Lodvick Verelst (1668–1704), “limner”

By PETER HANCOX

On the north wall of the nave of the church of St Mary’s, Old Swinford, there is a distinctive marble memorial bearing the inscription:

Near this place lyes
interred the body of
M‘ LODVICK VERELST
who departed this life
the 28th day of October
1704 in the 36th
year of his
Age

This is not the original location. Nash provides evidence that this memorial was relocated when the new nave was built in 1843.¹

There is no other memorial with the same surname neither does any similar name occur in the church’s records of births and deaths. The most recent guide to the church’s history describes Lodvick Verelst as a “Dutch artist of great repute”.² This article sets out to demonstrate that, while a member of an extended family of Dutch artists (some famous), Lodvick was not a significant artist and that this misattribution can be traced back, ultimately, to a misreading of the will of a Stourbridge worthy, Dr Joseph Ford.

Lodvick’s paternal grandfather and father were painters of some distinction while an uncle was, in his earlier working life, highly regarded and certainly one of Lodvick’s younger brothers made a good living from portrait painting. While other members of the family may have had some artistic skill or married artists, it is not clear that any of them were famous in their day or thereafter.

Pieter Hermansz Verelst (fl. 1618–1668) was the grandfather of Lodvick. Originally from Dordrecht, he joined the painters’ guild (Confereie Pictura) in The Hague in 1643. His surviving works consist almost entirely of portraits and of peasant scenes. His sons, Herman (b. 1634x42, d. 1691x1702) and Simon Pietersz (bap. 1644, d. 1710x1717) were paying dues to the Confereie Pictura by 1663.

Simon Pietersz was the most famous member of the family of painters. By 1667, he had moved to London becoming portraitist of choice to monarchy and nobility. His subjects included Charles II, James II and Nell Gwyn but he is more remembered now for extravagant flower paintings. Pepys was particularly taken by one of his flower paintings noting “a better picture I never saw in my whole life, and it is worth going twenty miles to see”. Unfortunately mental illness seems to have overcome Simon Verelst by 1685; his time as a portraitist was over and the remainder of his life seems to have been one of financial decline and, at best, some rather uneven work.³

Herman Verelst was Lodvick’s father. Much of what we know of his life is due to the writings of Jakob Campo Weyerman and, to a lesser extent, George Vertue. In 1667 in Amsterdam, he married Cecilia Fene, a Venetian. He worked in Amsterdam and The Hague until about 1678 before

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embarking on travels around Europe. He went to Ljubljana, Rome, Paris and then to Vienna. It may have been the Turkish siege of Vienna that caused him to join his brother Simon in London in 1683. Herman also made his living through portrait painting, of which the most famous is that of John Locke in the National Portrait Gallery. While never achieving the fame of Simon, Herman made an adequate living. The date of his death is uncertain but his pictures were offered for sale at his ‘late dwelling House’ on 24 December 1702. Cecilia outlived him being still alive in September 1704.

What of Lodvick? His baptism into the reformed (“Hervormd”) faith is recorded in the Amsterdam city archives as taking place at the Wester Kerk on 21 October 1668, his name being given as Lodewijck. Given that his parents married in 1667, it seems probable that Lodvick was the oldest child of the union. His brother, Petrus Emanuel, was baptised on 29 September 1669 but there is no record of other baptisms. Lodvick’s will shows that there were four other surviving children by 1704: brothers Peter (presumably Petrus Emmanuel), Richard and John and a sister, Adriana. Of these John (c. 1675–1734), become a very prosperous portrait painter and his son, William Verelst (bap. 1704, d. 1752), became a portraitist.

What can be known of Lodvick’s childhood can only be pieced together from the accounts of his father’s life: having spent his first ten years in Amsterdam and The Hague, he and his siblings moved around Europe until, at the age of 14 or 15, he arrived in London. Thereafter little is recorded. He married Elizabeth but the record of their marriage has not yet come to light. His home was in Hatton Garden, near the Globe Tavern. By September 1704, he (and probably his wife) were in the Stourbridge area. Lodvick made his will on 12 September 1704 and a copy is in the UK National Archives. It is very brief, leaving one guinea to each of his brothers, his sister and his mother (his father having died by 1702). All his remaining property and money he left to Elizabeth. Lodvick’s life came to an end on Saturday 28 October 1704, a few days after his thirty-sixth birthday, and he was buried on Monday, 30 October. His name is recorded in St Mary’s register as “Loddy Verelse”.

What was Lodvick Verelst doing in the parish of Old Swinford in late summer 1704? Unless new evidence turns up, it shall never be known. His will was witnessed by Mary Wheeler (whose own memorial is now next to his in the church), Susanna Child and Edward Kendall. Mary’s husband, John Wheeler, and Edward Kendall were both prominent in the local iron industry. In 1704, the Wheelers seem to have had the leasehold of Wollaston Hall and, given that there were no other substantial houses nearby, it seems probable that the Verelsts were staying there. Edward Kendall was a substantial figure in local non-conformity and the Wheelers were at least sympathetic but there is no evidence to suggest that this was the basis of a friendship with the Verelsts. (Burial in an Anglican churchyard at this time cannot be taken as an indication of conformity: there was no other graveyard available.)

We know nothing more of Elizabeth Verelst, Cecilia or most of his siblings. On 30 June 1705, a notice was posted in the London newspaper Post Man and Historical Account:

“The late Dwelling House of Mr Lodwick Verelst, near the Globe Tavern in Hatton Garden is to be let or sold; likewise the Household Goods, and a Collection of fine original Pictures. Where Attendance will be given till this day sevennight.”

The sale was supposed to last seven days but seemed to go badly as the advertisement was reprinted on 17 July and pictures were offered for sale again on 5 March 1706.

