



Art imitating life

The collection of sporting art at Cottesbrooke Hall reflects the family's passions as much as artistic taste, as JAMES STOURTON and EMMELINE HALLMARK reveal

NEARLY every country house in England contains sporting art in one form or another, but none is home to such a dazzling collection as that at Cottesbrooke Hall in Northamptonshire. Paintings of horses and men in scarlet coats have long hung beside Reynolds and Gainsborough, but it was not until Sir Walter Gilbey (1831–1914) that anyone thought of collecting it exclusively.

He was followed by James Buchanan, later the 1st Lord Woolavington, who brought the collecting of sporting art up to date with contemporary practitioners, and his collection can still be visited today. What makes the story of Lord Woolavington and his descendants so compelling is that the love of art went in tandem with the subject matter. As art collecting took hold, so did racehorses, hunting and the countryside.

At times, it's difficult to know whether life was imitating art, or the other way round.

James Buchanan took the well-trodden path of success from Scotland to London. He began his career in 1879, as the agent for a whisky firm. Charm, diligence, patience and the creation of a blend that, in his own words, was 'sufficiently light and old to please the palate' brought him one of the largest fortunes in Britain. Buchanan put his new

Gimcrack by Stubbs, set on Newmarket Heath, is one of the finest examples of the artist's genius for portraying the racing world

blend in a black bottle with a white label, so the public always referred to it as 'that black-and-white whisky'. The Highland terriers came later. He was a philanthropist who gave generously to Edinburgh University, Middlesex Hospital and restored St George's Chapel, Windsor, but there's little doubt that it was his horses and his art that absorbed his hours of leisure. In 1922, he was created 1st Baron Woolavington in the New Years Honours List—he had promised a large donation to the Conservative party, but cannily post-dated the cheque until January 2 and signed it 'Woolavington' in anticipation. It worked.

It was the purchase of a country house, Lavington Park in Sussex in 1903, and the

formation of a stud that probably stimulated Lord Woolavington into becoming one of the greatest collectors of English sporting art of all time. Messrs Pawsey and Payne were

his main suppliers, and, in 1927, he published the first of two volumes of the catalogue of the collection at Lavington Park. He was already able to boast a substantial group of >

Cottesbrooke Hall

This fine house was built for Sir John Langham, a rich London merchant and Northamptonshire landowner, between 1702 and 1713. On Lord Woolavington's death in 1935, it was bought by his daughter Catherine, and her husband, Maj Reginald Macdonald-Buchanan. The home of the Woolavington collection, the estate is also the site of the Pytchley hunt kennels, thus continuing the link between art and life.



works by Stubbs, Ferneley Snr, Ward, Barraud, Herring and Landseer. The hero of the collection, however, is Ben Marshall, that atmospheric painter of wide horizons who was the best sporting artist in the generation after Stubbs. By 1927, Woolavington owned 12 of his works, including the portrait of the Old Berkeley huntsman, *Thomas Oldacre on his Brown Mare, Pickle* (about 1800). Marshall conveys something of the earthiness of the 18th-century English scene with his depiction of both servants and masters, seen so clearly in *Anticipation* (about 1817).

If Marshall's paintings are essentially portraits and have the quality of a frozen moment, John Ferneley Snr, the second hero of the collection, is often at his best in full flight or in large-scale compositions and groups such as *Archibald, 13th Earl of Eglinton* (1832).

It was Lord Woolavington's racing career that was to stimulate his patronage of living artists. If ever he looked at his paintings of past winners by Marshall and Ferneley and wondered if his own horses would achieve the same celebrity, he needn't have worried. Hurry On sired his two Derby winners, the first being Captain Cuttle in 1922. However, his greatest success was Coronach, who won 10 out of his 14 races. In 1925, Coronach won races at Salisbury, Goodwood and Doncaster, and achieved his *annus mirabilis* in 1926 by winning the St Leger and the Derby. Lord Woolavington had him painted in 1928 by Sir Alfred Munnings, who left a vivid and affectionate portrait of his patron in his memoir *The Second Burst*. The artist was apprehensive, and only too

aware of the daunting standards of Woolavington's art collection. As it turned out, they had many shared interests, including a passion for the novels of Dickens. Munnings described the stud's 'romantic setting—large oak trees, a distant line of downs... but the scenery and oak trees were forgotten when this masterful horse was led out into the open... Coronach's snort was like the trumpet on the Day of Judgement'. The result was one of his best horse portraits.

One of the most interesting aspects of the art at Cottesbrooke Hall is the continuity of the collection through the patronage of artists then living: not only Munnings, but also Lionel Edwards and Lynwood Palmer, as well as the painters of family portraits: Henry La Thangue and James Shannon.

Lord Woolavington died in 1935, and



Lord Woolavington, one of the greatest ever collectors of English sporting art

left the collection to his daughter Catherine and her husband, Maj (later Sir) Reginald Macdonald-Buchanan. Together, they bought Cottesbrooke Hall, a country house by Francis Smith of Warwick, built in about 1710. It was to provide a perfect setting for the family and their growing collection, which they rounded off with Constable's *The Young Waltonians* and conversation pieces by Zoffany and Devis. They crowned the collection by buying the Stubbs masterpiece *Gimcrack*, with its broad views of Newmarket Heath, and by creating the Munnings corridor, dominated by the artist's *Ascot Landau* (1925). Lord Woolavington laid the foundation on which they spectacularly built. Sir Reginald was joint master of the Pytchely, and both he and his son, Capt John, were stewards of the Jockey Club. The latter continued the buying, and the present generation, Alastair and Sheran Macdonald-Buchanan, beautifully maintain their heritage. What shines through the collection is that this family enjoyed their art and lived the life with a satisfying circularity.

Cottesbrooke Hall and Gardens are open on selected days to the end of September (01604 505808; www.cottesbrookehall.co.uk)
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A gallery of equine stars: (Facing page, top left) *Anticipation* by Ben Marshall. (Top right) *Thomas Oldacre on his Brown Mare, Pickle* by Marshall. (Left centre) *The Cur* by John Ferneley. (Right centre) *Coronach* by Sir Alfred Munnings. (Bottom) *The Hon Charles Craven's Hunters* by Ferneley



Capturing the sense of anticipation before a day in the Shires: *Archibald, 13th Earl of Eglinton* by John Ferneley, master of large-scale compositions

