

THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



NEWSLETTER

Winter 2020 - 21 Issue 34

The Blind Earl's Dessert Service

by Anne Matthews



Plate of the 'Blind Earl' pattern at Croome ordered in 1813 from Flight, Barr & Barr in the name of the Earl of Coventry

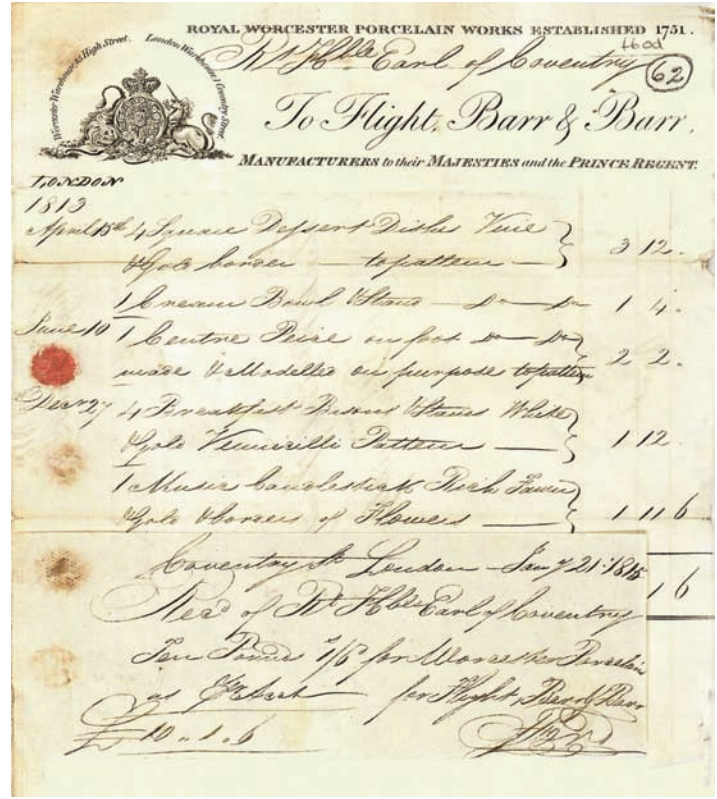
George William the 7th Earl of Coventry was known as the Blind Earl. He was born in 1758 and died in 1830. While still the heir to the estate he was blinded in 1780 in a hunting accident when his horse fell on him, causing the loss of sight in one eye completely. For the rest of his life, he was only able to faintly differentiate between light and dark in one eye. As the heir to the Earl of Coventry he had the title Lord Deerhurst.

The Coventry family seat is Croome Court, now in the care of the National Trust, and it is a proud boast that Royal Worcester named a dessert service after one of the Earls. However, porcelain experts are somewhat doubtful about this as they point out this design was being made long before

the Earl was born; and the Worcester manufactory had stopped making it by 1780 because it was no longer popular. As a volunteer at both Croome and the Museum of Royal Worcester I had access to both archives and so was able to investigate this. The Croome collection of furniture, paintings, and porcelain that the family took with them when Croome Court was sold was in store. Prior to its return to Croome every single item had to be painstakingly photographed and catalogued. My husband, Lionel, and another volunteer went with conservation managers from the National Trust to do this. I noticed that four plates of the 'Blind Earl's' design looked older and were less vividly coloured than the rest. They had no backstamp, whereas the rest of the service has the back stamp of Flight, Barr & Barr.



Plate of 'Chelsea Rosebud' design at Croome (no backstamp)



Receipt from Flight, Barr & Barr from the Croome archive

Investigation of the archive and library at the Museum of Royal Worcester, revealed that the design was originally made by Chelsea Porcelain Works. At Croome it was known it had been called 'Chelsea Rosebud,' until the Earl commissioned his dessert service. It was also discovered that the London decorator James Giles painted porcelain for Chelsea as well as for Worcester. During the 1750s records show that Worcester began making the design instead of Chelsea and continued to make it until about 1775, when it was no longer popular.

Lord Deerhurst married Peggy Pitches in 1783. Her father, Abraham Pitches, a wealthy self-made brandy importer, had bought Chelsea porcelain for a long time, as it was a fashionable piece to collect. It seems reasonable to assume some of it was Chelsea Rosebud because it was such a popular design. Sir Abraham (knighted in 1782) bequeathed his fortune to his four surviving daughters in such a way that their husbands would never have control over it, so Lady Deerhurst was extremely wealthy in her own right.

