

The English Rothschilds and the Vale of Aylesbury

Nicola Pickering presents some preliminary research since embarking on a PhD project looking at the collecting tastes and influences of the Rothschilds in the Vale of Aylesbury.

My study focuses on the English branch of the Rothschild family, from about the 1830s to 1880, specifically the family's activity in the Vale of Aylesbury. My completed thesis will survey several of the properties built in the area by the family and the collections of furniture, *objets d'art* and paintings housed within them. The brief historical introduction which follows will be a necessary preliminary to a broader study of these other aspects of the Rothschild presence in the Vale of Aylesbury.

Following on from this introduction to the family in the Vale of Aylesbury, the main purpose of my thesis will be to produce a more detailed study of the architecture, interiors and collections of each of the Rothschild houses in the Vale, something which has not been attempted by any other author to date. There is a need for a more wide-ranging and in-depth examination of each property in the Vale, in the context particularly of the time in which they were built, and in which the collections they housed were created. The properties under consideration are: Mentmore Towers, Aston Clinton, Ascott, Tring Park and Halton House. My research will enrich and add significantly to our understanding of the family and their collections in this area and should also act as a case study contributing to our understanding of nineteenth-century country houses, the lifestyle of a country gentleman, his collections and collecting activities. The documents held at The Rothschild Archive will be an invaluable and principal source for this project; I will call on family correspondence, wills, inventories, contracts, estate records and deeds, accounts, photographs or sketches, and catalogues.

Cover of an album
recording the grandeur
of Halton House
photographed by S G
Payne, Aylesbury, 1887.
RAL 000/887





Left
 South Drawing Room,
 Halton House, (built by
 Alfred de Rothschild) 1880s.
 RAL 000/887

Opposite
 The Morning Room, Tring
 Park (country residence
 of Nathaniel, 1st Lord
 Rothschild, and Emma,
 Lady Rothschild, from an
 album of photographs by
 H. Bedford Lemere, 1890.
 RAL 000/880

The association of the Rothschild family with the Vale of Aylesbury began with the second generation to reside in England. Three brothers of this generation, Lionel Nathan (1808–1879), Anthony Nathan (1810–1876) and Mayer Amschel (1818–1874), began to buy up large tracts of land in the Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire countryside from the 1840s onwards. The extent of their land holdings and their noteworthy social standing by the end of the century were such that the Vale of Aylesbury was often referred to as ‘Rothschildshire’. In the course of time the Rothschilds of this and subsequent generations managed to establish themselves in the area as model English country gentlemen, maintaining a renowned stag hunt, an eminent stud farm and acting as exemplary landlords. They were also actively involved in local politics, serving as County Sheriffs, JPs and Lieutenants, as well as representing the Vale of Aylesbury in the House of Commons. In addition they bought and built great country houses, which they adorned with magnificent collections of pictures, furniture and *objets d’art*, in a very particular way.

Copious correspondence provides good evidence that the family visited each other frequently and genuinely enjoyed one another’s company whilst resident at their country properties. They enjoyed hunting and shooting on each other’s land and were attentive in dinner and party engagements. It is also abundantly clear that they shared a preference for a certain style in their homes – most family members filled their residences with fine furniture, pictures and *objets d’art*, generally creating an impression of what has been labelled *le goût Rothschild*. The overriding preference was to collect objects of the French fashion, from the time of Louis XIV, XV and XVI, to create a feeling of opulence in the interiors of their various residences.

