

# The strange case of the Vampyre Lord

In the July issue of *Mensa Magazine* PAUL McNEIL explained how one ancestor overcoming adversity can set the pattern for generations of success. Here, he argues how ancestral mistakes can send a family into hard times for generations

When I research a Family Tree I spend time looking at the social and economic pressures that affected the family, in the 18th and early 19th Centuries in Britain when most of the population lived in thinly-disguised feudal serfdom. So I always research the Lord of The Manor, and it was while delving through the archives that I came across an envelope covered in 1859 postmarks that would lead me to the Vampyre Lord of Hurstbourne Priors.

The envelope showed a journey from Chatham in Canada through the south of England to Devon, in less than three weeks; a testimony to the speed of the Victorian Rail and Postal service. The letter was neatly folded and looked like it had been read once, then put back in its envelope for the next 150 years, until I opened it on a summer afternoon in 2007. It was clearly written in an elegant hand on rough paper, and contained a tale of woe from an old lady begging for £10 or £20 to be sent to her. She wrote that she was "once the Lady of Hurstbourne Park, now with not sufficient to buy my daily bread for the short remaining time that I may need it."

Further research showed stories from Canada of an old lady dressed in a red velvet cloak trimmed with Ermine gathering firewood in withered hands. How had The Lady of Hurstbourne Priors come to this?

On Friday, February 28, 1823, in the Freemasons Hall London, John Charles Wallop third Earl of Portsmouth and Lord of the Manor of Hurstbourne Priors was publicly denounced as having the disposition of a Vampyre, "...which was to be fed by nothing but the prey of death".

The Earl was accused of "haunting the abode of disease and mortality like a foul and obscene beast wherever a carcass may be found", going to the hut of the village carpenter to await the death of the man's daughter, so that he might with "worse than savage joy" follow the body from the house. The Earl would order his servants to open his veins with a lancet and catch the blood in a bowl. The village bell ringer testified that the Earl had thrown a bell rope around the neck of

the man's son, timing it to catch the upswing of the bell to sweep the boy up and hang him by his neck in the bell tower. Only the boy's quick reactions saved him.

The Earl had entered the village slaughterhouse and attacked cattle with an axe with no regard to his own safety among the stampeding beasts, screaming "it serves them right!".

John Charles Wallop was descended from Sir John Wallop who, in the reign of Henry VIII, took to warfare in order to raise booty, invading the Spanish Netherlands in 1511, ravaging towns on the French coast for a couple of years, before finding time to marry Henry VIII's elderly second cousin, who died within a year, leaving him free

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to join King Manuel of Portugal in an invasion of Morocco. After this he settled to a spot of campaigning in Ireland, and life as a diplomat.

Briefly accused of treason for being a Catholic, he astutely made his peace with the king, and the family continued to prosper through the generations, soaking up heiresses and estates, including relations of Sir Isaac Newton. But despite the advantages of social position, and genetic descent from ambitious, ruthless, and intelligent men and women, John Charles Wallop would prove to be a negative vector to those around him.

The third Earl of Portsmouth, our Vampyre Earl, lived at Hurstbourne Park in Hampshire. Educated by Jane Austen's father he was noted as being very backward, spoke with a stammer, and was in the habit of pinching the servants, tipping them into hedges, and pinning rabbit skins to their clothes.

His family arranged a suitable wedding match for him to the sister of Lord Grantley. Just prior to his wedding in 1799, he was lodging with his family solicitor Charles Hanson, when the solicitor's ward, the 11-year-old Lord Byron, came to stay. Lord Portsmouth displayed his usual eccentric behaviour, pinching the young Lord Byron on the ear.

The fiery Byron took this badly and hurled a large shell at Lord Portsmouth, breaking an expensive mirror.

A minor incident, but the memory rested heavily on Byron's mind. He said: "I will teach a fool of an Earl to pinch another noble's ear!"

It would take the passage of 15 years and another wedding before he had his revenge.

The Earl's marriage was more dynastic than an affair of the heart. The new Lady Portsmouth proved to be a strong woman, keeping her husband's more erratic behaviour in check by hiring a burly manservant, Charley Coombes, to act as minder for him, stopping the worst of his antics, and protecting him from retaliation by the more surly villagers.

Under the firm hand of his wife and Charley Coombes he managed a near normal life, holding balls for the local gentry, including Jane Austen, and taking his place in votes at the House of Lords (derangement it seems, not being a bar in British Politics). The furthest his eccentricities went were to ring the bells of the local church, race dung carts through the village, and play childish tricks on his servants.

But in 1813 his wife died, and without her restraining influence, he had free rein to act however he chose...

He relished attending "Black Jobs" as he called funerals, turning up at those of complete strangers; waylaid coach drivers and paid them to let him drive their coaches forcing other coaches off the roads.

One evening the Earl fatefully told his solicitor, Lord Byron's guardian, that he wished to marry again. Hanson, the solicitor, realised that this presented an opportunity as he had two unwed daughters.

## ROADS TO RUIN

The five common factors most likely to have caused a family to dramatically fall from high social and financial status to relative poverty are:

1. The premature death, incapacity, or absence of the main income earner.
2. Inability to adapt to sudden changes in social standing and circumstances.
3. Family disintegration and alienation; lack of supportive social network.
4. A tendency to use time and money wastefully; no focus on wealth generation.
5. A lack of drive, and an over reliance on others.

