

***'Home of Homes Happiest'***  
***Halcyon days at Lorbottle Hall***  
George Robson

An article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica states rural Northumberland *to be a tumbled incline of fells and ridges. Few eminences break the general incline which stretches in a far-spreading sea of confluent hills that for six months of the year mingle their browns, russets and duns in a pattern of oriental richness and at all times communicate a fine sense of altitude and expanse* (1).

Lying within easy reach of industrial Tyneside because of the intricate network of railway lines that sprang up during the second half on the nineteenth century, it is no surprise that the Noble family of Newcastle found a series of Northumbrian locations for weekend or even longer recreational forays. In 1860 Andrew Noble had joined armament manufacturers Armstrong and Co. of Tyneside as a researcher into artillery development and soon after this he leased a house at Cartington in the Coquet valley.

However as the size of his family grew and as his means also grew, in 1876 he decided when an opportunity presented itself to relocate three miles north to the imposing Hall at Lorbottle.



**The Hall from the South-East**

Lorbottle lies at the southern extremity of the parish of Whittingham in mid-Northumberland, amongst the foothills of the Cheviots and just over 400 feet above sea level. The suffix bottle appears within the names of a number of Northumbrian villages and derives from the Anglo-Saxon word *botl* which refers to a defensive structure.

There is much evidence of human habitation in the area over a very long period. The OS map shows standing stones, cairns, forts, enclosures and settlements of early man and the course of a Roman road passes right by Lorbottle. The castles at nearby Cartington and Callaly date from the medieval and Georgian periods respectively. The people of Lorbottle were once called *kebs* or *keaves*, terms of abuse whose precise meaning has been lost but which perhaps are more discreditable to their detractors than to the people of Lorbottle. It seems neighbouring villagers fancied themselves as more sophisticated and so made Lorbottle the local 'Gotham'. They passed through the generations mocking legends - that Lorbottle folk had tried to build a wall around a cuckoo so that it should always be spring - that they had gone to the top of nearby Long Crag to catch the moon in order to have plenty of cheese - that they did not know it was raining until they saw the drops splash in the puddles.

Lowrebottel, as it was at that time known, was ravaged by a party of Scots in 1532 and again in 1549, the latter marauding band under the leadership of a Mark Ker:

Mark Ker rode on, and Mark Ker rode on  
And never a hoof or horn saw he,  
Till he came to the ford of Lowrebottel burn  
Where a dainty drove lay on the lea  
(anon)

The only other recorded event of note at Lorbottle occurred on the night of Friday 30th June 1648 when a troop of encamped cavaliers received an unpleasant surprise. In the words of parliamentary officer Major Saunderson 'the next town was Lurbottle where we tooke 60 horses and 60 men all in bed'.

Having inherited Lorbottle and the surrounding area through his marriage, the 3rd Duke of Portland sold a portion of this land to Adam Atkinson of nearby Great Ryle, this on April 9th 1799. Atkinson immediately set about building Lorbottle Hall (2) - *in an airy and pleasant situation facing the south opposite to a range of picturesque crags called Maiden Chambers* (3).



The Hall has to some a rather severe appearance as was the style of that period in Northumberland, but it is undoubtedly notable and is Grade Two listed.

Ownership passing in due course to Atkinson's grandson and namesake, the Hall and estate were then leased out until bought by Alexander Henry Browne of Callaly Castle in 1886.

During the leasing period, in 1876, Andrew Noble took up, in partnership with George Rendel, a ten year lease on the Hall, planning to use its environs for shooting and other recreational pursuits. The idea was for the Rendels and the Nobles to be in residence for blocks of two months alternately. Family and friends periodically visited Lorbottle during this time, and from 1883 the Nobles were usually joined by the sons' resident tutor, John Meade Falkner.

In her autobiography written many years later Lady Margery Noble wrote:

*We had, I suppose, what would be called the happiest time of our lives there. The children were all well, and there were many new and old friends and neighbours. The shooting parties gathered happily and congenially. Among the young men studying at Elswick who came over was Charles Parsons, later Sir Charles, the inventor of the turbine. We had much amusement, picnics, walks, games and lawn tennis.*

*Visitors from Cragside often came to us at Lorbottle to stay weekends or just to spend the day with us, and we walked and rode over the moors to Cragside, and there was much pleasant intercourse.*

*One evening when the Huxley girls were staying with us, and some young men, we decided to cook our own dinner in the woods called 'Maiden Chambers' on the hill above the house.*



