

The Sitwells in Scarborough.

Prepared by James Bantoft - November, 2008.

Why a family who were at one time the principal iron-traders in the country and were the world centre for the trade in nails should settle in Scarborough for over 50 years is a question whose answer has brought the town into international focus and bequeathed it a rich heritage. The answer of course is that name which is for ever associated with eccentricity, but which is now more firmly founded in literature, namely the Sitwells.

That family has been associated with the town at least since 1774 when in common with many other visitors Francis Hurt Sitwell came to the resort both for health as well as leisure. His family seat, as it had been since 1620, was at Renishaw Hall, the centre of a 7000 acre estate located in the parish of Eckington in North Derbyshire. The Sitwells took no part in the affairs of State and only gained prominence when in 1808 the Prince Regent, having stayed there for a Ball in an extension built for his honour, conferred a Baronetcy on the incumbent head of the family. Sir Sitwell Sitwell's honour has descended to the present and 7th Baronet, Sir Reresby Sitwell, who resides there with his wife, Penelope, Lady Sitwell.

As is so often the case the most pleasant situations seem to have a deep shadow, and this was never more true for this family when the proceeds of a land-sale were deposited into a local Bank on the day that it went into liquidation. Allied to the loss, the family was defrauded of money and at the same time a family of Scottish relatives came south to live with and off them. It was all too much, and in 1847 Sir George Sitwell, the 2nd. Baronet, had to close the Hall and sell off the family treasure.

When he died in 1853 aged 55, and relinquished the title and estate to his son Sir George Reresby (Reresby) he passed on too an inheritance of problems which led to the 3rd Baronet's death in 1862, aged 41. Sir Reresby had by then a young family of two, one Florence and her younger brother George Reresby (Sir George) who, aged two on his father's death, became the youngest Baronet in England. It was this boy who was to become the beginning of the legends which have attached themselves over the 19th and 20th century to the Sitwells, but who would not have achieved fame without his remarkable and widowed mother, Lady Louisa.

Sir George grew up in Scarborough since his mother had decided to base the family in the town and had first lived at "Sunnyside", a modest villa which she had built, on the corner of Ramshill and Westbourne Grove, but later became more permanently established at "Woodend". From 1870 to the present day that house still stands as the focus for the family in its sea-side adoptive home. Lady Louisa, raised in the village and house of "Weston" in Northamptonshire came from the Hely-Hutchinson family. By her marriage to Sir Reresby in 1857 she brought "Weston" into the patrimony of the Sitwells and even today part of it is occupied by William Sitwell, who locally so recently entertained us with a performance of "Facade", a poetical composition by Edith before she became a Dame.

The marriage of Sir George to Lady Ida Denison on Nov.26 1886 at St George's, Hanover Square, London should have been one made in heaven! But, not so, since Ida being an innocent seventeen year old and Sir George being of a rather isolated nature were each unprepared for such a union and on the third day she ran back to mother. You do not bring such troubles to a Lady who, being the youngest daughter of the 7th. Duke of Beaufort, descended from the Plantagenets, and married to Baron Henry Denison, Lord

Londesborough No, the former Hon. Lady Edith Somerset (Somerset Terrace) sent her daughter back to get on with life! In any case Baron Londesborough was to be raised to the rank of Earl in the following year and his wife would not wish to disturb her own ascendancy to Countess!

Sir George and Lady Ida would have a family of three children, and the first was a great disappointment. She was a girl, known always as Edith, born at "Woodend" on 7th. Sept. 1887, not pretty like her beautiful mother Lady Ida, but worse, not the expected heir to the title. All her life Edith would suffer from the double rejection by parents, the wrong gender and her apparent hideous looks. This latter was untrue and in later life Cecil Beaton was much taken with her appearance and remarked on her most attractive voice.

Much greater joy was forthcoming for the parents when on 7th Dec. 1892 the heir, Osbert, was born at 3, Arlington Street, London. The reason for the location is simply that Sir George was Scarborough's M.P. (1892 - 1895) having earlier been the youngest M.P. in the House when elected for the Conservatives for the period 1885-1886. Osbert, like Edith, would never marry and in 1930 began travelling with a male companion, David Horner. This relationship continued until 1965.

At the time of Osbert's birth the family left "Woodend", where Lady Louisa still lived and moved across the Crescent to occupy "Belvoir House" on Belvoir Crescent, their home until 1908. Also with the move there came into the family a man called Henry Moat, part of a family of Whitby fishermen, and he became Sir George's valet serving until 1937.

