

Hubert Woodward Looks Back

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Hubert Hawkes Woodward, ninety years of age on May 11th 1973, sportsman, actor and impresario, is a lively link with the past in Leicestershire, particularly with the village (as it then was) of Quorn, and with the Quorn Hunt. His prodigious memory reaches back and brings to life the sayings and doings of long dead personalities - the Yellow Earl(1), Tom Firr(2) the famous huntsman, and many others - serving to remind us of a way of living that has long since receded into the past.

Hubert's father was a solicitor by profession, sportsman and amateur jockey by choice; his mother the youngest daughter of Thomas Cradock of Quorn Court, Quorndon.(2) A marble slab in Quorn church erected to his memory tells us that he was a loving husband, an affectionate father, and a faithful friend. Tom Woodward, 1801-1852, the distinguished Worcestershire animal and sporting painter was his great uncle.



Hubert Woodward

Such, briefly, is Hubert's family background. But though born into the world of privilege there was no silver spoon to go with it, and Hubert has had to earn his living. From a completely non-theatrical background he has carved out a career for himself in the theatre - but that is another story.

In 1887, at the urgent request of Hubert's uncle and grandmother - whose health was failing - the Woodward family went to live at Quorn Court. The Cradock family had long been closely connected with the Quorn Hunt(2). Hubert's great grandfather was secretary for twelve years, his grandfather for twenty, and his uncle for fifteen. Hubert himself acted as capper for eight seasons and Mrs L Weldon, the daughter of Corbett Cradock, who was Hubert's first cousin, was lately presented with a silver rose bowl to mark her fiftieth season with the Quorn.

The kennels were originally situated in the village, adjoining Quorn Hall (2), where Sir Richard Sutton (2) had lived when he was Master from 1847-1855. At this time it was occupied by the Warners, their second son William, being master. In 1905 the kennels were moved to Barrow-on-Soar, but the original bee-hive roofs of Swithland slate were preserved until recently, when they were bulldozed to the ground to make way for a car park.

Quorn House, owned by the Farnham family(2) for over six hundred years was the largest house in Quorn and the nearest to the Woodward/Cradock ménage - William Farnham's wife, 'Pussy', being one of the reigning beauties of her day. They always had a house full of people and many notable guests, one of whom, Mrs Farnham's uncle, Lord Edward Pelham Clinton - 'Clinny', was Controller of the Household to Queen Victoria and had a fund of stories about his royal mistress. One can well imagine a small boy

being deeply impressed by the fact that so delicate was her skin that her bottom sheet had to be stitched to the bed every night to avoid the slightest wrinkle.

A little incident involving himself and another of the Farnham's guests has also remained in the young Hubert's mind. The Baroness de Tuyl, (who afterwards became Duchess of Beaufort) - a very diminutive lady - was driving him in a governess cart with an equally diminutive Shetland pony, following Otho Paget's beagles. The pony refused to cross a ford, and various stalwart fellow guests lifted first the pony then the cart with its occupants and deposited them on the other side.

In 1892 Mr and Mrs Farnham went on a world tour, letting the house for the hunting season to Prince and Princess Henry of Pless. There was a heavy fall of snow during the winter and the village experienced the novel sight of sledges being driven about by the Prince and his retinue. Besides a large estate the Farnham's owned more than half Quorn church, their private chapel containing one of the finest Crusader tombs in the country(2). From the main part of the church only the heads of those in the chapel can be seen and vicar remarked one morning after service that the could not understand why one of the Farnham's guests stood on a hassock. It was Captain Ames, who stood well over six foot seven, and had headed the Diamond Jubilee procession in 1897.



Hubert Woodward as a boy

Quorn Court, where Hubert spent so much of his early life is situated nearly flush with the main street, and was rebuilt by his grandfather in the sixties, the older house being at one time a school, and before that belonging to a former Master of the Quorn, Lord Southampton(2). Now in the hands of big business it is not a beautiful piece of architecture, but very typical of its period - solid, and, according to Hubert, full of 'atmosphere.' The said grandfather had the greatest horror of fire and the floors of the nursery wing were all of stone, the staircase of marble, and the halls and kitchen stone-flagged.

