Mr Warren’s photograph album: memories of a vanished Rothschild estate

Justin Cavendish-Frost takes a look inside a recently acquired volume of unique private photographs to shed new light on life at Aston Clinton at the turn of the twentieth century. Further research has revealed the stories behind the images: the career of Mr Warren, Head Gardener; tragedy in the Warren family; efforts to improve public sanitation; and celebrations for the Coronation of 1902.

The collections of The Rothschild Archive are remarkable in their scope and variety. It is often the personal documents in the collection that repay detailed investigation. Such an item is accession 000/2126, the item known to us as Mr Warren’s photograph album, acquired by The Rothschild Archive in November 2012, a volume that can immediately transport us through the years by showing us images frozen in time.

The landscape of England was once resplendent with large country houses. For an elite group of families, their wealth allowed them to acquire a collection of properties. So successfully did a concentration of Rothschild family members settle in the Vale of Aylesbury that in the nineteenth century the area acquired the sobriquet ‘Rothschildshire’.

As important land-owners and commissioners of works, Rothschild patronage transformed the local landscape and the lives of the people employed on their estates. One such person was Mr William Hedley Warren, (1862–1928), Head Gardener at Aston Clinton for thirty years. The mansion at Aston Clinton no longer stands, and very few documents relating to the estate survive, making Mr Warren’s photograph album an important new discovery for the history of this Rothschild property.

This fascinating volume, measuring 30 by 40 centimetres contains over 220 previously unknown private photographs of Aston Clinton. Compiled between 1896 and 1902 it is a tantalising glimpse into Mr Warren’s life over these six years. The album contains Warren family photographs, views of buildings and views in Aston Clinton, and the joyful celebrations for the Coronation of 1902. Images of working life show Mr Warren and his staff, their horticultural triumphs, and activity on the estate through the seasons. The photographs are remarkable for their elegant composition and the clarity of the images.

The Rothschild connection to Aston Clinton began in 1849 when Sir Anthony de Rothschild bought the estate from the Marquis of Chandos. Anthony Nathan de Rothschild (1810–1876) was the second son of Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1777–1836), founder of the London banking house. Born at New Court, the family home and business address in the City of London, Anthony studied at universities in Europe, before serving an apprenticeship to the family firm, spending time in both the Frankfurt and Paris businesses. Becoming a partner in 1836 upon his father’s death, a good portion of the responsibility for running the family business fell on Anthony’s shoulders, and he was closely involved in the management of the family’s continental railway interests, and the Rothschild gold refinery in London. Anthony married Louise Montefiore (1821–1910) in 1840. Louise was the daughter of London stock-broker and financier Abraham Montefiore (1788–1812) and Henriette, née Rothschild (1791–1866). They had two daughters, Constance (1843–1931) and Annie (1844–1926). The family first lived at 107 Piccadilly, dividing their time between London and Paris, before moving to an opulent home at 2 Grosvenor Place in 1847, the year Anthony was granted a baronetcy by Queen Victoria. When the Aston Clinton estate came up for sale in July 1849, Anthony and his brothers Lionel Nathan (1808–1879) and Mayer Amschel (1818–1874) discussed a possible investment purchase, agreeing to pay no more than £26,000, as ‘it is not like a fancy place’. The property was finally purchased by Anthony in 1851 as his country estate, and the family took up residence in 1853.
The large mansion was situated to the south-east of the village of Aston Clinton, and from 1894, Anthony and Louise began to make alterations to the house. The architect George Henry Stokes, assistant of Joseph Paxton (who had designed the great Rothschild house Mentmore Towers for Anthony’s brother Mayer de Rothschild) and the builder George Myers produced a neo-Classical design at the foot of the Chilterns. Extensions included a ‘Billiard Room building’, dining room, offices and a conservatory. George Devey took over from Stokes from 1894 to 1897, designing the park gates and various cottages on the estate. Even after these building works, the house was not ostentatious, and was described by Lord Rosebery as ‘the only Rothschild mansion that could be called a gentleman’s house.’

