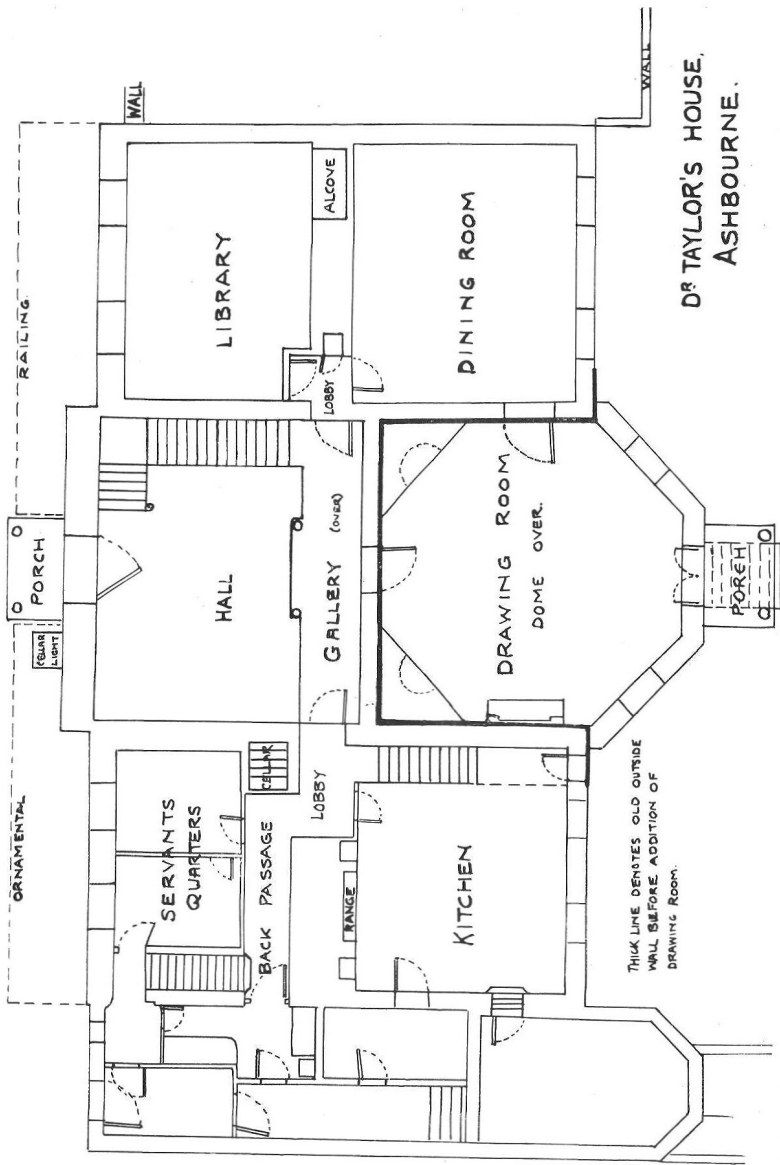


CHURCH STREET.



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The Mansion, Ashbourne.

By E. A. SADLER, M.D.

THE Mansion, Ashbourne, is of interest both to the archæologist and to the Johnsonian. Its archæological interest is due mainly to the additions made to the original Jacobean house by Robert Adam; and it appeals to Johnsonians as the residence of Dr. Taylor, the intimate friend of Dr. Samuel Johnson. A portrait of Dr. Taylor is reproduced as plate IX.

The house was built in or about the year 1685 by Benjamin Taylor, an Ashbourne attorney. He died in 1690 and by his last will left his "new house, the Mansion" to his wife for her life, and after her death to his son Thomas. The site of the house on the south side of Church Street near to the church and opposite the Elizabethan Grammar School built in 1585, was previously occupied by a humbler dwelling, the residence of the priest who served the Chantry of the Holy Cross in the parish church of Ashbourne.

The Mansion consisted at this period of the body of the house facing Church Street and running from east to west. At each end of this central portion was a wing projecting into the garden and between the wings a small court-yard (see plan). Windows blocked with brickwork, which overlooked the little court from the rooms and the corridor on both the first and second floors, can still be seen. There was a third floor consisting of six rooms and a large landing contained chiefly in the high-pitched roof.

