



The Grace Family of Battle Abbey

Introduction

The family names associated with Battle Abbey which most readily spring to mind are “Browne”, “Montagu”, “Webster” and “Vane”. But another family made Battle Abbey its home in the early twentieth century, joining, and having considerable influence over, the life of the town in much the same way as prior (and subsequent) occupants of the Abbey, yet they are often forgotten or unheard of.

When Sir Augustus Webster purchased the Abbey following its 1901 sale he had secured its return to the ownership of the Webster family, in whose hands the Abbey Estate had been from 1721 to 1858, when it had been sold out of financial necessity to Lord Harry Vane, later 4th Duke of Cleveland.¹ The purchase, however, had come at a great price. To finance the deal Sir Augustus had placed himself in debt to the tune of around £200,000² – a very considerable sum in 1901, equivalent to around £25 million in 2019. Consequently funds needed to be raised – parts of the Estate were sold off and a tenant was sought to lease the Abbey, while the Webster family themselves lived at Powdermill House, now the Powdermill Hotel, in Powdermill Lane. In 1902 it was announced that a suitable tenant had been found.

The news of the new occupant of the Abbey was broken by the *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* on 30 August 1902, under the heading “A Millionaire at Battle Abbey”. The article reveals that there had been local expectation and hope that the Websters would renew their residence in the Abbey following Sir Augustus’ purchase and details the concerns of both Battle and Hastings businessmen that the Abbey should remain open to the public, following rumours that the new tenant would not continue this tradition. It states:

“Mr M P Grace, a New York Millionaire, has taken Battle Abbey on a fourteen years’ lease from Augustus Webster. The fact is of no small significance to the town and trade of Battle and the announcement is also of considerable interest to Hastings, the historic seat being an important factor as a “show” place visited every year by thousands of visitors staying at our watering-place.”

The article reveals that the weekly Tuesday trip to the Abbey undertaken by visitors to Hastings was “one of the most popular” and provided “a source of most considerable profit to the trade of Battle”. The suggestion that the Abbey would no longer open to the public is revealed as a false rumour, however, but the author notes that “a special entrance will be

¹ It is interesting to note that the 4th Duke of Cleveland was also step father to Lord Rosebery, who was to become Prime Minister (1894-5) and leader of the Liberal Party (1894-6).

² See *Battle Abbey and the Websters*, by Roy Pryce, p.133



constructed in the wall on the Park side, to obviate the necessity of visitors going in through the gateway fronting the town". It is currently unclear whether this was ever completed, and if so, where it was.

Readers were told that Mr Grace would use the Abbey as a winter residence and would "prove to be a most desirable newcomer in this part of the country" and "be accorded the heartiest of hearty welcomes". In addition, Mr Grace would "entertain liberally" and intended to keep "a large stud of hunters" at the Abbey. It also notes that:

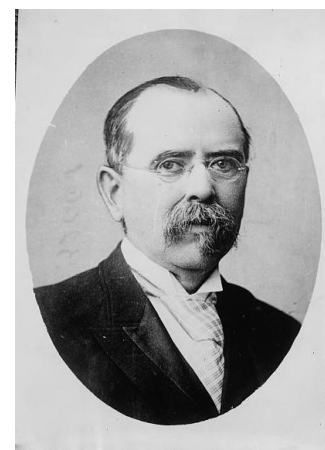
"The interior of the Abbey is now in the hands.....of workmen, who are fitting it with all those comforts and facilities which are indispensable to the environment of a millionaire, though, it may be presumed, no historical or archaeological features will be interfered with"

The scene was set for a new era at Battle Abbey.

Michael Paul Grace, 1842-1920

Who, then, was this American millionaire, the subject of so much local speculation? And where did his fortune come from?

