

# The Southwell Family



**King William III Returns stays at Kings Weston.** Returning from the Battle of the Boyne with the Southwell's the King Arrived back in Bristol and stayed at Kings Weston.

## The Southwell Family

In 1679 Robert Southwell bought the manor of Kings Weston from the estate of local merchant and one-time mayor of Bristol Humphrey Hooke. Robert was a well-educated man and a member of the Royal Society. He held numerous high-profile positions in the Government of King Charles II, including diplomatic posts as envoy to Lisbon, Brussels and Brandenburg. Then the political atmosphere in London changed and he found himself implicated in a popish plot. He withdrew from public life and retired to his newly acquired estate at Kings Weston.

The decision to settle at Kings Weston was well considered. Robert had been born in 1635 in Kinsale on the southern coast of Ireland and had inherited valuable estates there from his father. There were strong trade links between Kinsale and Bristol, with ships regularly calling at the Irish port on the outward and inward-bound legs of voyages to Europe and North America as well as regular coastal traffic. From Kings Weston Kinsale was probably more easily accessible than London where Robert continued to have political interests.

The unassuming Tudor mansion at Kings Weston became Robert's family home that he shared with his wife Elizabeth and his beloved 8-year old son Edward, affectionately called 'Neddy', and his daughter Elizabeth. In the ten years of his self-imposed exile he embarked on major improvements to the estate. He enthusiastically set about enlarging it by purchasing land towards Sea Mills and Sneyd Park and sought to increase its agricultural productivity by experimenting with a variety of newly-pioneered techniques.

He was equally keen on developing the potential of the setting of Kings Weston with ornamental and pleasure gardens. His friend and fellow member of the Royal Society John Evelyn, an eminent horticulturist, was consulted in the laying out of yew and fir groves. Much of the formal framework of avenues and parterre gardens to the south of the house is also likely to have been established by Robert.

After the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, in which his son participated, Robert returned to political prominence being appointed Secretary of State for Ireland by King William III in 1690. In the same



**Sir Robert Southwell** 1635-1702

year the deposed King James landed in Ireland and Robert and his son accompanied William III to confront him. On their victorious return after the Battle of the Boyne King William stayed with the Southwells at Kings Weston House.

1690 was an auspicious year for Robert. As well as the rise of his political influence he was elected to the exalted position of President of the Royal Society, a position to which he was annually re-elected until 1695. His son Edward followed him into the Society in 1692 in recognition of his interest in 'natural science'

The family cherished their strong connections with Ireland and Robert retained an Irish harpist Dick Barry at Kings Weston. The huge skull of an extinct Irish Elk that had been discovered in a bog in Ireland was shipped back to England where it was displayed in the old mansion along with a growing collection of paintings and sculpture. The same skull is still displayed in the entrance hall to the house.



**Edward Southwell** 1671-1730

On his death in 1702 Robert's son Edward inherited both Kings Weston and his father's enthusiasm to embellish it. The lucrative position of Secretary of State for Ireland was also handed down to him. The following year he married Lady Elizabeth Cromwell, daughter of the Earl of Ardglass, another Irish family, and with her came a considerable fortune. Together they further improved Kings Weston, adding a fashionable Orangery and, in 1708, a Banqueting House modelled on that of the Duke of Ormonde, Viceroy of Ireland and Edward's immediate superior.

In 1709 Elizabeth died in childbirth leaving Edward three sons, Edward, Robert, and Thomas, and the colossal sum of £35,000.

Robert and Edward were both very widely travelled and had undertaken the Grand Tour of Europe. Robert had visited Rome and Florence and Edward had added the Netherlands to his itinerary where he visited a number of eminent scientists of the age. It may be during these trips that the two accumulated a great collection of



**Elizabeth Southwell** 1674-1709

paintings for which the house became noted and contained examples by many Old Masters.

Edward was 'esteemed for his experience in business' and noted for his 'frugality', but the sums he lavished on Kings Weston between 1710 and his death in 1730 express a different side to his character. He focussed on rebuilding the house first, and then, after 1720 undertook a series of ambitious schemes to reconstruct the gardens introducing new ornamental buildings and structures and enlarging the pleasure grounds over Shirehampton Park.