

# THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



## NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2019 Issue 31

# ROTUNDA REDECORATION



John Hubble

**by Katherine Alker**

The Rotunda is a Grade 1 listed building, built by Brown in the 1750s and situated in the Home Shrubbery. It came under our care in 2007 when we took on the management of Croome Court. Almost immediately we set about the urgent repair work to save the building from further damage. Contractors removed the damaged outer dome and completely repaired it to prevent further weather damage; the floor was taken up and re-laid, and later extensive repairs were carried out on the plasterwork.

Until very recently, the plasterwork repairs have been clearly visible with circles of new plaster showing up all over the walls. However I am delighted to say that the redecoration of the building has recently been completed and the results are

stunning. We have been able to carry out the work due to 2 generous individuals; one private donor, and one through a legacy. Many of you will remember Dr Eric Jones, former chairman of the Friends of Croome. Eric was a keen and enthusiastic supporter of Croome and he decided to leave funds to Croome and I am sure that he would have been very happy that his legacy has helped restore part of Croome that was dear to him.

Experts carried out paint analysis and informed us that there had been several paint colour schemes over the centuries, including blue walls with white plasterwork detail. The original colours were an off white ceiling dome and grey walls, so this is what we have decided to use now. The paint is a casein distemper; a chalky paint which has been applied in

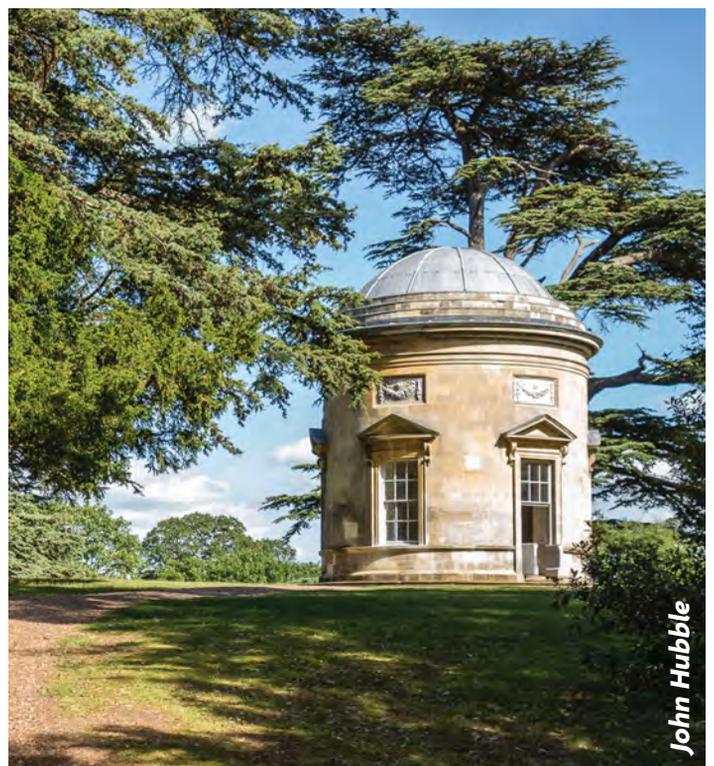


Tracy Blackwell

thin layers to create a 'dead flat' finish. The ceilings and walls had a good clean, then the paint was applied. The dome had three coats of off-white distemper. The walls have had two coats of Pavilion Grey, followed by one coat of 'Lamp Room Grey' which was 'lightly dragged' on. The 3D plasterwork decoration is clearly visible with light and shadow making the details stand out. The window frames and other woodwork have also been painted in Pavilion Grey.

The contractors who carried out the work, George Knibb and Son, have worked for the National Trust since the 1950s. Paul worked with his dad George at many properties and remembers that they used to be shut away from the visitors to do their work. Now Paul works with his son Tim and they are used to visitors watching them work and asking questions about what they're doing.

