

THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



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Friends of Croome Events

The Friends of Croome Events Group could do with some more help. Christine Adams' colleagues meet to come up with ideas for events and then share the job of organising them.

If you would like to know more of what is involved, please let Tim Hickson our Chairman know by email at thehicksons@uwclub.net and he will put you in touch with Christine.



"Croome with a View" ©Roger Lane Photography www.rogerlanephotography.com

NEWSLETTER

friendsofcroome.org.uk

Garden and Park update

by Katherine Alker

Wow! We achieved a lot last year and shared Croome with more people than ever. Brown's tercentenary put the spotlight well and truly on the garden and park; as well as all our usual local marketing and publicity, we appeared on Gardeners' World, Radio 4 and BBC World Service, as well as on a Royal Mail stamp! It was a fantastic year in which we continued to work on conservation and restoration projects in the garden and park too.

The plinth in the Home Shrubbery had been standing empty for many years, but thanks to a generous donation from the Friends of Croome and raffle tickets sales we were able to instruct Cliveden Conservation to piece back together the urn. The urn was erected after the 6th Earl of Coventry's death in 1809. Over the years, the urn deteriorated and fell apart. Although we found most of it in pieces on the ground, there were a few missing, so Cliveden had to carve some new stone pieces to complete the jigsaw. It was a wonderful sight when the urn was brought back and assembled on top of the plinth in October last year.

If you look very carefully at the plaque on the urn itself, in the right light you can just make out some of the words 'To the memory.... W Coventry'. The next step is to raise the balance of funds to replace the plaque which was once on the plinth.



*The plaque on the Urn, October 2016
©Katherine Alker*



*The restored Urn in the Home Shrubbery, October 2016
© Katherine Alker*



The Croome Walling Volunteers, September 2016 ©Katherine Alker

A project that has been going on for several years now is the repair of the park estate walls. The idea to repair the walls started when Pete Callaghan joined the Park team as a volunteer in 2012. Pete had walling skills that he was keen to share with others and, after a bit of recruitment, the Volunteer Walling Team was born! Since 2012 the team have repaired 200m of blue lias wall that runs behind the Park Seat down to the river; built up a 20m length of wall at the Walled Garden to help maintain the privacy of the privately-owned garden; rebuilt a 20m section of boundary wall in the shelterbelt to the west of the parkland; and completely rebuilt a 20m boundary wall at Middle Littleton Tithe Barn.

Pete has shared his skills with the core walling team, as well as the garden and park volunteer teams who worked at the tithe barn with him. Next for the team is an ambitious project to repair the wall which runs along Rebecca Road. Pete and Alan Gath, another member of the walling team, have done a lot of planning, and thanks to a donation from the Friends of Croome, we are able to purchase 20 tonnes of blue lias to rebuild the worst sections. The parkland team have started to clear access along the wall, and the walling team will start work there in Spring – you’ll be able to see progress from the road, so keep your eyes peeled!

Over the past 10 years a group of volunteers known as the Croome Plant Research Group have been poring over the hundreds of plant bills in the archive.



The Plant Book on sale at the National Trust Croome shop ©Katherine Alker

The 6th Earl was obsessive about his plant collection and wanted the best, the most exotic and most unusual plants for his collection, as well as the common and native plants that were available at the time. The group decided that they would like to celebrate the Earl’s collection and share their findings more widely with everyone, so after writing an article for The Garden History Society Journal, a book was produced.

The book has fascinating facts about the nurseries from where the plants were purchased, the plants themselves and the fact that the Earl checked the invoices himself and even wrote on one ‘were all dead – deduct 10/’, and on another ‘very very dear, pay no more’. Again, thanks to the Friends we have been able to print the book and it is now available in the Croome shop at £4. It’s well worth a read – so get your copy now!

Although this year is not a special anniversary year, we shall continue our work to present the garden and park to the highest standard possible. Thanks to all the Friends for your continued support of specific projects as well as the team in general. We do appreciate it.

