

**THE ANGLO-AMERICAN ISHAM ANCESTRY ASSOCIATION****THE STORY OF LAMPORT HALL IN WORLD WAR II**

**The story of Lamport Hall in World War 2 is an interesting case study for several reasons – because it had multiple uses, the ancestral family was not present to care for the place and the squire actually fought in the War himself, and because there is some fascinating visual evidence here to this day of the wartime era.**

**Lamport before the War**

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Lamport had been owned by the Isham family for 379 years, but they had not actually been able to afford to live there since 1907. The agricultural depression had taken a terrible toll on the family's fortunes, and between 1907 and 1932 the Hall had been rented out to a succession of wealthy tenants, attracted by the social cachet of the local hunt – the Pytchley.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Baronet, Sir Vere Isham, had been living on the south coast at St Leonards on Sea since 1907. His eldest son John had died of blood poisoning while on active service in France in 1916, and in 1931 Sir Vere gifted the Hall and its contents (but not the estate) to his younger son Gyles, then aged 28. Gyles had read History at Oxford and, as we shall see, was passionate about Lamport.

In 1932 the last residential tenant moved out and no replacement could be found. Many of the farm tenants on the estate were in arrears with their rent. In the following year the Hall became a country club for the foxhunting fraternity: the “Bosom Hugger” cocktails were legendary but it was a financial disaster and closed after just 6 months, and the Hall then lay empty for 6 years until the outbreak of the War.

In July 1937 advice was sought about modernising the Hall. The agent advised: “The house as it stands today is far too rambling and, with the difficulty of obtaining domestic servants, in my opinion it would be almost impossible to get a tenant to occupy it. As time goes on, this will be more apparent because of the scarcity of domestic servants”.

After graduating, Gyles Isham – unusually for a member of the landed classes – had made a decision to pursue a career on the stage. He took up residence in London, but nevertheless visited Lamport on a regular basis, both when it was tenanted and then when it lay empty for those 6 years. He made sure the house was kept wind and watertight, with a non-resident land agent down the road in Northampton and a resident housekeeper.

He ensured everything was shipshape when Queen Mary called by in 1937, but he could not afford to live here himself.

The Hall continued to be marketed for rent during the latter part of the 1930s, and at one stage the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester were said to be interested, but they opted instead for Barnwell in 1938.

In September 1939 a tenant was finally found; the Hall was rented to the Electric Construction Company, which was being evacuated from London. The tenancy was for a term of one year for the duration of the War. We do not know exactly what they used the building for, and virtually no records survive from that period. Gyles Isham was absent from the UK for most of the War, serving in the Middle East.

### **During 1940-42**

From about 1940 to 1942 the Electric Company used part of the Hall, while outside there were British troops stationed in the Stables and parkland, probably the same regiment that was based up the road at Haselbech Hall. Then during the course of 1942 the Hall was requisitioned for war use, and it was used by British troops until 1943. Sir Gyles would later say it took 6 months for news of the requisitioning of the Hall to reach him in the Middle East.

In November 1942 the agent looking after Lamport for Gyles Isham noted: " All the valuable furniture is now in the Summer Drawing Room and in the event of fire I have asked Tyrell [the gardener] to concentrate all the available service he has on removing the things from this room. The War Department have made an excellent job of the protection. The Van Dyck in the Dining Room is boxed in with a door for access to examine condition. The floors of the Oak Room and the Music Room are boarded over. The doors of the Music Room have been removed and stored. The pillars and architrave of the Inner Hall are protected; the chimney piece in the Music Room is boxed in".

### **During 1943-46**

In 1943 Free Czech troops arrived. They left their mark in the form of some delightful examples of graffiti in the stable attics, which have largely survived unchanged since the War.

In 1944 Lamport was taken over by the Ministry of Works to accommodate Italian POWs. They were housed in the Stables, where one can still see a mural 12 feet x 12 feet, drawn by one prisoner called Salvatore Nobile, from Southern Italy.

