That's no lady, that's...

... the earliest known portrait of the third Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron and possible lover. Its dramatic discovery will ignite a new debate about the playwright's sexuality



Anthony Holden

THROUGHOUT 56-year-old Alec Cobbe's childhood, and well into his middle age the picture that had been in his family some 300 years had been consigned either to a staircase or a dark passage, an unremarkable 'space-filler' in an otherwise distinguished art collection. There was a Titian, there was a Poussin and there was this: a clumsy, inelegant portrait of some remote female forebear from the Elizabethan branches of his ancient and eminent family tree. More interesting than the picture itself was the inscription on the back. In the handwriting of his most celebrated ancestor, Archbishop Cobbe of Dublin (1686-1765), a long-yellowed label, now legible only beneath ultraviolet light, identified the sitter as 'Lady Norton,

daughter of the Bishop of Winton'.

The portrait shuttled between the Anglo-Irish Cobbe family's ancestral estate of Newbridge House, near Dublin, and his other, more recent residence of Hatchlands Park in East Clandon, Surrey, leased to him by the National Trust 20 years ago to house his family's outstanding collection of art and furniture as well as the world-famous collection he has himself amassed of pianos which

once belonged to the great composers.

Then came the day, only a few years ago, when Alastair Laing, the National Trust's adviser on art and sculpture, told Cobbe he believed the portrait was not of a woman, but of a young man apparently dressed as a woman.

Cobbe was intrigued. As he researched his family history for a recent exhibition of its treasures at Kenwood House in London, under the auspices of English Heritage, he wondered who this effeminate young man might be. In the process, he discovered previously unknown connections between his own family and the Wriothesleys, earls of Southampton, dating back to Elizabethan times and beyond.

But it was not until earlier this year he says, after the Kenwood exhibition had closed, that 'the penny finally dropped. Suddenly I realised that the frogped. Studienty Freathest that the face reminded me of pictures I had seen during my research into my family's history. "My God," I thought, "could this be the third Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron and perhaps his large?"

and, perhaps, his lover?"

The features, as Cobbe points out, 'tally strikingly with those of the famous de Critz portrait of Southamp-ton, dating from 10 years or so later'. The equally celebrated Hilliard miniature, in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, also bears a telling resem-

blance to the Cobbe portrait.

Like many art experts, Alastair
Laing is sceptical about identifications based on similarity of features alone. 'There must,' he said, 'be a sound historical basis for linking the picture with the sitter.' Further researches by Cobbe into his family's long history have now revealed exactly such links, dating back to the reign of Elizabeth I and beyond. "The provenance of the picture," Laing confirms 'is now entirely convincing

Experts who have studied the facts now agree that the portrait is undoubt edly the earliest known image of the third Earl of Southampton – Shakespeare's patron, the 'fair youth' speare's patron, the larr yound addressed in his sonnets – somewhere between the age of 17 and 20 and painted at exactly the time those first few sonnets were written. Suddenly, the 'gap-stopper' became 'the jewel in the crown of the Cobbe collection'. ays Alastair Laing now, in the light of Cobbe's new evidence: 'I am verv happy indeed about the identification. Given the connection to Shakespeare nd his sonnets, it is a very, very exci-

ing discovery.'
In the portrait by an unknown artist, dating from the early 1590s, the teenage Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, is wearing lipstick, rouge and an elaborate double earring. His long hair hangs down in very feminine tresses and his hand lies on his heart in a somewhat camp gesture.
Unlike all the other extant portraits

of Southampton, who later chose to be depicted as a rather more macho courtier and soldier, this is much more the face of the androgynous creature the poet ambiguously called the 'mastermistress of my passion' in the twentieth

of the 154-sonnet cycle. Southampton's secretary was the Italian scholar John Florio, and the elaborate lacework around Southampton's neck is indeed Italian, probably Venetian, and the most expensive money could then buy This crucially dates the portrait to 1590-3, the period during which Shakespeare wrote and published two lengthy poems dedicated to the teenage Southampton, 'Venus and Adonis' and the 'Rape of Lucrece' – and began work on the early sonnets addressed to the fair youth,



The 1590s picture by an unknown artist shows the earl with flowing tresses and lipstick. For 300 years, it was thought to be of Lady Norton



The earl painted in 1603 by de Critz

whom he describes in Number 20 as having 'a woman's face with nature's own hand painted'.

The Shakespeare scholar, Sir Frank Kermode, former professor of English at Cambridge, who has been to Hatch-lands to see for himself, says: 'The portrait already has considerable intrinsic historical interest, and if you believe that the young man addressed in the sonnets was Henry Wriothesley there is the additional thrill that this could be the face that Shakespeare fell in love with, perhaps wishing its owner was a girl. The magnitude of the thrill depends on how much you think the identity of the young person matters to the poems. Many think it matters a lot.'

Despite a notorious lack of hard evidence about the facts of Shakespeare's life, there has long been fierce argument between two rival camps: those who interpret the sonnets as autobio-

graphical, and those who insist they do is well prepared for challenges to the not necessarily reflect the poet's private life, let alone his sexual predilections, merely the preoccupations of a poet writing to commission.

