

The History of Hembury Fort House

By Martin Habell, March 23, 2009

Non Sibi Sed Patriae
Not for self but for country
Motto on Simcoe coat of arms

The house's character has often attracted film producers, but few people realise that the actual history of the building and residents is a remarkable story in itself.

The house dates from the early 18th century and it links firmly to great events :

The actions that lost the American colonies, the saving of Canada, the battle of the Nile and the defeat of Napoleon.

*The **Admirals of the Graves family** fought the decisive actions of the American War of Independence, **Major General Simcoe** was known as a "hectic hero", fighting the American rebels and later forging the Canada we know today. His wife **Elizabeth Gwillim** was an amazingly resolute frontier woman and artist who is enshrined in Canadian folklore. All lived at Hembury Fort House and all are linked to **Horatio Nelson** who was presented the house. The poet **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** author of *Kubla Khan* and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the controversial cleric **Augustus Toplady** who composed *Rock of Ages* both knew the occupants well. A later inhabitant, **Count Stanislas Lasocki** saved the Polish gold reserves from the Germans in World War II*

A military location

Sitting on a spur of the Blackdown Hills as a landmark just to the north of Honiton and overlooking the ancient village of Buckerell the house has a panoramic vista from its front terrace over the Otter Valley and the softly rounded hills that conceal the town, while it is sheltered by rising ground and trees to the sides and rear. With its associated farm buildings it has been a perfect example of a working country estate and before that the land had been recognized for its military value.

Both the ancient Fort of Hembury and the house are an historic single entity as the fort was part of the house's estate, certainly up to the 19th century under Admiral Samuel Graves.

Even the name Hembury is evidence of the magnitude of its ancient role, becoming an archaeological designation. Pioneering excavations of the fort in the 1930's led to all Neolithic pottery found throughout the British Isles being termed "Hembury".

The location's earliest history and name (Hembury Fort) is attached to the prehistoric earthworks forming a double-entrenched fort. Many forts from different millenia overlay it each other on the land adjacent to the house. Excavations have uncovered Neolithic, bronze age and iron age settlements as well as Roman structures and coins. The fort was part of a system with lesser forts nearby that sat on the border of two large tribes of the time. Evidence shows it had only recently been abandoned by locals when the Roman Legio II Augusta with about 200 men took it over as a Military Camp. They used the same causeway and gates and altered little, but they added stockades, granaries and huts.

When they departed, in true military style they cut down all the walls to ground level and demolished all the buildings to prevent any beneficial use by the local people.

The strategic position overlooking a border and a main trade route were obvious attractions. The Romans built the Fosse Way simply by overlaying the much older route sending a branch up to the Fort that is today's road to the house out of Honiton. It was clearly a place where occupiers could keep the peace and watch for insurrection and invasion and this was recognized in more recent times, becoming valued also for the stunning visual prospects

Honiton itself is famous primarily for its lace, the result of an influx of Flemish lace workers in the reign of Elisabeth 1st, and this was complimented in the 18th century by brewing, ironwork and brick making. A strong naval connection developed because it lay on the route from London to the naval ports in Devon and the site characteristics remained as relevant to defense in Napoleonic times as in the Neolithic era.

Admiral Graves and the Graves dynasty

The military connection of the area, renewed in the 18th century. During the French Wars a strong naval and military link grew up around the house, with signals being telegraphed from the Devon ports first to Hembury Fort and telegraph hill for the military leaders resident there, before relay to London. Lower ranking officers housed in Honiton would use telescopes to read the telegraph and deduce if they were summoned to their Admirals and Generals at Hembury Fort and nearby Wolford Lodge.

The earliest ownership of the house is with the Prodham family and then by successive heirs to Whiting and Ashford before Samuel Graves purchased it in 1750. Local records in the Devonshire County Archives show it burning in 1752. Whether or not dates are inaccurate and fire preceded purchase is hard to say but it implies that the improvements and expansion that Graves is reported to have carried out, were in fact a significant rebuild and the house as we know it started then.

