

THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



NEWSLETTER

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Celebrating the Coronation of King Charles III

by Nicola Hewitt

On 6 May 2023, the coronation of King Charles III took place and for many this was the first coronation they had experienced. A display at Croome Court was planned to mark the occasion, using not only items from the collection held by the National Trust but also others held by the Croome Heritage Trust (CHT), that are not usually seen by the public. In the collection at Croome we have chairs used in three of the four previous coronations and the CHT hold the family robes and coronets.

Coronations have been held at Westminster Abbey since 1066 and the coronation of King Charles III was the fortieth. Arrangements are made by Earl Marshal and his coronation committee on behalf of the Crown. The Earl Marshal is a hereditary role, held since 1672 by the Dukes of Norfolk. Originally, they were responsible for the monarch's horses, stables and items connected with military operations, but the position evolved to include the organisation of major ceremonial occasions. The peers of the realm historically attended at the new monarch's summons,

to pay homage to the new monarch, witness the coronation and pledge fealty by kissing the ring and touching the crown. Since the 1902 coronation to accommodate the invited guests, chairs and stools have been commissioned to provide the seating necessary in Westminster Abbey (chairs for the more important and stools for those less so). These were then offered for sale to the individuals who had used them during the ceremony, a souvenir of the day. Any not purchased by the user were then put out for general release.

Hansard, January 1953 records that:

"Chairs will cost £7 10s. 0d. each and stools £4 7s. 6d. each, including packing and delivery. Applications should be sent, not later than 30 June 1953 to The Controller of Supplies, Ministry of Works, Great Westminster House, Horseferry Road, London, S.W.1. The envelope should be marked "Abbey furniture." Payment should not accompany the application. Applications may also be made for the purchase of carpets and damask frontals."

friendsofcroome.org.uk

By 1953 the increase in the number of peers meant that there were too many for them all to attend and still allow room for other dignitaries to attend so there was a ballot. At that time the 11th Earl of Coventry was only 19 and so did not attend. There are three coronation chairs in the Croome collection. In each case the chair is stamped with the maker's name, a chair number, and the coronation either on the back rail or the underside of the front rail.

The first was for the coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in Westminster Abbey on 9 August 1902. It has a mahogany frame with upright supports to a rectangular back, rush seats and square tapering legs and was made by Thomas Glenister of Temple Works, High Wycombe. The second chair was for the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary in Westminster Abbey on 22 June 1911. Again, made of mahogany, the chair has pierced vase splats and drop in seat, however the original leather seat has been reupholstered and was made by Wm. Bartlett & Sons. The final chair was for the coronation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth in Westminster Abbey on 12 May 1937. This has a limed oak frame, dark green velvet upholstery with gold banding, overwrap seats and a full padded back rest which has the King's Royal cypher embroidered on the front top left-hand corner. These were made by B North & Sons of West Wycombe

Coronation Robes

At previous coronations state robes were compulsory for the peers but optional for the occasion in 1937. There are two different types of robes, one for use in the House of Lords and the other for State

functions in particular coronations with a coronet. The male robes are a crimson velvet cloak with white silk ties, open at the front and trailing behind, worn over court uniform. The number of rows of ermine denote rank: Duke 4 rows, Marquess $3\frac{1}{2}$ rows, Earl 3 rows, Viscount $2\frac{1}{2}$ rows and Baron 2 rows.

The robes for the ladies are a crimson kirtle with train edged with ermine. The details of the style of dress underneath the robe would be instructed with precise details given by the Earl Marshal. For the ladies, length of train indicates status: Duchess 2 yards, Marchioness $1\frac{3}{4}$ yards, Countess $1\frac{1}{2}$ yards, Viscountess $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards and Baroness 1 yard.

A coronet is a small crown worn by the peers at specific events, including a coronation. The design of the coronet is determined by the rank of the individual: Duke/Duchess 8 Strawberry Leaves, Marquess/ Marchioness 4 Strawberry Leaves and 4 Silver Balls, Earl/Countess 8 Strawberry Leaves and 8 Silver Balls, Viscount/Viscountess 16 Silver Balls touching and Baron/Baroness 6 Silver Balls on a plain band.

To commemorate the coronation of King Charles III, the National Trust and the CHT put together a display of coronation items including the chairs and coronets and had hoped to display the coronation robes on mannequins, but when the robes were unpacked, they proved to be in poor condition and unsuitable to be displayed that way. Instead, the robes, last worn by the 10th Earl of Coventry, were placed in a display case with both coronets, souvenir medals and his red stockings.



Coronation Memories

Whilst the Peers of the realm had to attend the coronation and those in London could watch the procession, festivities happened all around the country. At Croome the servants were given the day off to attend local celebrations. In the archives are memories of two coronations.



Hilda Newman (nee Mulley)

Hilda Mulley became the Countess of Coventry's Lady's Maid in 1935. As well as the book written about her, she also left a recording as part of Croome's oral history archive. Brought up in Stamford, Lincolnshire, where her father was a tailor, Hilda was taught by him to make and to mend clothes. She put herself through a hairdressing course and then found an advertisement in The Lady magazine for a Lady's Maid to the Countess of Coventry at Croome Court in Worcestershire. Hilda applied for the job in writing and was successful.

