# DRAWINGS OF HANS HOLBEIN

Glass Case

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FRONTISPIECE



THOMAS BOLEYN, EARL OF WILTS AND ORMONDE

WINDSOR

# DRAWINGS OF HOLBEIN

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# HANS HOLBEIN
## BY A. L. BALDRY

AS is the case with many others of the more famous masters, it is not easy to fix exactly the dates of the chief events in Holbein's life. Even his name is uncertain, for though he has been generally called Hans by his biographers and by art historians, there seem reasons for assuming that he was really named John. The place and year of his birth are also disputed. Tradition assigns Basle for the former and 1498 for the latter, though some critics hold that he was born at Augsbourg, and support their contention by reference to a picture of *St. Paul*, painted by his father, John Holbein the elder, which bears the inscription, "This picture was completed by John Holbein, a citizen of Augsbourg, in 1499." It seems probable, however, that the younger Holbein was brought up at Basle, and that he was trained entirely by his father, who was an artist of considerable repute. The boy, indeed, lived from his earliest years in an artistic atmosphere, for, besides his father, he had an uncle, Sigismond, and two brothers, Ambrose and Bruno, who followed the profession of painting.

The training he received was unusually comprehensive: in addition to the preparatory exercises necessary for the painter, he was instructed in engraving, modelling, casting, and architecture, and so was well prepared for the many and varied demands which were made upon his powers in later life. That he progressed with unusual rapidity, and profited remarkably by the instruction given to him, is proved by the fact that, as early as 1512, he was able to paint portraits of his father and uncle, which, judging by the engravings by Sandrart from the original pictures, were works of notable merit, and surprising achievements for so young a boy. The writers who claim Augsbourg as Holbein's birthplace contend that these, his earliest recorded productions of importance, were executed there, and that his residence at Basle did not commence until 1515. He was certainly at Basle in 1520, for he received the freedom of the city in that year, and he painted a portrait of Erasmus, who had about that date come to take refuge there. By the patronage of Erasmus, and another influential friend, Amerbach the printer, of whom also he had painted a portrait, he was brought into a degree of prominence to which, despite his

unusual abilities, he might not have attained by his own exertions, for he was of reckless and extravagant habits, and by no means discreet in his manner of living.

However, the recommendations of his friends were so well justified by the rapidly increasing merit of his work that his reputation soon became considerable. He painted at this period some of his most famous pictures—the *Meier Madonna* in 1522, the series illustrating *The Passion of Christ*, frescoes in the Basle Town Hall, and a number of portraits; and he drew also a large number of designs for wood engraving, among them his *Dance of Death* and his *Alphabet of Death.* His fame attracted the attention of the Earl of Arundel—or, as some say, the Earl of Surrey—who, when he was passing through Basle on his way to Italy, urged the painter to come to England, so as to secure greater opportunities of advancement.

This advice Holbein at first neglected, but the troubles which occurred at Basle in 1525, and the resulting diminution in the local demand for his services, induced him to try the effect of a change of residence. So in the following year he set out for England, with letters of introduction from Erasmus to Sir Thomas More, and bringing with him his portrait of Erasmus as a specimen of his work. According to Horace Walpole, some difficulties were made about his departure from Basle, though he had given out that he was only going to England for a visit. He had, so the story runs, just finished a portrait of one of his patrons, and as a joke he painted a fly on the sitter's forehead. When the owner of the picture went to brush off the fly and discovered the deception, he was so impressed by the artist's imitative skill that he spread the story in all directions. The result of this easy trick was to give the people of Basle an opinion of Holbein's ability far greater than they had ever held before, and to induce them to take steps to prevent him leaving the city. He had, however, departed secretly before anything could be done, and had proceeded to England by way of Antwerp, where he made a short stay to study the works of Quentin Matsys.

On his arrival here he was received at once into the house of Sir Thomas More, at Chelsea, where he remained for nearly three years, busy with portraits and portrait groups. His first sitter was Sir Thomas More himself, and among the other works he executed at this time were portraits of Archbishop Warham, the Bishop of Rochester, Sir Henry Guildford, and a large picture of the More family. It has been generally believed that he was recommended to the King, Henry VIII., by Sir Thomas More. The accepted story is that the Chancellor, anxious that his painter should receive the

king's patronage, invited Henry to an entertainment which took place in a hall hung with Holbein's pictures. When the king noticed these works Sir Thomas begged him to accept any that he might wish to possess; but Henry, instead, asked for the artist, and when he was presented took him at once into his service, with the remark that "now he had got the painter Sir Thomas might keep his pictures." The anecdote is picturesque, but unfortunately it seems to lack confirmation.

The actual facts are apparently that, at the end of his residence at Chelsea, Holbein went back in the autumn of 1529 to Basle, and worked there for some two years. Then he decided to return to England, where he felt there would be more scope for him, and better chances of success in his profession. His family remained at Basle, but he was able to provide for them and leave his affairs there in proper order. Once again settled in England his progress was uninterrupted. Between the date of his return there and 1538, when appears the first record of a payment made to him for work done for the king, he painted a large number of important pictures, among them the famous *Ambassadors*, and this despite the fact that his first and greatest patron, Sir Thomas More, was no longer in power or able to advance his interests. From 1538 onwards to his death, which tradition assigns to the year 1554, though there is some evidence that it occurred as early as 1543, he was constantly employed on portraits of royal personages and court notabilities: and during this period he produced several large canvases illustrating events in contemporary history. Among these were the large representations of Henry VIII. granting the charter to the Company of Surgeons, and Edward VI. delivering to the Lord Mayor the charter under which the royal palace of Bridewell was to be converted into a hospital. This last picture, however, must obviously be assigned to some other artist, if the earlier date of Holbein's death is accepted; and anyhow there is some doubt whether the work is entirely from his hand. His own portrait is said to be included among those brought together in the composition.

While he held his post at court, to which was attached an annual salary of £30 with payment in addition for the pictures he painted, he was twice sent abroad to execute likenesses of princesses whom the king proposed to marry, once of Christiana, Dowager Duchess of Milan, and on another occasion of Anne of Cleves. The story of the king's displeasure, when he found that the original of this latter portrait lacked the beauty with which Holbein had flattered her, is well known. Oddly enough it was not, however, the painter who was blamed for the deception, but Thomas Cromwell, the adviser by

whom the marriage was advocated. Probably the artist's escape from the consequences of this attempt to treat the lady more kindly than her looks deserved was due to the high opinion of his capacities which was held by the king, an opinion summed up in a remark which Henry is said to have made, that he could of seven peasants make seven lords, but not one Hans Holbein even out of seven lords. Certainly Holbein never fell out of favour with his master, and, judging by the array of pictures of eminent men that he produced, his commanding professional position must have been universally recognised.

It is unfortunate that so many of the canvases for which he was responsible should either have disappeared or should have gone out of this country. Some were sold by the Puritan parliament, some were destroyed when the palace at Whitehall was burned, and others have been unaccountably lost to sight. At one time the majority of his best works were gathered in England, and though there still remain many that are both characteristic and important, time and accident have made curious gaps in the series. Sufficient can at all events be found to prove that he was an artist of extraordinary powers, a craftsman of the rarest ability, and a sincere and observant student of character. The small number of his larger compositions which have been preserved show that he had the greatest capacities as an imaginative and historical painter, but circumstances caused him to occupy himself chiefly with portraiture, and it is by his achievements in this branch of practice that his place in art history is established.

