

## Portraits by the friend of Sherlock Holmes discovered in the City of Westminster

Everyone who reads the Sherlock Holmes stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has a picture in their mind of how he looks. Though Conan Doyle does describe him, the modern image of Holmes is generally not derived from this description, but from elsewhere. This is how Conan Doyle saw Holmes:

"His very person and appearance were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were invariably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch, as I frequently had occasion to observe when I watched him manipulating his fragile philosophical instruments." (STUD)

In this day and age many people see in their mind's eye the actor Jeremy Brett. A slightly older generation tends to see another actor, Douglas Wilmer, while those a bit older still see Basil Rathbone. Americans nowadays also see Jeremy Brett, such was the Granada Television series' international impact. Older Americans saw William Gillette, an actor not well known in Britain today, but towering in his stage performances as Holmes over many decades in his native America and in Britain.

It was not, however, Gillette himself that people remembered - his film of Sherlock Holmes has not survived and is known visually from only a few stills. There is only one surviving piece of film of him, as an elderly man showing the audience his private miniature steam train in the grounds of his castle in Connecticut. What people are remembering are the original illustrations to the Sherlock Holmes stories that appeared in Colliers Magazine. The artist, Frederick Dorr Steele very consciously based his Holmes on Gillette.

This brings us back to the actors remembered above as Holmes. They have one thing in common, something that Brett in particular did very consciously. They all resemble the Holmes of the original illustrations in The Strand Magazine, illustrations that were so influential from the very beginning that even illustrators of translations of the stories published abroad drew their inspiration from (some almost blatantly copied) them.



That Holmes, Conan Doyle felt, was a bit more handsome than he had actually intended. The first two stories, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of Four* (1890) did not appear in *The Strand Magazine* and were illustrated by two different artists, D. H. Friston and Charles Kerr. *The Strand* itself only started in 1891, published by George Newnes. The issue for July contained a second story by a young author who had already contributed one short story and this one was about Sherlock Holmes, "A Scandal in Bohemia". *The Strand* wrote to a well known artist to commission illustrations. One of the main selling points of the magazine from its very beginning was the profusion and quality of the illustrations. "A picture on every page" was its war cry and throughout its life it maintained its lead over its rivals in this respect, having the best presses and moving early to colour reproduction. But that was in the future.

In 1891 the letter addressed to Mr. Paget was delivered. Legend has it that *The Strand* actually intended to commission Walter Paget, whose work in *The Illustrated London News* illustrating the Gordon Relief Expedition had impressed the Editor of the Strand, Greenhough Smith, but he was out of the country at the time and his brother Sidney, also an artist, opened the letter. So began a historic partnership that would make the reputations and quite possibly the fortunes of the magazine, the author and the artist.



Sidney Edward Paget was born on 4 October 1860 at 60, Pentonville Road, London, the fourth (some sources cite 5th) son of Robert Paget, a vestry clerk of St. James and St. John in Clerkenwell from 1856 to 1892 and his wife, Martha Clarke, a Professor of Music.

The oldest brother, Henry Marriott Paget RBA (1856-1936) was a painter of historical subjects and portraits. He entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1874, and exhibited at the Academy from 1879-94. The next two (possibly 3) brothers seem to have made little mark on history. The youngest of the family was Walter Stanley Paget (1863-1935). He signed himself as 'Wal Paget'. He was a gold medallist at the Royal Academy and was described as 'a good figure draughtsman, with a strong poetic feeling for landscape... working with

unconventional, fresh composition'. He also turned to drawing for the books and magazines. His major illustrative work is probably *Robinson Crusoe* in the early 1890s, but he is best remembered today for two things. One of these is certain: he illustrated the Sherlock Holmes story "The Dying Detective" for *The Strand* in December 1913. The second is a matter of legend, to which we shall return.