Amongst the other things she told us was that when there was a Servants' Ball, dancing would be led off by the Earl with her, and the Countess with the Butler. She said they had, "Such fun." Naturally, she accompanied the Countess when visits were made to other big houses and that there were a few where the relative informality of her relationship with her employer was frowned upon.



Hilda recalls several memories from the lead up to and the day of the coronation in 1937. The Countess asked her to get the family robes out, check them over and make any necessary alterations. Hilda recalls the softness of the velvet and the fur trim, but mostly the weight of the robes that the Countess would have to wear. She was very aware that she was handling and altering an historic robe that had been in the family for generations and the fact that even given her inexperience as a lady's maid she was being trusted with them and felt honoured to do so. She says that it made her really focus on the work and was some of her best sewing.

The Earl and Countess were going down to London to stay with Lady Suffield (the Countess's sister) at her London residence as the Coventry family no longer maintained a London address. Also, they would be borrowing her driver and not taking their own (Roland Newman – Hilda's future husband) and Hilda felt sad that Roland wouldn't get to see the spectacle for himself. However, the Earl had given orders for all staff to have the day off so they could attend local festivities and listen on the wireless.

A black Bentley collected the Earl and Countess from Croome and took them and Hilda down to London. The following morning at 9a.m. sharp the car drove Hilda to the bank to collect the countess's jewels for which she had to sign a form to say she had collected them. Glancing down the sheet Hilda noticed the value, in excess of £20,000. A nervous Hilda then rushed back to the car anxious to get back and hand over the jewels.

It took over 2 hours to get the Countess ready. They then headed off in the Bentley to Westminster Abbey. On arrival, Hilda jumped out of the car to arrange the countess's robes, and paused to take in the scene but was interrupted by the driver. "Hop back in sharpish please Miss, we need to move. We can get back to watch the procession". The procession was to pass in front of Lady Suffield's house and the servants had been given permission to view it.



Dorothy Ball

Dorothy Ball was born 31 January 1904 in Defford, the daughter of William and Lucy Simmonds and grew up on the Croome Estate. In February 1910 the family moved from their house on the edge of Defford Common to the Old Toll Gate House. Later in life Dorothy recalled her time living on the estate in a series of articles in the Worcester News. One article from March 1974 includes details of the festivities held at Croome for the Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911. Whilst still the Duke of York, he had stayed at Croome in 1894 when visiting Worcester to lay the foundation stone for the Library and Victoria Institute.

"In the following May King Edward VII died and I went to church with my hair tied with a black ribbon to take part in the memorial service. The coronation of King George and Queen Mary the following year did much to disperse our lingering sadness. Once more we gathered in the church of St. Mary Magdalene, this time to each receive a Union Jack and a mug, then we all marched down the hill to the Temple Greenhouse, a large and imposing building on the edge of the parkland surrounding the court.

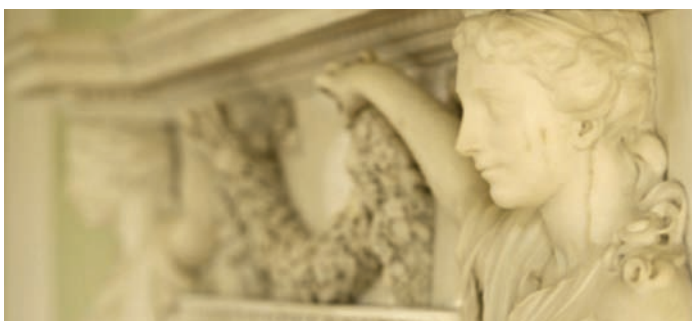
This building was always lent by the Earl of Coventry for such occasions. It had far larger outbuildings than the rest and a kitchen with a boiler etc. Barrels of beer were "trammed" in one part and a marquee was erected for preparing food. Another marquee occupied the lawn in front of the Temple Greenhouse and a temporary bridge was built to make access to the park easier. The greenhouse had been cleared of its palms, rubber trees and exotic plants to provide extra shelter if it should rain. But it did not rain. It was a hot, glorious summer."

"I cannot remember whether it was that summer or a later one that among the many visitors was a distinguished looking gentleman who called accompanied by two young girls. They were all on bicycles. The head gamekeeper told us later that he was Sir Edward Elgar and the girls were his daughter and a friend. They were staying at Kempsey at the time."

Dorothy died in 1981.

The Crown Jewels

One of the main symbols that people associate with the coronation are the crown jewels. They are housed in the Tower of London and comprise more than 100 objects and 23,000 gemstones. Amongst these gems is the Koh-I-Noor diamond. The original gemstone was much larger but was recut in 1852 to 105.6 carats and was set into the crown of Queen Elizabeth for the coronation in 1937.



In the early 1800s it formed part of the jewel collection of the Maharajah of Lahore, but in 1849 the East India Company deposed the ten-year old Maharajah Duleep Singh. As a condition of the Treaty of Lahore, which marked the end of the Anglo-Sikh wars, the diamond was surrendered to Queen Victoria. The young Maharajah was also sent to England, where he lived as an accepted member of high society. He married Bamba Mueller the illegitimate daughter of a German industrialist and an Assyrian slave in 1864 in Alexandria, Egypt. They had six children including Victor Albert Jay Duleep Singh, his eldest son and heir. Prince Victor would go on to marry Lady Anne Blanche Alice Coventry the third daughter of the 9th Earl of Coventry.

