

1. 'Extraordinary likenesses' (1844)

Tuesday 13th February 1844 was just a day, much like any other: events great and small were occurring all across the world, and, for the most part, the great events seemed greater where they happened than elsewhere. In Launceston, Tasmania, 23-year-old William Morton deserted the 96th Regiment of Foot, but reduced the likelihood of an inconspicuous getaway by continuing to wear his regimental shell jacket and white linen trousers. In India, the Synod of Pondicherry decided it was high time to establish schools for girl children. In Scotland, the rival priests of Gretna Green found their competing matrimonial services subject to unwelcome press scrutiny. In England, William Harbutt, the inventor of plasticine, was born in North Shields.

King's Lynn's notable event for the day occurred around mid-morning in an improvised studio in the New Market Rooms. Mysterious rituals were performed using chemicals, a metal plate, a dark slide, a covering cloth and a lens, and then, after a couple of minutes' uncomfortable immobility, one of the town's more prosperous citizens (name unknown) was disengaged from a head-rest and allowed to relax. T. H. Ely had just taken the town's first commercial photographic portrait.

Just over two months earlier, Ely had opened a photographic studio at the Royal Bazaar in St Andrew's Street, Norwich, using the daguerreotype process, for which he was the county's first licensee. The process, invented by Louis Daguerre and announced in Paris on 7th January 1839, involved forming images on silver-coated and light-sensitised copper plates. They were, essentially, negative images, but they appeared positive when held at the right angle to the light. Since 1839, Richard Beard had acquired the British rights to the process, had opened the first British studio in London in 1841, and had entered into licensing agreements with entrepreneurs who were anxious to take the new art into the provinces.

His offer of a Norfolk licence was not immediately taken up. The initial interest was in licences for cities with a large or affluent population. Daguerreotypes were expensive, and only the better-heeled members of a community could aspire to ownership. For those who could already afford painted portraits, the daguerreotype was a new and exciting way of having a likeness made. For others, photography brought the enviable status of portrait-subject within their grasp. But for the vast majority of the population, portraiture remained far beyond their means. Potential photographers had, therefore, to consider just how big a market any franchise could realistically be expected to offer. Consequently, in the summer of 1842, a year after issuing his first batch of licences, Beard was obliged to set about a new campaign to attract takers for those areas that were still unassigned. He offered Norfolk as a package 'to Small and Enterprising Capitalists', with the option to sub-let, 'by which alone an immense profit may be made'.¹ Waverers were assured that, 'The Photographic Apparatus is small and extremely portable, and the method of working it may be taught in a single lesson', and they were further encouraged by quotations from 'A few of the eulogiums of the Press upon Mr Beard's Daguerreotype Portraiture'.

The proposition sounded attractive to *The Norfolk News*:

A judicious bargain with the Patentee to use the license (sic) in provincial towns and neighbourhoods, we are inclined to think, might be made productive of a golden harvest, especially as it seems there is no particular skill required in working the apparatus.²

The paper had perhaps been over-impressed by Beard's 'single lesson' claim, for the process did, in fact, need some skill and precision. Prospective entrepreneurs were apparently more sceptical, for, enticing as Beard tried to make the licence seem, there was still no response, and a year later he was once again trying to stimulate interest 'among those who are desirous of increasing their capital', for whom this was 'an admirable opportunity, particularly as the Apparatus is small and light, and the method of using it may be taught in one or two Lessons'.³

Perhaps it was the offer of an extra lesson that tipped the scales. More probably, the time was at last right. The major cities of London, Liverpool, Nottingham, Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield were all by now served by practitioners of the new art, and daguerreotypes were also being produced in such places as Bath, Cheltenham and Oxford, where a sufficient portion of the population had money to spend. Now, at last, it was Norfolk's turn, and a licensee was found.

On 8th December 1843 Ely opened for business at the Norwich Royal Bazaar. He offered 'Beard's Patent Photographic Portraits, Taken daily from Ten till Dusk', and assured the public that 'These beautiful likenesses are surprisingly correct, and from the severe chemical test they have undergone, are proved to last to infinity.'⁴ But he soon had thoughts about exploring a wider market. A little more than five weeks later, whilst proffering 'his most sincere thanks to the numerous Friends who have honoured him with their visits', he gave notice of his plan 'to open Establishments in the Towns of Lynn and Wisbeach (sic) in the month of February'. He had no intention of permanently abandoning St Andrew's Street and hoped 'to see many more of the smiling faces of the Inhabitants of the City of Norwich' before his temporary departure, but he did need accommodation further afield:

