

THE FATHER OF INLAND NAVIGATION

By "BEORCHAM"

Two earlier articles have traced the history of Ashridge as far as the second half of the 18th century, when the house and estate passed to Francis Egerton, third Duke of Bridgewater. Every schoolboy knows him as "the father of inland navigation," and locally we have other reasons for remembering him. His memory is kept green by the 110 ft. high Bridgewater Monument in Ashridge Park, a mile or so from the mansion which, extravagant and expensive as it was, cost only a small part of the vast fortune the Duke amassed from his canal enterprises.

A boyhood overshadowed by ill-health and scant parental love warped the Duke's outlook on life. In 1745, on the death of his father, the nine years-old heir was left to the none-too-tender mercies of a frivolous mother who actually tried to stop the boy from coming into the estates and title of Duke of Bridgewater by asserting that he was mentally deficient. This manoeuvre failed, and so the Bridgewater fortune passed to a semi-invalid who, even as a youth, was regarded as boorish and a bad mixer. The customary "Grand Tour" brightened him, and on returning to England he plunged, rather timidly, into London's social whirl. A series of love affairs ended when he was jilted by a famous Irish beauty; the unhappy young-man-about-town turned misogynist and sought a new love—Mammon.

Frugality—then Riches

Hitherto the Bridgewater fortune had been adequate rather than ample, depending largely upon the revenues of the ducal coal mines in Lancashire. How could these revenues be increased? The Duke knew that markets for his coal were limited by high transport costs over inadequate waterways and roads that were often axle-deep in mud. Thus he decided to carry into effect a rather vague idea of his late father—the construction of a canal from the pits at Worsley to Manchester. He had the colossal good luck to secure the services of James Brindley, an illiterate Derbyshire man who nevertheless had one of the finest engineering brains of his age. Brindley, full of novel ideas, had a solution for every problem except the financial ones. These were the especial province of the Duke, who exhausted his credit and was forced to borrow from bankers and even his own tenants, meanwhile living almost as frugally as the labourers who scooped out the canal bed and built the aqueducts. Bridgewater mansions in town and country were boarded up; Ashridge was neglected to such an extent that part of the roof fell in.

The Bridgewater Canal cost the Duke £220,000, but soon it was pro-

ducing £80,000 a year, in addition to bigger profits from the sale of coal. Those who had poured scorn on the Duke's projects were now only too keen to follow his lead, and a nationwide canal boom was started. It is no exaggeration when we read on the Bridgewater monument that the Duke "opened a new field to national industry and rendered the most important services to the commercial interest of his country." That he had vision, patience and the courage to face ridicule and bankruptcy no one can deny, but it is difficult to condone his shabby treatment of Brindley, who died with seven years' salary unpaid, despite the fact that the Duke promptly repaid his loans and was already amassing a huge fortune. Otherwise the Duke was considered a good, if not generous, employer. Once, when George III wanted Plinkney, the chef at Ashridge, the Duke declined by saying "I like my cook and propose to keep him."

A Famous Art Collection

It cannot be said that riches brought the Duke much happiness. He had few friends, and developed into a lonely, crusty, corpulent old bachelor, proud of such eccentricities as dressing like Dr. Johnson and refusing to let a woman wait upon him. He reeked of snuff, smoked inordinately, and drank a bottle of port each day. But these were mere foibles. The Duke, to his credit, detested pomp and swank. He certainly lived a far more useful life than many of his well-to-do contemporaries, who considered licentiousness the hallmark of good breeding.

Canals became an obsession with the Duke—he seldom talked about anything else—but at least one effort to get him to extend his interests succeeded. In later years he gained a new reputation as an art patron, buying shrewdly and building up the famous Bridgewater collection with the same cleverness and efficiency as he showed in his normal business activities. Towards the end of his life (he died in 1803 and was buried at Little Gaddesden) the Duke worried about the disposal of his fortune, eventually drawing up the famous will leaving the mines and canal to the administration of the Bridgewater Trust for 100 years.

The eccentric old gentleman did not forget Ashridge. He had left the old house to go to rack and ruin; now he was anxious to rebuild on a grandiose scale. But, as the next article will show, he did not live to see his plans mature; it was under the régime of his cousin and successor, the seventh Earl of Bridgewater, that the new Ashridge House arose.