



LYNFORD HALL

COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL



THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF CONSOLATION AND ST. STEPHEN, LYNFORD

"The Church in the Wood"

"Whoever built such a beautiful little Church in a place like this, hidden away in a wood?" is a question often asked. Before it can be answered, we must look at the history of Lynford Hall.

The original Hall belonged to a family named Sutton. The last member of the family to live here was Sir Richard Sutton, who was a great lover of Horse & Hounds and kept a pack at Lynford. Sir Richard Sutton drove a coach driven by four cream coloured horses.

When Sir Richard died in 1856 his eldest son and heir, Sir John Sutton sold the Lynford estate to a Mr Lyne-Stephens, the Victorian banker who married Yolande Louise Duvernay, a French Catholic. Yolande Marie Louise Duvernay was a world famous danseuse and was mentioned in the Ingoldby Legends. She retired from the stage some eight years before her marriage, at the age of thirty-two. Mr Lyne Stephens became a merchant banker after he made his fortune by inventing dolls' eyes which open and close.

Sir John Sutton became a Catholic and after leaving Lynford Hall he retired to Bruges, where he purchased several houses and turned them into a seminary for the Education and Training of Catholic Priests for the English Mission. In the spring of 1857 Mr & Mrs Lyne Stephens took up residence in the old Hall at Lynford and in the same year began to build the present Lynford Hall, some three hundred yards distant on the other side of the River Wissey. The Hall took seven years to build and when finished in 1874 Madame Lyne Stephens took possession of it as a widow, for her husband had died in 1860 at the age of sixty. At the time of his death, he was considered to be the richest commoner in the reign of George VI and left one million pounds.

It was in Lynford Hall that Madame Lyne-Stephens spent the greatest part of her widowhood, devoting herself to the duties of a great landowner for besides the grounds and park; she owned about eight thousand acres of land. She was a "Lady Bountiful" and made generous gifts to every man, woman and child on the estate at Christmas. Lynford was not her only residence, for she had a splendid property in Roehampton and owned one of the finest houses in Paris.

For twenty-one years from 1857-1878, Madame Lyne Stephens, when at Lynford drove to Mass every Sunday in Thetford with her staff and guests and occasionally went to Oxborough. In the late seventies, the following remark was made by one of her guests, Lord Lovat, "Why don't you build a Church here in Lynford and save yourself the trouble of taking your staff and guests to Thetford every Sunday?"

As a result of that chance remark, the Church of Our Lady of Consolation and St. Stephens came into being.

The site chosen was the Home Farm and its House (which is almost three hundred years old) became the presbytery. About four acres of the estate were given over as Church property and marked with boundary stones inscribed "S.M.Consolate".

The Church was built in 1878 and the architect was a Mr Clutton. It is small Gothic in style and worthy of the great Pugin himself. It is finished on the outside with flint, the work of the famous Brandon Flint Knappers. In the outside buttresses carved stones taken from the old pre-reformation Church which stood near the old Hall, were built in thus linking the Catholicity of the past with the present. The Altar and the Reredos of the Pugin design are of stone and richly gilded. The floor sanctuary which is paved with mosaic is the work of an Italian artist.

The year 1884 was a memorable one for Lynford, for on 7th October, Bishop Riddell consecrated its Church in the presence of its pious founder. Many non-Catholics were present and one of the locals was firmly convinced that it was the Pope who had conducted the service. When he was told that it was the Bishop of Northampton, he said "Nay, Nay it was the Pope of Rome, I saw him with my own eyes".

Madame Lyne Stephens lived for sixteen years after the opening of the Church and passed away on 2nd September 1894 aged eighty-two. She was buried with her husband in Roehampton. After her death the Lynford estate passed out of Catholic hands and into those of a very bigoted anti-Catholic, whose first act was to have trees planted to "Hide the terrible eyesore of a Catholic church"

It is interesting to note that King Edward VII viewed Lynford Hall with the object of buying the estate but turned it down as it was unsuitable for his needs and settled on Sandringham instead.

It is also interesting to note that when Mr Joseph Kennedy was American ambassador In London, he and his son John F Kennedy (the future president of the United States of America) used to come and stay at Lynford Hall at the weekends to shoot and attend Mass on Sundays in our little Church.

Lynford was not the only Church which Madame Lyne Stephens built. She also built the fine Church of Our Lady and the English Martyrs in Cambridge and sold her pearls to do so. Incidentally because her husband invented the moving dolls' eyes the Church was known for many years as "The Dolls' Eye Church".

Among her other benefactions to the Northampton Diocese, are the Bishop's House in Northampton the Church of Shefford in Bedfordshire, for the Children's Home. She also had a share in the building of the church in Wellingborough, towards which she gave four thousand pounds.