

## The James Family

The foundations of the James family fortune were laid by Edward James's great-grandfather. At the end of the eighteenth century he emigrated from Britain to North America, where he bought up large tracts of forest in New York State for timber production. He and his wife, devout protestants, raised a large and pious family. Hard work and thrift – the puritan ethic – enabled them to accumulate a notable fortune. Daniel, the eldest son, enlarged the family interests by marrying into the metals and mining firm of Phelps Dodge & Co. Moreover, he played a leading role in the development of the United States railroad system, in particular of the Santa Fe Railway.

About 1830, Daniel moved to England as resident partner of Phelps Dodge & Co., establishing the family home at 'Beaconsfield', Woolton, in Lancashire. On the death of his first wife in 1847 at the early age of 39, he turned his American interests over to his son Daniel Willis and married as his second wife Sophia Hitchcock of New York. Three more sons were born of this marriage: Frank in 1851, Arthur in 1853, and William in 1854.

After school at Harrow, the brothers shared a London house at 14 Great Stanhope Street. They were all keen hunters and explorers, visiting countries as widely scattered as Arabia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and the Arctic. In 1884 they were the first Europeans to enter the interior of Somaliland, their experiences being published in *The Unknown Horn of Africa*, written by Frank as a sequel to his earlier book, *The Wild Tribes of the Soudan*. The illustrations for both books were based on glass-plate photographs taken by William. Some of their game trophies collected on those early safaris can still be seen at West Dean.

Frank, a keen sailor, had a 480 ton yacht, the *Lancashire Witch*. By using the yacht as a mobile base for their expeditions, the brothers were able to combine their interests in travel, sailing and hunting. On one such trip – to Gabon, West Africa, in 1890 – Frank was killed by an elephant. He was 39 years old and unmarried.



William and Evelyn James, c 1891



Evelyn James, and her son  
Edward, 1910 photographed by  
Alice Hughes



The first of the brothers to marry was Arthur. In 1885 he married Venetia Cavendish-Bentinck, becoming a well-known devotee of the turf and racehorse owner. Four years later, in 1889, William married a society beauty, Evelyn Forbes, the twenty-one year old daughter of Sir Charles Forbes, a Scottish baronet. The wedding, at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, was among the great social events of the year. Sir Charles had an estate adjoining Queen Victoria's at Balmoral and was a close friend of Edward, Prince of Wales.

William and Evelyn James owned property at Gullane, near St. Andrews, in Scotland, but made West Dean their principal home. The Stanhope Street house was maintained as their London home. Five children were born to them: Millicent, Alexandra, Silvia, Audrey and, finally, in 1908, after eighteen years, a son and heir, Edward Frank Willis, named after his godfather, King Edward VII. Edward was born in Scotland. His appearance at West Dean was the cause of great celebration. Arriving by special train at Singleton, he and his parents were met with a spectacular reception, including speeches of welcome by local dignitaries and a state progress in a carriage drawn by estate workers. The procession was escorted by a band and



about two hundred torch bearers. The house, floodlit for the occasion, formed a splendid back-drop to the sumptuous firework display which followed, culminating in special firework portraits of Mr and Mrs James and their infant son.

Members of the royal family often stayed at West Dean in William James's day. The first time the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, stayed at West Dean, in 1896, was because of a disagreement with the then Duke of Richmond. The Prince habitually stayed at Goodwood for the races. But, in 1899, the Duke took exception to the presence of two ladies on the Prince's guest list and declined to admit them to his house, even though they were received at court. The Prince of Wales thereupon intimated that he was no longer prepared to be the Duke's guest, and would stay at West Dean instead. This was at a time when royalty rarely accepted the hospitality of commoners, however wealthy or distinguished.

The pheasant and partridge shooting at West Dean was considered among the best in the country. Prince Edward, an enthusiastic shot, was at once drawn to the place, partly by the shooting and partly by the lavish hospitality and charm of his hostess. He returned frequently, continuing to do so after he came to the throne.

The West Dean house parties were typical of their day and famous in their time. Evelyn James was a leading hostess of the 'Marlborough House Set'. Petite and outstandingly lovely, as well as lively and witty, she could invariably entertain the King. The Queen, too, enjoyed her conversation as much as her brilliant theatrical performances, for Evelyn James was one of the most accomplished amateur actresses of her day. She was, moreover, a splendid mimic. When staying in Hungary as the guest of Baron von Hirsch, she managed to hoodwink the entire house party by impersonating an old peasant woman and begging successfully for alms. Even her host was deceived.

Edward James was barely five years old when, in 1912, his father died. Until he became of age, the estate was held in trust. After Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, and a brief marriage to the ballet dancer Tilly Losch, he lived only spasmodically at West Dean.



King Edward VII shooting at West Dean, 1910