

# Croome

before the National Trust



The Friends of Croome Park  
Oral History Project





## “...record these memories before they are lost for ever”

From this casual remark The Friends of Croome Park Oral History Project was born.

With the aid of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund our aim was to record the everyday recollections of the diverse range of people connected with Croome.

Through these anecdotes in the form of recordings, text and pictures we hope to bring their memories to life.

We already knew a great deal about the Coventry family, in particular the 6th Earl, who engaged 'Capability' Brown to redesign his house and park, and the well known names of Robert Adam and James Wyatt, who contributed to the landscape design, yet so

little about other individuals who lived and worked at Croome, helping to create the Park as we know it today.

Our collection comprises sound recordings, photographs, press cuttings and earlier research data acquired from a wide variety of people connected to the Park, local inhabitants, service men and women from RAF Defford, ex pupils of the Catholic school at Croome Court, the farming community, estate workers and those in service to the Coventry family.

Only a fraction of our findings can be included here, but information from interviews and photographs has already assisted the National Trust in

their restoration programme.

This publication marks the end of phase one of the project, describing life on the Croome Estate and the various uses of the Court over the twentieth century.

We shall continue to record memories, collect images and gather information

The research and production of this publication has been carried out by volunteers led by Eileen Clement, who said: "This has been a fascinating project, meeting many enthusiastic interviewees and people keen to share photographs, press cuttings and memorabilia – rather like piecing a jigsaw together."



## The Friends of Croome Park

The Friends of Croome Park was established with the aim of supporting Croome Park and its restoration. Members are drawn from a wide cross-section of the local community as well as others from further afield.

### WHAT CROOME MEANT TO US...

*"Croome Court... I cannot describe it – it was out of this world; it was fantastic"*

Billy Meecham a former pupil at Croome recounting his first reaction to the Court

*"Solid brambles and elderberries and sycamores... you couldn't see from one side of anywhere to anywhere else"*

Janet Williams describing the state of the park in 1970s

*"We were out of the house in the morning and up at the Rotunda. It was a lovely place for children"*

Lady Maria, who with her two sisters and brother Bill, were the last generation of the Coventry family to live at Croome Court

*"...it was very overwhelming when I first event; I cried myself to sleep for the first few nights"*

Hilda Newman (nee Mulley), personal maid to Lady Coventry 1935-1939, describes her feelings on arriving at Croome Court

► Main cover picture supplied by Geoff Sherwood. Geoff's father seated second from right. Geoff, his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and uncles lived and worked at Croome. Other pictures (left to right): Minnie Trenfield, Albert Sharrock, Joan Gill and John Downs.

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**"...they were happy days. None of us had much but we all enjoyed each other's company" –**

Muriel Mason (nee Ing). See page 4



Hilda Newman (nee Mulley) on the banks of Croome River, 1940s



Croome Court circa 1959



John Ralph and "Cathy" Odell, in front of local cottages, 1939

*"...simple living and high thinking... it didn't feel simple"*

Susan Black on her time as a devotee of the Hare Krishna Movement at Croome Court

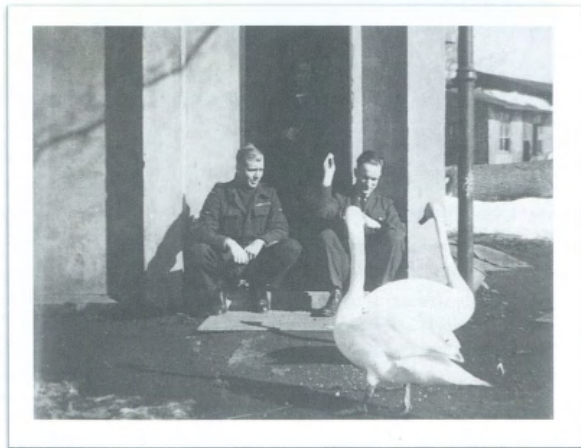


Charles Ralph samples the well water at 'The Old Flower Gardens', 1940s



Lady Maria and her brother Bill during the late 1930s

Corporal Robinson and John Rogers with swans outside No. 5 Picket Post, Winter 1946/7





## The Court was then privately owned by the Coventry family Man (and woman) power at Croome

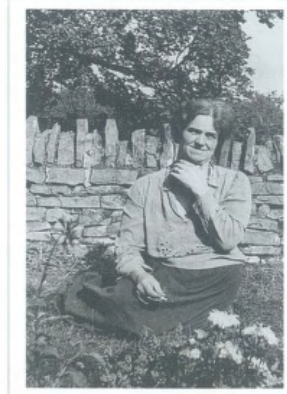


Muriel's father, William Ing

An estate such as Croome needed a vast army of house, garden and estate staff to run efficiently.

