

HARRY ELLARD

1897 – 1983

Owner of Compton Verney 1958 – 1983



Harry Ellard bought Compton Verney on a whim! He was originally attracted by some marble fireplaces in the house sale of 1958 but decided it was a pity to remove them. So, instead, he bought the mansion for £70,000 – thus leaving the fireplaces undamaged and in situ.

Back in 1921 the 19th Baron Willoughby de Broke had made the sad decision to sell the ancestral home where his family had lived for nearly 500 years. Two owning families followed: Joseph Watson and his son Miles, successively 1st and 2nd Baron Manton of Compton Verney, who owned the estate until 1929; and then Samuel Lamb, who bought it from the 2nd Baron. Forced out by the War Office to accommodate army manoeuvres and finding that their lives were then taking new directions, the Lambs sold the estate to Harry Ellard in 1958. Compton Verney had been neglected since the Lambs moved out and it was hoped that Mr. Ellard – a successful businessman and a multimillionaire - would live in the mansion and revive and nurture this beautiful estate. It was not to be.

The origins of Harry's fortune lay with his grandfather, Henry Ellard (1845-1908). Henry's father had been a farm labourer, but Henry turned to manufacturing to make his way in the world. He had two sons, Edwin Frederick (1881-1965) and Harry's father, Samuel Harry (1873-1944). In the 1881 census Henry Ellard was recorded as a metal stamper and piercer, living with his family in Willenhall, Wolverhampton. In 1894 he was elected to the newly founded Willenhall Urban District Council and the 1901 census shows that he had worked his way up to become a manufacturer employing others in the whitesmithing industry. His business, Henry Ellard and Sons, was an ironworks specialising in tinned and Japanned goods. By 1884 it was located at 38 Gomer Street, Willenhall, where it would remain until after the First World War.

Harry Jr, the future owner of Compton Verney, was born on 13th December 1897, the son of Samuel Harry and Annie (1869-1968), then living at 38 Gomer Street, which was obviously a home as well the site of the family's business premises. In the entry for Harry's baptism two months later, Samuel Harry is described as a whitesmith and would have been working for his father. Late in 1899 Harry's sister, Nellie, was born and the family was complete. Harry was obviously a bright boy as he was recorded in 1911, aged 13, as a boarding pupil at Brewood Grammar School, Staffordshire. Unusually, in addition to its standard curriculum, the school also taught Agricultural Science and had a small farm attached to it. This may be where Harry acquired his interest in the land and its management.



Brewood Grammar School, Staffs

In September 1916, aged 18, Harry enlisted into the Royal Flying Corps (service number 48076), which became the Royal Air Force in April 1918. He joined for the duration of the war and was discharged to the R.A.F. Reserve in February 1919. His military record describes him as being five feet and ten inches tall, with a chest measurement of 35½ inches. Sadly, the details of hair, eyes and complexion colour are blank! Harry was not a flyer. He enlisted as an Air Mechanic 2nd Class, progressed to Air Mechanic 1st Class, and then, in December 1918, to Corporal Mechanic. He served as a fitter, for which his family background in metalwork and engineering must have suited him.

The 1921 census shows that, after his military service, Harry returned to live with his parents, who had moved to The Gables, Broad Lane, Wednesfield, before the war. One of Harry's friends and his later executor, Norman Smart, recalled that Harry had been a "clever engineer, a self-made man beginning in his father's back garden workshop in ... Wednesfield". Despite the new address, both Harry and his father continued to work as ironwork manufacturers in the family business at Gomer Street, Samuel being described as an employer.

But times were changing and there were new opportunities for canny manufacturers. The area's traditions of metalwork and engineering were essential to the growing motor vehicle industry. In 1919 Samuel Ellard, Harry's father, described as 'a well-known Wednesfield manufacturer', became one of the co-founders and the first chairman of Henry Meadows Ltd., a company that manufactured gearboxes for a range of vehicle manufacturers. Harry served an

apprenticeship with Henry Meadows Ltd. One of the most popular products was the 4.5 litre 6 cyl. engine which powered the Lagonda and Invicta luxury motor cars. These became favourite motor cars for Harry. He became a substantial shareholder of Meadows. The family firm, Henry Ellard & Sons, where Samuel and Harry were working, turned to manufacturing pressed steel components for the car industry and the factory was probably upgraded during the 1930s. Practically all the presses in the factory were of Ellard design and manufacture. Business was booming for the company and for Harry, who is listed in the 1939 Register as 'General Manager, H. Ellard & Co'. Samuel Ellard died in 1944 and his brother, Edwin, in 1965. On Edwin's death, Harry inherited the business.

