

MADRESFIELD COURT

Text by John de la Cour

Madresfield Court stands at the foot of the Malvern Hills in a spectacular setting among parkland and gardens at the centre of a large, predominantly agricultural, estate of approximately 4,000 acres. The house is completely surrounded by a wide moat. Amongst other types of fish, this contains carp who show themselves on sunny days. Occasionally the blue flash of a passing kingfisher is seen.

The earliest known construction on this site was a great hall built in the twelfth century within the moat for safety, and designed for the feudal and communal life of the Middle Ages. In the Tudor period a manor house grew up round the hall, which remained as a dining hall in the middle. The new Tudor house had more rooms for different purposes, including a Long Gallery typical of the times, which suited an increasingly private domestic life.

During the succeeding centuries this core was added to, altered and renovated to suit the current circumstances of the family. The biggest changes were made in the last century when the Victorian architect Philip Hardwick (1792–1870) designed a major reconstruction in the Victorian Gothic style which was carried out over several years from 1865. During this time some of the seventeenth and eighteenth century alterations were removed in order to restore the original Tudor appearance of the old house. A little later, in 1875, the Bell Tower was added, echoing this general style.

HISTORY OF THE HOUSE AND FAMILY

Madresfield has never been bought or sold since records began. It has been passed down by inheritance through the same family. The house is first mentioned specifically in a charter of Henry I dating from the 1120s and it is known that a William de Bracy lived at the Court in 1260. His descendants, the Lygon family, have lived there ever since. William Lygon was created the first Earl of Beauchamp in 1815, and successive Earls Beauchamp lived at Madresfield until the death of the eighth and last Earl in 1979. The current occupant is Lady Morrison, a niece of the last Earl, and it is expected that the occupancy will pass to her daughter and family.



In 1451 the house appears in a document by Isabel Bracy who granted to her grandson William Lygon the use of the house, reserving for herself, “the house called the Yatehouse (gatehouse) with the Upper and Lower chambers and two chimneys attached to the same.”

William’s nephew and heir, Richard, married Anne, daughter of Lord Beauchamp, who was of the same family as the Beauchamps of Warwick Castle, hence the appearance of the Bear and Ragged Staff on the family coat of arms and among the armorial carvings in the house.

Their son, another Richard, received a knighthood at the coronation of Anne Boleyn. An inventory made for him in 1554 reveals the austerity of life at Madresfield at that time. A further document dated 1619, a schedule to the Will of Sir William Lygon, shows a marked increase in luxury and the number of furnishings, and a large range of specialised domestic offices such as a dairy and cheese chamber, cider, perry and wine cellars. The stone over the entrance door records the date 1593 when Elizabethan enlargements took place, and part of this building can still be seen in the first three storeys of the entrance elevation.

Colonel Lygon rather unenthusiastically supported the Parliamentarians during the Civil War, partly, it is believed, with the object of preserving his family's inheritance. At one time the Lygons were dispossessed, and the house was held by Royalists. The family recovered it when Worcester was surrendered in 1651. Significantly, the Colonel was not required to pay any penalty at the Restoration. Like so many of his family until the nineteenth century, he seems to have been apolitical.

William Lygon's wife Susannah inherited one third of the wealth of William Jennens who was an immensely rich godson of King William III. The litigation that followed his death was supposed to have given Charles Dickens the idea for the interminable Jarndyce case in *Bleak House*. Lygon's inheritance transformed the family fortunes. Madresfield Court was extended in 1799 and the collections of the house were enormously increased. Lygon went on to become Baron Beauchamp of Powycke in 1806, and in 1815 he was given an Earldom.

William Lygon was succeeded in turn by his three sons. The fifth Earl, grandson of the first Earl, succeeded in 1863 and embarked on major reconstruction of the house, starting in 1865. Most of the work was completed by his brother, who became the sixth Earl in 1866.

