Ancestral Jewels in Britain

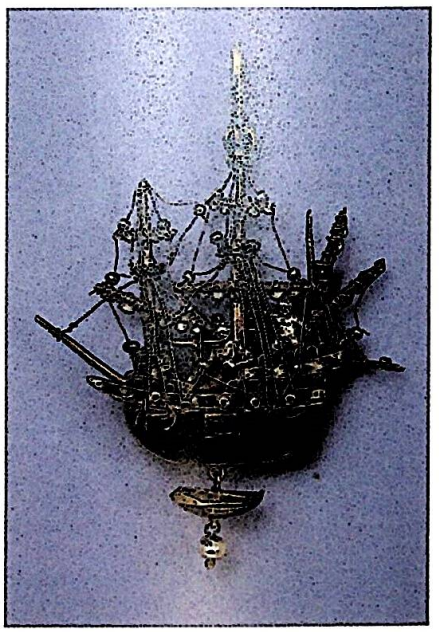
by DIANA SCARISBRICK

The *Treasures of British Houses* exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1984 broke new ground by including jewellery as part of the artistic heritage of the British aristocracy. The display of cameos collected by the second Duke of Devonshire and the tiaras lent by the Marchioness of Tavistock and the Countess of Durham aroused so much interest that I was asked to write a book on ancestral jewels which have passed through several generations of noble families in Britain.

In other countries this would not have been possible for jewellery rarely survives for long. It is fragile, easily lost, all too often stolen by thieves and being designed for wear is usually broken up and remodelled when fashions change. However there has been a tradition in Britain whereby some jewels, gem-stones and pearls have been regarded as heirlooms and preserved intact with the estate of land, houses and works of art which constitutes the aristocratic inheritance. For centuries a combination of special political, economic and social circumstances which favoured the British upper classes at a time of rising prosperity made this continuity possible. The island coastline protected against foreign invasion, stable government kept revolution at bay after 1688, and the law of primogeniture – by which the eldest son only inherited – ensured that the family fortune was not dispersed.

The earliest surviving jewelled heirlooms date from the sixteenth century and most were gifts from royalty. The Penruddocks own a sapphire pendant given by Katherine Parr, last of the six wives of King Henry VIII, to Sir George Penruddock. Rather than let this treasure fall into the hands of the Parliamentarian army during the Civil War it was thrown into the lake in front of the house: when the danger was passed the pendant was recovered from the water but the chain was lost. Whereas this and most Tudor jewels are not recorded in contemporary documents the famous Hunsdon heirlooms – gifts from Queen Elizabeth to her cousin Henry Lord Hunsdon are mentioned in the will of the second Lord Hunsdon dated 1603. He entrusts them to his daughter Elizabeth, wife of Sir Thomas Berkeley to be preserved 'So long as the conscience of my heires shall have grace and honestie to perform my will for that I esteeme them right jeweles and monumentes worthie to be kept for their beautie, rareness and that for monie they are not to be matched nor the like yet known to be found in this realme'.

The four Hunsdon heirlooms which are still in the collection at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire are of a quality which fully vindicates Lord Hunsdon's high opinion. The unique rock crystal bracelet comes from the court workshops of the Emperor Akbar (d. 1603) in Agra or Delhi: it is the earliest surviving piece of Mughal jewellery in the world. It may have been a present from the Emperor to Queen Elizabeth, or she may have bought it from one of the many merchants who supplied the London trade with gem-stones and jewels. At any rate it is listed in her inventory of 1587 as one of a pair 'of rock crystal sett with sparcks of Rubies powdered and little sparckes of saphiers made hoopewise called Persia worke'. Of great personal significance to Queen Elizabeth was the miniature prayer book she hung at the end of her girdle which is another of the Hunsdon heirlooms. Inside the enamelled covers is a copy of the last prayer of her brother King Edward VI who died aged only sixteen in 1553. Then the large sardonyx cameo illustrating the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus demonstrates the superb artistry of the Renaissance gem engraver under the patronage of the Habsburg and Medici princes. This cameo was mounted to wear as a pendant on the sleeve or from a neck chain as was the fourth Hunsdon jewel, a ship pendant said to represent the Golden Hind in which Sir Francis Drake sailed round the world in 1577–9 *(Plate 1)*.



