

The Arnolds at Pains Hill Cottage

by R. R. LANGHAM-CARTER

A description of Pains Hill Cottage was given in a previous number of this journal.¹ In the present note an attempt is made to re-create some facets of the Arnolds' twenty-eight years' residence in Street Cobham.

When Matthew Arnold decided to leave Harrow he chose Cobham for perhaps three reasons in particular. In the first place, he was still an Inspector of Schools and had to do much travelling and he needed to maintain contact with friends and with other literary men in London and elsewhere. In the second place, he was offered a home in Cobham by his close friend Charles Leaf. And, finally, he was greatly attracted by the Cobham countryside.

Pains Hill Cottage was within easy reach of the stations at Cobham and at Walton-on-Thames which gave him quick access to London. Quite frequently Arnold would walk to a station in the morning, spend the day in London and on his return would either walk home or else would be met at the station by his pony and trap.

Hitherto, Arnold had had to live most of his life in towns. But as early as 1832, when he began to spend boyhood holidays with his father Dr Thomas Arnold in the Lake District, his ambition had been to lead a country life.² Cobham became his first, and his only, country home and its scenery gave him much happiness during the last fifteen years of his life. For him it was 'the most enchanting country in England'. 'The country', he opined in his first Cobham year, 'is more beautiful even than the Chilterns because it has heather and pines while the trees of other kinds in the valley of the Mole are magnificent'. The Arnolds visited the Lovelaces at East Horsley Towers in February 1876, seemingly an unlovely time of year. But to Arnold

the country close by is delightful and even in this weather the chalk hills and woods cannot entirely lose their charm. The plants of primrose, violet and foxglove were literally everywhere and Lady Lovelace declares they have the daffodil, bee orchis and narcissus. Lord Lovelace's tract of country is something unusual for this part of England and the part of England is really a delightful one.

Arnold's published letters contain other references to his love of nature. In 1879, for instance,

I am told by the natives that the nightingale used always to build in the shrubberies of the Cottage but she has given up that good habit: however, all around us the nightingales positively swarm.

He reports in the same year that

I had two blackbirds and three thrushes roaming about together on the grass under my window as I was getting up... And a stock-dove has built her nest in the leaning ivied fir tree which you will remember between the house and the stables

In April 1880 he was glad to be able to pick some wild white violets 'though the cottage children are apt to be before me and they spoil as much as they gather'. And in one of his poems he sings of the wild foxgloves on St. George's Hill.

But Arnold was much too energetic a person to simply contemplate the beauties of nature. Sometimes he would go for a ride, an incongruous figure with his long legs almost touching the ground on either side of his small pony. He had an enjoyable ride in the autumn of 1879 on an old grass road—thirty yards wide—from Bookham Common to Effingham Common 'with woods on one side and a great bowring hedge on the other'. He was also an ungainly walker for he had rickets in his youth and always walked awkwardly and, at seventeen stone,³ he was greatly over-weight. Nevertheless he much preferred walking and covered long distances. He would often walk 'the Burwood round' with the dogs. They would enter the Burwood House grounds at the furthest lodge and walk back southwards through the park to the Mole and the Portsmouth road. Arnold was also fond of skating and mentions skating on the frozen lake at Pains Hill House in January 1879 and again in January and December 1886 and a month later his old friend Professor Butler came over from Weybridge and skated with him.⁴ Arnold used up his energies further in his garden. 'I do much enjoy the life at home', he told a friend in 1883, 'with half an hour in the garden every morning and two hours in the lanes in the afternoon'. The Arnolds, in fact, were always busy 'planting and improving about our cottage as if it were our own and we had a hundred years to live there'. In July 1876 Mrs Arnold was engaged in putting manure round the hybrid roses and preventing its dispersal by loading it with stones—and getting good results. They are recorded as transplanting some holly and laurel bushes in the autumn of 1879 and they planted cypresses and thuyas in 1882. In October 1885 they spent a whole morning up ladders, gathering their crop of pears and walnuts. Arnold once invited a friend to visit 'the hermit and hermitesses of the Mole'. He certainly spent a good deal of time writing in his study and a number of his more important works were published during his Cobham period. These included:

- 1875 *God and the Bible*
- 1877 *Last Essays on Church and State*
- 1879 *Mixed Essays*
- 1881 *Elegiac Poems*
- 1882 *Irish Essays and others*
- Posthumously:
- 1890 *Later Poems*
- 1902 *Notebooks*

And a good many poems and articles appeared in magazines.

