

Hugh Cecil Lowther, 5th Earl of Lonsdale, KG, GCVO (25 January 1857 – 13 April 1944) - The Yellow Earl.



Passing the Farley Way, Loughborough Road junction in Quorn one can hardly help but notice the Care UK home called 'Lonsdale Mews'. The name is derived from one-time Master of Quorn Hunt the 5th Earl of Lonsdale. Dennis Marchant looks at what we know about the Earl and his time in Quorn.....

Early Days

Hugh Cecil Lowther was born into an anything but a normal family on the 25th January 1857. A family that had inherited most of Cumberland and Westmorland, including Carlisle and Whitehaven. Unlike many titled families whose roots were connected to the time of William the Conqueror the Lowther family roots went back to the days of the Vikings. He was born just as the industrial age was replacing what was the agricultural feudal system and the rich were becoming richer and the poor poorer. The family seat was Lowther Castle and other homes included Wilton Crescent and Carlton House in London, Barleythorpe Hall in Rutland, and Asfordby Hall in Leicestershire and two steam yachts. Hugh's elder brother St George was in line to inherit the family's considerable fortune. Hugh was two years

younger than St George and there were younger brothers Charles and Lancelot. While St George was being groomed to step into his father's shoes Hugh's education was curtailed and he seems to have spent most of his time in the stable yard at Asfordby Hall and the surrounding countryside. The family estates brought in fortunes from their prime coal fields, iron ore and fifty thousand acres of agricultural land. Hugh's income rumoured to be of the order of £4000 a week failed to match his extravagant tastes and there was a certain amount of jealousy between the brothers. Oh! what luck for Hugh, spurned by society, hounded by creditors when in a relatively short time Grandad, Dad, and brother dead! - overnight Hugh at 25 years of age was one of the richest men in England. Cash flow however, was an issue and before inheriting he had reverted land at Whitehaven and Lowther into trust to finance his lifestyle. He soon saw the trustees as the 'spoilers' of his lifestyle.



'Yellow is the colour' sang Donovan and Hugh was certainly a colourful character using it to effect. Originating from the family coat of arms it was to adorn his carriages and staff uniforms. His appearance with his

entourage at sporting events made him a familiar and popular figure with the public although often the butt of the cartoonists of the time with his large cigar in mouth and gardenia in his lapel. He was a showman often outshining royalty at events such as Ascot acknowledging the crowd's cheers of 'Lordy' as he passed. We should not forget that at this time in history hunting was an extremely popular sport and was a major part of the Earl's life he had his own hounds and had hunted with the Cottesmore before hunting with the Quorn. Despite a few lordly scandals his skill of self-promotion carried him through.

Lovely Fun

Hugh's favourite saying 'lovely fun' helps sum up the life of the man who was interesting and colourful. Each episode of his life a story in itself! The man given an untrainable horse that a professional jockey and trainer had failed to control, within a week was ridden to hunt and then went on to win a six-mile steeplechase.

One of his earliest wagers in 1878 for five pounds was with an American a Mr Weston he met at his tailors. The man mentioned he was a road walker. Hugh challenged him to a match to walk one hundred miles from London to the Ram Jam Inn near Stamford. Hugh won completing the walk in under eighteen hours.

A man who later was to discourage gambling on his premises had gambled his last ten pounds, won back nearly two thousand then lost eighteen thousand, a sum way beyond his means.

John L. Sullivan another American had dominated boxing and took the Earl up on a challenge he made to fight him, travelling to New York to beat him. Boxing was illegal in England at the time something the Earl worked hard to change by founding and then becoming president of the National

Sporting Club in 1891. As Chairman of the Boxing Committee he gave his name to the Lonsdale Challenge Belt.

In 1878 Hugh Lowther married Lady Grace Gordon who he met when sixteen, then periodically at hunts and parties. Grace was a superb horse woman, played billiards, tennis and cricket well. The Gordons were not impressed when Hugh had asked for her hand and tried to extinguish thoughts of marriage. Hugh's reputation and his being in debt meant he was not suitable for their daughter. Eventually, using his persuasive skills the marriage was agreed and the couple were soon off to Wyoming where they enjoyed Buffalo and Bear hunting. Hugh was to invest in cattle ranching another failed venture.

On return he acted as an agent buying and selling horses and they moved into a cottage in Oakham where Grace was expecting a baby. Both Hugh and the Dowager Countess had failed to persuade her to give up hunting and in December 1870 her horse fell on her. After this she was unable to bear children and remained a partial invalid for the rest of her life. Grace withdrew from society; Hugh turned his attention to his self-promotion and pleasures.