1 Enamelled gold ship pendant given by Queen Elizabeth to her cousin Henry Hunsdon from the collection at Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire

Gifts from Queen Elizabeth to the great sailor still remain in the Drake family. Both contain her portrait painted by the celebrated miniaturist, Nicholas Hilliard, official custodian of her image. One is an opal and ruby star which Sir

Ancestral Jewels is published by André Deutsch in London, and by Rizzoli in New York.

Francis pinned to his hat, the other is a locket which he wears on a long chain over his doublet in his portrait by Marcus Gheeraerts dated 1595. The cover of the locket is set with a sardonyx cameo of a negro and a white princess – perhaps Othello and Desdemona – framed in rubies and diamonds and hung with pearls clustered like grapes.

Queen Elizabeth was proud of her hands and one of her most characteristic gestures was to remove her glove with a flourish and allow a courtier to kiss her long fingers glittering with rings. The bezel of one of her rings is set with diamonds in her initial E: the hoop is mother of pearl studded with rubies. It opens up to reveal two miniature enamelled gold busts of the Queen and her mother, Anne Boleyn wearing ruby and diamond brooches respectively. This little masterpiece was inherited by her successor, James I who came from Scotland to London after her death in 1603. He distributed some of her jewels to the loyal band of Scottish noblemen who accompanied him on the journey south, and this ring was his gift to the first Earl of Home. It was kept in the family until 1920 when it was sent for sale at Christie's. It is now one of the treasures at Chequers, the country residence of the Prime Minister given and endowed by the connoisseur first Viscount Lee of Fareham.

A most interesting group of jewels is associated with the other great woman protagonist on the stage of Tudor history, Queen Mary of Scots, the mother of James I. Most belong to Scottish families. The Duke of Hamilton owns a sapphire ring which bears an inscription 'SENT BY QUEEN MARY OF SCOTLAND AT HER DEATH TO JOHN MARQUIS OF HAMILTON'. To James Gordon of Methlick who fought so gallantly on her behalf at the disastrous battle of Langside and ancestor of the Marquis of Aberdeen, Queen

2 Ruby diamond and opal pendant hand holding out a victor's wreath given by Queen Mary of Scots to James Gordon of Methlick, and owned by his descendant, the Marquess of Aberdeen

Mary gave an opal, ruby and diamond pendant hand holding out the laurel wreath of victory: the wreath frames a tiny crystal locket enclosing a curl of her dark hair *(Plate 2)*. Another memento was given to Mary Seton whose cheerful company and hair-dressing skills did much to alleviate the rigours of the long years of captivity in England. Mary Seton's devotion was rewarded by the gift of a superb ruby chain of snakes and Esses – for SOUVENIR or SOVEREIGN – which has descended to the Seton heirs, the Hays of Duns Castle.

Adversity strengthened Queen Mary's religious faith and she took to wearing devotional jewellery with her black widow's weeds in affirmation of her position as martyr for the persecuted Roman Catholic Church. Standing before the executioner's block at Fotheringay in 1587 she proclaimed her belief: 'I am settled in the ancient Catholic faith and mind to spend my blood in it'. The rosary she held in her hands at that moment was bequeathed to Anne Dacre, daughter-in-law of the fourth Duke of Norfolk whom Queen Mary had hoped to marry. It is one of a group of Stuart relics displayed at Arundel Castle with the pearl necklace she is said to have sent the Duke as a token of their engagement.

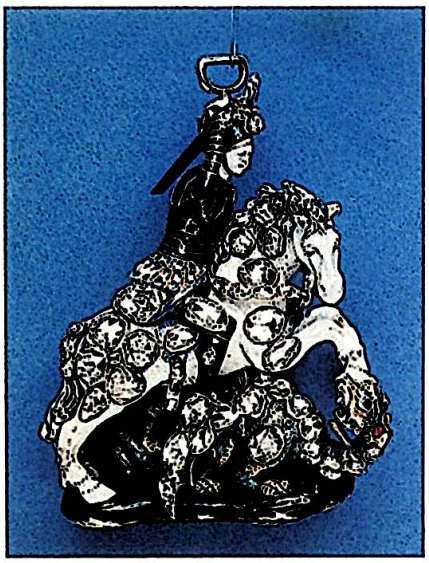
More sixteenth century jewels are preserved in other great houses. At Grimsthorpe Castle in Lincolnshire there is an emerald intaglio portrait of King Henry IV of France and a fine diamond – both gifts to Peregrine Bertie the brilliant swordsman who served King Henry at the head of a band of English soldiers. The collection at Chatsworth contains examples of Renaissance jewels – a lion and a helmeted warrior – designed round the misshapen forms of Baroque pearls. There would be far more if it had not been for the will of the Countess of Devonshire in 1685 which bequeathed her property to her daughter Anne Countess of Exeter. Some of these jewels – which were in the schedule drawn up of the objects which left Chatsworth are still in Burghley House the great mansion built by the founder of the Exeter family fortune, the statesman Robert Cecil. They include examples of pendants and lockets enamelled with scenes from the Bible and from classical mythology and a girdle book ornamented with ruby and diamond Tudor roses. These rarities were venerated as heirlooms in the eighteenth century when Horace Walpole saw them on a visit 'in a shrine full of crystal vases, filigree, enamels and the trinkets of taste that have belonged to many a noble dame'.

