

Bankes for the memory

Nick Churchill looks at an extraordinary local life

ASEX scandal that rocked the Dorset gentry and shocked Parliament; cloak and dagger dealings with the law and the locals; a link to smugglers and priceless works of art... the life and times of a disgraced Dorset landowner could provide Hollywood with its latest costume drama.

William John Bankes, the noted explorer and pioneer Egyptologist, who is widely credited with rebuilding the Kingston Lacy estate as it is today, fled the country in shame in 1841 having been caught in compromising circumstances with a young soldier in London's Green Park.

Sodomy was a capital crime in those days and, on legal advice, Bankes decamped to Venice after signing over his interest in Kingston Lacy to his brothers George and Edward. He was declared a criminal outlaw and remained in exile until his death in 1855.

Or did he?

By arrangement with Dorset's senior legal officials, politicians and local workers, it seems William made at least one clandestine trip back to his beloved Kingston Lacy to check on the progress of the work he was orchestrating from afar.



AUTHOR: Anne Sebba

His biographer, Anne Sebba, has sold the film rights to her highly-praised account of William's colourful life, *The Exiled Collector* (John Murray, £8.99), and is hoping a good script will entice the industry big boys to the story.

"You can just imagine it, these magnificent settings – Kingston Lacy and Venice, maybe with someone like Jude Law in the lead role," she says.

"It's very rare you get period stories where the exact locations still exist – it's not like you have to recreate a dingy Liverpool street or make a village as in Cranford."

Anne met film producer Richard Foord after a lecture she gave at Kingston Lacy about 18 months ago.

"I was being asked questions by a man in the audience who was clearly very knowledgeable and enthused by the subject. He told me afterwards that he was a producer and very interested in making a film about William John Bankes.

"Often film rights are bought and nothing happens, but I just have a funny feeling that this one might take off. Richard has said that what they really love in Hollywood is great stories about plucky little Brits, that's why *Calendar Girls* and films like that do so well."

A friend of Lord Byron and an MP from the age of 24, William John Bankes became first in line to inherit Kingston Lacy from his father Henry when his older brother, also called Henry, was drowned off the coast of Tunis in 1806.

Widely travelled, as a young man William amassed a sizeable collection of antiquities, some of which he sold to the British Museum, and earned a fine reputation as a skilled translator of ancient texts.

But his private life scandalised high society.

He was arrested, tried and acquitted for sexual indecency with a young Coldstream Guardsman in 1833. His father – who testified at his trial – became ill and died little more than a year later. Soon after William appointed the eminent



PIONEER: William John Bankes (1786-1855) by Sir George Hayter (1792-1871). Collector and traveller, rebuilt Kingston Lacy (above) to Sir Charles Barry's designs 1835-40. ©NTPL/Angelo Hornak



architect Charles Barry, who was also rebuilding the Houses of Parliament which had been destroyed by fire in 1834, to work with him on renovating Kingston Lacy.

"So many people have said to me that it's a poignant story, but I've always seen it as a triumphant story born of something quite sad," says Anne.

"Living on his wits in Venice with not much money he came as close as an 18th century gentleman could do to having a proper job. I really liked him in that he survived in adversity."

The intrigue continued throughout William's life – and beyond.

Anne believes he made at least one journey back to Kingston Lacy in the spring or summer of 1854, the year before he died. She was told the story of how he slipped into the country through Poole after landing at Studland by the Castleman family of Chettle House, adjacent to the Bankes estate. The Castleman family are descendants of celebrated Dorset smuggler Isaac Gulliver and it seems fairly certain that Gulliver and others were active on the Dorset estates.

"Teddy Castleman told me

they were

brought up with oral history, stories handed down the generations, rather than written down. It makes sense that there was smuggling on the Kingston Lacy estate as it suited the government at the time to turn a blind eye because they wanted the Napoleonic blockade broken.

"William would have known how the local customs worked as he always sent his artefacts back through Poole, so the families simply arranged his safe passage and made sure he could avoid arrest. I'm sure it happened at least once, if not twice. "Can you imagine the strength of will it took to do that? William lived in Venice but couldn't swim, so he had to conquer that fear. Then landing in choppy waters off England, worrying about whether he'd be arrested if discovered – there's so much intrigue and mystery in this story."

The scheming continued even after William's death.

Although branded an outlaw, his body was brought back and interred in the family tomb in Wimborne Minster. The funeral was held in total secrecy on June 13, 1855 – two months after

his death in Venice.

Bankes family lore has it that a private Act of Parliament was required for his remains to be brought, but there is no such Act.

It seems William's younger brother Edward, who was Canon of Bristol Cathedral and close to Queen Victoria, used his considerable influence.

It's now 25 years since Ralph Bankes bequeathed the entire Bankes family estate to the National Trust and Anne believes William would have been pleased with how it has turned out.

"Well, I think he would have preferred it to be preserved for the family, but having it saved for the nation would have suited him I'm sure. It's certainly better than seeing the collection split up and sold off and Kingston Lacy is to a great extent a memorial to his spirit and vision."

She also sees some similarities between William and the last Bankes – Ralph's reclusive and troubled son John, who died of liver cancer in 1996 and is buried at St Nicholas Church, Studland.

"They were both exiles in effect and misunderstood by their family. I spoke with many of John's friends and – even though it may have been for the best – he felt it was cruel that he couldn't take up his birthright. John had a real affinity with the place and such enthusiasm for it, as did William of course, but wasn't able to live there."

● Anne's new book, *Jennie Churchill: Winston's American Mother* is published by John Murray and available now. Anne will be giving a lunchtime talk at Kingston Lacy as part of National Archaeology Week on July 11.