Peggy loved porcelain. Both the Royal Worcester and the Croome archives show that she bought it all her married life. In the Croome archive there are many invoices and receipts from Flight, Barr & Barr in its various forms, and Chamberlain, addressed to 'My Lady Deerhurst,' and after 1809 addressed to 'My Lady Coventry.' Peggy's father might have given her his Chelsea Rosebud, she certainly had a few pieces, but it was no longer made. In 1813 Peggy commissioned a new set from Flight, Barr & Barr. Some of the pieces are identical in shape to the original design, but she asked for some new configurations: a modern

square plate, and a large oval centre piece, and for these she asked for a deeply scalloped edge which her husband could feel.

The receipt from Flight, Barr & Barr in the Croome archive (above) is annotated 'modeled on purpose.' As the Earl could faintly differentiate between light and dark in one eye it is believed Peggy asked to have the colours made more vivid, the leaves a dark green, which shows up against the white, and the sprays and sprigs much bolder and brighter. So, one could say that the older paler versions of the design are 'Chelsea Rosebud,' and the newer brighter ones are 'Blind Earl'. It's not clear exactly when it gained this epithet, but the design was made sporadically into the 1970s and no doubt the story was a good selling point.

A lot of the porcelain Peggy bought was brightly coloured. The receipts in the Croome archive itemise tea services in 'Imari' and 'India' patterns. Looking in the Chamberlain pattern design books at the Museum of Royal Worcester these designs were elaborate and richly coloured. It is fascinating to see the invoices and receipts in the Croome archive, and to find the corresponding entries and design drawings in the archive at the Museum. Whenever Croome Court is open, the Worcester porcelain is on display in the dining room alongside Sèvres and Meissen.

This article was originally prepared for "Melting Pot," the magazine of the Friends of Royal Worcester Museum www.museumofroyalworchester.org The images are reproduced by the kind permission of the National Trust and the Croome Heritage Trust.



Famous author H Rider Haggard visits Croome

by Chris Wynne-Davies



Lord and Lady Coventry distributing beef and bread to the Croome tenants on Christmas Eve, c.1915
© Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service

H Rider Haggard (1856-1925) is best known as the successful author of adventure stories such as *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*. However, he also served on a number of royal commissions. 'Rural England', published in 1902 and reissued in 1906, was the record of his travels around England and Wales. It shows a picture of agriculture in poor condition and suggest reforms which would improve matters. The report was well received, and subsequently many of his suggestions were included in the Development Act of 1909.

In his report, Haggard makes some fascinating observations about his visit to Croome and discussions with the 9th Earl of Coventry.

"One of the most interesting estates that I visited in Worcestershire was that of the Earl of Coventry, at Croome Court. Upon this property many improvements have been made within recent years. Thus, between 1869 and 1884, 3,000 acres were drained, at a cost of £16,551. During the past thirty-two years also thirty-eight new cottages have been built, each of them containing three bedrooms, while additions and improvements have been made to many of the older cottages, and other dwellings have been purchased on various parts of the estate. The

cottage rents here are low, varying from 1s. to 1s. 6d. a week, inclusive of a large garden. Of late years the allotments have been largely increased. They now number 321, ranging from a quarter of an acre to one acre in size. Also, there were forty-four small-holdings of from one to six acres, the majority of them in the neighbourhood of Pershore, which, for the most part, were occupied by working market gardeners.

Labour, that is of men who could build or thatch a rick, cut, or lay hedges, shear sheep etc, Lord Coventry informed me, had always been scarce in that part, but within the last few years it had grown still scarcer, as the young able-bodied men were leaving for the towns, whither they were attracted by the higher wages and the seductions of city life. As the older hands died out, or became past work, it grew increasingly difficult to find young ones to take their places. Lord Coventry also remarked that one of the difficulties of the labour question was that people declined to inhabit the remoter cottages, whereas forty years ago they liked these solitary spots. Another was that farm work was looked down on, and it was common to hear it said of such and such a man that 'he is too good for a clod hopper!'



There was a system of sick pay and old-age pensions in force for the benefit of those who are in the employ of Lord Coventry, under which labourers who were ill received half-pay after they had been laid up for a fortnight, and if permanently unfitted for work, at the expiration of twelve months were placed upon the pension list. Able-bodied men were paid 14s. a week during the winter months, and extra wages in the summer during hay and corn harvest. Also, whenever possible, opportunities were given to them to earn higher wages by piecework. Carters and stockmen received from 16s. to 17s. a week.

