THE LIMNER COMPANY



Studio of JOHN HOSKINS the Elder (c.1590 - 1664)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, traditionally called 'Mrs. Cromwell', likely Elizabeth Cromwell (née Steward; bap.1565-1654), wearing a black widow's hood, a black dress and white chemise, a black fur-trimmed cloak, and a necklace of large pearls; with a landscape background of a large darkening blue sky

Circa: mid 17th century

mid 17th century

Watercolour on vellum

Oval, (60 mm) (2 ⅜ in) high

Signed 'H.'

Turned wood frame with later brass scroll plaque inscribed 'Mrs Cromwell'

Versions:

The Tansey Miniatures Foundation, inv. no. 10347, called, 'Lady with a black bonnet'. [1]

Having traditionally been called 'Mrs. Cromwell' and thought to depict Elizabeth Cromwell (née Bourchier; 1598–1665), the present sitter can now be identified from a mezzotint in the National Portrait Gallery Collection (NPG D1540) as 'Elizabeth Steward Mother of Oliver Cromwell'. The print, dating to 1810, states that the image is 'From a Miniature in the Possession of Sir M. M. Sykes [sic] Bart.', which is almost certainly the collector Sir Mark Masterman Sykes Bt. MP (1771-1823). Such is the close resemblance between the print and the present image, it's possible that either this miniature or the version in the Tansey Miniatures Foundation is the miniature that once belonged to Sykes. [2]

When sold at auction in 1964, the previous lot was an identically framed miniature called Richard Cromwell (Oliver's son; 1626-1712) given to the studio/school of John Hoskins. It was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery at the sale and can be found in their collection today [NPG 4350] without the association with Hoskins. Richard's miniature was consigned to Sotheby's by esteemed art dealers the Leggatt Brothers, and it's likely both portraits came from the same collection.

Elizabeth Steward was the daughter of William Steward (1525-1593) and Catherine Payne (before 1545-1590). Her paternal grandfather was Robert Steward (d.1557) prior and dean of Ely, who leased the rectory of Ely to William, as well as abbey lands to other members of the family which would eventually pass to Elizabeth's son, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), the future Lord Protector.

Elizabeth first married William Lynne (1562-1589), a barrister of Gray's Inn, in 1580. The couple had a daughter, Catherine, who died in infancy as would her husband aged just 27 in 1589. Both father and daughter were buried at Ely Cathedral.

Elizabeth then married Robert Cromwell (1563-1617) circa 1590/91, whose family, like her own, had benefitted from the Reformation, receiving confiscated church lands through their loose connection to Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540). As a younger son, Robert's inheritance was relatively small and mainly urban property in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, from which he received a modest income. Nevertheless, the Cromwells were among the distinguished families of the area, and Robert stood for Huntingdon in parliament in 1593. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography describes him as 'a substantial inhabitant of a secondary town'. [3]

Elizabeth had a further 10 children with Robert, and Oliver was born on 25 April 1599, the fourth eldest child and second son. But in 1617, Robert died prematurely, leaving Elizabeth a widow for a second time and she appears to have worn widow's garb for the rest of her life. It is perhaps surprising that she did not remarry considering she was left with little means and responsible for a large household with Oliver - now the man of the house as the only surviving son - just 18 years old. Elizabeth was also entrusted with Robert's estates, who had stated in his will that they should be left in her charge for up to 21 years.

The period after Robert's death must have been fraught for Elizabeth, with seven unmarried daughters at the time (all of whom would require a dowry). It may have been a formative time for young Oliver too, who is generally thought to have been most at ease around women, and would be an exceptionally (for the period) affectionate husband and father to many daughters himself.

The documentary evidence for the remainder of Elizabeth's life is fragmentary. Her fortunes were now tied to Oliver's, and after he lost a dispute with local councilors, together they sold nearly all their Huntingdon property in 1631; she presumably moved with him (and his new wife) to the nearby town of St Ives. It was thanks to a bequest from Elizabeth's brother, Sir Thomas Steward (d.1636), that Oliver's luck improved in 1636, inheriting rental property in Ely as well as a glebe house that became the family home for some years and survives today as the Oliver Cromwell's House Museum.

In her twilight years, Elizabeth shared in her son's rise, becoming the matriarch of Britain's ruling family and royalty in all but name. At the time of her death on 18th November 1654, Cromwell had been declared head of state and reigned as Lord Protector for nearly a year. She was buried at Westminster Abbey, although would be disinterred by Royal Warrant in 1661 and her remains thrown in a pit in the churchyard of St Margaret's Westminster, adjoining the Abbey.

Much like the royal courts before and after the protectorate, Cromwell's court was attended by miniaturists, including John Hoskins. Hoskins had worked at the court of King James VI & I before emerging as the pre-eminent miniature painter during the reign of King Charles I, who appointed him 'His Majesty's Limner' in 1640. Like his nephew, Samuel Cooper (1609-1672), whom he trained, Hoskins seemingly moved between parliamentarian and royalist patrons without trouble.

Following the example of the great miniaturists of the previous generations, Hoskins employed a workshop of multiple junior artists; among his trainees or apprentices were his own son, John Hoskins the Younger (1617/20-1693), and his nephews Samuel and Alexander Cooper (c.1605-1660). As is often the case with artists in training, their early work is hard to distinguish from those they trained under, and the point at which they emerge from another artist's studio is hard to pin-point. This is complicated in Hoskins's case by the fact that some works thought to have been produced by his studio rather than the artist himself, bear his monogram or variations of it. Recent scholarship has suggested this may have been a deliberate exercise in perpetuating a Hoskins brand. To further confuse matters, one of his trainees was his own son who shared his name and initials. Therefore, the Hoskins monogram cannot necessarily be used to fully attribute a work to John Hoskins the Elder, especially when there are multiple versions of a miniature. In this instance, it may be that the Tansey version, which bears the monogram 'I.H.', is by Hoskins himself, and the present version, which bears the monogram of simply 'H.', is from his studio.

[1]To quote Pappe, B., Schmieglitz-Otten, Miniatures from the Baroque period in the Tansey Collection, (The Tansey Miniatures Foundation, Celle, 2016) p. 168: 'According to non-verifiable information, the miniature in the Tansey Collection shows an unknown Mrs Street. However, a replica of the miniature, also painted by Hoskins, supposedly shows a certain Mrs Cromwell according to the label on the frame (Sotheby's London, 9 March 1964, no.40; Christie's London, 21 November 2000, no.70).'

[2] At present an inventory of Sykes's collection cannot be found. The miniature was not listed in the posthumous sale of prints, coins and medals at Sotheby's in 1824.

[3] Morrill, John. "Cromwell, Oliver (1599–1658), lord protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 17 Sep. 2026. https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-6765.

Literature:

Pappe, B., Schmieglitz-Otten, Miniatures from the Baroque period in the Tansey Collection, (The Tansey Miniatures Foundation, Celle, 2016) p. 168;

Online catalogue for The Tansey Miniatures Foundation, inv. no. 10347, accessed 17th September 2026.