Arnold, nevertheless, was far from being a hermit. He and his family played an energetic part in Cobham's public life and are often mentioned in contemporary numbers of the Surrey press and the parish magazine. They were, for instance, staunch supporters of St Andrew's church. Arnold's personal religious beliefs were unorthodox but they all attended the Sunday services. The family used the pony and trap but Arnold himself preferred to walk and an old parishioner remembered seeing him striding down to Church Cobham across the leg-of-mutton field beyond the present vicarage.⁵ Though they were not wealthy they are recorded as subscribing to many local charities such as the Coal Club, the Clothing Club, the School Trust and the Schools Account. They gave £5 towards the building of a new Village Hall and contributed to the Cobham 'Ladies' Association in connection with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts'. In 1892 Mrs Arnold gave to the Parochial Schools and to the Choir Excursion. She was a diligent district visitor and she, Lady Ellesmere and some other ladies started the Parish Nurse Fund in about 1880. She acted as its manager in 1889 and was its secretary and a committee member almost up to her death in 1901. With an annual donation of £5 she was one of its chief financial supporters. She used to preside at Mothers' Meetings which were held at Ivy Cottage, the residence of the Parish Nurse. She was thanked in 1901 for presenting magazines to the Nursing Home. She also had her private charities. Each December she would ascertain which families had no money to buy a Christmas dinner and would make it and take it to them herself.⁶ On 30 December 1885 Mrs Arnold alone and on 31 December 1886 she and her husband entertained the village mothers and children to a Christmas tea at the Working Mens' Hall in Street Cobham. Their daughter Nelly and the wife of their son Richard also helped and Nelly regaled the company with some 'instrumental music'. They had thirty women and eighty children at Pains Hill Cottage on 22 July 1887, tea starting at four o'clock when the vicar had said Grace. Lady Ellesmere was present but was not the main attraction for Lucy and her husband were there and 'quite the chief attraction of the afternoon was the infant granddaughter of the house'. Nelly was also on duty at the opening of the Coffee House in the hamlet of Downside on 5 October 1887, a useful place which had rooms for meetings, for reading, smoking or coffee and kept the villagers further amused with a bagatelle table. And, finally, at a time of unemployment Arnold was the prime mover in raising a fund for local workless men.

Nor were the Arnolds hermits where friendships were concerned, being most convivial people who spent much time visiting in other parts of England and abroad. And when they were at home they continued to live a full social life. A number of relatives and friends came to stay at the Cottage (though there cannot have been much room for them) and others came down from London for the day. A couple who are mentioned several times in Arnold's letters were his sister Jane and her husband W. E. Forster, M.P. Forster (who was a cousin of the Arnold's neighbour Charles Buxton of Foxwarren) was a member of the Liberal cabinet and, like Arnold,

much concerned with education. Another family visitor was Arnold's niece Mary, the writer Mrs Humphrey Ward, who later recalled much of the life at Pains Hill Cottage in her memoirs. The Arnolds had been friendly with the novelist Henry James since March 1873. They often met in London and James came down to Lucy Arnold's wedding in 1884 and signed the church register. Then there was Dr George Smith, founder of the publishing firm of Smith Elder & Company who published many of Arnold's books and also printed his articles in his periodicals the *Cornhill Magazine* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Smith was not only a London friend but also a Surrey neighbour. He was living in Walton in 1879, when he took Arnold on his one and only visit to the Derby, and he had a house in Weybridge from 1884. Smith handed over the *Pall Mall Gazette* to his son-in-law Henry Yates Thompson in 1880 and the Thompsons came (probably from Walton) to lunch at the Cottage three years later. Afterwards Arnold and Nelly walked back with them as far as Fairmile.

Among the Arnolds' Surrey neighbours the most exalted was Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law the young Duchess of Albany. Arnold dined with her at Claremont on 26 May 1883, had a long talk with her after dinner and was pleased to find her a 'thoroughly good straightforward sensible girl'. Arnold writes rather noncommittally of Lord Lovelace as 'a very accomplished courteous man when he means, as he did in our case, to be civil and friendly'. And he makes no comment at all on another aristocratic neighbour the Earl of Rosebery, with whom he stayed in March 1888, though he remarked about Durdans that it was 'the house the warmest I have found in England'. The Dowager Countess of Ellesmere was much more to the Arnolds' taste. They often dined with her at Burwood House and Arnold used to walk his dogs across her park. She and Flu Arnold were leaders in much charitable work in Cobham. The Arnolds were also fond of her brother-in-law Admiral Francis Egerton of St George's Hill, a visit to which Arnold mentions in one of his poems.

