

# Jewel collectors unlock 17th-century mystery

### Real-life pendant from 1635 masterpiece reveals the true story of Thomas Aston's family tragedy

By Samuel Montgomery

FOR a couple of Londoners admiring a 17th-century masterpiece at Manchester Art Gallery, something seemed strangely familiar.

A heart-shaped gold pendant emblazoned with a skull and trailing a lock of blonde hair looked remarkably similar to a mourning jewel they had bought 30 years ago.

They soon realised that their pendant had been immortalised in *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of His Wife*, the 1635 life-size masterpiece by the Cheshire artist John Souch.

For centuries, it was believed the skull pendant attached to Aston's chest in the portrait alluded to the death of his beloved wife, Magdalen, who died in

childbirth months earlier. Yet the discovery reveals its inclusion was also intended to commemorate the death of their six-year-old son Robert a year prior, mirroring the story of William Shakespeare losing his son, Hamlet, in 1586.

The jewel had remained at Aston Hall in Cheshire, where the portrait was painted, until the 1862 sale of the collection – upon which the pendant's whereabouts became unknown.

A couple of keen collectors of memento mori jewellery purchased the pendant from an antiques dealer 30 years ago and its significance would only be fully understood on a chance visit to Manchester.

In the painting, the bereaved nobleman, dressed in mourning black, stands beside his sole surviving child, three-year-old Thomas, who gestures towards an inscription which reads: "The seas can be defined, the earth can be measured, grief is immeasurable".

Lady Aston's corpse is shown lying behind the wicker cradle of her dead

infant, which has been draped in a black elderdown and had a skull placed upon its head.

A Latin inscription on the cradle translates as "He who sows in flesh reaps bones".

Martyn Downer, specialist dealer in historic objects and works of art who is now representing the couple, said: "The seated female figure at the foot of the death bed is also believed to be Lady Aston in life, so the painting's a dual portrait of her."

Mr Downer, former head of jewellery at Sotheby's London, said: "The jewel on the painting is too small to read its text. So now that we have the jewel, we can see that the jewel actually doesn't commemorate his dead wife beside him in the painting, but his first son, Robert, who died the year before, and by wearing the jewel with a lock of Robert's hair, Sir Thomas Aston is trying to incorporate his dead son into that group painting – it's a tribute.

"The discovery of this extraordinary object propels us back to the rituals of

mourning in the age of Shakespeare and offers a vivid new insight into the celebrated family portrait."

Heart-shaped and surrounded by a golden wreath, the pendant jewel is enamelled in black and white with inscriptions in Latin on both sides, translated as: "Your Robert died 4th May 1634", front, and "In whom was our delight, through whom was our consolation, with whom the hope of his parents first perished", reverse.

Mr Downer said: "People who have seen *Hamlet* or read the book will, in this painting and in this jewel, recognise the grieving for a precious first son.

"The painting is full of tragedy, it's laden with emotion. There is a clear link with *Hamlet* that's really interesting."

Thomas, the little boy in the painting, would go on to die two years later, while his father was captured by parliamentary forces in Staffordshire during the Civil War and died aged just 44, from wounds received in attempting to escape.

As well as a tribute that could be seen

as a precursor to mourning jewellery, the pendant is another example of a memento mori – where the viewer is reminded of their own mortality.

"This is a very kind of Renaissance idea," Mr Downer said, adding: "Other objects in the painting, such as the globe, navigational instrument, the cross-staff and the lute with a broken string – they're all there deliberately to represent the passing of life, the end of worldly pleasures and the inevitability of our own life.

"Towards the end of the 17th century, the tradition of mourning jewellery, which is jewellery that was made specifically to commemorate a dead person, became very much more popular."

The pendant has now been valued at £650,000, and will be unveiled to the public at the Treasure House Fair at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, which runs on June 24-30.

The interdisciplinary art fair in London was founded in 2023 by Thomas Woodham-Smith and Harry Van der Hoorn.

