

# ***SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL***

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## **The Marquis d'Orsy: Aesthete, Eccentric and Enigma**

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**An early portrait of the Marquis d'Orsy, pictured in 1903 when he aged 23.  
*Photograph by courtesy of the author.***

On a warm summer's afternoon in 1917, the London to Cambridge train pulled up at Elsenham station. From out of the First Class carriage stepped the train's only passenger: a tall, thin gentleman with an aristocratic bearing, his black greying hair rustling slightly in the breeze.

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He placed his leather suitcase on the platform and deftly closed the carriage door. As the train pulled out of the station, he looked across the fields to the undulating landscape of north-west Essex. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the country air. Amand Edouard Ambroise Marie Louis Etienne Philippe d'Sant Andre Tournay, Marquis d'Oisy had arrived.

Whether or not this 37-year-old gentleman was met by anyone, or how long he intended to stay, records do not relate. What we do know is that he was bound for the nearby hamlet of Pledgdon Green, and it was there that he was to stay for the remaining 42 years of his life. Search the web, refer to as many reference books on the European aristocracy as you care, but you will not find any information on this man. To find out whom he was one needs to refer to the account of Rev Henry Ventham in Peter Anson's book, *Bishops at Large* (1964). Ventham was an eccentric opportunist who, having spent a number of years masquerading as the Bishop of Dorchester, was eventually ordained priest in the Church of England and ended his days as vicar of South Creake, Norfolk. Anson tells us that in about 1900-1901:

Having failed to become a catholic or an Old Catholic monk, Thomas ended his days as an Anglican layman. He became a familiar figure at Thaxted, Essex where he called himself the Marquis d'Oisey, claiming that he belonged to an ancient and noble family from Flanders. He designed ladies costumes and painted furniture in an extravagant baroque manner, and took a keen interest in folk-dancing as well as most of the religious and social activities sponsored by the vicar, the Rev'd Conrad Noel, grandson of the Earl of Gainsborough, well known for his support of Communism and services of an advanced 'English Use' type.

Whilst there are few mistakes here – to begin with, the Marquis (as I shall respectfully call him, for as such he was known in the locality) designed pageant costumes rather than ladies' couture, Noel was a Socialist and not a Communist, and d'Oisy rarely worshipped at Thaxted - the remainder of the observations are true.

Precisely when the Marquis arrived at Pledgdon is in dispute. Anson gives the impression that it was sometime towards to the end of the Great War, probably 1917, though others assume that it was in the 1920s. On balance, it appears that Anson has the upper hand, and this was later corroborated by the Marquis in 1921. But before we examine the argument, it would be worthwhile retracing our steps to Rio de Janeiro, for it was here on 21 June 1880 that the Marquis once said he had been born. As we all know, to be a good liar one has to have a good memory; at a bankruptcy hearing in London in 1921 he said that he had been brought to England in 1886, though in later life he altered this to 1888, adding that his mother was a countess and his father a viscount and that he had inherited the d'Oisy title from his grandmother. Be that as it may, his obituary in the *Herts & Essex Observer*, 18 December 1959, penned by his 'The Marquis d'Oisy' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 24 (2012)

friend Bernard Keel, had him arriving in England in 1892 having come, not from Rio de Janeiro, but from France, adding that he began business as an artistic designer of houses and furniture in 1900, using a legacy of £600. So much for the romance.

If we are to trust Peter Anson – and there is no reason why one should not – the Marquis d'Oisy was none other than Bro Ambrose Thomas. Furthermore, this is corroborated by the 1901 census record which has an Ambrose Thomas, single, aged 19, Benedictine Monk, being at Caldey Priory, Caldey Island, born Bath, 'Living on own Means' on the day that the census was taken. The statement, 'Living on own Means' falls in line with the *Brothers' Requirements for Postulants*, which stated that 'They must be free from engagements of debt or marriage, and are expected to defray the expenses of their noviciate'.

