



## The late Mr. A. Wivell, Portrait Painter.

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EXTRACT FROM THE "ART JOURNAL" (1849)

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This well-known portrait-painter was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1786, in the parish of Marylebone, London. His father, a tradesman, at Launceston, in Cornwall, being unfortunate in business, removed with his family to London a year before the birth of his only son, and died shortly afterwards, leaving his widow and four children in penury. Young Wivell, at the age of six years, was hired as a farmer's boy; his time being spent in feeding cattle, and driving away the crows from the corn. In this place he remained for two years and then returned home to his mother who was his sole instructress in reading and writing until she was enabled to send him to Marylebone School of Industry, where he was employed in heading pins and pointing needles, and afterwards in the more profitable occupation of making boots and shoes. About this time his mother became housekeeper to a Mrs. Smith, whose walls were decorated with engravings of the best masters, the sight of which first created a taste for the Arts in the boy. At the age of nine he entered the service of Mr. Pointing, a house-painter, where he remained eight months. In 1799 he was apprenticed for seven years to Mr. Osborne, a peruke-maker and hair dresser, and served the entire time with him. He subsequently commenced on his own account in the same business, to which he added that of miniature painter in water colours, specimens of which were placed in his window, interspersed with blocks and wigs. The attempts, rude as they were, gained him the friendship of Nollekens, and Northcote, who wished him to devote all his attention to the Arts: "for", said Northcote, "success is sure". But the young artist, having married in 1810, found that he could not, without injuring his rising family, devote himself exclusively to the Arts; so he still continued his business peruke-making and hair dressing, although he took ever advantage of his intimacy with the above-named artists to frequent as often as possible their studios, for the purpose of perfecting himself in his profession. At the time of the Cato Street Conspiracy, an acquaintance with one of the keepers of Clerkenwell prison, obtained him an interview with Thistlewood and the other State prisoners, so notorious at that period; they all sat to him and their portraits were much in request. Mr., now Alderman, Kelly, the publisher, engaged him to take them again when on their trial at the Old Bailey. Whilst thus employed he had the good fortune to meet Mr. John Cordy who admiring the spirited likenesses of the conspirators, called upon him the next day, and ever afterwards materially advanced his interests. Mr. Cordy engaged him to paint a portrait of Miss Stephens, the vocalist, and advanced him for that purpose the sum of 10*l*.; but after several negotiations the lady refused to finish the sittings. In 1820 Mr. Wivell sketched a portrait of Queen Caroline, at the balcony where she appeared to receive the congratulations of the public. This sketch was so admired that it was shown to the Queen by a gentleman of her household when she expressed her wish to have her portrait completed and sat for it accordingly. The Queen's Trial coming on immediately afterwards in the House of Lords, Mr. Kelly engaged our now rising artist to draw portraits of the principal personages on the trial, for a work then publishing; but Mr. Wivell had no means of entering the House, which was crowded with the rank and fashion of the day, attracted thither by the interest felt in the trial of a Queen, unparalleled since the reign of Henry VIII. In this dilemma, and when hovering about the entrance of the House of Lords, he happened to recognise an acquaintance in a barrister's clerk, who could not resist the offer of the artist to paint the portraits of himself and family if he could gain him admission to the House. Next morning he was admitted accordingly, with a bag and papers, in the guise of his Friend; and seating himself at the table appropriated to members of the bar, began to sketch away with a rapidity equal to the exigency of the case, not knowing how soon a summary ejection might follow his unwarrantable assumption of the character of even a small limb of the law, which, in his mind, was associated with the unedifying names of JOHN DOE and RICHARD ROE. The surprise of the bar was soon turned into astonishment as the sketches were handed round the table; they soon found their way from the bar to the benches, and from the benches to the woollack, and so pleased the parties interested that he was permitted to remain in the same place during the continuance of the trial. Most of the noble lords and gentlemen taken gave him a sitting or two to finish their portraits. Amongst these and others, were the Queen, Her Majesty's Attorney-General, Mr. Brougham; Her Solicitor-General, Mr. Denman, Mr. Copley, now Lord Lyndhurst; his late Lady and their Daughter, Count Forsari; Mr. Austin, the Queen's protégé; Mr. Alderman Wood, and His Majesty's Counsel and Ministers. He also took the notorious Theodore Majocchi, and all other witnesses against the Queen at the trial. The artist now advanced rapidly to the zenith of his professional fame. Amongst the distinguished individuals whose portraits he took immediately after the Queen's trial, were – H.R.H. the Duke of York, H.R.H. the Duke of