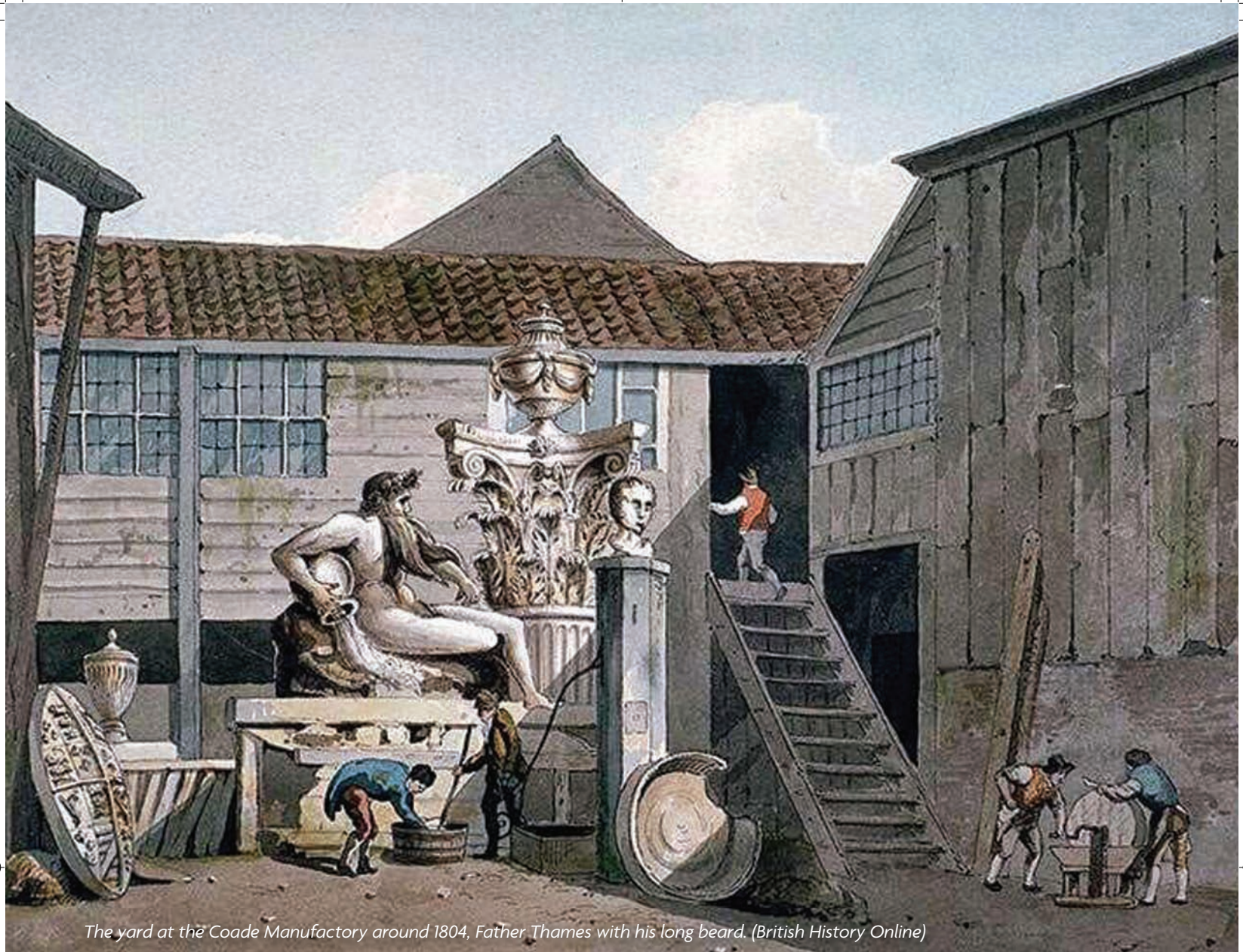


The Golden State Coach and the Croome Long Gallery Chimneypiece

A further connection with Croome is with the gilded 8-horse drawn golden state coach and the chimneypiece in the Long Gallery at Croome. Commissioned in 1760 for the coronation of King George III and his wedding to Princess Charlotte in 1761, it took longer to complete and so was not ready for either of these but instead was used for the state opening of parliament in November 1762. It has been used for every coronation from King George IV onwards and for other state occasions.

The coach was designed by William Chambers, made by coachmaker Samuel Butler with panels painted by Giovanni Cipriani and sculptures carved by Joseph Wilton. The cherubs on the roof represent England, Scotland and Ireland and support the Imperial Crown. The body of the coach is slung on braces covered in Morocco leather with the interior upholstered in velvet and satin. The coach is 7m long, 3.6m high and weighs 4 tons, as a consequence it can only travel at a walking pace. Queen Victoria was not fond of the coach and rarely used it describing it as having "distressing oscillations" and Queen Elizabeth II described her journey to Westminster Abbey in 1953 as "horrible".

Joseph Wilton also carved the chimneypiece in the Long Gallery at Croome, a design by Robert Adam. This has two life-sized caryatids, nymphs of flora holding a floral wreath. For his work on the chimneypiece Wilton was paid £338, and for his work on the coach just over £2,500.



