

A HISTORY OF THORPE LUBENHAM HALL

by Sir Bruce MacPhail

Thorpe Lubenham Hall was catapulted from relative obscurity in the 1920s when it was purchased by one of the wealthiest men in England, who had just married a Russian Countess with close connections to most of the royal families in Europe, including both The Queen and Prince Philip. This article consequently concentrates on this period of prominence.



SIR BRUCE AND LADY CAROLINE IN FRONT OF THORPE LUBENHAM HALL AS IT IS TODAY.

The origins of Thorpe Lubenham, or Thorpe near Lubenham as it was, is that when the Scandinavians raided England, they eventually began to colonise territory and created settlements or 'thorpes' (the old name for hamlet) near existing Anglo Saxon settlements. The 'thorpe' near Lubenham was at the bottom of the park in front of the present house, near the railway bridge. Today that area, together with the part-moated island across the drive, is designated a site of Special Archaeological Interest. One can see the outlines of a village from the air.

Thorpe near Lubenham appears in the Domesday Book as the property of Hugo de Grentmaisnill, a follower of William the Conqueror, having been held by Oslac under Edward the Confessor.

The original manor house is reported to have stood on the island in the moat, though it is uncertain when it was built. Subsequent owners included the Earl of Leicester, and in 1296 Hugh de Luterington's name appears. It passed through a number of hands in ensuing centuries, and the names Griffin, Caterby and Markham occur. There seems some possibility that they were all descendants through marriage from the original Luterington.

By 1720 it was the property of Matthew Johnson, of Willcote and in 1754 it passed to Edward Palmer – possibly part of the family of Sir Geoffrey Palmer at Carlton Curlieu, whose family owned much of this area in the Middle Ages – and thence to his sister, Elizabeth Dickinson whose granddaughter, Mary, brought it in marriage to Francis Stratford of Lincoln's Inn. There was a dispute at the time between her and her sister, who had inherited Somerby Manor. Her sister maintained Thorpe Lubenham was worth more than Somerby, and received £200 from Mary to make up the difference.

This was a time of great distress in Lubenham as between 1784 and 1792, 54 people were buried as paupers. Probably this was when the Industrial Revolution put weaving machinery in factories and drove the cottage weavers out of work.

There is an engraving of Thorpe Lubenham from the Church in 1797. It has always been thought to be the old manor house, on the island, but the lack of any water in the picture, either the river or the moat, casts doubt on this. It needs further research. At this time the Paget estate seems to have had some involvement as there is a valuation in the Paget papers in the late 1700s referring to Thorpe Lubenham and listing a number of fields totalling 363 acres and worth £550. Some of the field names, Clover Close, Ram Meadow and High Field are still in use today.



THORPE LUBENHAM HALL HOW IT WOULD HAVE LOOKED WHEN IT WAS FIRST BUILT



CUNARD GATE

Somewhere before 1805 the present house was built, or the first part of it, as there is a reference in local records to Mr Stratford enjoying his new house in its fine park at that date. There may have been a smaller house on the site before, as we found an old gable end high in the wall of our present hall when we originally decorated it. What happened to the old house on the island is still unknown.

The Stratfords, or Morgan Stratfords as they became, kept ownership of the estate throughout the 19th century, until they sold it in 1912. For much of this time it was let and its fortunes seem to have fluctuated. In the 1860s it was let to an extremely wealthy newly married Scottish nobleman, while in 1874 it was occupied by Hugh Morgan Stratford and his sister and just two servants.

During the latter part of the century it was let to Gordon Cunard, one of the shipping dynasty and cousin of Bache Cunard of Neville Holt, and he bought the freehold in the sale in 1912 when the sellers were listed as Mary Ann Morgan Stratford,

Frances Newman and George Jenkins. The size of the estate then was 1500 acres in a number of lots. Cunard sold the estate in about 1920 but he left a reminder of his tenure in a gate made of horseshoes with Cunard written across it. This was between the garden and what is now the swimming pool. I felt I could not let this pass, as CEO of the rival shipping line, I commissioned another horseshoe gate with P&O inscribed on it. Sadly modern horseshoes are slighter than they used to be and modern blacksmiths less good craftsmen, so the new gate is a pale shadow of the old one.

The house was bought in about 1920 by Harold Wernher. This was the start of the golden period for the house. Harold's father was Julius Wernher, a Lutheran German and son of a railway engineer, an important profession in those days when railway lines were being rolled out all over Europe. Julius started work in Paris with a bank called Porges. He moved onto London, again in banking, to learn English, and in 1871 was offered a job with a Porges brother who was a diamond trader to go out to South Africa with a partner and establish an office. They went straight to Kimberley where the diamond rush was in full swing. Initially, they bought diamonds off the miners and traded them or sent them back to the UK. It was a wild place then and the Post Office was often burgled, but the margins were so huge that they rapidly made money.



