

Oxfordshire

THE GREAT HOUSE

Ownership and Occupiers, by Nicholas Cooper

The Great House is one of the two outstanding late 17th/early 18th-century houses in Burford – the other being the present Methodist Chapel in the High Street (No. 75), now greatly altered inside and a little later in date. As one of the largest houses in the town, and one of the few with architectural pretensions, it has always been lived in by members of the gentry or professional classes.

The house was built on the site of the Black Boy inn, owned in 1685 by Thomas Castle, innholder, chandler, burgess and sometime bailiff. Thomas Castle died in 1690, and his property descended to his son John (b.1655), who probably built the house fairly soon afterwards.¹ John Castle may be identified with the John Castle, native of Oxfordshire, admitted licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians in 1679.² In 1684, as John Castle of Tewkesbury, physician, he leased 22 acres in the common fields of Burford,³ and featured prominently in town business over the next thirty years. He served as town Bailiff on seven occasions between 1688 and 1717,⁴ is recorded as a Trustee of Burford charities in 1702,⁵ and as churchwarden presented John Eykyn, vicar of Burford, for ‘several notorious Crimes and Scandals’ in 1704.⁶ He endowed almshouses for four elderly widows in 1706,⁷ and made further provision for them on his death.⁸ Castle’s active involvement in church and charitable affairs is directly relevant to the devotional scenes and symbolism of the remarkable painted decoration of his house.

Castle died childless in 1727 leaving his estate to his cousin Edward Castle of Buckland (Berkshire), with provision that his cousin Elizabeth should continue to have sole use of certain rooms in the house, and should have access to others. These rooms are discussed further in the building analysis. When Elizabeth Castle died in 1729, however, she was living at Bessels Leigh,⁹ perhaps as a guest or tenant of the Lenthall family of Burford Priory, whose second estate was there. On Edward Castle’s death in 1758 he bequeathed the house to Thomas Castle, ‘cheesemaker, with whom I live.’ Nothing is known of its ownership or occupancy thereafter until the late 18th century,

when in 1790 it was sold by the Hon Thomas Fettiplace as a house 'now in occupation of Mrs Gast'.

Sophia Gast was the sister of Samuel Crisp, a close friend of Dr Edward Burney, the music historian, and of his daughter Fanny Burney (Mme d'Arblay), the novelist. There is no record of Fanny Burney's having visited the Great House; she seems to have met Mrs Gast at Samuel Crisp's house ('Daddy Crisp' in her letters) at Chessington in Surrey, and to have seen little of her after Crisp's death in 1783. However, as a Dresser to Queen Caroline, Fanny Burney passed through Burford with the royal party in 1788 on the way to and from Cheltenham, and on her return met Mrs Gast at an inn.¹⁰

There is a further gap in knowledge of owners and occupants until 1823, when the house was occupied by Robert Pytt, surgeon, who remained until 1852.¹¹ In that year it was acquired (perhaps together with the medical practice) by Dr William Cooke, surgeon, who occupied the house until 1863. Thereafter it was occupied by a succession of tenants of the Cooke family, including Edward Marriott, JP (died 1887), who largely funded the restoration of the parish church; Thomas Walker, auctioneer (resident 1887-95); and W.H. Hutton (resident 1895-1915), Dean of Winchester and author of the *Burford Papers*, in which he wrote of the association of Fanny Burney, Samuel Crisp and Sophia Gast. In 1915 it was occupied by a Mrs Conway, and in 1920 by F.B. de Sales La Terrière, JP, no doubt a relative of B. La Terrière of Burford Priory.

¹ PRO, PROB 11/400, Thomas Castle.

² W. Monk, *Roll of the Royal College of Physicians* (1861), I, 377. Local tradition that Castle was a royal physician may stem from the possibility of his having acted as a physician extraordinary on the occasion of the royal visit to Burford in the 1680s; he held no regular appointment. See the list of royal physicians to 1702 in Harold J.Cook, *The Decline of the Old Medical Regime in Stuart London* (1986), appendix 3.

³ R.H. Gretton, *The Burford Records* (1920), 356.

⁴ *Ibid.* 100.

⁵ *Ibid.* 357.

⁶ *Ibid.* 479-81.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ PRO, PROB 11/615, f. 334. A sermon to be delivered on Good Friday was endowed by another John Castle of Burford, gentleman, who died in 1720. (PRO, PROB 11/578, sig. 4.) It

is likely that the activities listed above were those of John Castle of The Great House, who was probably a man of greater substance, but this cannot be proved.

⁹ PRO, PROB 11/628, sig. 68. She made bequests to Edward Castle of Burford, who she names as her cousin, including items that seem to have been left to her by John Castle.

¹⁰ Which inn is not specified: *Diary and Letters of Mm .D'Arblay ... with preface and notes by Austin Dobson* (1904), IV, 65. Letters from Samuel Crisp to Sophia Gast, 1779-82, are printed in W.H. Hutton, *Burford Papers* (1905), 24-93.

¹¹ Hutton suggests that Pytt was at the Great House from c.1810: *Burford Papers*, 23.