

On his memorial slab, now lost, Sir Thomas Beaumont of Stoughton Grange, Cromwell's baronet (see page 137) is described as Pater Familiae "the Father of the Family", probably because he had nine children. Viewed from the present day, it could also refer to the fact that from him were descended the heads of no less than three branches of the Beaumont family, those of Stoughton Grange, Dunmow and by inheritance from a relative, Cole Orton.

About the year 1670 William (1642 - 1719), third son of the baronet arrived in Dunmow and took up residence there. Eight years later he was joined by his elder brother Thomas (1639 - 1710). Thomas was a scholar of New College, Oxford, who had entered the church and came to the parish in 1678 as Vicar. From that time onward this branch of the Beaumonts were closely associated with Essex. Thomas died there of smallpox in 1710; at least two of his children were baptised there and his eldest son Thomas, also educated at New College, was Vicar of High Easter a mere five miles away.

William survived his elder brother by nine years, dying in March 1719. Three months later his wife died. They, together with their eldest son William, are commemorated on a tablet on the north wall of Great Dunmow Church. This memorial alludes to the origin of the family:

"Sacred to the memory of William Beaumont esq, son of Sir Thomas Beaumont Bart., of Stoughton in Leicestershire"

This association was to be important, for within twenty years of William's death it was to make his eldest grandson a baronet.

This grandson was George, the eldest son of William the Younger, born in 1726 and barely three years old when his father died. Before 1700 it would have appeared inconceivable that any Dunmow Beaumont would become a baronet, for four brothers of the Stoughton Grange family, the sons of Henry the second baronet, were still alive. In that year, however, Charles died when H.M.S. Carlisle was lost and three years later Basil was drowned in the great storm which swept the Goodwin Sands. Thomas the third baronet had died in 1690; the fourth baronet George, who had inherited all the Cole Orton Estates was unmarried and died in 1737. His only surviving brother the Reverend Lewis dying in 1739, left no children to succeed him and thus the Cole Orton Estates plus the Baronetcy were inherited by George, son of William of Dunmow. Born there in 1726, George, at the age of twelve, thus became Sir George Beaumont, the 6th baronet, of Cole Orton. He was educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford and married in March 1751 Rachel, daughter of Michael Howland of Stonehall, Dunmow. Their third and only surviving son, the 7th baronet, Sir George Howland Beaumont (1753-1827) became one of the most noted of all connoisseurs of art and a great patron of artists and men of letters.

In his early days at Eton and later at New College Oxford, Sir George showed a passion if not an outstanding talent, for drawing. At the age of eighteen he was introduced to his tutor Charles Davy to the London engraver William Woollett with whom he spent many hours sketching in the Suffolk countryside while staying at his tutor's rectory. He continued his studies at Oxford, not only of art in the drawing school but also of classical history and of English literature, familiarising himself with story and legend which in those days furnished many of the themes used by the painters.

At North Aston near Oxford lived his friend Oldfield Bowles who was a great patron of Richard Wilson and for some months employed Thomas Jones, one

of Wilson's pupils as his own tutor. It was among the small circle of friends at North Aston that he indulged his passion for painting and learnt better to discriminate between good and bad art. Here he played a leading part in amateur dramatics, and it is said, committed some of the plays of Shakespeare to memory. One evening, when acting at North Aston, he saw among the audience a very beautiful young lady who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the play, and found by enquiry that she was Margaret, daughter and heiress of John Willes of Astrop, M.P. for the County of Oxford. He arranged to be introduced to her, found that she had similar tastes to his own. This resulted in an engagement and the pair were married at St. George's, Hanover Square on May 6th, 1778. It was a perfect match, for they shared the same tastes, they loved company, they were excellent hosts, and they had the wealth to exercise their love of patronage to the full. In the year of their wedding Sir Joshua Reynolds painted a portrait of them in which Lady Beaumont is represented as looking to the right, dressed in a dark costume with her hair piled high on the head. This portrait is, or was, in the possession of the Earl of Arran.