Let us go back to Sidney Paget. He started drawing at a young age. Until his marriage, Paget lived with his family at 19 Lloyd Square in Clerkenwell. He received his early education at the Cowper Street School in London, and spent two years studying the artistic antiquities at The British Museum before going to the Heatherley School of Fine Art. In 1881 he entered the Royal Academy Schools where he was to study for 6 years. While he was there he met a student of architecture, Alfred Morris Butler, who, it is said, became the model for the illustrations of Dr. Watson. Paget won several important prizes at the school, among them second place in the 1885 Armitage competition and first place and medal in 1886 for his *Balaam Blessing the Children of Israel*. He only missed the gold medal for painting by a casting vote, having "tied" with the successful student.

Between 1879 and 1905, Sidney contributed some 18 varied paintings to the Royal Academy exhibitions, including landscapes and mythological subjects, with titles such as *A Perilous Passage* and *A Knight with Fairies*. As a successful exhibitor, Paget took a studio in Holland Park Road, Kensington and began painting portraits and small pictures. Perhaps the best known of his pictures, *Lancelot and Elaine*, exhibited in 1891, was presented to the Bristol Art Gallery by Lord Winterstoke. Its present whereabouts are unknown. Nine of the Royal Academy exhibits were portraits. His subjects included Dr. Weymouth (exh. RA, 1887), headmaster of Mill Hill School, and the two now in the possession of Westminster City Council, Sir John Aird, mayor of Paddington and Mr. Frank Dethridge, seen here, the borough's town clerk. He also did family portraits: his father, his uncle Robert Ernest and his wife.



From the 1890s, Paget concentrated more on black and white work. His work won a wide reputation in Britain and abroad through his drawings for periodicals such as *Pictorial World* (1882), for *The Sphere*, and for many of Cassell's publications. He also drew occasionally for *The Graphic*, *The Illustrated London News*, and *The*

*Pall Mall Magazine*. His subject included both fiction, such as Arthur Morrison's Martin Hewitt detective stories and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, both in *The Strand Magazine*, and news items, such as the wars in Egypt and the Soudan.

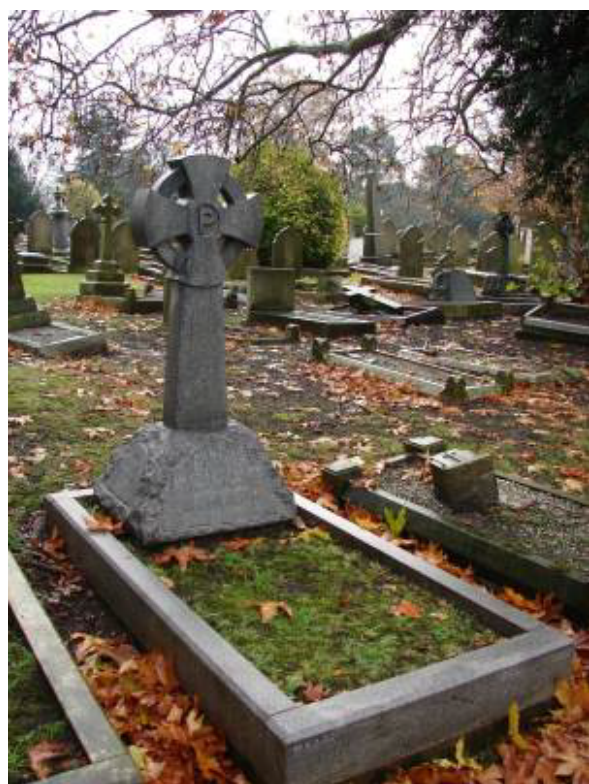
It is often said that Paget based Holmes' appearance on that of his brother, Walter. According to his brother Henry, quoted in the 1912 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* "the assertion that the artist's brother Walter, or any other person, served as model for the portrait of Sherlock Holmes is incorrect." Sidney's Holmes does, however, look very like Walter and one wonders whether the family were trying to

divert unwelcome attention. There are stories of Walter Paget being mistaken for Sherlock Holmes when attending a recital at the Bechstein Hall or, when attending a dinner given by friends hearing their young son call out, "Mummy, Mr. Sherlock Holmes has come!" The furniture in Holmes' rooms was often modelled on that Sidney had in his own home.



His illustrations have been criticised by some as being wooden. We must remember the technology of the day. An engraver made the plates for printing, a process which introduced the woodenness. It was not Paget's. The Strand Magazine offices had a gallery and shop on the ground floor where members of the public could go to see and purchase the original illustrations. Some have survived and are now extremely valuable and mostly in the hands of private collectors and the occasional library special collection.

