



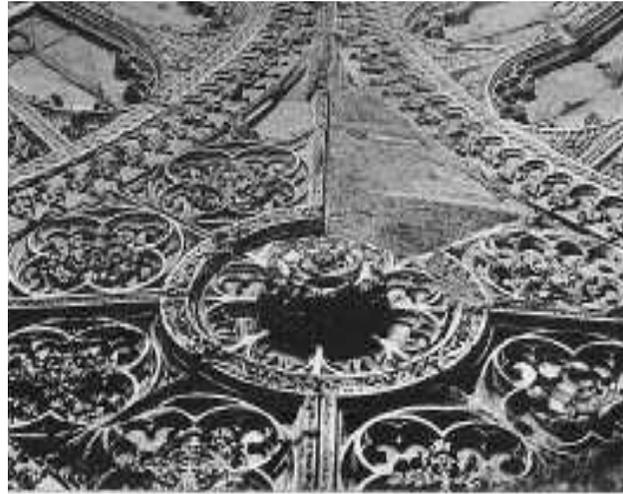
Meanwhile in Switzerland, unaware of the tragedy, the Viscount and his future brother-in-law decided, against local advice, to take their boat down the falls of the River Rhine at Laufenburg. Their craft over-turned and both men were drowned.

The next heir to the Montague title died four years later, before he had fathered a child. The viscounty died with him and Cowdray was uninhabitable.

## GOthic ROMANCE

The ruins became an epitome of the Romantic Movement that was popularised by the poetry of William Wordsworth and by the Gothic-horror novels ridiculed in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Cowdray was painted by JMW Turner, John Constable and a score of lesser artists. It was widely written about, was visited by antiquarians and became a popular attraction with the coming of railways that brought people from the London suburbs on cheap excursion tickets.

The property was sold to an Irish peer, Lord Egmont, in 1843, and the prestige of the ruins as *ruins* saved them from rebuilding. They escaped Victorianisation.



Tracery on the roof of the Porch of Honour

## CONSERVATION

In 1909 Sir Weetman Pearson, later the 1st Viscount Cowdray, bought the estate. He employed the foremost experts on historic buildings, Sir William St John Hope and Sir Aston Webb, to advise him. Some restoration was done, but increasing dilapidation made the walls unsafe.

Various proposals were made, but it was not until the creation of the Cowdray Heritage Trust in 1997 that the house was subject to a major conservation programme, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and other generous donors. Today it is a major visitor attraction.



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# COWDRAY

Cowdray, a short walk from Midhurst's North Street car park, is open to the public on certain days in summer.

It was one of the most magnificent 16th century houses in Sussex, owned by noblemen who were related to the Tudor monarchs and held great offices of state during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Cowdray was visited by Henry VIII (three times) and many of its



Cowdray, west view, before the fire

splendours were designed to do him honour. The boy King Edward VI came here and complained that the food was too rich for him. Queen Elizabeth I was entertained for a week with great ceremony.

Although devastated by fire in 1793, Cowdray today is a magical evocation of past glories.

## THE BUILDERS

Cowdray's history began in 1284 when Sir John Bohun finished building a house across the river from the old town of Midhurst. He

called it Codreya, the Norman word for the nearby hazel thickets. It was surrounded by a wall, and entered by a drawbridge over the nearby River Rother. King Edward I was entertained here, with his son, the future Edward II, and Edward III also visited. The Bohun family lived here until they moved to London in 1433, and the house became semi-derelict.

It was demolished in the 1480s and a new house built on its footprint. This was a small, single-range manor house but with a large estate. In 1529 it came into the possession of Sir William Fitzwilliam, Treasurer of Henry VIII's Household. He became Lord High Admiral of England, and the Lord Privy Seal. He was one of the most influential men in the kingdom and, as part of the celebration of the birth of the future Edward VI, he was ennobled as the Earl of Southampton in 1537. Cowdray passed to Fitzwilliam's half-brother, Sir Anthony Browne, and from him to his eldest son, also Anthony Browne, who was created Viscount Montague. The property was inherited by nine generations of the family.

Fitzwilliam improved the little manor house he had bought, but it was his nephew who completed the project in the early 1550s. He added north and south wings, joining them with a new west wing, making a quadrilateral enclosure around a central courtyard. Seen from within the courtyard, the new parts of the building were symmetrical, with turrets, towers and windows matching each other. The north, south and much of the west ranges were destroyed in the fire in 1793, but can be seen in eighteenth-century drawings.

Later owners made changes, altering some of the windows and the internal arrangements, but Cowdray remains as it was built. For us it is a remarkable survival of an early Tudor nobleman's mansion, an example of 16th century architecture at its best, understated and dignified.

## THE PERILS OF CATHOLICISM

The house was a Catholic stronghold when this was a forbidden form of religion. During the reign of the Protestant Elizabeth I, the devout 1st Viscount was suspected of being a traitor, but he escaped persecution. A few years later the 2nd Viscount was heavily fined and imprisoned for his faith and for alleged involvement with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, Guy Fawkes having been briefly employed at Cowdray.

During the Civil War of the 1640s the 3rd Viscount supported the Royalist cause; in retaliation Parliamentary troops occupied Cowdray for seventeen years. Although the house was plundered, it escaped demolition. The estates were sequestrated and the owners were once again heavily fined.

## GEORGIAN REVIVAL

It was not until the succession of the 6th Viscount in 1717 that Cowdray began to recover from the depredations of the previous century. Internal changes were made in accordance with Georgian taste. The family entertained ostentatiously. What had been their first floor dining room became a grand salon for social gatherings with distinguished neighbours and visitors.

The approach route to Cowdray was changed. The old causeway across the water meadows was fenced off. A new carriage road from Easebourne was built and, instead of the house being visible from afar, it now appeared to be secluded among the rolling acres of a landscape that had been redesigned in the new fashionable style.

Georgian polite society was meeting at Cowdray, but the family had over-spent. The young 8th Viscount proposed marriage to the eldest daughter of the wealthy banker Mr Thomas Coutts, hoping to inherit his money.



The elaborate tomb in Easebourne Church of the 1st Viscount Montague (died 1592) and his two wives. Originally much larger, it was reduced in size when transferred from Midhurst Church in 1851. Before then it was deliberately damaged by Parliamentary troops in the Civil War.

## RUINATION

While the house was being refurbished for his wedding he went on holiday to the Continent and his mother and sister visited the elegant resort of Brighton. Very few staff remained at Cowdray. At midnight on 24 September 1793 a spark from a coal basket left burning by the decorators set fire to the woodshavings and paper rubbish in their workroom. Before long it was all ablaze and the flames were spreading fast. Nothing much was done. Fire buckets and the water tanks were in an outside building, the keys to which could not be found and the door could not be forced. Crowds gathered and some treasures were rescued, but many more were stolen. The house smouldered for a fortnight.