

*The Palace of a Modern Magician*  
*The Falkners -- The Armstrongs -- The Nobles -- The Adyes*  
George Robson

John Meade Falkner, his wife, his sister - in - law, his brother - in - law, his parents- in - law, his first employer and his wife his second employer and his wife. All of these on occasions met each other at a magnificent venue in mid- Northumberland. Six of them lived here, died here and are buried close by.

Cragside was the creation of the 1st Lord Armstrong (1810 - 1900) who was an innovator, engineer, shipbuilder and gunmaker. He was one of Britain's greatest scientific geniuses and is described by the National Trust as *a mighty industrialist who displayed power, vigour, boldness, romance, sentiment and originality.*

Late in his life William Armstrong reminisced: *I first came to Redesdale as a babe in arms and my earliest recollections consist of paddling in the Coquet, gathering pebbles on its gravel beds and climbing amongst the rocks on the crags.*

The Armstrong family had travelled from their home in Newcastle each summer to stay with friends in the village of Rothbury which lies on River Coquet in mid-Northumberland. William was a delicate boy with a bad chest and an apparently incurable cough which nevertheless ceased as soon as he arrived in Rothbury and set about fishing, scrambling up the hillsides and, in particular, getting to know the banks of the Debdon Burn which forces its way down the Simonside Hills to the River Coquet.

But from 1847 when the young Armstrong was setting up his great engineering company, he had no time for holidays. He worked for years at fever pitch developing and managing Tyneside's Elswick works alongside finding the time to take up two exacting posts in

London, advising the Government on the design and manufacture of artillery.

However, by 1863 he found himself in a position to devolve his responsibilities to others and for the first time in sixteen years he returned to Rothbury, along with his business partners Andrew Noble and George Rendel. This encouraged him to use his wealth to purchase much of the Debdon valley. The land on either side of the burn was poor and mostly too rough for farming - good for nothing, it seemed, but shooting and fishing. Half-way up the hillside was an unremarkable shooting lodge known as Cragside, taking its name from Caged Hill above. Both Armstrong and his wife Margaret recognised the area had potential.



**Jesmond Dene House**

The Armstrongs were living at Jesmond Dene on the outskirts of Newcastle and its dramatic natural features became a model for what they planned for Cragside and its surrounds. William and Margaret took charge of operations themselves and at first gave more attention to covering the bare hillsides with foliage than to developing the lodge. In time seven million trees were planted covering the 1,729 acres, some being exotic and rare pines. Today, in the middle of a grove of Douglas firs, stands what has become the

tallest tree in England - a still growing Scots pine which after 140 years has reached 190 feet (the height of ten double decker buses stacked one on top of the other). Margaret Armstrong was particularly interested in the rhododendron which had been introduced from Asia some years before. Complimented by interplanted azalea, Cragside has become one of the best places in Britain to view varieties of rhododendron which flower during June and early July.



### **The Gardens at Cragside**

The planting completed, in 1869 a London architect was called upon to extend the lodge and transform it into something spectacular. During a visit to London the Armstrongs had met a young but rising architect called Richard Norman Shaw and they became convinced he was the man they needed. Shaw's work at Cragside was to catapult him to the very top of his profession. During the fifteen years he worked at Cragside, however, Shaw was never given a free hand for the Armstrongs were always looking over his shoulder and ensured Shaw never had a free hand. But he had the affability, patience and pliancy to never cross swords with his employers and in the end Shaw viewed the great house less as his own personal

creation and more as a plaything for those who employed him and a project giving him notoriety and furthering his career



### **Cragside Library**

A library and a dining room were added to the north end of the existing house with a plunge bath and hot-air heating system in the basement. Rich oak and walnut joinery, superb features of the whole house, were sent up from London suppliers and special items of stone, marble and wood carvings were supplied by James Forsyth, a trusted collaborator of Shaw's. Bedrooms over the former house were added, the fronts to the house remodelled and a central tower topped with half-timbered gables was raised. This all made the house and the whole estate more reminiscent of the Black Forest than Northumberland.

In early 1873 Armstrong decided to add a long new wing to house his 'museum' and observatory. And finally came a drawing room and a billiard room which were added to the south-east wing. Even though the exterior was now completed, all this did not fully satisfy the Armstrongs who in 1877 paid a considerable sum to Shaw in order for him to remodel the grand staircase, refit bedrooms and add other internal embellishments. Then they turned their attention to adding a picture collection albeit at vast expense. This was displayed in the spectacular Watercolour Gallery and included works by T.M. Richardson, Clarkson Stanfield, J.E. Millais and others. Armstrong much patronised the Newcastle artist H.H. Emmerson who produced Armstrong's favourite painting Faithful to Death. A variety of outbuildings were another of Shaw's contributions to the project. Stables, a buttery, a laundry and accommodation for staff and less illustrious guests featured amongst these.



