

SNELSTON HALL AND ITS OWNERS.

By THE EDITORS.

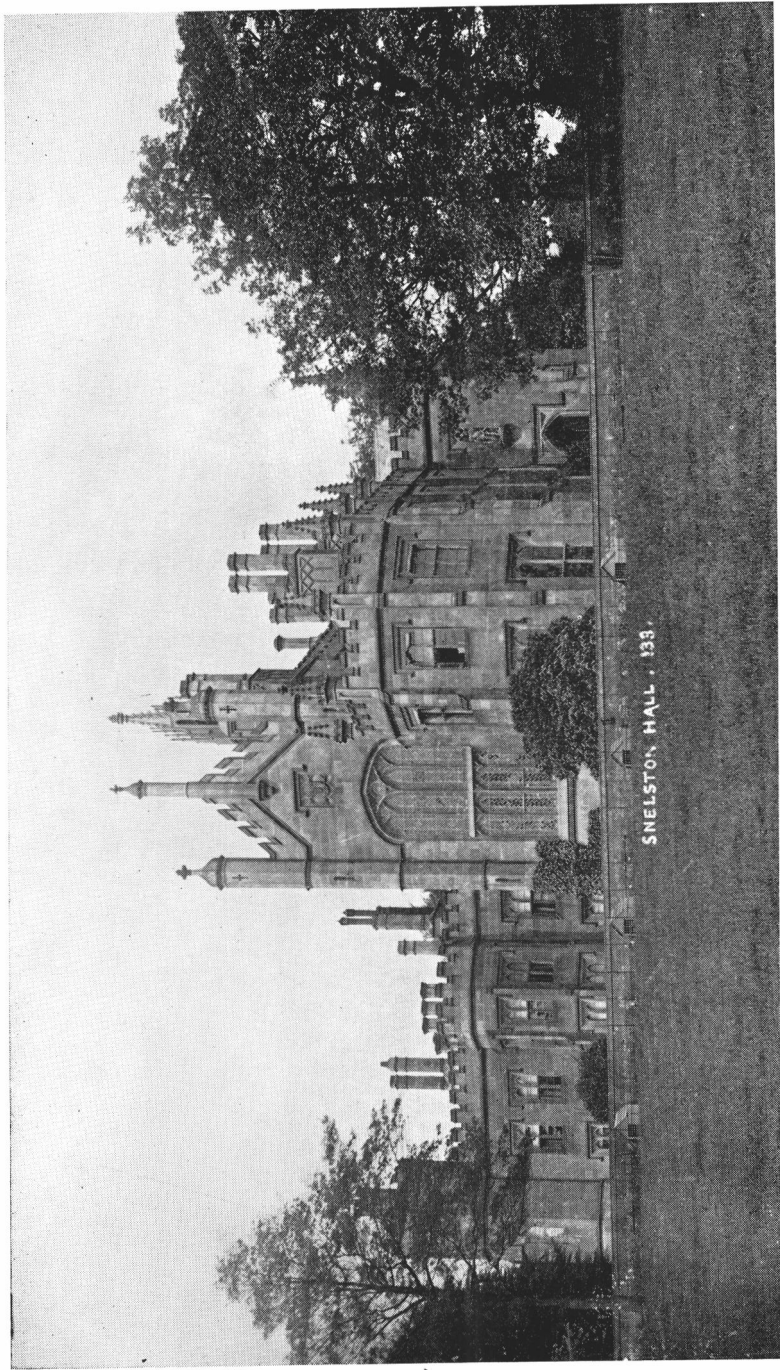
THE permission of the Ministry of Works given in 1951 for the demolition of Snelston Hall was accorded some prominence at the time in the national press. Regrets that another mansion has been added to the list of the several classic and ancient homes which have disappeared in this century can be tempered by the fact of its comparative modernity and indifferent structure.

Designed by the architect Cottingham¹ and built on the grand scale in 1828 for the then lord of the manor, John Harrison, its maintenance in recent years had become a matter of impossibility. In its heyday it possessed a certain grandeur which has not been known to any but the passing generation: in its last days it stood as a mournful testimony to a way of life almost completely gone.

The 19th-century building incorporated part of a smaller house of older date, which was probably the one referred to as the "Upper Hall" in a dispute of 1729. The "Middle Hall" seems to have been destroyed by fire, and was located near the church and the present home of Col. J. P. Stanton, lord of the manor. When the decision was taken to demolish the hall, the deeds of the estate were placed on loan in the care of the Derbyshire County Council, and their examination for the National Register of Archives has yielded some details which will correct existing accounts of the manor.

