

‘Sir William Harcourt’s Fireside’: Lodges, Leases and Liberals in the Late 19th-Century New Forest

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On 8 November 1888, Robert Hanbury, Conservative MP for Preston, drew the attention of the House to:

the New Forest, which represented the largest of the Crown Lands ... anyone who knew anything of the management of woodlands was aware that the Forest was most disgracefully managed. There was an ex-Minister ... on the other side of the House who ought to know something about the New Forest, [who] ... had leased a portion of [it] to himself.¹

Hanbury was referring to the lease for Castle Malwood Lodge granted in 1883 to Sir William Harcourt (1827–1904). Hanbury clearly wanted to hint at corruption on the part of the former Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Harcourt robustly denied any wrongdoing, but who was right? This paper examines the official policy towards Crown properties in the Forest in the later 19th century against a background of creeping suburbanisation. Had Harcourt obtained this lease in suspicious circumstances? Had any leases been granted before, and under what terms? Did this policy change after 1883? Did it indicate disgraceful mismanagement of the Forest? And what was the public perception of Sir William’s ‘Fireside’?

This paper starts with a brief history of the New Forest and the opportunities it afforded for country house development. This is followed by an examination of the Office of Woods’ policy towards the Forest properties for which it was responsible. The third section introduces Sir William Harcourt and his decision to lease Castle

1 House of Commons Debates [hereafter HC Deb.], 8 November 1888, vol. 561 c. 682.

Malwood Lodge. The fourth section of the paper looks in more detail at the building of Harcourt's house there and the way this was presented in the press. In the fifth section we return to the House of Commons debate of 1888 and the conclusion addresses the questions posed above.

1 The New Forest

Afforested some time between 1066 and 1086, the area defined by the perambulation of the New Forest was subject to Forest Law, which, to allow free movement of the game, dictated that the afforested area was unenclosed. But within the perambulation, common rights – estovers, marl, mast, pasture, and turbary – could be exercised. In the early modern period the Crown increasingly exploited the timber resources of the Forest, making enclosures to protect the young trees. From the end of the 17th century, forestry enclosures were a trigger for unrest and the tearing down of fences by graziers, who felt their common rights were being infringed.²

Management of the remnant Crown forests was subject to several failed bills and successful Acts of Parliament in the period between the Restoration and the 1780s (in particular the New Forest Act of 1698). But from the 1780s on, parliamentary interest in the New Forest intensified for two reasons. First, following the surrender of the hereditary revenues of the Crown estates to parliament on the accession of George III, it had transpired that the revenue from the estates was nowhere near being capable of supporting the Civil List. Second, there was concern about an imminent shortfall of timber for the navy, leading to the commissioning in 1786 of a survey of the Crown's woods, forest and land revenues, and the publication of 17 reports, one of which dealt exclusively with the New Forest.³

Scrutiny of forest resources as a source of national revenue coincided with a shift in cultural attitudes to the countryside: it could now be considered 'picturesque'. It was William Gilpin, vicar of Boldre in the southern New Forest, whose writings did much to stimulate aesthetic

- 2 D.J. Stagg, 'Silvicultural inclosure in the New Forest to 1780', *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archeological Society* [hereafter *Proc. HFCAS*] 45 (1989), 143–4; C. R. Tubbs, *The New Forest: History, Ecology and Conservation* (1986, 2nd rev. edn, 2001), p. 86; C.J. Griffin, 'More-than-human histories and the failure of grand state schemes: sylviculture in the New Forest, England', *Cultural Geographies* 17, 4 (2010), 451–72.
- 3 Stagg, 'Silvicultural inclosure to 1780', 143–4; idem, 'Silvicultural inclosure in the New Forest from 1780 to 1850', *Proc. HFCAS* 46 (1991), 131–2.

awareness of 'wild' landscapes. His book, *Remarks on Forest Scenery and other Woodland Views ... illustrated by the scenes of New Forest in Hampshire*, appeared in 1791, only two years after the parliamentary report.⁴ At this time, there was a handful of country houses in the area: as Gilpin wrote, 'tho the soil of New-forest is, in general, poor; yet there are some parts of it, which very happily admit culture'. These houses were on lands, which, over the centuries, had been 'given away in grants by the Crown', where the 'tenants are in possession of well cultivated farms'.⁵ Some of the houses, such as Cuffnells and Foxlease (then known as Coxlease), in Lyndhurst, are shown on the map made in support of the survey, published in 1789.⁶

As a result of the survey, the Lord Warden and his establishment – the function of which was primarily game conservation but which included sinecures held by members of the aristocracy – was abolished, and timber production, under the direction of the Surveyor General of Woods was stepped up. In 1851 the Deer Removal Act was passed and over the following two years most of the deer were shot.⁷

In the same year, the Offices of Woods and Works were separated: the former being headed by two Commissioners of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues [hereafter, 'the Commissioners'] at any one time. One of them was responsible for 'the Royal Forests and the greater part of the plantations in England, and also for the Land Revenues in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and in the Isles of Man and Alderney'. This included the New Forest and was the job, successively, of Thomas Kennedy, 1851–3, Charles Gore, 1854–5, James Howard, 1856–81, Sir Henry Loch, 1882–3, George Culley, 1884–94, and Sir Stafford Howard, 1895–1912; the other Commissioner was responsible for 'the rest', including Windsor Great Park and property in England.⁸ The two Commissioners presented an annual report to parliament that – among other things – listed all the leases of Crown lands made in the preceding year: Harcourt's lease and its terms were, therefore, a matter of public record.

4 W. Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Illustrated by the Scenes of New Forest in Hampshire* (3 vols, London, 1791).

