
Opening Extract from...

The Legacy of Hartlepool Hall

Written by Paul Torday

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The Legacy of Hartlepool Hall

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One

As a rule, Ed Hartlepool never opened letters unless they were invitations. These were opened and placed on the chimneypiece and marked with a tick or a cross to show whether he had found the time to answer them. Sometimes he even remembered to attend the wedding or drinks party he had been asked to: although for the last few years, living in the south of France as a non-dom, invitations had become scarce and his attendance scarcer.

Other post was usually left unopened. No member of his family had ever thought it worth their while to read correspondence from accountants, lawyers or bankers. Letters of this sort had been arriving at Villa Laurier with increasing frequency and remained in a pile on his desk. Every now and then he would open a few at random, glance at the first sentence, and then throw them away unread.

Ed never opened emails either – unless they were jokes. He used his computer to play on-line poker and couldn't see the point of it otherwise. His correspondents had long since learned it was hopeless trying to reach him in this way.

His father, Simon Aylmer Francis Simmonds, the fourth Marquess of Hartlepool, had died a few years ago. He had given Ed only two pieces of advice. The first was that if the opening sentence of a letter wasn't interesting, then the rest

of it didn't deserve attention. The second recommendation was: '*A gentleman should only need to move his bowels once a day*.'

Ed began his day at half past nine with a cup of coffee and a couple of cigarettes on the terrace. As usual, at that time of the morning, he was clothed only in his dressing gown, preferring to swim before he began reading the English newspapers that his housekeeper would soon bring from the village.

Next it was time to obey his father's advice. He took his morning's post to the only room at Villa Laurier that in any way resembled home. When he had moved to France on his trustees' advice he had taken the house on a ten-year lease. Most of the furniture and decoration had been acceptable. However, Ed had not found French ideas on domestic sanitation to his taste and in this one room he had made changes. The best of English glazed ceramic sanitary ware had been imported and fitted; a lustrous mahogany loo seat and lid added. To complete the illusion, Ed had hung his old school and house photographs on the walls. He gazed at the sea of half-forgotten faces at this time every morning without thinking anything much about them. They were there merely as a silent audience while Ed performed his morning functions.

As he sat there, he opened the first letter. It was from Horace, the butler at Hartlepool Hall. Ed couldn't remember the last time he had received a letter from Horace and the shaky handwriting was at first unfamiliar to him. The letter began with the intriguing sentence:

'A Lady Alice Birtley has come to stay with us, and I do not recollect that your Lordship left any instructions in respect of her visit.'

Ed had never heard of Alice Birtley. He put the letter to

one side, promising himself he would read the rest of it later. He had certainly not invited a Lady Alice, or anyone else, to stay at Hartlepool Hall. The second letter was from his accountant in London and almost went straight into the waste-paper basket. But this time some instinct made him open it. The first sentence commanded his attention straight away; and the next, and the next.

The letter informed Ed that his five-year exile as a non-dom had come to an end. A settlement had been reached by the trustees of the Hartlepool Estate in the enormous and costly row with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs that had arisen following the death of Ed's father. The figure that had been agreed was so large that Ed could not at first grasp it. It didn't seem as if the amount of money in the letter could have anything to do with him or his affairs. It was simply too large to understand.

Ed's father had followed a long family tradition of leaving his affairs in a dreadful tangle. The wealth of the Simmonds family had been colossal; it had survived generations of mismanagement. But somehow the taxman's demands had always been met or else avoided; to improve matters, Ed's father and his advisors had designed a series of trusts, in turn owned by overseas trusts in Guernsey, in turn owned by other trusts in Lichtenstein. As a result, the fourth Marquess had paid no inheritance tax on his own father's death; and little or no income tax during his lifetime. The arrangements that had been constructed to help him avoid all this tax were so complex it was probable that no single human being fully understood them.

When Ed's father died, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs had taken Ed's trustees to court, and Ed had been advised to

move abroad. Now the matter had been settled and the bills were coming in.

