

# Samuel and Zachary Kyrke, Painters of Lichfield

by

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*In discussing the authorship of the painted nave ceiling of Staunton Harold in the last volume of these Transactions (Vol 59, 2015), Irene Brightmer repeated the earlier statement of Louis Osman (TAMS, Vol 4, 1956) that the Kyrkes (or Kyrks) were unknown elsewhere. However, more recent research has established that they were provincial painters who enjoyed a considerable reputation over a lengthy period in the 17th century. This note describes some of their other commissions and achievements. Dr Brightmer has provided a Postscript to accompany this new account.*

For two generations the Kyrke family of painters from Lichfield in Staffordshire made a significant contribution to the visual culture of the Midlands. As might be expected in the early modern period their surname is spelt in a variety of different ways but this note adopts the spelling used in the verse painted on the ceiling of St Chad's church, Shrewsbury. Samuel Kyrke is first noted in 1594 as the painter of a full-length portrait of the wealthy merchant Sir Christopher Hoddesdon whose only child, Ursula, had married Sir John Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire.<sup>1</sup> He was subsequently commissioned to paint a posthumous half-length portrait of Hoddesdon as Master of the Merchant Venturers' Company, an office that he achieved in 1600 at the age of 66. Hoddesdon died in 1611. The portrait is signed by Kyrke and dated 1632.<sup>2</sup> It is inscribed with a coat of arms for which he had a particular facility having been appointed a deputy Herald for Staffordshire sometime before October 1620.<sup>3</sup>

In 1633 and 1634 he was working for Sir Richard Leveson on his new house at Trentham Hall, Staffordshire, and his other seat at Lilleshall Hall in Shropshire.<sup>4</sup> He was paid substantial sums on contracts which included decorative painting in Lady Leigh's chamber, the dining room and the stairs. This work was completed by May 1634 but he returned in October to paint the King's arms in the church and scutcheons in the parlour and at the head of the stairs. In addition to the payments for his workmanship he was reimbursed for the supply of his specialised materials which included gold leaf for the dining room scheme which was purchased at Lichfield. He was given a locked studio over the coach house in which to work and was clearly distinguished from the ordinary house painters in the building accounts. He was absent throughout 1635 but his place was taken by his son, Zachary, who worked for forty-four days painting the fountain, 'the Armes & scutchions at the hall doore' and a further set of arms at the gate. He was paid

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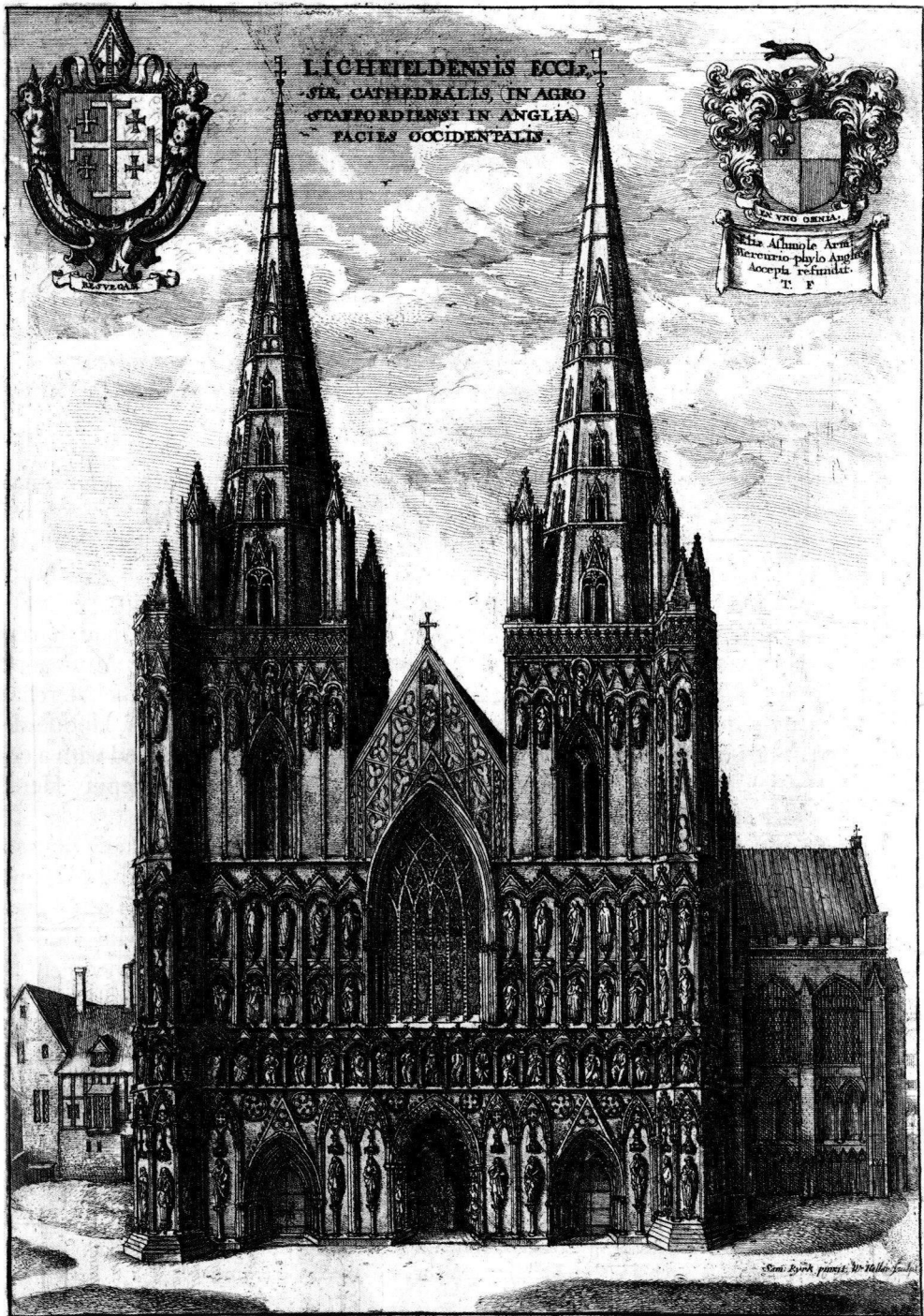


