



MY FAVOURITE THING

April 2024

The Friends of Ipswich Museums, a body with which our Trust is mutually supportive, employs the highly apposite strap line *We Look Forward to Promote the Past*. In each quarterly Newsletter there is an item “**My Favourite Thing**” in which an interested party is invited to nominate and describe his or her favourite thing in **Christchurch Mansion**.

In the spring 2024 issue the privilege is given to **Peter Ledger**. We reproduce his beautifully told story in full, as in our view (but we would say that wouldn't we?) it cannot be told too often.

Peter writes:

Christchurch Mansion, or the Mansion as it is affectionately known, is crammed with wonderful treasures but its value to art lovers is its focus on objects of local interest. In fairness, the Mansion does have an advantage over other local museums as two of Britain's finest artists, **Gainsborough** and **Constable**, lived within its 'catchment' area. The Mansion has an outstanding collection of their paintings, especially early examples.

My Favourite Thing is none of these. Instead, my choice is the portrait of **Felix Thornley Cobbold**, commissioned by Cobbold's friends and presented to the Mansion, it occupies pride of place in the Great Hall, but most visitors will probably scurry past to view the more famous paintings and objects displayed in the Mansion. The artist is **John Collier (1850-1934)**, one of the most successful portrait artists of his generation but little known today.

There are finer and much better known paintings in the Mansion's collection so why have I chosen this? The reason is simple – it is due to the generosity of Felix Cobbold that we have the Mansion and Christchurch Park today. Felix was a member of the Cobbold brewing family but, rather than enter the family business, initially he chose a career as a barrister and then as junior bursar and Senior Fellow at **King's College, Cambridge**, where he had been an MA student.

Following the death of his elder brother in 1871, his father persuaded Felix to return to Ipswich to take up his interest in the family businesses, which included the brewers **Cobbold & Co.** and the family-owned bank, **Bacon, Cobbold & Co.** As a result, Felix became extremely wealthy.

In 1892, the **Fonnereau** family, longstanding owners of the Mansion and **Christchurch Park**, vacated the house and put it up for sale along with the surrounding estate. **The Borough Corporation** (as it then was) voted against buying the estate. It seemed likely that the land would be sold off for housing and Christchurch Mansion demolished. Two years later the estate was sold to a property syndicate for £36,000 (approx. £36m today). Almost immediately the first plots on **Bolton Lane** were sold and a number of houses quickly built there. Land on **Park Road** soon followed.

The future of the Mansion was uncertain. It had been neglected since the departure of the Fonnereaus. Despite this, Felix stepped in and bought the Mansion from the syndicate to save it from demolition. Cobbold wrote to the Borough Corporation offering Christchurch Mansion “as a free gift” to the town, subject to certain conditions: 1) The Corporation to buy the surrounding parkland “for the people of Ipswich”. 2) “The main structure of the house to be preserved in its integrity,” specifically the “internal fittings,.. the principal rooms and passages, the marble pavement in the hall and the main staircase.” Amazingly, it took Cobbold three attempts to convince the Corporation to accept his offer.

His generosity did not end there. Felix left a further £20,000 in Ipswich Stock, the interest of £600 per year accruing therefrom to be used for the purchase of artworks. To this day, the Felix Cobbold Bequest Fund facilitates the purchase of art works for the Mansion.

Whenever I visit the Mansion, I always pause by the portrait of Felix Cobbold to remind myself it is his philanthropy that ensured we can enjoy the Mansion and its wonderful collection today and that is why I have chosen it as **My Favourite Thing**.