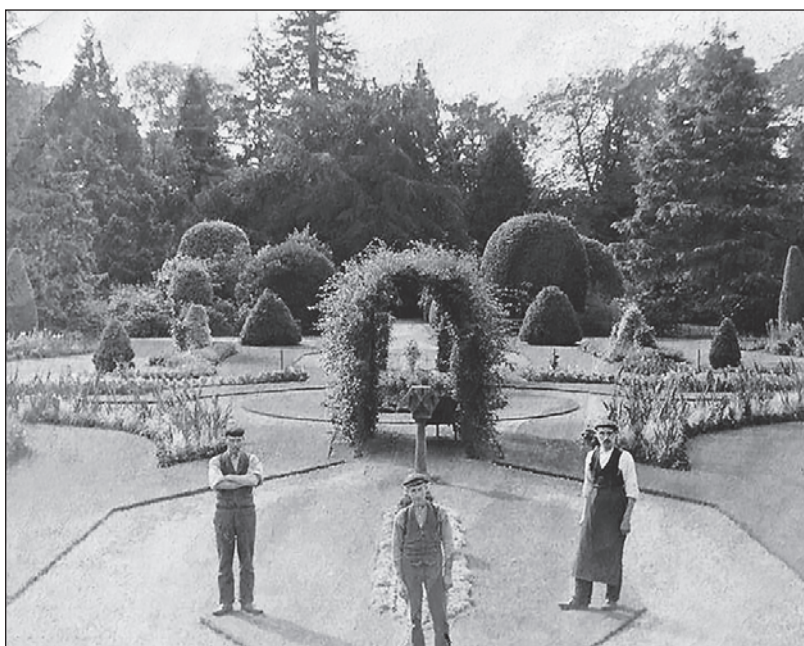


Beaumanor War and Peace – Behind the Scenes

Caroline Wessel

Until recently very little has been known about the Curzon Herrick era at Beaumanor, that is the years between 1915 and 1939 when the vast Herrick estates in Leicestershire, Herefordshire and Wales were owned by William Curzon Herrick - and those years that also saw the horrors of World War I and the more light-hearted frivolity of the 1920s. However extensive new research, some unexpected discoveries of hitherto unknown archives, and an acquaintanceship with present-day Curzon Herrick relatives, have provided rich material for an account of this significant epoch, and stories that are at times tragic, heart-warming, startling and even shocking.



Beaumanor formal gardens with gardeners in the 1920s. (Courtesy of Axon Collection.)

So who was William Curzon? When the childless Mrs Sophia Perry Herrick died in 1915, according to the terms of her late husband's Will the Beaumanor estates were to pass to a shy and melancholy young man, whose late father, Colonel the Hon. Montagu Curzon, had been the favourite godson of William Perry Herrick. He, in turn, had been a close friend of the 1st Earl Howe of Gopsall Park, Leicestershire, a man with an illustrious pedigree of naval and military heroes, and also the young William's grandfather. Consequently, after 320 years of Herrick ownership, in 1915 the Beaumanor lands passed to a non-relative, who by the terms of Perry Herrick's Will, was obliged to take on the name and coat-of-arms of 'Herrick'.

My interest in this period was seriously aroused when a solicitor made contact to say he thought I should take a look at some papers in the possession of a client, an informal scribbled correspondence on many scraps of paper between William Curzon Herrick and his chauffeur and *confidante*. Rushing up to Nottinghamshire to study them, much light was thrown on the relationship of these two men at the time during World War I when William was conscripted into the Army, and a dramatic crisis erupted. This opportune discovery led to the acquisition from the National Archives of the young William's World War I army medical records, that gave the minutest details of his physical appearance,

