

## WORTH NEWENHAM

### **Gentleman farmer and Master of the South Union.**

*(The Daily Telegraph, 2001)*

Worth Newenham, who has died aged 82, was for twenty years the Master of the South Union hunt, with a reputation for fearlessness in the face of daunting obstacles – as befitted a man who had piloted Lancaster bombers over wartime Germany. In a society where good horsemanship was a cardinal virtue, he epitomised the tradition of the ‘hard-riding country gentlemen’ celebrated by his compatriot W.B. Yeats in *Under Ben Bulbin*. A cheerful, dapper figure with a roguish sense of humour, he had the knack of charming people from all walks of life, and farmed his family’s estate in County Cork with shrewdness and determination.

William Percy Worth Newenham was born on 12 May 1919 into an Anglo-Irish family which had been prominent in Cork society for three centuries. An ancestor, John Newenham de Newenham, was one of the commissioners who carried out the Domesday survey. In the seventeenth century, Edmund Newenham became the first of the family to settle in Ireland, marrying the daughter of the Lord Mayor of Dublin, and purchasing the estate of Coolmore beside the Blackwater estuary, which the family still owns. The present house – an imposing Georgian edifice – was built in 1788.

Worth Newenham was educated at Castle Park, outside Dublin, and Wrekin College in Shropshire. At home he enjoyed a rumbustuous outdoor life with his two brothers and three sisters, riding, boating and fishing, as well as helping on the farm. He was an excellent shot, and shortly after the telephone was introduced to Coolmore, asked his brother Ted if he thought it would be possible to shoot a telegraph line with a .22

rifle – which he proceeded to do, much to his parents’ annoyance. In the words of a friend, ‘You only had to say, “You can’t do that” and off he would go and do it.’

At the outbreak of the Second World War, his father tried to impress upon him the importance of enlisting in ‘a good regiment’. Worth, however, insisted on joining the RAF. He trained in Australia and Canada, and eventually graduated to piloting Lancaster bombers with 106 Squadron. Between October 1944 and May 1945 he flew 30 missions over Germany and Norway, barely making it home on one occasion after a fierce attack by a Junkers 88 – an experience which haunted him in later years.

Visiting Cork on leave, he attempted to buy half a gallon of petrol for his treasured motorcycle – a trifling request, he thought, considering the vast quantities of fuel which his aeroplane consumed. But rationing was in force, and the garage owner turned him away, demanding indignantly, ‘Don’t you know there’s a war on?’

When hostilities ended, Newenham spent a year with Transport Command in India, and then returned to Ireland, where he married Pascha Peskett, before going to study at the Nottingham University School of Agriculture.

At this time he contracted a debilitating illness, but was told by the doctors that he should not be unduly worried – so he was baffled when he found that nobody was willing to sell him a life insurance policy. It was more than 20 years before he discovered the truth, which his family had agreed to keep from him – that the doctors had actually diagnosed Hodgkin’s disease, and given him no more than six months to live.

In 1950, without warning, his father decided to retire and give him control of the Coolmore estate. It was a daunting proposition: ‘We were left with the harvest,’ his wife Pascha remembered, ‘and nothing else to

live on, with a baby on the way.’ Drastic economies had to be made, and hunting was out of the question. A PG was taken in, who kept several horses at livery in the stable yard, but – to his host’s great chagrin – never offered him a mount.

Newenham rose to the challenge with typical resourcefulness, building an impressive herd of Aberdeen Angus and making a killing on the English market with his crops of early potatoes. Prosperity returned to Coolmore, and he was able to resume his hunting career with the South Union. In 1971 he took over as Master, leading by example and winning recognition as one of the bravest horsemen in the country.

He was a formidable point-to-pointer, winning a number of trophies, which he modestly attributed to the fact that his horse Carien was used to being at the front of the hunting field, and saw any attempt to overtake her as a serious instance of *lese-majeste*. Perhaps his finest hour was at the Scarteen point-to-point, where – by now in his sixties – he beat a field including the future Cheltenham Gold Cup challenger Sundance Kid, over a course so treacherous that the start had to be delayed while the bodies of horses killed in the previous race were removed.

Shortly afterwards, he was forced to retire from riding for medical reasons; but so highly was he regarded – particularly in the farming community – that the South Union persuaded him to stay on as joint Master for another ten years. He finally gave up the post in 1991.

In 1983 he made a cameo appearance in the television version of Molly Keane’s *Good Behaviour*, in which Coolmore served as the principal location for the racketsy Temple Alice. Unfortunately life imitated art, and the following year the family – deciding that the big house was no longer practical to live in – dispersed to a number of smaller, warmer dwellings around the estate. Newenham handed over the running of the estate to his eldest son, and retired to the old boatman’s

cottage at Drake's Pool – an idyllic spot named after Sir Francis Drake, who had found refuge from the Spanish there in 1589. Here he entertained generously with the companion of his later years, Meryl Gardner, cajoling any guest who refused another drink with the words of a wartime superior: 'You can't fly on one wing, old boy.'

He is survived by his wife, two sons and two daughters.