

### When Mr Witham met Mr Audubon

Four volumes of John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* were sold at a 2010 Sotheby's auction for a staggering £7.3 million (purchased for only £7,000 in 1951), making it the third most expensive non-religious published work below a Da Vinci and a Magna Carta document. Inside volume 1 is a dedication from Henry Witham's wife, Eliza, 'with sincere affection June 24 1831.'

Why did this set of hand-painted, engraved watercolour prints fetch such a high price and how did the Witham family become involved?

**Richard Witham (no relation to Henry) shared his research with Teesdale U3A members at another well attended zoom General Meeting this month.** Henry Witham came from a nouveau riche, North-east catholic family whilst the illegitimate and adopted John Audubon was shipped to America to avoid Napoleonic conscription. Both men were in debt after a wild youth and had a chance meeting in Edinburgh when John, on tour to raise funds for his book, was a guest at Henry's dinner party alongside the surgeon, Dr Robert Knox, and the infamous body snatchers, Burke and Hare.

Henry purchased a complete copy for 215 guineas (£21,700 today). It was held at Lartington Hall which ensured its excellent condition and is the one that sold at auction in 2010. Its ownership passed through the Englefield and Silvertop families by marriage, and it was bought in 1951 by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Hesketh. It is now held by an anonymous collector. There are 120 extant copies - some in a degraded condition - mostly held in public collections.

The prints are beautifully detailed life-size paintings of about 500 bird species, sometimes with four or five different birds on a page. John, a self-taught artist, went into the wilderness and shot, stuffed and mounted the birds before drawing them, an accepted practise in the nineteenth century. Some of the species, such as the passenger pigeon, great auk, the Eskimo curlew and the Carolina parakeet, are extinct.

John Audubon made money out of the project and went on to produce a similar work with his son, *The Quadrapeds of America*. He died in 1851 but the National Audubon Society exists in USA and his original house outside Philadelphia is open to the public.

Tim Meacham gave a vote of thanks to Richard for this excellent illustrated talk. You can view some of the prints on Richard Witham's website [www.richardwitham.com](http://www.richardwitham.com)

The next zoom meeting will be on Thursday 25 March at 10:30am when Tony Nicholson will talk on *Secrets of the Attic*, an account of an astonishing collection of Victorian photographs, souvenirs and letters found in his attic.

For more information about U3A, look at the website [www.teesdaleu3a.org.uk](http://www.teesdaleu3a.org.uk)

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