disturbed mental state, and the recognition that he had led a troubled life since 1905 during his tough schooldays at Eton College. Naturally, a visit to the archives at Eton College ensued. Here in these hallowed halls much biographical information was obtained about young Curzon and his (extremely aristocratic) fellow pupils; but the gem of the collection was a number of entries written in William's own hand in his House Debating Society Book. It revealed his viewpoints on a number of significant subjects, and greatly helped to form a picture of his character, and what would have been no doubt the typical opinions of a young person of that time. It also facilitated familiarity with William's handwriting, a most useful tool (as will be seen) for solving later Beaumanor conundrums. Meanwhile, a scrutiny of documents housed by the Woodhouse Parish Council produced a paper written by a local man, resident at Woodhouse during the Curzon Herrick years. It revealed that

as a youngster William Curzon, when living with his parents at Garats Hay in Woodhouse, was 'something of a tearaway, preferring the company of local lads to that of boys of his own class'. And on inheriting the Beaumanor estates, the first thing he said to his deferential farm tenants was that he did not wish to be addressed as 'Squire' or 'Sir' - and that plain 'Bill Herrick' would do.

Already, an intimate picture of William Curzon Herrick began to emerge, with more information and impressions added when his living relatives were tracked down and were able to give valuable first-hand accounts, including his passion for train-spotting. Clearly William was going to be more of an 'anti-hero' than a 'superman' and as such, one

greatly warmed to him. Many of the facts and stories that have since unfolded must wait for the reader to turn the pages of the new *Beaumanor War and Peace* publication!

Nonetheless, other developments in research along the way must be recorded. These included the discovery of over 600 Perry Herrick documents lying uncatalogued for the past fifty years in the Herefordshire Record Office (HRO). During several days spent at Hereford, the meticulous trawling through endless cardboard boxes threw up a mass of new information - birth, marriage and death certificates, wills and many other legal papers.

This amazing cache also included the 1916 Beaumanor Probate Inventory made on Mrs Perry Herrick's death that catalogues every single piece of furniture, silver, paintings, china, soft furnishings, and mundane household objects in the house, listed room by room. Armed with this, and the 1946 Beaumanor Furniture Sale Catalogue, the scenes of the mansion's interior could now be vividly described in the new publication, based with precise detail on authentic facts. Furthermore, Colonel Curzon's Probate Inventory (also at HRO), listing all his items of jewellery,

has even allowed the story to imagine the young William Curzon Herrick fastening his Papa's 'diamond and pearl tie pin' as he prepares to attend Mrs Perry Herrick's funeral. In addition, the Colonel's executors' detailed accounts of the family's expenditure at Garats Hay lets the reader into the secrets of their London exotic tea suppliers, their bicycle repairs, daughter's trousseau, doctors' names and visits, funeral details and expenses, and much more.

Census returns, trade directories, newspaper reports, the Beaumanor Head Gardener's Wages Book, Quorn Online Museum entries, local Wildlife Trust records and even church gravestones, were able to further set the scene of William's childhood home area. Within the early pages of *Beaumanor War and Peace* everyone is there - the local gentry, village doctor, tradesmen, schoolchildren, summer tourists in local guest houses, all vibrantly described against the backdrop of the social activities of Woodhouse and Woodhouse Eaves, and the stunning beauty and wild life of the surrounding Charnwood countryside. Meanwhile the internet yielded the Meteorological Office's monthly weather reports for every month of the twenty-four years story, so that scenes that take place on a warm sunny day, amidst continuous sleet and rain, or in heavy falls of snow, are weather-wise absolutely accurate.



Engagement photograph of William Curzon Herrick and Lady Kathleen Hastings. (Courtesy of Hastings Family Archive.)

World War I affected both aristocracy and Beaumanor estate worker, and there are harrowing accounts in *Beaumanor War and Peace* of some of the worst military conflicts ever known, that claimed local soldiers in the Leicestershire Regiment and also family, friends and villagers known to the Curzon Herricks. The mutilating injuries were sometimes so terrible that the soldiers' corpses were unidentifiable and lines from some famous World War I poems are quoted as a stirring accompaniment to these scenarios. Could William's wealthy gesture make any difference to the innovatory work of Leicester's war hospital? And were those from

Woodhouse who sacrificed their lives in action suitably recorded and memorialised? Moreover, battle was not the only killer - there was also a dreadful illness which at that time took the lives of many, including three young men and their father all from the same Woodhouse family.

