

THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021 Issue 35

GARDEN AND PARK UPDATE



Winch in use

Over the past year we have had to get used to many changes in our lives at home and at work. At Croome all but 6 members of staff were furloughed, and some still remain on the furlough scheme now. Sadly, in the property restructure, some members of the team were made redundant, and more recently two members of staff resigned to move on to other jobs. Hayley Burrows was one of the team never to be furloughed; she organised the re-opening of Croome in June, managed the booking system so that we could get visitors back on site, and so much more. She has got a new job within the National Trust in the Cotswolds.



Winch on tractor

The other person to leave is Michael Forster-Smith. The list of his achievements during his 17 years at Croome would take up the rest of the newsletter, but a few highlights for me are the acquisition and restoration of the three Outer Eyecatchers – Panorama Tower, Pirton Castle and Dunstall Castle in 2009; the agreement with Croome Heritage Trust to manage the court and the Home Shrubbery including the Rotunda in 2007; the acquisition of 10 acres of arable land so that we could re-plant Old Wood in 2011; and making significant strides forward in the way that we manage the garden and park. Croome will be a different place without him, and he will



be remembered as a key person who did so much to restore and re-unify so many parts of the Croome jigsaw.

Work in the garden and park continues, and all of the team are back at work now. Last March the Friends of Croome very kindly gave us a donation so that we could buy a winch for use in our woodland work. The shiny new winch was delivered early March 2020 just before lockdown, but unfortunately it then sat in the shed for 8 months until we could use it! Now that it's in use, it is proving to be invaluable; we hook it up to the tractor and it is powered by the PTO (Power Take Off). This means it is a far more efficient and a quicker procedure than what we did previously. Over the winter the Rangers have been concentrating on removing conifers from Cuckoo Pen so that it can be restored to broadleaf woodland. They have been able to winch the felled trunks away from the woodland to be stacked and processed later.

The felling and clearance of the area is now complete and re-planting has begun. We're planting species such as oak,

field maple, hazel, beech and hornbeam. The trees are going in a grid pattern which will make it far easier for us to manage the area in the next few years. Although it looks very formal now, in years to come it will hardly be noticed.

In the garden we have been focussing on getting the place ready for Spring. There was a lot of catching up to do but we're well on the way now. The one-way route around the garden remains for the time being, and generally it seems to be working well. One of the outcomes of the restructure last summer was a huge reduction in our budgets overall, but specifically in the garden grass-cutting budget. This means that we'll be doing it ourselves and I've had to do some fundraising so that we can purchase appropriate machinery. I have sourced funds from several places: thanks to the Friends of Croome for the donation towards a ride-on mower. We hope to get the machine on-site in the next few weeks – just in time for the first cut of the year!

Katherine Alker

Garden and Outdoors Manager, South Worcestershire



Planting in Cuckoo Pen morning noon and night

PIC•COLLAGE

© Helen Dorey & Hugh Warwick





Our very best wishes to Michael Smith

by Jill Tovey

Like me, I'm sure you were all shocked, surprised and saddened when you heard that Michael had decided to move on to pastures new.

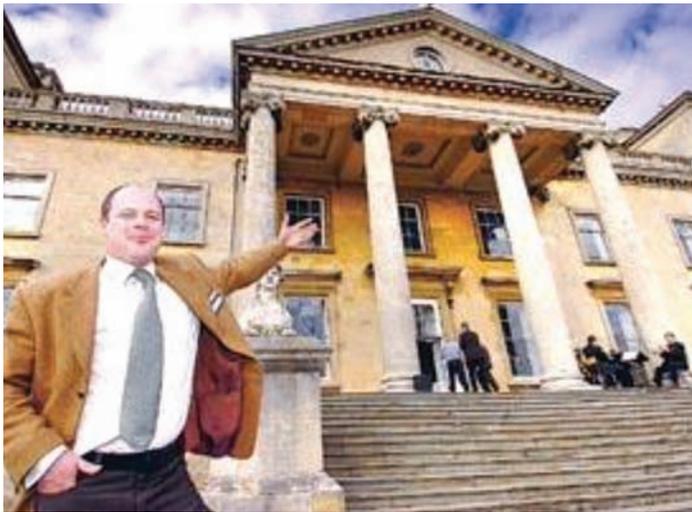
Michael came to Croome at the beginning of 2004 as manager of the restoration of the wonderful landscape that we all know and love, having qualified at Pershore College. The huge programme of improvements had already started when he arrived and when Katherine Alker joined as head gardener, with help of the dedicated team of volunteer gardeners, the landscape really began to take on the look and feel of its 18th century heyday.