Muriel Ing and her family lived and worked at Croome from around 1924. William was Lord Coventry's stud groom who recalls Black Minstrel, one his favourite horses.

Muriel helped as a housemaid at busy times. Ada, her mother, was disabled and could not walk. The Coventry family, who were kind and treated their staff well, not only supplied them with a Bath chair but also paid for hospital treatment when Ada fell ill with cancer.



Muriel's mother, Ada Ing

## Household chores

Without the help of modern appliances and products, housework was hard going!

The duties of housemaids like Muriel and second housemaid Mabel Compton, neé Gerrard, would include scrubbing the front steps with soap and a brush, polishing brass fire irons and cleaning carpets.

"...carpets had to be done with a brush... put some cold tea leaves over it... to damp it so the dust wouldn't rise up," said Muriel.

She also recalls the rituals of morning prayers and some of the staff who sat down to breakfast in the servants' hall: the butler, the valet, two footmen, three housemaids and three kitchen staff.

Hilda Newman, neé Mulley, was Lady Coventry's personal maid 1935-39. She and her future husband, Roland, who was the chauffeur/valet, used to do their courting in the Rotunda.

"I was very frightened," recalled Hilda. "I arrived at Worcester station and the blue hound van met me with the chauffeur and took me to Croome Court, which is an enormous place. I thought I had gone to prison."

Hilda's dressmaking skills were essential in altering clothes and she particularly recalls brushing her ladyship's hair for an hour in the morning and again at tea time.

Lord and Lady Coventry with their two younger children, Bill and Maria. Taken by Hilda in September 1935



*"...housemaids had their sitting room. If the housekeeper caught you in (another's room) that was wrong... had to keep yourselves to yourselves you see,"*

**– Muriel Mason  
reminisces about the  
below stairs hierarchy**



Hilda on the roof of Croome Court dressed for a servants' ball



## "I can remember going round at the Opening Meet selling poppies," recalls Lady Maria

Hilda looked after the two youngest children, Maria and Bill, when the nanny or governess was off duty.

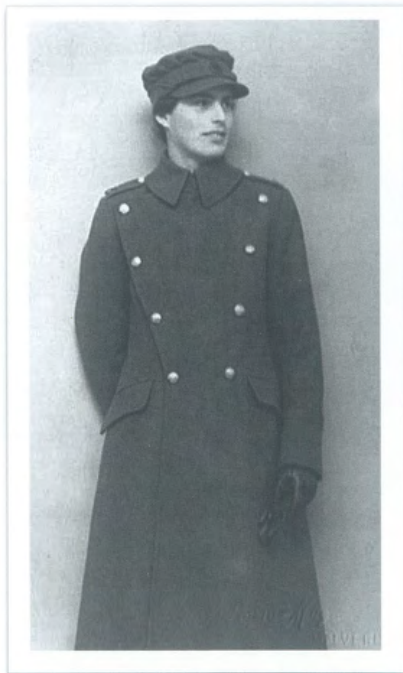
As a high ranking servant, she earned £1 a month but only had one day a week and every other Sunday off, although she still had to go to church.

Lady Maria recalls addressing her as 'Miss Mulley'.

When Lady Coventry joined the ATS in 1940, she asked Hilda to join up as well and be her batwoman. Hilda wanted to do this, but the army had other ideas and she was sent to Norton barracks, near Worcester, whilst Lady Coventry went to Warwick.



Hilda retained her links with Croome after marrying and going to live in a cottage in Hatfield; members of the Coventry family still brought her sewing work.



Lady Coventry in the ATS 1940. From Lady Maria's album

Lady Maria had happy memories of her childhood at Croome.

She and her younger brother William (Bill) lived in the Red Wing with their nanny and governess, whilst their two older sisters lived in the main part of the house with Lord and Lady Coventry.



Staff from Croome Court in ATS uniform. Top: Dorothy Salisbury, laundry staff. Front : Molly Bishop, right Doris Jones, left Hilda Newman, lady's maid

*"I wasn't told to curtsy but... one did a sort of bob to Granny and the Great Aunts who were all dragons"*

Lady Maria





Croome Estate Bailiff George Hanson (mid row right) on the occasion of his daughter's wedding – 26 August, 1890.

## Living off the land

Before the mechanisation of agriculture, many more workers were employed on the land than now. Horses were an essential part of Estate life and a large workforce was required to tend them.