One might wonder about the circumstances which first brought Lionel and his brothers to the Vale of Aylesbury. Some writers have suggested it began when their father, Nathan Mayer (1777–1836), rented Tring Park mansion in Hertfordshire, in the 1830s as a country retreat for his family. There is, however, no existing evidence to support this claim. The only surviving evidence connecting Nathan Mayer with the area is an insurance document issued to William



Kay for the manor of Tring Park and its contents by the Alliance Assurance Company, a company established by Nathan in 1824.¹ There is a somewhat different explanation for the association of the family with the Vale. George Ireland has shown that as early as the 1830s the brothers were familiar with several foxhunts and stag hunts in the Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire countryside and had been hunting and socialising with local landowners.² It was these early hunting experiences which encouraged the brothers to form their own pack of staghounds and begin a serious association with the Vale of Aylesbury in late 1838.³ Lionel bought an existing pack of hounds – the Astar Harriers – and kennels from a Mr Adamson at Hastoe near Tring Park in 1840, and agreed to rent the ‘Tring Park Mansion Stabling and Coach Houses’ and the ‘Stabling in the Estate Farm Yard’ for fifteen shillings a week and the horses’ manure.⁴ The Rothschilds’ pack received a warm welcome from the local sporting gentry and was a popular addition to the hunting scene.⁵

There soon appeared some difficulties with this rental arrangement however. The hounds at least once escaped their kennels and attacked the tame deer in the park at Tring. The family, moreover, needed somewhere to stay as their enthusiasm for the hunt grew still greater: it was not ideal to have to travel from London more than once a week, even if the trains were so fast. Nathaniel wrote in 1840:

Follow my advice, and do not let the opportunity slip of getting out [of stock] at fair prices so that when the season comes we may have a little hunting without sweating and bothering ourselves in the railway carriages.⁶

Lionel was the first to contemplate the purchase of land in the area in the late 1830s. Land in the Vale was of good quality and reasonably priced at the time. Lionel made enquiries about Tring Manor itself and several other estates soon after 1836. His brothers continued his interest and looked over or made enquiries about a number of properties in the area in the 1840s.

Yet it was Mayer who made the first major step in the purchase of land in the area, probably owing to the fact that he was somewhat freer than his brothers to do so; he played a less major role in running the bank at New Court. In addition he genuinely enjoyed country life and enthusiastically wanted to invest his time, energy and money in land, farming and stockbreeding. In September 1842 he purchased a small estate of several farms and cottages in the parishes of Mentmore and Wing (less than ten miles north of Tring Park) from a Mr Warner for £5,000, as well as some parcels of land at Ledburn, in Mentmore parish, from Eleanor Villiers.⁷

It was from this initial purchase that the three brothers' estates in the Vale would take form. Soon, instead of merely looking for land upon which to hunt, it is evident they gained a taste for country life and looked to the purchase of property or landed estates. Thus began the enormous investment in land holdings in the Vale of Aylesbury by the Rothschild family that would continue for generations to come.

In the months and years following his initial purchase, Mayer sought to expand his holdings and continued to acquire neighbouring lands.⁸ By 1850 he had secured a seven hundred acre estate together with 'manor and advowson' of Mentmore for £12,400.⁹ The existing mansion on the estate was not thought quite grand enough and he decided to mark his entrance into the Vale of Aylesbury by designing and erecting the first of the great Rothschild houses in the area. The house was to be a magnificent statement of opulence and country living, built on an 'eminence which commands a fine view of the Vale of Aylesbury, the Dunstable downs and the Chiltern and Barnham hills'.¹⁰ He chose Joseph Paxton, architect and gardener to the Duke of Devonshire, fresh from his triumphs at the Great Exhibition, as his architect (along with Paxton's son-in-law George Stokes). Paxton conceived a 'superb mansion' in the Jacobean style.¹¹ The completed house was noted to have a 'beauty rivalling its size'.¹² It was not only a sumptuous statement in its exterior; Mayer filled his new country residence with an enviable collection of furniture, paintings and *objets d'art*, expressing faithfully and splendidly *le goût Rothschild*.

