

# Richard Whitford: animal painter to the Queen

## A biography

by Andrew J A Sheldon

[www.whitfords.org.uk](http://www.whitfords.org.uk)



Coloured photograph of Richard Whitford, portrait and animal painter

Richard Whitford, the portrait and animal painter, was born in Evesham, Worcestershire, probably in 1821. This was before the days of compulsory registration, which began in England in 1837. He was probably not baptised, this apparently being the case for most members of his family. His parents were Richard and Louisa Whitford.

Richard Whitford senior was a hairdresser, as was his father, Thomas. Richard junior apparently chose not to follow in the trade. In 1841, at the age of 19, he took instruction in Pershore to become an excise officer, and became "... qualified for surveying Common Brewers Victuallers Maltsters, Soapers, Brickmakers, Papermakers, Postmasters, Spirit Dealers and Retailers". He was posted to Manchester in November 1841. It is interesting to note that, rather than take the oath of office and allegiance, he

made a solemn declaration as to his honesty.

The next year, on 24 September 1842, he married Elizabeth Balhatchet in Bideford, Devon. Their first child, a son, was born in Manchester, not long before Richard was posted to London. Soon after the move to London, Richard was given an appointment in Watlington, Oxfordshire.

It was in Watlington that his next two children were born. It was also there that he fell from grace. He was accused of suppressing an entry by a tobacco and tea dealer and appropriating to his own use 5s 3d duty paid by the dealer three months later, in the meantime receiving and then returning the 5s 3d due from another dealer. Whether he was in fact guilty is unknown. However, his subsequent dismissal was perhaps inevitable in 1848.

### Return to Evesham

After leaving Customs and Excise, Richard and his family returned to Evesham. He had evidently attained some proficiency in painting in oils, and this was now to become his occupation.

I have seen a painting, unfortunately undated, of three sheep against a very leafy background, signed "W.Widgery and R.Whitford". It is possible that Richard met the Devonian artist Widgery at the time he was courting Elizabeth.

Some of Richard's paintings are undated. The earliest dated work, credited solely to Richard Whitford, is from 1847, while he was still in Watlington.

The *Worcestershire Chronicle* of 26 February 1848 refers to an article in an Oxford paper dated 29 January 1848 from Watlington.

"[Mr Whitford] had been a member of Evesham Literary, Scientific, and Mechanics' Institution. He had derived the first rudiments of oil painting in a class formed for that purpose, under the superintendence of their respected secretary, Mr Herbert New:-  
"We have had the pleasure of viewing a fine painting on canvas, drawn by our respected townsman, Mr Whitford, of John Fane, Esq, mounted on his favourite horse,

accompanied by his two servants, Floyd and Messinger, together with 22 Harriers. The scene is taken from a field near Watlington Church, in which appears an excellent view of that venerable structure. Altogether, the picture does great credit to the genius of our enterprising artist.”

Herbert New, born 12 December 1820, was almost the same age as Richard Whitford. He was a solicitor in Evesham, and a noted historian and poet. It would be interesting to know the identity of the tutor of the painting class.

Richard and Elizabeth produced four more children in Evesham between 1849 and 1856. One of these was Harry Sheldon Whitford, about whom more later.



Richard Whitford, portrait and animal painter, in his senior years, photographed by his son, Harry Sheldon Whitford.

Richard Whitford senior, the artist's father, died on 31 July 1859 at the age of 63. In his Will, dated 19 July 1859, he left his hairdressing business to his wife and youngest son. The rest of his estate was to be divided equally between his seven children. There was, however, a proviso that, before receiving his share, his son Richard should account for an advance from him of £30 and for any other sums of money paid on his behalf. Painting animals and portraits, it would seem, was not lucrative enough to support a wife and seven children and the servant included in the household.

The 1871 census records both Richard and Harry Whitford as animal painters. Richard's wife, Elizabeth, died on 29 September 1875 at the age of 55. Richard still appears in an Evesham directory in 1880, but by mid-1881 he had moved to Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. He had moved to London by the middle of 1885.