Yet he was an artist of very varied possibilities, and there remains sufficient of his work outside portraiture to prove that he profited to the utmost by the comprehensiveness of his early training. He was an admirable designer of jewellery and ornamental details, as may be seen by the book of his drawings for objects of this class which is in the British Museum; he was a distinguished architect and was responsible for the erection of several important buildings; he modelled and carved; and he executed a large number of excellent drawings for wood engraving. Despite the stories which are told about his reckless and extravagant manner of life he must have been a strenuous worker and must have devoted himself assiduously to his profession. No man who had not an enthusiastic love of art could have done so much or could have kept so consistently to such a high level of accomplishment. Immense bodily and mental vigour no doubt helped him to success in his many undertakings, but that he worked conscientiously and with a serious intention is proved by the consistent merit of his performances.

He used many mediums with equal success; his pictures were executed mostly in oil, but there are several in distemper or water-colour. This last method he is supposed to have learned from Lucas Cornelii after coming to England; but if this is so he must have mastered it very quickly, for his works in it, and his miniatures especially, are admirable in their qualities, and have a surprising degree of strength. His oil paintings have a delightful delicacy of tone and a luminosity of colour which has borne well the test of time. He preferred subtle effects of lighting without much depth of shadow, but in spite of this absence of strong contrasts of light and dark his pictures never lack roundness or variety of modelling, and are especially free from the flatness which a less sensitive observer working in such a manner might have given to them. His draughtsmanship, too, can be especially admired on account of its wonderful suggestion of refinements of form and modulations of line. In this respect his mastery is beyond question, for he combined, as few other painters have, perfect precision of statement with grace and freedom of execution.

In his composition he was, according to the custom of the period, formal and studied, preferring a certain stiffness of arrangement to flowing lines. But this stiffness never degenerated into angularity, and certainly never spoiled the dignity and strength of his design. Its only effect was to give to his pictures a character which seems now to have been appropriate enough, and to be thoroughly in keeping with what is recorded of the social life during the Tudor reigns. The grace of Van Dyck or the redundance of Lely would not have suited the atmosphere of the court of Henry VIII., and Holbein by his precision and repose of technical method reflected the characteristics of his own times with a completeness that can be fully appreciated. His residence at court no doubt helped to confirm him in this tendency; surrounded as he was there by stately personages, he would naturally be inclined to emphasise their attributes and to bring much of their formality into his art. That he could be, when the occasion arose, freely fanciful is shown by many of his designs and early drawings, which reveal an eminently German inclination towards richness of detail. The reserve of his manner when he was working in England may be taken as evidence of his artistic fidelity, and of his readiness to respond fully to the impressions he received.

One other of his qualities as a painter must be noted—his imitative power. This power, which had enabled him to make a painted fly sufficiently like life to deceive his patron at Basle, became, as his skill matured, legitimately helpful in his practice. It gave a particular

beauty of texture to his flesh surfaces and to the details of the costumes of his sitters, and it aided him to secure that appearance of absolute reality which is to be counted among the merits of his pictures. Few artists, indeed, can be said to have equalled him in the purity and delicacy of his flesh colour with its subtle gradations and play of gentle tones; and his treatment of furs, stuffs, and jewelled trimmings, and all the other accessories of the formal Tudor dress, is worthy of unqualified admiration. Yet, with all his regard for actuality, he was never mechanical. His imitativeness was free from trickery, and escaped that suggestion of purposeless realism which became afterwards more than a little wearisome in the performances of the lesser artists who aped his style. He knew exactly how far he could carry his work without losing spontaneity and without sacrificing its dignity for the sake of asserting trivialities. As a consequence, his paintings with all their elaboration have a delightful simplicity, and a marvellous reticence which keeps in strict relation the various parts with which they are built up.

If any proof were needed of the correctness of the principles by which he was guided, it would only be necessary to refer to his drawings to see how independent he was of those little technical shifts and contrivances, to which the inferior artist too often resorts in the struggle to gain attention. He was not one of those workers who can arrive at nothing without painful labour, and can only succeed when provided with a battery of appliances. The simplest means often sufficed to lead him to the most admirable results. He was as indisputably a master in his slighter exercises as in the more ambitious paintings by which he asserted the completeness of his professional equipment; and the qualities upon which the whole of his achievements were based gave to his sketches and rapid notes an extraordinary significance. In these there is never a suggestion that they would have been better, or more expressive, if they had been treated in some other way. Each one says what it has to say with perfect frankness and with an absence of circumlocution that is quite refreshing. Work of this summary type would reveal at once the smallest hesitation of an artist about what he meant to imply; entire agreement between his mind and hand is the one and only thing by the aid of which he can properly realise his intention.

It is because this agreement is so obvious in the practice of a master like Holbein, that there is, among the men who appreciate and study art sincerely, such a general inclination to treasure as things of inestimable value those of his drawings which have been preserved to the present day. Everything that has been touched by a great artist

has, of course, a supreme interest, but his sketches specially deserve consideration, for in them there is a clear reflection of his personality. They were executed originally, not to please his patrons or to make any appeal to the public, but solely to record the ideas which were forming in his own mind. They may be regarded as notes jotted down for future reference, recording some sudden impression, or a stage in the working out of an artistic scheme. Therefore they have an intimate connection with the man himself, and their strength or their weakness can be taken as the measure of his qualification for the position assigned to him in the ranks of art workers. They take us into his private life and, as it were, allow us to overhear a soliloquy in which he argues out his convictions and observations with himself.

Technically, too, they are instructive, on account of the light they throw upon the artist's preference for, and understanding of, certain mediums. In things he does for himself he naturally chooses the method which seems to him most explanatory, and works in the manner that he feels will be most suggestive. Some men have used pen and ink, some silver point, or crayon, others have preferred sepia wash, or have combined line and wash in such a way as to arrive at a comparatively elaborate result with much economy of time. Hardly any two artists have adopted exactly the same form of expression. Nor is there any approach to uniformity in the character of the sketches themselves. One may be merely an assemblage of apparently haphazard lines, another may be precise, detailed, and perfected with the minutest care, according to the temperament or mood of the executant or the purpose for which the drawing may have been intended. This variety in the work adds fascination to the study of such examples of masterly production, and increases their claim upon the attention of the art lover. Nothing shows better the extraordinary range that is possible to the draughtsman or the number of permissible applications of the materials available for the artist's use.

The rare charm of Holbein's drawings comes principally from the exquisite combination which they present of delicacy and vigour. Not often is there to be seen such sympathetic management of simple line and broad, flat masses of tone, or such accurate judgment in the placing of small details of modelling, and not often have things in little more than outline, and with the merest hint of shading, been made so decisive in manner and so firm in their presentation of all necessary facts. It would have been so easy to have strayed out of the right direction into either coarseness or over-refinement, to have attempted to do more than would have been discreet, or to have sacrificed all character in aiming at an impossible degree of subtlety. But he kept,

with the shrewdest perception of what was appropriate to his subjects, exactly within the right limits of technical contrivance, and within the bounds of very correct taste. That a man of his reputedly reckless temperament should have been able to subject his art to such firm control is in some ways surprising; but his drawings certainly show that, whatever his habit of life, his self-discipline and self-restraint when he was at work were complete.