On 1 June 1893 Sidney Paget married Edith (b. 1865/6), daughter of William Hounsfield, a farmer. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle sent a silver cigarette case, inscribed from Sherlock Holmes. They had six children. During the last few years of his life he suffered from a painful chest complaint, to which he succumbed at 16 Surrey Road, Margate, on 28 January 1908, aged only 47. According to one source, he was in the habit of sucking his brushes and the paints he used were lead-based. He was buried at Marylebone cemetery, Finchley.



His daughter Winifred published some reminiscences about her father in 1950, which give a more personal view of him:

"After their marriage in 1893, my parents set up their home in a village in Hertfordshire. Here my father built a studio in one corner of the orchard that surrounded the house. During the summer I fear he sometimes spent more time in that orchard than he did in the studio. When the time came for the next batch of drawings to go to the publisher he would have to sit up half the night working hard to get them finished. It was worth it I suppose for those sunny days spent hay-making in the orchard.

I remember, too, the barrel organ that used to stop and play outside our gate and around which we children would dance and throw our pennies. Suddenly my father would appear and, with great abandon, turn cartwheels on the lawn. Then, with a wave and a grin he would just as suddenly disappear and return to work..."

"As a young man, my father lived in the country. It was then that he wore the surely now most famous of all hats, the deerstalker. Like most artists, he followed many pursuits, but I do not think deerstalking was one of them! I imagine he chose this type of hat for himself as being suitable and comfortable for tramping round the countryside. This possibly inspired him to depict Holmes wearing a deerstalker on similar occasions. It seems to me to be a fitting headgear for the great detective out on the man-hunt. It may once more become the height of fashion as it has lately been seen adorning the head of young Prince Charles on his return from a visit to the country. Little did my father know that his deerstalker would still be



talked about more than half a century after it first appeared in the pages of The Strand Magazine!"

Sidney Paget painted two portraits which were presented to Paddington Borough Council and which came into the possession of Westminster City Council when the former boroughs of Paddington, Marylebone and Westminster merged in the 1965 local government reorganisation. The first, as we have seen was of Mr Frank Dethridge. The now indistinct inscription reads,



FRANK DETHRIDGE ESQ.  
 FIRST TOWN CLERK OF PADDINGTON  
 PRESENTED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE BOROUGH COUNCIL  
 ON HIS RETIREMENT FROM OFFICE, IN TESTIMONY OF THEIR HIGH APPRECIATION  
 OF THE VALUABLE SERVICES RENDERED BY HIM TO THE BOROUGH  
 AS VESTRY CLERK AND TOWN CLERK DURING A PERIOD OF 34 YEARS  
 22ND JANUARY 1903

A detail of Dethridge's right hand shows the quality of the painting. Frank Dethridge was Vestry Clerk of Paddington for 40 years and the first Town Clerk of the new Borough of Paddington when it was formed in 1900. He was a well-known figure at

The Reform Club and stood as Liberal M.P. for Hammersmith in 1885. During his career he suggested the average gas meter system and promoted the purchase of Ravenscourt Park as a public park. After retiring he lived in Brighton, where he suffered a stroke while playing billiards on New Year's Day 1911 and died immediately. He was 74. He was cremated and his ashes interred at Highgate New Cemetery. The Times published his obituary was in on Thursday, Jan 05, 1911 (pg. 10; Issue 39474; col B).



It is on this portrait that Paget's signature is more clearly visible.



The painting is not, sadly, in a location where arrangements can easily be made to view it.



SIR JOHN AIRD, BART. M.P.  
FIRST MAYOR OF PADDINGTON, 1900-1, 1901-2  
PRESENTED BY MEMBERS OF THE BOROUGH COUNCIL  
ON HIS RETIREMENT FROM OFFICE  
IN RECOGNITION OF THE ABLE AND CONSIDERATE MANNER  
IN WHICH FOR TWO SUCCESSIVE YEARS  
HE DISCHARGED THE DUTIES OF THE MAYORALTY

The second portrait is that of Sir John Aird, Bart. M.P. Arrangements can be made to view this painting when visiting the Sherlock Holmes Collection at Marylebone Library. It is not, however, in a location that makes it easy to photograph. Again, time has not served the plaque well.