Other women featured and the first we hear about was 'Skittles' Waters a name associated with her past working in a Skittle Alley. 'Skittles' flamboyancy and affairs went on to rock the Quorn. Lily Langtry the Prince of Wales' mistress followed and then his fling with married actress and singer Violet Cameron. These affairs became tabloid news attracting the attention of Queen Victoria who suggested a trip away. An ideal opportunity arose when someone was needed to go to the waste lands of Canada to collect fauna specimens. Hugh jumped at the chance of what was to become one big adventure.

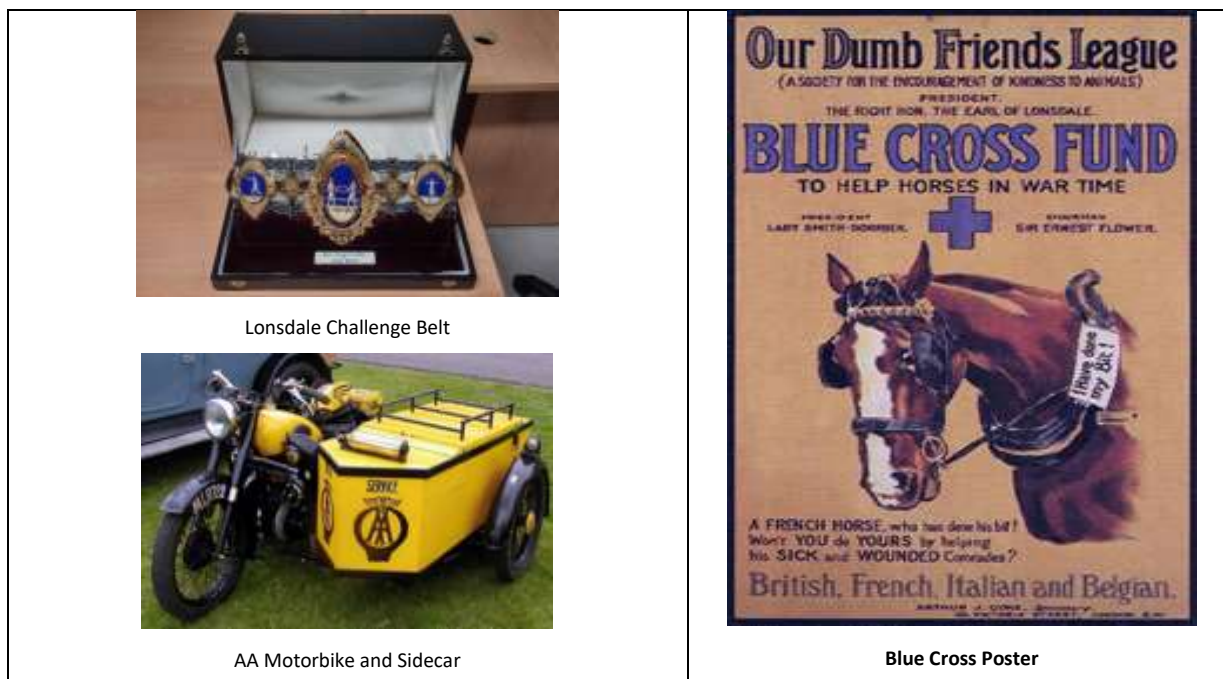


Actress and socialite Lillie Langtry
photographed by William Downey (1829-
1915), 1885



Violet Cameron in *The Commodore* at the Royal
Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, 1886

Later, in the great war Hugh became president of the Blue Cross Fund, providing veterinary help to French, Italian, Belgian and British horses. In 1905 he was a founder member and first president of the Automobile Association which adopted his yellow livery. He was a keen football fan and was Chairman of the Arsenal in 1936 having been a director and later became club president. As well as his Boer and Great War achievements he was appointed Kings Master of Horse. Amongst his friends he listed Buffalo Bill and Kaiser 'Bill'.



Then there was Quorn

In any organisation factions develop and the Quorn Hunt was no different. The Quorn Country as it was known had expanded and changed over the almost 200 years before the Earl's appointment. This itself had caused trouble in some quarters, the two main factions in the Quorn had vied for control. The issue revolved around what were known as the 'Beasts of the Forest' or the rough, the established hunting families including the Herricks of Beaumanor, the Ferrers of Staunton Harold, deLisles of Garendon, Greys of Groby and the Storeys of Lockington and the 'Meltonians' or foreigners, the modernisers if you like. The roughs believed hunting the fox was the most important thing and, in the forest, required exceptional skills of the riders, horses and hounds. The Meltonians on the other hand liked the chase across the flat lands, the fox was almost immaterial to a good day's sport. There was also a perception that Quorn Huntsman, Tom Firr, the most celebrated Huntsman in the world had too much rein under previous masters. Into this mix in September 1893 at the age of 36, the Earl of Lonsdale was formally appointed as the Quorn Master of the Hunt.