### **Maiden Chambers – a section of the cliff face**

*We carried up our cooking utensils and food, but it was nearly dark before the food was ready and quite dark when we had finished. As we sat around the blazing fire, Miss Rachel Huxley and Mr Harding playing chess like Ferdinand and Miranda\*, we heard the sound of music out of the darkness. It sounded fairy-like and mysterious. It was our gamekeeper, John Dickinson (4) and his sons; he played the violin very well, and his sons were musical. The young people danced*

*reels in the firelight among the trees while they played - a very pretty sight.*

*Herbert Cairns, later Lord Cairns, played the bagpipes wonderfully well and played the whole party down to the old barn where we all danced.*

JMF was part of all this. Cricket (as wicket-keeper), tennis, fishing, shooting at both targets and wildlife, rambles and horse-rides over the surrounding moors gave the young JMF some of his happiest days. When weather was less clement and in the evenings, painting, dances, musical activities, smoking and conversing prevented *ennui and dark melancholy* (5).



**“So sit here on the lawn and they’ll give you a crumpet”**

Lady Margery Noble further recollected in her autobiography: *At Lorbottle my husband began a series of cricket matches...these were continued after we left Lorbottle, at Jesmond and Nunykirk, and were very great fun.*

Not a natural sportsman, we know JMF played a deal of cricket but also turned to some golf, racquets and both lawn and real tennis. It is recorded that one fellow-participant commented that JMF *played his sports generally in his own way, which was often not the most usual or the best way, but always with the greatest enthusiasm.*

On his final visit to Lorbottle, shortly before the lease expired in 1885, the twenty-seven-year-old JMF penned his poem which lauds the environment, the hospitality and each of the

activities that preoccupied the guests. The poem betrays the author's sadness at having to leave Lorbottle for the last time.

### OLD MEMORIES PROSIT! (6)

*A Farewell to Lorbottle Hall, (written in the autumn of 1885.)*

Farewell to the home in the North, and the Chambers  
Named from the Maidens that roam on the steep;  
Farewell to the pines, and the rocks where one clammers,  
Startling the rabbit and black-visaged sheep.

Home of homes happiest, e'en Horace's measure  
Would faint if he tried all your glories to sing;  
The long summer days, and the long round of pleasure,  
The tints of the autumn, the splendour of spring.

No; the difficult task when one takes up the pen is  
To say just enough, and not make it too long;  
The shooting, the fishing, the cricket, the tennis,  
The riding and painting, the music and song.

For *ennui* and dyspepsia, dark melancholy,  
In the 'court' find a charm that cannot be withstood;  
They fly in the zest of a daring half-volley,  
Or a fluky back-hander scraped up off the wood.

So sit here on the lawn and they'll give you a crumpet,  
At an *al fresco* (7) tea in the pure moorland air,  
With a fanfarronade on Miss Huxley's (8) new trumpet,  
Purchased for twopence at Harbottle Fair (9).

Or you'll hear at your shoulder the crack of the rifle  
The ring of the bull's eye, the target's dull thud,  
With a chorus the marksman tries vainly to stifle,  
Voices in unison shouting out 'Mud' (10)

Look, under the fir-tree you see the small wicket,  
And the path leading down to the green on the slope.  
That's where we disport, when the word passed is 'cricket',  
And Alwick come over against us to cope.

There was Johnny to bowl 'em and Spencer to hit 'em,  
And Ashby to knock up a hundred or more,  
And they very soon found that the pace didn't fit 'em,  
For the Lorbottle gamesters could play to the score.

It's a month later now, friend, and shooting's the past-time,  
So be up, sirs, and at 'em; of sport take your fill.  
Catch your hare while you can, for it's all for the last time,  
Your stroll with Toddie on Lorbottle Hill.

Oh the scent's on the heather, the sun's on Bigg's Pillar;  
The grouse are go-backing - don't waste time in words;  
Watch the man below you, a regular 'killer',  
Right and left, left and right, how he brings down the birds!

Though I don't say it's nice when his knowledge is smattery,  
And his gun a full choke, and his shot No.5,  
As you coweringly shrink round the end of your battery,  
And hope that somehow you may come out alive.

Then you mustn't forget when the frost's on the cover,  
Where the pheasants come thick and the fun never flags  
And the pipes and the armchairs when we talk it all over,  
The firelight and fables and wonderful bags.

And perhaps after dinner some charming young lady,  
As you sit meekly waiting your tune to cut in,  
Will soothe your impatience with bold *John O'Grady*,  
Or Philip will sing you of *Father O'Flynn*.