At Christmas every cottager and his family were given presents of beef at the rate of 2 lb. and a 2 lb. loaf per head, a custom that has been in force upon this estate for upwards of a century. Also, liberal contributions were made towards the coal clubs in the various parishes. A shire stallion was kept for the use of the tenants at a nominal fee. In 1900 the noted prize winner 'College Don' was hired by Lord Coventry at a high fee, and in 1901 another prize winner, 'Curfew,' had been hired by him at a still higher fee for the benefit of the tenants.

Lord Coventry's herds of Hereford cattle, many of which wandered on the lush meadows round the house, were on the whole the finest I have seen, or am likely to see. About ninety breeding cows were kept which brought up their calves in the fields. Here it is the practice not to sell the best of the heifers, but of the steers about a hundred are fatted off at three years of age. The bulls were magnificent animals, especially 'Champion,' a splendid beast in store condition; 'Mercury,' a three-year-old; and a youngster of one year named 'Vatican.' These creatures, which were descended from ancestors that have never been beaten in the prize ring, as might be expected, fetch a great deal of money when sold.

At Pirton we saw one of the most beautiful half-timbered houses that I visited in Worcestershire, which, in addition to its plentiful black oak, was remarkable for its gables and fine stack of twisted chimneys. Other interesting objects at Croome Court itself were a fine growing oak planted by the late Queen Victoria when she was five years old, and a gigantic elm measuring thirty feet round the base. Lord Coventry also kindly drove us to see another beautiful timbered house in the neighbourhood, which was, I think, in the occupation of one of his sons. Of the two, however, I preferred Pirton Court, which seemed to me to have undergone less renovation.



Pirton Court home of Viscount Deerhurst and family, c.1908



*Lord Coventry and his champion Hereford cow 'Madrigal.'
Photograph by W H Bustin*



BROADWAY TOWER - A FOLLY?

by *Jill Tovey*

© Sue Haslam



In 1751 George William Coventry inherited the title 6th Earl of Coventry, Croome Court and 15,000 acres of land in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. He was 29 years old and the speed with which he set about improving and modernising his inheritance implies that he had already made plans about what he would do.

His first act was to employ up-and-coming landscape management expert Lancelot Brown to work with him on the project. Brown was an instinctive engineer who knew how water and land could be moulded and controlled – he knew the ‘Capabilities’. The two men had met through a mutual association with Lord Cobham at Stowe and the young George William had recognised Brown’s potential. So it was that in 1752 the two began working in partnership; they first of all turned the existing seventeenth-century house into a modern, symmetrical Palladian style mansion and then went on to create a vast, idyllic English landscape around it.

Whilst the basic ideas, and the boldness of style and design, were almost certainly the Earl’s, it was probably Brown’s skills in land and water management that gave him the confidence to have the 760 acres of land surrounding the house sculpted on a monumental scale, never before attempted.

The basic project took over ten years, but Brown continued to be involved – making adjustments to drainage right up until his death in 1783. So grateful to him was the Earl that he erected a monument in his memory beside the beautiful lake he had created out of a ‘Morass’.



Monument to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown at Croome





A watercolour of the Panorama Tower by James Wyatt, 1801

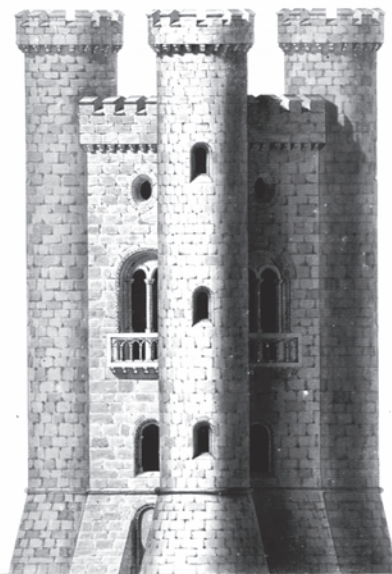
The creation of the Landscape Park had become a lifetime obsession for the 6th Earl of Coventry. He had also employed Robert Adam to design iconic buildings to form focal points and draw the eye to views that observers were intended to see. In this Adam, Brown and the Earl had worked closely together. However, by 1794 Brown and Adam were both dead, but George Coventry wasn't finished.