It would be a considerable undertaking to attempt to catalogue all of his drawings, which are preserved in public and private collections in England and abroad. There are many at Basle, many more in the chief continental Museums and Art Galleries, to which they went when the artist's works were dispersed after the death of Charles I. But in this country there remains one great group of his drawn portraits—the series of eighty-seven, two of them of doubtful authenticity, in the royal collection at Windsor Castle—which is unrivalled for the number and the beauty of the works comprised in it. This series by itself would suffice to establish his fame as a draughtsman, so memorable is the quality of the accomplishment throughout, and so perfect the demonstration it provides of his unfailing executive resource. There is displayed, moreover, an instructive variety of method, some of the drawings are in crayon on untinted paper, others are upon a flesh-coloured ground, with touches of stronger colour in the eyes, the hair, and the costumes, and a few are practically water-colours carried to a fairly high degree of finish, sometimes the crayon-point is used for outlines and shading, sometimes a brush filled with Indian ink. No stereotyped method runs through the series, each work is plainly a momentary inspiration and represents a particular phase of the artist's observation. Probably, many of the drawings were preliminary studies for larger oil portraits; indeed some are known to have been executed with this intention; but a fair proportion of them seem to have been complete in themselves.

Apart from their artistic importance they have the greatest interest for every student of history, on account of the people they represent. Holbein, by his position in the English Court, and by the patronage he received from prominent personages, was enabled to depict most of the men and women who were notable in English sixteenth century society, and many foreigners as well. Special opportunities came to him of mixing with all ranks, and these opportunities, as can be seen from the great number of portraits, painted and drawn, which are left out of the immense mass of his production, he turned to admirable account. If it had been his deliberate purpose to compile a pictorial history of his contemporaries, for the information

of future generations, he could not have worked more sincerely or with better judgment. Moreover, there is in all these portraits, and in the drawings particularly, an obvious air of fidelity, which implies that he represented his sitters exactly as he saw them. The tradition may be true, that in the case of Anne of Cleves he used an undue amount of artistic licence, but there is little reason for believing that he flattered other people. Rather is he to be considered as a somewhat uncompromising realist, who thought more of recording decisively and clearly what he actually saw, than of persuading his patrons by graceful concessions to their vanity.

The names of some of the originals of his drawings are worth mentioning, to show what very diverse types of people he studied. There are royalties, like Queen Anne Boleyn, Queen Jane Seymour, and Edward VI.; ecclesiastics, like John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's, Chaplain to Henry VIII., and founder of St. Paul's School, and John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, who was credited apparently on insufficient authority with the authorship of the "Assertio Septum Sacramentorum," which by its attack on Luther led the Pope to confer upon Henry VIII. the title of "Defender of the Faith"; people of rank, like the Marchioness of Dorset; Lady Butts, the wife of Sir W. Butts, physician to Henry VIII.; the Earl of Ormonde, the father of Anne Boleyn; Sir Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor and the author of "Utopia"; Lord Cobham, Sir Thomas Eliot, Sir William Parr; Sir John Russell, afterwards Earl of Bedford; William Fitzwilliam, who was Earl of Southampton and High Admiral; Sir John Gage, Sir Henry Guilford, Sir Richard Southwell, Henry Howard, who was the son of the Duke of Norfolk and a leader in the poetic movement that heralded, during the reign of Henry VIII., the great literary development of the Elizabethan Era; and Elizabeth Lady Audley, the daughter of Sir Brian Tuke, Treasurer of the Chamber, and the first recorded English Postmaster-General—he is described in the Records of 1533 as "Magister Nunciorum, Cursorum, sive Postarum, both in England and in other parts of the King's dominions beyond the seas."

There are, too, various members of the family of Sir Thomas More, his sons and daughters, and Margaret Clement, who was brought up with them. Besides, there are other drawings of men like Simon George of Cornwall, John Poyns of Essex, Reskymer a gentleman of Cornwall, John Godsal or Godsalve, Nicholas Bourbon de Vaudoeuvre the poet, and Philip Melanchthon the German reformer and scholar, who collaborated with Luther in the translation of the Scriptures. He drew up the seventeen articles of the

Evangelical faith known as the "Augsbourg Confession," and other documents, which were issued by the Reformers. The names of nearly all the people whom Holbein drew are recorded in the history of the Tudor period, many of them, indeed, are famous. They are scarcely likely to be forgotten, but the fact that they are appended to the works of such a master makes them doubly interesting.

According to tradition the Windsor collection of Holbein's belonged originally to Edward VI., and while they were in his possession the names which they still bear were written upon them by Sir John Cheke. Subsequently these drawings were sold and went to France, and they did not return to England till the reign of Charles I., to which king they were presented or sold by M. de Liancourt. Charles exchanged them with the Earl of Pembroke for a St. George by Raphael, and the Earl of Pembroke gave them to the Earl of Arundel. When Lord Arundel died his collections were sold, and at this sale Charles II., on the advice of Sir Peter Lely, bought the Holbeins and some other drawings by old masters. Apparently he did not attach much value to his acquisition, for no special care seems to have been taken of the collection, and not long after it disappeared, and remained lost to sight for seventy years. Eventually the Holbeins were discovered by Caroline, Queen of George II., hidden away in an old bureau at Kensington Palace, where, seemingly, they had been carelessly thrown and forgotten. The other drawings, which had been purchased under Lely's recommendation, were similarly brought to light at Kensington during the earlier years of the reign of George III.

It is unnecessary to go into the details of the later history of the Holbein drawings. At one time they were framed and glazed and hung up, first at Richmond and afterwards at Kensington; then they were mounted in folios without any precautions to preserve them from injury, and not improbably they have suffered to some extent from the risks to which they have been exposed. But when the Prince Consort undertook the rearrangement of the royal collection, they were taken out of the books, and placed in sunk mounts which would protect them from being rubbed. That for the future they will be given fully the consideration they deserve is only to be expected. Holbein's place among the greater masters is beyond dispute, and his works are too highly valued to be treated with anything but the utmost care. That these, in spite of their perilous adventures, should have survived to our own time is a matter for congratulation; they are national records, and the destruction of them would have been in every way a national loss.