Exploring Croome

by Melinda Hayter



The South front of Croome Court ©Melinda Hayter

Around Christmas I celebrated my birthday and as part of his gift to me my husband Adam bought us National Trust membership. I'd been ogling some of the properties the Trust owns in the lead-up to our departure from Australia and we recently had a wonderful stay in a National Trust cottage in the Lake District, so I was thoroughly chuffed at the present.

After a quick scan of the thick book of attractions that was sent to us, we quickly decided to head to a property about a 20-minute drive from Malvern, Croome – which for many years was the home of the Earls of Coventry and more recently the site of a secret World War II airbase, RAF Defford. The main house is beautiful, and I must confess I immediately felt like I'd stepped onto the set of a Downton Abbey episode!

The National Trust only acquired the property a few years ago, so it's quite sparsely decorated. Instead of full rooms of furniture set out as they would've been in say the 1700s, there are museum like exhibitions featuring key pieces. Adam and I particularly loved the dining room where some of Croome's porcelain was displayed in what's called the 'Golden Box'. The lighting and use of mirrors makes you pick up details that you might not have in a standard display.



The 'Golden Box' in the Dining Room at Croome Court ©Melinda Hayter

We were lucky enough to be the only people on a tour of the basement, where we learnt about the history of the property and the life of its servants. Our guide also took us to the 'Red Wing', which was the servants' quarters. It's been made weather-proof in recent years, but a full restoration is yet to begin. Despite the chilly air, flaking paint and signs about bat infestations there was still a beauty to the space. It was like the bones of the property were out for all to see.



The Red Wing at Croome ©Melinda Hayter

Lunch was also in the basement – a bowl of delightfully hot leek and potato soup in a tea room run by the National Trust – just what was needed after 30 minutes or so wandering around the Red Wing! Croome is set on a huge parcel of land, made up of paddocks of grazing sheep and cattle, formal gardens and wide open fields. Although it was foggy for most of the day, we had a lovely time wandering around spotting squirrels and robins and visiting some of the elaborate outbuildings.

It was one of the nicest birthdays I can remember and because it was the low season and we visited mid-week, it often felt like we had Croome all to ourselves. The author's blog 'Wattle and Ash from Wagga Wagga to Worcestershire' can be viewed at wattleandash.com



The Rotunda at Croome ©Melinda Hayter

Coming home to Croome

by Mark Grimshaw

The Croome Collection

The 6th Earl of Coventry, George William, at the age of 28 succeeded as Earl of Coventry on the death of his father in 1751 and inherited Croome Court. He undertook an ambitious development of the Court and parkland and it was his aim for Croome to be at the height of fashion. He sought the first and the best of everything that he admired and brought it to Croome Court; he amassed a fantastic collection of porcelain, furniture, tapestries, paintings and many other contemporary pieces.

The breakup of the Croome Collection

As with many landed families, fortunes were won and lost and by 1948, the Earls of Coventry had run out of time and money. With the onslaught of the Second World War and the tragic loss of the 10th Earl in battle, it was resolved that Croome Court, the park and the estate had to be sold. Most the contents of the house that had not previously been sold off were sold at auction and the court itself was sold to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham. It was fitted out as a boarding school for boys and run by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. St Joseph's had about 140 pupils from all over the country. The remainder of the collection which had not sold in the auction was moved to nearby Earls Croome Court where the Coventry family took up residence.

A new home for the collection

On the death of the 11th Earl in 2002 and the subsequent sale of Earls Croome Court, it became necessary for the Croome Heritage Trustees to find a new home for the porcelain, furniture and family portraits which had been retained. Until recently many of these items (around 1,200) have been stored and exhibited at Kelmarsh Hall in Northamptonshire.



Nikki Hewitt checking off returning items ©Mark Grimshaw

The collection comes home

After recent extensive remedial and re-servicing work at Croome Court it is now a suitable environment once again to store and exhibit the remaining items of the collection. Over recent months the Croome treasures have been delivered and staff and volunteers have brought the items back to the house cataloguing everything using the National Trust Collection Management System. The objects that have returned include an incredibly important collection of Vincennes, Sèvres and Meissen porcelain, examples of George III furniture, including Mayhew and Ince commodes, and portraits by Allan Ramsay which are now on display within the house.

