

# Portraits of Francis Bacon



*Original and other Portraits of Sir Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam of Verulam, Viscount St Alban, Lord Chancellor.*

Six portraits of Francis Bacon were done from life as far as is known. The six are: (1) an oil painting by an unknown artist of Francis Bacon as a child; (2) a miniature of Francis Bacon painted by Nicholas Hilliard in 1578/9; (3) an engraving of Francis Bacon as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal made by Simon Passe in 1617 that was included in Holland's *Baziliologia, a Booke of Kings* (1618); (4) a half-length portrait of Francis Bacon as Lord Keeper painted by Frans Pourbus in 1617; (5) a half-length portrait of Francis Bacon as Lord Chancellor attributed to Abraham Blyenberch (or studio of Paul van Somer), painted 1618; and (6) a three-quarter-length portrait of Francis Bacon as Lord Chancellor attributed to Paul van Somer, painted 1618.

Three other important portraits of Francis Bacon are also included in this information sheet.

**(1) Portrait of Francis Bacon as a child, aged 1-2 years – oil painting by unknown artist (c.1561-2).**

Francis Bacon was known to have dark brown or hazel eyes and light brown or ginger hair, which this portrait shows. He is depicted holding an apple in his right hand, whilst hung around his neck are two gold chains from which are suspended two square miniatures, one of which is concealed by the other.

[On display at Gorhambury House, St Albans.]



**(2) Portrait miniature of Francis Bacon in his 18th year – painted by Nicholas Hilliard in Paris in 1578.**

The Latin inscription around the oval edge of the portrait reads: "Si tabula daretur digna animum malle" ["It would be preferable if a worthy painting could present his mind."]

[On display at the National Portrait Gallery, London]



(3) **Portrait of Sir Francis Bacon as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England** – engraving made by Simon van de Passe in 1617 and printed in Compton Holland’s *Baziliologia, a Booke of Kings* (1618).<sup>1</sup>

Held in and suspended from Bacon’s left hand is the purse containing the Great Seal. The top end of the purse is positioned in such a way as to conceal a pendant suspended on a ribbon from Bacon’s neck.

The oval border of the portrait bears the words:

“HONORATISS : D<sup>s</sup>. FRANCISCUS BACON : EQUES AU: MAG : SIGILL : ANGL : CUSTos.” [i.e. “The Honourable Lord Francis Bacon, august knight, Keeper of the Great Seal of England.”]

Above the picture is shown Francis Bacon’s heraldic shield, derived from Sir Nicholas Bacon, together with a ribbon displaying Francis Bacon’s personal motto, “MONITI MELIORA” [“Being instructed, to better things”], derived from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Book 3, which reads in its fullness, “Moniti meliora sequamur” [“Let us, being instructed, strive after better things”].

The inscription beneath the portrait reads: “The righte Honourable S.<sup>r</sup> Fravncis Bacon knight, Lorde keeper of the greate Seale of Englande and one of his Mat.<sup>ies</sup> most hon.<sup>bl</sup> privie Counsell”.

Under this inscription, in small letters, is engraved: “Simon Passæus sculpsit L. Are to be sould by John Sudbury and George Humble at the signe of the white horse in Pope’s head Alley.”

Because the inscription does not include Bacon’s subsequent title of Lord Chancellor, the engraving would have been made sometime between 7 March 1617, when Bacon was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, and 4 January 1618, when he was made Lord High Chancellor.

Passe’s plate was later reused, with suitable changes, for the frontispiece to Bacon’s *Sylva Sylvarum* (1626 and 1627). It also formed the model for or basis of the frontispiece to the 1640 *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning*.



<sup>1</sup> Compton Holland (d.1622) first came to prominence in 1616, when he published a series of portrait engravings by Simon de Passe that revolutionised English printmaking. Two years later, with his brother Henry Holland, he published the *Basiliologia*, the famous series of portrait engravings of English kings and queens and other eminent persons.

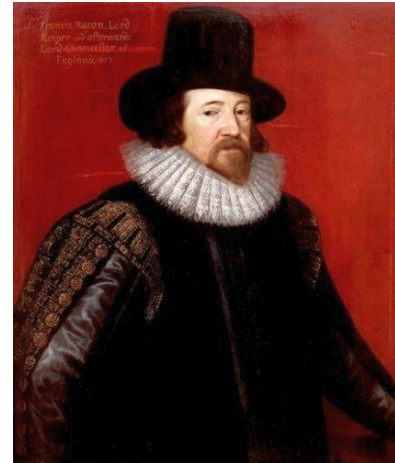
(4) **Half-length portrait of Francis Bacon as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England (1617)** – oil on panel by Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569–1622).