It contained some really good pictures, including three of the best of Fearnley's works. One of these, a portrait of a great, great uncle, John, has a curious history. The artist lived at Melton and the sitter at Woodhouse Eaves. One morning John Cradock rode from Woodhouse to Melton, a distance of over twenty miles, and on his arrival was told, to his annoyance, that the artist had gone hunting with the Belvoir. Whose fault it was, history does not relate. At any rate the irate gentleman obtained a fresh horse and rode out to

the Belvoir meet where, on encountering the artist, he called him every name he could lay his tongue to, and then rode back to Woodhouse Eaves. A few days afterwards the picture arrived, minus a face! It lay in the lumber room for about five years, until, on the death of John Cradock, Hubert's grandfather approached Fearnley and asked him if he could do anything about it. He thereupon painted the head from memory.

Hubert saw his first fox killed in '89, when the Hunt was under the Mastership of Captain Warner, the huntsman being the redoubtable Tom Firr - 'The Professor' as he was called by many - with Fred Earp and Walter Keyte as first and second whips. In 'Spy' caricatures of Firr he has for a title, 'The Huntsman' and that summed him up. In later life Hubert observed that Tom Firr was to hunting what Irving was to the stage. To the school boy he was the personification of what a huntsman should be. He was at one time offered the huntsmanship of the Queen's Buck Hounds, a great honour, but not from the sportsman's angle. The offer was tactfully declined, the Duke of Portland saving him for the Quorn by guaranteeing to give him £50 a year as long as he stayed there.

On April 10th, 1899 Lord Belper presented Tom Firr with a testimonial amounting to £3,200. This had been subscribed to by people from all over the world, including the Prince of Wales. Firr died at the end of 1902 and was buried in Quorn churchyard. Within a few days of the funeral hounds met nearby and for the only time in living memory the fox took them across the churchyard and they ran over Firr's newly made grave.

It is fitting to finish this gallery of Leicestershire and Quorn Hunt personalities and eccentrics with some added words about Hubert's uncle, J.D Cradock, who has already figured in these recollections. Besides being secretary to the Quorn Hunt for fifteen years, he was chairman of the Quorn Urban District Council(2), represented Quorn on the County Council and was chairman of the local Conservative Association. He was also Lord of the Manor of Loughborough and Walton on the Wolds, but eventually sold his rights under this title, complaining that it cost him too much gin to collect them! He was, in fact a typical country gentleman of the late Victorian era. Aristocratic, autocratic, sometimes brusque, but respected and loved by all, he had his share of eccentricities. Although Quorn Court had many bedrooms, he always slept at the very top of the house, up an uncarpeted staircase. He used a four poster with a canopy over the top and by the side of the bed was a large pitch fork with sharpened prongs, in case he was disturbed by burglars.

A devout churchman, J.D Cradock never missed the eleven o'clock service on a Sunday when he was at home. Punctual to a degree, he timed his arrival to the stroke of the last bell, and although all the seats were free, with the exception of the Farnham Chapel, no-one ever took the aisle seat in the second pew on the left that he always occupied. For some reason he never explained he declined to stand up when the clergyman made his entrance, and was much given to making audible remarks if anything was said in the sermon with which he did not agree. One Sunday a visiting preacher (one assumes the sitting incumbent would have known better), asserted that Moses was a good-looking man, to be interrupted by 'how the hell does he know?' from J.D Cradock. As the text was given out, he would produce his gold watch, look at it, snap it shut and put it back. When he thought it was time to finish he would do the same thing.