Ed knew as soon as he read the opening sentence of the letter, that his life was about to change. Decisive action had to be taken. The responsibilities that had fallen to him on his father's death must now be taken up. His inheritance, the large Hartlepool estate and its enormous house, on the borders of Durham and Yorkshire, was finally his and his life of leisure was over. For five years he had done nothing; trod water, in a manner of speaking, whilst other people had written him letters either seeking instruction, or giving him information. He had almost never replied. How could he be expected to understand letters that began with sentences such as: '*You will recall the judgement in the case of Rex v. Chorley Settled Estates in 1934*'?

Ed sighed as he thought of all the trouble that lay ahead of him, then went outside into the heat of a late spring morning in Provence.

The sun was climbing in the sky. Ed walked along the path to the swimming pool, which was about fifteen metres long and made of white marble, surrounded by an area of terracotta tiles. Sun loungers sat along its side, and there was a small pool-house at the far end. Here were lilos and beach balls and other objects that Ed never used. They were provided for the use of the villa's occasional tenants: sometimes Ed went back to England in the hottest part of the summer and let the villa to friends.

He wound back the pool cover, took off his dressing gown and flung it onto the nearest sun lounger. The blue water sparkled in the spring sun that had just cleared the tops of the surrounding trees. Dew glinted on the freshly mown grass. Ed picked up the skimmer and removed from the surface of

the water a few dead leaves, a couple of drowned wasps and a large spider whose legs were still flailing. He emptied the contents of the net into a corner of the garden, then lowered himself slowly into the water.

At first the temperature seemed cold, but within moments, as he swam the first of twenty lengths, it was refreshing. The water felt like cream against his skin, and it lapped gently against the sides of the pool or gurgled in the overflow pipe. He made a turn, pushing underwater and changed from a medium-fast crawl to breaststroke. After a few more lengths he turned on his back and began a gentle backstroke, half closing his eyes to keep out the water, which was salty, like the sea. Now, as he lay on his back, the sun was a distant golden dot. The endless blue sky arched over him, warming his limbs. He turned again and swam with a steady breaststroke, smelling the fresh air of late spring, the scent of newly cut grass, the tang of salt.

Ed was at his happiest at this hour of the day when life was at its simplest. All he had to do was get from one end of the pool to the other, and count off the lengths as he did so. He swam with the grace and fluency you would expect from a man who had been swimming like this most spring and summer mornings for the last five years.

Fragments of thought went through his mind as he turned and swam and turned and swam.

'I shall miss all this ... there's nowhere to swim at Hartlepool Hall. The lake is full of blanket-weed and far too cold.'

Then another fragment, of a different kind.

'I wonder if the beech trees are in leaf yet at home?'

He felt as if he was no longer in a swimming pool, but being carried on some mysterious tide, sweeping him on to a

destination of which he remained, for the moment, ignorant.

He finished his swim and climbed out of the pool. The water continued lapping and gurgling after he got out, as if it were calling him back, in a watery language he could not fathom. Perhaps it was asking him to stay a while longer; but as he dried himself with his towel he knew that this morning's letter, unlike all the others, could not be ignored. He must return to England.

Ed spent a night in London on the way home. Then he took an early train from King's Cross and arrived at Hartlepool Hall in a taxi, around mid-morning.

Spring comes to the north of England later than it arrives in the south of France. But when it arrives, it comes in the blink of an eye. The young winter wheat had emerged in the fields; every tree in every wood seemed about to burst into leaf. The willows and the birch trees were already out; the horse chestnuts unfurling their waxy green spikes. The hawthorn was white in the hedgerows and wild cherry flowered everywhere in explosions of white and pink.

Approaching Hartlepool Hall from the station, the visitor travels at first through a region of flat water meadows. Slow streams wind their way listlessly towards a distant sea, leaving oxbows to the right and left of them. There are flat expanses of oilseed rape or wheat; or else grass fields trodden into mud by grazing lambs or pigs.