5 Ibid., III, p. 38.

6 T. Richardson, W. King and A. and W. Driver, *A Plan of His Majesty's Forest called New Forest in the County of Southampton* (2nd edn, 1814) [hereafter 'Drivers' map'].

7 New Forest Act, 1851, 14 and 15 Vict. c. 76.

8 British Parliamentary Papers [hereafter BPP], *The Sixty-First Report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues*, 1883 (236), xxi, pp. 4–5.

In 1859, White's directory listed 39 houses of significance within the Forest perambulation.⁹ By 1921 this number had tripled: the New Forest had become a rich man's playground. Not only had the 'picturesque' landscape become fashionable but so had the mystique of the area's historical associations; and opportunities for sport persisted, despite the deer cull. Above all, communications had improved, first with the building of the Southampton and Dorchester Railway in 1847, with stations at Ashurst ('Lyndhurst Road'), Beaulieu Road, Brockenhurst and Holmesley, and later with road improvements following the 1883 New Forest Highways Act and the formation of Hampshire County Council in 1889.¹⁰ Development took off during the 1860s and '70s, accelerating in the '80s to produce around 70 substantial houses by 1891.¹¹

Out of 92,395 acres, over 60,000 were not available for development; they were either 'open', unenclosed woods or pasture, or timber plantations (enclosed or thrown open), and all subject to rights of common. Of the rest, 27,658 acres were 'private property' and 2,089 acres 'freehold lands of the Crown'.¹² The private property consisted of liberties, manors and smaller holdings that had been granted by the Crown from the medieval period around the periphery of the Forest (including Beaulieu, Boldre, Bramshaw and Bartley) and even enclosed within it (including Brockenhurst, Burley, Minstead, Fritham and Canterton); the manor of Lyndhurst itself was held by the Crown and was also included among the private lands; the freehold lands of the Crown included the sites of former Master Keepers' lodges and other scattered sites such as New Park (until 1851 the residence of the Deputy Surveyor).

What, then, were the options for the gentleman seeking to build a country house in the New Forest? Most of the existing 'country houses' in mid-century were on the private lands. In terms of parishes and

- 9 W. White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (Sheffield, 1859). A minimum for 'significant size' is assumed to be seven bedrooms, but data is lacking for most houses before the 1911 census. An element of judgment based on a number of factors has been used.
- 10 Hampshire Cultural Trust, 'The Railways of Hampshire', Trust <https://www.hampshireculturaltrust.org.uk/content/railways-hampshire> (accessed 29 February 2016); G. Lascelles, *Thirty-Five Years in the New Forest* (London, 1915), pp. 29–32.
- 11 C.E.M. Glover, 'A Country house or a house in the country? A study of country houses in the New Forest and their residents, c.1851 to c.1923', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Winchester (2012), pp. 104–5.
- 12 BPP, The Sixty-Third Report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues, 1885 (248), xx, p. 12.

settlements, Bramshaw and Bartley in the north, and Fawley, Exbury and Beaulieu in the south each had one or two significant houses. Minstead, Brockenhurst and Burley parishes each had three or four, but the majority were either in Boldre or Lyndhurst. One option was further development in the Crown's manor of Lyndhurst, where the copyholds had been enfranchised in 1829.¹³ With many villas being built there as well, a house in Lyndhurst could no longer really be considered a 'house in the country', never mind a 'country house': increasingly people were looking elsewhere for opportunities to build secluded country residences.

A second option was development upon other private manors. One possibility was to build on private lands already owned by the family: houses were built on the estates of Foxlease (Wilverley) and Minstead (Blackwater House) for junior family members; in Brockenhurst, Carey's was built by Hermann Bowden-Smith in the grounds of Brockenhurst Lodge, which he demolished.¹⁴ Much more commonly, cottages and smaller houses, and even, in the case of Lepe House, an inn, were extended to create larger, grander houses. One example of a smaller house being enlarged in the early 1890s to create a mansion was Castle Malwood in the manor of Minstead, about half a mile away from the site of the property with which this paper is chiefly concerned, Castle Malwood Lodge. Harcourt named his new house 'Malwood' to avoid confusion, although not, as we shall see, entirely successfully.

From the 1880s, some of the larger estates were being sold off piecemeal, with the suggestion that each part might offer the site for a substantial house and grounds. An example of this was the attempted sale of Canterton, near Bramshaw. In 1887 it was advertised in a splendid brochure, with a photograph of the Rufus Stone – '300 yards from the southern portion of this estate' – on the cover. It was for sale in several lots, and the sites of several 'mansions ... commanding some of the finest views of Sylvan Scenery' were identified, as were several sites suitable for artificial lakes.¹⁵ But fortunately the estate was eventually sold to one purchaser, who built a single mansion, so the landscape remained largely undeveloped. In contrast to the relatively inaccessible

¹³ Crown Lands Act, 1829, 10 Geo. IV c. 50.

¹⁴ Christopher Tower New Forest Reference Library [hereafter NFRL], Lyndhurst, N140 Archive 41, Georgina Bowden-Smith's notes on house(s) around Lyndhurst written in early 1890s, pp. 34–5.

¹⁵ The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA], F 10/271, Canterton Estate, 1887–1896, plan of sale lots; NFRL, 716MIN, Canterton Estate, Sales Brochure, 22 July 1887.

Canterton, the presence of railway stations at Brockenhurst and, to a lesser extent, Burley made building plots there valuable and many were sold off in the 1890s and 1910s as the sites for large houses. Eventually, after the turn of the century, even the Beaulieu estate started selling building leases on plots in the forest, albeit discreetly hidden in the woods.¹⁶ The third option was to develop Crown freehold land, and it is this that the rest of the paper considers.

