

Prologue

The Wheatsheaf and the Pelican



Charles Eamer Kempe, though a shy man with a lifelong stammer, has a talent for friendship and enjoys playing the host. In July 1885, he announces a grand garden party (a '*Festa*' he calls it) at Old Place in Lindfield, his Sussex home, to raise money for the local church. Old Place is his passion: he has restored and enlarged it, laying out what is already a spectacular garden with borders, hedges, vistas, pavilions and lawns large enough for entertaining on a grand scale. In another ten years, he will have extended the house again, filling it with an astonishing collection of furniture, art, stained glass, books and treasures of all kinds. Yet he lives here alone, except for a small team of servants. Now in his fifties, he has never married.

Though he stays in London during the week, Old Place is his constant point of return. He has spent a fortune already on creating not just a home but one of the most admired country houses in England. Here Kempe entertains archbishops and aristocrats, architects, artists and writers, as well as a close circle of friends and family. Each summer he invites his staff from London down to Lindfield; he is photographed in the garden surrounded by them, looking like a benevolent patriarch. Some of them have no doubt been conscripted to help run his 'Church Restoration *Festa*'. The entertainment is to be on a lavish scale.

The poster advertising the event has a banner heading: '*OYEZ! OYEZ! OYEZ!*' Kempe wants to recreate a sense of Merrie England, and the familiar town crier's call strikes the desired note at once. He addresses:

All lovers of music
All students in Antiquities
All skilled in the Art of Needlework
All who seek Refection or Trifles
All who would see the England of their Forefathers.

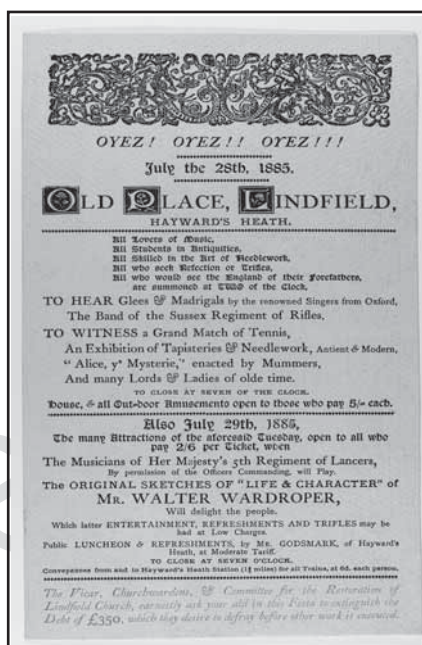
Kempe is appealing to an audience whose tastes match his own: music, antiquities, tapestries and needlework, the architecture, decoration and furnishings of Old Place itself – with all these he offers a glimpse of that England in which he feels peculiarly at home. He has cajoled his staff and friends into putting on Elizabethan costume: a photograph taken for the occasion shows them looking, rather self-consciously, like the cast of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Kempe may well have donned doublet and hose himself – he enjoys dressing up.

This ‘*Festa*’ is much more than a fundraising jamboree. It is the moment at which Kempe will open his gates to welcome the world. In offering to show his guests the England of their forefathers, he is really offering to present the world of his own forefathers. This might not be evident to the visitors, but the more observant may notice an inn-sign hanging over a thatched and half-timbered alehouse Kempe has erected in the garden. The name of the alehouse, as depicted in its inn-sign, is The Wheatsheaf and Pelican, and these two emblems together embody everything that matters most to Kempe. It is his family crest: a golden pelican picking at a sheaf of wheat.

Kempe has always been fascinated by his family, its history and its heraldry. He started painting his family arms while still a schoolboy. His earliest major solo project, the redecoration of the family church (St Wulfran, Ovingdean near Brighton) has the Kemp arms in a hatchment over the inner doorway, in memory of his father whom he hardly remembered. Here too, the wheatsheaf appears for the first time as a single image in some window quarries; in future years it will become his own identifying mark. He treats it both as a personal signature – when sending letters, he stamps the wax with a wheatsheaf seal – and as a badge proclaiming him a member of a distinguished family with strong ecclesiastical roots. As with the ‘e’ appended to his surname, it links him back to the fifteenth century Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal Kempe, whose emblem was also a wheatsheaf. Being a Kempe matters to him greatly.

But the wheatsheaf is not his only emblem. In one particular window at Ovingdean, wheatsheaves alternate with a less familiar image: the Pelican in her Piety, symbolic of Christ’s sacrifice for mankind on the Cross. Alongside each pelican, a text: ‘*Ihs Pelicanus Noster*’ [‘Jesus our pelican’]. Hereafter, whenever the pelican appears in Kempe’s windows, this Augustinian inscription asserting Christ’s loving care for all will accompany it. As for Kempe, the pelican is a talisman. As he lies in bed he sees it emblazoned on his walls; from his bedroom window he can gaze down on it, wings spread, nesting on the sundial below. Above the garden door, another pelican holds in its beak a scroll containing his family motto: ‘*Qui seminant in lacrymis in exultatione metent*’ (‘They that sow in tears shall reap in joy’).

Kempe believes that this verse from Psalm 126 speaks directly to him and about him. He had originally hoped to be ordained a priest, but his stammer destroyed such hopes. So, reluctantly, he had to choose a different career. In later life he will describe – a trifle sententiously, perhaps – how on leaving Oxford he decided that, since he could not pursue his vocation to serve God in His Sanctuary (“They that sow in tears”), he would serve Him by adorning His Sanctuary. And now, this unplanned career in religious art has enabled him to ‘reap in joy’: it has brought him prosperity – prosperity represented by the wheatshaf, symbol of good harvest. Thus, to find the course of his life foreshadowed in his own family heraldry is a further affirmation of God’s providence, as he sees it – ‘Jesus our pelican’ picking at the wheatshaf.



*Handbill advertising
the Old Place Garden Party,
July 1885.*

Whether many of Kempe’s friends at the garden party understood the significance of the inn-sign is doubtful. In 1885 a few may have guessed in part. But understanding Kempe fully today requires us to remember how these interconnected elements – family and faith, sacrifice and service, prosperity and providence – were embodied for him in the Kempe crest itself, the wheatshaf and the pelican.