

The North Euston Hotel, Fleetwood

'The whole affair is a wonder.'

With the day-to-day management of the Victoria Hotel left in the hands of his wife, and Dethier still at that time (1841) running the Euston, Vantini had answered an advertisement for the lease of another new hotel then being built at Fleetwood in Lancashire, to be called the North Euston Hotel. This is where Vantini was for the 1841 census.

Fleetwood was an extraordinary place at that time. It was a new model town, planned and developed by local aristocrat Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood with architect Decimus Burton. From the start, an important part of the plan for the town was the building of a first-class grand hotel, intended as a stop for rail and boat passengers between London and Scotland. As indicated by the hotel's name, the whole project was partly based on the premise that the railway up to the north west of England would terminate south of the Cumbrian hills, due to the major obstacle presented by Shap Fell. Fleetwood, therefore, would become an important transit point served by the Preston & Wyre Railway, linked by ship to Ardrossan, where passengers would transfer back onto the railway, and from there up to Glasgow. There would also be services to Belfast, Dublin and the Isle of Man. The idea may have had special appeal to Vantini, recalling the Sutherlands' journey south from Scotland in 1839. The railway from London to Fleetwood opened on 15 July 1840, using the tracks of five different railway companies, finally consolidating into the London & North Western Railway in 1846. The hotel was financed not by the railway company but by Hesketh-Fleetwood



9. (above) *An early postcard view of the North Euston Hotel and Baths, Fleetwood, opened in 1841.*



10. (left) *The North Euston Hotel as it was around 2000.*

and designed by Decimus Burton. Construction began in 1840 and was completed in 1841, at a cost variously reported to be between £30,000 and £60,000.

Vantini threw himself into perfecting the northern hotel with all his customary enthusiasm. According to the Duke of Sutherland, when Vantini left the Leveson-Gowers, he took with him some of the servants who had supported him in his disputes in that household, including the French chef, Napolion Binney, the confectioner, Cranham, and the upholsterer, George London. In itself this is indicative of the level of service he intended to offer at the hotel. Vantini's replacement steward at Stafford House was highly indignant about the poaching of his staff, for he felt Vantini was using his friends to wreak vengeance on the Sutherland household. He determined to 'send off' anyone else who showed interest in Fleetwood.¹

The level of resident staffing at the North Euston Hotel as revealed by the 1841 census for Fleetwood was remarkable. There is a slight mystery right at the beginning, for Vantini was listed by the census enumerator

as 'Zecharia Vantini'. In the Sutherland Papers Vantini invariably signed himself 'Z. Vantini' and was referred to by others as 'Monsieur Vantini'. Legal documents such as leases all gave his name as 'Zenon Vantini'.² The only record anywhere of Vantini being called 'Zecharia' is this one census entry, and there is no record of him having a relative or ancestor of that name. The 1841 census entry for the hotel at Fleetwood is so long that almost certainly the enumerator was presented with a written list in which Vantini had included himself in his usual way, as 'Z. Vantini'. Probably puzzled by the strange initial, the enumerator recorded it in the only way with which he was familiar. We know from the census that Zenon's wife Jeanette and their daughter Cornelia were not at Fleetwood; they are both recorded as residing at the Euston Hotel in London.

Also in the 1841 census of the North Euston Hotel were two men of independent means, one of whom was 20-year-old Julius Peters who was a relation of Vantini's wife, possibly a brother, and who was recorded as being born in foreign parts. Six other men who were described as menservants were also born abroad. There were a further eleven male servants with English-sounding names; and a total of no less than eighteen women servants. There was one family, a servant couple with two young children. The age range of the servants was fourteen to 40, although most were in their twenties and all the older ones were male. Vantini was obviously not concerned about providing work for the local community, for of the total workforce of 36 people, including himself, seven were born in foreign parts, one in Scotland and 24 in English counties other than Lancashire; only four were born in Lancashire.

The first event to test both staff and management of the new hotel was a formal breakfast to mark the arrival of the steam packet *Fire King* on a tidal test run from Ardrossan in Scotland, in May 1841. A month later, a 'sumptuous dinner' for the local clergy and gentry was provided by Vantini as part of the celebrations following the consecration by the Bishop of Chester of the new town's parish church of St Peter's. The meal was followed by a concert of classical songs in the hotel. According to the local newspaper, although the hotel was still not officially open, it was already a 'gorgeous palace of comfort, splendour and entertainment'.³

Two months after this event the hotel celebrated its own official opening, again with a banquet but this time also accompanied by a regatta. A contemporary writer described the building:⁴

It is a superb building in the form of a crescent with a frontage of nearly 300ft. The noble portico in front of the main entrance and the spacious hall within are supported by massive stone

pillars, whilst a handsome terrace, raised a little above the level of the street, encircles the whole level of the ground floor and is protected by iron railing. The building is faced with large blocks of grey stone.