External views in Mr Warren’s album show a large neo-Georgian Italianate-style house with verandahs, a large porte-cochère and an elegant conservatory. By the time the Rothschilds sold the estate in 1923, the estate comprised 540 acres, and the house had grown from its humble origins to become a classical mansion with seven reception rooms, billiard room, ball room, thirteen principal bed and dressing rooms, seventeen secondary and servants’ bedrooms, four bath rooms and complete domestic offices, with stabling for 32 horses.

Louise de Rothschild was initially disappointed with the property, and wrote in her diaries ‘the house is too small to be very comfortable’. Nevertheless, she and her daughters came to love Aston Clinton and the family enjoyed a pleasant life in the country. The house and park were the setting for many entertainments, both formal and intimate. Anthony was a keen countryman and he became owner of a number of successful racehorses. Aston Clinton hosted shooting parties at which the Prince of Wales was a frequent guest, while artists, such as Sir Charles Hallé and Sir Arthur Sullivan, performed at the family’s parties. Constance in particular had a great love for the house and the estate, and found it hard to leave when the family sold up in 1923. Her Reminiscences, published in 1922, recall her youth at Aston Clinton, and her views on the staff were clearly influenced by her Temperance beliefs:

‘Perhaps it would not be out of place were I to state here that in those old days domestic service bore no stigma, as, unfortunately, some think it does now, but was an honourable, even an enviable, calling. From an early age village youths and maidens would aspire to serve in the ‘big house’ connected with the soil of their own county, and considered it a matter of justifiable pride to remain a lifetime with one employer, thus helping to carry on the traditions of that house, keeping warm the name it might have acquired for generosity and hospitality. I can speak, indeed, with grateful recollection of the many devoted men and women in my parents’ household, whose excellent service was deeply appreciated. If, unhappily, there was a failure amongst them, the cause could generally have been ascribed to over-indulgence in the matter of drink, which in those days was not unknown in other grades of society.

When Anthony died in 1876, Louise continued to live in the mansion. After the death of their mother in 1910, Constance and Annie used Aston Clinton as a holiday home, keeping the estate going until the First World War. The estate eventually passed to Charles Rothschild, (1877–1921). When he died in 1921, his executors, concerned about the cost of the upkeep of Aston Clinton, put the estate on the market. The whole estate was disposed of in sales in 1923, and again came to the market in 1924, when the ‘freehold estate known as Aston Clinton Park’ was auctioned, and purchased by a builder for development.

At Aston Clinton, Anthony and Louise were noted for their enlightened views of the responsibilities towards their employees and tenants. Shortly after arriving at Aston Clinton in 1854, Lady de Rothschild wrote in her diaries, ‘let me not be carried away therefore by the indolent luxury of giving, but try to do real good at our little Aston Clinton.’ The whole family took a close interest in the development of the community, and the Rothschilds transformed the estate and village. A large number of workers’ cottages were built and The Anthony Hall in the village was erected by Louise in 1874 in memory of her husband. Other schemes for the benefit of the village, such as a Library were established. Both Rothschild daughters inherited their parents’ sense of moral responsibility and devoted their time to education issues and other social welfare causes. Aston Clinton Infants’ School was built by Anthony as a sixteenth birthday present for Constance, at her request. Constance was later to recall: ‘My family, whilst remaining true to their religion, established a firm footing in the social and political life of their country, and beyond that were recognised as being some of the best landlords that the county of Bucks had ever seen. Their sporting tastes made them popular amongst their country friends and neighbours, and my parents’ genuine charity and kindness of heart endeared them to the clergy in their villages and to all those who were working for the welfare of the people.’