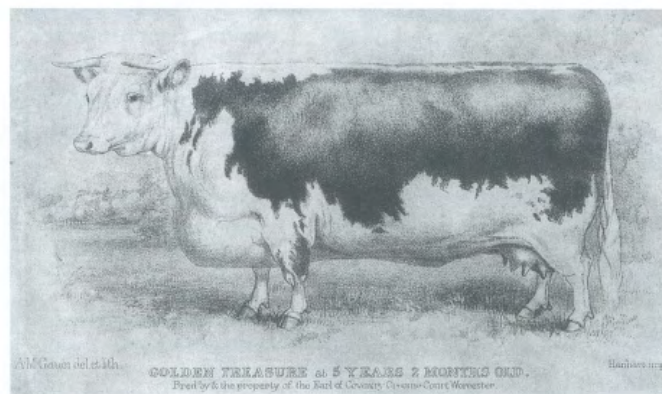
Whole families would work on a large country estate, often for their entire working lives.

Croome was huge; it included 15,000 acres, 57 farms, 574 cottages and 10 other properties.

It was self-supporting: cattle, sheep and deer provided meat for the House.

Garden staff produced vegetables and cut flowers from the walled garden.

"His Lordship used to go to Scotland and they'd buy as many as 100 head of cattle to come down and put in the park," recalls Fred Gerrard.



### 'Golden Treasure', bred and owned by the Earl of Coventry

He also remembers 350 deer and 30 or 40 goats in the park. In the early 20th century they even made their own gas from coke.

Farming was badly affected by the Depression. Harold

Checketts, son of the tenant of Walcot Farm, recalls: "The plight of the farmers in the '20s... remember people going broke in the area, but we were very lucky at Walcot because we were saved by an enormous crop of mushrooms in one of the fields."

*"There was a beast killed for Croome every fortnight... Half for the house and half for the butcher's down in Severn Stoke – they killed four bacon pigs and four porks a year... and then a sheep was killed every fortnight..."*

**Fred Gerrard who spent his whole life on the estate**



## Life and work on the Estate through the decades

Haymaking on the Estate – summer 1938



The Coventry Arms, High Green, is now a private house. Several interviewees recall it only as an off-licence

James Hemming of 'The Old Flower Gardens' Croome on the occasion of his 40 years' service award from the Croome Estate



### Old fashioned manners

Village and estate life still followed some of the old ways. Marge Scott, nee Hemming, was born in 1919. Her father was a forester and her mother worked in the kitchens. She recounts what used to happen as Lady Coventry passed by in her carriage.

*"There was a pump halfway down High Green for all the village. If the women were going up the village with their buckets of water they had to put their buckets down and curtsy."*

Marge Scott



Stables workers at Croome Court



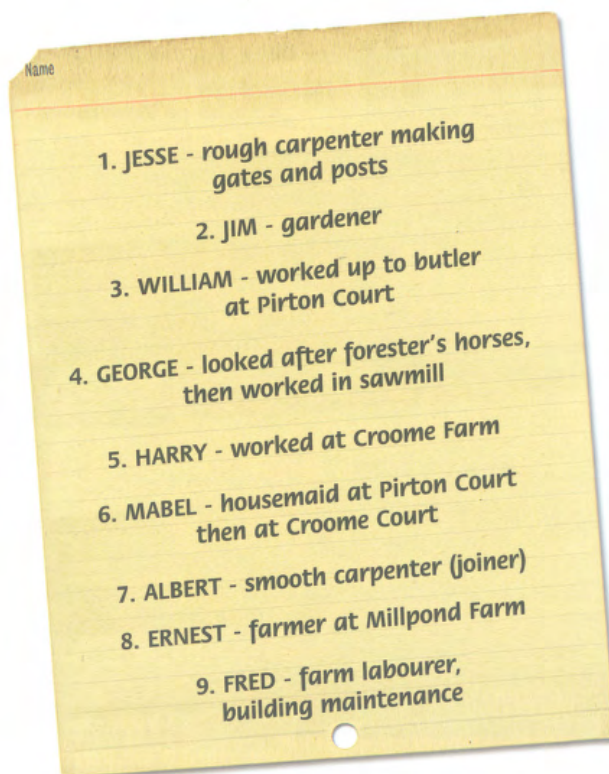


Lord and Lady Coventry distributing beef and bread to the Croome tenants on Christmas Eve 1909.  
Reproduced by permission of The Trustees of the Croome Estate

## The Gerrard Family

"I'm the youngest of nine and every one of the family worked for the Coventrys"  
– Fred Gerrard, who worked on the Croome estate circa 1920-1980

Fred's father, a stockman, was the first of the Gerrards to work at Croome. All his children were later employed by the Coventry family.