II The Office of Woods

The Commissioners appear to have actively pursued a policy of maximising revenue from the parcels of 'Crown freehold' at their disposal.¹⁷ Secluded in the woods, these were small areas of enclosed land where it was legally possible to build because there had been an earlier building: the Crown duly took advantage of the demand for a 'house in the country' by selling building leases. Most of these were the sites of the former Master Keepers' lodges, which were no longer needed for officials of the Lord Warden's establishment. Historically, the New Forest had been divided into fifteen walks, most having its own Master Keeper's lodge. Some of these had been rather grand houses, as befitted the aristocratic holders of these sinecures. In 1787 there appear to have been four grand houses – Boldrewood, Rhinefield, Burley, and Ironshill – but as Gerald Lascelles wrote in 1915, there was:

a good deal of suspicion and comment about the large sums which were spent on these lodges ... and since they were only held as an emolument of a complimentary and altogether sinecure office, public indignation rose. The result was the gradual disappearance of all these charming old residences. *It is a great pity that they were not preserved and utilized on sounder conditions* [author's emphasis].¹⁸

The acreages associated with these lodges varied from 162 acres at Burley, where 'high farming' was practised in the mid-19th century, to 28 acres at Bramble Hill.¹⁹

16 H.E.R. Widnell, *The Beaulieu Record* (London, 1973), pp. 366, 375, 409; *The Times*, 16 April 1926 (sale notice).

17 As documented in various files in TNA, F 10, Forestry Commission and predecessors: Director of Forestry for England, Correspondence and Papers, New Forest.

18 Lascelles, *Thirty-Five Years*, p. 125.

19 Burley: *The Times*, 11 July 1883; Bramble Hill: BPP, The Forty-sixth Report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues, 1868 (368), xx, p. 92.

After the Deer Removal Act of 1851:

various Lodges, Lodge Grounds and other Tenements ... occupied by Keepers or other Officers of Her Majesty in ... the said Forest would no longer be required to be so occupied and it was expedient that the same should be let to the best advantage.²⁰

Some of the sites were leased to tenants and others were used for forestry-related purposes. The site of Castle Malwood Lodge, for which Harcourt was granted a building lease in 1883, was one of the latter. As early as 1859, Lawrence Cumberbatch, Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest, was envisaging Eyeworth Lodge as a suitable residence for a sporting gentleman:

I think if I might be permitted without advertising it to hold out a prospect of a gentleman taking this place being recommended for a Forest License, I could perhaps obtain a better class of tenant than I otherwise could do.²¹

Bramble Hill Lodge was certainly let as a gentleman's residence from 1866 onwards if not before.²²

After Gerald Lascelles became Deputy Surveyor in 1880, the policy seems to have been intensified. Lascelles was constantly on the lookout for opportunities both to make revenue and to increase the value of properties, even bemoaning the impact of earlier decisions on his ability to generate funds for the Crown. He regretted, for instance, that when the copyholds in the manor of Lyndhurst were enfranchised in 1829 they had been sold, rather than 'let on building terms on long leases':

the various properties would have gradually become just as valuable as they are now ... The leases would be beginning to fall in, and the Crown would be the possessor of a very valuable estate which has nearly all passed to private owners.²³

A building lease committed the lessee to spend considerable sums of money improving an existing house or building a new one, which would eventually revert to the Crown. In 1866, for example, the lease

20 TNA, F 10/18, Eyeworth Lodge, 1854-1861, 'Demise of lodges and inclosed lands held therewith'.

21 TNA, F 10/18, Cumberbatch to Howard, 7 April 1859; TNA, F 10/383, Bramble Hill Lodge, 1921-1944, undated typescript.

22 TNA, F 10/383, undated typescript.

23 TNA, F 10/59, Manor of Lyndhurst, Manorial records.

on Bramble Hill Lodge had been extended from 21 to 31 years for an annual rent of £50 in consideration of the fact that the tenant had already spent 'some £3,000 or so in enlarging and improving the house', and on condition that he spent a further £1,000.²⁴

In 1880 the main problem was what to do with Burley and Rhinefield Lodges. Burley had a large amount of land associated with it and could be let as a farm. Rhinefield had been used as a tree nursery but now the soil was exhausted and the decision had been taken to move the nursery function to Ashurst Lodge. The lodge itself had fallen into ruins. One of the options, Lascelles thought, was to get a tenant to spend £1,000 on doing it up.²⁵

It is clear from the records that Lascelles, the Commissioners of Woods, and ultimately the Treasury, wanted to get the tenants to spend as much money as possible, to enhance the value of the property. They placed advertisements for both Burley and Rhinefield in *The Times* and other newspapers, and they were not above 'omitting the sum which the tenant will be required to expend' from the advertisement:

It would I think be wisest ... to leave the tenant to prepare and submit plans to the department, as the more a tenant is allowed to have his own way in such a matter, the more money he is likely to expend upon the place.²⁶

They emphasised the possibility of shooting over hundreds of acres of adjoining land – the open forest. It was, indeed, a great selling point for all the houses developed in the New Forest that you could enjoy field sports without having the bother of managing your own land.

At Rhinefield the emphasis was on the ornamental shrubbery and rare conifers. In 1883, a lease of 31 years 'or longer' was what the Office of Woods had in mind: Cluttons, the Crown surveyors, recommended an annual rent of £45 assuming 'a term of 31 years and upon condition of the lessee expending sum of not less than £2500'.²⁷ They had the draft lease prepared 'on the same lines as the Castle Malwood Lease' that was being drawn up at the same time for Sir William

24 Hampshire Record Office, Winchester, 114M90/3, Lease for 21 years for a messuage called Bramble Hill Lodge, with appurtenances in Bramshaw, 1855–1858; TNA, F 10/383, undated typescript.

