

Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History.

“THE MERRY MONARCH” IN SUFFOLK.

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Though many years have passed since I was in Suffolk I have a vivid recollection of a pilgrimage made in this peaceful unspoiled county whose silvan beauty and soothing graceful rivers and ancient mills made so strong an appeal to Gainsborough and Constable. Unspoiled, at least some three decades before the disastrous and revolutionary effect of the war.

Nevertheless this charming county can well bear comparison with others in the matter of rough handling by vandals who have no artistic taste nor reverence for antiquity. And, judging by report, the drastic demands of the Ministers of Health and Transport have left this corner of Eastern England practically untouched. But I speak from hearsay only; for this, at least, was the impression made upon a friend leisurely touring Suffolk last autumn. Let us hope, long may it continue inviolate.

Looking back to my eastward jaunt in 1885, which happened to be the year of the Tercentenary of Charles II's death, that reign of revelry, curiously enough, seems less remote than the span that separates the Eighties from this year of grace. Three lives, in fact, can easily bridge the gulf, for I have corresponded with a nonegarian who as a youngster was taken to see a bedridden fossil who not only had seen his Merry Majesty very much *alive*, but in all likelihood *kicking* at the inadequate Treasury grant to meet his secret services expenses.

Back-stair Chiffinch, as we know, contributed substantial sums towards the credit account from Louis XIV's Privy Purse as a pension to the ruler, who in gratitude for service rendered, had to dole out so many pensions. I mention this particular friend of the king, as a sort of “understudy” of his steps at this moment before the curtain. Suffice it to say that it was through a descendant of Edward Progers, groom of the bed-chamber to Charles II, confidant of the Royal intrigues, and panderer to his majesty's pleasures, that I obtained entree to the ancestral home of the Royalist Jermyns, Rushbrooke. The aforesaid accommodating Edward was a kinsman of the Jermyns, and the representative who wrote my letter of introduction was a cousin of the last Jermyn descendant who lived in the grand old Tudor mansion.

Crossing the weed-grown moat, evidences of decay were painfully apparent, though more without than within, saving the bats that flitted about the bedrooms.

The young squire, who greeted me cordially, was a bachelor, but though, to a certain extent, proud of his heirlooms and forebears and their associations with the House of Stuart, he was at the same time unmistakably bored by them. He and another cousin of Progers descent, being the sole occupants of Rushbrooke Hall, were far happier with gun and rod—shooting rats and hauling eels from the moat. The Stuart relics and historical portraits, presumably made no great appeal; the very casual handling of the Bonny Prince's silk brocaded costume, or the night apparel of "the Martyr King," revealed no trace of reverence or veneration. The lingering atmosphere of the Stuart Court naturally helped to revisualize those lively days of pomp and pleasure, when the deeds, or misdeeds, of the *dramatis personae* who sojourned within these walls, were added to the earlier local Tudor records and traditions.

So far, perhaps, a somewhat laboured preface to the subject in hand.

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His Merry Majesty was entirely in his element when "way down East," surrounded by the gay and witty throng that formed the most intimate of his chosen friends—the frivolous, reckless associates who basked and pirouetted lawlessly under the wing of royal favour. The diaries of Pepys and Evelyn, and other contemporary scribes, give vivid glimpses of the licence of these carousals. The virtuoso and philosopher, naturally, was shocked at the unrestrained proceedings, while the Secretary to the Navy, if ostensibly so, may be reckoned to have had his tongue in his cheek, at "goings on" in which outward decorum would not permit him to participate.

When the Court adjourned from Audley End to Newmarket, restraint, in any form, was cast to the winds. Lodging in the sporting town, Evelyn was by no means in his element with "jolly blades racing, dauncing, feasting and revelling, more resembling a luxurious and abandon'd rout." Here was his Grace of Bridingham with his band of fiddlers and the abandoned countess, whose husband he had slain, shortly before, in a duel. Rochester, Buckhurst, Sedley, Etherege and the rest of the lively crew, naturally would be there when the king was dining with his Jockeys. Only a few miles eastward was Arlington's new-built seat, and when the Court moved there, the pace became more rapid; not for a moment because, as Walpole describes Euston, as a place "that neither sees nor is seen"; far from it, for a myriad of eyes were about the house on such occasions, being filled from one end to the other with lords, ladys and gallants—two hundred people at table and half as many horses, besides servants and guards."

Here it was that Nelly's rival, Portsmouth, entered upon her official career with a parody of orthodox form and ceremony. Evelyn was there at the time and saw more than enough of the "fondnesse and toying with that young wanton." Though he doesn't say as much as the more lively diarist would have said had he formed one of the house

party. My Lord Howard (a few years later to inherit the Dukedom of Norfolk), another lively spark, with his “ flying chariot and lightning horses ” swept Evelyn away to his palace in Norwich, where shortly before he had entertained the king in gorgeous fashion. This rōue had fallen under the sway of the actress, Betterton, the daughter of a royal cellarman. These ladies of the stage (a novelty introduced by Killigrew of Drury Lane), Nell Gwyn, Moll Davis and the rest were soon picked off the boards for an easier career. Moll was a sort of cousin German to Howard, being the natural daughter of his kinsman, Sir Robert, the dramatist. Upon one occasion, before the advent of these rapidly snapped up sirens, the king inquiring the cause of delay in raising the curtain was meekly informed that the heroine of the play was *being shaved!*