The yard at the Coade Manufactory around 1804, Father Thames with his long beard. (British History Online)

The Story of Pioneering Businesswoman Eleanor Coade

Historic England, November 2021

Eleanor Coade (1733-1821), a Georgian businesswoman, successfully adapted a secret formula to manufacture an elegant artificial stone. The stone became widely used, including as neo-classical architectural decoration on some of the country's finest buildings by the pre-eminent architects of the day, such as Robert Adam, James Wyatt, John Nash and John Soane, as well as for the creation of sculptures and monuments.

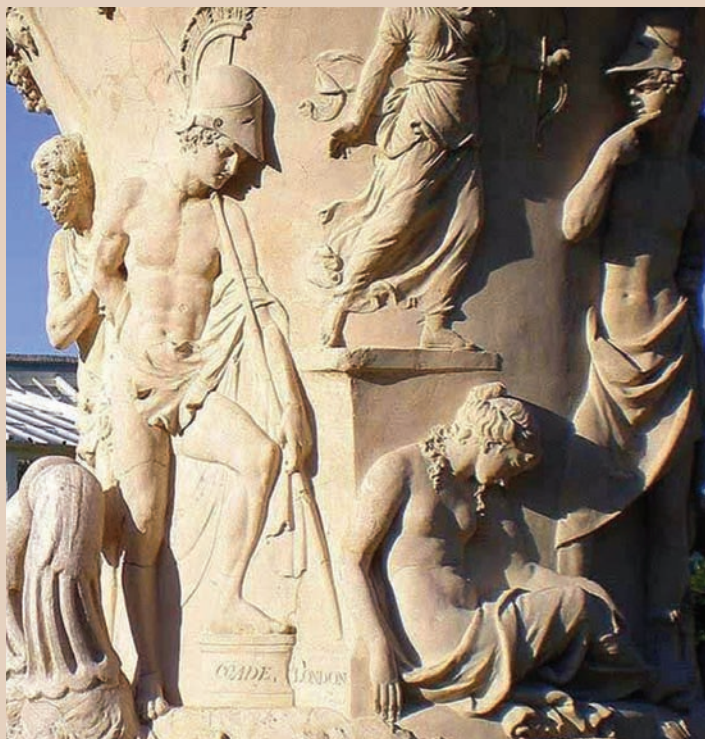
Born in Lyme Regis, Dorset, to a family connected with the wool trade, Eleanor, with her mother and two sisters, relocated to London following her father's bankruptcy, trading as a linen draper in her own right – an acceptable occupation for women then. For reasons unknown, in 1769 Eleanor and her mother went into business with the owner of a struggling artificial stone manufacturer, Daniel Pincot, based at King's Arms Stairs, Narrow Walk, London. Two years later, the partnership foundered in acrimony, with Eleanor stating she was the real proprietor. Pincot was dismissed. She took complete control of the business and employed a talented young sculptor, John Bacon. He became her business partner and supervisor of manufacture and design.

Eleanor Coade did not invent Coade stone. The search for an artificial stone – cheaper and more versatile than natural stone – had a long history, pre-dating her involvement. There were already existing patents and secret formulas, along with fierce rivalries between artificial stone companies. No doubt Mrs. Coade – Mrs. was a courteous title assumed

by unmarried businesswomen then – was a forceful strong-willed character in her own right, but there were other reasons for her coming to dominate the market in artificial stone: Hers was a fired ceramic, unlike cements which were cast. The finished result was high quality, frost-resistant and aesthetic; uniquely suitable for fine neo-classical ornamentation, as well as for statues and monuments.

She adapted and refined an existing formula, using a mix of finely ground clay, silicates such as flint and glass, and pre-fired terracotta ('grog'). The manufacture was labour-intensive, relying heavily on the skills of the clay mixer/modeller and those of the kiln firer. To produce an object, a clay model was made of the design and a plaster mould created from it (such moulds were reusable and adaptable). The Coade raw paste mix was rolled into thick sheets and pressed into the mould before firing at extremely high temperatures over four days, with final finishing and smoothing when cool. Large sculptures were cut into sections for firing, then reassembled.

Eleanor promoted Coade stone as being better than natural stone, keeping her formula a closely guarded secret, but never patenting it. In addition, by going into partnership with sculptor John Bacon – a rising star – Eleanor infused her business with vital artistic credibility at the sophisticated end of the market. Other renowned sculptors also worked



Detail of a Coade stone urn in the Italian Garden, Chiswick House, London.

with the Manufactory over the years. The huge 18th-century building boom had created a pressing demand for craftsmen to produce neo-classical ornamentation, especially for great country houses and grand terraces. Carving natural stone was slow and expensive. Coade stone could be manufactured relatively quickly by kiln firing; it was weather-resistant and cost less.

The firm's catalogues displayed hundreds of designs within a classical theme – including statues, fascias, panels, busts, medallions, chimneypieces, swags, festoons, flowers, pedestals, architraves, urns, columns, capitals, keystones and ornament for tombs. Leading architects used Coade stone as architectural embellishments on the exterior of their buildings, as well as within the interiors and for garden statuary – including Robert Adam at Buckingham Palace, John Nash at Brighton's Royal Pavilion, and John Soane in his own home. Coade stone was also used for other prestigious commissions, including the fan vaulting on the organ screen and for the font in St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. The Coade Stone Manufactory was granted the Royal Warrant to King George III (reigned 1760-1820) and George IV (reigned 1820-1830).