In 1901 Caldey Priory could hardly be described as comfortable. It was in October 1900 that Rev. W. Done Bushell, the owner of Caldey Island, near Tenby, wrote to Fr Aelred Carlyle, offering the Brothers a temporary asylum in his old rooms and church of the ancient Priory on the Island. The small band of men arrived on the Island on 10 January 1901, but their occupation of the rooms put at their disposal was only contingent on Bushell not requiring them for his own use, and in Holy Week they had to move into the partially-restored Gatehouse, which contained two rooms above and one below, Fr Aelred occupying the room which had formerly belonged to the Prior of olden days, 'which was in the same state as he had left it nearly four centuries before'. During August and September, when the whole house was required by Bushell, the Brothers were reduced to a tent encampment in the pine woods. One Brother recorded in his diary:

We experienced for the second time the joy of Camp life in a storm. Rain began to fall at 10.30, and continued all night very heavily. All our beds were wet in the morning, but the morning dawned clear and fine, and we were not much the worse for our rough night. Our Monastic Camp consists of three second-hand bell tents. The larder is a disused fowl-house, improvising with shelves for the occasion. The Refectory is outside the tents, under the trees, very nice in fine weather, with plenty of our fowls for company; the Kitchen also is outside, all the cooking has to be done on a navvy's coal-box, which is alright on a fine day, but cannot be expected to burn in the rain.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that Ambrose Thomas felt that he was not really called to the religious life?

It soon became obvious to Fr Aelred that the living conditions on Caldey were intolerable. Fortunately, the Earl Halifax had offered the Brothers more salubrious accommodation at Painsthorpe, a house standing in a wooded meadow outside of the village of Kirby Underdale in the Yorkshire Wolds. The move to Painsthorpe took place on 5 March 1902, and it seems likely that this is the date that Ambrose Thomas decided to leave

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the Order, for there is no record of him being at Painsthorpe. The Community eventually returned to Caldey on 18 October 1906.

According to the late John Hunter, who was 13 when he first met the Marquis in 1945, the latter told him that he was working as a navvy for the Underground Electric Railways Company of London in 1902, digging the extension tunnel for the Northern Line between Camden Town and Kentish Town, but left shortly afterwards as he was unwilling to accept promotion to that of a skilled worker.

There then follows a gap of 13 years before he appears on the scene again, by which time he has assumed his alter ego of the Marquis d'Oisy. Michael Yelton in *Anglican Papalism: An illustrated history 1900-1960* (2005, p.155), records that the Marquis was working at St Saviour's, Hoxton:

In 1915 alterations were made, originally on a temporary basis for the Corpus Christi Day celebrations that year, by the exotically named Marquis de Tournay d'Oisy, representing the vestment makers Louis Grossé. He added a Sacred Heart motif on the figure of Christ, and some curtaining around the altar.

So what had happened between his short sojourn with the Underground Electric Railways Company of London and his employment as a designer with the church furnishers, Louis Grossé? Unfortunately, all one can do is to speculate. Doubtless his religious zeal had cooled since experiencing Caldey, and navvying for the Underground probably gave him the thinking-time he needed to plan out his life. Furthermore, there is no record that he ever went to Buckfast after Caldey, so the story about being put into a ketch – itself rather far-fetched – was probably no more than a figment of Fr Ventham's colourful imagination.

To form an idea of what he did post-London Transport we need to bear in mind his later life as a decorator of furniture and a seams-man of pageant costumes. His later circle of London friends might all give us a clue. To begin with, we know that the cottage at Pledgdon Green to which he moved in 1917 was owned by the silent-film actress Irene Rook. It was part of an extensive property portfolio which she had amassed during her performing years, probably as a means of creating a rental income to sustain her during her retirement years. But how did the Marquis get to know her? One thought is that on leaving manual work he attached himself to a London scenic studio. Indeed, looking at his works of later years they all have a theatrical bias, far more at home on stage at Covent Garden than in a parish church. Furthermore, had that scenic studio cemented a connection with the film industry, he would have come across a multitude of actors and actresses, all useful contacts when it came to a possible market for his out-of-hours painted furniture. If nothing else, the

Marquis had a charm, and it would have been easy for him to have persuaded the likes of Irene Rook to have purchased some of his wares.

We also know that by 1915 he was working for the ecclesiastical vestment couturier, Louis Grossé, where he would have picked up skills – probably as a result of watching those in the cutting-rooms – on how to make vestments and robes. In addition, his time at Grossé would have brought him into contact with other church furnishing suppliers and their outlets.

Doubtless he retained his contacts with his theatrical friends, though how and where he lived – probably in ‘digs’ – when he was in London remains unknown. And why this unusual *nom-de-plume*? Could it have been invented whilst he was at Grossé’s, suggesting that an outré name such as the Marquis d’Oisy would add *éclat* to the firm’s church furnishing arm? Indeed, the St Saviour’s, Hoxton commission came via Louis Grossé, so he surely must have known of d’Oisy’s background. Unfortunately, Grossé’s closed in the 1970s, at which time all of their records were destroyed, so we have no way of finding out when Ambrose Thomas joined the firm. Why Thomas decided to leave might be associated with the decrease in commissions for ecclesiastical work during the Great War. When war was declared in 1914 Thomas would have been aged 34; precisely why he did not join up might have been that he was a conscientious objector, but it seems more likely – as will be later revealed – that he was unfit for service, as there is every possibility that he had tuberculosis.

