

Plunging into Bath

In need of money, Thomas Gainsborough went to Bath in search of suitable sitters to paint. [Hugh Belsey](#) describes how the experience laid the foundations for his later career



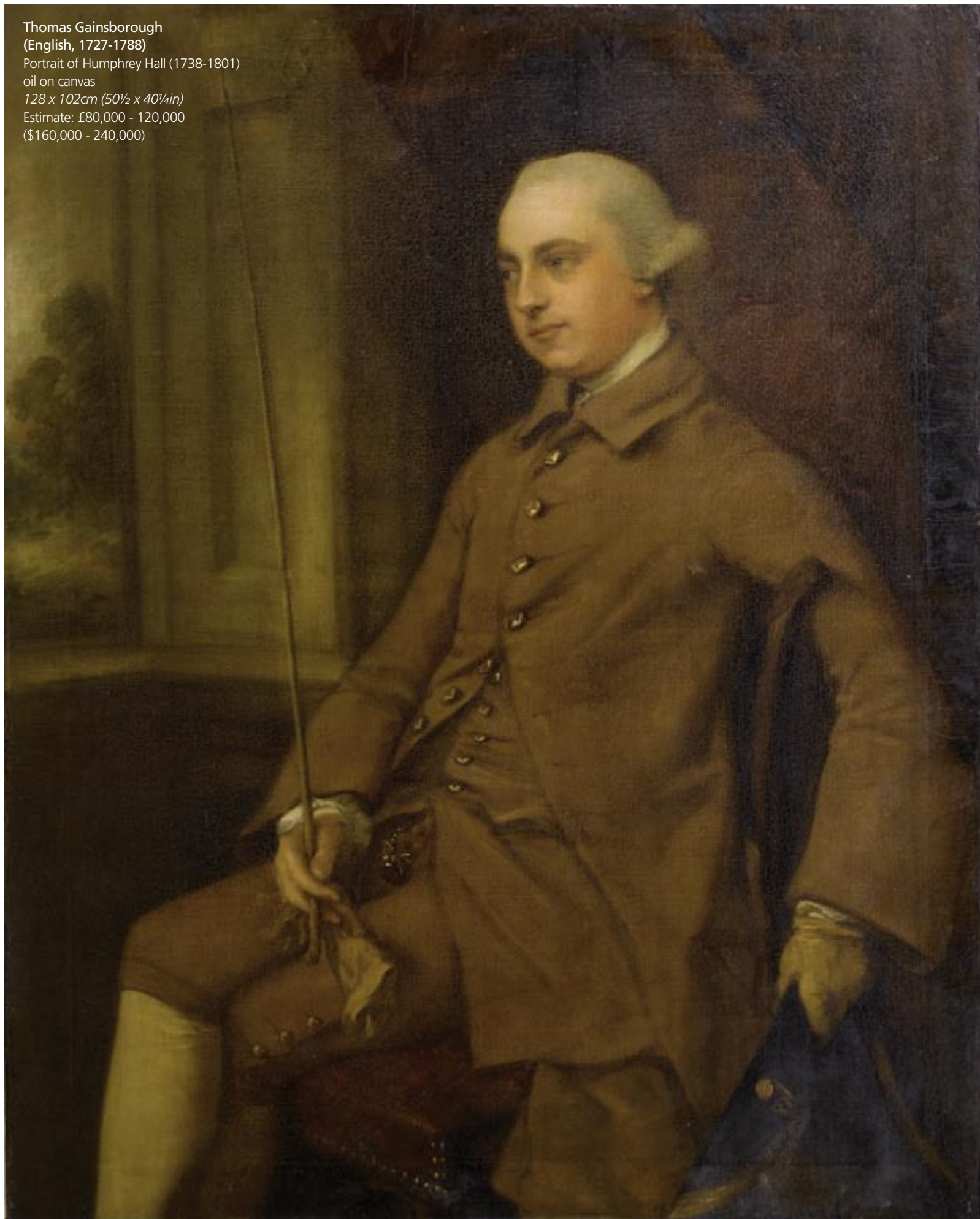
Portraiture was the only way for an 18th-century painter to make a living in Britain. The British had an inexhaustible need for portraits, and in the second half of the century there were many suppliers and as many strategies to find a ready supply of sitters. It was a fiercely competitive business and it involved a continual stream of people, all expecting portraitists to make them appear better than the mirror. Thomas Gainsborough was among the best and although his career was slow to start, it rapidly gained momentum as soon as he moved to the West Country.

Gainsborough was born in 1727 in Sudbury in the east of England. He showed an early aptitude for drawing, even playing truant to spend time sketching in the woods and meadows around the town. At the age of 14 he went to London. His family, all cloth merchants and weavers, had contacts in the Capital and Gainsborough's gifts as a draughtsman were, like his great mentor William Hogarth, probably first used by a silver engraver. In London he took every opportunity to learn his craft. His drawing skills were aided by the Frenchman, Hubert François Gravelot, and he must have learnt much about painting techniques from Francis Hayman. By the time he supplied a painting for the Foundling Hospital in London in 1748, his talent was unquestioned. However, the carnal delights of London were a distraction and he fathered a child by a young woman – who proved to be the illegitimate daughter of a Duke – and, sadly, after a shot-gun wedding, the daughter died and the couple, expecting their second child, returned to Sudbury.