Edward Harbord Lushington lived close by at Brackenhurst (now Feltonfleet School). Mary his wife was a fellow gardening enthusiast who gave the Arnolds in 1885 a booklet on how to get the best results from fruit trees, which they found helpful. And she was also one of the founders of the Nurse Fund. Charles Buxton, M.P., (who had designed Foxwarren and Brackenhurst and other houses in the locality) had died nearly two years before the Arnolds came to Pains Hill and lay buried in his big tomb at Hatchford. But his widow and children still lived on at Foxwarren. 'We were to have gone with the Buxtons in their brake to see the foxhounds meet on Ripley Common', Arnold writes in November 1874. When the Arnolds dined with the Buxtons in 1880 they had the pleasure of meeting Dean Stanley and during Christmas 1886 Mrs Buxton invited them to Foxwarren for amateur theatricals. They evidently knew the Evelyns of Wootton House well as Arnold was godfather to an Evelyn girl in July 1882.

W. S. Deacon was one of the best shots in Surrey and Arnold one of the worst but this did not prevent them being firm friends. His wife was yet another on the committee of the Cobham Nurse Fund and in October 1886

she drove Flu and Nelly Arnold to call on a new family in Oxshott. Yet other friends were the F. A. Maxses. Arnold lists Admiral Maxse as a dinner guest in October 1885. It was presumably on another occasion that a party of Maxses drove over from Effingham Hill in their dog cart. It was a red letter day for the Admiral's fourteen-year-old daughter. For their host himself took her into dinner and the guests included Andrew Lang and Charles Leaf's son Walter.⁷ Lang was no doubt staying at Pains Hill House for he was a friend of Walter Leaf's and in 1882 they had bought out a joint translation of the *Iliad*.

One of the chief events of the Arnolds' Cobham days was Lucy's wedding on 9 December 1884 to Frederick Whitridge, a wealthy American whom they had met in New York. The presents and trousseau were put on display at the Cottage and the public were invited to come in and inspect them. Many houses in Cobham were decorated and arches were erected in the streets. Celebrities came down from London and people stood on the pews to see better and chattered about them, behaviour which the vicar rebuked in the next number of the parish magazine. The marriage register was signed by such well-known folk as W. E. Forster, Henry James, A. J. Mundella, M.P., and Charles Combe and by Arnold himself.

LAST DAYS AT THE COTTAGE

In the spring of the following year Arnold experienced 'horrid pains across my chest' and realised that he had angina pectoris, a condition which had killed both his father and his grandfather. As they had died comparatively young Arnold had been prepared for this and had taken out a large insurance policy on his life, keeping up the premiums on which proved a heavy drain on his resources in his last years. He reduced his activities a little though probably not as much as he should have done. He gave up playing tennis and on the frozen lake at Pains Hill he abjured skating backwards and cutting figures though he still did his forward skating. He continued to walk though he avoided steep hills and was distressed at having to go slowly up such a mild incline as Pains Hill. 'Imagine my having to stop half a dozen times in going up Pains Hill!' And he retired from Government service on 30 April 1886 though this, again, did not mean much lessening in his journeys and his literary activities.

Lucy and her baby and the Richard Arnolds were all due to reach Liverpool from America on the *Aurania* in April 1888. Arnold and his wife left Cobham on the morning of the 13 April and took an afternoon train from London to Liverpool. Two days later he died very suddenly of heart failure on his way to meet the ship. Richard came down to Cobham next day to make arrangements for the funeral and Arnold's body was brought thither on the 18th. He was buried across the Thames at Laleham alongside many other members of his family, the great concourse of his friends including Charles Leaf and his sons Henry and Walter, Deacon, Admiral Egerton, Walter Chinnery of Hatchford Park, G. M. Smith, several Lushingtons, and their families.

Arnold's study was kept exactly as he had left it, with his coat hanging on a peg on the door, his slippers beside his chair, his pens and the last letters he had received on his writing table.⁸ His widow remained at the Cottage till she died on 29 June 1901 and was buried beside her husband at Laleham. After her death Lady Ellesmere and two of her family commissioned a brass plate in their memory from Benham and Froud of London. It was erected in Cobham church and bears the initials of the three donors, M. L. E., C. G. E., and A. E. Pains Hill Cottage was requisitioned in the last war by Esher Urban District Council to house persons who had been bombed out of their homes. The building was badly neglected over a long period and by the time it was handed back to its owner in 1961 it was beyond profitable repair. Planning permission to develop the site was therefore obtained and the house was demolished in 1964.

NOTES

1. *Surrey A. C.*, LXVII (1970), 95-100
2. Speech by L. J. Coleridge at the unveiling of Arnold's bust in Westminster Abbey on 31 October 1891.
3. Medical evidence at the inquest on Arnold, 1888.
4. Entry of 2 January 1887 in the diary of A. J. Butler, edited by Grace E. Butler of Wonersh.
5. Percy Hebburn, quoted in the guide to St Andrew's church, 1960.
6. Reminiscence of Miss A. Hutchinson of Stoke D'Abernon.
7. *My Picture Gallery*, by Lady Milner.
8. Mrs Humphrey Ward.