## **The war career of Sir Gyles Isham**

It is believed that Sir Gyles Isham was the only Northamptonshire squire who actually fought in the War. He had what we would call now “a good war”. He put his acting career behind him even before the war broke out, and joined the TA in April 1939, at the age of 36, conscious that it was his duty to serve.

Sir Gyles served abroad for 5 years and was away from his ancestral home for the whole of the War. After leaving England in April 1940, he was based in the Western Desert, working in Military Intelligence. A few of his letters home have survived, and one contains this revealing snippet: *‘I keep wondering what sort of life we are going to have afterwards- I fear Lamport will be a difficulty.’* – 1942

## **Postwar Lamport**

And what of postwar Lamport?

The Northamptonshire author Denys Watkins-Pitchford, also known as BB described Lamport in 1945 as follows: “The vast unhomely Hall and its once shaved lawns now weedy jungles, has now had its day. I doubt whether the present owner will ever live here. It is part of another more spacious age. Last time I was there I found noble trees were coming down, decay and desolation seemed to be everywhere”.

At the end of the War the Ministry of Works proposed replacing the Italian POWs with German POWs, until the formidable county archivist Joan Wake successfully lobbied Clement Attlee’s new minister to allow Lamport to be used for the county archives instead. Rooms such as the Library hosted the records from 1947 until they were moved to Delapre Abbey in Northampton in 1959.

Fortunately for us, Watkins-Pitchford was unduly pessimistic and Sir Gyles came back to live here. He returned home from the Middle East in December 1946 to find the Ministry of Works had not yet left the house, which was in a shocking condition. Soldiers had hung their pin-ups and notices using nails on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century panelling, without a second thought. When removed, the nails filled half a tea chest. Rooms had been broken into and some rare books stolen.

## **In 1947**

Sir Gyles’s heir, a third cousin called Sir Ian Isham, came to Lamport with his younger brother (the current Baronet, Sir Norman Isham) and their father Vere to visit Sir Gyles, and he saw the condition of the Hall for himself: “The whole place was dilapidated beyond belief. The Italians were the best occupants: ‘They didn’t want to escape, they were quite happy to stay here and look after the garden’. In contrast, the British troops “had played havoc with this house”.

No routine maintenance had been undertaken for seven years.

Ian recalled his own father taking one look at the place and advising Sir Gyles: 'the only thing you can do with it is to let it fall down, it will ruin you if you attempt to do anything else. Just let it fall down; it will become a ruin and people will come and look at it'.

We have a delightful letter from Earl Spencer to Sir Gyles, written in January 1947: "I am very sorry to hear Lamport has been left by the army in such a bad state and I am afraid it will be a long time before any of us will be allowed to do what we want to do in the building way .... At Althorp we are living here very uncomfortably with very few servants and things are very difficult, not seeming to get any easier".

During 1947 the agent pressed the Ministry of Works for compensation, finally agreed at £4,000. The Army finally moved out and the archives arrived. The upstairs floors were converted into flats, with Sir Gyles living in one of them and his sister Virginia in another.

How lucky we are that Sir Gyles had the determination to hold on by his fingernails, when others threw in the towel. But the War left one ominous legacy, in the form of dry rot. The estate staff had not been allowed inside to make any repairs to the building during the War, and by boarding so much up the building had been unable to breathe. Immediately after the War an outbreak of dry rot was discovered and treated, but when Sir Gyles offered Lamport to the National Trust in the 1960s it was discovered that the Hall was riddled from top to bottom with dry rot. It would take six years to sort it out, at a cost in the region of £70,000, making it possibly the biggest outbreak of dry rot of any country house in England.

## **The Legacy**

**Such was the legacy of the War at Lamport, a very lucky survivor, and now in impeccable order in the care of the well established Lamport Hall Preservation Trust.**

This "Story of Lamport" was researched, written and contributed by Neil Lyon, Assistant Property Manager, Lamport Estate Office in 2015.