JULIUS WERNHER

Over the next twenty years the business, renamed Wernher Beit, became hugely successful, with huge interests in most of the gold and diamond mining companies which sprang up in the area; De Beers being one of the largest. Wernher worked with Cecil Rhodes, Barney Barnate and Alfred Beit, reputed at one time to be the richest man in the world. They built up the mining industry together, invested in many other African projects, and played an active role in politics. They were known as the Randlords. Rhodes, though not the richest, was the visionary of the group. He saw his riches purely as a means to an end, and that was to spread benevolent British rule, which he saw as a superior form of government, over as much of Africa as possible, before the Germans, Portuguese, French, and others got there. He wanted the map to be red from the Cape to Cairo, and he did not do too badly. Much of his money went into securing Rhodesia and other lands to the

north of the Cape, and even at his death the residue of his fortune went to establishing the Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford.

However, all this came to an end with the Jameson raid. In the Transvaal, an independent Dutch state ruled by Kruger, there were nearly as many British as Dutch, particularly in Johannesburg, where many of the mining houses had their main offices. There were considerable tensions between the Dutch government, who were sensitive and suspicious of the increasing UK investment and population. Rhodes saw the solution as to fold the Transvaal into the British Empire in union with the British colonies. He encouraged and armed an incipient rebellion in Johannesburg and sent a close associate, Dr Jameson, into the Bechuanaland ready to ride into Transvaal with 1500 men, support the uprising in Johannesburg and then march on Pretoria. How much the other Randlords, who certainly provided finance, knew of this is unknown, but it almost certainly had the tacit support of the UK Colonial Office. However, the uprising was



P&O GATE

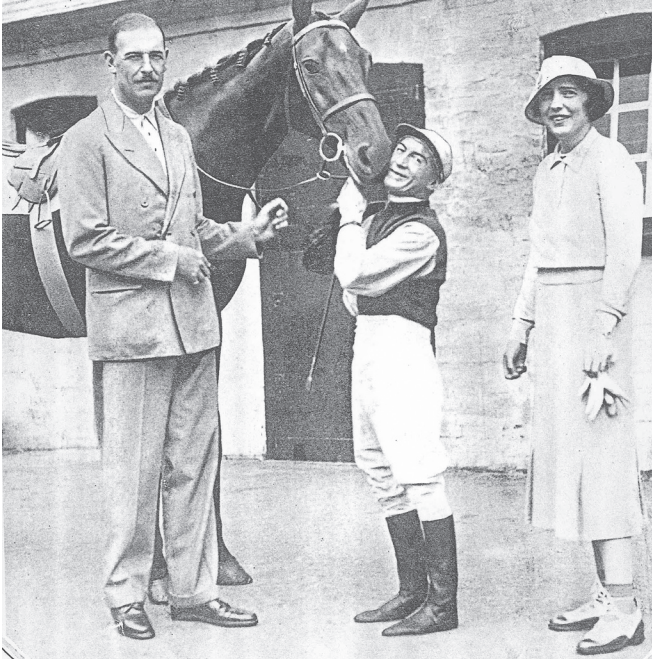


GRAND DUKE MICHAEL
OF RUSSIA

delayed and delayed and eventually Jameson, who was losing men, marched in on his own initiative. The Boers knew of the plan, met him, killed 25 percent of his force, and snuffed out the Johannesburg uprising before it happened. Rhodes resigned as Prime Minister of Cape Colony, Jameson was handed back to the UK government and jailed in London, and everyone else claimed to have nothing to do with it. Beit and Wernher, who had become British citizens, moved to London with their huge fortunes. Wernher bought Bath House, a huge mansion in Piccadilly opposite where the Ritz is now, and Luton Hoo, with 5000 acres as his country cottage. He lived in great state and began to build up a huge collection of paintings, objects d'art and furniture. His wealth put him at the pinnacle of Edwardian society and he was made a baronet in 1905 for his philanthropy. He had three sons: Denis, who he disinherited over a series of financial scandals, Harold and Alex. He died in 1912. His wife, Birdie, remained living in his houses. During the war Alex was killed. Harold did very well and in 1917 he married Countess Zia de Torby.

Zia was the daughter of Grand Duke Michael of Russia's, grandson of Tsar Nicholas II. Grand Duke Michael lived at Kenwood, a large country house on the edge of Hampstead Heath and had vast estates and wealth in Russia. He had two daughters and a son. One daughter Nada, married Prince George of Battenberg whose name was later changed to Mountbatten. He was brother of Louis Mountbatten, and sister of Princess Alice, who married Prince Andrew of Greece and was mother of Prince Philip. The other sister married the King of Sweden. The other daughter was Zia. When Nada married in 1916 the storm clouds were looming in Russia. In 1917 the Tsar abdicated and was murdered in 1918. Grande Duke Michael lost all his assets in Russia and suddenly Zia was, though hugely well connected and beautiful, rather poor. Thus marriage to a young hugely rich Englishman, with a good war record, albeit from a rather modest background, was a merger made in heaven, Harold inherited the whole of Julius' fortune after Alex's death, apart from his mother's life interest in part of it.