Hembury Fort House is first recorded as "*Cockenhays*" ' taking its name from Cockenhay Street, the Roman Road leading past it to the ancient Camp. By 1765 local maps recorded it as "*Cockenhays at Hembury Fort Admiral Graves*". Samuel Graves renamed it Hembury Fort House. He was part of a remarkable and unique dynasty. The family had five Admirals as well as Generals and they ran much of the British navy. Samuel was clearly a talented seaman and so much respected that he was entrusted with impossible tasks which often failed for lack of resources. His continued promotion inspite of such setbacks testified to this. By his death he was much renowned and also credited with being the inventor of the lifeboat

A direct contemporary and close neighbour of Samuel Graves from 1767 to 1775 was the Vicar of Broad Hembury, Augustus M Toplady, the composer of *Rock of Ages* who would undoubtedly have visited Hembury Fort House. A strong calvanist, he was part of a varied body of contemporary preachers immediately surrounding Hembury Fort House that greatly influenced Elizabeth Gwillim as she grew up there. He left for London with TB, persuaded that the "humid air of Hembury Fort" should be changed for the "healthy air of London."

The Graves family lose America

The naval family of Graves not only produced a remarkable line of great British admirals in the 18th century but also a line of admirals in the independent United States. Samuel Graves had an impeccable lineage stretching back to the De Grava family of Bordeaux who came to England with the Normans. He was born in 1713 and died at Hembury Fort House on 8th March 1787. Becoming Fleet Commander in America from 1774, he was based in Boston with a near impossible brief of vague commands to control unrest and customs and revenue over a vast area and seal off Boston. This had a direct bearing on colonial unrest which he could not control. He was driven to laying waste to coastal ports and his burning of Falmouth (now Portland) decisively tilted an ambivalent general population of colonists into support of the rebel cause. At one time he served with his nephew Thomas Graves who was later to be Rear Admiral 1st Baron Graves. Unlike his uncle Samuel, this was a man renowned for a conservatism and indecision that was later to lead directly to defeat in the battle of Chesapeake in 1781 which led to Lord Cornwallis' surrender.

Militarily speaking, the family saw the American colonies slip through their fingers although in Samuel's case this was not due to lack of talent but to too few ships and men on a huge coastline. Certainly, Admiral Samuel Graves was blamed for the failure to control events that ensued from the Boston Tea Party that he was ordered to handle, and he returned to Hembury Fort House angry at the injustice of criticism when he had been given an impossible job. The Government clearly knew that they were unjust because he was offered an immediate new command but he turned it down. The break in service gave him time to indulge his loves of Hembury Fort House and his niece, Elizabeth, who was now living there permanently having been a constant visitor in earlier years. He relished her company and riding with her in the surrounding countryside.

Living at Hembury Fort House

After Admiral Samuel Graves' purchase, the house had formed part of his second marriage settlement in 1769. By then he was Rear Admiral of the Blue possibly indicating a sideways promotion following his difficult experiences in America. This second marriage was to Margaret Spinkes. The house functioned well as a country estate with formal gardens to the front and a courtyard of stabling at the rear while the farmland was managed from the farm adjacent.

The Admiral developed the house with fine rooms for entertaining at the ground and an oval staircase to the first floor. Servants had their own stair to the second floor.

It was an excellent family house and yet the Admiral was childless by both his first and second wife. A boy and later a girl would arrive at the house, however, who would change that.

A statue to "Samuel Graves Admiral of the White" and his wife survives in the 15th Century church of St Mary & St Giles in the village of Buckerell below the house. Very unusually, in spite of near aristocratic lineage, he never received a knighthood because of his failure to win favour with the king. Meanwhile the two children, his godson and niece who grew up at the house, married and changed North America are buried close by in Wolford Chapel, owned and maintained by the Ontario Government.

The Admiral and the boy John Simcoe

John Simcoe was Samuel's godson and the relationship with John's parents had been so close that John was christened John "Graves" Simcoe. His father, Cpt John Simcoe had been Captain James Cook's 4th Captain on HMS Pembroke and had taught the great explorer navigation. He had been a prisoner of the French in Quebec and it is said that the secret maps of the St. Lawrence River that he drew and smuggled out led to General Wolfe's success in taking the city. He later died on the St. Lawrence River.