Fig. 1

The west front of Lichfield Cathedral, engraved by Wenceslaus Hollar after Samuel Kyrk (British Museum 1855, 0144.97)

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a skilled craftsman's rate of 1s.4d. a day rather than by contract like his father. He, too, was reimbursed for his materials. Samuel returned on site in early 1636 with a contract for what was described as 'church worke' but it did not specify what that involved.

It is likely that Samuel's absence in 1635 was due to a commission to paint the ceiling of old St Chad's church in Shrewsbury. When Sir William Brereton of Handforth Hall, Cheshire, passed through the town later that year he roundly condemned what must have been an even more extraordinary scheme than Kyrke's later ceiling at Staunton Harold. It was, Brereton wrote, 'of late gaudily painted with idle, ridiculous, vain and absurd pictures, representations and stories, the like whereunto I never saw in England'.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the church collapsed in 1789 and the ceiling was destroyed. No illustrations exist but there is a brief description originally published ten years before the collapse which refers to its being 'painted in an antique manner, with celestial devices, the signs of the Zodiac, &c. done in the year 1635'. It then describes a 'painted label' with the inscription:

Samuel Kyrke of Litchfield, hath not left behind  
The figure of his face, but the image of his mind<sup>6</sup>

A more detailed description was published in 1808 which quoted the same intriguing verse and listed 'various devices, scriptural texts and emblems, the signs of the zodiac, St Michael and the dragon, angels, and animals' painted in the spaces between the beams.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the criticism of Brereton, both Samuel and Zachary enjoyed a high reputation in their native city. In 1638 they were both recommended to a post in the College of Arms in a petition signed by the bailiffs of Lichfield and the Chancellor of the Diocese.<sup>8</sup> Around the same time before the Civil War, Samuel made accomplished drawings of the south and west front of the cathedral which were subsequently engraved by no less an artist than Wenceslaus Hollar and published in Thomas Fuller's *Church History of Britaine* in 1655 (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup>

The signed and dated nave ceiling at Staunton Harold in Leicestershire is the last recorded work by the father and son team. Samuel must have been an old man by 1655 and it is perhaps significant that by the time that the chancel and aisles were painted in 1662, the contract was awarded to Mr Lovett.<sup>10</sup> Samuel was almost certainly dead by then and Zachary had moved up the social ladder although he was still in demand to paint the arms of his friend Sir Robert Greisbrooke of Shenstone for submission to Sir William Dugdale on his visitation to Staffordshire in 1663 and in the same year he was paid £18 for 'beautifying' St Mary's church with the arms of both the king and the city.<sup>11</sup> In 1668 he served as Sheriff of Lichfield and in 1669, when he drew up his will he described himself as 'gent of the city of Leitchfeild...being but weak in body but of perfect memory'.<sup>12</sup> He had a portfolio of an unspecified number of houses which he left to his son, also called Zachary, and he made provision for his wife Sarah, a daughter Ursula, 'and all the rest of my dawters'.<sup>13</sup> None of his children seems to have been of age or married when the will was drawn up. He died on 17 December 1673 and his inventory names ten principal rooms in his house together with various service rooms such as a brew house and cellars. It must have been a substantial town house and its contents, including debts 'supposed to be good', amounted to a value of £222.6s.8d. Although he was no longer styled 'limmer' as he had been in 1647 when he was granted administration of the will of his father-in-law, there was a brief entry 'for tooles, pensills and other nesesaries belonging to his trade as boks, oyles, Allablaster & dials etc.' valued at £5.

This seems to have been the end of the Kyrke dynasty of painters. Although they never penetrated the fashionable world of London, they deserve recognition as exceptionally talented provincial artists of the sort described by Robert Tittler.<sup>14</sup> Their skills embraced a variety of different branches of the profession. Apart from his ceiling paintings, Samuel was a distinguished portrait painter and topographical artist. Both of them excelled at the specialised art of heraldry. They achieved both fame and a modest fortune from their talents and it is hoped that this brief account of their lives has rescued them from comparative obscurity. The tantalising verse that Samuel inscribed on the Shrewsbury ceiling and the boldness of their signatures there and at Staunton Harold demonstrate a pride in their work which was richly deserved.