With little work coming in, it is no surprise that Grossé had to thin-out his work-force. Thomas was too proud a man to wait until the push came and, having shared his dilemma with Irene Rook, was offered rent-free accommodation for life at her property in Pledgdon Green, where he could live cheaply and continue to provide his theatrical friends with painted furniture. Thus it was that the Marquis arrived on the platform at Elsenham in 1917.

At first, the locals were afeared of him, some even taking him to be a spy, attributing his exotic apparel of long cloak and floppy-brimmed hat as being more French than English. With money being in very short supply, he kept a cow tethered on the green for the sake of its milk, as well as a goat, and he grew edible flowers, fruits and herbs to keep the cost of his groceries down. He also kept two elegant greyhounds, and always slept in the open, whatever the weather, on the first-floor balcony of his cottage. Now that in itself points towards the probability of him having TB.

The film director, Basil Dean, knew him well. Dean lived with his wife, the daughter of Daisy Maynard, Countess of Warwick, at Little Easton Manor. Writing in 1970, 11 years after the Marquis’ death, Dean recalled:

There lived not far away a certain Marquis d'Oisy, who was said to be descended from one of the oldest French families, some said that of Cardinal Richelieu. Although he had never been to France, could not speak a word of French, and had an atrocious Cockney accent, he was, by tacit consent, known throughout the district as 'the Marquis', yet I never heard him lay claim to any title. Lady Warwick used to say he came not from any foreign land but from the East End of London. He was a strange creature altogether, very tall and thin, emaciated almost, with a squeaky voice and a chin beard; and obvious homosexual. He lived with a Scottish henchman called John in a tumbledown cottage so primitive that one had to bend almost double to get through the door. Lady Warwick once murmured mischievously to me: 'If you ever go to lunch with the Marquis, he'll give you nasturtium leaves and violets to eat'. Nevertheless, she had done her best to help him.

Two years later, in 1972, Dean added to this portrait:

On the opposite side of the county there dwelt that enigmatic figure, the Marquis d'Oisy, so well known to us all, although none would swear the title was true inheritance – pathetic if it were so, ridiculous if false; artist-antiquarian, vegetarian, and decorator – extraordinary of cottage replacements of period furniture to Lady Warwick. We owed to him much of our knowledge of Little Easton Manor's history, all of our discovery of its foundations, and enthusiastic guidance along the path of its restoration. A passionate student of peasant ways – a folk-artist, you might say – he spent much of his time organising medieval pageantry in remote villages, blandly ignoring the desperate poverty in which he lived.

That the Marquis could be mischievous cannot be denied. Whilst entertaining the 13-year old John Hunter in 1945, he showed the lad 'his family tree, in which his cadet branch of the family inherited the title when those in the line perished on the crossing to Brazil, fleeing the Revolution and the guillotine'. Forty-five years later, Hunter recalled:

He lived in a house at Pledgdon Green with a few acres of land. The house was medieval and this was the style of his life. He slept on an open balcony guarded by two greyhounds. Inside was a huge open fire (then unusual) with spit, wooden trenchers, pewter mugs and bone-handled knives and forks. Behind was his formal herb garden with vine-trellises and scented plants. It was all still magical when I saw it in 1945. There was something of the January scenes in Flemish breviaries, where the lord feasts, and the Marquis would have known them well. He was a medievalist and lived in that time and a talented decorative artist, running a workshop decorating furniture for Liberty and elsewhere. In later years I used to cycle over to chat with him about medieval buildings and gardens and he was always kindly and courteous although the house and herb garden had become ruinous and he now lived in a large shed with his manservant Bernard and his dogs.

According to Reg Payne, the Marquis had a number of greyhounds over the years, all with female names such as Nellie, Sally, Jenny, a whippet called Alice and 'a rogue of a dog, a so-called Alsatian pedigree, who wasn't, and ate anything, such as old Ever Ready razor-blades'.