Anthony was less at liberty to move to the countryside in a style such as his brother had chosen. It was not until 1853 that he and his wife Louisa were able to spend their summer months in the Vale of Aylesbury, as the demands of business in London eased. In July 1849 a 'newly erected residence suitable for a family of respectability, with offices, gardens, orchard, pleasure ground, and a small park' at Aston Clinton, about six miles south of Mentmore House, had come on to the market.¹³ The brothers together decided to purchase the 'Sporting Residence' and estate of one thousand and eighty three acres with '900 acres of productive land, abounding with game' for £26,000 from the second Duke of Buckingham and Chandos.¹⁴

It is not clear exactly who, or which of the brothers in combination, provided the money for the estate. Nathaniel declared in 1851 that he would 'willingly take ¼ share in Aston Clinton as well as the former [Halton]. I hope Sir Anthony will look well after it and get the rentes [*sic*] paid as well as the shooting up'.¹⁵ Much evidence suggests it was Lionel however who held the rights to the estate.¹⁶ Lionel was certainly buying other parcels of land in the Aston Clinton area in the 1850s.¹⁷

Yet, although not technically owning the estate, it fell to Anthony to take up residence in the new property. Unable to compete with Mentmore, Anthony and Louisa set about enlarging and improving the eighteenth-century Aston Clinton house for their needs. They again engaged Sir Joseph Paxton to carry out the work, but it was under the supervision of George Stokes that the house was significantly altered and extended. After some initial misgivings, the house, 'remade beyond any wild dreams', became a country home which Anthony and Louisa and their two daughters, Constance and Annie, loved dearly.¹⁸

Lionel did not follow his brothers in assuming residence in the Vale of Aylesbury. He had expressed his interest in the area through purchases of land, but had not chosen to establish a home here. His largest purchase was an estate of one thousand four hundred acres (along with a few other farms) at Halton just five miles west of Tring Park, in the 1850s. Lionel made an initial

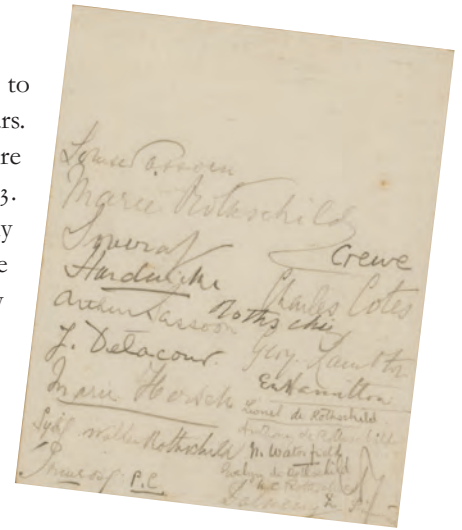
When we reflect but that a few years ago that beautiful sweep of country which lies on the slope of the Halton hills [...] was worked by the plough, or given up only to the feeding of cattle, we cannot be but overcome with surprise that so magnificent a house should have risen on the spot, invested with the charm of artistic completeness, and lying in the midst of beautiful gardens.²⁶

Since the late 1850s Lionel had also been buying land around Ascott, and continued to enlarge the estate with small purchases of land and stabling over the next eighteen years. Eventually the cottage or farmhouse at Ascott itself (around two miles north of Mentmore House) and about ninety acres which adjoined the Mentmore estate, were acquired in 1873. Leopold (1845–1917), Lionel’s third son, took over the estate in 1874 and eventually inherited it in 1879. He oversaw the enlargement of the cottage, which dated from the seventeenth-century, and turned the house into a fashionable hunting box and country residence. George Devey drew up plans for an Old English or Jacobean style house, taking the original farmhouse as the core. The final product was pleasing to *Country Life*:

Neither imposing or stately, like some palatial abodes, it has just the character of a comfortable country home [...] There is abundant charm in the quaint timbered gables and walls, the deep tiled roofs, the bold chimney stacks.²⁷

Other members of the family also decided that the Vale of Aylesbury was so suitable an area in which to settle that they too built new properties. Ferdinand James (1839–1898) of the Vienna branch of the family, Lionel’s nephew, had settled in England in the 1860s and had married his cousin, Lionel’s daughter Evelina (1839–1866). In 1874, after the death of his father, Ferdinand wasted no time in purchasing almost three thousand acres at Waddesdon from the Duke of Marlborough.²⁸ Soon after, he began work to build his famous château, situated about thirteen miles from Tring Park.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Rothschild family had built or purchased and extended seven substantial properties in the Vale of Aylesbury; the examination of several of these properties, their interiors and collections forms the basis of my wider thesis.