N.B. – Rooms are wanted in the Towns of Lynn and Wisbeach, for the purpose of taking these Portraits. It is necessary, there should be a Sky and Side Light. A Green-house would be suitable.⁵

A fortnight later, to a new advertisement for his 'inimitable and much admired portraits, in which Great Improvements have lately been effected', he added that 'Arrangements have been made to open an Establishment in Lynn early in February'.⁶

The town offered a potential clientele that, though relatively small, was well worth targeting. Looking back in the 1890s to the scenes of his boyhood, publisher and newspaper proprietor John Dyker Thew called up memories of 'the prosperous and

wealthy Lynn merchants (who) occupied the largest houses in the town'.⁷ Trade, he added, 'was in a few hands then' and the successful traders drew in affluent customers from the countryside around.

Lynn, like many other towns similarly situated, used to be visited by all the country families. There was in those days a much more familiar understanding than now obtains between the upper classes of society and the tradesmen with whom they deal. Prior to the establishment of the railways ... the county aristocracy were among the best customers and patrons of the local shopkeepers. On market days the streets and hotel yards were full of carriages, having on their panels many an honoured crest and coat of arms, and one after another they would drive up to our doors.⁸

The town was a promising market for an enterprising daguerreotypist, and some of the townsfolk had already seen and been impressed by examples of photography. The previous November, at a well-attended public meeting of the recently formed Lynn Conversazione Society, a number of daguerreotypes were among the treasures offered for examination and discussion.⁹ But the people of Lynn had hitherto lacked the opportunity to have their own portraits taken on home ground. Then, on February 6th 1844, they learned from their local paper that the omission was about to be remedied. Headed 'Her Majesty's Royal Letters Patent, Beard's Photographic Portraits', Ely's advertisement promised a momentous event:

The inhabitants of Lynn and its Vicinity are respectfully informed that an Establishment will be opened at the New Market Rooms, Market Place, Lynn, on the 13th February, and during the Mart, for the purpose of taking these truly astonishing Likenesses. Prices One & Two Guineas, either in Morocco Case or Frame.¹⁰

Both time and location had been well chosen. The New Market Rooms evidently satisfied Ely's window requirements, for adequate daylight was needed to make the pictures. They also occupied a favourable location: they were on the market place and convenient for the inhabitants and visitors who would be attending the annual Mart during one of the busiest and liveliest periods on Lynn's calendar. It was also winter, however, when daylight is often subdued as well as brief. It was perhaps for this reason that, in his second announcement, Ely sought to reassure potential customers that photographs could be 'Taken in a few minutes, in all weathers.' He also took this opportunity to offer a 'Reduction when families are taken'.¹¹ By this he meant a series of portraits of different family members taken on the same occasion. It would have taken a brave photographer to even attempt group portraits, let alone offer to make them at a bargain price. The problems of keeping several people motionless at the same time would have greatly increased the chances of a spoiled picture.

Movement of the subject during exposure was just one of the ways in which an image could be ruined. The operator needed to deploy a range of skills. According to Antoine Claudet – a pioneer practising independently of Beard and by direct arrangement with

Daguerre – photographic success required ‘the chemical knowledge of a Faraday, the optical knowledge of a Herschel, the artistic talent of a Reynolds or a Rembrandt, and the indomitable pluck and energy of a Hannibal.’¹² This was perhaps an exaggeration, but if its head was in a cloud of fantasy, its feet still had contact with the ground of fact. The daguerreotypist, having prepared a highly-polished silvered plate and coated it with iodine, had to protect it from light while transferring it to the camera. He had to manage his subject, contriving to engineer an adequately lit and sustainable pose and an agreeable composition. He had to evaluate the strength of light coming into the studio and estimate an exposure time that would be appropriate for both the palest and darkest areas of the picture. He had to transfer the exposed plate to a box where, settled at just the right angle, it was exposed to the vapour of mercury and the image was developed. Then he must put the plate into a fixing bath containing a solution of salt or hyposulphite of soda, to counteract its sensitivity to light and prevent it from darkening to uniform blackness. After that came washing with distilled water, drying, and framing or encasing. It was a process that could be mishandled at any stage, and the operator did indeed need some skill in chemistry and physics, combined with generous measures of artistic judgement, cool nerve and self-belief.

