

THE HISTORY OF CASTLE ASHBY.¹

By R. G. SCRIVEN.

The history of Castle Ashby has already received considerable attention. Bridges wrote a sketch of it for his *History of Northamptonshire*, and Baker afterwards wrote a full and detailed account, which was published in Robinson's *Vitruvius Britannicus*. More lately Mr. S. S. Campion has written an *Historical and descriptive sketch of the Castle and Grounds, with Biographical Notices of the Northampton and Compton Peerages*, which is published by Messrs. Taylor and Son, Northampton. I now propose to give a short sketch of the early history of Castle Ashby, condensed mainly from Mr. Baker's valuable monograph; a descriptive history of the mansion and church, derived from various sources; and an account of the planting and other improvements in the garden and parks, taken from the estate accounts, and corroborated by many interesting particulars handed down by tradition, and kindly furnished to me by Lord and Lady Alwyne Compton.

Castle Ashby is first mentioned as "Asebi," in the time of Edward the Confessor, when it was rated to the value of 20s. yearly. The name of its Saxon lord is not recorded. At the time of the Domesday Survey, it was held by Hugh under the Countess Judith, to whom it was presented by her uncle William the Conqueror, together with immense estates in other parts of the country. The estates of the Countess Judith afterwards constituted the honor of Huntingdon, and on the distribution among the coheirs, consequent on the failure of the Scotch line of the earldom, the feudal service of this manor was included in the purparty of Henry de Hastings, ancestor of the Earl of Pembroke. Various owners seem to have succeeded Hugh as lord of the

¹ Read at Castle Ashby, August 2nd, 1878.

manor of "Asebi," or Esseby, but no regular order of succession can be traced until the reign of Henry III, when David de Esseby was lord. This David, according to Baker, was probably a native of, and certainly designated from, the village of which he was lord, and the village was also indebted to him for its first distinctive name, being called for some time after in legal documents by the name of Ashby David.

David de Esseby forfeited his lands in the reign of King John, for adherence to the barons; but in 1st Henry III (1217) a writ was directed to Fulke de Breaut to restore the lands of David de Assebi, on his return to fealty and the service of the king; and in 3rd Henry III (1219) he had the honour of being one of three individuals to whom the custody of the lands of his paramount lord, the late Earl David, were committed during the royal pleasure. We do not hear of him again until about 1242, when, in the Testa de Nevill, David de Esseby is certified to hold one fee in Esseby and Grendon, of the fees of the honor of Huntingdon, of the purparty of Henry Hastings. A little later he is reported to have taken part with his son Stephen in the rising of the barons against the king, and to have been, with the Earl of Gloucester, at the Battle of Lewes, where the royal army was defeated and the king taken prisoner. The next year, however, Prince Edward raised an army and defeated the barons at Evesham, after which the lands of the offending barons and their adherents were confiscated, and amongst them the lands of David de Esseby. David, however, is said to have enfeoffed Moefin, the Jew of the manor of Ashby, some time before this, who had enfeoffed Alan la Zouch and Elena his wife, so that when in 1268 the confiscated lands came to be redeemed, there were two applicants for them—Isabella, as daughter of Stephen, the son of David de Esseby (both David and Stephen having died in the meantime), and Alan la Zouch, as owner of the lands by purchase. Alan la Zouch was confirmed in the possession of the lands after considerable litigation, and died shortly after in 1269; but Elena, his wife, who was jointly enfeoffed with him in the manor, survived him for many years, and gave the manor to her younger son,

