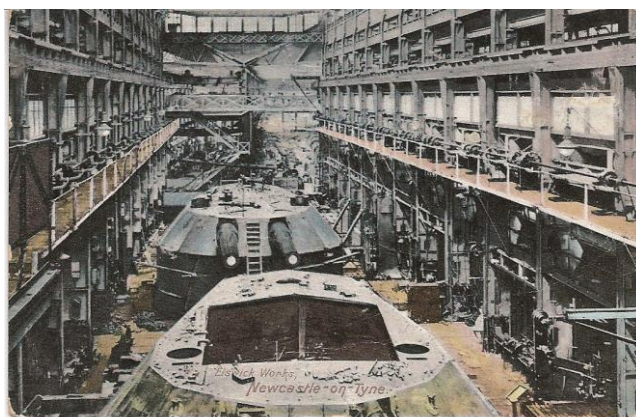


The Northumberland recreations of the masters of Elswick
Kenneth Warren

At the end of the Victorian era the country house party was a prominent feature of the life of the upper classes, whether long-established or those members of the new wealthy, the men whose economic base was business and often manufacturing. As a result, rural homes which a generation or two earlier had been owned by county families were now bought or leased by industrialists. This was certainly the case with the leaders of Tyneside industry, including the partners and leading managers of Armstrongs. From early in 1883 for almost half a century John Meade Falkner was closely involved with this group which headed what was then one of the leading companies in Britain. His material well-being, the basis of his everyday life, including his writing career and achievements, literary and ecclesiastical friendships and indeed all the activities and interests of this talented, if rather eccentric man, depended on the salary, commissions and profits he received from his involvement in the business operations of the Armstrong engineering and armament operations whose headquarters were at Elswick on the Tyne above Newcastle. His fascinating letters, the accounts left by colleagues in the managerial team or recollections by members of their families provide ample evidence of this busy and varied life of rural rehabilitation.

Of necessity most of the thousands of `ordinary` men who earned their daily bread at Elswick lived either in close proximity or not far away in the older, western parts of Newcastle or across the river in Gateshead. During the early years of Armstrongs – roughly the 35 years before Falkner came to the North East - most of the partners and heads of department also occupied homes in these same areas; William Armstrong and Andrew Noble were exceptional in living in Jesmond Dene, east of the central districts of Newcastle. But after that there occurred a very marked dispersal of senior people away from the built-up areas of Tyneside. Sir William Armstrong began this shift when he purchased a large plot of undeveloped land far away on the Alnwick road out from Rothbury, on which he built a modest house, later extended to create the present Cragside. Over the years most of his partners followed his lead into rural Northumberland. There were four notable exceptions. Three of them were the Rendel brothers, members of a fascinating family, vital in the development of the firm, but generally under-represented in accounts of

its history. Hamilton Rendel, assistant manager and later head of the company's engineering works, lived throughout his Elswick career on Sydenham Terrace, near the Great North Road, a little way beyond the northern edge of Newcastle's central business district. His elder brother George eventually moved from Condercum House just off the West Road, first to London and then to a villa on the Bay of Naples. The middle brother Stuart owned a number of houses in London, in other parts of south east England and in Provence. Throughout his life he was a multiple home owner. The other important exception was John Meade Falkner, who when he moved from the places in which he lived on Tyneside, chose not Northumberland but the ecclesiastical setting of Palace Green, Durham. Why was there such a strong centrifugal tendency, and what did its generally strong Northumberland emphasis mean for the way of life of the masters of Elswick - including Falkner?