Richard Whitford died on 19 January 1890 at 16 Canonbury Square, Islington, London, at the age of 68, from "Decay of Nature". He is buried in Islington Cemetery, East Finchley, London.

## The Paintings

My catalogue to date contains over 250 entries relating to paintings known, or said, to be by Richard Whitford. Of these, most bear his signature; some his initials. About one half of the paintings that I know of include sheep, about one third include cattle, and the rest include pigs, horses, or sporting dogs. Some of the paintings include people such as shepherds, the animals' owners, or horse riders. One of the portraits is of a race horse, "Iroquois" (8101), the first American horse to win the Derby, with his jockey, Fred Archer. This is similar in style to Richard Whitford's portraits of gentlemen on horseback.

A few paintings, however, are not of farm animals but of domestic cats and dogs in domestic settings. One (6512) is of some farm buildings in their landscape setting.

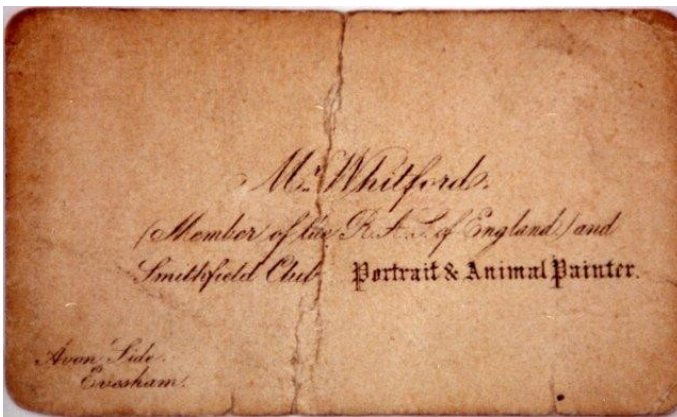
It was not unusual for owners and breeders of pedigree farm animals to commission paintings

of their stock and progeny to display alongside cups, medals, and other trophies won at major agricultural shows. This was for the benefit of visiting buyers of livestock and bloodstock. Many of Whitford's known paintings were done for such owners and breeders, especially in the English Midlands. Quite a number of the paintings include an inscription which may include such details as the animal's name, the owner's or breeder's name, and what prizes it had won at which shows: the Royal Agricultural Society's show is frequently mentioned.

Queen Victoria owned some paintings by Whitford. These hung at Shaw Farm, Windsor, though they no longer form part of the Royal Collection. This doubtless inspired the legend "Animal Painter to the Queen" inscribed below the painter's signature on some pictures painted in the 1860s and early 1870s.

### "Portrait and Animal Painter"

Richard Whitford's business card describes him as a "Portrait and Animal Painter". The portraits seen to date are of men, usually on horseback, often with other animals present. All of the people that accompany his animal subjects are proficiently and expressively depicted.

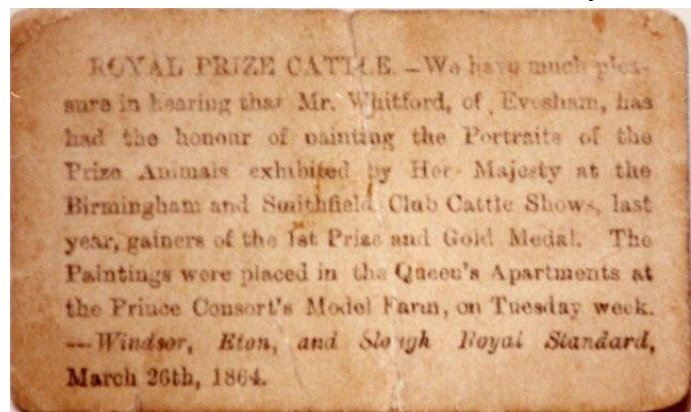


The owner of one horse painting has told me that the pictured rider, the owner's great-grandfather, is an excellent likeness. As is the case in the work of other contemporary animal painters, the proportions of some subjects appear unfamiliar. Animals grossly distended by fat were often a requirement of the day, and sheep have long been subjected to fashionable grooming and clipping for show purposes.