### **Cragside from the Rock Garden**

But what has become the most renowned feature of Cragside is its power supply. In 1868 Armstrong had a dam built to store water at the head of Debdon Burn above the house and this created what was named Tumbleton Lake. Gravity took water from here down the hillside to the house and outhouses where it was used to power labour-saving machines such as a hydraulic lift, a spit in the kitchen, gongs and laundry equipment.



### **Tumbleton Lake spillway**

Armstrong's friend Joseph Swan had recently perfected the light bulb, or incandescent lamp as it was known at the time. With state of the art, innovative turbines and dynamos installed, powered largely by water from the Nelly Moss Lakes above a power house, it was now possible for electric lamps to be installed throughout the house. So Cragend Hill became the first house in the world to be lit by water-generated electricity.



### **Christmas at Cragside**

At a grand switching on ceremony Armstrong had chosen the youngest of his employees to throw the switch, reasoning it was likely the boy would live the longest to relate first hand memories of the occasion. This proved to be correct thinking, for young Andrew Crozier lived until he was eighty-eight and remained in service at Cragside throughout his long life, rising to become butler for more than forty years.

Armstrong's scientific prowess is perhaps best seen in what is now considered his greatest invention. Shortly after he had founded his armaments, shipbuilding and engineering works at Elswick on the River Tyne in 1847 he faced the problem of finding adequate water pressure to power hydraulic machinery. When natural water power was not available a tall tower had to be built in which engines pumped the necessary water supply. However, it was not always possible to build high water towers and they were expensive. But Armstrong came up with the solution - a device he called the accumulator. It was a means of increasing water pressure (and therefore power) without having a high head of water or to build a

water tower. Of all the resultant hydraulic projects, his firm accomplished the most impressive and notable was the manufacture and installation of the hydraulic accumulators' necessary to raise London's Tower Bridge bascules.

The Armstrongs became more attached to their creations at Cragside and by the late 1870s they were spending more time there. So, they made the decision to sell their house at Jesmond and gift the adjacent Jesmond Dene valley to the City of Newcastle so enabling the people of Newcastle to enjoy it.

Armstrong had used his Jesmond home to offer hospitality to often illustrious prospective Elswick clients and in order for this to be transferred to Cragside a final contribution by Shaw was required. What is termed the Drawing-room wing was added. Modelled externally on Haddon Hall in Derbyshire but with a large top-lit interior space, the whole room is dominated by a truly sumptuous inglenook chimney-piece which almost fills the south wall. Shaw's brilliant chief assistant at this time was W.R. Lethaby whose design for the piece was based in early Renaissance vein. The chimney-piece weighs ten tons and is made of Italian marbles. The inglenook within is lined with further marbles and has settees covered in red leather on either side. The smoke from this and other fireplaces within the house was drawn underground to escape from a chimney disguised as a rock pile high up on the hillside. The now completed Cragside was soon dubbed *The Wonder of the Age*.

Just about the first visitors to Cragside were the Noble family. Captain Andrew Noble had been a young gunnery expert whom Armstrong had met in the course of ordnance trials and who was to become his right-hand man of business for the rest of his life. Noble had been advised by Armstrong to purchase the imposing Jesmond Dene House in 1880 which he then extended to accommodate his growing family.



## Lorbottle Hall

Only a few miles across the moors from Cragside lies the hamlet of Lorbottle with its late Georgian Lorbottle Hall.

Taken on a ten-year lease in 1876 the Nobles and the Rendels agreed to use the Hall alternately as a base for recreational breaks from the exacting work at Elswick back on Tyneside. For the final two years of the lease the Nobles had been accompanied by a young JMF, employed as a tutor and companion to John and Philip, the youngest of Andrew Noble's children. Margery Noble wrote in her late life autobiography: *Visitors from Cragside often came to us at Lorbottle to stay weekends or just to spend the day with us, and we walked or rode over the moors to Cragside and there was much pleasant intercourse* (Journal No. 12, 2011 - *Home of Homes Happiest*)

During this introduction to the delights and fascinations of Cragside JMF would have had no inkling that in years to come he would be making many more visits because of his marriage that would bring him close to the Armstrong family.

Later visitors to Cragside were to include the King of Siam and the Shah of Persia in 1889 and the Crown prince of Afghanistan in 1895. But most illustrious of all were the Prince and Princess of Wales (later King Edward V11 and Queen Alexandra) who arrived with their sons Prince Albert and Prince George as part of a visit to Tyneside in August 1884. Andrew Noble, as a friend and colleague of the Armstrongs, was invited to stay at Cragside during this royal visit but was too unwell to accept the invitation. So, the Noble family were represented by the eldest daughter Liliás.