John Davys Cradock

While dining at Quorn Court one Saturday night, the vicar, soon after dinner, asked if he could be excused. 'Haven't you finished your sermon, yet, Vicar?' enquired his host. 'Not quite, Mr Cradock, I've only just got to the part where you snap your watch', was the parson's quick reply.

It need hardly be said that J.D Cradock was a great lover of animals - one of his pets being an enormous Persian cat called 'Toby', who lived for over fourteen years. This cat had never been known to poach, but when Hubert's grandmother lay dying it appeared one morning with a young rabbit which it laid outside her bedroom door, untouched. 'J.D' also had a great affection for the hedgehog, and these creatures were never allowed to be molested if they came into the garden. Hubert can remember one in particular as he could set his watch by it. Every evening at five minutes to ten it used to come out of the shrubbery and cross over the gravelled terrace to the trees on the opposite side. Perhaps its very punctuality appealed to Hubert's uncle.

At Westfields(2) the Woodward's had a wooden hut in the garden which at one time occupied by a terrier bitch with two puppies a few days old. One night Mrs Woodward was aroused by screams of fear from the terrier. Hastily seizing a torch, she ran out to the shed where she found the terrier savagely snapping at some object on the back of one of the puppies. As it fled she saw that it was a hedgehog. The other puppy was dead with a wound in the back of its head.



Westfields, Loughborough Rd

At that time there existed a Society for the Prosecution of Felons. The Quorn branch dated back to the early part of the eighteenth century, but the Loughborough one was in existence in the reign of Charles II. The subscription was ten shillings per annum for that sum the society was supposed to take over all legal expenses in connection with any felonious act against oneself or one's property. The annual dinner was the chief event recorded in its minutes. This gargantuan feast presided over by Hubert's uncle, took place in the Village Hall at 4.30 in the afternoon! The menu consisted of soup and enormous joints of beef, mutton and pork, followed by plum pudding, the whole washed down by beer, whisky or gin. The Superintendent of Police for the district was always invited, and an entertainment followed the meal.

A permanent item on the programme was a song given by one Elijah Cox from Mountsorrel, a retired London bus-driver. The song, a sad story of a bus-driver's broken romance, consisted of about twenty verses, and after each verse came a chorus in which the audience joined lustily. Hubert can remember the words:

*Heigh ho! Who's for the Bank,
Fenchurch Street and Blackwall Railway?
Heigh ho! Who's for the Bank?
It's fourpence all the way.*

In 1898, on his retirement from the honorary Secretaryship of the Quorn, J.D. Cradock was presented with a silver cup and a cheque. A lawn meet was held at Barkby for the occasion, and 'J.D.', very embarrassed at the enthusiastic reception accorded him, made short reply which ended with the remark that the hounds were outside and would give anyone more fun than listening to him inside.

When he died, in September 1923, his funeral took place during Wake Week, and without waiting to be asked, the show people closed down everything for an hour.

In 1893 Hubert was taken to London for a severe operation. Born with atrophy of the legs, no calf muscles and both feet in reverse, so to speak, he had endured altogether twelve operations, and as a child spent ten years on and off in irons. But plainly he decided early on in his life not to allow his disabilities to interfere with his sporting tastes. In 1895 his family returned to Quorn, this time taking 'Westfield', on the Loughborough Road.

Meanwhile Lord Lonsdale had become Master of the Quorn Hunt and though actually living at Barleythorpe, had taken Churchill Cottage in Quorn so as to be near the kennels. As it was rather small he built an annexe for entertaining. He had over a hundred horses stabled round about, also a private pack of hounds he hunted himself on bye-days. His Lordship carried on most of his correspondence by telegram, and when he was at the cottage the village Post Office was kept open specially for him until ten o'clock. One afternoon Hubert's mother sent up a note asking Lord Lonsdale if he would dine with her that night, and, though Churchill Cottage lies exactly half way between Westfield and the Post Office, he replied with a long telegram, which had to be sent on a private wire to the Post Office and then on to Westfield by a telegraph boy!

