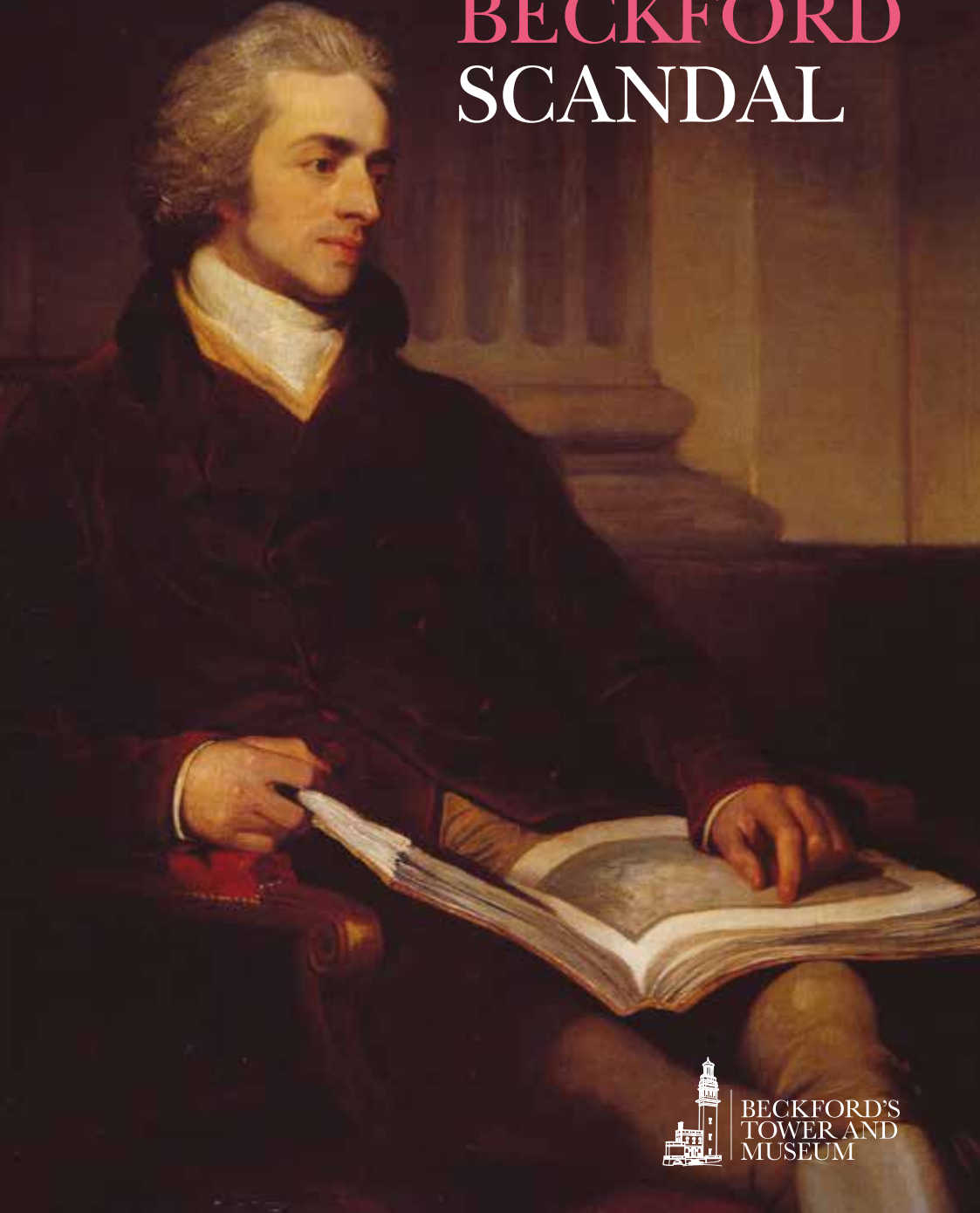


The
BECKFORD
SCANDAL



BECKFORD'S
TOWER AND
MUSEUM

The BECKFORD SCANDAL

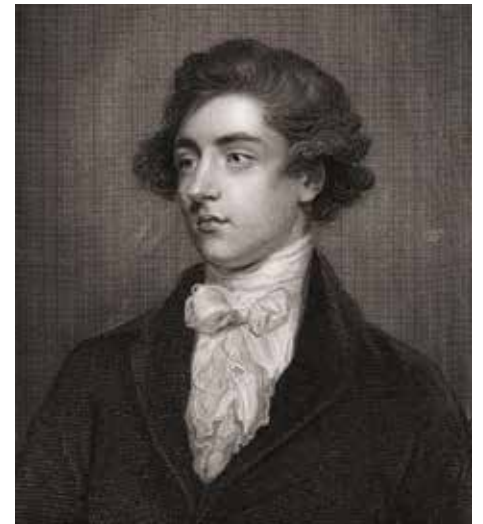
When William Beckford left England in 1785 he entered a period of exile that would last a decade. Having been one of the most celebrated members of 18th century society, for the rest of his life he would be a social outcast. The reason for this exile was the exposure of his relationship with William 'Kitty' Courtenay, the heir to Powderham Castle in Devon. For Beckford, the exposure of this homosexual relationship threatened not just social exile, but the risk of imprisonment and execution. Certain sexual acts between men had been defined as criminal and punishable by death since 1558, when Elizabeth I reinstated Henry VIII's 1533 Buggery Act. During Beckford's youth the high profile case of Captain Robert Jones in 1772 had resulted in England's first public debate about homosexuality.