ELIZABETH LADY AUDLEY

WINDSOR




EDWARD VI

WINDSOR




SIR JOHN RUSSELL, AFTERWARDS EARL OF BEDFORD — WINDSOR



JANE SEYMOUR, QUEEN TO HENRY VIII WINDSOR




SIR WILLIAM PARR, AFTERWARDS MARQUIS OF NORTHAMPTON WINDSOR

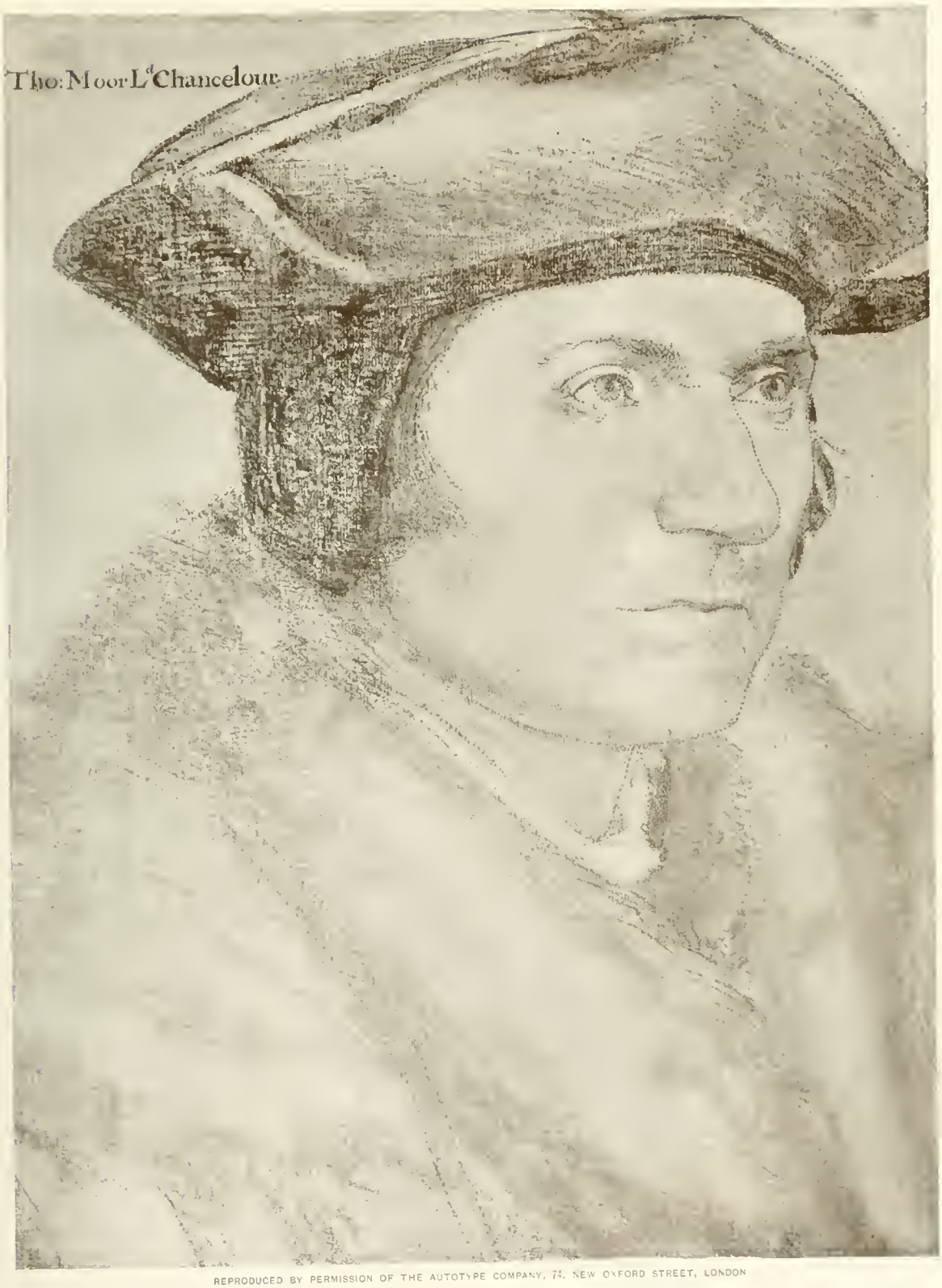



FRANCES MARCHIONESS OF DORSET WINDSOR




SIR JOHN MORE

WINDSOR






SIR THOMAS MORE, LORD CHANCELLOR — WINDSOR



CECILIA HERON, DAUGHTER OF SIR THOMAS MORE — WINDSOR



