Historical portraits are ubiquitous in country houses, often overlooked and their sitters’ identities or significance forgotten. In late Stuart and early Georgian England, however, portraits were vital to the practice of instrumental friendship, in which friends, family and political associates were bound by ties of mutual obligation. Portraits were commissioned, exchanged as gifts and, as Kate Retford has shown, they were displayed on the walls of town and country houses as a pictorial ‘address book’ of their owners’ connections. This paper examines the portraits that were commissioned, exchanged and displayed by some of the leading political families of late Stuart and early Georgian England. These families used portraiture as a form of ‘soft power’ to shape and visualise their political and social networks; the analysis of their portraits undertaken here deepens our understanding of those networks and the messages they wished to communicate to their contemporaries. The paper also argues for the importance of interdisciplinary methodology to historians and art historians alike.
one house in the country, the use of those properties was contingent on geography. While Charles Seymour, sixth duke of Somerset, regularly hosted political gatherings at his country house, Petworth in Sussex, Devonshire received far fewer visitors at his principal country seat of Chatsworth in Derbyshire due to its distance from London. Devonshire employed a differentiated strategy of display for his portfolio of properties, engaging with contemporary politics in his London townhouse, where he displayed his own portrait alongside those of the monarchs he served. While Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire was positioned as the ancestral seat of the Cavendish family, he invested in Chatsworth as the new seat of the dynasty and commemorated his own pivotal contribution to the Glorious Revolution of 1688/9 through its mural paintings. In the state apartments, Devonshire assembled a group of portraits of his relations and associates which together presented a formidable statement of the power of the seventeenth century aristocracy.

_Patronage circles: Charles and Elizabeth Seymour, sixth duke and duchess of Somerset_

Charles (1662-1748) and Elizabeth (1667-1722) Seymour, sixth duke and duchess of Somerset used portraiture extensively to display and consolidate their social, political and kinship networks. This section will consider the ‘Petworth Beauties’, a group of portraits that, as Tabitha Barber has shown, was not simply a collection of court ladies but represented the ‘personal court’ of the Somersets, with the sitters drawn from within their close circles. The patronage of a particular artist could also be shared within a network, and in common with many of their friends and associates, the Somersets patronised Swedish portrait painter Michael Dahl (1659-1743), an artist who was also favoured by Prince George of Denmark.
Norfolk Whigs: The Townshend, Walpole and Pelham families

The final section of the paper will consider three powerful Whig families of early eighteenth century Norfolk: the Townshends, Walpole and Pelhams, and their shared patronage of portrait painter Charles Jervas (c. 1675-1739). The families were interlinked by marriage and during the 1720s, the decade in which between them they dominated the cabinet, they consolidated and commemorated their ties through a series of portraits commissioned from Jervas. A memorandum presented by Jervas to Charles, second Viscount Townshend (1675-1738), illuminates the implicit hierarchies within family networks and demonstrates how the families’ political and marital interdependence was manifested through the exchange and display of portraits.

The paper concludes with a plea for interdisciplinarity, and the importance of connecting textual and material sources. The political context can help to make sense of portrait collections, and in turn, the study of those portraits can also deepen our understanding of the political, social and kinship networks that underpinned early modern elite society.