

THE FRIENDS OF CROOME



NEWSLETTER

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THE TALE OF THE CROOME TAPESTRIES

An intriguing mystery story by **Laurence Freeman**



Everybody loves a good mystery story, especially if it involves a hero, a villain and a good surprise twist at the end. During my many years as a volunteer guide in Croome Court I was frequently asked by visitors; “why do you have a tapestry room? Why are there no tapestries?” A mystery indeed, and one that clearly needed an answer, which I was only too happy to give, both then, and for your interest, now.

When George William, the 6th Earl of Coventry, inherited Croome Estate in 1751 he was wealthy, 25 years of age and at the height of his powers and with, no doubt, a burning ambition to establish himself in the highest echelons of 18th century society. He had begun the transformation of Croome Court into his vision of a grand Palladian-style mansion and would have been equally keen to furnish it with the finest interiors that money could then buy.

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Unfortunately, the Earl's desire to do this was somewhat curtailed by the inconvenience of the Seven Years War that raged across central Europe between 1756-1763. Once peace was declared, however, he wasted no time in hopping over the channel in August 1763 to do a bit of shopping! His target was Paris where, according to a letter from his brother-in-law, Gilly Williams, he was after 'buying glasses and tapestry'.

The Earl's shopping tour included him arriving at the doors of the prestigious Gobelin tapestry factory on the outskirts of Paris. At the time of his arrival the Gobelin works were going through a bit of a crisis. They had previously been commissioned to produce tapestries for the French Court for which payment had subsequently not been forthcoming. The Seven Years War had also hit the business rather badly. It is said that they were prepared to sell off the French King's unpurchased tapestries, still languishing in the warehouse, for a knock-down third off!

The greatest priority for Gobelin, however, was their desperate need for more private customers to help fill the financial coffers. To assist with their aim, the factory had developed a colourful new range of tapestries designed by Maurice Jacques and Louis Tessier and based upon the classical paintings of the artist Francois Boucher; at that time the most highly thought of artist in France.



Entitled 'Tentures de Boucher', the new tapestries were incredibly bright and colourful with endless variations of animals and flowers in the decorative surrounds. They could be produced relatively cheaply and quickly due to the invention of new upright looms and, uniquely, could be designed and configured to fit a room much in the same way as wallpaper. Complementary furniture covers could also be designed to match the tapestries. This represented a sea-change from the more traditional tapestries which tended to be draped straight down and separated by wood panelling.

Unsurprisingly, the 6th Earl was much taken with the new tapestries and commissioned a set to be made for Croome Court in the 'cramois', crimson, colour scheme. Hot-footing it back across the channel, the Earl brought back some Gobelin sketches and then began the task of commissioning the creation of a new tapestry room for the Court. The old breakfast room was chosen as the most appropriate location and Robert Adam was contracted to design a new ceiling and chimneypiece. The latter was carved by John Wildsmith and eventually put in place around the fireplace which was relocated from the East to the North wall of the room. Additional changes and embellishments to the room were undertaken by master craftsmen, John Hobcroft, joiner, and Sefferin Alken, wood carver. This included moving the original doorways to the position we see today and the installation of wainscoting and chair-rails.



Although production in Paris of the new tapestries was quicker than had previously been possible, it still took 7 years for them to be completed. They were eventually delivered to the 6th Earl in 1771 via the French Ambassador in London. This saved the Earl having to pay the 50% ad valorem duty payable on the assessed value of personal property! There is no record, strangely, of the price paid by the Earl, but a bill for a similar order to Moor Park was 27,600 livres; approximately £1200 in 1766. Equivalent to £246,000 today.

In June 1771, the London company of Ince and Mayhew, who made the wooden furniture for the tapestry room, eventually hung the tapestries on the walls and applied the upholstery to the purpose designed furniture. Protected by 'paper case hangings' (104 yards of linen a yard wide) and later, by chamois leather hangings, the tapestries were now to reside at Croome in all their colourful glory and retained their splendid colour unfaded for many years to come.

Now we come to an intriguing question. After all this effort and expense, why were the tapestries eventually sold? At this point of the story, it is appropriate to roll forward 100 plus years to the late nineteenth century. The 9th Earl of Coventry is now residing at Croome and, as we know from his writings, he was extremely proud of all that he had inherited. That said, in 1887 the Earl drew up a family Trust Settlement document that listed designated family heirlooms, and the tapestries were surprisingly not included. It is understood that he considered the tapestries too huge a responsibility to keep in the long term and pass on to future generations as heirlooms. By their very nature they collect dirt, fade and the threads can break down in the sunlit smoke-filled rooms of that time and were, for the most part, covered up. This decision did, however, become central to a significant family rift.

The 9th Earl's eldest son, Lord Deerhurst, had succumbed to an unfortunate gambling habit which eventually led to him being declared bankrupt. Like many elder sons in a similar situation, he approached his father with a request to bail him out. It is understood that the Earl agreed to this on condition that additional funds would be raised by the sale of the tapestries. Lord Deerhurst was not happy with this condition as he was aware of the value of the tapestries and saw them as part of his inheritance notwithstanding the fact that they had been omitted for the 1887 Trust settlement as protected items.