Whilst he now had buildings to decorate the inner park, he was thinking on a wider scale and brought in the latest 'must have' architect, James Wyatt to finish the job. There was already an 'eye-catcher' to the south in the shape of gothic style Dunstall Castle, which Adam had designed in 1765, but now he wanted eye-catchers to the north, east and west of the house, to be placed on the most visible pieces of high ground that he owned. So, between 1794 and 1801 Wyatt designed the Panorama Tower to the west, Pirton Castle to the north – and, to the east, Broadway Tower.

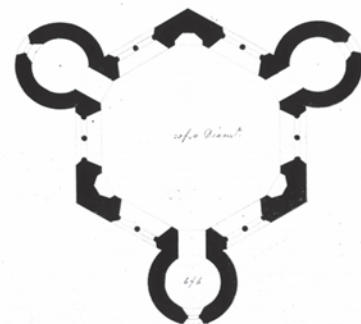


A watercolour of Pirton Castle by James Wyatt, 1801

Some miles to the east of Croome he owned Springhill House and land on the high ridge near the village of Broadway and Wyatt's design, in the Romanesque style fashionable at the time, completed the Earl's vision of the ideal, allegorical landscape. The Tower could also perhaps have been intended as a monument to himself – standing



Plan & Elevation of a Square Roman Tower intended to be erected on the Beacon at Springhill, one of the Seats of the Earl of Coventry –



proud on the hilltop, only distantly visible from Croome, but with views over sixteen counties. If this was the case, it worked because 220 years later, people still ask "Who built this?" The answer is George William, 6th Earl of Coventry and thus his name lives on. So, far from being a 'Folly' – it was a proud statement and had a purpose.



Charles Jervoise Dudley Smith

by Nicola Hewitt

The Worcester News from March 1974 captures the recollections of Mrs. Dorothy Ball, then living at Old Toll Gate. Her account includes a poignant memory of Croome and a brave young soldier:

“ In the morning (of 28 June 1914) we learned that Britain had declared war on Germany. The territorials who had remained behind for the rest of the week were confined to camp, except for the water fatigue party, but they were in great spirits and declared it would all be over by Christmas. By the end of the week, they had packed up and marched away and we never saw any of them again.

That Christmas (1914) when we had our party and Christmas tree at Croome Court, among the many grandchildren of the Earl and Countess of Coventry there was a tall young Grenadier Guardsman. For a brief moment he unsheathed his sword to show to his younger brother and cousins. Nine months later, aged only 19, he was killed in action. The organ at Croome D’Abitot church perpetuates his memory.”

The Grenadier Guardsman was Second Lieutenant Charles Jervoise Dudley Smith, eldest son of Barbara Coventry (daughter of the 9th Earl) and Gerald Dudley Smith. The family lived at Strensham Court, Worcestershire. He joined the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards in France with a draft of 30 NCOs and men on 21 April 1915, just in time to relieve the 2nd Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment on the front line.

The Battalion alternated its time between the front line, reserve positions and billets behind the line. On the 14 June the Battalion was again sent to the front line, to relieve the Border Regiment this time. Until they were relieved four days later the trenches came under heavy shelling and on 15 June 1915, during one of these bombardments, Charles is mortally wounded.

Charles’ name appears on the memorial commemorating the residents of Upper Strensham who were killed or missing in the First World War. He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Le Touret memorial in France.



Charles Jervoise Dudley Smith



War Memorial, Upper Strensham (Phillip Halling)



Clark Gable

© Imperial War Museum

IWM

Crash landing of USAAF Dakota at Worcester with Clark Gable on board

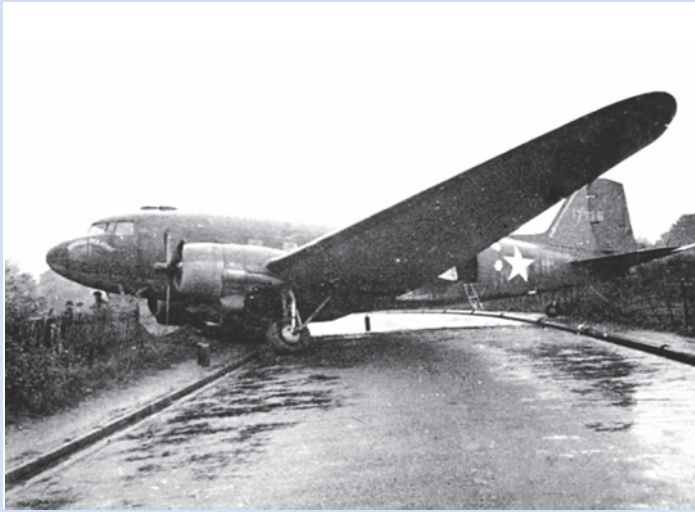
Defford Airfield Heritage Group

In September 1942 an American Douglas C-47 transport plane made an emergency landing at RAF Worcester (Perdiswell) but came in too fast for the grass field and crashed through the railings onto the adjacent Bilford Road, and into the city rubbish dump.

