



A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

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THE LONG WEEKEND¹

Adrian Tinniswood's book of that name describes the Interwar *Indian Summer* of the Aristocratic country house and its period of gentle decline. Below, Pilgrims Hall, Essex in 1936 by Rex Whistler the artist who so epitomised the period.



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Here are some excerpts to give you a flavour:

In the winter of 1913, Archduke Franz Ferdinand (of Austria-Hungary) accepted an invitation to a shooting party at Welbeck Abbey (The home of the Duke of Portland), in the course of which one of the loaders tripped and accidentally discharged both barrels of the gun he was holding, the shot passing within a few feet of the Archduke. *I have often wondered* wrote Portland rather regretfully, *whether the Great War might not have been averted, or at least postponed, had the archduke met his death then and not at Sarajevo the following year.*

The 11th Duke of Bedford refused to install central heating at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, so in winter his fifty-odd indoor servants kept seventy or eighty open wood fires burning in the rooms, including the bathrooms. His housemaids all had to be five feet ten inches tall. When electricity was eventually and grudgingly installed at Woburn, each bedroom was still equipped with a single candle so that house guests could seal their letters with wax.

The Duke of Richmond married a vicar's daughter, a Georgian Earl of Peterborough famously married an opera singer from Fulham and in 1792 Sir Henry Crewe of Calke Abbey in Derbyshire married a lady's maid called Nanny Hawkins.



The number of cases heard at the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division (colloquially known as the Court of Wills, Wives and Wrecks) broke four figures for the first time in history in 1918. In 2012 there were thirteen divorces *an hour*.

Hugh Grosvenor, 2nd Duke of Westminster was known as Bendor - a nickname derived either from the ancient Grosvenor arms, *Azure, a bend or*, or from the name of his grandfather's racehorse that won the Epsom Derby soon after the boy's birth.

Eccentricity was endemic in the aristocracy. William Waldorf Astor (above) went in fear of plots against his life, installing a forbidding set of electrically operated gates at Haver Castle and keeping a posse of policemen in the grounds to guard against intruders. He liked to show his guests off the premises at night and raise the drawbridge behind them. Casual sightseers were no longer allowed, earning him the nickname of William *Walled-off* Astor.

Sir Philip Sassoon (right) inherited a vast fortune. His family had been bankers to the caliphs of Baghdad for 1,000 years. His great-grandfather had moved from Persia to Bombay in the nineteenth century, establishing a trading empire so powerful that it was said *silver and gold, silks, gums and spices, opium and cotton, wool and wheat - whatever moves over sea or land feels the hand or bears the mark of Sassoon & Co.* His grandfather's philanthropy earned him a baronetcy, and his father married a Rothschild, Aline. The Prince of Wales later Edward VII, named his yacht after her.



Sir Philip inherited the parliamentary constituency of Hythe in Kent, where his father had sat as Liberal Unionist MP. His rival for the seat was Sir Arthur Colefax, decorator Sybil Colefax's (below right) husband, who was said to be *so boring that he could have dug the Channel Tunnel*. Philip spent the war as private secretary to the commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig but this did not inhibit his directing work on his new home at Port Lympne overlooking Romney Marsh.

Philip was homosexual which did not concern his equals unlike his Jewishness. Virginia Woolf described him as an underbred Whitechapel Jew but most used the coded casual racism of the day and called him exotic or oriental. Interestingly, his sister Sybil's marriage into the ranks of the English nobility meant that none of this sense of otherness clung to her at all.



We have all seen the futuristic, concrete and glass, country houses beloved of *Poirot* location finders and which look so dated today. *Vita Glass* was a British invention developed in the 1920s which, unlike ordinary glass, allowed the passage of ultraviolet rays, the vital rays which tanned the skin and produced vitamin D in the body, assisted the formation of sound bone and teeth and, it was claimed, even

increased the bactericidal power of the blood, helping it to resist infection. So in a typical English summer you could sunbathe indoors.

Electricity was part of this new world. In Stanford Hall, Lincolnshire, Lord and Lady Braye were baffled by the prospect of having to run cables through their long ballroom without wrecking its delicate eighteenth century stucco-work. Then someone had the bright idea of prising up a floorboard at one end and dropping a dead rabbit into the void; then prising up a floorboard at the other end, when a ferret was unleashed with a string tied to its collar. The cable was tied to the string and the problem solved.