The consequence was an unfortunate legal dispute between father and son which was found in favour of the 9th Earl and the tapestries together with the associated tapestry covered furniture were sold in March 1900 for the sum of £50,000 (equivalent to £5 million today).

The purchaser was a French tapestry collector, Maurice Fenaille, who retained the tapestries in his private collection and exhibited them in his Paris salon in 1902. In the meantime, bereft of its original contents, the room at Croome was redecorated with green damask wall hangings and became known as the Green Drawing Room (ref. 1930 inventory).

Eventually, the tapestries transferred to the Paris galleries of the art connoisseur Georges Wildenstein where they remained until 1932. At this point Wildenstein was opening new galleries on East 64th Street, New York, so the tapestries were transferred there to be the prime exhibit. This was probably a fortuitous decision as World War II was shortly to break out in Europe and if the tapestries had remained in Paris who knows where they might have ended up.

During this period the tapestries came to the attention of a wealthy American businessman and philanthropist, Samuel Henry Kress. With his fortune Kress had amassed one of the most significant collections of Italian Renaissance and European artwork assembled in the 20th century. In the 1950s and '60s his Kress Foundation would go on to donate 776 works of art from his collection to 18 regional art



museums in the United States. Kress purchased the Croome Tapestries from the Wildenstein Galleries and eventually gifted them to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, in May 1968 where they reside to this day.

So now to the final 'twist' in the tale of the tapestries. When the contents of Croome Court were put up for sale following the end of the war, an approach was made by the Met to the estate trustees to purchase the original tapestry room, for it to be used to display the original contents. This was at a time when there was already a considerable transatlantic trade in architectural salvage and ephemera. From a positive perspective it would mean that the room, furniture and tapestries would be reunited. On the other hand, it would leave an architectural 'hole' in Croome Court.

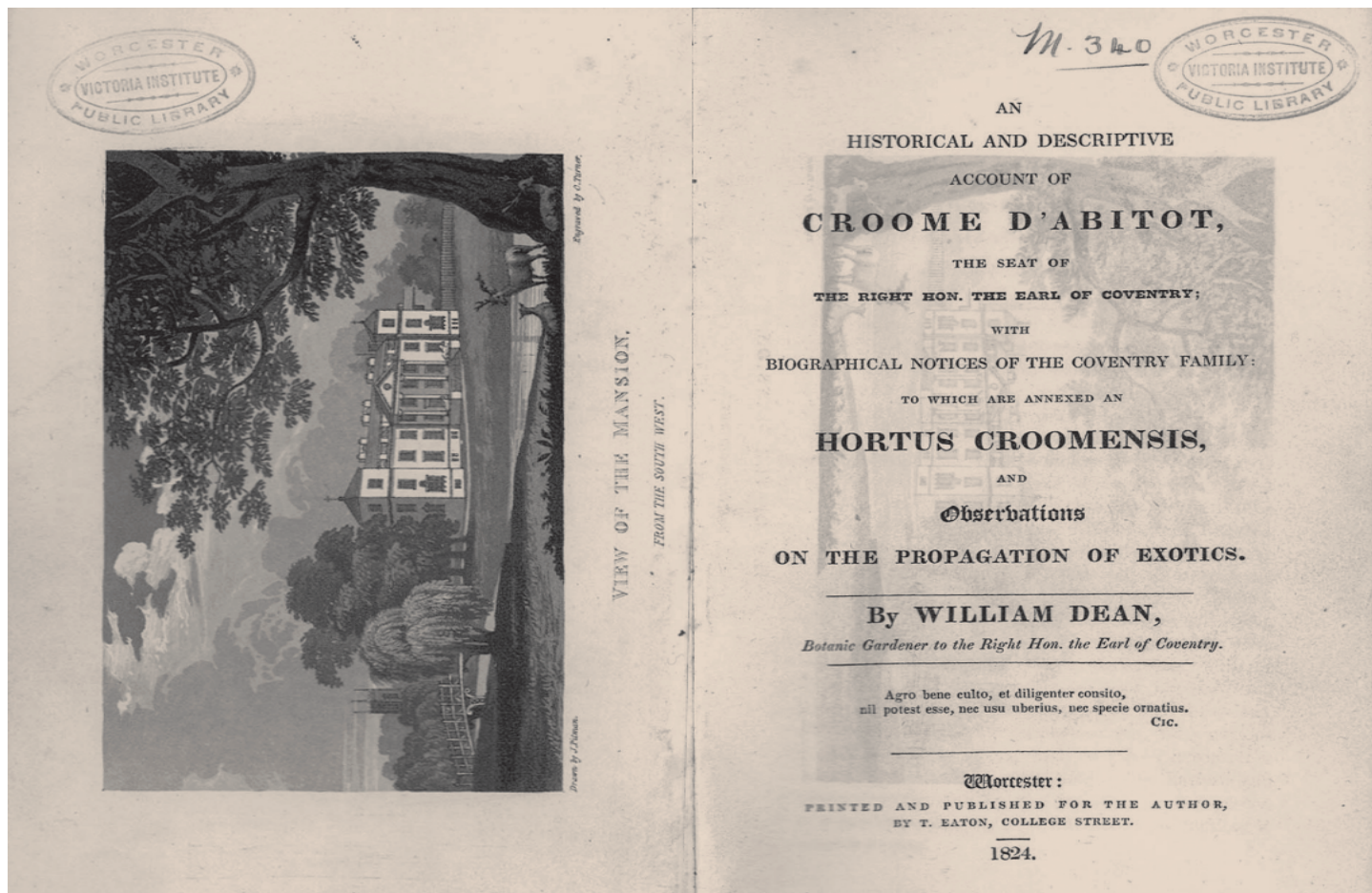
A sale of the room was agreed but a condition of the deal was that an exact copy of the room would be re-instated at Croome Court. This to include the floorboards, ornate plaster ceiling, Adam grate and fender, window sashes, shutters, joinery and, most important, a copy of the beautiful Italian marble chimneypiece. Following the sale agreement, contractors removed the original components of the tapestry room, packed it into 43 large packing cases, shipped it to the USA and in 1959 the room was reassembled within the Metropolitan Museum, New York, reunited with the tapestries and opened to the public.