Well, it's over, my masters; we're nearing our tether,  
We must go where luck leads us; no brave heart repines.  
So we'll pluck the last sprig of Lorbottle heather,  
And watch the last moon come up over the pines.

But let's drink ere we part to the host and hostess,  
Wealth health and happiness long years to come.  
Nunnykirk (11) or Lorbottle, a house at the most is,  
It's the kind-hearted owners that make it a home.

Thirty years after JMF's final Lorbottle break and after happy years at Nunnykirk and Chillingham, he returned to Northumberland on the first of many annual visits to remote Catcleugh (12) in the north-west of the county. As a director of the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Board he attended the late June or early July summer Board meeting/recreational weekends based at Catcleugh House from 1915 until 1931.

It seems the Catcleugh environs brought mental and physical relief to JMF - Kenneth Warren states he *welcomed the visits with childlike delight* (1). In a letter to Miss Noble dated July 12th 1923 JMF wrote 'I was up at Catcleugh yesterday....in the loneliest country imaginable, of boundless green hills and vallies' (sic).

This description nicely encapsulates the environs surrounding all the Noble Northumberland bases - Cartington, Lorbottle, Nunnykirk and Chillingham.

Although over twenty miles of moorland roads lie between Catcleugh and Lorbottle there can be little doubt that each of these later-life returns to the Northumberland wilderness brought to JMF memories of those halcyon Lorbottle breaks *with their long round of pleasure.*

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- (1). Highlighted in *John Meade Falkner 1858-1932: A Paradoxical Life* by Kenneth Warren (The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd.,1995).
- (2). In the 1950s Lorbottle Hall became the home of the fashion designer Jean Muir and her husband and business partner Harry Leuckert. Moving between their London home and Lorbottle, the pair counted amongst clients Lauren Bacall, Joanna Lumley, Maggie Smith, Judie Dench, Joan Plowright, Patricia Hodge, Miriam Stoppard, Julie Walters and Charlotte Rampling. Jean Muir died at Lorbottle in 1995 and is buried at nearby Whittingham church.



- (3). The crags above the Hall contain a number of caves (chambers) where maidens were said to dwell. Maiden Chambers are referred to in the first verse of JMF's Lorbottle poem.
- (4.) John Dickinson and his sons followed the Nobles to their later residences at Nunnykirk, Chillingham and Ardkinglas.
- (5). See verse 4 of *Old Memories Prosit!*
- (6). Prosit - a toast to someone's health while drinking
- (7). *al fresco*. Italian - literally in the fresh. e.g. dining *al fresco* i.e. eating outside, used in English since the late 18th century.
- (8). Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) is remembered as *Darwin's Bulldog* for his staunch defence of Darwin's theory of evolution. He was instrumental in developing scientific education in Britain. Friends with both Lord Armstrong and Andrew Noble he made a number of visits to both Cragside and Lorbottle Hall, thus meeting JMF. Because of inherited mental instability and depressions he retired at the age of sixty in 1885 and to mark this spent some days at Lorbottle, weeks before the lease on the Hall was to expire. He was accompanied by his wife Henrietta and daughters Rachel and Marian (or Madie). Marian (1859-1887) is referred to in JMF's poem and in her autobiography Lady Noble refers to Marian as a *very gifted creature who became my daughter's friend*. Marian was indeed a gifted painter who married another gifted painter - John Collier – but, like her father, was prone to severe depression. She succumbed to pneumonia at the early age of twenty-seven whilst being treated for 'hysteria' in Paris.
- (9). *Harbottle Fairs were in days gone by the great events of the year in that upland district, at which all the farmers and shepherds out of the Coquet and Redewater foregathered. Not only were large*

*numbers of hill sheep and cattle sold, but many other transactions of sale and barter there took place.* (Dixon op.cit., 195-196) Trade directories record that by JMF's time Fairs had been reduced from weekly to twice yearly events - July 8th and September 19th, whatever the days of the week.

- (10). MUD - a stupid or twaddling fellow/ word ejaculated upon the conclusion of a silly oration or silly action. (John Babcock's Dictionary of Slang, 1823)
- (11). Some months before the Lorbottle lease expired Andrew Noble took up a lease on **Nunnykirk Hall** from the Campbell-Orde family.



**Andrew Noble and his cricketers at Nunnykirk c.1890**

A devotee of the game, Noble formed his own team at each of his three Northumberland seats – Lorbottle Hall, Nunnykirk Hall and Chillingham Castle. Meade Falkner sits to the left of the be-whiskered Noble. John Noble stands behind his father.

- (12). Rural Rides to Catcleugh - **The John Meade Falkner Society Journal** Number 10 (2009).