

Notable People of Buscot Park

2: The Second Lord Faringdon



Basque refugees.

Gavin Henderson, the second Lord Faringdon, was quite remarkable. It is surprising that no one has made a film about him. He saved hundreds of lives. John Betjeman met a taxi driver in Swindon who said he had driven for him and that “he was a very brave man – that he had gone up to London fire-fighting and become a hero in the thick of it.”

Born in 1902 he grew up at Kitemore House, Shellingford, and after Eton went to Christchurch Oxford to study Modern History. He got a Fourth possibly because of an attack of mumps and the death of his father in 1922. (Probably not because of his membership of the Hypocrites Club where Evelyn Waugh had declared his plan to do no work at all at Oxford!) He was elected to the Peerage in 1934 when he succeeded his grandfather, Alexander the first Lord Faringdon.

Alexander Henderson had worked for Deloittes as a young man and had a distinguished business career investing in railways in South America, Spain and Britain at a time when the railways were beginning to carry freight around the world. He organised the finance for the Manchester Ship Canal and connected up his Great Central Line to the Immingham Dock at Grimsby. He bought Buscot Park in his forties in 1889 and in 1902 he was knighted. He was made a Peer in 1916 and the Companion of Honour in 1917.

Gavin was a worthy successor with the intelligence and drive, though not the views of either his Conservative father or grandfather. He became a Labour Peer. After the first world war the next generation sought political change and his resistance to the conservative government of Baldwin took

him towards the left- wing causes of the 1930s. He supported the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil war despite the fact that Hendersons had business interests in the Spanish railways which meant doing business with General Franco.

The refusal of the British Government to get involved in the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) shocked many people and many young men volunteered to go to Spain. As a pacifist Gavin was not willing to fight but he took his (pale green) Rolls Royce out to the front at Aragon in 1937 to be converted to an ambulance. He worked as a stretcher bearer in a Field hospital, and it was remarked that “he was quick at seizing the nuances of field situations and eminently helpful in solving practical problems”. In 1939 he was known for getting refugees away from Gandia in Spain by putting down a Union Jack and declaring it British territory so that they could board for Mexico.

Back in Britain he used his Rolls Royce, now pockmarked by bullets, to join the country-wide fundraising drive to help the victims of the vicious struggle. Ted Heath and Dennis Healey, both at Balliol, marched together in support of the Spanish republic and in November 1938 Healey included Oriel College in the fundraising British tour of Picasso's 68 drawings for Guernica ending at Whitechapel Art Gallery. A shop at 77 George St Oxford raised money selling posters and photographs and collected clothes for Spain. In March 1938, Poppy Vulliamy of the Basque Childrens' committee asked Lord Faringdon to offer sanctuary to evacuees and he opened up a house on the Buscot estate to 40 Basque refugee boys from Bilbao now known as Basque House. The Spanish poet and teacher Luis Cernuda taught them, but these urban youngsters did not take to the rural life and later moved to Shipton under Wychwood. In 1939, a group of adult refugees moved into the house, among them the poet Domenec Perramon, journalist Eduardo de Ortañon, Fermin Verves, and Pedro Garfias who wrote a long poem called 'Primavera en Eaton Hastings'. They left in 1939 from Sete in France on a ship chartered in secret. In 1944 the Spanish writer and broadcaster Arturo Barea and his wife Ilsa were invited to Buscot and they stayed until his death in 1957. Gavin showed his kindness by giving his widow a pension for life.