The task of creating the copy of the room back at Croome was undertaken by the London firm of Brown & Muntzer in 1949. The marble chimneypiece became subject to a nine month delay due to the post-war shortage of marble masons and carvers, and the original 'Lapis Lazuli' central tablet of the original was replaced by the piece of green marble you can see today. A final irony is that the final cost agreed to purchase the original room was £3,000 whereas the additional cost paid by the purchaser for creating the replica at Croome was £3,500.

So, there we end the tale of the Croome tapestries. It can be argued that whilst it is sad that they are no longer at Croome, given all the changes that have taken place, they are in a location where they are properly cared for and will give pleasure to many for a very long time to come.

HORTUS CROOMENSIS

a cause for celebration by Katherine Alker



There is a lot to look forward to this year! Our theme for the year is 'Pages from Nature' and will start in March and run until February 2025. We are celebrating the 200th anniversary of the publication of William Dean's guide to Croome, which includes the fantastic list of over 6,000 plants which were grown at Croome in 1824, the 'Hortus Croomensis'.

This small, unassuming-looking book holds an absolute wealth of information about the Coventry family history, wonderful descriptions about the area surrounding Croome, details about how some of the rooms in the house were decorated, as well as an in-depth description of the garden. The second part of the book is the list of over 6,000 plants which were growing at Croome in 1824, listing common and botanical names, place of origin and time of flowering, and how to keep them, e.g. 'in a heated greenhouse', or 'requires little water'.

Croome's Outdoors Team have been able to use this valuable source of information, as well as other historic documents and maps, to direct us in replanting the garden and park. In some cases, we have been able to pinpoint exact trees that are mentioned in the book, which are still growing at Croome; examples include the Ginkgo trees and Oriental Plane in the Home Shrubbery, London Planes by the lakeside and cedars by the Rotunda. In other places the book has informed us of the location of missing specimen trees and we have been able to replant them, such as the Pagoda tree by the Temple Greenhouse and an oak tree by the Druid statue.

In Croome Court, a new exhibition 'Pages from Nature' will open on 23 March in the Tapestry Room and Library. We are looking forward to sharing information about the 7th Earl of Coventry, for whom the

book was written. We wonder if the book is so descriptive so that the Earl could picture in his imagination what Croome looked like, as by this point he was completely blind.

We will also take a look at where some of the plants in the Hortus Croomensis originally came from, as well as where people who subscribed to the book lived and worked. There will be several original copies of the book on display in the Tapestry Room, and in the Library there will be some bespoke work by the Gloucestershire Society for Botanical Illustration of some of the plants listed in the book.

Before making a special trip to Croome to see 'Pages from Nature', please check the website to ensure the exhibition is fully open. We have to carry out some essential building work over the next few months, meaning the Library in the Court could be closed for up to 2 weeks.

In mid-April, we will begin the outdoor aspect of the exhibition. Visitors will be able to purchase a re-worked version of the guidebook to follow around the garden. It will include quotes from the original text, information about some of the specific trees mentioned, as well as the restoration work done in the garden and park, and some activities to try including some sensory elements such as 'smelling stations' in the garden.

We're really looking forward to celebrating this important book, highlighting how we use historical sources in our restoration work, and sharing stories about some of the plants and people involved at Croome 200 years ago. We hope you enjoy all elements of the exhibition when you visit!

George William 10th Earl of Coventry

by **Hugh Worsfold**



George William Reginald Victor Coventry (above) was born on 10th September 1900 at Birlingham House, Birlingham, Worcestershire, the eldest son of Viscount Deerhurst and so a grandson of the 9th Earl of Coventry. Birlingham House no longer exists but in the 1901 census, when George was 6 months old, it is recorded that he was living there with his parents and two elder sisters, Helena aged 6 years and Peggy aged 5. The household at this time also included his grandmother on his mother's side, Rhodie Stephens Bonyng, a niece, Helena Maxwell aged 7 years, and thirteen servants living in the house, plus a coachman and groom in the stable block.

George's initial education was at Ludgrove School in Berkshire (many years later Prince William and then Prince Harry started their schooling there). From Ludgrove he went to Eton College in the Lent Term (January to Easter) of 1914 and left at the end of the Michaelmas Term (September to December) 1918. Archive records at Eton College do not have any details of him being involved in any sporting activities unlike his brother John who excelled on the cricket field playing for the first XI.