A seventeenth century mansion on the edge of Wimbledon Common, Southside House, contains an extraordinarily interesting collection of historic jewels inherited from the Wharton and Pennington Mellor families. Two date from the reign of James I. The fine diamond studded scent container or pomander designed as a small book belonged to Philadelphia, wife of Thomas Wharton and the other, a

ruby pendant cipher with the initials GW commemorates her brother-in-law, George. The skull and cross bones and cross hanging from the cipher were added after his death in a duel with Sir James Stuart of Blantyre whom he had accused of cheating at cards. Both were well under thirty and both died. Years later the two families were reconciled and George Wharton's rapier was returned with a piece of Royal Stuart tartan and a Van Dyck portrait of James Stuart, posthumous son of the dead duellist.

A magnificent ring of five diamond set star-like round the bezel belonged to King Charles I. Engaged in battle with the Parliamentarians during the Civil War he was saved from capture by Nicholas Kemeys, ancestor of the Whartons. In gratitude the King removed the ring from his finger and presented it to his rescuer, dubbing him a knight at the same time. Thereafter, to commemorate this event every eldest son in each generation was given the name of Charles. Like his grandmother, Queen Mary of Scots, King Charles went to his execution with exemplary dignity. The pear shaped earring which he wore in his ear is now at Welbeck Abbey with a note in the handwriting of Queen Mary II: 'This pearle was taken out of ye king my grandfather's ear after he was beheaded and given ye Princess Royal'. Queen Mary's ruby ring – her first gift from her husband, King William III – and her pearl necklace were given after her death to his favourite the first Earl of Portland, and like the earring is in the collection at Welbeck. In the nineteenth century Winifred Duchess of Portland wore this necklace on grand occasions and holds it in her hand in a portrait by Philip de Lazlo.

On the eve of his death King Charles gave his confessor Bishop Juxon a ring set with his cornelian cameo portrait. After the Restoration of 1660 the Bishop returned the ring to King Charles II who in turn presented it to his son by Nell Gwynne, the first Duke of St. Albans. The Duke of St. Albans still owns it and other jewels which belonged to Nell Gwynne – her hair pin and ring – both set with brilliant diamond clusters, and a memorial ring worn after the death of King Charles in 1684.



3 Enamelled gold and diamond studded George from the insignia of the Order of the Garter worn by James, Duke of Monmouth. From the collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry

The eldest of Charles II's brood of illegetimate children was the dashing James, Duke of Monmouth who married Anne, Duchess of Buccleuch in 1663. That same year he was appointed to the Order of the Garter and the splendid George – the pendant of St. George killing the dragon which hangs from the garter collar – which he received from his father is still in the Buccleuch collection *(Plate 3)*. Beautifully enamelled and studded with rose-cut diamonds the present Duke would not risk sending it to Washington for the *Treasures of British Houses* exhibition. It is a monument to seventeenth century English jewellery and sole survivor of the wonderful Georges worn at the picturesque Garter ceremonies of the Stuart period since the most famous of them all, that given by Queen Anne to the Duke of Marlborough was stolen in 1965.

Two families have kept diamonds given to their daughters by King Charles II and his queen. The pair of diamond cluster earrings which the King sent the daughter of the Speaker of the House of Commons descended through the Hornyold Strickland family of Sizergh Castle in Cumbria: now part of the National Trust property they are displayed with other Stuart relics. The diamonds which Queen Katherine gave her goddaughter Katherine Clifford daughter of the Lord High Treasurer the first Lord Clifford of Chudleigh were reset in the last century but are always known as 'Queen Katherine's'.