The sixth Earl was a deeply religious theological scholar who created the Chapel during the alterations of 1865. In his day, it was decorated purely functionally as a place of prayer. He was a distinguished churchman, and was closely involved with the Oxford Movement which sought to restore the High Church ideals of the 17th century, whose leaders included John Keble and Edward Pusey.

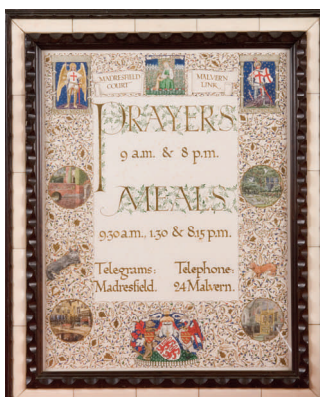
The seventh Earl was a considerable patron of the Arts and Crafts movement and was responsible for the construction of the Staircase Hall and the decoration of the Library and Chapel. He was himself an artist and craftsman, and there is a set of chairs covered in *bargello* (Florentine or flame stitch) needlework embroidered by him.



MADRESFIELD'S COLLECTIONS

Even Madresfield's evocative exterior, and the beauty of the house's setting, cannot prepare the visitor for the range and calibre of the contents. Magnificent examples of English furniture and pictures are complemented by French and German furniture, porcelain and *objets d'art* of exceptional quality.

But the house is perhaps most noticeable for the many examples of the work of the Arts and Crafts movement executed by contemporaries of William Morris. In particular, the decoration of the Chapel and the carvings in the Library are considered to be some of the finest work carried out in this style.



These diverse influences are all combined in an interior scheme which manages to integrate them in a way which creates a sense of intimacy and warmth all too rarely found in a house so richly endowed.

THE LIBRARY

Madresfield's Library contains about 8,000 books. The earliest are the Missals or Mass books written by monks before the invention of printing. The printed successors to such manuscripts form an important part of the fifteenth and sixteenth century collection, of which the religious ones were largely collected by Frederick, sixth Earl, who was a prominent Victorian theological scholar.

One particularly unusual book is *The Dyette of the Privye Counsell of 1594*. This is a manuscript record of the menus, seating plans and meticulous accounts of Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council, meeting in the Star Chamber. Figures such as Walsingham, Archbishop Whitgift, once Bishop of Worcester, and Lord Chief Justice Popham were regular attenders. Their expenses were authorised by the Queen's Secretary and the Lord High Treasurer of England, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, whose portrait hangs in the Dining Room.

The striking feature of the collection is the way the family is revealed as people with interests and taste. The books are primarily for reading, not purely for show. There are significant sections for those with an interest in interior design and living, architecture, furniture and craftsmanship and children's books. Books on agriculture, gardening and flowers form an important category, including several first editions.



It is in the Library that the visitor is first made acquainted with Madresfield's unique association with the Arts and Crafts movement. The quality of the works contained at Madresfield make the house one of England's most important centres for a style which continues to influence Western design. The great designer C. R. Ashbee (1832–1942) was commissioned by the seventh Earl and his wife to create their library. Between 1902 and 1905 he designed the carvings which were carried out by members of his Guild of Handicraft, founded in London in 1888.



Working later from their Cotswold base in Chipping Camden, the master carvers Alec Miller and Will Hart created scenes on four doors and two large bookcase ends which amount to Ashbee's most successful scheme of interior decoration. The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life form the centre of a series of images – the monkish scholar, the musician, the reaper, the doctor – which allude to the many different paths to learning and wisdom. Yet there is wit too: amidst the root of the Tree of Knowledge the hunched figure of the book thief rubs shoulders with the lowest forms of animal life, the toad, the rat and the weasel.