A few miles further on, the bones of the land begin to change. The contours begin to undulate gently, a foretaste of the dales further west where the land ramps up towards the crests of the Pennines. Woods and copses become more frequent, and the fields are smaller: green pastures bounded by dry stone walls instead of barbed wire fences. The villages

are no longer straggling rows of dull red brick buildings. Instead the houses are built from a grey limestone and clustered around a green, with a pub and a church. It is a landscape that has not changed as much over the last two centuries as other parts of Britain. Then the road turns a corner and there is the first glimpse, through the trees, of Hartlepool Hall. That is the view that takes the visitor by surprise: the unexpectedness of this palace in the middle of nowhere.

Ed's ancestor Henry Simmonds, a descendant of miners and forge masters from somewhere on the coast between Middlesbrough and Hartlepool, hired an architect and with him he visited various stately homes: Chatsworth, Castle Howard and Blenheim. In front of one of them – it is not recorded which – he is said to have given his instructions: 'Build me summat like that.'

The story is no doubt apocryphal, but even the Simmonds family enjoyed repeating it. In those days the family enjoyed immeasurable wealth, enriched by the expansion of the manufacturing industry caused by the Napoleonic Wars. They were hard men who worked with iron and steel. They knew the value of every penny they made, and when they loaned quite a large sum of money at the end of the Crimean War to an almost bankrupt Government, they made it plain that they expected a dukedom to go with the new house they were building.

The Secretary to the Treasury Bench, who was responsible for affairs of patronage, explained that a dukedom was not possible; the other dukes mightn't like it; but they could make Henry Simmonds a Marquess, if that would do?

After a bit of grumbling it was decided that it would have to do, and Henry Simmonds became the first Marquess of

Hartlepool just as the last sheet of lead was being laid on the roof of Hartlepool Hall.

The taxi drove through the lodge gates and then along the half a mile or so of drive that led to the house itself. Underneath avenues of wellingtonia and cedar, a mass of bluebells surged in drifts of a startling deep blue that seemed to shine with a light all their own in the gloom beneath the trees. The pale yellow of primroses showed here and there in small clusters.

Ed stepped out of the taxi and took a moment to look up at his family home. Indeed it *was* his home, and his alone. He had no close relations to share it with him: no sisters, no brothers, no wife or children. In front of him the cliff-like face of the building – a great façade of grey stone broken by countless windows – was graced with a central portico. Crowning the front of the house was a white marble dome that looked as if it might have been airlifted from Rome or Florence.

Behind the house was the ten-acre lake, where banks of rhododendrons were beginning to flower along the water's edge: luxuriant blooms of red and pink and cream whose reflections glanced upwards from the surface of the still water. Beyond the lake were the woods that encircled the house and its gardens and grounds, protecting them from curious eyes. This secret kingdom of limestone and glass, lead and marble, of lake and woodland, now basked in the hazy heat of a cloudless spring day.

Horace the butler was descending the steps while Ed paid off the driver. When he reached the taxi he said, 'Good morning, M'Lord.'

'How are you, Horace?' Without waiting for an answer, Ed bounded up to the front entrance. Horace struggled up

the steps behind him with the luggage. Ed now stood in the great hall in the shaft of sunlight let in through the oculus, a circular window in the marble dome far above. The architect had borrowed this idea from the Pantheon in Rome, inspired by the family's treasured white marble statue of Romulus and Remus. This statue was now installed at one end of the hall and had originally been purchased by Percy, the father of Henry Simmonds, while on a grand tour in Italy during the first half of the nineteenth century.

It was good to be home.

'Get one of the gardeners to give you a hand taking those cases upstairs, Horace,' said Ed. Horace was wheezing as he set the suitcases down on the floor. Ed had forgotten how old Horace was. His pink, unlined cheeks belied his age: he must be eighty, Ed thought. He had served the Simmonds family since he was in his teens when his duties had consisted of polishing shoes in the boot room and taking the post down to the village. He had been his grandfather's, then his father's butler and personal manservant for at least fifty years and should have retired a decade ago. No one had remembered to tell him he could go, so he stayed on.