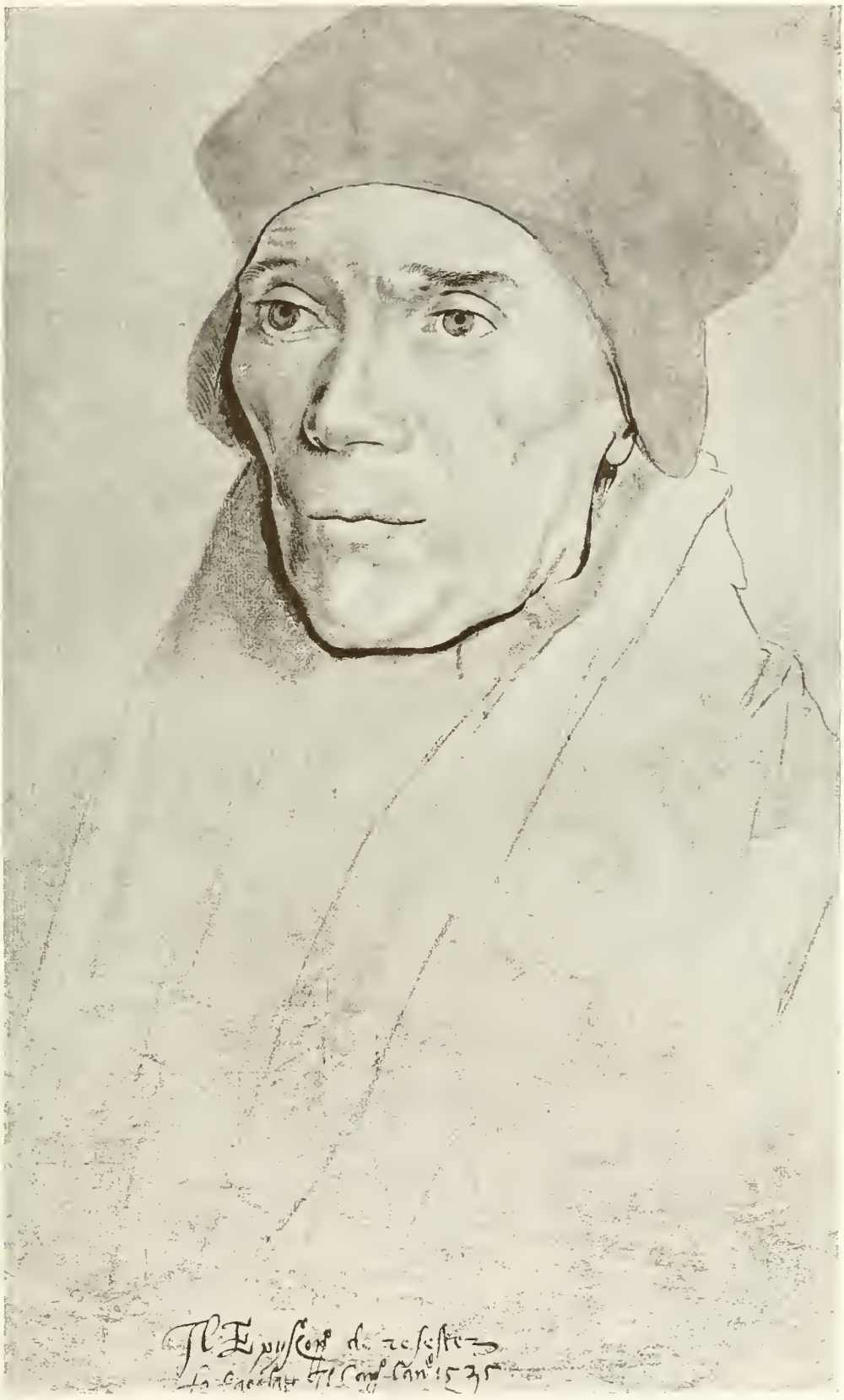

JOHN MORE

WINDSOR



ANNA CRESACRE

WINDSOR





JOHN FISHER, BISHOP OF ROCHESTER WINDSOR



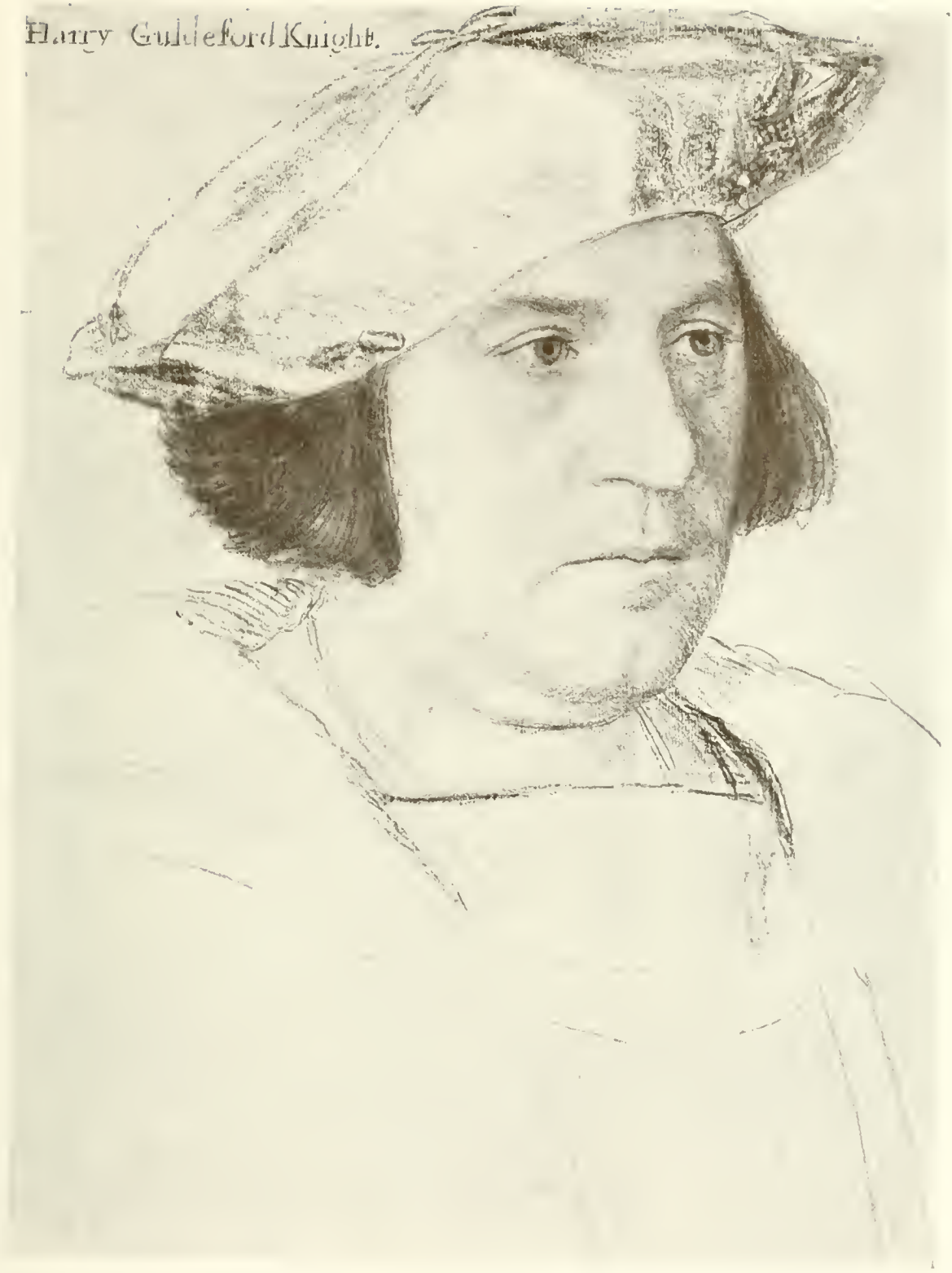

GEORGE BROOKE, LORD COBHAM

WINDSOR




LADY BUTTS

WINDSOR






SIR HENRY GUILDFORD

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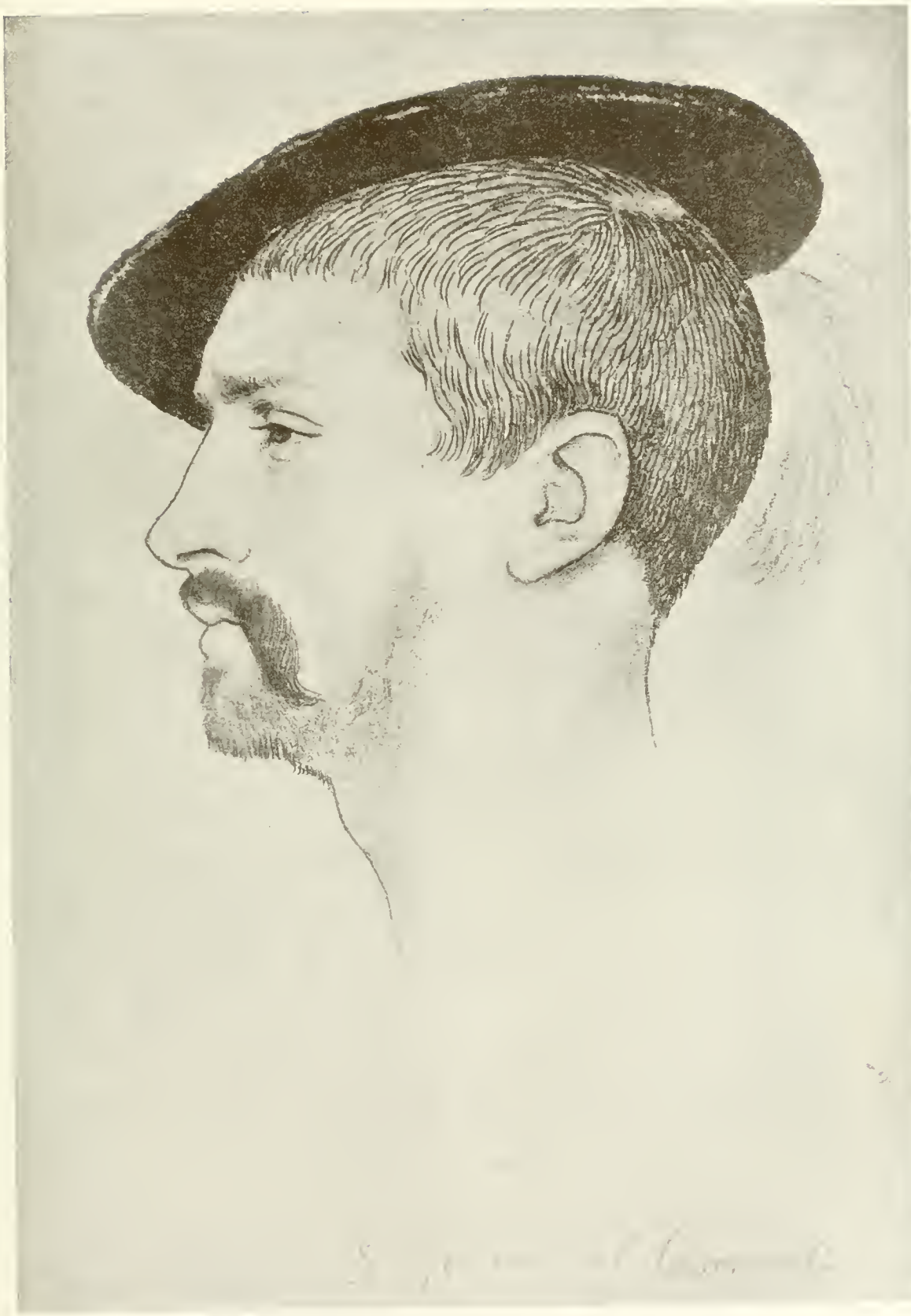
THOMAS HOWARD, EARL OF SURREY