## NOTES

1. B. Stewart and M. Cutten, *The Dictionary of Portrait Painters in Britain up to 1920* (Woodbridge, 1997), 288.
2. Sold at Christies of London on 2 November 1984 by the Stoneleigh Abbey Preservation Trust: Lot 58 in the catalogue of English Pictures with a full description and illustration. The present whereabouts of the painting is unknown.
3. Early Modern British Painters database. <http://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/980096>. Accessed 9 October 2015.
4. Staffordshire County Record Office D593 R/1/2.
5. A. Ricketts, *The English Country House Chapel* (Reading, 2007), 137.
6. T. Phillips, *The History and the Antiquities of Shrewsbury*. 2nd edn. by Charles Hulbert, vol.I (1837), 79.
7. H. Owen, *Some Account of the Ancient and Present State of Shrewsbury* (1808), 164. He gives the date as 1633 but it seems likely that this was a mistranscription.
8. Staffordshire County Record Office, William Salt Library M848. It is not known whether the recommendation was successful.
9. The engraving of the west front is inscribed 'Sam:Kyrk pinxit, W:Hollar sculp' with a dedication in Latin from Fuller to Elias Ashmole who was a native of Lichfield and a patron of Hollar. The engraving of the south elevation is reproduced in the *Victoria County History of Staffordshire*, vol.14 (1990), 50.
10. I. Brightmer, 'Two Private Chapels, Two Painted Ceilings: Gwydir Uchaf and Staunton Harold', *TAMS*, vol.59 (2015), 33.
11. H. S. Grazebrook (ed.), *The Heraldic Visitations of Staffordshire Made by Sir Richard St George and Sir William Dugdale* (London, 1885), 156-7. Kyrke was given the title of 'Mr' in the churchwardens accounts for St Mary's, Lichfield Record Office D20/4/1.
12. Lichfield Record Office P/C/11.
13. It is tempting to think that his daughter was named after his father's early patron at Stoneleigh.
14. R. Tittler, *Portraits, Painters, and Publics in Provincial England, 1540-1640*, (Oxford, 2012), 78, for a brief mention of the Kyrkes.

## POSTSCRIPT

Following the publication of my paper 'Two Private Chapels ...' in the last volume of these *Transactions*, I was delighted to hear from Malcolm Airs that he was familiar with work by Samuel and Zachary Kyrke at Trentham Hall in Staffordshire, and that he believed them to be father and son, rather than brothers, which had previously been the received wisdom.

This revelation led to fresh searches, initially using the internet, and gradually a more complete picture emerged of the creative, professional and civic lives of these men, associating them with Staffordshire in general and Lichfield in particular. I am grateful to Malcolm Airs for writing up these findings in the above account.

The huge progress made during the 21st century in the digitisation and online publication both of books long out of print and of indexes to public archives, has provided a new and rich research tool for the scholar. Moreover, digitisation will never be complete: even as I write, more material is becoming available online.

Discovering that the Kyrkes were from Lichfield obviously sent me to Lichfield Record Office, where local publications, collections of prints, and documentary archives such as churchwardens' accounts provided further insight into the Kyrkes. I was able to see the two prints made by Hollar from Samuel's drawings of Lichfield Cathedral. And, thanks to original church records, we can now add another painted church interior to their list of works, that of St Mary's church, Lichfield. Sadly, their work there in 1663 in 'beautifying the Church, the King's Armes and City Armes', for which Mr Kyrke was paid the huge sum of £18, survives only in the churchwardens' accounts, since St Mary's has been rebuilt several times since the 17th century (Fig. 2). That work may only have been by Zachary; he alone was named later that year in a payment for repairs to the same church.

I am greatly indebted to Malcolm Airs for alerting me to the references in the Trentham archive, thus opening up for me the interesting lives of the Kyrkes. I suspect that there is still more to be revealed about their achievements, and doubt that I shall ever feel that their story has been fully told.

IRENE BRIGHTMER

Given a gentleman in his suite travelling towards Scotland	0. 1. 6
paid William Launde his quarters & wages	0. 6. 0
paid John Bird for the like	0. 6. 0
paid for providing two stumps	0. 0. 4
paid for nails	0. 0. 4
paid to John Bull for lynes	0. 0. 0
paid Mr. Smith for beautifying the Church the King's Armes & City Armes	18. 0. 0
paid to Mr. Holt for a pound of salt of Soddy and for work done	0. 1. 6
paid William Higgins for busing in Chappell sands	0. 5. 0
paid for an Iron Crown for the Church	0. 0. 0
for a spade for the Church	0. 2. 6
paid to Thomas M. Walter for work	0. 4. 6

Fig. 2

In 1663 Mr Kyrke was paid the huge sum of £18 for 'beautifying the Church, the King's Armes and City Armes'. (Lichfield Record Office D20/4/1, Churchwardens' accounts, St Mary's Church, Lichfield).

Photograph, Irene Brightmer