

Robert Henty of Langley House and his nephew G A Henty

by Ann J King, Henty Society Archivist

Robert Henty, who was born in Ferring, Sussex in 1808, died in May 1905 at Langley House at the great age of 96, having lived there for almost twenty years after retiring from a successful career in mining in Wales and around the world. His life may be of interest to Abbots Langley historians although the major part of it was not spent in Hertfordshire.

Robert descended from generations of yeoman farmers in Sussex. Direct line Hentys can be found in records as far back as the fourteenth century in the central wealden area around Wivelsfield. Two centuries later, some Hentys remained in the central area of Sussex, one branch of the family moved eastwards towards Lewes, and another branch went westwards across the county towards Worthing and Chichester. This second branch were more successful both in farming and in their ability to administer aspects of the communities in which they lived. They were moving well with the times, adapting to the changes in agriculture and diversifying into brewing and banking during the 18th century. Some served as officers in the Sussex Yeomanry and were active in the defence of the Sussex coastline through the period of the Napoleonic wars. Others, including Robert Henty, served as Justices of the Peace, churchwardens, or overseers.

In 1790 George Henty married Ann, daughter of the local rector, James Penfold, at St Andrew's Church, Ferring. George and Ann had twelve children and their youngest son was Robert. From the age of about eighteen Robert worked a farm at Funtington, a few miles west of Chichester, in conjunction with

his brother, George. After marriage to Eliza and the baptisms of some of their children at St Bartholomew's Church in Chichester, Robert, Eliza and the family moved away from Sussex, and from farming, into mine ownership in Wales. However, they returned to Chichester for the baptisms of each of their remaining children. The mining operation grew into a great enterprise and Robert eventually had business connections in many parts of the world. His knowledge was respected and his reputation as a good engineer put demands on him from mine owners in remote places.

Robert and his wife, Eliza, were known to have travelled extensively from the late 1850s to the 1870s. References to Mr and Mrs Henty appear in one or two volumes of memoirs, as genial travelling companions on long journeys westwards across America. The unnamed writer of a diary published as *Sunways* recounts that on 9 February 1875 he encountered Mr and Mrs Henty travelling by train to Georgetown, Colorado. Later he met them again when visiting a Dutchman named Decatur to see his collection of fossils and archaeological fragments.

Robert was uncle to the celebrated special correspondent and writer of almost 100 boys' adventure and history stories, George Alfred Henty (1832–1902). As a young university student, Henty spent many visits to Wales learning mining and engineering skills, which he then put to good use, chiefly in Italy and Sardinia. *Facing Death* was one of Henty's adventure stories for boys (pp 58–67 *G A Henty 1832–1902 A Bibliographical Study* by Peter Newbolt). It was centred on a

coal mining area, and the drama of a pit disaster. This title was the tenth book by Henty, and it was first published in 1882. In it he drew upon his mining knowledge, but the Vaughan Pit in the story was not located in Wales. Henty always said he never wrote directly about any personal experiences, but his memories coloured his stories and brought real life into them. Later in his life G A Henty told interviewers he felt *Facing Death* was one of his best adventure stories.