To hide their activities the Earl was whisked away to Scotland by the Hansons and Alder. Here their conduct became so scandalous, that, amid stories of Alder cavorting with Lady Portsmouth and her sister, and screams from their rooms as the Earl was beaten and horsewhipped, a number of hotels ejected the party for fear that their reputations may be ruined.

They eventually rented a private house. A stroke of luck came the Earl's way when a solicitor engaged to settle disputes between the Earl and his brother was contacted by the Earl's bailiff in Scotland and told of the mistreatment, including his confinement to the house with only two hours of freedom per day, and how the Earl was so bereft of money that he would borrow from the garden labourers. The Earl's younger brother Newton Wallop was informed and a rescue mission planned.

The Earl's nephew was dispatched with the old minder Charley Coombes to Edinburgh where they tracked the Hansons and Alder down, lay in wait, and managed to seize the Earl off the street, bundled him into a carriage and galloped back to London. Here the Earl's brother hired two Bow Street Runners to protect the Vampyre Earl.

The Hansons and Alder weren't beaten yet. They pursued the Earl back to Hurstbourne Priors, a legal challenge was mounted which removed the Bow Street Runners as it was technically illegal for them to be privately hired. Horsemen and bailiffs entered the Earl's estate, but the local villagers, led by the Earl's game keeper armed with a shotgun, mounted a counter attack, forming a human wall behind which darted the Earl. The horsemen were seen off, and the bailiffs manhandled out of the Parish by the gleeful peasantry.

Seizing the moment he told the Earl that he should choose one of his daughters and threatened him with confinement on his Devon Estate if he refused. The Earl, eager to have the prettier of Hanson's daughters, agreed and asked for her hand. That very night the solicitor had contracts drawn up and witnessed, signed by Lord Byron and a family friend called Rowland Alder, a member of the gentry who had a gambling habit, an eye for the ladies, and a reputation as a deadly duellist.

Hanson then contacted the Earl early in the morning, told him that his daughter had agreed to the marriage as long as it took place at noon that day! As an afterthought he added that the Earl would not be marrying his daughter Louisa, but his somewhat plainer daughter Mary Elizabeth.

Staggeringly the Earl consented, a church service was interrupted by the party and the bride was given away to the hapless Earl by Lord Byron who, according to his diary, "tried not to laugh in the face of the supplicants"

In the space of a few days the Hansons had taken control of the Earl's holdings, and Byron

had exacted his revenge for a pinch on the ear more than a decade earlier.

The Earl's younger brother, Newton Wallop, seeking to protect the family from the Hansons, launched a Lunacy Commission to prove his brother incapable, but, helped along by a challenge to a duel issued by Hanson's son to one of the Lunacy Commissioners, the case went the Hansons' way and the Earl was declared sane. The Hansons commenced selling off the Wallop London properties to raise cash.

Rowland Alder moved fully onto the scene. He was seen by the servants to knock the Earl to the ground and reduce him to tears in front of Lady Portsmouth. The servants later testified to seeing Lady Portsmouth, her sister, and her brother, all perform acts of cruelty on the Earl, spitting in his face, throwing filthy water over him, and horse whipping him across the face. Accusations from the servants became more scandalous. One of them said he had seen Lady Portsmouth lying in bed with Alder, her hand resting on his chest, whilst the Earl was asleep on the other side of the bed.

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The Earl was still a danger to himself and those around him – he wanted to have a throne built and to sit in court at Hurstbourne to receive supplicants “like the king”. This could be construed as treason, a hanging offence.

His brother was forced to instigate the lunacy investigation again, and this time he managed to prove that The Earl couldn't look after his own affairs.

The marriage to the Countess was annulled, and the paternity of the Countess's daughter rejected. Newton Wallop wrested control back to the Wallop family under his governance.

For his part, the Vampyre Earl settled into quiet retirement.

I found him in the 1851 census listed as “Earl and Lunatic”. He died in 1853 and was buried at Farleigh Wallop. Hurstbourne House, as befits the home of a “Vampyre”, burned down in a mysterious fire in 1894.

After the annulment, the Countess married Alder; he fell into gambling debt, and they were forced to live in a single room in a Scottish fishing village. Alder died and the Countess moved to London and then to Canada, with her son by Alder. She left her daughter, the former heiress of Lord Portsmouth, in England.

Deeply impoverished and with her begging letters left unanswered and forgotten until I found them, the countess sold off the last of the family silverware and died impoverished in Canada in 1870. Her son migrated south to Michigan and became a farmer.

Her daughter, titled by her mother Lady Marion Elizabeth Wallop, married William Newman in 1844. They took on The White Hart Pub at New Haw Surrey, which still stands on the banks of the Wey Canal. Here “Lady Wallop” bore her husband three children, helped run the pub and let rooms to passing Bargees. Their happiness was short lived. William died in 1851, leaving Marion to struggle with the upbringing of their children.

A year later she married Walter Ayles, a former policeman turned railway guard, they moved to Lambeth and Lady Marion bore him three children. Life was hard and she died in 1865, aged 39. To add insult to injury, Walter Ayles took Marion's young daughter, his own step-daughter half his age, as his common law wife. Marion's line died out in obscurity in the slums of late Victorian Lambeth.

All that remains of the scandal is a pub by a Canal once run by “Lady Marion” and a forgotten letter in Hampshire Register Office.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Paul McNeil runs a successful genealogy business called the Time Detectives. He says: “We all have this chest of treasures; at Time Detectives I dig them up and let them shine.” More information can be found at <http://www.timedetectives.co.uk>