Agricultural fields were turned back to permanent pasture and trees were planted in the exact places recorded on the contemporary maps, the lake and river were cleared and dredged and buildings renovated.

At the time there were two other properties in Michael's portfolio – Middle Littleton Tythe Barn and the 15th century Fleece Inn at Bretforton – and it is thus we come to two great upheavals which were about to confront the

new manager... He perhaps realised the job description was going to be pushed to its limits when, within a month of his arrival, the Inn's roof was destroyed by fire and he had to manage its restoration. 'In at the deep end' as he described it himself. However, he coped brilliantly and it was opened again, looking almost unscathed, within eighteen months. When Michael came to Croome in 2004 only the historic 'Capability' Brown parkland and its garden buildings were his responsibility. Croome Court was in the hands of a property developer and appreciated by visitors as the focal point of the glorious landscape. However, also in 2004 came the second great upheaval. The 12th Earl of Coventry died and so the direct male line from the 9th Earl ended and completely coincidentally, the property developer put Croome Court on the market.

This was too good an opportunity for the Croome Estate Trust and the National Trust to miss. There had long been a dream of recombining house and parkland, as they were meant to be. For the next four years the two Trusts worked together, with Michael at the forefront for the National Trust. A lease was drawn up which meant that the



Michael and the public opening of Croome Court, September 2009

Croome Estate Trust bought the court and leased it to the National Trust, rent free, for 999 years. It must have been a steep learning curve, with many obstacles, but such was Michael and both teams' will to succeed that the wonderful outcome was the opening of Croome Court to the public in September 2009.

From that date Croome took on a much wider identity – staff numbers increased and hundreds of volunteers joined the team. The RAF buildings were restored to house a visitor reception area, offices, a café/restaurant and a museum for the Defford Airfield Heritage Group. The shop was built. So much more too and Michael oversaw it all – so successfully that visitor numbers rose from about 20,000



Michael leading a walk for the Friends of Croome

per annum to the present figure of over 300,000. Of course, this was all wonderful team work, but Michael was the head of that team.

This is just a brief summary of all Michael Smith did for Croome, but it went beyond this – he put his heart and soul into it. Every member of the Friends of Croome had personal evidence of his total involvement when listening to him talk about it – whether in formal lectures or chatting to him informally. He loved the place and I'm sure always will.

The Friends of Croome will be forever grateful.

WORCESTER INFIRMARY AND THE COVENTRY FAMILY by Nicola Hewitt

The local Worcester newspapers reported that on 15 February 1897, Lady Coventry “lightly tapped the foundation stone into position” and declared it “well and truly laid”. Afterwards she was presented with a silver trowel by the architects and a mallet by the builders, the trowel being inscribed with the arms of the Coventry and Craven families and that of the City of Worcester.

This was the result of an appeal launched by the 9th Earl of Coventry to build suitable accommodation for the Worcester Infirmary nurses: “Efforts should be made to render the work of their nurses more endurable by bringing a little comfort and light and happiness to them in their daily toil.”

The appeal raised £1,536 1s 9d for a building to be erected in Wheeley's Gardens, 50ft south of the main building facing Infirmary Walk. The nurses' home was to be a three-storey building with 32 bedrooms (most to be shared by two nurses) as well as two large sitting rooms on the ground floor – divided by folding doors which could be opened to make one large sitting room – and bathrooms and toilets on each

floor. The basement would contain storage areas and a boiler room providing the building with heating and hot water. The nurses' home would be linked to the main Infirmary building by a covered walkway. The building was completed and opened to its first residents in 1899.

