

Aston Clinton House, Buckinghamshire

Diana Gulland, Archivist of the Buckinghamshire Archeological Society, charts the history of a lost Rothschild house



IN RESEARCH WHICH I HAVE RECENTLY carried out on the Lake family estates in Aston Clinton I have sought to lift the curtain of obscurity which has hung over the origins of the house which Sir Anthony de Rothschild and his family made their country residence from 1853 to 1923.¹ Material in The Rothschild Archive has proved invaluable in the search for the true story. Aston Clinton lies beside the A41 (formerly the Sparrows Herne Turnpike Road from Bushey Heath (Watford) to Aylesbury). The village, and most of the park of the former Aston Clinton House to the south of it, stands on the level, water-retaining surface of the Gault Clay. However the south-eastern margin of the park, where it was bounded by the Wendover Arm of the Grand Junction Canal, stands on the beginning of the better drained gentle rise into the Chiltern Hills. The church of St Michael and All Angels is between the A41 and the park.

The Lord of the Manor from 1760 to 1808 was Gerard Lake (1744-1808). He had a long military career in which he saw service in America, Ireland and India. He was elected as an MP for Aylesbury in 1790 and 1796. Raised to the peerage in 1804 as a baron, and in 1807 as a viscount, Lake took the title of 1st Viscount of Delhi, Leswarree and Aston Clinton. When Gerard Lake inherited Aston Clinton the manor house was moated and was located next door to the church of St Michael and All Angels. It later became a farmhouse known as Church Farm and was replaced by a larger manor house, built half a mile to the south east, close to what was to become the site of the Grand Junction Canal. The exact date of the new house, and who built it, are unknown but it was sometime between 1770, when Church Farm was still the manor house², and 1793 when, on the plans for the proposed canal³ a house was marked as 'seat of General Lake'. It is possible that Lake had planned to build a new house in 1785 when he applied to stop up a section of the lower end of the road, now known as Aston Hill, where it would have passed through the grounds of the proposed house.⁴ There is evidence that George, Prince of

A drawing of the house from the sketchbook of Alice de Rothschild, c.1863. (Courtesy of the Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor)

Wales, who was a close friend of Lord Lake, was using the house as a sporting residence between 1789 and 1792⁵. After Gerard Lake's death in 1808 his son Francis Gerard (1772-1836) inherited the title and the estate and used the house as his country residence. Francis died in 1836 without heirs and the title and estate passed to his younger brother Warwick (1783-1848). Either for family or financial reasons Warwick decided to sell the estate and put it up for sale in 1836⁶. The sale attracted the attention of the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos. At that time the estate was of 1,055 acres valued at £1,000 per annum, and was seen by the Duke as an investment to pay off debts. Due to the acute financial difficulties of the Duke the purchase could not be completed until he had sold the Norton Estate in Hampshire and it was not until 1838, after Warwick Lake had threatened to withdraw from the sale, that the purchase was finally concluded at £23,426⁷.

In the 1836 sale catalogue⁸ the house was described as 'a shooting box' with extensive plantations, pleasure grounds and park, with shaded walks and fish pond. The house contained four best bedrooms and five secondary and servants' sleeping rooms. On the ground floor there was a 'cheerful' drawing room with a bow window and a dining room. There were servants' quarters and an enclosed yard with wash-house and laundry, a double coach-house, stables and loose box. Among other buildings were a blacksmith's shop, a forge and a carpenter's shop. Church Farm (the old manor house) was one of the farms included in the sale.