A friend reminisces that when Harry was invited to dinner, the tablecloth was covered with diagrams of torsion bar suspension and other technical features always subject of lively discussion.

Even before Harry became the Chairman, the company was doing well and he was already very rich by the 1940s. Although he was later called a "miser" and a "skinflint", there are many examples of him enjoying his money by buying things that took his fancy.



Henry Ellard & Sons Ltd. Address: Midland Works, Field Street, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 2NX, United Kingdom.

One of his most extravagant luxuries was his motor cars which he started to collect in the 1930s.

The Colliers, Bigwood & Bewlay Auction Catalogue of 1984 listed over 100 vehicles including 20 Lagondas, 6 Invictas, 4 Aston Martins, 5 Riley Healeys, an Ellard 1919 motorcycle and a variety of agricultural and commercial vehicles. Many were unroadworthy and were stored in a factory warehouse or in a farm building. He regularly drove a 1962 Aston Martin DB4 or an Austin Allegro estate car.



Some of Harry's cars stored in a warehouse at Wednesfield, Wolverhampton.

Another of Harry's extravagancies was property. One of the first properties he bought was the 2,300-acre Broadstone Estate, near Chipping Norton, which he purchased in 1943. The manor house had burned down so Harry had it rebuilt and planned to create an agricultural college, perhaps inspired by his experience as a pupil at Brewood Grammar School, but, like many of his ideas, this came to nothing. Harry also bought two nearby farms - Old Chalford Farm with 502 acres of arable land and Broadstone Hill farm with 290 acres of dairy and arable land.



Broadstone Manor 1970s

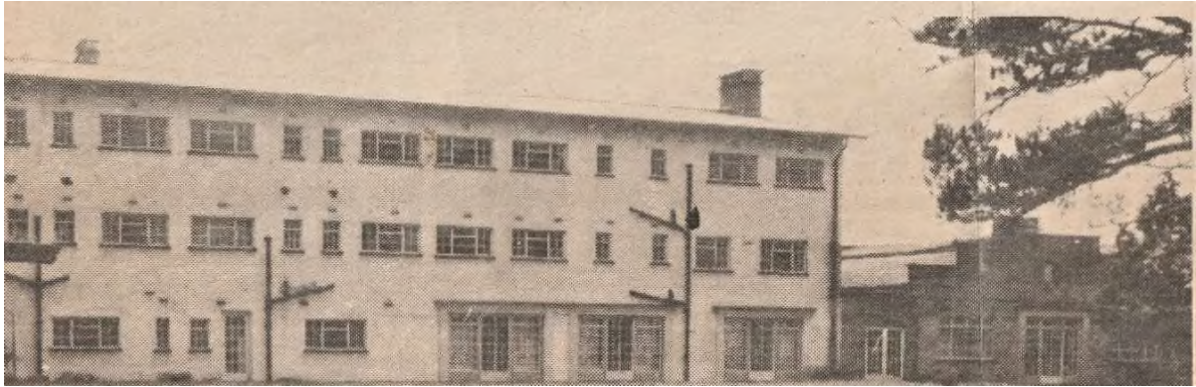


Broadstone Manor today

As well as these rural properties in Oxfordshire, Harry also owned property closer to his roots in the West Midlands. Ellards Drive, Wednesfield, was named after Harry's grandfather, Henry Ellard. Henry had built a factory on this land and he owned many of the houses round here, built for his workers. Harry inherited these but when he died in 1983 his will stated that the tenants of the houses could purchase them at a very low price, if they desired; many did. Harry also owned an empty factory, Ogley Mill, Burntwood, and a bungalow and farm at Great Barr, Birmingham. There was also a house called 'Pinehurst', in Crook Lane, Aldridge, Walsall, which he had built in about 1935, and which he continued to own even after he had effectively moved to Solihull in the mid-1950s.

By 1957, Harry was listed in the telephone book not only at his residence in Aldridge but also at the Regency Club, Monkspath, Solihull. A year or so earlier he had purchased a Victorian house built in the 1870s and somewhat romantically called Monkspath Priory. Harry turned it into an exclusive, members-only venue, which was visited by many famous entertainers and other celebrities. It was complete with restaurant and banqueting complex and all the meat and vegetables were supplied to the kitchens by his farms near Chipping

Norton. He did have ambitions to open a motel at the rear of the club, and then a 90-room hotel – builders were in permanent work for years – but, typically Harry, it never quite came to completion! This enterprise was officially named ‘The Regency Club’ but later became known by locals as ‘Harry’s Folly’. Despite all his other property, Harry eventually became something of a recluse, living in just one room of his club, with seven staff to look after him.



