



THE BECKFORD NEWSLETTER

NO. 63 SEPTEMBER 2025



THE BECKFORD LECTURE



STEPHEN CLARKE

Beckfordian Asides and well-conditioned Books:
New Discoveries from William Beckford's Library

FRIDAY 7 NOVEMBER

11.30 AM

THE TRAVELLERS CLUB, LONDON SW1

BOOKING FORM ENCLOSED

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thirty-seven members attended this year's Annual General Meeting held at Old Fonthill Abbey.

After lunch, members had the opportunity to walk in the grounds.

We thank Stephen and Bonnie Morant for their generous hospitality.



Photographs: David Allen

THE BECKFORD SOCIETY

MINUTES OF TWENTY-NINTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

HELD ON SATURDAY 21 JUNE 2025

AT OLD FONTHILL ABBEY

Stephen Morant welcomed members to Fonthill. He said members would see changes to the grounds since their last visit, but there was still a long way to go.

Item 1 – Apologies for Absence.

Apologies had been received from Anne-Marie Bannister, Diana Berry, Sandra Canning, Laurent Chat el. Andrew Fletcher, Peter Forsaith, Alba Graziano, Jonathan Holt, Stephen Lloyd, Bet McLeod, Daniele Niedda, Angela Proby, Michael Ranson, Pat Reynolds and Jane Wainwright.

Item 2 – Minutes of 28th AGM.

Minutes of the last AGM held at Kingswood School Sports Pavilion, Lansdown, Bath on 27 July 2024 were approved.

Item 3 – Chairman’s Report.

This is the 29th Annual General Meeting of the Beckford Society. It is a joy to be back at Fonthill and see the transformations since our AGM here in 2027. We are immensely grateful to Stephen and Bonnie Morant for allowing us to meet here today.

Last November, forty-two members and guests attended the annual Beckford Lecture at the Travellers Club when our new Vice-President Dr Daniele Niedda lectured on ‘William Beckford’s use of the Ancients in Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents’. We look forward to seeing the lecture in print in this year’s *Beckford Journal*.

Before dinner, Professor Ronald de Leeuw presented to the Beckford Tower Trust, Beckford’s annotated copy of Walter Herte, *The History of the Life of Gustavus Adolphus*, published in London, 1759. This was part of the bequest of Dr Gerlof Janzen, and I was honoured to receive the volume on behalf of the Beckford Tower Trust.

In all, it was a memorable evening held in the splendid setting of the Travellers Club. We have been holding events here since 2002, when John Hardy talked about William Beckford’s and the Prince Regent’s taste for French art. This a tradition which I personally hope we will be able to continue. Later under ‘Future Events’, I will seek your views.

It is with much regret that we record the death of Min Wood on 11 April. Min was by profession a barrister, who described himself as a ‘place maker and garden writer’. He lived in Fonthill’s great archway and consequently acquired an intimate knowledge of the Fonthill landscape. Members will remember his generous hospitality when we

visited Wardour New Castle on the day of our AGM in 2022. He was warm-hearted and life-enhancing and will be much missed.

Item 4 – Treasurer’s Report.

In the absence of the Treasurer, Roger Southgate presented the Accounts for 2024/2025. These showed an income of £8,734 and expenditure of £9,157. The deficit was mainly due to increased costs incurred by the annual lecture and dinner. The Society’s reserves were £8,507. Currently the Society had UK and USA bank accounts. It was planned to close the latter account.

Item 5 – Election of Committee.

Jane Wainwright who has served as Treasurer since October 2025 has indicated that she would like to step down. The Chairman said we owe huge thanks to Jane for her work in producing such accurate and clear accounts. Roger Southgate had offered to take on the role of Treasurer. His election, proposed by Sir Malcolm Jack and seconded by Sidney Blackmore, was approved.

The Chairman explained that under the Society’s rules, he was due to retire at this meeting, having served for a three-year term. He was happy to continue and was duly re-elected.