25 TNA, F 10/32, Rhinefield Lodge, 1881–1887, Lascelles to Howard, 12 March 1880.

26 TNA, F 10/32, Lascelles to Howard, 25 July 1881.

27 TNA, F 10/32, Extract from Mr Clutton's Report of 18 April 1883.

Harcourt.²⁸ They received a proposal for a 99-year lease from Charles Newbolt of Eastleigh, which they declined: Lascelles' enquiries had revealed that Newbolt was 'somewhat of a speculator in the building line without much means of his own. I do not think that he is the class of tenant desirable for Rhinefield Lodge'. Besides, he was only offering a rent of £20 per annum, for an expenditure of £500: 'not sufficient inducement for the granting of a long lease'.²⁹ Mr Duff Dunbar was a more appropriate tenant, but one of the options he suggested was a 99-year lease: the blunt verdict from the Office of Woods was that 'a lease for so long a term as 99 years would not be granted', on top of which the prospective lessee wanted the Crown to lay out £4,000, himself contributing £1,000.³⁰

By 1887, still not having found a suitable tenant for Rhinefield, they advertised an 80-year building lease, and this finally brought success. Lionel Walker-Munro and his wife, Mabel, heiress of the Eastwood Collieries (Nottinghamshire) fortune were currently sub-tenants at Lady Cross Lodge. They had already tried to get a 'considerably longer lease than 31 years' for that property, where they were prepared to spend £10,000 on enlarging the house, but Commissioner George Culley said that he was 'unable under the circumstances to grant a lease for a longer term than 40 years'.³¹ They initially demanded 99 years at Rhinefield, but eventually they settled for 84 years, at a rent of £80 per annum, undertaking to spend not less than £4,000 to build 'a really fine house to put up about 20 visitors with care, stabling for 1[5] horses etc etc'.³²

Table 1 demonstrates that a 99-year lease was by no means usual in 1883. As we have seen, two proposals for 99-year leases had been turned down outright. Until 1887 the norm remained 21 or 31 years, and it was not until 1900 that the Crown was prepared to let another of its New Forest freeholds, High Coxlease, on a 99-year lease.

28 TNA, F 10/32, Memo signed JRS, 29 May 1883.

29 TNA, F 10/32, Lascelles to Loch, 6 July 1883.

30 TNA, F 10/32, Lascelles to Culley, 11 October 1884 and memo signed JRS, 15 October 1884).

31 TNA, F 10/160, Lady Cross Lodge, 1884-1915, Walker-Munro to Culley, 13 December 1887; Ibid., Culley to Walker-Munro, 27 December 1887.

32 TNA, F 10/32, Rhinefield Lodge, 1888-1889, JRS to Lascelles, 8 February 1887; TNA, F 10/33, Rhinefield Lodge, 1881-1887, JRS to Walker-Munro, 29 March 1888.

Table 1: Details of building leases requested by prospective lessees or granted by the Crown in the New Forest, 1860–1907

Property	Acres	Lessee	Year	Term (years)	Annual Rent	To be spent by lessee	Outcome
Eyeworth	43	Drayson	1860	31	£60	£1500	Granted
Bramble Hill	28	Glyn	1866	31	£50	£4000 ¹	Granted
Burley	162	Hudson	1874	21	£170	£400	Granted
Furzey Lawn	–	Meyrick	1878	21	£5	£400	Granted
Bullfigs	3	Morris	1880	31	£10	£200	Granted
Rhinefield	42	Newbolt	1883	99	£20	£500	Refused
Castle Malwood	22	Harcourt	1883	99	£100 ²	£3000	Granted
Rhinefield	42	Duff Dunbar	1884	99	tbd	£1000	Refused
Bramble Hill	28	Glyn	1887	31	£213 10s	£5000 ³ £6000	Granted
Lady Cross	69	Walker-Munro	1887	tbd ⁴	tbd ⁴	£10,000	Refused
Rhinefield	42	Walker-Munro	1887	99	£80	£4000	Refused
Rhinefield	42	Walker-Munro	1888	84	£80	£4000	Granted
Lady Cross	69	Greathed	1888	31	£130	£1000	Granted
Irons Hill	40	White	1891	80	£80	£3000	Granted
Lady Cross	69	Darling	1897	50	£130	£2000	Granted
High Coxlease	33	Smith	1900	99	£60	£4000	Granted
Bramble Hill	28	Mather	1907	65	£230	£13,340 ⁵	Granted

Notes:

1 £3000 already spent, tenant agrees to spend £1000 more.

2 £35 p. a. for the first two years.

3 Already spent by the lessee.

4 Walker-Munro asked for 'considerably longer lease than 31 years'. He was offered 40 years for £150 p.a. with £4000 to be spent.

5 This was the amount already spent by the lessee. An alternative suggestion from the Crown surveyors was 90 years for a rent of £300, which Mather declined.

Sources: TNA, F 10/18, Eyeworth Lodge, 1854–1861; TNA, F 10/383, Bramble Hill Lodge, 1921–1944; BPP, The Fifty-fifth Report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues, 1877 (300), x, p. 57 (Lease on Burley Lodge); TNA, F 10/15, Furzey Lawn Cottage, 1870–1883; TNA, F 10/160–161, Lady Cross Lodge, 1884–1915; TNA, T 1/12671, Warrants for lease on Bullfigs; TNA, F 10/32, Rhinefield Lodge, 1881–1887; TNA, F 10/33, Rhinefield Lodge, 1888–1889; TNA, F 10/111 Castle Malwood Lodge, 1872–1919; TNA, F 10/163, Ironshill Park. Building Leases, 1891–1906; TNA, F 10/292, High Coxlease Enclosure. Leases for building purposes, 1900–1908.

