

The mystery of Edmund Ashfield¹

NEIL JEFFARES



Ashfield, Duke of Lauderdale (Ham House)

Among British pastellists working in the seventeenth century, Edmund Ashfield occupies a special place, both for the beauty of his work and for his technical advances. He was the first to use pastel in a genuinely painterly way, and to divorce it from the practice of engraving. But despite much curiosity, details of his life have remained pitifully few. From one commentator we know he was a “gentleman well descended”; others tell us he was suspected of being a Catholic; one gives his address, at what is now 1 Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Of the œuvre itself, we have only a few dozen pastels, the dated examples all between 1669 and 1676. The DNB suggest that he was still working into the 1690s on the basis of a group of miniatures attributed to him. My updated [article](#) changes the position, and this blog provides a less formal account of how I arrived at my suggestions. For my sources etc. consult my [article](#) and [genealogy](#).

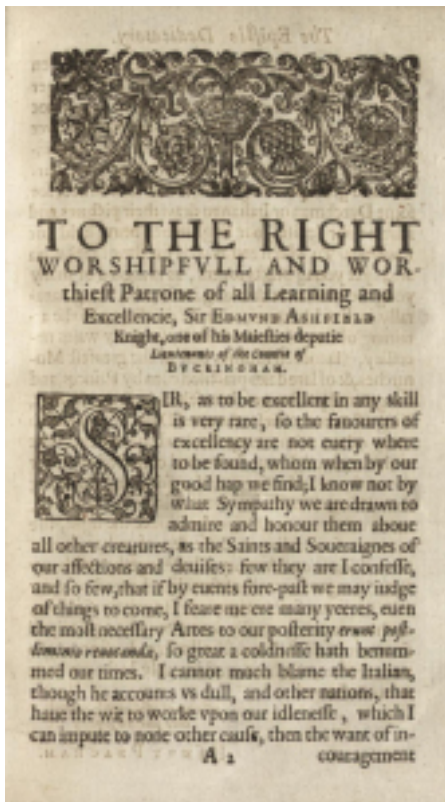
A couple of weeks ago I was browsing in the excellent database of Inner Temple admissions when I stumbled across another Edmund Ashfield, admitted in 1594. Obviously he couldn’t be the pastellist, but I wondered if there might be some connection. The story took me back to this Edmund’s uncle, Thomas Ashfield, bailiff to the Earl of Oxford who (perhaps because he hadn’t written the works of Shakespeare) was always short of money to support his wildly extravagant lifestyle. So in 1579 he was forced to borrow £1500 from his bailiff (and an associate called Alexander Hampden). Ashfield was astute enough to take land (at Chesham in Buckinghamshire) as security, and soon after took possession of the land.

¹ This essay first appeared as a post on my blog, neiljeffares.wordpress.com, on 26 September 2014. It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, “The mystery of Edmund Ashfield”, *Pastels & pastellists*, <http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Ashfield.pdf>.



Holborn Row in 1658 (now Lincoln's Inn Fields)

His nephew was Sir Edmond Ashfield of Chesham (1566–1616), who was educated at St Mary Hall, Oxford before his admission to the Inner Temple on 5 June 1594. A Catholic, he wrote to James VI of Scotland while Elizabeth was still on the throne, and he travelled to Scotland to advance his arguments in favour of James's succession to the English throne. The English ambassador to Scotland arranged to have him kidnapped and brought back to England, where he was imprisoned in the Tower of London and only restored to favour, and knighted, when James acceded.



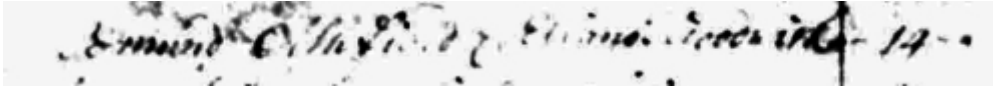
Sir Edmond was a cultured man and a patron of the arts. In 1612 Henry Peacham dedicated his treatise on drawing, *Graphice*, to him, noting Sir Edmond's support for scholarship and his hospitality at Chesham: he was "the worthiest patron of all learning and excellency...generally known to be a principal faviourer of all skill and scholarship". His children included Sir Thomas Ashfield, his heir, and "Hampden soonne of Sr Edmond Ashfield Knight & of the Ladie Clare his wife" who was baptised in Chesham 5 October 1606. This younger son was evidently named after his great-uncle's associate who appeared in Lord Oxford's 1579 debt recognisance. Hampden's name appears in the Royalist Composition Papers, listing those "delinquents" who took the part of Charles I in the Civil War, or who professed the Roman Catholic religion. Another document (1665) refers to "Hampden Ashfield and his brother Sir Thomas, a convict recusant". Sir Thomas's lands in Buckinghamshire being sequestered, he appealed to the Court of Exchequer, 1656, having taken the oath of abjuration. After the Restoration he again petitioned the House of Commons.

