

CHAPTER 4: JAMES FLEES FROM HIS ESTATE.

Mr. Edward James departed for America shortly after war was declared on September the third 1939. I remember the activity at the time. In an unusual manner, Mr. James was going around directly giving instructions to his executives before leaving. These were the Estate Agent (cannot remember his name) Mr. Reid the estate manager, Mr. Field the head game keeper and Mr. Lyne the head gardener. The meeting with the latter included my Dad. He was not directly employed by the estate but his farm duties involved use of the estate park in particular; for which Mr. Lyne was also responsible. There was a meeting in the walled kitchen garden: Mr. James, Mr. Lyne and my Dad and I were all present. This was the first time I had ever seen my Dad take off his trilby hat in deference to anyone. I guess James warranted that high mark of respect.

There was discussion about how the park should be maintained in the absence of park workers who were going off to war. Also there was to be a trust formed from local farmers and the Estate Agent to temporarily run the estate and have the benefit of shooting game inside the park and the rest of the estate. They could use Monkton hall and the Norwegian chalet in St. Roches Arboretum for their lunches during the shoots. At that time I believe most people, including James, thought the war would be over quickly.

In view of the lack of workers for the Estate grounds, the responsibility for the House Field, between West Dean House and the Lavant River would pass to my Dad. The grass was no longer to be finely mowed and would be allowed to fully grow and then be harvested as hay every year;. and the nine hole golf course could be used for grazing by sheep or cattle to keep the grass from growing too high. James proposed to My Dad and Mr. Lyne that a small piglet should be taken up to Monkton Hall and left there to

eat the lunch leftovers from shooting party luncheons. Apparently, he didn't like the idea of waste food being dumped near the house; attracting wild birds and animals. My Dad's instructions were, to take the piglet to Monkton Hall in the horse drawn dray and leave it there in a pen, to be taken care of by Mr. and Mrs Porter, the new housekeepers.

At this meeting Mr. James never spoke to me, indeed hardly looked at me; I remember it



was though I was non-existent. At times over the years, I had met James when he was walking around his estate and the same thing happened. I kind of stepped aside and he would regally march on by without stopping or speaking. He certainly knew who I was, being the only child living in confines of the park. I usually walked around his Park, pretty much as I pleased. Unless I was barred from doing so by my Dad, because of important people staying in the main house and using the Park.

Anyway, shortly after this meeting my Dad had with James he was said to have travelled via Wales to Southern Ireland and then to America, ending up in Hollywood. Where he is reported to have cavorted, being generous with his great wealth and joined in with some ex-patriot British aristocrats and famous artists, who had also fled from the UK and the war. For example: Christopher Isherwood and Aldous Huxley were of members of his partying group. By a number of accounts from various recorders who knew James, he had an effeminate and witty manner that went down well. His route to Southern Ireland shortly after the war started was the only way to get out of Britain, all other ports and airports had been closed for emigration by the British Government. At the time the Southern Ireland government was not on the side of Britain and had aligned itself with the doctrines of the German Nazi regime, so James was easily able to transit through there. Later this route of escape was also closed by the Government of Britain. I understood that the reason why this point of embarkation was left open for a while was because The British Government was ardently seeking an alliance with Southern Ireland's government, instead of them joining up with the Nazi's. To no avail!

Many British citizens who were "in the know", that is, in a position of government association; politician's, judge's, banker's and the hierarchy of the country, aristocrats in general and-or simply those intelligent enough to interpret the early war plans of the British Government or read the signs of war being inevitable, sought sanctuary in neutral foreign countries.

Either James typically was just plain paranoid in general or he was afraid of conscription in the British military. After all he was only 32 year's old and eligible. He would have had to register under The National Service Act in 1937 the same as all men between the ages of 18 and 38 and if he had stayed in England would have surely been called up to fight and possibly be killed or injured in time of war: like all the eligible age young men on his Estate. At that moment in time, he had probably received 'call up' papers for National Service in time of war.

From the point of view of the local villagers he had acted in the manner of a coward and run away, neglecting his Estate. He was no longer looked up to as the benevolent landlord. It was also thought by the locals after the war that he was afraid to come home and face ridicule. Emotions ran high in England at that time, after so much death and destruction had occurred. He acted like many people of great wealth: they exiled themselves to escape the rigours of war. I should say here, that it is a well known fact, that the large majority of aristocrats and rich young men of Britain, stayed and fought bravely in the war and many lost their lives. Children of rich Parents were evacuated to safe havens abroad, including The United States. My contemporary friend Gay, as a child and a member of a leading London banking family, was evacuated to New England on the last passenger liner to leave Southampton.