Michael Paul Grace was of Irish origin, making his money initially in Peru before moving to New York. There is some variation as to his exact year and place of birth, but what is certain is that he was baptised in Dublin, on 12 November 1843 at St James', James Street, Dublin City, being the son of James Grace and his wife Ellen (nee Russell).³ It would seem probable that he was born in County Laois in November 1842 and baptised in Dublin in November 1843. Sources suggest that his father, James Grace, came from Laois and was a farmer. Michael was the last of a family of at least seven; including William Russell Grace and John W Grace, whose fortunes and finances became very much interlinked with those of Michael Paul Grace.



Michael Paul Grace

William Russell Grace was born in 1832. At the age of fourteen he ran away from Ireland to New York and by 1850, helped by his father, had settled in Callao, Peru, working for Bryce &

³ A passport application in 1915 gives his date of birth as 19 Nov 1842 in Queen's County (now Laois). A further passport application in 1918 gives his month of birth as November (no day given) 1842 in Dublin. The 1901 census states he is aged 57 and born in Dublin; whereas the 1911 census gives his age as 69 and born in Queens County.



William Russell Grace

Co., shipping chandlers. By 1852 he had become a partner in the firm, and by 1854 it was re-named Bryce, Grace & Co. Soon after this he was joined in Peru by his younger brother, Michael Paul Grace. In 1865 William left Peru for New York, leaving Michael in charge of Bryce, Grace & Co. and by 1868 had founded W R Grace & Co. in New York, a shipping firm which dealt with most of the trade between the United States and South America. Throughout 1879/83 William and Michael Grace supplied arms to Peru during its war with Chile, after the war assuming the country's national debt following a deal organised by Michael in 1887, which saw the firm in return benefit from access to Peru's silver mines and Chilean guano deposits. In addition they acquired the lease on the eighty-six mile long

Peruvian Oroya railroad at no cost provided that they complete it.⁴ Sales of nitrates were handled out of Valparaiso, Chile, while Peru operations were handled out of Lima. The fortunes of the brothers grew. A further brother, John W Grace had established a firm in San Francisco and during the 1890s replaced William Grace running the firm in New York. In 1892 the brothers formed the New York and Pacific Steamship Company, which shipped manufactured goods from New York to the west coast of South America and returned to New York with raw materials mainly sourced from Grace Bros businesses. By 1895 the New York Times reported that the Grace brothers had decided to merge their firms – W R Grace & Co., New York; Grace & Co., Valparaiso; Grace Bros & Co., Lima; William R Grace & Co., London; and J W Grace & Co., San Francisco to form W R Grace & Co, which went on to open branches in all Latin American countries.⁵ William Grace became the first Catholic Mayor of New York in 1880 and was again Mayor in 1884. He advocated a canal through Central America – a plan which saw fruition with the creation of the Panama Canal, opened in 1914. Both William and John died in 1904 and Michael Grace assumed control of the family businesses, eventually passing them on to Joseph Grace, son of William. Despite this picture of a highly successful business enterprise there is some evidence that the entrepreneur brothers were not universally popular. The Philadelphia Times reported on 29 November 1886 that New York Mayor, William Grace, had been “blackballed” and his nomination for membership of the New York Riding Club refused. Speculation was that the Riding Club contained many members of the Union Club, which had blackballed Michael Grace's application for membership a year earlier, although reasons for this remain unclear.

While this vast business empire was under development, perhaps surprisingly, Michael Grace managed to find time for a personal life. On 16 January 1869 “Miguel Pablo Grace” married “Margarita Ana Mazon” (Mason) at Santa Rosa, Callao, in Peru. In February that

⁴ See *New York Times* June 22 1885

⁵ See *New York Times* January 11 1895



year his father died in Ireland, but happier news came in the form of the birth of a daughter, Elisa Mercedes, on 28 October. She was followed by Elina Marie in 1874, Margarita Cecilia in 1876 (both born in Peru) and Gladys (born in New York) in 1888. In later years the sisters, renowned for their good looks, became known as “the four graces”. Michael, his wife and three eldest daughters moved from South America to New York in 1876 and on 19 June 1882 Michael Paul Grace became an American citizen by naturalisation. The address on his naturalisation certificate is given as “Great Neck, Long Is(land), N(ew) Y(ork)”, although he later also lived at Westbury, Long Island. A love of riding was in evidence while he was living in New York, for in 1885 newspapers reported that Michael Grace “met with a serious accident while riding on horseback at his country place at Great Neck”. It appears that while riding a partially broken horse he fell, breaking his left femur as well as dislocating his hip joint but made a good recovery – probably a testament more to his general fitness rather than medical intervention of the time!

