



## How Battle Abbey passed from private to public ownership



*From the Strutt and Parker auction catalogue, 24 June 1976*

*Readers should note that the diary quoted below may contain some instances of language of the time which is not acceptable now, and it should be viewed in its historical context.*

### The beginning

Three families occupied the Abbey after the expulsion of the monks and its handing over to royal possession. There were at first the Brownes, later the Viscounts Montagu, who were given it in 1538 and remained owners until 1721. They also inherited Cowdray House near Midhurst and in the seventeenth century made that their country residence. Clearly it was a more comfortable house, but it meant that the Abbey probably remained unoccupied after the death of Viscountess Magdalen Montague in 1608.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Thomas Webster bought the Abbey estate, and with one interruption his family owned it until 1976. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw them fall on hard times thanks to their financial incapacity, brought on largely by unsuccessful gambling. In 1835 they sold all the old 'Muniments' including many ancient charters of the abbey and abbey estate, but by 1858 they had to sell the abbey and its estate. It went to Lord Harry Vane, soon the fourth and last Duke of Cleveland, who was one of the richest men in Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> See Adrian Hall, Sarah Hall and Keith Foord: Brownes, Montagues and Recusancy 1538 - 1629, at <https://battlehistorysociety.com/Documents/F13.pdf>



He renovated parts of it and built the library that we see today. He had no children. On the Duchess's death in 1901 the legatee put it up for sale and Sir Augustus Webster, the eighth baronet, bought it back. He had made a sensible marriage, to a woman whose Crossley family wealth came from a very successful carpet manufacturing business based in Yorkshire. He had none of the wild enthusiasm for losing money that had caused the family's loss of the Abbey more than forty years before.

The Websters chose not to live at the Abbey, however. We do not know the reasons. They preferred Powdermill House, a most attractive and rather more modern property outside the town that until 1874 had been the centre of gunpowder-making at Battle. It is now an hotel.



*Powdermill House in 1976*

They then leased the Abbey to tenants. The first was Michael Grace, an Irish-American businessman who left not long before he died in 1920.<sup>2</sup> Then in 1918/19 it was leased to Paul Waterkeyn, a Belgian businessman engaged in an ultimately unsuccessful battle with the Government over what he maintained was a very large sum owned to him for the supply of munitions. In 1922 the last tenant – still there – was Battle Abbey School, originally St Etheldreda's girls' school at Bexhill. Some of the school building was burned down in a fire in 1931, mainly the Abbot's Hall, but it was carefully restored by Sir Harold Breakspear.

The last Websters had a son and two daughters. The son was killed in the First World War, and as there were no male heirs to the baronetcy to be found anywhere it became extinct when Sir Augustus died in 1923 at the age of only 59.

The property was left to Lucy, Sir Augustus' elder daughter. However, when it became apparent that she had mental health problems, the control of the property was put in the hands of the trustees of the Battle Abbey Settled Estate, whose main task was to make sure

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<sup>2</sup> See Georgina Doherty: The Grace family, at <https://battlehistorysociety.com/Documents/O19.pdf>



that it was financially in good order and that both daughters, were adequately supported. But maintaining the estate was no easy task, given the difficulties being experienced by agriculture between the wars, even with the regular income from the school.

So in September 1923 21 lots were offered for sale, including two butcher's shops and 26 cottages in the town. In December 1923 the second sale was held, for parts of the estate at and around Bexhill, a total of 835 acres. They were followed with a further 2365 acres in March 1924: the sales particulars inviting bids listed

TWENTY-ONE 21 DAIRY FARMS With Good Houses and Buildings, held Yearly, Numerous Small Holdings. Valuable Accommodation and Building Lands. Thirty-two Houses and Cottages. The Wellington Inn [at] Battle, The Battle Fruit Farms., A Fully-Licensed Market House. Ground Rents. Corn Warehouse. Coal Stores and Wharfs. Allotments and Extensive Woodlands.

Most of the properties were in Battle itself.

The last sale before 1976 was held in June 1926 and were for 45 lots, mostly more distant but they included the Drill Hall in North Trade Road (where the telephone exchange now is) and the cattle market (Market Square) as well as any that had failed to sell earlier.

These four sales meant a very great reduction in the estate and offered considerable possibilities for development by others; at that time there was an enormous increase in the private development of land and the trustees might be tempted into further sales, but if so they resisted. In 1935 the new town plan declared the lands close to the Abbey private land not for development. This meant that the new Rural District Council would reject any proposal for their development, but not of others.

But from then 1926 the trustees ran the estate successfully, and at some point around 1969 managed to remove the real owner, Lucy Webster, from her legal position. As a certified lunatic her affairs had been overseen by the Master of Lunacy (and then the Court of Protection), a requirement that had added to the legal complexities of managing the estate.

The trustees' decision to sell in 1976 initially provoked anger in the person of the one sane daughter Evelyn ('Pickles'; her married name was Harbord, but she and her husband had separated) and of her elder son Godfrey. These were an odd pair. Evelyn had married and so officially was Mrs Harbord, but after divorce preferred at times to revert to her maiden name Webster. Godfrey often used the surname Webster and at times led people to believe that he was the ninth baronet – which, as baronetcies could descend only through the male line, he could never be. Evelyn had little money but behaved as a grand landowner and as far as she could she kept up appropriate appearances.

The UK was having a miserable time in the 1970s, both economically and politically. In 1974 the National Institute for Economic & Social Research made a report about the UK economy. Its conclusions made grim reading:



It is not often that a government finds itself confronted with a possibility of a simultaneous failure to achieve all four main policy objectives: adequate economic growth, full employment, a satisfactory balance of payments, and reasonable, stable prices.<sup>1</sup>

*Evelyn Webster, 1951*



Godfrey's obituary in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2003 described him as an idiosyncratic character ill-suited to life in a democratic era. He had little regard for the law and once in the High Court insulted the judge; on another at gunpoint he ordered people off a public footpath across Abbey lands. Neither had good relations with Godfrey's younger brother Simon or with each other.

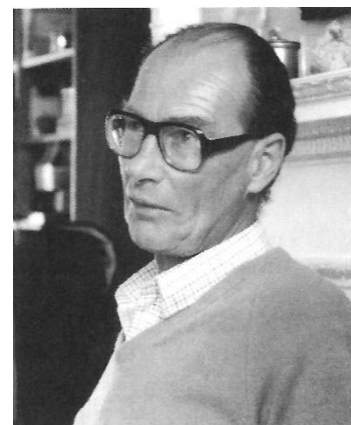


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**Godfrey V. Webster  
(Harbord)**

Left: by Bassano Ltd:  
half-plate film negative,  
13 September 1948. Given  
by Bassano & Vandyk  
Studios, 1974 © National  
Portrait Gallery, London

Right: **Godfrey  
Webster in later years**



Evelyn and Godfrey took rather different attitudes to the sale, much regretting the action but she coming round to it – probably because of the proceeds it would provide – and he behaving in his usual erratic ways, taking unsuccessful legal action to attempt to stop it.