## The Sherwood Family

"I'm a member of the fourth generation of Sherwoods to be associated with Croome"  
– Geoff Sherwood

Geoff was brought up on the estate; he played with the Coventry children and roamed all over the park. Mr Latter, the butler, gave him his first ice cream.



Geoff in the Coventry pram, given to his mother by Lady Coventry

*"... they used to give food all used to go up to Croome"*



## The Coventry Family



Lord & Lady Coventry, baby Bill, Lady Joan & Lady Maria (held by her father)

Local children enjoyed Christmas parties at the Court. They had tea with cakes and sandwiches in the kitchen, then were taken up to the dining room to see the Christmas tree all lit up. Each child received a little basket containing an orange, a bag of sweets and a present.

Marge Scott remembers: "The Christmas tree was as high as the ceilings."

The Croome Hunt played a big part in rural life. Meets were social occasions, as were hunt balls and hound shows.



Valerie Rimell and her late husband, Peter, were tenant farmers from 1951. Valerie recalls: "I can remember in 1951-2, we used to go and skate on Pirton Pool at night and have our car lights on the pool and take a picnic."

"I first rode as a girl from Whittington to the opening meet and came for I can't remember how many years.. and I have very happy memories of seeing Lady Coventry and Mercy Rimell riding side saddle"

- Trish Jones nee Constance rode to the hounds



The Croome Hunt meets at the London Arch

*"they brought a horse and cart - something that could hold a lot of children - sheet over the top, straw in the bottom... after the party, we had to walk back"*

**Marian Gerrard, Fred's widow**



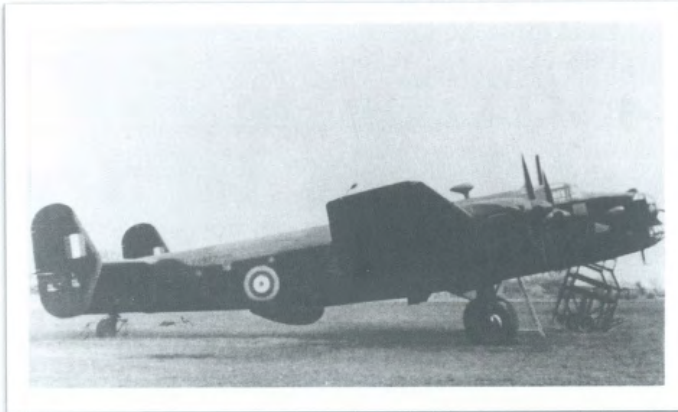
Lady Maria collects for Earl Haig's fund on her 3rd birthday in 1934

*ood out to the families; a pound of beef per head and a loaf of bread. So the families come Court at Christmas... my granddad had a lot of children so they did very well out of that - they had a lot of meat and loaves of bread"*

**Geoff Sherwood**



## RAF Defford, Croome



A test aircraft at Defford.



Defford police dogs and handlers 16th July 1947

### RADAR – the silent weapon that won the war

The Croome Estate became home to RAF Defford. In 1939, fourteen-year-old Francis Bird started work on the construction of the aerodrome, where he learned to drive a Fordson tractor.

He worked there with the 'Black Gang' for two and a half years, until he joined the army at sixteen.

The men used to meet at the Bluebell pub, where cars supplied by local garages, all driven by lady drivers, would pick them up and take them to the site. Francis recalls that it took two years to

build the runways and the dispersal points.

*"One week we worked 96 hours and do you know what my wages were... twelve pounds ten shillings"*

**Francis Bird**

Although never an operational air base, RAF Defford played a vital role in the development of RADAR. In May 1942

Telecommunications and Research Establishment (TRE) scientists and RAF personnel moved up from

Hurn airfield on the south coast to escape the regular air raids.

