



John Evelyn 1620-1706

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A member of the Evelyn Family has been a patron of St. James' Church from 1638 to the last decade of the 20th century in an almost continuous line.

John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys were friends. They were also the two greatest diarists of their time. Neither diary was intended to be read and both were published well after their authors were dead.

Indeed, Pepys wrote his entire diary in a sort of personal shorthand or cipher. Hence its extraordinary frankness and immediacy. The manuscript languished in Magdalen College, Cambridge, where he took his degree, until it was deciphered by the forgettably named John Smith, edited by Lord Braybroke and first published in 1825. Prudery demanded heavy editing and it was only over the years 1970 to 1983 that the eleven volumes making up the full, rollicking, unexpurgated edition were published. The diary was opened on 1st January 1660 and closed on 31st May 1669 because of his, thankfully, unfounded fears for his eyesight.

John Evelyn's Memoirs or Diary opens "I was born (at Wotton in the County of Surrey,) at about twenty minutes past two in the morning, being on Tuesday the 31st and last of October, 1620." It concludes with an entry for 27 February, 1706; "My indisposition increasing, I was exceeding ill this whole week". This was the day he died. So the scope of the Memoirs or Diary covers 85 years compared with a mere nine years by Pepys. It was first published in 1818, edited from the original manuscript in the possession of Lady Evelyn, widow of the diarist's great-great-grandson, Sir Frederick Evelyn Bt. She, apparently, did not consider the original of any great consequence and, according to reports at the time, it might easily have ended being cut up for dress patterns or lighting fires.

Whilst Pepys, like Alan Clark in our time, wrote with the events of the day fresh in his mind, John Evelyn took a more leisurely approach. Some diary entries were made after time had passed and he also jogged back to add to earlier passages and to transcribe and edit. The result, when added to his less exuberant character than Pepys, is a more studied, sober account of a full and active life at the centre of things. Historically, his Diary has more value than Pepys.

So, how does John the diarist fit into the Evelyn dynasty and what sort of life did he lead?

The family goes back to Normandy from where one Evelyn went on Crusade to the Holy Land with Robert, Duke of Normandy in 1100. The firmly documented pedigree starts with an entry in the Harrow Court Rolls in 1440 mentioning a William Avelyn or Evelyn of Harrow on the Hill, Middlesex, who later died in 1470.

Evelyn's father was the fourth son of George Evelyn of Long Ditton, Godstone & Wotton. George Evelyn was a steady collector of estates funded by his profits from making gunpowder. He had enough land to settle an estate on each of his three sons and it was Evelyn's father, Richard, who went to Wotton. There he brought up three sons and two daughters.

Evelyn's education started early at the age of four. He had a tutor and a classroom over the porch at the church of St John the Evangelist at Wotton. Soon he was sent to his maternal grandfather's home in Lewes and continued his education there. Some consideration was given to securing a place at Eton, but the then headmaster's reputation for ferocious floggings did not appeal. Shortly after his mother's death in 1635 and that of his eldest sister Elizabeth who died in childbirth, Evelyn moved into the Middle Temple with his younger brother Richard. The study of law was a father's dream which Evelyn did not share.

By the time he was twenty one his father had died and Evelyn was able to put on one side all thoughts of a legal career. His elder brother, George, inherited the Wotton Estate and in the background the Civil War was brewing. It seemed the right time to travel. He made a short but adventurous excursion across the Channel to Flushing then Gennep which was being besieged by the French and Dutch. He retreated across the Channel and back home moved between Wotton and London "studying a little but dancing and fooling more" before being briefly and comically caught up in the Civil War. He rode off in November, 1641, to join the Royalist forces and found them just after they had won the battle of Brentford. He traipsed back to Wotton unblooded and unconvinced about the attractions of the military life. Here, briefly, he began to discover a real love for the management and improvement of the Wotton Estate. He persuaded his brother to allow him to dig a fish pond, make an island, and build a study. It gave him great satisfaction.

