


ONE BRITISH ARCHIVE

One British Archive: Family Histories at Shulbrede Priory

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Abstract

This short article describes some of the archival materials held at Shulbrede Priory, located in West Sussex, England. This private home in Haslemere also serves as an archive containing materials related to the Ponsonby family and presents exciting research opportunities for historians of early twentieth-century Britain. The collection includes material related to the composer Hubert Parry and the diaries of Arthur and Dorothea Ponsonby. Additionally, it contains manuscript and photographic materials related to the Ponsonby's daughter, Elizabeth—particularly her involvement with the so-called Bright Young People of the 1920s and 1930s. As it remains a private home, this archive also compels us to think about the nature of family histories.

Keywords: interwar; social life; family history; Bright Young People

On a cold January afternoon in 1929, Elizabeth Ponsonby departed from London Waterloo to her parents' home, Shulbrede Priory in West Sussex. Her mother, Dorothea (known as Dolly), had spent the morning preparing for the arrival of Elizabeth and her friends, who had planned a small party for the weekend. The party was not a success, at least in the view of Elizabeth's parents, who would subsequently complain in their diaries of the "wretched" and "demoralizing" behavior of modern youth—their hedonistic impulses, their courting of scandal, the frequent press attention, and even skirmishes with the law.¹

Nearly a century later, I made the same journey. Shulbrede Priory, a former monastery dating back to the twelfth century, remains in the possession of the Ponsonby family. I was greeted at Haslemere station by Ian Russell, who drove me along the winding country roads to the house. His wife, Kate, is the daughter of Matthew Ponsonby, Elizabeth's younger brother. I had written to the Russells after encountering Shulbrede Priory in D. J. Taylor's book on the Bright Young People—the subject of my dissertation research—and they enthusiastically welcomed me to dig through their family history.²

Elizabeth rose to fame in the interwar gossip press as one of the leaders of the Bright Young People, an amorphous collection of mostly aristocratic and upper-class individuals best known for their elaborate fancy-dress parties, along with Brian Howard, Babe Plunkett-Greene, and Eddie Gathorne-Hardy (the latter two would attend the party at Shulbrede in January 1929). Generally, the Bright Young People have received relatively little serious scholarly attention, appearing only in passing in accounts of the period as an amusing anecdote or as the subject of popular histories. However, what my dissertation aims to show is that revelry can be revelatory.

¹ Transcript of Diary by Dorothea Ponsonby, 15 April 1925, Shulbrede Priory, Linchmere, Haslemere, UK.

² See D. J. Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* (New York, 2007).



Figure 1. My workspace while at Shulbrede Priory—an upper room adjoining the Prior's Chamber. The robes were worn by Hubert Parry on receiving his BMus from Oxford. Source: All photographs by the author.

There is much to be gained in studying the “trivial,” namely, a stronger understanding of the history of everyday life. We see, also, in these histories the traces of our contemporary interest in wealth and celebrity, attempts at understanding the persistence of elite power structures, and lingering fascinations with the “long-weekend” that was the 1920s.³ March 2020, for instance, saw the opening (and untimely pandemic-related shuttering) of an exhibition of Cecil Beaton photography titled “Bright Young Things” at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Claridge’s would relaunch their cocktail program to feature a “Mixing with the Bright Young Things” menu to coincide with the exhibition. The lives of

³ See also Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman, *Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite* (Cambridge, MA, 2024).



Figure 2. Scrapbook labelled “Miss Ponsonby.”

the rich were fascinating to readers of the interwar gossip column, and it seems that for a broad public they remain so today—how can historians leverage those public interests into professional outputs?

Dolly was the daughter of the composer Hubert Parry, and Elizabeth’s father, Arthur, is likely to be known to political historians as a leading member of the Labour Party in the House of Lords. Both left behind detailed diaries that have since been transcribed, which recount their daily lives, and feature (not without cause) anxieties about their daughter and her friends. Upon arrival, and after requisite offers of tea and biscuits, I was presented with boxes filled with scrapbooks, diaries, and letters related to Elizabeth and her parents.