I do hope that you are able to visit Croome soon and in particular admire the newly decorated Rotunda. Our next phase of work will be to investigate the steps around the building which are very uneven in places, with a view to full repair when funds allow.



John Hubble

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CROOME HERITAGE TRUST

by Jill Tovey and John Henderson

## The Origins - The Croome Estate Trust (CET)

The Croome Estate Trust was set up in 1921 by the 9th Earl of Coventry, to preserve the 15,000-acre Estate and Croome Court with its contents as one entity. The Earl, by then 83 and aware of his mortality, had feared that after his death the estate might be broken up. His third son, a lawyer, Sir Reginald Coventry, was made chairman of the Trust, serving alongside other indirect family members and the family lawyers.

However, fate and the hiatus of the 2nd World War stepped in - his son and heir had predeceased him in 1927 and when the Earl himself died in 1930, at the age of 92, his grandson, George William became 10th Earl. After a modernisation project, he and his wife Donne and their children moved into Croome Court in 1933, but this wasn't to last - when war broke out in 1939 Croome Court was requisitioned by the government and then, in 1940, the Earl was killed at Dunkirk. His widow, Donne (pronounced Doon) became a Commandant in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and moved to Kineton in Warwickshire with the six-year-old 11th Earl and his sisters.

After the war was over, it became apparent that nothing would be the same again - such great houses were no longer financially viable, and people didn't want to be servants any more - better to work on rebuilding the shattered country. With great reluctance, the Trustees decided they would have to sell the Court in the hope that a new owner would be able to save it from demolition. For four years prospective buyers came and went, until in 1949, at the eleventh hour, the House and thirty surrounding acres was bought by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham, for use as a school for disadvantaged boys.

For the next fifty-six years Croome Court passed through the hands of various owners, but miraculously survived, although the fabric was left much in need of attention and the service wing was in a parlous state. In 1996, 760 acres of Parkland were sold to the National Trust by its then owners Royal Sun Alliance and London Assurance Co.

## The Croome Heritage Trust (CHT) - Chairman: John Henderson, ex-Agent for the Croome Estate

In 2004 there were two significant events - Croome Court was again put on the market and the 12th Earl of Coventry, who was the last direct male descendant of the 9th Earl, died; by the constitution of the Croome Estate Trust, it must be wound up 20 years after that event i.e. in 2024. The CET had long held the ambition of re-uniting the House and its historic Park and here was a golden opportunity.

Negotiations between the CET and NT began immediately; the outcome was that the Croome Estate Trust should buy back Croome Court and immediately lease it to the National Trust, initially for 10 years, extended to 999 years if the arrangement proved viable. The lease was extended in 2012.

In order for the arrangement to work after 2024, it was necessary to set up a charitable trust, the Croome Heritage Trust, to act as lessors in perpetuity. The CHT also owns the Croome furniture, pictures and chattels which are on long term loan to the NT by a conventional loan agreement.

## The Aims & Objectives of the Croome Heritage Trust to which they are bound by the Charity Commission are:

1. To conserve and preserve the Heritage, Chattels and historical property of the Earls of Coventry, Croome, in perpetuity for the public benefit.
2. To educate the public in the historical significance of the Earls of Coventry & Croome and to provide wider educational benefit to young people. To help train young people in the skills and craftsmanship that Croome embodies.



George William, 13th Earl



John Henderson

## The Trustees

So, who are the Trustees who have owned and cared for Croome Court and the Croome Estate since 1921?

The first CET Chairman was Sir Reginald Coventry, 3rd son of the 9th Earl and a lawyer. He died in 1940 and was succeeded by Colonel Osbert Dudley-Smith, son of the 9th Earl's daughter, Barbara; his son, Col. Anthony Dudley-Smith (died 1996) followed him.

The present CHT trustees are:

John Henderson, chairman, Peter Scott (also chair of the CET), Trust lawyer, Peter Beresford, George William, 13th Earl of Coventry, Duncan Coventry, heir, Jonathan Hoare, family member and Jill Tovey, archivist.