Oliver la Zouch, who in 1295 was certified to hold one fee in Esseby, and part of Grendon, in Wymersly hundred of John de Hastings. The Zouches, however, did not continue long in the possession of the manor, for early in the next century, we find it in the possession of Walter de Langton, Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, who, in 1306, had licence to embattle his mansions at Beauderset in Staffordshire, Ashby David, and elsewhere. The words of the record are "*Kernellare mansum suum*," and are interesting as giving the first hint of the castelated building which existed here at that time, and from which the parish ultimately took the name of Castle Ashby. The bishop had extensive possessions in this and other counties, and was also Treasurer of the Exchequer, in which capacity he gave offence to the Prince of Wales, who was of dissolute and expensive habits, by refusing to advance to him out of the Exchequer more than the limited weekly allowance assigned him by the king. A quarrel ensued, in which the king took the part of his minister, banished the prince from court, and would not suffer him to enter his presence until he had made satisfaction. The bishop, however, had soon cause to regret this quarrel with the heir to the throne, as on the accession of the Prince of Wales as Edward II, he went through many vicissitudes of fortune. We find him first deprived of his office, his lands seized, and himself imprisoned in Windsor Castle, and afterwards in the Tower, where he remained for four years—then again restored to favour in 1311, when he was liberated and his lands restored, and himself reappointed Treasurer of the Exchequer—and again very shortly afterwards discharged from his office by the Barons, who had become all-powerful, excommunicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and obliged to leave the country to appeal to the Pope. He died in 1321, but he had previously given the Manor of Ashby to his sister Alice, whose husband, Robert Peverel, in 9th Edward II, 1315, was certified to be lord. Her husband died, and she married Thomas Verdon, and died in 1349, leaving John Peverel, her grandson and heir, aged nineteen, who, dying in the same year, was succeeded in his inheritance by his only sister and heiress, Margaret, wife of Sir William de la Pole. At this time we have the first

mention of the name of Castle Ashby, in a deed by which "Willielmus de la Pole, miles, dominus de Castel Assheby," and Margaret his wife conveyed away the manors of Brington and Ashley. The deed is dated at Castel Assheby in 1358, but the name of Ashby David continued to be used occasionally as late as the reign of Elizabeth. The property descended in due order to John de la Pole, son of William and Margaret, and from him to his daughter and heiress, Joan, who was also Lady Cobham in right of her mother, but from this point the succession becomes complicated by a great number of marriages, Joan having five husbands, while Isabella, who as wife of John Peverel had also a claim on the property, had four. However, Isabella married for her fourth husband, Sir Gerard de Braybrooke, and Joan married for her second husband his younger brother, Sir Reginald Braybrooke, and by a joint deed dated at Ashby David, the castle and manors of Ashby and Chadstone were entailed upon the Braybrookes, by whom the property was finally sold to the family of Grey de Ruthin in 1424.

I do not propose to go particularly into the history of the next hundred years, which were for Castle Ashby merely a period of decay. The family of Grey de Ruthin had their patrimonial residence at the neighbouring village of Yardley Hastings, and allowed the old castle at Castle Ashby to fall into ruins. Their own fortune also was wasted by the heedless extravagance of their successor, Richard, third Earl of Kent, who in 1505 sold the manor and advowson of Ashby Davy to Sir John Hussey, who, in 1512, resold it with a large quantity of land adjoining to William Compton, Esq., afterwards Sir William Compton. The title was, however, disputed on the ground that Richard Earl of Kent had no right to alienate the property, and it was not until 1573 that the Comptons became peaceably and indisputably possessed of the manor which has continued in the family until the present time.

I have shown that the old castle probably fell into ruins soon after the property came into the hands of the family of Grey de Ruthin. Leland thus describes it shortly afterwards, "Almost in the middle way betwixte Wellingborow and Northampton I passed Asheby more than a mile of on the left hand, wher hath been a castle

that now is clene down, and is made but a septum for bestes."

Sir William Compton leased it in 1522 for sixty one years to George Carleton, and it is described in a survey of 1565 as "the manor and farm of Asheby David, with all the desmesne lands, whereunto pertaineth the old ruined castle and a building called le Porter's Lodge or le Gatehouse," and an enclosure called the "Castell Yarde," containing by estimation two acres of pasture worth 2s. 6d. each yearly. I may mention here that a piece of massive foundation from the corner of an old building was found in removing the earth for the new garden levels in 1860, which may have belonged to the old castle, but with this doubtful exception no trace of it remains.