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The Marquis managed to eke out a living – though most of us would call it 'survival' – during the Great War. Unfortunately, he was not as successful as he had hoped, and on 25 January 1921 he appeared in London seeking a discharge from an Order in Bankruptcy, owing £1,524 – an enormous sum in those days – against assets of £188. From the indictment, we learn much about Marquis' fantasy:

The applicant, who has assets of £188 and debts of £1,524 is a Brazilian subject, brought to this country as a child in 1886 and, in 1900, with £600 representing legacies, he began business as an artistic designer of houses and furniture. In 1917 he took Pledgdon Green Cottage for the purpose of demonstrating his works to people who required their properties restored and, in the same year, he took a farm at Broxted, Essex. The failure was attributed to losses in connection with the Essex farm and Pledgdon Green Cottage, to interest on borrowed money, and the slump in the trade which caused a decline in his designing business.

This so-called farm was, in fact, a five-acre smallholding which he rented from a neighbouring farmer. Marquis subsequently sold the land which, of course, he had no right to do. Two months later he appeared in the Bankruptcy Court again, before Registrar Hope, to answer a charge of debts of £1,575 and assets of £576. It was not a good year. However, circumstances changed in the late spring when Louis Grossé came to his aid and gave him a commission. This was for the west porch at Our Lady of the Holy Souls, Bosworth Road, Kensal New Town to be installed in memory of Fr Joseph Greene and Fr Arnold Baker, the first two rectors of the parish. The decoration, depicting various saints, was unfortunately obliterated in the 1960s when the building was re-ordered. Consecrated on 11 November 1921, the Order of Service noted: 'COLLECTION. It is earnestly hoped that all will give generously, so that the whole sum required for the payment of the Porch may be completed'.

Doubtless, Marquis was desperate to be paid. On the back of the Service Sheet was a note to the effect that 'The New Porch has been designed and painted by the Marquis de Saint André de Tournay d'Oisy. 3 Queen's Road Studios, St John's Wood, N.W.8'. A blatant advertisement and a blatant lie, for his true address was Pledgdon Green, that at St John's Wood being merely the home of a friend with whom he would stay when visiting London.

In early 1923 Conrad Noel announced his intention of financing the restoration of the Chantry and Almshouses in Thaxted churchyard. Noel wished to use them to house destitute farm-labourers, but on 24 June the Marquis wrote to him suggesting an idea for converting the buildings into a 'Guest house and pilgrims hostel at west side with refectory. Windows show life of old guilds of Thaxted, walls painted green and gold as if curtains.' He also added a few comments on the redecoration of the church: 'Reredos with figures of saints and in all chapels. Cupboard with scenes of life of Our Lady in L(ady) C(hapel), painted saints in chapel of St 'The Marquis d'Oisy' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 24 (2012)

Anne. Priests say masses at all the altars, guild in place.’ Conrad wrote back, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, on 4 October:

Thanks for the typescript on St John the Baptist; not my vision, but helpful. Only the Shilling Fund run by Mrs Holst can pay for kind of work you envisage. Vestment cupboard a priority. Need an estimate. Could also paint existing cupboard in sacristy. As for rest, don’t want to raise hopes too high. Don’t really want portraits of saints, modern artists can do Ignatius Loyola that is the kind of neurotic writer who is now accounted a saint, but God forbid that his statue should ever find a niche in Thaxted.

In the end, Noel did get his painted vestment cupboard and the decorated corner-cupboard in the sacristy, and both are still in use. Indeed, Conrad Noel was particularly helpful to the Marquis, subsequently asking him to paint the lectern, the niche and statue of St Lawrence, the decorative carving on the reredos in the Becket Chapel, and commissioning two painted pewter coronas for the Lady Chapel and one for the statue of Our Lady as well as a band of identical cresting for the High Altar, the latter currently in store.

His greatest commission, and the one which gave him the most pleasure, was Basil Dean’s request in 1925 for the Marquis to assist in the restoration of Little Easton Manor; it was an association which was to last for 13 years. The Marquis’ role was that of architectural historian, advising Dean on how the building once looked, which allowed the contractors to return the house much to its original appearance. No doubt the Marquis would have liked to have ‘medievalised’ the place, with his trademark murals of ‘green and gold, as if curtains’ and stained-glass windows. In the end he merely provided advice. Basil Dean recorded Marquis’ first visit:

The Marquis was well-acquainted with both fact and legend regarding the house. As he led me round the property, on a sort of treasure hunt, his long nose twitched with excitement, like huntsmen after a fox. I caught something of his zest for restoration. He began by tracing the lines of the great hall and the ‘fire’, its red brick chimney-stack still standing, smothered in ivy at one end. He also showed me the entrance to an underground passage to the church, long since blocked up, which enabled hunted men to seek sanctuary in the church. To test his story, I asked the gardener one day to dig down below the flowers and the winter-planted vegetables. There, sure enough, were the brick footings extending the length and breadth of the garden, just as the Marquis had said. The inside of the house, what remained of it, had been ravaged by Victorian adaptation to menial use. The Marquis was not a whit disturbed by all the mess and, poking his long shepherd’s crook through rotting plaster and tearing away accumulations of Victorian wallpaper to show me where original oak beams might be found. And there they were. In two small rooms we found beneath the deal boards the original oak floors, fastened

with the original hand-cut nails, and still valiantly resisting the depravity of dry rot.