Ely appears to have possessed the necessary talents. He had them in sufficient quantity, at any rate, to satisfy the local newspaper, where the account of his activities reads more like an advertisement than a news report:

We have great pleasure in directing attention to the advertisement in our first page, which refers to the Photographic establishment now open in this town. We have several portraits now before us, and they are really most extraordinary likenesses. The features are admirably delineated, for nature in this, as in other similar operations, admits of no mistake. We would advise our friends to avail themselves of an early visit to this establishment.¹³

A week later, the *Lynn Advertiser* returned to the subject:

The Photographic Establishment ... continues to be visited daily. Such is this happy art that it is impossible to fail in taking a likeness; the features are admirably delineated; indeed, it is altogether one of the most extraordinary discoveries of modern times. A perfect likeness is certain.¹⁴

The writer rather underestimated the effort involved. In recognising that photographic images were created by the sun, with its rays of light acting as the pencil of nature, it was easy to overlook the demanding disciplines involved in organising nature and persuading it to produce clear and permanent pictures. But it is perhaps not surprising that enthusiasm should lead to oversimplification.

Business for Ely seems to have been healthy, and while the masses paid their pennies to stare at Wombwell’s Menagerie (a popular Mart attraction), the moneyed classes paid their guineas to stare at the camera’s lens. For a short while Ely seems to have kept two studios in operation. On February 17th he included both Norwich and Lynn addresses in

an advertisement, but he warned Norwich readers that the Royal Bazaar business ‘will shortly close’.¹⁵ This evidence of simultaneous activity at two centres indicates, incidentally, that the photographer was employing some assistance, though perhaps only on a temporary basis.

Trade couldn’t remain brisk indefinitely. At a guinea or more a time, the market for photographs was limited, since there were only so many prosperous tradesmen and out-of-town gentry who could afford a portrait. Lynn’s population was just over 16,000 and was continuing, for the time being, to grow.¹⁶ But the Electoral Roll showed that fewer than 1,200 householders were rated at £10 or more a year, and the early 1840s were years of high unemployment in the town. So, although daguerreotypes were much cheaper than paintings, they were well beyond the reach of most of the population. In Norfolk, as elsewhere, the strategy of the pioneer photographer was simple: meet the demand and move on. So it was that, half-way through March, Ely was forced to consider how much longer his Lynn venture could last. He encouraged decisive action by any wavering last-minute customers: ‘Persons desirous of their Portraits will oblige by an early call, as the stay is limited.’¹⁷ Then, by March 23rd (if the sudden absence of press advertisements is to be judged as evidence), he was gone.

Ely returned to Norwich and to an enthusiastic welcome from the *Norfolk Chronicle*:

We would recommend those of our readers who have not yet visited the establishment of T.H. Ely, at the Bazaar, to embrace the opportunity ere it closes. The recent productions far excel any we have seen. ... This art, by which portraiture in living likeness is won from the hand of Nature herself, and which must rank among the most extraordinary discoveries of this era of scientific marvels, may be looked upon as clearly and satisfactorily brought into practice at this establishment.¹⁸

While retaining his premises at the Bazaar, Ely spent some time in Great Yarmouth that summer and made a visit to Swaffham in June 1845.¹⁹ In July he moved his Norwich operation to 1 Exchange Street, but he appears to have given up the business quite soon after that, and by September 1846 Beard was advertising for a new Norfolk licensee.²⁰ As for the gentry of Lynn, they had another six years to wait before their next encounter with a professional camera.

¹ *Norwich Mercury*, 16th July 1842.

² *Norfolk News*, 25th June, 1842.

³ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 22nd July 1843

⁴ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 9th December 1843.

⁵ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 13th January 1844.

⁶ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 27th January 1844.

⁷ J D Thew, *Personal Recollections: by a Lynn Sexagenarian*, pp43-44, (King’s Lynn: Thew & Son, 1891).

⁸ *Ibid.* p152.

⁹ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 12th November 1842.

¹⁰ *Lynn Advertiser*, 6th February 1844.

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- 11 *Lynn Advertiser*, 13th February 1844.
- 12 Thomas Sutton, *Reminiscences of an old photographer* in *The British Journal of Photography*,
30 August, 1867, p413 (London: Henry Greenwood).
- 13 *Lynn Advertiser*, 25th February 1844.
- 14 *Lynn Advertiser*, 2nd March 1844.
- 15 *Norfolk Chronicle*, 17th February 1844.
- 16 J D Thew, *Personal Recollections: by a Lynn Sexagenarian*, p98, (King's Lynn: Thew & Son,
1891).
- 17 *Lynn Advertiser*, 16th March 1844.
- 18 *Norfolk Chronicle*, 1st June 1844.
- 19 Bernard & Pauline Heathcote, *A Faithful Likeness: The first photographic portrait studios
in the British Isles, 1841 to 1855*, p75 (Lowdham: Heathcote, 2002).
- 20 Keith Adamson, *More Early Studios (Part 2)* in *The Photographic Journal*, volume 128,
number 7, p305 (London: Royal Photographic Society, July 1988).