In Beckford's lifetime the only way to escape the threat of arrest was to escape the country. Exile from England, and more importantly from his home at Fonthill in Wiltshire, had a powerful impact on the rest of Beckford's life. His time spent in exile influenced everything from the evolution of Fonthill Abbey and its landscape in the 1790s, to the creation of his retreat from society in Bath at Lansdown Tower (more commonly known as Beckford's Tower).



From childhood, William Beckford was groomed by his mother to be the son who would elevate his wealthy family into the peerage. When William was just nine years old his father died, leaving him – the only legitimate child and heir – the richest person in England. Although Beckford was privileged to have some of the best tutors in the country, he was educated at home, and his younger years were shaped by his mother and her plans for his future.

At seventeen, Beckford embarked on his first trip abroad. He visited Geneva with his tutor, and during this time he became infatuated with an unnamed youth. The following year Mrs Beckford, concerned about her son's behaviour, travelled to Switzerland to escort him home.





In the summer of 1779, at the age of nineteen, Beckford took a tour of England visiting the country estates of his soon-to-be peers. In Devon Beckford visited Powderham Castle, the seat of Viscount Courtenay who was a distant relation of the Beckford family. It was at Powderham that Beckford met the heir to the title and estate, William 'Kitty' Courtenay, the only son out of the Viscount's thirteen children.

Beckford found himself growing close to Kitty, and Beckford's biographers have noted that his early relationship with Kitty was one centred around shared dreams, ideas, and an innocence of youth, rather than an explicitly sexual attraction. Beckford was acutely aware of his

impending coming of age and the weight of responsibility it would bring. His longing for the freedom and innocence of youth is preserved in a letter, where he wrote "How firmly I am resolved to stay a child forever."

However, Kitty wasn't the only person to find himself fascinated with Beckford that year. Viscount Courtenay's unmarried sister, Charlotte, became infatuated with Beckford, and it was also around this time that Beckford met Louisa, the wife of his cousin Peter Beckford. Louisa became so hopelessly taken with Beckford that she was willing to help arrange his other affairs in an attempt to retain his affection.



Sir William and the first Lady Hamilton in their villa in Naples. By David Allen, 1770. Courtesy of Compton Verney.

In the summer of 1780, Beckford embarked on his Grand Tour of the Continent. During his time in Venice, he became involved with the son of a wealthy Venetian family, the Cornaros. When the time came to leave Venice, Beckford was unhappily aware of the situation the expression of his sexuality could place him in. In the autumn of the same year, Beckford travelled to Naples to spend time with his cousin Sir William Hamilton and his wife, Lady Catherine.

In Lady Hamilton, Beckford found a confidant, someone who could offer him comfort and guidance through a turbulent time. Knowing Beckford's personality and aware of his Venetian affair, Lady Hamilton urged him to be careful what he shared in letters and to temper his strong emotions.



William Beckford by George Romney, courtesy of Upton House.

In 1781, Beckford turned 21. To celebrate his birthday, a wildly lavish party was thrown at Fonthill in the mansion built by his father. Scandal soon erupted around the celebrations, but for once they did not directly involve Beckford. Louisa Beckford and a friend, both married, had attended the party without their husbands and instead were



William 'Kitty' Courtenay by George Romney, courtesy of The Nemours Foundation.

escorted by their acknowledged lovers. In the days immediately following his birthday celebrations, Beckford claims to have written his Gothic novel, *Vathek*. To commemorate this coming of age, a full-length portrait of Beckford was painted by George Romney. A similar portrait of Kitty was also commissioned from the artist.

Once again, Beckford embarked on a succession of travels throughout Europe. During this time he wrote a series of letters intended to form his second book, *Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents*. The letters conveyed his profound appreciation for art, nature, and architecture and made no attempt to mask how deeply his emotions ran. In 1783, Beckford's family suppressed the publication of the book for its uninhibited text which focused heavily on Beckford's personal feelings.

Beckford had sensed that his coming of age party and subsequent travels would be his last days of youth and freedom before the life that his mother had planned would be forced upon him, and he was correct. By November 1782, Beckford had returned to England. The following May, he married Lady Margaret Gordon, temporarily dispelling any rumours of homosexual scandal.

Although it was not initially a love match, Beckford and his wife had a deep commitment rooted in respect and fondness for each other – something which was soon to be tested.

In the spring of 1784, Beckford became Member of Parliament for Wells, bringing him one step closer to the peerage. However, later that year Beckford found himself at Powderham Castle once again.

