

'Possibly the earliest of the series of pictures: John Pollock, steward, most senior in the servant hierarchy, shown in his own comfortable but plainly furnished room.'



'Mrs Brown, housekeeper, painted in the laundry where she would keep those sharp eyes firmly fixed on the lowly laundrymaids. The title of "Mrs" may have been honorary.'



'William Wright, gatekeeper, keeps a watchful eye at the gateway to Bramham Park on what was obviously a fine autumn day.'



'...and is this the man, William Fox the one-eyed coachman, whose elbow might have knocked over the lamp that started the fire? Well, he loved a drink, as we can see.'

Servants' homecoming

More than a century ago, they vanished from public view. Now these household retainers are promoted to fame on BBC2. Art expert Philip Mould tells their story



At the beginning of the 17th century, a rich Yorkshire landowner, lover of the hunt and the turf, did an extraordinary thing: he commissioned an artist to paint portraits of his servants.

Art expert Philip Mould takes up the tale with zest. 'Such a commission was an extremely unusual gesture. Men of substance would have their racehorses painted, even their dogs, but servants were – well, below stairs, weren't they? Some people might regard them as mere cogs in the machinery of the running of an estate.

'What's more, these servants were not to be portrayed by some passing journeyman painter but by a man already respected by the Royal Academy, George Garrard, whose patrons included the Prince of Wales.

'The benevolent squire was George Lane Fox, owner of Bramham Park, near Leeds. Another fine house stands there today, built for the Lane Fox descendants, because – and here's the irony – the original house was burned to the ground, probably through the carelessness of a servant. That was on July 29, 1828. A contemporary

account by the son of the steward gives a good idea of the informal life below stairs on that night: "We had some music in the footman's room. Afterwards went into the steward's room to supper with the housekeeper and lady's maid and two sisters of mine and my mother." Plenty of good Yorkshire ale was consumed, we may suppose, and then, it seems, someone – the coachman? – knocked over a lamp...

The whole house was soon on fire. The servants did their best to rescue from the flames the Master's valuables, among them, tellingly, their own portraits, which were hurled onto the lawns. When the smoke died away, Bramham Park was a gutted ruin, uninhabitable for the next 70 years – and the portraits had gone.

Fast forward in time, and here is Philip Mould on camera for *The Antiques Show*, admiring five portraits bought in America for £37,000. (The money came from Leeds City Council and the Leeds Art Collection, with contributions from the V&A and private benefactors. Philip himself could be regarded as the pictures' first saviour: as a dealer in historical portraits, he received the

tip-off, in early 1997, that 'some servant paintings' were coming up for auction in a small Manhattan sale and organised their return to Yorkshire.)