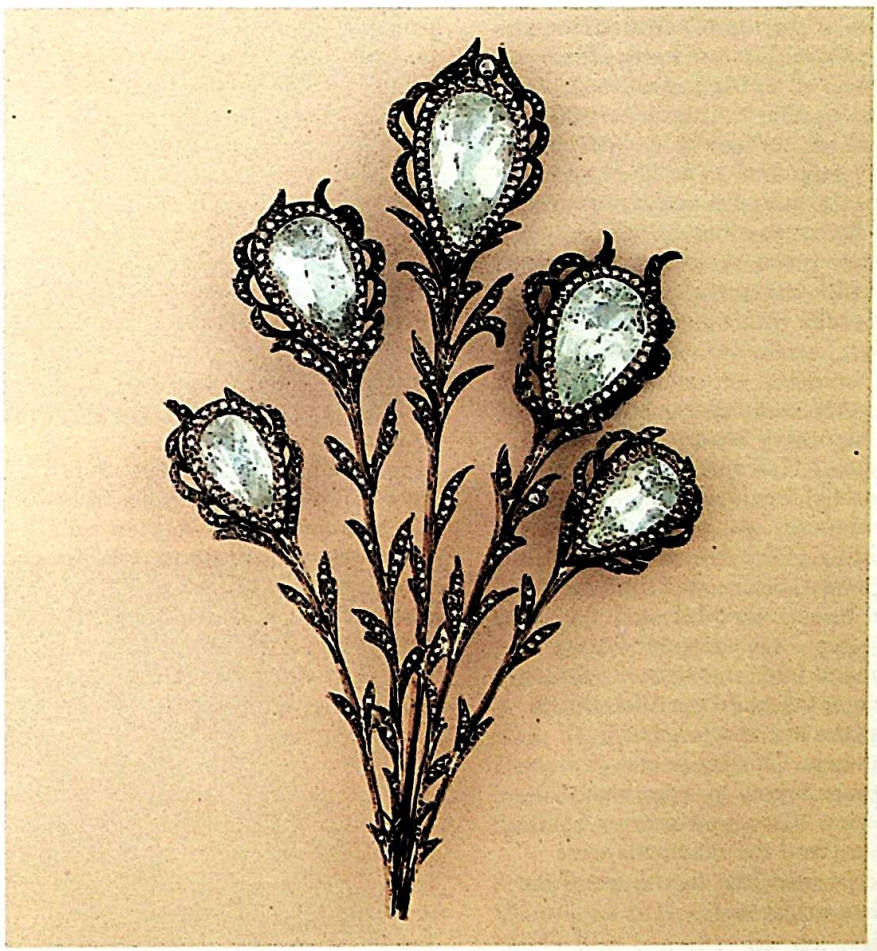
From the reign of James I the Master of Ceremonies was one of the most important court officials. He decided on matters of protocol, escorted foreign envoys to audience with the king and distributed gifts to visitors. Since the expertise gained by long experience was best transmitted by father to son the office became hereditary and during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was held by members of the Cottrell Dormer family. At their family home, Rousham in Oxfordshire there are portraits of several generations of Cottrell-Dormers each wearing the distinctive badge of the Master of Ceremonies on a long chain. The badge itself, which is crowned and framed in diamonds, given by King Charles II to Sir Charles Cottrell in 1661 still survives in the family collection. The design is unchanged from the reign of King James I. On one side there is a hand holding out the olive branch of peace with the Biblical quotation BEATI PACIFICI (Blessed are the peacemakers) with which King James identified, and on the other a gauntleted arm holds out a sword to punish and protect with the royal motto DIEU ET MON DROIT (GOD and my right). The Cottrell Dormers also own the records kept by the various Masters recording the events of court life often with amusing comments.

In contrast with the generosity of

the Stuarts, the Hanoverians who succeeded to the throne after 1714 gave little away. It was not until the accession of George III that fine jewels rewarded service to the monarchy. One recipient was Viscount Harcourt, Master of the Horse, who escorted Princess Charlotte from her home in Germany to London in 1761 for her marriage to the King. The Harcourts became friends of King George and Queen Charlotte who gave them presents, a fine watch for him and chatelaine with the King's miniature for her, enamelled blue and bearing the royal ciphers in diamonds. This has survived unaltered in the Harcourt family. The magnificent sword of honour which King George presented the victorious Admiral Lord Howe shortly after his defeat of the French on the 'glorious first of June' in 1790 did not remain intact for early this century the diamonds in the hilt were removed and set in bracelets now worn by the reigning Viscountess Howe.