Mike Fraser, who was first elected to the committee in 2010, and has developed the Society’s website considered that due to work commitments, he should resign as he is unable to give the website the attention it needs. We are very grateful to Mike for his work and accept his resignation with regret. It does mean that the Society needs someone with expertise to oversee the website’s development and maintenance. Any member willing to take on this role, should speak to the Chairman or Secretary.

Item 6 – Future Events

The annual lecture and dinner are key events in the Society's calendar, and it is important these are held in a venue which reflects well on the Society. The Travellers Club has provided a very appropriate setting, giving the opportunity of having dinner in the splendid library. In recent years clubland prices have increased considerably leading to a loss which the committee feels is no longer sustainable. Last year we charged £90 for dinner, but even if this were increased to £95, the loss would be a least £1,500.

We have considered alternatives, including a lecture with drinks and canapes, and a change of venue. However, the cost of room hire remains a significant factor, and other venues do not have the presence of The Travellers.

Another option is to change from evening to lunchtime, which would reduce room hire cost. For this arrangement, coffee would precede the lecture and be followed by lunch. This might be attractive to members living outside London. If this appeals to the meeting, then three members have each offered to donate £150 towards the event. If any member would like to make a similar contribution, please advise the Chairman.

The President whilst recognising the necessity to save costs, felt it would be a great shame to move from the Travellers Club. He agreed that a lunch-time event was a good option which might help out-of-town members. Other members also supported a lunch time event. One member asked if the RAC had been considered as a possible venue. Answering a question about a younger members' evening, the Chairman said that like all Societies of our kind, our demographic tended to be of an older age group. One member's suggestion was to sponsor younger members.

The Chairman thanked members for their views and given that the meeting was in generally in favour of a lunch-time event, the Committee would take this idea forward.

Item 7 – Society Publications and Communications

We are grateful to Kim Sloan for producing a Journal with a wide range of interesting material. Last year's issue had articles on the auctioneer Harry Phillips, and an account of Beckford's influence on Lord Byron. There was also the second instalment of Diana Berry's fascinating account of the 1976 Beckford exhibition as well as pieces by our President on Beckford's early Eastern Tales and a tribute to Prof. Joao de Almeida Flor. The Journal is a marvellous advertisement for the Society and is something of which we can be proud. The Chairman added that he had recently walked past Thomas Heneage's bookshop in Duke Street and was delighted to see the Beckford Journal displayed in the window.

Kim Sloan reported that the forthcoming issue would have Daniele Niedda's Beckford Lecture, Stephen Clarke's article on Beckford's books at Waddesdon and the third part of Diana Berry's article on the 1976 Beckford exhibition. Also, a review of the recent Hamilton exhibition in Naples and a tribute to Min Wood. The following year's issue would have the second part of Kazuhiko Yamaguchi's account of the Japanese reception of Beckford's work.

The website has been mentioned earlier; our aim is to make considerable improvements in coming months.

Item 8 – Beckford's Tower.

Amy Frost reported that it is a year since the Tower re-opened. The annual target for visitors had been achieved in the first six months. The Tower had been nominated for a Museum Heritage award and short-listed for Georgian Group and Civil Trust awards. Encouraging

feedback had been received from the HLF as the project came in on time and budget. The new guidebook would be available shortly.

Thanks to a generous contribution from the FNL the Tower had been able to acquire three works from Barry Humphries' collection including two books from Beckford's collection and a copy of *Azemia*, the only work by William Beckford the Tower did not have.

It was planned to invite members to see the Tower's recent acquisition of books once in Beckford's library. This would be announced in the Newsletter.

Item 8 – Any Other Business

The Chairman said he hoped members would consider joining the Friends of the Nation's Libraries (FNL) which on various occasions had given support to purchases made by Beckford's Tower.

The President thanked the Committee for all the work members had undertaken on behalf of the Society.

BECKFORD LECTURE 2025

This year's Beckford Lecture will be held on Friday 7th November when Stephen Clarke our Chairman will lecture on 'Beckfordian Asides and well-conditioned Books: New Discoveries from William Beckford's Library'.