George did not go to university, unlike his father who went to Trinity College, Cambridge. However, it appears that he attended Wye Agricultural College in Kent. Whilst the college no longer exists some of the buildings do and in one is a memorial to those from the college who died in the Second World War and it includes Lieutenant G W V R Coventry.

The future 10th Earl's involvement in the army began on 1 September 1920 when he was granted a Territorial commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Worcestershire Yeomanry. It is thought that he responded to an appeal by his uncle Colonel Charles John Coventry for new recruits.

On the 17 September 1921 George married the Hon. Nesta Donne Philipps, the eldest child of Owen Cosby Philipps, the 1st and last Baron Kylsant of Carmarthen. It was clearly the wedding of the year in Carmarthen, if not Wales, judging by the full page spread of photographs in the Western Mail the following Monday. One photograph showed many hundreds of well-wishers from the town lining the streets. It is recorded that the bridesmaids were Miss Olive Philipps and Miss Honor Philipps, the bride's sisters, the Hon. Helena Coventry, and the Hon. Peggy Coventry, sisters of the bridegroom, the Hon. Imogen Rhys, daughter of Lord and Lady Dynevor, Miss Dorothy Davies Evans, cousin of the bride, and Miss Pamela Coventry. The best man was the Hon. Elwyn Rhys, son of Lord and Lady Dynevor, and the officiating clergy were the Bishop of St David's, assisted by the Archbishop of Wales, the Bishop of Coventry and the Rev. B. Parry Griffiths (vicar).

The honeymoon was initially spent at the Phillipps' family home, Amroth Castle and then on Madeira. Amroth (above centre) is now a holiday park!

When the couple returned from honeymoon, they went to live at Amroth Castle where they stayed until they moved to Croome Court following the death of the 9th Earl of Coventry in 1930. Whilst there George continued his interest in country sports being Deputy Master of Fox Hounds for the Carmarthen Hunt for which his father-in-law was Master. He held this position from 1921 to 1926. In 1925 he was also Joint Master of the Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire Otter-Hounds. He was also a Justice of the Peace for Pembrokeshire.



The couple, with their eldest daughter Anne at Amroth Castle (The Tatler, 17 March 1926)

General election 1922: Carmarthen			
Party	Candidate	Votes	%
National Liberal	John Hinds	12,530	41.9
Unionist	George Coventry	8,805	29.4
National Farmers' Union	Daniel Johns	4,775	15.9
Liberal	H. Llewelyn-Williams	3,847	12.8
Majority		3,725	12.5
Turnout		29,957	82.7
Registered electors		36,213	
National Liberal gain from Liberal			
1922 Election Results			

George's father-in-law Owen Philipps is described as a shipping magnate, but he was also a politician, being MP for Pembroke from 1906 to 1910 and for Chester from 1916 to 1918. It may be because of this that George became the youngest candidate to be adopted by the Conservatives to stand for Carmarthen in the 1922 General Election held on 15 November.

It was reported in the Welsh Gazette on Thursday 28 December 1922, that the Conservative Party owed a debt of gratitude to George Coventry for coming forward when he did and for doing so well in a short time to test the Conservative feelings in the County. It went on to say that if George had been adopted six months earlier it was certain that he would have secured those extra votes which would have got him elected. George's wife was also thanked for being a staunch worker and supporter throughout the election period. It was also noted that George had an enormous number of votes when compared with the number given in previous elections in that part of Wales.

Owen Philipps set up the King Alfred Steam Ship Ltd in 1889 after a ship he owned called King Alfred. Four years later the company name was changed to the King Line Ltd. During the 1920s the company had a fleet of 25 vessels. George Coventry was appointed a director during that period, he was also a director of London and Thames Haven Oil Wharves Ltd. Following the death of the 9th Earl on 13 March 1930 George and Nesta returned to live at Croome Court with their daughters, Anne born in 1922 and Joan in 1924. Two further children were born at Croome, Maria in 1931 and George William in 1934.

In 1932 the 10th Earl was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Worcestershire, a position that had been held by previous members of the family and for a short period he was President of the Bewdley Conservative Association.

In 1938 he applied to join the Worcestershire Regiment and was granted a commission as Lieutenant in the 7th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment. On his application in answer to a question about driving and radio experience he says "Can drive a car but know very little about maintenance. Nothing about radio". It also reveals he has had whooping cough, mumps, measles, and German measles.



The family on the south steps of Croome Court c.1938

The 7th Battalion went to France on the 14 January 1940 as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Despite advances the BEF was forced back by the Germans. The retreat towards Dunkirk began and several regiments including the Worcestershire were ordered to hold the line to enable the retreat to take place. The 7th Battalion's position was to hold the line at Givenchy.

The 10th Earl and his batman, Frank Sheldon, along with other soldiers took refuge in a house during the Battle of Givenchy. In 1997 the Kidderminster Shuttle interviewed Frank about his time with the 10th Earl. They wrote the following about the 10th Earl's death: "(On 27 May 1940) Private Sheldon had prepared breakfast as usual for the Earl of Coventry when the Earl said: "I am just going out". Mr Sheldon replied: "I'll follow you in a minute". It was the last time Frank spoke to him. Moments later the Earl fell to the ground, hit by a sniper's bullet."