In seeking the history of a manor, one naturally turns to the recognised authorities within the county. It is

¹L. N. Cottingham (1787-1847). Snelston — in the "perpendicular style of Gothic" architecture — was accounted a good example of his work, for which he gained a considerable reputation. Restorations for which he was responsible included Rochester Cathedral, Magdalene College, Ashbourne Church and Elvaston Castle.



Snelston Hall, Derbyshire.

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disconcerting to find that none of the standard works of reference accords anything but cursory notice to Snelston, and that what is printed is largely erroneous.

Lysons's *Magna Britannica* quotes from a manuscript of Heiron at Langley Hall, and Glover's notes for his uncompleted history of the county — used in Bagshaw's *History and Gazetteer of Derbyshire* for 1846 — and Cox's *Churches of Derbyshire* do little more than copy this information. Other writers are generally as vague and inaccurate.

From deeds of mid-17th century onwards and from the history of the Okeover family of Okeover, printed by the William Salt Society (Vol. VII, N.S. 1904) it is now possible to give a fairly full account of the descent of Snelston.

The manor was part of the four knights' fees held by the Montgomery family of Cubley under the Ferrers, and on the attainder of the earls passed to the house of Lancaster. The feoffment came to the Okeovers on the marriage of Ralph Fitz-Orm (c. 1140-1170) to Lettice, sister of Walter de Montgomery. The Montgomerys retained the wardship and marriage of the heir of the Okeovers on every occasion of a minority.

In a suit in Banco commenced in Trinity term 29 Edw. I, Roger de Acovre sued William son of William the Bastard of Montgomery for 100 acres of land in Snelston, and after several adjournments the jury found in 1307 that Robert the grandfather of Roger had been lord of a moiety of the manor and William de Grendon lord of the other half. William de Grendon had subsequently remitted and quitclaimed to Robert de Okeover all his rights in his half of the manor.

By 40 Hen. III Snelston had been subinfeudated, and some time between 1431 and 1460 Thomas Okeover was able, probably by a heavy amercement, to convert the tenure from one of military fiefship to the Duchy of Lancaster to one of socage, subject to the nominal rent of a rose.

An inquisition taken at Derby in September, 1604, after the death of Philip Okeover (I.P.M. ser. II, vol. 289, pt. 2, no. 91, P.R.O.) found that the lands and

manor of Snelston were held of Elizabeth Bassett as of her manor of Gryndon, Staffs, in socage by fealty only and worth by the year, clear, £20. The writer of the Okeover history says "this is of course an error, Snelston being held of the heirs of Montgomery", but apparently overlooked the point that the position was the same at the time of a previous inquisition in 1538 after the death of Humphrey Okeover, the superior lord then being William Bassett.

Accepted genealogies give the Montgomeries as extinct on the death of Sir John in 1513, the inheritance passing by heiresses to Dorothy, wife of Sir John Gifford, Ellen wife of John Vernon knight, and Ann wife of John Browne of Snelston. It is fairly clear, however, that the Snelston interest was held by Richard Montgomery, who married Margaret daughter of Sir John Dethick. Richard died without issue, and his relict took as her dower the overlordship of the manor to her second husband, Ralph Bassett of Langley, with which family it remained for six generations until the marriage of Elizabeth Bassett to William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle.

Of the various disputes which occurred from time to time, and which are so numerous and unknown to the general reader, it is unnecessary here to do more than refer to the history of the Okeovers, who retained the manor and lands until the 17th century. In the Civil War the estates of the Okeovers came within the evil orbit of the Committees for Compounding, of which a commissioner for Derbyshire was Gervase Bennett, a mercer of the borough.

Representing Derby in the Commonwealth parliament, and mayor in 1645, he styles himself "gentleman" in deeds of 1654 and onwards. At the visitation of 1663 he entered his arms without proof, but supposedly took out a grant to regularise matters. He made some small claim to memory when he described George Fox's followers as Quakers, the first to give them the sobriquet, as Fox says in his diary: "because I bid him Tremble at the word of the Lord".

In the widespread speculation in sequestered estates which took place in and after the Civil War, there is little

doubt that Gervase Bennett took full advantage of his membership of the Derbyshire Committee. There is a confusing number of deeds during the period 1647-1668 which leave an unpleasant savour of jobbery.

The will of Humphrey Okeover, who died in 1639, made provision for the portion of his daughter Catherine who married Sir Robert Shirley. The realisation of this portion, Snelston comprising the major part, was vested by a deed of 12 Chas. I in the trusteeship of Thomas Gresley and John Gell. A subsequent lease by Humphrey Okeover made in 1639 for the purpose of settling his debts, conveyed the manor to Thomas Milward, Gilbert Sheldon, Thomas Gresley, John Gell and John Cuffe, then servant to Humphrey.