When his widow Catherine died in 1766 the 14 year old son went to live at Hembury Fort House and the unshakable belief in the military life was fostered by his godfather.

Born in 1752 John took part in a rebellion of pupils at Eton in 1768, went to Oxford and, joining the military in 1770, was posted to the American colonies. A glittering career began and by 1777 he won the Battle of Crooked Billet as a Major and had been wounded three times in a single year. The inability of the British military to counter the hit and run tactics of the rebels led to the famous Rogers of Rogers Rangers fame being called in to form the Queen's Rangers as light troops trained in woodcraft and guerrilla tactics to fight the colonists on equal terms. However Rogers record was poor and although the Rangers defeated George Washington at Brandywine Creek it was at great cost. In 1779 Simcoe was made the Rangers' Commander and in all his time he never lost a battle and was the most successful commander of the war. He developed revolutionary tactics of reconnaissance and surprise and encouraged camouflage, with soldiers dressed in green; a change from the traditional scarlet that Simcoe had to continually fight the government's resistance over. It was also condemned, strangely, by the rebels and led to their hanging scores of captured Rangers. Indeed the fate of Rangers and loyalists alike was one of execution by the rebels. Ordered to surrender by Cornwallis and knowing their likely fate he wanted to escape down river but was ordered to stay put. It was an event he never forgot, claiming all the rest of his life that the official American and French history of the War of Independence (which the British population believed and because of which a majority actually supported the rebels) wrongly blamed Britain for atrocities when he felt the reverse was the case.

The man who spared George Washington

While Simcoe had, in fact, killed many rebels himself in surprise attacks he earned a reputation for magnanimity towards the enemy. Confronting an American sentry he said "*you are a brave fellow but you must go away*" Prints of the time show him ordering a hold of fire to allow the enemy to run away. This was not the image the rebels had, who never forgave what they saw as an atrocity of 1778 in his killing Judge William Hancock (not a rebel) and 20 others while they slept. It was certainly true he was a man who fought with all means and made great use of surprise and subterfuge; characteristics that the enemy, strangely for them, felt were unfair. On the other side George Washington denounced Simcoe for "*high handed and irregular tactics*", a somewhat unfair assessment bearing in mind later events, but it showed how the rules of warfare were changing. As history would show, however, he was for the time extraordinarily farsighted and enlightened.

His compassionate side was marked by the lengths he went to care for his men and for servants but it would be wrong to see him in a modern light politically. On the one hand

he hated slavery (attempting to form a black regiment of freed slaves in Boston and introducing legislation to abolish slavery well in advance of anything anywhere else in the world) but he regarded democracy as being as bad as despotism. His belief in the rightness and fitness of certain men to rule others explains his fierce defense of the Empire and his respect for the opposing side's leaders.

In 1779 he attempted to capture George Washington but as Washington with two others fled the fighting he refused to shoot them in the back. Late he received a letter thanking him for his chivalry signed by George Washinton. Simcoe was captured by Armand Tuffin de la Roverie, a Frenchman serving with the Americans and a great friend of George Washington. Held on parole by the rebels, John Simcoe's release was specifically and individually signed by Benjamin Franklin.

John Simcoe was known as a "hectic hero" and, fiercely ambitious, he maneuvered to achieve his aims:

"Nothing is more essential than to profess correct opinions, unless it is to possess correct acquaintances"

Some accused him of being a snob and being enthused by whatever was the latest idea but most were entranced by his fundamental honesty and decency and it was his political ability that allowed him to move effortlessly from the military life to one of statesmanship. In later years when Americans crossed the border to visit him at Niagara they invariably commented on "a very kindly reception" and it is perhaps a hallmark of the times that, no matter the battles, all parties whether French, American or British preserved great respect for each other and, once hostilities ended, sought to work together.

Hembury, the Admiral and Elizabeth

After four years raising John from 1766 history repeated itself for Admiral Graves. Six years after John left for Oxford and the military, the Admiral's niece, Elizabeth, came to live with her godfather. Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim was aged 14 when her mother Jemima died in 1776. Her second name derived from the death of her father 7 months before she was born. The strong military tradition was in her genes as her father had been ADC to General Wolfe who took Quebec.