But, most importantly, was the Curzon Herrick line destined to continue, and would an heir to the estate be produced? If so, this would of course require William to take a wife, which in due course he did. His bride was the warm-natured and vivacious Lady Kathleen Hastings, daughter of

the Earl of Huntingdon, on whose landed Irish estate she spent her idyllic childhood, whilst showing a very precocious talent for literary writing.

Lady Selina Hastings, the celebrated biographer, is Lady Kathleen's niece, and her account of her father's life entitled *The Red Earl: the extraordinary life of the 16th Earl of Huntingdon* gives delightful descriptions of Kathleen's family background, her home, and her later married life at Beaumanor. Contact with *The Red Earl's* publisher resulted in a most satisfying e-mail correspondence with Lady Selina, who generously provided additional information and photographs, and gave permission to quote passages direct from her publication. In addition, further intensive newspaper and *Tatler* magazine research revealed that Kathleen Hastings had published poetry, written and performed privately and publicly in a number of her own plays, and published at least a couple of novels. The endless possibilities of the internet then facilitated the excited purchase of a slim, red leather, gold-embossed volume of Kathleen's poems, and soon afterwards the postman delivered the first of her two novels.

In *Beaumanor War and Peace* chapter five, Lady Kathleen Curzon Herrick's story is presented to the reader against a

background of appropriate lines from her impassioned poetry, while a later chapter is a critique of her literary output. Sissinghurst Castle, home of Victoria Sackville-West (Kathleen's exact contemporary, to whom she gave a wedding gift), holds signed copies of these novels in its library, and the Archivist there was kind enough to supply a synopsis of Kathleen's second novel, as it is currently unavailable globally for purchase. Meanwhile, the unconventional life, loves and marriage of Selina Hastings' father, Jack Viscount Hastings (Kathleen's young brother), is developed into yet another important strand of the ongoing narrative.

By now it had become abundantly clear that this ever-growing treasure trove of research would best be written as a compelling story, descriptively evocative of its period, rather than as a dry academic paper. So a wide range of background topics were then energetically and fastidiously researched, including the London Season, ladies fashion (the transition from the painful corset to the new-fangled but more comfortable brassière), popular music and dance (what was the Bunny Hug?), society and political magazines, newly-published literature and novels, and even the contemporary slang words of the time.

In addition, spliced in between the Curzon Herrick sagas are colourful anecdotes from the contemporary political scene - the Suffragettes, Home Rule for Ireland, industrial unrest and large-scale strikes, using contemporary newspapers and other authentic documents. The narrative occasionally harks back to the days of Beaumanor's early Herrick owners, giving the reader an insight into the family's illustrious past and demonstrating how much times had changed since then.

What is more, by now the dates spanned by the research, as well as the content itself, suggested two distinct halves to the publication - War (1915-1918) and Peace (1919-1939). The front cover of the book therefore represents this, with its black-and-white shadowy left hand picture of Beaumanor, and in the sky a Zeppelin flying over Woodhouse in 1916 on its way to bomb nearby Loughborough. The cover design then merges into a right-hand sunnier image of the mansion, showing daffodils in the grass that symbolise re-birth and new life, and also because a documentary account states that the mile-long drive to the house was in springtime flanked with golden daffodils. However some dark shadows fall forebodingly across the sunny side of the lawn - for there are still physical and mental scars of war imprinted on the lives of the Curzon Herrick circle, resulting in pain, excessive drinking, marital infidelity and worse.