By the early 1890s Michael Grace had established a further home in London, at 40 Belgrave Square, with a country residence at “Porters”, Shenley, in Hertfordshire. He appears at “Porters” on the 1901 census of England and Wales aged 59, living with his wife, Margarita Anne, who was born Valparaiso, Chile; his daughters Elina, Margarita and Gladys, as well as nineteen servants, including a housekeeper; governess; dairy maid; cook; two housemaids; three lady’s maids; two laundry maids; two kitchen maids; a head housemaid; a hall boy; two footmen; an odd boy and a bailiff – evidence of a lavish lifestyle with much entertaining, for the Graces moved in high social circles, reflected in the marriages of their daughters. May 1900 had seen the marriage of his eldest daughter, Elisa Mercedes, to Hubert George Beaumont at St Paul’s Knightsbridge. Hubert Beaumont was a Liberal politician who was successfully elected as MP for Eastbourne in 1906, remaining MP until 1910, when he elected not to stand. He was the son of the 1st Baron Allendale and his wife, the daughter of the 1st Marquess of Clanricarde. In December 1901 *The Sketch* reported the marriage of Miss Elena (sic) Grace and the 6th Earl of Donoughmore, Richard John Walter Hely-Hutchinson, at St Michael’s, Chester Square. The bride’s father is reported as being from New York and residing at 40 Belgrave Square and “Porters”, Shenley, while the Earl’s family seats were at Knocklofty and Kilmanahan Castle, Clonmel. The best man was the Earl of Malmesbury and the sub-Dean of the Chapels Royal and Canon Fleming officiated. It was noted that bride did not carry a bouquet, but rather a prayer book, a present from the Countess of Donoughmore. The wedding itself was described as being “one of the prettiest of the season”, with the reception held at 40, Belgrave Square, London home of the Grace family.



The Grace and Hely-Hutchinson families appear to have known each other for some years before they were joined by marriage. The 5th Earl of Donoughmore ⁶ had played a key role in the Grace brothers' successful bid to take on the Peruvian debt in the 1880s. They may well also have been connected via Freemasonry. Michael Grace had become a member of the Duke of Leinster's Lodge of the Grand Lodge of Freemasons of Ireland, in Lima, Peru in 1866⁷, while the Earls of Donoughmore also had extensive connections with the Grand Lodge of Freemasons of Ireland⁸. Richard Hely-Hutchinson, 2nd Baron Donoughmore, had been elected Grand Master in 1789 and the 5th Earl was also a member of the Grand Lodge of Ireland⁹. The 6th Earl, Michael Grace's new son-in-law, followed ancestral traditions in being elected Grand Master in 1913 and later the 7th Earl, Grace's grandson, followed suit in 1964. Once in Battle M P Grace would have found further connections to freemasonry in his landlord Sir Augustus Webster and the Dean, the Very Rev Currie.

In 1901 the well-connected millionaire, Michael Grace, sold his country retreat, "Porters", to Cecil Frank Raphael, and the Grace links to the town of Battle began.