Croome collection accessible store

Croome Court is never going to be a typical National Trust property with rooms full of period artefacts. Instead it is the intention to use much of the space within the court, on a rotating basis, to show items from the collection in innovative ways. We are building an accessible store on the second floor where we will offer guided tours by volunteers of the store rooms. On the first floor, we will utilise two rooms to store items and a conservation studio where visitors can come and view items from the store being conserved by our staff and volunteer conservators. We are hopeful that this will all be in place from the middle of this year.



From top left, clockwise: Carol Fidoe and Tom Coombe carry in a painting (Peter Young); Collection store (Peter Young); Andrew Auger using the Collections Management System (Mark Grimshaw)



Knights Pool Secret Walk

by Eileen Clement

On 22 September 2016, a lovely sunny day, thirteen Friends of Croome and three National Trust staff members set off on a walk from Croome past the Panorama Tower to Knights Bridge and Knights Pool. We were led by David and Sheila Bavington, who had been involved in a follow up search for a red gemstone. David told us the story of the search for the Green Stone in the late-1970s/early-1980s by a group called Parasearch. Led by messages and visions to Knights Bridge the sword was found hidden in the stones. They were then directed via Dunstall Castle to Swan's Neck on the River Avon where they found the Green Stone.



Meonia sword

As the sword was discovered on the Croome Estate it was given to 'Bill' Coventry, the 11th Earl of Coventry. Birmingham Museum dated it about 1880. I was fortunate enough to be able to track down the sword which now resides in Tudor House Museum, Upton upon Severn, and they kindly lent it to me for our walk. Members of the group were delighted to handle the sword with its interesting history.

A picnic was enjoyed by Panorama Tower before walking back through the Park. We all agreed it was an exciting and interesting adventure and we were very lucky to hear the story from someone who had been involved in this.



Eileen, David and Sheila Bavington with the sword

Revealed - The Two Wives of Thomas William Coventry

by Mike Payne



Illustration of North Cray Place by J. Bayly c. 1779 ©Bexley Local Studiers & Archive Centre

The First Wife

Thomas William, the youngest son of the 6th Earl, appears to be one who blotted the Coventry copybook. His first crime seems to be in an unsuitable choice of a wife – a mysterious Miss Clarke according to most of the sources. Catherine Gordon in *The Coventrys of Croome* suggests that she came from Evesham and may even have been a servant at Croome.

The Honourable Thomas William Coventry was married to a Catherine Clarke on 15 July 1800 at Holy Trinity Church, Clapham. Thomas was listed as being of that parish so must have been living in Clapham at the time. He was 21 years old, having been born on Christmas Eve 1778, and had matriculated from Christchurch College Oxford on 20 January 1797. Catherine was a minor and came from the parish of St James, Westminster. Because of her status, they were married under licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury and with the consent of her widowed mother, also called Catherine Clarke, and her guardian, Matthias [surname unreadable]. She was also very heavily pregnant. Their first son, also called Thomas William, was born the next week on 23 July but was not baptised until 26 February 1801 at Holy Trinity.

The Clarke family had been residents of the parish of St James (better known as St James, Piccadilly) since their marriage in 1771 and all their 7 children had been baptised there. Unfortunately, the father Thomas Clarke had also been buried there in 1787. There is no obvious connection with Pershore and if Catherine were a servant it is more likely she would have been employed at Coventry House in Piccadilly.

The scene now switches to North Cray Place in Kent, situated on the banks of the River Cray and adjacent to the parish church, also dedicated to St James. The house had belonged to Rev. William Hetherington, the Rector of St James, who inherited it from his brother. On his death in 1778 it passed to his cousin – a member of the Coventry family. The recipient was another Thomas Coventry who was the son of the 6th Earl's uncle, also Thomas! This Thomas Coventry had become MP for Bridport in 1754, a position held by both the 5th and 6th Earls prior to their succession. He had become very rich and was a director and, later, governor of the South Sea Company.

