

Bessborough/Ponsonby Family History

by Dorothy Bone

The 10th Earl of Bessborough, Frederick known as Eric (1913-93), a descendent of Sir John Ponsonby (1608-78) and his second wife Elizabeth ffolliot, was Emsworth Maritime & Historical Trust's first President.

There is a belief that the Ponsonby family came from Picardy and it is reputed that the original Ponsonby came over soon after 1066 to the court of William I and was appointed to the office of hereditary Barber and Surgeon to the King. *Three combs argent* are still on the family crest. The family tree between 1070 and 1647 is sketchy but records show that the grant of arms was confirmed to Colonel John Ponsonby by Ulster King of Arms following his service to His Majesty, Charles I. At his own expense, Colonel Ponsonby took over 100 soldiers and officers to serve against the Irish rebels. He was rewarded with land and a knighthood.

Down the years there have been many colourful characters in the Bessborough family – and whilst some fought in battles, both army and navy, achieving great recognition for their gallantry others took up diplomatic careers.

In the early 1920s Vere, the 9th Earl of Bessborough, decided due to increasing 'troubles' in Ireland to discreetly move his family and many possessions and find a new home in England. His home in Ireland was burnt to the ground in 1923 and Vere purchased the Stansted Estate in 1924.

He was succeeded by his son Frederick (Eric) who in 1983 recognised that times and economic realities had changed and gave Stansted to a Charitable Trust (the Stansted Park Foundation) so that it could be preserved for the nation in perpetuity. Eric was a Minister for Science and Technology in Edward Heath's government. Following his death the title passed to a cousin, Arthur, with the present Earl succeeding his father in 2002. In 2022 Myles, the 12th Earl of Bessborough, hosted a gathering of more than 200 Ponsonby relatives at Stansted House.

Michael Ponsonby's ancestors have had more ordinary careers often serving King and country. There are Ponsonbys through the female line in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand.

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Michael however is directly descended through the male line from the third grandson of Colonel John Ponsonby and his first wife Dorothy. Michael with Faith and their four children came to live on the Havant Road, Emsworth in 1979 after the IBM Headquarters moved to North Harbour, Portsmouth. It was later that Michael discovered that his great uncle, Douglas Ponsonby, had lived almost opposite for two years in Emsworth House School 79 years before. Douglas arrived in Emsworth in 1900 at the age of 14 to attend the naval crammers school just started up by Baldwin King-Hall. He was determined to become a naval officer and writes that he enjoyed his time there but failed to pass into the navy.

At that time the entrance examination into Osborne was taken between the ages of 14 years 6 months and 15 years 6 months and he tried twice. The first time he failed on medical grounds and the second time after an operation in London he passed the medical and obtained the qualifying marks but did not get a high enough place partly because he arrived an hour late for the first paper. The trains were delayed for four hours because of an accident on the railway line and the only motor car in Emsworth was being repaired so the journey had to be made by horse vehicle. Although the subject – maths – was one of Douglas's strongest he was too upset to do himself justice.

He eventually had a long career in the army, was awarded a DSC in WWI and also served in an administrative post in the RAF in WWII.

Michael's father Wilfred Montague Ponsonby, a Signals Officer in WWII, was taken prisoner and attempted to escape several times. He was awarded the OBE when he was returned to the UK in October 1943 in the one and only exchange of prisoners because he was suspected of having TB. This was a misdiagnosis thanks to several earlier riding accidents and the breaking of his shoulder bone which made his chest sound hollow.

After the war he was sent to the Sudan to set up a Signals Regiment and later to Paris representing the UK in the Western Union Defence Organisation a precursor of NATO. In 1953, as a Brigadier, he took command of SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe). One of his contributions was to standardise the phonetic alphabet as different ones had been developed. 'W' was one of the letters that was confused and to his family's amusement he managed to change this from 'William' to 'Whisky'.

Both the present Earl of Bessborough and Michael Ponsonby can trace their ancestry all the way back to Colonel John Ponsonby and Michael Ponsonby reckons they are tenth half-cousins to one another. Two special stained-glass panels containing the family crest by local artist Marian Forster were commissioned by Michael's wife, Faith, and were moved from their Emsworth home to the front door of their new home in central Havant.

Faith Ponsonby was Havant Mayor in 2016/17 and opened the centenary exhibition in Emsworth Museum's David Rudkin Room remembering those who died in the Battle of the Somme. She visited again later that year to open the U3A exhibition.

This article, written by Dorothy Bone, is based on information provided by Faith Ponsonby. More details and dates of the history of the Bessborough/Ponsonby family will be available in Emsworth Museum's Research Room in 2024.