However, Coade stone was not just employed on grand architecturally significant buildings, it was also used on more modest properties, as well as providing ornamental detail – such as keystones – to the exteriors of ordinary homes in towns and cities across the country. John Bacon died in 1799 and Eleanor went into partnership with her cousin, John Sealy. They opened a gallery together that same year; spacious premises for exhibiting and selling their products. Their partnership lasted for fourteen years until Sealy's death in 1813 when the firm's name reverted to Coade.

Early in the 19th-century, the Coade Manufactory was asked to create a memorial to Admiral Horatio Nelson. This was the company's greatest honour. The colossal Nelson Pediment, completed in 1812 is full of classical and national references. It was based on a painting by Benjamin West, famous for painting historical scenes. The Pediment features the body of Nelson at its centre, along with Britannia and the sea deities, Triton and Neptune, as well as the emblems of Scotland, England and Ireland.

After Sealy's death, Eleanor appointed a distant relative, William Croggon, as manager of the business, rather than as a partner. Orders continued to flood in, including from across Britain's then Empire, as well as from Russia and America. Eleanor Coade died on 18 November 1821,



Early 19th-century Coade stone ornamental vase in the grounds of Sezincote House, Gloucestershire.

aged 88, at her home in Camberwell Grove; exactly where remains a mystery. This pioneering and unusual woman, unmarried and a devout Baptist, also left no images of herself and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Nonconformist Bunhill Fields Burial Ground, now a public garden, just to the north of the City of London. She did not leave her business to Croggon. He bought the company from her; going bankrupt in 1833 and dying around ten years later. The firm eventually closed in the 1840s as cheaper Portland cement began to replace Coade stone.

Mrs. Coade was wealthy; a philanthropist in later life, often helping women in difficult circumstances. She left many bequests in her will, including to the Baptists and to several married women, stipulating that the money was theirs alone. There is no memorial to Eleanor Coade. But hundreds of examples of Coade stone ornamentation across Britain and elsewhere – much of it as pristine today as when first manufactured – act as her enduring legacy.



Coade stone lion that today stands at the southern end of Westminster Bridge.

The lion, dating from 1837, was one of the last Coade sculptures produced by the firm. Once painted red but now plain Coade stone, it originally stood high on a plinth above the parapet of the Red Lion Brewery that was situated near its current site. The lion was moved to the bridge location in 1966, after briefly standing at the Waterloo entrance to the Festival of Britain in 1951 following the demolition of the Brewery two years earlier.



Fond Farewell to Lord and Lady Coventry

"They were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their death were not divided."

Daily Express, 17 March 1930

True to their oft expressed wish the 9th Earl of Coventry and Blanche, his Countess went together on their last journey. A fine old English sportsman had died on 13 March 1930, and his wife for 65 years had followed him within three days - broken-hearted.

Up the little hill, they had climbed hand in hand so many times for Sunday worship, they were taken on a stout farm wagon in coffins made of oak from their own park and fashioned by the hands of their own servants. Few saw the arrival of the cortege for it was two hours before the funeral, but from the top of the hill little groups of figures winding their way across the park from nearby villages could be seen.

Every house on the estate had sent a representative. Young labourers left their work in the fields, old men who had long since ceased to work left their chimney corners and young mothers with babies in their arms tramped the three and four miles to pay their last tribute to a beloved landlord and his lady. All of them knew they would have no seat in the church, which is small and could only accommodate members of the family and employees, but they were proud to pay homage to their friends, who were gone. A niche was found for old John Hill, aged 87, and the Earl's agent for 61 years and John Drew, 90, who had worked on the estate until recently. He sat near to the huntsman of the Croome hunt and his first whip, both in

hunting pink, and by them were the nurses who had looked after the couple during their last weeks on earth.

The new Earl and his young wife sat in the family pew with Lord Coventry's surviving sons and daughters and their families and it was they who led the procession of tenants past the opening of the family tomb, wherein the bodies of seven Earls of Coventry lie, after the coffins had been lowered by stalwart menservants of the estate. It was a simple service with favourite hymns of the dead couple beautifully sung by the Croome Choral Society, who always practised in a room at Croome Court in the winter so that the Earl could hear them.

The cricketing rector of Croome the Rev. Hugh Bennett, who had succeeded his father, took the service. He was obviously visibly affected and so too was Dr. Pearce the Bishop of Worcester, as he read the lesson. There were 500 people gathered around the entrance to the tomb while the Bishop read the committal. Memorial services were held at Worcester Cathedral and at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, at the same time as the burial took place at Croome. The King was represented at the services, and friends of the Earl and Countess attended to make their last gesture of affection.



The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, March 1930

A LINK WITH WELLINGTON: THE LATE EARL AND COUNTESS OF COVENTRY.