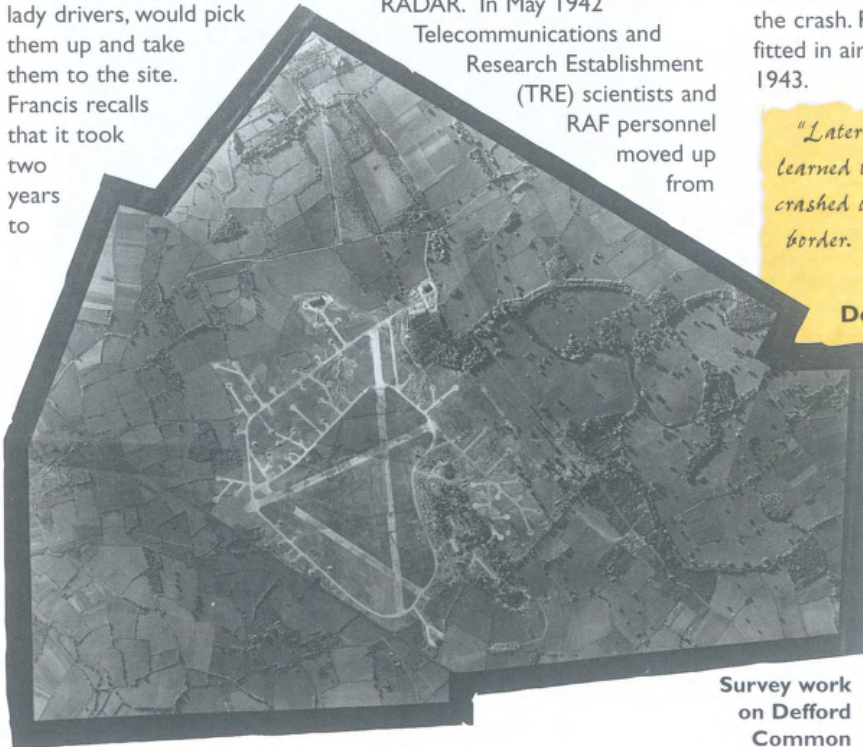
The scientists settled themselves in Malvern and the Telecommunications Flying Unit (TFU) was established at Defford airfield.

Scientist Derek Moseley recalls 7th June 1942 when a Halifax bomber took off for its final test flight.

Eleven aircrew and scientists, including Alan Dower Blumlein, chief scientist for EMI, died in the crash. Radar equipment was fitted in aircraft from the end of 1943.

*"Later that afternoon we learned that the aircraft had crashed on the South Wales border. All on board were lost..."*

**Derek Moseley**

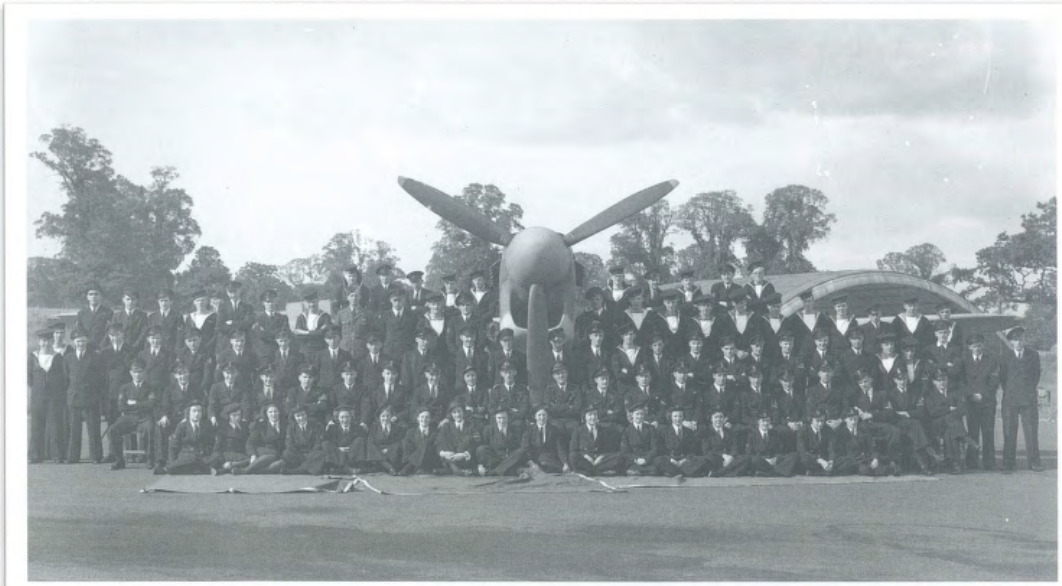


Survey work on Defford Common





## RAF Defford, Croome



The Navy at Defford, 1940s

*"There wasn't an airfield like it anywhere in the country, we were really special"*

**Albert Shorrock**

RAF airframe fitter Albert Shorrock, who was stationed at Defford between May 1942 and September 1945, has many memories of his time there.

"We worked on practically every type of aircraft that flew during the war... over 70 different types of aircraft came to Defford at one time or another. At any one time we had upward of 200 aircraft on station."

Albert recalls the excellent facilities.

"...surrounding airfields all looked upon Defford as a holiday camp."

Although an RAF base, there was also a small naval establishment at Defford.



