

## Notes from Local Interest Group 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2023

**Present:** Maureen Lloyd (ML), John Price, Wendy Ozols, Lucy Trench, Dawn Richards, Gina Goodge, Helen Barnett, David & Anwyn Price, Alison Duncan, James & Jenny Martin, Tim Francis, Bronwen Jenkins, Elsa Harflett, Malc Gonnella, Richard Harris, Richard Thomas

**On Zoom:** Dainis Ozols, Jenny Francis, Roy & Avryl Lloyd, Margaret Price, Grace Davies

**Apologies:** Ann & Howard Dean, Cherry Williams

ML welcomed everyone to the Hall and on Zoom and introduced the speaker for the evening, Lucy Trench.

### **The Sidney Nolan Trust**

Lucy began by telling us that she is the Chair of the Board of Trustees for the Trust, which had been set up by Sidney Nolan in 1985. Nolan gave all of the land and outbuildings at The Rodd and 50 of his paintings to the Trust. The house was acquired in 2016 when his wife, Mary, died. In her talk, Lucy said that she would be telling us about Sir Sidney, the history of the house (The Rodd) and the Trust and how it works today. Many people will have seen the signs for the Trust on the road near Presteigne, but not many know much about what there is to see there, and so the Trust is currently working to make it more obvious and to make visitors feel welcome. The new signs let people know that there is an art gallery, a café and gardens for them to visit. It is open from the end of March until the end of September.

### **The Rodd**

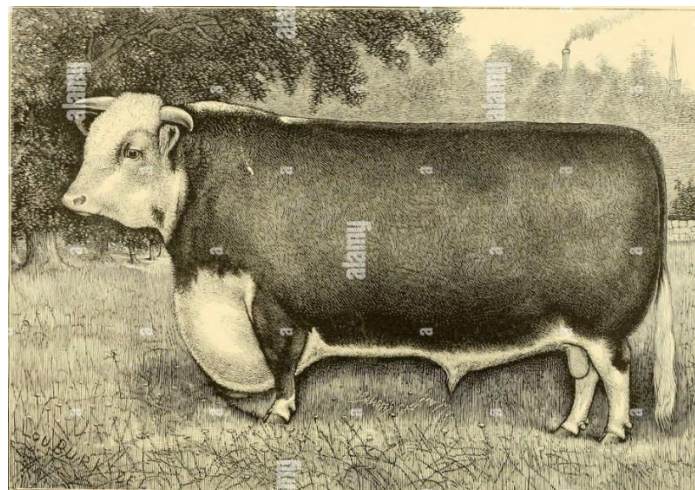


**Rodd Court, Presteigne 2018 (Alex Ramsay)**

The Rodd is the last home of Sir Sidney Nolan and his wife, Mary; they bought it in 1983. Lucy described it as “an extraordinary” place which is Grade 2\* listed. It was built between the 1590s and 1633 by a family called Rodd, who were merchants and landowners. Somewhat unusually for a building of this period in a rural area, it is built of brick and, for many reasons, it has remained almost unchanged since it was built. It was never converted or updated. The Rodd family also had an estate in Dorset where they spent much of their time and so they never really got established at The Rodd, although it did remain in the family until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it belonged to the Harley estates, but it was part-owned by someone called Robert Lane, who had a one quarter share. By 1824, a Lyndon Evelyn MP had bought it, along with Kinsham and some other estates. In 1827, it was let to a Mr Mason for £530/year. In 1839, Lyndon Evelyn died and there was a dispute over his will. Lucy told us that many of the letters and other documents that were associated with this will have provided the Trust with very useful information about the building and the estate. Contemporary newspaper articles are also most illuminating.