The proposal to sell and to some extent the result of the sale also provoked considerable worries among the local population and among some people outside. The sale was one of the most important events affecting Battle since the Dissolution. It could have been a disaster.

But why sell it at all? One might think that after the sales of the 1920s there was sufficient income to keep the place in good order and to support the remaining family. But by 1975 the



situation had become critical. The crisis of the early decade had led to very high inflation – in 1976 still 16.9% – and oil prices remained high after OPEC had sharply raised them in 1973, giving rise among other things to petrol rationing. Industrial disputes were still widespread. There was very high government borrowing and a budget deficit. Taxes were very high, and there was talk of wealth taxes being imposed. Local authorities were coming under stress. Things were so bad that the UK was to go to the International Monetary Fund for a loan in September 1976.

## **The beginning of the end**

The trustees were well aware of the dangers facing the still large estate. When approached they referred to the increased costs of maintenance, insurance, rates and other things; they believed that the taxation policies of the then government – capital transfer taxes and the proposed wealth tax – made the breakup of estates inevitable within a very short time. Much to the resentment of the surviving Websters they were determined to sell. By then word had already got out.

Much of the following account of the sale comes from a document written by Mrs Ann Moore of Hancox in Whatlington and kindly lent by her. At the time she was a county councillor and a busy local historian, much committed to the Abbey going to someone with imagination and a real sense of history, willing and able to keep it open to the public, to preserve it and to respect the importance of what may have been the most significant moment in English history – in 1066. This did not look like something for the bureaucracy of Whitehall.

In the end all was well. After much argument as to whether the government agency concerned could run a house rather than archaeological remains, there was finally the creation of the body that runs the Abbey today. At the time most people thought it a close-run thing.

It had become clear during 1975 that the estate had a problem. The trustees were concerned that its income was too low to cover likely expenditure, and the remaining Websters were hardly likely to be colleagues in any effort to remedy matters. The two active ones were unpredictable, particularly in the case of Godfrey, and mutually hostile. Accordingly, in July 1975 the trustees announced that they were considering the future of the estate. In due course *The Times* reported that annual income from the 573 acres (232 hectares) was about £4108.

The announcement led to alarm. The income of the town depended very heavily on a tourist trade of which the Abbey was the principal driver. Something approaching panic produced the thought that a buyer might be a foreigner keen on his privacy and unaware of the estate's importance; he might shut the Abbey altogether and perhaps harm it irrevocably. Evelyn must have made things worse by saying that she had known the possibility of a sale since April three months before. Neither she nor Godfrey were regarded as anything other than unhelpful if not unreliable.



Robert Emeleus, a pharmacist and town councillor, had been early in reporting the possibility of a sale. The Round Table was to assess the prospects of an appeal against the Abbey trustees; the Town Council, with others, made it clear that the Abbey and battlefield must remain open to the public, and a charitable trust should be started to conduct an appeal for money; at least £500,000 would be needed.<sup>ii</sup>

Accordingly the 1066 Trust was established to keep watch on proceedings and if necessary to find a buyer who would act in the best interests of the town – and indeed of English history. The trustees' intentions were hard to achieve. Not only was a reliable private buyer hard to find at first, but understandably no-one knew what kind of price would be successful. Nevertheless preparation was needed. Richard Compton (of Rosaline dress shop, Battle) and Robert Emeleus were among the trustees.

Excerpts from Ann Moore's diary of the time, which must be the nearest we can get to the real story, are given below in smaller typeface, with her later annotations in italics. It exhibits the efforts made at Battle to ensure that a reliable bidder was found. It also illustrates the serious concerns of Battle and its locality that the 'wrong' kind or person or organisation might buy the Abbey. She reports a Trust meeting in mid-February 1976:

Jobling proposed setting up Study Group to produce aims and objects before any appeal, will take 3-4 months. With June auction that's pretty close but necessary if asking for money. "What we *must* ensure is that we don't just sit by, on auction day, while some American or Jap whisks it away." Group to include her [Ann]. Jack Hayward a possible donor, Richard Moore to try to approach him through Thorpe. My idea for a public meeting at Battle to tell people what was happening and have unity, very soon after 14.03 when Strutt and Parker will announce sale/terms.<sup>iii</sup>

Ten days later it was evident that the majority party on the East Sussex County Council were taking interest and expressed a wish to meet the Study Group. This was apparently the beginning of the Council's work that was to prove significant in the final result. Early in March, when the trustees' decision must have been known but no formal announcement had yet been made, a wider meeting took place among selected members of the Trust and the Council. This time Andrew Thorburn, the County Planning Officer, was there. There were too many possibilities for effective planning to be made and some scepticism about what could be done by the time of the auction in June. The two parties must keep in touch.

Ann Moore continues, reporting on the Study Group meeting:

Some progress. Interesting talk with Jobling in George afterwards – said I should write to Hayward.

The local Historical Society was represented and Ann Moore would be press officer.

On 2 March *The Times* reported that the sale would indeed be in June, and on 11 March came the formal announcement by the auctioneers Strutt and Parker that the sale would be on 24 June. Their press conference was:



so mishandled that the broadcasting media didn't even know of it. Spent the whole day battling to get our Press Statement out into their reluctant hands, or ears ... Battle is not on any BBC local area. Southampton TV only goes to (i.e. as far as) Brighton, Radio Brighton only goes to Seaford. When I asked the girl in London which our local TV station might be, if not Southampton, she said 'What about Plymouth?' I was not rendered speechless, but will not repeat what I said.

To London by car after lunch, dropped in my press statement at the reluctant Press Association (where I had to ring twice and practically *bludgeon* to get them to take it – they had decided not to carry the Battle Abbey story at all). Luckily able to park illegally just off Fleet St and go to 85, Reuters.

The announcement was met with objections in letters to *The Times* – “this hallowed piece of England” might be sold abroad, and Britain must buy it. It was feared that Ripley's of Toronto might buy it, a well-known amusement company; but perhaps the price would be too high.