The Coventry family had been linked to the Infirmary since its conception in the 1740s. In the early eighteenth-century, the Voluntary Hospitals Movement began, where subscribers provided for and administered hospitals. Worcester Infirmary was the seventh to open outside London. Prior to this, medical care for the masses was by privately endowed charities, usually little more than alms houses, and Worcester had several of these. Although workhouses had been established after the 1722 Poor Relief Act, they were only obliged to provide accommodation for the destitute. Medical care was usually lacking.

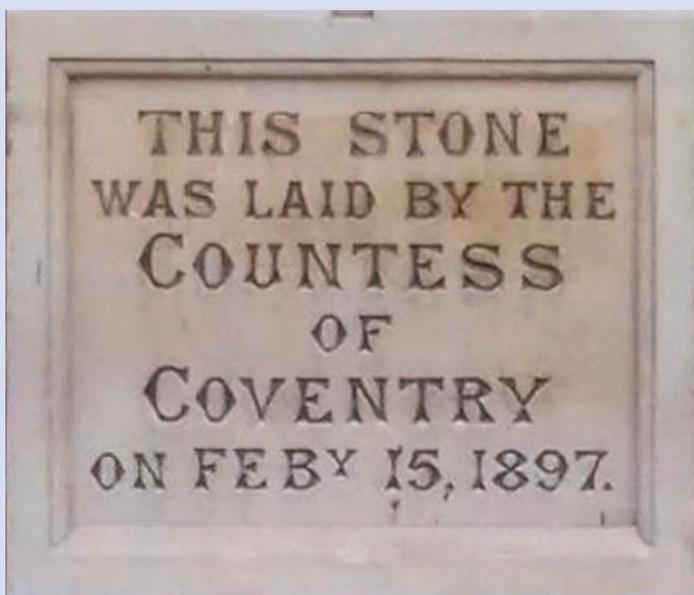
Isaac Maddox arrived in Worcester in 1743 to take up his new position of Bishop of Worcester. Before long he launched a



campaign for the foundation of an infirmary in Worcester. However, most potential subscribers were concerned with the Jacobite threat from the north, but he was persuasive and enough were found to finance the Infirmary, including 20 guineas from Lord Deerhurst (the future 6th Earl of Coventry), 10 guineas each from Lord Sandys, Thomas Lyttleton and George Lyttleton and five guineas from the Earl of Shrewsbury. A site was found at Silver Street which would serve as home for the Infirmary for the next 25 years.

At the first meeting, on 15 October 1747, Lord Deerhurst and the Bishop of Worcester were asked to be presidents, with Lord Deerhurst acting as chairman. Almost straight away, despite additional buildings adjacent to the Infirmary being rented and equipped, it became apparent that these were not going to be sufficient to meet demand. By 1768 an alternative site in Castle Street had been found and building work had begun, the bricks being made on Pitchcroft, which led to a few delays when the site flooded. It was finally ready to receive patients in 1770. In March 1821 the number of presidents was increased to 12 and included the 7th Earl of Coventry and, at the annual anniversary meeting, they set out the 114 rules of the Infirmary.

From the opening of the original site, patients had to be recommended by a subscriber. For every guinea they gave they could recommend one in and one out patient per annum but these must not include children under seven, pregnant women with venereal disease, no dying, and nobody with a mental disorder. By 1821 they also had to provide an address or place to which the individual could be removed if they caused a disturbance. Another rule set out that every patient had to wash their hands and face every morning and their feet on Saturday night. The 8th Earl of Coventry was asked to become a trustee in 1835 and on the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Infirmary his grandson, the 9th Earl, started the appeal to raise funds for accommodation for the nursing staff, continuing the tradition of support started by his distinguished ancestor the 6th Earl of Coventry.





