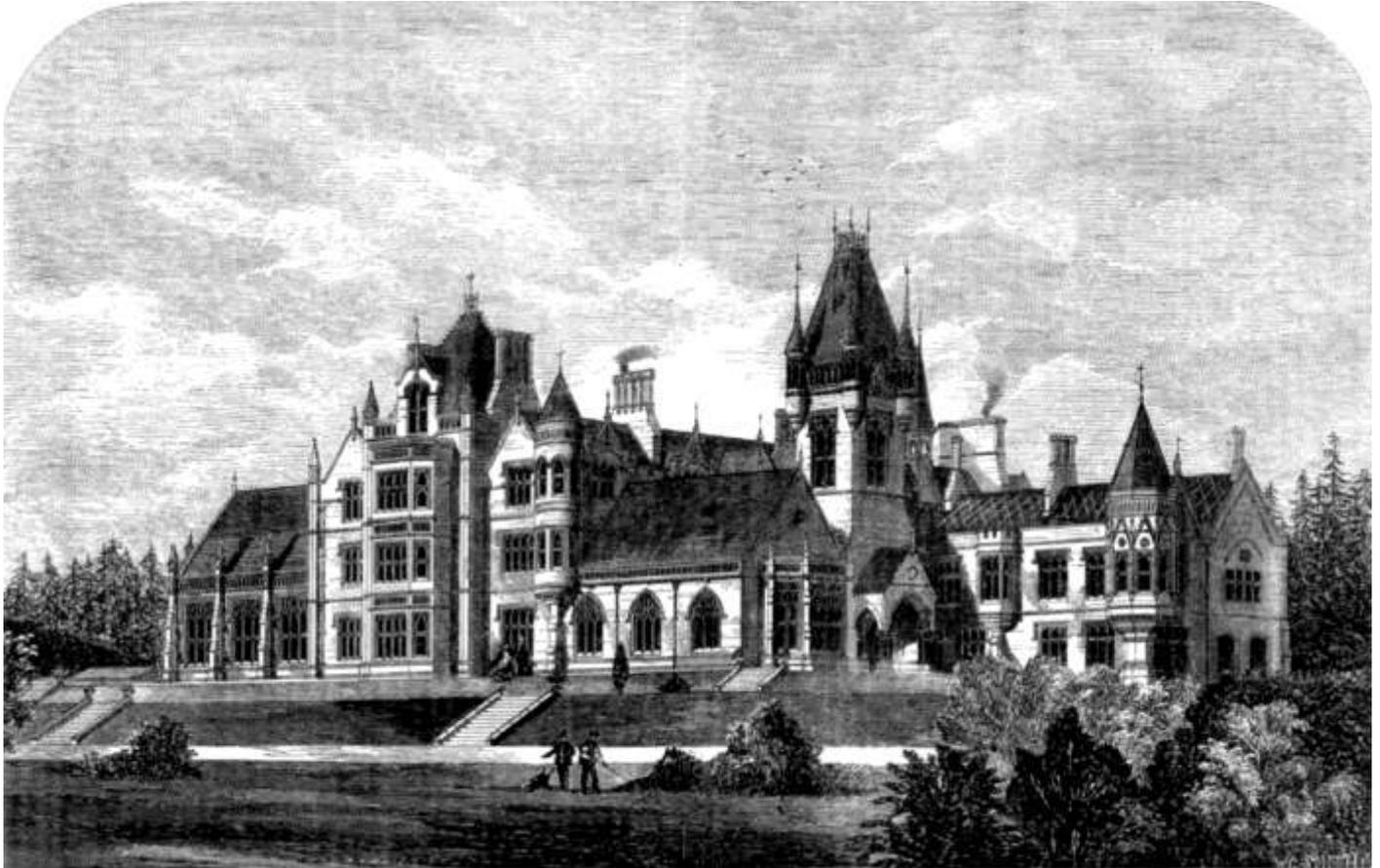


**History of the House and Family  
at  
TYNTESFIELD**

*Terry Steven (volunteer at Tyntesfield, living 3 miles away)*  
**Kennet Valley National Trust**  
17<sup>th</sup> January 2011



*Image of Tyntesfield in an 1866 edition of The Builder magazine.  
The central clock tower shown was demolished in 1935.*

Originally the area was the home of the Tynte family - which indicates how the name of the house should be pronounced.