Ann Moore again:

26.03.76 Wrote letter to Times about the site. An indignant American quite rightly written to deplore failure to save it for nation.

In April the *Daily Mirror* joined in. Ripley was a real possibility in what it called the new Battle of Hastings. Ripley's International, the Canadian company with their sights on Battle Abbey, ran waxworks museums in the USA and Canada. Chairman Alec Rigby, said: 'The estate could attract five times as many people if it is managed properly.' His company hoped to buy the site before it went for auction in June. But a spokesman for the estate agents handling the sale said: 'We would be highly unlikely to sell before the auction.' The *Daily Mail* printed that Ripley's might want to buy: 'this might bring American-style commercialism to the Sussex Downs ... a threat of battle burgers and conquest cookies. Ripley values the site at £500,000 – could be a commercial proposition. Might there also be Arab or French competition?'

By now it was clear that the Government was unwilling to buy the estate, the National Trust would not act without an endowment to support maintenance costs, and East Sussex County Council could not do so. The position looked desperate.

20.04.76 Overcome by fit of agitation at inaction of Trust, at her urging arranged mtg at Hancox with Compton, Robert, Philip Howe (treasurer). Useful – managed to register protest that Trust has done *nothing*. Agreed send brochure to all MPs and on what to say to Lee Pateman (local reporter for Sussex Express). Discussed sending something round to Battle papers, but no decision. Robert thinks all local people already know (am not convinced of this, nor Howe).

21.04.76 Pateman came, concocted reasonably good story. “Silly old Godman Irvine, our MP, wrote straight to Lady Birk, head of the Ancient Monuments section of the DoE [predecessor of English Heritage] asking if DoE would buy abbey – she said No. He really ought to know better than to ask a question like that. The only answer a Minister can give, off the cuff, is No, and that's very difficult to retreat from later. Depressing.”



22.04.76 Howe came in with all the leaflets for the MPs, Richard M to take them to London. He wants, and so do I, to send things (leaflets) round with the papers but Robert demurs – the leaflets are expensive (first 500 cost £25 – ludicrous. 2500 more done, how much she doesn't know.)

Mrs Webster rang me up great many times, on and on about the awfulness of the Trustees. Finally, in the evening, she rang to say DoE man had been at the abbey and told staff DoE was going to make compulsory purchase. Hardly likely to be true, but confusing. Told Philip and Robert. Cdn't sell newspaper leaflet idea to Robert. He'll ask Richard tomorrow.

23.04.76 Rang [Robin] Hodgson to ask him to confirm or deny the DoE story [he said it was untrue], and to ask what the Council would charge for an offset litho leaflet. Prompt answer 10 minutes later - £3-£6 per thousand for two sides. Rather a difference from Oliver's [printer in Lower Lake, Battle] printing charges!

... Evelyn Webster rang, not so repetitive as usual, and I gave her the news of the DoE which I think relieved her. She's been afraid of not getting her money. Rang John Hodgson, Mayor of Hastings [a County Councillor], who we should have rung before, I find, as he has been receiving quite a mail. ... the front page of the *Sussex Express* [had] ... a good big story (and well done) about the Abbey.

26.04.76 ... a call from Jobling. I told him we were making very little progress, and that I hoped to see some ESCC people tomorrow. Had a useful talk, and he told me to get R Compton's copy of the *aide memoire* he has done for Sir J Royden (who has had a coronary and is in hospital, so this evening's Study Group is cancelled) to read before tomorrow. To Richard C for a short talk and a drink.

27.04.76 The stupid House of Commons won't deliver our letters to MPs – or rather, the GPO has a monopoly so that they must all be stamped, even if posted in the House! Ludicrous. To Lewes ... Jenny Clayton of "Tonight" [BBC programme] rang at lunch time and made hopeful noises about a 1066 programme. She will ring again tomorrow. Talked 1066 with ... John Hodgson of Hastings. Then met Thorburn, M Taylor and H Aris to talk 1066. I had spoken to Robin Hodgson. We want them [ESCC] to underwrite us for £23,000 to start fundraising, but I think the answer will be No to that. Apart from that, we talked quite interestingly about their role and ours [i.e. ESCC – 1066 Trust]. I get the feeling that they know more than they say, and though their manner is confident, their words are not particularly optimistic. Their tactic seems to be to wait until [June] 24th [the date of the auction] and assume a) that no-one will buy it (which I have always thought probable) or b) if a private purchaser does, to negotiate with him, or acquire by compulsory purchase. But when I ask them if they think they can find the money for this, they say they don't know how they can. So what next? And how do we keep public interest alive and kicking meanwhile? For their view is that if one begins fundraising, one has to name a price, produce a feasibility study, give information about possible income, all of which is "dynamite" in Thorburn's words – i.e. would inflate the price hopelessly. Meanwhile they and Rother [District Council] are making it clear that every possible Planning restriction is being slapped on. Herbert Aris drove me home and we dropped some Trust leaflets (done for us by ESCC) on Howe on our way.

29.04.76 Jenny Clayton [BBC] rang and made hopeful noises – they want to do a programme on the history of Battle Abbey and the problems of ownership, future etc of such places. Sounds sensible and good.

30.04.76 Long conversation with Mrs Webster on the phone. She wept over the Abbey sale, but then raised her fine old spirit again by bursting into fresh anger at the [Abbey] Trustees.





She had just rung off when she rang again to say Simon [Harbord] had an American millionaire willing to buy the whole property, and would I come to tea with them tomorrow? I rather feel I'll believe it when I see it but it will be interesting.

In the evening a meeting of the Trust with Jobling, which went on, quite profitably, till about 11.15. Sir John Royden has died, which creates Chairmanship problems for the Study Group. Yesterday Richard C asked me if I'd do it, but I said I was quite unsuitable as it needs business contacts and experience. So they got Aris to tide them over for tonight, and are hoping to prevail on Sir Peter Allen to do it.