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The family on the south steps of Croome Court c.1938

In 1995 Frank was at a battalion reunion and heard that George William the 11th Earl of Coventry had been making enquiries as to whether his father's batman had survived the war and was still alive. In September of that year Frank made contact with the 11th Earl; they met up and on 14 July 1996, visited the 10th Earl's grave at the cemetery at Givenchy.

There have been many tributes to the 10th Earl but perhaps the most fitting appeared in The Worcestershire Regiment Journal "Firm" in December 1940:

"When Lord Coventry realised more than a year ago that war was inevitable, he determined to make himself an efficient soldier to take his part in defending his country and civilisation. With this in view he joined a Territorial division at Norton Barracks, and applied himself with energy to learn all that could be learnt of a soldier's profession, and with such success that when his unit was ordered to France he was fully qualified to take his place with it as a junior officer. The example of true patriotism which he set, at the age of 39, will never be forgotten in the county of his birth; he gave up his amusements, his home comforts, and family surroundings to do his duty; he showed himself indeed a man and a man to be admired and respected. His numerous friends will miss his cheery smile, but they will never forget his unselfish sacrifice."



A London Address

by Nicola Hewitt

In the Coventry archive, there is a letter dated 12th March 1936, addressed to the 10th Earl, from the National Mutual Life Assurance Society. They are rebuilding their head office which is at the corner of Cheapside and King Street in London and are trying to trace the history of the site, which records they say was in the possession of the Coventry family and wondered if there is any additional information in the Croome archive. There is no record of the reply from the 10th Earl but there is a second letter from the society containing some information they have since uncovered; the will of a Thomas Coventry but they cannot link him to the family or the site.

Records for the area of Cheapside and King Street go back to the 12th Century and a search led to 2 tenements called "le Kage" (later le Cage) and "le Hert" (later le Hart) in the parishes of St Mary le Bow and St Mary Colechurch. In 1397 the Cage and the Hert were bought by William Coventre, pinner, Thomas Wilford, fishmonger, William Chaumbre, fishmonger, John Wykes, clerk, Robert Taunton, girdler, and John Cosham, mercer from the executors of William de Walleworth. The following year 1398, Taunton and Cosham quitclaimed to William Coventre. Quitclaiming is the transfer of your rights to a property to another individual. Chaumbre and Wykes quitclaimed to Wilford in 1399. This left Wilford and Coventre holding the rights to the two properties. In 1402, the properties were divided with Wilford keeping the Hert and Coventre the Cage. Each quitclaiming their interests to the other. Whilst Wilford and Coventre had the rights to the properties, the sites were actually owned by the Canterbury Cathedral Priory and in 1406 they demanded the rents due them, 9 ¼ years' worth, totalling £43 18s 9d. They settled for a payment of £20 from Wilford and Coventre for the arrears.

William was a pinner, creating elaborate metal pins. The guild of pinmakers or pinners is first mentioned in 1376 and were one of the lowest branches of craftsmen whose members were not eligible to stand for office in the City of London. Although demand for their metal pins was high due to the fashion of the period in particular elaborate head-dresses. In 1348, Princess Joan daughter of King Edward III had over 12,000 pins in her trousseau. William Coventry is obviously doing quite well for himself as not only is he acquiring property but in 1401 he applies to join and is accepted into the mercer's guild and so becomes eligible for City Office.

William dies in 1407 and in his will gives details of his family, his wife is called Alice and sons John, William, Richard and Robert and her wife's son Stephen Causton. It is unclear whether Alice is the mother of his sons, but she obviously has a son from a previous marriage. By his will, dated and enrolled in 1407, William Coventre, now a mercer, left the Cage to his son John and his heirs with remainder to his sons Richard and Robert and their heirs. The annual rent from the Cage was £6 13s 4d and Alice could collect this as long as she didn't remarry. If she did remarry it would then go to his son John William's son John was also a mercer and citizen of London and because of this he was eligible for city office. He was probably a dealer of fine cloths and textiles and in 1416 was Sheriff of London, a law-officer for the city. In 1425 he became Lord Mayor of London. He was selected as Lord Mayor in October and on the day of his inaugural feast there was a riot in the City of London between the followers of Beaufort and Gloucester. He manages to quell this as it is ruining trade in the city, and he appealed to King for help. This incident is referenced by Shakespeare in Henry VI part 1.

Together with John Carpenter and William Grove he was an executor of the will of Richard Whittington, Lord Mayor of London and inspiration for the pantomime "Dick Whittington", who died in 1423, leaving a considerable fortune to be spent on projects to benefit the citizens of London including almshouses, hospitals and rebuilding Newgate prison.

John during his mayoralty in 1425-6 lived in the Mercery, Cheapside, but he had other properties outside of Cheapside. John also marries an Alice and together they have three sons, Thomas, Richard, Henry and a daughter Philippa. At the time of his death in 1429 John was a resident of St. Mary le Bow parish and he was buried in the parish churchyard there. On his death le Cage was inherited by his son, Thomas Coventre and then passed to Peter Coventre. Peter is described as a gentleman, son, and heir of Henry Coventre. John Coventre, had a younger son Henry, and so Peter was probably Thomas's nephew. In 1488 le Cage is described as two messuages. A messuage is a dwelling house together with its outbuildings, curtilage, and the adjacent land appropriated to its use. The Cage passes through various members of the Coventre family until around 1530, when records show it is now in the possession of Richard Gresham and not the Coventre family.