Doing research at Shulbrede Priory felt less like being in an archive and more like stumbling across something wonderful in a long-forgotten family member’s attic (Figure 1). From



Figure 3. Envelope containing Elizabeth's hair.

this upper room, I saw the whole of Elizabeth's life unfold before me (Figure 2). The joy her arrival brought to her parents, early (and ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to pursue a career on the stage, her associations with the Bright Young People, and her eventual, untimely death resulting from complications related to alcoholism at the age of thirty-nine in 1940 (Figures 3–4).

The party in January 1929 was not the Ponsonbys' first disappointing encounter with the Bright Young People. Their son, Matthew, had been arrested for drunk driving with the author Evelyn Waugh in 1925, which had tainted their view of modern youth. While the Bright Young People are often viewed within a metropolitan—particularly Mayfair—context, my dissertation explores how elite social life was preoccupied with movement between London, the countryside, and the European continent. The January party reinforces this notion, as Elizabeth had begun planning it while holidaying in

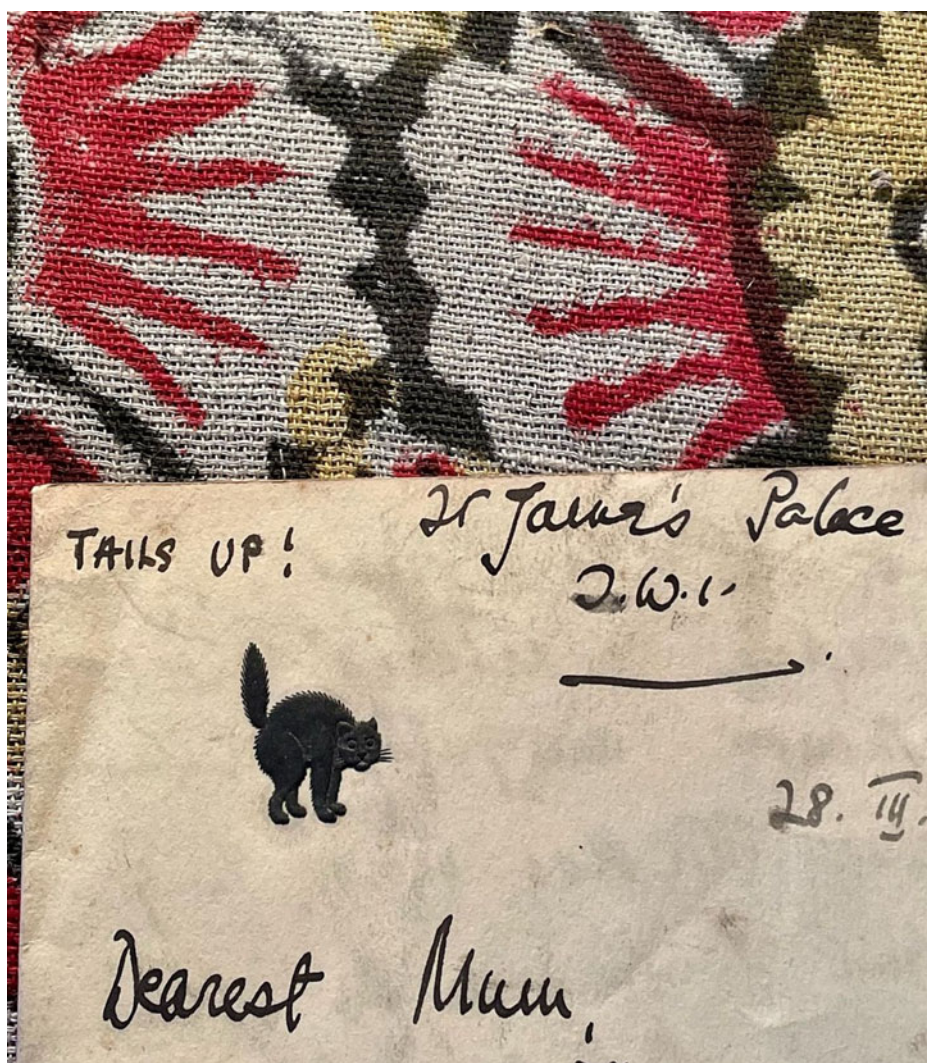


Figure 4. Childhood letter from Elizabeth to her mother, sent from St. James's Palace.

