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OBITUARIES

THE RT HON. THE VISCOUNT DAVENTRY 1921-2000

Patron of the George Eliot Fellowship

Francis Humphrey Maurice FitzRoy Newdegate, 3rd Viscount Daventry, died at his home, Temple House at Arbury, on 15 February. He had been ill for some time.

The Arbury Estate spans 4000 acres between Nuneaton and Bedworth and it was in one of the estate’s farmhouses, South Farm, then known as Arbury Farm, that George Eliot was born in 1819 when her father was agent to the Arbury estate. It was because of this association with Arbury that Lord Daventry was invited to succeed his mother as Patron when she died in 1982. Until his illness he had taken a lot of interest in Fellowship affairs and had attended many events during the years.

He was born in Havant in Hampshire on 17 December 1921, the son of Commander the Hon. J. M. FitzRoy Newdegate who had added Newdegate to his family name of FitzRoy at the time of his marriage to Lucia Charlotte Susan Newdegate whose father inherited the Arbury estate. His grandfather, the Rt Hon. Edward Algernon FitzRoy, Speaker of the House of Commons until his death in 1943, was posthumously created the first Viscount Daventry.

In 1959 Lord Daventry married the Hon. Rosemary, daughter of Lieutenant-General Lord Norrie and they had three children, James who inherits Arbury and becomes the 4th Viscount Daventry, Hugh, and Joanna. He succeeded his uncle as the 3rd Viscount in 1986 but the Newdegates’ family connection with Arbury goes back to 1586, when John Newdegate of Harefield in Middlesex exchanged Harefield Manor for Arbury. The family has lived there ever since.

Viscount Daventry was educated at Eton before joining the Coldstream Guards. He rose to the rank of captain and saw service in North Africa and Italy in the second World War. He was wounded in Italy and returned to England. Later he went to India as aide-de-camp to the Viceroy, Lord Wavell and also to Lord Mountbatten, the next Viceroy before the build-up to Indian independence. Between 1948 and 1949 he went to Japan as ADC to the Prime Minister’s personal representative.

In 1950 his mother passed the Arbury estate over to her son and Lord Daventry was faced with the mammoth task of restoring Arbury to its earlier sound financial footing. During the war the estate was used to house German Prisoners of War, Italians, and Americans. The remains of their housing still cluttered the park and little farming had been done during those years. He loved the estate and worked hard to secure its future for those who would follow after him. He was highly respected and held in great affection by all those who worked on the estate, from farmers, gamekeepers to the guides who showed visitors round his beautiful gothicized home, made famous by George Eliot as ‘Cheverel Manor’ in Scenes of Clerical Life.

Lord Daventry became a Justice of the Peace in 1959, was made deputy lieutenant of Warwickshire in 1970 and in 1974 Vice Lord Lieutenant. He was High Sheriff of the county.
in 1970 and in 1990 he became Lord Lieutenant, the Queen’s representative in Warwickshire. Ill health forced him to relinquish this honourable position in 1997.

He held several public offices in Warwickshire including many years as Patron of the George Eliot Fellowship. He has been missed during the years of his illness when he was prevented from attending any of our events, but the close association with his ancestral home will continue. Several Fellowship members are guides at Arbury Hall and very much enjoy the privilege of working in a house still owned and much loved by the family who have lived there for over 400 years.

Lord Daventry’s funeral was held on 24 February in Astley Church, the ‘Knebley’ Church of George Eliot’s ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ which is set in Arbury Hall and demonstrates how warm were her memories of the house she visited with her father and in whose library she was allowed to read anything she wanted in a wonderful collection of books.

Only three weeks after Lord Daventry’s death, his family was devastated by the tragic death in Burma of the younger son, The Hon. Hugh FitzRoy Newdegate, aged 38.

[A happier footnote: The late Lord Daventry’s daughter-in-law, wife of the 4th Viscount, has accepted the Fellowship’s invitation to succeed her late father-in-law as Patron of the Fellowship. ‘I am very honoured,’ she wrote, ‘to be associated with a gifted authoress who was so closely linked with Arbury’. We are honoured and delighted to have her.]

Kathleen Adams