01.05.76 I went to Powdermill at 4.0 and found Simon and Mrs W. Very far from being an American millionaire, I found I was to meet one Tony Richards, who is American but who is married to Simon's half sister, i.e. Charles Harbord's daughter, and is also employed by Wells International. He has persuaded Simon of the virtues of the idea Jobling put up last night i.e. to persuade the Abbey Trustees to withdraw the Abbey and the Battlefield from the market, to make it into a Trust so that the 1066 Trust could raise money for it by fundraising, and set up a Development Trust to run it thereafter. The conversation was strangely triangular – I sat on the sofa with Tony, and Simon and his mother sat opposite, but screened from each other by a vase of rhododendrons, so that, with her deafness, Mrs W couldn't really hear what Simon was saying. "Let Ann say it," she kept saying, "she says it much more clearly. Simon mumbles so." And she couldn't really keep her mind on the argument, but rather pathetically kept rambling off on to the misdeeds of the Estate Trustees, or on to the repairs that were needed at the Abbey. However they agreed heartily with Tony Richards' scheme – I *think* Mrs W understood – and Simon is to approach the Abbey Trustees, with the backing of Stephen Terrell QC, who will do it for nothing. I do see certain drawbacks. Simon is not a beneficiary except in expectancy, after Godfrey [who was childless]. Godfrey is [a beneficiary], and may well not agree (he is said to be furious with us for trying to get the Abbey for the public, and threatens to sue!). Secondly, they are thinking in terms of a financial rake-off from profits and this is only doubtfully possible under a Trust. I am also by no means certain of Jobling's part in all this. Richard C told me that he knew of the family connection and so before they took Jobling on they made him swear he'd have no contact with the family. Now I *believe* Simon said his father had been talking to him – and certainly I believe that this is the one feasible solution Jobling sees, apart from sitting it out on June 24th and hoping no-one will buy.

*The 1066 Trust decided to try to get a number of leading figures to sign a letter to The Times – Sir Roy Strong (National Portrait Gallery), Lady Longford, Malcolm Muggeridge, the Bishop of Chichester, Cardinal Hume, Hope Muntz (author of The Golden Warrior, on the Battle of Hastings), Edward Carpenter (Dean of Westminster), Dr Alec Vidler, Lord Henley, the Duke of Grafton, the Marquess of Abergavenny (Lord Lieutenant of East Sussex), Earl of Antrim (National Trust), Professor Asa Briggs (Sussex University). England was now in the grip of the hottest driest summer for many years.*

*During this period an American TV company came over to do a programme, and filmed me at home.*

By the end of April, however, Ripley's had withdrawn, but no Briton had appeared. Neither Mecca nor Pleasurama expressed an interest – which no doubt pleased those who wanted to see a 'serious' owner.

03.06.76 An informal meeting of the Trust in the Queen's Head [Sedlescombe] tonight. Some replied back from the letter we want people to sign for *The Times*. Quite a good meeting, and improved Robert's morale which was rather low.

It was then reported that the Earl of Lonsdale<sup>iv</sup> was prepared to bid, and the Government let it be known that a group of Americans were interested in buying it and then giving it to



them. This led to a secret Government decision to buy, made by Peter Shore, the Secretary of State for the Environment.

06.06.76 Boiling hot. Lord Lonsdale (James Lowther) is apparently interested in the Abbey. He sounds reliable from his Cumbrian record. We are to meet him, in conditions of the utmost secrecy, on Thursday.

09.06.76 [Lewes] Saw [Bill] Lanning and told him of our projected meeting with Lonsdale which interested him. He also talked of the possibilities of excavating on the Vindolanda principles – a supervised dig done by schoolchildren and students. [In the evening] I picked up Emil Godfrey's architectural report on the Abbey.

*Emil Godfrey, of Lewes architects Godfrey & Macfadyean, adviser to the Sussex Archaeological Society, had undertaken a survey of the structural condition of the Abbey, free of charge. The 'Canadian Foundation' referred to in the next entry was The Imperial Heritage Trust, through a Donald Stewart.*

10.06.76 Went to Stream House, which is on Netherfield Hill, nearly opposite Le Rette farm, the house of a Miss Phil Rance [or Rounce], a theatrical agent, also a friend of Lord Lonsdale, who had arranged the meeting. Richard C, Robert and one Keith Datchelor who manages Beech Farm [Netherfield] were there.

Lord Lonsdale turned up, smallish, thinnish and active ... intelligent and quick to take up points, including times when he didn't appear at first to have taken in a chance remark, but would return to it later ... His ideas for Battle seem sound. He has talked to the National Trust about some form of covenant, the effect of which I assume would be to safeguard it for the public, though he would run it and be responsible for it. He had seen Godfrey [Webster] and evidently sized him up. "What a family! What an incredible family!" he kept saying. Had also, on arrival (greeted by Southern TV cameras on the platform) plunged straight into the woods, talked to Doug Crouch who makes hurdles in Powdermill Wood on Richards Hill, and who had no idea who he was talking to. When asked if they could leave the car there, he replied briefly he didn't suppose they'd be in the way. [Lord Lonsdale] rushed off to meet the rest of his entourage at the Pilgrim's Rest.



**James Hugh William Lowther, 7th Earl of Lonsdale** by Bassano Ltd; half-plate film negative, 11 November 1958. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Just as we were going, back came Phil saying he wanted us to join him for coffee. So off we went, rustled up Richard C. from the shop and joined them for coffee and hock in the Pilgrim's Rest – so much for secrecy! I talked to his associate, [Victor] Sandelson, also related by marriage (who I later realised was probably at Cambridge with me), and not as much as I wished to his agent who I think counts for a good deal. Jim Woodhams [Battle land agent] was also there as he used to manage the Estate and could answer questions on forestry. I probed further – or rather, Lonsdale probed further and I advanced, I hope, my own thesis –

on the degree of ESCC co-operation and the indication that this would be in ratio to the amount of consultation with them. I talked more about the archaeological aspects, repeated Bill Lanning's



ideas on Vindolanda (for which he'd been in part responsible). This produced instant interest, as Lord L knew it well, as indeed he knew Thorburn's work on the Cheshire Linear Park.

At about 10 to 4 they all flocked off to see Mrs Webster which gratified her very much. She later rang me up, pleased, but a little grand about it. "Weren't they in Coal, a couple of generations back?" She felt it was thoughtful of him to call.<sup>v</sup>

11.06.76 Lanning was out so I told Robin Hodgson such as I could of the fruits of our meeting with Lonsdale. He was most interested. There is also a Canadian Foundation willing to put up either the purchase price or the endowment [for the National Trust, presumably], so we managed to get a meeting of minds between these two.

Our letter to *The Times* has tiresomely fallen between 2 stools – Muntz, Carpenter and Vidler will; Henley, Grafton and Abergavenny will if all the others do. Hume might if his arm was twisted, Antrim and Strong can't because of their positions, Chichester won't because he's not sure of our credentials, no answer from Asa Briggs, Lady Longford or Muggeridge. So I have written again to the uncertain to try to persuade them. Tuesday must be our deadline.