When the Duke's son, the Marquis of Chandos sold the estate in 1848 it was described as a valuable freehold and tithe-free estate, situated in a beautiful part of the County of Buckinghamshire consisting of the Manor of Aston Clinton. Included in the sale was a 'newly-erected and most desirable brick-built and stuccoed sporting residence, suited for a family of respectability, with offices, gardens, orchard, pleasure ground and small park, and the Home Farm, Church and Hill Farms, with suitable agricultural buildings, the whole estate about nine hundred acres'.⁹ Kelly's Directory of 1854 refers to the Duke of Buckingham having re-built the house but as no evidence to support this claim has been found I suggested that he carried out repairs and made some changes to the layout of the rooms. The bedrooms and sleeping rooms described above had become six principal bedrooms and three servants' rooms. It still had a 'cheerful' drawing room with a 'window to the floor' and a dining room. The only addition to the description in the 1848 sale catalogue is a portico entrance. The small-scale plans that accompany both the 1836 and 1848 catalogues show an identical scatter of buildings on the site, and in the same location as those shown on the Enclosure Commissioner's Working Map of 1814.¹⁰ Some changes to the layout of the grounds are apparent. The 1836 plan does not show the drive down from the Turnpike but the 1848 does, terminating at the largest building.



The Park and its settings in 1900. Ordnance Survey 25-inch map, 2nd edition (sheet XXXIV). (Courtesy of the Buckinghamshire Record Office)

Baron Mayer de Rothschild attended one of the many sales of the Duke of Buckingham's estates in October 1848.¹¹ The Aston Clinton estate was due to be the principal property for auction at £25,000 but was withdrawn. When the estate came up for sale again in July 1849¹² the Rothschilds had discussed a possible purchase within the family. They agreed however to offer no more than £26,000, as "It is not like a fancy place" and should be treated as an investment only.¹³ There is evidence to suggest that it was Lionel de Rothschild who made the purchase¹⁴ although it was his brother Sir Anthony¹⁵ who decided to make it his country home. Sir Anthony finally moved into it in 1853, once the pressures of the London and Paris banking houses allowed,¹⁶ with his wife Louise (née Montefiore) and their daughters Constance (b. 1843) and Annie (b. 1844). Later, Constance wrote that her father had been fortunate to find a small country house in Aston Clinton, formerly the home of the Lake family.¹⁷ This, of course, is further evidence that the Duke of Buckingham had not demolished Lord Lake's house.

The smallness of the house, which Lady de Rothschild particularly found unsuitable, prompted Sir Anthony to obtain tenders for enlarging it. He employed George Henry Stokes, Sir Joseph Paxton's son-in-law, as architect and George Myers as builder just as Mayer de Rothschild had at Mentmore a few years earlier.¹⁸ Tantalisingly no plans or drawings of Aston Clinton House and the proposed extensions have been found but a copy of an Indenture and Specification of 1855,¹⁹ and accounts from George Myers for 1856-1857,²⁰ all in The Rothschild Archive, describe in detail the work carried out. Some suggestions have been made in the past that the house was demolished at this stage and a new one built but the Indenture proves the supposition to be false. The Indenture states that "all the old works of every kind interfered with by the alterations to be made good in all respects; the old portion of the building to be thoroughly repaired...". By 1856 alterations to both the interior and exterior of the existing house had begun in order to accommodate the extensions. Alterations were made to the eaves of the old house to form new cornices; a parapet was added; the roof leaded, and air flues added under the house. Doors in the old building were rehung, floors repaired, woodwork repainted. Chimney stacks were changed in size and position and the exterior walls were cemented. Alterations to the old porch were made, steps were added to the outside of the drawing and dining room windows and inside the house some of the rooms were converted. The extensions added included what was described as a 'Billiard Room building', a new dining room, new offices and a new conservatory. The sum of £5,179.11.8 appears on one of the accounts from Myers which may be the total amount for the contract; however an invoice dated 1857-1859 from John Lee, Surveyor, to Sir Anthony²¹ states that an agreement had been reached with Mr. Myers on a reduction in the schedule of prices, due to the fall in the cost of materials, but no amended figure is given. A drawing by Alice de Rothschild shows the front of the house in the 1860s after the alterations and extensions were completed.²²

George Devey took over from Stokes, from 1864 to 1877, the continuing works of improvement to the mansion and designed various cottages and the park gates.²³ Sir Anthony died in 1876 and in 1877 Constance married Cyril Flower and they made Aston Clinton their home during the autumn and winter. Lucy Cohen refers to the reorganisation of the stables and the building of an additional wing by Cyril Flower but gives no date or source. It may have been sometime during the late 1870s or early 1880s when this work was carried out.²⁴