The lecture will be held at the Travellers Club, but as discussed at the AGM, the timing this year will change, moving from an evening to a morning event. The lecture at 11.30 am, will be followed by lunch.

We were anxious despite increased venue costs, that we should continue our association with the Travellers Club and are grateful to those members who have generously offered to subscribe £150 to subsidise the annual lecture and lunch.

MIN WOOD (1943 – 2025)

The death occurred on 11 April of Min Wood, place-maker and garden writer, who lived for many years in Fonthill's archway. He lectured to the Society, contributed to the *Beckford Journal* and guided us on our explorations of the Fonthill landscape. He will be much missed.

A tribute will appear in this year's *Beckford Journal*.

IN THE AUCTION ROOM

Two travel books from Beckford's collection – which were later in the Rosebery collection - were included in the sale of the Oiesvold Collection of North Calotte exploration books, sold in Oslo by SD Auctions on 14th June.

Francesco Negri, *Viaggio settentrionale Fatto...* Padova, 1700. An account by an Italian priest who travelled in Scandinavia in 1664 describing the native people of the North. He was the first Italian to reach

the North Cape. In a binding by Kalthoeber, it sold for (lot 41) Kr 90,000 (£7,040).



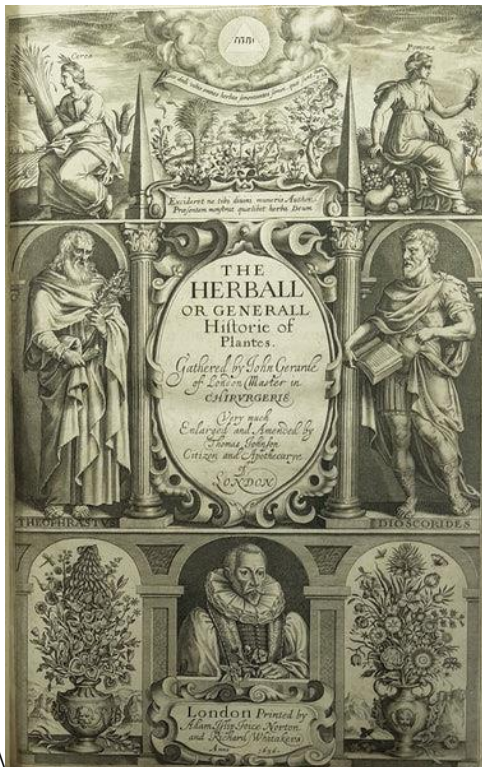
An engraving from *Beskrivelse over Finmarkens Lapper*

A rare large paper copy of Knud Leem, *Beskrivelse over Finmarkens Lapper*, Copenhagen, 1767. In Latin and Danish, it describes the Sami people with 101 hand-coloured engravings. This sold for (lot 56) Kr 900,000 (£70,400).

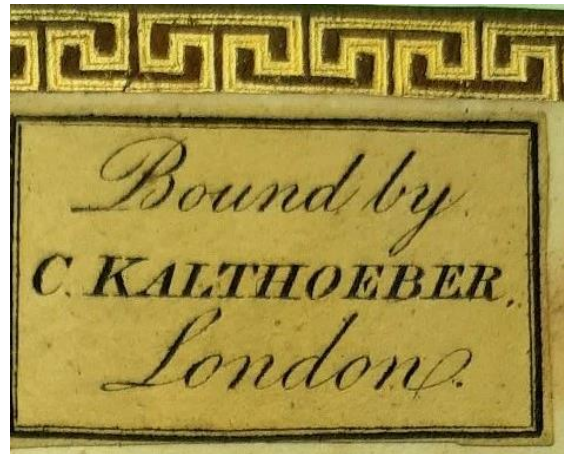
Many thanks to Neil Guthrie for information about this auction.

GERARDE'S *THE HERBALL*

A recent catalogue from Voewood Rare Books offers Beckford's copy of John Gerarde, *The Herball or General History of Plantes* (third edition). London, 1636. With numerous woodcuts and an engraved title by John Payne.



