

In the Eye of the Beholder...

Shrewsbury, 1881

‘Good afternoon, Dean! And what a fine afternoon it is!’

‘Good afternoon to you, my Lord. We don’t often see you in Town. Have you travelled in to admire the new gates?’

The Rural Dean’s manner towards His Lordship was respectful, as befitted his standing in the community but, in truth, he regarded the aristocracy as a necessary evil, useful for supporting worthwhile projects (by this he meant projects that were initiated by or, at least, benefited the Church) and for making endowments but good for little else. In his view, they led indulgent and indolent lives. Take the current Lord. Rarely seen around unless it was to show off his ‘generosity’, such as his contribution to the cost of the new gates.

‘Yes, indeed. And a magnificent sight they are, to be sure. See how they gleam and glisten in the sun! Well worth the outlay. But, of course, you will have seen them being erected, no doubt, from your vantage point in St Chad’s. Hmm?’

His Lordship’s manner towards the Dean was respectful, as befitted his office but, in truth, he found him sanctimonious and irritating; in fact, he couldn’t bear the man.

‘I don’t have much time to stand and stare. Besides, my duties keep me at St Mary’s, when I’m not assisting the Bishop or called upon to deputise for the Archdeacon. But, yes, I did notice their installation yesterday. And I have to confess that my pleasure in the new gates was heightened by the consequent removal of the abomination that is the Hercules statue!’

‘*Abomination?* Why, whatever do you mean, sir? The Hercules is a masterpiece! It’s not the original, of course: it’s a copy in lead of the Farnese Hercules, itself a version of the magnificent bronze created by Lysippos in the 4th century BC, sadly lost. Jan van Nost’s Hercules, that he sculpted in the early 1700s, and that we are proud to have here in Shrewsbury, is a triumph, in my opinion!’

The Dean sniffed. As if His Lordship’s opinion was the only one that counted!

‘I do not dispute that the statue is well-executed. My objection is to its subject matter.’

‘*Its subject matter?*’ His Lordship was beginning to sound like a parrot, the Dean noted.

‘It depicts one of the great heroes of Greek mythology having performed two of his Labours: Hercules leans on his club over which is draped the skin of the Nemean Lion that he has just killed, and he holds the apples of the Hesperides behind his back. A pure Classical subject. How can you, a master of the Greek language, possibly have objection to that?’

‘But that is precisely the point, my Lord. It is not pure. Hercules is depicted in all his shameful nakedness. His modesty is only protected by a fig leaf held in place by a belt. I cannot tell you how many ladies of the Church have complained to me of their embarrassment at seeing such an obscenity every time they emerge from the sanctity of God’s House. They cannot avoid it: it is staring them in the face.’

‘*An obscenity?*’ Now His Lordship himself realised he was resembling a parrot. But, really, what on Earth was the Rural Dean getting so het up about? He tried to reason with him. ‘But the statue has been sited here for four years, since it was presented to the Town when the new Gaol was built and there was no place for it. Why do you speak so vehemently against it now?’

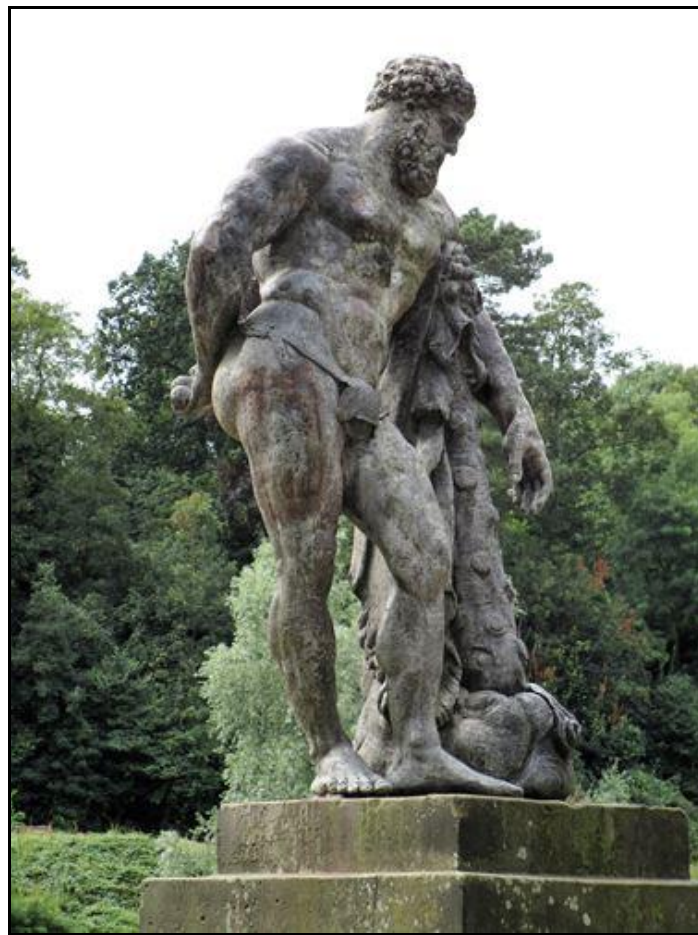
‘Do you think I haven’t tried to get it removed?’ The Dean caught the sharp look thrown at him. He was becoming agitated and needed to curb his tongue. ‘All I’m saying, my Lord, is that, in my opinion...’ (he couldn’t resist the slight dig)... ‘in my opinion, the statue should have stayed in its original

location, Condover Hall, a private house, where I believe it had stood for almost 100 years since its casting in the 1720s.' (The Dean had also done his homework).

'Well, my great-uncle who, as you know, was a highly regarded patron of the arts, was delighted, so my father told me, when the statue was moved to the Town and the skill of the sculptor could be appreciated by all who professed themselves to be admirers of the Classical era...'

The same great-uncle who almost bankrupted the family estate in his pursuit of ever rarer, and more expensive, objets d'art, the Dean thought, but didn't say.

'... In any case,' His Lordship concluded, 'the sensibilities of your flock need no longer trouble you, at least as far as the statue is concerned. The Church ladies or, indeed, anyone else, will not be obliged to gaze upon Hercules in future – unless, of course, they take a stroll down to the bottom of the Quarry Park to visit him in his new home on the river bank!'



An artistic masterpiece? Or a lewd nude? You decide.

Historical notes on Hercules

The two protagonists were real people, Richard Noel-Hill, 7th Lord Berwick of Attingham Hall, and Thomas Bucknall Lloyd, Rural Dean of Shrewsbury and later Archdeacon of Salop, but the words and opinions ascribed to them are fictional.

The statue of Hercules is attributed to Jan van Nost, a Flemish sculptor who worked in England in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. He received many commissions including the garden figures for Chirk Castle (c 1720).

Hercules stood in front of Condober Hall until 1804, when the statue was sold (reason and date unknown) to a Shrewsbury plumber who was going to melt it down. Fortunately, it was saved and erected close to the (old) Gaol. Hercules was later (date unknown) presented to the town and was put up at the entrance to the Quarry Park. The statue was moved to its present position in 1881 when new park gates were installed.

In recent years, Hercules has suffered various indignities including being painted in football team colours, daubed with graffiti and having the fig leaf chopped off by vandals. In 2004, the statue was restored. It had been thought that, originally, Hercules was completely naked and that a fig leaf was added in Victorian times to spare the blushes of church-going ladies. However, X-rays taken by researchers at Liverpool University revealed that there had always been a fig leaf (with nothing underneath...) so a new one was made.