The inscription on the painting reads: “Francis Bacon, Lord Keeper and afterwards Lord Chancellor of England”.

Bacon wears a black hat, a delicate white lace ruff around his neck, and the gold embroidered black robe of a Lord Chancellor.

The background is a simple red panel.

[Current Location: Łazienki Palace, Royal Baths Museum, Warsaw, Poland]



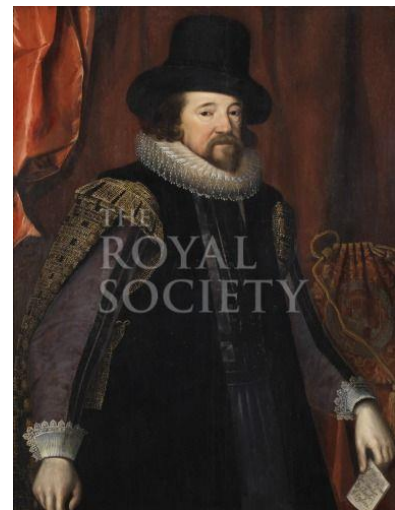
(5) **Half-length portrait of Francis Bacon as Lord Chancellor (1618)** – oil painting attributed to Abraham van Blyenberch (or, alternatively, to the Studio of Paulus van Somer I).

Bacon is shown standing, his left arm resting on a table upon which is the purse holding the Great Seal of England, signifying his office as its Keeper. This hand holds a paper addressed “To the Hon:ble Francis Lord Verulam Ld. Chancler of England”. [i.e. “To the Honourable Francis Lord Verulam, Lord Chancellor of England.”]

Francis Bacon was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal on 7 March 1617. Following this, the title of Lord High Chancellor was bestowed on him by King James I on 4 January 1618. He was created Baron Verulam of Verulam on 12 July 1618. The portrait was probably painted shortly after 12 July 1618. In fact it is recorded that at least £33 was “paid to the picture drawer for his Lp’s picture” on 12 September 1618, which probably refers to this portrait and its artist.

The background displays a red curtain, with part folded and drawn back behind Bacon’s right shoulder.

[Current location: The Royal Society, London, England. The painting was bequeathed to the Royal Society by Martin Folkes, who died in 1754.]



(6) **Three-quarter-length portrait of Sir Francis Bacon as Lord Chancellor (1618)** – oil painting attributed to Paul van Somer.

Bacon is shown standing with his left hand holding a letter and resting on a table by its corner. On the table is the purse that holds the Great Seal of England, a corner of which is covered by the letter. Bacon's right hand rests on a ceremonial walking stick. He wears his Lord Chancellor's black robe with gold lace embroidery. Unlike the Pourbus and Blyenberch portraits, he wears no hat.

The background is likewise slightly different, with the red curtain behind him having its extra folds displayed to the left of Bacon's left arm and shoulder, above the table which is covered with a red cloth.



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[On display at Gorhambury House, St Albans]

The diarist, George Vertue, noted in 1731 that John Vanderbank made six copies of the Gorhambury portrait of Lord Bacon. A number of these copies are recorded:-

1. Badminton House (Duke of Beaufort);
2. National Portrait Gallery (presented to the British Museum in 1758 by Dr A. Gifford);
3. with Duits, 1943;
4. recorded by Vertue in Speaker Onslow's collection.

When Vanderbank made his copies of the Gorhambury portrait, the Gorhambury portrait was thought to be an original painted from life. It is thought nowadays by some that the Gorhambury portrait might actually be a posthumous version after the portrait in the Royal Society, although there are several notable differences which argue against this.

(7) **Portrait of Sir Francis Bacon as Lord Verulam, Viscount St Alban** – engraving by Simon de Passe as originally used in Holland’s *Baziliologia* (1618), but suitably altered and then printed as the frontispiece to the first edition of Francis Bacon’s *Sylva Sylvarum* (dated 1626).