The passengers and crew had minor injuries. The VIP passenger in the co-pilot's seat was Clark Gable, the American movie star, but as the RAF Sergeant who helped remembered, Gable was not the glamorous pilot he had just watched at the cinema winning the war. The plane was called "Idiot's Delight" after the title of a pre-war film planned for Gable and Hedy Lamar, which was abandoned when her parents refused to let their schoolgirl daughter take part. Also on board was General Spaatz, Commander of the US Air Force, newly arrived in Europe. He unfortunately broke his ankle and was heard to grumble something about not crossing the Atlantic to land in the town's trash tip. The plane had taken off from RAF Pershore with a film crew, making a gunnery training film.

The VIPs were taken to the officers' mess for something stronger than tea. Two British officers told the RAF Sergeant's mother that Clarke Gable had been their guest and she pretended to swoon! Bilford Road was blocked for some days until the plane could be dismantled and taken away on a 'Queen Mary' transporter.

Clark Cable starred in over sixty Hollywood films, the most famous being 'Gone with the Wind' made in 1939, in which he co-starred with Vivien Leigh and Olivia De Havilland. Gable enlisted in January 1942; at 41, he was well over the normal recruitment age. He was based at the Biggs Army Airfield, Texas to train with and accompany the 351st Bomb Group to England as head of a six-man motion picture unit. He was promoted to captain. Gable spent most of 1943 at RAF Polebrook; he flew five combat missions, including one to Germany, as an observer-gunner in B-17 Flying Fortresses during 1943, earning the Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts. On one mission over Germany, Gable's aircraft was damaged by flak and attacked by

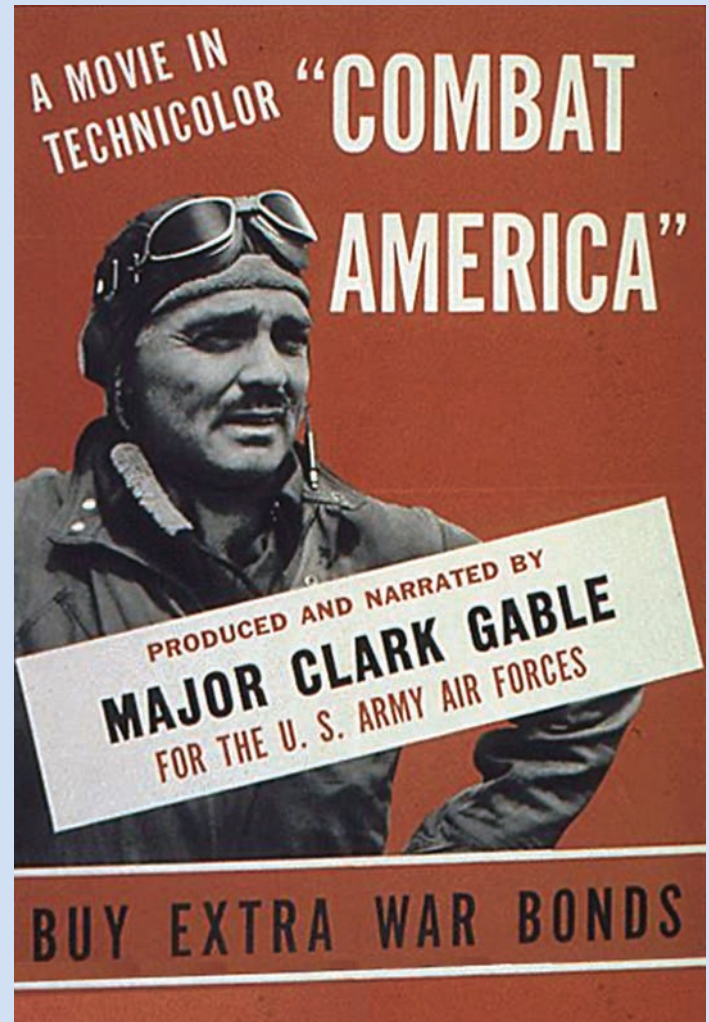


The beleaguered Dakota at RAF Worcester

fighters, which immobilised one of the engines and damaged the stabiliser. In the raid, one crewman was killed and two others were wounded, and flak went through Gable's boot and narrowly missed his head.