The Regency Club known as Harry's Folly



Harry with Tommy Cooper at the Regency Club 1954

In 1958 Harry, the great collector of property, purchased the most spectacular of all: Compton Verney. One of Harry's lady friends, Margaret Wheate, explained why:

"He went to an auction to bid for one of the fireplaces, one of several lots. But when he saw it he thought it would be a crime to rip it out. So he bought the whole estate to go with it ... the lake and parkland. That was Harry. If he fancied anything he bought it."

This sudden whim cost him £70,000. By the time he made this extraordinary purchase Harry was becoming something of an eccentric. He purchased a caravan, which he parked near the stables, and came over most Saturdays and Sundays, welcoming visitors and inviting them to enjoy the park. He never once stayed overnight, returning to his home in Solihull. Older visitors to Compton Verney recall meeting him, being offered cups of tea, and finding him quiet and friendly.

Harry continued to employ John Schumann, who already worked at Compton Verney, as gardener and caretaker. John recalled that he and Harry became quite good friends and described Harry's secret love for the derelict, eerie, but still magnificent mansion. John Schumann's recollections are an astute summing up of Harry's personality.



Girl Guide Camp - West Lawn 1950s

John Schumann's recollections:

Between Mr Lamb dying and Mr. Ellard buying CV the gardens had been 'let go'. Mr Ellard wanted to get them back into shape – just the kitchen gardens. John cannot remember any herbaceous borders. He mowed all the lawns about the house. The three kitchen gardens were all tended, growing all the usual garden crops and tomatoes and early lettuce in the glasshouse. The vinery was still there, with black and white grapes, but they did not flourish. The glasshouses needed repair. Mr Ellard pulled down the peach house and one of the other glass houses.

Mr Ellard was keen to have the produce from the gardens for the club where he lived. He also kept pigs – one breeding sow; part of each litter was slaughtered for the club and part went to market. Mr Ellard came every Thursday, to pay him his wages and the pig-swill from the club, and to take back the produce. He was very keen on the pigs, and on their economic value. When one died suddenly of a twisted gut, and the vet advised Mr Schumann to bury it, Mr Ellard went mad, saying it was a waste of food. He also brought bones for the Alsatian dog that was kept there. He was very fond of Alsatis and asked John to keep his eye open for any going free to good homes. They acquired three dogs that way. One he had for 13 years.

Sometimes in the early days Mr Ellard came in a Lagonda, then in a succession of old 1100s. He was forever buying 'bargains' out of the paper. One day he bought an old Volvo at Burton Dassett and asked John to tow him back. Even though it ran, it was not taxed and he would not break the law. He gave John £2 for his trouble. This was his usual way; he would never pay overtime, but gave him £2 to get himself a drink. Towards the end of his life Mr Ellard had to be driven over by someone else – he had bumped his head getting off a pick-up truck and 'that was the beginning of the end'. He was 86 when he died.

Sometimes he only stayed a few minutes, other times for a few hours, visiting the pigs and making a cup of tea in his caravan. It was a van he had designed himself, and had built in his factory. ('He was a very clever man'). It was kept at the back of the stable yard. However, it was not very clean and the tea cups were never washed – John used to tip the tea away behind his back when he made him one. At one time a 'lady friend' of his and her mother lived in it. It caught fire and was uninhabitable, so the two women lived in the library in the mansion for a short while, but Mr Ellard soon had them out, because that meant he was liable to pay rates.

Even though the house was not inhabited it was used quite a bit for entertaining and hired out for weddings, film sets etc. an insurance company (could not remember the name) had it one day a year. He thinks it was used for more films/television than just *The Bell* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Receptions were held in the saloon, and sometimes used the whole suite of rooms along the lake front as well. The Aga in the kitchen no longer worked, but caterers would bring in hot plates.

Mr Ellard gave very short notice of events, but expected John to have everything ready. One Thursday he announced that there was to be a tea party a week on Saturday, and to be sure to have the water on – the tanks in the attic were gravity fed from a spring near the lake. John turned the water on, and a number of the old lead pipes burst. He managed to get a plumber to fix the leaks, and the do went ahead. That

evening there was a storm, and water started coming through the ceiling – he had to go up onto the roof, and discovered that the gully was blocked with moss, which he had to clear.

Mr Ellard did not spend much on the house, but he did alter the Butler's Cottage, the Gun Room and do some repairs to the Lodge. This was at the time that Moreton Paddox was demolished. Mr Ellard bought the rubble. The old butler was in need of a job and a home, and Mr Ellard said he would take him on and he could live in the Lodge. He would do it up. This consisted of not much more than putting a new bucket in the toilet! 'Mr Ellard was the sort that would promise you the earth and do nothing'.