Carpenters at Defford, mid 1940s. Aircraft contained a significant amount of wood



WAAFs and airmen at Defford in 1946

WREN radio mechanic Wendy Hogarth was posted there in May 1943. "There was a little bit of bad feeling with the WAAFs... we were autonomous and we wore black silk stockings... we had dockets to buy our own underclothes."

Work at Defford continued post war. Aircraft electrician Ken Ashenden was posted to Defford in 1948.

Ken recalls nights out at local pubs. "We had to cart these bikes back across the fields... with cider and beer inside us and we had to get up early in the morning being Sunday for Church Parade and the trouble was, when I woke up in the morning I looked at my uniform and it had got cow muck all over it"

*"I was lucky enough to go and live at Croome and I remember being put on a train at Paddington Station in charge of the guard with the usual little square box with our gas masks"*

**John Ralph, sent from Hornchurch to live with his grandparents at the Old Flower Gardens**



## The post war years

### Big changes end with National Trust takeover

Both Croome Court and the Estate underwent major changes in the second half of the twentieth century.

RAF Defford continued until the late fifties, when it was decommissioned.

The Croome Estate Trustees, a family Trust set up by the 9th Earl, managed the Estate. The central core was transferred to the 11th Earl in the mid-seventies and he sold his part of the Estate to Sun Alliance in 1981. During the 1980s, surplus cottages were sold when they became vacant as workers were no longer employed. The Trustees retained ownership of

the outlying parts of the Estate. Croome Court was handed back to the Trustees after the war but, like so many grand houses, it was sold with 38 acres in 1948 to the Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham. Nuns ran St Joseph's Special School there until 1979, when it was sold to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, known as the Hare Krishna movement. They established Chaitanya College to educate their children in the Hindu faith, but left in 1984.

Successive owners tried and failed to turn the Court to other uses; a training centre, conversion to apartments, a

restaurant and conference centre and finally plans to develop a hotel and golf course.

In 1996 the National Trust purchased 670 acres of the parkland, with the help of Heritage Lottery funding and a donation from Sun Alliance who sold the rest of their holding to The Society of Merchant Venturers. The Croome Estate Trustees sold most of their 5,000 acres to sitting farm tenants. The Court reverted to a private family home and some of the outbuildings were converted into private dwellings.

### Harvests, fruit, fishing - and afternoon tea...



Colin Adams, above, and a friend regularly fished at Croome between 1959 and 1967. They spent whole weekends camping by the river

They remember the abundant wildlife; kingfishers, mad March hares on their hind legs boxing; large catches of perch, tench, bream, eels, pike and rudd.

The water was full of freshwater mussels. Colin recalls the heronry which disappeared around 1965/66.

Fishermen Mike Davis and friend observed: "...the numerous calls

of hunting owls, whilst animals, presumably foxes and badgers, could be heard in the undergrowth... snakes were seen crossing the lake and also water voles."

*"...there used to be as many as 50 herons, it was absolutely amazing especially in March... you used to see the herons sat on the top and they'd have a couple of chicks ... and the wind blowing..."*

**Colin Adams**

Elizabeth Troughton and her husband were the tenants of Croome Farm, previously Home Farm, from 1969 to 1988. She recalls many varieties of apples that grew in the old orchard.

"...top quality cider apples which were Kingston Black, there were Blenheim Orange and Newton Wonders and Princess Pippins and Worcester Pearmains and Warner Kings. Apples that would carry you all through the year:"

Malcolm Walford spent almost all his life in the area.

"I worked on every property on the estate from 1953 to 2006 from Tirley down in Gloucestershire to Upton Snodsbury in Worcestershire to Powick."

John Chugg, from Red Deer Farm, remembers their old horse drawn binder which made sheaves of corn.

*"...afterwards as children we used to go along and what you call stook them up. You put so many of them up together and then the wind would dry them out."*