III Sir William Harcourt

Sir William Harcourt was born William Venables Vernon in 1827, the younger son of a clergyman whose father was the Archbishop of York from 1807 to 1847. Harcourt was added to the family name when William was three, on his grandfather's inheriting the Harcourt estates from his cousin. Although the family was deeply embedded in the landed establishment, as a younger son, he had no prospect of inheriting a country estate himself. In 1859 he married Maria Thérèse Lister, who died giving birth to their second son, Lewis (who was to be his father's secretary and later a prominent politician himself). A barrister, Harcourt took his first seat in parliament in 1868, as a Liberal, and received the traditional knighthood – against his wishes – on his appointment as Solicitor General in 1874. He married his second wife in 1876 and by 1883 they had a five-year old son. Sir William became Home Secretary in Gladstone's parliament of 1880.³³ He became known for his populist approach to politics, after introducing the bill that resulted in the Ground Game Act, giving tenant farmers the right to shoot hares and rabbits to prevent them destroying crops.³⁴ It was an act that surely indicated his lack of support for landed privilege, as his later introduction of the Single Estate Duty, was also to do.³⁵

Sir William may have got the idea for leasing one of the lodges from the 1881 advertisements for Burley and Rhinefield lodges. He was not unfamiliar with this area, having sat on the Commons Select Committee on the New Forest in 1875. Further, according to the diary of his elder son, Lewis (or 'Loulou'), the Harcourts were renting a house in Lyndhurst in 1882, and it may have been there that he conceived the idea of asking for a lease of one of the Crown properties.³⁶

How did Harcourt come to lease Castle Malwood Lodge, for which there is no trace of a newspaper advertisement ever being placed? The only Office of Woods record of it that pre-dates Sir William's application is from ten years earlier when barrister George Heaton

33 P. Stansky, 'Harcourt, Sir William George Granville Venables Vernon (1827–1904)', *Dictionary of National Biography*, www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33693 (accessed 15 May 2011).

34 HC Deb., 27 May 1880, vol. 252 c. 594; I. Machin, 'Sir William Harcourt, 1827–1904', *Liberal History*, www.liberalhistory.org.uk/history/harcourt-sir-william/ (accessed 1 September 2016).

35 Finance Act, 1894, 57 and 58 Vict. c. 30.

36 BPP, Report from the Select Committee on New Forest, 1875 (341), xiii; L.H. Harcourt, *Loulou: Selected Extracts from the Journals of Lewis Harcourt (1880–1895)*, edited by P. Jackson (Madison, NJ, 2006).

Esq. asked that he might be considered for a lease of Castle Malwood Lodge and that his request might be placed on record. Heaton received a polite reply and it would appear likely that that was the last he heard of it. The lodge was not for leasing, and Heaton's request remains on record.³⁷

Castle Malwood was not dilapidated like Rhinefield, nor was it vacant, it being the residence of the Deputy Surveyor's assistant, John Dixon. Sir William's biographer claims that he picked the site where William Rufus had breakfasted on the day he was shot.³⁸ Like Heaton ten years earlier, he must have approached the Office of Woods directly, but with more success. The Commissioner Sir Henry Loch considered it 'in the interest of the Crown to have a gentleman's residence erected on this site', and recommended Harcourt's proposition to the Treasury.³⁹ The lease, authorised in 1883 (but not included in a Commissioner's Report until June 1887, where the sum to be expended was not specified), was for 99 years from 10 October 1883, at a rent of £100 p.a. (£35 p.a. for the first two years). The lessee was to 'expend a minimum sum of £3000 in erecting a residence, stables and offices.'⁴⁰

IV Malwood

Harcourt had a budget of up to £5,000 for building a new house, and had plans drawn up by Ewan Christian. These being ready by September 1883, two months later, Lady Harcourt turned the first sod. Lewis, then aged 21, stayed in a nearby cottage to supervise the works. By the following October the brickwork was finished and the roof timbers were being erected: 'It looks charming and the stone mullions for the windows are a great success.'⁴¹ It was at this time that the public began to take an interest. Someone who signed themselves 'Rusticus' wrote to *The Standard* to complain that, while 'wandering about' in 'an old haunt' of his, the 'attractive part of the Forest ... adjacent to Stoney Cross', he observed:

37 TNA, F 10/11, Heaton to Howard, 21 August and reply 27 August 1872.

38 Castle Malwood was closest lodge to the Rufus Stone, erected in 1841 supposedly at the site of William Rufus' demise.

39 TNA, F 10/11, Loch to Treasury, 23 May 1883.

40 TNA, F 10/11, Treasury warrant authorising the grant of a lease, received by Office of Woods, 2 June 1883; BPP, *The Sixty-fifth report of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues*, 1887 (205), xxvii, p. 12.

41 A.G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt, 1886-1904* (2 vols, London, 1923), I, p. 491; Harcourt, *Loulou*, pp. 57, 59, 68, 115-16.

a change. The closed gates, the notice of 'no admission to these premises except on business', and the howls of a ferocious-looking dog ... the old cottage was gone ... The humble official of the Forest has been displaced to make way for a great official of the State.⁴²

This certainly was true – rehousing Dixon and his family and compensating them for the loss of their garden and orchard had been a huge headache for the Office of Woods. They had managed to get the current tenant of a nearby cottage known as 'Seamans' to surrender the lease, and then discovered that:

owing to the age of the premises it [would] not be possible to add to them and improve them ... except at large cost and then with an unsatisfactory result.