Bound by C. Kalthoeber in 'russia extra' with a border of continuous 'draw 'handle' design. At the outer border are the Beckford and Hamiton crests.



It was sold in the second portion of the Beckford sale in 1882 and was later in the collection of the Earl of Rosebery, sold in 1975. It has Kalthoeber's label and Rosebery's armorial bookplate. It is priced at £6,750.

Voewood are also offering an entry ticket to the Fonthill Abbey sale, 1823. Signed by the auctioneer and numbered 3143. It is priced at £950.

Voewood Rare Books, Holt, Norfolk NR25 6QS,

PERFECT STRANGERS

Perfect Strangers, a television drama written and directed by Stephen Poliakoff, first shown in 2001 was re-screened by BBC4 in August.

A reunion of the huge Symon family, held at a grand London hotel, is reluctantly attended by Raymond (played by Michael Gambon), his wife Esther (Jill Bacon) and son Daniel (Matthew MacFadyen). In the third part, Esther tells her husband that she is descended from William Beckford who 'kept on building huge garden follies'. The film cuts from Raymond to show images of Beckford's family tree, Romney's portrait, Fonthill Abbey and Beckford's Tower.

The series is available on BBC iPlayer for the next eleven months.

BECKFORD'S FOLLY

Followers of horse racing, may have noticed that Beckford's Folly was the winner of races at Newmarket on 26th June and

1st August. The dam of this two-year-old colt is Fonthill Abbey. Both horses belong to Dubai's Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

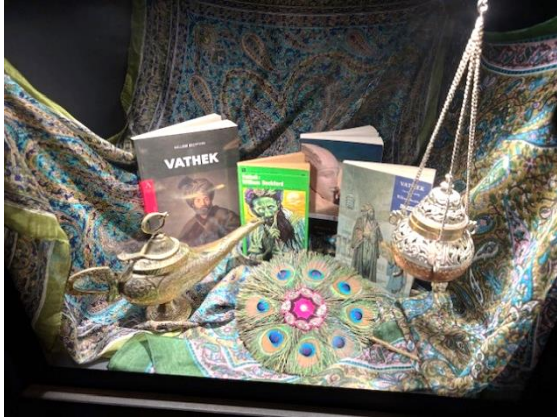
BECKFORD AT CHATEAU DE PRANGINS



Recently I visited the Chateau de Prangins situated near Nyon on Lake Geneva, a National Museum for French-speaking Switzerland since 1998.

On the main first floor landing a gallery has been created with multi-media displays of eight personalities connected with the chateau one of whom is Beckford (Joseph Bonaparte being another!). With sound in a choice of four languages, the voice of Beckford talks about

the contents of four drawers in a 'cabinet' which the visitor pulls open in turn. Close by is a chair with a modern copy of *Vathek*.



On the wall above, Beckford's portrait and two views of Fonthill. There is also a further cabinet of Beckfordiana.

JON HOWARD

SETEAIS IN SINTRA

While in Sintra I discovered a wonderful coffee table book *Seteais in Sintra* with marvellous photographs spread across 367 pages showing Sintra through the ages with a text in Portuguese and English.

There are references to Beckford on 12 pages, with quotes not only from

Beckford's diaries but also from those of Daniel Gildemeester, the Dutch Consul General and builder of Seteais, and the Marquis de Bombelles, the French Ambassador.



Although most photographs relate to Seteais Palace, which is next to Monserrate – which Beckford was to lease in the 1790s - Seteais is a place which he knew well having visited on many occasions.

Seteais Palace is now a luxurious hotel and I recommend lunch there. Also, it is the only place where you can purchase this small print-run book.

GARY JEFFERSON

MY FIRST DECADE WITH BECKFORD

JON MILLINGTON

In the early 1960s I was living in Bath while training to be a teacher at Newton Park College (now Bath Spa University), whose main building was a beautiful Georgian house. While there I heard about a fascinating author, William Beckford, who had written an incredible tale, *Vathek*.

