

REVIEWS

A CHESHAM CENTURY The story of a Town and its Council 1894–1994

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It has become the received wisdom that local government in England grew out of the drains, and there is some truth in this; drainage boards were indeed among the earliest organs of local government, usually under the spur of mid-Victorian epidemics – commonly cholera or typhoid. In Chesham it would be truer to say it grew out of the demand for schooling, the supply of gas, and the demand for finance for housing. The Chesham Building Society is the oldest in the world, founded in 1845. The Chesham Gas Company and the first National School (in Church Street) opened in the same year.

The story of the slow regrowth of self rule in Chesham is told with verve and affection by two men who have been as soaked in the doings of present-day Chesham as of its past. If you talk to Arnold Baines or Clive Birch about Chesham you don't get the feeling that they are merely regurgitating what they have read; it is as though their knowledge has been acquired by a species of mental osmosis, from the air they breathe. We say regrowth because in earlier centuries there had been flourishing self government through the vestries and the manor courts; the regulation of common grazing and common cultivation had been strictly controlled, and the controls had been efficiently enforced. But the manor courts had become burdensome to the participants and had allowed their powers to lapse, while the vestries, who had been responsible for poor relief and highways, had subsided into self-perpetuating oligarchies.

Democratic local government was a legacy of Mr Gladstone. However when Chesham voted for the first time it already had not only a school, a gasworks and a building society, but choirs and

bands based on its chapels, sporting clubs, the Cooperatve Movement, the Mechanics' Institute, the Temperance Society, and friendly societies. This was all fertile soil for local government; for the functions discharged by these bodies were to be taken over by the council. So were many of their personnel: the names of the first council members can be found among the 'homage' of the manor courts; the tradition of self government among the people of Chesham was only waiting to be blown into life.

It is an ironic footnote to the story of Chesham that the 1971 bill nearly became law without any provision for parish councils in areas formerly parts of Urban Districts. This would have had the effect that Chartridge (population 1,750) would have had sole responsibility for the burial ground of Chesham (pop 21, 140). Fortunately at the last moment wiser councils prevailed.

J.C.T.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GRENVILLES, DUKES OF BUCKINGHAM AND CHANDOS, 1710 TO 1921

John Beckett

Manchester University Press, 1994, 308pp., 8 figures, 22 plates, £45 (paperback £14.99), ISBN: 0-7190-3756-5

The Grenvilles were a long established Buckinghamshire family, producing three county sheriffs during the 16th and 17th centuries. For over 500 years, from the 12th century until Richard Grenville's death in 1727, they owned just over 4,000 acres, mainly in the western part of central Buckinghamshire, around Wotton Underwood, where Richard built a fine new house in 1704. The family's fortunes changed, however, only as the result of his marriage in 1710, at the age of 32, to Hester Temple, the second and favourite sister of Lord Cobham from Stowe in the north of Buckinghamshire. Although Lord Cobham himself married five years later, on Richard's death he educated her children almost as his own and, in

view of his childless state, entailed Stowe on his sister and her children in 1737. This was to ensure the marriage of Richard's son, another Richard Grenville, to Anna Chambers, an heiress worth £54,000. The younger Richard inherited his father's 4,343 acres, worth about £3,000 per annum, in 1727 aged 16 and Lord Cobham's estates in 1749, bringing the acreage to 7,000 and the rental income to about £7,000. This was at a time when an acre of land cost well under £200 but yielded less than many government stocks.

As John Beckett details so well, it was this Richard Grenville, created Earl Temple in 1752, and his nephew and heir, the first Marquess of Buckingham, who master-minded the growth in the family's fortune and property. At that time a landed estate was a pre-requisite for advancement in the peerage and an eventual dukedom, now the family's ultimate ambition. At Earl Temple's death in 1779 the annual income was more than £20,000, while soon after the Marquess' death in 1813 it had reached nearly £53,000 and the estate 39,000 acres, of which over 13,000 were in Buckinghamshire. The Marquess' marriage to the heiress of the Chandos family in 1775 had supposedly brought in property worth £14,000 annually and a fortune of £200,000. By now, however, the family's lavish life-style was beginning to outstrip even this enormous income and in 1804 it was said that the debts were being paid several years in arrears.