The lease expired in 1583, and Baker fixes the date of the commencement of the present mansion between that time and 1589, when Henry Lord Compton died. That Henry Lord Compton began the building is certain from the following mention of it in Camden's *Britannia*, "From hence Nene maketh haste away by Castle Ashbey, where Henry Lord Compton began to build a faire stately house;" but it may possibly have been earlier than the expiration of the lease, as the arms of his first wife, Lady Frances Hastings, daughter of the Earl of Huntingdon, appear with his in the spandril of the north doorway of the western tower leading into the inner court. However this may be, the building was continued by William, the second Lord Compton, to whom it was one of the special requests of his wife, the rich heiress of Sir John Spencer, that he would "build up Ashby house." The original building consisted of three sides, and was probably complete when King James and his queen visited it in 1605, the cloisters and gallery on the south side which closes the quadrangle and some considerable portion of the east front having been designed and added by Inigo Jones a few years later. Bridges describes the building as follows: "It was finished in 1624, the sides to the north and east were designed by Inigo Jones. That on the east was originally open with cloisters to the garden, but they are now filled up. Within the quadrangle on the southern side is a cloister, and at the

east end is a handsome chapel. This wing is adorned with the family crests, many military trophies, and other ensigns of honour. At two of the corners is a high small tower, with these words, *Nisi Dominus*, at the top, and on the battlements running round the eastern side in great letters of stone, is this verse of the Psalms: *NISI DOMINVS AEDIFICAVERIT DOMVM IN VANVM LABORAVERVNT QUI AEDIFICANT EAM*, and this concludes with the date, 1624. Answering to it on the other side is a like verse." I must however take exception to Bridges' statement, that the east side was originally open with cloisters to the garden as being of doubtful accuracy. Bridges does not state from what source he derived his information, which is entirely uncorroborated by anything I have been able to discover. The appearance of arches over the windows on the east side might at the first glance give some credit to the idea, but a more close inspection will show that the mouldings of the arches are continued down the perpendiculars of the windows underneath them, without any apparent break, and there is no definite line of separation between the masonry of the piers on which the arches rest, and the wall between them, which would probably have been the case if they had been filled up at a later date. I therefore only give Bridges' statement for what it is worth.

In Colin Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*, published in 1731, is an elevation of the south front and two plans of the house. These however do not require much comment. The elevation seems to have been taken from Inigo Jones' original design for the alteration of the house, and the author does not seem to have taken the trouble to compare it with the actual state of the house, or he would have indicated that a great part of the design was never carried out. It involved not only the connecting cloister and gallery, but an almost entire reconstruction of the two wings, which however still remain in their original state. The plans show the house in very much its present state, with one important exception, that there was an open courtyard deeply recessed on the north front, which however was filled up in 1720, or ten years before the date of publication of Campbell's *Vitruvius*. I find in some old estate accounts

the following entries which refer to this alteration. October 3rd to November 21st, 1719, ten men employed "building a new bow window to the house," and again from March 1720, to February 1722, or about two years, fourteen men were employed almost constantly "building part of the north front of the house." This alteration was very skilfully made, and the masonry so carefully copied, that it would escape observation if not specially pointed out.

The next alteration of any importance was made in 1771, to the great hall. The hall had probably originally an open timber roof, and is shown in some old paintings with a high pitched gable, elevated above the rest of the building. I find, on the 1st June, 1771, some men employed in "assisting in taking down the great hall," and on the 1st December, 1772, "clearing the great hall for flooring," and in 1774 a bill was paid of £45 12s. 6d., for new roof to great hall, though the work was done most probably soon after the taking down of the old one. The new roof was made to the same level as the rest of the house, with a poor plaster ceiling under it. The ceiling has been recently taken down, and the hall is now again in process of reconstruction. The only other important alteration to the exterior was the addition of the third text, *BEATI OMNES QUI TIMENT*, &c., running round the north side, which was added by Spencer Joshua Alwyne, second Marquis, and which bears the date 1827. The house contains a large number of valuable paintings and works of art, collected by the successive noble proprietors.