Promoted to major, while he hoped for another combat assignment, he had been placed on inactive duty and in June 1944, his discharge papers were signed by Captain (later President) Ronald Reagan. Gable completed editing of the film *Combat America* later that year, giving the narration himself and making use of numerous interviews with enlisted gunners.

He made good use of his wartime experiences in the 1948 film *Command Decision*, playing a World War II brigadier general who supervised bombing raids over Germany. *Variety* magazine said, "His is a believable delivery, interpreting the brigadier-general who must send his men out to almost certain death with an understanding that bespeaks his sympathy with the soldier..."



The Coventry Jockey Brothers

by Hugh Worsfold

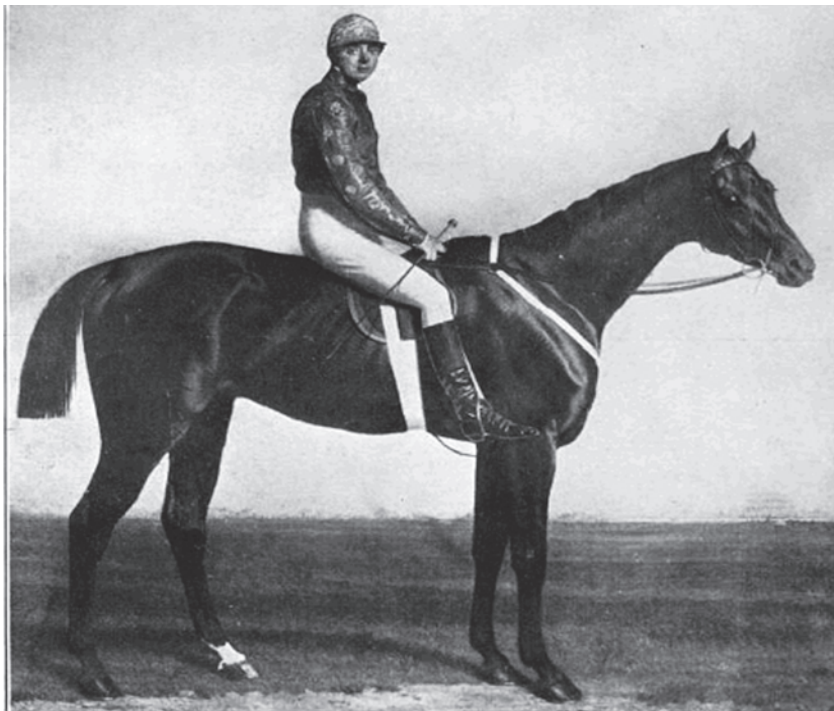


Henry Coventry

When we think of horse racing and the Coventry family, we first think of the 9th Earl and his association with the Grand National. He owned two winners. Firstly, in 1863, Emblem who won at odds of 10/1 and then the following year Emblematic winning at odds of 4/1. On both occasions the jockey was George Stevens and the trainer was Edwin Weever. Looking up the 'Roll of Honour' George Stevens also rode Grand National winners in 1856, 1869 and 1870.

However, the 1865 race is especially interesting as the winning jockey was Captain Henry Coventry (age 23). The horse was Alcibiade and won with

odds of 100/7. The owner was a Mr Ben Angell. His full name was Henry Amelius Beauclerk Coventry, a grandson of the 8th Earl and cousin of the 9th Earl. He was born on the 15 May 1842 and rose to the rank of Captain in the Grenadier Guards. The eldest son of Henry Amelius Coventry, he had a younger brother Arthur who was an accomplished amateur jockey. Henry Coventry's first public race, however, was at Warwick in the Grand Military Steeplechase where he came second on a horse called Martyr. On the following day at Warwick, he rode the same horse to achieve his first win, in the Scurry Handicap. He rode Martyr again to win a race at Cheltenham.



Alcibiade

His standing as a jockey grew and he eventually had his own horse, Agnes, on which he won several military races. He last rode Agnes at Windsor racecourse after which he sold the mare for it is said 'a great deal of money.'