For the first time in history, the English people were beginning to view their landscapes, not merely as pleasant scenes with possibilities for crop-growing, industry or cattle-rearing, but for their pure aesthetic value. The beauties of the Lake District which had up to that time been regarded as of little use because of being mountainous and largely barren was 'discovered' by admirers of nature. Thomas Grey, the poet and others brought back descriptions of its 'awful amphitheatres of mountains, the shining purity of its lakes, its towering crags, its deep almost perpendicular chasms and its streams clear as glass, showing every trout that passes'. Sir George was captivated by its beauty and visited the Lakes on his honeymoon and in the three consecutive years 1779, 1780 and 1781, bringing home each time a number of drawings. This was followed in 1782 by a grand tour of western Europe visiting Brussels, Lausanne, Turin, Perugia, Rome and Naples. For the first time he saw the wonder, and tried to express in pencil and colour, the beauty and the atmosphere of the Alps and the ancient Italian towns.

1790 was the first of Sir George's six years as M.P. for Beer Alston. During this time he saw little of Cole Orton which had fallen into decay and was hardly habitable. Most of his time was spent in the town house in Grosvenor Square which his wife had inherited, at his country residence, the Clock House, Dunmow, or at Dedham where his mother was living. At that time a young lad named John Constable was working for his father, who had flour mills at Dedham and Flatford. Sir George who probably met him in 1795, immediately recognised the young man's undoubted talents. Certainly the meeting was the starting point of Constable's life as a serious artist, and, inspired by Sir George's own work and his collection, he persuaded his father to allow him to go to London to consult Joseph Farington the painter.

Between 1795 and 1800 Sir George visited both Wales and the Lake District making more drawings, some of them imaginary scenes. Far more important than these however, was the way in which he was gathering round him and encouraging poorer artists in their work. He was a wealthy amateur, one of the very few to be associated with masters far greater than he could ever hope to be. Benjamin Haydon, one of his proteges, probably put his finger on the real reason for this. "Sir George", he said

"was an extraordinary man, one of the old school formed by Sir Joshua - a link between the artist and the nobleman, elevating the one by an intimacy which did not depress the other. Born a painter, his fortune prevented the necessity of application for subsistence, and of course,

he did not apply, His taste was exquisite, not peculiar or classical, but essentially Shakespearean. Painting was his great delight. He talked of nothing else, and would willingly have done nothing else. His ambition was to connect himself with the Art of the country and he has done it for ever".

This from a man who had quarreled with him bitterly over the completion of a picture, is a tribute indeed. He was by this time both patron and friend of Farington, Hearne, Benjamin West, Thomas Daniel, Julius Ibbetson, George Dance, William Alexander, Girtton and Constable, and during the next ten years he was to add many more names to this list.

At first the artists came to Dunmow and might be seen by the country people sketching near the Clock House and on the Downs, while the evenings were spent in discussion on art and letters. Coleridge, who was writing his *Christabel*, stayed with Sir George in 1804 and lent him the manuscript. On his return to London Coleridge received letters from Lady Beaumont and replied to one of them:

"The thought that you and Sir George will at times talk of the Poem by your fireside, or in your summer evening walks, and sometimes wish for its conclusion, will be one and a strong inducement to me to finish it. I trust I need not say to your Ladyship that in a letter to Dunmow, least of all correspondents should I dare to let my words outstrip my weighted meaning, my inmost feeling."

Coleridge was at that time living at Greta Hall near Keswick and Sir George, who had made the acquaintance of Wordsworth, presented him with a small estate at Applethwaite so that he could build a house near that of his friend. The property was beautifully situated on the southern flank of Skiddaw and the orchard and other parts of the grounds commanded a magnificent prospect of Derwentwater and the mountains of Borrowdale. When Wordsworth received the piece of land he composed a sonnet:

"Beaumont! It was thy wish that I should rear
A seemly cottage in this sunny Dell,
On favoured ground, thy gift, where I might dwell
In neighbourhood with one to me most dear,
That undivided, we from year to year
Might work in our high calling - a bright hope
To which our fancies, mingling, give free scope
Till checked by some necessities severe.
And should these slacken, honoured BEAUMONT! Still
Even then we might perhaps in vain implore
Leave of our fate thy wishes to fulfil.
Whether this boon be granted us or not,
Our Skiddaw will look down upon the Spot
With pride, the Muses love it evermore."

The 'sever necessities' which prevented the scheme being carried out were due to Wordsworth's domestic situation.

While Coleorton was in process of re-construction Wordsworth with his wife and Dorothy, visited it. The three ladies superintended the fashioning of a garden out of an old quarry and Wordsworth wrote another sonnet to commemorate it. In the grounds he and Sir George planted a cedar in honour of the earlier Beaumont poets, Sir John and Francis the Dramatist.