Discovery of this object propels us back to the rituals of mourning in the age of Shakespeare

The skull pendant in the 1635 painting was to commemorate Sir Thomas Aston's son Robert, who had died a year earlier when he was a six-year-old

Memento mori How the locket changes the painting's meaning

FRONT OF LOCKET

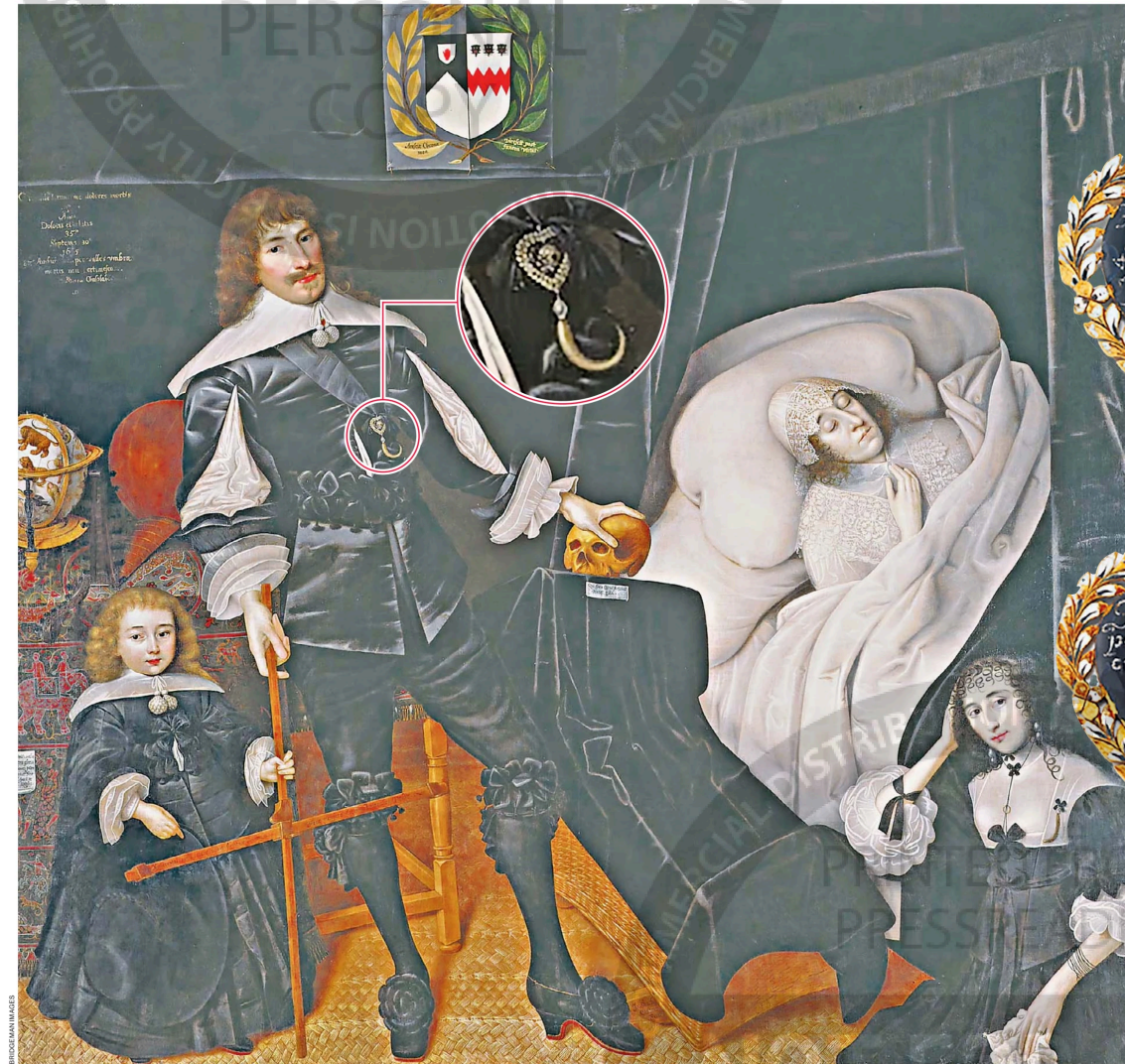


BACK OF LOCKET



TRANSLATION

Your Robert died 4th May 1634... In whom was our delight, through whom was our consolation, with whom the hope of his parents first perished



## Love fraudster told victim he was in hospital when he was in dock

By Telegraph Reporter

A CON artist told his victim he was in hospital while he was actually at court for another fraud case.

Ben Millin, 33, stole £5,500 from Fiona Mulkerrens-Dixon, 37, during their eight-month relationship.