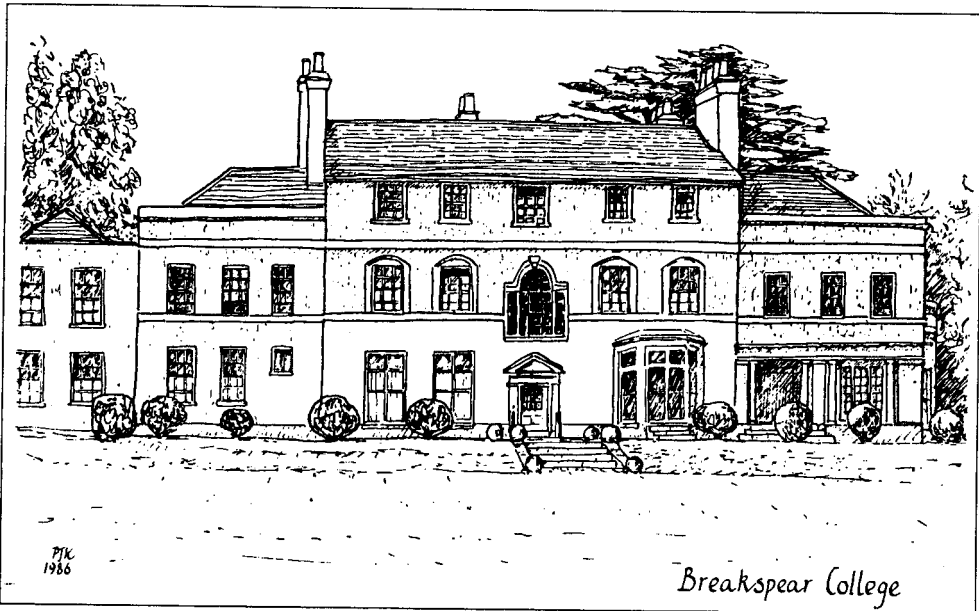
Robert Henty has the serious misfortune to have fathered only girls – eight of them – Catherine Eliza, Josephine, Mary Anne, Rachel, Alice, Agnes, Caroline Beatrice and Louise. In the latter years of his working life Robert had no-one within his immediate family to whom he could hand his business activities. Eliza, his wife, and two of their daughters had died; two of the eight girls had married; and there still remained four unmarried girls. They could be counted upon to care for their father in his old age. In 1887, and with retirement imminent, Robert relinquished most of his mining interests but he was still listed in *The Mining Manual* of 1887 as having business involvements in nine Welsh mining companies. Robert retired to live at Langley House (see *Abbots Langley Local History Society Journal Number 9* – front cover illustration), a substantial place with elegantly laid out grounds. Here he had staff to run the household and the 32-acre farm, under the watchful eyes of two of his daughters, Catherine and Alice. A third daughter may have lived nearby, as Beatrice is mentioned in the letter from G A Henty to Alice. He expresses pleasure at knowing she too would be present at supper. The whereabouts of Mary Anne, the fourth single daughter, at this time has so far remained undiscovered.

Robert was a well respected senior figure in the community, a churchwarden and school manager, the one who dug deeply in his

pocket for village entertainments at times of royal jubilees, provided prizes and gifts at village events and gave generously to the needy. When a Langley House servant, Miss Annie Mansfield, married Mr W. Botwright on Saturday 20 April 1901 in the parish church, the couple then drove to Langley House where 'Mr Robert Henty had most kindly provided the breakfast, to which a large number of relatives and fellow-servants of the establishment and from the Vicarage had been invited'.

In mid June 1897 *The Watford Observer* carried a short article on the forthcoming celebrations for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. At Abbots Langley, in addition to a full range of Sunday services of thanksgiving there would be a whole day of events on the following Tuesday. That day, after a short church service, a procession would form up behind a band and progress to Robert Henty's field where a meal would be served, after which there would be 'athletic sports'. Later, in the field, there would be dancing followed by fireworks, for which the sum of £21 was to be spent with Messrs Brock.

The following Saturday the *Watford Observer* carried a fulsome account of the celebrations. Two Miss Hentys were reported as being out and about by 8 o'clock with the committee putting the finishing touches to the event. 'Langley House was festooned most effectively with red, white and blue and lines of fairy lights outlined all the windows which were also illuminated from the inside'. 450 parishioners sat down to a banquet of beef, mutton and ham with new potatoes and salad washed down with ale and ginger-beer. The second course was 'good rich plum pudding'. Robert Henty, then aged 89, addressed the assembled company and recounted his memory of Queen Victoria's Coronation. At the end of the day the Vicar, the Rev'd A H Parnell, offered thanks to everyone who had helped in the successful outcome. Hearty



A sketch by Prue King of Langley House appears on the front cover of Journal 9. This is an earlier sketch by Prue of Langley House when it was referred to as Breakspear College

cheers followed his thanks to Mr Robert Henty for lending his field and for taking the keenest interest from start to finish.

