

## ■ George Blackall-Simonds



**O**n a winter's evening in November 1927 a group of friends gathered together to enjoy a sumptuous game dinner. Items on the menu were a lure of oysters, Michell Soup, woodcock, pheasant and hare. The friends were all falconers and this was the annual 'Falconers Feast', instituted many years earlier by Edward Blair Michell. The Feast was always celebrated in London on St. Martin's Day. George Blackall-Simonds invited a number of his fellow falconers to this feast with a special purpose in mind. He called for the forming of a new falconry club.

The famous Old Hawking Club had withered away in the face of the ravages of The Great War and the death of many of its strongest adherents. A new association was called for, said Simonds and his proposal found

acceptance all around. That night Simonds was chosen as the first President of this new organization. Following his acceptance speech all rose and a toast was given: 'Hood, Lure and Leash', (changed the following year to 'Hood, Leash and Lure') and so began The British Falconers' Club.

## Second Son

Simonds was born in Reading, Berkshire on October 6 1843 and was christened George Simonds. The 'Blackall' was to come later. He was the second son of George Simonds Senior who was the Director of H & G Simonds Brewery, now part of the Courage Group, located in the town of Reading. The Simonds family were also important landowners in Berkshire and it is principally over these grounds that Simonds flew his hawks.

In 1852 George was a pupil at St. Andrews College, which was later to become Bradfield College. He was the 19th pupil entered at this school, his elder brother Blackall having the honour of being the first. By the time he was 15 years old he had left the college and was in Dresden studying sculpture. He took to it with a passion! From there he went to the Academy of Brussels and in 1864 travelled to Rome where he lived for the next 12 years. It was in Rome that he was to meet his future wife, Gertrude Prescott, an American.

By the time he was 23 Simonds was

# We

George Blackall-Simonds  
1843-1929

George was the second son of George Simonds Senior who was the Director of H & G Simonds Brewery, now part of the Courage Group.

were

# Falconers

exhibiting his sculptures in the Royal Academy and over the years he was to show some 44 pieces there. His sculptures received many favourable reviews, and with the passage of time have lost none of their power and grace to enchant or to awe.

### Sparrowhaks in Rome

George Simonds was also a falconer. It is not known exactly when he started practising falconry but he was certainly hunting with Sparrowhawks whilst he was in Rome and possibly flew a Gyr as well. In a letter written to him by Captain Salvin on April 29 1872, Salvin says:

*My Dear Sir,*

*I am much obliged for yours of the 22nd which was very acceptable. I suppose you got the Icelander from Mr Corbet (Ireland) and I hear they have not done much with them on Salisbury Plain.*

*I am puzzled to know what you can do with so many Sparrow Hawks! ONE is as much as any one can manage. I suppose you fly the Sparrow Hawk at Quail which they catch splendidly. I am glad you use varvels. I like them. I should like to know more about your short leash. How is it fastened onto the palm of your glove? It's a good idea I fancy. Damp either indoors or out and draughts cause kecks. I have never found a little rain to be injurious. I am bringing out, along with Mr Brodrick, a second edition of Falconry in the British Isles. Van Voorst, Pater Noster Row, is our publisher. The colour plates promise to be a success. Now, I am up on Bells and if you will kindly send me one of your make and instructions thereon I shall be greatly obliged. If I find it good may I mention it and the inventor?*

*You promised not only to write to me about your hawking in Rome but you said I should have a photograph of your Falconer Bronze. If you remembered your promise and sent it, it never reached me. Did you finish this bronze statue and did it please you?*

*Believe me yrs very truly, F H Salvin*

From this letter it appears that Simonds had 'invented' a type of bell but it is unclear as to whether or not Salvin received it and, if he did, thought anything of it. The 'Falconer Bronze' mentioned by Salvin is undoubtedly his most famous piece, one that perfectly married Simond's love of falconry with his love of sculpture.

### ■ Blackall-Simonds in 1874.



'The Falconer' is a bronze that lives and breathes the romance of our sport. The statue is one of great drama and movement, depicting the moment when a youthful falconer of the 14th or 15th Century casts his falcon to the winds. The clothing is more Italian than British, but as Simonds was sculpting in Rome at the time this is understandable. Italy had captured his imagination and several of his pieces from this era reflect his admiration of the classic old country.