The Gibbs family's fortunes originated in the establishment of a trading company by **Antony Gibbs (1756–1816)** who is shown on the right. He was the son of an Exeter surgeon, but his family roots can be traced to the village of Clyst St George, a few miles south east of the city.

Family memorials in the church date back to the 16th-century and their house remains in the parish today.

Antony Gibbs decided against following his father into medicine. Instead, he was attracted into the exciting - and profitable - world of international trade. He started life as a wool merchant, before establishing himself in Madrid selling English cloth in Spain and sending Spanish fruit and wine to England. Eventually Antony took his two oldest sons (William and George) into partnership.

Antony nearly went bust several times. It was only after the Spanish colonies were liberated that the firm - under the control, after his death, of sons, George and William - began to thrive. Amusingly, much of their fortune came from their trade in the droppings of sea birds, called guano. This could be found many feet deep on rainless islets along the South America's Pacific coast. When the first shipment was made in 1842, it was a huge gamble. But the guano was an instant success and became Britain's most popular fertiliser.



When his elder brother died, William became head of the firm. From then, until his death, the business' profits continued to boom. The firm's profits from the trade in guano were such that **William Gibbs (1790-1875)** became one of the richest men in England, and was able to finance the construction of Tyntesfield as a country home for his family. To this end, he purchased Tyntes Place, the original Regency-Gothic house that stood on the site, in 1843.

Originally the house on the site dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century but the successor to that, and the building that William purchased, was a newish Georgian house constructed in 1820.

In 1863 he began a full-blown rebuilding programme to create the Gothic Revival extravaganza that now stands. This was at a cost of £70,000 – the profit that his company made in just one year!

Notable elements of the house include glass by Powell and Wooldridge, mosaics by Salviati, and ironwork by Hart, Son, Peard and Co. The original architect was John Norton. In the 1880s further alterations were made by architect Henry Woodyer. The chapel was designed by Arthur William Blomfield in the 1870s.

William Gibbs had been born in Spain in 1790 and was a fluent Spanish speaker. He then came back to Britain and became a London merchant. He knew the area around Tyntesfield well and when the estate came on the market he decided to purchase it. It offered him a country seat but it also gave him access to Bristol for his trading activities.

William Gibbs was deeply religious - as was his wife, the beautiful Matilda Blanche Crawley-Boevey (always known as Blanche). She was in fact his cousin and he had married her in 1839, creating another link in the close-knit Gibbs family. Life at Tyntesfield was anything but solemn - private theatricals were often held in the library – and together William and Blanche had a large Victorian family that ran to seven children and 18 grandchildren!



*Photo taken in 1862 – showing William and Blanche Gibbs and family with the Reverend Mr. Hardie*

*Left to right: William, Henry Martin, Dorothea Harriett, Matilda Blanche, Antony, William, Albinia, Revd. Mr Hardie, Alice Blanche and George Abraham*

Being a high-flying businessman, William Gibbs was often in London. He kept a house in Hyde Park Gardens from where he would regularly walk to the City - always with cane in hand. William could often be found at the docks inspecting the huge piles of guano outside the warehouses.

In 1841, William Gibb's eldest son, another Antony, was born. He loved to play the organ and also showed enormous skill in turning ivory, which he did in a special lathe room opening off the billiard room.

Antony's claim to fame was his invention of a special bicycle, which stored energy when going downhill. This power could then be released by a pedal but, sadly, the bicycle proved very heavy to ride on the flat and it didn't catch on.