The parish church, which is situated in the grounds immediately adjoining the castle, forming a charming foreground to the landscape, will be found of considerable interest to the archæologist. It consists of a nave, north and south aisles, and porches, a chancel, lady chapel, and a small embattled tower, containing five bells. It is generally considered as dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, as the feast follows that day, but Bridges says, without giving his authority, that it ought "more properly to follow Nicholas the Bishop." The north porch is the oldest part of the building, and has always been a crux to archæologists, combining, as it does, the late Norman

zigzag with the Early English dogtooth. In the opinion of Mr. Edmund Sharpe, of Lancaster, quoted in Mr. Taylor's pamphlet, the doorway is transitional, while, on the other hand, it is suggested that it was originally pure Norman, and that the dogtooth ornament has been subsequently cut upon the square mouldings of the Norman arch. However this may be, the arch is probably part of an older church at Castle Ashby or elsewhere, and was rebuilt in its present position at the time of the building of the north aisle. Over it is a parvise, with the remains of a staircase communicating with the church, in which lived, so late as 1624, according to local tradition, an old woman, who was the first to discover the fire which destroyed part of the mansion in that year. The north aisle is of the Decorated period, the windows at each end of it being singularly beautiful.¹ The small chapel at the east end of the aisle was originally separated from it by a screen, some fragments of which remained at the commencement of the present century. The remainder, and larger part of the church, the nave and chancel, with the south aisle and the tower, is in good Perpendicular work of an early period. I should here notice that the small niche in the wall of the south aisle is not part of the original fabric, having been brought from one of the neighbouring villages, about the beginning of the present century. In the chancel is a fine brass, which is described in Hudson's *Monumental Brasses of Northamptonshire*. It represents the figure of an ecclesiastic, wearing a cope, and bearing on his breast the arms, a saltire, on a chief a lion passant; on the cope are the figures of ten saints, with their emblems and names written in Gothic characters—on the right side, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Andrew, St. Nicholas, and St. Lawrence; and on the left, St. Anna, St. Catherine, St. Margaret, St. Mary Magdalene, and St. Elena.

Mr. Hudson notes that it had originally four shields, one at each corner of the slab, and was surrounded by a marginal inscription, all of which, however, have been abstracted, and the figure alone remains in perfect preservation, to testify to the pristine beauty of the whole. The

¹ The eastern window has lately been filled up with stained glass, representing

the Ascension, painted by Lady Marian Alford.

loss of the inscription is the more to be regretted, as it would possibly have thrown some light upon the date of the building. The figure is identified by the arms as that of William Eyremyn, who was rector of the parish from 1367 to 1401, and I would venture to suggest that the Perpendicular part of the church may have been completed during his long incumbency, and that the brass was laid in the chancel partly in commemoration of the event.

On the floor of the Lady Chapel is a very interesting monumental effigy of early date, which is very fully described in Hartshorne's *Recumbent Monumental Effigies of Northamptonshire*, and is attributed by Mr. Hartshorne to David de Esseby, who has been already mentioned as lord of the manor in the early part of the thirteenth century. The effigy, which is that of a knight in a closely fitting suit of ring mail, carved in highly polished Purbeck marble, originally lay on an altar tomb under the arch between the chancel and the Lady Chapel, but was removed to its present position when the church was restored. The church also contains some very beautiful modern monuments. The earliest, in memory of Margaret, wife of Spencer the second Marquis, who died in 1830 is by Tenerani of Rome, as is also the fine angel figure under the tower arch, erected in memory of Spencer, second Marquis, who died in 1851, by his son the late Marquis of Northampton. The very beautiful monument which is placed under a recessed arch in the wall of the north aisle in memory of Lady Margaret Leveson Gower, is by Baron Marochetti, and was one of his latest works.

The church, which has recently been very completely restored, also contains the fine oak pulpit which was very probably designed by Inigo Jones.