Richard Wilson's painting of Croome Court, 1758 (Croome Heritage Trust)

THE CHINESE BRIDGE AT CROOME

from a report by **Jeremy Milln**, April 2014

The 6th Earl of Coventry, while still Lord Deerhurst, began work on the parkland at Croome in 1747. By 1748 a stretch of water crossed by the Chinese bridge designed by William Halfpenny was completed, linking the mansion house to the wider parkland. The Chinese bridge appears in a 1758 painting by Richard Wilson of Croome Court but by the early nineteenth-century it had disappeared into the artificial river it once spanned.

The partial-dismantlement and demise of the original Chinese Bridge is likely to have occurred around 1820 followed by preparations for a second bridge broadly on the line of the original bridge (there are no illustrations for the second bridge and it is known only from archaeological evidence). At some point perhaps soon after 1850, this second bridge was demolished and the whole area re-landscaped.

Photograph from the south-west, 1865





Ferro-concrete bridge, view to the east, 2009

The third bridge a few yards to the south is illustrated in a very early photograph of 1865, one of a set commissioned by the 9th Earl of Coventry. This shows a slender footbridge of plain painted timber with handrails and small bracing outriggers. Why the bridge was relocated is uncertain unless it was to conceal it below the level of the bank, perhaps also within some new shrubbery planting and to give the effect of it 'skimming' the water.

Also lasting little more than a couple of generations, the third footbridge was replaced by a simple ferro-concrete structure at the same location in about 1930. This bridge settled into the river following iron corrosion and concrete decay and became unsafe to use by the time of the National Trust's acquisition of Croome park in 1996.

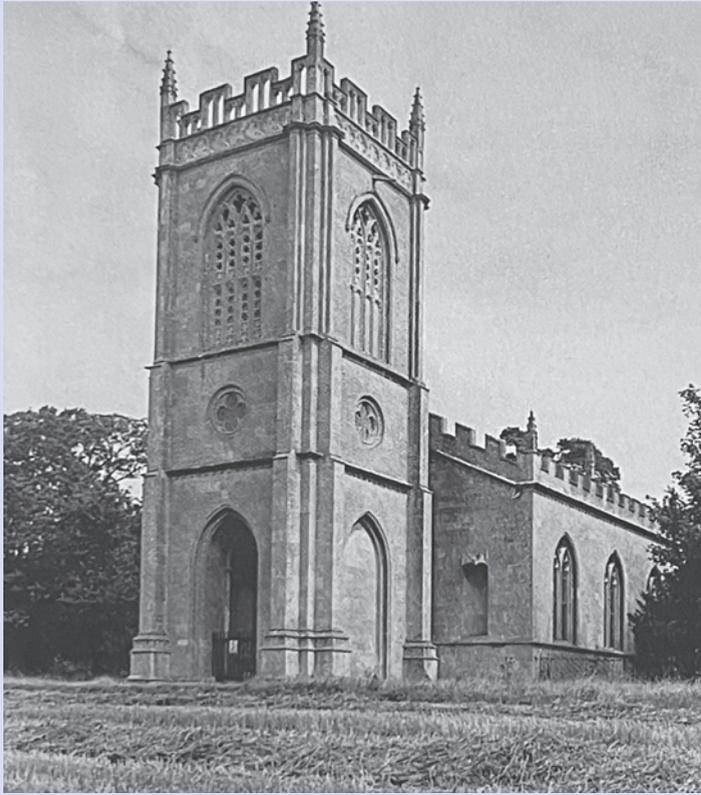
National Trust steel bridge from the north



Erected as a temporary structure in steel in 2010 by the National Trust on the line of the ferro-concrete bridge, the fifth bridge was purely functional to allow the circular walking routes round the estate to be used by visitors pending the reconstruction of the original Chinese Bridge.

In 2009, the foundations and fragments of old timbers of the original bridge were discovered. This, together with William Halfpenny's drawing of the original bridge and Richard Wilson's painting, enabled the creation of a design which matched the original bridge as much as possible. A grant from the Monument Trust meant the reconstruction of the bridge could go ahead. Since 2015, visitors have been able to use the replica bridge linking Croome Court to the wider parkland.