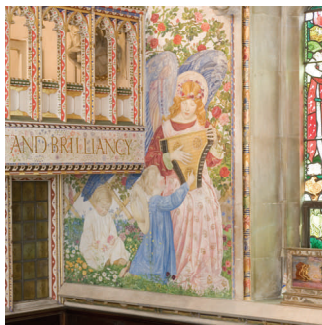
There are many volumes from modern presses, such as the Baskerville Press and William Morris' Kelmscott Press. An interesting feature of the collection is a set of Roxburghe Club publications. Founded in 1812, the members (who for several generations included the Earl Beauchamp of the day) publish for each other's benefit private editions of unpublished works. The seventh Earl gave a copy of music by Henry VIII edited by his sister, Lady Mary Lygon, and in 1975 the eighth Earl gave a facsimile edition of a magnificent Book of Hours of 1370 from the Library, now no longer in the collection.

A magnificent wood carving of the seventh Earl's Coat of Arms is above the fireplace and on either side stand Venetian lanterns collected by the last Earl and Countess on one of their many trips to their favourite Italian city.

THE CHAPEL

Madresfield Court is widely reckoned to be perhaps the most thorough expression of Arts and Crafts theory in Britain, and also possibly its most lovely. In the decoration of the Chapel, which was commissioned in 1902 as a wedding present from the wife of the seventh Earl to her husband, the movement's most perfect union of the arts and crafts is thought to have been achieved. Originally two bedrooms, called the King's Rooms, where Charles II is supposed to have stayed during the Battle of Worcester, the Chapel was built as part of the 1865 alterations. In earlier days a service was conducted by a resident chaplain for the household every morning and evening.

Almost all the painting, stained glass and metal work in the Chapel was designed and made by teachers at the Birmingham Municipal School of Arts and Crafts – known as the Birmingham Group. Only the silver chalice and paten by Robert Hilton come from outside Birmingham: they bear the Chester mark associated with the Countess's home at Eaton, seat of her Grosvenor family.



The frescoes were painted using egg tempera on dry plaster by Henry Payne and three young assistants, Joseph Sanders, Dick Stubington and Harry Rushbury, later Sir Henry Rushbury R.A. When they started, one of these young assistants was 21; the other only 15.

The frescoes feature the seven children of the family amongst a profusion of flowers in joyous but delicate colours. The model for the young angel at whose feet two of the children are kneeling was Miss Gladys Gaylord from New England, a cousin of Payne.

Payne also created the stained glass windows, and decorations on the gallery balustrades and organ case. The altar cross, decorated with *champlevé* enamel and one of the most celebrated examples of Arts and Crafts metalwork, was made by the husband and wife team Arthur and Georgie Gaskin, who also made the candlesticks and sanctuary lamps. The organ is by the famous Malvern builder John Nicholson, whose firm continues to this day.

The triptych was designed by the architect William Bidlake, and painted by Charles Gere. Gere also designed the magnificent altar frontal worked by two daughters of the Rector of Madresfield in a form of embroidery known as *or nué*. Gold thread was stitched by hand to cover a navy blue, linen-like background. The frontal bears the Greek text from St. John's gospel, *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*.

Gere also designed the altar paintings. Appropriately enough for a High Anglican family like the Lygons at that time, these follow the theme of the sacrament of the Eucharist, with Christ inviting the worshippers in this exquisite setting to join Him in Holy Communion.



THE LONG GALLERY

The Long Gallery, which was part of the Tudor house but widened in the nineteenth century, contains a variety of Jacobean and Elizabethan oak furniture which goes well with a number of Birmingham Arts and Crafts standard lamps to be found around the room. It has a spectacular plasterwork ceiling.

There are several display cases with weapons, ivory and porcelain. Some fine examples of Madresfield's collection of Chinese porcelain are sited in the Gallery, including two large pots from the Kangxi period (1662-1722) depicting scenes from a play.

The views are the finest offered from the house. Through the park to the east stretches a mile-long avenue which ends with the Gloucester Gate. Looking south-west there is a perfect view of the Malvern Hills. Galleries such as this were used for exercise when the weather was bad, and it is easy to understand how people could feel close to the outdoors while staying inside.