In about 1782 he had the grounds of North Cray Place laid out by Capability Brown. Thomas died in 1797 and, having no heirs, in his will all of his estates were left in trust for his godson, Thomas William Coventry for the duration of his natural life and thereafter for his firstborn son, etc.

Thomas William and Catherine took up residence at North Cray and had five more children, all of them daughters. The last two were born and baptised in Southwark so it is likely that the family had a London residence as well. Catherine died in 1806 probably as the result of the birth of their last child, Mary Leonora, who also perished. Catherine's body was returned to North Cray for burial in a vault at the west end of the church near the font. Catherine's mother, also Catherine Clarke, had apparently moved with them to North Cray Place for she is referenced as residing there in a draft conveyance of land in Pebworth dated 1803.

The Second Wife

Catherine Gordon also refers to a set of letters in the Croome Estate Archive to the 7th Earl from an S. Coventry who claimed to be the widow of Thomas William and "was described as a 'debauched and disgusting woman' by other family members. Apparently destitute and living in an attic, her demands for financial assistance became increasingly desperate and dramatic. Her identity has never been confirmed or disproved".

I can confirm her identity and that she had been legitimately married to Thomas William. In the registers of Ealing Parish Church there is an entry which states that "the Honourable Thomas William Coventry of the Parish of North Cray in the County of Kent a Widower and Sarah Manton of the Parish of St Martin Ludgate London, a Spinster were married in the Vicarial House of this Parish by a special Licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury this thirty first day of May in the Year one thousand eight hundred and thirteen by me Colston Carr Vicar".

The marriage arrangements were unusual but presumably legitimate. Unfortunately, I have been unable to determine with certainty any further information about Sarah other than what may be deduced from her pleading letters following her

husband's death. It is evident that Sarah was given an allowance by the Trustees of Thomas' estate for about 10 years, after which she was left destitute.

Thomas William died in the Ludgate Hill area of London in 1816 aged only 37 and was returned to North Cray for burial. His estates fell to his son who was still a minor at Harrow School.

The Family

Thomas William, the only son, married his first cousin Anne in 1823 and they had nine children. Thomas and Catherine's two eldest daughters, Augusta Elinor and Julia Catherine, married two members of the Pocock family. Augusta married George Edward who became 2nd Baronet Pocock. Julia married his brother Augustus but died just a year after being married. The other surviving daughters also died relatively young – Barbara Matilda aged 16 and Laura Maria aged 32 and unmarried.



North Cray Place c.1910 ©London Borough of Bexley

The House

A new house was built at North Cray Place in 1823, presumably for Thomas and Anne, but ten years later the whole estate was sold to Lord Bexley. It was sold to a development company in 1933 and turned into a club in 1936. It was hit by a doodle-bug during the war and finally demolished in 1961.

Virginia, Viscountess Deerhurst (1866-1948)

by Susanne Atkin

The story of Virginia, Viscountess Deerhurst, has been distorted by writers of romantic fantasy and by sentimental poeticisation which have obscured the reality of her life. Virginia Lee Daniel was born in California in 1866 to Rodie (Rhodie) and William Daniel, who later committed suicide after serving time in prison. Her mother married again to Charles Bonyngé, who adopted Virginia. Bonyngé (born in Ireland, not London as he claimed) became a millionaire through 'sharp dealing' in stocks of silver mines in Nevada, and decided to use his new-found wealth to move his family to London in about 1880 intent on entering high society and acquiring social status; in the process he put his step-daughter Virginia and his daughter Louise into the paths of aristocratic suitors doubtless in need of cash.