He was seen by some as the perfect person for the job, a hard riding, free spending, highflyer with money to turn the Quorn out in style and regain its reputation. The first for a while not a Meltonian and they considered him to be explosive, autocratic, and militaristic however, all agreed that he was a deeply knowledgeable huntsman.



The Earl and Countess Lonsdale Arriving from Barleythorpe, With Party for the Hunt Chases, 1893. Cuthbert Bradley. National Sporting Library & Museum.

It soon became clear he would be involved with every detail of the Quorn and was to be at the forefront in changing the way the hunt operated. His first letter ran to fourteen pages addressing the issue of second horses. Those with second horses were to instruct their servants not to jump fences and to use only the lanes and byways.

Another long-standing issue was with the farmers over whose lands the hunt travelled. Lord Lonsdale wanted the farmers supported and reminded followers to purchase forage, stable hay, etc from them. He expected his Huntsman and Whipper-ins to be smartly turned out in white leather

breeches, polished boots and dark red jackets with the newly introduced buttons. The same buttons, only obtainable from one supplier and only available to those who had paid their subscriptions shaming followers who had not subscribed. The staff horses were all to be long tailed, hog-maned, thoroughbred chestnuts of 15 hands 2 inches.

Lonsdale introduced the idea that a chaise be sent for Tom Firr at the end of the day's hunt to prevent him having to ride home to Quorn, often not returning until late after a hard day's work. Hounds were ordered home if rules were not being followed, something his brother Lancelot, who acted as Master when Hugh was away, would not do.

Although, the changes did not go down too well with some, the decisions to re-instate the Loughborough Meet and the Melton Hunt Ball certainly did. Tuesday 26th March 1894 saw Loughborough Town Hall decorated and a large archway stretching across the street on which was inscribed 'Success to Foxhunting'. The hunt left the town under the arch to the cheers of the crowd. The event was deemed a great success, in his diary Tom Firr recorded 'there never were so many people seen in Loughborough' apparently over 12,000 people had turned out. The Melton Hunt ball revived in 1895 and proved another great success.

Hugh had agreed to live near the hounds and took on Churchill Cottage a property that stood in Barrow Road in the area of what is now Castledine Street. A cottage that with some modification consisted of four bedrooms, three servants' rooms, two bathrooms, three sitting rooms, stables, coach house, garden, and paddock. In 1894 Soar House, also in Quorn, was purchased by Hugh and he instigated a programme of alterations that changed the property beyond recognition. Being a larger property it was ideal for providing accommodation for his many guests. Soar House was

retained by him after he resigned the Mastership. Although not documented there is anecdotal evidence that Kaiser Wilhelm stayed there. This is possible as he was the Earl's guest at Cowes in July 1895 and then travelled north to Lowther Castle on a 'private visit' as Hugh's guest. Being a sporting man he was welcomed to the castle by the Quorn Hunt horns. The Kaiser returned to Berlin accompanied by the Earl in August so, maybe they did call in to see the most famous hunt in the world. Back in Quorn he would visit the local gentry for dinner, had the Post Office opening hours extended to 10pm so he could send telegrams, participated in the local produce show and had John Crane a Hounds Runner prosecuted for allegedly stealing his bottle of whiskey from the Cottage.

Goodbye

Hugh's years as Master were largely successful, he had poured in funds turning the Quorn into the show hunt. By late 1896 though money was running out and he was to resign when the farmers begged him to stay, he agreed but by June 1898 the reducing income from the mines and the drain on his income meant a sudden goodbye. The horses were sold at the largest sale of the 20th century on 21st July. He and Tom Firr ended up respecting each other and £25 was subscribed toward Firr's retirement gift in 1899.



1923 etching of Hugh Lowther. The artist Joseph Simpson (1879-1939) was born in Carlisle and was an official war artist in the First World War for which he was awarded the CBE.

England's Greatest Sportsman as he was known, continued as the Cottesmore Master until 1921 and spent his final years during the second world war near Barleythorpe where he died aged 87. It is surely appropriate that his memory will live on in Quorn with the Lonsdale Mews, a modern state of the art Care Home.



Grace and Hugh in later years

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