The house, as we have seen, passed from Benjamin Taylor to his eldest son, Thomas, who was also an Ashbourne attorney and died in 1731. He bequeathed it to his eldest son John, the John Taylor who is chiefly noted as the life-long friend of Dr. Johnson, a friendship which began in their school-days at Lichfield. Taylor, who was eighteen months younger, followed Johnson to Oxford, though not to the same college. He became a Master of Arts in 1742 and a Doctor of Laws in 1752, after which time he was always known as Dr. Taylor. It was his intention to follow the profession of his father and grandfather, but he soon gave up the idea, and sometime between 1736 and 1740 was admitted to Holy Orders, and in 1740 became rector of Market Bosworth in Leicestershire. In the following years he acquired various other preferments, which he held in plurality; but he does not appear to have resided in any parish of which he was incumbent, or to have spent much time in his various parishes. In fact he generally lived in Ashbourne, where he spent his time breeding cattle, horses, deer, and bull-dogs. He held an important social position in the town and was known in the neighbourhood as the 'King of Ashbourne.' He was never vicar of Ashbourne, but he occasionally occupied the pulpit of the parish church, where he is said to have preached sermons composed for him by Dr. Johnson; certainly the sermons he left behind him at his death, which were published sometime afterwards, bear pronounced evidence of the pompous style of Johnson. Dr. Taylor had an income of £7,000 a year, a princely sum in those days; and as he was fond of pomp and display, he decided, among other things, to enlarge and embellish the modest Jacobean home of his ancestors; and the presence of the famous architect, Robert Adam, in the neighbourhood presented an opportunity which he was not slow to seize upon.