The Marquis subsequently wrote a short article in 1927 for *Ideal Home* on the restoration work at Little Easton.

It had been in October 1922 that the Marquis mounted a *Pageant of Fashion* at Holland Park Rink in Kensington. This was the first of his pageants, and led to a series of diverse extravaganzas of varying success held in Pledgdon between 1926 and 1936. The first, in 1926, involved Imogen Holst, whom he had probably met in 1917 during his first visit to Thaxted, where Gustav Holst was then living. Christopher Crogan, in his *Imogen Holst: A Life in Music* (2007), notes that 'Another of Imogen's pre-Royal College of Music activities was to provide the music for a pageant held near Thaxted in July (1926). The goal of this fund-raising effort was to build what became Cecil Sharp House, headquarters for the English Folk Dance Society.' Devised by the Marquis, and written by A. A. Thomson, it took the form of *The Chronicle of St Thomas of Canterbury*: 'The Letchworth Morris team, in traditional costumes will dance to the pipe and tabor played by Mr Kenworthy Schofield. Miss Imogen Holst is arranging and conducting the old music which accompanies the play.' Crogan adds, 'The Marquis D'Oisy was a somewhat ambivalent, flamboyant character, known for painting plain furniture with Italianate decoration and with a flair for staging events and pageants such as this one. He was to disappear off the Essex scene rather suddenly and apparently without explanation a few years later.'

The success of the Pledgdon pageant led the Marquis to repeat the exercise in July in the following year, this time at Henham Hall. Under the title of *A Folk Play*, again from the pen of A. A. Thomson and directed by the Marquis, it presented a gaily-coloured picture of rural England in the 15th century. Basil Dean was present to record the incident:

It aroused much local interest because of the numbers of men and women, boys and girls of the surrounding villages, involved in the performance . . . I gather it was an hilariously self-conscious entertainment that delighted the village audience, especially when they saw the Marquis's white muslin draperies changing colour, blue to red to amber, by the simple use of coloured gelatine held in front of some flickering electric globes. The battery-operated lighting plant at the Manor was objecting strenuously to this overtime work. Such naïve enjoyment was a measure of the remoteness of those Essex villages, even in the late twenties.

What the other VIPs – the Countess of Warwick and H.G. Wells – thought of it all has not been recorded!

Arguably the triumph of pageants was that held on Saturday 19 May 1928 when the Pledgdon Green Players performed at the Royal College of Music in Kensington. It was a somewhat extended variant of the 1926 and 1927 pageants, with the Marquis taking the role of The Lord in *The Story of* 'The Marquis d'Oisy' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 24 (2012)

*Lady Malary*. Buoyed by this success, The Marquis took a break in 1929, but in the following year he directed the Pledgdon Green Players in *King Robert of Sicily*, himself playing the part of a peasant. Again, he drew heavily on the people of Thaxted to provide the actors, the Letchworth Morris men and the choir of Thaxted church, under the leadership of its then curate, Fr Jack Putterill.

During the 1930s the Marquis was a frequent and familiar figure in Thaxted. His friendship with Conrad Noel had not diminished, even though he had been slightly mocked by him in 1927 regarding his vision for the church's interior. His connection with the Thaxted Morris continued, though he was now more of an observer than a participant, but in 1933, when the Morris was asked to perform the Horn Dance at the Royal Albert Hall, he designed and made for them red tabards and embroidered mitres. These lasted until 1951, when Margaret Hunter made the replacements which continue to be worn each year at the Morris Ring's Thaxted Festival.