The alterations consist of changing the Bacon heraldic shield to the full coat of arms of Francis Bacon as Viscount St Alban, altering the inscription and removing the Great Seal purse from the picture – except for the top part of the purse held in Bacon’s hand that conceals the pendant.

Above the picture are shown Bacon’s heraldic arms as Viscount St Alban, with the Bacon family motto “MEDIOCRIA FIRMA” beneath. [“Moderate is Sure,” or “Moderate things endure,” or “The Middle Path is Strong/Firm/True.”]

The motto on the surrounding ribbon gives Francis Bacon’s more personal motto, “MONITI MELIORA.”

The inscription reads:-

The right Hon<sup>ble</sup>, Francis Lo: Verulam, Viscount S<sup>ct</sup> Alban. Mortuus 9 Aprilis, Anno Dñi. 1626. Annoq Aetat 66.

[i.e. “The right Honourable Francis Lord Verulam, Viscount St Alban. Died 9 April, Anno Domini 1626. In his 66th year of age.”]

In later versions of *Sylva Sylvarum*, the engraving becomes increasingly worn, resulting in the portrait appearing increasingly distorted or spoilt.

It is in the 1640 *Advancement of Learning* frontispiece that the concealed pendant is finally revealed. (See over →)



(8) **Portrait of Sir Francis Bacon as Baron Verulam of Verulam, Viscount St Alban** – engraving by William Marshal after Simon de Passe and printed as the frontispiece to *Of the Advancement and Proficiency of Learning or the Partitions of Sciences* (1640), being the first English translation of Francis Bacon's *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum* (1624).

The laurel-wreathed plaque above Bacon's head reads: "Tertius A Platone, Philosophiæ Princeps". ["The Third after Plato, the Prince/Chief of Philosophy."]

On the left-hand page of the open book on the desk are written "Mundus" ["World"] and "Mens" ["Mind"], whilst on the right-hand page Bacon has just completed writing the phrase "Conubio jungam stabili" ["I'll join thee in firm wedlock"] – a sentence derived from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book 1, line 73, but which Bacon is using to refer to the marriage of World and Mind. The book is the 7th Book (i.e. stage) of the Great Instauration, with the other six shown on the table and the bookshelf above.



The inscription beneath the picture reads:

QUOD FELICITER VORTAT REIP: LITERARIAE  
 V.C. FRAN. DE VERULAMIO PHILOSOPH: LIBERTATIS  
 ASSERTOR AUDAX, SCIENTIARU REPARATORY FELIX  
 MUNDI MENTISQ MAGNUS ARBITER INCLYTIS  
 MAX: TERRARUM ORBIS ACAD: OXON: CANTAB. Q. HANC  
 SUAM INSTAUR: VOTO SUSCEPTO VIVUS DECERNEBAT  
 OBITI V NON: APRIL II D:N: KAROLE. I.  
 PP AUG: clō lōc XXVI.

Which translates: "Viscount Francis of Verulam, philosopher, bold assertor of liberty, happy repairer of the sciences, great judge of nature and the mind, by a vow he undertook when living, proposed this his Instauration for Oxford and Cambridge, the most famous Universities of the world, which he [the translator] felicitously translates for the commonwealth of letters. He [Verulam] died on 9 April, in the second year of the reign of the august father of his fatherland, Charles 1, 1626."

Notably the pendant suspended on a ribbon from around Bacon's neck, which in earlier portraits was deliberately concealed in such a way as to suggest a secret, is in this picture shown exposed, revealing itself as the Lesser George and thereby suggesting or indicating that Bacon was a secret Knight of the Garter, or had the right to be one. If so, it would mean that Francis Bacon was the eldest natural son of Queen Elizabeth I and, if he had been acknowledged publicly by the Queen, the rightful heir to the throne of England.

The work is included by Bacon's chaplain, Dr Rawley, in the list of his lordship's true works (*Resuscitatio*, 1657, 1671).

(9) **Full length portrait of Francis Bacon, Viscount St Alban** – oil on canvas by unknown artist, after 1731. Posthumous version after the Gorhambury and Royal Society portraits of Bacon. Purchased in 1900 by the National Gallery.

[National Gallery Primary Collection: NPG 1288]



Please see the Francis Bacon Research Trust website for enlarged images of these and other pictures, plus essays and further descriptions/explanations.

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

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