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MARY, COUNTESS OF BESSBOROUGH



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MARY MUNN became the Countess of Bessborough when she married Frederick Ponsonby and came to live in England. She was originally from the Munn family of London, Paris, and Philadelphia. The entrepreneurial skills of her father and older brother, coupled with her upbringing in European capitals, must have instilled in her the passion and determination that was reflected in her dedication to the recovery of the Benjamin Franklin House on Craven Street in London.

She was motivated to restore the house by a link to Franklin in her husband's family history. The second Earl of Bessborough, William Ponsonby (1704–93), was, for a short time, Joint Postmaster General overseeing Franklin, who was joint Postmaster of the American Colonies. It was this connection that inspired May's interest in 36 Craven Street, Charing Cross, London.

She established the Friends of Benjamin Franklin House in 1978 and worked to raise awareness and support for Franklin's only lodgings. (Franklin lived on Craven Street from 1757–62, and again from 1764–75.) The House on Craven Street had been a rented property with several tenants for some years, including the now-defunct not-for-profit group The British Society for International Understanding. More recently, the House was in the possession of British Rail, owners of Charing Cross Station next door. Mary sought British Rail's assistance, and the Charity was eventually given the freehold of the building with the backing of Margaret Thatcher, who had attended a reception Mary had organized in the House. This gift was a key event in the possibility of opening the House to the public in honor of Ben Franklin and Mary's husband, who had died in 1993.

There was much work to be done. The House, built circa 1730, had a great deal of original fabric, including panelling, flooring, and a central staircase, but it was very fragile and in need of detailed conservation. Before enough funds could be found, significant deterioration occurred, not helped by theft, flooding, and minor fires caused by vandals. Although fundraising events were held, the income was not enough to pay for the necessary external and internal scaffolding.

Mary and her committee consulted English Heritage, which had awarded the House a Grade 1 listing, denoting a building of the highest architectural and historic interest. The charity, which Mary had set up, suggested seeking a new partner to progress the work. Mary then approached the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), with its own headquarters just round the corner on John Adam Street. Franklin had become the first Overseas

Corresponding Fellow of the Society in 1754, 3 years before he arrived in London. He took a great interest in its work and was a member of several committees throughout his time in the city. The RSA provided additional trustees, and their involvement signalled the project's vitality to various funders.

Soon, with Sir Bob Reid as Chairman, Dr. Marcia Balisciano as Director, and a new architect, Patrick Dillon, work began in earnest. Trustee Anne Keigher, who was a friend of Mary's and had been involved from the beginning, provided critical expertise and advice as an architect and designer to the very end of the project.

Among the challenges of the small and narrow building was a roof from the 1790s that was pushing out the exterior wall; in addition, the Victorians had cut into the House's main structural beam, leading to internal collapse, which meant that there was scaffolding both inside and out to support the building. To add to these problems, the building's foundations were coal dust and infill from a coal jetty that once stood at the edge of the Thames at the bottom of the street.

At this point, the fundraising became more international. Mary established an office in Philadelphia to spread the word, and trustees travelled twice to the United States for events in Washington DC, New York, and Philadelphia. One of the highlights was a lecture and reception at The Library Company, which honored Franklin as one of its Founders.

In London, the success of an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund was a key point of success. This support led to the exterior stabilization of the building. New support beams and iron rods were added, creating a steel corset that made the building stable but not necessarily level. Mary's dream was on its way.

Late in 1998, there was considerable excitement when repairs were underway in the basement and workers came across what looked to be human bones. After much media interest, the coroner declared that the bones were more than 100 years old and were therefore of archaeological rather than forensic interest. The Institute of Archaeology at University College London led the excavation. More than 100 bones were recovered from a pit 1 meter square. Most were human, including trepanned skulls and amputated limbs. Many of the bones were from animals and fish. It soon became clear that the bones were the buried remains of an anatomy school that was active in the house next door. William Hewson, the son-in-law of Franklin's landlady, Margaret Stevenson, had joined with John Leake, a "man midwife" who lived next door, to open a small school for the demonstration of amputation

skills, which were becoming necessary and possible on the various fields of battle. Who knows how many other bones lie under the basement floor.

Now it was the turn of the House's interior, which was still derelict. The trustees had to decide how to present the house. With funding from a variety of sources, including a second grant of nearly £1 million pounds from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Mary's traditional vision for the house evolved into a concept inspired by Franklin's love of innovation and technology. It was decided not to fill the house with furniture but rather leave the spaces empty and create a drama that was written and brought to life using sound and visual projection to evoke some of the challenges that Franklin encountered during his stay in England. An actress plays Polly Stevenson, the landlady's daughter, to whom Franklin had written many letters concerning all manner of scientific subjects. With Polly guiding the group, the hour-long presentation has been very popular with all the various visitors to the House (more than 65,000 to date), who are not often aware how long Franklin stayed in London. The absence of interior furnishings means that the space can be used flexibly for lectures, receptions, and other events. The House also features a Student Science Centre on the upper floor, where children participate in activities based on Franklin's experiments in London. More than 8,000 young students have enjoyed this programme, which, so far, has been free of charge. The top floor houses the Robert H. Smith Scholarship Centre, with an active Internship programme for older students and nearly 40 public events each year.

The House opened on 17 January 2006, coinciding with Franklin's 300th birthday. The day was marked with a banquet in Whitehall Palace to celebrate the project's completion. Nearly 300 people enjoyed an 18th century-themed dinner in the magnificent 16th century hall with its grand Rubens ceiling. Guests listened to music composed by film music composer George Fenton, who used rarely heard music from John Stanley, the blind organist and a firm Franklin friend, as his inspiration. Mary, who had moved back to the United States, returned and was celebrated for taking the important first steps necessary to preserve the Benjamin Franklin House for generations to come. She was joined by other key donors, including Robert H. Smith of Washington and Craig Dobbin of St. John's, Newfoundland.

John Studzinski has become the Chairman of the Trustees, while Dr. Balisciano remains at the helm, supported by an excellent small staff. The House is a vibrant place, although finding enough money to ensure its long-term future remains a challenge. Mary made a generous

bequest in her will to help current operations, but the effort to provide an endowment will go on to ensure that her vision and determination are sustained.

Elected 1988

LADY JOAN REID

House Historian

Board Member, 1995

Benjamin Franklin House, London