Lady Louisa meanwhile had started a "Home of Hope", for young girls, in a large detached house known as "Red House" in Sitwell Street, which still stands today. Too she had opened a charitable hospital in King Street in 1883 and appointed a Dr. Peckitt Dale as one of the physicians there. Dr. Dale, had built, in 1879, a house in Scalby called "Hay Brow". When he died in 1893 she bought the property and used it as a summer residence until her declining health compelled her to move to Bournemouth where she died on 31st Oct. 1911.

Lady Louisa had used her business acumen to good effect for by the turn of the century she had reopened the Hall and already Sir George was surveying it to channel his creative urges into establishing a garden, outlined in his book of 1909 "On the making of Gardens". The funds for this new wealth were the royalties flowing in from every ton of coal mined under the Renishaw Estate, and some of these funds found their way into the pockets of Scarborough fishermen when times were bad and Sir George needed men to dig out a new lake!

It is a tribute to this town that even though the family could easily have decamped and gone back home to Derbyshire they would stay until at least 1922, Osbert even standing as the local Liberal candidate in 1919. Edith and Osbert returned to the town in August 1949 to view "Woodend" and the changes brought by the Council who were now the owners, and would establish the Natural History Museum, later to be the Creative Industries Centre.

The Londesboroughs are descended from the Marquis of Conyngham whose wife Elizabeth was an established mistress of George IV. Her brother William Joseph Denison left a tremendous fortune in money and land, and being childless endowed it to Albert Conyngham, their son, and his nephew, on condition that he changed his family name, which of course he did and became Albert Denison in 1849. In 1850 he was created a Baron, bought Grimston Hall, and the the Londesborough Park Estate, and was succeeded by his son Henry in 1860. It was Albert who in 1853 purchased Londesborough Lodge, previously known as "Warwick House" There Henry, 2nd. Baron entertained the

future king Edward VII who in staying with them developed typhoid fever, and was so ill that his recovery is commemorated by a stained-glass window in St. Martin's Church. Henry, who had been an M.P. for both Beverley and Scarborough was created an Earl in 1887, dying in April 1900 of psittacosis complications. His son Viscount Raincliffe derived his title from the local area of that name and many of the "rides" there are named after the Denison relatives., as Lady Edith's Drive remembers his wife. It is important to understand that all of the land totalling 60,000 acres of Yorkshire and £2.300.000 of cash came from W.J.Denison and raised the former Conynghams to their local pre-eminence.

The durability of the Sitwell title was further sustained when the third and last child was born to Sir George and Lady Ida. Named Sacheverell, derived from the French language and long used in the family, this baby would become the 6th. Baronet, after Osbert. It was his son Sir Reresby, who as the present Baronet, came to Scarborough in November 2004. He unveiled a Civic Society Blue Plaque which commemorated his father's birth at the then Belvoir House (later Bedford Hotel and now flats) on 15th Nov. 1897. Sir George was always punctilious and he spaced his children at five-yearly intervals!

To delve into all the experiences and effects which the town brought into the lives of the family would be too exhaustive here, but suffice to say that the literary output of the three children, and their father, was always reflected and acknowledged. To think of Osbert learning to dance the Hornpipe on the beach under the careful tuition of Mr. Owston is just one of hundreds of recollections, later used in Osbert's autobiography, the five volumes beginning with "Left Hand, Right Hand". Too, his short story "Low Tide", in his book "Triple Fugue", brings a harrowing account of the fall of two maiden ladies who ruined their lives with a change of investment. What a prophecy for our contemporary predicament!

Sir George's health broke in the early 1900's shortly after the painting of the family group by the noted American artist John Singer Sargent. It was executed in a house especially rented for the purpose from a relative of the Churchills. Edith hated the picture because it portrayed her father resting an affectionate arm on her, a deep hypocrisy linked to his failure not just to love her but to show understanding of her emerging gifts

Sir George, fortunately given great help by his guardian and great-uncle Archibald Tail, had failed to allow any close friends into his life and therefore became excessively introspective. His intelligence, capacity for research and huge correspondence, not to mention his forensic viewpoint of family matters often brought him into conflict. Archibald Tait, an Anglican clergyman who would become Headmaster of Rugby School and the first Scottish Archbishop of Canterbury could not save Sir George from being a lifelong agnostic! In his breakdown there could be seen the conflict with his wife and Edith, and his departure from the earlier shared political beliefs by which he renounced the Conservatives. A turning point occurred in 1909 when on his travels in Italy he viewed and purchased a castle near Florence - Castello De Montegufoni. This purchase was to dominate the family until it was sold in 1974 by Sir Reresby. In the mid-1900's the family left Belvoir House and "Woodend" became the local focus for gatherings, particularly in the winter, since the Hall was now being regularly used during the summer holidays. As for the three children's education, Edith never went to a school but had early tuition from a Miss King-Church, whilst at the same time retaining a great affection for the children's nurse, Davis. Osbert and Sacheverell would progress through schools in Scarborough and beyond both going to Eton and Oxford University.