Being a duke's daughter, no matter from which side of the blanket, had its advantages. An annuity of £200 had been settled on young Margaret Gainsborough which provided an income for the young family and a lack of incentive for the young artist. There were exceptions, such as the rightly famous portrait of *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, which was painted not long after their move to the country. But the couple soon moved again, this time to the coastal town of Ipswich, which offered more opportunities for portrait commissions. And they came in the 1750s, when Gainsborough painted many head-and-shoulder portraits of the Suffolk gentry. Ipswich, like many provincial centres, could support a competent portraitist for half-a-dozen years but not for much longer than that.

In the autumn of 1758, tired of relying on the annuity, Gainsborough was anxious to earn a respectable income. He visited Bath for several months during the winter of 1758/59, when the city was bristling with visitors who had more money and time than they knew what to do with. The detailed head-and-shoulder portraits he painted there were more confident than those he had produced in his native Suffolk, and they met with approval, especially for their "likeness". George Lucy, a neighbour of Henry Wise of Warwick, who had sat for Gainsborough in Bath, thought his portrait "was very like". Bath had a continual ebb and flow of new sitters who would provide a ready market for portraiture, and Gainsborough was confident that his future was assured. Back in Ipswich, he put his personal effects up for auction, gave some paintings away and took his family to Bath.

Thomas Gainsborough
(English, 1727-1788)
Portrait of Humphrey Hall (1738-1801)
oil on canvas
128 x 102cm (50½ x 40¼in)
Estimate: £80,000 - 120,000
(\$160,000 - 240,000)





Left: Thomas Gainsborough's self-portrait, painted c.1758-1759, when the artist was 30.

Right: One of Gainsborough's most famous works, Mr and Mrs Andrews, now in The National Gallery

Above: A view of Bath Abbey by J.M.W. Turner. The house that Gainsborough rented from The Duke of Kingston is on the right of the picture, with the Venetian window.

Below right: Gainsborough's portrait of Lord Nugent, showing how the artist re-used the 'hanging arm' pose first seen in the portrait of Humphrey Hall.

It is not known where the Gainsboroughs lived when they first arrived in the city, but on 24 May, 1760, the artist took a seven-year lease (it was renewed for a further seven years) on the largest and most prominent available property in the city, a house built for the Duke of Kingston opposite the west end of Bath Abbey, "in the smoak", as Gainsborough was to call it. He took in paying guests to ensure that he had the necessary income to cover the £50 annual rent. He made one of the large ground floor rooms a 'shew' room in which he exhibited portraits that were in progress and canvases he had painted to impress future clients and converted the room immediately above into his studio.

One of the paintings that showed off his talent was probably the self-portrait, now in The National Portrait Gallery, set against an oak tree in which Gainsborough declares himself to be *anghus pinxit*, as William Hogarth had once written. Perhaps the portrait hung with one of his wife and greeted visitors when they arrived at the building. Indeed, the property was so commodious that, later in the decade Gainsborough's widowed sister, Mrs Mary Gibbon, opened a millinery shop on the ground floor selling ribbons, frills and furbelows as well as hats. A milliner's was regarded as the only respectable trade for a lady and had the additional benefit of providing a honeypot for beaux to gather and meet respectable young women.

The portrait of Humphrey Hall, offered in Bonhams' sale, dates from the artist's first years in Bath and the nonchalant arm hooked over the back of the Chippendale-style chair is one that Gainsborough toyed with during the early years of his maturity. As with many of Gainsborough's early Bath-

period portraits, Hall is posed in the studio beside a window with a view of countryside which is reminiscent of the artist's landscape paintings rather than the topographical view of the city that visitors must have seen from the window.

Gainsborough painted Humphrey Hall in the most informal of poses. He may well have been the 'Mr Hall' who is listed in *Boddley's Bath Journal* as arriving in Bath shortly before 14 April, 1760, and this would tally with the style of the portrait. Fresh from riding, he has come to the studio wearing one calf glove and holding the other. He holds his whip in his right hand and

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in his left a tricorne hangs by his side. The energy expended on his ride had clearly made him tense and the beholder is aware that as a sitter he is uncomfortable and, perhaps, uneasy about the amount of time the process is taking. Hall hooks his arm over the back of the chair and crosses his legs with irritation. Time has passed and so he is a little more relaxed, his attention caught by a conversation outside the picture plane. He wears a light brown suit with brass buttons, which is made to appear warmer in tone juxtaposed against the seat of the chair and a full red silk damask curtain pulled back from the window. The black of the tricorne, the green of the landscape and the white



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flashes of stock and cuffs enliven the image and a fob hanging from his waist shows that Hall is a man of substance.

Humphrey Hall was born in 1738, the son of Thomas Hall, a London merchant, and his wife, Mary Hallett of Dunmow in Essex. Both his parents died young and his elder siblings were dead by 1750, but instead of living at Goldings in the village of Bengoe near Hertford, the village where many of his forebears are buried, he spent most of his time at Manadon near Plymouth. In 1767, he completed the family's transition from merchant class to gentry, when he married Jane, a daughter of Lord St John. The couple brought up a family of daughters and he died on 25 September, 1801.

The hooked arm stayed with Gainsborough. He had already observed it in the paintings of Francis Hayman and he adapted it, making it more his own when he re-used it for the full-length portrait of Lord Nugent, a painting which he chose to exhibit in his first London exhibition at the Society of Artists in 1761. The experience of painting the portrait of Humphrey Hall had taught Gainsborough a great deal and, with growing fluency, set him on his way to paint some of his greatest masterpieces in Bath, which include *The Blue Boy*, and later on in London.

Hugh Belsey is a Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre in London. He is writing a catalogue of portraits by Thomas Gainsborough.

Sale: Old Master Paintings
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Wednesday 9 July at 2pm
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