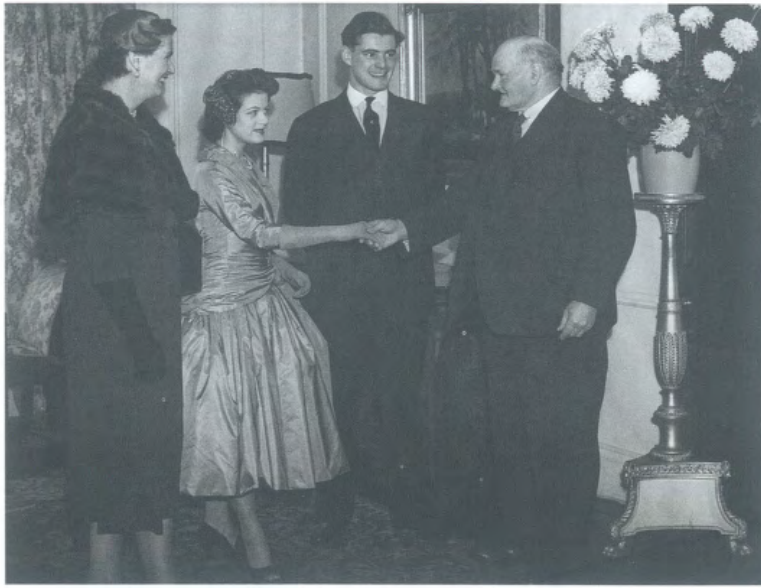
**John Chugg**

John tells the story of clearing the wine cellars in 1947 prior to the sale. Estate workers were allowed to take unlabelled bottles.

"...from the Court past Boathouse Cover to High Green the pebble road was almost littered with barrows full of vintage wines with men asleep by the side of them."



## The post war years



A tea reception in 1952

*"[it] began to alter the whole landscape because the elm was the Worcestershire weed and all the hedgerows were absolutely solid with them."*

**Land agent  
John Henderson**



Estate workers Jesse Gerrard and Alfred Turk with their long service awards around 1949

Sign at Croome in 1975

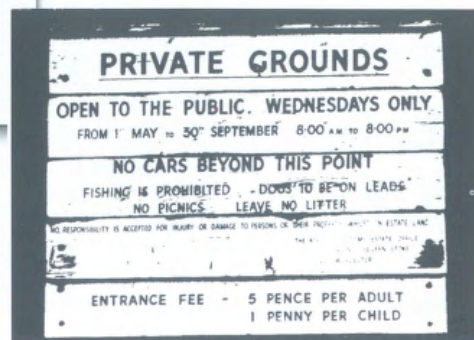
Valerie Rimell went to a tea reception at Earl's Croome Court, where John W Tarran, a long serving tenant, presented Lord Coventry and his new American wife, Mimi, with a Worcester dinner service.

Land Agent John Henderson worked for the Croome Estate from 1967 to 1996. He remembers the excitement of fighting his way through the overgrown Boathouse Cover near the lake and discovering the hidden Follies.

Dutch Elm disease began in 1968/9 and quickly spread.

However, the loss of so many trees opened up new vistas.

The Historic Buildings Council, who had given grant aid to restore the parkland follies, insisted on public access, so part of the park was open on Wednesdays only.





## The post war years



The school in August 1962

### Nature and nurture at St Joseph's school

A boarding school for boys with learning difficulties, St Joseph's had about 140 pupils from all over the country.

Sister Ursula Halpin, a teacher at the school 1964-79 remembers Croome:

"...it had the beauty of the building [and] the countryside and it had this kind of feminine atmosphere... there was a warmth... a nurturing atmosphere."

Tony Devlin, who attended the school during the 1960s and '70s,

remembers driving George Patrick, Archbishop of Birmingham, in the donkey cart.

"I took him up the hill up to the main gate, turned the cart around, got back to the bottom, and everybody was clapping."

Amongst other activities, the boys had film shows.

Graham Bill, one of the teachers, relates an incident when all the pupils were kept in the dining room whilst the nuns tried to discover who had written 'SEX' in biro on Sister Paulinus's girdle.

"...we can narrow it down,

because it's somebody who can spell."

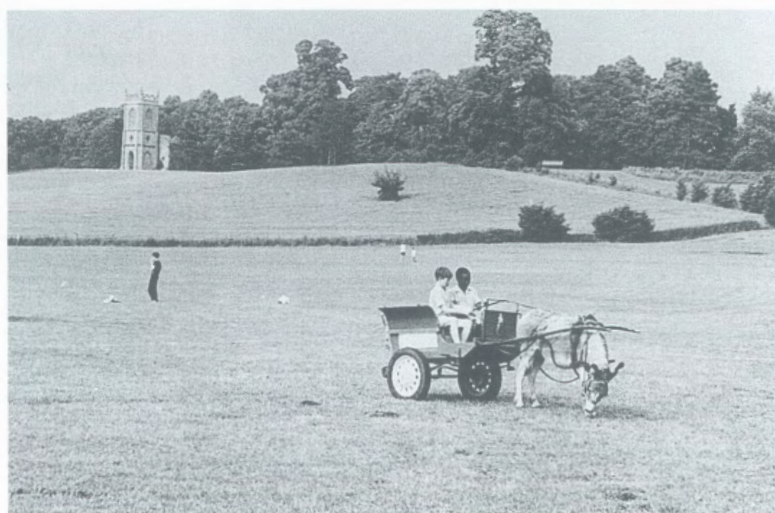
Sylvia Stanley worked at the school for eight years looking after the boys and their clothes.