In October 1643 his feet got seriously itchy and he applied for His Majesty's licence to travel. This was to be a really Grand Tour, lasting three years, costing £300 in each year, a tidy sum for those days. He travelled widely through France and Italy, staying seven months in Rome. He collected. But he got most pleasure out of the taming of nature by gardening. He had no great love for untamed nature itself. Perhaps Evelyn started out a dilettante but he soon applied himself seriously to the study of language, and customs as well as architecture, antiquities and horticulture. This was a Grand Education and the knowledge he gained informed all his long life. He never went walkabout again.

Before returning home he spent a busy and instructive time in Paris. More than that, he met the extremely young daughter and sole heiress of the English Resident, Sir Richard Browne. Her tombstone in Wotton Church states that she was in her 74th year in 1709 which would make her between twelve and thirteen when she was married in the chapel to the Embassy on 27th June, 1647. They were both seriously in love and had embarked on a happy marriage which would last more than fifty eight years.

Evelyn moved between Paris and London and once personally carried messages to King Charles as he was held prisoner by Cromwell in Hampton Court. Evelyn made no secret of his sympathy for the Royalist cause. He even published his first book where he nailed his Royalist colours publicly to his mast. It came out no more than two days before the King was beheaded.

After considerable difficulty, including confiscation, Evelyn was able to buy for £ 3,500 in 1653 the Deptford property, Sayes Court. His wife finally joined him from Paris and swiftly produced four sons, only one of which survived childhood. There was wholesale landscaping to be carried out with a huge planting programme transforming a good hundred acres. At this time, the Diary begins to show Evelyn's devout nature as well as his unflinching devotion to the new King Charles. The King got to know both Evelyn and his wife well whilst they were in Paris and clearly trusted their loyalty and Evelyn's ability as a commonsensical adviser over a wide range of problems. He also found out very early on that Evelyn was a "studious decliner of honours and titles". Where are such men and women now?

He did, however, accept from the King the nomination to the Council of the Royal Society. This seemed to trigger off a spate of creativity. In 1662 he published (he liked long titles) "Sculptura; or, the History and Art of Chalcography". This set out his considerable knowledge of the graphic arts including the new method of engraving in mezzotint. Then came his masterpiece, 'Sylva', briefly titled but a comprehensive manual on woodland management. It had a lasting effect and Disraeli was able to say much later that Nelson's fleets were built from the oaks that Evelyn planted.

Whilst Evelyn refused all honours and titles under King Charles, when James the Second came to the throne, he allowed himself to be appointed in 1685 to the office of the Privy Seal as one of the three Commissioners. He did not always find it possible to reconcile the wishes of the King, a zealous Catholic, with his own deeply felt convictions as a member of the Church of England. It was a relief when he was replaced by Lord Arundel.

In 1691 came a crucial turning point. Evelyn's brother, George, lost his only remaining son. Evelyn became heir to the Wotton Estate and was invited to set up home there. This

he did after living forty years at Sayes Court. He described what was effectively his life in retirement in a letter to a friend, "I am planting an ever-green grove here to an old house ready to drop, the economy and hospitality of which my good old Brother will not depart from, but kept a Christmas (1696) in which we had no fewer than three hundred bumpkins every holy-day. We have a very convenient apartment of five rooms together, besides a pretty closet which we have furnished with the spoils of Sayes Court".

old Deptford home was let to a prickly tenant, Admiral John Benbow. He sublet it to Peter the Great, Czar of Russia. It was a disaster for the house and carefully tended grounds. Evelyn and Benbow both got compensation of about £160 each but the garden was a ruin.

In October, 1699, brother George died and Evelyn inherited the Wotton Estate. He continued to publish original books and translations. His last major public work was to act as Treasurer helping to oversee the transformation of the Palace of Greenwich into a home and hospital for seamen. He laid the foundation stone to the Wren extensions in 1705.

In his introduction to the Diary published in 1906 (from which much of these notes are drawn) the editor, Austin Dobson characterised the diarist as follows: "He was not only a man of marked accomplishment and conspicuous integrity, but a model husband and father, an exemplary citizen, friend, and neighbour". Something of his own generosity of spirit shines through Evelyn's appreciation of Pepys on his death. Evelyn remembered him "as a very worthy, industrious and curious person, none in England exceeding him in knowledge of the navy ... universally beloved, hospitable, generous, learned in many things, skilled in music, a very great cherisher of learned men."

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