

THE SECRETS OF WARDOUR

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WARDOUR Old Castle was built in 1392 by John fifth Lord Lovell of Tichmarsh. During the Wars of the Roses it changed hands several times and, in 1499, was sold to Lord Willoughby de Broke whose grand-daughter re-sold it to a Cornish knight, Sir John Arundell of Lanherne. 'The family', wrote John Francis, 12th Baron Arundell of Wardour in 1906, 'has never ceased to be Catholic since mediaeval times', and in 1552 Sir Thomas Arundell was executed because he belonged to the old religion. Queen Mary restored Wardour to Matthew Arundell, son of Sir Thomas, who in spite of his faith was knighted by Queen Elizabeth. He modernised the castle and built new Tudor windows into the Norman walls. Matthew Arundell's son, Thomas, went to the Wars in Hungary, captured a Turkish banner at Esztergoum and was made a count of the Holy Roman Empire. Queen Elizabeth objected to this Popish honour and Count Thomas was sent to prison. James I, who could never quite forget that he had been born a Catholic, set Thomas Arundell free and made him the first Baron Arundell of Wardour. His grandson, the third Lord Arundell, was granted a special licence by James II whereby he and his heir were established as Counts of the Empire for good.

By this time Wardour Castle, though still inhabitable, had during the Great Rebellion, undergone two sieges in the space of ten months. Lady Blanche Arundell, a god-daughter of Margaret, Countess of Salisbury, had not the blood of the Plantagenets in her veins for nothing. When the rebels under Sir Edward Hungerford, knowing that Lord Arundell and his son were with the Royalist forces in Cornwall, tried to take the castle they were kept at bay by twenty-five men at arms under the direction of the lady, who, sixty years of age, wore a man's head-piece and fired her own blunderbuss at the besiegers until, seeing that she was not to be beaten, they mined part of the fortress and took her prisoner. Her son, the second baron, having seen his father die of wounds, came back to Wardour and retook the castle by the simple means of bettering the enemy's instruction and blowing yet more of its

walls down with mines. This was in 1644. For another hundred years the Arundells lived on in such parts of the castle as were weatherproof enough to shelter them, and the loving-cup made from wood from the Glastonbury thorn, and the Westminster chasuble given to the chapel by Henry VII—as well as another embroidered with the pomegranate of Aragon and the Tudor Rose, the gift of Henry VIII before the Reformation; a great plumed four-post bed hung with curtains of crimson damask; family portraits by Holbein and Van Dyck and one by a now forgotten artist of the indomitable Lady Blanche, which was copied by Angelica Kauffmann.

But, by the middle of the eighteenth century a good deal of Italianate rebuilding was being commissioned by the owners of dilapidated or merely old-fashioned mansions. James Paine, the architect of Worksop Manor and of Kedleston, which reminded Dr Johnston of a town hall, was fortunate enough to work with the brothers Adam, whose genius for interior decoration was recognised by an age that was tired of Jacobean heaviness. To them in 1768 Henry, tenth Lord Arundell, entrusted the building of Wardour New Castle, a mile or so to the north of the old fortress and on a site from which the river was hidden by the trees of the parkland sloping down to the lake. James Paine built palaces rather than castles, but Arundell's new house kept the old name. Palaces are expensive to construct: in order that this one should fulfil his dream of magnificence and comfort Lord Arundell sold a certain London property that belonged to him: it was called Wardour Street.

The old castle still stands below the wooded hills to the north, and has for years been the goal of picnic-parties. It has been taken over by the Ministry of Works.

Most of the great houses of England, however secluded in their parks, are approached through gates between lodges or under gate-houses visible to passers-by on the roads that skirt their ring-fences. Wardour New Castle has no such proclaiming road-side entrance. The Chevalier de St George had died in Rome a year or two before the building was begun, but the Young Pretender and Cardinal York were still alive. Clement XIV had suppressed the Society of Jesus before Wardour was finished, and the pot that was to boil over in the No Popery Riots had begun to simmer. England under the Hanoverians was a country where the families

who had 'never ceased to be Roman Catholics since mediaeval times' lived for the faith and for each other, and, as they still do, formed a guarded though no longer threatened society of their own. Wardour increased in magnificence; in the splendour of its collections of pictures and porcelains; in the gay opulence of painted ceilings—with sunset clouds threaded through by flights of the *hirondelle*, punning French emblem of Arundell; of delicate white marble Adam fireplaces; of gilded chairs and inlaid tables and the long suite of dining-hall, drawing-room, music-room, library and boudoir all facing south across the slopes of the park, so planted that no sign of any human dwelling could be seen through the windows. The ruined castle was hidden from the palace, but the palace was hidden from the curious world. Only at night when the carved and gilded shutters were closed over the windows of the high saloons was the house made visible in the darkness by the reflection of moonlight or starlight or late mid-summer sunset in the tall narrow strips of looking-glass set in their outward facing panels.