"If but the Cedar thrive that near them stands,
Planted by Beaumont's and by Wordsworth's hands,
One wooed the silent Art with studious pains;
These groves heard the Other's pensive strains:

When inspiration hovered o'er this ground,
The haunts of him who sang how spear and shield
In civil conflict met on Bosworth Field,
And of that famous Youth, full soon removed
From earth, perhaps by Shakespeare's self approved,
Fletcher's associate, Jonson's friend beloved."

Wordsworth visited Dunmow in 1809 and was impressed by the solitude and uninterrupted quiet of the place. The friendship between poet and artist was one which Sir George considered one of the most precious of his life, while Lady Beaumont was equally devoted to Dorothy, Wordsworth's sister. The two men must have known that they were related to each other, for a more recent inventory of the poet's possessions included furniture bearing the Beaumont arms and the initial of Wordsworth's Beaumont ancestors. It is inconceivable that Sir George when visiting the poet should not have seen these pieces of furniture. In 1810 David Wilkie, worn out by overwork and neglecting to care to his health was invited to Dunmow where Sir George and Lady Beaumont treated him almost like a son.

In 1807 when Benjamin Haydon was painting his picture "Joseph and Mary" Sir George asked Wilkie if he could be taken to the artist's studio to see it. In his autobiography Haydon describes this first meeting.

"A thundering knock and trampling horses, a rattling down of steps and flinging open of doors, announced consequence and fashion. The picture was set in a good light, the room neat, the chairs old, the carpet worn. In came David Wilkie introducing Lady and Sir George Beaumont, the friends of Garrick and Sir Joshua.

Lady Beaumont was a graceful woman, looking young for her age; Sir George a tall, well-bred, handsome man with a highly intellectual air. They both eyed me and were delighted with the picture."

Two years later when Cole Orton was finished, Haydon and Wilkie were invited to stay a fortnight there.

"Sir George painted, and Lady Beaumont drew, and Wilkie and I made our respective studies for our own purposes. At lunch we assembled and chatted over what we had been doing, and at dinner we brought down our respective sketches and cut up each other in great good humour. We dined with Claude and the Rembrandt before us, breakfasted with the Rubens landscape, and did nothing, morning, noon or night, but think of painting, talk of painting, dream of painting and wake up to paint again."

He describes how, even on the stairs on the way to bed, they stopped, made each other stand in this position and that, and holding the candle in different places, they discussed the colours they would use. Then separating for the night, they rose with the lark and were at the painting again "all of us feeling as jealous as if we were artists struggling for fame." Wilkie painted an old woman of the village and Haydon made Lady Beaumont's maid stand on the stairs with the light behind her to make a study for his Lady Macbeth.

"Sir George said to us one day at dinner: Wordsworth may perhaps walk in; if he do. I caution you both against his terrific democratic notions."

At the height of his career, almost everybody of note "walked in", and there was hardly a poet or artist whom Sir George did not help in some way. In his early days he had known Dr. Johnson, in his middle age he helped to establish Landseer and supported the artist Cozens, the son of his old tutor when he went insane, and provided for him until his death. It was under his roof that Sir Walter Scott met Sir Humphrey Davy, Samuel Rogers and Byron, and his interest in English artists led him to commission many of them to paint works for his huge collection. For him Landseer painted the famous "fighting dogs" and Gibson the group "Psyche born by Zephyrs". Although he quarrelled with Haydon about the size of the picture of Macbeth, he bought it in the end.

Byron in "The Blues", one of his worst efforts, satirised the kind of intellectual discussion that was carried on by Sir George and his friends, ridiculing them as a pretentious lot of babblers. In a few lines in which Inkel addresses Lady Blumount, he makes fun of Wordsworth:

"INKEL. Lady Blumount! A glass of Madeira!

LADY BLUM. With pleasure.

INKEL.

How does your friend Wordsworth, that Windermere treasure?

Does he stick to his lakes, like the leeches

he sings?

And their gatherers, as Homer sung warriors

and kings?

He has just got a place.

As a footman?

For shame!

Nor profane with your sneers so poetic a name."

Such outpourings were not likely to cause much disquiet to Sir George and his circle.

