

The Great Gresleys: A Derbyshire Painting Dynasty

by Elizabeth Bailey

The rolling hills of Derbyshire, and the majesty of the surrounding Peak District have long enticed artistic expression. Elizabeth Bennett, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, famously did a tour of the Peaks with her aunt and uncle and managed to glimpse the inside of the Derbyshire stately home of the heavenly Mr Darcy. William Wordsworth, similarly enthused by Derbyshire described artists' favourite scene Dovedale as 'the loveliest spot that man hath ever found...' Notable examples of Derbyshire scenes to appear at auction include paintings by a family of painters stretching over three generations. The famed Gresley dynasty of Derbyshire artists painted from the early 1850s until the late 1960s. Oils and watercolour landscapes frequent auction rooms up and down the country, and the skill of artistry throughout is evident.

The 'grandfather' of the Gresleys was James Stephen Gresley (1829-1908). In 1850, at the age of 21, James enrolled in drawing classes at the Nottingham Mechanic's Institute. His talent had become apparent by 1853, as he was appointed assistant master at the Derby School of Art. He went on to exhibit works at the New Society of Artists, the Watercolour Society and various local galleries. Works by James Stephen Gresley are typically scenes of Derbyshire, however scenes of Yorkshire do appear following his move north later on in his life. J. S. Gresley's paintings can appear both as oils and watercolours - as a general rule his oils reach higher hammer prices. Earlier works are signed fluidly, however due to poor eyesight towards the end of his life, later works are printed simply 'J. S. GRESLEY.'

James' son, Frank Gresley (1855-1936) also went on to become a prestigious landscape artist. Well known and respected in his hometown of Chellaston, he was the father of later Gresley's Cuthbert and Harold. Situated in the suburbs of Derby for much of his life, his paintings of Derby villages are highly sought after by local residents. His works of Swarkestone, Barrow-upon-Trent and Chellaston offer collectors a piquant snapshot of a rural and simplified past. Most of Frank's works are executed in watercolour, and it goes without a doubt that he was influenced by his father's style - of pastoral, vivid and colourful scenes that glorify the rural scenes of Derbyshire. In turn, Frank inspired sons Cuthbert and Harold to paint voraciously, turning their hands to Derbyshire scenes, still life, portraits and commissioned ceramic pieces.

Cuthbert and Harold trained under John Porter Wale, head painter at the Royal Crown Derby porcelain firm. This prestigious education provided Cuthbert (1876-1963) with a niche skill, and he specialized in painting flowers and landscapes as a ceramics artist from 1893 onwards. Cuthbert was a highly accomplished and revered Royal Crown Derby painter, and was responsible for many commissions for royal households including King George VI. Subsequently, fine gilded vases and covers decorated with local scenes and floral sprays by Gresley are sought after by collectors and can fetch up to £3,000 at auction. In his private life he was known for his floral paintings in watercolour, but truly his best works adorn Royal Crown Derby pieces.

Cuthbert's brother Harold Gresley (1892-1967) is the last of the Gresley four. Like Cuthbert, Harold had a brief period of painting for Royal Crown Derby, before commencing his studies at the Derby School of Art in 1912. Harold was forced to leave Art School at the advent of the First World War. He was enlisted in the Sherwood Foresters and won a Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1917. Upon his return to the Midlands in 1919 he studied at Nottingham under the famed landscape painter Arthur Spooner (1873-1962). His early twentieth century watercolours capture beautifully the glorious landscapes of Derbyshire and occasionally Wales. Scenes of Dovedale, the River Trent, and Derbyshire villages form most of his work. Though mainly known as a landscape painter, Harold was also an accomplished portrait painter, as well as executing several commission pieces, such as the one of a house in Darley Dale. This work is particularly striking, for its use of vibrant colour and shows Harold's adept skill at portraying both wild, craggy landscapes and the preened perfection of a country house flowerbed. Harold's exhibition works are highly sought after, and can fetch between £200-£2,000 at auction dependent on scene, size and detail.

Works by Harold Gresley appear most often in the salerooms, yet works by his forbears can be bought relatively cheaply. Paintings appear nationwide, but understandably are highest in the Midlands. Often, a wonderfully detailed, glorious work can be purchased for less than £1,000. Now is the time to invest in these scenes, as picture prices are slowly rising, and soon quality pieces will command quality prices! Look out for unusual scenes, detailed works and a vibrant colour palate. Collectors will fight tooth and claw for an exhibition piece of an unexpected location, such as the smaller villages surrounding the Peak District and Derbyshire.



Harold Gresley (1892-1967), *Derwent Water, Derbyshire, signed l.r., and dated 1927, watercolour; inscribed to verso, 25 x 20cm. Sold for £290. Hansons Auctioneers, October 12.*



Harold Gresley (1892-1967) *The Stepping Stones, Dovedale, Derbyshire, a summer scene, with figures, watercolour heightened with white, signed, 33.5 x 51cm. Sold for £1,400. Neales Auctioneers, July 05.*



Frank Gresley (1855-1936), *The Duck Pond, before figures and cottage, signed lower right, watercolour approx 26 x 35cm. Sold for £750. Hansons Auctioneers, June 12.*



Frank Gresley (1855-1936), *Weir on the River Trent, signed, watercolour, 22 x 38.5cm. Sold for £580. Peter Wilson Fine Art Auctioneers Ltd, February 08.*



Harold Gresley (1892-1967), *Darley Fields, Broadway, signed watercolour. 32 x 47cm. Sold for £480. Hansons Auctioneers, March 13.*



J S Gresley, dated 1886 (1829-1908), *Bolton Abbey, watercolour; signed lower left on paper; 40 x 29cm. Sold for £210. Hansons Auctioneers, June 12.*



Cuthbert Gresley (1876-1963) *A Garden Border, signed, watercolour; circular, 39cm dia, ++slightly faded. Sold for £190. Mellors & Kirk, March 12.*



Exhibition quality Royal Crown Derby vase and cover, c1889-90, large size, cobalt ground, richly raised gilding, elaborately pierced handles, reverse painted with views of Chatsworth House and bridge at Bonsall Dale, attributed to Cuthbert Gresley, elaborate gilding by J.J. Brownsword, shape No. 545. Footnote: this superb piece of exhibition quality was on loan at Royal Crown Derby from 2000-2002 to celebrate 250 years of Royal Crown Derby. Sold for £2,300. Hansons. October 12.