Certain settings are similar in many of the paintings. One such includes a slope in the middle ground to the right of his subject. There is often a wall on the slope, and a tree growing at an interesting angle on top of the slope. Sometimes there is a church spire or tower in the distance, a number of birds in the sky, a patch of water or bare soil in the middle foreground. Other recurrent settings are either in or by a farm building; a bucket is frequently included bearing the initials of the animal's owner or breeder. Some of these features are true to the locality but their disposition is often fictional.

Richard Whitford's signature is fairly consistent up to and including some paintings dated 1885. A number of paintings attributed to Richard, dated between 1885 and 1889 inclusive, may be

by a different hand: they bear an entirely different signature in which the initial "R" is set in what my father suggested could be a monogram of "HW". Could it be that these paintings were done by Harry, working on his father's behalf? After all, it is common practice for an architect's drawing to carry a principal's name while the drawing is by an assistant. 1885 was, coincidentally, the year in which Richard Whitford moved to London.



### Harry Sheldon Whitford

Harry Sheldon Whitford was Richard Whitford's fifth child. He was born in Evesham on 7

March 1852. He followed in his father's artistic footsteps, and moved to Oswestry, Shropshire, in 1876, where he worked for Mr Maclardy's firm of artists and photographers. When he married Sarah Watkins in 1881, both his occupation and that of his father were given as "Animal Painter". By the birth of their first child in 1883, Harry had dropped his name Whitford and was using Sheldon as his surname. He presumably wished to dissociate himself from his father. The practice of artist sons using different surnames from their fathers has been noticed in other families in the second half of the nineteenth century.

I have seen a painting of a dog signed and dated "H S Whitford 1875". In later life, he signed his work "H Sheldon".

*Industries of Shropshire and District Business Review* of 1891 includes John Maclardy as a "Portrait and Animal Painter, Landscape and Art Photographer", in Oswestry. Mention is made that Mr Maclardy employed a number of assistants, and an impressive list of works is given. I wonder what became of the animal paintings? I wonder who painted them? It would not be at all surprising if the answer to the last question is Harry, thus continuing, in an unsigned way, in Richard Whitford's artistic activities after Richard's death.



Harry Sheldon Whitford with 9U03

### More Information

A well-illustrated book with information about numerous animal painters and their work was published in 1996 [*Farm Animal Portraits* by Elspeth Moncrieff with Stephen and Iona Joseph, Antique Collectors' Club].

The National Trust purchased seven paintings by Richard Whitford in January 2010. The [pictures show prize bulls](#) that were bred at the home farm at [Powis Castle](#), Powys, in the nineteenth century.

The BBC has some additional [examples](#) of Richard Whitford's paintings on its [website](#).

Any information concerning Richard Whitford or Harry Sheldon Whitford and their paintings would be most welcome. Please [email](#) me to let me know of anything, however apparently trivial.

### Notes

There are some references, particularly in older literature, to Richard Whitford having lived at Northleach. I have found no primary evidence to support this assertion. Census records, directories, his business card, and inscriptions on the stretchers of some paintings all give his address as Evesham.

Reference is made in a somewhat obscure publication (C.E. Mogridge Hudson (1901), *The Manor of Wike and Wyke Waryn*, published privately) to collaboration between Whitford of Evesham and Woodward of Pershore in the painting, in 1844, of a picture of a racehorse called "Swop". This is an error. Whitford was not involved in the painting of this picture. The error is acknowledged in a note by CEMH in his corrected copy of the book. Inspection of the painting concurs with the correction.

This web page is an updated version of my article published in 'Country Life', 8 November



1990, and in 'the Ark' (magazine of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust) in March 1992. See the bottom of this page to see when it was last updated.

Any information concerning Richard Whitford or Harry Sheldon Whitford and their paintings would be most welcome. Please [email](mailto:andrew@whitfords.org.uk) me - [andrew@whitfords.org.uk](mailto:andrew@whitfords.org.uk) – to let me know of anything, however apparently trivial.

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