A gun mounting shop at Elswick c.1905

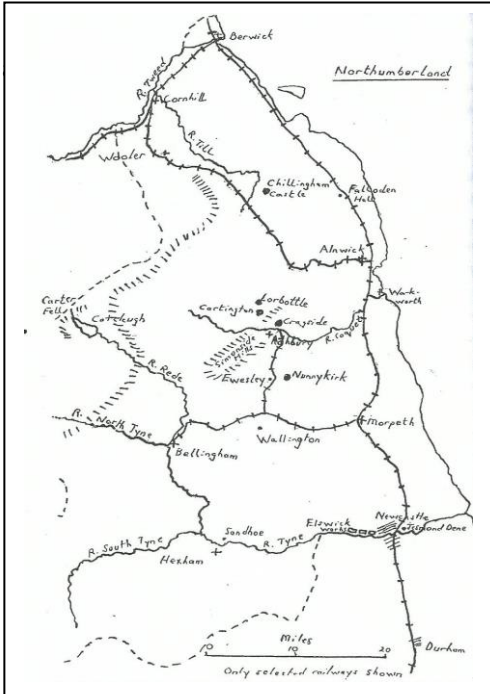
The vital motivation of those who sought refuge from Tyneside was to leave behind the hard, often incessant pressures of the everyday working environment. Falkner sometimes romanticised Elswick, but in his earlier days at least he felt the burden of his new role as company secretary there. In February 1889 he mentioned to John Noble that the work was 'getting rather beyond me'. A few weeks later, trying to explain his 'heterodox' behaviour in starting out on a boating trip along the Thames on Good Friday, he pointed out that: '...the stern necessity of Elswick has led me to look upon any day out of the works as a great chance – and not to be

wasted...` (1) After he had served as secretary for 15 years and had recently become a director, he again referred to the pressures of the daily routine: `It is one unceasing operation from the moment one gets there till very late in the evening....No one, except those actively and daily engaged at Elswick knows anything of the daily anxieties and the daily strain...` (2)

A second incentive for seizing any opportunity to get away from Tyneside was closely related to the first - to escape the environmental pollution with which the operations not only of Armstrongs but of numerous other industrial activities seemed to have indelibly stamped the area. There was a striking contrast between this industrial district and the character of most of the countryside beyond. As a topographical writer of the time pointed out: `To those people who have only seen the River Tyne from the three great bridges which connect Gateshead with Newcastle, it's very name can be suggestive of nothing but grinding industrialism, carried on in an atmosphere of gloom and grime`. But in fact, apart from this relatively small part of the county, the course of the Tyne - and of the other rivers in the region - was through a `country which is wild and romantic, pastoral and picturesque, past ancient castles and houses, and through more than one old town of historic association`. It was this wonderland of rural Northumbria which provided the setting within which most Elswick partners either bought new homes or, as with those most closely connected with Falkner as friends rather than just as workday colleagues, rented houses to use as weekend retreats or holiday homes. There Falkner shared in their richly diverse recreational and leisure life. (3)

The late nineteenth century was a uniquely favourable time for weekend retreats to the countryside by wealthy industrialists. It was a time of depression in agriculture and rent income from land had fallen. In such circumstances landowners were happy to lease out fine houses to men whose income and wealth was derived from manufacturing rather than farming. Not until the early years of the 20th century did the advance of the motor car begin to breakdown the general isolation of the countryside, but already main line railways, and in the last decades of the Victorian age, the building of rural branch lines, created large tracts of more accessible land. The movement of the controllers of Elswick into rural Northumberland broadly followed these railway corridors, the particular places chosen by them being located within relatively easy reach of stations on the rural rail network which led on to the connections through

to Newcastle. Some, like the Cruddas family, chose to be near the Border Counties Railway up the North Tyne valley or, as with John Noble, close by the Newcastle to Carlisle main line. The focus of the developments involving Falkner was either the Morpeth – Scots Gap – Rothbury line, or the later branch which linked Alnwick to Wooler and the Scottish border towns.



**Railways and selected rural homes
in Northumberland**

Falkner seems to have spent good deal of time at Lord Armstrong's great house and estate of Cragston. Since 1870 this had been only a few minutes coach drive from Rothbury station, the terminus of the short line from Scots Gap.

In November 1892 he wrote a short note – mailed from Elswick works - to Watson Armstrong, Lord Armstrong's nephew and later his heir. The message was characteristic of Falkner's interests and it throws light on the position he had already achieved in the firm and among its principals: 'When I was stopping at Cragston last, I left a book called the Colleges of Oxford; I think in the Library. It is a shiny

dark blue cloth book. Could you tell your butler to send it in to me here? It would be very kind if you would and I am sorry to bother you by leaving my belongings about'. (4) Probably it was at Cragston that he met and wooed the daughter of the retired artillery expert and governor of Gibraltar, Sir John Adye. Evelyn was sister to Winifred who in 1889 had become Watson Armstrong's wife. Falkner and Evelyn waited 10 years before they too were married.