Even in exile the unfortunate Stuarts kept up their tradition of princely largesse. Many jewels which have come down to us were given by Prince Charles Edward during the campaign of 1745 when he arrived in Scotland with no money, arms or support and yet by sheer personal charisma succeeded in raising an army and leading it within reach of London. Those who sheltered him and rallied to his cause treasured the tokens he distributed, ornamented with Stuart emblems and containing his portrait, a lock of his hair or a fragment of his tartan. Perhaps the finest of these Jacobite jewels was the ring he gave a Cheshire gentleman, Thomas Cholmondeley. The bezel is set with a piece of moss agate with inclusions forming the thistle of Scotland, framed in diamonds with the white rose of York and royal crown flanking it on the shoulders. On the back there is the green star of the Order of the Thistle with the inscription CAESAR CAESARIS (to Caesar that which is Caesar's), and the hoop is wrought with a panoply of arms. Since the possession of Jacobite jewellery was a treasonable offence not everyone dared to wear it openly. In the collection of the Duke of Hamilton at Lennoxlove House there is a ring with miniature of King Charles I framed in the ribbon of the garter inscribed PRO PATRIA NON TIMIDUS MORI (Do not fear death for your country). In this case the owner wore it hidden under the broad gold keeper ring preserved with it. After Jacobitism ceased to be a political threat with the death of Prince Charles Edward devotion to the memory of the Stuarts was stimulated by the novels of Sir Walter Scott. The Duchess of Atholl had the miniature painted of Prince Charles Edward while he breakfasted at her home, Blair Castle in 1745, and a family heirloom, mounted as the centrepiece of a gold bracelet. She was mistress of the Robes to Queen Victoria who being proud of the Stuart blood in her veins must have approved of this romantic souvenir.

Each time the large diamonds and coloured stones passed from one generation to the next they were almost always recut and reset into more up-to-date ornaments. This was the fate of the grand jewels made for the British aristocracy recorded in eighteenth century inventories, described in memoirs and depicted in portraits. Those which escaped were usually of little intrinsic value, considered not worth the expense of breaking up, such as the exquisite aquamarine and rose diamond aigrette of peacock feathers worn by the Duchess of Wharton and part of the collection at Southside *(Plate 4)*. Others were preserved because of



4 Aquamarine and rose diamond aigrette of peacock feathers given by the Duke of Wharton to his wife, c. 1726. From the Pennington Mellor Munthe collection, Southside House

their royal provenance. The bracelet clasp with diamond cipher of the Empress Maria Theresa, her gift to an English friend, Lady Mary Coke, is still in the Buccleuch collection, and the diamond jewellery given by Catherine the Great to the British ambassador, the Earl of Buckinghamshire, 1762–5, has also been left untouched by his heirs.

The name of Queen Marie-Antoinette is attached to jewels made from diamonds set in the famous necklace made by Bohmer and Bassange and which she refused to buy. The syndicate who stole the stones disposed of some of them on the London market. The Duke of Sutherland bought twenty for a necklace which he gave his wife and these large diamonds have been admired ever since. In the reign of Edward VII the beautiful Duchess Millicent, receiving her guests at the top of the staircase at her palatial London home, Stafford House, 'all in black with the gorgeous Marie Antoinette necklace round her throat was a sight not easily forgotten'. The Duke of Dorset acquired a necklace from this source too, but early this century it was broken up by Lady Sackville who had the stones reset by Cartier into a tiara of tasselled design.

The Harcourt family necklace has an interesting history. In 1795 Viscount Harcourt – son of the friends of George III and Queen Charlotte – was present at the wedding of the Prince of Wales to Princess Caroline of Brunswick. The Prince asked him to hold his hat which was adorned with a diamond loop and button: after the ceremony he told the Viscount to keep the hat and jewel as a memento. This incident was commemorated by a portrait showing Viscount Harcourt holding the hat and the diamonds were incorporated into the centre of the riviere for his wife.