A month after the War was declared in 1939 Gavin received delivery of a Vauxhall lorry that was then converted into Oxfordshire's no.15 fire-fighting tender. Lord Faringdon (nicknamed “Lordy”) then played a vital role in working for the National Fire Service in London, Oxford, Coventry,

Maidenhead, and Henley. It had been seen that the Germans would drop incendiary bombs to light the way for the bigger bombs and the Auxiliary fire service with their smaller vehicles were able to get through the streets to put these out. When the bombs grew fewer, he volunteered for fire service in the Netherlands and France to support the allied advance on Germany by protecting ration, fuel and ammunition dumps. By July 1945 they had attended over 500 incidents and after the war Gavin received medals from Britain, Holland and France. He had joined the National Fire Service Union in 1940 and used his influence in the House of Lords (sometimes attending in his fire-fighter's uniform!) to call for women to have equal pay to men and for adequate pensions if they became widows after their husbands died in service. At the beginning of the war women worked in administrative roles but by 1943 the NFS crews were predominately women. He became president of the London Fire Services Association 1960-69.

He was on the committee of the Fabian Society 1942-66, on the colonial bureau 1952-58, and vice-president 1970-77. He was a member of a parliamentary goodwill mission to USSR in Jan/Feb 1945, though he shocked the interpreters by his forthright remarks on Churchill's policy in Greece foreseeing that it would end in civil war which it did. 1940-45 he was Treasurer of the National Council for Civil Liberties, and in 1950s involved with the Bevinite Keep Left Group. In 1948-51 he was a member of the Colonial Economic and Development Council. In the Greater London Council in 1942 he was a member of the historic buildings committee and also Chairman of a committee to consider the appearance of Local Authority housing estates. He served on the Central Housing Advisory Committee in 1946. From 1958-61 he was a London County Councillor and an Alderman 1961-65. He was a member of the parliamentary Labour Party executive 1957-60 and Buscot was regularly used as a venue for conferences. The local labour party had benefited when he drove round in his Rolls Royce collecting members to vote in the 1930s.

After the restoration of his own mansion, he became regarded as an authority on Georgian architecture. The house was built in 1782 for Edward Loveden, bought by Robert Tertius Campbell in 1859 and the first Lord in 1889. Gavin Henderson restored the house to its Georgian state in 1934-6 and added the swimming pool and the Theatre. He asked Eric Ravilious to make a watercolour of the new frontage and Ravilious

donated his fee to 'Art for Ambulances'. Sickert's portrait in the house show him on the steps in front of his beautiful house. He promoted the preservation of British country houses and arranged for Buscot Park to pass to the National Trust on his death though with provision for the Hendersons to remain in residence. In his final years he had a downstairs breakfast room for his own use decorated by frescos. His interest in art and architecture had initially been fostered by the ideas of William Morris, a nearby influence of his grandfather. In 1936 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a trustee of the Wallace Collection 1946-53 and 1966-73. He purchased art that he liked – including a fresco showing the history of international Socialism. He also bought back furniture and paintings that had been in his grandfather's collection and sold off in 1934 – including Watts Wife of Pygmalion Ford Madox Brown's Entombment and Leighton's Dedalus and Icarus.

He was President of the Historic Buildings Council 1964-73 and President of the Friends of City Churches in 1943. He was an enthusiastic garden designer, though the initial design of the park at Buscot had been laid out by his grandfather and the farming side developed by his three predecessors with the best modern ideas.

He maintained city contacts with the Henderson family's stockbroking business and was Master of the Plumbers' Company. This firm financial base was useful when he invested in Private Eye in 1964 to save it from extinction 3 years after it had started with a budget of £450! He died at his London house in Brompton Square in 1977 and is buried at Buscot. He was a distinguished socialist Peer and a generous man, worthy of much respect and further reading.

- A History of the life of Alexander Henderson. David Wainwright 1985
- Buscot Park and the Faringdon Collection. The National Trust
- www.basquechildren.org [www. national joint committee for Spanish relief](http://www.nationaljointcommittee.org)
- Loveden, founder of Buscot Park N.G Shippobotham 2015
- No Other Way, Oxford International Brigade 2015
- Searchlight on Spain Duchess of Atholl 1938
- Bright Young People 1918-1940 D.J Taylor
- Draft chapter from a biography of the 2nd Lord Faringdon Roger Vlitos.
- Spanish Testament by Arthur Koestler. 1937.

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