*In the end we got most of the remaining signatures but had to abort the letter as Hume and Abergavenny wouldn't sign unless the others did. Antrim and Strong couldn't and Chichester wouldn't.*

16.06.76 Rang Andrew Thorburn, as he felt we weren't keeping in touch. Told him all we knew of Lonsdale, and of the Canadian Foundation. He told me that they [ESCC] had an American one also interested but wouldn't tell me its name, but at least we found we weren't both speaking of the same person.

17.06.76 1066 Trust. Nothing really new, but that Sandelson will manage the Abbey if Lonsdale acquires it, and at present all dealings are to be through him. I knew this as I had a nice letter from the Earl this morning saying this and giving me his number, and also more importantly saying that he would set up a local consultative committee.

18.06.76 Rang Thorburn to tell him Sandelson would be in touch. Asked if he could tell the name of the Americans but he said he couldn't. Annoyingly I'd lost me bargaining position as they'd found out the name of our Canadians. Andrew [Thorburn] at one stage expressed doubts as to the motives of the Americans which is worrying.

19.06.76 To "Rosaline" [Richard C's dress shop] to meet a representative of the Canadian Foundation, a Mrs Bradshaw ... and we "sold" the interesting architecture and archaeology of the Abbey to her. We hope that the foundation may provide the "cream" needed to top up Lonsdale's money and so make the Abbey safe, but there may be technical problems in getting their money here [i.e. across the Atlantic] in time.

19.06.76 [date unsure] Rang Michael Taylor, who told me a bundle of news. He can't tell me the name of the American, though he said he's asked and was told No. But he told me as follows: "He" (i.e. presumably a man with a Foundation in his power, not vice versa) will buy the Abbey and present it to the Queen in a posh ceremony – for this reason doesn't want to share with anyone, or e.g. support Lonsdale against the horrid commercial Ripley's [a private commercial concern rumoured to be a potential bidder]. (He only wants Lots 1 & 2 [the Abbey and the Battlefield], but ESCC wants him to bid for the whole). But, it's not an open cheque, there is a limit and this is



based on “all our valuations and these come out roughly the same figure” - £500,000? Ours [i.e. the Trust’s] is £600,000 but that is thought to be high. The County Council is then to run it. So here is the empire building, and this is why they have, until now, told us less than they knew – for I have long felt they knew *something*, they some idea of what was in the wind. This man (?) has refused to talk to Lonsdale, which makes me dread they’ll defeat each other in bidding and leave the field to evil Ripley’s. Rang Richard C. and told him, then rang Victor Sandelson and told him. We thought it might possibly be Jack Hayward, I suggested perhaps the man could be made to cooperate by an honour, or something. Victor seemed to have an inner confidence some weeks ago. If so, they jolly well should have let us have S. thought this a good idea and he’d see what he could do.

In the evening Richard C. rang again to say the National Trust told him it was the Philadelphia or Philadelphic Society. Told Sandelson, who said he’d get cracking.

22.06.76 Victor Sandelson rang me first thing to say that Lonsdale was determined to get the Abbey, was willing to go up to £640,000 or £650,000, but couldn’t manage more, possibly. Also that he’d put in a bid on Friday, on the understanding that if it was in before noon [that day] it would be accepted, for £640,000, but that the Trustees wouldn’t have it. He was bitterly disappointed. Very low conduct by the Trustees (or by Strutt & Parker?), as Hillary (of S&P) will now presumably alert other buyers. Strutt & Parker’s valuation is £480,000, and the reserve, I suppose, below that (though someone has mentioned £520,000) so if Hillary has not told the Philadelphian, let us hope that this is the target they have in mind. Sandelson says this is Lonsdale’s uttermost and cannot go beyond that, nor is it commercially viable. Canadian money will not be available in time to add the cream. He says Lonsdale is reasonably confident as Philadelphia only wants Lots 1 and 2, but I warned him that the Country was urging him to bid for the whole, and not to be complacent about it.

I set a few more wheels in motion ... to find out more about Philadelphia, and have so far discovered it is an antiquarian society (with funds), very respectable, and recently addressed by the Duke of Gloucester. Connected with a man called Vaux. I hope to learn more tomorrow. Battle Abbey on Tonight. An amusing piece of TV, even more amusing for locals., I imagine, but useless as to serious content. They dwelt almost entirely on the Webster follies, giving both Pickle and Godfrey plenty of rope to hang themselves, which they did – especially Godfrey.

23.06.76 Managed to get a catalogue from Richard C. which is our entrée to the Auction tomorrow. He told me that Andrew Gordon, [Abbey Trustee], told him it is the Philosophical Society of America who is involved. So more ringing round, I suppose.

Rang Andrew Thorburn to see if I could find out anything. He seemed to think their people *had* collapsed, but then [I] found that Robin Beechey [Chief Executive, ESCC] was even then on his way to London for a meeting. “With the Philosophical Society?” “Not necessarily” he replied with some hesitation (I forgot to say that this morning after Richard C. told me I rang Sandelson and told him. Not sure if this is one Society or two. He is trying to get the DoE to ban sale to a foreigner. Says they [DoE] are sympathetic, and tell him that Ripley’s have dropped out. No-one takes Wylton-Dickson [of Ripley’s] seriously).

He (Andrew) said, If only one knew what Lonsdale’s price would be. I said I knew, but wild horses wouldn’t drag it out. He reacted strongly, and gratifyingly, to this, and began to fish to find out. I wouldn’t say. Rather unflatteringly, he said “I wonder why he told you?”, hinting, I think, that it



was with the intention of passing it on. I wouldn't. He seemed to think that Robin ought to talk to Sandelson, so I have him the number.

24.06.76 Boiling hot [about 90 degrees in London]. Caught the 11.0 train. [After lunch] to the Mayfair Hotel where the commissionaire was very affable, thinking no doubt that we might be millionaires come to bid. Met Andrew Thorburn smiling like a Cheshire cat (which in a sense, I suppose, he is), which made me feel he'd fixed something. Met Richard C. Got seats in the auditorium, fairly near the front next to Thorburn and Michael Taylor, though later they moved up and we got separated by one or two. Richard C. had a rumour that Lonsdale had withdrawn, which I doubted, remembering the terms in which Sandelson had spoken to me, and soon in came Sandelson, and later Lonsdale was there, and so was the agent, and a bevy of advisers. It was immensely hot, in spite of air conditioning, with TV lights, and there were batteries of pressmen about.