For nearly three hundred years there was a Lord Arundell of Wardour in the New Castle: one of them was a Jesuit Father and when Lieutenant Lord Arundell of Wardour, who had been a prisoner of war in Germany, came home in 1945 and died unmarried leaving no heir, the property was acquired by the Society of Jesus. The twelfth baron had sold his Cornish lands and 'several valuable pictures gone out of the country since the passing of the Finance Act of 1894'. The increasing death duties drained the estate as the successive deaths of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth inheritors necessitated the sale of yet more pictures and much of the land; but the great house was there and, as the new Socialist Government was, at the time, proposing to run an arterial road through Manresa House, the Jesuit Fathers thought, for a time, that Wardour might be used as their noviciate. However, the huge place needed too much reconditioning: it had neither gas nor electric light, and though an American tenant had put in two bath-rooms these were in the sacristy. A community of refugee nuns had camped for a time in the kitchens, but when peace was declared they went away; only a caretaker and his wife inhabit Wardour today. The white owl sinister supporting the coat of arms that has appeared to warn the living of the death of each lord of the castle, has flown across the gardens for the last time.

Today, if you can find your way through the narrow lanes and to the old white iron gate across the entrance to the drive, the priest who serves the chapel will shew you part of the house and tell you some of the Wardour tale. A visit to Wardour leaves a double memory when it is over, of secrets disclosed and unimagined loveliness. A low door leads from the rather stark courtyard on the north side of the house into a dark panelled hall with no more distinction than may be found in almost any country manor house of the same period. A few pieces of seventeenth-century armour hang on the walls, among them a helmet said to be that worn by the Lady Blanche when she defended the old castle. And then, as you begin to wonder why you have come so far to see so dim a place, a door at the back of the hall is opened and under the light from a domed roof you see a double flight of pale marble steps curving round the sides of a rotunda to a circular gallery behind a delicate balustrade of black and gold, from the rail of which, at intervals, rise like great transparent tulips, the shades that once held lamps to star the beauty of what is probably the most perfect staircase in the world. It is a wonder to dream of for many nights after it has been seen; an architectural miracle continued in the panels of the carved doors and the gallery, that, opening, lead to the parallelograms of painted rooms that still hold a few pictures and carpets and suites of rather alarmingly upholstered chairs left after the more intimate family things have been taken away and the locust swarms of antique dealers have bought and gone. The windows of this *piano nobile* face south: immediately after them the ground is paved with flagstones brought there from Newgate Prison when it was pulled down in 1783 after the gallows on which the skeleton of Oliver Cromwell had hung, successor to the bodies of the martyrs, brought from Tyburn to Smithfield for greater convenience in the execution of the condemned. The lawn which this grim path borders is now broken by a cabbage field. This innovation is only the other extremity of the incongruity inside the walls, where the lime-green and starch-blue paint of the domed music-room; the gilding and brocaded panelling of the dining-hall and drawing-rooms, the exquisite white Adam chimney-pieces; a great Sheraton china-cabinet, emptied of its treasures; a little gilded stand from which the miniatures it was made to display have been taken, leaving unfaded violet ovals dark against the

paleness of the velvet covering, remain to show the depths of opulence on which life floated here a hundred years ago. Here and there amid the evidence of worldly luxury there are reminders of that faith of whose continuance the old lord boasted. Such pictures as still remain are either copies of old masters, many of them landscapes and many of them portraits of Arundells or Holy Families of no very great importance. One picture, fine enough in itself, is of peculiar interest as showing that Lady Blanche was not the only woman of determined character in the family. Cecily Arundell, daughter of the third baron, entered a community of Poor Clares and wished to take portraits of her father and mother into the convent with her. This was refused as not being consistent with the rule of the strict order. So the lady ordered a picture of the Crucifixion and had her parents painted kneeling on the left side of the scene as donors of the work. As the picture now hangs at Wardour it is possible that the subterfuge was of no avail. Here and there less dramatic, more conventional signs of the devout life remain in the rooms. A fine amber crucifix hangs on a wall; there are calvarys and filigree silver crèches in glass box-frames in the boudoir, but the most intimate and beautiful of these holy vestiges is a tiny bronze not more than four inches high: a lovely head, with a gilded nimbus, bent slightly sideways in delicate pensiveness: Jesus as a very young man. I cannot recall seeing any other bust of the same subject that approached it for tenderness and grace, or indeed for rarity: we are accustomed to full length figures of the Lord.

