

7. Legends Associated with Marbury Hall and its Families

There are a number of strange stories associated with the Hall, its estate and the Smith Barry family. They are in the annals of folklore and have no known historical foundation. However, the stories have survived and are one of the many attractions of Marbury. The two most famous are the story of the Marbury Dun and secondly, the Marbury Lady. Both were commemorated in a glass etching in the Archway which led from the car park at Marbury Country Park into the lime avenues (now sadly removed for safety reasons).



Marbury Entrance Feature

Smith Barry Family's Love of Horses in 18th Century

The Smith Barry family enjoyed horse breeding, racing and wagering. From 1752, John Smith Barry (1725-1784), son of James Barry, 4th Earl of Barrymore, devoted much of his time to horse racing and hunting. He was a founder member of the Jockey Club in 1750s and a member of the racing elite, as a result, attending the main race meetings all over the country. Advertisements for Chester and Manchester races show that he entered horses on many occasions; a full record of his entries is in the archives of National Horse Racing Museum in Newmarket. The first meeting of the Tarporley Hunt Club was held in November 1762; John was President of the Club in 1767 and 1779, following his brothers Arthur and Richard. He was a leading supporter of the Northwich racecourse situated below Hartford beach.

John's best horse was Spinner, a successful filly over a three year period in the early 1760s, winning four races before retiring to stud in 1764. John's fortunes peaked in 1772 when, from a string of successful horses, Amaranthus, twice netted £500 guineas by winning at Newmarket.

James Hugh Smith Barry took over his father's pack of hounds and stables in 1784 on his father's death. He had been elected to the Tarporley Hunt Club in 1769 before he went on the Grand Tour of Europe and the Middle East. He chose to wear the colours of the club when he had his portrait painted by Batoni in Rome in the early 1770s: scarlet velvet coat, green velvet cape, gold braided green waistcoat, green breeches and gold buckled shoes.

On his return from the Grand Tour, James continued to race but not as much or as successfully as his father. Probably his best horse was Burgamotte, born in 1787 of a strong pedigree, whose last race was at York in 1794. When James' racing stud was advertised in 1802, a year after his death, The 'Chester Courant' listed twenty four horses for sale, including Burgamotte.

According to its website, the public house in Comberbach was originally called 'The Spinner' after a local spinning loom between Pickmere and Wincham. The horse 'Spinner' is said to have been named after the pub. The pub was later renamed 'The Spinner and Bergamot' as a tribute to the Smith Barry family's famous and successful horses.



The Spinner and Burgamot, Comberbach

The name of Smith Barry had been in the forefront of the sporting world in England for fifty years. This status may perhaps contribute to the legend of The Marbury Dun.

The Marbury Dun

'Dun' is a general name for a horse, indicating a brownish-grey colour, most likely a colloquial reference to a well-known horse rather than the horse's actual name. The Marbury Dun is said to have raced from London to Marbury during daylight hours for a large bet. The horse won the bet but, exhausted, drank deeply of the water of Budworth Mere and died. The horse is said to be buried close to the mere; some people have referred to a gravestone above the slipway on the mere's edge (now apparently 'removed').

The Cheshire Soulcakers have a play centred on the Marbury Dun. They are traditional groups of mummers who perform folk plays around All Souls Day (Halloween):

*This horse was bred from Marbury Dun
The finest mare that ever run
Run fourteen miles in fifteen hours
And never sweat a hair
Come from London to Marbury from sunrise to sunset for a wager
And when she died they buried her with silver shoes upon her feet
And lapped her in a linen sheet.*

The Marbury Lady

The intrigue surrounding the Marbury Lady is more extreme and there are many variations to this legend. This is one of them.

A gentleman from Marbury fell in love with a beautiful Egyptian woman on his travels. Marriage was promised. The woman arrived at the Hall but was not well received by other family members. During the liaison, the woman extracted a promise that when she died, she would be embalmed and kept at Marbury Hall. Her remains were kept in a wooden chest in the well of a staircase. When the gentleman died, the family decided to bury her in Great Budworth Church. Thus started the hauntings in the Hall and parkland.

Certainly James Hugh Smith Barry (1748-1801) spent at least five years on the Grand Tour of Europe and the Middle East in 1770s. He was very keen, almost obsessed, to build up an art collection and was very interested in antiquaries. It is possible he bought a mummy whilst in the Middle East and kept it in a box under a staircase. However the rest of his large collection is mainly sculpture, books and paintings. He also did not marry, but chose to live with Ann Tanner and their five children. The Smith Barrys certainly worshipped regularly in Great Budworth Church; some twenty three members of the family are buried in a family vault.

And a Real Dog! (1758-1771)

The gentry hunted hares and stags in the early eighteenth century. John Smith Barry (1725-1784) pioneered hunting foxes and bred hounds with both stamina and speed. He was a friend and rival of Hugo Meynell, founder and master of the Quorn Hunt (Leicestershire) for 47 years. Meynell is generally acknowledged as father of modern fox hunting, experimenting with extended chases at high speeds through open grassland.



*The Hon. John Smith Barry and His Hounds, 1749
(From an oil painting by James Seymour (1702-1752))*

Tarporley Hunt Club, established in 1762, had the first pack of foxhounds in Cheshire (based in Sandiway) and John Smith Barry was the first Master of the Hounds. In the same year, Hugo Meynell accepted a challenge to produce two hounds to race against Smith Barry's swift, strong hound, Bluecap and his three year old daughter, Wanton. Smith Barry won 500 guineas as Bluecap won the race over four miles on 30 September at Newmarket, with Wanton a close second and Meynell's Richmond a hundred yards behind. The hounds raced with sixty mounted followers, but only twelve finished with the dogs, such was the pace of the race.

Francis Sartorius, (1734-1804), a prolific and popular English painter of horses, horse racing and hunting scenes painted 'The Newmarket Match 1762' featuring the famous hounds and the riders. He also painted Bluecap on his own.



Bluecap
(Painted by Francis Sartorius)

In addition, the Tarporley Hunt Club voted that Smith Barry's portrait be painted with Bluecap. They voted in 1773, the portrait was painted in 1776; the bill was presented in 1779. The painting hangs in The Hunt Room of the Swan Hotel in Tarporley. It was the work of Warrington portrait artist, James Cranke (1707-1780).



John Smith Barry with Bluecap
(Painted by James Cranke)



Bluecap at Marbury

When Bluecap died in 1771, Smith Barry erected an obelisk-shaped monument in memory of his famous dog at the kennels in Sandiway.



This is the epitaph on a brass plate:

TO THE MEMORY OF OLD BLUECAP A FOX HOUND
THE LATE PROPERTY OF THE HONBLE JOHN
SMITH BARRY

*This obelisk, reader, is a monument rais'd
To a shade, though a hound, that deserves to be prais'd
For if life's but a stage whereon each act a part,
And true greatness a term that's derived from the heart,
If fame, honour and glory depend on the deed
Then, O! Blue Cap, rare Blue Cap, we'll boast of thy breed!
If no tear, yet a glass we'll pour on the brute
So high-famed as he was in glorious pursuit.
But no more of this theme, since this life's but a race,
And Blue Cap has gone to the death of the chase.*

'The Bluecap', is a 'Chef and Brewer' public house and restaurant on the A556 close to Sandiway and twelve miles from Chester. Built in 1716 and formerly known as 'Sandiway Head', now renamed to celebrate its local hero. The pub sign shows the hound on one side and a version of the famous race on the other side (artist unknown).



The Blue Cap, Sandiway