I forgot to say that last night Mrs Harbord (Webster) told me that Godfrey had made an application to a judge in chambers for an injunction to stop the sale. Quite futile – without her consent – and advised against by Godfrey's own solicitor, whom he promptly abandoned in favour of another. It was refused, but he appeared in the paper this morning as "the man who is leading the Save Battle Abbey campaign". This morning he gave a press conference, and now, just before the sale, the auctioneer (one Col. Judd) gave the platform to an appalling smoothy called Matthew Thompson-Royd who said he spoke for this "Campaign – formed 48 hours ago" and then read out a load of meaningless guff about saving Battle Abbey for posterity. Godfrey was about, looking important, though he didn't speak, and Simon was there. He and Godfrey talked together once. Lots of the idle curious from Battle ... were there [including] Power-Berry of the Town Council ... and Jim Woodhams, no doubt hoping to act for a client if separate lots were sold.

Various fiddle-faddles and technicalities and then the bidding prepared to begin, Lonsdale looking tense and nervous. Dead silence, then a starter from somewhere at the back for £450,000. It went up by big jumps at first – Lonsdale offered £500,000. Then a tall man with a white beard standing in the shadows to [our] right joined in. As it went up, the steps went down, eventually to £2,500, an odd proceeding, and odder still, the bearded bidder occasionally shouted out bids that were not of the correct interval. The auctioneer quite often [got] muddled, talked of "£65,000", asked for the same bid twice, and once was confused as to whose bid was whose.

The price went up near Lonsdale's limit – Sanderson bidding – and my heart started hammering, but he kept steadily on. At about £670,000 it was nearly knocked down to him – "£670,000 once ..." and my hopes leapt high, but back came the beard. Jerkily it went up through the 670s and 680s, Sandelson shaking his head once or twice, but after a conference with Lonsdale went on again, a sitting target for the beard. At last Lonsdale stuck at £687,000 - £37,000 over his limit – and the beard gave £690,000. And the ivory hammer came down, and that was that. The photographers crowded round while Col. Judd tried to get them back, as he said he had an announcement to make. Who was the purchaser? Was it Ripley's? I leant forward and looked at Andrew, who smiled and nodded and winked. I looked at John Lovill [leader of ESCC] who was sitting in front of us (with Robin Beechey and a white-haired man). 'Is he one of yours?' I asked. 'Yes', John mouthed back at me, 'DoE, but don't say'. I was amazed – after all their stonewalling. Then Judd announced 'The Battle Abbey Estate has been bought by the Government.' Gasps, clapping, all rather muddles as to whether this was or was not a Good Thing ... 'with generous assistance from American donors who wish to remain anonymous at present'. Then chaos. The odious Thompson-Royd tried to speak again, and I, furious, rushed up to Richard C. to get him to



assert himself. Robin Beechey met me, grinning, but I said 'I think this is a bad result' and his face fell. I felt cruel, he was like a child with a new toy.

The confusion of people and reporters and heat make it hard to remember. Simon was overjoyed – a good price too – though Godfrey said it was too little. I tracked down the odious Thompson-Royd, and said that if he was really concerned about the Abbey he should have joined the Campaign months ago, like us, and not 24 hours ago. 'Not 24 hours', he solemnly corrected me, '48 hours ago'. So after a futile talk, like arguing with a marshmallow, he said 'Chacon à son gout' and I said 'Well, it's not to my taste. I think it's despicable.' Then I commiserated with Sandelson, and Miss Rounce who appeared rather gloomy. He was obviously disappointed but he said he was glad for the nation. I said yes, but was sorry it would be run by a public authority which lacked the excitement and imagination of a private owner. I then found Lonsdale, very warm and friendly. 'Ah, Ann', he said, and introduced me to his wife. I commiserated and thanked him for all his hard work, and he was sorry, but said he was glad it was for the nation. His agent said it was great compensation to have met so many nice people in Battle.

Then gradually wended our way out, having to shake hands all the way with our odious MP Godman Irvine. In the hotel lounge were the ESCC people, Taylor and Lovill, and Beechey and Thorburn, with the white haired man who turned out to be Ditchfield of the DoE, and a ... young man ... who was acting for the Americans. Robin Beechey asked me why [I had said it was a bad result]. I said I preferred things run by private individuals – with safeguards – rather than by public authorities, and that Lonsdale would have done this, and the whole thing was unnecessary. Not well received.

I was introduced to Ditchfield ... Then Lee Pateman offered me a drink – only shandy to be had – and I helped him a bit with his story for the *Sussex Express*, and told him that the Americans were either the Philosophical Society or the Philadelphia Society, at which he was in high gee and ran off to the phone to add it to his story. Then another pressman came along and said 'Lee, what are these 'philosophers'?' 'No idea', said Lee, 'don't know anything about it'.

Robin Beechey joined us, and Lee departed. – Robin full of the desire to chat, so pleased with himself, and told me a good deal about his to-ing and fro-ing, and talks in high places. A man at the next table began to flap his ears and presently joined in – disappointed to learn that Robin was not Jeremy Francis but nonetheless eager to hear our talk, and asked questions. Robin, with a curious imperviousness to the inessential, seemed obsessed with the idea that both he, and Bowyer the man who hid [the beard], were Battle people – Bowyer had once worked for James Woodhams, and he [JW] was very surprised when he recognised him. This seemed to me to be only mildly interesting, and certainly not Press Association level – the man was a P A man. Home late, and found that the *Daily Mail* and Today [BBC] had both tried for me.



***Ann Moore in celebratory mode***  
Courtesy Charlotte Moore



## After the sale

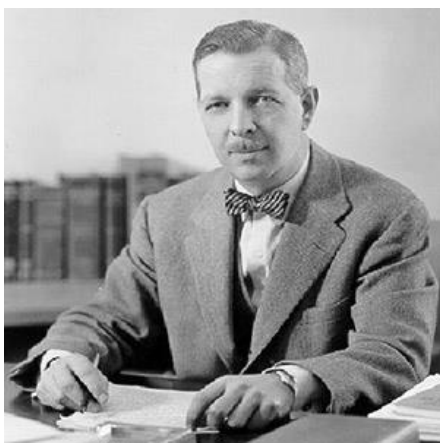
25.06.76 Awake early, and rang 'Today' but too late. Spoke to Mrs Webster later who is wholly delighted. It hasn't occurred to her she is much less likely to get humane treatment under this regime, and naturally I didn't enlighten her.

On the same day the *Daily Mail* reported that Lonsdale regretted that Britain could not save the battle site without outside assistance but added: 'Had I known who that other chap was I would not have kept bidding against the nation. As it is, I got what I wanted – without paying for it'.