Lodvick’s will gives one more tantalizing detail about his life: he describes himself as a “limner”. The Oxford English Dictionary gives a range of usages but it is unclear which was dominant at that time; it could have been a portrait painter, book illustrator, water colourist, topographical painter or one of several other things. Kearsey’s Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum of 1708 has the entry:

“To LIMN, to paint in Water-Colours”
The Builder’s Dictionary of 1734 gives:

“LIMNING, is the art of painting in water-colours; in contradistinction to painting, properly so called, which is done in oil-colours.”11

Its extensive entry gives instruction in techniques for painting portraits, drapery, armour and landscapes. William Salmon’s Polygraphice of 1701 introduces its section on limning with:

“Limning is an Art whereby in water Colours, we strive to resemble Nature in everything to the Life.”12

The conclusion that has to be drawn from these witnesses is that, in describing himself as a “limner”, Lodvick Verelst was identifying himself as a water-colourist who may have made portraits but could equally likely have painted landscapes or even views of houses. Searches in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands have failed to find any work attributed to him and no pictures appear in the few surviving sale catalogues of his day.13 It has to be concluded that he was not a well-known artist in his day.

As stated in the introduction, there is a local belief that Lodvick was a painter of “great repute”. The basis of this belief seems to stem from a reading of the will of Dr Joseph Ford (1721), a Stourbridge physician remembered now as uncle to Samuel Johnson. He married Jane Lander, widow of Gregory Hickman (1651–1690). Gregory Hickman and Jane had had several children of which the oldest boy was another Gregory Hickman (1688–1748). Joseph Ford and Jane also had a son called Cornelius. Joseph Ford’s will14 includes the two statements:

“I also give and bequeath unto my own son Cornelius all my Plate my owne Picture and my Wifes Picture drawn by M’ Verelst Jun’ ....”
“T also give and bequeath unto my said Son in Law M’ Gregory Hickman after my Wifes death my Wifes picture drawn by M’ Verelst Sen’.”

It is a pity that Joseph Ford was not more precise in identifying the artists. The portraits by Verelst junior could have been painted anywhere between 1690 and 1721 and so the artist could have been any of Simon, Herman, John or Lodvick. It is possible that the portrait by Verelst senior was painted before Jane’s marriage to Joseph Ford and so dates from 1690 or before, meaning that it must have been by Simon or Herman. Equally, Verelst senior could be identified as Lodvick and Verelst junior as John. There simply is not sufficient evidence to make any identification and, unless the portraits come to light, it will most likely stay that way.15

This lack of evidence has not stopped the identification of Lodvick as one of the artists. In his Johnsonian Gleanings of 1923, Aley Lyell Reade refers to both Lodvick’s memorial and Joseph Ford’s will: “Probably Lodvick was the ‘M’. Verelst Jun’ and his father the ‘M’. Verelst Sen’ of the will. It would be interesting to know what brought them into Worcestershire.”16 M.V. Herbert in The Hickmans of Oldswinford notes that Jane Lander/Hickman/Ford had been painted “twice by different members of the Verelst family, local artists of repute”.17

In summary Lodvick Verelst (bap. 21 October 1668, d. 28 October 1704) was born in Amsterdam and lived there for the first ten years of his life before travels round Europe until the age of 14 or 15 brought him to London. He married Elizabeth. He died, probably at Wollaston Hall, after several weeks of illness. He described himself as what we would now describe as a water-colourist but in his day he seemed not to have had a substantial reputation and no identifiable work seems to have survived. That he is remembered at all is down to an unusual memorial, his rather brief will and the less than precise wording of Dr Joseph Ford’s will.

Acknowledgements
I am grateful to Mr Roy Peacock of St Mary’s Old Swinford for discussions and for drawing my attention to details and connections that made these conclusions possible. I am also grateful to Dr
Paul Taylor of the Warburg Institute for his email correspondence and for sharing his detailed knowledge of the Verelst family.

References


3. The form of names used follows those used by the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in their database (http://website.rkd.nl/, accessed 4 March 2010).


5. John Locke by Herman Verelst, 1689, NPG 3846.


7. Post Man and the Historical Account (London), Thursday, December 24, 1702. The catalogue survives: A Curious Collection of Pictures, to be sold ... on Thursday the 31st of this instant December 1702 ... from ten aclock in the morning will be sold by auction a large and curious collection of pictures of all sorts, made by Mr. Herman Verelst, etc. [London, 1702].

8. The will of Lodvick Verelst, proved 8 Nov 1704, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/479.


10. John Kersey. Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum: or, a general English Dictionary, comprehending a brief ... explication of all sorts of difficult words, etc. London: J. Phillips, 1708.

11. The Builder’s Dictionary: explaining the terms of art in all the several parts of architecture: also containing the theory and practice of the various branches thereof: the whole illustrated, etc. London: A. Bettesworth & C. Hitch, 1734.

12. William Salmon. Polygraphice: or, the Arts of drawing, engraving ... varnishing ... dyeing .... Eighth ed. London: Thomas Passinger, 1701. This was first published in 1672 and so, taken with The Builder’s Dictionary of 1734 (op. cit. note 11) suggests that the identification of “limmer” with water-colourist had some longevity.

13. See, for instance, An Extraordinary Collection of Original Pictures will be sold by auction, at the Three-Tun Tavern in Withchstreet ... the ninth of this instant November, 1691, etc. [London, 1691]. In this catalogue, Herman Verelst’s paintings are distinguished from those of Simon Verelst.

14. The will of Joseph Ford, proved 4 July 1721, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/560.

15. The portraits are not mentioned in the wills of Gregory Hickman (1651–1690) (proved 3 May 1690, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/399) or of Gregory Hickman (1688–1748) (proved 19 April 1749, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/769).