Towards the end of the 19th century the old manor house, Church Farm, was demolished and a kitchen garden created on its site. Alice de Rothschild's 1863 drawing of the view towards the church, from the grounds of Aston Clinton House, is perhaps the only surviving illustration of Church Farm.²⁵ The 1877 Ordnance Survey map shows buildings still at Church Farm but by the 1900 Ordnance Survey map the site had been cleared to make way for the kitchen garden with its extensive range of glasshouses and living quarters for staff. The kitchen garden is described in the 1923 sale catalogue²⁶ as being in a high state of cultivation and including a fig house, vinery, peach and cherry houses.

opposite
The gardens, Aston
Clinton, 1854,
 by William Callow,
 drawing master to
 Constance and Annie
 de Rothschild.
 (Courtesy of
 Buckinghamshire
 County Museum
 Service: 1945.223.63)





Aston Clinton House, the south-east front (facing the canal) and north-east side, 1956. (Courtesy of English Heritage, National Monuments Record)

By the time the Rothschilds sold the estate in 1923 the house had grown from its humble origins to a classical mansion with seven reception rooms, billiard room, ball room, 13 principal bed and dressing rooms, 17 secondary and servants' bedrooms, four bath rooms and complete domestic offices. There was stabling for 32 horses and two lodges had been built. The sale catalogue is illustrated with pictures of the sumptuous interior of the house and the formal gardens.

After the death of Lady de Rothschild in 1910 Aston Clinton reverted to the Rothschild Estate and Lionel's three sons, Nathaniel (first Lord Rothschild), Alfred and Leopold jointly inherited the interest. Constance and Annie remained in occupation and kept the estate going until the 1st World War, when it was given over to the Commanding Officer of the Twenty-first Division, then encamped on the Halton estate, and it was finally sold in 1923. By this time Lionel's three sons had

died and the Hon. N. Charles Rothschild, Nathaniel's son, had inherited the estate. However he died in October 1923 and the sale was dealt with by his executors²⁷. Dr. Albert Edward Bredin Crawford purchased the house and grounds (only) for £15,000. Dr. Crawford was a schoolmaster and used the house as a school for backward boys. Evelyn Waugh was a master at the school for a short time from 1925 and in his diaries referred to it as "an inconceivably ugly house but a lovely park" and "a house of echoing and ill-lit passages and a frightful common-room".²⁸ The school did not prosper and by 1932 the house was on the market again. The general remarks in the sale catalogue of that year describe it as eminently suited for a club, school or institution.²⁹ A valuation list of 1934, updated to 1954, shows the changing fortunes of the house over the twenty years. It lists the owners as Howard Park Hotel, E.K. Cole (Echo Radios), H.M. Treasury, Thames Side Development Properties Ltd. and finally Green Park Hotel.³⁰ A brochure for the Howard Park Hotel advertised "A week-end spent in these luxurious quiet surroundings is well spent, and the hours will slip by ... broken by an occasional dance in the wonderful oak ballroom ..."³¹

In 1958, The Department of Transport proposed a route of a southern bypass to Aston Clinton traversing a section of the park. In part the proposal was rejected because of the environmental damage to the park.³² However an alternative fate for the house was not far away. Buckinghamshire County Council acquired the house and park in three lots from 1959 to 1967.³³ The house was demolished and Green Park Training Centre built in its place. Today nothing remains of the former mansion; the only reminder of its existence is the balustrading which once encircled the garden at the front of the house. The wooded parkland is still there and features of the formal gardens can be found among the undergrowth.

