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LINK WITH A FAMOUS WOMAN NOVELIST

Maria Edgeworth's House

BERKHAMSTED lost two potential tourist attractions when the old rectory (William Cowper's birthplace) and Egerton House (with "Peter Pan" associations) were pulled down. But we are not entirely bereft of buildings of literary interest. Nearly two centuries ago a house in the district was for a time the childhood home of Maria Edgeworth, the most famous of our early women novelists.

Few of the thousands of people who ride or walk past Edgeworth House each day are aware of its link with a great writer. Naturally, the greatness has faded with the passing years. But if her books are not widely read today, her place in literary history is secure.

Edgeworth, one of the smallest of the old houses featured in this series of articles, carries its 200 years lightly. It ought to frown upon the noisy traffic, but it doesn't. The Georgian façade, so typically English, somehow has almost a Continental gaiety, providing a bright spot in the rather sombre gap between Gossoms End and Northchurch.

BUILT IN 1767

The setting is pleasant, too. There is an air of spaciousness in what is really a very narrow strip of land between the road and the river at the bottom of the garden. Adding interest to the scene are the remains of the old stables, sliced through when part of the frontage was sacrificed for road widening in 1937.

Neatly carved in the brickwork of the north-west chimney is the date 1767, and what seems to be a similar date (the third figure is indistinct) appears on the weathervane above the stables, preceded by the initials A.R.E. Were these the initials of an Edgeworth?

The date 1767 is right from an architectural point of view, and the many lime trees which gave the house its former name, The Limes, are about the same age. It was not called Edgeworth House until 1911.

Georgian, yes; but at the north-west end there are foundations with Elizabethan bricks. The main wing is of timber-framed construction, brick nogged, with a plaster covering. We shall never know what, if anything, preceded the present house, though one is tempted to speculate about a former chapel or hospital from the reputed discovery of human bones near the yew tree when the road was widened.

Perhaps someone who was present at the time could confirm this discovery.

Apart from the fairly recent loss of part of the frontage, the boundary has remained unchanged since 1795, the date of the map which accompanies the earliest known deeds. The house itself has been extensively altered inside, and two storeys have been added to the old wash-house, the first in 1840, the second about 1900. The fine drawing room with octagonal end is decorated with the original Italian plaster-work, now restored to its original colouring.

AN IRISH OWNER

Richard Lovell Edgeworth, a burly Irishman from Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford, came to Northchurch in 1776. Land Tax Assessments for Northchurch, missing for some years before 1780, show that he let the house in 1780, when he was absent to marry his deceased wife's sister, the third of his four wives. In 1781 he was again in residence at Edgeworth House, but found a tenant for it in 1782 and 1783.

This remarkable man, a writer with an inventive mind, loved filling his home with all sorts of ingenious gadgets. He also filled his home with children, of whom there were nineteen. A contemporary described him as "one of the most successful husbands and fathers on record."

VISIT TO THE WILD BOY

As the eldest child, Maria was obviously qualified to write a book entitled "The Parent's Assistant." She started writing at a very early age, greatly encouraged by her father, with whom she often collaborated. Her moral and instructive tales for the young were widely read, but her reputation rests upon such novels as "Castle Rackrent" and "The Absentee."

Visits to her father's home at Northchurch during school holidays were remembered when, with her father, she wrote a book entitled "Practical Education" in 1798. She recalled visiting Peter the Wild Boy in 1779, when she was twelve years old, and we can pardon her for saying that Peter lived half a mile from her home. Actually, Peter lived at Broadway Farm, over two miles from Edgeworth House.

"We had frequent opportunities of trying experiments upon him," Maria wrote. "He could articulate imperfectly

a few words, in particular King George, which words he always accompanied with an imitation of the bells, which rang at the coronation of George the Second; he could in a rude manner imitate two or three common tunes, without words. He had acquired a few automatic habits of rationality and industry; he would shut the door of the farm-yard five hundred times a day, but he would not reap or make hay. Drawing water from a neighbouring river was the only domestic business which he regularly pursued."

AFTER THE EDGEWORTHS

From Mr. Edgeworth the house passed to Walter Hutchinson, who resided there from 1784. His executors sold it to Walter Moore in 1795, and he and his successors owned it until 1852, when Edgeworth House was bought by the Duncombe family.

Moore and Duncombe—here we have two familiar names. Both families are better remembered as residents of two other large houses, the Moores at Woodcock Hill (the subject of next month's article) and the Duncombes at Lagley.

Edgeworth House, which had been let by the Duncombes to various tenants, passed to Mr. Spencer L. Holland in 1902. Since then the house has changed hands four times, and it is to the present owners, Mr. and Mrs. E. J. Talbot-Ponsonby, that I am indebted for much of the information given in this article.

While in this district I should like to revive old memories by recalling the farmhouse which formerly stood at the

east corner of Durrants Lane. The Council's large housing estate has made the name Durrants famous locally, but it is doubtful whether many of the people who live there know that there was once a manor of Durrants, and that the old manor house (used by Northchurch Baptists as a place of worship in 1719) probably stood on the site later occupied by the farmhouse, which was pulled down after the war.

THE MANOR OF DURRANTS

The manor is mentioned in court rolls of 1495, and the name Adam Durant appears as early as 1294. A survey of 1607 tells us that Henry Sare (Sear) held "one Mansion House or Capitall Messuage called Durrantes with fifty acres of land by estimation; meadow, pasture, arable & Wood-ground."

The list of rents belonging to the manor of Durrants included Lagley. But by 1607 the manor was apparently in the process of dismemberment, for we find a list of rents "sometime belonging to the Mannor of Durrants and lately purchased by John Orrys." One tenant, with "one tenement with a backside in Northchurch," had to give half a day's work at harvest, in addition to rent.

LOW RENTS

In 1739 William Cock sold the manor and messuage called Durrants to the Duke of Bridgewater, and the manor was then apparently merged with the manor paramount.

Durrants Farm, a fairly large house with six bedrooms, was noted for a fine old timbered barn which probably

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dated back to manorial times. For the house, outbuildings and 167 acres of land, Mr. John Ashby paid a rent of £201 per annum in 1904.

This is a fair sample of rents current at that period. At the beginning of the century, a large house at Northchurch, with stables, coach-house, large garden and nine acres of land, was let for £84 yearly. Eight cottages in Northchurch High Street were let at a total rental of £44 16s. per annum. In other words, 2s. 2d. per cottage per week, inclusive of rates!

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