

COTSWOLD CHARACTER

“I suppose my broad aim... is to make as many people as possible care for those things I care about myself – things which so often today are threatened and desperately need friends to protect them and explain them to the public – our heritage in the way of antiquities and buildings, museums and galleries, learning, indeed anything connected with the survival and appreciation of our past.”

87 – which are famously witty and acerbic. Inevitably, the cameos are seized upon: Diana whose accent was “really rather awful considering that she is an earl’s daughter... dare I say it, a bit common...”; Princess Margaret is “tiresome, spoilt, idle and irritating” (though later he acknowledges an act of kindness by her). Princess Michael, with her indiscreet observations, is bright and sharp but a risk: “The women that make up the Royal Family at the moment would make a fascinating study so disparate are they in looks, intellect and motivation”.

His diaries also chronicle his life with his beloved late wife, Julia Trevelyan Oman with whom he famously ‘eloped’ in 1971. Together, they created the wonderful gardens around their Herefordshire home, the Laskett – an achievement Rosemary Verey called ‘the largest private formal garden made in the UK since 1945’.

“It wasn’t intended; we got hooked. What interests me most now is revisiting the garden – it’s 35 years old – taking things out and replanting.”

Is that hard to do?

“It was hard to do at the beginning after my wife died; we created it together. Yes, some of it’s quite emotional. But on the other hand, a garden is mutant; it’s changing the whole time. And I think to recognise that is very important for the people to whom one leaves the garden.”

When we began the interview, it was on the understanding it would be on Westonbirt. But as we chat, the conversation ranges much more widely and fascinatingly. We talk about his introduction to museums by his mother who, despite her lack of education, took her 11-year-old son to see a French tapestry exhibition. “I remember, after the war, seeing an art book with colour plates. There was one I took to bed and put under my pillow, I was so excited. All that sense of wonderment.”

There’s the philistine Labour Government, today’s ‘blame’ culture, and the appalling belief that everyone’s opinion is as valid as those who actually know about the subject. “I always remember going up to the BBC when they were deciding who were going to be the six greatest Britons. It was a bizarre list anyway – Diana, Princess of Wales, was absolutely ridiculous. But what annoyed me was that it wasn’t a consideration by people who spent their lives studying the subject; it was just anybody sitting in their lounge, pressing a button.”

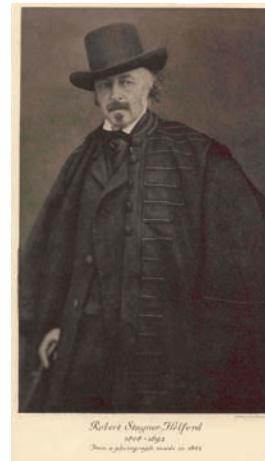
We discuss the last 10 years as a mad kind of Belle Epoque, full of diamond skulls and unmade beds, where money has been thrown around like confetti.

And his glittering career. “I always loved the V&A and the Portrait Gallery; if I had to choose, the Portrait Gallery is very high in my affection. The V&A is a more difficult institution; terribly difficult; terribly difficult.”

Always?

“Yes, I think it always has been.”

Why?



Clockwise from top: Majestic Westonbirt House; ante-library restoration; Robert Stayner Holford.

“Robert Armstrong – Lord Armstrong – said it’s like government departments: Department of Education, rotten to the core; just in the blood. And the V&A has always been brilliant. After the war, Leigh Ashton was a brilliant curator. Opened one’s eyes to so much: had glamour, style, everything. But behind the scenes it was a blood bath.”

“Very unhappy people. Terrible history of directors and members of staff – just awful. Awful.”

So are there any heroes and heroines today? “One did reflect after the American election, which still gave hope of that country, how amazing it was to see the rise of a man from the black community, a great orator with a great sense of integrity. And what also struck me was McCain’s speech of acceptance that he had lost: it was of a gracious nature; a model kind of old-fashioned gentleman. And all I could think of was what rubbish we had at this end.”

“I remember Sir Isaiah Berlin saying 20 years ago: No great name any more. There’s a terrible truth in it. There’s no one – not a single politician – that could raise to either of those levels in this country.”

“And you think of the great Victorians and it’s a very different role call of people.”

Yet another reason to remind the world of Holford. ■

For more information about The Holfords of Westonbirt Trust, log onto www.holfordtrust.com or ring Janice Malschuk, the administrator, on 01666 881372.