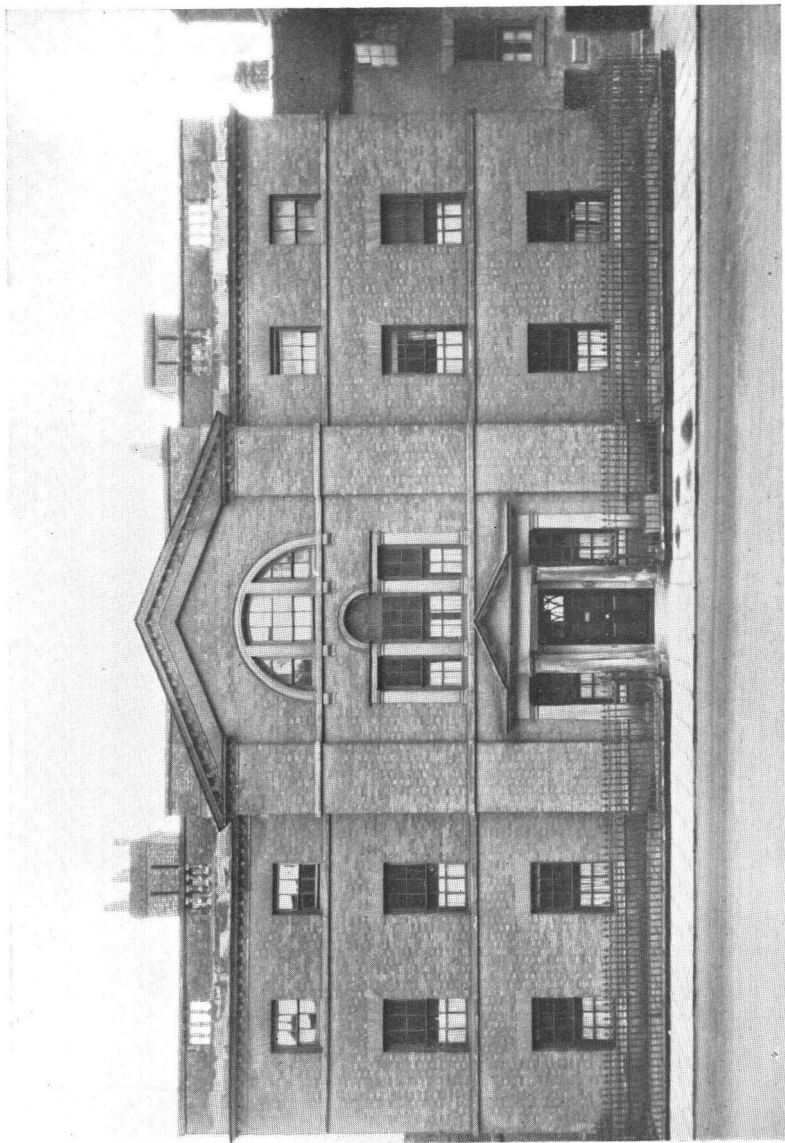


PLATE II.—STREET FRONT OF THE MANSION, ASHBOURNE,
built by Robert Adam, 1761-3, to hide the Jacobean structure of the original house.



PLATE III.—GARDEN FRONT OF THE MANSION, ASHBOURNE,
showing the Octagon Drawing-room and Portico built by Robert Adam, 1761-3. This view shows the
Jacobean gables of the original house.

Robert Adam had been engaged by Sir Nathaniel Curzon (who during the progress of the work became Lord Scarsdale) to enlarge and rebuild Kedleston Hall. The work was begun in the latter part of 1761 and completed by the end of 1763. These were the years when the Adam additions were made to the Mansion and they constitute a beautiful example of the work of this illustrious architect. The details are typical of Adam architecture, and show many of the same features that are seen at Kedleston, on a smaller scale of course, but not less beautiful or characteristic.

The additions which Robert Adam made to the old house may be grouped under four main headings. Firstly, the erection of an octagonal drawing room; secondly, the gutting of the central part of the north side of the old house and the building of a large entrance hall rising to the height of two storeys; thirdly, the building of a massive façade of red brick in front of the old house; and fourthly, various improvements in the dining room and bedrooms.

THE OCTAGON DRAWING ROOM is, perhaps, the most beautiful feature of the house. It measures 24 feet in each direction and has also a height of 24 feet. There is no room above, and the ceiling is surmounted by a dome. The eight sections of the ceiling are covered with a beautiful moulded design, and at the central point where the eight sections meet is a gilded sun with streamers of gold 4 ft. in diameter. The consoled cornice is bold and finely moulded, each of the eight sides being supported by fifteen gilded corbels (see plate VIII).

On the south-east, south and south-west sides of the octagon are three windows looking into the garden, and the central window opens on to a flight of steps, at each side of which is a stone balustrade, the whole canopied with a stone portico supported on Doric columns (plate III). The panelled shutters have several strings of

ornamental mouldings, and they carry the original door furniture (knobs, etc.) supplied by Adam.

The fire-place in the west side of the room has a finely carved Adam mantelpiece of white marble (plate VIII). On the east and north sides of the room are doorways, the easterly one communicates with the dining-room and the northerly one opens into the hall. Each door has three tiers of panels, and the panels are richly ornamented with the egg-moulding and with the door-furniture of the Adam period.

The N.E. and N.W. walls have large alcoves with circular heads so often associated with the work of the Adam brothers. They originally contained statuary. A cornice of wood ornamented with the same mouldings as the doors and shutters runs round the room on a level with the sills of the windows; and the floor of the room is of wide polished oak boards.

From the central point of the ceiling, out of the great gilded sun, hung the crystal chandelier which at the visit of Johnson in 1777 gave rise to the incident described in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Taylor suggested that, as the next day was Johnson's birthday, the chandelier should be lit up in his honour—a suggestion which drew from Johnson the curt rejoinder that he "would not have the lustre lighted the next day."