Leaving the splendid empty rooms we are taken down the dream staircase into one of these dim and narrow passages that wind inside the walls of great houses and come to the sacristy. Here in press after press and room upon room are stored the innumerable vestments, all magnificent, some of rare historic value—such as the Westminster chasuble of Henry VII's time, used when High Mass was sung at Wardour to the accompaniment of a string orchestra seated in the organ-loft of the chapel. Those days are over: there is only one priest now to say Mass for the faithful who still come up to the little door which, until lately, was guarded on Sunday mornings by a policeman sent up from the village under a royal order made in the days of the persecution. The door is narrow, the vestibule small and meagre. It had to be so. The chapel is masked by the smaller rooms rising to a second

floor in the east wing of the palace. This chapel is the most secret of all the secrets in this place of refuge: the most secret and the most astonishing.

Lit perforce by windows high above the walls of the quasi-rococo basilica designed by Sir James Soane and decorated by an exuberant Italian called Quarenghi, the chapel is at once gay and intimate and, because of the lighting, theatrical. The altar, standing well away from the curve of the apse, is surmounted by a figure of the risen Christ copied in gold from the statue in the dome of Santa Sophia in Jerusalem. Below it a crucifix is planted between two enormous uncut amethysts; immediately above the altar an Indian bloodstone, larger than a full-blown rose, glows and sparkles as if with dew on its petals. Round the walls the Stations of the Cross hang—vivid in Limoges enamel in lightly wrought frames of branched gold.

As I sat there, dazzled by the glow and movement of the decorated place, I remembered the fastidious astonishment of Maurice de Guérin when he reached the sanctuary under the cupola of the *Chapelle Expiatoire* in Paris:

Ce petit oratoire est tout reluisant d'or, de cuivre et de marbre. D'élégantes moulures, de belles sculptures en relief serpentant ça et là tout autour: la coupole est toute fleurie de rosaces. L'ensemble est frais, poli, délicat et d'un art exquis. . . . comment s'expliquer la pensée qui a élevé sur une tombe un oratoire tout inondé de lumière et coiffé d'une coupole qui est un véritable chapeau de fleurs?

Guérin was doubtful about the gay building placed above the trenches where the bodies of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette lie buried in quicklime together with those of the eight hundred Swiss Guards who fell during the storming of the Tuileries in 1792. Was it intended to typify the prayer that rises, a sweet songbird mounting upwards to the heart of light and peace, he asks, while below it before a bare forbidding altar stands in a darkened vault to commemorate human pain? 'La douleur humaine serait là: la douleur chrétienne.'

Guérin would have found his symbol of christian anguish amid the rose and gold and sea-blue of this chapel in England: for under the altar there stretches an enormous sarcophagus in verde antique enclosing the bones of one of Diocletian's martyrs—found in the chapel of St Calixtus when in 1850 the Commendatore de Rossi, pupil of the Jesuit Father Marchi, made his great discovery.

The chapel holds about two hundred people and is usually full at 8 o'clock Mass every Sunday morning. At Corpus Christi last year five hundred and fifty Catholics came to walk in the strange procession that, in order to encircle the hidden church, has to march singing around the castle and through the lovely melancholy of its deserted garden.

All this and more can be seen and learnt about through the courtesy of the Jesuit Fathers Rogers and Payne who have charge of house and chapel. I have been there twice; one day I hope to go there again, if only to pause once more by the little bronze where, in a long-abandoned room, it waits exquisite in pensive beauty to enclose the wandering stranger in a momentary benediction.

OBITER

DOCTRINE AND LIFE (every second month; 1s. 6d.) is a new review, edited by the Irish Dominicans, which will, in the Irish Provincial's words, 'undertake the task of initiating the faithful into the treasures hidden beneath the sacred mysteries'. The first number (February), including as it does contributions by the Archbishop of Port of Spain, Fr Gabriel, O.D.C., Fr Moynihan, O.P. and H. C. Graef, promises to fulfil this admirable intention with grace and authority.

ESPRIT has devoted a special double number to the memory of its founder, Emmanuel Mounier. Articles by many of his friends and colleagues, as well as extracts from his diaries and letters, are ample testimony to the range of his influence and the integrity of his teaching.

LA VIE INTELLECTUELLE (February) includes an interesting study of Chagall, 'Jew and Russian', as well as authoritative articles on the present German situation. In NEW LIFE (January) Donald Nicholl deals with the Catholic Worker Tradition in Germany and shows the true continuity of Bishop Ketteler's work.

The Catholic Truth Society's edition of the Encyclical *Humani Generis* in Mgr Ronald Knox's translation provides a convenient means of reading (and re-reading) a document whose importance for the intellectual life of Catholics can hardly be exaggerated.