Elizabeth had visited Hembury Fort House frequently as a small girl where her uncle doted on her as a daughter and riding companion. When she moved in permanently she continued her love of horses and art. She had already had a very privileged upbringing with French and German governess's and excelled in music and painting. She loved dancing, outdoor life and plants. Indeed she was extremely accomplished at all the necessary society pursuits appropriate to an heiress to considerable sums from both parents. She was rich and very well connected and would be seen as a very good match for any man of the time seeking to make his way to the top.

The house and its immediate environs were to play an important part in shaping her love of nature, horsemanship and art that allowed her to enjoy her very dangerous life on the frontiers of Empire, in Canada. It seemed that Canada was in her blood, being the scene of her father's military triumph and death (just like her future husband's father).

She grew into an attractive and diminutive woman of just 5 feet tall but her transformation from quiet girl to redoubtable woman began in 1781 with the return of John Simcoe, now a Colonel.

Colonel Simcoe returns to Hembury Fort

Colonel John Graves Simcoe, was a handsome and popular hero, and he returned to his godparents and Hembury Fort House to convalesce having been released by the American colonists and just promoted. Admiral Graves felt he was a very suitable match for Elizabeth and was anxious to find someone she would get on with after a disastrous attempt of his previously. In his and his wife's minds nothing could be neater than the two people they regarded as the children they never had, getting together for life.

Elizabeth and the Colonel

Now 31, John Simcoe began his stay spending much time with the Admiral in the library at Hembury Fort; but the Admiral's 16 year old ward, Elizabeth did not go unnoticed. His godfather had been perceptive this time as his plans worked uncomfortably fast. The pair discovered mutual interests in art and walking and would set off around the Hembury Fort House estate with his tall form making long strides and Elisabeth having to run every few paces to keep up. Their favorite walk was from the house to the ruined Dunkeswell Abbey. Aunt Margaret followed as chaperone but soon found she could not keep up and more worryingly the two were becoming uncomfortably interested in each other. Aunt Margaret got cold feet at the idea of a 16 year old marrying so soon and tried to put the breaks on the relationship but the Admiral was delighted. John Simcoe and Elizabeth were married in 1782, a devoted couple all their lives, yet in married life at all times she addressed him by his rank not his first name.

They rented a house in Honiton and then moved temporarily to Exeter and it was not until 1784 that Elizabeth bought the Wolford Estate consisting of Wolford Lodge and 5000 acres just across the road from Hembury Fort House, in the shadow of the ancient Hembury Fort itself and stretching far south to views of Sidmouth. Her choice was guided by a desire to stay close to her uncle and aunt in Hembury Fort House and the estate included other local landmarks she had grown to love: the ruined Cistercian abbey near Dunkeswell, and the River Wolf.

She and her husband set about improving the property. Elisabeth's Aunt supplied a great deal of furniture for the new home from Hembury Fort House and ties with the house remained strong as their surrogate parents, (uncle, aunt, godparents and mentors) still lived there. After Samuel's death in 1787 her aunt continued there, moving out only in 1791 for Bath when the Admiral's nephew Richard Graves moved in. Elisabeth and Richard Graves did not have an easy relationship, he had been the first suitor the Admiral had arranged and Elizabeth had so disliked him as an argumentative bully that she avoided being in the same room as him when he had visited Hembury Fort House in her girlhood.