CROOME CHURCH AND ITS ARCHITECT

from an article by **Howard Colvin**, *The Georgian Group Journal* Volume VIII 1998

The church of St Mary Magdalene at Croome stands high in the ranking of Georgian Gothic churches: an excellent example of what a Georgian architect could make of a commission to design such a church. The well-lit nave and aisles together form almost an exact square; the chancel is 'long for an age that did its chancels short' no doubt in order to accommodate the Coventry family monuments; the tower, besides housing the bells, forms an effective feature in the landscaped park.

The exterior is carried out in smooth ashlar, with battlemented parapets and pinnacles at the angles. Inside, the ogee arch, the quatrefoil and the cusped cornice, are much in evidence as plaster decoration, the tower alone having, exceptionally, an authentic stone ribbed vault. The tower, with its set-back buttresses and pierced parapets does suggest some first-hand observation of 'medieval prototypes'. Otherwise no feature appears to have been derived from any specific source: it was architect's Gothic, elegant and sophisticated, the whole forming a polite and ornamental edifice quite different from the 'relatively humble village church which it replaced'.

The old church had stood inconveniently close to the court, and after the 6th Earl of Coventry had had the house remodelled and the park landscaped by Brown from 1750 onwards, he decided to re-site the church on rising ground some 500 yards to the north-east. As an 18th century visitor commented, 'a church was not the building that should have been erected here: this was the place for the house.' The expense, however, was perhaps too great. His lordship found the mansion where it stands, and therefore

contented himself with altering the rooms and giving it a fashionable exterior. The faculty to rebuild the church was granted on 16 March 1758, and with it in the diocesan records is the conveyance of the site, dated 4 July of the same year. The new church was consecrated on 29 June 1763.

Was Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, however, the 'unaided' architect of Croome church? The amateur architect Sanderson Miller, a friend of the 6th Earl of Coventry and who had advised him on the house and landscape, may have played some part in the decision to build a Gothic church but there does not appear to have been involved in its design. Within the church Robert Adam's role was responsible for the plasterwork and joinery. The masonry was performed by Robert Newman, a master mason. The carpenter and joiner was John Hobcraft, regularly employed by Brown, who was also an architect in his own right. The slating was done by another associate of Brown, Henry Holland (senior). The plasterer Joseph Rose, and the woodcarver, Sefferin Alken, were leading craftsmen who were also employed, under Brown, to execute designs for the interior of the court.

Hobcraft and Holland were men with whom Brown had a regular association. That in 1760 he measured the latter's work on the roof shows him exercising one of the functions of an architect, and the existence of a working drawing by the master-carpenter is consistent with Brown's 'authorship' of the design. The 'attribution' of the design of the church to Brown does in fact go back to 1824: William Dean, the head gardener at Croome, states that the church 'does honour to the taste of Brown, after whose design it was erected.'

Don't believe everything you find on the internet

The story of Thomas William Coventry (1800-82) by Rob Baldwin

I have long been aware of a connection between my family and the Coventrys. My great-grandfather was Sir George Francis Coventry Pocock, Baronet, whose mother was Augusta Elinor Coventry, granddaughter of the 6th Earl of Coventry. However, I have only been seriously researching the family for the last four years since I joined Ancestry, the genealogical website. What follows is an example of the kind of genealogical wormhole, facilitated greatly by the resource of the internet, down which it is very easy to disappear: I love it.



Miniature of Thomas William Coventry, Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry c.1821

The story begins with a miniature of an army officer that appears to date to the early 19th century. This was uploaded on Ancestry to the record for Thomas William Coventry (1800-82), son of Thomas William Coventry (1778-1816) who was the younger son of the 6th Earl of Coventry by his second wife Barbara St John. There is no information given for this picture on Ancestry, and late in 2020, I became aware of discussion on the website about who the picture depicted.

The initial suggestion was that this was Thomas William in the uniform of the 15th Hussars, since a death notice published in the Illustrated London News of 4 March 1882 stated that he was late of this regiment. A check through the regimental website had clarified that the uniform was not that of the 15th Hussars but might be that of the 17th Lancers. I have long had an interest in military history and the uniform to me did not

look quite right for the 17th Lancers. It is similar, but the epaulettes are gold in the portrait, not silver, and the collar has decorative lace that was not normal for a regular regiment. A search in the London Gazette found that Thomas William Coventry, Gentlemen, was commissioned Lieutenant in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry on 31 May 1821.

