

Adisham: Benediction and Beauty

Posted on

Florence Ratwatte



Adisham is the kind of place seekers of peace dream about. Now a Benedictine monastery where tranquillity lies like a blessing and the grandeur of sweeping mountain vistas takes your breath away, Adisham was originally the country seat of Sir Thomas Villiers, a distinguished British resident in the colonial period of Ceylon. The spirit of Thomas Lister Villiers strongly pervades this stately house. Villiers came out to Ceylon in 1887 with £10 in his pocket. He was born in 1869 in Adisham Rectory in Kent, the son of Rev. Henry Montagu Villiers. He was a grandson of Lord John Russel, twice Prime Minister of Great Britain.

Villiers received a public school education but instead of settling down to a business or political career in England, chose adventure in the colony of Ceylon. Soon after his arrival, he began life here as a trainee “creeper” planter on Elbedde Estate, Bogawantalawa. In 1896 he married the daughter of a tea planter and went to Brazil. He returned to Ceylon four years later and soon began his own tea estate, Dikoya Group.

In 1905 Villiers joined the firm of George Steuart, a leading sterling trading and estate agency house in Colombo, and rose to be its chairman in 1928, a position he held till his retirement in 1948. He also played a major role in Ceylon politics.

It was while he was chairman of George Steuart that Sir Thomas commenced building a dream home in the country. He selected an idyllic site at Haputale, surrounded by virgin forest and commanding views across hills, dales and valleys, of all the highest mountain ranges of Ceylon.

The house was designed in the Tudor style, on the lines of Leeds Castle in Kent, with stout granite walls of locally quarried stone, long, narrow turret windows and chimneys. It looked in every detail an Elizabethan country mansion, the retreat in the tropics of a homesick Englishman, nostalgic for the scenes of his boyhood.

Villiers spared no expense to ensure that his country home was luxurious in its appointments. The entire roof was covered with flat Burma teak shingle tiles; the doors, windows, panelling, staircase and floors were also of fine seasoned Burma teak. The elaborate pillared landing on the main staircase adorned by portraits of his relatives, the Clarendons and the Dukes of Bedford, consists of four stout English oaks, polished, but otherwise au nature. The garden lay-out was also British and, as in the house, the incomparable scenery is used to best effect. The terraced lawns, flower-beds and orchard, like the drawing-room, study, library, dining room and bedrooms, look out on lofty mountain ranges all between 1,828 – 2,133m above sea level, etched sharply on the skyline to form a curious outline called the Sleeping Warrior.

Villiers imported fine period furniture, linen, carpets, porcelain, silver, and glassware from England for his home and named it Adisham after the Kentish village where he was born. English tea and cabbage roses bloomed on the lawns. Albertines and honeysuckle climbed over the porches and windows; strawberries, apples and Victoria plums ripened in the cool mountain air and the sub-tropical sunshine. Villiers even had an English chauffeur for his Daimler.

Adisham entertained the social elite of Ceylon at the time; its house parties included many British Governors and distinguished visitors to the island. Lady Villiers, chatelaine of Adisham, was a gracious, gentle person and a charming hostess. She was a painter of considerable skill; her oil paintings and water colours (mostly of marine subjects), adorn the walls of the library and the drawing room. The Villiers had two sons but both pre-deceased them; their only grandson, Stephen, who lives in England, recently visited Sri Lanka with a BBC team for the preparation of a feature on Adisham. Sir Thomas retired to Kent and died on December 21, 1959.

In 1949, after Sir Thomas left George Steuart, Adisham and its furniture, fittings and other effects were sold to the Sedawatte Mills. In 1961 the Roman Catholic Church acquired Adisham with its 12 acre grounds and turned it into a monastery and novitiate run by the monks of the Order of St Benedict, a semi-contemplative monastic religious community founded in the mid sixth century.

Today, the spirit of Sir Thomas and Lady Villiers lingers in their living rooms kept in impeccable order by the Benedictines. The library, with its vast collection of books and its cupboards of polished oak, is meticulously orderly- even though the Regency clock on the mantelpiece of the handsome fireplace, with its gleaming fire-irons, has

stopped ticking. A long line of the Dukes of Bedford look down from the walls and one gets the feeling that any minute Sir Thomas might come in, calling to his dogs. The drawing room has been preserved in every detail. David Paynter's study of Sir Thomas looks down from above the fireplace.

The Regency and William IV furniture is polished even if the Lancashire broadloom on the chairs and the Axminster carpets have aged gently. On the Dutch marquetry card-table is a half-finished game of patience and the Georgian gate-legged table is set for tea with Wedgwood jasper china. The rustle you hear is not the swish of silk dresses on the beautifully kept grand staircase; it is just the wind sighing in the forest trees. Outside the morning room the terrace looks out over the sunny lawns. rioting with a hundred varieties of roses. A signboard near the gate reminds you that if you can't find happiness along the way. you will not find it at the end of the road. One of Adisham's most wonderful sights is its natural bird sanctuary. Brilliantly plumaged orange minivets, green barbers, blue magpies, paradise flycatchers, horn bills, golden oreoles and a host of others which live in the forested slopes of the nature reserve above Adisham, swoop down to feast on the apple and plum trees.

Today's Adisham is primarily a Benedictine monastery, where a small community of six novices and a few monks follow the austere prayer, meditation, work and service routine laid down by their founder, St Benedict. Like its better known parallel, Buckfast Abbey in England, Adisham has made itself famous for fine products such as strawberry jam, orange marmalade, wild guava jelly and fresh fruit cordials.

When Adisham was purchased, the monks found half-wild strawberries, Seville oranges and guavas from the original Villiers orchards, which they developed and extended. The monks as well as a few villagers work in the orchards, vegetable gardens, dairy and in the processing of produce.

The day begins early for the novices and monks when the rising bell tolls at 5.30 in the mist-covered dawn. It is always chilly and, from November to January when the north-east monsoon howls down the Tangamalai wind-gap, freezing. The gong sounds for muster for tea-estate labourers on neighbouring Glenanore Estate when the monks kneel in prayer and meditation in the little chapel adorned with a centre-piece of St Benedict.

Breakfast is at eight and is wholesome and home grown; it is served, like all meals,

in the plain and austere refectory. Two hours of silence, contemplation and study follow. Next come two hours of manual work in the orchards, flower and kitchen gardens, dairy, house, laundry or kitchen. Prayer at the chapel is followed by lunch – rice and spicy curries with fresh vegetables from the gardens. A period of recreation is next – a sense of humour and a cheerful heart is encouraged. An hour's manual work, a short break for tea, silence, prayer, studies, more prayer, dinner, recreation, study and then, after 22.30 the Grand Silence of the monastery reigns. From their cell windows, the brothers can see the mist swirling round the Sleeping Warrior. On clear, moonlit nights, the view is stunning and heaven seems within touching distance.

Although it should be emphasised that Adisham is not in any way a commercial guest-house nor a Villiers museum" open to casual callers. accommodation is available for 12 guests. It would suit people appreciative of a Christian spiritual experience, counsel and guidance in a place of surpassing peace, solitude and beauty. The large rooms are comfortable and have some of the best mountain views in Sri Lanka; the food (three main meals and afternoon tea) is simple but excellent and the atmosphere edifying and serene.

Guests should not expect hotel amusement and are expected to be considerate of the rules of the community. The rate is Rs200 per day, inclusive of all meals. Prior written notice and bookings are essential. Enquiries may be made from Father Superior. Adisham, Haputale: tel 057-8030.



A novice in contemplation at Adisham.



The main parlour with its original furniture.