The Simcoes shape Canada

Few countries have been shaped by a single man as much as Canada by John Simcoe, let alone by a partnership of husband and wife. Before his appointment in 1791 as Governor General the immigrant population of Canada, largely on the coast, was around 10,000, a mix of English, French Arcadians or English and French seamen. Following the loss of the American colonies 100,000 loyalists out of a population of 2.4 million new

Americans, were stripped of all their property and forced north, settling in what was named Upper Canada. This was virtually unknown and limitless territory. The Canadians saw the American revolution with its Puritan ingredient as being a continuance of the English Civil War with the Americans as Roundheads and the Canadians as Royalists. Canada under Simcoe molded itself to loyalist and royalist traditions but he was a multiculturalist and encouraged Quakers, Lutherans, French Royalists, and Scots Catholics to settle alongside English. Simcoe had been MP for St. Mawes in Cornwall from 1790 (a role not demanding his presence either in his constituency or indeed in Parliament where he rarely spoke). He was however fiercely ambitious and strove first for the ambassadorship to the new USA and then for the Governor Generalship of Canada. This he gained in 1791. John Graves' new role was to direct this vast increase in population into the unpopulated lands of Ontario and in doing so explored and named much of the country and set about the protection and consolidation of the country. This involved ensuring that the British remained on good terms with the native Indian tribes on both sides of the border. He set up the administrative framework we know today, putting the burgeoning population in place by forming towns, while living in a tent and log cabin through bitter winters and mosquito ridden summers. His foresight saved Canada in 1812 when America declared war and attacked and burned Toronto (followed by the British burning Washington); but Simcoe's strategic siting of settlements, road networks and Indian friendships and alliances were crucial in holding on to his territory.

This was wild country and much was explored by him and his men and he gave his name to Simcoe Co in Ontario (and much else) and oversaw in 1792 the first Parliament at Newark. He founded Toronto as state capital which he first named York and introduced the Anti Slavery Act of 1793 well ahead of the rest of the world. As a direct result of Simcoe's vision, Canada became a safe haven for 50,000 slaves crossing the border. The concept of the light and flexible soldier embodied in the Rangers, together with the good relations he tried to foster with French colonists and 1st nation tribes, was to prove a decisive factor in consolidating Canada. In further anticipation of the modern army he used the Rangers flexibly to defend and explore and in engineering projects on the frontier. His policies formed and preserved the Canada we know today and his name is marked by a Civic Holiday throughout the nation even when the original name has changed.

Elizabeth as frontier woman, artist and diarist

Elizabeth was no simple and passive accompaniment to John Simcoe. This was a partnership in every sense. Her grit and determination to prevail in circumstances of incredible hardship while preserving family and settler morale was vital in shaping the new territory. Having sailed from Weymouth in a small boat she spent 5 years there and relished the excitement of frontier life and loved Canada. She recorded it in prints, paintings and engravings which have become a priceless part of the Canadian heritage, very often recording and naming areas for the very first time as modern Canada. She wrote of her paintings of the wild landscape:

"These scenes have afforded me so much delight that I class this day with those in which I remember to have felt the greatest pleasure from fine objects, whether Art or Nature"

Her portrait and that of her husband John and many of her pictures are part of Ontario State Records. She was a dominant woman who reveled in being the wife of “His Excellency as is indicated in a letter of the time by Hannah Jarvis:

“Everybody is sick of York (Toronto) but no matter the Lady likes the place and therefore everyone must”. The Canadian historical perception is of Elizabeth as a frontier gentlewoman of grace, charm and spirit.

She carried off her role with energy and determination. The Duke de la Rocheforcauld commented on how bashful she was and that she spoke little. He put it down to the slight speech impediment she had. She made up for it by action, resilience and example.

Her fortitude in the face of primitive conditions amazed visitors as she lived in a large tent formerly owned by Captain James Cook. General Simcoe’s father had been a mentor of the Captain, teaching him navigation, and they were anxious to acquire a similar tent. The actual one was bought for them from the Captain’s effects. It had 2 rooms and plank snow cover and it got so cold in the winter that water froze to the floor beside the stove. Her only complaint was that in fir and gloves she could not hold her playing cards in the evening. She aimed to dance four nights in seven, not only because she enjoyed it but because she felt it was good for morale and appreciated by the other officers and wives. She organised fortnightly balls in the winter in Niagara for 14 couples in velvet, feathers and with wax candles. The American General Hull wrote:

“ you have no conception of the misery in which they live, their canvass house being their only residence.... It is surprising how Mrs Simcoe, who is a very delicate woman, can support the fatigue she does”.