So this was exactly the sort of family to which the pastellist might have belonged. What clinched it for me was the discovery in the parish records of Little Missenden (very close to Chesham) of the birth, on Christmas Eve, 1640, to Hampden and Katharine Ashfield, of a son named Edmund. It would be impossible to hope for a better fit to the facts we have about the pastellist: and a wonder that no one had thought of it before. Although actually, armed with the answer (it is far easier to Google answers than questions), I was able to unearth one source in which an historian, in a footnote to an appendix in a

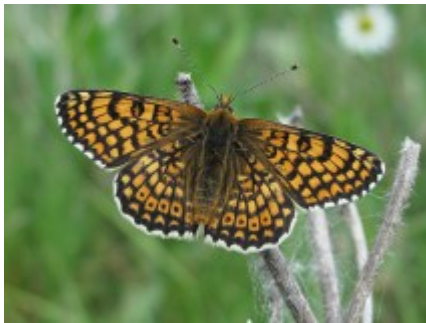
topographical monograph privately printed in 1858 (and promptly ignored), speculated that the artist might be connected with the Chesham family.

So much for Ashfield's birth. I will leave what I have been able to establish of his career to my *Dictionary* article, but I do want to take up the mystery of his end.

Several years ago I came across a marriage record which seemed to fit: Edmund Ashfield and an Elianor Goodwicke, at St Marylebone, on 14 April 1676.



I put it in the *Dictionary* as a possibility: the date was about right, but we knew no more. The entry in the parish records was of the briefest, and the scan of the faded writing virtually illegible. It was in fact only ten days ago that the penny suddenly dropped: her name, misread in the transcription, was in fact Goodricke. She would later become Eleanor Glanville, and she turned out to be a fascinating woman, with an entry in the DNB, as well as being the subject of an



historical novel (which I decided not to read, as it is described on the author's website as "a sweeping and highly romantic novel written in the tradition of Philippa Gregory"). Celebrated as a pioneering entomologist, among her discoveries was a butterfly still known as the Glanville Fritillary (*Melitaea cinxia*). But of course I was immediately engaged by the remark in the DNB that her husband was a painter.

Elation subsided rapidly when I also read that he was "from Lincolnshire", and nothing suggested that he was a "gentleman well descended". And that her father was a major in the Puritan army, while the pastellist was clearly at least a crypto-Catholic. And that her Ashfield died in 1679 – ten years before the group of miniatures in the V&A.

Grave though those objections were, I wanted to get my hands on the *Entomologist's Gazette* in which several biographical articles about her appeared some 40–50 years ago. Fortunately my brother has a complete set. I immediately established that it was not Edmund, but the family he came from, that had lands in Lincolnshire and Suffolk (a statement that the biographer might have made from his own researches into Ashfield families). And the statement that he was a painter apparently appeared in an affidavit in a court case, made by the son of her guardian. But clearly I would have to consult the primary source, a bundle in the National Archives.

In the meantime I was able to deal with some of the other objections. Her father, Major William Goodricke, may have served in the Puritan army, but he was suspected by Cromwell of having Royalist views, and was pardoned with suspicious alacrity at the Restoration. Eleanor herself was accused of being a Papist and of later supporting the Jacobite cause, and in her will she made bequests of £100 each to two Catholic priests, with the remainder of her estate to a distant cousin from the Royalist side of her family, Sir Henry Goodricke, 4th Bt of Ribston.

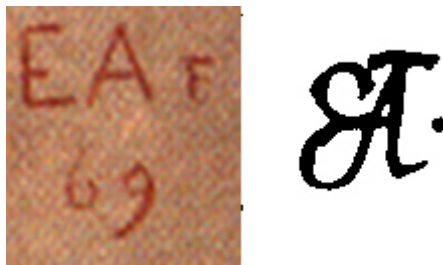
After the marriage Ashfield moved to his wife's home, Tickenham Court, Somerset. Three children were born, Forest Edmund Ashfield in 1677 and two girls the following year, but Ashfield's death is commemorated in a black granite floor slab in the church of quaintly named SS Quiricus and Julietta at Tickenham inscribed "EDMUNDUS ASHFIELD DE TICKENHAM, ARMIGER OBIIT DECIMO SEXTO DIE MENSIS JANUARIJ ANNO DOMINO 1678" [i.e. 1679 new style]. The crucial word here is "armiger": there may have been numerous homonyms in England at the time, but very few bore arms (sadly the arms themselves are not devised on the slab). Those in

the Ashfield of Chesham family were granted at least by 1527 when they appear in a family tomb in Heythrop: they are shared with the Lincolnshire branch.

