

## **(John Edmond) Heugh Balfour (1863-1952)**

There are still a number of older Sidmouth residents who remember Colonel Balfour. His title as Lord of the Manor was far from ceremonial or a sinecure. Instead he directly influenced almost every aspect of life in the town from the water supply to building new hotels. He was to be the last Lord of the Manor; the only one with a closer relationship to the town.

His father, George Edmond Balfour (1821-69), was an immensely wealthy shipping agent, based in Manchester, who traded mainly with the Far East. His wife died in her late 20s from a tragic dental mishap and perhaps this prompted his decision for a complete change of lifestyle and to purchase the Manor of Sidmouth in 1866. The sale arose following the death of the previous incumbent, the Regency rake, Edward Hughes Ball Hughes who rarely, if ever, visited the town. There was no manor house and the estates were badly neglected but the town was fashionable. George moved into Powys but tragedy struck again when he died three years later aged just 39. His three children, Georgina, Heugh and Kenneth, all under 10 years old, were now orphans. The Manorial estate at the time of George's death was 690 acres with an income of £2,267. Trustees were appointed to manage George's considerable legacy and one of their first tasks was to build a manor house.

A site was chosen to replace Broadway Farm with a very grand, red brick Jacobean-style building, designed by the eminent architect, George Somers Clarke, a pupil of Sir Charles Barry. It was completed in 1876 with further extensions in 1907 and 1922. Downstairs rooms included stained glass by William Morris's company (now in the V&A) and upstairs there were 13 principal bedrooms and accommodation for female staff in the attics and for male servants in the east wing.

Heugh was educated at Eton and his subsequent adult life can be viewed from both a military and manor perspective but there was a considerable overlap in both roles between 1888 and 1918.

His paternal grandfather, Robert Balfour, who died before Heugh's birth, was a Commander in the Royal Navy. Heugh chose the army and was to follow a distinguished career. Initially an officer in the cavalry regiment, the 11th Hussars, he became lieutenant in 1881 and then, as Captain, joined the Royal 1st Devon Yeomanry in 1892 and was promoted to Major in 1897. In the Boer War in 1900 he served with the cavalry regiment, the Roberts' Horse, and commanded a division the same year. In September 1901 he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

He served in the First World War and was twice mentioned in Despatches and created a CMG (Companion of St Michael and St George). He was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1917. He relinquished his commission in 1919 but was granted permission to retain his rank. In 1922 he was appointed Sheriff of Devon.

Balfour assumed the Lord of the Manor role on his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1888 but had been living at the Manor House since 1884. He was fortunate in employing two very talented and industrious colleagues, Major W.H Hastings as his estate solicitor and agent and, from 1895, RW Sampson as his Manor architect. The extent of his Manorial ownership was truly extraordinary.

By the end of the 19th century the Manor owned the water, gas, and railway companies. It wished to add electricity to its portfolio but Sidmouth Urban Council blocked the application (Tension between the Manor and the Council continued until Balfour's death). The Manor also built the new Sidmouth Baths (the present site of Kingswood Hotel) which were primarily for hydrotherapy treatment.

The Fortfield Hotel (Sanditon site) and the Knowle Hotel, initially, belonged to the Manor. He had the Victoria Hotel built (1904), which is the largest building in Sidmouth.

Other initiatives were the Manor Hall, later Pavilion (1891), and the Golf Club (1889). Land owned in Bickwell Valley was developed and included many of Sampson's finest Arts and Crafts Edwardian villas. The soft orange local bricks were made on the Manor.

Other notable buildings which belonged to the Manor, at some stage during his tenure, included Tudor Cottage, Rock Cottage and Fortfield Terrace. In 1910 he married a noted beauty, Evelyn Gerard-Dicconson, and they had one child, Elizabeth, who was born two years later.

Balfour had to balance the maintenance and profitability of his huge estate with the necessity for improvements to the town and its citizens. By and large this was achieved although there were

errors of judgement including the foreshore shingle blunder. In the absence of a harbour, landing fishing boats was often unsafe and required a consistent shingle shore. Balfour claimed ownership of the foreshore and took shingle on a regular basis for his building projects, thereby endangering the boats as well as the fishermen's livelihood. This was an egregious abuse of his position. In 1907 the author and fisherman, Stephen Reynolds contacted, on behalf of the fishermen, the Board of Trade and persuaded the Town Council to seek legal advice. After a lengthy legal battle an obscure 1862 Act was discovered and the Board of Trade banned the removal of shingle from the foreshore. Reynolds said that he bore no hard feelings towards Balfour and presented him in 1910 with copies of *A Poor Man's House* and *Alongshore*. It is possible that Balfour did not share the same sanguine view. After his death both books were donated to the Museum and are in mint condition, apparently unread.

On the credit side there were undoubted acts of philanthropy. In 1885 he contributed to costs to set up the town's first hospital, May Cottage, a property owned by the Manor. Later, in 1891, he generously donated the land on which the present Victoria Cottage Hospital is sited. Other gifts included Glen Goyle, the Manstone Fields Recreation site and the Three Cornered Plot (Triangle).

He established a close friendship with Queen Victoria's son, the Duke of Connaught, who overwintered in Sidmouth in the early 1930s; the Duke stayed at the Manor House in 1934. They shared previous careers in the army, Connaught being a Field Marshal. There is a general impression that Balfour was not at ease with ordinary working people. There are many anecdotes of Connaught chatting easily to locals whilst walking in the town, a facility not enjoyed by Balfour. His personality was no doubt shaped by his sad childhood, orphaned at six years, then Eton and an officer army life.

Walter Wagstaff has a memory of Balfour dating back to the late 1940s. Balfour insisted that postmen dismounted from their bicycles when they used the path through the vegetable garden. Walter continued cycling, unaware that Balfour was in an adjacent greenhouse and from which he emerged with a shaking fist and shouting 'Bloody postmen!'

Colonel Balfour died in 1952. The entire Manor estate had increased almost two-fold to 1,169 acres and included 10 farms and woodland. He had a reputation for feudal patronage, and towards the end of his long life it was clear that his role was increasingly out-dated. In old age he said that he regretted that the town had been suspicious of the Manor and its schemes for improvement.

He had been a brave soldier and a hard working Lord of the Manor but he nevertheless came across as remote and as private as his vast Manor House and grounds.

The Museum has a new display marking his life.

Nigel Hyman

Taken from the [SVA Magazine Summer Edition 2019](#)