THE ENTRANCE HALL, which rises to the height of two storeys, like the entrance hall and saloon at Kedleston, has many beautiful Adam features. The staircase of stone (plate IV) with an ornamental wrought-iron balustrade, with cast-iron rosettes and other decorations, begins at the N.E. corner of the hall and is carried up the east side to terminate in a balcony running along the south wall, forming a landing, which is bounded by a continuation of the iron balustrade of the stairs. The centre of the balustrade until recent years carried the emblazoned shield of arms of the Taylor family. The

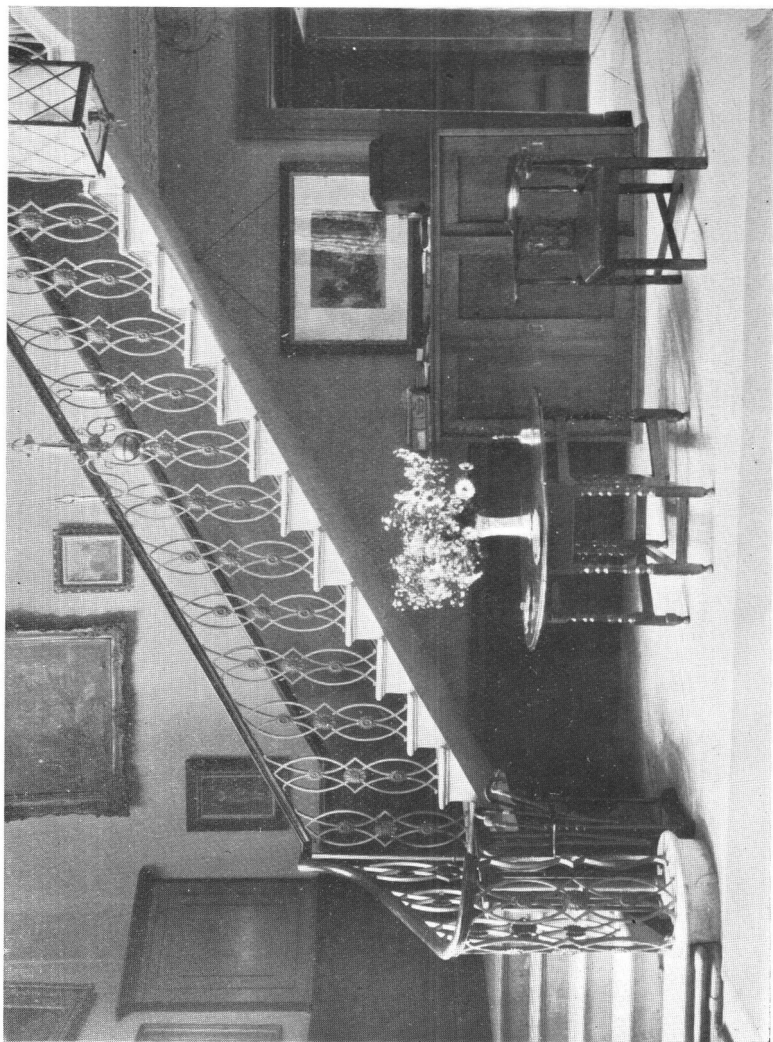


PLATE IV.—THE HALL OF THE MANSION, ASHBOURNE,
as reconstructed by Robert Adam in 1761-3. Note the light and graceful wrought-iron banisters.



PLATE V.—PART OF THE HALL AT THE MANSION, ASHBOURNE,
showing one of the alabaster columns and the Adam fireplace.

balcony is supported by two massive fluted columns of Derbyshire alabaster with moulded bases and beautifully carved Ionic capitals. The ceiling is ornamented with light and delicate festoons of plaster work, surrounding a central medallion, $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. in diameter, in which is a painting representing *The Rape of Ganymede* (plate VI). The painting is the handiwork of Antonio Zucchi, one of the artists whom Robert Adam had brought from Italy to assist him in his work. Zucchi eventually married Angelica Kauffmann who was the more famous of the two Italian artists who painted for the Adam brothers.

The hall has a cornice even more elaborately moulded than that of the drawing-room, and there are moulded medallions, shields and figures on the wall over the doorways. There are also two of the characteristic Adam alcoves, one on each side of the drawing-room door, which is in the centre of the south wall, beneath the stone balcony and between the alabaster columns that support it (plate V). There is a large open fireplace containing the original Adam grate and surmounted by one of the beautiful Adam mantelpieces of white marble. The bas-relief upon the central tablet is carved to represent the seaborne trade of Britain with figures of Britannia and the British lion.

