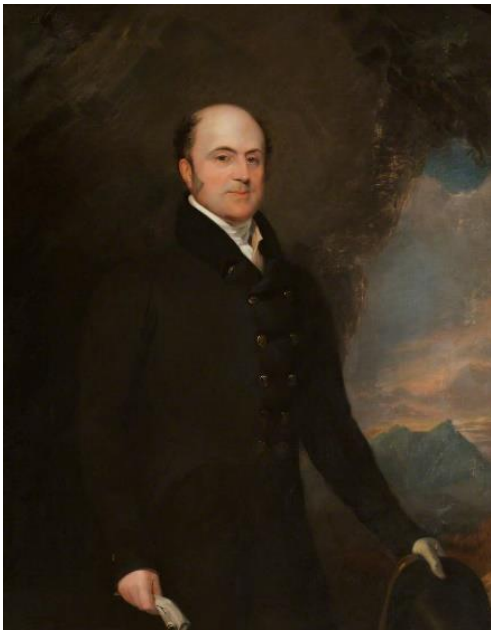


Who Painted Thomas Wood and the Riddle of the Hat?



Thomas Wood, Artist Unknown
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum and Art
Gallery

William Gibbs

Hanging in the Court Room of the former Shire Hall in Brecon (now y Gaer, home of the Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery) is this portrait of Colonel Thomas Wood of Gwernyfed. He was MP for Brecknockshire for over 40 years between 1806 and 1847 and in 1809 he was also the High Sheriff of Brecknock. The artist is given as "Artist Unknown". This article describes the search to identify the artist who painted it and why.

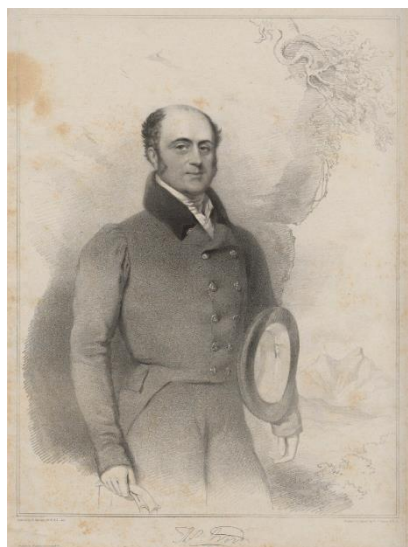
My search was prompted by the discovery of a fascinating letter in *The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian* for 22nd February 1834. It describes a visit to Brecon which included the Priory House, St Mary's and John Evan

Thomas' Studio by an unknown writer, an art enthusiast, who signs himself as Palomino (I have not been able to discover who hides behind this alias). The letter contains details of pictures that Palomino has seen in the Priory House in Brecon, including a portrait of Thomas Wood which he describes as follows;

I cannot here close this very hasty communication without a reference to a capital picture, which I saw yesterday at the Priory, in Brecon. It is a three-quarter-length portrait of Thomas Wood, Esq. JP. for the county of Brecon...He is in a standing- posture, and the calm self possession of a gentleman is most successfully expressed. The face is nearly in a front view; the colouring mellow and warm, of a sanguine tint in the carnations and admirably united. The left-hand holds a manuscript, but not presenting it to view; the arm falls down at ease, the scroll is held, as if not at that moment, an object of his attention. His hat is under the other arm the inside of it being seen with a faint reflection on its lining. This fine portrait does honour to Hayter's pencil.

Now this description is a near perfect match for the picture of Thomas Wood in y Gaer and gave me the name of Hayter for the artist. Sir George Hayter was a celebrated 19th century portrait artist who despite an unconventional life was much favoured by Queen Victoria.

However there are two strange anomalies in the description. He has misread the glove held in one hand for a scroll and, more surprisingly, the hat held in the other hand is described by Palomino as being *under the arm*.



Thomas Ward

by Lane after Hayter , NPG

A suggestion from Andrew Renton, at that time Keeper of Art at NMW, led me to an engraving of *Thomas Ward* at the National Portrait Gallery. As you can see this is clearly mistitled and the engraving should be labelled *Thomas Wood*. The lithographer is Richard James Lane and to my delight , the hat is under the arm, just as Palomino described it!