She recalls the beginning of term: "...they came back with all sorts of things like scabies, nits, fleas, so their clothes were stripped off them and they were put through a sluice."

Marie Passey worked at the school from 1948 to 1979, cleaning and cooking. "I did over 300 pancakes one day... oh, it was terrible."

*"...we were watching a James Bond film when it come to Ursula Andress coming out the water they turned it off because it was too, you know..."*

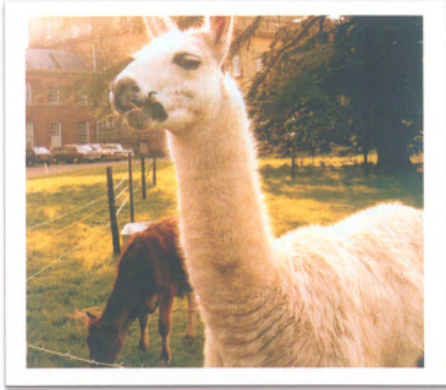
**Pupil  
Tony Devlin**





## The post war years

### The Hare Krishna Years



Susan Black and family lived in the community at Croome. She remembers the day when three swans came up from the river. The swan has particular significance for followers of Lord Krishna.

"...they walked right up the path past all of us women chanting... and noisy children... and they walked right into the building, into the temple room."

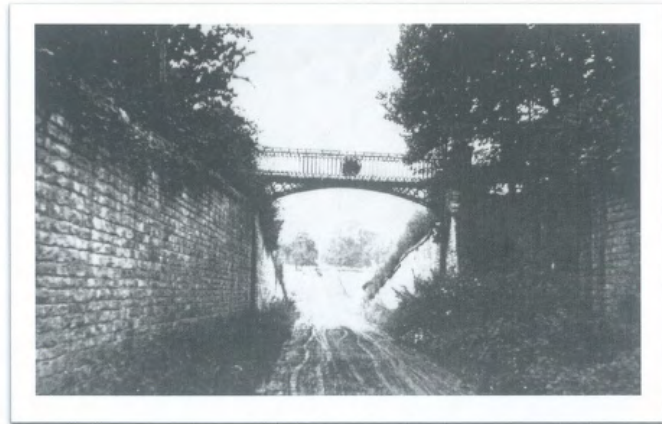
The community wanted the land at Croome to keep their cattle. Gordon Johnson, a maintenance worker, remembers the garden being ploughed with two bullocks. Several interviewees recall a bullock being buried in front of the Court. Local resident Enid Smith recalls how she and her husband were surprised one evening by a group of people in long flowing robes, ringing bells and chanting.

*"The thing that struck me most was that they were leading two llamas..."*

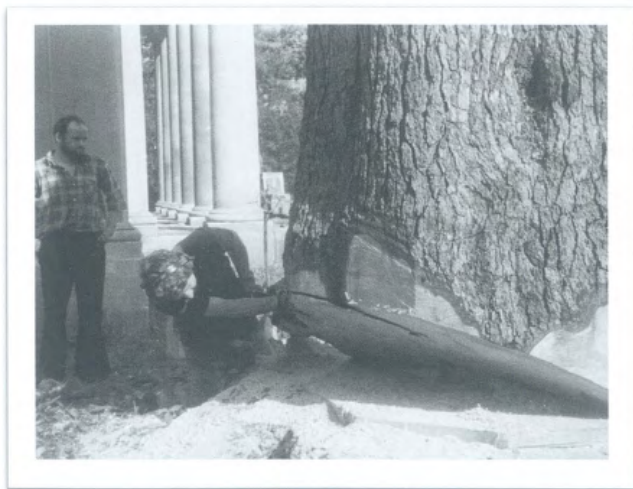
**Enid Smith**



The Druid statue just visible through the undergrowth during the 1970s



Known as the Iron Bridge, this linked the parkland on either side of the road to High Green. It was demolished by accident during construction of the M5



The cedar was damaging the Temple Greenhouse roof so was felled in 1976. It had been planted in 1760, according to the growth rings



The Pickle Yard, High Green, in flames c1969





**"...with the war, the construction of Defford Aerodrome, the construction of the motorway, the modernisation of farming practices... the devastation of elm disease, it really is a miracle that the Capability Brown landscape and his garden buildings and subsequent Follies survived"**  
*John Henderson, Land Agent 1967 -1996*