All the sonnets are love poems, the later ones reeking of heterosexual jealousy, some 10 years before *Othello*, for the enigmatic Dark Lady who appears to cerned, the manner of its 'descent' into have two-timed the writer with a rival poet. But the opening poems in the cycle express ambiguous sexual longings for an effeminate youth, traditionally identified as Southampton, Shakespeare's patron at the time, and his host in London and Hampshire when the plague ed the London theatres.

W.H. Auden, for instance, argued that the sonnets unequivocally showed that his 'Top Bard' was (like himself) gay. Others have gone further, and suggested that Shakespeare, the father of three children by his wife Anne Hathaway, must have had a gay affair with Southampton. The locus classicus on the matter is sonnet Number 20. with its famous pun on the word 'prick', which seems to imply that the youth is pretty enough to be a woman in which case the poet would be sexually interested. But he is not, so the young man is 'to my purpose nothing'

Whatever the truth about Shake speare's sexuality, which seems likely as was the case then as now in the the atre, to have been flexible, the dra matic discovery of the Cobbe portrait of the young, effeminate Southamptor is bound to relaunch a tidal wave of debate. Given the strong feelings these arguments arouse in the field of Shake speare studies, which has recently seen a voguish penchant for investigations into Elizabethan cross-dressing, Cobbe

painting's provenance. Reassured by the conviction of its authenticity among Laing and others, notably the Elizabethan costume and jewellery scholar Diana Scarisbrick, he is armed and ready to defend his find. As far as his family through the Cobbes' 400 year-old links with the Southamptons, is vital proof of its authenticity quite as important as the similarity of the sit-ter's features with other portraits of the third Earl.

Cobbe originally believed the por-trait came into his family when it was presented by Southampton himself to his contemporary and Hampshire neighbour Thomas Cobbe (1573-1638). who kept a handsome company of 100 foot-soldiers on his estates next to the ancestral Southampton seat of Titchfield. As recently as last month, how ever, he established a much more con vincing, and thus seminal ancestral link. Now he believes that the so-called 'Norton descent' is the key to the paint



ing's provenance. Archbishop Cobbe identified the sitter as 'Lady Norton, daughter of the Bishop of Winton'. She was his great-grandmother Anne, daughter of Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, who married Sir Richard Norton, by whom she bore the arch-bishop's grandmother, Honor Norton.

But Cobbe has now realised that the archbishop got it wrong. The 'Lady Norton' in question 'was almost certainly' Lady Elizabeth Norton, great-granddaughter of the third Earl himself, who inherited the portrait from her grandfather, the fourth Earl (who had no male heir), and passed it in the early eighteenth century to the Cobbe children of her kinswoman, Honor Norton, eventual co-heiress of the Nortons

and thus of this painting.
Uncovering the marital connection between the Cobbes and the Wriothesleys through the Nortons 'has con-vinced any remaining doubters,' Cobbe now says. 'This was the real break-

Once it had passed to the Cobbe family, the history of the portrait is well documented. Beyond the understand-able mislabelling by the archbishop, an eighteenth-century note in the hand of his son records its then unceremonious position in 'the Passage' at Newbridge House. 'In the nineteenth century,' says Cobbe, 'it was further banished to the top tier of a battery of portraits on the staircase, where it was catalogued in 1868 by the noted writer and feminist Frances Power Cobbe.' An expert picture restorer, Cobbe has himself been cleaning the Elizabethan wood panel, with its lifesize head-and-shoulders por-trait of the third Earl, before it goes on display at Hatchlands today.

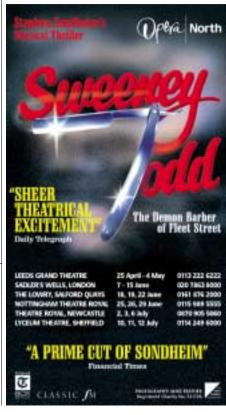
It is a remarkable coincidence that much of the Cobbe collection, including the Southampton portrait, should now hang at Hatchlands, as the magnificent Surrey estate was originally granted by Henry VIII in 1544 to the third Earl of Southampton's great-grandfather, Sir Anthony Browne, yet another Cobbe

As Shakespeare scholars rush to Hatchlands to inspect it, a fresh rash of furious disputes will no doubt break out between those who regard the sonnets as autobiographical and those who maintain that the poet's universality – the humanity which shines through his work, defying pigeonholing of any kind – renders such conclusions irrelevant.

But there is no doubting the immense historical and literary significance of the discovery of the Cobbe portrait of the enigmatic third Earl. Thanks to Alastair Laing's scepticism, Cobbe's researches, and the National Trust, which will now place the painting on display at Hatch-lands, Shakespeare studies may never be quite the same again.

The Cobbe portrait of Southampton goes on display today at Hatchlands Park, East Clandon, Surrey (01483 222482), 2-5pm Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Bank Holidays to the end of October

A new exhibition of Elizabethan clothing and cross-dressing in Shakespeare opens at Shake speare's Globe, London SE1 on 11 May. For details see www.shakespeares-globe.org or call 020 7902 1500



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