

THE LIMNER COMPANY



THOMAS FLATMAN (1635 - 1688)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, probably Sir Thomas Noel, 3rd Baronet (1662-1688); 1680

Circa: 1680

1680

8.3 cm (3 1/4 inches) high

Watercolour on vellum

The reverse inscribed in ink 'Toms Noel' and further illegible inscription

Thomas Flatman was one of the most fascinating, highly intellectual personalities in the artistic circle of the second half of the seventeenth century, which included Samuel Cooper (1607/08-1672), Charles (1631-1705) and Mary Beale (1633-1699), and John Hayls (1600?-1679). He also counted among his friends the composers Henry Purcell (1659-1695), and John Blow (1649-1708), and the poet Samuel Woodford(e) (1636-1700).[1]

Flatman was part of a sophisticated literary elite, who could include the art of 'limning' (miniature painting) as one of their gentlemanly pursuits. Highly educated, in 1655, he had been admitted to the Inner Temple and was called to the Bar in 1662, but it is not known if he ever practiced.[2] He may have trained in law out of duty to his father, who was possibly a clerk in the Court of Chancery.[3] In 1668, he was elected a fellow of the newly founded Royal Society, although he was likewise an inactive member.

For Flatman his writing took central place in his sphere of interests and he published several works, including *Poems and Songs* (1674)[4]. His contemporaries noted his artistic talent however, with Bainbrigg Buckeridge (1667/8-1733) stating, 'perhaps limning was his greater excellence'[5]. This exquisitely preserved example certainly shows him to have been a miniaturist of significant skill.

Alongside portraits of his artistic circle of friends[6], the majority of Flatman's output seems to have been professional and high-ranking men. If the previously suggested identity of the present sitter as Sir Thomas Noel, 3rd Baronet is correct, he represents an intersection of these two groups as Noel's stepmother, Frances Noel (née Ward) (d.1698), may be the 'Mrs Fran. Noels (sic.)' who sat to Mary Beale in 1674.[7]

Sir Thomas became the 3rd of the Noel baronets of Kirkby Mallory, Leicester, in 1675, the baronetcy having been created only 15 years prior for his grandfather. He was the son Sir William Noel, 2nd Bt. (c.1642-1675) and The Hon. Margaret Lovelace (c.1644-1671), who was buried in Westminster Abbey on her death and has the more noteworthy family history. Thomas's maternal grandmother, Anne Wentworth, Baroness Wentworth (1623-1697), to whom the cavalier poet, Richard Lovelace (1617-1657) had dedicated his collection of poetry titled, *Lucasta*, was the co-heir of Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Cleveland (1591-1667). Thomas's maternal uncle was the prominent whig politician and outspoken anti-Catholic, John Lovelace, 3rd Baron Lovelace (c.1640–1693).[8] Among the descendants of his mother's family are Anne Isabella (Annabella) Noel (née Milbanke), Baroness Wentworth and Lady Byron (1792–1860), the long-suffering wife of Lord Byron; and their daughter, the mathematician and early computer pioneer (Augusta) Ada King (née Byron), Countess of Lovelace (1815–1852).

Sir Thomas married Anne Whitlock (d.1737), possibly shortly after the present miniature was painted, which depicts him around the age of 18. It may be that the miniature was exchanged as part of their courtship.

[1] Foskett, D. *British Portrait Miniatures*, 1963, pp.74-75

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9675> - accessed 25 June 2025, and Poole, W. Thomas Flatman, Unlikely First FRS of New College, *New College Notes* 20 (2023), no. 6, p.1

[4] Foskett, p.74

[5] Buckeridge, B. *The Art of Painting... To which is added, An Essay towards and English School* (3rd edn of 1754; from 1969 Cornmarket facsimile), p.372

[6] For example, a portrait by Flatman of Charles Beale the elder is now in the collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum [accession no. P.13-1941], and his portrait of Samuel Woodford in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge [object no. 3842].

[7] See catalogue essay from Philip Mould & Co., 2021, available online:
<https://historicalportraits.com/artworks/5574-thomas-flatman-a-gentleman-probably-sir-thomas-noel-3rd-baronet-1680/> - accessed 19 June 2025.

[8] The 3rd Baron Lovelace was a supporter of both Titus Oates and the Duke of Monmouth, although seems to have stopped short of involving himself in treasonous plots until the Glorious Revolution, when he acted as a messenger between the future William III on the Continent and his supporters in England.