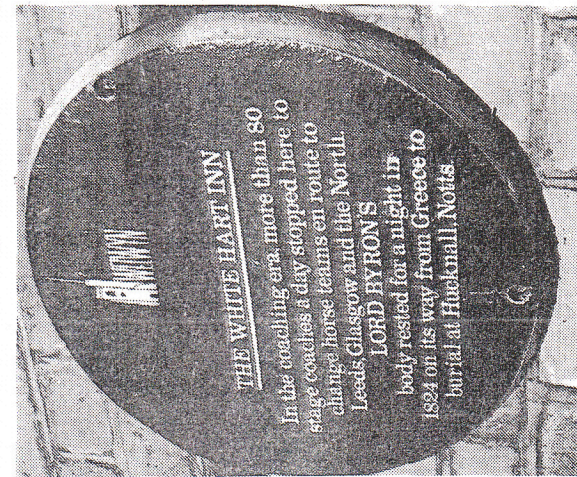


Leisure Review

FLASHBACK



● Lord Byron's brief posthumous stay is commemorated on this wall plaque at the White Hart, Welwyn.

● James Paine's stylish stone bridge (below) overlooks a shallow waterfall.



JAMES Paine designed it, lords have lived in it—and now foreign diplomats meet there to talk about international policy. Brocket Hall has also been the setting for a more unusual event—the ritual burning of Lord Byron's love letters to Lady Caroline Lamb. JOAN KING describes that and other happenings in the 170-year history of the hall.

When love went up in smoke

In the grounds of Brocket Hall a large bonfire is burning. Circling around it, local girls in long white dresses try hard to dance in a mournful manner.

Nearer the flames, a diminutive young beauty holds aloft a portrait and a pile of letters. Solemnly, with great cries of grief, she feeds the papers one by one into the fire. Lastly, the portrait too is burnt.

Anyone watching might think Brocket Hall was featuring in yet another television film—except that the performance took place over 170 years ago and the main character was Lady Caroline Lamb in person.

It was her husband's grandfather, Sir Matthew Lamb, who commissioned James Paine to design the house. As it remained only partially built when Sir Matthew died in 1768, Lord Melbourne, Caroline's father-in-law, became the first person to own the finished property.

In his time the River Lea was widened below the house to form an ornamental lake, spanned by a stylish stone bridge above a shallow waterfall. Behind the hall, Lord Melbourne laid out a racetrack, where the Prince Regent himself is said to have attended the races.

After her marriage to William Lamb, Lord Melbourne's son, Caroline too was often at Brocket Hall. Always a wayward wife, she began a tempestuous love affair with Lord Byron. Both were highly intelligent, had endured

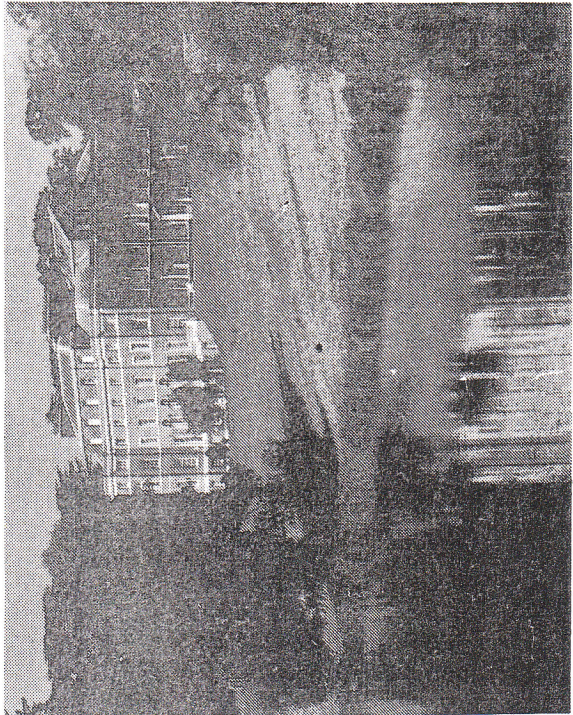
unhappy childhoods, and they were also extremely selfish, making a serious quarrel almost inevitable.

When it came, Caroline staged her doleful bonfire in order to feed the poet's letters to the flames of a symbolic funeral pyre. It is thought, though, that she destroyed copies, keeping the originals to re-read tearfully throughout Byron's European exile.

There was one further bizarre encounter between these two. Driving out from Brocket Hall in 1824 Caroline found her coach held up by a funeral procession travelling slowly along the Great North Road. Byron, intending to fight for Greek independence against the Turks, had died of fever at Missolonghi. Scandalised by his earlier adventures, the church authorities refused to allow him to be buried in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. Now his friends were taking him to Hucknall Torkard in Nottinghamshire, near to Newstead Abbey, Byron's former house.

On learning that this was her lover's funeral procession Caroline fell into a dramatic fit of apparent madness. Mine host at the White Hart in Welwyn received the corpse more calmly, allowing it to lie for the night in an upstairs room. Today, a wall plaque near the south-facing porch of the old inn commemorates this brief stay by a world-famous poet on his final journey north.

Caroline herself died in 1828, soon after her husband became the second Lord Melbourne. By then, William had already climbed the political ladder, and when Victoria came to the throne he was well into his second



● Reflected in the waters where the River Lea was widened to form an ornamental lake—Brocket Hall.

term as a respected Prime Minister. Tutoring the conscientious young queen gave him genuine pleasure after years spent coping with the temperamental Caroline.

Even so, on his death in 1848 he was buried beside his wife in St Etheldreda's Church, Hatfield, and the Brocket estate passed to his sister, Lady Palmerston. At that stage her husband was Foreign Secretary, treating like a finicky schoolmaster despatches he considered badly written. One he even returned to a senior diplomat overseas with instructions that it was to be re-written in blacker ink.

Yet seven years after he moved into Brocket Hall Lord Palmerston became a highly popular Prime Minister. He was still in office at 81, dying at Brocket Hall while attending to official papers.

Following his wife's death four years later the estate came into the hands of the Cowpers, through Lady Palmerston's son by her first husband.

Eventually, in 1922, it was bought by Sir Charles Nall-Cain, who became the first Lord Brocket. And with the exception of the Second World War, when it was turned into a maternity hospital, the hall has remained the home of his successors.

Recently there has been a further development. Brocket Hall has begun to host conferences. And last summer F.E.C. foreign ministers met there, so that the surroundings in which Melbourne and Palmerston