Next door is the New Gallery, part of the Victorian additions built from 1865. The family rocking horse is here, its seats covered in William Morris fabric.

THE STAIRCASE HALL



The Staircase Hall is dramatic. It is lit by three large glass domes, and originally contained two enormous *art nouveau* hanging lamps. The crystal balustrades are thought to be unique.

The hall used to be three rooms, but was made into one by the seventh Earl, whose bust stands in the corner. The swans and bears on the banisters and the emblems on the ceiling of the Order of the Garter and of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports are all associated with various aspects of his career. The mystical, poetic side of his nature is well reflected by the motto taken from Shelley's *Adonais* which he chose for the cornice.

*The One remains, the many change and pass; Heaven's light for ever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, Stains the white radiance of eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.*

A number of French pictures, many after Mignard of French royal mistresses, were part of the first Countess's acquisitions in France. Amongst the finest are five Paris street scenes by Etienne Jeaurat, strongly reminiscent of Hogarth's London paintings. There are also German and Flemish pictures, and examples from the Dutch school.

Large porcelain birds are mostly Meissen, and there is an intriguing Augsburg apothecary's cabinet from the early seventeenth century. A display case of old German and English silver includes a warming pan and a Cromwellian spicebox.



There are two English paintings of considerable interest. One is by Edward Lear. Entitled *The Quarries of Syracuse*, it was painted in 1853, when it was bought in the Royal Academy by the fourth Earl. The other is by William Ranken, and shows the family of the seventh Earl on the occasion of the twenty-first birthday of his eldest son, Viscount Elmley, in 1924.

When the Staircase Hall was enlarged, the fire surround, which is of English alabaster, was a present from the second Duke of Westminster to his sister Lettice, Countess Beauchamp.

THE SALOON AND THE DRAWING ROOM



These two richly decorated rooms display the French influence on the house. Much of the profusion of Boulle furniture (brass inlaid in tortoiseshell), pictures and *objets d'art* were collected by Catherine Denne, the first Countess Beauchamp. She made a great many purchases in Paris after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo while visiting her sons who were there in the British army of occupation. A Boulle cupboard in the Saloon, which was reputedly in one of Louis XVI's private rooms at Versailles, contains an outstanding collection of Limoges enamel. These pieces are from the seventeenth century and thus some of the oldest fine objects in the house.

Two other cabinets display dessert services made by Worcester China Works for the family, decorated with the Lygons' crest of a Saracen's head, an heraldic device used to denote that an ancestor took part in one of the Crusades.

The Saloon contains the majority of the family portraits in the house, three of which are by Joseph Wright of Derby. There is a magnificent full length portrait by Charles Jervas of William Jennens part of whose immense fortune eventually went to his first cousin once removed William Lygon, later the first Earl Beauchamp. Jennens' shoes have wonderful red heels, thus showing him to be distinctly "well-heeled." Apparently he grew into a miser, and it was said of him that if he had a visitor at night who only wanted to talk he blew out the candles to save money.

At the window hang impressive and substantial curtains, which are said to have been embroidered by Queen Anne and the first Duchess of Marlborough, and in the middle of the Saloon there is a table with unusual parquetry inlay made from fruitwood knots.

Moving through to the Drawing Room, one quickly realises how its grand and ornate character is complemented by small items of exquisite craftsmanship. The boldness of its two chandeliers, and much of the fine Boulle furniture contrasts so well with the *objets d'art* which are to be found in cabinets and display cases.

A cabinet with old mounted rock-crystal also includes a large crystal ball, and an American Steuben glass plate presented by the Ligon Kinsmen's Association of America who descend from Thomas Ligon who went to Jamestown, Virginia in 1641. He was not the only family member to travel overseas: Richard Ligon sailed to the Caribbean and his *History of the Island of Barbadoes*, published in 1657, is in the library.



Two portraits in this room are among the best English paintings in the house. Above the fireplace hangs an interesting picture by George Romney of Edward Gibbon, one of only three known images of the great historian. The other is an example of the early work of Sir Joshua Reynolds and depicts the first Lord Eliot.