On the day of last week following the success of his horse, Black Minstrel, in the National Hunt Juvenile Steeplechase at Cheltenham, the Earl of Coventry died at his Worcestershire home, Croome Court, within two months of his 92nd birthday. Three days later his devoted wife died also, after sixty-five years of married life. The late earl succeeded his grandfather when just five years old and had held his title longer than any other British peer has ever done. In 1860 he was elected to the Jockey Club, and two years after won the Great Metropolitan at Epsom with Elcho, a horse that during his turf career beat Epsom and Ascot heroes in Caractacus and Asteroid. In 1863 and 1864 Lord Coventry won the Grand National with two sisters, Emblem and Emblematic, and he also had a victory in the Cesarewitch in the 'sixties. Then, some sixty years after, we find him winning the Cambridgeshire in 1923 with Verdict, after a great race with the famous Epinard, and also taking the Coronation Cup with the same horse next year. Lord Coventry had once been president of the M.C.C. He hunted for many years, having founded what is now known as the Croome, and hunted the North Cotswold at his own expense for six seasons. Viscount Deerpurst, the master and huntsman of the Carmarthenshire Foxhounds, succeeds to the title.



The 9th Earl of Coventry as a young man



Lady Blanche Craven at the time of her marriage to Lord Coventry in 1865

Peggy Pitches, Countess of Coventry

by Anne Matthews

Peggy Pitches was born in 1760, the second of six daughters of Abraham Pitches, a self-made businessman. His family had imported brandy for several generations. Their premises were in Lower Thames Street in the dockland area of London and the family lived there.

Abraham Pitches was ambitious. He moved his growing family to Streatham where he bought a property overlooking the common. The house was old and tumbledown but he modernised and changed its name to Streatham Manor, which sounded grander. He made a fortune, and despite humble origins he rose to become Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, and was knighted. He was determined his daughters would marry well, so he had them educated as ladies, not as the daughters of, and future wives of a tradesman.

The first mention of the girls was by Fanny Burney who was staying with friends in Streatham in 1778. She describes them as 'pretty, well dressed, trifling and furiously extravagant.' She meets them again in Sussex where Abraham had taken a house. There was a regiment stationed close by and one evening Fanny described how Peggy made a complete fool of herself. A group of officers were playing cards with some of the young ladies, including Peggy. She flirted outrageously with one of them, who was so exasperated by this he grabbed her hand and exposed her cards: 'Peggy blushed and sat quiet for the rest of the evening.'

In July 1779, Fanny was staying in Streatham with her friend Hester Thrale. One evening the pair go out for a walk and bump into Peggy with her sister Sophia. Sophia looked wan and pale and said she has not felt well all day. Peggy didn't look much better. Within a couple of days, Hester hears that Sophia is quite ill, so she goes round to see her straight away. Sophia is indeed very poorly, having fits and not recognising anyone. Her parents had called the local apothecary who diagnosed 'unrequited love for the local curate!' Hester immediately called in a proper doctor who concludes it was probably lead or mercury poisoning caused by the preparations she had been using to give her a pale complexion, but there was nothing he could do and she was beyond help. Peggy immediately stopped using such preparations.



Viscount Deerhurst, 7th Earl of Coventry

Peggy met Lord Deerhurst when he moved into a house in Streatham owned by his father the 6th Earl of Coventry. Two aunts of the 6th Earl had lived there; both had died but the Earl kept the house. Deerhurst had been estranged from his father. First, he fell in with an undesirable set when at Westminster School, then he left Oxford before sitting his exams. He then eloped to Gretna Green with a young heiress, Catherine Lygon; and finally he joined the army to fight in the American War of independence, but when he arrived in America, he sold his commission and returned home: unfortunately, the money order 'bounced.'

His young wife died in childbirth and finally in 1780 when out hunting, he set his horse to jump a fence which was too high, the horse fell on him and he was taken up for dead. Later it was reported that he would survive but he was blinded, and had trouble breathing through his broken nose. Hester Thrale reports that his father rushed to his bedside and they were reconciled. When he finally recovered as much as he was ever going to, he moved into the family-owned house in Streatham.



The seat of Lord Coventry in Streatham by J Hassell

Abraham almost certainly had his eye on Deerhurst as the very husband for Peggy. There was a brief courtship before the couple married in January 1783. Deerhurst writes to ask his father's permission. Quite what the 6th Earl made of Abraham Pitches can only be imagined but he had put up a substantial dowry of £5,000.

Peggy settled quickly to married life, giving birth to ten children over the next eighteen years. But life was not easy, her husband and her father-in-law often disagreed and she and her mother-in-law had to step in to keep the peace. Because her husband was blind, Peggy had to read his letters and documents, so she always knew what was going on. The couple visited Croome, but stayed at a house in nearby Upton-upon-Severn and visited Croome only for the day. Peggy was not too keen on Croome: for her, it was in the middle of nowhere and bleak with not much to see or do. Also the journey from Streatham took two or three days, travelling in carriages on uneven roads and, as she was almost always pregnant, travelling with young children and a blind husband would not have been easy.

Abraham Pitches died in 1792. He left a fortune, but in such a way that none of his sons-in-law would ever have control of it. Each of his daughters inherited £4,000, but his will stipulated it was for their exclusive use. If a daughter predeceased her husband, the money was to be invested for her children. This might have caused friction between Lord Deerhurst and Peggy, as much later, in 1819 in a letter to his son, states that £200 a year was a large enough allowance for a wife, and any more would make her too independent.

At first, the couple lived in the house in Streatham owned by the Coventry family, but in 1800 they bought an old house and set about restoring it. It had been the original Streatham Manor, which they renamed Coventry House. They commissioned the celebrated architects James Wyatt, then John Nash to carry out alterations. A novel feature was a pedal on the floor of the drawing room. It was for Deerhurst to summon his valet: if pressed it rang a bell in the servants' corridor. The house nestled in 80 acres of land, so the family were able to keep livestock and grow produce.