William Hedley Warren was Head Gardener at Aston Clinton from 1884 until his retirement in 1914. During this period he and his family would have witnessed many of the changes wrought by the Rothschilds. Born in Salisbury, Wiltshire in 1864, William married Mary Elizabeth Horne (1866–1959) of Cardiff, in Christchurch, Hampshire in 1889. In 1889 their first child Charlotte Beatrice (known as ‘Beatrice’) was born, followed by a son, also called William Hedley in 1891. In 1895, William took up the position at Aston Clinton, and a second daughter, Ethel Doris was born in Aston Clinton in 1896. The family lived in a substantial detached
cottage on the estate. William Hedley Warren’s obituary in 1928 records his distinguished career over 50 years. He was appointed by The Royal Horticultural Society as one of the judges at the exhibition at Chelsea, was a lecturer for the Bucks Education Committee, and was for many years a contributor to the Gardeners’ Chronicle, the Gardeners’ Magazine and the Journal of Horticulture. He was a judge at local horticultural shows, and during the First World War, acted as an adviser on war-time gardening. He held many positions of esteem in the local church and community including Rector’s Warden of St Michael and All Angel’s Church, Aston Clinton and he was an active member of the Parish Council.

The Head Gardener was the most senior staff member of ‘outdoor’ staff after the Estate Steward, and was a ‘management’ position. Mr Warren was not only a skilled man who had attained his trade as an apprentice to fine gardeners before him, but he was also a mentor to those who worked under his command. Photographs in the album show Mr Warren with his staff, posed with early lawn mowers and other tools of their trade. The position was well paid and salaries of £100 per annum were not uncommon; a young gardener at nearby Halton House earned 16 shillings a week in 1900. Mr Warren would have been responsible for ensuring a continuous supply of fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers from the estate garden to the Aston Clinton dining tables throughout the year, regardless of the weather. Constance recalled how the family valued the work of Mr Warren and the garden staff:

My dear mother found much happiness in bestowing gifts of fruit and flowers on friends and neighbours… but fruit and flowers and luxuriant gardens are not evolved by the waving of a magician’s wand; they all need long and careful preparation, and to the gardeners who have produced these happy results, both in Bucks and Norfolk, my thanks are due.

Opposite

Aylesbury Cottagers’ Show, November 1895. Events such as this one were often a source of intense rivalry and real pride.

Haymaking, Aston Clinton, 1899. Cutting grass and curing it for hay was a labour-intensive process, undertaken in the few short weeks when the grass was at its most nutritious.

In Edwardian horticultural circles it used to be said that one could tell a man’s status by the size of his bedding list; 10,000 plants for a squire; 20,000 for a baronet, 30,000 for an earl and 50,000 for a duke. Testament to the fine work of Mr Warren can be found in the Catalogue of the 1915 sale of Aston Clinton. Lot 1 included ‘gardens and pleasure grounds which include an Italian sunken garden, the park and kitchen and vegetable gardens with an extensive collection of glasshouses’. The kitchen garden is described as being in a high state of cultivation and including a fig house, vineyard, peach and cherry houses. A fine photograph in the album depicts tables at the Aylesbury Cottagers Show of 1895 groaning with prize-winning produce; another is captioned Cep of Alicante grapes, 17 months from time of planting 1900. However, by 1914, the kitchen garden had been cleared and the glasshouses demolished.

No journals or gardeners’ notebooks from Aston Clinton survive, but in the collection of The Rothschild Archive there exists a notebook of Thomas Hobbs, Gardener to Anthony’s nephew (and keen horticulturalist) Leopold de Rothschild (1847–1927) at Gunnersbury Park. An entry for November 1894 gives an indication of the daily tasks a Head Gardener would have undertaken:

November 1894.

Note

1. The Rothschild desire for quality extended to the garden: the gardeners are posed with a Green’s ‘silens messor’ (silent cutter) a top-of-the-range lawn mower introduced in 1899.

2. Cutting of Alicante grapes, 17 months from time of planting 1900. However, by 1914, the kitchen garden had been cleared and the glasshouses demolished.