Gloucester, William IV., when Duke of Clarence; Prince George of Cambridge, and the Princess Augusta, when children; George IV., Lord Suffield, Lord Holland, Captain Scrosby, Sir John Cam Hobhouse, Mr. Joseph Hume, Colonel Macaroni, General Pepe, aid-decamp to Murat, the ex-king of Naples; Lord Cochrane, the Hon. Spring Rice, Mr. William Freemantle, Sir Francis Burdett, the Right Hon. George Canning, the Right Hon. William Huskisson, Lord John Russell, Sir Astley Cooper, Bart, his portraits of whom were all engraved. He likewise painted portraits of nearly two hundred members of the House of Commons, for a view of the interior of the House, published by Messrs. Bowyer and Parkes. In 1825 his friend Mr. Cordy, prevailed upon him to go to Stratford-upon-Avon to take a drawing of the marble bust of Shakespeare, placed in the chancel of the church, in the poet's birthplace. This Mr. Wivell executed admirably; it was engraved by J.S. Agar and is still allowed to be the best published. The success attending this engraving led him to engage on his admirable work. "An Inquiry into the History, Authenticity, and Characteristics of the Shakespeare Portraits," which was first published in 1827; and although the work showed great research and admirable execution, and contained twenty-six faithful engravings of all the genuine and spurious portraits and prints of the immortal bard, with engravings of the Stratford Monument, Roubillias, and the Westminster Abbey statues; yet it failed as a publication. Mr. Wivell's fearless exposure of the various tricks used by picture dealers and others in manufacturing pictures to suit the taste of the day, drew upon him the attack of a whole nest of hornets about to be deprived of their lawful prey – the public; and the envious possessors of the spurious portraits of the poet, for which some of them paid a very high price, swelled the torrent of disaffection raised against the work; so that an undertaking which cost him 700 guineas, besides two years of the best of his life, worth at least 2000 guineas more, realised only 250*l*. Cart-loads of copies were sent to the cheesemongers and the engraved plates were disposed of to pay the publishers. Time has since avenged him for the wrong done to his assiduity; for he lived to see eight guineas offered for a single copy of the work, but time has not made up the pecuniary loss, which reduced him from affluence to comparative poverty.

After the failure of the Shakespeare portraits, his uncle, Abram Wivell, of Camden Town, died and left him the house in which he lived, his household furniture, and an annuity of 100*l*. per annum for the remainder of his life. Amongst the plates sold to pay the publishers for the Shakespeare loss, were portraits of the leading actors of the day, including Charles Young, Elliston and Kemble, Miss Sheriff, James Wallack and Munden, Miss Ellen Tree, Mr. Sinclair, and Miss Somerville, Cooper, Harley, Miss Stephens, Master Betty, the Young Roscius and Helen Faucit, Mr. Macready, Mr. Farren, and the elder Matthews, all considered first-rate likenesses, to which may be added Cramer, Mori, Moschelles, and Hertz, the composers.

In 1828 Mr. Wivell's attention was first directed to fire escapes, and he invented the Rope Fire Escape, which in the course of time was superseded by his patent one now in use. In 1829 he gave lectures on the subject, illustrated with models and drawings. Shortly afterwards, a meeting was held in the Lawson's Rooms, Gower Street, where a chairman, committee, &c., were appointed, being nucleus of the present "Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire," established in 1836. Mr. Wivell was made superintendent (sic) of fire escapes to this society at a salary of 100*l*. per annum, and continued in that capacity until 1841, when, having a dispute with a newly-elected committee, he threw up his engagement with them, and went to reside at Birmingham in the latter end of that year. He spent a great deal of money and time in perfecting these fire escapes, and so useful have been their advantages to society, that above one hundred lives have been saved by them in London alone. It is seldom that we hear of such practical results arising from the labour of the philanthropist, but our artist was a man of singular energy in carrying out any undertaking which he commenced. In Birmingham he resumed his artistical career with Thomas Atwood, Esq., M.P., and the principal gentleman of the town and neighbourhood. In 1847 he was engaged by Mr. Robertson to take the portraits of the railway celebrities for the *Monthly Railway Record*. This was his last public work. It contains portraits of G. Hudson, Esq., M.P.; D. Waddington, Esq., M.P.; Capt. Mark Huish; George Carr Glynn, Esq., banker; S.M. Peto, Esq., M.P.; J.P. Westhead, Esq., M.P.; W. Chadwick, Esq.; Richard Creed, Esq.; H.C. Lacy, Esq., M.P.; and Charles Russell, Esq., chairman of the Great Western Railway Company.

He died of chronic bronchitis, at Birmingham, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 1849, in the 63<sup>rd</sup> year of his age, leaving his second wife, to whom he was married in 1821, and a large family of ten children unprovided for to lament his loss. \*\*

\*\* In addition to the above transcription of the original printed extract, the reference copy of the Art Journal for 1849, viewed at Birmingham Central Library, contains the following extra sentence.

The sole care of the family devolves upon his eldest son, Abraham Wivell, who although a very young man, is already a most promising artist.