The gambling addict from Yeovil, Somerset, faked calls with solicitors, friends and family to defraud his four female victims out of £30,000-£40,000. It later emerged that his hospital appointments for his "heart condition" were in fact court hearings for a previous fraud offence in 2019-2020 – where he conned a woman out of £20,000.

Millin admitted to four counts of fraud by false representation at Taunton Crown Court in July 2025.

He was sentenced to 34 months in prison, handed restraining orders preventing him from contacting any of the four victims, and given a five-year serious crime prevention order.

He is now out of jail – having served less than five months of his sentence, Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon said.

She met Millin in July 2021 at an after-work drinks when they were working at the same marketing firm in Exeter.

Within just a few hours of meeting her, Millin unveiled his first lie. Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon said: "He told me his biological father had died in a car crash and he was born in Naples. The next morning, Ben faked a text message from his 'soon-to-be fiancé and girlfriend of 10 years' – who had allegedly been having an affair."

"She was not real. He lied about everything – what didn't he lie about? It makes me sick. I don't even know the



Ben Millin, who conned four women out of between £30,000 and £40,000

man I shared a bed with."

Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon said not only was Millin "incredibly convincing" but she felt sorry for him because she had experienced a lot of the traumas he claimed to be going through.

She said: "I thought we were two broken souls supporting one another, lifting each other up through these horrible hard times and loving each other through it. He was ambitious, suc-

cessful at work and everyone loved him. Nobody else saw it – it wasn't just me."

"He even made another victim homeless: she was a teacher and had to sleep in her car because of how much he stole off her."

In November that year, Millin started asking Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon for large amounts of money, claiming he was a victim of fraud. Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon said he had previously been borrowing small amounts of cash from her and swiftly paying them back to "gain her trust". He conned Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon out of £5,500 by January – defrauding her "of every penny she had".

In April 2022, Millin claimed to be going for a job interview in Bristol before taking Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon on holiday to London – and then he disappeared. Ms Mulkerrens-Dixon called every hospital and the police to report a missing person.

Millin was in fact at a court hearing at Taunton Crown Court.

DC Claire Morgan, officer in the case, said: "I've been investigating crimes for 18 years and Ben Millin is by far the most complex character I have met in regards to the deceit and lies he managed to maintain.

"He was a master of manipulation."

## Africans don't want to live in Britain anymore, says actress

By Albert Tait

MICHAELA COEL has claimed West Africans are leaving the UK because it is no longer attractive.

The writer and star of Channel 4 series *Cheating Gam* and the BBC's *I May Destroy You* claimed anti-immigration marches were "a bit odd" because the UK is no longer as desirable to immigrants. Last year's Unite the Kingdom demonstration organised by far-right activist Tommy Robinson drew more than 100,000 people to the streets of London.

Coel, 38, whose parents are Ghanaian, told the *Sunday Times*: "It just seems a bit odd because I don't think many people are racing to immigrate to the UK like they used to. I think more and more, if people can find a way out – I'm talking particularly for west Africans – they will go. I think the UK has lost the attraction it once had."

Coel, who lives in east London, added that she feels "more at peace" at her other home in Ghana.

Data show that the number of people living in England and Wales who are originally from Nigeria has increased in recent decades. In the 2011 census, just over 190,000 residents in England and

Wales recorded their place of birth as Nigeria.

In the 2021 census, this number had risen to more than 270,000. Last year, David Lammy, who was then Foreign Secretary, sent immigration experts to West African nations after a "spike" in attempts by migrants with fake visas to board flights to Britain.

In the interview, Coel also spoke about her upcoming film, *Mother Mary*, in which she plays a former costume designer who reunites with an estranged best friend and pop star, played by Anne Hathaway.

She praised how all the main characters in the film are female and the only men she could recall were backing dancers.

"Everybody who

speaks [in the film] – how amazing – is female," Coel said.

Coel, who was born and raised in east London by a single mother, rose to prominence with her coming-of-age show series *Cheating Gam* about a restricted religious woman trying to lose her virginity.

The show, which ran on E4 from 2015 to 2017, won her two Bafas.

She also appeared in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and the 2018 drama *Black Earth Rising* before becoming a household name when she wrote and starred in *I May Destroy You* in 2020.

In the show, which won five Bafas, she plays a young writer who seeks to rebuild her life after being drugged and raped, which is based on Coel's own experiences.



Michaela Coel feels more at peace in Ghana