Having now described the principal objects of interest to the student of architecture in Castle Ashby, a brief sketch shall be given of the various alterations which have been made from time to time in the gardens and park surrounding the mansion. Although the house was finished in 1624, it seems hardly likely that much progress was made in laying out the grounds, owing to the disturbed state of the country from the civil war which broke out soon afterwards. The Comptons suffered much

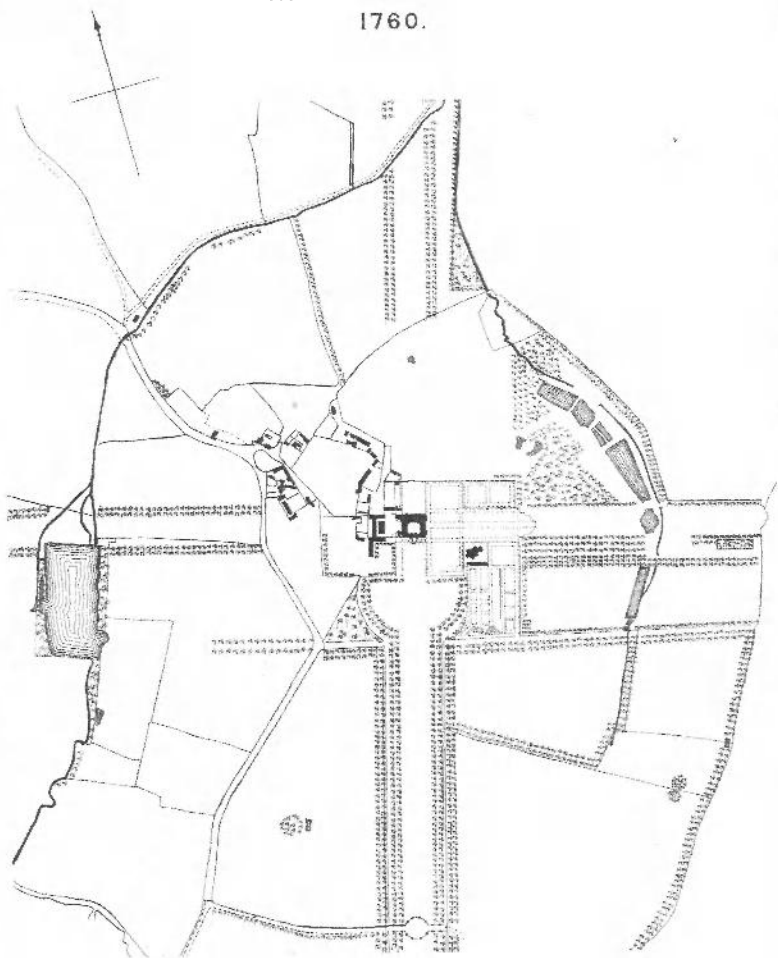
in the royal cause, of which they were ardent supporters, and seem at that time and for some years after the restoration to have made their chief residence at Compton Wynyates, where they rebuilt the church in 1663. We find them, however, returning to Ashby towards the end of the century, and, in common with many of the land-owners of the time, inspired with the love of improvement, which the publication of Evelyn's *Silva* in 1664 had done so much to promote. Evelyn himself visited Castle Ashby in 1688, and gives an amusing account of his visit, which does not seem to have been a pleasant one. He was staying with Lady Spencer, who drove him over from Althorp. He says, "My lady carried us to see Lord Northampton's seat, a very strong large house, built with stone, not altogether modern. They were enlarging the garden, in which was nothing extraordinary, except the iron gate opening into the park, which indeede was very good worke, wrought in flowers painted with blue and gilded. There is a noble walk of elms towards the front of the house by the bowling greene. I was not in any roome of the house besides a lobby looking into the garden, where my Lord and his new Countesse entertained the Countesse and her daughter, the Countesse of Arran, with so little good grace and so dully that our visite was very short, and so we returned to Althorp, 12 miles distant." This was in the time of George, fourth Earl of Northampton, who was under age when he succeeded his father in 1681. The "noble walk of elms," of which Evelyn speaks, is no part of the present avenue, which was not then planted. George, fourth Earl, did a great deal for the improvement of the place, and I am able from the estate accounts, which were very completely kept, to give exact details of the employment of the labourers.