Towards the end of his life he not only pronounced on good taste in art; he actually created it. A story by Haydon says more than many a full-length essay could about Sir George's character:

"Lawrence and Sir George Beaumont are the most perfect gentlemen I ever saw - both naturally irritable and waspish, but both controlling every feeling which is incompatible with breeding."

At a large party once at an hotel in Jermyn Street, to breakfast with Sir Walter Scott, Sir George remained a long time with his empty cup waiting for tea. The conversation being lively, he was forgotten by Sir Walter, and I sat watching him to observe how he would bear it. It was quite a study to see how admirably Sir George by anecdotes, and laughing, and listening, all of which was intentional, kept everybody from believing that he was neglected, or thought himself so. At last his cup caught Sir Walter's eye; he filled it, with apology, and Sir George took it as if he had only then been thirsty, and as if on the whole his tea was a great deal better than if he had had it sooner. It was exquisitely done . . .

The perpetual consciousness of a defect of temper which would destroy all affection begets a perpetual effort at control. Reynolds, Lawrence and Sir George are examples."

In 1818 he began an agitation for a National Gallery of paintings and it was mainly owing to his appeals, his tact and his personal qualities that it was founded in 1826 and has now become the home of some of the most famous of the world's art treasures. One of his own water colours, a painting of a tower near Ponte Molle, Rome, is in the National Gallery. In the Tate is a pencil and wash of a waterfall, and on the back of the frame is a note that it was given by Sir George to Wordsworth on the 11th October, 1803. This with two others was given to the author by Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, (great great grandson of the poet), and the other two have been presented to the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery. In Leicester too is Sir George's painting of Peel Castle. Sir Joshua Reynolds did an engraving of this picture, the only engraving he is known to have done.

Sir George was a frequent exhibitor at the National Gallery. His own besides work of all the best English artists of which he left or presented sixteen to the National Gallery, included Michelangelo's unfinished bas-relief of the Holy Mother and Child with St. John.

After a life of intense activity and travel Sir George died at Coleorton Hall on February 7th, 1827, and was buried in the church there. For the working classes the post-war years were filled with misery and discontent, though they hardly touched Sir George's privileged circle. The poets, however, viewed with grief and dismay the decay of political and social morality and the probabilities of a violent uprising of the masses. In their attacks on the ministry they were joined by Wordsworth, who unburdened his mind to Sir George on the iniquities and the insincerities of statesmen.

As the well-spent and happy years glided by, Sir George retained his health and was as fortunate in this as in his friendships, for to the last he suffered no physical decay nor were his capacities impaired. Then suddenly, in February 1827 he had a seizure followed by an attack of erysipelas. The results were fatal and on the 7th of the month he died. On the very morning of his death he was planning his work for the day with his usual vigour, in spite of his apparent suffering. When Sir Walter Scott heard the news he wrote in his journal (L. 358)

"14th February 1827. Sir George Beaumont is dead, by far the most sensible and pleasing man I never knew, kind, too, in his nature and generous; gentle in society . . . as an amateur he was a painter of the very highest rank."

Tributes to his kindness and his wife's influence on artistic life came from even the most unexpected quarters. His natural happiness made a strong impression on Southey, whose industry and pure integrity had been appreciated by Sir George. "It is something", said the poet, "to have left durable memorials of himself, and a noble example. But the crowning blessing is to have lived well and in faith." Haydon who had long believed himself ill-treated owing to Sir George's initial refusal to buy his picture of Macbeth criticised what he thought was lack of attention in caring more to bring unacknowledged talent from obscurity than to support that talent once it was acknowledged.

In less than two years following Sir George's death his wife Margaret, who had for a lifetime been his support and helpmeet, died, and that world-famous group of poets and artists lost the noblest patrons and the most loyal of friends. In 1830, Wordsworth wrote in his "Elegiac Musings in the

grounds of Cole Orton Hall," on Sir George's death:

"With copious eulogy in prose or rhyme

Graven on the tomb, we struggle against Time,

Alas, how feebly; but our feelings rise

And still we struggle when a good man dies.

Such offering Beaumont dreaded and forbade,

A spirit meek in self-abasement clad."

But again the most direct tribute comes from Haydon, the man who was his most severe critic:

"His loss, with all his faults, will not easily be
supplied. He founded the National Gallery. Let him
be crowned. Peace to him."

He was succeeded in the baronetcy by his cousin George, eldest son of
Thomas Beaumont of Buckland.