# RAF DEFFORD MUSEUM

## The restoration of the RAF buildings

When the National Trust took over Croome Park in 1996, it also took responsibility for a group of derelict former RAF buildings. These buildings were judged to be of historic significance, as they formed a rare, possibly unique surviving example of an intact war-time Station Sick Quarters (SSQ). They were erected in 1942, following the requisition of Croome Park for an airfield, in 1940.

In the war years, the airfield and its buildings, which spread across estate land, housed up to 3,000 service and civilian men and women committed to the development of Airborne Radar which played a vital role in winning WW2 and success in the Cold War years which followed, until the airfield closed in 1958. Following closure, most of the former RAF buildings were demolished, except for the SSQ which became derelict.

Meanwhile, a group of former airfield service men and women and supporters in the RAF Defford Reunion Association campaigned for preservation of the buildings, specifically with a vision to create a Museum. In 2010 this group of stalwart but ageing veterans merged with the then recently formed Defford Airfield Heritage Group (DAHG), who were welcomed by the National Trust as a supporter group. In 2006, the National Trust refurbished the Ward block to provide a visitor reception area and canteen, with further work in 2008 to create offices.



In 2014 the National Trust and DAHG established a partnership that enabled the Decontamination Annexe and the Ambulance Garage to be restored. With the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Severn Waste Environmental Fund and a generous private donation, the RAF Defford Museum has been created in these buildings.

The former Ambulance Garage and Mortuary was restored in 2015 to serve as an extension to the RAF Defford Museum. It now houses the forward fuselage of a Canberra jet bomber with Defford links. This year will see the return for public display of the complete restored Gloster Meteor NF11 WD686, the last 'plane to fly out of RAF Defford (in 1958).



*The former Ambulance Garage and Mortuary, before and after restoration.*

In 2018, the last derelict RAF buildings which had remained were restored. These were the former RAF Sergeant's and Orderlies' Quarters and adjacent Latrines. These restored buildings are now functioning as a 'Learning Centre' for visitors and community use.

**Bob Shaw**

*Left: The team responsible for the restoration of the Sergeant's and Orderlies' Quarters and Latrines, with sponsors, on completion of phase one of the project in August 2018: (left to right) Matt Davies (Croft Building & Conservation contractors); Kate Stott (Severn Waste); Bill Richardson (Severn Waste); Bob Shaw (DAHG, Joint Project Leader); Amy Forster-Smith (National Trust, Joint Project Leader); Dennis Williams (Curator, DAHG).*



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# CROOME PARK in pictures

My earliest memories of Croome is as a very young boy in the very early 1960s when riding in the back of my parents' car, with my mother and grandparents, visiting an aunt who lived near Kempsey. On those journeys I remember gazing out of the car window and seeing the M5 motorway being constructed. The country road at Dunstall, where it crosses the motorway, was realigned, and I can still visualise the newly-erected wooden fencing. The hedges have grown and are now quite thick, but in winter without leaves, in places remnants of these wooden fences survive, almost sixty years later. I remember passing parallel with one of the bridges being constructed over the new motorway, surrounded by scaffolding. Thirty years later, I watched some of these bridges being blown up, when the motorway was widened.

The structure that really caught my attention and imagination was Dunstall Castle. In those days I had no concept of a folly or an eighteenth-century landscape park. Ten years later I used to cycle across Dunstall Common, passing what to me was a ruined medieval castle. In my imagination I was visualising what may have taken place there, perhaps it was the site of a medieval siege, or even a battle. I never considered that it was not in a defensive location or that there was no motte, or moat. This was the early 1970s and a little further along Dunstall Lane towards Earls Croome I remember seeing what I would describe as a 'barrage balloon' tethered on the former ADRDE (Army Development Research & Development Establishment) site. An echo of WWII, and a reminder of the importance of Croome at that time, some of the buildings of this site are still visible, just east of Earls Croome.