At the same time, H.A.N. Brockman's excellent biography, *The Caliph of Fonthill*, had just been remaindered at five shillings, with a shelf-full at Seawright's bookshop in New Bond St Place off Milsom St. Lured by the endpaper map, I visited Fonthill, and at first mistook the site of the New Abbey for that of Beckford's. I was puzzled by the two large groups of statuary looking as if they had come from one of the mid nineteenth-century national exhibitions. Only the stables, full of agricultural vehicles, remained; later they were converted into a house whose owner adopted the name Fonthill Abbey.

When the Beckford exhibition organised by Philippa Bishop at the Holburne Museum opened in June 1966 as part of that year's Bath Festival, I did not need any persuading to go, and have a distinct memory of climbing to the top floor of the museum three times to see it. The catalogue also made a great impression on me, and a few days later I happened to mention this to the manager of Gregory's bookshop in Green Street, Mr Stanton. He said one of the authors, Peter Summers, was actually in the shop and offered to introduce me to him. This was the beginning of a valued friendship with Peter that lasted until his death in 1994. He nurtured my interest in Beckford, and often recommended books he thought my wife and I would like. For example, very early on he advised us to buy the catalogues of the Clements sale which was about to take place at Sotheby's. Visits to Peter and his sister, Felicity, were always an enormous pleasure, and his library, with every book in fine state, set an example which I tried to follow.

My 'Recollections of the 1966 Bath Festival' appeared in *The Beckford Newsletter* 57 (August 2002). This event laid the foundations for a half-hour film on Beckford by boys from Kingswood School, with

encouragement from Peter Summers. It was released in the next year and described in *Newsletter* 58.

My wife and I began married life in a top floor flat in Cavendish Crescent in December 1966, and while there got to know the Rev. Gordon Jones, Rector of Walcot; we always enjoyed his dynamic sermons at St Swithin's Church. The following January he kindly wrote us a letter to show to the then sexton, Reg Stroud, granting us permission to enter the Tower, emphasising that it was entirely at our own risk. In the same month we visited Bayntun's bookshop in Manvers Street to see two copies of Edmund English's *Views of Lansdown Tower* (1844). One was a fine copy at £125, but we settled for the other, at £25, which was all we could afford at the time.

Whenever we stayed with my wife's parents in Poole, we would try to visit Commin's bookshop in Bournemouth to have a chat with John Ruston (Obituary, *The Independent*, 17.3.1990, 14). He presided over the first floor with his cat, Hodge. Between regaling us with stories of the famous and well-connected people he had just met, he sold us some fine books, including Chapman's *Bibliography* and, on one occasion wrote offering us a disbound copy of Rutter's *Delineations of Fonthill Abbey* (which he knew he had somewhere) for four guineas – plus 4/6d postage.

After reading early in 1971 that Dr and Mrs Hilliard had bought Beckford's Tower, we invited them to our house in Bristol for tea, and borrowed a Wedgwood teapot from a kind neighbour, as we thought our brown pottery one was too dowdy. We offered to help with the restoration but they explained that they were using professionals. However, Leslie asked me if I would like to write a guide book to the Tower, and it appeared just in time for the opening in May 1973. When Leslie and Elizabeth formed the Beckford Tower Trust in January 1977 they invited Sidney Blackmore and me to become foundation Trustees. Over the years we were in frequent contact with them, and enjoyed their hospitality at Batheaston House and their subsequent homes on many occasions. They always liked the public to know what was going on at the Tower, and in 1980, with this in mind, Leslie asked me to edit an annual *Newsletter* which lives on, but under a new title, *The Beckford Journal*.

On one visit to Peter Summers at Day's Cottage, near Wallingford, he took us to meet Boyd Alexander at Upton. There were internal steel shutters on the drawing room windows to safeguard his Turner watercolour of Fonthill Abbey. The only other time I met him was at Christie's in 1975, when some manuscripts and books from Fonthill House were being sold by Lord Margadale. Talking of sales, later that year I went to the Rosebery sale at Sotheby's where, over two days, the largest collection of books from Beckford's library to come on the market for many years was being sold. Seeing so many wonderful bindings together was something I will never forget, and I only wish I could have afforded more than the two lots I finally decided on.