In 1666 the fire of London swept through the area and the property was destroyed. Le Cage was a stone's throw from St Paul's, Mansion House and in the heart of the area containing the city Guilds. The church of St Mary-le-Bow was also destroyed together with the monument to John. Few maps showing the layout of the streets survived the fire and those that do are aerial views. This map from 1755 shows the post fire of London street layout for the area where Le Cage had been where Kings Street intercepts Cheapside.



Although the site was in the hands of a Coventry family, and the legend is that the Coventry's of Croome are descended from John Coventry, Lord Mayor of London, no documentary proof has been found yet to support this. There are several family trees in the archive, each drawn up at different times. The furthest back that the family can be traced with any degree of certainty is to Vincent Coventry from Cassington in Oxfordshire nearly 100 years after John Coventre.



The junction of Cheapside and Kings Street today. The site where Le Cage stood is now a Barclays bank (or at least it was when I visited the area in 2019).

Protecting: Past and Present

Apotropaic marks at Croome by Jennifer Skemp



Collection of Daisy Wheels © Norfolk and Suffolk Medieval Graffiti Survey

Last autumn, I set about scouring the walls, fireplaces, and floorboards of Croome Court armed with nothing but a phone torch and a strange interest. With our nights growing longer and darker, it felt fitting to search the building for a form of ancient graffiti that helps shine a light on the hidden corners of Britain's folklore. These Apotropaic Marks can be found in countless National Trust sites – including the nearby Fleece Inn – attracting visitors curious to hear the traditions behind these now peculiar appearing markings. Apotropaic marks, also known as "witch marks" or "protection marks," are enigmatic symbols and patterns scribed into historic sites, buildings, objects, or even personal belongings. They can be found across the country in churches, stately homes, rural houses, barns, and caves dating back thousands of years. Their roots can be traced back to mankind's ancient beliefs in the protective power of symbols and rituals. Apotropaicos means turning away: from the Greek *apotrepein* "to ward off", *apo-* "away" and *trepein* "to turn". In more recent history, Apotropaic marks gained prominence during the medieval and early modern periods, particularly in Europe. During this time belief in the supernatural was commonplace, and the purpose of these marks was taken very seriously.

A protective function

The marks were used as a form of spiritual defence against malevolent forces, such as evil spirits, witches, or other supernatural entities and the unknown. Many were also believed to ward off bad weather, fire, and lightning. During times when understanding of natural phenomena and scientific explanation was still developing, people sought to find solace and protection where they could. Common motifs included concentric circles, intertwining lines, and various geometric patterns. Along with marks, physical objects like witches' bottles and even animals were concealed within walls and floors.

Apotropaic marks were strategically placed in areas deemed vulnerable to such forces. Commonly these would be where the outside met the inside such as doorways, windows, and hearths. Also, in areas prone to darkness; a basement or simply the corner of a room. In some cases, these marks were also found on personal items like chairs and storage chests. Many properties across the National Trust bear these marks, highlighting to visitors the beliefs and superstitions of everyday people that once called these places home. Croome Court, despite its multiple layers of structural alterations and redecoration by previous owners still has some marks to show. Four marks have been found so far including a Daisy Wheel, two burn marks, and a Marion mark.

The Daisy Wheel

Our first mark is in the basement: a Daisy Wheel on the frame of the dumb waiter. A Daisy Wheel is a compass drawn shape of overlapping circles that forms a hexafoil. The shape is designed to mesmerise a spirit, where it becomes trapped following its never-ending shape. It is also believed to resemble the sun and present light to a dark space. Drawn in pencil, ours is somewhat crude, but like all graffiti it's subject to the drawer's skill so the complex shape is made with mild success. Though the drawer's aim to create curves that converge at a circles centre, points to the intention of a daisy wheel shape.

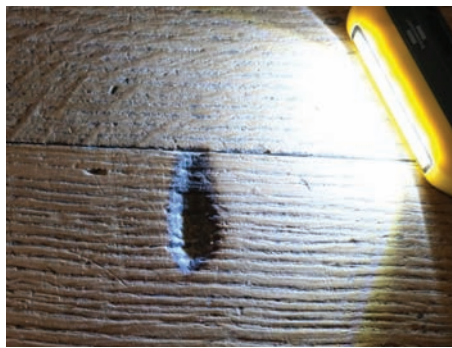
The structure of the dumb waiter is in keeping with where this mark is typically found too, as it is a flue that connects the dark basement to the upper floors of the house. Perhaps from the times of the Roman Catholic school, the boys didn't want anything to catch them as they sneaked down in the lift!

Background: Daisy Wheel copy
Right: Dumb Waiter Daisy Wheel



Burn Marks

The second Apotropaic mark is a Burn Mark, which were believed to protect a structure from both fire and being struck by lightning. It's made by placing a flame against wood until it begins to char, then scraping away the burnt carbon. This process is repeated until a concave indent is created. On the first floor of the Court there are two such marks, one in the Alcove bedroom and one in the wooden stairway corridor where the Saloon roof void can be viewed.