As Prince of Wales, Prince Regent and from 1820 King George IV spent prodigiously on jewellery. He showered jewels on the women in his life. Mrs Fitzherbert whom he married morganatically was given rings and pendants with miniature portrait and eye by Richard Cosway – and a fine diamond suite which she bequeathed to her adopted daughter Minnie Seymour. These in turn passed to her descendants. Far more predatory was his last love, the Marchioness of Conyngham who removed two wagon loads of jewellery and plate from Windsor Castle as the king lay dying in 1830. Every so often the Conyngham jewels are sold at auction and all are imbued with the taste and quality for which George IV was famous.

He was master of the grand gesture. For his coronation in 1821 he commissioned splendid jewels as mementoes for the more important officials. There were rings and pendants set with his cameo portrait: some were inscribed VIVE LE ROI. The wife of the Lord Chamberlain, Lady Willoughby d'Eresby, received a suite of necklace, brooch and earrings designed round the historic emblems of rose, thistle, shamrock, Garter collar, cross of St. George and the orb of sovereignty. This is preserved at Grimsthorpe Castle. In contrast with this pomp and ceremony was the hard hearted treatment of his estranged wife, Queen Caroline, who was ignominiously turned away from doors of Westminster Abbey when she attempted – as was her right – to attend the coronation. Her spirit broken, she died shortly afterwards leaving her friend, Lady Anne Hamilton, a jewelled cross inscribed with a farewell message. This pathetic keepsake is at Lennoxlove.

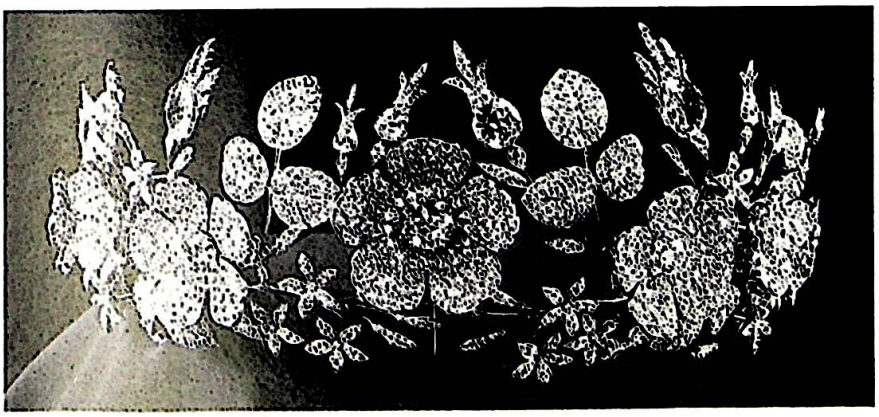
Most of the great hereditary collections of jewels and plate were acquired at this time. Most came from the firm of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell who had bought their superb stock of pearls and gems at advantageous prices from the French emigrés who took refuge in London after the outbreak of the Revolution of 1789.

George Fox, a former salesman, who wrote the history of the firm said there was a great change in 1803 when 'on war breaking out again with France, and the consequent advance of Rents generally the Nobility and Gentry seemed anxious to vie with each other in every species of Luxury and extravagance and such orders were given for splendid services and costly suits of jewels as had not been before thought of'.

The most magnificent of all these collections was owned by Frances Anne, wife of the third Marquess of Londonderry. From her mother, Countess of Antrim she inherited a fine collection of rubies and emeralds, and from her father, Sir Harry Vane, the money to buy whatever she wished. She made two spectacular purchases in Vienna when her husband was ambassador there in 1821. From Countess de Fries she acquired – at a cost of £10,000 – a set of pear pearls known as the 'Gouttes de perles' or tear-drops, and from Count Ferdinand Palffy the turquoises he had spent his life in acquiring. She too had a royal admirer, none other than the Russian Emperor, Alexander I. Some years before their meeting he had seen her unfinished portrait in the studio of Sir Thomas Lawrence and 'felt a sort of foreboding that the person whose picture was before him was fated to have an influence over his destiny and cause him much disquiet'. He continually sought her company and, although much flattered, she did not lose her head. As trophies of his regard she wore gem-stones mined in his vast Empire – an intense pink topaz, a yellow diamond and large Siberian amethysts. These last were first set in clasps for her sleeves and then with diamonds in a chain which she wore on her bodice like the ribbon of an order.

