

Portrait of Captain William Wade 1734-1809

by Thomas Gainsborough

Master of Ceremonies at Bath Assembly Rooms.

Very recently the splendid portrait of Captain Wade, painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1771, has been returned to the Great Octagon, originally the Card Room, at The Assembly Rooms.



Before during and after conservation

The picture had been removed for conservation as the varnish was very yellow, there was substantial over painting in the foreground and the frame had warped badly. The canvas was covered by a sheet of ageing perspex.

The conservators found evidence of the known alterations to the background carried out by Gainsborough himself (Pentimenti). Public opinion was unhappy at Wade being set against a rural landscape as he was essentially a city man and dressed for town.

A satirical verse was published about the matter at the time:-
All at once I was struck with the portrait of Wade,
Which tho' like him in feature tis much too tall made
And looks, like its master - ashamed of its trade
For it's drawn as if walking alone in the fields
In a jauntee undress which the present mode yields
Uncovered - as tho he intended to bow
To an ox or an ass - to a heffer or cow.

As a consequence, Gainsborough added more architectural features and removing the old varnish has now revealed the shadows of the trees he tried to conceal by adding the lower part of the wall. The handsome frame has been fixed to the wall in a different way. It now hangs virtually flat and the perspex has been removed. The overall impact is most pleasing.

Captain William Wade gave up his army career after marrying the heiress Katherine Gore of Leatherhead.

He was appointed as Master of Ceremonies on April 18th 1769, as a compromise candidate, in a contested election. He presided over the Lower Rooms and supervised the building of the New or Upper Rooms which we now know as The Assembly Rooms. Gainsborough painted the portrait at his studio at No.17 Circus and presented it as a gift to the New Rooms.

Wade was always known for his elegance of attire and manners and was known as 'The Bath Adonis' and 'The Immaculate Capt. Wade'.



He was reputedly fond of the company of ladies and was forced to retire from Bath in 1777 after being cited in a marital scandal. This affair resulted in the divorce of Elizabeth Bassett from her husband John Hooke Campbell. Wade's wife died in 1787 and he then married Elizabeth Campbell.

Having held the master of ceremonies post in Bath jointly with that in Brighton, he took up the full time position in Brighton after leaving Bath. He wears in the picture his badge of office. There is also a badge of office in the gallery collection and both are shown here. Clearly either Gainsborough took an impressionistic view of it or this is not the same badge.



Wade died in Brighton on March 16th 1809.

The portrait belongs to the public collection of Bath and North East Somerset Council. Like all the major pictures in Bath's historic public rooms, it is cared for as part of the Victoria Art Gallery collection. The curatorial staff carry out regular condition checks of all the pictures and commission necessary conservation work where this is needed due to ageing and incidental damages. These high quality pictures add greatly the period ambiance of the World Heritage Site, City of Bath.



The picture being taken down, ready to go back and being lifted into place.

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