Sir George carried out extensive alterations to "Woodend" by adding a wing on

the Valley elevation such that a Library and a bedroom (for Osbert) was created. These survive to this day but his balcony, crossing a Conservatory installed during his mother's tenure, has gone in the most recent alterations. With the onset of the Great War Osbert found himself in France, serving with the Grenadier Guards, being recalled home in 1915 to testify against his mother, who was being prosecuted for being an accessory to the fraudulent operations of a man named Julian Field. This was the nadir of the Sitwell family, brought about by Lady Ida's extravagance. On this occasion Sir George refused to pay her mounting debt and in desperation she employed a man who was already a criminal. Being found guilty she was sent down to Holloway Gaol for three months. Her mother, the Dowager Countess Edith died that year. In 1913 Edith finally began to blossom when she moved to London sharing a flat with her companion and former Governess Helen Rootham. Helen was Edith's amanuensis, and would be with Edith almost constantly up to Helen's death in October 1938. In London Edith was soon being noticed for her unusual poetry and later edited a Magazine called *Wheels*, which attracted like minds. Her first published poem was "Drowned Suns" appearing in the *Daily Mirror* in March 1913.

After the Armistice Sacheverell returned, having served too with the Grenadier Guards, taking up a career which would last well into his old age. Quite simply he began to travel and quickly established himself with the results of his Italian wanderings when in 1924 "Southern Baroque Art" was published. Later in 1925 he would marry Georgia Doble, the daughter of a wealthy Canadian banker. They had two sons, the future Baronet Reresby and his younger brother Francis.

By this time Scarborough had been left behind. "Woodend" was empty in 1925 and most of the possessions were transported to Renishaw or Montegufoni. The Londesboroughs had given up the Lodge. Various Aunts who had been careful that the children always had the most impeccable manners had died and there the "in Scarborough" has to end.

Well, almost. Henry Moat, Sir George's valet retired to Scarborough and kept up a ceaseless correspondence with the family from 1937. His letters from Beulah Terrace were always full of that earthy phrase which is amusing and descriptive and on the night of his death in Whitby those staying at Renishaw were disturbed by rumblings in the pantry! On a wall in his retired house he had written of his position with the Sitwell family.

Lady Ida would die in 1937 and was interred, as is Edith, amongst other relatives in the cemetery at Lois Weedon, only a short distance from Weston. Sir George, leaving it too late to get back to England when war was declared, had to remain in Switzerland until his death at Locarno in 1943. The title passed to Osbert, who made Montegufoni his major residence, though he would regularly return to Derbyshire as Renishaw was still the family base.

In the post-war years Osbert would achieve lasting literary fame with the five volumes of his autobiography, known under the title of the first volume "Left Hand! Right Hand!". He and Edith would tour America in that period and gave their poetical recitals to packed audiences. So famous that Marilyn Monroe, filming in England, would visit Renishaw with her husband Arthur Miller.

Edith's poetry now went under a period of re-appraisal and she was formally honoured by three English Universities, Then in June 1954 she featured in the Queen's Honours List, elevated to a Dame. In 1962 there came a memorable 75th Birthday, organised by her nephew Francis, in the form of a Gala Evening at the Royal Festival Hall. Her genius vindicated she died on 12th. Dec. 1964. Osbert slowly declined with Parkinsons Disease, and by the end of 1964 his life with David Horner was over. When he died in May 1969 at the Castle he left a

Will which would cause the utmost distress to Sacheverell and his wife Georgia. When he succeeded as the 6th Baronet he would not succeed to the Castle, which went to Reresby. Sacheverell was devastated with the shock and distaste which his brother had inflicted, not alleviated when the Castle left possession of the family, as the upkeep became apparent to Reresby and was sold in 1974.

Osbert was cremated and his ashes buried in an urn in the Alliori Protestant cemetery in Florence. In keeping with his wishes a copy of "Before The Bombardment" rested too in that urn. Scarborough was remembered to the end.

Sacheverell had to settle on the fact that "Weston" would always have to be his family base. Georgia died in 1980, but he continued to work at his desk until his death in Oct. 1988. The trio will always be remembered for themselves, but whose lives too must always be reflected back into that man, - odd, clever, selfish, kind. Given to intellectual melancholy, as he saw his Victorian era melt into the disasters of war, Sir George Sitwell, 4th Baronet, deserves our serious attention.