It was impossible to get any new equipment out of him for maintenance. John used his own shovel from home for mucking out the pigs and had to borrow a broom from Mr Lean at the farm. There was no old machinery left in the estate yard, just a succession of broken pieces which Mr Ellard bought as 'bargains' at farm sales. Nothing worked properly and attachment did not fit. He would not invest in any new machinery.

When Mr Ellard died he was cremated and the ashes brought to Compton Verney. At first it was proposed they be put in the chapel, but John said that a new owner might not want them there and it would be better to bury them in the grounds. At first the suggestion was in the middle of the lawn with a headstone, then, finally, by the lake, by the old graves, which is where his ashes are buried, very deep.

As John Schumann recalled, Compton Verney was sometimes used as a film set. Peter Hall was invited to make a film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there, starring youthful actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company who are now famous and honoured, including Helen Mirren, Diana Rigg, Ian Holm and Derek Jacobi. Judi Dench took the role of Titania and two of her young nieces appeared as fairies. Although the film was not universally praised by the critics when it came out, it is now regarded with fondness and the mansion, used as the palace interior, and the park as the woods, looked as stunning then as they do today.



Compton Verney was also used as part of the location for *The Bell*, based on the novel by Iris Murdoch, made into a four-part television series by Reg Gadney. Directed by Barry Davis with music by Marc Wilkinson, it appeared on BBC Two beginning on 13 January 1982. The cast included Ian Holm as Michael Meade, Tessa Peake-Jones as Dora Greenfield, and Michael Maloney as Toby Gashe.



A third film - *Licking Hitler*, - was shot during the summer of 1977 at Compton Verney. Written and directed by David Hare, it featured performances by Kate Nelligan and Bill Paterson.



Margaret Wheate with Ian Carmichael at the Regency Club

Although Harry never married and became a recluse in his later years, he was quite a ladies' man! Miss Margaret Wheate was one of Harry's many girlfriends. A former beauty queen, she was Harry's constant companion in the 1950s and Harry asked her to marry him. She declined: "I knew he was a rich man and I thought seriously about it, but I came to the conclusion that he was generous, great fun to be with, but I did not love him." Another companion, Gwendoline Keenan, said, "Harry collected girlfriends the way he collected everything else in those days. We were not the only ones."

Miss Wheate recalled that in one of the rooms of the bungalow he owned he stored large carpets that were piled to the ceiling; another room contained pianos and pianolas. But it was always the motor vehicles that came first. She believed that Harry also had stored away somewhere two Clectrac vehicles, two 1920 tractors, two Valentine military tanks that he had bought on a whim, two cement mixers and a motorcycle he had built from spare parts in 1919. She also remembered that on frosty nights they went outside The Regency Club to put heaters under his thirteen Lagondas.



Harry welcoming guests at an evening function

Although Harry clearly loved cars, he was not always, in later life, a keen driver. Tony Mackintosh was his solicitor and, on occasions, his chauffeur. “Harry liked his tippie and thought wiser not to drive. I did not drink alcohol so I drove him to all his venues.” As John Schumann mentioned above, Harry had suffered a serious bump on his head when getting off a pick-up truck and this was another reason why he did not want to drive any more.

Mr. Schumann considered that that injury was ‘the beginning of the end’ for Harry Ellard. Harry spent his final years in a small room in the Regency Club and died on Christmas Day 1983 at the age of 86. He had never married and had no children, so the bulk of his fortune of nearly £4.5 million was left to the Grand Charity of the United Grand Lodge of England, the home of Freemasonry. Harry had been a Mason and the local branch had met at The Regency Club. Following a funeral in Birmingham, Harry’s body was cremated, and his ashes were buried under a black memorial slab close to the lake and the obelisk at Compton Verney.

Harry Ellard was in many ways an eccentric, whose wealth allowed him to indulge his enthusiasms. Several people remembered that his great plans did not always come to fruition but he was clearly a man of imagination and vision,

especially clever and capable when it came to engineering projects. He seems to have been a caring employer – a coachload of workers from the factory attended his funeral – but John Schumann’s recollections suggest that he may not have been the most predictable of employers. He lived a life of outward extravagance but had an eye for supposed economies and bargains, saving money in little ways and spending it in big ones. Above all, he was a collector: acquiring cars, property, glamorous friends and beautiful women. But perhaps he was not entirely the great extrovert he sometimes seemed. Tony Mackintosh, his solicitor and sometime chauffeur, described him as someone who “was great fun and enjoyed life”, adding, “but he was very shy”.

How fortunate it was that this shy eccentric fell in love with a fireplace and bought a mansion on whim!



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