Coventry Hall, Streatham as St. Andrew's Convent in the 1970s, before eventual demolition

Peggy was a caring and sympathetic employer. A letter to her housekeeper discusses a new maid who had been ailing ever since they took her on. Peggy had organised the doctor to see her several times; he could find nothing wrong with her, but she was no better. Peggy thought she must be homesick and suggested the housekeeper paid the fare for the maid to return home. In another letter, Peggy insists the housekeeper sleeps at the Coventry home in Piccadilly as the house in Streatham was being painted and Peggy was concerned that the fumes from the paint were not good to breathe in all the time.

Peggy endured constant problems with her children. First Augusta, the eldest daughter, wanted to marry Willoughby Cotton who was in the army and a friend of Wellington. At the last minute, after the banns have been read, Lord Deerhurst decided she was too young and forbade the marriage, but they were allowed to marry a few years later. The second daughter, Georgiana, eloped to Gretna Green with a total 'no-hoper' and Peggy had to fund them and their two children for the rest of her life from her own money. Jane was widowed young.

The youngest son, William, was sent down from Oxford the very term he was to sit his finals and despite several letters from his father the university refuse to budge. William then eloped to Gretna Green with Mary Laing. John was a total 'ne'er do well,' and always looking to borrow money. Barbara eloped to Scotland then went to Paris with the dashing Lt. Col Crawford. While they were there she succumbed to illness and her husband enjoyed Paris alone. Whilst there, he encountered Barbara's sister, Augusta, and her now husband Willoughby Cotton. He insulted the couple and Willoughby challenged him to a duel. This was only called off thanks to the intervention of the British Consul and Wellington, but it became the talk of London.

But quite the worst problem was the eldest son, George. His first wife died after producing a son and later he remarried a woman who was regarded by society as 'quite dreadful.' An heiress, which might have been part of her attraction, she had affairs including with two of her husband's brothers; and even the footman! Peggy, acting on her husband's behalf insisted on a legal separation and the woman was sent to live in a house in London owned by the Coventry family. Peggy funded her to a certain extent but it soon becomes obvious she was pregnant, but George was not the father. When her time is due, she comes to London with her maid and a groom where the baby is born but then quickly taken away.

Deerhurst became the 7th Earl of Coventry upon the death of his father in 1809, but by 1818 his health began to fail and he prepared his will. He trusted Peggy and gave her full control of his affairs. As a woman, she could not own property, but he made certain she could control what happened to it. His executors were two of Peggy's nephews, both lawyers. By 1825 the Earl's mental capacities had become seriously impaired and he was confined to his own room in Piccadilly. George, his eldest son and heir, arranged for a doctor to attend his father but stressed to his mother that she must allow the Earl to speak for himself, so that the doctor could properly assess her husband's condition.

Peggy wrote a sad note to herself about the onus of being a wife: 'you have to learn always to be good natured whatever your husband says or does, even though you often have reason to complain.' The 7th Earl of Coventry died in London on 26 March 1831 whereupon Peggy retired to the house at Streatham, which she regarded as home, and lived for another nine years. She knew about the birth of her great-grandson, who later became the 9th Earl of Coventry, and also of the death of Lord Deerhurst, the heir to her son George, by then the 8th Earl of Coventry.

Each of Peggy's sisters married well. Jane married her father's apprentice, William Boyce who later became a barrister. Penelope married Robert Sheffield. Sadly she died young, possibly in childbirth, but her son, Robert, inherited the Sheffield title later in life, and was quite outspoken in the House of Lords. Julia married William Joliffe, a King's Counsel who later took holy orders becoming Rector of Merstham, Surrey, and developed the first iron roadway in the county.

Amelia married quite late in life: her husband was Edward Banks, business partner of William Joliffe. Their company built some of the first iron bridges over the Thames, Staines bridge and, Waterloo bridge amongst them. Edward Banks seems to have had even more humble origins than Abraham, starting off digging canals but learned how to construct bridges over canals by observing the engineers and listening to their conversations. He was hugely successful in business, was knighted and so his wife, Amelia Pitches, became Lady Banks. Peggy died on 15 January 1840 at Streatham after a full and rewarding life but one heavy with responsibility, having faithfully supported her husband throughout their marriage.

Sophie Catherine Coventry b.1902, Peggy Pitches' youngest daughter



Hon. Charles John Coventry

by Roy Pierce

Born on 26 February 1867 in Marylebone, London, the second son of the 9th Earl of Coventry, Charles (John) Coventry played cricket for Worcestershire, at the time a Minor County, and in 1888-89 was invited to tour South Africa with Major Warton's side. Two of the games were considered Tests. In the first, Coventry, who was making his first-class debut, batted at No.10 and made 12; in the second, he again batted at No.10 and scored 1 not out.

A career army man, he returned to South Africa in 1896 and took part in the ill-fated Jameson Raid. A newspaper report from that time describes the extraordinary events.