In 1974 Peter passed on my name to Julian Berry, organiser of the 1976 William Beckford Exhibition, and so I became involved in its planning. That winter, while in London for one of the first committee meetings, I visited Bertram Rota's bookshop, then in Savile Row. I learnt that some books from Guy Chapman's library might be for sale, but there was an element of doubt because they were being offered to Yale University who, as it turned out, declined them. So I received a letter to say that they were available after all at a price of £400, a lot of money at that time. The collection of some thirty-six books and Beckford's fair copy of a letter from Fonthill to James Wyatt in 1811 was probably being sold on behalf of Guy Chapman's widow, the novelist Storm Jameson. Several volumes were copies of his own editions of Beckford's works which he had had beautifully bound in full dark green morocco by Bain of London.

As for the 1976 exhibition, I remember being amazed at how much planning and how many meetings were required to make it happen. So many museums and individuals had to be approached for loans, and matters were complicated by the fact that the exhibition was held in two places, first Salisbury and then Bath. It was easy enough to decide on the library as the venue in Salisbury, but I can remember the organising committee looking at a number of possible sites in Bath, including what was then the reference library in Queen Square, before deciding on the large upstairs room in the Victoria Art Gallery. In fact, the room was so tall that it was necessary to install a false ceiling of black polythene. It was also a pleasure to be involved in choosing the illustrations for the book designed to accompany the exhibition, James Lees-Milne's excellent

William Beckford.

Just before Sotheby's sold the Beckford Papers in 1977, Roy Davids very kindly allowed me to spend a day looking at them in a small room overlooking New Bond Street. Boxes were stacked from floor to ceiling, and to be able to browse at will through any box that looked promising was a memorable experience. I remember being very excited to see Soane's drawings for Fonthill Splendens, and spent some time trying to decipher Cyrus Redding's handwriting in his 1846 *Memoirs of Beckford*. Today we can be very grateful to Sir Basil Blackwell, who bought the Papers, for deciding that their rightful home was the Bodleian Library.

A ROLE MODEL

'That Stephen [Tennant] knew he appeared eccentric was obvious. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that he looked to great eccentrics of the past for inspiration ... Perhaps Mad Ludwig of Bavaria was a little *de trop* – but certainly William Beckford was a role model for Stephen, and had been since the early thirties, and he would quote from biographies of Beckford in his ever-more extensive marginalia. Beckford had lived nearby, at Fonthill, where he built his great Gothic folly. Beckford was Stephen's eighteenth-century equivalent; James Lees-Milne describes his prose as antedating modern writers like Firbank and Waugh, and, like Stephen, had spent much of his time travelling and recording his experience in detailed journals. He too was essentially child-like. ... Fonthill seems to have predated Wilsford [Tennant's house in Wiltshire] with its "owner a mystery man, in a decor of echoing corridors, Gothic halls and galleries, opulent hangings, contrived lighting effects, dizzy heights, pictures, music, wonderful books"¹.

Philip Hoare, *Serious Pleasures. The Life of Stephen Tennant*, 1990.

Hon. Stephen Tennant (1906 – 1987) socialite, artist, poet and aesthete.

¹ James Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*. New Jersey, 1979.

AN INDIAN LEAF



A leaf from a Northern Indian manuscript, which had been part of an album in William Beckford's collection, sold at Olympia Auctions, London on 4 June (lot 21) for £9,500.

This came from one of the albums made for Col. Antione-Louis-Henri Polier de Bottens (1741-1795), a Swiss engineer, architect and entrepreneur who spent 30 years in India. In Lucknow he produced a series of albums in the Mughal tradition, often incorporating works from an earlier period. Although 20 albums are now in Berlin two of Hindu subjects sold by Beckford in 1817, are now in the British Library.

THE BECKFORD NEWSLETTER
IS EDITED BY
SIDNEY BLACKMORE
THE TIMBER COTTAGE
CROCKERTON
WARMINSTER BA12 8AX
sidney.blackmore@btinternet.com
www.beckfordsociety.org