



Hilton Hall, The High Street, Hilton

Bloomsbury Outpost

“Such excitements, my dear, have been happening to me. It’s not a person, but a- no, not an animal- but a house that I have fallen in love with this time” Letter to Sylvia Townsend Warner

David Garnett was a successful writer and close friend of many members of the literary and artistic circle which has come to be known as The Bloomsbury Group due to their residences in or near the London district of Bloomsbury. In 1922, he had a best-seller with the story *‘Lady into Fox’*. On the proceeds, he and his first wife, Ray, decided to look for a house in the country and saw a photograph of Hilton Hall in *Country Life*. David was smitten with the photograph and was, as he confided to his friend Sylvia, “sick with apprehension” at the thought that he might not be able to buy it. Luckily his offer of £1600 against an asking price of £2000 was accepted.

The house has had some changes since the 1920s. The lean-to addition on the left of the picture used to house the kitchen. This has been sympathetically re-built by the present owners to meet modern standards. However, the body of the house and surroundings correspond to David’s description:

“It is an early Jacobean farmhouse or small manor house - not too large. It is very much in the original state. There is a staircase of oak, carved beams, a wide hall, splendid dining-room and drawing-room, six bedrooms, a bath, hot and cold water, two WCs and a convenient kitchen with a good range.

There is a pigeon house in the garden, a tennis -court and two acres of orchard. The kitchen has been added recently and the windows in front are sash and were altered some time in the eighteenth century.”

Apparently, his many literary friends (amongst them D.H. Lawrence) teased him for living in a “Hall”, but he protested: ***“It’s not at all grand, except in a way that a grandmother is grand”***.

Now Grade 11* listed, it is thought that the original house on this site in the early 17th C was a thatched property with a steeply pitched roof. It was built as a gentleman’s residence and Robert Walpole (1598-1699), whose memorial is in the church, is the first owner to be recorded. He married into the Sparrow family who lived at Park Farm on The Green. This was also a beautiful house until it fell into disrepair. Interestingly, David tried hard to engage people in conserving Park

Farm, but in 1948 there was little enthusiasm and no cash available for such projects. David and his sons explored the house before it was demolished and found the following treasures: some early paintings of the senses now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal Arms, subsequently mounted in the church, and enough eighteenth-century oak panelling to line a study in an extension to the rear of Hilton Hall.

Many houses in the eighteenth century were altered by the owners to boast a symmetrical flat front to their properties with sash windows. Often the whole front of the house was rebuilt and a parapet added to join new roof to old, as you can see to be the case here.

David, known as **Bunny** to friends and family, lived at Hilton Hall until 1970 when he moved to France for the last years of his life, surviving until 17th February 1981. The house was let in the nineteen seventies, but subsequently returned to the family when David's eldest son, Richard, and his wife Jane, became its custodians in 1977, living there until the house was put up for sale in 2009.

The house is full of associations with literary Londoners and H.G. Wells was a frequent visitor. Richard Garnett used to enjoy telling us that Virginia Woolf helped dig out the swimming pool. The pool is still there behind the picturesque Dove house which is topped with a golden weathervane. Villagers apparently used to spy on the bathers through the fence, especially when the beautiful Garnett sisters (daughters of Bunny's second marriage) were resident.

David's life

Sadly, Ray Garnett, David's first wife, died of cancer in 1940. David began work for the Air Ministry in the early stages of the war and lived with Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf's sister and Duncan Grant, the painter, at their Sussex home called Charleston. The messy, complicated relationships of the Bloomsbury circle are well documented. Both David and Duncan were bisexual and lovers. Vanessa had a daughter who was known as Angelica Bell, but her father was not Clive Bell, Vanessa's husband, but Duncan Grant.

David had seen Angelica as a new born baby in 1918 and had famously, or infamously, written to Lytton Strachey about his first impressions:

“Its beauty is the remarkable thing. I think of marrying it. When she is 20 I shall be 46. Will it be a scandalous thing?”

Remarkably, that is exactly what happened. David and Angelica married and came to live in Hilton where they brought up four daughters.

During the post war years David continued to write and edit. He published amongst many works: *The Sailor's Return*, *Go She Must*, *Pocahontas* and *Aspects of Love*. Nothing else in his life-time achieved the runaway success of 'Lady into Fox', but he was described by a Times reviewer as “ a writer of delicately individual talent” . He ascribed his strong visual style to learning to write “among painters.” However, after his death, his novel *Aspects of Love*, written in 1955, was turned into a commercially successful musical in 1989 by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The royalties for this work were a delightful windfall for Richard and Jane who were facing a huge bill for repairs to the roof of the Hall. Richard was asked by the press what his father would have done with this addition to his funds. “He would have thrown an enormous party”, Richard replied without hesitation. As this indicates, David lived for social contacts, enjoying many deep and long-lasting friendships and always enjoying the company of his six children: Richard and William from his first marriage.

Amaryllis, Henrietta, Nerissa and Fanny from his second. He died, according to Richard ,with only £11,000 in the bank, having bequeathed the Hall, land and cottages in Hilton to his family well before his death.

(William was an oboist and instrument-maker; Richard was a publisher and writer. In retirement he travelled to Russia to write a biography of his grandmother, Constance Garnett, who translated the Russian classics. He also wrote a book for children called 'The White Dragon' about skating on the Fens).

Claire Sarkies