They named and recorded much of the new territories known as Upper Canada where the loyalists settled. This was really the vast balance of Canada beyond the eastern coast and rivers settled by the French. But the Simcoes also reflected a change to an enlightened attitude to the French that followed the end of hostilities, with preservation of French law, custom and religion.

Producing 11 children never stopped her life of adventure as she took the two younger children with her. Husband and wife were loath to be apart. The harsh life likewise did not hinder her from enjoying her role as the wife of “His Excellency” or becoming known as gentlewoman, author and artist although her personality did not suit some. She was a doer and self opinionated. She annoyed some locals by her good works for the surrounding poor settlers and needy, delivered with an effortless air of superiority and a slight stutter. She wrote in later years that her curiosity was great but as a woman she could not ask direct questions but was convinced she knew more than the people she dealt with. This, she said, applied even when watching sailors at work on the long voyages.

Battle on the front lawns of Hembury Fort House

Following service in Canada the Simcoes returned to Wolford, and Hembury Fort House again became part of the picture. Napoleon was expected to invade at any moment and General Simcoe was appointed in 1798 to defend the whole of South West England, considered the most strategic area of the country. Hembury Fort House and Wolford were at the epicenter of planning defense, as well as the continuing naval presence of Admiral

Graves at the House. Elizabeth's cosmopolitan interests attracted French friends and these were regarded as spies by the local population.

By now the General was a huge bulldog of a figure, likened to John Bull. He enacted massive training exercises with armies of British and "French". The Admiral and the general organized one battle across the county involving 4000 soldiers and 10,000 onlookers which culminated in a "French" retreat to Hembury Fort where a large battle threatened to get out of control with the soldiers fighting in earnest. It culminated on the lawns of Hembury Fort House with cannons causing actual injuries.

In 1799 the now Major General Simcoe met Lord Horatio Nelson and the navy HQ was moved from Wolford to Plymouth. In 1806 he was offered the post of Commander in Chief of forces in India but died on a return from Portugal before commencing duties. He is buried in the Simcoe family estate in the Wolford Chapel close to Hembury Fort House and owned by the Ontario Heritage Trust. The Ontario State archives have 500 drawings and water colours by Elizabeth. She spent her widowhood traveling by coach all over England and Wales escorted by her servant and coachman of 37 years, John Bailey. Born in a still standing cottage in Awlescombe, he himself left a valuable account of the time, particularly of Simcoe's war exercises around Hembury and of his time with Hembury Fort's own coachman.

Admiral Richard Graves

Richard Graves, nephew of Samuel eventually took over Hembury Fort House after the death of Samuel and eventual departure of his wife.

Richard too was an Admiral so the naval links of the house were reinforced. He was never as well known as his uncle largely explained by a lack of any more wars to fight. Somehow the men of Hembury Fort had run out of enemies. His presence in Hembury Fort House was not helpful to Elizabeth Posthuma who threw him out of Wolford Lodge when visiting for his constant criticism of her relatives. His continuing at Hembury was also not aided by his wife's hatred of the countryside and she made intermittent pressure to move. His daughter Sophia married in 1813. He was still there in 1815 when he appointed Robert Hatchet as gamekeeper and at that time furniture was sold off. But by 1822, while still owner he had left it occupied by just a servant.

Coleridge

The Simcoe family and Hembury Fort House had connections to the Coleridge family. In 1897 Lord Coleridge QC (an executor of Elizabeth's will) grandson of the great poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge , (born 1772 and author of Kubla Khan and Rime of the Ancient Mariner), gave a lecture referring to Hembury Fort House. He recalled General Simcoe's role in the US War of Independence. His father, James Coleridge, had been the general's Aide de Camp and wrote: "*the finest disciplined man, sir, that ever entered the British Army. Between you and me, sir, I believe he was as good as Napoleon*".