This was my suggestion for the identity of the regiment portrayed in the miniature, however, at this stage, there was no evidence for what the uniform of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry actually looked like. The yeomanry of this period tended to dress very like regular Light Dragoons, with added flourishes and decoration because they were not bound by King's Regulations. It was possible, therefore, that the Bedfordshire Yeomanry could have looked as similar to the 17th Lancers as seemed to be the case.

Chris Wynne-Davies, Chairman of the Friends of Croome, discovered a photograph of a portrait of an officer in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry from the collection of Bedfordshire County Archives, described as a copy of an oil painting of Captain M Coventry by Alexander Fraser (1786-1865), painted around 1824. Although the photograph is in black and white, the uniform in the picture is identical to the miniature.



Captain Thomas William Coventry by Alexander Fraser, 1824 (Bedfordshire Archives)

An article from *Country Life* in 1966 held by Nicola Hewitt at Croome, covered a query raised by a reader, Lloyd Franklin of Tangier in Morocco, who claimed to hold the original oil painting, bought at Christies in 1958. Christies had somehow identified the picture as Thomas William Coventry of the 10th Hussars with Napoleon's horse Marengo but *Country Life* confirmed that the uniform pictured was actually that of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry. The horse could be Marengo, but is perhaps more likely to be one made to look like him since he was on public display in London around the time the painting was made.

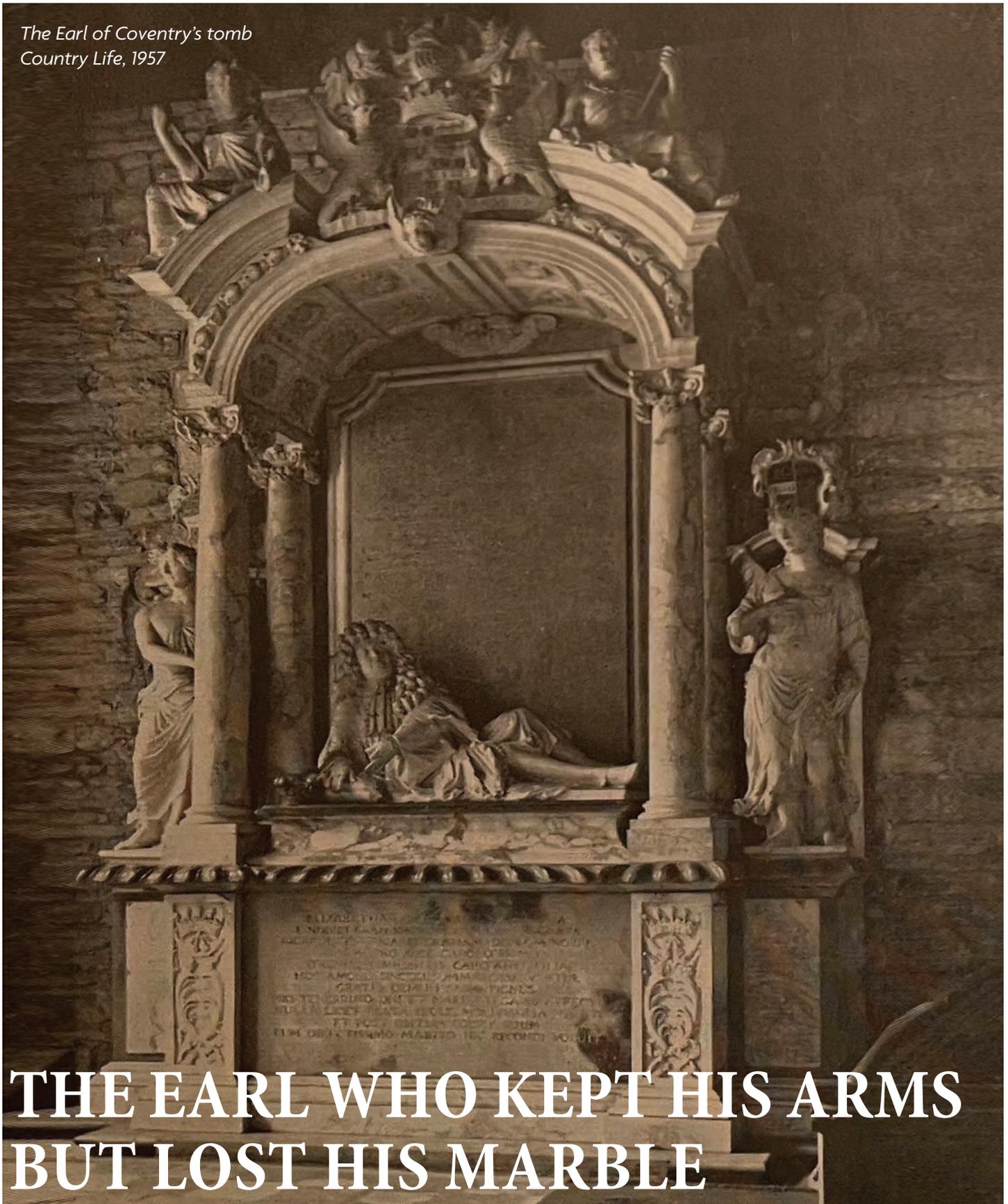
Country Life was categorical that Thomas William was in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry and on this basis, the Bedfordshire Archive amended its catalogue to record the picture as relating to Captain Thomas William Coventry. He was gazetted Captain on 31 March 1824, which might have been the occasion for the painting.

