

DISCOVERY OF TWO PORTRAITS OF PHINEAS PETT*

by *Henri P. Richard*

A painting described as being a portrait of the British Admiral Sir William Monson (1569-1643), painted in oil on canvas by the followers of Cornelius Johnson, was sold by auction in London on 29 November 2001 (hereinafter referred to as the 'London' painting).¹

An identical painting of the same sitter held privately in Sydney, Australia (hereinafter referred to as the 'Sydney' painting) has provided evidence that the sitter for the portrait was not Sir William Monson as claimed but, in fact, the famous Master Shipwright and Commissioner of the Navy Phineas Pett (1570-1647).

TWO PORTRAITS OF THE SAME SITTER

The 'London' Painting

Prior to the sale of the painting, the auctioneers explained that the portrait (**Fig.1**), of dimensions 77.5 x 86 cm, was painted in the seventeenth century and that an inscription '67/37' was contemporary with the painting and was believed to indicate that the sitter was 67 years of age in 1637 as was Sir William Monson.



Fig.1. The 'London' Painting.

The Trustees of the National Maritime Museum Greenwich de-acquired the painting in 1995, but to date the Museum has not been able to trace the manner in which it came to hold the painting. Prior to its ownership by the National Maritime Museum, the painting may have been in the possession of one A.R. Harman as the annotation 'The Property of A.R. Harman' is stencilled on the back of the canvas lining, and 'PL679' similarly stencilled on the stretcher.

The National Maritime Museum did not appear to consider, when it sold the painting in 1996, that it had sufficient evidence to identify the sitter, simply describing him in the auction catalogue as a 'Gentleman' with 'a Baton in his right hand'.²

The identification of the sitter as the Admiral Sir William Monson by the vendor in the auction sale of 2001³ appears to have been based on the following facts

- (i) the sitter held a military commander's baton and was very probably a Naval Commander due to the provenance of the painting, and
- (ii) the inscription '67/37' (**Fig.2**) applied to the front of the painting by the artist meant that the sitter was 67 years of age in 1637.



Fig.2. Inscription '67/37'.

However, the Museum's caution in relation to the identification of the sitter was, to some degree, vindicated because coincidentally another person was 67 years of age in 1637 and a 'Principal Officer and Commissioner of his Navy'⁴; that person was Phineas Pett of Chatham born in 1570.⁵

There is an incomplete inscription on the front of the 'London' painting which appears to read 'Pett of', and is located to the right of the sitter's head (**Fig.3**). This inscription, which has not been mentioned by previous owners, is hidden in the sense that it is painted in the same dark brown colour as the earth and roots of the trees

*Courtesy of The Society for Nautical Research which published the paper in its journal *The Mariner's Mirror*, Vol 89, No.2, May, 2003, pp.203-207.



Fig.3. Inscription 'Pett of'.

surrounding it and is barely distinguishable from them.

A prior knowledge of the sitter's identity as a member of the Pett family (in this instance afforded by the evidence from the 'Sydney' painting) would have been essential to be able to associate this indistinct inscription with the name Pett.

The 'Sydney' Painting

The painting (**Fig.4**), of dimensions 61 x 76.5 cm, is a duplicate of the 'London' painting except that it carries the Arms of the Pett family and an inscription describing the sitter as Peter Pett of Deptford. It is held in Sydney, Australia by descendants of the Pett family.

The dimensions of the sitter's features are the same as those of the 'London' painting and its framed size would be the same as that painting except for the losses caused by the painted canvas being wrapped around the stretcher to fit a



Fig.4. The 'Sydney' Painting

smaller frame (the dimensions of the painted canvas are approx. 73 x 84 cm).

Some compelling reasons, stemming from the provenance of the painting and its inscriptions, indicate quite clearly that the sitter was a member of the Pett family:

- (i) The Sydney owners are descendants of Phineas Pett's elder brother Joseph of Deptford (d.1605).⁶ Their ancestors have had an association with the Royal Navy on a continuing basis up to the middle of the twentieth century culminating with the career of Rear Admiral Maitland Boucher who took part in the *Scharnhorst* action during the Second World War.
- (ii) The descendants also own a late seventeenth-century painting of their ancestor Samuel Pett (1643-1698), Commissioner of the Navy at Chatham, and grandson of Joseph of Deptford (**Fig.5**).



Fig.5.Samuel Pett, Commissioner of the Navy at Chatham (d.1698)

- (iii) The 'Sydney' painting bears the Arms granted to the Pett family in 1583 (**Fig.4**). The same Arms also appear on the portrait of Phineas Pett held by the National Portrait Gallery in London (**Fig.6**); hitherto the only known painting of Phineas Pett. The inscription "AETAT SVE 43" appears at the top of the portrait. This is very probably the same painting mentioned by Phineas Pett in the year 1612 of his autobiography.⁷



Fig.6. Portrait of Phineas Pett, Master Shipwright at 43 years of age.
(Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London)

- (iv) There is an inscription painted in oil on the front of the ‘Sydney’ painting (Fig.4) claiming the sitter is Peter Pett of Deptford (Phineas Pett’s father) reading:

Peter Pett
of Deptford Co. Kent
Master Shipwright
to Queen Elizabeth
Ob. 1589.

IDENTIFYING THE SITTER

The strong evidence from the ‘Sydney’ painting that the sitter was a Pett together with the ‘67/37’ on the ‘London’ painting indicated that the sitter was very probably Phineas Pett, the only member of the Pett dynasty that was 67 years old in 1637. The claim by the inscription on the ‘Sydney’ painting that the sitter was Peter Pett did not fit with the year 1637 giving rise to a contradiction which is resolved below.

