

A thousand words

The mysterious painting

A Covid-safe open-air production at Ashton Court at the end of the month promises colourful tales of the Smyth dynasty who once owned the estate and mansion, and will speculate on two characters in a mysterious painting.

If you're not quite ready to go back into the theatre (and at the time of writing we're not sure it will be allowed even by June 21), then there's always open-air drama.

A new production from Show of Strength theatre company at Ashton Court later this month looks very promising; the publicity tells us in fact that "This show will change your view of Ashton Court - forever."

At Home with the Smyths takes the form of a journey around Ashton Court to meet various members of the dynasty that built the mansion and laid out the estate.

If you know your local history, you'll be aware that there are plenty of soap opera stories and ghosts in the shadows of the great house and its grounds. We're promised "impostors, buried treasure, a lost ring" - and more.

Seven actors will be playing seven characters both high- and low-born, all with remarkable stories to tell spanning the period from Tudor times and on through Civil War to the Second World War, from first resident Hugh Smyth to the last, Esme Smyth.

One of the aspects of the Ashton Court story the production will examine - albeit fictionally - is a

very enigmatic painting, recently re-named 'Supposed Portrait of Florence Smyth, with an Unnamed Black Attendant'.

The picture, once owned by the Smyth family and now at the Red Lodge, is one of the earliest depictions of an African in Britain. In a case of Bristolian wishful thinking, it was long said that the girl in the picture was Arabella Astry, later Lady Suffolk, and that the boy was 'Scipio Africanus', the African page/servant who is buried at Henbury churchyard.

If you know your history, though, you soon quickly realise that this is not possible. 'Scipio' died, according to his gravestone, in 1720, and the clothes the two children are wearing are from around 100 years before that.

Some say the girl is one of the daughters of Thomas Smyth and his wife Florence (nee Poulett), who married in 1627. By this time, the Smyths were well on their way up in the world. John Smyth had effectively founded the dynasty on the back of a mercantile career and had bought the estate in 1555. Thomas Smyth's improvements to the mansion included a long gallery for the exhibition of paintings, and it's possible he may have commissioned this picture of one of his



The mysterious painting. Photo courtesy of Bristol Culture

daughters and an attendant. Both are dressed in very expensive clothes, with plenty of lace, demonstrating the family's wealth.

Africans in Britain at this time were incredibly rare; there was no systematic slave trade as there would later be, but the Smyths had a lot of trading connections and it's possible the boy might have arrived in Bristol via Africa, the Azores or the West Indies - though there were very few Africans in the Caribbean at this stage.

Another suggestion is that the girl in the picture is not one of the daughters of Thomas Smyth and Florence Poulett, but Florence herself. We know that Florence Poulett and Thomas Smyth had been betrothed for some time and that they married when still very young.

While the Smyths had money, they were still mere merchants, while the Pouletts of Hinton St

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George (in Somerset) were a well-established aristocratic family of high social standing. Perhaps the boy was sent to the Pouletts as a sort of betrothal gift.

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wealth that could clothe children in lace and damask, and the fledgling bird in the girl's hand may be some sort of statement about being ready to fly the nest.

The girl's red sash might also symbolise the transformation from childhood, telling us that she has started her periods and that therefore will soon be ready to start a family...

As for the boy, we know nothing. One suggestion is that he might have gone on to become the jester known as Austin, who's mentioned in Smyth family accounts for the 1630s, but this is pure speculation.

As for the speculations that Show of Strength opt for, well you'll just have to go and see the show...

» At Home with the Smyths is at Ashton Court Friday 25-Sun 27 June. For details and bookings, see www.showofstrength.org.uk



Rachael Fagan, Gerard Cooke, Kirsty Cox & Sheila Hannon in Show of Strength's outdoor production (Photo: Zuleika Henry)