## **Prince Edward and Princess Alexandra**

In a letter written to her uncle Isambard Brunel, who was living in Germany at the time and written to immediately after the royal visit, Liliias describes in detail her recollections. This letter was recently discovered by Society member John Cochrane having lain for years amongst his family's papers. Cragside, even with its outhouses, could not accommodate all the royal party, its entourage, and special guests so hotels and private houses in Rothbury were commandeered for the duration of the visit. Liliias stayed at Rothbury's rectory with the Reverend Ainger and his family but was present for formal functions at Cragside and accompanied the royal party on their visit to Newcastle and Jesmond. At Jesmond Prince Edward had formally handed over the Dene as a gift from William Armstrong to the City of Newcastle. Andrew Noble had felt well enough to walk down from Jesmond Dene House to the Banqueting House to witness the occasion, accompanied by his wife, sons and JMF. Following the ceremony Liliias had joined the royal couple in procession to Newcastle city centre where the Hancock Natural History Museum (now The Great North Museum) was formally opened by Prince Edward. Always the benefactor, Lord Armstrong had shortly before the opening gifted the then large sum of £11,500 to the museum.

Travelling by train back to Cragside a banquet was held that same evening during which Liliias was placed next to Prince George (later King George V). In the letter, she describes the Prince as of a sweet nature but shy. Following the meal everyone had retired to the drawing room where Liliias, an accomplished singer, was unexpectedly invited to sing solos.



### **The Owl Suite**

The Prince and Princess of Wales during their stay had been given the use of the finest of the guest chambers known as The Owl Rooms. They had been

built by Shaw between 1872 - 1874 and overlook the house's entrance. The largest room of the suite was the bedroom with an adjoining dressing room, and there was also a small room for the use of visitors' children or servants. The name Owl Rooms comes from the fact that the bed is adorned with carvings of owls perched atop the bedposts. On leaving Cragside, the town of Rothbury presented to the Armstrongs a book of watercolours illustrating the visit and which is currently on display in the portrait gallery.

Having bought *The Divinity House* on Durham City's Palace Green in 1897 JMF was soon afterwards married. His wife was Evelyn, the younger daughter of General Sir John Adye, now retired as Governor of Gibraltar, and to whose family he had been introduced to whilst accompanying the now elevated Sir Andrew Noble on a business venture in London. The lives of the Falkners, the Armstrongs and the Adyes became even more intertwined when Evelyn's elder sister Winifreda married William Armstrong's great nephew William Henry Watson in 1889.

Although officially living in London, Sir John and Clara Adye spent much time at Cragside, especially after Lord Armstrong became a widower in 1893. Sir John and William had much in common and their friendship stretched back many years. So, the Adyes were

granted the use of one of the houses that had been built within the grounds of Cragside. John Adye was a very keen and talented painter and a number of his works are displayed in Cragside's bedrooms. Notable amongst them is one that features Gibraltar. Two more of his Gibraltar works are displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum and a number executed during his time in India are in the Army and Navy Museum.

After a short illness Sir John died at Cragside in November 1900 only a month before the death of Lord Armstrong himself on 27th December. Both Sir John and Lord Armstrong, plus their wives, are buried within yards of each other in the private graveyard at All Saints Church, Rothbury, where William had served as a sidesman for almost forty years.

We know that JMF attended the funerals of his parents-in-law and his sister-in-law and made other occasional visits to Cragside. A letter written by JMF, a copy of which is in the hands of the Society, requests the return of a book which he had left behind in the library after one such visit.

Although Lord Armstrong's nephew John Watson was still alive, he was suffering from a mental disorder and, being himself childless, Lord Armstrong bequeathed his estates and interests totalling £1,400,000 gross to his great nephew William Henry who had lived at Cragside since the late 1880s, charged with managing the whole estate. On the death of his great uncle William Henry changed his surname to Watson-Armstrong and 1903 he was raised to the title 1st Baron Armstrong of Bamburgh\* and Cragside.

Winifreda died in 1914 and William Watson-Armstrong in 1941. Both were laid to rest at the All Saints family graveyard. Cragside then passed into the ownership of the 2nd Lord Armstrong of the second creation on his father's death in 1972. In 1977 the house and the surrounding 911 acres passed to the Treasury as settlement of

death duties incurred on the estate. Shortly afterwards it was all transferred to the National Trust and was first opened to the public in 1979 after restoration. Since then much has been done to draw the attraction of the increasing number of visitors. Armstrong's many hydroelectric schemes on the estate have been revived to working order, the rockery which fronts the House (and which is the largest in Europe) replanted, and in 1991 the formal terraced gardens, glasshouses and even more parkland were acquired.

Being childless, on the death of the 3rd Baron Armstrong of Bamburgh and Cragside in 1989 the title became extinct.

HOWEVER HIGH WE CLIMB IN PURSUIT  
OF KNOWLEDGE WE SHALL STILL SEE  
HEIGHTS ABOVE US, AND THE MORE WE  
EXTEND OUR VIEW THE MORE CONSCIOUS  
WE SHALL BE OF THE IMMENSITY WHICH  
LIES BEYOND

(W.G..Armstrong)

\* William Armstrong had bought and developed Bamburgh Castle which lies on the Northumberland coast