So they decided to build a new lodge in the grounds of Seamans and had to ask the Treasury for £438 (plus 10 per cent for contingencies) to add to the £200 they had already received from Sir William.⁴³

Rusticus goes on to insinuate that the Home Secretary has abused his position at the expense, not only of the previous resident but of public amenity, adding that:

I am at a loss to understand, nor will I believe that our admirable Home Secretary has been ... any party to the abridgement of a public enjoyment ... for Malwood Castle is practically very little more remote from London than Epping Forest or Burnham Beeches.⁴⁴

This was a reference to Harcourt's active support, from 1870, for the Commons Preservation Society and his leading role in the movement for maintaining the public rights in open spaces.⁴⁵

The Harcourts moved into the new house late in 1886, by which time Sir William was out of office, the Liberal government having been defeated over the issue of Irish Home Rule.⁴⁶ This was perhaps the first time Harcourt retreated to 'contemplate his own fireside' – probably a euphemism similar to 'wanting to spend time with his family'.⁴⁷ The

42 *The Standard*, 24 October 1884.

43 TNA, T 1/4935, Loch to Treasury, 18 August 1883.

44 *The Standard*, 24 October 1884.

45 Gardiner, *Life*, I, p. 491.

46 P. Jackson, *Harcourt and Son: A Political Biography of Sir William Harcourt, 1827–1904* (Madison, NJ, 2004), pp. 165–6.

47 *The Spectator*, 17 January 1891, 'Fireside Politics'. 'Sir William Harcourt's Fireside' was also referred to in *Cassell's Family Magazine*, in an article syndicated to papers including the *Northern Echo* and the *Leicester Chronicle* in 1896; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 11 July 1896. Sometimes it is referred to as 'contemplating' and other times 'cultivating'.



Figure 1: Sir William Harcourt standing on the terrace of Castle Malwood Lodge (author's own collection)

house was described in the press as 'a picturesque modern brick and timber house',⁴⁸ and:

a spacious villa of Queen Anne's style ... the main features ... were designed by Sir William and Lady Harcourt themselves ... The dark red walls still emphasise the newness of the house but they are being rapidly covered by thriving creepers of various kinds, including clematis and the passion plant.⁴⁹

Figure 1 shows Sir William standing on the terrace. Although no contemporary images of the interior have yet been discovered, we know from the sale of the contents that the fireside had 'massive ormolu curbs'.⁵⁰

The arched entrance-door of black oak, to which a short carriage-drive conducts you from the high road opens into a small square hall, in which I noticed a number of old engravings of Stancy-Harcourt, the ancestral home of Sir William's family in Oxfordshire. From an inner hall of somewhat larger size you can walk into the principal rooms of the house – the drawing-room, the dining-room and the library. In the decoration and furnishing of these rooms – as, indeed, of the whole house – lightness and brightness have been very skilfully reconciled with a large measure of the solid and substantial.⁵¹

48 *Derby Mercury*, 4 October 1893.

49 *Leicestershire Mercury*, 11 July 1896

50 *The Times*, 17 September 1921.

51 *Leicestershire Mercury*, 11 July 1896

The house had 25 bedrooms, which gives us a sense of its size.⁵²

The house and grounds are on quite a modern scale, but the situation is one of the most charming in the New Forest, and delightfully retired ... Hidden away behind the forest at some distance from his house Sir William Harcourt has a pretty little model farm in which he takes much interest.⁵³

Harcourt was to take great pleasure in this farm, joking that he was:

conducting agriculture here on the most scientific principles. [He had] almost attained a dairy herd which will give no milk, hens which will lay no eggs, and pigs which will not sell.⁵⁴

The house too gave him a complete break from public life and the pressures of government office:

Another feature of the whole house, which cannot fail to impress Sir William Harcourt's visitors, is the almost entire absence of anything bearing upon his public career. The house proclaims its owner to be a man of culture, for there are shelves of books along one side of the broad corridors – the overflow of an extensive, if not very remarkable, library. Of Sir William's many years' service to the State, there is in any part of the house scarcely a hint or suggestion. A stranger examining all its rooms might well conclude that Castle Malwood Lodge was but the residence of a country gentleman with a love for books.⁵⁵

In 1888, the nearby house called 'Castle Malwood' was advertised as being 'to let'. Assuming that it was 'Sir Wm. Harcourt's grand castle in the New Forest' that was vacant, it was reported that 'speculation is running high to account for his sudden abandonment of so expensive and colossal a toy. Can he contemplate a residence abroad?'⁵⁶

The dominant political stance in the area was Tory: Gladstone's visit to Malwood in June 1889 was remarked upon with scepticism by the *Hampshire Advertiser*: 'his visits to this part of the country, we believe, have been "few and far between", Hampshire being strongly anti-Gladstonian in principles'.⁵⁷ But although Harcourt

52 *The Times*, 31 May 1935, letter from Robert Harcourt.

53 *Derby Mercury*, 4 October 1893.

54 Harcourt to Spencer, quoted in Jackson, *Harcourt and Son*, p. 165.

55 *Leicestershire Mercury*, 11 July 1896.

56 *Morning Post*, 7 July 1888; *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 11 July 1888. This was before Charles Hill bought the 'other' house and enlarged it.