Among the wounded Englishmen in the force of Armed and Mounted Police serving the British South Africa Company, who followed Dr. Jameson in his disastrous invasion of the Transvaal, is Major the Hon. Charles John Coventry, a younger son of the present Earl of Coventry. The unfortunate young gentleman, in the fighting at Krugersdorp on New Year's Day, received a shot in the back. He was one of those who surrendered the next day with Dr. Jameson, Sir John Willoughby, and seven or eight other officers, and about 500 men, at Vlaktefontein, and was sent with them to the jail at Pretoria. Major Coventry has been a Captain of Militia in the Worcestershire Regiment, and had passed his examination for the Army, but went out to South Africa, taking a commission at the Bechuanaland Police, and latterly transferred his services to the British South Africa Company. The report that he had died of his wounds is happily unfounded.

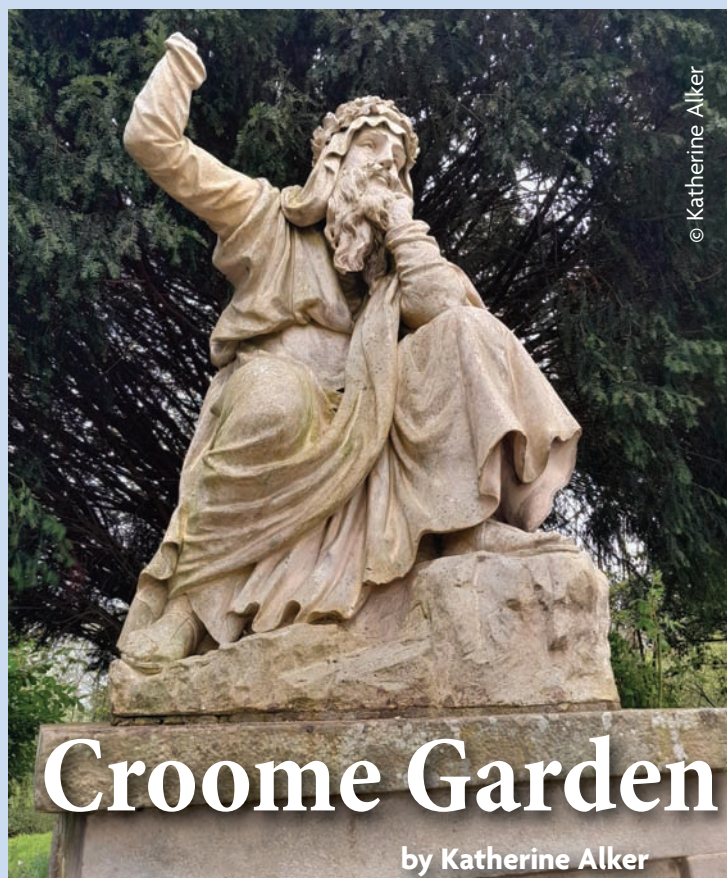


Colonel Charles Coventry, Worcestershire Yeomanry c.1916

Upon the initial report that Coventry had been killed in the raid, arrangements were made for a memorial service in England but news arrived that he was alive as the service was about to start and it instead became a remarkable celebration. He was sentenced to five months in prison for his part in the raid but was released after 24 days due to ill-health.

Charles Coventry also saw service in the Great War. In April 1916 the Worcestershire Yeomanry, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Coventry, defending the garrison at Qatia, in the Egyptian Sinai Desert, came under attack by Turkish troops. Coventry was among the 235 soldiers taken prisoner by the Turks, suffering further indignity when they were marched into Jerusalem in a mock procession. He remained a prisoner for the rest of the war and was repatriated to England in December 1918.

For many years Charles Coventry was official starter to the Jockey Club. He died on 2 June 1929 at Earls Croome in Worcestershire, aged 62.



Croome Garden and Park update

by Katherine Alker

Several of the statues in the garden at Croome have been needing some specialist attention for a while now, and I'm not talking about the awful situation we had over Easter where Sabrina and the 'Capability' Brown memorial were defaced with blue crayon – thankfully we managed to get this cleaned off very well in just a few days.

Last year we had a full condition survey of the statues in the garden and park. Cliveden Conservation (who you may know from the BBC programme Hidden Treasures of the National Trust, which is well worth watching if you haven't already) recommended some repairs to the Druid, the Sphinxes, Sabrina and one of the punchbowls on top of the Worcester Gates. Sadly the Druid had experienced some vandalism with his wrist being broken – it wasn't glaringly obvious as it hung in place thanks to the wires running from his hand through to his elbow, but clearly, we were keen to get this repair work done as soon as possible. The Friends of Croome were very generous in offering a donation for this repair and enabling us to book the work with the conservators.

The Druid is made of Coade stone; a man-made, ceramic product which is formed into shape (sometimes in a mould) and then fired. In April 2023 the conservators returned to do some final measuring up of the new hand which is made of the closest match material to Coade – no-one is certain of the exact 18th - century formula! At this point the damaged hand was removed and the wrist prepared to receive the new hand.

In June, once the new hand had been fired in the workshop off-site, the conservators returned to attach it to the statue. As can be seen from the photographs, the Druid now has his staff replaced in his new hand and is looking complete once again. The conservators also carried out repair work to the lid of the punchbowl by pinning the pieces of the original lid back together and re-attaching it to the bowl, as well as doing some minor repairs to both the Sphinxes and Sabrina.

Thank you to the Friends of Croome for your continued support of conservation and restoration work in the garden and park. We really appreciate it – and I am sure the Druid does too!