Sybil Colefax, mentioned above, was the ultimate networker. Margot Asquith, exasperated at her determination to know everyone, said one couldn't talk about the birth of Christ without Sybil saying she was there in the manger. Gerald Berners enticed her to a dinner by saying that the P of W would be there. She was mortified when introduced to the Provost of Worcester. Sybil took on the young designer John Fowler as a partner in 1938, the company of course is still with us.

Design was upmost in everyone's mind and so the aristocracy would buy *Vogue* to find out what period was in Fashion and *Country Life* to understand why. Ronald Tree and Nancy Field met on the Cunard liner Mauretania and took on Cottesbrooke Hall, supposed to be the model for Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Ronald was obsessed with hunting and became Master of the Pytchley but Nancy was an interior designer at heart. In 1944 Ronald bought Sibyl Colefax's share in Colefax & Fowler and As Nancy Lancaster she then took over Sybil's role at the company.

Since before WWI, American heiresses had been marrying impoverished nobility. Consuelo (right), the daughter of railway magnate William Kissam Vanderbilt, spent a miserable eleven years lost in the marble halls of Blenheim Palace, surrounded by an army of blank-faced servants and condescending in-laws. Her eleven year old brother warned her that she was only being married for her money. He was right, her father handed over \$2.5 million in railway stock as a dowry. It has been roughly estimated that some \$50 million of American cash had found its way to England.



Ireland too was in the US sights, the 5th Lord Decies of Leixlip Castle in Kildare lost his first wife, the daughter of railway magnate George Jay Gould in 1931 and married a member of the fabulously rich Drexel banking dynasty - but his fellow Irishman the 5th Earl of Gosford deserted his castle in Armagh, his wife the daughter of the US minister to Romania and his teenage son. He travelled to New York where he married a wealthy divorcee, set up a wine shop and joined the NYPD!

Sunny Marlborough, having divorced Consuelo, met American society beauty Gladys Deacon (right). Her background was somewhat doubtful. Her father went to prison for shooting dead her mother's French lover and then went mad. Her mother then ran off with an Italian nobleman. Gladys drifted around Europe captivating everyone with her beauty. She later claimed that she had slept with every prime minister in Europe, and most kings. She had set her sights on Marlborough though and married Sunny in 1921. Only his sudden death in 1934 stopped him from divorcing her.





THE MYTH OF THE MAGDALENE⁴

Susan Haskins published in *History Today* Volume 56 Issue 8 August 2006: The *Da Vinci Code*: millions of people who have read Dan Brown's novel or seen the film know – or at least think they do – who this 'Dark Age' dynasty was. And they 'know' that Mary Magdalen apparently married Jesus, and bore his child, their descendants marrying into the French royal line and, after several generations, engendering the Merovingian dynasty. (In the 7th century, according to Brown's book, the Vatican attempted to eradicate the dynasty by murdering Dagobert II, but his son Sigisbert II survived, as did his bloodline down through history, ending up with Sophie – Sophia, Greek for wisdom, and Mary Magdalen's alter ego in the *Pistis Sophia*, a Gnostic text – heroine of the novel.) The 'historical' aspects of this tale were first told in *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail* (1982), by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln.

According to Luke's Gospel (8:2), Mary of Magdala was the leader of the group of Jesus's women followers, and had been healed; she was present at the crucifixion and, according to John and Mark, was the first to witness the risen Christ. In the commentaries of the Early Church Fathers her gospel figure became conflated with a nameless sinner in Luke, who wept on Christ's feet, wiping them with her hair and anointing them with spikenard (7:37-50), and Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany (John, 11-12). This composite identification was disputed by Protestants from the 16th century, but it was only in 1969 that the Church of Rome distinguished the three separate figures. Baigent et al retain the link between Mary of Magdala and Mary of Bethany with specious and unhistorical arguments regarding the possible wife of Jesus. She was not however a whore.

The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail uses the Gnostic texts (right) of the Gospel of Mary, where Mary Magdalen is described as being loved by Jesus more than the other women and disciples, and the Gospel of Philip, which contains the symbolic imagery of the bridal chamber, to reinforce its hypothesis of a marriage between Christ and Mary Magdalen; *The Da Vinci Code* does the same. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* suggests that Jesus may have survived the crucifixion, and that Mary Magdalen, pregnant at that event, may have fled to France where she was protected by a Jewish kingdom at Narbonne. It continues: According to other accounts, the Grail was brought by the Magdalene to France. As

