# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**JOHN SMART (1741 - 1811)**

**Portrait miniatures of The Hon Mrs William Irby née Mary Blackman (c.1744-1792) and The Hon William Irby (1750-1830)**

Circa: 1781

1781

*Watercolour on ivory (Her licence: DFQW3A56, His: 5A3316Z1)*

Hers: Oval, 47 mm (1 ⅞ in) high; His: Oval, 50 mm (2 in) high

Both signed with initials and dated 1781

Hers: gold frame, His: gilt-metal frame

These portrait miniatures depict The Honourable Mrs. William Irby née Mary Blackman (c.1744-1792) and The Honourable William Henry Irby (1750-1830). The couple were wed on 25th October 1781,[1] the very same year these portraits were commissioned, indicating they were made to commemorate their marriage. Mary was the daughter and coheiress of Rowland Blackman, Esq., of the Island of Antigua. William was the second son of Sir William Irby, 2nd Baronet and later 1st Baron Boston (1707-1775) and Lady Albinia Irby, *née* Selwyn (1719-1769). Mary and William had two children together: William Henry Rowland (1784-1842) and Augusta Priscilla (d. 1849).[2]

The couple here are depicted in fashionable attire. Mary's hair, treated with lilac powder, is worn raised with a fine veil attached to her hair and held at her shoulder by pearl strands. She wears a turquoise pelisse with a warm brown fur trim over a white gown with a matching turquoise border meeting a lace edge. William wears his hair *en queue* with soft pink powder, sporting an olive green coat, a lilac waistcoat, and a knotted white stock with a lace cravat.

Portrait miniatures often capture the more ephemeral trends in fashion that do not appear in full-scale oil portraits, like the coloured powder in the Irby's hairstyles. This perhaps owes to miniatures' role as

intimate, private objects compared to the relatively public nature of full-scale portraits. Because they are intended as personal keepsakes rather than open displays, sitters may feel more comfortable exhibiting more daring fashions like the pink and lilac hair seen here. A full-scale portrait of William by George Romney (1734-1802) from just a few years earlier shows him in more timeless attire with his hair, while styled similarly, in grey powder.[3]

These coloured hair powders first became popular in France, particularly and unsurprisingly in the circle of Marie Antoinette. Their international origins made them a slightly controversial fashion choice in England, but that did not dissuade many from joining in on the trend. Some of the colours available at the time included reddish-brown, violet, brown, pink, grey, and white powders, according to a perfumer's 1778 advertisement in *The Bath Chronicle*.[4] Coloured powders adorn the hair of sitters in miniatures by several artists. However, John Smart (1741 - 1811) is noted for having completed a large number of them, with a total of 46 pink-haired sitters accounted for at present, with shades ranging from grey-pink to lilac.[5] Smart's penchant for these brightly-coloured powders may owe partially to his upbringing as the son of a wigmaker.

Despite associations of sitters wearing coloured hair powder with the nouveau riche, the Irby's had established wealth and belonged to the landed gentry and nobility.[6] They were a distinguished family, even before William's father ascended to the peerage as the 1st Baron Boston in 1761, tracing their lineage back to Knight Sir William de Irby in the thirteenth century.[7] Still, Mary and William embraced this somewhat experimental trend in these personal portraits for each other, though their hues are slightly more elegant and toned down compared to the hot pinks seen on some of Smart's other sitters.

Mary and William's relationship was brought to a premature end when Mary died at age 48. Mary's character is attested to at her grave. The monument – carved by Joseph Nollekens R.A. (1737-1823) – at St. Mary's Church in Whiston, Northamptonshire reads:

"Sacred to the Memory

of MARY, the beloved Wife of

the Hon. WILLIAM HENRY IRBY

*Youngest Daughter and Coheiress*

Of ROWLAND BLACKMAN, *Esq. of the Island of Antigua*:

Of whom it may with strictest Truth be said,

That none of her Sex in any Station of Life

Supported with more uniform Consistence,

The several amiable and important Characters,

Of a dutiful & attentive Daughter;

Of a kind & benevolent Friend:

Of a prudent & affectionate Wife;

Of a tender & indulgent Mother;

And (which was the Source of all her Virtues)

Of a sincere & well-informed CHRISTIAN.

She was, prematurely for all, except herself,

Taken from this World,

To the Enjoyment of endless Felicity;

On the 30th of July, 1782: Æt 48."[8]

William went on to live another four decades after Mary's death, never remarrying. In a codicil to his will from 1820, he requests to be buried in the same church and the very same vault as his wife.[9] In this same amendment, he sets an annuity of two hundred pounds– paid half yearly – for his daughter Augusta Priscilla, who had been widowed by her husband Sir William Langham of Cottesbrooke (1771-1812) after less than two years of marriage.[10] He apologises for not being able to give more without injuring the property his son is meant to inherit from him, as a result of the heavy taxes following "long protracted" Napoleonic wars and "many other calamities attendant upon West India property".[11]

[1] "The Genealogical Memoir of the Hon. Mrs. Irby", *The Court Magazine, and Belle Assemblée*, vol. 5, no. 2, August 1834.

[2] Charles Mosley, *Burke's Peerage, Baronetage and Knightage: Clan Chiefs Scottish Feudal Barons*, 107th ed, vol. 1 (Burke's Peerage and Gentry, 2003), 445; vol. 2, 2234.

[3] George Romney (1734-1802), *Portrait of William Henry Irby (1750-1830)*, 1776-1777, oil on canvas, 74.9 × 63.5 cm (29 ½ × 25 in). Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth [P.980.72].

[4] "Berwick of London," *The Bath Chronicle*, vol. 18, no. 898, 1 January 1778.

[5] Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, "Pretty in Pink: John Smart's Penchant (or not) for Pink Hair" in *Portrait Miniatures: Artists, Functions, Manufacturing Aspects, and Collections*, ed. Bernd Pappe and Juliane Schmieglitz-Otten (Michael Imhof Verlag, 2026), 183.

[6] Marcereau DeGalan, “Pretty in Pink”, 180.

[7] “The Genealogical Memoir of the Hon. Mrs. Irby”, 45.

[8] Text (with modernised spellings) from the Monument to Mrs. Mary Irby, sculpted by Joseph Nollekens (1737-1823). St. Mary’s Church, Whiston, Northamptonshire.

[9] “Will of The Honorable William Henry Irby of Farnham Royal, Buckinghamshire”, 7 July 1830, The National Archives, Kew [Ref. PROB 11/1773/428]. https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D240815.

[10] “Will of William Henry Irby”, The National Archives, Kew.

[11] “Will of William Henry Irby”, The National Archives, Kew.

**Literature:**

Daphne Foskett, *John Smart: The Man and his Miniatures*, London 1964, p. 69.