Lord Eliot's granddaughter Susan, whose portrait is in the Saloon, was the wife of the fourth Earl, though she died in 1835, eighteen years before he was to inherit the title.

No less interesting than these family personalities are the portraits of more famous figures. The most imposing of these is a large portrait by the Dutch painter Gerrit van Honthorst of King Charles II, dressed fully prepared for battle.

But there are many other fine pictures here. The most significant in terms of the history of the are two of Catherine Denne, the first Countess, important not only because of her extensive collecting, but also because she trained her four sons to do the same. Broadly speaking, William, second Earl, specialised in historical portraits; Henry, later fourth Earl, collected miniatures, and Edward collected snuff boxes. They can all be seen here.

Madresfield also houses many miniatures. The earliest of these are painted in watercolour, and date from the mid-sixteenth century.

Two Boulle tables contain items of family memorabilia, including strands of hair from the Duke of Wellington and William Pitt the Younger and a bullet taken from the neck of the fourth Earl when he was injured in the Peninsular war.

THE DINING ROOM

The Dining Room is part of the old house and was the former entrance hall. It has a minstrel's gallery and a fine hammerbeam roof from which hang seven flags. These are guidons of the Thirteenth Light Dragoons of which General Henry Lygon, later the fourth Earl, was honorary colonel. His brother Edward, as colonel of the Second Life Guards, led a charge of the Life Guards at the Battle of Waterloo.

Two of the house's most attractive pictures are in this room. One, painted on wood panels by an unidentified, probably Dutch or Flemish artist depicts Orpheus playing to the animals; the other, by a follower of Ambrosius Benson, is said to be of the beautiful Lady Jane Gray, beheaded in 1554 after being Queen for only a few days. There is an imposing full-length portrait of Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II.

But pride of place goes to an extremely fine portrait of Queen Elizabeth. It is one of a handful of similar portraits of her holding a sieve, an ancient Roman symbol of virginity. It is attributed to John Bettes around 1585, as is another in the National Portrait Gallery. Nearby hangs her loyal Chancellor William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Also portraits of Sir William Wade, who was Governor of the Tower of London, and his stern-looking wife.

Through the windows can be seen the Courtyard, which was created as part of Hardwick's alterations in 1865. It was made smaller to provide space for a new entrance hall, the old one having been transformed into the dining room. Half-timbering, *sgraffito*-decorated panels, and a gallery outside the nursery wing, make the courtyard reminiscent of old German towns. The mosaic pavement was made by Italian craftsmen and forms a maze. To add to the difficulty it has two middles.



FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS

In addition to the architectural, historical, and art and design associations referred to so far, mention should be made of the house's many other connections.

In common with many other similar English families there are extensive aristocratic ties. Lady Lettice Grosvenor, sister to the Duke of Westminster, was the wife of the seventh Earl. The Earl's mother was Lady Mary Stanhope of Chevening. Over the years the Eliot, Raglan, Longford and Warwick families have been related by marriage, among many others. A grave in the grounds is of the charger Shadrach ridden by Lord Raglan at the Battle of Alma in 1854.

There are many references to the house and its family links in the surrounding area. The best known of these is the celebrated Lygon Arms hotel in the village of Broadway. The manager in the early nineteenth century had previously been the butler at Madresfield and he renamed the Inn as a tribute to his former employers.

Several of the Earls played a prominent part in national politics and local affairs. In addition, the last two played a leading role in the Liberal party. Several of the Countesses have also been notable figures, the last, for example, being widely respected in the district after inspiring war-time work with the Women's Voluntary Service, the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and a long association with the county Girl Guides Association.