Apart from occasional visits to Cragside, Falkner's Northumberland recreation centred on three houses each of which in turn was leased by Andrew Noble, managing director of Elswick, who from the first days of 1883 had been his private employer as tutor to two of his sons. From the late '80s Noble was also his senior colleague at Elswick. Falkner rapidly became what he remained throughout his life, a treasured friend of all members of the Noble family.

Cartington Castle, which Armstrong had rescued from complete decay by financing a partial restoration, had been Noble's country retreat in the late '60s and '70s before Falkner came to the North. After this Noble leased in turn Lorbottle Hall north of the Coquet, Nunykirk Hall to the south of the Simonside Hills, and Chillingham Castle much further north and east.



JMF at Lorbottle with the Noble women folk

satisfaction I think not a bad plan would be for you and Mr Falkner to go to Lorbottle straight away and stay there until the exam...'. (6) After John became an undergraduate at Balliol, Falkner coached his younger brother, Philip, who had only been 12 when he joined the household. He was soon

In her memoirs, published late in her very long life, Margery Noble, Andrew's wife, wrote of Lorbottle as the place in which they had enjoyed the happiest times of their lives. (5) An early reference to Falkner's association with this house dates from late winter 1883, only a little more than two months after his selection as John Noble's tutor. John was at Eton but had not been working well. Andrew Noble wrote to his son that he had heard from his head of house, HJE Luxmoore, who '...thinks you might work better away from home, but if you will promise me on your word to work hard and to Mr Falkner's

advocating a Lorbottle-based programme of tutored work for this new pupil. (7)

Nunykirk Hall lay in a part of the valley of the river Font described by a contemporary as 'very beautiful and romantic'. The house was an 'imposing stone building of great elegance and simplicity with a fine prospect to the south'. For men whose everyday business was on Tyneside it had the added attraction of being only a short drive from Ewesley station on the railway from Rothbury to Scots Gap and on from there on to Morpeth and Tyneside. 'The Early Train', a poem written for the family in summer 1890 by Alfred Cochrane and Philip Noble, concerned the Ewesley train – which left the station at 3.10 am.

Between 1900 and 1907 Noble leased Chillingham Castle from the Tankerville family, and after that moved on at last to his own great estate at Ardkinglas on Loch Fyne. By this time the motoring age had begun. It brought with it not only a new freedom of location, but flexibility in terms of time - it is said that on one occasion Sir Andrew arrived at Ardkinglas only to receive news from the works that made him instruct his driver to turn round at once and drive him back to Tyneside. A richly diverse life was enjoyed in the various Northumberland houses.

Sport was a major interest in the rural life of the senior staff at Elswick. Armstrong set the pattern with his passion for fishing in the fine trout stream of the Coquet and by shooting across the extensive moorlands of the Cragside estate. Sir William was a quiet, retiring individual, but Andrew Noble seems to have gained his recreation from the strains of everyday work, as he did everything else, with unremitting commitment and enthusiasm. One who obviously knew him well wrote after his death, '...he kept his own love of games under very rigid control', but this same writer also recorded that Noble played racquets [squash] to the age of 60 and real tennis until he was 80. In 1895 he built a tennis court at Jesmond Dene House. (8)

Apparently all male members of Sir Andrew Noble's family fished and shot. Two photographs from the early days of Falkner's association with them seemed to highlight the fact that as a newcomer, he had no part in the manly sport of shooting. Eventually he participated in much of the recreation, but another new member of the firm, a man with close

contacts with the Nobles over a much longer time span, and who shared many of Falkner's interests, was also a much more distinguished sportsman. Alfred Henry John Cochrane like Falkner was the son of a clergyman, and was seven years his junior. While at Repton he had played first class cricket for Derbyshire and football for Derby County. He went up to Hertford some years after Falkner. Cochrane was chosen, apparently by Falkner who visited Oxford expressly to interview him, to join Armstrong Mitchell and Company in a senior secretarial capacity. (9) When Falkner became a director in 1901 Cochrane replaced him as company secretary. Although he did not become a director until 1921, Alfred Cochrane was from an early stage part of the inner circle of the Nobles, whose younger daughter Ethel he married in 1895. He took part in the sporting life of both the firm and of the local area, playing minor county cricket for Northumberland. Over many years he contributed to The Times on sporting subjects. His stories and light verse were also largely concerned with sport. (EV Lucas included 9 of his poems in his 1927 anthology The Joy of Life. All but two of them involved sport or country ways. (10))