The great avenue was originally a very fine example. It had four rows of trees on each side for the greater part of the distance, and the lines were planted with limes and elms alternately. The two outer rows have been almost entirely cut away, and the limes, with the exception of six, have been cut out of the inner rows, so that only the elms remain. Besides the principal avenue, three others were planted in the following years, 1702,

1706, and 1709. In 1701 the men were employed in "making a new pond in Parke," and in 1708-9 levelling and walling new kitchen gardens, greenhouse gardens, and a bowling green, which formed part of a great garden extending down the park far beyond the boundaries of the present flower garden, and of which the foundations now remain. Another new pond was made in 1718-19, and in 1723 we have a very interesting entry of seven men "taking up chesnuts in the nursery and planting in Park," which are probably the great horse-chesnuts now standing. It may be interesting to state that the wages of masons and carpenters at this time were 14d. per day; of labourers, 8d.; wheat, a luxury, was about 30s. per quarter; barley, 16s.; beans, 16s.; oats, 12s.; butter was 5d. a pound, and eggs 4d. a dozen.

After the death of Lord Northampton in 1727 the work came to a pause, and his successors seem to have been satisfied with keeping up what had been already done. In 1760, a very complete survey was made of the parish with an admirable map. From this it will be seen that the four great avenues extended south, east, west and north, with a series of small ponds rather formal in outline. This plan was probably made preparatory to the next great change which was begun about this time either by Charles, seventh Earl of Northampton, who died in 1764, or by his immediate successor, Spencer, eighth earl, from the plans, and under the management of Lawrence Brown, well known as Capability Brown. At this time the old walled garden was entirely swept away, the two ponds known as the Park Pond and the Menagerie Pond, were made out of the small ponds already referred to, and the whole of the plantation walks surrounding the park were laid out and planted. It is recorded that the next heir to the property, Charles, ninth Earl and first Marquis, who was born in 1760, was forbidden when a boy to jump over the great cedar tree which now stands in the plantation. The work of improvement however came to a sudden termination owing to the embarrassment caused by the expense attending the great election of 1767-8, in which Lord Northampton was one of the principal movers. "Capability" Brown was paid for his work by the gift

A PLAN
OF THE PARISH OF
CASTLE ASHBY
TAKEN IN THE YEAR
1760.



of a manor, one of many lost to the family at that time, and amongst the papers at Castle Ashby is a curious memorandum of land at Fenny Compton conveyed to "Lawrence Brown, Taste, esquire, in return for taste," by Spencer Lord Northampton.

Lord Northampton went abroad soon after, and resided for the remainder of his life in Switzerland, and the trustees in whom the property was vested had enough to do to make both ends meet, without undertaking any expenses which were not absolutely necessary. Nothing of any consequence was, therefore, done until the beginning of the present century, when Charles, 9th Earl and 1st Marquis of Northampton, came to the possession of the estate. He began the series of ponds extending along the north side of the park, and planted a great deal of timber in that direction. This work was also continued by his son, Spencer Joshua Alwyne, 2nd Marquis, by whom it was completed in its present form. The immediate surroundings of the mansion, however, remained as they were left by Capability Brown, until the accession to the property of Charles Douglas, the 3rd and late Marquis of Northampton, to whom the place owes much of its magnificence. He laid out the beautiful gardens, which, rising terrace above terrace, form so fitting a basement for the house; and the arrangement of the flower beds is mainly from his own design. He also brought from Rome the ironwork, which was made into the handsome gates facing the great avenue. He made a new kitchen garden at a greater distance from the house, and on the site of the old kitchen garden he laid out a beautiful winter garden, surrounded by choice shrubs, and adorned by new greenhouses, one of which is probably one of the finest buildings of the kind in the kingdom. He made new waterworks, those completed in 1700 having become insufficient. He also laid out and planted the new park near the station, and made a great number of other improvements on the estate, which will furnish much material for the future historian.