

Part of my work across the last year has been to increase the levels of information held for objects in our collections, making them available to the public via our online database. Information on how to search the database is at the end. I recently came across a record with a slightly fuzzy image of a man, (which was out of focus when the photo was taken many years ago). Through the fuzziness I could see the face of a man who looked like he was sleeping. I scrolled down to read the short and simple record that told me that this was the “corpse of Benjamin Tatham”.

Why had somebody drawn a picture of the recently deceased Benjamin Tatham? Well it may seem strange now, but post-mortem art was fairly common in the past. Initially only the wealthy could afford to commemorate their dead with a mourning portrait. Later with the invention of photography post-mortem photographs became affordable to many, for some this would have been the only image to remember their loved one by. A search on Google reveals many photographs of deceased people, including this image of German Emperor Frederick III who died in 1888.

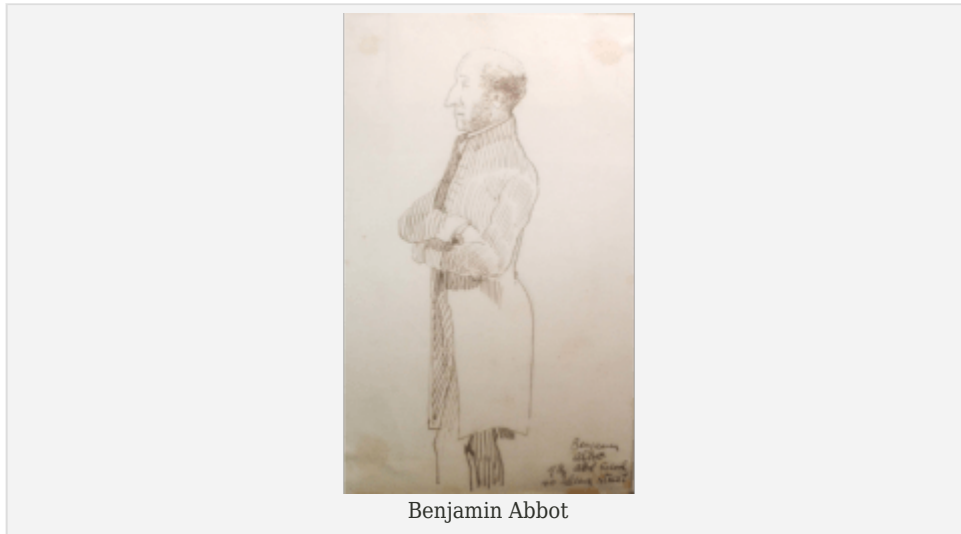


German Emperor Frederick III

Our drawing of Benjamin Tatham was created by Hitchin artist Samuel Lucas Senior. It's

Benjamin Tatham a life beyond death

thanks to Samuel and his prolific sketching output that we can look upon the faces of many Hitchin residents of times gone by. The image below is a sketch he made of school master Benjamin Abbot of Tilehouse Street.



Both the image of Benjamin Tatham and of Benjamin Abbot entered our museum service at the same time on 12 August 1940 among a collection of many Lucas sketches, close to a century after they were drawn. This means that the post-mortem drawing of Benjamin Tatham stayed with Lucas and was not given to Tatham's family. Perhaps Samuel Lucas visited the family to pay his respects and, ever the sketcher, could not help himself but sketch a final image of Tatham posed in his bed, or coffin. Perhaps the image stuck with him so much that he jotted down his memories at a later time. Maybe this formed a preparatory sketch for a later image given to the Tatham family? We think this is the only drawing of the dead that Samuel Lucas Senior created.

What do we know of Benjamin Tatham himself? Well we know that in life he worked as a woolstapler, a dealer in wool, on Bancroft, just around the corner from our museum. Trade directories show him operating from Bancroft in 1823, 1832, 1839 and a final appearance of 1846, perhaps suggesting his death shortly afterwards. To the best of our knowledge this is the only image of Benjamin Tatham to survive to the modern day. Samuel Lucas' simple but moving sketch allows Benjamin Tatham to live on into 2021. More than one hundred and fifty years after his passing, we can look at this picture and imagine the man, dealing wool in Hitchin, walking the same streets we walk and interacting with the other residents captured in Lucas's sketches. Perhaps he is amongst the crowd of people in the Lucas painting of the Market Place.



Samuel Lucas Senior's Market Place painting

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