He pursued members of the royal family, until at a German spa Virginia met Princess Christian (formerly Helena), one of Queen Victoria's daughters. Virginia became her protégée and friend, and shared the princess's interests in charities for helping women and girls of all classes and in Unionist politics; she also became involved in the Royal School of Needlework, founded by Princess Christian, and to which Bonyngé donated money. The Bonyngés were presented at Court, although resented by other Americans in the UK as being *nouveau riche*, and attended various aristocratic garden parties and royal events that brought Virginia into contact with the Coventrys. Virginia was described as slim, tall, pretty, and 'charming', with a 'frank and pleasing manners' considered typical of Americans.

In 1894 Virginia married Viscount Deerhurst, eldest son and heir of the 9th Earl of Coventry; Princess Christian attended and gave Virginia a wedding veil. If some of the more fanciful American newspapers saw the match as a fairy-tale culminating in her becoming a countess, other commentators were more cynical, and more realistic, in comparing Deerhurst to many other cash-strapped members of the aristocracy who married rich American women, and indeed Deerhurst was in need of money. The couple moved to Worcestershire by 1901 when they were temporarily resident at Birlingham House before eventually settling at Pirton Court. They had four children: Helena (later Countess of Harrowby); Peggy; George William (later the 10th Earl); and John.



Virginia Bonyngé, published on the occasion of her marriage in 1894

Virginia appears to have slotted into the aristocratic lifestyle without any difficulty, joining in the Coventry family's charity work and taking her turn as a figurehead for local organisations. She shared their Unionist politics, and their membership of the ultra-Conservative Primrose League; the Countess of Coventry had been on the Ladies Grand Council, and both she and Virginia became presidents of local habitations (branches).

Virginia's step-father died at Pirton Court in 1913, and her mother Rodie died in 1914; both were buried next to Croome church. Virginia then appears to have formed a close bond with the Earl, especially during the war years. During the First World War the Coventrys, as a leading aristocratic family in the county, set a patriotic example by supporting numerous charities and new wartime organisations, and taking honorary roles as figureheads. As food shortages became serious, Virginia found a niche for herself in committee work focusing on agriculture - an odd choice, perhaps, for a woman hitherto lauded as a London society hostess, but she was probably influenced by her father-in-law Lord Coventry, a renowned and experienced agriculturist.

Virginia was one of a group of upper-class local women sitting on Ladies Committees such as Worcestershire Women's War Agricultural Committee, encouraging middle and working class women to get involved in food production and to work on the land to replace the men who had gone to war, and persuading disgruntled farmers that women could do farmwork despite prejudice and resentment. These committees were responsible for appointing others to take on the organisation and the hard practical work.

Lord Coventry publicly encouraged women to work on the land, once saying he thought milking and hoeing were two jobs women could do very well; however, many women land workers received training in all aspects of agriculture. After a Midlands land workers' test competition in 1917, about 100 land girls later marched through Worcester: Virginia organised lunch for them, and Lord Coventry handed out the certificates and badges. Virginia was involved in a successful scheme (as President) to collect and preserve fruit and vegetables but it is unclear whether she was the founder or a figurehead. With others, she also helped to organise demonstrations of preserving, canning, and bottling in some local villages.



Tomb of Charles and Rodie Bonyng, Croome churchyard
@Susanne Atkin

The new Women's Institute movement was brought to the UK under the auspices of wartime agriculture and food production organisations. Mrs Madge Watt, the organiser of the movement in Canada, was invited by Lord Coventry to speak at a meeting in Pershore in 1916, leading to the formation of one of the early WIs. As with other organisations, it was expected that the lady of the manor would become the figurehead as the Honorary President; in Pershore Virginia fulfilled that role, but it was the middle class women of the town, many of them married to wealthy businessmen and fruit-growers, who took on the actual organisation and made such a success of the WI. Virginia and her daughter were (briefly) involved in other local WIs;

although the Viscountess was photographed in 1921 with the Pershore WI ladies on the occasion of the opening of their new meeting hall, it is not clear whether she had continued to be involved with them.