Arguably the pageant of pageants was *Seven Centuries of Dancing*, a light-hearted revue of songs and dances of the past, performed in the grounds of Hatfield House in July 1936. With its cast of 600, this event of Cecil B. De Mille magnitude, took three hours to perform. The costumes were all designed by the Marquis, the more important of which he made himself, no doubt putting to good use the skills he had learnt whilst at Grossé's. The President of the English Folk Dance Society was in the audience, together with the majority of the Society's trustees, including Ralph Vaughan Williams. A. A. Thomson again provided the script, Imogen Holst conducted the 19-piece orchestra, Kenworthy Schofield played pipe and tabor and both the Letchworth and Thaxted Morris danced.

As fate would have it, this was to be the last of the Marquis' theatrical productions. Storm clouds were gathering, and it looked as though war was inevitable. By September 1939 the Marquis was approaching 60; Liberty's, Heal's and Sayle's of Cambridge were not ordering as much painted furniture from him as before. Many of his private clients were either dying of old age or feeling the pinch themselves and he was reduced to taking on manual tasks such as tarring the barns at Pledgdon Green Farm and making wooden fruit boxes for local farmers. Things were looking bleak. Nevertheless, ever the optimist, he kept himself as cheerful as possible, turning out now and again for social events, though rarely entertaining. In July 1942 he appeared at the funeral of Conrad Noel in Thaxted Church where his name – Marquis d'Oisy – appeared in the newspaper report after those of Lord and Lady Buxton and the Hon Mrs Maynard Greville, thus putting him in the upper ranks of Conrad's friends.

It was in 1942, despite the reduction in his work that the Marquis decided to take on an assistant. Reg Payne, a local lad, was employed at £1 a week to help in the workshop at Pledgdon Green. Reg, who was 14 at the

time, stayed with the Marquis for two years. Last year I asked Reg what he remembered of the man:

He was six foot five; the most fairest man I've ever met in my life. He drove a car erratically and had no sense of cornering in a car. Of course, he used to look after Easton Lodge when Daisy Warwick went away, She used to give him the keys, bring the dogs over, so he used to go over there in a horse and trap. She wanted him to live in Stone Hall, separated from the Lodge, about half a mile from the main house, but he declined.

Reg recalled that there was still a reasonable amount of private work coming in. On one occasion in 1943 he went down to Drayton Beauchamp in Hertfordshire to lay a patio for the actress Anne Trevor. Then there was the incident of the piano. According to Reg:

This was a brand-new baby grand, got the corrugated cardboard all round the legs. And of course, it was like gloss; made for Maples or somewhere. And he said to me, 'Come on then, come on'. So I said, 'For what?' He got this sandpaper out, like an attaché case full of sandpaper, and I had to rub it down, get all the gloss off. And then, just before I left, he put a coat of white paint on. And someone told me, 'That piano, you should have seen it afterwards. It was all acanthus leaves. Beautifully done'.

Reg was also able to provide a more intimate vignette on the Marquis:

Every morning he had a loaf delivered to my father's pub which I used to take to work. It was a long loaf, specially made for him. He used to say 'It's all the sweepings of the floor, you know.' It was just a long loaf, with three or four cuts in the top, you know? Break that into large lumps, and he had this – I believe it was Roman to look at it – it was a massive cup. It was a big, thick, yellow terracotta cup and he'd have this full of – well, he used to grind his own Algerian coffee-beans. The old-fashioned grinder with the drawer underneath. And then he got the percolator – the French percolator – well, like a teapot with the handle on the side. And then he'd have this lovely strong . . . I could smell that a quarter of a mile from when I was going to work. I used to think, 'Hello, He's up. He's got it going'. Yes, and so he'd eat this plain bread. Always on time. Always started on time. He'd had a wash and a shave before I got there and he was always ready for work. Always.

I also asked Reg if the Marquis had ever told him any of his history:

Yes. His father was a viscount and his mother was a countess who couldn't speak English. It was French. Lived in Rio – born in Rio, he told me – and could see a little house with shutters across. He said 'I always remember that little house', and he used to have tears in his eyes. He said his mother had left . . . and they got settled at Bath. And then waiting for his father, and he got lost at sea. So he inherited the money, I think, when he was about 16.

It was in about 1944 that Reg Payne left the Marquis' employ. Some six years later the Marquis, who by now was living in utter penury, was befriended by George Langham Service, the free-trade representative of Rayment's Brewery at Furneux Pelham. To his credit, Langham Service commissioned the Marquis to paint a series of pub signs for the brewery's  
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inns. To do this, the Marquis would go to Furneux Pelham and create his artwork either in a small barn opposite the parish church or at George Felton's cooperage at the brewery. It was whilst he was working there that he met Capt H. N. Lake, the owner of Rayment's, and formed a friendship with him. Early in 1951 Mr and Mrs Service converted to Roman Catholicism, only to be followed into the fold by Captain Lake and Marquis. One wonders if Marquis recalled the advice given to him 50 years earlier by Aelred Carlyle that he should be reconciled to Rome? Fired with enthusiasm for the faith, Captain Lake had one of his barns at Furneux Pelham turned into a Roman Catholic chapel, with the Marquis providing the fixtures and fittings.

