

# The Garter Knight Portrait of Francis Bacon



*Sir Francis Bacon depicted as a Garter Knight in the 1640 version of his *Advancement of Learning*, as also in a mezzotint portrait by Cornelius Johnson.*

Author: Peter Dawkins

In this engraved illustration on the frontispiece to the 1640 edition of Francis Bacon's *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning*,<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon is shown seated at his writing desk, attired in his Lord Chancellor's robes, hatted, and wearing the Lesser George on a ribbon hanging from around his neck. This depicts an extraordinary secret, previously kept hidden.



Frontispiece portrait, *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning* (1640)

The portrait is derived from an original, done from life, which was engraved by Simon Pass sometime in 1617, after Bacon had been appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal (7 March 1617) but before his appointment as Lord High Chancellor (4 January 1618). Pass' original was printed in Holland's *Baziliologia* (1618). The same plate was reused eight years later for the frontispiece of Bacon's *Sylva Sylvarum* (1626/7), but with suitable changes to reflect the fact that Bacon held, by the time of his death (Easter Day, 1626), the titles of Baron Verulam of Verulam and Viscount Saint Alban, but by then was no longer Lord Keeper of the Great Seal.



A) Francis Bacon Portrait: *Baziliologia* (1618)



B) Francis Bacon Portrait: *Sylva Sylvarum* (1627)

A) Portrait of "The Right Honourable Sir Francis Bacon, knight, Lorde Keeper of the great Seale of England and one of his Majesty's most honourable privie Counsell", engraved by Simon Pass and printed in Holland's *Baziliologia* (1618).

B) Portrait of "The right honourable Francis Lord Verulam, Viscount St Alban", engraved by Simon Pass, with suitable alterations, and printed in Bacon's *Sylva Sylvarum* (1626/7).

In the 1640 *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning* frontispiece the portrait is redrawn, reversed, on a new plate, and with specific changes and additions, to show Francis Bacon as Baron Verulam of Verulam, Viscount St Alban, Lord Chancellor, seated at a desk and holding open a book in which he is writing with a quill pen, and wearing the Lesser George.

The exact same engraved illustration was used again in the 1641 edition of Bacon's *The Historie of the Reigne of King Henry the Seventh*,<sup>2</sup> replacing the portrait of King Henry that was included in the original 1622 edition.

All the portraits depict a medallion suspended from Francis Bacon's neck on a ribbon. But, on the original 1618 engraving, the medallion is carefully obscured by the top end of the ceremonial purse containing the Great Seal of England that Bacon holds in his hand. The subsequent 1626 version has the purse suitably removed, as Bacon was by then no longer Lord Chancellor and Keeper of the Great Seal, but the purse top is kept, thereby maintaining the medallion's concealment whilst at the same time continuing to hint at some great secret veiled from public eyes.

In the 1640 *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning* frontispiece the medallion is plainly visible, revealing what it is. It depicts St. George slaying the dragon. Such a badge was and still is the preserve of England's premier Order of Chivalry, the Most Noble Order of the Garter. When worn suspended from the Order's elaborate gold and enamel collar, the badge (similarly of enamelled gold) is known as the George. This is used in ceremonial. For normal wear, a simpler medallion of plain gold is used, known as the Lesser George, hung from a blue ribbon around the neck so as to be worn upon the breast—and this is what Bacon is shown wearing.



It would appear that the intention of this portrait of Francis Bacon is to depict him as a Garter Knight wearing the Lesser George, but there is no record of him having ever been invested as such. All investments as a Knight of the Order of the Garter are by personal invitation of the reigning Sovereign. However, according to the Order's Statutes reissued and revised by King Henry VIII in 1522,<sup>3</sup> there are always two persons who are Garter Knights by right of birth, and these are the Sovereign and the heir to the throne, the Prince of Wales.

According to Article I of the Statutes:

First, it is Ordered and accorded, that the Kyng, and his Heirs and Successors Kyngs of England, shall be for evermore Soveraynes of the saide most Noble Order and amiable Companie of Saynt George, named the Gartier.

According to Article XXXVIII of the Statutes:

... And in other days of the year shall be holden to wear a small Chayne of Gold with the Image of St. George depending at the end of the said Chayne, except in time of war, sickness, long voyage, then it shall suffice him to wear alone, a lase of sylke, with the said Image of St. George.

There is, therefore, an implication in this picture, carefully foreshadowed by its predecessors, that Francis Bacon was a Prince of Wales, although concealed and unacknowledged publicly.<sup>4</sup>

Copyright © Peter Dawkins, 2021

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> This book, entitled *Of the Advancement and Proficiency of Learning or the Partitions of Sciences*, was the first English translation of Francis Bacon's *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum* published in 1623. This English translation was published in 1640, being printed in Oxford by Leon. Lichfield, Printer to the University, for Rob. Young and Ed. Forrest. The engraving was made by William Marshall. The translation was done by the Rev. Doctor Gilbert Wats, and the book was dedicated to King Charles I and his son, who later became King Charles II.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Historie of the Reigne of King Henry the Seventh*. London: Printed by R.Y. and R.H. and are sold by R. Meighen, 1641.

<sup>3</sup> *The Statutes and Ordinances of the most Noble Ordre of Saint George, named the Gartier*. Ordained by Henry VIII and set forth on 23 April 1522; printed in Latin and English by Elias Ashmole, Windsor Herald, *The Institutions, laws and ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, collected and digested into one body* (1672).

See also: Beltz, George Frederick, *Memorials of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (1841); Rance, H.F., *In Search of St. George* (digitised by David Rance and published on the internet by Adrian Rance-McGregor, June 2016.)

<sup>4</sup> The George is also shown being worn by Francis Bacon in another picture, contemporary with the 1640 *Advancement of Learning* version. This is a mezzotint portrait on paper originally made by the artist Cornelius Johnson (1593-1661).

Cornelius Johnson, also known as Cornelis Janssens van Ceulen (1593-1661) was an English painter of portraits of Dutch or Flemish parentage. He was active in England, from at least 1618 to 1643. Born in London, he moved to the Netherlands in 1643. He was in Amsterdam 1646-1652, and then in Utrecht 1652-1661, where he died.

The mezzotint portrait was published in London c.1730 by John Cooper. A copy is kept in the British Museum: "The Right Honble Francis Bacon". Museum number 1902,1011.520.

([https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1902-1011-520](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1902-1011-520))

The published portrait has an inscription beneath it reading, "The Right Honble. Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam and Viscount St. Albans, Lord High Chancellor of England, Obit. 9 April 1626. Aetat 66. Cornelius Johnson pinxit. Sold by J. Cooper in James Street, Covent Garden."

It is worth noting here that Francis Bacon's title, given him by King James I in January 1621, was in fact Viscount St Alban, referencing the saint and not the place. In John Cooper's 18<sup>th</sup> century publication of Cornelius Johnson's portrait of Bacon, the title is rendered incorrectly as "Viscount St Albans". Because a noble title normally referenced a place, it became fairly common after Bacon's death for publishers, writers, editors, scholars, artists and others to correct what they considered an error—an erroneous practice that still continues to be repeated today.

Not only is Bacon's correct title shown on the *Sylva Sylvarum* portrait and the title pages of his original books published in English, including that of the 1640 *Advancement and Proficiency of Learning*, but also, after he was given the title Viscount St Alban, Bacon used to sign himself "Francis St Alban", as can be seen in his letters. Moreover, if the title had been intended to reference a place, Bacon's title would have been Viscount of St Albans; but there was no "of" in Bacon's title.