The Grace Family at Battle

Only a year after the Graces had arrived in Battle the *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* was able to report in November 1903 news of a "Millionaire's Wedding – Fashionable ceremony at Battle", an article which shows that the Grace family had very quickly settled into the life of the town and assumed a degree of influence and importance locally. Michael Grace's third daughter, Margarita, married Mr John S Phipps, of Westbury, Long Island, New York, at the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, Battle. Like her sisters, Margarita had made a well-connected marriage. Mr Phipps was the son of Mr Henry Phipps, a steel magnate of New York and Pittsburg, USA. Battle's Dean, the Very Rev E R Currie, officiated, aided by his curates. The church must have looked spectacular:

"Masses of white flowers were on the altar, and lining the front of the choir stalls were also some choice plants. Leading from the gates to the west door of the church was an awning covered with evergreens and hung with Union Jacks and the stars and stripes and the nave being covered with crimson cloth".

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https://web.archive.org/web/20100113125339/http://www.irishmidlandsancestry.com/content/laois/people/grace_william-russell.htm

⁷ See *Grand Lodge of Ireland Freemasons Membership Registers* available at www.ancestry.co.uk

⁸ <https://www.geni.com/projects/Grand-Lodge-of-Ireland/27369>

⁹ See *Grand Lodge of Ireland Freemasons Membership Registers* available at www.ancestry.co.uk



It was noted that the bride carried a prayer book rather than a bouquet, just as her sister Elina had at her marriage to the Earl of Donoughmore. The special supplement to the Observer tells us that the church was “filled to overflowing”. A reception was held for guests after the ceremony at the Abbey and at 4pm, in an event which would seem very alien and perhaps even patronising and condescending to us today, townspeople were admitted by ticket to view the mass of wedding presents, displayed in the Abbey’s library. Guests had arrived in time for the ceremony travelling by special train and included both national and local dignitaries – The Earl of Ashburnham, Lord and Lady Brassey, the American Ambassador, the Countess de la Warr, Sir Augustus and Lady Webster, Lord and Lady Tweedmouth, the Earl and Countess of Yarmouth to name but a few of the very many well-known guests. The article lists all the wedding gifts – an amazing collection from the bridegroom’s presents to the bride which included an emerald drop and diamond platinum necklet, various other items of jewellery, a Queen Anne silver bowl and a set of “Russian sables” to a silver salver, presented by the “working population of Battle”. This last was accompanied by a note:

“As a mark of the appreciation and regard which the working population of Battle bear towards M.P. Grace Esq. of Battle Abbey (who, during the short time he has been in residence has organised considerable undertakings which have found employment for many working-men) we, the undersigned, on the occasion of the marriage of his daughter Miss Margarita Grace to Mr Jay S Phipps, take this opportunity of offering for their acceptance a wedding present raised by contributions not exceeding one shilling as a small token of our regard, wishing the Bride and Bridegroom every happiness”¹⁰

The “trade” of Battle¹¹ gave a separate gift, accompanied by a list of subscribers illuminated by M H Hoad, as did the Estate workmen¹². These gifts would appear to suggest that Mr

¹⁰ The “working men” were: Charles Bowers, William Neeves, William Newman, Mrs Newman, Miss Newman, Albert E Anderson, Percy Carter, Charles Dennis, G King, W P Parks, P Anderson, W T Burt, E Elliott, Gilbert Noakes, Stephen Fuller, H Wilsher, R Croft, Wm Honeysett, Fred Edwards, A Baker, Mrs Baker, Gilbert Eldridge, A Rideout, John Wait, Chas Noakes, Jane Farmer, George Putland, Mrs Essery, James Walters, W Wickens, Mrs W Wickens, G Muggridge, Mrs G Muggridge, Chas. Foord, W Ballard, Mrs W Ballard, Mrs J P Eldridge, Miss Jane Dalia, Mrs Comfort, Mrs Fuller, F Duke, Mrs F Duke, J Duke, Mrs J Duke, A Godden, Mrs James Godden, Mrs Pook, G Gower, Mrs G Gower, E Willard, Mrs E Willard, H Everest, Mrs H Everest, J Kirgan, Mrs Kirgan, Joseph Kirgan, Miss J G Kirgan, Miss W Kirgan, William Webb, Alfred Flint, J Holman, Mrs J Holman, W Boxall, Mrs Small, T J Nash, Mrs Nash, W Bridger, Mrs W Bridger, J Balcomb, Mrs J Balcomb, L Winchester, H Everest jnr, Mrs Rose Pack, J Oliver, Mrs J Oliver, Percy Eldridge, Mrs Percy Eldridge, C J Connock, Mrs C J Connock, W Guy, Mrs W Guy, J Eldridge, Mrs J Eldridge, Mrs C Hyland, Ben Willox, William Santer, Mrs Dowling, Mrs Schnorr, Miss C Schnorr, Miss L Schnorr, Mr William Schnorr, Frank Fuller, H Gurr, A Cruttenden, T Duke, Mrs T Duke, Mrs M A Bannister, Jack Turner, Mrs R Bowers, Mrs Parrott, B Parrott, Mrs A Curtis, Alan Austin, Tom Bowers, Wm Christian, Mrs Christian.

