusements of Men of Fashion” published in *The Morning Herald* on August 6, 1782, Buckinghamshire is described as taking a “principal delight in . . . an old coat.”²² Judging from the characteristics listed for the other peers, this seems to have been a genuine preference and perhaps shows a reaction to the opulence of the robes his state appointments forced him to wear. In any case, although the significance of such an eccentric coat has been lost, the identification of the sitter is no longer in doubt.

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David Tyler, in one of our frequent and fruitful discussions, first mentioned the relationship between the canvas in the Metropolitan Museum and the portrait of Buckinghamshire, and I am most grateful to him. Jan Brookes, the property manager at Blickling, and Bunty Gotts gave me every facility to look at the Buckinghamshire portraits in their care, and I should also like to thank Katharine Baetjer for kindly suggesting that I write this note.

NOTES

1. Baetjer 2009, pp. 95–96, no. 41. I am currently writing a catalogue raisonné of Gainsborough's portraits with the support of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London. I was curator of Gainsborough's House, the artist's birthplace museum in Sudbury, Suffolk, for twenty-three years.
2. Buckinghamshire's biography is given in Kelly 2008 and in Cockayne 1910–59, vol. 2, pp. 401–2.
3. Maddison 1991. After her death the sale of the first Lady Buckinghamshire's jewelry helped Buckinghamshire finance the improvements to Blickling.
4. Quoted in Cockayne 1910–59, vol. 2, p. 402.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The severe pyramidal mausoleum by the Neoclassical architect Joseph Bonomi was commissioned by Buckinghamshire's daughter, Lady Suffield (see Bowdler 1998).
7. Bowdler (*ibid.*, p. 11) gives the same reasons for the commission of Bonomi's mausoleum.
8. Bartell 1806, p. 101.
9. Roscoe, Hardy, and Sullivan 2009, pp. 658–59.
10. For the architects Thomas and William Ivory, father and son, see Colvin 2008, pp. 558–60.
11. John Maddison in National Trust 1987, revised by Oliver Garnett in National Trust 1998, p. 26.
12. The contents of the room are described in an inventory made after the earl's death (Norfolk Record Office, MC 3/338 477 x 8) and in Bartell 1806, p. 101. See also Maddison and Cornforth 1988.
13. Gainsborough included a sketch of the eight portraits he intended to show in the exhibition in a letter to the Hanging Committee in [April] 1784 (Hayes 2001, pp. 158–59, letter 96).
14. *Morning Herald*, July 26, 1784, p. 2.
15. The portrait descended to Peter, 12th Marquess of Lothian, and appeared in his sale: Christie's, London, October 19, 1951, lot 32. It was purchased from Newhouse Galleries, New York, by the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, in 1952 and deaccessioned and sold at Christie's, London, on November 16, 1990, lot 10, where it was purchased by Colnaghi, London. It was later bought by a private collector in the United States from Historical Portraits Ltd, London.
16. Stevenson 2002, pp. 36–61.
17. The sale took place at Christie's in London on July 6, 1923. The painting in the Metropolitan Museum was lot 8, and it sold to Knoedler's for £3,255.
18. Knoedler 1923, no. 16.
19. Ellis Waterhouse (1958, p. 55) was "very doubtful" about the identification, as the sitter was "not of great age."
20. Crookshank and The Knight of Glin 1978, pp. 38, 42, colorpl. 7.
21. I am grateful to both Deirdre Murphy of the Court Dress Collection at Kensington Palace, London, and Andrew Cormack, editor of the *Journal for Army Historical Research*, for confirming that the costume is not naval. Cormack suggested it has some association with the Windsor Uniform, and further elaborations are my own. Alex Ward, assistant keeper, Art and Industrial Division, National Museum of Ireland, and her colleagues are unaware of any similar costumes associated with the Lord Lieutenancy.
22. Quoted in Cockayne 1910–59, vol. 1, p. 496.

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