

The Guardian

Awkward family portrait brings industrious Leaches out of the shadows

Cambridge family of college cooks, craft workers, artists and publicans feature in series of events including display of painting

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Sun 31 Aug 2014 17.22 BST



A detail from a portrait of the Leach family by Richard Hopkins Leach shows the artist, far right, his wife, Isabella, far left, and their offspring. Photograph: Marek Rajchert

Generations of Cambridge dons and students can have been only dimly aware of the Leach dynasty, even as they sat under highly decorated ceilings, ate lavish college dinners or sloped off to a pub marked by a lively painted sign - all the work of the same industrious family of cooks, craft workers and publicans.

The family members come out of the shadows in a charmingly awkward 19th-century painting by Richard Hopkins Leach, which shows the journeyman artist, best known for his pub signs, looking tremendously respectable in stiff collar and tie. One son, Frederick - said to be responsible for the noticeably better painted face of his father - would found a business with a £300 loan and work with the designer William Morris on projects including a staircase for St James's Palace, and important buildings in Cambridge. By 1871 Frederick was proudly described as "painter: designer and art worker employing 28 men, 2 women and 6 boys on painted decorations, stained glass and making furniture".

The painting is on loan to an exhibition at the Museum of Cambridge, which is appropriately housed in a former pub, and part of a series of events featuring the Leach family in the Open

Cambridge weekend from 12 to 14 September, including a walking tour of surviving work by the family.

Richard Leach's wife is holding the evidence of his one heroic attempt to break away from Cambridge, an illustrated journal kept in 1814 when he walked the 300 miles from Cambridge to Cornwall looking for work. He drew maps and sketches of interesting buildings he saw, and recorded chats with newly released Napoleonic prisoners of war, and a publican in Wiltshire so glad to see a rare visitor that he offered to give up his own bed and sleep on "long feathers" - a much cheaper but more spiky and uncomfortable mattress filling than down. "In deference to his age we declined the offer," Leach wrote.

Exhibition curator Tamsin Wimhurst has traced the family in Cambridge back to 1675 when Barnett and Margaret Leach lived in the now demolished Archers inn. Their grandson, Barnett III, became the master cook at Trinity College in 1770, and did well enough to buy himself a pair of silver shoe buckles, still treasured by his family and also on display.

His son, another Barnett, combined the job of college cook with working as a bacon dealer, and also ran the Pickerel Inn, which survives to this day, and is a suitable place for visitors to drink a toast to some previously unsung heroes of the life of town and gown.

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