As for the bundle in the National Archives, this concerned the rather sensational events after Ashfield's death. In 1685 Eleanor married a Richard Glanville from Bristol: he turned out not merely to be a brute, but to have his eye on her estates. She was astute enough to separate fairly soon after the marriage, putting her assets in trust, although not before several more children had been born. The subsequent story provides excellent material for *The Lady of the Butterflies* (even if the bit about Edmund being poisoned is, shall we say, conjectural). Richard's initial step was to have his own son abducted and imprisoned in order to coerce him (successfully) into breaking the entail on the estates. Eleanor died in 1709, leaving the bulk of her extensive lands to her distant cousin, and only £10 to her son Forest Ashfield. He disputed the will, and initiated a suit eventually heard at the Wells Assizes in 1712, where he had the will set aside on grounds of his mother's insanity. The evidence for this included her interest in entomology (as one of her servants put it, "I believe she did really value her blind bitch and her butterflyes more than her children", while another agreed that "she was only well pleased and in good humour when amongst her butterflies"), but also a great deal of evidence (whose credibility is difficult to assess today) ranging from mild eccentricity to cruelty to her servants (which makes her a somewhat difficult heroine in a story in which she is supposed to be the victim). Not long before she might well have been burnt as a witch.

This bundle then consisted of the statements of many of the hundred witnesses who testified at the trial. Unindexed, it consisted of twenty-five enormous sheets of vellum (double sided, each with up to 7–8000 words), folded to make photography impossible and so large that to read them (and comply with the National Archives handling rules) required bodily contortions that may have inspired Mats Ek's choreography: at least Michelangelo had a scaffold. And try as I might I could find nowhere in the affidavit of her guardian's son the statement I hoped to find. But as I was very close to giving up going through the rest of the bundle, I came across the statement made by the defendant, Sir Henry Goodricke, in which he does indeed refer to Eleanor's first husband as "Mr Edmond Ashfield, the Plaintiff's Father, who was by Trade a Painter...& had no visible Estate of his owne".

Mr Edmond Ashfield the P. Father who was by Trade a Painter

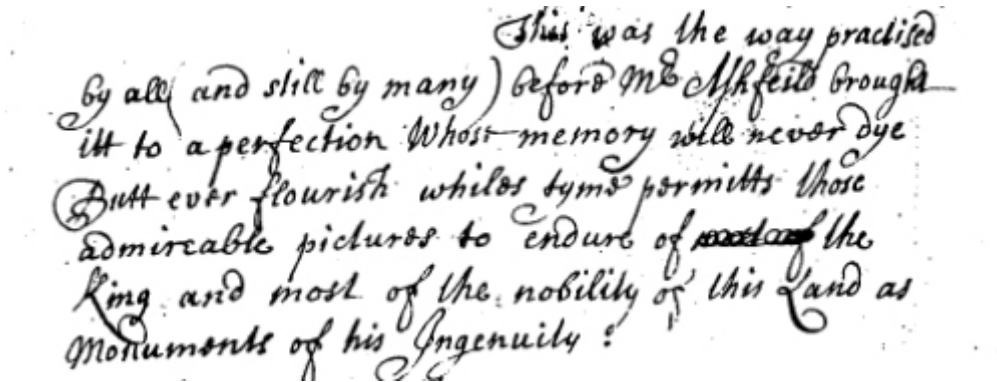


Monogram on pastel (left); on V&A miniature (right)

So: an armigerous, Catholic or crypto-Catholic, artist called Edmund Ashfield, with no estate of his own, who married in London in 1676. Only one real objection remained: those miniatures in the V&A. (There are no dated pastels after 1676.) They were of the North family, and the ages of the children made it quite clear that they were made very close to 1690. While they were generally quite similar to Ashfield's portraits, the technique seemed much less accomplished, even allowing for the switch in medium (which always makes stylistic comparisons treacherous). One bears the initials EA, and the author of the V&A catalogue concluded that this signed work "apparently substantiates Edmund Ashfield as a miniaturist" but cautiously noted that it was "curious that he

is apparently not documented as one of the artists in the North circle.” In fact the formation of the monogram bears little resemblance to those on the pastels.

But there turned out to be other reasons, apart from my Tickenham theory, to reject these miniatures. We had all overlooked a curious passage in the 1683 manuscript treatise of his pupil, Edward Luttrell (the *Epitome of painting, containing breife directions for drawing, painting, limning and cryoons*, now at the Yale Center for British Art).



Not only does he write of Ashfield in the past tense, but no one could possibly refer to a living person with a phrase such as “whose memory will never dye”. I hope I’ve done a little to revive it.

Postscript – 17 February 2015

A delightful find rounds off this post nicely. A lost Ashfield pastel has turned up in a private collection. The owner was curious about the wax seal on the back, which turns out to be that of the artist himself:



argent, a trefoil slipped, between three mullets gules, as seen on the 1521 family monument in the old church at Heythrop where Ashfield’s great-great-grandfather is buried. This rubbing comes from an article by Jonathan Moor in the *Bulletin of the Monumental Brass Society*, October 2011, pp. 356–58:



Of your charite pray for the soules of John Scherfeld
clerke and Eleanor his wyfe the whiche John decessed
the xxv day of december in the yere of our lord god *era*
of *MCCCLXXIV* and *xxv* on thoose soules Thou have mercy



Neil Jeffares