Part Two, Peace, is centred around the Beaumanor Visitors' Book for 1920-1928, a heavy, leather-bound tome, today carefully stored in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland. Copies of the pages of the Visitors'

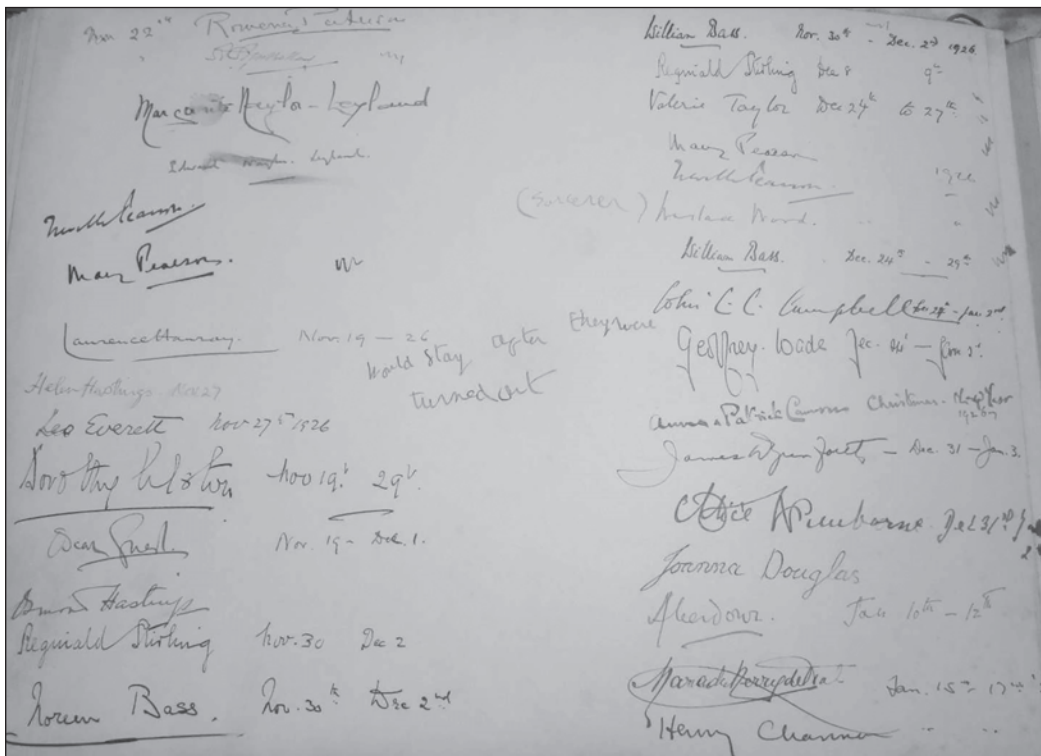
Book were made, and its 757 names recorded. Large and flamboyant, tiny and introverted, ink-smudged, nearly illegible and names in the coded etiquette for earls or viscounts - the signatures were all (well nearly all) deciphered, listed, analysed, researched (thank heavens for the internet) and trends identified.

At the start of the nine year Visitors' Book period, house guests were mostly the aristocratic members, or friends, of the Curzon and Hastings families, old Etonians, politicians, sportsmen or military leaders. But as the years moved on, increasingly the Beaumanor visitors became more artistic, flamboyant, Bohemian and yes, outrageously talented. Famous authors, a *virtuoso* concert pianist, a Swedish artist, world famous film and theatre stars, novelists, a renowned theatre designer, a successful popular song lyricist - just about every famous name of that period that one has ever heard of.

So many interesting facts and stories emerged - what for example did visitor John Buckmaster have to do with Buck's Fizz? Which film star visited with someone else's husband? Why were so many guests orientated towards contacting their deceased loved ones? Who played the seven-octave walnut-cased grand piano in the Morning Room? Who owned the naughty Siamese cats? How many of the male visitors fought in and survived World War I (though maybe were injured)? And which of the ladies were wartime nurses, or served on wartime fundraising committees? Which Herrick farm was the home of a war horse that, post-war, was returned unscathed to Woodhouse? Was the Quorn hunting season really that decadent? Which one thousand year old Crown appointment did William hold? And, most intriguing of all, which regular Beaumanor visitor was with Howard Carter when he entered Egypt's tomb of Tutankhamun - and did the Curzon Herricks' friend finally succumb to the 'Mummy's Curse'?