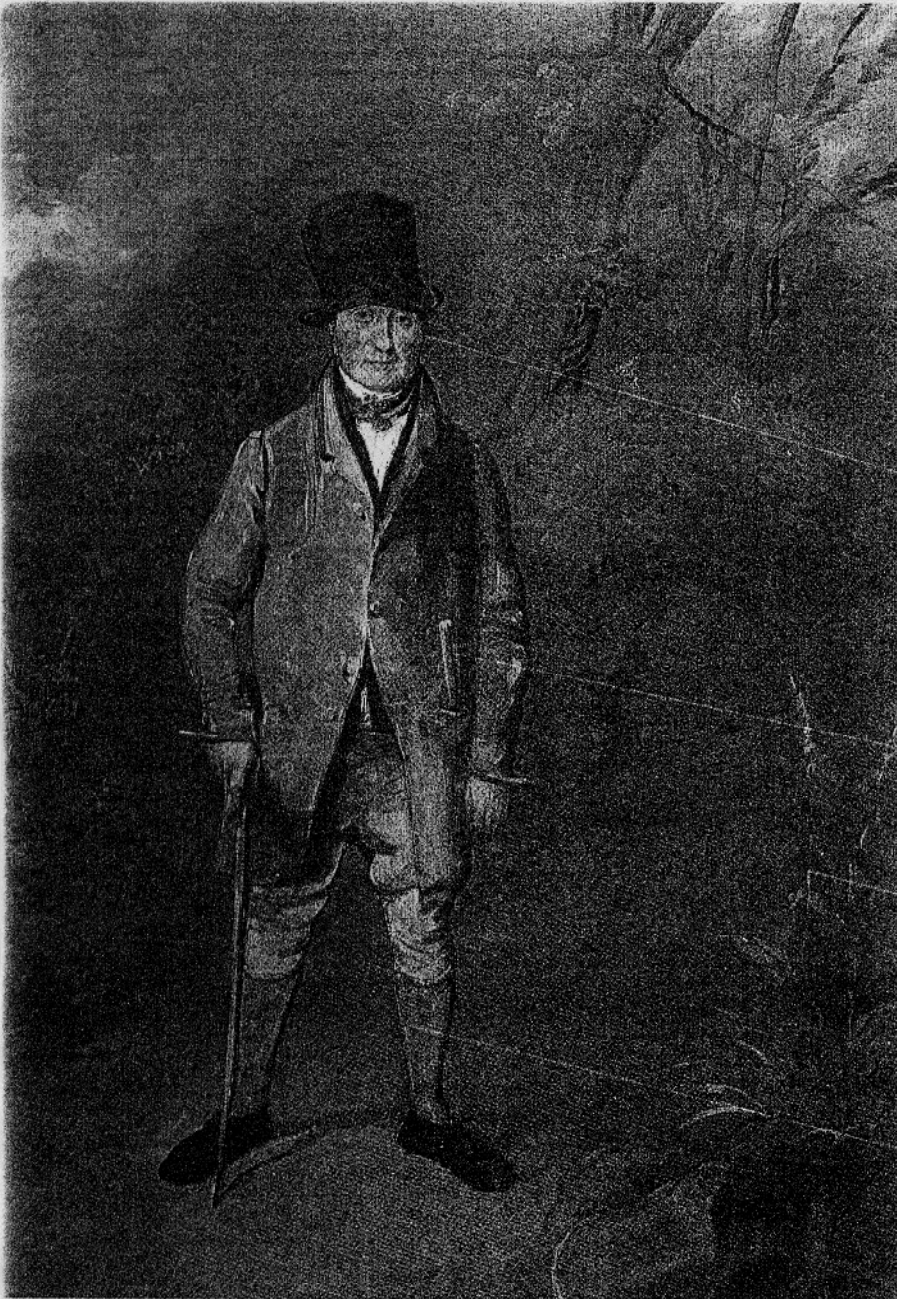
'We'll never know how they arrived on the other side of the Atlantic,' he says wondrously. 'But it wasn't uncommon, in the early part of this century, to see shipments of portraits for sale to Americans who wanted a touch of Ye Olde England on their walls. What is wonderful is that they were kept

'I love these pictures for their unadorned realism'

together, not separated. And in the meantime the artist – Garrard (1760-1826) – has become much more appreciated. Today one of his horse paintings might fetch as much as £20,000 in a London gallery.

'I love these pictures for their unadorned realism. It is so refreshing to see portraits of true workers at a time when 99.9 per cent of artistic output was of a restrained social nature, conforming to the protocol of the day. And what is so intriguing is that at the same time the artist conformed to a certain convention in setting each figure in his or her very appropriate landscape.

'George Lane Fox was obviously one of the rarer humane employers of the



'With technical virtuosity, the artist has conveyed the gardener's stout breeches and leather coat in bold, built-up strokes. Contrast that with the careful drawing that has gone into achieving the intense and impassive expression on that weatherbeaten face. You feel you would know that man if you were to meet him today on a country walk.'

'To make quite sure that we understand his subject's occupation, the artist has allowed a pruning tool to poke from the gardener's pocket.'

'Each servant has been set in his or her own realm, without pretension. So here we are somewhere in the woods of the Bramham estate. Had Garrard been painting the master here, he might have set an idealised column or piece of statuary in the composition; instead, we have a gnarled tree, and a spray of wild foxgloves.'

'He stands sturdy and four-square, with a certain dignity. There is nothing contrived or patronising about this picture. And it was painted, remember, at a time when portrayals of working people were, if done at all, likely to be romanticised or included only as accessories in a formal picture of upper-class life.'

18th century, much loved by workers.

'Now, how exciting it would be if someone, somewhere, looked at an old oil sketch, darkened by smoke and time, and remembered, say, a Yorkshire ancestor who worked at Bramham as a lady's maid. Perhaps we'd discover another Garrard!'

A specialist in historical portraits, Philip finds this 'the greatest thrill: to find an anonymous face, to link it with a painter, and finally to give it a name and a family. Literally like bringing something to life.' □

BBC TWO See Philip Mould and the servants of Bramham Park on *The Antiques Show* mid April.

YORKSHIRE HOME

Visitors to Temple Newsam House, 4 miles from Leeds town centre, can now see all of Garrard's 'servant portraits' on display – a very suitable setting in that in 1903 the former owner of the house, Lord Halifax, married the sister of George Lane Fox, a descendant of the original squire of Bramham Park. Described as the Hampton Court of the north, the fine Tudor-Jacobean Temple Newsam House sits in 1,200 acres, encompassing picnic sites and a restored Edwardian home farm. Interior decor enthusiasts can also, by appointment, see the house's important collection of historic wallpaper fragments. For opening times, tel: 0113 264 7321.