William Gibbs' wife, Matilda Blanche Gibbs, was an accomplished artist and she painted the house in 1850. The family were devout Anglicans, and William and his wife were supporters of the Oxford Movement. He was a major benefactor of Keble College Oxford. As major sponsors of the Oxford Movement, they provided funds for the upkeep of many ecclesiastical buildings and there is a poignant memorial to William Gibbs in one of the Exeter churches that benefited:

*William Gibbs, a merchant of London,  
but by parentage and affection a man of Devon.  
In his life he did many good works for the love  
of Christ, as elsewhere, so especially in the city of Exeter.  
One such work in the erection of this church of SS. Michael and All Angels  
for the use of the poor of the neighbourhood, is here recorded by his  
widow and surviving children to the end that the remembrance of  
his loving kindness and piety may not pass away.*

In 1863 -1865 when Tyntesfield was re-modelled, William Gibbs used the architect John Norton. The new build was wrapped around the old. Gibbs and his family subsequently lived at Tyntesfield permanently. A photo dating from the early 1870s survives.

The library is regarded as the most important gentleman's library in the possession of the National Trust. The carpet and some of the furnishings in the library were designed by John G. Crace – the leading British designer of the age.

**Major Anthony Gibbs (1841-1907)** took over the house following the death of his father in 1875 (allowing his mother, Matilda, to live there til her death in 1887). Anthony and his wife, Janet Louisa Merivale, put in a new entrance to the dining room with statues guarding the door modelled on the two daughters of the Gibbs – William's diary revealed that his daughters sat for the statues. Both girls sadly died in their 20s of tuberculosis.

Anthony's architect, Henry Woodyer, extended the dining room by taking in part of the original housekeeper's room. At the far end of the dining room is a fantastic sideboard which grew as the room grew!

The wallpaper was a British paper that imitated the Japanese paper itself imitating Spanish tooled leather. Someone had to hand paint detail onto it – around the whole room.

The hall is 43 feet high – designed by John Norton. Anthony had the hall changed so that the screen and central staircase were removed and the whole space opened out. Norton's fireplace remained untouched and his ironwork was kept and repositioned. There is a bust statue of both William and Matilda Blanche Gibbs.

In the drawing room, there is an original picture dating from 1878 showing the gas lighting of the time.

Antony died in 1907 and the third generation, **George Abraham Gibbs (6 July 1873 – 28 October 1931)** and his wife, took over. George was the eldest of Antony and Janet's 7 sons and began his career as a soldier. He was later MP for West Bristol until 1928. He was elevated to the peerage as Baron Wraxall of Clyst St. George in the County of Devon in 1928. His appointment as Treasurer of the Household was instrumental in his elevation to the peerage.

George Abraham Gibbs and his wife had Crace's stencilling all painted out, the Norton fireplace removed, the furniture replaced with Edwardian pieces and the carpet died by Sketchleys. By then the gas lighting had been replaced by electric lighting. There was damasked silk, stretched on battening on the walls. They were portraying the room as a Venetian Drawing Room.

George Abraham Gibbs, Lord Wraxall, married firstly Victoria Florence de Burgh Long, (Via) daughter of Walter Hume Long. Via sadly suffered a string of 9 miscarriages and both of her sons died as infants. Their only surviving child was a daughter, **Doreen Albinia de Burgh Gibbs (born at Tyntesfield on 13 September 1913)**, who was understandably incredibly precious and over-protected. Via died, aged only 39, in 1920 when Doreen was only 6 years old. In 1927, when Doreen was 14 years old, Lord Wraxall married again – the Hon. Ursula Mary Lawley, daughter of Arthur Lawley, 6th Baron Wenlock. This second marriage produced two boys: **George Richard Lawley Gibbs (16 May 1928 - 19 July 2001)**, (known as Richard), and **Eustace Hubert Beilby Gibbs**.

George Abraham was succeeded by his elder son, Richard, the second Lord Wraxall, on 28 October 1931. Richard was three years old when he succeeded (of interest is the fact that his godmother was Queen Mary of Teck.) Richard served in the Coldstream Guards and the local Yeomanry regiment.