An inscription in the same colour and the same hand as that on the ‘Sydney’ painting is present on the painting of Samuel Pett (Fig.5) reading:

Samuel Pett Esq.
A Commiffioner in
his Majesty’s Navy
at Chatham Ob. 1698.

It followed, that, being in the same hand, the inscriptions were added to the paintings by

the same person sometime after 1698, and the accuracy of the inscription written on the ‘Sydney’ painting is questionable as it was applied to the painting at least 109 years after the death of Peter Pett of Deptford and was therefore not contemporary with the painting.

To strengthen the case for the identification of the sitter, two further matters needed to be addressed, namely, the style of costume in which he is depicted in the context of the late 1500’s and early 1600’s, and his eligibility to hold a military commander’s baton as portrayed in the ‘Sydney and ‘London’ paintings.

Expert advice from the Department of Textiles and Dress, Victoria and Albert Museum London, confirmed that the style of costume worn by the sitter fitted the 1630’s; specifically because of the ‘bobbin lace with detached needlelace points with deep rounded scallops that was fashionable in the 1620’s and 1630’s’ used for the lace crown, and the 1630’s style of ‘plain wide linen collar with tied linen tassels’.

As it was highly unlikely that the sixteenth-century Peter Pett of Deptford wore clothes in the future style of the 1630’s, the claim that he was the sitter was simply incorrect. The sitter’s costume fits the year 1637 confirming Phineas as the sitter. (Note: The only Peter Pett of Deptford (1592-1652) contemporary with the 1630’s was a nephew of Phineas Pett but, he was 45 years of age in 1637 and therefore younger than the sitter represented).

Peter Pett of Deptford was a Master Shipwright but did not hold a military post and was not entitled to carry a military commander’s baton, unlike Phineas who was promoted by the King ‘to be a principal officer of the Navy with a fee of 200L. per annum. His patent was sealed on the 16 th of January 1631’⁸ well before 1637, the date of the sitting. Apart from his exceptional talent at designing and building ships, for which he is well known, Phineas Pett was also an experienced naval officer, who is recorded as having spent 11 months from 30 October 1620 as Captain of the *Mercury* pursuing Barbary pirates in the Channel and as far as their base in Algiers.⁹

On a more subjective level, even though they are presented from different perspectives

and after an interval of 24 years, the 67 year old sitter for the 'London' and 'Sydney' portraits (**Figs.1 and 4**) is recognisable as the 43 year old Phineas Pett portrayed in the National Portrait Gallery's portrait (**Fig.6**). Their facial expressions and features are strikingly similar (**Fig.7**).



Phineas at 43
(from Fig.6)



Phineas at 67
(from Fig.4)

Fig.7. Comparison of the facial characteristics of the 43 year old Phineas Pett as portrayed in the National Portrait Gallery's painting and those of the 67 year old sitter in the 'Sydney' and 'London' portraits.

One can only conclude that the 67 year old 'principal officer of the Navy' portrayed in the 'Sydney' and 'London' paintings in 1637 is Phineas Pett.

1637 A KEY DATE

Phineas Pett and his son Sir Peter Pett designed and built the 102-gun, 1,522-ton *Sovereign of the Seas*; at that time, the largest and most innovative warship of the Royal Navy and 'the prototype for every English capital ship until 1860'.¹⁰

The fact that the *Sovereign of the Seas* was launched on the 12 October 1637, with the enthusiastic royal patronage of Charles I, provides a good explanation why portraits of the celebrated Phineas Pett and his son Peter would have been painted at that time. Supporting this explanation is the existence of a portrait of Phineas' son Peter (**Fig. 8**) standing near the *Sovereign of the Seas*.

SUMMARY

In keeping with the 200-year tradition of the Pett family, Phineas Pett was a key person in the development of warships capable of expanding Britain's naval power.

He was one of the first two University of Cambridge Engineers mentioned in the Dictionary of National Biography having attended Emmanuel College at the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹¹ He was

appointed first Master of the Shipwrights Company at Woolwich in 1607 and first Commissioner of the Chatham Dockyards in 1630. During his shipbuilding career, Phineas built two important warships; the *Prince Royal* in 1610 and the *Sovereign of the Seas* in 1637.¹²



Fig.8. Portrait of Phineas' son Sir Peter Pett and the *Sovereign of the Seas*.

(Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)

The evidence provided by the 'London' painting (**Fig.1**) would be sufficient to contend that the sitter is either Sir William Monson or Phineas Pett, but, with the strong evidence from the 'Sydney' painting (**Fig.4**), the claim that he is Phineas Pett becomes virtually irrefutable. The evidence that identifies the sitter is:

- (a) He was 67 years of age in 1637 as indicated by the inscription '67/37' painted on the 'London' painting.
- (b) He was a member of the Pett family given that
 - (i) The inscription 'Pett of' appears on the 'London' painting, and
 - (ii) The 'Sydney' painting held by descendants of the Pett family bears the Arms of the family and an inscription referring to Peter Pett.
- (c) Expert opinion confirms that the sitter's costume fits the date 1637.
- (d) The sitter is a senior naval officer as he holds a military commander's baton.
- (e) The 67 year old sitter is recognisable as the 43 year old Phineas Pett in an earlier portrait (**Fig.7**).

Phineas Pett is the only member of the Pett family satisfying all of the above criteria.

Therefore it follows that:

- ❖ The painting (**Fig.1**) sold at auction in London in November 2001¹³ is not a portrait of Sir William Monson but of Phineas Pett.
- ❖ The duplicate painting (**Fig.4**) held by the Pett descendants in Australia is not a portrait of the sixteenth-century Peter Pett of Deptford, but of his son, Phineas Pett.

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