Robert's nephew, G A Henty, was a frequent visitor after he had ceased to travel the world on behalf of *The Standard* newspaper. At least one letter from GA to Alice survives from the late 1880s, giving the time of a train from London to Langley, on which he planned to travel to spend the evening with them. Robert also sought GA's advice on behalf of his friend Thomas Armstrong, about getting a letter published in a specialist journal concerning light railways in Italy. Henty's reply survives amongst papers in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

In the final few years of Robert's life he was cared for by a small army of nurses and ancillary staff. When G A Henty's son Charles returned from service in the Boer War and was found to be in a very poor state of health it was suggested he go to Abbots

Langley to be nursed by Robert's team of carers. Mr Ferrier, his London doctor, was sent to cast his professional eye over Charles. Quickly, he identified the reason for the malaise. It would seem that whilst Charles was in South Africa, an army doctor had prescribed a solutive which had had the wrong effect and was worsening his already weak and delirious condition. Charles did recover some of his strength but was far from well during the remaining 22 years of his life. However, he benefited greatly from the care and affection of his relatives and the staff at Langley House at a time when his own father was seriously ill with diabetes, and from which he died a year later.

Robert died at Langley House and his funeral took place on 3 June 1905. A newspaper report spoke generously of him as an amiable character, endeared to all around him. The report of his funeral listed members of the family present, including his six surviving

daughters, seven Henty nephews and cousins, and Captain Charles Henty, GA's son, who accompanied 'the nurses and the household servants inside and out' from Langley House – a kindly gesture in appreciation of all they had done to bring about his own return to health some four years earlier.

Robert's surviving daughters gave a beautiful stained glass window to Abbots Langley Parish Church in memory of both parents. Detail in the lower part of the design reveals vignettes of the church and some houses, together with a representation of St Albans Abbey. Seven months after Robert's death an auction was held by Sedgwick, Son & Weall of surplus household furniture, effects, farm and other items. A pair of carriage horses, a brougham, a landau, a 4-wheel dog cart and carriage harness, 3 Jersey cows, some large furniture and all the greenhouse plants were amongst the lots sold that day. The daughters moved from Langley House which then stood empty for three years. The vicar reported that it began to look neglected (p. 445 *Abbots Langley Then 1760–1960* by Clive W Clark). Whether Robert actually owned the house is debatable, since at the time renting even large properties was quite common. Robert's first-born daughter, Catherine Eliza, later resided at the Causeway House, Abbots Langley for many years before dying there in 1925, aged 87. She is remembered on a plaque adjacent to her parents' memorial window in the parish church.

G A Henty wrote many short stories for compilations by various publishers. In one book, *Please Tell Me Another Tale*, published by Skeffington in 1890 there is a tale 'Faithful'. It revolves around Sir James Beltram and his family who reside at a fine mansion at neighbouring Kings Langley. The heroine of the tale, a female member of the staff, rescues all the Beltram family from the burning house. Perhaps Robert's stately mansion in Abbots Langley was the model

for Beltram's home? In the course of the tale Henty passes the useful information that the train from London to Langley takes 50 minutes, a fact he knew from his own visits to his uncle in the years just before the tale was published.

Where have all the Hentys gone? Robert had no male heirs. G A Henty's elder son, Charles, and his wife, Ethel, had two daughters. GA's younger son, Hubert, died unmarried. Few of the other Hentys listed as attending Robert's funeral had male heirs and only one or two more distant connections could claim that distinction. After many previous prolific generations the Henty surname from this line has all but died out. Perhaps a photograph of Robert Henty at an event in Abbots Langley survives somewhere – it would be interesting to compare it with the several which exist of G A Henty.

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I would like to thank Audrey Ashby for her assistance in tracking down the interesting newspaper articles quoted above, and Reg Nice for his kindly help.

Erratum!

On this page the author refers to a feature of the stained glass window memorial, as a 'representation of St Albans Abbey'. Raymond Wilkinson's book states that this is the cathedral at Chichester, where Robert Henty was born. Comparison between the image in the window with photographs of the cathedral confirms that Wilkinson is correct.

T. Brooks Aug 2020