Harold and Zia decided to set up their own establishments and bought Thorpe Lubenham, rather bigger then, and a house in London near Regent's Park, that was even bigger. They lived at Thorpe Lubenham in considerable state, with 26 staff. Harold built a covered tennis court, now our grain store, and a golf course, the contours of which can still be seen to the west of the house. They would spend June and July in London, August and September in Scotland, and the rest between Thorpe Lubenham and London. After the birth of their third child Myra, Alex and Gina had preceded her, a new wing was added. Harold and Zia were active with the Fernie Hunt, had polo ponies and began owning and breeding race horses.



BROWN JACK (HORSE, JOCKEY AND OWNER)

In the early 1920's Harold asked Aubrey Hastings, a well known trainer, to look for an Irish maiden that might win the Cheltenham Champion Hurdle. He talked to his Irish contacts and was shown a horse that had raced only twice, lost once and unplaced the other time, but which was thought to have potential. It was called Brown Jack. Hastings liked the look of it, bought it and brought it to Wroughton Stables, his establishment in Wiltshire. Brown Jack was not a very impressive looking horse and the staff at Wroughton thought that their boss was mad, especially because Brown Jack got very ill just after his arrival and nearly died. However, he survived and went into training. He was gradually raced and began to win, duly amazingly winning the Champion Hurdle the next March. Hastings thought his potential at the flat could be even greater, and had asked Steve Donoghue, the most famous flat jockey at the time, to watch the Cheltenham race and give his opinion.

He agreed with Hastings and said he would like to ride Brown Jack, thereby starting one of the most famous partnerships in racing history. Wernher was persuaded to go along, although he really then preferred jumpers, and Hastings started to train Brown Jack for the flat.

The races he won are legendary, but one fact stands out beyond the rest and may never be surpassed. He won the Alexander Stakes at Ascot, the longest race under Jockey Club Rules at nearly 3 miles, an incredible 6 years in succession.

Wernher retired him after this and he spent the rest of his life in stable no. 13 at Thorpe Lubenham, where previously he had spent his winters. He was renowned for a number of idiosyncrasies, one of which was to sit on his manger to have his hooves shod. He died the night before he was going to be moved to Luton Hoo.

There was a constant stream of Royal visitors to the house, The Queen first came when she was 2½ years old and was a good friend of Zia and Myra. Prince Philip, a close relative, used to spend time in his holidays from Cheam and Gordonstoun at Thorpe Lubenham as many of his family were abroad.

Luton Hoo was taken over by the War Office during the war. At the end of the war after Harold's mother died he handed the house and collection to the National Trust on the understanding that the family could continue to live there. He and Zia moved there after the war and handed Thorpe Lubenham over to Gina, their daughter; their son Alex having been killed in N. Africa, the second Alex to die at war in two generations! There is a window in All Saints in the south Chapel commemorating him, just by the large square pew that was reputedly created and maintained and used by the house.



MEMORIAL WINDOW IN ALL SAINTS CHURCH, LUBENHAM TO ALEX

The Queen always used to worship there on her frequent visits in the 1950's. Many other Royal family members stayed during those years, and I remember Angus Ogilvy telling me that he first kissed Princess Alexandra in the covered tennis court here. Gina had married Colonel 'Bunnie' Philips in 1944. He had previously been the lover of Edwina Ashby, who married Louis Mountbatten, so it was quite a closed circle. The Philips had 5 children. Sasha and Natalie, who married the Dukes of Abercorn and Westminster; Nicholas, who moved into Luton Hoo, but committed suicide after large losses in the 1990 property crash, Marita and Fiona. Many of the family returned to Lubenham recently for Mrs Mawby's funeral. A friend of mine from Balliol, Peter Snow, was staying last weekend. He received a message and photograph on his phone from his son, Dan, who was at Eaton Hall with Edwina, the Duke of Westminster's daughter with whom he is going out. The message said 'Just enjoying the estate.' Peter was able to send back a picture of himself and his wife Annie in front of this house with a text saying 'Just enjoying the estate your mother was brought up on!'

The Philips decided to move closer to their children's schools and moved to Checkenden Court in 1966, selling the house to Viscount Kemsley, part of the Berry family of newspaper fame. They had four children and when they began to move away decided that the house was too big and pulled down the west wing and the nursery wing that Wernher had built. In 1985 they sold the house to us.



THE QUEEN (THEN PRINCESS ELIZABETH) AND PRINCE PHILLIP
ATTENDING ALL SAINTS CHURCH IN 1949