57 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 4 May 1889; Gardiner, *Life*, II, p. 134.

built the house as a retreat from politics, he loved entertaining his friends and colleagues there. Liberal gatherings were also sometimes held at Malwood. In 1889, the *Hampshire Advertiser* reported that the Shirley Working Men's Liberal Association held a demonstration there, expressing disappointment that Sir William did not deign to address them and finding it 'funny ... very funny', that the meeting ended with the band playing 'The fine old English gentleman'.⁵⁸ This was possibly a modified version of the satirical parody of this song, published by Charles Dickens in 1841, which had poked fun at Tory landowners:

I'll sing you a new ballad, and I'll warrant it first-rate,
Of the days of that old gentleman who had that old estate;
When they spent the public money at a bountiful old rate
On ev'ry mistress, pimp, and scamp, at ev'ry noble gate,
In the fine old English Tory times;
Soon may they come again!⁵⁹

But, Harcourt's neighbour at 'Castle Malwood', Colonel Henry Shakerley perhaps had the last laugh when he telegraphed the paper to complain: 'No Liberal meeting has been held at Castle Malwood or ever will be as long as I am tenant. Please correct your report on Saturday.'⁶⁰

Referring to other neighbours at Minstead Lodge, Harcourt wrote to Robert Morley that 'Lady Gosford ... keeps up an anti-cyclone of Tories and Orange-folk'.⁶¹ He also told Joseph Chamberlain that he lived like 'a leper in the Holy Land ... [people] pass by on the other side and cry, "unclean, unclean"'.⁶² But the prevailing views of the neighbourhood, and the sniping in parliament and the press, did not prevent Harcourt from enjoying life there. In 1888, the year of the House of Commons debate alluded to earlier, he wrote to John Morley, 'A delicious sun – beautiful west wind – the Forest a paradise. How can you all be such fools as to occupy yourselves about politics? I have forgotten they exist.'⁶³

58 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 14 August 1889.

59 *The Examiner*, 7 August 1841.

60 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 14 August 1889.

61 Harcourt to Morley, 11 January 1888, quoted in Gardiner, *Life*, II, p. 134.

62 Jackson, *Harcourt and Son*, p. 166.

63 Harcourt to Morley, 5 March 1888, quoted in Gardiner, *Life*, II, p. 132.

V The Debate

Let us return to the 1888 Commons debate, in which the honourable member for Preston insinuated that he had – as Harcourt put it in his reply – ‘smelt a job’ in the granting of the lease. The debate was on the salaries and expenses of civil service departments. Hanbury got up to speak for the first time early on to say that he ‘could find no clear statement whatever as to what the nation really got from the Crown Lands’. He was much exercised by the notion that tax-payers were paying more for the Crown lands than they were worth in terms of the revenue brought in to the Exchequer, and that the reason for this was ‘maladministration’ on behalf of the Office of Woods. He complained that the Reports of the Commissioners were ‘more unintelligible than the usual unintelligible documents presented to Parliament’ and that he could find no schedule of the acreage of any of the Crown lands – other than Windsor Park – upon which he could base an assessment of their profitability. He then turned to the New Forest and brought up the issue of Sir William Harcourt’s lease, before enquiring whether the Navy still used timber from ‘estates of this nature’ (and how much), or were they now obtaining timber from other sources? He was worried that the Office of Woods was selling the timber to private buyers who were then profiteering by selling it to the Navy. He went on to ask questions about farms and mines on the Crown estates. Other examples of maladministration and misappropriation of the Crown lands in other areas, such as Wales, were brought up by other MPs.⁶⁴

Harcourt was not in the Commons when his lease was mentioned, but came to the floor of the House to explain the Crown’s policy in respect of the redundant keepers’ lodges:

By slow degrees they got people to take what were originally called these Forest lodges. They were offered in the public market to persons who went to cut the wood, and they were let upon various terms. One of those places being in the market, he had taken the land upon a building lease. Some other of the lodges had been in the market, and had with great difficulty been let, but he believed that one had been let within the last six months.⁶⁵

Harcourt may have genuinely believed this, but it would appear that the property he had leased had not been on the market, while the

64 HC Deb., 8 November 1888, vol. 252 cc. 671–2.

65 Ibid., c. 683. Presumably this was Rhinefield Lodge, which had eventually been let in 1887.

Deputy Surveyor was still desperately seeking a tenant for a different lodge. He could not say whether this property too was 'upon a 99 years lease', but he did go on to say that:

those places were yielding no rent at all, but were simply occupied by officers *having no employment whatever*, so far as the New Forest was concerned [author's emphasis].⁶⁶

As we have seen, this was false: Sir William was well aware that he had had to contribute towards rehousing a Forest employee. He added, airily, that 'the length of the lease was proportionate to the sum to be spent upon the land', but Walker-Munro's offer to spend £4,000 (£1,000 more than Harcourt's committed expenditure) for a 99-year lease on Rhinefield had been rejected (see Table 1). Harcourt observed that, rather than getting a bargain, he 'had never yet heard of the Crown asking too little, and all he could say was that in this instance he simply gave the price asked for it'.⁶⁷ His local MP, Francis Compton, despite being a Tory, stood up for him, arguing that 'land in the New Forest was subject to considerable restrictions imposed by Parliament', which could not be expected to 'fetch the same price as if it were unrestricted'.⁶⁸ This brought Hanbury to his feet again, this time to assert that his main objection was not the price but that a minister should:

lease any part of the Crown Lands to himself, that he should lease land that had never been let before, that in his case an unusual exception should be made, because there was no other piece of land let for so long a term, and all that in contravention of rules to the effect that no piece of land should be let for a longer period than 21 years.⁶⁹

Harcourt's retort was that none of the leases were 'confined to 21 years' and the 'lease recently effected' had a very much longer term.⁷⁰ Table 1 shows that although the Office of Woods were already disregarding the 21-year rule (if it had ever actually existed), the longest building lease granted before 1883 was still only 31 years. It was,

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., c. 686.