The dukedom of Buckingham and Chandos was finally achieved in 1822 by the Marquess' son, but only at the expense of abandoning his Whig principles for the Tory cause. By his death in 1839 he had consolidated his Buckinghamshire estate into over 23,000 acres, about 5% of the county, but under half the total Grenville and Chandos lands. Nevertheless his extravagance and especially that of his son brought a swift reversal and, from a rental income of nearly £30,000 in 1840, the effect of the great sales in the late 1840s reduced the annual income to just over £16,000 by 1883 for an acreage of merely 10,500, most of which was in Buckinghamshire. This estate was now only 1.04% of the total English acreage of the 21 dukes alive in 1883. The last Duke died in 1889 and the family sold Stowe, the neglected jewel of their properties, in 1921.

Such a fascinating economic account, based on

a perhaps uniquely detailed examination of a family's finances over two centuries, makes a compelling read. John Beckett, however, provides much more. There is a wealth of social and political history, extraordinary even by the standards of the 18th and 19th centuries. Family feuds, electoral intrigues, royal visits and ducal misdemeanours lace the pages. The Grenvilles and their Pitt cousins boasted no fewer than four prime ministers within 50 years, while their quintuple-barrelled surname, Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville, broke all records. Earl Temple was once described as the richest commoner in the country but within a century the second Duke was condemned by *The Times* for being the country's greatest debtor. In fact six of the ten chapters cover just the first two Dukes, whose excessive expenditure accumulated staggering debts of some £1.5 million. By August 1848 *The Times* could thunder in its leader that the second Duke was "the destroyer of his house, the man whose reckless course has thrown on the ground a pillar of the state, and struck a heavy blow at the whole order to which he unfortunately belongs."

Hubris has rarely been followed so inexorably by nemesis. Few families can have tried so hard to enhance their status, only to lose almost everything at the apparent point of success. Indeed the great sale of Stowe's contents followed only three years after Queen Victoria's visit, the long-awaited seal of approval by a reigning monarch. The last Duke's grandson, who sold Stowe in 1921, is said to have finished his days the worse for drink, an end not dissimilar to that of his great-grandfather, who died in a railway hotel, divorced by his wife and avoided by his family, after being forced to abandon Stowe by his creditors. Alexander Pope, whose *Epistle to Lord Burlington* praises Stowe's early garden yet ironically notes the passing of wealthy Timon's estate, might have smiled: the great palace of Stowe survives, but it was saved in the nineteenth century through the strict settlement of the Chandos heiress who married the first Duke, and rescued in the twentieth century by an educational charity, with its landscape garden now being preserved by a charity devoted to places of natural beauty and historic interest. John Beckett has provided a masterly study of this powerful tragedy enacted on both local and national stage.

Michael Bevington

THE ROTHSCHILDS AND DISRAELI IN
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE David Kessler
34 pp, 7 plates, Rothschild Waddesdon Ltd,
Waddesdon Manor, Aylesbury, Bucks HP18 0JH,
ISBN 0 9527809 0 9.

Consider the gulf that separates an executive in a modern financial services company from a fox-hunting countryman; and consider whether this can be any wider than that which separated a fox-hunting squire from a pushing young entrepreneur in a Frankfurt ghetto two hundred years ago. It is a measure of David Kessler's success that within the compass of this slim volume he makes clear the size of the gulf and the Rothschild family's achievement in bridging it.

The young entrepreneur in question was Nathan Mayer Rothschild, who came to England in 1798. This was not a case, as is sometimes hinted, of a pauper immigrating from a slum: a ghetto meant discrimination and lack of liberty, not poverty. Nathan Mayer was already a man of substance when he arrived. Eighteen years later he rented Tring Park as a summer residence and, by

thus introducing his sons to riding and hunting, took the first steps to them joining the English squirarchy.

Money, of course can do most things in England, but Disraeli was never accepted as the Rothschilds were. Mr Kessler never elaborates on the reasons, but they emerge fairly clearly: the Rothschilds were gentlemen. They set an example as generous and humane landlords, and of good and efficient husbandry. They displayed great skills as breeders of racehorses as well as of cattle and domestic animals. They left a lasting impact on those villages where they owned property, supporting schools, hospitals, alms houses, inns and workers' housing. Probably nowhere else in rural England has one family in so short a time made such a profound impression as the Rothschild squirarchy.

Mr Kessler also records the tragic loss of several tons of archival material when the family's papers were destroyed during the second World War by a misguided employee. The full story of the family will never be told.

J.C.T.