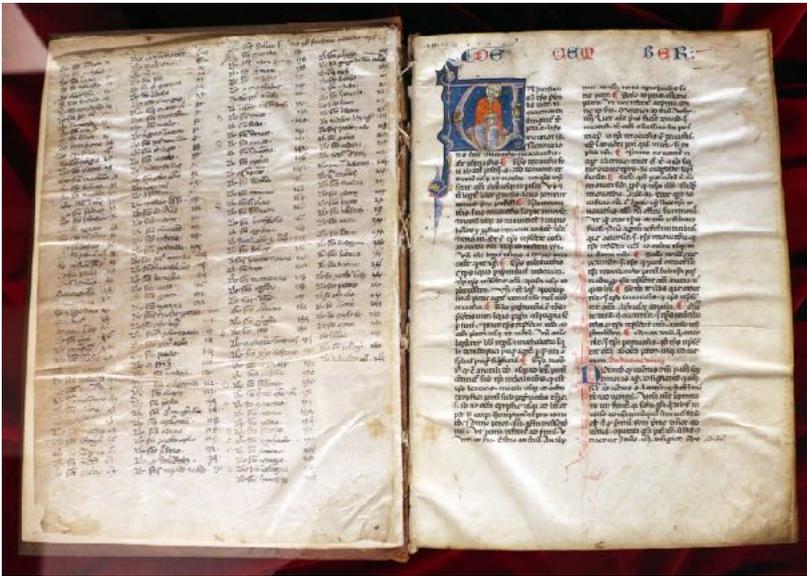


early as the 4th century legends describe the Magdalene fleeing the Holy Land and being set ashore near Marseilles – where for that matter, her purported relics are still venerated. Further, ‘according to medieval legends, she carried with her to Marseilles the Holy Grail. But the early legends say that the Magdalene brought the Grail into France, not a cup. In other words, the simple association of Grail and cup was a relatively late development’. We are then tantalised by another suggestion: that ‘If our hypothesis is correct’, the Holy Grail would have been both ‘Jesus’s bloodline and descendants – the ‘Sang Raal’ ... of which the Templars, were ...[the] guardians; and the receptacle or vessel containing Jesus’s blood, the womb of Mary Magdalen’. The *Da Vinci Code* is of the same view.

The veracity of these hypotheses should be taken with a large dose of salt. There are no accounts or medieval legends of the Grail being brought by Mary Magdalen to France. The earliest legend of her fleeing the Holy Land is of the 13th century. The earliest account of Mary Magdalen’s post-Ascension life appears in an Anglo-Saxon martyrology of c. 850, in which she retires as a hermit, hidden away in sorrow and love of Christ in a desert cave, a story that derives from the legend of the 5th-century penitent harlot St Mary of Egypt, who went into the desert to repent of her sins, naked to reject her worldly life, her hair growing down to cover her. As Mary Magdalen dies, a priest gives her the last rites and buries her. By the 11th century, this legend, known later as the *Vita eremitica beatae Mariae Magdalenae* (‘Eremitical life’) had become widespread, and Mary Magdalen’s legend became one of the best-known saints’ vitae, after the abbey of Vézelay in Burgundy claimed to possess her relics in 1050.

Monsignor Victor Saxer (b.1918), doyen of Magdalenian scholarship, has traced the development of the legends. To the question of how her body had arrived in Gaul, the faithful were informed that it had been through the love of all-powerful God. Before long, however, Vézelay (below) had to come up with something more concrete to explain its possession of the relics: this was the classic holy theft whereby various versions told of how a monk from Vézelay had been sent to near Aix to retrieve her body where it had been buried, before the Saracens invaded, and brought it back to the abbey for safe-keeping. The next step of the story related how the body had actually come to Provence. This was the *vita apostolica*, or apostolic life of





Mary Magdalen, elements of which have been used in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. Here Mary Magdalen and various companions, including one Maximinus, landed at Marseille, where they preached the gospel. Mary Magdalen converted the local prince and his wife to Christianity, and performed miracles such as helping the previously childless couple to conceive (thus becoming a patron saint of childbearing), and restoring the princess to life after being shipwrecked. In a later version, what *The Holy Blood and*

the Holy Grail refers to as ‘according to tradition, as well as certain early Church writers’ and appears to treat as fact, she is accompanied by Martha and Lazarus, having been put to flight by the Jews in a leaky and rudderless vessel, which guided by God, also, arrives at Marseille – Martha goes to Tarascon to kill the wicked dragon, while Lazarus stays to become bishop of Marseille.