© Philip Halling



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Little did I realise then that about thirty years later I would live in Earls Croome and regularly walk the parkland at Croome, now knowing that Dunstall Castle was not a medieval castle at all but an 18th century folly, part of the park which was 'Capability' Brown's first full commission, created at the behest of his patron the 6th Earl of Coventry. A landscape park which was to be the forerunner of numerous other country estates throughout the country.



© Philip Halling

In the time I lived nearby I have been fortunate to photograph the park recording the restoration work and replanting. Year after year the park is going through a renaissance and coming back to life.

My only regret is I didn't record it in the very early days when the National Trust took over the park in the late 1990s.

*Philip Halling*



© Philip Halling

In the past fourteen years I have uploaded many pictures of Croome onto the Geograph website. The original objective of this website was to have a photograph in each Ordnance Survey grid square. There are now more than 6 million pictures on this website, of which I have uploaded almost 60,000. These pictures are archived and should be a pictorial library for future generations [www.geograph.org.uk](http://www.geograph.org.uk)

*Philip Halling*



# John Chugg, Croome and the Coventry family

I was born and raised at Red Deer Park Farm on the Croome Estate, which is one field from the south deer park wall at Croome. The farm is where the 6th Earl of Coventry coursed his greyhounds.

There was a blue lias stone quarry in the field next to the Ridings, which we gradually filled in. The stone was used to build the bell tower at Earls Croome church and the deer park wall around Croome Park and across Defford Common. The deer park had a large herd of red deer and the park wall was four miles around. It stretched from the London Arch, along Rebecca Road, across Defford Common, behind the Salt Baths, Park Seat, South Wall gates and the carriage splash until it ended abruptly near Westfield Farm, originally built for the 6th Earl's second wife, Barbara St John.



**St Nicholas' Church, Earls Croome**

I got to know some of the Coventry family quite well as I grew up. As a member of Earls Croome church choir, my special memories were of Lady Coventry, tall and seemingly quite remote, and her children: Lady Anne; Lady Joan, who had arresting beauty, but tragically took her own life aged just 24, the result of a doomed affair with a famous local married man; Lady Maria, who would talk to everyone; and George William, the 11th Earl. I particularly remember Bill, as he was known, just out of the Grenadier Guards, tall, strikingly handsome and slim, in a suit, with his American heiress wife Mimi Medart, always, it seemed, in large Jackie Onassis style dark glasses.

Lady Barbara, daughter of the 9th Earl, gifted the church a magnificent oil painting, 'The Adoration of the Shepherds' from the school of Peter Paul Rubens, which hangs above the Norman arch in the chancel. This was when her family left Strensham Court for Earls Croome Court where the painting was thought too large.

Colonel Osbert Dudley-Smith, Lady Barbara's son, guarded the Coventry family pews jealously – heaven help any person who was not a family member, who tried to sit on them. Colonel Smith lived at Levant Lodge. Mr Latter, who was previously the Butler at Croome Court, would open the front door in his black coat and pinstriped trousers. Visitors were then taken upstairs to the sitting room overlooking the river and point to point course. The Colonel always wore a country-style three-piece suit with a gold watch chain and had a habit of clicking his heels and rising on the balls of his feet, probably because he was just 5ft 6ins, somewhat short for a Grenadier Guards officer.

## **Captain Charles Coventry**

Charles Coventry was born in 1867, the second son of the 9th Earl. He had three great interests as a boy: cricket, the Army and racehorses. He listened intently to his father's stories, especially of Emblem and Emblematic, full sisters, who each won the Grand National in 1863 and 1864, respectively. Both were trained by Edwin Weever at Bourton on the Hill and ridden by George Stevens, who holds the record for riding five Grand National winners: both Emblem and Emblematic are buried there. A local man won enough money backing Emblem to build a house and a yard of twelve loose boxes as a training yard at Earls Croome and named it Emblem Villa.