WINDSOR




WILLIAM WARHAM, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY — WINDSOR





SIMON GEORGE

WINDSOR




ANNE BOLEYN, QUEEN TO HENRY VIII

WINDSOR

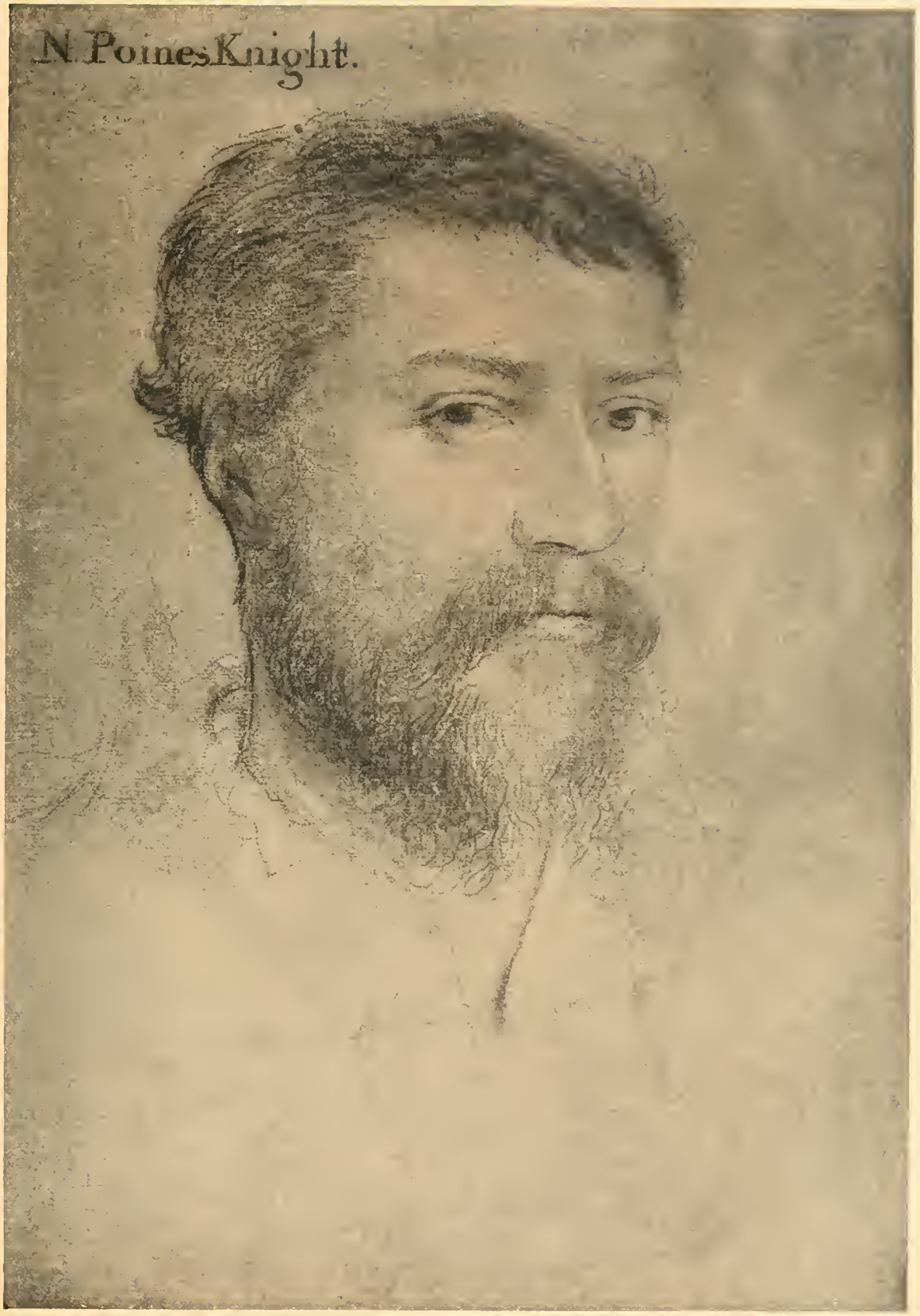


JOHN POYNS WINDSOR




ANNE LADY BERKELEY

WINDSOR






SIR NICHOLAS POYNS THE ELDER — WINDSOR



PORTRAIT OF A LADY

WINDSOR




PHILIP MELANCTHON

WINDSOR




SIR NICHOLAS POYNS THE YOUNGER WINDSOR



PORTRAIT OF A LADY

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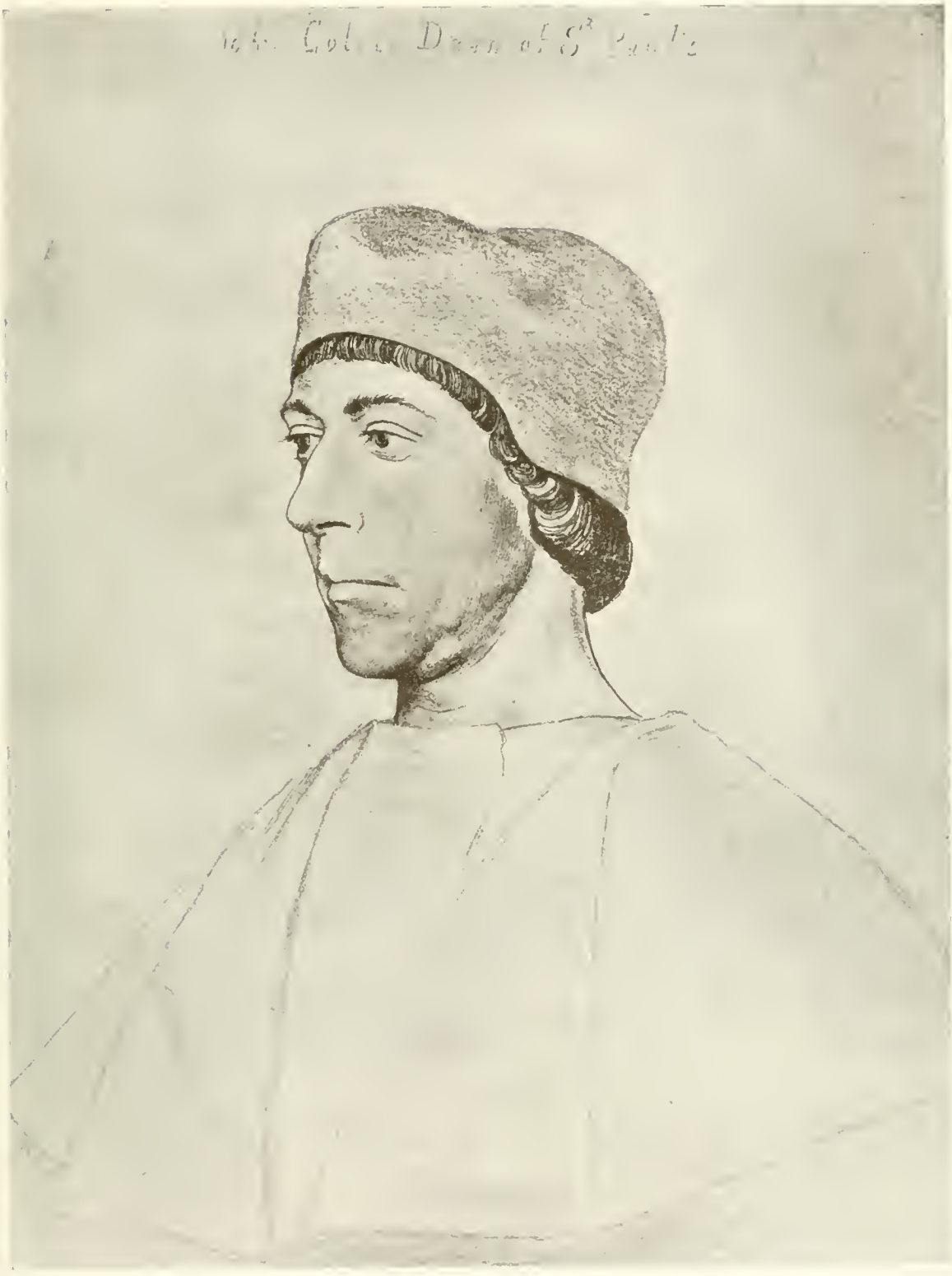