Photographs taken before demolition, for the National Buildings Record,³⁴⁻³⁶ afford a chance to look at the exterior of the house in detail and to come to some conclusion about the location of the original 18th-century house. It could not have been part of the south east front, facing the canal, because, at that time, there was no access from that direction. On the north west frontage, facing the village, the square extension on the right-hand side was a later addition to the house by the Rothschild family. That leaves the portion projecting forward from the conservatory on the north east corner of the house. Its architecture was different to that of the rest of the building, it faced the village and would have been in the right position for the old carriage drive from the Turnpike. A large bow window opened onto a flight of steps out onto the grounds, which, as we have seen, were added in the 1850s. A projection can be seen on the north east side with a flight of steps. This may well have been the old entrance and I suggest that it marked the limit of the 1850s house and that the remainder of that wing, coming forward to the south east front, was added by Sir Anthony.

NOTES

1. Gulland, Diana. 'Aston Clinton Manor House: from moated site to classical mansion.' *Records of Buckinghamshire*, Volume 43, 2003, pages 195-207.
2. Hertfordshire Record Office: D/EB 1430 T4/2. Aston Clinton Deed, 30/6/1770.
3. Buckinghamshire Record Office: P/U/A 9/2. Plan to make navigable the proposed cut or feeder from Wendover to the summit level of the Grand Junction Canal at Bulbourne, c. 1793-4.
4. Buckinghamshire Record Office: Q/SO/22 Quarter Sessions Minute Book. Mids. 1787-Epiph. 1790.
5. Buckinghamshire Record Office: D/X/17/1. Colonel's from Michaelmas 1789 to March 1792. Account book of wood supplied to people in Aston Clinton and surrounding area from woodlands on the Lake Estate, 1789-1792.
6. *Bucks Chronicle*, Volume XXV, No. 1268, 22 October 1836.
7. London Metropolitan Archive: ACC/262/62/1 and 2. Minute books of the Proceedings of the Trustees of the Duke of Buckingham, 1836-1839.
8. Huntington Library, California: STG Manorial papers Box 20, folder 13. Particulars of sale of Aston Clinton, 1836.
9. Huntington Library, California: ST maps and plans. Box 7(9). Particulars of sale of Aston Clinton, 1848.
10. Buckinghamshire Record Office: Church Farm, (immediately south of church) and the new mansion house (immediately north of canal). An extract from the Enclosure Commissioners Working Map 1814, surveyed by John King of Winslow. Reduced from the scale of 3ch = 1 inch.
11. *Bucks Chronicle*, Volume 1, 21 October 1848.
12. Huntington Library, California: STG Manorial Papers Box 20, folder 13, particulars of sale of Aston Clinton, 1849.
13. Rothschild Archive: XI/109/72/3. Letter from Frankfurt addressed to Mayer de Rothschild from Lionel de Rothschild, 23rd September 1849.
14. A deed of 1854 (Buckinghamshire Record Office BAS 666/28), between Lionel de Rothschild and the Rector of Aston Clinton, refers to the purchase of buildings which Lionel wished to demolish to improve the approach to *his* house and pleasure grounds at Aston Clinton. A further deed of 1859 (Public Record Office MAF 11/8 1542), again between Lionel and the Rector, refers to a part of Parsonage Lane allotted to Viscount Lake under the Aston Clinton Inclosure in the *occupation* of Sir Anthony de Rothschild. Two later documents in The Rothschild Archive help to confirm this assumption. One dated 20 November 1877 (RA 000/53/1) granted a life interest in the estate to Louise (Sir Anthony's wife), in accordance with an agreement arrived at between Lionel and Anthony on 1 August 1875 (RA 000/107).
15. Anthony Nathan (1810-1876), second of the four sons of Nathan Mayer Rothschild, younger brother of Lionel and a partner in NM Rothschild & Sons from 1836. Granted a baronetcy in 1847, which passed, on his death to his nephew, Nathaniel Mayer de Rothschild.