The settlement appears later to have been welcomed by the majority of the leading Derbyshire parliamentarians as an opportunity of taking a hand in the realisation of this part of the Okeover estates, other members coming into various deeds of lease, sale or mortgage being Samuel Sanders, Henry Mellor and Thomas Eyre of Hassop. The last named seems to have purchased the manor and land from the trustees, and for a while to have lived in the manor house, succeeding Humphrey's widow on her removal to London.

Eyre's tenure was brief. He was followed by Gervase Bennett, now the armigerous gentleman, who occupied the house until his death. How much of his fortune came from his legitimate mercer's business and how much from his speculation — or peculation — in sequestered lands cannot be known, but he made numerous purchases of small pieces of land from the small village freeholders. Whether his dubious fortune was of lasting value to his family we have been unable to discover, but after his death his son sold the manor lands in 1682 to another *nouveau homme*, this time Robert Doxey — or Docksey — a goldsmith turned sugar baker of London.

Heiron's account of Snelston, previously referred to as cited by Lysons, Glover and Cox, says that Ralph Docksey held the manor in 1598. At that time the family in the village was one of husbandmen or small yeomen only, and the origin of Robert is disparagingly mentioned

in the manuscript of 1687 printed in this journal for 1910 giving notes for a projected heraldic visitation, where under "Persons for Grants" occurs the name of "Mr. Rob. Doxey of Snelston in Derbysh. who hath bought Bennet and Archer's estate, was born in Snelston of mean parentage. Was after a confectioner, then Sugar Baker in London, where he is still partner with one Coxon in a Sugar House near Cordwainers' Hall . . ." The projected visitation did not take place, and there is no record that Docksey ever took out his grant, although the family used from time to time a seal of a lion rampant debruised by a bend.

From about 1671 Docksey had been engaged in a series of deals involving many closes in Snelston and neighbourhood. His partner, George Coxon of London, also bought much of the Snelston land, but did not settle permanently, and later sold out to Docksey.

This new lord of the manor, who died in 1704, was succeeded by his son Ralph, and left a widow Elizabeth. Between mother and son there was considerable ill feeling, and there are records of at least two quarrels, after the first of which the son removed his seat in the church from beside Elizabeth. The second dispute aroused extraordinary bitterness which seems a little unreal to-day, and concerned which pew should be occupied by the head of the family. After her husband's death, Elizabeth exchanged homes with her son, moving from the Upper Hall to the Middle Hall. As far as can be gleaned from the remaining papers she retained the pew in which she had customarily sat whilst her husband was alive. Depositions of many aged villagers were taken in 1729 to establish the traditional use of this pew by former lords. It is interesting to find that as far back as the time of the Okeovers the lord of the manor had always occupied the same pew, his family another and his servants a certain appointed place. Jane Webster of Clifton, born at Snelston, remembered Mrs. Okeover living at the Middle Hall, and Robert Tunnicliffe of Snelston, labourer, aged 76, deposed that at the age of seven he was servant to Gervase Bennett. We cannot discover the result of this quarrel, whether it came to a civil or an ecclesiastical

court for settlement, but it affords an interesting glimpse of the unchanging and long established customs of the village.

This Ralph married Mary Hope and was followed by his son Thomas, educated at Chesterfield Grammar School and later gaining admission to one of the universities. He married Merial Garrick of Lichfield in 1726, her brother, the celebrated actor, being a party to the marriage settlement. Apart from this passing point of interest, we glean little of the Dockseys. Whether the family reverted to its former modest status or whether other descendants of the erstwhile sugar baker of London left the neighbourhood, we do not know. The name is not uncommon in the county to-day.

Thomas and Merial left an only daughter who married the Reverend Chas. Stead Hope of Derby, who sold the estates. The bare recitation of a list of lords of the manor can be unsatisfying both to the general reader and to the historian. It is disappointing to be unable to explain how William Bowyer the next lord came by his means to purchase the manor.

Born at Marston Montgomery, in which village there had long been a yeoman family of some substance, he married Ellen Stubbing of that place in 1712. In later years he aspired to arms, and used the traditional arms of the Bowyers of Knipersley, co. Staffs., but for this we cannot find the justification.