Having arrived by rail in the Northumbrian countryside, Elswick businessmen were like everyone else dependent on traditional forms of transport, such as walking, or the use of horses and carriages, or on the new mobility provided by the bicycle. Then as now the wild rural areas of the county provided a wonderful setting for walking. When George Noble – the oldest of the Noble sons, and the only one without either direct involvement in Armstrongs, or, unlike Philip in other aspects of the regional economy - published the Birds of Jesmond Dene he dedicated it to his younger sister, by then Ethel Cochrane `an ideal companion on many delightful rambles over the Northumberland moors`. In letters written during his early years in the region, Falkner made a number of references to walking with `Mr Rendel`, meaning Hamilton, the only one of the three brothers involved with Armstrongs who was both unmarried and lived to the end of his life in the North East. Generally guests of Armstrong and of the Nobles seem to have been good walkers. In late June 1886, writing to John in Oxford, Falkner reported a recent visit to Nunnykirk. [His account was written in a more or less ordinary flowing script for as yet he had not yet adopted the distinct calligraphy which was soon to become his regular form. The letter was addressed from Jesmond Dene House, though it used notepaper from the Elswick Ordnance Department]. He had been a member of a Whitsuntide house party which had included Andrew Noble,

Rendel, Majoribanks, a senior member of the works staff, and also for a day or two Philip Watts, who had recently succeeded William White as Armstrong's chief naval architect. "We all walked over to Fallowles on Sunday – a very long walk and we did not hit the tarn [The map uses the form Fallowles `Lough`] – however a shepherd came to our assistance and showed us where it lay." George Noble had joined them for part of the time, and it was under his leadership that the walkers behaved in a way which would nowadays be regarded as ecologically unacceptable and probably illegal: `We found any amount of seagull eggs and George got 4 young birds which we brought home – 2 have since died...` George had also found 2 plovers' nests. (11)

The rapid advance of `bicycling` had made available not only another mode of travel but also of recreation. As an undergraduate Falkner had cycled widely in and around the Thames valley, visiting churches, houses and estates. At that time he and his friends had ridden `high` bicycles or even tricycles, but during the 1880s the ancestor of the present style of bicycle made rapid headway, and at the end of the decade the pneumatic tyre became dominant. We know that Andrew Noble cycled – in summer 1901, when almost 70, he had a near fatal accident when riding alone near Chillingham - but the only specific reference to Falkner riding in this area seems to have involved an emergency of a different and less critical kind. In May 1888 Liliias Noble told John that their father had missed the train during the last week and that they had therefore driven all the way between Tyneside and Nunnykirk: but, she added: `Mr Falkner bicycled. It was damp both days`. (12) There were sports or pastimes for most weathers.

Perhaps the most widely spread country sport was shooting, though after his early days with the family Falkner seems not to have been keen on this - or even, perhaps, to have been involved at all. Yet he had reported favourably on his experience on a visit to Lorbottle, even managing to convey the impression that he had found it congenial. The guests at that time had included Hamilton Rendel and the future Lord Cairns – who `....shot rifles all the time we were there. It seemed very good sport, and I enjoyed marking`. (13) When applied to bird life the results could be appalling. Late in February 1887 Andrew Noble listed for John the record of the recent shooting season: `The total game shot this year is as follows –

723 partridges, 173 pheasants, 150 hares, 1,259 rabbits, 60 woodcock, 21 snipe, 972 grouse, 125 others – grand total 3,483' (14)

Fishing was a prominent interest. While at Nunnykirk, which Falkner reported was 'looking very lovely', he and Hamilton Rendel had fished in the Font. They '...tried the stream diligently for fish with fly - but unsuccessfully. I used worm one day and got two good ones and one fairish one. Mr Thornton Trevelyan [a name which Falkner spelled Trevifian] who had come over one day from Netherwitton Hall told them that 'one might as well fish on a road as in the stream, except 2 or 3 days after a fresh [i.e a freshet]and then it was very good and his boys often took 7 dozen in a day'. (15)

Tennis and cricket were of great importance in the recreational menu of the Noble country houses. Lawn tennis was at this time making great advances as its rules were being formulated. Falkner played in his early years of involvement with the Noble family. For instance at Lorbottle in April 1885 he and Saxton Noble took on Andrew Noble and Walter Singer. He reported the result to John Noble '...we achieved a brilliant coup by losing 6 games to 1'. A month later they were again at Lorbottle. This time it was wet, but bad weather was not allowed to interrupt play: 'All the morning it rained in torrents. However we played tennis through it all. The game was after all not at all bad – swimming was at a great premium and we dived to pick up the balls'. (16)