It was a good year for the Marquis. His soul had at last found rest with the Church, he had made good friends with the Lakes and the Langham Services and he had also slightly dabbled in pageants again, when Thaxted decided to celebrate the Festival of Britain with a dance display in the Market Square. This was led by the Marquis in colourful 18th-century costume as Castleton King. Bruce Munro of Thaxted has a photograph showing the Marquis in his 'colourful eighteenth-century costume', escorting a young Stanley Moss on his arm, the latter in female attire and holding a lace-fringed parasol. The Marquis looks in his element.

Towards the end of 1958 Irene Rook died and bequeathed the Pledgdon Green cottage to the Marquis. By then the little building was uninhabitable and the Marquis had taken up residence in a second-hand army hut which he had erected adjacent to the cottage where he now lived with his dogs, accompanied by his manservant Bernard Keel. It would not be unfair to say that the man was by now destitute; he was 79 and only had his state pension on which to live. Consequently, he sold the derelict cottage in January 1959 and its land for £200. According to John Hunter, 'the cottage subsequently passed into other hands and suffered one of the nastiest restorations I have ever seen'.

The sale of Pledgdon Green Cottage was the last business deal the Marquis was involved in. His prostate cancer was getting worse and sapping his strength and his life. The Marquis spent his last weeks at Smith's Cottage at Takeley, the home of his manservant, Bernard Keel, where he died on Friday 11 December 1959. According to Reg Payne, the Marquis only had 30 shillings at the time of his death. His body lay upstairs in the cottage until the morning of the funeral on Monday 14 December, a rosary entwined round his fingers. The undertaker's men man-handled the emaciated corpse down the tight staircase and encoffined him on the ground floor. Only ten or twelve people attended the service, which took place at the little Roman Catholic Church at Dunmow, and he was buried on the north-east side of Dunmow churchyard beneath a simple kerbing, now devoid of its marker. Four days later his obituary appeared in the *Herts & Essex Observer*:

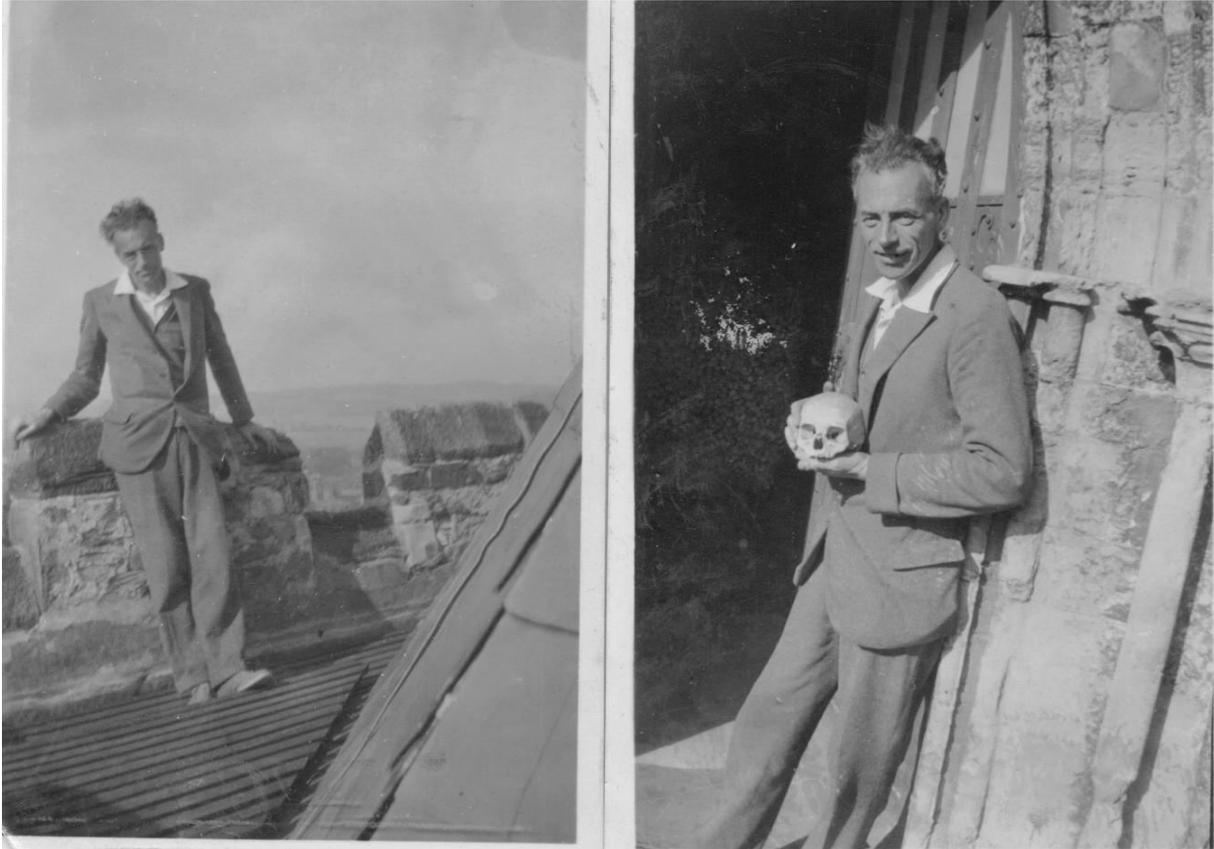
A well-known figure in local circles, Amand Amboise Louis, Marquis d'Oisy, of Pledgdon Green, Henham, died in the home of a friend at Smith's Green, Takeley, on Friday. The Marquis, who was 79 years of age, came to England from the French town of Oisy, with which his family had been closely associated since 1665, when he was 12 years of age. He moved to Henham during the First World War. Marquis d'Oisy, who was a bachelor, assumed the title on the death of his grandmother in 1888. Father Kelly conducted the funeral which took place at Dunmow Roman Catholic Church on Monday.