'Thank you, M'Lord,' said Horace. 'Will your Lordship be in the usual bedroom?'

'Yes,' said Ed.

'Lady Alice has asked me to say she would like to join you in the library just before luncheon. She has not yet risen. Lady Alice prefers to read the newspapers in bed. I am afraid it slipped my mind for a moment that your Lordship was coming home today, and I had the papers sent up to her. Shall I get someone to go to the village and buy some more?'

'Don't worry,' Ed replied. 'I read all the papers on the train. But who on earth is Lady Alice?'

'I wrote to your Lordship about the lady.'

'Of course you did,' said Ed. The experience of coming back to Hartlepool Hall and knowing that, for the first time in his life, it was his alone to enjoy, freed from the arthritic grip of his father, had driven all other thoughts from his head.

'She's still here, is she?'

'The lady has not yet said how long she intends to stay,' replied Horace.

'Has she not?' said Ed. 'We'll see about that.'

He left Horace standing in the hall and wandered about the ground floor of the house. Nothing had changed: the drawing room was covered in dust sheets, and the shutters were closed, but the dining room and the library had been made ready. The curtains and windows had been opened and there were fresh-cut spring flowers in a vase; a drinks tray had also been set out, so Horace mustn't really have forgotten about his arrival. The rest of the house was asleep: windows shuttered, curtains drawn to protect the paintings and the furniture from sunlight, dust everywhere, a sleepy quiet broken only by the echo of Ed's footsteps as he went from room to room.

He unlocked the glass door that led onto the terrace overlooking the lake and stepped outside. After the cool darkness of the house the sunlight made him narrow his eyes for a moment and warmed his face: he could have been in France still. He walked across the terrace to the stone balustrade. Below were more rhododendrons coming into flower and a yard or two beyond them was the shore of the lake. Startled by his arrival a mallard was paddling away, followed by six ducklings so small they could only have hatched in the last day or so. Clouds of midges and sedge darted above the

water and swallows swooped amongst them, feeding on the new life.

For a long time Ed stood there gazing at the view, resting his elbows on the lichen-covered stone of the balustrade and drinking in the extraordinary beauty of the place – last glimpsed on a wet November night some months ago. This was his inheritance; this place was all his now, to do with as he liked. A sound behind him made him turn. It was Horace, standing at the window.

'Lady Alice is in the library, M'Lord.'

Edward followed Horace back into the house. His eyes had difficulty adjusting to the gloom after the brightness of the sunshine outside. He had not decided on the best approach to take with this interloper: cold irony, or outright abuse? In the centre of the room stood a tall woman, wearing a grey dress.

Edward blinked. He realised he was looking at a woman in her late sixties in whose features and figure a faded beauty could still be detected. Lady Alice Birtley was not much younger than his father would have been, had he still lived. She was not yet pulled earthwards by gravity. She held herself erect and she was slim: no, not slim, painfully thin. She had tight silver-grey curls about her head that must once have been blonde ringlets. She had great dark eyes: no, they were not dark, but a watery blue. They looked dark because the sockets were deep and shadowed. Her skin was so transparent that the bones of her face almost seemed to show. It must once have been a beautiful face to look at: even now, it was remarkable.

'Good morning,' she said as Ed entered the room. Her voice was clear, with the cut-glass accents of an earlier decade. She held out her hand and Ed took it in a brief grasp. Her skin felt like old paper.

'Good morning,' said Ed. 'I'm Ed Hartlepool.'

'I know who you are. I recognised you at once, even though we have never met before. You have your father's looks.'

'Have I indeed?' replied Ed.

'My name is Alice Birtley,' said the old lady. 'I don't suppose your father ever mentioned my name to you?'

'No. He didn't.'

He waited for some explanation but none came. Then Horace appeared beside them carrying a silver tray on which there were two glasses of champagne.

'Horace spoils me,' said Lady Alice. She raised her glass in Ed's direction. 'Happy days.'

Who was this person in Ed's house? Who was this woman, acting as if she had lived there all her life, drinking his best champagne?