

## Obituary of Robert Heber-Percy

Robert Heber-Percy was the heir of Lord Berners (1884-1950) and the maintainer at Faringdon House of his quirky and stylish hospitality. He contrived to continue there the elegance, substance and excitement of country house life as they were over 50 years ago. That he had achieved this, and won the support of family friends, staff and tenants in that task of preservation, was due still more to his own qualities of charm and appreciation, of fantasy, wit and quick wits, of generosity and perseverance, than to the advantages he inherited.

The youngest of four sons of Algernon Heber-Percy, of Hodnet hall, Shropshire, Robert joined his elder brothers in the rude sports of a country gentleman. He early became an excellent rider, in the hunting field and as a schooler of young horses. He was exceptionally good looking 'the handsomest man I have ever seen' was said of him by women and men, generations apart, and even when he was over 60.



One of the *jeunesse douee* rather than *doree*, after leaving Stowe he enlivened a gallimaufry of occupations. When about 23, he is mentioned as the only male in Cyril Connolly's list (in his journal, since published) of real or imagined pin-ups (or pick-ups) for a @A sexy party: Lesbia, Delia, Cynthia, Chloe, Phyllis, Jeanne Duval, Albertine, Gilberte, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Robert Heber-Percy)

In the early 1930s Robert was taken up by Lord Berners as his friend and companion, both in his house in the Forum at Rome and at Faringdon, where he helped manage the estate. The tower that Lord Berners built there (the last notable Folly erected in England) was to commemorate Heber-Percy's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday- though it was not completed until 1936. Robert would admit saying ungratefully that he would sooner have had a hunter (horse, not watch). He assisted (and often surprised, for he was known as 'Mad Boy') the constant entertaining of Berners numerous friends of literary and musical and social fame, from Shaw to Stein (and Toklas) and Stravinsky, from the Mitford sisters to Oliver Messel.

During the Second World War, Heber-Percy served in some chaotically secret emissary capacities in the @Balkans and in Arabia. He married in 1942 Jennifer Fry; there is a daughter, Victoria, but the marriage ended after the war and Jennifer later married Alan Ross.

On Lord Berners death, Robert Heber-Percy inherited practically all, save of course the peerage. Faringdon remained a place of country-house visits for many old, and new, friends. Robert had no sense of music, but Constant Lambert was a fellow spirit, and Heber-Percy became godfather to his son Kit; and he beneficently encouraged the increasing numbers of those who gave concerts of Berners' works. He enjoyed the equal friendships of writers such as William Plomer, John and Penelope Betjeman and Raymond Mortimer; he was an exquisite host (thanks to his housekeeper Rosa Proll 'the best cook in the south of England'- anywhere further North was generally not in dispute). Champagne filled tankards, and parties were frequent, the company fascinating and eclectic- with Hugh Cruddas, who resided with Robert at Faringdon between the 1950s and 1970s, an ebullient co-entertainer. If it seems a sybaritic prolongation of the thirties, it was yet due to Heber-Percy's energy, persistence and even pietas - up and out with the workers on the estate early each morning, and not asking more rent of his lifelong tenants than 20 or 30 years before.

In 1985 he married Dorothy ('Coote') Lygon, his near neighbour and devoted friend of 50 years or more, who had cheered his latter years, when he was lame from a stroke and several brushes with death, more closely and courageously than any other. Not a religious man, Robert Heber-Percy would sometimes speak of God, as one he recognised: creative, imaginative, controlling, though given to pranks and even mischief making: yet essentially trustworthy. They should get on together.

Richard Brain.            Independant newspaper

Robert Vernon Heber-Percy, born Hodnet 5 November 1911, died Faringdon 29 October 1987