It is well documented after 1942 and America had entered the war, when James thought he might be traced by the British military, he sought out a sanctuary in Mexico. It is said that he toured by chauffer driven limousine all the way down to Cuernavaca, south of Mexico City; He rather liked the place and went into a Cantina (bar) to ask the Mexican locals where he could buy some land. They were particularly put off by this Gringo's small stature and weird western appearance in monk like clothing; thinking he had no money. However, when they went outside and saw his large Ford Lincoln limousine, not to mention his accompanying Valet and chauffeur in full livery they changed their attitude. The whole scene a bit incongruous on a dirt road in a small Mexican town. Then they became more intrigued and introduced him to an operator from the local telephone exchange, called Plutarco Gastelum, who spoke English. James quickly learned from him that no foreigner could buy and own land in Mexico. However, they struck up a lasting friendship and James agreed to put up the money to buy land and build a home in the name of his new found partner. Gastelum apparently told James about an exotic jungle region with tropical foliage, flora and fauna, about 250 miles north east of Mexico City on the road to Tampico. This was an untouched wild tropical region, with waterfalls coming down a mountainside. So, in the mid 1940s they purchased about eighty acres, near the village of Xilitla (pronounced: ScheLEETla) Over the following 35 years James is reputed to have spent three million pounds sterling in continuously building a castle there in concrete and surrealist form. James conceived fantastic surrealist shapes of buildings and rooms with waterfalls and pools for fish and swimming. He obviously contributed greatly to the local building community.

He collected tropical birds and boa constrictors and loved to watch the naked children of Gastelum Plutarco in the swimming pool who lived in the house with him. There were apparently and eventually at least thirty six separate buildings in this housing extravaganza. James disappearance from England prompted his friend, the poet, John Betjeman, whose first book of poems he financed to be published, to write a line in a poem: "Where is Edward James hiding now?"

Probably James's commercialization of West Dean House and Estate helped pay for the enterprise in Mexico. His Trust, on his orders, certainly put up the rents of the Estate farms and houses about 1942-3. He sometimes travelled out of Mexico after the war but he seldom visited West Dean House. Preferring, when he did, by staying in seclusion at Monkton Hall. He returned to England for medical treatment about 1980 and died in 1984 at 77 year's old. Finally, I believe, he willed the concrete edifice and grounds to the Gastelum family and part of the grounds to the Mexican State.

James had always used his prodigious wealth to associate himself with artists and at times became their patron. Just like his support of Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte. He even helped to start George Ballanchine on his illustrious career by sponsoring, funding and producing a ballet for him and Tilly Losch; they both became famous and rich afterwards. (The latter was James's wife for three years; he divorced her for adultery with a prince and she accused him of homosexuality); he was almost certainly bi-sexual. (More elsewhere of this tale) Some other artists he purchased works of art from for Monkton Hall were: Picasso, Klee, Max Ersnat, Paul Delvaux, Monet and Manet.

James desperately wanted to be recognized as a poet and even self published books of poems but they were seriously and badly panned by the literary critics.

I understand he is buried in St. Roches Arboretum and the inscription on his tombstone reads: Poet.

James love of exotic birds extended to the wonderful one hundred acres of arboretum, named St. Roches. He had large wood and chicken wire pens constructed there , enclosing bushes and trees, creating a natural habitat. Inside these there were caged gold, silver and Chinese pheasants. I used to visit these birds regularly and admire their fabulous plumage, but was not allowed to feed them. At the same time I felt sorry for them, despite their large enclosures, they were constantly pacing around the perimeter, looking for a way out. Some time

after the war started, their desire was granted, there was no one left with time to feed them and they were let out to roam free in the park grounds. I don't think they lasted long outside their protected environment but I like to think they enjoyed their final days of freedom.

All the non native trees like American redwoods, rhododendrons, azaleas and etc., interested me greatly. Every cultivated example had a lead plaque on a brass post near the ground, describing the genus and origin of the species and giving the Latin name.

There was a hunting lodge at the bottom of the Arboretum and this was a genuine single storey Norwegian chalet with a sod-covered grass roof, the chalet had been shipped in sections from Norway and re-built. It was furnished with custom hand-made American sugar pine wood furniture. The furniture was made in the 17th century joinery manner ; possibly by the father and son team of Donald and David English, the East London furniture maker's, artists and wood carver's. Then used for many years for lunches by hunting parties, including members of the British royal family.

The house was allowed to fall into disrepair from the war time onwards and after the war the furniture was stolen by antique scavengers. The house was vandalized and eventually disintegrated.