Sir John Aird (3 December 1833 to 6 January 1911) is, historically, the more interesting figure. His obituary was published in *The Times* on Saturday, Jan 07, 1911 (pg. 8; Issue 39476; col E). He was the only child of John Aird (1800-1876) by his wife Agnes (d. 29 July 1869). His father was for twenty years the superintendent of the Phoenix Gas Company's station at Greenwich who in 1848 set up a contracting business of his own laying mains for many gas and water companies in London. John was educated at Greenwich and Southgate, then joined his elder brother, Charles in their father's business on his eighteenth birthday. The firm became known as John Aird & Sons. One of his first contracts was the removal of the 1851 Great Exhibition buildings (which had been erected by his father) and their reconstruction as the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. The firm built reservoirs at Hampton and Staines and the Beckton plant of the Gas Light and Coke Company, as well as commissions abroad. They were also associated with Sir John Kirk in the building of the Millwall Docks.

In the 1860s the Airds began railway contracting and from 1870 operated with another family, the Lucas family, as three firms: Lucas Brothers, who carried out building works, Lucas and Aird, who carried out railway and civil engineering contracts, and John Aird & Sons, who continued to specialize in water and gas contracts. On 6 Sept. 1855 John Aird had married Sarah (d. 4 April 1909), the daughter of Benjamin Smith of Lewisham, Kent, by whom he had two sons and

seven daughters. As his sons became old enough they too were brought into the business. The elder, John (1861-1934), joined in 1879 and became a partner in 1886, while the younger, Malcolm (1872-1934), followed in 1892. After the death of Sir Charles Thomas Lucas in 1895 the firms of Lucas Brothers and Lucas and Aird were dissolved and a new firm of John Aird & Co. was set up to carry on the railway and civil engineering work; Aird & Sons continued the water and gas contracts. John Aird remained very active. Nearly fifty more contracts were taken by the two Aird firms before his death. During this time it carried out work for both railways and docks, including various extensions of the Metropolitan, District, and St. John's Wood railways, the Royal Albert Docks, Tilbury Docks, the East and West India Docks extension, and the West Highland railway.

Aird is today perhaps best known for his great work of damming the Nile. In February 1898 Aird offered to construct dams at Assuan and Assyût, payment being deferred until the completion of the contract, and then spread over a term of years. His offer was accepted by the Egyptian government, and the work, begun in April 1898, was finished in 1902, a year ahead of schedule.

From 1887 to 1905 Sir John represented North Paddington as Conservative M. P. in the House of Commons, where he was well known and respected. He was also popular in City circles and was in 1882 appointed on the commission of lieutenancy of the City of London. He became in 1900 the first mayor of the newly-created London Borough of Paddington, and was re-elected in the following year.

He was created 1st Baronet Aird, of Hyde Park Terrace, Paddington, London on 5 March 1901 on Lord Salisbury's recommendation. Aird suffered a stroke in 1908, prompting his retirement to Wilton Park, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, where he died on 6 January 1911. He was buried in a vault alongside his wife in St Anne's Church, at Littleworth, near Dropmore, Beaconsfield.



There is one final point of interest. If Sir John Aird looks a little familiar it may be that you are thinking of the Duke of Holderness. Conan Doyle's story "The Adventure of the Priory School" was published in The Strand Magazine in February 1904, not all that long after Sir John's retirement as mayor in 1902 and Paget's portrait of him. Did Sidney Paget further mask the identity the man

Watson called the Duke of Holderness by drawing inspiration from Sir John Aird?





## Links

For other pictures of Sir John Aird :

<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/person.asp?LinkID=mp00051>

For more information on Sir John Aird :

<http://www.thepeerage.com/e144.htm>

For information on the Paget brothers :

[www.artintheblood.com](http://www.artintheblood.com)

For a new census to track down and describe Sidney Paget's original art:

<http://members.aol.com/shbest/ref/sidney-paget-original-art.htm>