The front or NORTHERN FACADE of the house in the classical style, adapted by the Adam brothers to their own designs, is plain but imposing. Its plain stern surface is relieved by the stone facings of the central windows, by a parapet with stone balustrades which conceals the gables of the high pitched roof of the original house, and by the Doric stone portico over the front door (plate II). A portion of the pavement in front of the house is enclosed by an iron paling which is of interest in that the date of its erection is mentioned by Johnson in one of his letters to Queeney Thrale, that have lately been discovered at Bowood by Lord Lansdowne.

Writing from Ashbourne on Sept. 4th, 1777 he says, "Dr. Taylor has put a very elegant iron palisade before his house."

THE DINING-ROOM in the south-east wing of the old house was not structurally altered by Adam, but the panelling of the room dates from that period, and was probably part of the alterations to the house undertaken at that time. The panels themselves are of pine set in a moulded framework of oak, but all has been painted at some period or other. There is a moulding round the cornice and along the beams which is probably also part of the decoration by Adam, as it contains the same ornamentation as the other rooms; and a marble chimney-piece is certainly his work. It has been executed in white marble with a delicately carved medallion in the centre and smaller carvings at the ends, with an inlay of red and yellow breccia (plate VII).

There is a second staircase at the west end of the house leading from the servants' quarters to the top of the house. This is of black oak with balustrade roughly carved by hand, evidently of the same period as the original house; and I am inclined to think that it may be the chief staircase of the old house removed from the hall to make room for the more imposing stairs and balcony of Robert Adam.

Though the library and bedrooms show no elaborate decoration as do the other rooms, they all have the old hob-grates, and three of them have Adam mantel-pieces, though with simpler carving than those in the main rooms. The chimney-piece in the chief bedroom is inlaid with a black veined marble and light yellow breccia.

Even in the garden Adam's handiwork occurs, in the form of a well-designed classical arbour which has always been called Dr. Johnson's Summer House.

Any account of the Mansion would be incomplete without some notice of the important personages who have

