

Trips Out with a religious connection:

Coughton Court – and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605



The glorious house and topiary gardens at Coughton Court near Alcester in Warwickshire – the focus of religious dissent and rebellion in the late 16th and early 17th century.

During the early years of the 17th century, religious dissent among the leading Catholic families in the country against Protestantism reached its crescendo in the Gunpowder Plot. Everyone knows the story of Guy Fawkes, who was apprehended in the Houses of Parliament on 5th November, just as he was about to blow the buildings and their occupants to kingdom come at the state opening of Parliament.

What is less well known is the part the Midlands played in the Catholic conspiracy - and that the plot reached its denouement in Kingswinford at **Holbeach House**, nowadays a nursing home. In May 2017 we visited Coughton Court, the home of the Throckmorton family, who were deeply involved in the Plot.



The front entrance to Coughton Court. The central Tudor gatehouse, dating from 1530, features hexagonal turrets, similar to the gatehouse of Hampton Court Palace, built just ten years later. The gatehouse was dedicated to Henry VIII by Sir George Throckmorton, who was one of the king's greatest friends.



An owl watches over the estate at Coughton from the top of the gatehouse tower.



The Tabula Eliensis is an embroidery displayed in Coughton Court. It was done in the reign of Elizabeth I when Catholic families were undergoing persecution. It features the shields of prominent Catholic families who were imprisoned by the government, including Thomas Throckmorton's shield.

The interior of Coughton Court is beautifully preserved - and is well documented in various sites on the internet. What interested us was the proximity of a Church of England church, and a Catholic Church, within yards of one another in the grounds. We explored the St Peter's, belonging to the Church of England first.



The gateway to St Peter's Church at Coughton.

Coughton passed to Robert Throckmorton in 1552. He and his family were practising Catholics, therefore the house at one time contained a priest hole, a hiding place for priests during the period when Catholics were persecuted by law in England, from the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The Hall also holds a place in English history for its roles in both the Throckmorton Plot of 1583 to murder Queen Elizabeth I of England, and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, although the Throckmorton family were themselves only indirectly implicated in the latter, when some of the Gunpowder conspirators rode directly there after its discovery.



An alabaster tomb with effigies of Sir John Throckmorton d1580, and his wife Marjorie, in St Peter's Church, Coughton. The church, originally Catholic, was appropriated for Protestantism, and Sir John and his wife had to endure the indignity of being entombed for eternity in a Protestant church!



The east window depicts the three Sibyls, who were prophetesses in the ancient world. In the middle lights are three Sibyls with modern heads: the middle one, bearing the legend 'Sibylla Persica', wears an enriched blue gown and a purple cloak with a green lining: in her left hand she holds a lantern. The northern, 'Sybilla Europa', has a green gown and red mantle and holds a sword upright in her left hand. The southern, 'Sybilla Samia', has a green gown and blue and red mantle: she holds what is presumably her usual emblem, a cradle.



The font dates from the 13th century.



Under the eastern arch on the north side of the chancel is a large altar-tomb, 9 ft. long, to Sir George (who died in 1552) and Dame Katherine his wife. It is of grey marble with cusped panelled sides containing brass shields, and a moulded top slab in which are their brass effigies. He is represented in armour and she wears a pedimental head-dress, a loose mantle, and belted skirt. Below are the figures of eight sons and eleven daughters, and there are four shields of arms.



In the middle of the nave is the altar tomb intended for the Sir Robert Throckmorton who rebuilt the church, and died on a pilgrimage in Palestine in 1518. The tomb was intended as his resting place but he died on pilgrimage to the Holy Land leaving the tomb empty for over 350 years. In 1791 his descendant, another Sir Robert Throckmorton, 4th Baronet, was laid to rest in this tomb.

The Throckmortons and The Gunpowder Plot.

Members of the Throckmorton family were involved in the Gunpowder plot, along with other Catholic families in the Midlands. The 'Powder Treason', or Gunpowder Plot, of 1605 was a failed assassination attempt by a group of English Catholics belonging to the gentry, against King James I of England and VI of Scotland.

The ringleader was Robert Catesby (nephew of Thomas Throckmorton), several of the other plotters were also related to the Throckmorton family.

The plot was intended to kill the king and his family, and most of the Protestant aristocracy in a single blow, by blowing up the Houses of Parliament during the State Opening on 5 November 1605. The conspirators had also planned to kidnap the royal children, and lead a popular revolt in the Midlands – before installing Princess Elizabeth, the eldest daughter of King James, a child at the time, on the throne. She was to be Queen Elizabeth II, a Catholic Queen – having been converted by her guardians. This was not to be – however our current Queen Elizabeth II is directly descended from this Princess Elizabeth rather than her brother Charles I who took the throne after James I.

Early in the morning of the 6th November 1605 in the cold early hours of November 6th, Thomas Bates, servant to Robert Catesby, who had been overseeing the plot from May 1604, rode over the moat bridge of Coughton Court. He climbed the stairs to the Drawing Room where a group of people, all closely involved in the then illegal Catholic community, were waiting for news.

Nicholas Owen, the priest-hide builder, was also present. Thomas Bates told them that the plot had failed, and that the conspirators were now running for their lives.

When they heard the news the men fled, Father Garnet and Nicholas Owen went into hiding at Hindlip House and Father Tessimond escaped to France.

The group at Norbrook House carried on to Huddington Hall where they stayed overnight. On the morning of 7th November they travelled to Hewell Grange and then in pouring rain on to Holbeach House in Kingswinford.

On arrival at Holbeach House the plotters including Catesby, Percy and the Wright brothers and their gunpowder were soaking wet. In an attempt to dry out they spread the gunpowder in front of an open fire.

The Sherriff and his men, who had been trailing the plotters, saw the resulting explosion and surrounded the House. On the morning of November 8th there was a showdown. Four of the plotters were killed and the others captured. Catesby and Percy were killed together with one musket shot.

The plotters were all tried and convicted of treason and subsequently hung, drawn and quartered at the end of January 1606.

The Catholic Church at Coughton.

The SS Peter, Paul and Elizabeth's (Catholic) Church is fairly modern by comparison with its neighbouring Anglican church, St Peter's. It was built in 1851 by the Throckmorton family as they were now able to worship openly. The original church, which had been rebuilt by Sir Robert Throckmorton in the early 16th century, was appropriated for Protestantism following the Reformation of the 1530s when Catholics were persecuted for refusing to accept the new Protestant faith. When more tolerant times eventually arrived in the 19th century with the Catholic Emancipation Acts, tolerance did not extend to handing back former Catholic churches necessitating new churches such as this one.



The Catholic church at Coughton dedicated to the saints Peter, Paul and Elizabeth.



The beautiful font in the Catholic Church.



The nave at Coughton's Catholic church.



The beautifully decorated roof of the chancel at the Catholic church.



The wonderful gardens at Coughton Court.

Martin and Magda Jones

Coughton Court visited on Saturday 27th May 2017

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Corrections and amendments welcome.

Information sources:

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