After the wartime organisations and committees were disbanded, Virginia resumed the typical aristocratic lifestyle: her younger daughter's coming-out, weddings for both George William and Helena, social events, and support for charities. Rather than enter politics herself (unlike American-born Nancy, Viscountess Astor), it was Viscount Deerhurst and their two sons who attempted to stand for Parliament as Unionist candidates in the 1920s, but without success. When her son John became the youngest mayor of Worcester in 1929-30, Virginia became Lady Mayoress for which her skills as a hostess were said to be useful.

The death of Deerhurst in 1927 meant Virginia would never be Countess. Both her sister and brother-in-law died in 1929. When the 9th Earl and Countess died in 1930, Virginia's son George William became the 10th Earl; as the new Countess, his wife Nesta took precedence over the Viscountess, taking over charity work and committees, although Virginia remained involved with local Conservative and Unionist groups into the 1930s. Her eldest son, the 10th Earl, was killed in action in 1940. Virginia died at Pirton Court in 1948, aged 82, and is buried at Croome church.

Virginia Deerhurst was very much a woman both of her time and of the class into which she married. An aristocrat's charming wife, who did nothing particularly remarkable during a period that included issues such as women's suffrage and opportunities for women in work and politics. But, for a brief period during the First World War, she worked diligently on committees to encourage women to work on the land and to make sure no food was wasted during a time of crisis.

The information in this article is part of Croome 100, an independent research project about the Coventry family and the Croome Estate during the Great War. Research into Lady Deerhurst is ongoing for future publication.

Viscountess Deerhurst
(holding the flowers)
with the ladies of
Pershore WI in 1921
(author's collection)



Back in Time

by Paul Walby

When I was very young I lived in a typical pre-war house on the old A2 at Sidcup (then in) Kent. We had a long, narrow garden with access to an even bigger ‘garden’ at the top – Danson Park, a large expanse of glorious play space for young chaps. A small woodland area led out to a more open grassed area with random trees which then led down to a big lake fed by a small ‘river’ at one end and a big, old wood built Boathouse at the other, more rolling grassland and trees the other side and at the top Danson Mansion, not very big, but in its way quite imposing, with vaguely formal gardens on its north side.

This was not long after the war, and there was an air of mild neglect in and around the park; blocked off air raid shelters just along from the top of our garden, and an area which obviously had been a gun battery during the war (Woolwich Arsenal wasn’t far away) not far from the ‘river’. But the 1930’s almost Art Deco open-air swimming pool was certainly well used, and I used to crawl under the turnstiles and sneak in frequently! (But I still can’t swim!). I loved that park, heaven for a young lad. Fast forward sixty-odd years, and here I am, a volunteer at Croome and enjoying immensely the Court set amid the glorious parkland with that beautiful view as I stand beside the church at the top of Church Hill; the continual ‘buzz’ and the friendly bunch of volunteers and staff have helped recreate my ‘heaven’ of all those years ago.

I didn’t immediately recognise the similarities between Danson Park and Croome until recently, whilst searching for other properties that Brown was involved with. But in a list of work that Brown was associated with, Danson Park sprang out of the page! *‘Danson Park, laid out in 1763 by Nathaniel Richmond, assistant gardener to Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown’.*

In my mind, I revisited my old playground, it’s almost casual landscape with trees – apparently, there was even a Cedar of Lebanon – scattered around, the lake (when I was a lad trips were available in a lovely blue launch, and rowing boats were for hire), and ‘river’ weaving its way through a reed bed, the old mansion with its’ tree lined drive and a small slightly formal garden area... No Follies, though; maybe there were one or two in the 1800s.

Croome, and Brown’s wonderful legacy, has certainly opened my eyes to the incredible, different, array of landscapes around the country, cared for in the main by National Trust and available to us all to enjoy. Brown may well have been considered a ‘vandal’ in recreating formal gardens into more relaxing landscapes, but his ‘vision’ gives us an area of calm in today’s frenetic world. Cherish that.



The Lake at Croome ©National Trust



The Lake at Danson Park ©London Borough of Bexley



The Lake at Danson Park c.1955 ©London Borough of Bexley