69 Ibid.

70 Backed up by Compton who added that 'lodges had been let for long terms—some for 30 or 40 years', Ibid., c. 687.

therefore, disingenuous of Harcourt to use the 1888 Rhinefield lease retrospectively to justify his lease of five years earlier.⁷¹

At this point the debate took a slightly surreal turn, Hansard reporting Harcourt as saying that: "[t]he main part of the land which he had leased was a piece of four acres, upon which he *desired* to build ... the rent would be paid by the piece of land he *intended* to build upon" [author's emphasis].⁷² And yet it was a matter of public knowledge that the Harcourts had already built and moved into the house.⁷³ Nevertheless, it transpires that this was not the first time an MP from the other side of the House had seen an opportunity to attack Harcourt over this matter. In a second intervention, Compton related that Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, the then member for Portsmouth, had come to him in 1883 to ask 'Is this not a job?' Upon investigation, they concluded that 'it was no job at all, but an exceedingly good bargain for the Crown',⁷⁴ bringing the debate back to the subject of management of the Crown estates. From Harcourt's side, Sir Julian Goldsmid, MP for St Pancras South, added that:

he had always found on every occasion that the Commissioners ... drove a very hard bargain on the part of the Crown. He believed they managed the Crown estates with the greatest possible care; they were most courteous to the tenants ... At the same time, they looked very carefully after the interests of the taxpayers of the country.⁷⁵

Hugh Childers, Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time the lease was granted, also rose to say that:

when the case came before the Treasury, it was by them very carefully considered, and the act of the Commissioners had been sanctioned and entirely approved by them.⁷⁶

Finally, Henry Labouchere, Liberal MP for Northampton, observed that:

71 A few 99-year leases on residential property in other areas are to be found in, for example, BPP, Reports of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues, 1861, 1877, 1878, 1880, 1882, 1883, 1886, and 1887.

72 HC Deb., 8 November 1888, vol. 252 c. 687.

73 For example, *Derby Mercury*, 14 July 1886, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 3 August 1888.

74 HC Deb., 8 November 1888, vol. 252 c. 687.

75 Ibid., c. 688.

76 Ibid., c. 694. Childers implied that the lease had been granted 'the previous year' i.e. 1882, but we know from F 10/11 that it had not.

he knew that [Harcourt] had made a bad bargain with the Government. He had himself suggested to a friend that he should take a place in the New Forest ... but that gentleman found there were so many demands made by the Commissioners that he said 'he would not take the place as a gift'.⁷⁷ He believed that any hon. member who desired it could become a leaseholder in the New Forest on the same terms precisely as those accepted by [Harcourt].⁷⁸

Expanding on his own reply to Hanbury's original questions, Sir William had taken the opportunity to suggest that there 'should be an inquiry into the general administration of the Crown estates'.⁷⁹ A Select Committee – with Harcourt himself as a member – was appointed the following year, resulting in the passing of the Crown Lands Act of 1894. But this had little to say about the granting of leases.

VI Conclusion

The way in which the lease was obtained seems to imply a degree of what might be termed 'insider influence'. Harcourt secured a lease that others had been refused, on a property that was not currently posing a problem to the Commissioners. The length of the lease certainly went against stated department policy, something that did not alter for the next 20 years. On the other hand, like many other lessees, Harcourt eventually spent much more than the minimum expenditure stipulated: £10,000, or twice as much than he himself originally intended.⁸⁰

Looking back, Lascelles wrote:

In this way, arose such mansions – built on the desirable sites of some of the keepers' lodges ... The tendency of the tenant, as one succeeded another, has been to overbuild, and some of these houses have rather outgrown their sites. But they represent valuable property, all of which reverts to the Crown at the expiration of the lease, and they are all very lovely residences.⁸¹

In the longer term, these extended leases became a liability to the Crown as tenants with the means to keep a household big enough to fill

77 This was possibly Edward Hodges, who turned down a 66-year lease on Rhinefield because 'the terms are to[o] stringent and irksome ... more hampering and unfavorable than I had been led to expect': F 10/32, Hodges to Culley, 9 October 1885.

78 HC Deb., 8 November 1888, vol. 252 c. 695.

79 Ibid., c. 684.

80 TNA, F 10/11, Ewan Christian to Office of Woods, 10 May 1884.

81 Lascelles, *Thirty-Five Years*, p. 55.

them could not be found. Several of the old lodges are now hotels, and Malwood has been divided into apartments (and is once more called 'Castle Malwood Lodge').

Hanbury was not only trying to score a point against a political adversary, but he and others in this debate were manifesting the sort of antipathy towards the Office of Woods that had in the times of its predecessors been justified; indeed, Lascelles observed later that 'scandal with regard to the Board of Works ... was to be unearthed with respect to the Office of Woods'. In the end, the Select Committee found no evidence of mismanagement by the Commissioners.⁸²

Overall it is hard to see that Harcourt gained a great bargain at the expense of the Treasury but he did secure a prime site that would not have been available to an outsider. To us, if not to Hanbury, what is to be deplored is perhaps the hypocrisy of the man who had sat on the Select Committee of 1875, which had determined that 'if the New Forest were dealt with for the purpose of Revenue only, one of the best parts of England might be disfigured'.⁸³ Harcourt was increasingly ribbed over his New Forest residence, invariably being referred to in the press as 'the Squire', 'the Knight', 'the Hermit', or 'the Recluse', of Malwood.⁸⁴ 'Sir William Harcourt's Fireside' seems to have become, over the years, a metaphor for being out of office, the fire giving 'comfort and consolation to those who suffer from the coldness and indifference of the outside world', but also throwing up shadows: perhaps 'the old Liberal Party as it once lived':

The fireside is a comforting place wherein to sit and muse, but a dangerous one for those who fall asleep. For want of fuel, the fire fails and dies, and the unconscious sleeper prepares for himself a cold awakening ... Being left out in the cold is a predicament to which Mr. Gladstone's party is doubtless well accustomed, but habit has not succeeded in making it any more agreeable to them.⁸⁵

82 Ibid., pp. 51-2.

83 HC Deb., 8 November 1888, vol. 252 c. 684.

84 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 16 July 1892 and 12 January 1895.

85 *The Spectator*, 17 January 1891, 'Fireside Politics'.