3. Carnation Countess of Erne & Countess of Devon bought in November 1894.

4. Carnations Countess of Erne bought in also 6 carnations Queen Charlotte.

5. Carnations cuttings put in, 100 Mrs L de R 14, Countess of Erne & 20 Sir H Calcraft.

6. Cut bush had 160 plant of Carnation Mrs L de R. Cleaned cool Orchid House.

7. Cala Elliottiana bought in.


9. Carnation Mrs L de R & Sir H Calcraft.

10. Carnation Mrs L de R & Sir H Calcraft.
must have been a jolly summer event. In the cricket field, the Rector, Thomas Williams gave comments decorated with flowers, garlands and lanterns.

At the time of the sale of Aston Clinton house and park in 1903, several estate cottages were occupied by former Rothschild employees, including the Warrens. It was agreed that the sale should not be delayed by any of the cottages remaining occupied, and Mr Warren and his wife and daughter moved to a new house, ‘Sunnymead’ in Buckland, near Aston Clinton.26 It was here that Mr Warren passed away in 1918, aged 61. He left an estate of £2,209 (c. £70,000 today). His wife Elizabeth died in 1919. Their surviving daughter Doris appears on the Electoral Roll of 1922 living at ‘Sunnymead’ but by 1949, another family is recorded living in the property.

The creation and maintenance of an exquisite garden was part of the portfolio of interests that enabled the Rothschilds to take their place as country squires. It was expected of them as responsible estate managers, and was another way in which they could display their wealth, fashionable taste and attention to detail; a finely planned garden could be used to entertain both friends and business contacts, and a good kitchen garden ensured a generous table. The gardens of the Rothschilds blossomed as their social status grew; Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild (1839–1888) grew rare orchids at Waddesdon Manor, whilst his sister Miss Alice (1847–1921) planned the elegant parterre. At Hatton, Alfred de Rothschild (1842–1918) grew exotic roses that were made to bloom out of season. In many ways, the Rothschilds arrived in the Vale of Aylesbury regarding themselves as outsiders compared to the established landed aristocracy. At Aston Clinton, they vowed the seeds of kindness through their philanthropy and generous and careful management of the estate, which resulted in an appreciation of those that passed through the generations and is evident in the locality to this day.

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NOTES
1 In addition to Anton Clinton, Rothschild houses in the Vale of Aylesbury included Ascot House, Wing, Bucks, purchased by Lionel de Rothschild (1808–1875) for his son Leopold (1845–1915) in 1873; Champneys, Ting, Bucks, purchased by Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild (1845–1907) as part of the Tring Park estate; Eythrope House, Waddesdon, Bucks, purchased in 1879 by Alex de Rothschild (1843–1932); Halton House, Halton, Bucks, built by Alfred de Rothschild (1842–1918); Mammoth Towers, Merton, Bucks built by Mayer Amschel de Rothschild (1808–1879); Tring Park, Tring, Herts, the country seat of Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild (1845–1907); and Waddesdon Manor, Waddesdon, Bucks, built by Ferdinand de Rothschild (1853–1898).
3 Born in Frankfurt, Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1777–1836) founded the London banking business at New Court, St Swithin’s Lane in London in 1809. Remarkably successful dealing in bullion and foreign exchange, including the famous Warsaw Commission, quickly established the Rothschilds as the pre-eminent bankers of their age.
4 Anthony’s eldest brother Lionel (1808–1875) worked at the bank but became more involved in politics, taking his seat as the first Jewish MP in 1874. Anthony’s brother Nathaniel (1811–1875) settled in Paris and his remaining brother, Mayer Amschel (1818–1879) showed little interest in banking. Anthony was closely involved in the management of the Chemin de fer du Nord, the family’s main railway interest in France, and with the financing of the Chemin de fer du Pas de Calais et à la Méditerranée, and the Imperial Lombardo Venetian and Central Italian Railway Company as well as funding railway construction in Brazil. In the 1860s he was involved with investment in a paper mill in Mexico. The Royal Mint Refinery was the family gold refining business, which began in 1761 when the Rothschilds acquired the leases. Louis de Rothschild (1821–1915) was an outstanding figure of her generation, speaking several languages.
and a talented artist. Constance ("Connie") de Rothschild (1845–1910) spent much of her early life with her sister in Paris, marrying the politician Sir Cyril Flower, (1st Lord Battersea) in 1875. As the wife of the wealthy and briefly married to Eliot Yorke. All three women were noted for their charitable works for the causes of education.