¹¹ “Trade” of Battle were: R B Allwork, R Barton, E J Bailey, W Beney, G Bones, E Burgess, G Burrows, E W B Cowtan, F Cruttenden, W Cook, Davis and Son, J T Dunn, T G Dunn, Henry Elliott, C B Gausden, Holt Bros, C Headland, J Holland, F W Hoad, J Isard, W C Jenner, F Mathis, J Mathis, J Mercer, J W Pepper, P Paine, R Soan, W C Till, H Tutt and Son, A Thorpe, E R Thorpe, A J Turner, Tom Vidler, J E Winton, G Wagstaff, Wallis and Co.

¹² The “estate” workmen were as follows: Frank Cockett, Richard Parks, Charles Jenner, Samuel Selmes, A White, H Jones, F Jones, James Turner, J Hards, J Morgan, W Blackman, H Blackman, William H Sedridge, W Sinden, T Sinden, W H Mercer, Tom Burton, Henry F Flint, Henry Cotton, James Cotton, Walter Tilyer, William Turner.



Grace had assumed quite quickly a considerable influence over the life, employees and businesses of the town, asserting his premier role as a wealthy benefactor to the town's inhabitants who commanded not only their loyalty but also subservience.

Michael Grace seems to have wasted no time in becoming involved in local affairs, continuing local customs, becoming highly regarded by the townspeople of Battle as well as being something of a philanthropist. Many examples of these activities can be found – those which follow give a flavour of his activities in Battle.

On 21 November 1903 the *Bexhill Observer* reported the annual dinner of the Battle Bonfire Society. Speeches after the loyal toast confirmed that the celebrations that year had been “the best ever”. It was noted that Battle was probably the only Bonfire Society which could claim a former Prime Minister as a member, for Lord Roseberry, son of the Duchess of Cleveland, had joined the procession when residing in his youth with his mother and step father, the Duke of Cleveland, in Battle Abbey. Michael Grace's commitment to local Battle customs is illustrated when the speeches went on to note that for the first time in fifty years the procession had gone into the Abbey Grounds, with permission of Mr Grace, whose youngest daughter had lit the bonfire, which had burned for two or three days thanks to faggots provided by Sir Augustus Webster. Many house parties focusing on hunting and shooting for various well connected guests took place during the Grace's tenure at the Abbey, but servants, estate workers and locals were not forgotten. Michael Grace continued the tradition of the very popular Servant's Ball¹³, to which members of the household invited guests to a ball in the Servant's Hall at the Abbey. In November 1904 the Countess Donoughmore, Michael Grace's daughter, took time out of a house party at Battle Abbey (where the guests, including General Baden-Powell, were enjoying “capital shooting on the Estate”)¹⁴ to present prizes to the local Rifle Volunteers at the Drill Hall. In January the following year the regular Abbey Estate dinner for workers on the Estate took place at the George Hotel, where, after dinner, Mr Phipps and Mr Beaumont, representing Mr Grace, joined the guests. Mr Cruse, the Estate manager, proposing a toast to Mr Grace, described him as a “friend of the working man and the poor” who “knew Battle from end to end”.¹⁵ In 1912 he is recorded as being one of the Vice Presidents of Battle's Football Club,¹⁶ while in 1913 he is recorded as a Vice President of the Mountjoy Institute. Fetes and fundraisers were held in the Abbey grounds, including in 1909 a fete to raise money for Dr Barnardo's Homes,¹⁷ attended by many guests including the Duchess of Marlborough. Michael Grace's philanthropic interests appear not confined to Battle. For example in February 1904 he