So what was going on? The lithographer James Richard Lane was highly respected and became lithographer to Queen Victoria. He would never have made such changes.

Now like all the oil paintings in the y Gaer Collection , this portrait is on the Art Uk website which also runs an Art Detective page where queries can be posted. So intrigued by the riddle of the hat in February 2022 I put the evidence so far gathered on Art Detective. This produced a lively debate and much new information including an article in the Carmarthen Journal of January 13th 1832 which reported that *“a meeting of some of the most respectable gentlemen of the county of Brecon was held on Wednesday at the Castle Hotel for the purpose of entering into subscriptions to obtain a portrait of Colonel Wood the County Member in order that the same may be placed in some public room in the town of Brecon. We understand a large sum is subscribed”*.

Another contributor found this report in the Hereford Journal of April 4th 1832; *“Mr Hayter, RA has undertaken to paint the portrait of Colonel Wood , the Representative of the County .. We understand that Mr Hayter has also agreed to present each subscriber with a lithographic engraving of the picture”*.

The list of subscribers is listed in the paper and is headed by the Marquis of Camden and contains about 120 names subscribing one or two guineas each. The total subscribed is £206-17s .

Another contributor noted that there were relevant letters in the National Library of Wales and recently I visited the Library to transcribe them. Colonel Wood writes in 1832 to his agent Jones in Brecon; *My Dear Jones, I yesterday went to London and called on Hayter. The picture is now finished and will be dry enough in 10 days to set out for Brecon*. Wood adds that *It is in a very handsome frame which will cost another £20*. Wood makes arrangements for it to be taken by wagon to Brecon.

In another letter in 1832 Wood describes how he visited Mr Lane who has *made an admirable drawing of Hayters picture* and he arranges for 150 prints to *be sent to (Jones) in a case carefully packed at a cost of £35*. By contrast Hayter is paid £80 for the portrait in oils.

So there is compelling evidence that Wood sat for a portrait by Hayter, commissioned by his supporters and engraved by Lane and that this would have been the picture seen two years later by Palomino in The Priory House, owned then by the Marquis of Camden and used by his son-in-law Colonel Thomas Wood when in Brecon. Whether this is quite the “*public room*” his supporters had imagined we do not know.

What happened thereafter is now a mystery! In some curious way a picture of Wood with his hat under his arm has been transmuted into a picture with his hat in his hand.

Another “art detective” discovered that in 1846 while Colonel Wood was still MP for Breconshire there is mention of his portrait at a meeting of the magistrates held in the recently completed Shire Hall. Lloyd Watkins, Wood’s opponent at the polls, raises the subject of “*the valuable picture*” which Col Wood has presented to the county. Watkins declares that he “*felt pride in moving that this portrait be hung up in that room*” (Silurian, Saturday 24th Oct 1846).

It seems very likely that the portrait was of Colonel Wood and ‘*that room*’ to which Watkins referred was the Grand Jury Room of the Shire Hall. Certainly Poole in his 1886 history of Brecknockshire reported that a portrait of Colonel Wood hung there and that it was ‘*given by relatives*’. This must be the picture now in the Court Room.

To confuse the issue still further another “art detective” has found a report in the Brecon County Times of November 5th 1882 which states *“that affixed to one of the corridors in Gwern-y-fed mansion is a magnificent oil painting of the hon gentleman (Colonel Woods) which was presented to him by his constituents”*.

So there are still plenty of unanswered questions;

- Is the picture in y Gaer the one commissioned by his constituents or another one given by his family or even the copy “after” Sir George Hayter which another “art detective” finds is listed at St David’s School, Ashford, close to the Wood’s estate at Littleton and now untraced?
- How do the finances work out? The sum raised is £206-17s while the artists fee is £80, frame £20 and prints cost £35?.
- If the y Gaer portrait of Thomas Wood is the commissioned painting of 1832 when and why was it altered with the hat now in a gloved hand?

The debate on Art Detective also raised questions about another picture in y Gaer and you can read about this in my next article.

With thanks to Art Detectives Marcie Doran and Osmund Bullock, whose contributions you can see on the website

<https://www.artuk.org/artdetective/discussions/discussions/who-painted-thomas-wood-and-can-you-explain-the-riddle-of-the-hat>