The story is resumed in the compilation known as the *Golden Legend* (above) by Jacobus de Voragine of 1276. All hagiographical material issued by one small Burgundian abbey, which prompted, as intended, a massive pilgrimage industry, particularly after the invention or discovery in 1259, of heaps of feminine hair (something that would to the medieval mentalité confirm that the body was indeed that of Mary Magdalen). Then, in 1279, through the intervention of Mary Magdalen herself in a dream, the monks at St Maximin in Provence ‘discovered’ her relics in their church, turning the steps of the credulous faithful southwards. The instigator of the discovery of the Magdalen’s relics at St Maximin was Charles of Anjou and Salerno, count of Provence. So where do the Merovingians come in? Nowhere. In *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* we learn that: ‘If our hypothesis is correct, ... after fleeing the Holy Land, Jesus’s wife and offspring found a refuge in the south of France, and in a Jewish community they preserved their lineage. During the 5th century this lineage appears to have intermarried with the royal line of the Franks, thus engendering the Merovingian dynasty.’

There is no footnote to this amazing leap in historical speculation, although the occasional fact is referred to such as the assassination of Dagobert II in 679, and that ‘despite all efforts to eradicate it, Jesus’s bloodline – or at any rate, the Merovingian bloodline – survived ... in part through the Carolingians, ... who sought to legitimise themselves by dynastic alliance with Merovingian princesses’. Hard on the heels of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Dan Brown follows. Nor is there any link between Mary Magdalen and the French bloodline, as hypothesised by the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* when they state that Louis XI (r.1461-83) regarded ‘the Magdalene as a source of the French royal line’, citing Sainte-Marie Madeleine (1860) by the Dominican H.D. Lacordaire, an apologist for the claims of St Maximin and the veracity of Mary Magdalen’s sojourn in Provence. Either their French is bad or it is yet another instance of imagination running riot, for Lacordaire merely noted that the king was an ‘example of limitless veneration’ for Mary Magdalen, ‘treating her as a daughter of France’, and endowing his descendants ‘with a pilgrimage proper to the French monarchy’. While it is true that the French monarchy, from Louis IX (r.1226-70), who attended the inventions both at Vézelay and St Maximin, to Francis I (r.1515-47), in particular, down to the 18th century, first supported and endowed Vézelay and then did the same for the convent at St Maximin and

pilgrimage site at La Ste-Baume, it was not only the French royal house that did so. Royalty and nobility, as well as humbler pilgrims, from all over Europe came to the shrine of the most popular saint of Christendom after the Virgin Mary: among them Francis I, the emperor Charles V, his daughter-in-law Beatrice of Savoy, and princesses such as Isabella d'Este, while several females of dynastic descent had themselves portrayed as the penitent in her grotto, such as the Archduchess Maria Magdalena of Tuscany in 1621.

Finally, it is interesting to note that after the loss to France of the duchy of Burgundy in 1477, the Burgundian Hapsburgs used the legendary apostolic life of Mary Magdalen to claim their prior right to the duchy. A manuscript of c.1486 now in the British Library, purporting to be a history of the house of Burgundy, states that Mary Magdalen converted their forebears, the king and queen of Burgundy (altering what in the legend had been the prince and princess 'of the province', or Provence), to Christianity. With the addition at the beginning of two apocryphal names, Trophime and Etienne (the king and his son), is a genealogical list that would have done *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* proud: Chilperic I and Sigismond IV of Burgundy, Clovis I, king of the Franks, converted by his wife Clothilde (of the Burgundian house which, according to the partisan historiographer was Christian 'long before there was a Christian king in France'), and Theuderic II, ending with the Archduke (later Holy Roman Emperor) Maximilian I (r.1477-82), and his son Philip the Handsome (r.1482-1506), father of Charles V.



Baigent and Leigh's recent case in the High Court against Dan Brown failed since using material both factual and in the public domain is not plagiarism. Had they claimed the stuff of their book to have been the authors' own invention, they might have got somewhere. That the central pivot to both *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code* was a fiction could well have been established by the lack of connection between Mary Magdalen (right⁶), Marseilles and the Merovingians.

And you thought we suffered from fake news!

Susan Haskins is the author of *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (HarperCollins, 1993).

1. Jonathan Cape 2016. Painting: Rex Whistler's Trent Park, 1934.
2. Pietà (Lamentation), St. John and Mary Magdalene mourn with the Virgin Mary over the crucified Jesus Christ. French, c. 16th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.
3. Codex II, one of the most prominent Gnostic writings found in the Nag Hammadi library. Shown here are the end of the Apocryphon of John and the beginning of the Gospel of Thomas.
4. Basilica Sainte-Marie-Madeleine courtesy of Tripadvisor.
5. *Legenda Aurea*, c. 1290, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Creative commons.
6. *Mary Magdalene*, (Mary Magdalene, c. 1510) by Master of the Mary Magdalene Legend.