Henry Coventry's association with the owner Mr Angell began in 1863 when he went to Baden-Baden in Germany to ride a horse called Bridegroom in the Grand Steeplechase. Despite not getting placed in this race, two years later Mr Angell asked Henry if he would ride his horse Alcibiade in the Grand National.

The weather conditions for the race were not good as it was snowy. The records state that Alcibiade and Hall Court, the mount of Captain Tempest, jumped the last together with Hall Court patently going the better. Captain Tempest, however, failed to hold his horse together as Henry delivered his horse with perfect judgement to get up on the line.

This was the National's closet ever finish (up to then). He did not ride in the Grand National again and his last notable win was two years later, on Emperor III in the National Hunt Steeplechase at Clapham Park near Bedford (this ceased to be a racecourse in 1901).

Captain Coventry died on 29 June 1885 at the age of 43. He had married Lady Evelyn Mary Craven in 1869 and they had one son. Henry's youngest brother Arthur was born on 7 December 1852 and he also became a fine amateur jockey. Arthur's first race was in 1874 at Croxton Park, near Waltham in Leicestershire (closed as a racecourse in 1914 with the outbreak of war and did not re-open). Shortly after this he won his first flat race at Worcester on a horse called The Baby. He was much in demand and was just as good a jockey over the jumps winning the 1879 National Hunt Steeplechase on Bellringer.

Unfortunately, Arthur Coventry could not repeat his brother's success in winning the Grand National. In the 1883 race he rode Jolly Sir John. It is recorded that 'a flood of money from its connections and from the public saw the horse start at 8/1, but hope was short-lived as Jolly Sir John fell at the second.'

Arthur Coventry said that he attributed much of his success to the tuition he received from Tom Cannon Snr, a jockey and then horse trainer. In 1890, at the age of 38, he decided to retire from the saddle and become a Jockey Club starter. In 1899 he was the starter of the Derby at Epsom. One of the horses was Flying Fox, the



Arthur Coventry

eventual winner, ridden by Mornington Cannon son of Tom Cannon Snr.

Arthur Coventry was described as a quiet, modest man with charming manners until someone upset him and then he could produce a string of profanities. He passed away at the Old Manor Hospital, Salisbury on 22 August 1925 aged 73. The following year a race was named after him, the Arthur Coventry National Hunt Flat Race, and run at Sandown.



Arthur Coventry



The Walled Garden at Croome Court

by *The Cronin Family*

First published in 'The English Garden' in June 2020

Chris and Karen Cronin weren't looking to restore one of Europe's largest walled gardens when they clambered through a hole in some brickwork to inspect a potential site for their dream family home. Yet within minutes of setting eyes on "broken hulks of enormous glasshouses sat forlorn like shipwrecks in an ocean of brambles" on that fateful day in 2000, they knew the course of their lives had entered an entirely new trajectory. "We both felt it," Karen recalls. "Somehow we were drawn to the place."

The seven-and-a-half-acre walled garden lies at the heart of Croome Court, famously the site of the first commission undertaken by the 18th-century landscape designer, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Yet while the house, church and parklands are now cared for by The National Trust, the Grade II* listed walled garden remains a separate entity.

For the Cronins, who run a company supplying engineering products to the music industry, and their daughter Victoria Richardson, the restoration has been a steep learning curve. "The garden had been abandoned since World War II," Chris explains. "A huge number of the walls were down; the brambles were so dense we didn't realise how bad the walls were, but we were determined to restore the garden."

Over the years the Cronins have worked with specialist craftspeople to rebuild the walls, often cleaning and stacking hundreds of old bricks themselves, and have overseen the restoration of its historical structures, including a fig and peach house, melon and cucumber house, dipping pond, hot wall and underground heating system, along with the vinery – part of which is now their home.

Come 2014 the Cronins had achieved a great deal, but as Chris observes: "It was a colossal project and we weren't getting any younger." The realisation that they might need extra help dawned when their carpenter discovered a serious case of rot in the melon and cucumber house, just ten years after they had restored it, which was, says Chris, a body blow.