*In 1988 he was kidnapped at Tyntesfield and locked in the boot of his BMW for almost seven hours! Afterwards according to The Times, he said "Good grief, there's more room in the back than I ever thought". The kidnappers had knocked him to the ground, one battering him on the head with a plank, and demanded the combination to his safe and his house keys, but the burglar alarm went off and, in a panic, the raiders bundled Lord Wraxall into the boot of his car and drove him to woods about two miles away, before making off with his wallet and credit cards.*

Richard died unmarried in 2001. He was alone in the house at the time and it is thought he died of an asthma attack. On his death, the estate was sold.

His brother, the diplomat Sir Eustace Gibbs, is now the third Lord Wraxall. Sir Eustace Gibbs has three sons and two daughters. "Wraxall" means 'the valley of the buzzards'.

### ***Miscellaneous Notes on the Buildings, Grounds etc:***

The chapel has no organ – this has been transplanted elsewhere! In the chapel, the amazing tiled floor has been protected by a special type of matting which has the photographic image of what is below – so that it looks just like what it covers.

By 1935, because of wet rot and dry rot, Ursula Lady Wraxall took the decision to remove both the tower and the turret that were originally built in 1863-1865.

### **450 great houses were completely demolished in England between 1945 and 1955!**

As early as 1976, the NT asked Mark Girouard if he would identify key houses and he put Tyntesfield on the list. July 2001 the opportunity came for the Trust to buy Tyntesfield and did so but it was a close run thing. Negotiations went on for 26 hours into the small hours of the morning. The appeal by the National Trust collected **£8.2 million** in just 100 days. Over 3 million pounds was raised from the public and there were two anonymous donations of another 4 million and 1 million respectively. The Trust also received the largest single grant ever by the National Heritage Memorial Fund (at £17.4 million), which caused some controversy.

The National Lottery has earmarked a further £25 million for the major conservation work that is needed .

Tyntesfield Estate no longer exists as it was formerly known. The National Trust purchased only the main central part of the Estate which now comprises the house, the kitchen garden, and the park. It is now simply known as Tyntesfield. The rest of Lord Wraxall's estate was broken up and sold off. One part of the former estate, Charlton Farm, is now home to Children's Hospice South West, which provides palliative care to children with terminal illnesses; while Charlton House was sold in 2002, having been since 1927 the home of The Downs School.

Since 2004, staff and volunteers have been cataloguing the contents of the house, which had been collected by the four generations of the family. By 2008 a total of 30,000 items had been listed including an unexploded Second World War bomb, a jewel-encrusted chalice, a roll of 19th-century flock wallpaper and a coconut with carved face and hair. A further 10,000 items are being catalogued and the task is expected to be finished in 2009.

The house was opened only 10 weeks after purchase.

Initially there were 30 volunteers and now there are between 600 –700 (more than at any other property owned by the Trust).

The quality of the house and its contents prompted the purchase – the contents were crucial.

Over 3 million pounds was raised and there were two anonymous donations of another 2 million. This enabled trusts to augment the sums.

There are in excess of 500 acres with 9 champion trees identified originally (now 8 when the top fell off one).

The roofs of Tyntesfield are the equivalent of some 20 normal houses.

From 28<sup>th</sup> February 2011 there will be new restaurant facilities. It is very “green” with everything being recycled wherever possible. There will be a big visible difference this year.

- Last year nearly 1200 school children visited
- NT gardeners were trained
- A landscape scholarship has been instituted.

The whole house has been rewired with a special cabling, copper sheathed (fire and rodent proofed) and it has been completed re-plumbed.

Exciting discoveries have been made – e.g. some of the original stencilling behind the red damask silk wall covering.

Students come from all over the world on placements – it is a very vibrant place.

The Orangery is currently being restored by students - the building having been stabilised.

There is a fine example of a Victorian walled garden – part of which was turfed when the house was put on the market. That is now being restored to what it would originally have been.

When the restaurant opens, fresh vegetables will be used from this garden.

Photos can be taken throughout but without flash.

The last Gibbs, Richard, was incorrectly described by Dan Cruickshank as a recluse – which was far from the truth. He was a governor of the local school and also involved in scouting – going to the Gang Shows etc.



*The Dilapidated Aviary was used by Doreen Albinia de Burgh Gibbs when entertaining her friends as a girl. It is intended to restore the building as part of the restoration programme.*