After the death of her sister-in-law Emily – widow of the eminent

5 Frances Anne, Marchioness of Londonderry in the dress and jewellery she wore to the coronation of William IV in 1831. Painted by A. Dubois-Drahonnet. Collection: Marquess of Londonderry



6 Diamond tiara composed of jasmine and wild roses. A Bedford heirloom probably French, c. 1830

statesman usually known as Viscount Castlereagh – Frances Anne had the use of the family diamonds. Some came through the mother of the first Marquess whose uncle had been Governor of Bombay, others were gifts to Castlereagh from the Allied Monarchs for his part in bringing about the defeat of Napoleon. The quantity and quality were remarkable and included a belt at least two inches wide. With such a collection she could outshine almost everyone and even the Empress of Russia asked to see it, during the Londonderry's visit to St. Petersburg in 1837. As a souvenir of this enjoyable occasion the Empress gave the Marchioness her miniature in national costume framed in diamonds and mounted as the centre-piece to a turquoise bracelet.

Where Frances-Anne led, the others followed. Competing with her for the prize for the most bejewelled Peeress at the coronation of William IV in 1831 *(Plate 5)* were a long list of ladies. There was the Countess of Shrewsbury with her diamond fringe necklace and shamrocks, the Duchess of Northumberland with stones brought back from India by her grandfather the first Lord Clive, the Countess Spencer whose collection included the fabulous diamonds and pearls amassed by Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough during the reign of Queen Anne. Certain families became noted for particular pieces and on grand occasions the Norfolk diamonds, the Wharncliffe turquoises, the Buccleuch emeralds, the Carew ruby always made a talking point. Then there were the famous tiaras – the Rutland and Bedford flowers *(Plate 6)*, the Galway and Newcastle feathers, Exeter scrolls – which topped with nodding plumes never failed to impress foreigners.

From the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 the political climate was stable, taxation was low, domestic service was cheap,

and thanks to the Industrial Revolution and the possession of a worldwide Empire, the country was richer than ever. In this atmosphere of prosperity and confidence while society was still highly formal, more jewellery was displayed than ever before.

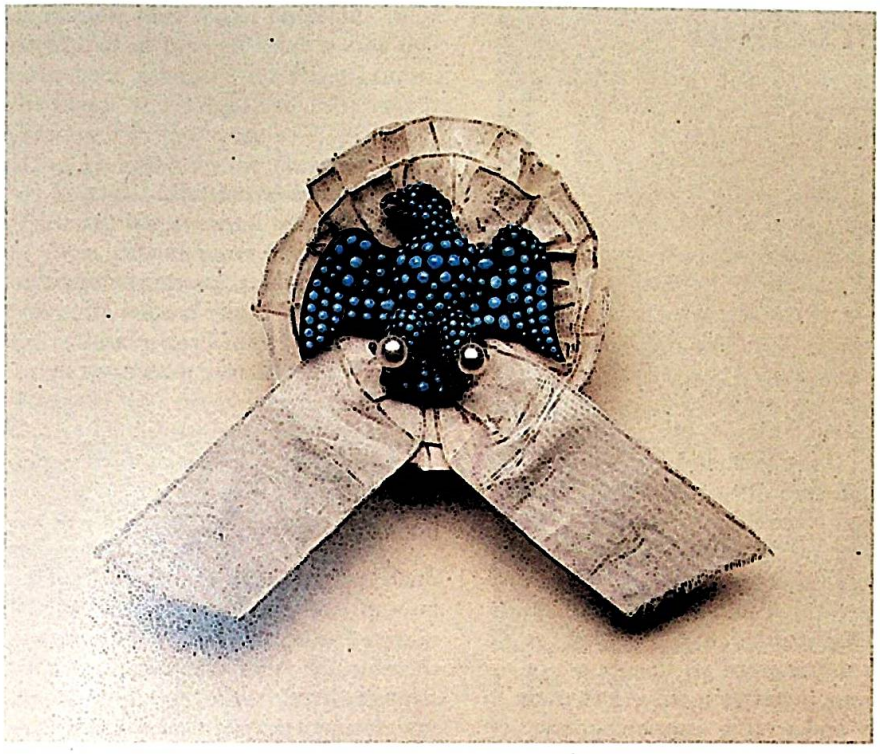
Many designs represented ancient family emblems or badges. There was the Pelham buckle, the Cavendish snake, the Willoughby owl, the knots of the Ormonde, Stafford and Heneage families. Leaves – the Gordon ivy, and the Howard oak leaves and acorns – could be copied in diamond wreaths for tiaras. Many were worn as brooches and nowhere did they seem more appropriate than at the annual Caledonian Ball pinned to the shoulder keeping the tartan sash in place: one of the most remarkable of these clan badges was the huge diamond Sutherland cat framed in a buckled garter inscribed with the motto SANS PEUR.