From his early days as a tutor, Falkner encouraged John Noble to take an interest in cricket. He seems to have been keen himself, in June 1884 recording he had been to Nottingham to see the Australians play. Next spring Andrew Noble went so far as to put Falkner's name down for membership of the Rothbury Cricket Club. (17). He reported in some detail how the game had gone in their house parties - when the numbers involved were augmented by drawing men or boys from the local area. He described his own role in a game played in July 1888. This match with Tynemouth had 'proved a greater fiasco than you had anticipated...': they had 'not so bad a team when it came to the scratch' but the wicket had turned out to be very difficult 'and we had a total collapse'. 'I was not so bad myself', being in a long time for 4, the second best score! 'The ball that bowled me broke on the leg side and took the off bail [and] I think would have beaten a good many people'. (18)



Cricket team led by Andrew Noble (Falkner on his right)

Lorbottle and Nunnykirk seem to have been the two places in which Falkner played a leading role in the Noble family's recreational life. In later years things changed. From the early 1890s his own home was in Durham; in October 1899 he married Evelyn and was soon making new friends in the very different societies of the cathedral and university. Colleagues who had shared his weekends in Northumberland were moving on – Watts left the firm for the Admiralty in autumn 1901; Hamilton Rendel died a year later; Saxton Noble became Armstrong's London representative and soon lived there, and by July 1902 John Noble had married. Falkner sometimes visited the Nobles' country retreats, and Henry Newbolt spoke warmly of the contribution which he and Cochrane made to his own visits to Chillingham.⁽¹⁹⁾ Much of the glory of the early days had passed, but hosts of happy memories remained. When the lease of Lorbottle, the first of the Northumberland homes he had known was given up at the end of the 1885 season, Falkner had composed a 'Farewell to Lorbottle Hall', 'home of homes happiest'. His verse celebrated 'long summer days, and the long round of pleasure' - the beauties of nature, but also 'shooting, the fishing, the cricket and tennis, the riding and painting, the music and song'.⁽²⁰⁾

At the end of Falkner's life, Cochrane's younger brother, Wilfred, who became a director in the 1920s, wrote an obituary notice for the Armstrong Whitworth Record ⁽²¹⁾. It celebrated Falkner's cultural

interests, but also paid tribute to his participation and achievements in sport. There were insights which must have owed most to the shared experience of the many weekend retreats in rural Northumberland: ` He was a keen games player so far as his health allowed; a more than useful wicket keeper, he also played golf, tennis, racquets and lawn tennis, generally in his own way, which was often not the most usual or the best way, but always with the greatest enthusiasm. Field sports had not much attraction for him, though he fished occasionally, but he understood and appreciated the sporting interests of others`. All in all those few words seem to make up an appropriate appreciation of a man of John Meade Falkner`s character.

Notes

- (1) JMF to John Noble 5 February 1889; 10 April 1889
- (2) JMF to Stuart Rendel 27 March 1903
- (3) J.S. Fletcher. *The Enchanting North*. 1908 pp 195,156
- (4) JMF to W Watson-Armstrong 4 November 1892
- (5) M. Noble. *A Long Life*. 1925p 70
- (6) AN to JN 11 March 1883
- (7) JMF to JN 20 November 1885
- (8) A. Noble obituary in *Transactions of the Institute of Naval Architects* LVIII, 1916 p 245
- (9) JMF to JN 2 March 1889
- (10) E.V. Lucas. *The Joy of Life*. 1927
- (11) G. Noble to June 1886
- (12) LN to JN 3 May 1888
- (13) JMF to JN 28 May 1885
- (14) AN to JN 23 February 1887
- (15) JMF to JN 29 June 1886
- (16) JMF to JN 20 April 1885, 17 May 1885
- (17) JMF to JN 11 June 1884, 28 May 1885
- (18) JMF to JN from Elswick 16 July 1888
- (19) H. Newbolt. *My World as in My Time, 1862-1932* 1933. passim
- (20) JMF `A Farewell to Lorbottle Hall` 1885
- (21) *Armstrong Whitworth Record*. Autumn 1932