In 1840, David Rogers from Pilleth took over the tenancy. He was a well-known Hereford cattle breeder and is listed in the 1861 census as a farmer. He had no wife or children, but he farmed alongside his nephew Aaron, listed as being 18 years of age in the 1861 census. They farmed 400 acres with the help of 6 labourers and a number of farm boys. David died in 1866 and his stock was sold; Aaron bought the cattle. The 1871 census lists Aaron as being the farmer living at The Rodd, with 500 acres and employing labourers and farm boys, as well as a governess for his children. His wife was from London. Aaron became an extremely important breeder of Hereford cattle and Lucy asked Anwyn Price to read a poem that had been written about one of his most famous bulls, Archibald, which sold in the USA for the equivalent of £150 000 in today’s money. Archibald’s nickname was “Champion of the World”. The breed was very popular in the USA and, at this time, The Rodd was famously associated with Hereford cattle and it features in the 1902 publication, “The History of Hereford Cattle”.



**Archibald, Aaron’s prize Hereford bull**

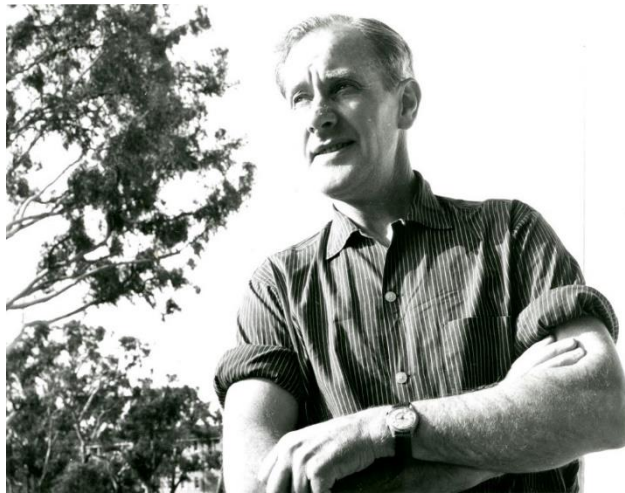
In the 1892 book, “Nooks and Corners of Herefordshire”, by H T Timmins, the house was described as, ‘a noble specimen of a seventeenth-century manor house...the exterior of the mansion is adorned with festoons of ivy and creeping plants; while quaint pigeon cotes, set against the huge old chimney stacks, add a picturesque feature’. One of the reasons that it was so unchanged from the

17<sup>th</sup> century is that had been lived in mainly by tenant farmers (up until 1911 in fact) who had little incentive to make any changes or improvements.

In 1911, it came on the market. This was a time of agricultural decline and insolvency and many estates were being sold off. The sales brochure is in the Historic England archive, along with a wonderful map of the estate, which was bigger in 1911 than it is today. It was bought by Mildred and Gilbert Drage; she was an artist and he was a retired military man. They did a lot of work to the house, basically rescuing it, and they built an extension at the back. They had a hand-weaving business which they conducted in the hall. In 1931, a very detailed survey of the house was done by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME). This has proved invaluable to the Trust in planning their restoration project.

The Drage's business was not very lucrative and, in 1935, they sold the estate to Francis Rodd, later Lord Rennell; he was a relative of the original Rodd family. He was an interesting man, a traveller, banker, soldier, farmer and one-time President of the Royal Geographical Society. He and his wife, Mary, who was an artist, did quite a bit of work on the house, including the conversion of one of the cart sheds into a comfortable room linked to the house and work on the library. When Mary died in 1981, the house was put on the market and it was bought by Sir Sidney Nolan two years later.

### **Sir Sidney Nolan**



**Sidney Nolan 1965 (Noel Butlin)**

Sidney Nolan was born in 1917; he was the son of a Melbourne taxi driver. His family was of Irish descent. He had very little formal art training, but he became Australia's most well-known artist. He is perhaps most famous for his paintings of the notorious Australian outlaw, Ned Kelly, a series of about a dozen works that he completed in 1946. However, he went on to paint the Australian landscape from the air many times and he was also a very interesting photographer. Nolan's work was always developing and he was inspired by many topics, including the fate of the native Aboriginal people. He travelled widely, especially in Africa, and this also featured in his work, which included studies of African wildlife. His paintings reached a wider audience and were bought by Prince Philip, amongst others. He was well ahead of his time, being interested in climate change and species extinction long before these were widely debated. In addition, he was concerned about how badly people treat one another and also animals.