To cope with the hundreds of visitors each year, Lady Kathleen ordered hampers of luxury foods for her house parties from London's Fortnum & Mason that were sent down by rail from London to Quorn & Woodhouse station - and the Fortnum & Mason Archivist has generously shared her stock of 1920s exotic menus for inclusion in this publication. Several *eureka* moments occurred during the persistent tracking down of names in the Visitors' Book, notably on one occasion when a framed document with signature was discovered on the internet and when its print-out was held next to that of the Beaumanor guest being pursued ... the signatures were identical.

A chance contact with the author's old school friend, Viscountess Wimborne, led to the exciting arrival of a mass of photocopies of an unpublished book about the history and tittle-tattle of the Wimborne family (surname 'Guest'). And



The Beaumanor Visitors' Book from November 1925 – January 1926. Guests included: the famous actor Laurence Hanray, actress Valerie Taylor, millionaire American playboy Sir Henry "Chips" Channon, and popular song composer James Dyrenforth. Family names include the artist Colin Cairns Clinton Campbell, Viscountess Alice Wimborne, Lady Rowena Paterson and brewery tycoon and famous racehorse owner Sir William and Lady Bass. The host's own pencilled in remarks include comments such as 'would stay when they were turned out'. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

this introduced yet another round of (often hilarious) stories that had to be included in *Beaumanor War and Peace*. Lady Kathleen's first cousin, Susan, married Oscar Guest, brother of Lord Wimborne, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at the time of the 1916 Easter Rising. Oscar and Susan were very frequent visitors at Beaumanor, and held their wedding reception there (the newspaper report even describes their rather over-the-top wedding cake). Entitled *The Guest House* and written by Oscar's son, Bertie, the book's charming stories reflect and often poke fun at the foibles and upper-class etiquette of the period, and chronicle the Wimborne connections with Society and Royalty. But the account also gives yet more anecdotes and personal insight into the lives, characters and idiosyncrasies of Uncle William and Aunt Kathleen.

But poor William Curzon Herrick had sometimes had enough of all this, and from time to time would pencil into the Visitors' Book his wry, or sometimes downright angry, comments against some of his guests' signatures. And these sardonic snippets, in addition to being most amusing, give yet one more indication of the Beaumanor host's personality and viewpoints.

In the penultimate chapter of *Beaumanor War and Peace* the last big question is posed - how, why and for what reasons did William and Kathleen finally leave Beaumanor in 1928?

Where did they spend their remaining years, and what was the state of their health and cause of their deaths? In the intervening ten-year period between the Curzon Herricks' departure and the handover to the military in World War II, Beaumanor was leased to a wealthy tenant, and of course it was essential to include an account of this era in the new publication as well. Good fortune smiled and two branches of the present-day family were traced, producing some more most agreeable tales. And, as some readers will wonder what happened to many of the Beaumanor visitors in their later life, a 'Post Scripts' chapter was added to satisfy their curiosity.

Even after the first proofs for *Beaumanor War and Peace* had been received for amendments, another set of extraordinary stories arrived from a descendant of the aristocratic family with whom the Curzon Herricks lived at their Scottish castle during World War II. And after chasing up a string of enquiries with undertakers, the Lady of Beaumanor's final demise was at last ascertained.

The search continues, and following its publication, *Beaumanor War and Peace* will no doubt produce even further information from readers about the lives of William and Lady Kathleen Curzon Herrick during their residency at Beaumanor from 1915 to 1939. It is a remarkable chronicle that records both human sufferings and joys, and the contrasts of life during wartime and peace.

Acknowledgements:

Beaumanor War and Peace: the Curzon Herrick years 1915-1939, by Caroline Wessel, published in 2018 by the Author, with a generous grant from the Leicestershire Archaeological & Historical Society, and practical support from Leicestershire County Council. The book is available from Clarendon Books, 144 Clarendon Park Road, Leicester, LE2 3AE, 0116 2701856 or 0116 2701914. Email: clarendonbooks@aol.com, from Beaumanor Hall Reception, and from The Café Next Door, 94 Main Street, Woodhouse Eaves, LE12 8RZ.