On a floorboard in front of the hearth in the Alcove Bedroom (above) there is a teardrop shaped concave indent characteristic of a Burn Mark. A burnt hole next to a fireplace may not seem odd, but bear in mind that these marks are intended to ward off fire, and its shape has the characteristics of an intentional imprint. It runs perpendicular to the fireplace, and the scorch does not overlap onto the adjacent board. As a flame must burn vertically, we can reason the mark was made *before* the board was lain.

An example of a Burn Mark is hidden but in plain sight on a panel above the Saloon's ceiling-void window (above right). This alcove would have been constructed between 1758-1763 when work was being done on the first floor to convert the Jacobean house into the neo-palladian style. This section of panelling was concealed until the National Trust began renovations in 2010. Despite being at least 250 years old it looks like it could have been made yesterday, still with soot stains and melting wax residue from the candle that was used. Previously, many historic sites and homes interpreted these marks as being scorches left by unattended candles or lamps, but experimental archaeology has demonstrated that the marks are almost impossible to create by simply leaving a flame unattended. Many are found in locations not suitable for light fittings like window shutters or doors, and walls that have no evidence of a previous sconce or holder.

Marion Marks



The fourth Apotropaic mark is carved into one of our collection pieces. The dowry chest (see below) gifted for the marriage between John Milton and Mary Powell sits on the second floor and bears a Marion Mark on its lid (see left). We can't know if this mark was carved before or after the 9th Earl of Coventry acquired it at auction. Not to be mistaken with carpenter or merchant marks which are symbols (often Roman numerals) used to help joiners with construction work and tradesmen authenticate goods, a Marion Mark draws on the protection of the Virgin Mary. Its overlapping Vs are thought to mean Virgo Virginum (the Virgin of Virgins) and when inverted, forms an M to represent Ava Maria, or PM for Pace Maria. Not only were these marks intended to safeguard people, they also were used to protect their possessions. Barns, larders, and cellars that contained food, drink, grain, and livestock; along with more material goods such as where money was stored were warded for fear of the evil eye spoiling a person's livelihood.

Other marks have been spoken about, but unfortunately any other evidence is lost to time. One includes an account that construction workers discovered a dried cat within the walls of the stable buildings as they underwent conversion into residential homes during the 1990s. Concealing items within walls was certainly a method of Apotropaic warding (known as ritual concealment) and cats were seen as one of many animals that had the ability to see past the veil. With their semi-nocturnal nature and keen eyesight, they were thought to help guard us during the night. To make use of this ability even in their afterlife, cats were entombed within the walls of structures to prowl the void between the walls and chase away anything that may do their masters harm. The body was removed and disposed of, so it remains uncertain how the poor animal truly found itself there.

Today, while Apotropaic marks may no longer hold the same significance for many people, they continue to remain a fascinating reminder of our ancestors' spiritual beliefs and the power of symbolism. These symbols tell a story of humans' persistent desire to protect themselves and their loved ones from harm, navigating a world filled with unknown and unseen dangers. The presence of these marks shows the desire that those who lived and worked at Croome wanted to protect their surroundings. The desire is still the same for many of us today, though I may stress for the sake of conservation – perhaps we will refrain from carving or burning parts of the furniture and walls!



Images by Jennifer Skemp and Brian Hoggard.

Daisy Wheel Collection image credited to Norfolk and Suffolk Medieval Graffiti Survey.

*A special thankyou to Rosie Wright, Croome's Collections and House Officer and Brian Hoggard author of **Magical House Protection - The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft** for their advice on my findings.*

When High Green beat Worcestershire

A Cricket Match to Remember by Clive O'Donnell



Reverend Hugh Bennett, middle of back row wearing a boater, in a Worcestershire XI at the Oval in 1896



Charles Bennett, pictured in 1890 while he was an assistant master at St George's School in Harpenden. He was later Rector of Woolstone in Gloucestershire from 1906 until 1931.

Cricket was one of the many sporting passions of the 9th Earl of Coventry - indeed he had been President of the Marylebone Cricket Club in 1859 at the age of just 21 and played for Worcestershire between 1868-1886. So it was no surprise that he and his sons arranged cricket matches in the grounds of Croome Court. In 1892 with his own playing days over, the Earl had invited Worcestershire to send a Club & Ground XI to Croome to play his side, High Green. A high scoring draw on a wicket much better than many at the time - the pitch was directly in front of the main house - led to a repeat fixture being organised the following summer.

Worcestershire captain for the day, EGM Carmichael, won the toss and had no hesitation in batting on a glorious late August day. However, the Reverend HF Bennett opening the bowling for the Earl's XI quickly had the visitors in disarray, sending back Carmichael, Poole and Plum with only seven runs on the board. Hugh Bennett had returned to the area from Oswestry Grammar School, where he had been chaplain, the previous summer to take over the living of Pirton with Croome D'Abitot from his deceased father. A post he would hold for nearly fifty years. The Bennetts lived at Elmley Castle and had a long association with the Coventry family. Hugh's younger brother, Charles, another clergyman, working in the East End of London, was also in the High Green side.