Tom Killigrew, dramatist, producer and “ Jester,” was, perhaps, on more easy terms with his royal master than any other favourite, and his official calling gave him more licence than the rest. Thornham, near Eye, which came by marriage into the possession of the Killigrews, in the next century, has visible evidence of Charles II’s presence there in the form of his bed hangings, if not his bed. The royal bed at Saxham, the seat of Monmouth’s guardian, Lord Crofts, was there until that old hall was demolished. Owing to the connection with his favourite bastard, Charles here made himself quite at home, vide gossip Pepys : “ The king was drunk at Saxham, with Sidley (Sedly), Buckhurst, etc., the night that Arlington came thither ; and would not give him audience, or could not ; which is true, for it was the night that I was there and saw the king go up to his chamber, and was told that the king had been drinking.” “ Madcap ” Crofts’ select society at Saxham, being guests well suited to his majesty’s taste, undoubtedly formed the foundation of Monmouth’s later rakish ways. His guardian was unsteady enough as was his own royal sire, but Buckingham, Bab May and George Porter, who joined one Christmas revel, were no companions for tender youth. And Tom Killigrew’s son Harry, a great friend of the king, was the worst of the lot. And, by the way, many of his sins have been put down to his father’s dis-credit.

The older seat of the Crofts, West Stow, fortunately still survives. This quaint old building was left by Lord Croft’s mother to Edward Progers precedently mentioned. Close by was Culford, Lord Cornwallis’s seat. Here we find Bridlingham relieving the king’s boredom on a Sunday with a ribald sermon, while the noble host, a notorious spendthrift and gambler, to provide a new diversion for his majesty, introduced the rector’s daughter, the result culminating in a grim tragedy such as happened in the story of “ Jew Suss.” For the poor girl, in panic, jumped from a height and was killed.

We get glimpses of these worthless associates of Charles II towards the close of their useless careers, when their pace had considerably subsided since they foregathered in Suffolk. The elder Jermyn, the old Earl of St. Albans, properly cannot be classed with the rest. Evelyn

was correct in calling him a "prudent old courtier," for did he not manage to keep the fact dark that he became the second husband of Queen Henrietta Maria. In 1683, at the age of eighty, though practically blind, he was still devoted to the gaming-table, bidding recklessly, with somebody at his elbow to explain the hand he held and the cards laid down.

Edward Progers survived the three succeeding reigns, and shewed remarkable vitality in second childhood, for he is said to have "died of the agony of cutting four new teeth." Nor is the name yet dead, I believe, in Bury St. Edmunds.

As for Buckingham's end, we are all familiar with the squalid surroundings so graphically drawn by Pope. As to the poet's accuracy, well, it may be likened to Mark Twain's observation regarding an obituary notice during his lifetime that "The report of his decease was much exaggerated." However, the dying duke admitted to the minister that was sent for, that he had been "a shame and a disgrace to all religions," adding "If you can do me any good, *do!*"

The end of young Rochester, too, will be recalled, with bigotted Bishop Burnet listening to his repentance; a moral lesson of which he made the most.

Etherege made a suitable departure by breaking his neck tumbling downstairs when he was drunk. Buckhurst, when comparatively respectable, as Earl of Dorset, old and infirm, was paying for his sins in the form of gout of exceptionally painful character. Anyhow, the malady proved fatal. Under such conditions we are told "the devil a saint can be," so in all likelihood he repented for his dissolute career. Nevertheless, he was excellent company to the last, and that was in the reign of Queen Anne. Congreve, who was with him at the end, says he had "more wit while dying than others in the best of health."

As for Sedley, notorious for debauchery in younger days, they were by no means shorteined because his life was "a merry one," for he outlived all his gay companions, dying well past eighty in the reign of the first George. By this time, presumably he had turned over a dozen "new leaves," for a friend—not an enemy, please note—said he "was everything that an English gentleman should be," which, en passant, judging by the accommodating code of integrity of the period, may be accepted at its face value.

Looking at these scenes of reckless gait in Western Suffolk a few years after the exiled king had come into his own again, what a contrast to the privations endured by the impoverished English Court in Paris a few years before. But it was not so with the widowed Queen Mother's master of the horse, "handsome Jermyn," (later Lord St. Albans); who, high up in the lofty entrance hall of royalist Rushbrooke, looked so imperious in his robes and ribbons. For by all accounts, before the Restoration his own table was always extravagantly spread. A reminder of those hard times for the House of Stuart

stood out in bold relief near Lely's full-length portrait; viz., Charles in the Boscobel oak, when the young fugitive was grateful enough for bread and cheese, and thankful also for one of Jermyn's shirts upon his safe arrival in France.

And, by the way, in the autumn of 1651 Charles was no nearer Ipswich than the coast of Sussex, a distance of roughly a hundred miles as the crow flies. The erroneous tradition of the king being hidden in "Sparrowe's House" probably originated from the fact that Jane Lane and her brother, Colonel John, managed to escape to the continent by tramping in disguise eastward to Yarmouth. And it is quite possible that they may first have tried to get a boat at Ipswich, obtaining a night's lodging in the Butter Market?