¹³ *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* 13 February 1904

¹⁴ *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* 12 November 1904

¹⁵ *Bexhill Observer* 7 Jan 1905

¹⁶ *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* August 1912

¹⁷ *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 1909



presided over the annual meeting of the supporters of the Buchanan Cottage Hospital in St Leonards¹⁸. His speech displayed a high regard for both allopathic and homeopathic disciplines of treatment and led the appeal for additional funds from subscribers so that a new operating theatre could be built.

Michael Grace's social connections seem to have spanned the highest in the land. In October 1907 the *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* reported a "Royal Visitor to the Abbey". Princess Henry of Battenberg, or Beatrice, youngest daughter of Queen Victoria and sister to the King, was entertained to lunch by Michael Grace at Battle. It seems that she had been staying at Ratton, Hampden Park at the home of the MP Mr Freeman-Thomas and had been driven over to the Abbey in a party consisting of Lord Leconfield, Mr and the Hon. Mrs Freeman –Thomas, Lady Speyer, Miss Sydney Buxton and Colonel Collins, and Miss Cochrane. Having visited the Brasseys at Normanhurst en route to the Abbey the party arrived in Battle at 1.30pm. Mr and Mrs Grace and their youngest daughter were joined by Lady Webster, and their daughter Mrs Beaumont and her husband Hubert Beaumont, MP for Eastbourne. Locals were "treated" to a view of the party arriving at the Abbey. Following lunch, the Princess and her party visited Ashburnham Place before returning to Hampden Park. Mr Grace was, however, obviously choosy in his guests for the same welcome was not in evidence five years later when Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, visited the Abbey.¹⁹ Like the Princess, Lloyd George had been staying in Eastbourne and had motored over to Battle. Having handed in his card with a request to be allowed to view the Abbey, he was told that visitors were only permitted on a Tuesday. Thinking that perhaps Mr Grace did not realise who he was, he made the request again, stating that he and his guests had come specifically to see the Abbey. He was met with the response that "Mr Grace had nothing to add to his original message" and Lloyd George was turned away.

All this points to a man held in high regard by all, those of high social standing, local tradespeople and residents of Battle – but does it provide the complete picture? It has already been noted in the blackballing incident that not all New York Society was impressed with Grace brothers, but what did Battle's local people really think of the latest incumbent of the Abbey? Were they genuinely pleased to be able to view the lavish gifts (which they themselves could not dream of affording) given to his daughter at her wedding and to be able to toast their benefactor at dinners and balls? Were they genuinely grateful for the extra trade and employment opportunities he provided? Unfortunately there is only limited evidence of what local townspeople really thought of Michael Grace. The days of the type of lifestyle Michael Grace enjoyed while at the Abbey were numbered – twenty years later it would not have been possible, or at any rate, uncommon, and society and expectations had changed. There is no doubt that local traders benefitted from his custom – for example

