

THE WELLSIAN

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THE SCENIC BACKGROUND OF
TONO-BUNGAY

J.R.Hammond

Many of Wells's novels are centred on a particular region or locality : **The Wheels of Chance** for example, describes a cycling tour of Sussex and Hampshire and **The Secret Places of the Heart** includes a detailed account of a tour of the West Country. Of all his novels, however, perhaps **Tono-Bungay** derives its inspiration and atmosphere most closely from a particular scenic background - the area around Midhurst and Uppark in Sussex.

Uppark in the 'Bladesover House' Chapter in **Tono-Bungay**, and in the description of Burnmore Park in **The Passionate Friends**. It is one of the most famous and beautiful English country houses built in the late seventeenth century, and a symbol **par excellence** of the squirarchy of the Age of Reason. He stayed at Uppark frequently whilst his mother was housekeeper there, and the house played a very important part in stimulating his youthful imagination.

The house has been in the hands of the Featherstonhaugh family for very many years, and Sir Harry Featherstonhaugh, who died in 1846 at the age of 92, was a free-thinker. As a boy, Wells spent many happy hours looking through the library of Uppark, and there he discovered many of Sir Harry's books - books which had an inspiring effect on his enquiring mind. Here, for example, he read **Tom Paine**, an unexpurgated edition of "**Gulliver's Travels**", and Plato's "**Republic**". The latter work, in particular, was to have a deep influence on the development of his imagination - an influence which bore fruit in his own description of an ideal community, "**A Modern Utopia**". Here, also, in the attic, he discovered an old Gregorian telescope, which revealed to him something of the wonder and fascination of the starry sky - a theme he was to recur to in his novels. His mother found him in the small hours of the morning, studying the craters of the moon.

There are some large gratings let into the ground in front of the entrance to the house, and if one stares down these gratings it is apparent they are not part of the drains or dungeons, but serve as ventilators and skylights for underground passages. These connect the big house with the kitchen building and the stable block. These gratings bear an extraordinary resemblance to the circular wells he describes so vividly in "**The Time Machine**", and it is quite feasible that Wells may have derived the germ of the idea for those ventilating shafts from the gratings he must have seen as a boy at Uppark. Indeed, at a time when so many people of Wells's class spent so much of their working lives "below stairs", it is hardly surprising that he conceived the idea of a division of the human race into two distinct species; the Eloi, living about the ground, and a labouring class, the Morlocks, living underground. Almost all the large houses of this kind had underground kitchens, into which the light of day very rarely filtered. The shop at Bromley also had an underground kitchen.

He remembered a great deal about Uppark and thought of it, in later years, with affection.¹ He regarded it as one of the great houses where people in the past had been able to read, talk, think and write in an atmosphere of dignity, leisure and independent thought, and that England had gained much because of them. He thought also that the estate and the sharply defined farms and villages of the countryside below caught him at just the right stage of mental development to awaken a sense of history and social relationships that might never have been roused if he had remained surrounded by suburbs.

"For me at any rate the house at Uppark was alive and potent". To Wells, it was "the clue to all England", and the key to almost all that is distinctively British and puzzling to the foreign inquirer. "There have been no revolutions, no deliberate restatements or abandonments of opinion in England since the days of the fine gentry, since 1688 or thereabouts, the days when Bladesover was built; there have been changes, dissolving forces, replacing forces, if you will; but then it was that the broad lines of the English system set firmly".²

George Ponderevo, the narrator in *Tono-Bungay*, develops this idea until Bladesover House becomes a symbol of 'the Bladesover system': the system of great country houses and landed gentry, depending for its existence on a subordinate toiling class. "Grasp firmly that England was all Bladesover two hundred years ago.....Everybody who is not actually in the shadow of a Bladesover is as it were perpetually seeking after lost orientations".³

There had arisen in these country houses a spirit of scepticism, curiosity and free deliberate thought. Many of these prosperous, independent people had made important contributions in the fields of education, science, literature, research and art. The country house was "the experimental cellule of the coming Modern State".⁴

One day in August 1883, Wells, then a boy of nearly seventeen, walked the seventeen miles from Southsea to Uppark to present an ultimatum to his mother. He told her that he hated the Southsea Drapery Emporium, and begged her to let him go to Midhurst Grammar School as a student-assistant.