The local press was ecstatic:⁵

We cannot attempt anything like a description of what M. Vantini's enterprise has already affected, still less what he has in embryo. . . . We have no hesitation in pronouncing it to be one of the most splendid establishments in England – perhaps in Europe. . . . The fact is, the whole affair is a wonder, and cannot but be regarded as a splendid monument to the ingenuity and enterprise which has designed it and carried it into effect.

The hotel was fitted throughout with the latest technology in gas lighting, kitchen grates with ovens and immense steam boilers, and a bell system which connected every room to the reception desk. As well as spacious accommodation offering 'quietude and comfort', it had a full-size concert hall, a beautiful ballroom, a 33-foot-long promenade on the roof, carriages of all descriptions, sailing boats, and a band from 'the Italian Opera House' to perform during the *table d'hôte* every day. It was, in fact, a spa hotel; all types of bathing were offered, including: 'Indian medicated and vapour shampooing baths' designed for those suffering from 'rheumatism, gout, lumbago, sciatica, paralysis, roughness and disease of the skin, stiff joints, sprains . . . cases of corporeal weakness or where the circulation is languid'.⁶ Truly the inhabitants of Fleetwood must have thought the glamour of New York had arrived in their new town.

Unfortunately, the hotel encountered several major problems. It was situated some distance away from both the new railway terminus and the established arrival points of stagecoaches. To make this worse, the approach road to the hotel was left unmade for several years. There were at least three other hotels nearer to the dock from which the ferries to Scotland or Belfast left. The hotel had been so expensive to build that prices were astronomical. Finally, Fleetwood as a whole was to be left stranded when in 1846 the railway engineers contracted by the Lancaster & Carlisle Railway chose a route over Shap which had been surveyed by Joseph Locke back in the 1830s. This route successfully conquered the gradients and so Fleetwood was bypassed by trains travelling north and south. By 1848 the west coast main line was completed all the way to Glasgow. As a railway hotel, the North Euston was left high and dry.

Not surprisingly, after a couple of years when trade had been slow, the Fleetwood project needed a boost to its finances. Vantini was not one to give up easily and was not short of resourcefulness. The solution he came up with seems typical of his idiosyncratic thinking: in order to put Fleetwood on the map and encourage the development of the town, what was needed was a first-rate school. According to the principle founder of the school, Canon St Vincent Beechey, the original idea was definitely Vantini's, though it was the Canon who took over the project and piloted it to its successful conclusion.⁷

On 1 July 1842 a meeting of the provisional committee of the Fleetwood Colleges Association was held at the North Euston Hotel at which Vantini gave the address, outlining his proposal for two colleges, each for 500 pupils, one for boys and one for girls on opposite sides of the estuary ('for ze proprieties!' as he said), to be funded by the novel means of life insurance.⁸ Though no doubt there was a large element of self-interest behind these ideas, Vantini's original proposal was founded on something of an idealistic vision of education: 'I am about to propose a thing which conscientiously I believe will one day be a great boon to humanity, namely a means of enabling everyone to obtain the best possible education at the least possible cost.' He went on to outline his calculations, saying that the idea had occurred to him in 1835, since when it had weighed heavily on his mind. In effect the plan was to educate the living at the cost of those who died. He had consulted many eminent experts, including Professor Augustus de Morgan, then professor of mathematics at University College London who examined the proportional payments required for educational insurance, taking into account that one half of all children born died before the age of twelve (which was the situation in the 1840s). It was typical of the cunning Vantini that the professor had been a friend of Canon Beechey at Cambridge. The school running costs had been drawn up by a Mr Coates, the secretary of London University and, again, a schoolfriend of the Canon. In his assessment of the finances, Coates had consulted all the large boarding schools. These consultants had been paid by Vantini himself (£300 to the secretary alone).

Vantini's emphasis on the cost of a good education for girls, 'in a country where the females' education, well conferred, is very costly, and a good school at moderate price can scarcely be obtained', was obviously based on personal experience. At this time, he was the father of five girls with one more yet to come. At the meeting his proposal was received with cheers and he must have been greatly pleased with his reception. To the canon, however, the idea of financing education through insurance was both 'too vast and visionary'. Yet the school project showed both Vantini's business

acumen and his pragmatism. Both the consultants chosen by Vantini were selected as part of his plan to entice the canon to take on the public face of the project, in which role he knew that he himself would not be acceptable. The canon was successful but only to a point. The boys' school was reduced to 200 pupils and the proposal for a school for girls was dropped altogether, much to Vantini's chagrin – according to Canon Beechey, Vantini's reaction was 'You have dropped my 500 girls in ze river!' Though unhappy about the reduction in pupils, Vantini accepted it, as well as the dropping of his idea of a Unitarian committee to oversee the foundation.