Nevertheless there was a measure of anger at the fact that it had taken overseas money to make the purchase. Victor Sandelson wrote in *The Times* of his "suspension of belief ... bought and sold on the open market like any ordinary piece of real estate ... the shameful state of a Britain that cannot even afford its national treasures".

A letter from the President of the British Antique Dealers Association pointed out that the Greater London Council was considering subsidising Chelsea Football Club with public money: 'Must the yahoos always win, and do we, as a nation, really deserve to survive?' There was concern that the American money might have come with unpublished conditions, and the Government stated that there were none.

It was only a short time before it was clear who had raised the money. In August the names of Julian Parks Boyd and Eugene Barnum Power were revealed, both distinguished academics and not mere money-getters. Boyd (1907-99) was the librarian at Princeton, professor of history and author and editor of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.



**Julian Parks Boyd, Hon. CBE (1903-1980)**

Anonymous author, via Wikimedia Commons

Power, of the University of Michigan, (1905-95) was a microfilm pioneer and an honorary Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, who had put his expertise and money to helping to ensure the preservation of rare books and manuscripts in the British Museum and other museums during the Second World War; in 1977 he was awarded an honorary KBE for this work.



**Eugene Barnum Power, Hon. KBE (1905-1993)** Image Courtesy of the Washtenaw County Historical Society via Ann Arbor District Library <https://aadl.org/>: Image cropped

After the auction they had said: ‘This action was taken during the bi-centennial year of the United States to the important historical and cultural ties between America and the United Kingdom. We believe that such an act is only appropriate at this time. The people of the United Kingdom have been generous and supportive of our national celebration and we believe that it is important to make clear that the ties of affection and respect go in both directions across the Atlantic’.<sup>vi</sup>

*What happened was that (while the temperature rocketed through the 90s) it soon became clear that the Government did not have cash in hand for the full purchase price. It had used the American donations as “cream” to outbid Lonsdale although the transfer formalities had not been completed – which Lonsdale had scrupulously refused to do in respect of the promised Canadian money. After many exertions the 1066 Trust, through personal approaches to the Minister, Lady Birk, and the good offices of Lord Abergavenny (who promised to contact the Duke of Grafton) was able to persuade the DoE not to sell the whole of the remaining Battle Abbey Estate. It retained both the Pilgrim’s Rest – a mediaeval building, former Almonry, next to the Great Gate, and The Stumblets, a piece of rough land behind the Abbey but not classified as part of the Battlefield, which is crossed by a public footpath and much enjoyed by walkers. I asked Lady Birk to let the Town Council have it as permanent open space for the people of Battle, which she did. I also persuaded her of the importance of local consultation over the running of the Abbey as it is such an integral part of the town. She accordingly set up the Battle Abbey Advisory Committee, with local representative – Town Council, District and County Councils, local amenity societies, local comprehensive school, CPRE etc. This was unique for the DoE then, and may still be so for English Heritage. Robin Beechey was hailed as “the man who saved Battle Abbey”. A number of County Councillors expressed disquiet, and a member of the ESCC Senior Management Team remarked privately “I cannot understand how a Conservative council can agree to Andrew Thorburn’s ambitions to get more and more within the Council’s control. Meanwhile there was a grand thankyou party.*

## Afterwards

22.10.76 On October 13th came the splendid celebration party in the Abbot’s Hall. Abergavenny (Lord Lieutenant) and [Tom] Mynors [Chair of the ESCC] were hosts, Peter Shore [Sec of State for the Environment] and all the American donors except the anonymity were guests of honour, and the rest were Battle worthies, Souvenir Normande and selected County Councillors.





Champagne flowed like water and it was colossal fun. I talked to Shore, who is even more limp and wet in the flesh than on TV. I ladled out butter and soft soap, and he swallowed it all, wreathed in fatuous smiles. I talked to a civil servant with an unmemorable name who told me he was Ditchfield's and Lipmann's [DoE civil servants] boss.

*Wells had proposed a Management Plan involving a Development Trust but this came to nothing as Beechey and Thorburn had been given to understand by the DoE that if the Government bought the Abbey, they (ESCC) would be allowed to run it. This never happened. This idea, headed by Robin Beechey, sagged during the 1970s Callaghan Government, was revived again under Thatcher, but was finally killed off in the early 1990s.*

22.10.76 [referring to an earlier meeting] ... Andrew T told me much that was interesting: that if the DoE runs the Abbey, all net receipts will go to the Treasury and not necessarily come back to the Abbey; that though v.g. on the ancient-monuments side, they have notion of promotion, interpretation of the wider educational and interpretative processes and indeed this is outside their remit. Andrew is running it [Abbey] for them for a year, recycling the receipts through a special fund and making darn sure there is no surplus to go to the Treasury. He hopes, I think, for a permanent arrangement on these lines and so is not in favour of our plan though he 'sees the merit' in it. In short, he would be for it if it was his best chance, and certainly is prepared to help us in so far as we both want the management to be independent of civil servants. His great objection – so far expressed – to our scheme is that as the DoE have never done it before they won't listen to it.

*At the celebration party I put this to Ditchfield's boss, who said the DoE was certainly prepared to listen, but to no avail.*

*Later that autumn we (1066 Trustees) were invited to meet an American woman representing the US Royal Oak Foundation, which had been drafted in to facilitate the transfer of funds from America. She told us, with considerable indignation, that the Foundation was being 'used' by the UK Government to legitimate and hasten the transfer, overriding (she said) the then fairly complex and time-consuming rules and restrictions on getting funds from North America to the UK. On November 9th there was a public meeting in the Abbot's Hall addressed by Ditchfield of the DoE and Andrew Thorburn, demonstrating (very well) how the DoE ran ancient monuments, and explaining their plans for the Abbey. One questioner asked why the DoE had been against Lonsdale, and got no satisfactory answer. After that the 1066 Trust continued for a long time to work, for a more responsive management structure, but in the end had to give up as it had no ESCC support.*

Webster was allowed a last event at the Abbey, in commemoration of his family's long ownership.

He "was allowed to preside over a white tie ball at the Abbey just before it changed hands. Taking over the entire ground floor, he invited some 150 friends and acquaintances.

"As the guests enjoyed champagne and a buffet supper, and danced to two bands, Webster looked on serenely from the Abbot's chair. English Heritage - which was to take over the running of the Abbey - had flooded the place with security guards during the party for fear that it might be burned down, or otherwise damaged, during the festivities.