Despite a quick-fire 28 from Arthur Isaac, one of the Isaacs of Boughton Park, Worcestershire found themselves in all sorts of trouble at 55 - 7; five wickets for Hugh Bennett and two for his future brother-in-law, Reginald Boucher. At this point, young all-rounder, Douglas Smith, who had retired hurt earlier in the innings after a blow on the head, resumed his innings in the company of Reverend Francis Bickmore, who, a couple of years earlier, had taken on the parish of Leigh with Bransford at the invitation of Lady Somerset. Bickmore hailed from Stone, near Kidderminster, where his father was vicar. Either side of the luncheon interval, Smith and Bickmore added 89 runs, taking the total to 144 before Douglas Smith was bowled by Hugh Bennett for a 'capital' 63. Bickmore was now joined by G Drewer and this last pair (Worcestershire had only ten players) added a further 25 before Drewer was bowled for 12, leaving Frank Bickmore 47 not out and the total 180, a rather more competitive score than seemed likely earlier in the innings.

High Green began their reply with the Bennett brothers opening the batting. Both were young clergymen who could be categorised as exponents of 'muscular Christianity'. They had excelled at school sport -- Hugh at Bradfield and Charles at Stratford-upon-Avon Grammar -- and both were well regarded sportsmen at Worcester College, Oxford, where they had studied Theology. Neither achieved a 'blue' but Charles played soccer for Luton Town and St Albans, while Hugh became the first 'man of the cloth' to play first class-cricket for Worcestershire, when he made his County Championship debut against Gloucestershire at Bristol in 1901.

Nineteen runs were scored off the first two overs, with Charles Bennett hitting a six that hit the front door of the Court. After just 25 minutes at the crease the 50 partnership was reached, but shortly after, Hugh Bennett 'skied one in the slips and retired for 23'. Dr James Harris, an Irishman from County Cork, who had a surgery in Upton-upon-Severn, was next to bat but the run rate didn't slow down. Charles Bennett hit five successive boundaries as the 100 came up in less than an hour. Carmichael rotated his bowlers without success and it was only when he brought himself back on that the second wicket fell, Dr Harris clean bowled for a well-made 53, which contained eight fours. Only four runs were required for victory which Charles Bennett quickly scored with a hit to leg. High Green had achieved a famous victory by the convincing margin of eight wickets.

As was the custom at the time, the winning team carried on batting -- why not on a sunny day in an idyllic setting? Bennett was eventually dismissed for 91, one of eight wickets for EGM Carmichael, at a cost of just 38 runs. The other six bowlers took a solitary wicket between them and conceded 200 runs! The one member of the Coventry family in the High Green side, the Hon. William, only managed a couple of runs and when time was called the home side had amassed a total of 238-9. The Earl, who had arrived home from the Dublin Horse Show the day before, was no doubt delighted at his team's success!

Four members of the Club & Ground XI that day would go on to play first-class cricket for the county: Carmichael, Smith, Isaac and Munn while two of the High Green team, Boucher and Harris, would join Hugh Bennett in the Worcestershire ranks, albeit in the Minor Counties Championship.

Croome Walled Garden update

by **Chris** and **Karen Cronin**



Reflecting on 2023, we were thrilled to host over 6,000 visitors in our gardens throughout the season. As we eagerly anticipate our 11th year in 2024, we are pleased to share some exciting updates. Ongoing maintenance efforts are in full swing and Dan, from our on-site woodwork shop, has diligently replaced any weather-worn window frames on the Melon House (below left). The restored frames (above left) undergo meticulous repainting and refitting, ensuring the glasshouse maintains its charm and functionality. Simultaneously, Melanie has been busy preparing the Melon House for the upcoming growing season by thoroughly washing and sanitising the beds ready for planting later this year.

2024 brings forth significant projects. The Pineapple House (below right) is set to be reconstructed and initial steps involve crafting templates and weeding the area. Work on the middle section and the new water feature has faced a temporary pause due to inclement weather, but will restart soon. Also, the Mosaic Garden (above centre) an intricately detailed nature piece crafted by artist Claire Cotterill, promises to be a unique addition and will be unveiled to visitors in due course.

The diligent efforts of Melanie and the volunteer team extend to various tasks, including apple tree pruning, espalier trimming, weeding, seed sowing in the Fig House, and planting.

Look out for a new and unique sculpture in the gardens this year. The diamond-shaped design (above right) was constructed by our Site Manager, Dan, from scrap metal. It has a notable history and was part of a Pershore Horticultural College show garden, which won a gold medal at the RGS Malvern Spring Festival. Having been in storage off site for a few years, it's currently being refurbished ready to be put back on display where it belongs.

Mark your calendars! The Gallery will reopen on Friday, March 29th, from 11am to 5pm every Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Bank Holidays until 1 October. Access to Croome Gallery and Pottery is through the National Trust Croome visitor centre, with no additional entrance fee on Fridays (regular National Trust admission applies). To reach Croome Gallery and Pottery on Fridays, follow the signage to The Walled Gardens' gate, down the hill behind the gazebo. Please note that the Walled Gardens are closed on Fridays.

For weekend explorations, the Walled Gardens will be open every Saturday and Sunday from 29 March to 1 October, along with Bank Holidays. Operating hours are 11am to 5pm, with the last entry at 4pm. Admission is £5 per adult, and children enjoy free entry, with all funds contributing to the continuous restoration and maintenance of the historic gardens. We eagerly anticipate welcoming you back soon!