Nicola Pickering is a PhD student based at the Centre for Contemporary British History, working under the supervision of Professor Richard Roberts and Dr Peter Mandler. Her research project is the second of three Collaborative Doctoral Awards to be hosted at The Rothschild Archive Trust in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Centre for Contemporary British History.

Left
Menu for a New Year's Eve Dinner held at Mentmore Towers, 1900. The frame incorporates images of horseracing. The reverse of the card was signed by the guests (*above*).

RAL 000/2019

NOTES

- 1 Insurance agreement: Alliance Assurance Company to William Kay Esq. for Tring Park House and contents, 5 April 1824. Rothschild Archive London (RAL hereafter), oversized accessions, box 1.
- 2 George Ireland, *Plutocrats* (London: John Murray, 2007), pp. 106–122. For example they were already acquainted with Harvey Combe and his Old Berkley foxhounds, and so already knew the hunt country around Tring. Ireland also asserts that by the 1840s Lionel and his brothers were hunting with the Royal Buckhounds from Ascot who frequented Buckinghamshire.
- 3 Originally fox and hare hounds, the Rothschilds instead chose to employ the pack as staghounds.
- 4 Lionel to Edmund Carrington and J. Gleinster. RAL XI/109/43; Ireland, *Plutocrats*, p. 122.
- 5 J. S. Brown to Mayer, 26 January 1844. RAL XI/109/56/28.
- 6 Nathaniel to his brothers, Paris, (undated) 1840. RAL XI/104/0, ink no. 76, pencil no. 279.
- 7 Conveyance of a message lands and tithes at Ledburn in the County of Bucks, Mrs Eleanor Villiers to the Baron Mayer Amschel Rothschild, 29 September 1842. Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS hereafter), Bucks D94–26; Covenant for production of deeds, Mrs Eleanor Villiers to the Baron Mayer Amschel de Rothschild, 16 September 1842. CBS, Bucks D94–26; Richard Dawes to Mayer, 15 October 1842. RAL XI/109/52; Hannah Rosebery, *Mentmore* (Privately printed, 1883).
- 8 See for example CBS, D94–1; D94–6; D–94–8; D94–10; D94–11; D94–12; D94–18; D94–21; D94–24; D94–25; D94–26; D94–49, all of which contain deeds relating to the sale of land in the area to Mayer, between 1842 and 1851; see also plans and references of the estate of the late James Field, 1843. Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS hereafter): the plan of which is marked with the lands of ‘Barons Rothschild’. See also Thomas Hart to Mayer, Ascott, 7 August 1849. RAL XI/109/72/2; Lionel to Mayer, Frankfurt, August 1844. RAL XI/109/48A/1/57; Sir Henry Verney to Mayer, Claydon House, Bucks, 6 May 1845. RAL XI/109/52A/2/42; J. S. Brown to Mayer, 26 January 1844. RAL XI/109/56/28: for letters relating to the purchase of lands by Mayer.
- 9 Conveyance of the Manor and Advowson of Mentmore in the County of Bucks and of Certain Lands in that Parish, William Henry Frederick Cavendish Esq. to the Baron Mayer Amschel de Rothschild, 26 November 1850. CBS, D94–6; Richard Dawes to Mayer, 15 October 1842. RAL XI/109/52; Hannah Rosebery, *Mentmore* (Privately printed, 1883).
- 10 ‘Mentmore’, *The Builder*, xv (1857), 738–40.
- 11 H. E., ‘Mentmore Towers’, *The Gardener’s Chronicle*, 21 June 1879.
- 12 ‘The Premier’s Country Seats’, *The Illustrated London News*, 24 March 1894.
- 13 ‘Property’, *The Times*, 9 June 1849.
- 14 Particulars and conditions of sale of the Manor of Aston Clinton, 27 September 1836. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, s.62; Diana Gulland, ‘Aston Clinton Manor House: from moated site to classical mansion’, *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 43 (2003), 196–207.