**Emblem by Harry Hall, 1863 (Croome Estate Trust)**

Charles Coventry started off training racehorses next to the 9th Earl's indoor riding school beside the Priest House at Croome. There were ten loose boxes with green doors and a blacksmith's shop. I used gallops on the Old Park, which was 1.5 miles around and railed on the perimeter: the

9th Earl laid this down in the 1860s as a private racecourse and training ground. The other training gallops laid out for Captain Coventry were Lickmoor, Cubsmoor, Defford Common and Smithmoor Common, which was laid out with large white painted stone markers. Occasionally he would have horses hacked to Strensham Court to work them there.

Captain Coventry died at his home, Earls Croome Court, in 1929 aged 62. He is buried on the right, just inside the lychgate at Earls Croome church next to the 11th Earl, and his son, Ted Deerhurst. To the left of the church, in a large vault, are Barbara and Gerald Dudley-Smith and their son Osbert. Next to them lies Lady Maria Coventry, buried in the 9th Earl's racing colours of chocolate and Eton blue.

### Kinnersley Riding Stables

Kinnersley Riding Stables were originally built by the 9th Earl for Captain Coventry's use; the stables were completed in 1899 at a cost of



**The Charles Coventry Cup**

£3,000 and the trainer's house was built in 1909. These stables didn't really come into their own until the Rimell family took over in the 1920s, first Tom Rimell and then, in the 1940s, his son, Fred, who made it world famous: five Grand National winners, two Gold Cups, four Champion Hurdles, three Triumph Hurdles, the Champion Chase, five Mackeson Gold Cups and champion trainer five times. When I was a teenager, I rode there regularly. Ron Peachey was Head Lad for many years and was very strict. The two yards were swept daily, and everything had to be kept immaculate. I saw many famous owners and jockeys and I was lucky to ride out some famous racecourses. Captain Coventry's family donated a huge solid silver cup to be competed for in his memory at the Croome point-to-point. My family have been fortunate to win this magnificent trophy on several occasions with horses we have bred, raced or sold.

**John Chugg**

## THE BOY WHO WENT TO CHAPEL WITH WELLINGTON

CROOME D'ABITOT. It is the great mansion of the Earls of Coventry, set in a huge park with magnificent trees. The grounds were laid out by that famous landscape gardener of the 18th century, Lancelot Brown, who planned Kew Gardens and was so capable that they called him everywhere Capability Brown. Here he made hills and dales from a swamp, and in one of the walks there is this inscription:

*To the memory of Lancelot Brown,  
Who by the power of his inimitable genius formed  
this garden scene out of a morass.*

Older than the church itself are some of the Coventry monuments in it. The church, built by the sixth Earl, stands on the edge of the park, and we come to it beside an orchard, where we saw a peacock strutting among the lambs. It is adorned outside with canopied niches, and the base of the finely embattled tower (serving as a porch) has a richly carved pendant boss in its vaulted roof. Clustered columns support the richly moulded ceilings within, and in the fine carving of the elegant wooden font and its cover are four cherub heads round the bowl.

The chancel has the imposing array of black and white marble Coventry monuments once in the old church. Thomas, the Earl, lies in his fur-lined robe and lace skull cap; below him the mace and royal arms, and one of the figures on each side holds the Great Seal and a sword. He was active in those fateful days when the Civil War was brewing. As Keeper of the

Great Seal, he opened two Parliaments, and carried the King's reprimand to the House for not granting supplies. He tried to mediate between Charles and the Parliamentary leaders, and earned his title for services to the first two Stuart kings.

Thomas, the second Lord is here, looking terribly uncomfortable in his coronet and robes. His wife's elaborate monument shows her reclining with a babe in her arms, lace on her shawl and on the baby's clothing; two boys are kneeling at her feet. The fourth Lord, John, reclines in a most extraordinary position, wearing elaborate dress, his coronet perched oddly on his head; and at each side is the lifesize figure of a woman. Among the memorials on the walls to later Earls is one to the ninth who lived to his 92nd year and died in our own time, a famous English gentleman.