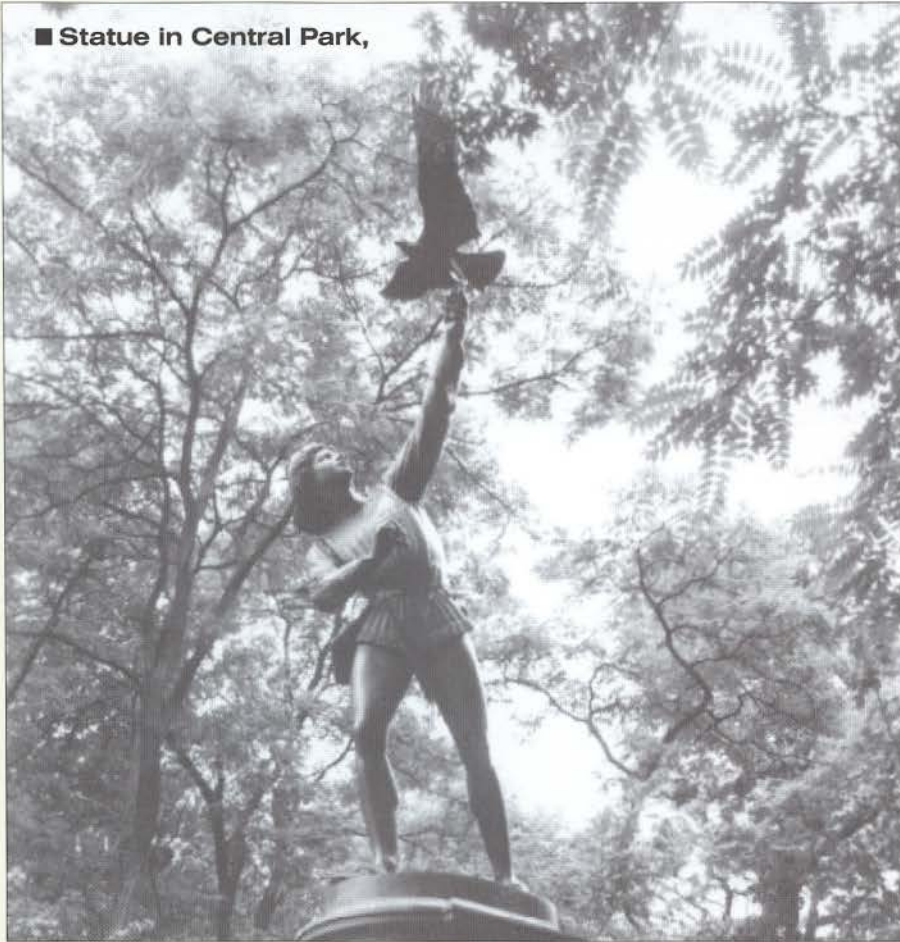
The original bronze, life size, was first exhibited in Vienna in 1873. Following the exhibition it was packed up and shipped to Trieste, Italy, where its exhibition was so well received it was purchased for the city's museum. The bronze was also rendered in marble and was placed on view in London, at the Royal Academy, in 1875. This statue now resides at the Shipley Art Museum in Gateshead. Several smaller versions in bronze were later created, one still with the Simonds family. The most famous version of 'The Falconer', however, stands proudly on a rocky precipice in New York City's Central Park.

While on his Grand Tour in 1870 Irish-American merchant prince George Kemp saw Simonds' plaster model of the piece and commissioned the monumental statue that now graces the park. When first placed on exhibit, in May 1875, the park was largely treeless and the handsome falconer was appropriately seen casting off his falcon over a wide expanse of open downland and meadow. Now, however, trees have almost completely surrounded the statue. The youthful falconer nevertheless still has a blaze of hope and pride in his eyes that his falcon will bring down her quarry even in so inappropriate a hunting countryside. After all, there are pigeon eating peregrines nesting on the skyscrapers! The well known Central Park Redtail, Pale Male, lives within eyesight of the statue.

### Imagination Captured

About 1912 the statue in Central Park captivated the imagination of a man named Robert Evans, a native of New England, who was mending body and mind in a city hospital nearby. He secured permission to have a copy made and it too graces a public park,

■ Statue in Central Park,



this one in Evans' home town of Beverly, Massachusetts.

The statue in Central Park attracted not only admirers but also vandals. It was removed from view in 1957 when thieves cut off the arm and falcon. Finally, in 1982, the arm and hawk were recast and the statue was put back on display. It is one of the handsomest in a city known for many exceptional public bronzes.

Following his success with 'The Falconer', Simonds married Gertrude Prescott in London in 1877. He had by this time set up his own studio in Buckingham Palace Road, moving on to St. Johns Wood in 1888. During the years 1884-5 he was the first Master of the Art Workers Guild, which he helped to found.

During his career most of the major sculptures he is celebrated for were placed in the town where he was born, Reading, in Berkshire. The most famous is The Maiwand Lion which stands to this day in the Forbury Gardens. It celebrates the valiant last stand of the Royal Berkshire Regiment at the Battle of Maiwand in Afghanistan in 1880. It is one of the world's largest bronzes, at 31 feet in length with a weight of 16 tons. It took two years to design and complete. The statue

was unveiled in 1886. The following year he created the statue of Queen Victoria to celebrate her Golden Jubilee. It stands to this day outside Reading Town Hall.

### More Statues

The town of Reading, well known for the Simonds brewery, was perhaps more famous for its biscuits made by none other than Huntley & Palmer. In November 1891 another statue by Simonds was unveiled in the town centre, this of George Palmer of that company, also a mayor and member of Parliament for the town. In 1930, due to the changes in transport, it was moved to the aptly named Palmer Park.

