

Croome Collection Coventry Family History

George William Coventry, 6th Earl of Coventry

Born 26th April 1722, the second son of William Coventry (5th Earl) and his wife, Elizabeth. He succeeded as Earl in 1751. He married his first wife Maria Gunning, daughter of John Gunning of Castle Coote, Co. Roscommon, Esquire, in March 1752. Together they had one son, George William (later 7th Earl), and 3 daughters: Elizabeth Ann, who died an infant, Maria Alicia and Ann Margaret. After the death of his first wife, he remarried to Barbara, daughter of John St John, 10th Baron of St John of Bletsoe. Together they had two sons: John and Thomas William.

George William became MP for Bridport and Worcester. He was appointed Lord Lieutenant and Custos Rotulorum for Worcester in 1758 and served as Recorder of Worcester from 1774-1809. In October 1747 he was appointed the first co-president of Worcester Infirmary alongside the Bishop of Worcester. He chaired the annual meetings for this without fail for the next 20 years. George William served as Lord of the Bedchamber to King George II and King George III.

It was under George William that extensive works were carried out on Croome Court and the surrounding parkland. His elder brother, Thomas, had many plans for improvements he wished to make. His untimely death affected his younger brother greatly and the transformation of Croome by George William owes largely to his desire to carry out his wishes. Not long after death of his elder brother, George William began to put his plans for the estate into action. Survey work was carried out, fields were exchanged, divided and enclosed and there was reduction in leaseholders between 1749-50, which was made possible by doubling the rent. Formal gardens were also swept away, creating a blank canvas for work to begin. Around 1751 Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) was commissioned to work on the designs for the house and the garden. He was to continue working at Croome for over 30 years, until his death in 1782 on his way home from dining with the Coventry family. Croome is believed to be the first complete landscape design by 'Capability' Brown. This places particular importance upon the original plant bills and accounts in the collection, which show evidence of the original work carried out at this time.

George William also employed Scottish architect and designer, Robert Adam (1728-1792), to work on the redesign of the house and its surrounding buildings. Apart from his work on the house and the church at Croome, Adam designed most of the important buildings in the park, including the Temple Greenhouse, the Alcove or Park Seat, the London Arch and the pier gates, and possibly Dunstall castle. Architect James Wyatt completed the work in the park after Adam's death and developed the design of the Panorama tower from Adam's drawings. Original letters and bills from Adam's work survive in the Croome archive.

'Capability' Brown was also commissioned to build a new house for the Earl on his Broadway estate around 1763, called Springhill House. This was built with the aim of allowing the Earl a place in Worcestershire where he could retreat from his arduous social and official duties. In 1764 the Earl acquired another new home, Coventry House, in Piccadilly, London.

George William died 3rd September 1809 at Coventry house, aged 87. His body was taken to Croome and is said to have been met at Evesham by a whole body of his tenants. The funeral procession was said to have been 1 mile long. A monument to the Earl was erected in Croome Park, on the jubilee of George III later that year.