

Lottery funding helps Heritage Trust secure art collection of local significance

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A windfall from the Heritage Lottery Fund means that the work of an important Victorian artist from Hemel Hempstead can be permanently safeguarded.

Dacorum Heritage Trust has received a grant of 10,000 from the fund to acquire and display 16 paintings and drawings by Lefevre Cranstone - one of a prestigious and public spirited family living in Hemel Hempstead around 1747.

Until now his work has been on loan to the Trust from the artist's great grandnephew. However, earlier this year the owner decided to sell the pictures and was keen that the DHT should be given the chance to acquire them.

The collection includes a painting of Hemel Hempstead Market Place (oil on fabric) produced around 1850. It is a fine work that wonderfully illustrates the vibrancy and character of a busy market.

It is illustrated in a book -Time's Highway by Elizabeth Buteux - published by the DHT in 1998 and shows a market trader haggling from his stall and the book tells us to the right is one of Lefevre's younger brothers, Edmund, with his future wife, Miss E Donaldson, whose parents kept the Swan Inn.

Lefevre Cranstone (1822-1893) was born in Hemel Hempstead, the son of Joseph and Maria Cranstone. He is reputed to have trained under the notable Victorian artist, William Powell Frith, says Richard Lewis, curator for DHT.

"Despite living the majority of his life in England, his work is perhaps better known in America. The reason for this is that Cranstone spent a year in America in 1859. During this period his artistic work was prolific. Many of these works are now in notable American institutions, such as

the Lilly Library, Indiana University. Following the death of Lefevre's wife, Lillia, in 1882, he moved to Australia where he died in 1893.

Elizabeth Buteux's fascinating story of the High Street tells us of all the yards and entrances off the High Street in which were conducted all manner of trades and also housed the ancient Plait Market - to which women walked from outlying villages to sell the long lengths of plaited split straws in different patterns which they had completed at home ready for stitching into straw hats - which became a main industry in nearby Luton.

The Cranstones were a Quaker family. In 1718 The Quakers bought a plot of land from the Bell Inn and built their meeting house in the High Street, then called Bell Lane, the book tells us.

Down the generations they became part of the hierarchy in this thriving commercial area of the town and had an iron foundry - Phoenix Works - in one of the yards.

Elizabeth says: Father Joseph (1747-1811), son Joseph (1794-1878) and grandson William Henry (1841-1913) managed an ironmongers shop at 25 High Street and later added the foundry.

Joseph, his wife Sarah and four children had initially come from Surrey, possibly because of Hemel Hempstead's strong Quaker traditions. They were in debt, but had relatives here. Several businesses had failed, but Joseph was not bankrupt, and it was likely that the Quakers helped to set up the business. Plus the relatives were in banking which is probably why the family went on to prosper.

Joseph Cranstone Jr married Maria Lefevre in a Quaker wedding at Longford Meeting House. They had 15 children, the second being the artist Lefevre James Cranstone.

Local people may not know the name, but most are familiar with the foundry products. They made the wrought iron bridge over the River Gade and the ornamental pumps which now stand outside the Boxmoor Hall and at the northern end of the High Street.

The Cranstones played a huge part in the public life of Hemel Hempstead serving on the more important Trusts and Committees - and also reaping many public contracts as well as external ones. Elizabeth tells us how William Cranstone took on an extra 120 men in 1897 to make two-ton bearings for the Admiralty and a 300hp engine for a gold mine in Johannesburg

The grant will also help fund an exhibition of Lefevre's life and work at Berkhamsted Civic Centre from Thursday, September 20 to Saturday, September 23.

Smaller displays will take place across the borough over the next 12 months.

Robyn Llewellyn, regional manager for the Heritage Lottery Fund said: "This excellent project will secure the paintings of local artist Lefevre Cranstone in the region and will enable people to learn about this important heritage."

This is the first Heritage Lottery grant to the Dacorum Heritage Trust for purchase of a specific item - but the Trust worked closely with the Apsley Paper Trail to help secure a grant there.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded grants totalling 3.6billion to more than 22,500 projects, 244 million of which went on 2,500 projects in the East of England.