His mother was dismayed beyond measure, but he was firm, threatening that suicide would be the answer if not Midhurst Grammar School. This walk to Uppark and the parley with Mrs. Wells was undoubtedly one of the turning points in his life. and he wrote afterwards that "I felt then most desperately wicked, and now I know that it was nearly the best thing I ever did".

Mrs. Wells relented and he was allowed to go to the Grammar School as an assistant master, a post which enabled him to pursue a considerable amount of private reading and study in his free time. Here he remained for one year (1883-84); a year of hard work but great happiness and mental growth. He had succeeded in escaping at last from the world of drapery, in which he might otherwise have been imprisoned for the rest of his days.

He was very much attracted to Midhurst and the town subsequently figured in many of his novels. It is portrayed as Whortley in *Love and Mr. Lewisham* and Wimblehurst in *Tono-Bungay*. There is also a careful description of Midhurst in *The Wheels of Chance*, in which his landlady, Mrs. Walton, appears as 'Mrs. Wardor'.

Lady Grove, the ancient house described in *Tono-Bungay*, is almost certainly Sutton Place, near Guildford, the former home of Lord Northcliffe.

The chain of reasoning on which this deduction rests is as follows:-

1. In *Tono-Bungay* we are given several clues as to the house's location.
 - (a) that the lights of Leatherhead could be seen from it;
 - (b) that it was not far from Effingham;
 - (c) that it adjoined the Old Woking Road.All this tallies with Sutton Place.
2. The description of Lady Grove tallies exactly with the description (and photograph) of Sutton Place given in the biography of Northcliffe by Geoffrey Harmsworth.
3. Very close to Sutton Place (on the Ordnance Survey map) is a building called 'Lady Grove Farm'. It seems highly probable that Wells simply decided to take the name 'Lady Grove' and use it for Sutton Place, for the purposes of the novel.
4. Sutton Place was purchased by Northcliffe (in 1900) in very much the same 'Napoleonic' manner as Lady Grove was "snapped up" by Ponderevo. (Book 3, Ch. 2, 6.) In view of the close similarity between the description of Edward Ponderevo and the personality of Northcliffe, I think it is highly probable that the fictional character was, at least in part, a caricature of Northcliffe.

Finally, it might be worth mentioning the origin of "Crest Hill", the vast house built by Edward Ponderevo at the zenith of his fame and power. It was the building of Crest Hill which led directly to the collapse of the Tono-Bungay empire. Wells records perceptively: "It is curious how many of these modern financiers of chance and bluff have ended their careers by building. It was not merely my uncle. Sooner or later they all seem to bring their luck to the test of realisation.... Then the whole fabric of confidence and imagination totters - and down they come....."⁵

The account of Crest Hill given in 10 of 'Our Progress from Camden Town to Crest Hill' is in fact a photographic description of Witley Park Manor, near Godalming, the never completed mansion of the financier Whitaker Wright. Indeed, the idea of writing *Tono-Bungay*, a vast panorama of "this strange advertising commercialised civilisation", seems to date from the suicide of Whitaker Wright in the London Law Courts in 1904.

An insight into the topographical background of *Tono-Bungay* thus contributes materially to an understanding of the novel and to a deeper appreciation of its underlying seriousness of purpose.

J.R. Hammond

NOTES

1. Although Anthony West argues (in *The Observer*, 11.1.76) that the references to Uppark in *Experiment in Autobiography* are disingenuous, and that *The Time Machine* is in fact a parody of the elitist society upon which Uppark was based.
2. *Tono-Bungay*, 1909, 118.
3. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
4. *Experiment in Autobiography*, 1934, 136.
5. *Tono-Bungay*, 341.