AUGUSTUS HILLS COBBOLD (1854-1931)  Sept 2012

‘Moreover he had those little creases about his eyes which are generally the mark of the good humoured and tolerant man.’ Thus wrote Anton in the Hampshire Advertiser on the death of Augustus Hills Cobbold. ‘He was often to be seen in the main street of Southampton, tweed clad, hatless, hearty, with a quizzical look in his eyes over the top of steel spectacles, generally with a bundle of papers in his hand and an odd little mannerism of continuing the conversation as he walked away. Mr Cobbold had a remarkable grip of local affairs on the financial side; he was sometimes a critic, but always a just one, and was ready at company meetings with a neatly turned compliment when it was deserved.’

Principal of his own company, A H Cobbold & Co, Stockbrokers, he had for many years been a director of the British American Land Company and the Canada Land Company and one of the auditors of the Southampton Gaslight and Coke Company. Well known and well respected, he had worked his way up to the top.

He was a summer baby, born in the Rectory at Yaxley in Suffolk where his father had taken up the living only 3 years previously and where his elder sister, Grace was already a toddler. Another brother, Herbert Spencer and two more sisters, Emily Mary and Georgiana Augusta were to join the family before they left Yaxley, the last child, William Nevill, the famous Corinthian and international footballer, being born in Long Melford. Hills was sent to Cranbrook School in preference to Charterhouse which his father had attended and which some 5 generations of the family subsequently favoured. It certainly seems that young Augustus chose to be ‘hands-on’ rather than academic for he left school at 17 to go and work for the National Provincial Bank in Southampton, later to become their Chief Cashier.

Aged just 24 he married Mary Constance Eden at St Jude’s, Kensington and their first child, Alice Mary was born the following year at their home, 12 Carlton Terrace, Southampton, a property subsequently destroyed in WWII. Alice, who married Duncan Tatton-Brown, grew to be a deeply religious and wonderfully loving mother to 5 children. In a Christmas thank-you letter a few years before he died, Hills addressed each of them in the most affectionate terms. Alice’s younger brother, Neville was born in 1882, again at 12 Carlton Terrace, served with the rank of Major in WWI and later sailed to Australia on the 3111 ton windjammer, Herzogin Cecilie as part of an attempt to secure a record in one of the annual grain races. Students of the many wrecks along the S. Devon coast will know that she later struck the Ham Stone in fog and was abandoned to break up in Starehole Bay. In 1884 when Neville was still less than 2 years old his mother died of pneumonia.
Hills seems to have been an unlucky lover, for his second wife, Edith Elinor Maria Hankinson who he married at St Peter’s Bournemouth in 1886 and with whom he had moved to 6 Cranbury Terrace, died in childbirth less than a year after they married. Their child, Geoffrey survived his mother for only 8 months and they lie together in a Southampton cemetery.

But, ‘third time lucky’ he met and married, in 1892, Ellen Stanley Townsend, the daughter of the late Joseph Phipps Townsend of Downhills, Tottenham and Walpole, Norfolk. It is suggested, but without confirmation, that Ellen brought some money to the marriage as the business of A H Cobbold & Co. was founded that year and it was in late 1892 or early 1893 that the substantial Villa, Brownhill House at Nursling was acquired along with several acres of open country. Indeed it may have been the open country which was the attraction because it included the Fearnings Brook around which Hills set out to fashion his remarkable garden. He had always been a collector of landscapes, fine engravings and mezzotints and it seems this spilled over into his garden design as he planted it as a series of pictures offering different vistas, colours and textures to the viewer. Within living memory ducks and black swans are recalled on the pool in the water garden.

There was more to Augustus Hills Cobbold than his business by day and his garden at the weekend. He took a wide interest in church affairs serving on the Rownhams Church Council and representing his parish at the Ruri-Decanal Conference; a man whose advice was often sought and freely given. His help was appreciated when he filled the post of hon. treasurer for the Southampton branch of the NSPCC and for the Test Valley Musical Society. Assuredly he appreciated the fine things in life. He liked good furniture, art and music but most of all he loved life.

A son was born to Hills and Ellen a year after they married. Charles Townsend Cobbold, always known as Charlie, breathed his first at Brownhill on 6th February 1893 and his parents happily despatched him first to Bradfield and later to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, with the expectation that he would return to learn his father’s business. At Caius he was a fit and handsome young oarsman who won his oar in the Lent races in 1913 and graduated in 1914. Keen to serve his country he joined the Hampshire Carabineers and after training was commissioned into the Royal Field Artillery. The distress felt at home when news came that he had been killed at Les Boeufs on 3rd October 1916 is unimaginable.

Charlie’s younger sister, Sylvia Townsend Cobbold was born at Brownhill when he was 6 years old and she will have been only 17 when he was killed. In 1922, in the local church at Rownhams, she married a naval officer, Robin Sivewright who was also a handsome young oarsman in the First Trinity (Cambridge) boat which went head in the 1919 Lents. In WWII he was awarded a DSC for his part in the dangerous task of mine sweeping off Madagascar. Sylvia inherited Brownhill House when her father died and 5 of her 6 children were born there in the same room. She remembered it, at its zenith, fondly, as the traditionally secure and comfortable family home that it had always been.

Sadly, Brownhill, as recalled by Sylvia, is no more. Gone are the fields, replaced by rather a large number of rather small houses and gone is most of Hills’s prized garden but Brownhill is still a home; it’s just a different sort of home for a different sort of family. Now, local authority owned and with the addition of two large wings, it provides residential rehabilitation for nearly 40 needy patients (one aged 103) as well as a thriving day centre. Interestingly a staff member has been enthusiastically researching the history of the house and its prior occupants and has built a display for all to see. As more information is uncovered the display grows and plans are afoot to restore Fearnings Brook. The residents’ interest makes it abundantly clear that this is still a home – their home – and it is just as much appreciated now as it was in ‘the old days.’

Note: The Trust would like to put on record its appreciation for the generosity of one of Augustus Hills Cobbold’s granddaughters, Elizabeth Jauncey and her family, who have been keen supporters of the Trust since the beginning. Augustus Hills Cobbold is #281 on the family tree.