Monte Carlo.⁴ When Elizabeth and her friends arrived at Shulbrede, they took their sherry glasses, carefully laid out by Dolly, upstairs to the Prior's Chamber, where they depleted the house's stock of sherry, whisky, and brandy (Figure 5).⁵ The following day was, in the view of Arthur and Dolly, even worse, and featured the arrival of "a woman known as 'Little Monica' a whore with a dissipated boy lover called 'Pansy'" in addition to a sham Sicilian prince and the "5th rate actor Kim Peacock."⁶ They drank yet more in the Prior's Chamber, with Arthur lamenting that their "household is not made for such entertainment."⁷ By the time the weekend had come to a conclusion, the party had "consumed 1 dozen bottles of Brandy Sherry Whisky, several bottles of beer and a good deal of wine."⁸

⁴ Elizabeth Ponsonby to Dorothea Ponsonby, [n.d.], Shulbrede Priory, Linchmere, Haslemere, UK.

⁵ Transcript of Diary by Dorothea Ponsonby, 5 January 1929. An account of the party also appears in Taylor, *Bright Young People*, pp. 105–07.

⁶ Transcript of Diary by Dorothea Ponsonby, 5 January 1929.

⁷ Transcript of Diary by Arthur Ponsonby, 7 January 1929, Shulbrede Priory, Linchmere, Haslemere, UK.

⁸ Transcript of Diary by Arthur Ponsonby.



Figure 5. The Prior's Chamber—where the January 1929 party unfolded.

What does this party reveal about the history of the Bright Young People, then? We see, for instance, the intergenerational tensions at play between the Bright Young People and their parents. And we also see on display the relationship between social spaces and accepted social behavior—Elizabeth and her friends behaved in the country as they would have done in London, a violation of accepted social practice. While the Ponsonby parents begrudgingly, if uneasily, tolerated their daughter's lifestyle in London, to bring such behavior home to the countryside was an unconscionable error in judgment. The rich archives at the Priory enable a glimpse into these behind-the-scenes tensions.

More generally, the collection represents a snapshot of everyday life in the early twentieth century—accounts of quotidian pleasures, moments of joy and sorrow, the mundane and the extraordinary. These family histories are both intimate and incredibly



Figure 6. The dining room at Shulbrede Priory.

revealing, and to be able to read about them where they happened is a sublime privilege. What other histories do private homes like Shulbrede hold? And how do we, as historians, gain access to them? And, concerningly, what will become of these archives when they lose their caretakers (Figure 6)?

Elizabeth Ponsonby's party at her parents' home in January 1929 speaks to the question at the heart of my dissertation—how, and importantly *where*, did elite sociability in interwar Britain manifest? It was not, as contemporaries and historians have suggested, confined to a Mayfair drawing room. The Bright Young People, rather, would bring Mayfair to greater London, to the British countryside, and to the European continent. The interwar gossip column would work to pull back the curtains of that Mayfair drawing room, the country house party, and the Continental resort, offering a view on elite social life to a broader reading public. The discourse that followed would pay particular attention to place—to behave a

certain way in Mayfair was one thing, but to transpose that behavior to other locales (as Dolly and Arthur experienced firsthand) was another thing altogether.

In addition to the materials related to Elizabeth Ponsonby, Shulbrede also has the journals of Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby, the diaries of Arthur and Dorothea Ponsonby, Hubert Parry's diaries and memorabilia, and other manuscript material related to the Ponsonby family. Henry Ponsonby, Arthur's father, was private secretary to Queen Victoria from 1870 until his death in 1895. The collection would be of interest not only to cultural historians of the early twentieth century, but also to researchers exploring questions related to political history and the history of music. Shulbrede Priory remains first and foremost a private family home, rather than a public archive. However, the Russells do welcome inquiries from serious researchers and are often happy to oblige requests to visit. Inquiries may be directed to Ian Russell at russellconsult7113@gmail.com.

Thomas J. Sojka is currently a Lecturer of History at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester, New Hampshire. He recently completed his PhD at Boston University. His work has also appeared or is forthcoming in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Broadsides*, and *Modern British History*. He would like to extend his thanks to Arianne Chernock, Charles Dellheim, and the *JBS* editorial team, in addition to Courteney Smith, Rachel Weiser, D. J. Taylor, and Ian and Kate Russell.