16. Wilson, Derek. *Rothschild: a story of wealth and power*. Revised edition, Mandarin Paperbacks, 1994. Chapter 12, page 160.
17. Battersea, Constance. *Lady de Rothschild: Extracts from her notebooks with a preface by her daughter*. Arthur L. Humphreys, 1912, Chapter 1, page 10; Chapter 2, page 24.
18. Paxton, Stokes and Myers had previously worked together on the mansion, village and park at Mentmore, 1850-1855, for Mayer de Rothschild and then on Ferrières for James de Rothschild 1854-1863. Paxton and Stokes worked at Prégny for Adolphe de Rothschild, 1858-1864. George Myers worked for the Rothschilds for 20 years from 1853 to 1873. He worked on houses for them in Piccadilly and its hinterland, including a mansion for Lionel de Rothschild at 148 Piccadilly in 1863. Also for Lionel, improvements and extensions at Gunnersbury, 1860-1870. He continued working for Mayer at Mentmore, adding and improving, until his retirement in 1873. In 1866-1870 he was the contractor for the Evelina Hospital in London, which was built with funds from Baron Ferdinand in memory of his wife Evelina.
19. Rothschild Archive: 000/891. Draft Indenture and Specification between Sir Anthony de Rothschild and George Myers, 1855.
20. Rothschild Archive: XI/2/0 and XII/41/1 Myers Accounts 1856-1857.
21. Rothschild Archive: XII/4/1 Invoice from John Lee to Sir Anthony de Rothschild 1857-1859.
22. Waddesdon Manor: Rothschild Family Trust, 146.1997. Main front of Aston Clinton. From Alice de Rothschild's sketchbook. c. 1863.
23. Allibone, Jill. *George Devey: Architect, 1820-1886*. Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 1991. Devey was also the architect for lodges, stables and riding school, cottages and farm buildings at Mentmore 1860-1872; Master's house and Rectory, Cheddington for Hannah de Rothschild and Lord Rosebery 1877; conversion of farmhouse at Ascott for Leopold de Rothschild 1873-1887; with George Myers, on houses at Halton and Tring 1873-1878 for Baron Lionel de Rothschild; The Pavilion at Eythrope 1876-1879 for Miss Alice de Rothschild; alterations to the King's Head, Aylesbury for Sir Nathaniel Mayer de Rothschild 1879-1880; and the erection of the Literary Institute at Aylesbury for Lord Rothschild 1879-1880.
24. Cohen, Lucy. *Lady de Rothschild and her daughters* 1821-1931. John Murray, 1935, page 100.
25. Waddesdon Manor: Rothschild Collection (Rothschild Family Trust). Vue du Parc, Aston Clinton – 146.1997. From Alice de Rothschild's sketchbook. 1863.
26. Buckinghamshire Archeological Society. 947/40. Aston Clinton Estate. Catalogue of mansion and estate by direction of N. Charles Rothschild, 1923.
27. Rothschild Archive. H & J L/164. Executors of the will of Hon. N. Charles Rothschild deceased to Horwood & James re Mr. A.E.B. Crawford's mortgage of Aston Clinton House, Park & premises resulting from 1923 sale. March 1924.
28. Davie, Michael, editor. *The diaries of Evelyn Waugh*. Penguin Books, 1979, pages 216 and 224.
29. Buckinghamshire Archeological Society: 1997/85. Aston Clinton Park Estate. Sale 1932 by direction of the Mortgagees.
30. Buckinghamshire Record Office: DVA 1/2 Aylesbury Rural District Council Valuation List 1934.
31. Local Studies Library, Buckinghamshire County Council: L384.36. Howard Park Hotel. Tariff and services, n.d. (Photocopy).
32. Department of Transport. *A41 trunk road proposed bypass of Aston Clinton. Description of preferred route*. Bedford, Departments of the Environment and Transport Eastern Regional Office, 1985.
33. Bruton Knowles, Surveyors. Personal communication.
34. English Heritage. National Monuments Record. Aston Clinton House showing the SE front (facing the canal) and the NE side. 1956.
35. English Heritage. National Monuments Record. Aston Clinton House showing the NW front (facing Aston Clinton village) and the SW side. 1956.
36. English Heritage. National Monuments Record. Aston Clinton House showing the NW and the NE side. 1956.