¹⁸ *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* 2 February 1904

¹⁹ *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 26 October 1912



Holland's butchers, E H Nash the fishmonger and Allwork's grocery store. However, local memory suggests that the Abbey was not always prompt in paying its bills, leaving local traders to provide barely affordable credit to the fabulously wealthy Abbey occupants. In the Battle and District Historical Society's online Oral History collection Fred Holland, butcher, describes how he remembers his father Alfred (Alf) providing meat to the Abbey. He recalls that the Abbey was a very good customer and also that Mr Grace used to have venison sent to Battle from his Estate in Scotland. However, the chef wouldn't store the venison at the Abbey because "it stunk the place out" – instead he sent it down to Holland's shop in Upper Lake for storage, where, if the weather was fine, it was placed along with other meats in the passageway next to the shop, or, if the weather were bad, the meat would be moved into the shop, where the smell was strong. Fred Holland comments that seventy years later he could still remember the awful smell. Perhaps more significantly he notes that locals coming into the shop would not dare to complain about it, because they knew the meat belonged to Mr Grace, whom they wouldn't dare to criticise. This suggests that Michael Grace was not so much popular with many locals as tolerated and to some extent feared, presumably because so many were dependant on him for employment and custom.

The 1911 Census of England and Wales reveals that the Grace family was not in residence at Battle Abbey on Census day. Instead, Michael Grace can be found on holiday in Bournemouth, at the Mont Dore Hotel, which later became Bournemouth Town Hall. He appears to be treating his grandchildren, John Michael Henry Hely-Hutchinson (Viscount Suidale), then aged 8, and his sister Lady Doreen Clare Hely-Hutchinson, to a seaside holiday, accompanied by their Governess. There is an interesting episode in the later life of the same John Hely-Hutchinson, by then Earl of Donoughmore, when, in 1974, he and his wife, the Countess, were kidnapped from their home in County Tipperary by the IRA, being driven away under protest at gunpoint towards Dublin²⁰. Apparently the couple were the third choice for the kidnappers, who tried and failed to locate either Sir Alfred Beit or the Marquess of Waterford, their first and second choices for kidnap. They were released into Phoenix Park five days later at night. Their son Mark revealed in an interview with the *Irish Independent* in 2008 that his parents had formed an unlikely bond with their kidnappers, and he believed they had hoped they would never be caught. Although the family had expected a ransom demand, it seemed the Earl and Countess had been kidnapped by a breakaway group of the IRA wanting to influence British policy towards IRA hunger strikers in Irish jails, who did not seek a ransom.²¹

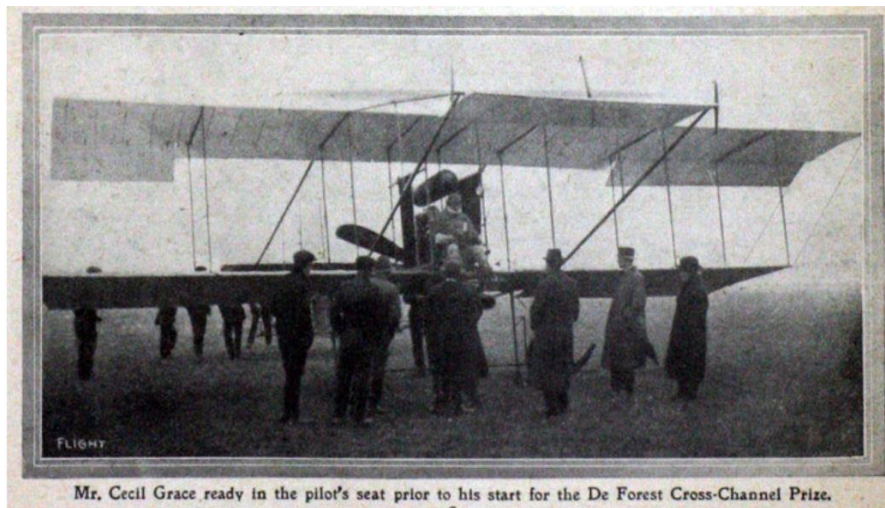
²⁰ *Birmingham Daily Post* 5 June 1974

²¹ *Irish Independent* June 15 2008 <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/couple-formed-unlikely-bond-with-kidnappers-26454119.html>