The school eventually acquired a 21-year lease of Rossall Hall and grounds, the ancestral home of the unfortunate Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood who could no longer afford to live there. The school opened in August 1844, at first named the Northern Church of England School, but later renamed Rossall School. Canon Beechey had seen it as being run on similar lines to that founded at Marlborough the previous year and in fact it became a sister school to Marlborough. The Bishop of Chester was Visitor. Its stated aim was 'to provide, at a moderate cost, for the sons of Clergymen and others, a classical, mathematical and general education of the highest class'. It still flourishes today as one of the foremost privately funded schools in the country.

Vantini's acceptance of the oversight of the Church of England says a good deal regarding his religious enthusiasm, about which the canon had no illusions, describing him as being only 'nominally' a Roman Catholic. Though Roman Catholicism was legal in England after 1791, Vantini's personal scepticism was reinforced by a belief that it was probably a good business move not to practise the religion of his birth. Madame Vantini, by contrast, was a convinced Lutheran, a constant communicant at the parish church (presumably a manager had been put into the Victoria Hotel). At the canon's suggestion, she held a daily family prayer service with the female servants of the hotel and was 'deeply grieved' at her irreligious husband.

Clearly, Vantini was a man of business first, and a Roman Catholic after, for he refused to assist in arrangements for establishing a Roman Catholic priest at Fleetwood.⁹ In his history of the school, Canon Beechey reported his own conversation with Vantini on this point, in order to illustrate Vantini's shrewd but irreligious mind:

Ah! How are you Mr Beechey? I have had my priest with me today.

Well, Mr Vantini, what did he say to you?

He say: Mr Vantini, we want to establish a resident Roman Catholic priest in Fleetwood.

Well, what did you say?

I take him by de button, and I say: My good frient, I have been at Rome; I know you! you want to come here under my wing. I will not take you under my wing.

Well, but Mr Vantini, he say, I hear you have taken six pews in the [parish] Church?

Very true,' I say 'no Church, no hotel! Shew me it is de same wit de Roman Catholic Chapel, and I will subscribe tomorrow.

Den he say, Oh! Mr. Vantini, if that is your religion, I am afraid you have none at all.

Vantini did not stay long enough to see his educational idea fully materialise. When Canon Beechey finally heard that negotiations for the land for the school had succeeded, he rushed excitedly round to the North Euston to tell the Vantinis the good news, only to find the hotel closed and deserted. After a poor summer Vantini and his wife had admitted defeat and quietly packed their bags and departed, though it was 1845 before contact was finally relinquished. One wonders what happened to all the staff whom he must have bribed, charmed or manipulated into putting their trust in him. Of Napolion Binney, at least, there is a record: he went back to London to work as a chef in a household in Marylebone but subsequently set up as a hotelkeeper in Manchester. The 1881 census records him as being retired, aged 67, still in Manchester. The confectioner, Charles Cranham, and his wife Caroline returned to employment with the Sutherlands but by the 1861 census they too had gone into business for themselves.

In yet another of those twists of history which are so enjoyable, Vantini's activities in Fleetwood sent a parting shot in the direction of the Sutherlands' household which would no doubt have delighted him had he known about it, which is unlikely. There survives a letter dated 20 March 1844 from the second Duke to his secretary Jackson, Vantini's arch enemy, seeking Jackson's advice:¹⁰

Vantini's Education Scheme has had a wonderful degree of success as . . . this Northern Church of England School is founded on his suggestion. My brother says that the B[ishop] of Chester patronizes it and has asked him to be an 'office bearer' and I believe he will be V. Pres. I wish you to consider whether I should agree to give my name in any way.

We shall never know, but can perhaps imagine, what Jackson's reply to the Duke was. We do know, however, that the Earl of Ellesmere, the

second Duke of Sutherland's younger brother, did indeed become both a long-term supporter of the canon and one of the vice presidents of what became Rossall School.

Clearly Vantini had miscalculated the potential of the North Euston Hotel and in this respect made a grave mistake. With regard to Fleetwood, he was not alone; it would prove a major financial disaster to the Hesketh-Fleetwood family and many others. As a result of his dedication to the founding of the new town Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood died in 1866 in relative poverty.

What became of the hotel? After Vantini left it was re-opened in July 1845 under the management of a woman called Mary Sharples, who had worked previously for Sir Peter. She unfortunately met with little more success than Vantini.¹¹ By 1859 it had been sold to the government and used as an army barracks, then as a school of musketry and later as army officers' quarters. At the end of the nineteenth century it was sold to a group of businessmen who demolished parts of the building and restored it as a hotel with 80 bedrooms. Since then it has changed hands several times, undergoing substantial restoration in 1980, and today remains as a successful and comfortable hotel. It includes a wedding suite – the Vantini Suite – a rare memorial to its first proprietor and its first victim.