

Langrish House History

by Nigel Talbot-Ponsonby

Meon Matters invited Nigel Talbot-Ponsonby to talk about Langrish House, his family connections with Langrish village and not least a bit about his own family's history and the future?

Q *What is the history of the house and its link to your family?*

A The house dates from the early 1600's, although its real heyday was under the tenure of Charles William and Constance Louisa Talbot-Ponsonby. They married in 1868 and brought up 7 children here. Family archives paint a wonderful picture of a jolly, bustling life, centred on horses, dogs and country pursuits. There were music recitals, plays, croquet, sad partings and joyful homecomings from visits to Empire, huge house parties – Goodwood – hunting and great celebrations such as Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 when canons were fired from the lawn!

However, turning back 200 years to the beginning at the start of the English Civil War in 1642. The house, much smaller then, was one of the few Parliamentary strongholds 'for' Cromwell, within an area otherwise predominantly 'for the King'. It was after the bloody Battle of Cheriton in 1644, nine miles away and supposedly one of the turning points of the war, where Royalist prisoners, captured in battle were taken back to Langrish House



Here they were set to digging the vaults – or dungeons – for their own occupation and a deep 100' well for water. Relatively little is known about the occupiers of Langrish House until in 1839, my Great, Great, Great, Great Uncle, John Waddington bought 'the house and Langrish Farm' which comprised the majority of the village. The cost was the heady figure of £16,807!

He set about enlarging the original Cromwellian farmhouse by adding two Victorian malmstone wings with high chimneys creating the long rambling house we see today. He built model farm buildings and stables at Langrish Farm – now Home Farm – in a sheltered meadow near Wool Pond (the lake) and an icehouse. Twenty-five years later his sons started to build the exquisite small flint church, St John the Evangelist, for the benefit of villagers who otherwise trudged twice on Sundays' the two miles to East Meon. They usually arrived early to have a good 'jaw' in the churchyard before the service!

George who had provided much of the money died in 1870 without seeing the completion of his plans and John finished the project. Thus Langrish became severed from East Meon to become a separate Ecclesiastical Parish – a situation that was to exist for 100 years and 8 vicars until 1974 when it became held in plurality with East Meon again. The building of the Vicarage and the school followed. Subsequently Langrish School moved to Stroud in 1914 but happily still retains its Langrish name!

In 1939 the War Office, at a week's notice, requisitioned the house and New Zealand troops made their home here! In the stables the small precision steel die and mould making business, Talbot-Ponsonby and Co Ltd, translated into a munitions factory for the War effort with

up to 160 men and women producing munitions and Spitfire parts 24 hours a day. It went on to make, in the 1960's, the precision moulds for the Concorde Aircraft's iconic nose cone. Today it continues to produce precision tools, inter alia, for Bentley and Land Rover. My father, Edward, who was something of an engineering prodigy, had established the original factory in 1937. For him, the Estate and its farms held little interest.

Q *What is the family's history?*

A The Talbots came across as 'companions' of William the Conqueror and prospered! Richard Talbot is mentioned in the Domesday Book as holding nine Hides of land. Much later, a descendant, Sir John Talbot (1387–1453) after subduing first the Welsh, followed by the Irish and, after a short spell in the Tower, large parts of France where he seems to have inherited the heroic spirit of his Royal friend and master Henry V.

In 1442, he was created Premier Earl of England and Ireland as Earl of Shrewsbury

for his incredible French successes. His death in the saddle at the remarkably old age of 66 at the Battle of Castillon (1453), in Gascony proved fatal to the English dominions in France, which never really flourished afterwards! Joan of Arc's 'sorcery and intervention' in 1429 had been unhelpful in restoring a bit of backbone to the faltering French. By modern standards, Talbot's approach to war was far from politically correct but his chivalry and honour in battle were legendary.

In fact the theme of chivalric hero was taken up by Shakespeare in Henry V "those happy few, the band of brothers" celebrated on St Crispin's Day at Agincourt, including Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester. Actually it is in Henry VI part I that the Talbot Legend reaches its pinnacle.

As to the Ponsonby side – the names of Talbot and Ponsonby, were the result of judicious marriage. On a lighter note, Sir Charles Talbot, an Admiral, who served under Nelson, had a dog whose collar was inscribed: "I am Admiral Talbot's dog – Pray Sir, who are you?" Anyway, Talbot married one of the 4 daughters of William Ponsonby of Imokilly in Southern Ireland and consequently found himself owner of considerable estates at nearby Inchiquin. Under the Will of his uncle, he assumed by 'Royal Sign-Manual' the names and arms of Ponsonby in addition to those of Talbot.

These Irish Estates, however, brought him little but angst and it was at Langrish, which he called home, where he brought up his family. Constance T-P (née Delmé Radcliffe) had inherited Langrish from her maternal uncle John Waddington.

In passing, one Ponsonby, General Sir William, was at Waterloo in June 1815, commanding the Scots Greys and was paid tribute by Wellington as "An ornament to his profession" after being cut down by French Cuirassiers. A national monument was erected to his memory in St Pauls with his body interred in the family vaults in Kensington. The head of the Ponsonby's today is Myles Bessborough, who lives locally at Stansted Park, and retired from the City, is the wonderfully effective joint Patron with his wife Alison of the Rosemary Foundation based in the converted stables here at Langrish.

Thus cutting to the chase, our boys are the 7th generation of the family to live in the house albeit there was the short break of 25 years until I bought it back in 1997.



Q When and how did the house turn into a hotel?

A The house passed out of the family in 1972, to other owners under whose tenure in 1976 there was a terrible fire. The house stood forlorn and partly open to the skies before being rescued by London hoteliers Monique Von Kospoth and Peter ffytche, who converted it partly into their Country home and partly as a Hotel. After some 10 years, Peter ffytche died and 10 years later Monique invited us to buy it back on her retirement.

Heart ruled head and Robina and I returned to an empty house, retaining Langrish Lodge for a few years in case we didn't like it, and rather bothered about what to do with the place! The rest you know!

Q What are the distinctive offerings of Langrish House today?

A Langrish is very traditional, without modern spas, heated swimming pools or glitz. It has incredibly nice bedrooms and bathrooms, a wonderfully warm atmosphere and sits in a stunning setting with lovely gardens. We are incredibly lucky. The offering is simply that of a small, historic country home with marvellous food - 2 AA rosettes for fine dining. We have 4 great, full-time chefs, one with a 'Four Seasons' background and one with a Michelin Star background. There are 12 full time staff and countless part timers. We have a mix of Wedding Receptions, Civil Marriage Ceremonies, Special Events and large numbers of celebratory parties and business conferences. Langrish won the coveted "Les Routiers Hotel of the Year Award" some years ago, with a nice accolade "Langrish House is exactly how a country house hotel should be; it is like visiting old friends for the weekend. Beautiful grounds, a family home steeped in history, family run and with passion oozing from the kitchen". Robina also has a personally cherished 'Gold Award' for Green Business Tourism.

Q What are your plans for the future?

A It depends on what our 3 boys ultimately want to do and not least their future wives! If no interest to live here unfolds, the shape of what we will do in the coming years will be 'open season!'



Langrish Scout Troop circa 1910