

Town's life created by a vanished dynasty

A memorial high above Exeter serves as a constant reminder of the friendship that existed between a soldier and a wealthy local landowning family. But, as **Colin Bradley** discovers from a new book, the white tower of Haldon Belvedere represents just a tiny part of the Palk legacy

TODAY there are few visible signs commemorating them in the town they all-but owned. But if it had not been for the Palks and their immense wealth, Torquay would probably never have blossomed into one of the nation's most fashionable resorts.

No official plaques serve as a reminder of their vital contribution to transforming the former fishing hamlet. Instead, only a handful of streets and a harbourside pier sport the names of family members, while some of the lavish buildings they created are celebrated, not for their involvement, but because of the famous figures who lived or stayed in them.

A clue to the reason why the Palks have largely been forgotten in Devon is that the dynasty was short-lived and ultimately rocked by bankruptcy. In the space of about 150 years the family, which had risen from humble beginnings to owning vast estates and even forging links with royalty, ended up penniless on the streets of London.

The rise and fall of the Palks is told in a compelling new book by South Devon local historian Iain Fraser, whose home village of Hennock boasts the last of the five pubs that bore the family name – The Palk Arms.

“Their story is fascinating because it would once have seemed totally unthinkable that these wealthy landowners would



Sir Robert Palk

eventually be reduced to sleeping on park benches,” says the author, who spent three years researching the Palks and their legacy.

It was Robert Palk who made the family its fortune. Born of yeoman farmer stock at Lower Headborough Farm on the outskirts of Ashburton in 1717, he first made his mark as Governor of Madras in India. Then his involvement with the East India Trading Company, through which he

traded in diamonds, coral, cloth and spices, ensured he returned home to Devon with a fortune.

In 1768 he used his new-found wealth to become a major landowner in Torquay. First he bought the Manor of Tormohun from the Earl of Donegal for £12,000. It included the grand Torwood Grange manor house, built nearly 200 years before, and several hundred acres. Eventually the family owned 1,150 acres of Torquay, which in total covered 1,465 acres. The rest mainly belonged to two other families – the Mallocks, who owned Cockington Court, and the Carys, of Torre Abbey.

But Robert Palk soon fell out with the Carys. His home overlooked the harbour, which he planned to develop, but in the way was a stretch of land owned by the Cary family. They would not sell it, so Palk moved to Haldon House near Exeter, which he bought, along with thousands of acres, for £10,000.

Built between 1717 and 1735 by Sir George Chudleigh, the property was re-modelled by the new owner who added two extra wings and adorned its walls with paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and other famous artists.

And on the crest of Haldon Hill, which overlooked Haldon House, Palk built Lawrence Castle, now known as Haldon Belvedere, as a memorial to his great friend from his time in India, Major-General Stringer Lawrence. A veteran of the Battle of Culloden, Lawrence had been commander-in-chief of the East India Company's armed forces and often stayed with the Palks on their Devon estate.

When Lawrence died in 1775 he left all



Remaining wing of Haldon House, now the Lord Haldon Hotel

his property to the Palks along with a request that the eldest son of each future Palk generation bore his name. The family carried out his last wish and he is buried at nearby Dunchideock church.

An MP for Ashburton, Palk was made a baronet by King George III in recognition of his efforts in securing India for Britain. But, according to the book's author, successive heirs of Sir Robert quickly spent the family fortune. By 1873 they owned more than 10,000 acres in Devon, which generated an annual income of nearly £110,000, but most of the money went into paying off loans and mortgages secured against the estates.

In Torquay, they built schools, churches, roads, large-Italian-styled villas, the inner harbour, Haldon pier and the Rotunda market. Their Palk Water Company not only supplied their breweries at St Marychurch but also met the town's

demand for water. In addition, they built the Imperial Hotel, bought out and redeveloped the old Royal Hotel, where Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli was a frequent guest, and commissioned the Regency-styled Hesketh Crescent, the central part of which was Osborne House. It later became the Osborne Hotel.

The crescent was originally built as 15 private houses. Osborne House was the home of Sir Lawrence Vaughan Palk, the 3rd Baronet. His son, the 1st Lord Haldon, also lived in the row and so did the richest woman in England – Angela Burdett-Coutts, who arrived in 1857 after inheriting a vast fortune from her grandfather, the banker Thomas Coutts.

Charles Darwin also lived in the crescent for a while and Isambard Kingdom Brunel stayed there, too.

The Palks also had mining interests around Torquay. And they invested in the



Sir Lawrence Palk

Teign Valley Railway, as well as opening up Kents Cavern, which was on their land, to exploration.

Behind the Palk name, there were others who played a major part in the planning and execution of the town, particularly William Kitson, the Palk family lawyer, banker, business manager and estate steward who was later heralded as "the Maker of Torquay." He was considered the mastermind of Torquay's redevelopment, a task he performed in the absence of the 3rd Baronet when he fled to France in the 1840s because of money worries.

After the 3rd Baronet's death in 1860, his son enthusiastically continued the family's work. It was he who spent £70,000 on



A cartoon caricature of the 2nd Lord Haldon who was declared bankrupt in 1891

the new harbour pier at Torquay and £65,000 on the Teign Valley Railway. For his role in developing Torquay, as well as supporting his friend Disraeli's government, the 4th Baronet was elevated to the title of Lord Haldon in 1880. But even-

tually pressure was put on the family to sell their holdings, including their Haldon estate and their lands in Torquay. The 2nd Lord Haldon could not escape being declared a bankrupt and when the 3rd Lord Haldon inherited the title he had no estate or money to count on. At times was forced to sleep outside the House of Lords on a park bench.

He spent the last days of his life in a labourer's cottage near Bude and died at Stratton Cottage Hospital in 1933. Five years later the penniless 4th Lord, who had fought in the Gallipoli campaign and was later jailed several times for theft, died at the age of 42. He had been living in a London bed-sit on the dole.

The line of Palk baronets ended in 1945 when Wilmot Lawrence Lancelot Palk, a former lieutenant in the Durham Light Infantry, died with no heir. But there is a Palk connection to the present Royal family, says the book's author.

"Elizabeth Malet Palk, daughter of the 2nd Baronet Lawrence Palk, married Sir Horace Beauchamp Seymour, baronet and an Army captain," he writes. "Their daughter, Adelaide Horatia, married Frederic Spencer in 1854, thus becoming the great, great, great grandmother of Princes William and Harry."

■ *The Palk Family of Haldon House and Torquay* is written by Iain Fraser and published by Sylvorwood. It costs £7.95 and is available from bookshops or through the author's website, www.palkhistory.net

The book also features in the Haldon's Hidden Heritage exhibition, which is run by the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World at Haldon Forest Park until January 18, next year. The free event is open Tuesdays to Sundays.