6. Anthony was a hereditary baronet of the Austrian Empire through the title bestowed upon his uncle Salomon von Rothschild in 1774, see Diana Gulland, A History of the Rothschilds, Baroness Horwood & James, 1997, p. 209. Nathaniel Mayer Rothschild who was subsequently created 1st Baron Rothschild in 1898, was born in 1819, with whom the barony remains merged.

7. Letter from Frankfort to Mayer de Rothschild from Lionel de Rothschild, 1842, JAS 107/1/3, p. 231. August arrived at between Lionel and Anthony de Rothschild the 1st Baronet de Rothschild. On his death the title went to his nephew, Nathaniel Mayer Rothschild who was subsequently created 1st Lord Rothschild in 1898, with whom the barony remains merged.


11. During the First World War, the house was used by the Commanding Officer of the Twenty Fifth Yorkshire Division, then encamped on the nearby Rothschild estates at Halton. Andrew E. Adam, Beechwoods and Bayonets: The Book of Halton (Whitbourn: Baron, 1996), p. 80.


13. Anthony was in the Jewish community, supporting the Jews’ Free School in London, and serving as the chairman of the 1st Congregational Synagogue, President of the United Synagogue. Louise became president of the Jewish Ladies’ Beneficial Loan and Visiting Society, established a convalescent home, and oversaw the direction of the education for the girls of the Jews’ Free School. Constance was actively involved with the prison visitors of Aylesbury Women’s Prison and Anna later became a member of the Education Committee of Hampshire County Council.


17. John Taylor (1845–1896), Mr Bentinck’s predecessor, served as Landscape Gardener and Land Steward to the Rothschilds at Aston Clinton for 45 years. The Head Gardener’s Cottage still stands and is now the West Lodge Hotel.

18. Obituary of Mr W.H. Warren, The Bucks Herald, Friday 16 March 1917. Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies. The events must have been a great success, for in 1911, Mr Warren was invited by the Parish Council to serve as secretary to manage the village festivities for the Coronation of George V. Minutes of Aston Clinton Parish Council, 1916–1919. Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, 1897/1.

19. Jane Ridley, Botte: A Life of Edward VII London: Chatto & Windus, 2011, p. 86. Two days before the Coronation was due to be held, Edward was diagnosed with appendicitis. Sir Frederic Treves and Lord Lister performed a then radical operation of drawing the infected abscess through a small incision. Two weeks later, it was announced that the King was out of danger.

20. Electoral roll records show that all but one of the cottages (including the Head Gardener’s Cottage) were immediately vacated. The estate was sold to Dr Albert Burdin Crawford, who intended to establish a school; the project was not a success and following the school’s closure in 1911, and Burdin-Crawford’s bankruptcy, a much reduced Aston Clinton estate was again sold in 1912.

A selection of over 1,200 cards documenting the objects looted from the family of Alphonse von Rothschild and identifying the place from which the object was removed. The index was compiled in the years after the end of World War II 1997/1998.

One of the earliest issues of the Archive’s Review of the Year brought news of the recovery of significant archives from Moscow, archives relating to the earliest history of the Rothschild family and businesses which had been ‘twice looted’, in the words of an expert in the field of restitution.¹ The first recipient of these papers was Mrs Bettina Looram, niece Rothschild, who immediately transferred the entire collection to The Rothschild Archive Trust. A small but highly significant group of papers was missing from this collection: a correspondence between Salomon von Rothschild and Prince Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, from the years 1846–1849. Readers will see elsewhere in this Review that these documents have themselves recovered, thanks to the remarkable tenacity of archivists and colleagues from the Austrian National Archives.

¹ Melanie Aspey explains how a recent acquisition provides a valuable link in the chain of research into looted art and the collections of the Austrian Rothschilds.

‘The book that started it all’: art, archives and Austria

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