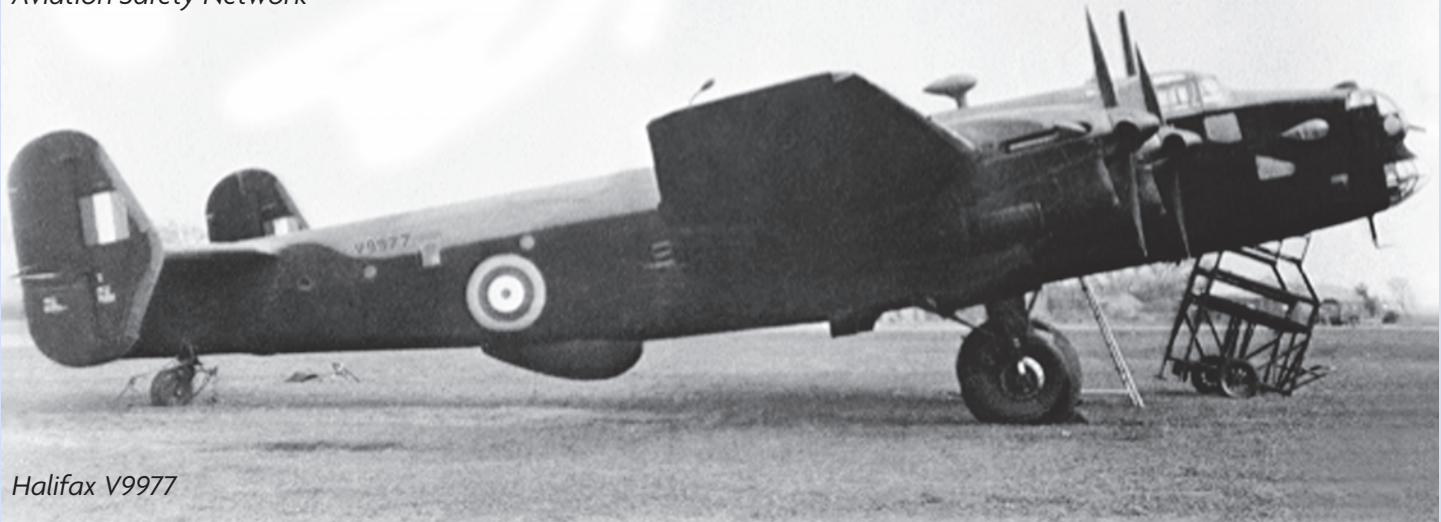
A serious re-think led them to contact the National Trust, which made volunteers available to help in exchange for the walled garden being opened to the public on certain dates. "It's been fantastic," says Chris. "Visitors are fascinated by what we're doing and want to become part of the story. The volunteers are wonderful – reliable, effective and friendly – and over the years we've formed a robust strategy. Hopefully we can hand it over to the nation in a sustainable form. It's been a great privilege to be custodians of this extraordinary place."

croomewalledgardens.com



RAF Defford Halifax V9977 Accident

Aviation Safety Network



Halifax V9977

On Sunday 7 June 1942, a Handley Page Halifax Mk II bomber, V9977, took off from RAF Defford. This aircraft was equipped with an experimental radar, code-named H2S.

The aircraft was operated by a crew from the Telecommunications Flying Unit, based at Defford. Also on board were Geoffrey Hensby (a Telecommunications Radar Establishment scientist in the H2S radar team led by Dr Bernard Lovell), and three engineers from EMI, including the distinguished electronics engineer Alan Blumlein, who is regarded as one of the most significant scientists of the twentieth-century. (He held 128 patents for inventions in the fields of telecommunications, sound recording, radar, and television and is acknowledged as the inventor of the stereophonic sound system).

The Halifax headed to the Bristol Channel to provide the engineers with a demonstration of the H2S radar but, over the Forest of Dean, a fire started in the starboard outer engine and spread to adjacent fuel tanks. The pilot attempted a forced landing on flat ground near the River Wye, but before he could do so the wing structure burned through and the outer portion of the starboard wing broke away. The Halifax rolled over and dived five hundred feet to the ground. All eleven on board perished.

The subsequent RAF investigation found that the fire was caused by the improper tightening of a tappet valve nut which had unscrewed in flight, causing excessive valve opening and the failure of the valve stem. This allowed fuel to leak out of the rocker cover and ignite inside the engine 'nacelle'.

A few days after the accident Dr Lovell was informed personally by the Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, that H2S radar development must retain its priority status. H2S went into action with Bomber Command in January 1943 and provided crews, for the first time, with a means of navigating accurately to targets as far afield as Berlin.

The sacrifices made in furtherance of radar test flying are commemorated in a stain-glass memorial window in the chapel at Goodrich Castle, close to the crash site of the Halifax; the window was dedicated on 7 June 1992, the fiftieth anniversary of the crash.



Memorial window in Goodrich Castle chapel