

ROBERT LOUIS PARSONS (1920-2000)

Robert was a man who loved England. He first came here as a soldier in the American army in time of war. His love of the English way of life and of English architecture was confirmed after the bicycle trip he made when, on leave, he travelled from one great house to another.

Born in Ponca City, Oklahoma, and living later in Texas, he came from a part of America not rich in great architecture. But architecture was the subject he chose to study when he went up to Harvard.

After the war, he lived in London as an antique dealer and renovator of property. Only he, I think, could have seen the possibilities of Newark Park, Glos., coming upon it as he did, in 1970, when its fortunes were at a low ebb, the house having recently closed down as an old people's home.

Essentially what Robert undertook was a labour of love. But a labour it was, requiring great physical effort in a building well on the way to becoming a ruin. He worked indoors with buckets to counteract the leaking roof and he worked in the grounds, attending to the first stages of recovering the garden. He was still working in that garden only weeks before his death. So this toil extended over the better part of thirty years.

We must remember, too, that, long before the National Trust took a conscious interest in the house, having finally realised its unique Tudor features and its early use of classical details, Robert had seen the potential there and set about revealing its beauties. He also set about revealing the lost lake and the lovely eighteenth century summer house, both of which had to be forcibly recovered from the chaos of natural growth that had overwhelmed them.

The summerhouse was relocated because a pig made its way out of the arboreal tangle that had hidden it from human sight. These grounds on which he expended so much time and sweat, were open for the local community and its several organisations interested in the various aspects of nature. You knew you were always free to wander among the beeches and to inspect the folly, the artistic ruin which Bob built, as distinct from the ruin he was repairing.

What he made of that hill-top eyrie, having begun putting it back together with his bare hands, was a place of hospitality, a place of aristocratic largesse and democratic openness. It

was in this latter quality that his American side showed itself so attractively.

It seemed natural when Gordon Eames, our postman, retired, that his retirement party should be held at Newark. More than once, as a teacher of English literature, I have thought of that great tradition in the seventeenth century, the country-house poem, in which a similar ideal of the hospitable was embodied, as in Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst"

whose liberal board doth flow  
With all that hospitality doth know.

Bob had not isolated himself in a rural retreat, but energetically continued his visits to the London galleries and, if you wanted to borrow the catalogue of the latest show of painting or sculpture, you could be sure that Bob would lend you a copy, having already been there. He also continued to visit Europe, Tunisia and Thailand in search of those civilised achievements of mankind that meant so much to him. Italy had a special place in his world for its humane architecture, its gardens and its extension of the spirit of painting from the Renaissance onwards. So he cultivated not only a garden, but his own mind, going back to the sources particularly of the great moments of European imaginative endeavour.

Bob's accomplishment, then, was not merely to have put the house together again: it involved his emanation of the spirit of neighbourliness, arising from a deep affection for others and a capacity for friendship often difficult to find these days, when people are just too busy with their own affairs. Bob had not an ounce of self-interested ego. He wanted his neighbours to be comfortable and his house parties were relaxed affairs, without ostentation and always with good food and interesting guests. When he had to leave for a period and underwent surgery in London, we all thought that an era was over, knowing full well that no one could replace his geniality and his having made of Newark a social centre for our rural corner. But we were wrong. The surgery was a success and Bob returned. Together with his friend and excellent manager, Michael Claydon, he began the second phase of his reign. We had all hoped to be celebrating his eightieth birthday this August under that familiar roof, but it was not to be.

My wife and I have lived for over forty years at Ozleworth Bottom, the low point of the area into which all the waters flow. It has been a great human resource for us and our two girls to know that on the highest point lived someone who over the years would offer us innumerable tokens of affection. And it is that word, affection,

He often talked, even with some enthusiasm, of the time when he would be no more, and would, he liked to imagine, have on his memorial stone just three words, Robert Parsons, Texan.

Charles Tomlinson