"Some said English Heritage was mindful of the curse laid on Battle by the monks at the



Dissolution; others that they were concerned lest Webster took some form of revenge for the loss of his 'heritage'".<sup>vii</sup>

He left Battle very shortly, going to an estate in Brazil; he did not return. His mother lived in London to 1988 and his aunt Lucy in homes to 1989. The Webster line continues through Godfrey's brother Simon, but not at Battle.

Very soon the DoE sold some of what it had bought, for in December 1976 it sold Powdermill House, soon to become a hotel, with gardens and woodland (43 acres); three cottages near it, Tower Hill farmhouse (the four properties amounting to seven acres); further land (67 acres); Down Barn Farm (148 acres); Powdermill Wood (97 acres) and Farthing Pond (7 acres): a total of just under 362 acres. The sale reached £221,350, a substantial contribution to the Government's expenditure beyond the Americans' June contribution of some £250,000.

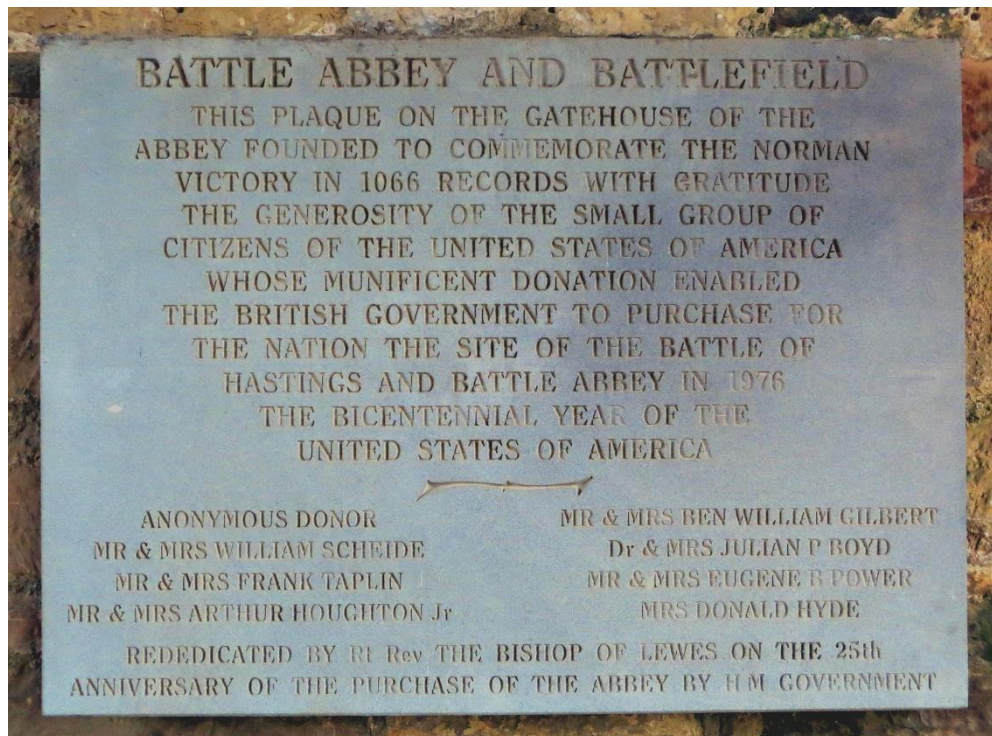
A problem for the DoE was that it had no arrangements for properties of the kind that the Abbey represented: it and its predecessor the Ministry of Works rarely had old buildings and had concentrated on archaeology. Two days after the auction *The Times* reported that the DoE was soon to start negotiation with local authorities about the future of the estate and which authority should manage it. It took time for its brief to include housing and for English Heritage to be established. But in due course all the aims of the 1066 Trust were to be satisfied.

The names of the individual American benefactors are now commemorated on a plaque inside the Abbey gateway: Mr and Mrs William Scheide, Mr and Mrs Frank Taplin, Mr and Mrs Arthur Houghton, Mr and Mrs Benjamin Gilbert, Mr and Mrs Julian P Boyd, Mr and Mrs Eugene B Power, Mrs Donald Hyde and an anonymous benefactor. Mrs Hyde was a scholar and a world authority on Samuel Johnson who later married Viscount (David) Eccles, a former Cabinet minister. The anonymous donor, whose name is now known, was later revealed as Paul Mellon, again of Princeton

Not for some years was it clear just how close to failure was their attempt to raise money. Boyd was the main mover, assisted by Eugene Power, who had pledged money from the moment he knew of the need for it, 15 March, from when he asked his friends; he was President of the American Philosophical Society. Knowing of his commitment and activities, early in June the British Government, through the embassy at Washington, said that it would welcome the Society's being host for the funds, and its status as a charity meant that it could pass the money over to the Department of the Environment with no complications such as tax.

Unfortunately his term of office in the society came to an end almost at once. His successor disagreed with this approach and persuaded most of the society of his view. It was not until 22 June, two days before the auction, that a replacement was found.

In 2001 the anniversary of the battle was celebrated at the Abbey, with the surviving donors present. The opportunity was taken to replace the memorial plaque to them with another, rectifying some mistakes.



*The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Abbey's purchase for the Nation - Plaque in the Abbey gatehouse  
(Photo: Keith Foord)*

## Sources

As has been seen, copious use has been made of Ann Moore's account (courtesy of the Hancox archive), and some use of Pryce, Roy: *Battle Abbey and the Websters*, 2005. That book supplied the pictures of Powdermill House in 1976, Evelyn Harbord, and her son Godfrey at a later date. The information on donors comes from Mary, Viscount Eccles: Founder, Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library in 'Julian Boyd and the Battlefield of Hastings', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society vol 147, no. 2, June 2003*, via JSTOR.

**George Kiloh**

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<sup>i</sup> From <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/132993/economics/uk-imf-crisis-of-1976/>

<sup>ii</sup> From his oral account, in bdhsarchive.com: AUD00001.m4a: Interviews re Abbey Sale 1976.

<sup>iii</sup> Jobling was from Wells International, fundraisers, and so far no more is known about him. Richard Moore was Ann's husband and a prominent Liberal, Hayward a donor to the Liberal Party, of which Jeremy Thorpe was then leader.

<sup>iv</sup> He was the 7th earl (1922-2006) who had been badly wounded shortly after the Normandy landings, and was a substantial landowner in Westmorland and Cumberland.

<sup>v</sup> Victor Sandelson (1928-2017) was a stockbroker and contributed a weekly column on the art market to *The Financial Times*.

<sup>vi</sup> Unknown source, from Battle Town Council.

<sup>vii</sup> Obituary, *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 2003.