JOHN COLET, DEAN OF SAINT PAUL'S WINDSOR




MRS. SOUCH

WINDSOR




NICHOLAS BOURBON DE VAUDOEUVRE

WINDSOR



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

BASLE




LADY HEVENINGHAM

WINDSOR



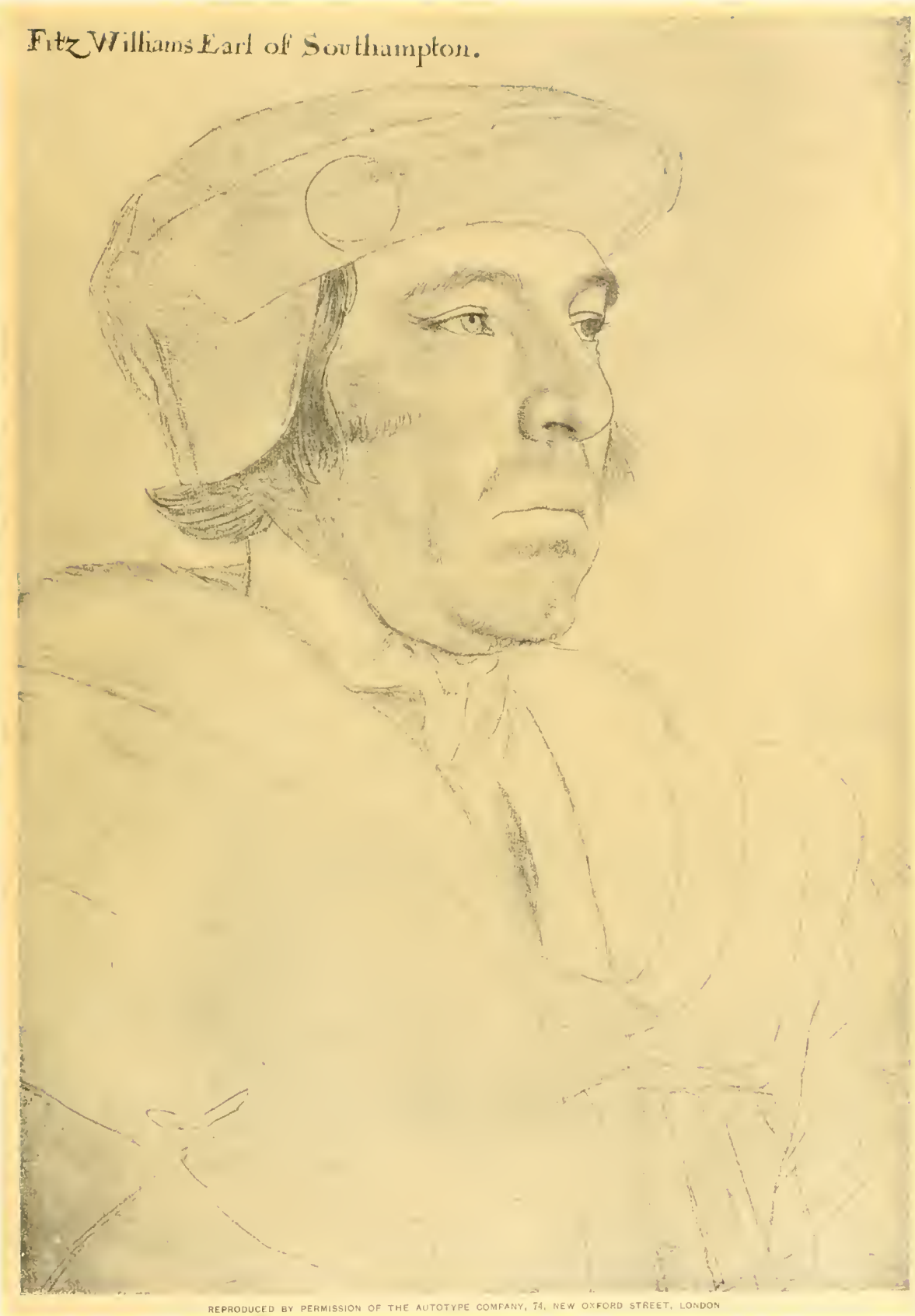
SIR NICHOLAS CAREW

BASLE



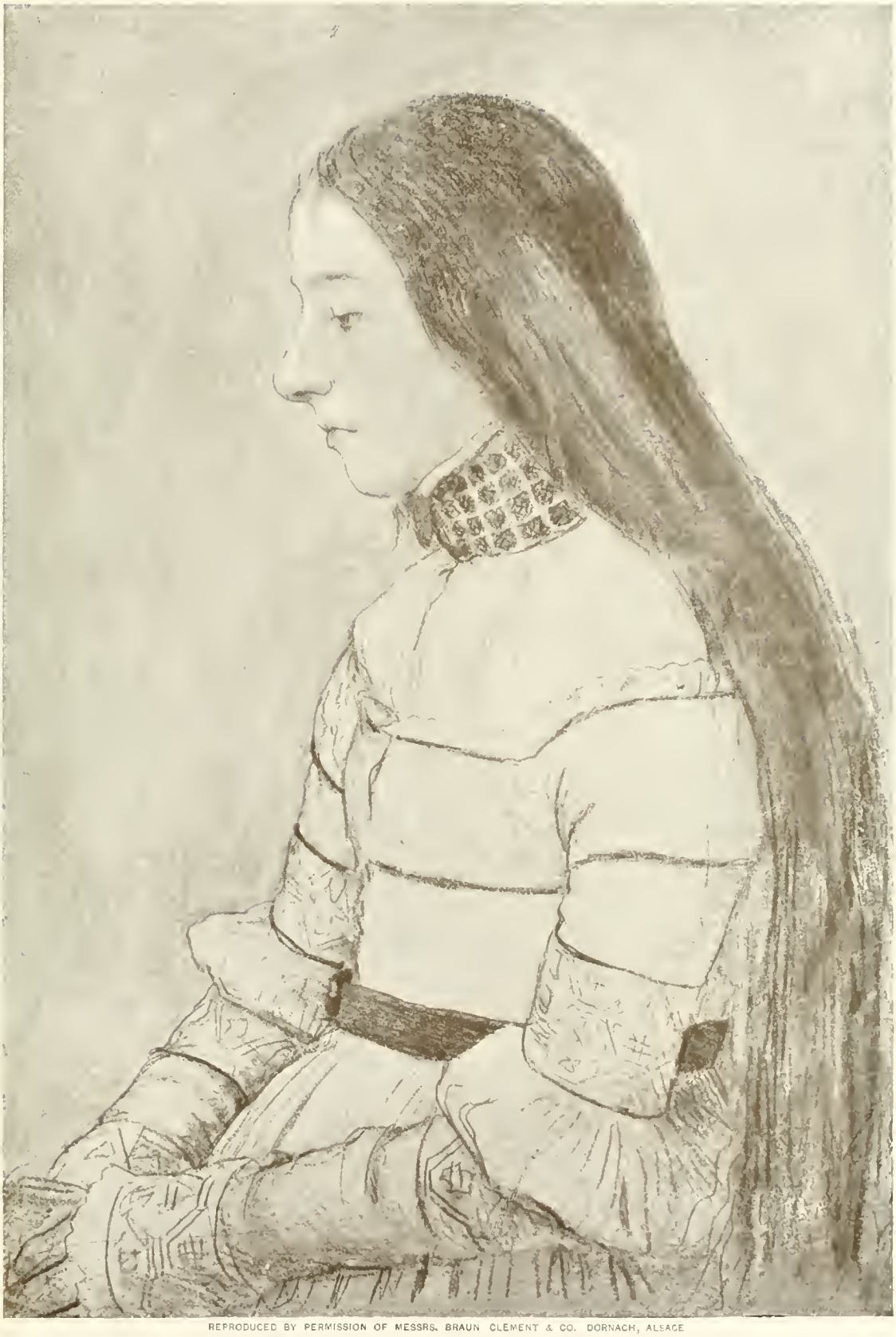
SHEEP

BASLE






