

To The Lords with a Lord

From 1997 until his tragically early death at the age of 67 in December 2000, I had the honour of working for Lord Cowdrey of Tonbridge, better known as the Kent and England cricketer Colin Cowdrey. To be absolutely accurate it was Lordy's (an affectionate term for Lord Cowdrey used by everyone on the estate) wife and sister in law who were my real employers. Following the death of their father Bernard 16th Duke of Norfolk in 1976 the Arundel Estate was split into two parts. The Castle, Park and inner core of the Estate passed to Bernard's second cousin, Miles, and a crescent of land around the southern end became the Angmering Park Estate which passed to Bernard's daughters. Angmering's home farm was the 2300 acre Lee Farm and it was this that I managed from 1997 until 2004.

Despite not having any form of countryside background Lordy was always very interested in the estate particularly the farm. The first time I met him was just before Christmas 1997 when I was being taken on a tour of the Estate by the Agent. The Family always have a private day shooting the week before Christmas and Lordy loved shooting. He used to shoot with his father in law's Purdy, a beautiful sidelock ejector with 30 inch barrels and superb scroll work on the locks. It is actually one of a 'triple', three identical guns, built especially for Duke Bernard by the London firm of Purdey to celebrate his 21st birthday. His mother the dowager Duchess replied to the Estate tenants when asked what his lordship may like for his birthday that '...the tenants will like to buy him some guns. Handmade from London.' For those who don't know their guns, makers, Purdey are the cr me de la cr me of gunmaking in London, probably the World. Today a triple of Purdeys with such provenance would easily make over  100,000.

As I walked across to Lordy he was standing in the pound seat (prime spot!) for the next drive and at any moment clouds of partridge would soon come buzzing over him like a swarm of bees. I got to within a few yards of him when just such a covey came his way. He looked up and shot two with the left and right barrels, broke the gun and hefted it into his left hand, offering me his right and welcomed me to Lee Farm. At that time he was over 60 years old but he had lost none of the magnificent hand eye coordination that had enabled him to become one of England's finest test batsmen.

My office was in the farm yard and it was not unknown for him to 'just pop by for a chat'. Such chats were always held out on the farm, driving around in the Land Rover. Our conversations ranged from the finer points of ewe management, the price of wheat, the speed of Jeff Thompson's bowling to the guile of Sonny Ramadine. His interest in the countryside was not just confined to the Estate. In 1997 he was ennobled to become Lord Cowdrey of Tonbridge and was a tireless worker within the House of Lords often speaking on countryside matters with great authority. In December 1999 Lordy asked me if I would

like to visit the House as his guest as there was a particular debate entitled 'To call Attention to The Countryside'.

So on the morning of December 1st I caught the train from Arundel to Victoria. 'I'll meet you there', he said 'there's a side entrance just as you walk off the platform'. I didn't know what to expect, a taxi maybe or perhaps we would walk to 'The House'. My geography of our capital was so weak I had this naïve thought that everywhere was within walking distance of everywhere else, a thought soon banished after two Countryside Marches however! None the less there he was, with his official green Jaguar complete with driver. The run through London was splendid. I felt like a visiting dignitary, a prime minister perhaps from a distant colony or the Arundel Ambassador to the Court of St James, but certainly not like a Shuttleworth boy on a bit of a jolly.

Our arrival at the House took me by surprise. I'm not sure how else you are supposed to get into the House of Lords except through the door. A small side door perhaps but when we went through the Peers Entrance off Old Palace yard I realised that it was all so very real. The first thing we did was to hand our coats over to the chap in the cloak room. The attendant took Lordy's black town coat without a murmur; my wax jacket however was not something he was used to although luckily I had emptied the pockets of the various bits of string, staples and the odd 12 bore cartridges that forever seemed to reside there. Walking down the corridor towards the chamber we met several other peers. Some I recognised from the television, of others I didn't have a clue. The England cricket team had just dropped to the bottom of the world test match rankings after a disastrous series against the New Zealanders and everyone wanted to hear Lordy's opinion as to how this terrible state of affairs could be rectified. I remember standing in the Gentlemen's toilet having a long conversation with Lord Runcie the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury about the problems associated with pig farming. For a man of the cloth from St Albans he was remarkably well informed.

We waited in the Peers Lobby for the opening ceremony to begin. The day's proceedings were due to start at half past two and sure enough at about a quarter past the hour the lobby began to fill. The procession into the chamber was led by the Lord Speaker who was followed by the clerks and other officers. The peers who had elected to attend completed the procession. The Lord Speaker still sits astride the Woolsack but unlike his namesake in 'The other place' does not intervene in the debate. As was evident to me in the proceedings that followed, debate in the Upper Chamber is a civilised affair and a far cry from the Commons where, it seems to me, the rules of the playground abound. I took my seat in the visitors' pews and tried to take in the scene. It is not a big as I had imagined, quite small in fact. The seats are covered in sumptuous deep red leather, whilst the Commons are green. This differentiation of colour is critical. All the carpets in the Lords are red, the Commons Green. There is one corridor that connects the two houses where the red carpet runs to the imagined boundary and changes to green on the otherwise invisible dividing line. Lordy

advised me that I could walk on either red or green but he could not venture onto green as that belonged to the 'Other Place'.

Once some of the formal business was completed the Countryside debate began. I still have a copy of Hansard, which Lordy signed, giving a complete and accurate record of all that was said. Lord Plumb, one time NFU president, and Michael Jopling ex Min of Ag spoke well as did Earl Ferrers. I am not sure that anything good came out of the debate, or indeed if that was the intention, but many town dwelling peers had a chance to develop a better understanding of the countryside.

After another ride back to Victoria and the train home, I came to the end of what had been an amazing day. I never dreamed that I would go back to the House again, but in March of 2001, my family and I, alongside many others from the Estate, were invited to a reception in the River Room following Lord Colin's memorial service in Westminster Abbey. The service was a fine tribute to a great man. John Major gave a marvellous eulogy to, it transpired, someone who had become a great friend and confidant during his time as Prime Minister. The River room was full of famous faces and I had a long chat with Tom Graveney and Sir Gary Sobers. Not about pigs on this occasion, I think it was about our mutual love of beer and what makes a great pint.