Nolan left Australia in 1953 and settled in Britain. His technique and style continued to develop and he started to use spray paint, often working his canvasses whilst suspended from the ceiling. He was also interested in digital art long before this became fashionable or indeed mainstream. Some of his work is very challenging and hard to look at, especially his series on Auschwitz (done before he had actually visited the place) and some of his photographs taken in after a prolonged Australian drought. After he moved to The Rodd, he used one of the drawing rooms as a studio. His last studio, housed in one of the barns, can still be seen in its original state in situ on a visit to the Trust today.



**Ned Kelly 1946 National Gallery of Australia**

When he came to The Rodd, he continued the estate's connection with cattle rearing, keeping Welsh Blacks on the land. He and Mary would visit the byre in the evenings to give the bull a scratch! Sir Sidney died in 1992 and Mary continued to live in the house until her death in 2016. In order to raise money to help to develop the gallery in The Rodd, in 2005 Mary sold a large canvas, *The Snake*, to the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart for Australian \$2 million. The Rodd has around 80 paintings by Nolan in its collection, together with works on paper and hundreds of photographs and a vast collection of Polaroids. Recently, they had an exhibition of his Auschwitz work. The archive of his work and other papers is slowly being organized by volunteers.

### **The Site**

Lastly, Lucy talked to us about the site. When the Nolans lived here, the land was farmed organically and one of the last tenants kept this going until about three years ago. A local farmer now rents the land and he farms under certain restrictions placed on him by the Trust. The rent obtained from this tenancy agreement gives the Trust quite a major part of its income, enabling them to carry out their plans.

There is an 18<sup>th</sup> century barn which is historically significant. The gardens are particularly lovely; Mary loved them and wanted them to be kept as natural as possible with no weedkillers or pesticides being used. The vegetable garden is being renovated by a local group who will be producing vegetables to sell to the community and also for the food bank. There are 85ha of woodland to explore, including bluebell woods, and the Hindwell flows through the grounds, providing yet another significant habitat. From the car park, there is a very interesting view. It

takes in about eight miles along the Hindwell valley to the west between the hills, completely uninterrupted. This vista is exactly parallel to one of the major Bronze Age sites in the Walton Basin.



**Rodd Wood Bluebells 2020 (Kiefer Whitlock)**

### **What does the Trust do?**

The Trust :

- Mounts exhibitions
- Runs workshops
- Hosts artists in residence
- Has a holiday let – Orchard Cottage
- Puts on Community Days with painting, music, food, etc
- Has a varied programme of events throughout the year
- Has an extensive library of around 5000 books which belonged to Sidney Nolan, many of which he annotated

In 2023, there will be two exhibitions: “Sidney Nolan Revealed” and, from 13<sup>th</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> September, “Earth Photo 2023”, images and short films which focus on issues affecting the planet.

The Trust has a very informative website, <https://www.sidneynolantrust.org/> which is well worth looking at.

(Very many thanks to the Sidney Nolan Trust for allowing us to include some of their photos.)

ML thanked Lucy for her most interesting and well-illustrated talk. We had all learned a great deal about The Rodd, Sir Sidney Nolan and the Trust and hope that we can plan a visit for the group once the place re-opens in March. It is extremely kind of Lucy to give so generously of her time to come to talk to us.

The evening ended as always with refreshments, very kindly made for us by Dawn Richards, Gina Godge and Helen Barnett – many thanks to them for their help with this. Thanks as always go to our technical wizard, John Price, for ensuring that the people at home could enjoy this fascinating talk on Zoom.