

# ASHRIDGE AFTER THE SUPPRESSION

By "BEORCHAM"

As related in last month's article, Ashridge was not left to fall into ruin after the monastery was suppressed in 1535. Instead, it began a new lease of life, and, by a curious twist of fate, the monks' austere retreat became the home of an almost incredibly extravagant family, the Bridgewater.

But there was a lapse of nearly 60 years before Ashridge passed to the Bridgewaters. First the monastery became the temporary home of Henry VIII's three children, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth, each of whom succeeded to the throne. It is said that the Prince (afterwards Edward VI) was nursed at Ashridge, and that the western avenue, "Prince's Riding," was named after him. Mary's association with Ashridge is equally slight, but it is believed that she was sent to join her young brother and sister at Ashridge during a period of ill-health.

With Princess Elizabeth—afterwards "Good Queen Bess"—Ashridge has more substantial links. She was granted the manor by her brother, Edward VI, in 1551, and retired to the house on the coronation of her sister Mary, spending much of her time embroidering "with her own fayre hande" dainty articles which were kept at Ashridge as heirlooms for centuries afterwards.

## To the Traitors' Gate

Some of these articles were "bed things" intended as presents for Mary, but there was precious little love between the two sisters. Indeed, Mary suspected Elizabeth of being concerned in the Wyatt rebellion, and ordered her arrest. The Queen's Commissioners, under orders to drive Elizabeth to the Tower of London without delay, arrived at Ashridge at nightfall, and, heedless of cries that the princess was ill, forced their way into her bedroom. They warned her to be ready at nine o'clock the following morning, declaring they would take her whether dead or alive. When the hour arrived, Elizabeth was unceremoniously hustled away. Whether her illness was feigned or genuine is open to question, but legend has it that she collapsed three times while being taken across the courtyard. Ironically enough, the "traitor" was crowned Queen of England only four years after this undignified incident at Ashridge.

It is doubtful whether Elizabeth ever returned to Ashridge. Soon after her coronation, she granted the house to a courtier named William Gorge, and after several other changes it became the residence of the founder of the Bridgewater family, Thomas Egerton. A great opportunist, he built up a fortune from nothing more than hard work and patience. As a law student, it is said that he worked with such diligence that he never left the precincts of Lincoln's Inn for four years. Thomas Egerton quickly rose to eminence in his profession, and became the confidant of Queen Elizabeth and James I, who appointed

him Lord Chancellor. In 1604 he purchased Ashridge and spent much of his newly-acquired wealth on improving the house. But, as Mr. Bernard Falk tells us in "The Bridgewater Millions," published last summer, under his auspices Ashridge never developed such ceremonious state as it was to enjoy under some of his successors.

## The Bridgewater Family

Thomas Egerton's son, the first Earl of Bridgewater, set for himself a high standard of luxurious living, and it is recorded that he was so eager for what passed for fame and glory that he allowed himself to be mulcted of best part of his fortune—£20,000—to secure the earldom. His son and successor was a prince of cynics, and drew up elaborate "Orderings of the Household" for the staff at Ashridge. Here are some extracts: "Civill and sober demeanour is to be used by all the servants at the severall tables where they are appoynted to sit; and all unseemly and rude deportment to be avoyded." Those waiting "are diligently to attend their service at the table, without gazing about (soe blindinge their owne eyes from findinge what is fitting for them to doe) or listening too earnestly to what is said (soe stoppinge their owne ears against the calle of such as have occasion to make use of them)." The steward was to "look carefully to all bills . . . that the stuff be good, the prices reasonable, and none of the bills paid twice."

The Bridgewaters produced many worthy sons, but one or two are to-day best remembered for their amazing extravagance—as, for instance, the eighth Earl, who lived in great style in Paris over 100 years ago. Although a most serious and scholarly author, he attracted much attention by holding foxhunts in the grounds of his Paris house and dressing up his dogs like human beings, allotting them places at table and having gorgeously uniformed flunkies to wait upon them!

## The "Canal Duke"

In fairness, it must be added that the Bridgewaters had the reputation of being good and generous employers. They spent much of their money wisely and hundreds of peasants in the villages near Ashridge benefited from their unstinted munificence. Most famous of all the Bridgewaters is, of course, the "Canal Duke," in whose memory the tall monument near Ashridge was erected. If it is true that much of his reputation as "the father of inland navigation" belongs to his engineer, James Brindley, it is also true that he showed great initiative in financing a project ridiculed by many of his contemporaries. Although something of an eccentric, he was, like Thomas Egerton, a great man in his own right. A summary of his life story must be deferred for a later article, together with an outline of the more recent history of Ashridge.