This might be the end of the story but a final trawl through the London Gazette revealed two more records for "Thomas Coventry, Gent". These state that on 17 July 1817, Thomas was commissioned Cornet (the lowest rank of cavalry officer) in the 15th Light Dragoons, and then on 9 April 1818, he exchanged with another officer, selling his commission and leaving the army as the system at the time allowed him to do. The 15th Light Dragoons adopted hussar dress in 1807, but dropped 'Light Dragoons' from their title in 1861, becoming at the 15th (The King's) Hussars. So, though he had less than 9 months' service in the regiment, it seems that Thomas William's obituary in the Illustrated London News was actually correct.

A tangled story, but it seems we can now be reasonably confident that the miniature is indeed of Thomas William Coventry, grandson of the 6th Earl of Coventry, in the uniform of an officer in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry in which he held a commission between 1821 and 1824, and possibly up to 1827 when the regiment was disbanded.



*The Earl of Coventry's tomb
Country Life, 1957*



THE EARL WHO KEPT HIS ARMS BUT LOST HIS MARBLE

by Sue Coleman

Heraldry is fascinating, complex, sexist, engrained with tradition and ancient law. And it gave rise to one of the biggest rows, the greatest intrigue, most enduring consequences, in the history of the Coventry family. Thomas, 1st Earl, born 1629, had two sons by his wife Winifred. He was in his mid-sixties when she died and just a year later, he took a 25-year-old servant in the Croome household called Elizabeth Grimes as his wife.

Elizabeth's father came from Cripplegate in the City of London and was a woodworker. Documented as a loose and idle fellow, he abandoned his wife Anne, who died soon afterwards, and the three children were taken in by their Aunt Honor of Cheshunt who 'scratched a living spinning and weaving'. But it was another aunt, Frances, who changed their fortune. She was chambermaid to Winifred, married one of his Lordship's servants and rose





Elmley Castle church (Country Life, 1957)

to the prestigious position of housekeeper; and she gave Elizabeth a job at Croome Court. Elizabeth's social climb was meteoric, becoming Lady Coventry and stepmother to the future 2nd and 4th Earl while younger than both. Sadly, the excitement of a young wife proved too much for the 1st Earl and on the eve of his third wedding anniversary, 15 July 1699, he died. Elizabeth started funeral arrangements, aided by the Lancaster Herald of Arms, one Gregory King. He would act on behalf of the Crown in all matters of heraldry, genealogy, coats of arms, and assist in the planning of the funeral – which would be a high profile ceremony.