Cecil Grace
Collection of Jean Pierre Lauwers

A curious and sad incident occurred in the life of Michael Grace just before World War 1. In late December 1910 his nephew Cecil, son of his brother John William Grace, disappeared while crossing the channel in an aircraft²². Cecil Grace was an early aviator and had been trying to secure Maurice de Forest's Baron de Forest prize of £4000 to the first Englishman to fly an English built aircraft across the channel, landing as far into Europe as possible (Cecil Grace had become a naturalised British citizen in 1883). On December 22 1910 Cecil Grace managed to fly from Swingate Downs, near Dover, to Calais. However, unfavourable weather conditions meant he could get no further and he decided to abandon the attempt and return to England. He never arrived. An aircraft had been spotted by the North Goodwin Lightship about six miles off the Kent coast, but that was the last sighting. On 6 January 1911 a pair of aviator's goggles and a cap were washed ashore in Belgium and in March that year a body was found near the same beach. Decomposition meant it could not be positively identified as that of Grace, but hope that he was alive seems to have dwindled and he was declared dead that month.



Mr. Cecil Grace ready in the pilot's seat prior to his start for the De Forest Cross-Channel Prize.
Cecil Grace prepares for his doomed flight in an effort to win the Baron de Forest Prize. December 22, 1910. Photo Credit: Flight

A further tragedy struck In August 1917, soon after the Grace family had left Battle. Michael Grace's eldest daughter, Elisa Mercedes Beaumont, drowned while swimming in a lake in Italy. Her husband, Hubert was at the time serving in the Army at the Front while Mrs Beaumont had been working with the Red Cross in Italy.²³ Elisa had apparently been swimming with her son when she was swept out to sea. Her son was saved, but unfortunately she was not. Comparisons were made to the death by drowning of Lady Webster earlier that year and possible connections were made to the tradition of the

²² *Bexhill Observer* 24 December 1910

²³ *New York Times* 17 August 1917



“curse” of the last Abbot of Battle, that the future owners of the Abbey would meet their deaths by water or fire.²⁴

Michael Grace did not live long after he gave up the tenancy of Battle Abbey in 1916. By 1920 he regularly spent time at his home in Florida – he appears here on the American Census of that year - while continuing to travel regularly between the UK and America. He died suddenly in September 1920 at the home of his daughter, the Countess of Donoughmore, having just returned from deer-stalking in Scotland. In 1986 his Granddaughter, Peggie Phipps Boegner, wrote in *Halcyon Days: An American Family Through Three Generations*, that she recalled her Grandfather (“Grandpoods”) enjoying his time at Battle Abbey and the visits she and his other Grandchildren had made there. She says that “the place he really loved was Battle Abbey, in Sussex”. She describes Michael Grace as:

“small and round, with pink cheeks, bright blue eyes, and a sparkling look. Without the slightest effort on his part he charmed everyone and made them feel that they were of the utmost importance. He lavished his affections on his four daughters and nine grandchildren. Each one of us secretly felt that he or she was his favorite”

Later she tells how he visited Battle for one last time, recounting how, after stopping to go into a shop, a crowd gathered round to “shake his hand and wish him well”, cited as a measure of his popularity in the town. She records his burial place as “in the churchyard at Battle Abbey, just across from the rose-garden”. In fact he was buried in Battle, but in the Cemetery, Marley Lane, where his grave can be seen today.



Michael Grace was a self-made millionaire who enjoyed a lifestyle which was very much of its time. He obviously loved the town of Battle and the social standing provided by his tenancy of the Abbey. He seems to have seen his role as a benefactor and wanted to share his wealth by employing local people and purchasing locally as well as entering fully the life

²⁴ *Sussex Agricultural Express* 24 September 1920



of the town. His grave no longer forms the impressive memorial to his wealth and influence which he intended, instead the current wildflower planting of the cemetery has the effect of reducing this one time symbol of a life of opulence and power in the story of Battle to the same status as the lives of the incumbents of the surrounding graves, giving equality in death, if not in life, to the inhabitants of Battle.

Georgina Doherty

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