In 1903 Simonds decided to retire from working at sculpture as he felt it was time to join the family business. He was to spend the rest of his life involved in brewing.

In 1905 his brother Blackall, who ran the brewery, died. In his will he stipulated that George, as his heir, should take the Blackall name. He thus became George Blackall Simonds. Shortly after that he became the Chairman of the brewery. His official portrait as Chairman, by society artist Oswald Birley, depicts him in the garb of a falconer holding his peregrine Althaea.

In 1908 Gilbert Blaine, with whom the Simonds family hawked on occasion, records a lovely gift from the brewer of Reading: *Sunday 27 September. Received a fine Red Falcon caught by Edwd. Dwyer of Thurles, Tipperary, in his plover nets, as a present from Mr. George Simonds. She is a large powerful light plumed hawk, and feeds well through the hood.*

### Tragedy Strikes

In 1914 tragedy struck the Simonds family. His only son, Lieutenant George Simonds of the 2nd Battalion, South Wales Borderers died in the first few weeks of The First World War. After the war ended Simonds sadly turned his hand once again to sculpture, designing one of his last large scale works, The Bradfield War Memorial. This records the name of his own son and others who had fallen during the war. How he must have grieved when carving out the name of his boy.

Simonds resided on the outskirts of Reading, mainly in Bradfield. He was known to fly and hunt his birds in Bradfield especially at Rushall Farm over land that he owned. He flew Merlins and Peregrines. He was a known rook hawk and is recorded flying with members of the Old Hawking Club in 1923 with Althaea, a passage Peregrine Falcon. He flew his birds with other well known falconers of the day: Michell, Blaine, Allen, Garnett and Palmer to name but a few. He was known as a good and proficient falconer. His wife also joined him in falconry and she flew a Sparrowhawk.

During his later years Simonds continued to be very active in the sport. At the age of 84 he even went to India and was practising falconry with Indian Princes. As 1929 drew to a close Simonds was not in the best of health. In a letter to Hugh Knight, the Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer of The British Falconers' Club, he says:-

*My Dear Knight,*

*I have just been 'vetted' this morning and I am told that if I give up most of the things, that make life worth living, I may go on for a year or two yet, or even more but no cakes and ale! Now as to Hawks. My wife desires me to say that if you will accept her Sparhawk you will be doing her a favour. They don't seem to be catching any more at Basildon. My health is not good enough to look after Hawks myself and Leslie and my wife are too busy looking after me. I have no news of the Hawking world, not a word from Blaine. I have no idea where he*

*is. My old Falcon is almost clean moulted out and is as handsome as paint but probably about as useless.  
My kind regards to you and your family  
Yrs truly G.B.S.*

Sadly, he did not go on for a year or two but passed away some five weeks later. He continued his brewery duties right up until his death and only ten days prior he signed the Simonds annual report at the Board Meeting. Before he died he was delighted and honoured to know that the Simonds Company had been granted the Royal Warrant.

In 1929 there was no British Falconers Club Magazine but his eulogy, written by Hugh Knight, was recorded in *The Field*:-

#### *A Famous Falconer*

*Sir, There are probably many of your readers who are unaware of the death of George Blackall-Simonds, of Bradfield House, Berkshire which occurred on the 15 December last.*

*He will be greatly missed by all those who are keen on falconry, as well as others; president of our club to the very last he took a tremendous interest in the ancient sport. As late as last August he took the field with us on the Marlborough Downs rook hawking etc., and although he was very frail then, his keenness was extraordinary and his delight at having a falcon on his fist was a joy to us all. We shall miss him very much indeed.*

*He was an artist of some considerable note, being a sculptor; he studied at the Royal Academy of Arts at Dresden and later on in Rome, where he always had a few trained sparrow hawks in his studio, and he has often told me that any hawks that were brought to him by bird catchers and others always found sanctuary with him, and if he had no room to keep them, he let them go; curiously the only hawk he did not care for was a gos. Rook and game hawking was what he liked best and he loved a day out on the Salisbury Plain with the Old Hawking Club, now alas extinct! A kind and generous man and an excellent host, we shall miss him tremendously.*

*There is an excellent oil painting of him carrying a falcon, by Oswald Birley, hanging in the directors room at Messrs Simonds' Brewery, Reading and there is also a statue of a falconer in Central Park, New York, which is his work.*

*He was born in Reading in 1843, and was almost the last of the old school of falconers, such as E.B. Michell, Col Sanford and others.*

*George Blackall-Simonds has not been forgotten. Not by The British Falconer's Club and certainly not by the town of Reading. In*



■ Blackall-Simonds with falcon.

*2005 he was voted the town's greatest ever person. He finished first in a poll on the Reading Library's website and a debate at the Central Library beating the biscuit baron George Palmer, playwright Oscar Wilde, King Henry I and a host of others.*

*And we, the members of the British Falconry Club, will ever raise a toast of thanks to him that was born, along with our club, at the Falconers' Feast of 1927: 'Hood, leash, and lure'. In 1927 the old man gave us a future and here we remember his past.*

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#### With thanks to:

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