

CROWN

ALL FOR LOVE

THE GOTHIC DREAM

The love affair of 'Beau' Petersham and Maria Foote that was to bring such changes to Elvaston began in the 1820s. The couple were the talk of fashionable London and the scandal of Lord Harrington's heir living with an actress delighted the society gossips. But there was no talk of marriage until after the 3rd Earl's death in 1829.

Maria Foote's first stage appearance, as Juliet in 1810, was followed four years later by her

result of social pressure. London society may have welcomed Maria as Lord Harrington's mistress; as Countess of Harrington they certainly did not.

The lovers were by all accounts totally absorbed in each other. The Earl would not allow Maria outside the grounds and neither would he allow anyone in. Apart, that is, from the army of workmen and gardeners employed to transform Elvaston into a world of Gothic fantasy; a shrine to their undying passion.



'Beau' Petersham and Maria Foote.

debut at Covent Garden. She was sixteen years old. It was the start of a glittering career that owed far more to the beauty and charm of the courtesan than to Maria's talents on stage.

At seventeen she became the mistress of Colonel Berkeley, the future Earl Fitzhardinge, by whom she had two children, but who had no intention of marrying her. Her next conquest was another Regency dandy known to society as 'Pea Green' Haynes, a nickname acquired from the colour of his coats. He promised to marry her but then changed his mind. Miss Foote sued for breach of promise and was awarded a gratifying three thousand pounds. It was after this that she captivated Lord Petersham.

After their marriage in 1831 the 4th Earl of Harrington and his Countess took up residence at Elvaston Castle. This was no coincidence but the



PHOTO: JOHN WARTON.

The romantic Gothic entrance hall.

Lewis Cottingham was commissioned to redecorate Wyatt's original entrance hall which was renamed the Hall of the Fair Star. This Gothic extravaganza stood as a symbol of the chivalrous pursuit of love. Numerous pillars covered with lances led the eye up to the elaborate vaulted ceiling. More lances and swords covered the walls while niches around the room displayed whole suits of armour. Gold, black and scarlet, in fact all the colours of heraldry, were there in an abundance of arms and symbols. Mottoes appeared on every available surface; Faithful to Honour and Love; Gallantry, Courtesy and Love; Fayre beyond the Fayrest.

Outside work progressed on a larger scale. The task turned down by Capability Brown was accepted by William Barron, a young Scot, who had trained at the Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh. Under his direction long avenues of trees were planted, and a large lake excavated, while a series of theme gardens began to take shape to the south of the castle. There was an Italian garden based on authentic designs from Tuscany, and the Alhambra garden with its Moorish temple. This was one of the Earl's favourite haunts and inside was a statue of the couple, depicting an adoring Charles kneeling at Maria's feet.

The most famous of the individual gardens was Mon Plaisir, the bower garden. Based on a seventeenth century design, this riot of topiary and statues became known as the Garden of the Fair Star. In the centre a monkey puzzle tree stood

in a star shaped bed surrounded by yews clipped to form bowers for statues. A dark curving tunnel of arbor vitae enclosed the central part of the garden giving it a maze-like quality. Peacocks strutted on the gravel amid numerous green and yellow yew trees clipped to a variety of exotic shapes.

The Earl and Countess were impatient to see this dream become reality and so established shrubs and trees, yews, cedars, conifers and monkey puzzles, were transported to Elvaston and planted for immediate effect. This was made possible only by William Barron's unique skill at transplanting mature specimens, many of which were brought over long distances. It is said that trees carried through the streets of Derby on their way to Elvaston shattered more than a few windows!

The Countess was in her element in this make-believe world of chivalry but perhaps there were times when she longed for the company and acclaim of Covent Garden. Always the actress, she could still play to the gallery and would occasionally scatter the servants as she rode her horse straight through the kitchens.

For twenty years Lord and Lady Harrington lived here in their private world while around them matured the gardens that were to make Elvaston famous.

Aerial photograph (1954) showing Barron's original garden design largely intact.



PHOTO: HUNTING AEROPIANS