This charming man succeeded to the title as a child of five, so that he was a peer for 86 years and 10 months, the longest period on record. One of his first friends was the Duke of Wellington, who loved the fair-haired boy who used to walk home with him Sunday after Sunday from church. The Earl held office in the Governments of Disraeli, but his chief interest was in horses and agriculture, his herd of Hereford cattle at Croome Court being famous for half a century. Lord Baldwin once described him as the ideal of what an English gentleman living in Worcestershire should be. His wife was the daughter of the Earl of Craven and they lived together 65 years. All Worcestershire adored her. She passed away three days after her husband and they were buried as they would have wished to be, side by side, in the same grave, at the same hour.

*from 'The King's England, Worcestershire'  
by Arthur Mee, first printed in 1938*



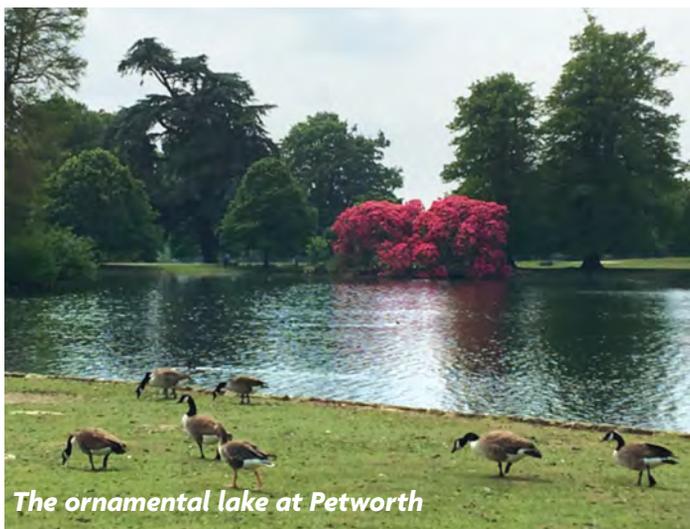
# Friends of Croome holiday 2019

*by Judy Wynne-Davies*

On 19th May a group of excited folk set off by coach to Hastings for the annual Friends of Croome holiday. We were very capably driven by our old friend Simon, who kept us entertained with his commentary on the poor standard of driving by other people!

On the outward journey we stopped at Petworth House and Park where we saw an amazing number of old masters, and had lunch and a stroll round the beautiful Capability Brown parkland.

Later, we arrived at the Royal Victoria Hotel in St Leonards on Sea, which was very comfortable with the most enormous bedrooms and overlooked the sea.



*The ornamental lake at Petworth*



*Sissinghurst Castle Garden*

On Monday 20th May we visited Sissinghurst, the former home of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson. The (mostly walled) gardens were beautiful, and there was a chance to climb the tower to see lovely views as well as Vita's hideaway room where she spent much time writing.



**The Tower at Sissinghurst**

On Tuesday we travelled to Dover to visit the Castle. We nearly came to grief on the journey as a huge milk tanker nearly ploughed into us on a narrow bend, but Simon was equal to the situation and manoeuvred the coach to safety (with a few pleasant words and friendly gestures to the other driver).



**Dover Castle**

There was much to see and enjoy at the Castle, including the wartime and hospital tunnels. The main tower of the castle housed a magnificent throne room and tapestries which were fascinating. In the afternoon we had the chance to visit Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Wednesday saw us in the lovely little town of Rye, with its narrow cobbled streets, including the famous Mermaid Street, and many beautiful old buildings including the 12th century church in which some brave souls climbed the tower for fantastic views. Later Simon drove us to Tenterden, where we caught a train to Bodiam whilst enjoying a lovely lunch on board.



