

## From Berkswell to Tasmania

On the edge of the picturesque Warwickshire village of Berkswell stands Berkswell Hall, smiling beneficently down upon its lake and parkland. If this sounds like the blurb from an estate agent, let me warn you that the apartments there go for a cool £400,000.

It has never been cheap to live at Berkswell Hall, especially not when the whole place was a single residence. But for one man the pursuit of enough cash to run it had tragic consequences, not in Berkswell itself, but far away on the other side of the world.

In the mid-16th Century the hall and lands were given by the Crown to the Marow family. When the male line of Marows withered, the estate went sideways to Sir John Eardley Wilmot (1709-92), who married Ursula Marow. Sir John was a notable London lawyer, who rose to become Chief Justice of the Common Pleas and a member of the Privy Council. His son followed his father into the font as another John, and later into the legal profession as well.

Each of these two Johns has an interesting story to tell, not least for their involvement in the compensation claims after the American War of Independence. But we cannot tarry here, and must move swiftly on to the next generation, and to John Eardley Eardley Wilmot.

You'll not be surprised to know that this John too became a lawyer. I first came across him in the records of the Warwick Quarter Sessions, where, as chairman, Eardley Wilmot opened each new session with a reflective statement on the state of law and order in the county, much of it directed towards Birmingham.

Eardley Wilmot was far from your average justice. His recommendations for the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders led to the creation of a pioneering county reformatory at Stretton-on-Dunsmore. He was also involved in the anti-slavery movement, and was an MP for North Warwickshire from 1832 to 1843.

At a time when party affiliation was considerably more fluid than today, Sir John charted a winding course between the Tories and the Whigs. You would probably dub him a liberal conservative, which, in the industrialised north of the country, was probably the best ticket, though one that inevitably drew criticism from both sides. The Warwickshire Gazette called him a "tardy, reluctant and most inefficient advocate of reform".

It was also said that he did not have sufficient means to sustain an election campaign, and this may explain why Eardley Wilmot began to get into financial trouble in the 1830s. Parts of the Berkswell estate was mortgaged or sold off to support him.

Salvation came from the most unexpected of directions. In 1843 Eardley Wilmot was offered the post of Lieutenant Governor of Van Dieman's Land at £4,000 a year; he resigned his seat in the Commons, and was off like a shot. Doubtless, Sir John's familiarity with the justice system recommended him for the job, for Tasmania was

still the dumping-ground for Britain's criminals. Some sections of the press, however, branded it "jobbery".

It was an unfortunate trait of the man that, without ever being offensive, Eardley Wilmot effortlessly offended. Even Lord Stanley, the colonial secretary who secured him the position, called him "a muffle-brained blockhead". Sir John took those skills with him to the Antipodes.

To be fair to the man from Berkswell, managing Van Dieman's Land would have defeated a far more able diplomat than him. The colony was practically bankrupt, for one thing; for another, Eardley Wilmot was there to introduce new government policy towards the convict gangs, and they would not go down well with the natives.

Prior to this point the colonists had been permitted to employ convicts practically as slave labour, the costs being under-written by the UK government. It was Lord Stanley's idea to impose a new system that was cheaper to run, and more likely to rehabilitate the prisoners. The convicts would therefore be on probation, and be entitled to receive wages for their labour.

Eardley Wilmot's new austerity package was not restricted to the settlers. He attempted to cut the salaries of officials too, and to raise taxes. But when the Treasury attempted to devolve the cost of policing onto the islanders, Eardley Wilmot stood his ground. If Tasmania had a law and order problem, he argued, it was down to the policy of sending convicts there.

In a way that came natural to him, then, Sir John managed to offend everyone. To Stanley he was taking the side of the settlers; to the Tasmanians he was the government's hatchet-man. Such is the fate of the liberal conservative.

Eardley Wilmot was dismissed in 1846, only three years after his appointment. There were allegations of immoral behaviour, almost certainly unfounded, but it suited the new colonial secretary - William Gladstone - to pay them heed. In reality, Sir John became the fall-guy for a failed policy.

The strain was all too much for Wilmot, and the disgraced governor died in February 1847, far away from his Berkswell home.

Ironically, at his death, Eardley Wilmot began to garner the support he had lacked all this time. Under pressure from the opposition at home, Whitehall was forced to release correspondence, much of which vindicated him, while the Colonial Times declared that he had been, in effect, "murdered". In 1850 the citizens of Hobart erected a Gothic mausoleum to their former governor, which still stands in St David's Park.

There is one corner of an Australian field that is forever Warwickshire.