This time Beckford was caught in a compromising situation with Kitty, supposedly following an argument they had over a letter in Kitty's possession. Letters between Beckford and Kitty were intercepted by Kitty's uncle, Lord Loughborough, and their affair was eventually deliberately leaked to the press. The story masked the names of those involved, but gave enough suggestions for readers to understand to whom it referred.



The Beckford Children: Margaret Beckford, later Margaret Orde, and Susan Euphemia Beckford, later Duchess of Hamilton. By George Romney, ca. 1789-91. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, Art Collections.

The scandal surrounding Beckford and Kitty was enough to deny Beckford any hope of the peerage which was to have been bestowed on him in less than a month's time. Homosexuality was still punishable by death in Britain and although Beckford wasn't issued with a warrant for arrest, his high profile and the general public's intolerance of homosexuality made for a looming threat.

Lady Margaret's family gave her the opportunity to leave Beckford in the wake of the scandal, but she refused to leave her husband's side. Instead, Beckford and his wife decided to retreat to Europe, and based themselves in Switzerland. In Vevey, Beckford's wife Margaret died just twelve days after giving birth to their second daughter, Susan Euphemia. She was only 23 years old. Lady Margaret's death completely devastated Beckford and there is no evidence to show Beckford had any subsequent romantic relationships with women.



Beckford remained in Europe until 1795 before returning to Britain and the Fonthill estate. He constructed a barrier wall around the estate within which the building of Fonthill Abbey began in the summer of 1796, designed by the architect James Wyatt. Beckford wanted his new home to be completed as quickly as possible, and even paid for workers to have lamps so they could work through the night. This hastiness led to the main tower collapsing twice during building, but Beckford simply demanded it be rebuilt again, and this time even grander in design. Fonthill Abbey provided

Beckford with a retreat where he could live surrounded by his own landscape and be called on only by a select group of visitors.

By 1819, building at Fonthill Abbey had finally been completed, however Beckford's architectural extravagance in its building had drained him of his fortune. Fonthill Abbey and many of its contents were put up for auction in a ticketed sale in 1822 that lasted over a month and garnered huge amounts of public attention.

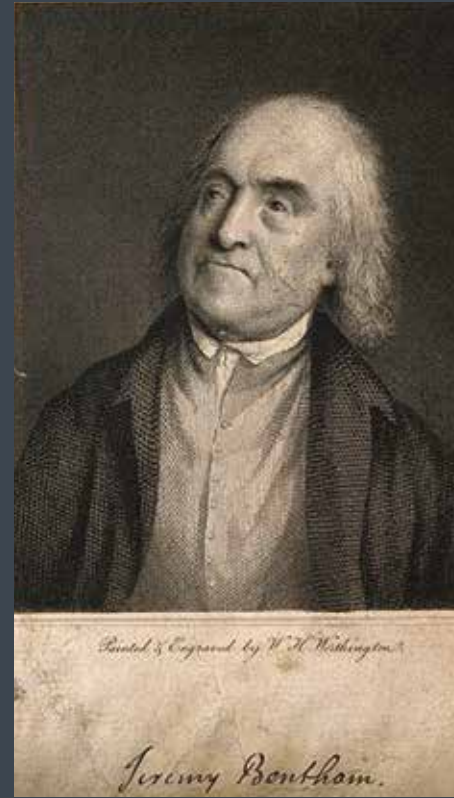


In 1822, Beckford sold Fonthill Abbey and made the move to Bath. After a brief stay on Great Pulteney Street, he purchased a series of houses in Lansdown Crescent. It wasn't long before Beckford decided to embark on another architectural project, this time a neoclassical tower at the top of a mile-long strip of land behind Lansdown Crescent which he had created through leasing and purchasing.

Completed in 1827, Lansdown Tower provided Beckford with the opportunity once again to retreat within a sweeping landscape. He deliberately chose to situate the Tower so that views from its

top would not include the city of Bath. Bath was still a popular destination and a social hub, hosting gambling evenings, concerts and dances on a regular basis. While Beckford is known to have attended some select concerts and events, his preference for spending time in the Tower with his collection and the views suggests that he was still wary of the society which had treated him so poorly in the wake of his sexual orientation being publicised.

William Beckford remained a social outcast for the rest of his life. He died on the 2nd of May, 1844, at Lansdown Crescent in Bath.



Jeremy Bentham. Line engraving by W. H. Worthington after himself.

In 1785, the same year Beckford went into exile abroad, Jeremy Bentham's essay *Offences Against One's Self* became the first publication in England to argue for the liberalisation of the laws prohibiting homosexual sex.

The last two men to be sentenced to death under a conviction for sodomy were James Pratt and John Smith, both consenting men in their thirties. Pratt and Smith were sentenced to a public hanging, which took place outside Newgate Prison in London in 1835. It wasn't until 1861, seventeen years after Beckford's death, that the death penalty for these offences was finally abolished in Great Britain.



Written by Courtney Fleming and Dr. Amy Frost in 2017 to commemorate the 50 year anniversary of The Sexual Offences Act 1967 which decriminalised homosexuality in England and Wales.



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With support from: **Bath & North East
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Cover Image: William Beckford by John Hoppner courtesy of Salford City Art Gallery.