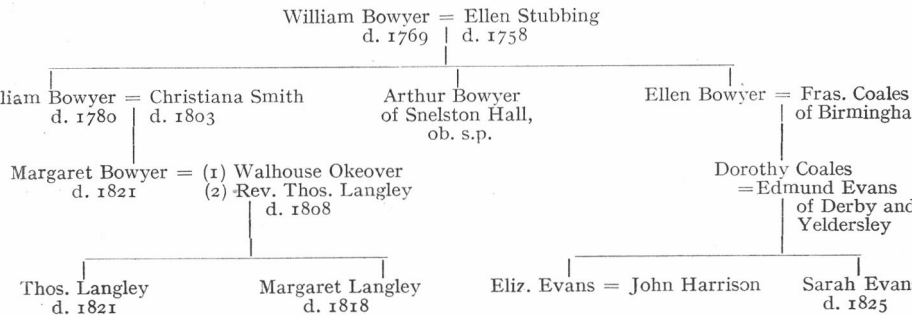
William Bowyer died in 1769 and was buried at Norbury. He left an elder son William as his heir to the manor and lands in Snelston, another son Arthur of Roston who died in 1781, and a daughter Ellen, who married Francis Coales of Birmingham. Of the second William Bowyer we know little. He was married to Christiana Smith and left only a surviving daughter, Margaret, who succeeded to the manor on the death of her father in or about 1780.

Margaret married twice. Her first marriage was to Edward Walhouse Okeover, son of Morton Walhouse — who took the name of Okeover by the will of Leake Okeover (1763) — and Catherine Okeover. Thus in name at least the manor rolls of Snelston once more after

the lapse of a century had an Okeover as lord. There was, however, no issue of this marriage, and after Walhouse Okeover's death, Margaret married again, this time to the Reverend Thos. Langley of Draycott-on-the-Moors, co. Staffs., who has been euphemistically described as "a literary character". From the nature of his works, it is doubtful if either present or future readers of this journal will be stimulated by a recital of his literary efforts.

There were two children, one a son, Thomas, who died at Montpelier in 1821 a month after his mother, and Margaret Langley, who was fifteen years of age when she died in 1818. The position then was that there were no apparent heirs of Margaret the mother except her half-brother and her half-sister, the Reverend John Langley and Ann Welch, both entitled to large legacies under her will made expectant that she would be survived by her son Thomas.

The executors of the will, Thomas Alcock of Cheadle and James Riddleston, surgeon, of Ashbourne, took up their duties and proceeded to administer the estate for whom they supposed to be the residuary legatees, i.e., the Reverend John Langley and Ann Welch. The Reverend John seems to have assumed that he was the senior heir-at-law, and entered into possession of the manor house. He was, however, acting without regard for an exceedingly astute man of business, one John Harrison² of Derby, who married Elizabeth Evans, heiress *ex parte maternâ* of William Bowyer the elder. The following sketch pedigree shews the descent more clearly than words however carefully chosen can do:—



² Derived from a family originally of Stretford, co. Lancs., the earliest traced member being John Harrison living 1655 whose two sons John and Thomas bought an estate at Bromyhurst.

There are amongst the Snelston deeds two boxes full of legal papers relating to the various causes which ensued when John Harrison asserted the claim of his wife to the Bowyer estate and the manor of Snelston. Mostly they pertain to a suit "Langley v. Sneyd", and arose from the marriage settlement executed in 1786 on the marriage of Walhouse Okeover and Margaret Bowyer, wherein the estates were entailed to a John Sneyd of Belmont, co. Staffs. No revocation ever having been made or steps taken to sever the entail, the descendant of this trustee, William Sneyd of Ashcomb Hall, co. Staffs., now found himself embroiled in a cause which lasted four or five years. Harrison had discovered the existence of this settlement, and persuaded Sneyd that the estates had devolved upon him for the rightful use of the heirs, now Elizabeth Harrison and her sister Sarah, who died unmarried in 1825.

More than once during the course of the various suits which were commenced the manor house changed hands, on two occasions at least forcible entry being made. The Sheriff's officer was taken to Snelston in the middle of the night to gain possession for a second time. For the solicitors it was a Roman holiday: lawyer John Brittlebank of Ashbourne rendered an account for £2,250, and that was only one of many.

The exact determination of the many cases may interest the historian of a future generation: to us the legal intricacies are of little consequence, and will be left with the fact that John Harrison and his wife took their place as the new lord and lady of the manor and proceeded to weld the lands round Snelston, Roston, Norbury and half a dozen other parishes into one great estate. The new hall was commenced in 1827 on a lavish scale which nowadays is barred to individuals.

John Harrison had a son John who died a bachelor in 1906, and a daughter Juliana Bowyer, who married her cousin Henry Stanton of Greenfield in Thelwall, co. Lancs., from whom the present lord of the manor is descended.

As a matter of record the illustration accompanying this article will give some idea of the impressiveness of

the now dismantled hall, and the notes here a more clear indication of the descent of the manor than has hitherto been readily available.

To Col. Stanton the writers would express their thanks for assistance with this article, and the appreciation of county historians will be extended for his loan of the valuable and interesting muniments for the furtherance of Derbyshire parochial history.