- 15 Nathaniel to his brothers, Paris, 5 July 1851. RAL XI/109/77/4.
- 16 For example deeds between Lionel and local landowners after the purchase of the estate, and documents between Lionel and Anthony establishing a life interest in the estate for Anthony’s wife after his death: Indenture between Baron Lionel of New Court and Charles Edward Gee Barnard of 35 Lincolns Inn Fields in the County of Middlesex and the Reverend Charles Watkin Wynne Eyton of Aston Clinton, 25 December 1854. CBS, 666/28; Indenture between Baron Lionel Nathan de Rothschild of Gunnersbury Park and Sir Anthony Nathan de Rothschild of No 2 Grosvenor Place Houses, 1 June 1875. RAL 000/107; Copy deed between Lionel Nathan de Rothschild and Sir Anthony Nathan de Rothschild, 1 June 1875. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, L.119.
- 17 See for example: Abstract of the Title of Major Lionel Nathan de Rothschild to hereditaments forming part of the Halton Estate in the County of Bucks, 1918. RAL 000/765; Conveyance of land at Aston Clinton in the County of Buckinghamshire, Mr George Harriott and his wife to the Baron Lionel N de Rothschild, 3 June 1851. RAL 000/68/3; Copy conveyance of houses, lands and hereditaments in Aston Clinton, Gerard Warwick Lake to Baron L. N. de Rothschild, 23 January 1857. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, s.27; Draft conveyance of two closes of meadowland at Aston Clinton, George Saunders to Baron Lionel de Rothschild, 23 September 1858. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, s.70; Plan of land at Aston Clinton for sale, Trustees of G. Robinson to Baron L. N. de Rothschild, 23 September 1858. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, B.20; Plan of Homestead and close at Aston Clinton, Lord Leigh and others to Baron L Rothschild, 4 January 1859. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, B.22.
- 18 William J. Lacey, ‘Two Rothschild Homes in Buckinghamshire’, *The Woman at Home*, CCXXX (1912), 103–107.
- 19 Conveyance of land, Sir G. H Dashwood to Baron L. N. de Rothschild, 24 June 1853. RAL 000/681; bond of indemnity and for quiet enjoyment, Sir G. H. Dashwood Bart to Baron Lionel Nathan de Rothschild, 24 June 1853. RAL 000/69/2, bundle 9.
- 20 Correspondence regarding sale of Halton estate by Sir George Dashwood to Baron de Rothschild, 1851–4. CBS, D–D/2/58.
- 21 Abstract of title of Mr Lionel de Rothschild to hereditaments forming part of the Halton Estate in the County of Buckingham, 30 September 1879. RAL Horwood and James Papers, L.18.
- 22 ‘Property’, *The Times*, 20 July 1820, p.4; particulars and conditions of sale, Tring Park Estate, 7 May 1872. CBS, DX258/13.
- 23 Particulars and conditions of sale, Tring Park Estate, 7 May 1872. CBS, DX258/13.
- 24 Roger North (1653–1734) in his treatise *Of Buildings* stated that Tring Park was built c.1670 for Henry Guy, Gentleman of the Privy Chamber to King Charles II by Sir Christopher Wren. *Of Buildings. Roger North’s Writings on Architecture*, ed. by Howard Colvin and John Newman (Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.172.
- 25 Draft Deed of Partition of Estates Held by Baron Lionel Nathan de Rothschild, 30 September 1879. RAL, Horwood and James Papers, J.36: Includes details of the division of his lands at Halton, Aston Clinton, Buckland, Ascott, Wing, Linslade, Drayton Beauchamp, Marsworth, Cheddington, and Pitstone between his three sons.
- 26 ‘Country Homes: Halton’, *Country Life Illustrated*, 1 (1897), 664–666.
- 27 ‘Country Homes: Ascott’, *Country Life Illustrated*, 11 (1897), 210–212.
- 28 Ferdinand de Rothschild, *Waddesdon* (Privately Printed), 1897.