The seventh Earl had a particularly impressive record of public service. In addition to the appointments already mentioned, he was twice Lord President of the Council, First Commissioner of Works, 1910–1914, Chancellor of London University, and Liberal leader in the House of Lords. When he was only twenty-seven he was appointed Governor of New South Wales. He was accompanied by his sister Lady Mary Lygon, an attractive and popular figure who had a long friendship with Edward Elgar. Her voyage to Australia is recorded in the thirteenth of the composer's *Enigma* Variations, and the house has an autographed full score of *The Dream of Gerontius*.

The house's religious associations stem from the leading role the sixth Earl played in the Oxford Movement. He was Chairman of the Athanasian Creed Defence Committee, bringing him into contact with figures such as Keble, Newman, and Pusey. He built several churches, and helped to found Keble College, Oxford. The extent of his support can perhaps be gauged by the fact that his portrait hangs behind the Master's chair in the hall there.

In 1858 he produced a translation of the Roman Breviary which he entitled *The Day Hours of the Church of England*, arranged "according to the Authorised Version of the Bible." This formed the basis of the *Madresfield Court Service-Book* which was published by his son in 1910 for use in the Chapel and the parish.

Madresfield's main literary association is with the author Evelyn Waugh. He knew the children of the seventh Earl well, dedicating his novel *Black Mischief* which he wrote at Madresfield to two of the daughters. The most celebrated connection is with *Brideshead Revisited*. Waugh's imaginary house (especially the Chapel) was partly modelled on Madresfield, and most of his main characters are drawn from members of the Lygon family.

During the second World War the house was reserved for Royal occupation by George VI and his family should they have to leave London. There is a list of all who were to have occupied the rooms. In the event it was never used for such a purpose: if it had been, the many small bedrooms would have been very useful, only just enough. There is a list of all who were to have occupied the rooms.

Interestingly, the Crown of England has been lost and won three times within twenty miles of the house; at the battles of Evesham, Tewkesbury and Worcester.

Perhaps the most concentrated evidence of Madresfield's extensive associations is contained in the Muniments Room. As well as all the Deeds, there are personal records such as regimental details from Waterloo, estate surveys and maps from several counties, inventories and accounts, letters and papers. Together they disclose an astonishing range of insights into English life over eight centuries, and comprise a powerful living testimony to the political, economic and cultural influence of a great English house.

THE GARDENS

The main drive enters the gardens past a Norman Shaw Lodge, and through an archway designed by Charles Voysey in 1901.

The gardens were very much enlarged in 1865 and now cover sixty-nine acres. The layout is based on three avenues of oak, cedar and Lombardy poplar, within and around which are a mass of specimen trees and flowering shrubs. In the spring the gardens are carpeted with daffodils, anemone, cowslips, fritillaries, bluebells and other wild flowers.

In addition to the formal gardens and lawns to the front of the house, features include a Pulhamite rock garden assembled in 1879, an herbaceous border in the centre of which is a sundial reminding us *That day is wasted on which we have not laughed*, an arbour of pleached lime trees, a wild garden and a large yew maze. Rising above head height, it was planted in 1893. Nearby is the cemetery where the animals of the house are buried.

The most distinguished gardener to work at Madresfield was William Crump. He came from Blenheim Palace where he had raised the Blenheim Orange Melon. The late dessert apple named after him, a cross between Cox's Orange and Worcester Pearmain, won the Royal Horticultural Society's First Class certificate in 1910, and this was followed by the *Madresfield* cooking apple and other fruits. He died in 1932 aged eighty-nine.

The walled kitchen garden, built in 1867, contains the Madresfield vine, raised in 1868 by Crump's predecessor William Cox, and which has fruited ever since. This grape is unique in that, although it is blue in colour, it tastes like a white muscatel. Between them, Cox and Crump were in charge for seventy-six years.

A drive near the old stable block leads to an entrance where once are said to have hung gates, purchased in 1871 which were previously the choir-gates of Cologne Cathedral. On the other side lies the Home Farm, which used to supply the house with dairy produce. The centrepiece of the charming buildings is a fine dovecote, tall and welcoming. It was built from bricks made on the estate.