Hembury Fort House and Lord Horatio Nelson

Coleridge also described how, following the Battle of the Nile a grateful nation wanted to present Lord Nelson with an estate as they had done for the Duke of Marlborough. Hembury Fort House was offered. As this gift was likely to have occurred after the Battle in 1798 and before Trafalgar in 1805 it is curious to note that the Graves family still

owned it, Samuel Graves having died there in 1787 and after his widow left his nephew Richard continued to own it for another twenty five years at least. Coleridge described how his grandfather the poet, recalled seeing as a boy the great hero Lord Nelson riding up the lane and inspecting the house on horseback. Whether Nelson was disappointed by a comparison with what the Duke of Marlborough was given is not known. It is unclear if Nelson ever lived there and later events may explain that: He was certainly preoccupied with Lady Hamilton and his estranged wife was uncomfortably close in Exeter. There may well have been opportunism on the part of Richard Graves as it was certainly conveniently available for the nation to buy off him and give to Nelson. By what ever circumstances, Graves owned it again after Nelson's death.

Coleridge remembered Nelson staying at the Golden Inn in Honiton on January 1801 where he invited surviving relatives of Captain Wescott to breakfast. Cpt. George Blagdon Westcot was born in Honiton and one of Nelson's Band of Brothers at the Battle of the Nile. He died shot by a musket ball having been instrumental in winning the Battle. When his mother, in much reduced circumstances, said she had no medal or mementos, he unpinned one of his medals and gave it to her saying "*You will not value it less because Nelson has worn it*".

This kind of gesture nurtured the common people's adoration. After the battle of Trafalgar Simcoe misunderstood the mood of the local population around Hembury Fort by firing cannons in celebration at the news of naval victory at Trafalgar, not realising the effect Nelson's death would have. The local population, somber with news of their hero's death thought the French were invading and rose to arms.

The Porter family takes over

In later years little history passed the doors. At later times it was recorded as occupied only by a servant. In 1822 a William Radford was resident but Admiral Richard Graves was still recorded as owner although with the property unoccupied at some point. Radford may have been a purchaser in that year. By 1850 the Devonshire Directory Records for the village of Buckerell show the house as the seat of William Porter "*at the north end of the Parish with a commanding eminence near the ancient entrenchment of that name*" The tithe records show that Porter had 100 acres associated with the house and many more acres around the village leased out, and he kept a herd of Devon breed cows. He was the youngest son of John Porter, Bishop of Belleisle, Fermanagh, Co. Tyrone and part of a well known clerical family. Born in 1802 and a Captain with the 6th Dragoon Guards, known for a time as the Carabiniers, he married Elizabeth Gibbs Ludlow in 1830 and they had three sons and four daughters. The clerical tradition clearly stayed strong and all four daughters, as grand daughters of a Bishop, married Reverends, possibly being seen by ambitious churchmen as a means of fast tracking their careers. There were by now no wars to fight and Cpt. Porter served as Deputy Lieutenant and Justice of the Peace. He died in 1887. Cpt Porter may well have been leasing out the house in his later years. By 1880 Augusta Louisa Peek is recorded as resident and is still recorded as resident in the 1934 Devon Who's Who but in 1903 the Hon Lady Montgomery wrote from the Hotel d' Italie in Rome to Mary Yonge to complain that all her family letters had been passed to Major W. Porter of Hembury Fort.

School, Polish gold , Circus, and hotel

In the Second World War the house served as a school and by 1946 an Ashford Timber Merchant George Thomas Champion sold it to Count Stanislas Maria Lasocki and his wife Countess Elaine Lasoka. He was Polish Ambassador, a Commander in the Polish Navy and had been Polish Attaché to Paris immediately prior to the Fall of France. In a secret mission as Poland fell to the Germans he accompanied 57 tonnes of Polish gold reserves in a dash for safety across the Mediterranean having been smuggled across Romania and loaded onto the French light cruiser Emile-Bertin which headed for Toulon pursued by the German Luftwaffe and Navy.

There is also evidence of circus connections. There was known to be a menagerie with white horses on the front side lawns which the lady owner rode bareback and peacocks on the front lawn . Tiny boots and ice skates for chimps have been found in the cellar. By the 1960's the house was an hotel.

Care Home

Hembury Fort House did not suddenly change into a care home, it evolved. Its role as hotel and rest home was altered by the legislation reclassifying the house as a care home and some of the original "hotel" residents continued to live there.

Today Hembury Fort House is classified as a top rated (3 star) home.