In actuality, Ambrose Thomas, *aka* Marquis d'Oisy, was 79 years, five months and 20 days old at the time of his death, if we are to go by his self-stated date of birth as 21 June (the Feast of St Aloysius) 1880. But what do we know about his birth? The census of 1881 draws a blank, but the 1891 census records for 8 Widecombe Parade, Claverton Street, Bath an Ambrose E. Merchant, aged nine, scholar, born at Bath to Ambrose C. Merchant, a 32-year-old self-employed gas fitter, married to Alice Merchant, nee Thomas. It will be remembered that d'Oisy said to Reg Payne that he had childhood memories of Bath; could it be that the young Ambrose Merchant decided to take his mother's maiden name as his surname in 1899 when he was first at Erdington Abbey? That there was no Ambrose Thomas recorded anywhere in England in the 1881 and 1891 censuses only adds to the mystery, but an Ambrose Thomas, aged 21, monk, living on own means, born Bath, Somerset does appear in the 1901 census taken on Caldey Island.

Whether or not he was happy with his lot, who can say? Perhaps he was happiest between 1925 and 1936 when he was not only working on the restoration of Little Easton Manor but also busy with the Pledgdon Players, creating and making the costumes and scenery for his pageants. Neither did he ever lose his fascination with the monastic life; witness his attempt in 1923 to convince Conrad Noel to convert the Chantry and Almshouses at Thaxted into a College of Priests. And yet, in those dark winter nights as he dozed on his balcony at Pledgdon, did he ever think that his life might have taken a better turn had a remained plain Ambrose Marchant? He certainly had sufficient talent to survive, whatever he chose to call himself. Perhaps he thought that in being the Marquis he would gain respect? Les Carr of Pledgdon Green, who once drove the Marquis to and from London, told Gordon Barker that 'he never was a marquis'. Frances, Countess of Warwick was of the same opinion, as was Ernie Drane of Thaxted. Mrs Zeta Hill of Thaxted, who knew him vaguely, told Gordon Barker in 2010 that 'he was never a marquis. A lot of people invented these titles between the wars.'

But whatever the truth of the story, nothing can detract from his craftsmanship. He was neither an eccentric nor a rogue. He was merely a rare exotic, a bird of elegant plumage of which the world now has too few. On balance, one cannot fail but like him, this son of a self-employed gas-

fitter from Bath who created for himself, and for us, a life of fabulous tell-tale and a multitude of outstanding works of art.



Marquis d'Oisy at St Leonard's, Hythe, Kent on 3 October 1928. ©Julian Litten.

**Note: Since this article appeared, the author has written a book about the Marquis, which contains much more detail and illustrations of his work.**

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