**Mermaid Street, Rye**

In the afternoon many of us stopped off to explore Hastings before returning to St Leonards for a stroll along the beach and a peek at the Banksy on the seafront!

All too soon our lovely holiday came to an end, and we journeyed back to Croome on Thursday. Sadly, traffic problems meant we didn't have time to visit The Vyne on the way back, but we managed to grab a sandwich at Reading Services instead (not quite the same though!). We were so lucky that the sun shone on us all week, and we all thoroughly enjoyed a wonderful holiday that was so well thought out and organised by Carol, Sue and Gill, to whom we are all so very grateful.



# THE COVENTRY ACT

Sir John Coventry, grandson of Lord Keeper Coventry, was elected MP for Weymouth in 1667. Notoriously, he attracted attention because of a comment made in Parliament in 1670, when he suggested a tax on theatres. Sir John Birkenhead remarked that the theatres had been of great service to the King, Charles II, prompting Coventry to ask him if he meant 'the men or women players'. This was seen as an offensive reference to the king's relations with Nell Gwyn and Moll Davis.

Later, Coventry was assaulted by troops of the Duke of Monmouth ("with the approval of the king himself") whereby his nose was 'slit to the bone'. The House of Commons was so affronted that the 'Coventry Act' was passed 'to prevent malicious maiming and wounding' of members.

## **The assault of Sir John Coventry**

The Coventry Act of 1671: "By this statute it is enacted, that if any person shall, of malice aforethought, and by laying-in-wait, unlawfully cut or disable the tongue, put out an eye, slit the nose, cut off the nose or lip, or cut off or disable any

limb, or member of any other person, with intent to maim or disfigure him, such person, his counsellors, aiders and abettors, shall be guilty of felony, without benefit of clergy."

Attempts to discredit Coventry because of his Roman Catholic beliefs failed. His uncle, Henry Coventry, urged him to marry someone who was both a protestant and rich enough to help clear his debts, which by 1667 were £2,000. Coventry, nonetheless, condemned the Duke of York as a protector of Catholics and called for his removal from the king's presence and councils. 'When inebriated at a coffee house in the city,' he was heard to say the Duke was a papist and a traitor.

When he died, unmarried, in 1685, he left bequests to the poor English nuns at Paris and the English College in Rome and asked to be buried in one of the queen's chapels if he died in England and a Roman Catholic church if he died abroad. His final resting place is unknown, but the Coventry Act lived on and was only repealed in 1828.

**Chris Wynne-Davies**



"Malvern Hills" by Dame Laura Knight

### THE MALVERN HILLS by R.G.T. Coventry 1907

HILLS of my heart, dear native hills,  
 And all ye meadows, woods, and rills,  
 From whose fair scenes my mind hath caught  
 A tone of sweet poetic thought;  
 I would before my voice is dumb,  
 Ere yet the silent hour is come,  
 That I in flowers of song might dress  
 Each turf with everlastingness,  
 And shed on every herb and tree  
 The dew of immortality.

For here, here only have I found  
 A charm that never tires, a sound  
 That keeps its music, here have heard  
 The Incommunicable Word  
 The soul doth to itself express  
 When touched with Nature's loveliness;  
 And here have known those deeper moods  
 That haunt old wandering solitudes,  
 Until their calm and peace have grown  
 To be my heart's prevailing tone.

And so I want to leave behind  
 A song stirred ever with the wind,  
 And golden with the light that fills  
 Your airy heights, beloved hills -  
 A thing of living breath and bloom  
 To cheer the close and narrow room,  
 To fill the empty hands with flowers,  
 To fall on weary hearts in showers,  
 And lead them on by summer streams  
 To higher thoughts, and purer dreams.

**Richard George Temple Coventry** was born on 22 October 1869 in Worcestershire. The son of William George Coventry and Frances Cecilia Norbury, he was a great-grandson of the 7th Earl of Coventry. He died on 19 January 1939 aged 69, unmarried.