Hubert recounts an interesting little story about Queen Victoria's childhood. A Dr Davys, at one time Bishop of Peterborough, and god-father to J.D. Cradock (who was named John Davys after him), was a frequent visitor to Quorn Court during Mrs Woodward's youth. He once described to her how, when he was tutor to the little princess, he taught her the alphabet by having letters printed on pieces of cardboard which he then strewed on the floor making her retrieve them as he called them out.

To look back even further Hubert's uncle John was at Wellington's funeral and his grandparents talked to William IV on the playing fields of Eton. But the most fascinating link with the past is illustrated by a story told to Hubert by an elderly friend, John Pollock. In the year 1870 Pollock found himself sitting next to a lady at dinner who turned to him and said, 'as Louis XVth said to my husband.....' This somewhat shook Pollock, but the lady was about eighty and as a girl of sixteen had made a 'mariage de convenance' with an old marquis of over sixty, who had, as a boy of ten, been page to Louis XVth!

An annual local event was the Quorn Steeplechase held at Loughborough. The meeting took place sometime in the month of April and drew big crowds. Behind the carriages were tables spread with quantities of food and drink. At Hubert's uncle's table as many of sixty or seventy would partake, the famous treacle-cured Quorn Court hams being particularly in demand. After the races there was a dinner party at Quorn Court. The dining room, lit entirely by wax candles, with poinsettias to tone with the men's scarlet coats decorating the table, must have a gay and colourful sight. In spite of being a bachelor, J. D Cradock had the best of everything, especially port, for which the house was justly famed.

For the 1901 race meeting one of the house guests arrived in a motor car, the first, probably, that Quorn had ever seen. The village turned out en masse to have a look. Hubert remembers it as a 'sort of double dog-car affair'.

Quorn occasionally had visits from Barnstormers, some of whom brought their own booths. But sometimes they would rent the village hall and stay for a week, putting on a different play every night. Hubert went to one of these, *The Bells* which he knew from cover to cover. The actors had a vague idea what the piece was about, but scarcely spoke three consecutive lines from the script. He learnt afterwards in the 'local' that they had only had their books the night before, never having previously seen or read the play!



Quorn Court, High Street

Another annual event was Wake week, which took place 'on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the feast of St Bartholomew'. St Bartholomew being the patron saint of Quorn Church(2). The show folk used to arrive early on the Sunday, and once Mrs Woodward, with the help of the village organised breakfast for them on their arrival. Hubert, as a volunteer waiter remembers serving one man with fourteen cups of tea and a cup of coffee to finish with! Of such stuff were local entertainments made before the days of the all-pervasive 'box'.

Hubert himself was becoming more and more drawn towards a career in the theatre, and in May 1908, just over sixty five years ago, he made his first appearance on the London state at the Royal Court Theatre in the play *David Garrick*, a production given in aid of the Cabdrivers' Benevolent Society. On this occasion he played as an amateur. After various theatrical ups and downs his first West End appearance as a professional came a few years later when he superseded the late Cedric Harkwicke, then a struggling unknown actor, in a small part at the Garrick theatre. Hubert describes himself as treading on air until he discovered what his salary was to be - 25/- a week! Incidentally he and Cedric Harkwicke became friends and Harkwicke always introduced him to anyone thereafter as the man who did him out of his first part in the West End.

And so we take our leave of Hubert Woodward, on the threshold of his long and colourful theatrical career. He is, perhaps, at the age of ninety, the last surviving 'character' of the British theatre, a designation he shares - in a different context - with many of those other personalities who have figured in these recollections.

(1) The Yellow Earl was Hugh Lowther, 5th Earl of Lonsdale. Master of the Quorn Hunt from 1893 to 1898. He was part of a famous wager as to whether a man could circumnavigate the globe and remain unidentified. Named 'The Yellow Earl' due to his penchant for the colour.

(2) For more information on these people and places visit the Quorn Museum website: www.quornmuseum.com