The Earl lay in state at the Court and on the day of the funeral a huge procession gathered to trumpet the coffin into the church. It was attended by persons of quality and distinction from Worcestershire and beyond. Lord Thomas, now the 2nd Earl, led as chief mourner preceded by Gregory King. There followed a host of Baronets, Knights and Esquires, Gentlemen in Mourning, Officers of Arms, servants to the nobility and Principal Clergy. It was deliberately ostentatious and showy, an immensely grand affair.

Lord Thomas saw the banners and erupted in fury. Because the Coventry coat of arms had been impaled with false heraldry, supposedly in the name of the Graham family of Norfolk. Curiously, that family had no right to Arms at that time so the Arms used were actually those of another unrelated Graham family, from Norton Conyers in Yorkshire. Could Grimes have been mistaken for Graham, London for Norfolk, and Norfolk for Yorkshire? Error, subterfuge or fraud? Worse still, Elizabeth had commissioned a marble monument flaunting the same inaccuracies, King confessed his part in all this to the 2nd Earl without hesitation, adding that he'd extracted a promise from

Elizabeth, now the Dowager Countess, to free him from any blame. He claimed to have acted with good intent to conceal Elizabeth's lowly parentage, give her name respectability and save any future embarrassment for the Coventry family.

The months passed and the row rumbled on. Gregory King had lost all integrity and was suspended from his high office for his part in the scandal. And in May 1700 Elizabeth married again, a Thomas Savage of nearby Elmley Castle. So when the marble monument was complete and the 2nd Earl (Elizabeth's stepson) refused to have it in Croome church unless the false arms were removed and the names corrected at no expense to himself, it was Mr Savage who stepped in, rejecting these suggestions and recommending that the memorial be installed in the Savage Chapel at Elmley Castle church. How humiliating and infuriating for the Earl.

Meanwhile, there is a record of a rather surprising marriage. Remember Frances Grimes, Elizabeth's aunt? She was housekeeper at Croome and it was she who found employment for Elizabeth in the Coventry household. In 1701 Frances married again, her husband was none other than Gregory King.

Was she at the root of all this? Or an accomplice? We'll never know. In 1724 Elizabeth Savage, nee Grimes, once Dowager Countess, died. Gregory King appears to have been pardoned for his misdemeanours. But the lavish marble monument to the 1st Earl, still bearing inscriptions accusing his son, the 2nd Earl, of banning it from Croome 'without reason' remains in the church at Elmley Castle to this day – so the Earl kept his Arms but lost his marble.



THE PUNCHBOWL GATES AT CROOME

by *Chris Wynne-Davies*

Originally known as the Pier Gates, the Punchbowl Gates at Croome consist of a pair of ashlar arched gate piers linked by a central arch with moulded cornice and relief carved festoons, flanking the West Drive. The original structure was built in 1777-8 and in 1794 large Coade stone punch bowls were added on the central pedestal on each arch. Although it is not known who designed the gates it is likely to have been Robert Adam who designed many structures at Croome between 1760 and 1792. In 1793-94 a refurbishment was undertaken to the design of the architect James Wyatt. In this scheme the each set of piers were linked together by lintels with arched underside surmounted by wide shallow punch bowls of Coade stone.

A theory that the gates had been relocated to their current position is based partly on a 1784 watercolour by EF and TF

Burney titled “Entrance to the Park at Croomb;” which shows a glimpse of the church in the distance; a view which is not possible in the gates’ current location and which suggests that the gates may originally have been located to the east of their present site.

Subsequent archaeological work has revealed evidence to strongly suggest that the gates themselves were hung on the piers in their current location. It is also apparent from comparing the 1784 illustration with the existing structure that the piers survive from the original structure (and that the lintels were added in the mid-1790s alterations). It is quite possible, therefore, that some artistic licence was taken by the Burneys and that the location of the church was ‘moved’ to include it in the view!