Perhaps there is no piece of Victorian jewellery more imbued with the spirit of history than the Devonshire parure. It was commissioned by the sixth Duke of Devonshire from the firm of C. F. Hancock in 1856 for Countess Granville – wife of the Duke's nephew – to wear to the coronation of the Tsar Alexander II in Moscow. All seven pieces – bandeau, coronet, diadem, comb, stomacher, necklace and bracelet – are set with eighty-eight cameos and intaglios from the collection of the second Duke. Some of the gems were carved in the first century B.C. in the court workshops of Alexandria and Rome, others during the Renaissance. They are set in mounts enamelled in the much admired 'Holbein' or Neo-Renaissance style and studded with diamonds. These stones were removed by the wife of the eighth Duke to make a great all-round crown in 1895: otherwise the parure is intact.

Similarly historical in character are the jewels ordered by the Marquess of Bute for his wife Gwendalen on their marriage in 1872, using stones broken out of heirlooms. They included a fine necklace of forty-one brilliants with matching earrings, a stomacher of brilliants copied from a painting dating from the Renaissance, a fairy tale princess pinnacled style diadem, and a suite of emeralds and rubies highlighted with diamonds. For informal wear the Marquess gave his bride a set of silver ornaments inspired by Italian Gothic art. Her pearls were perfect, and clasped with diamonds of the finest water.

7 Duchess Elizabeth wearing turquoise eagle brooch, a present from Queen Victoria whose bridesmaid she was, and the Bedford family pearls. Portrait by Richard Buckner from Woburn Abbey

Pride of place was always given to ornaments received from Queen Victoria. Some commemorate events in her life – her accession, coronation, marriage *(Plates 7 and 8)* – others rewarded service in her household, or were tokens to friends, god-daughters and hostesses. Never of great intrinsic value, these rings, bracelets and brooches inscribed with the Queen's name meant much to the recipients. The Countess of Lytton was very moved when one day the



8 Turquoise brooch: the Coburg eagle designed by Prince Albert for the bridesmaids at his wedding with Queen Victoria and worn by the Duchess of Bedford in her portrait. Woburn Abbey

Queen said to her 'Edith, here is a bracelet for you'. She kissed the Queen's hand many times to show how grateful she was and that evening wrote in her diary 'I hope it will always be kept in the family'. It is indeed on show at Knebworth House, home of the Lyttons.

The old traditions were maintained during the reign of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. American heiresses such as Consuelo Vanderbilt, who married the Duke of Marlborough, and Cornelia Bradley Martin, wife of Lord Craven, replenished ancestral jewel caskets and set the fashion for jewels mounted in platinum in the new French style. Few could resist the elegant garland designs for tiaras, stomachers, dog collars and necklaces and many heirlooms were consigned to Cartier, Boucheron, Garrard and Hennell for remodelling. This style and the luxurious and privileged way of life it epitomised vanished with the declaration of war in 1914.

With the dramatic changes and upheavals in twentieth century life the position of the aristocracy declined. Their political influence was reduced, their fortunes decimated by taxation and many families died out through the failure to produce an heir. One by one the great town houses were sold, and in order to hold on to their land works of art and jewellery were disposed of. The sale catalogues of the auction from the 1920's record dispersal after dispersal. This process continues. Last year Christie's sold the Harcourt emeralds, this year the Cholmondeley necklace and tiara have come up for sale. There have also been spectacular robberies in which great collections such as those of the Dukes of Sutherland, Rutland and Northumberland have vanished without trace.

The story is not entirely negative. During the inter-war period smart women – Countess Mountbatten, Countess Brownlow and Lady Alexandra Metcalfe – bought new jewellery in the severely geometric Art Deco style so much admired today and which are the heirlooms of the future. Meanwhile the London jewellers are still in business and noble families bring old pieces to them for remodelling and buy new ones for weddings and anniversaries. Those who have learnt how to hold on to their inheritance in the modern world often have fortunes in family jewellery hidden away in bank vaults. Though regarded more as assets than as ornaments these jewels do appear every so often to add their incomparable brilliance to great celebrations in family and national life.