

New facts from old diaries

THE MAN WHO REBUILT ASHRIDGE

By 'BEORCHAM'

A FEW YEARS AGO I was introduced to Mr. G. G. Buckingham, who was staying with friends in the district. He told me that he was the owner of some diaries kept by an ancestor, William Buckingham, who was bailiff, steward and agent to the seventh Earl of Bridgewater, the man who rebuilt Ashridge House.

The discovery of old diaries always excites local historians. I envied my informant his opportunity of dipping into what, almost certainly, was a rich source of information. Then, to my delight, Mr. Buckingham took the public-spirited step of depositing the diaries at the County Record Office, Hertford. As Mr. Peter Walne, the County Archivist, says in his latest report, the Buckingham diaries describe in great detail the running of one of the country's largest estates in its heyday.

In such great detail, it may be added, that in two visits to Hertford I had time to read and digest only a score or so of the thousands of entries in three manuscript books for the years 1813-14 and 1820-27.

MISSING LINK

Obviously William Buckingham did not abandon his homework in 1814 and resume it six years later. Books for the intervening years may still be in existence; there is always a chance, if a remote one, that they are in someone's attic.

However, the three closely-written books at Hertford are probably sufficient to provide material for an interesting book. Such a task may commend itself to a researcher with lots of time, patience, and good eyesight. I cannot promise to do more than devote an article or two to the indefatigable diarist, who was forever trotting here, there and everywhere to make sure that all was well on the Ashridge estate.

Meanwhile, a very short refresher

course may help to set the scene. Before we meet the diarist we should meet his employer, and before we meet the employer we should pay our respects to the man who provided the money for the most astonishing building in the district.

THE BRIDGEWATER DYNASTY

The Bridgewater connection with Ashridge started in early Stuart times. The 13th century monastery, converted into a mansion in Tudor times, was bought by Sir Thomas Egerton in 1603. His son and successor was created the first Earl of Bridgewater. Scroop, the fourth Earl, became the first Duke of Bridgewater; his second son, Francis, was the third and last Duke, and is remembered as the 'Canal Duke' or as 'the father of inland navigation.'

The Canal Duke left Ashridge to go to rack and ruin; then, after amassing a huge fortune from his canals, he wanted to replace the decayed relic of monastic days by a great gothic mansion. He died at Ashridge in 1803, before his ambition was realised, and the dukedom died with him.

Over half of the Bridgewater millions were inherited by the bachelor Duke's cousin, Lieut-General John William Egerton, seventh Earl of Bridgewater and son of the Lord Bishop of Durham. At the time of the inheritance he was nearly 50 years old, married and childless.

IN THE GRAND MANNER

Rebuilding Ashridge on a grandiose scale at a cost of £300,000, he felt that he was discharging a sacred trust; his late cousin wanted a vast castle, and James Wyatt, the architect, provided an extravaganza. It was a preposterously large mansion for a childless, ageing couple, and many slighting remarks were made about its ostentatious owner. For all his riches he could at times be astoundingly parsimonious. But he

could never be accused of belonging to the idle rich.

He started the good work of giving the labouring poor decent housing conditions, thereby setting an example which was followed enthusiastically by the Brownlows, turning Little Gaddesden into what was considered a model village.

His interest in agriculture was keen, if influenced by a desire to be in the fashion. As Bernard Falk tells us in his racy book, *The Bridgewater Millions*, it was an age when George III (Farmer George) and wealthy landowners strove to be agriculturally-minded. The Buckingham diaries show that his lordship kept a very close eye on his vast estate.

THE ROAD BUILDER

Then, as George Whybrow relates in his *History of Berkhamsted Common*, during his last years the seventh Earl had a passion for road-making. He provided the road from Gravel Path to Ashridge House some forty years before Lord Brownlow constructed the easier ascent from the 'Crystal Palace' bridge to the Common. The seventh Earl of Bridgewater also built the road across Northchurch Common, replacing the old Dunstable road which started with a cruel gradient above Billet Lane.

That this road was inspired partly by a desire to provide work at a time of unemployment is suggested by the following extract from an old book, *Paterson's Roads*: 'To the Right Hon. the Earl of Bridgewater, I have to express my obligations . . . for the communication of the new link from North Church to Dunstable, executed at His Lordship's sole expense, an example well worthy of imitation, as it afforded employment to the labouring poor during a period of severe pressure and effected at the same time a public improvement of great and acknowledged utility.'

POLLY PAGE

To the Earl's discredit, he closed an old road which, if it existed today, would have eased congestion on the A41. The old road ran from Aldbury to Hemel Hempstead, and parts of it may be seen as a tree-lined track on the border of Berkhamsted Common and Ashridge Park. The Earl closed this road without legal sanction, blocking it with ponds and other obstructions.

The Earl attended meetings of the local Turnpike Trust, was a magistrate, and took an active interest in much that happened in Berkhamsted and neighbouring towns and villages.

The Buckingham diaries show that the

BEORCHAM (Contd.)

Earl was well acquainted with the Page family, who kept the King's Arms Inn at Berkhamsted. This new knowledge gives credence to a rather vague newspaper report of 1830 to the effect that the Earl 'promoted and assisted' Mary (Polly) Page in a legal action against a young man named Monk, who deserted her a short time after they were married. (See the *Berkhamsted Review* for July 1966).

ANOTHER ECCENTRIC

The Earl, it seems, was happily married, despite his unfulfilled longing for children. Having inherited a fortune from a cousin, he too had to look far and wide for an heir. He deliberately bypassed his brother, Francis Henry, a great scholar and astonishing eccentric, who organised foxhounds in the grounds of his home in Paris and had uniformed flunkies to wait upon his dogs, which were dressed like human beings and were given places at his table.

The eccentric Francis Henry became the eighth Earl on the death of his brother in 1823, but did not succeed to the Ashridge estate. The seventh Earl's widow, the Countess of Bridgewater, was life tenant until 1849, and long after her husband's death his complicated will was the subject of a law-suit. But that is a long story; it was in the very early years of the new Ashridge when William Buckingham wrote his diaries, and we shall return to this period in a later article.