WILLIAM FITZWILLIAM, EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON — WINDSOR





ANNA MEYER

BASLE



JACOB MEYER

BASLE



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN

WINDSOR



A YOUNG WOMAN

BASLE



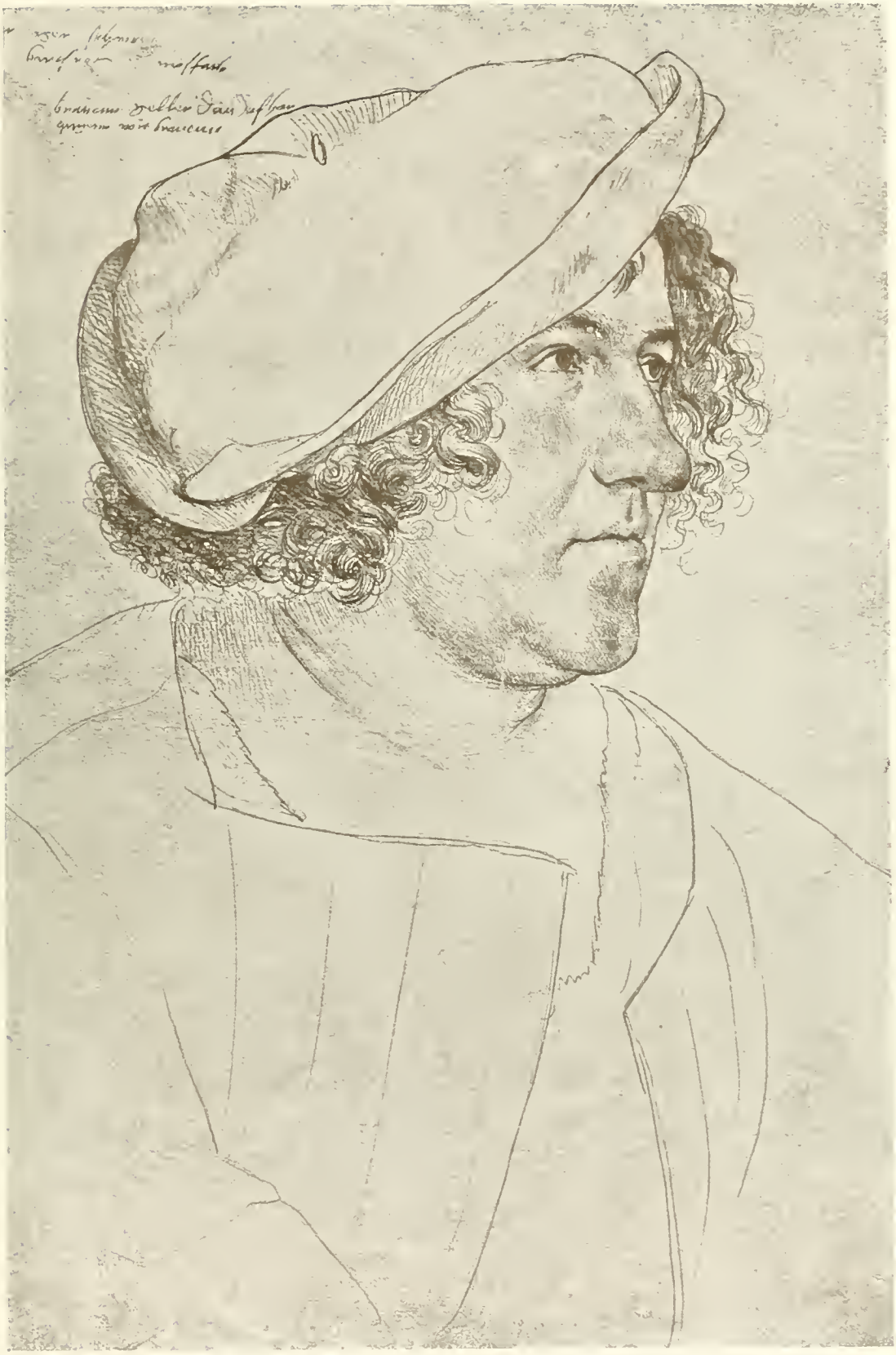
PORTRAIT OF A MAN

BASLE



RICHARD SOUTHWELL, AFTERWARDS KNIGHTED

WINDSOR





JACOB MEYER BASLE



A WAITRESS

BASLE