

The Strange Tale of Miss Wallman

Related by Patience Mackarness



All through my childhood, a painting of a woman in a gold dress – and in a gold frame – hung in a prominent position in our house. Members of our family were rude about her round, plain face, but the frame was handsome, and because she was a relation, we were quite fond of her. No-one knew exactly what relation she was, though. We called her, simply, ‘Miss Wallman’.

As child I thought she had been given the name because she hung on the wall. Later I learned that Wallman was a family name – a middle name of my maternal grandmother. Once or twice I consulted family trees in an attempt to find out who she was; but there were a lot of Wallmans on the tree, and we didn’t know which era the woman was from. (One supposed expert told my parents she was probably in fancy dress, not wearing the fashion of her own time.)

When my parents moved into a small bungalow in 1988, they had no room for Miss Wallman, and no-one else in the family wanted to give her a home. So it came about, rather by default, that my husband Eric and I took her to the cottage in Brittany that we bought in 1989 to use as a summer home while we were working in Bahrain. This was how a very small cottage in France came to have a very large, ornate, English portrait on its wall.

A bit of dampness was inevitable, as the house stood empty for most of the year, and over time the frame began to show slight signs of woodworm, but generally we found Miss Wallman in good condition when we arrived for our summer holidays. A quick wipe to remove the film of mould that had collected over the winter, and she was (almost) as good as new.



About 20 years after buying the house, we began to let it commercially to summer guests, and Miss Wallman was again surplus to requirements; she just wasn't appropriate for a house that people were paying to spend their holidays in. So out to the garage she had to go. The garage is rather damp, and prone to leaking in wet weather. We wrapped the painting up, but obviously not well enough: when we eventually remembered to check Miss Wallman's condition some years later, part of her gold frame was rotted beyond repair.

Once again she was offered (now frameless) to various family members, and once again no-one wanted her. However, we didn't feel comfortable about consigning her to the tip either, so my niece Laura agreed to store her in a garage. And there, for several years, she was again forgotten.

Enter my cousin Imogen, an historian and something of an expert in the genealogy of the Wedd and Wallman families. She had seen a photo of Miss Wallman, with a note saying that we had been unable to identify her, on our family history website.

Imogen contacted me, proposing a name for Miss Wallman: Elizabeth Pattisson, née Wallman, of Southchurch in Essex, who lived from 1732 to 1825. (This would make her four-times-great-grandmother, or thereabouts, to both of us.) The portrait may have been painted before her marriage in 1755, so perhaps when she was about eighteen years old.

Even better, Imogen offered Miss Wallman a home. And there she now hangs, restored, dry and appreciated for the first time in decades.

An interesting postscript to this story is that while photographing some other paintings to send to Imogen, I suddenly realised that one portrait, of an old lady in a cap, was labelled as Elizabeth Pattisson, and had been painted in 1820 when she was 88 years old. Which could very well mean that the old lady and the woman in the gold dress are one and the same person.



(Miss Wallman's image has been reversed so both ladies are facing the same way)