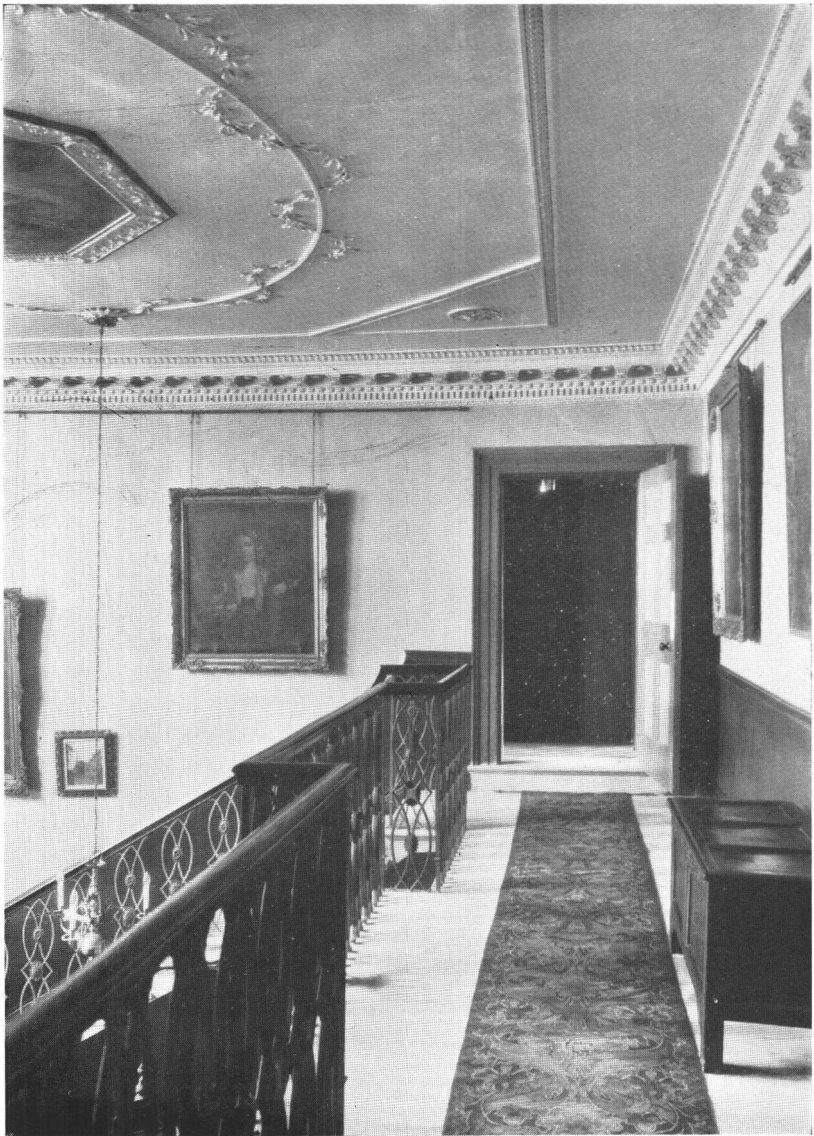


PLATE VI.—THE LANDING IN THE HALL, AT THE
MANSION, ASHBOURNE,
showing part of the ceiling painting by Antonio Zucchi, 1761-3.

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PLATE VII.—THE DINING ROOM AT THE MANSION, ASHBOURNE,
showing the Adam mantelpiece and the panelling put in by Adam 1761-3.

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been associated with it; and a brief record of the friends of Dr. Taylor also will not be without interest.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, of course, holds the first place. As the old school-fellow and intimate friend of Dr. Taylor, he paid many visits to him at Ashbourne. Johnson used to make what he called his annual visit to the midland counties, which included Oxford and his birthplace Lichfield, as well as Ashbourne; and he did not miss many years. At Lichfield he would usually be met, as Boswell described, by "an equipage properly suited to a wealthy well-beneficed clergyman: Dr. Taylor's large roomy postchaise drawn by four stout plump horses and driven by two steady jolly postilions." The oak stalls which accomodated these four stout plump horses still exist in the large and well-built stables at the Mansion.

The first of Johnson's visits to Ashbourne took place in 1738 when he made the acquaintance of Miss Hill Boothby, Mrs. FitzHerbert and the Meynells of Bradley. The last was in 1784, when, weary with a long illness, he came to Ashbourne in search of health; and though some slight improvement occured there, he was unable to rally, and died on December 13th barely two months after his return to London.

On some of these visits he was accompanied by his London friends. In 1774, on his way into North Wales with Mrs. Thrale, he stayed ten or eleven days at Dr. Taylor's. In 1776 James Boswell made the annual tour with him, but on this occasion only one night was spent in Ashbourne as Johnson had received news of the death of Mrs. Thrale's son and heir, and decided to hurry back to town. Boswell's impressions of the house and his host are recorded in *The Life*. He says "I found my friend's school-fellow living upon an establishment perfectly corresponding with his substantial creditable equipage: his house, garden, pleasure-ground, table, in short everything good, and no scantiness appearing . . .

Dr. Taylor had a good estate of his own, and good preference in the church, being a prebendary of Westminster and a Rector of Bosworth. He was a diligent Justice of the Peace, and presided over the town of Ashbourne, to the inhabitants of which I was told he was very liberal; and as proof of this it was mentioned to me, he had the preceding winter distributed two hundred pounds among such of them as stood in need of his assistance. He had consequently considerable political interest in the county of Derby, which he employed to support the Devonshire family; for, though the schoolfellow and friend of Johnson, he was a Whig. I could not perceive in his character much congeniality of any sort with that of Johnson, who, however, said to me 'Sir, he has a very good understanding.' His size and figure, and countenance, and manner, were that of a hearty English squire, with the parson superinduced: and I took particular notice of his upper-servant, Mr. Peters, a decent grave man, in purple clothes and a large white wig, like the butler or major-domo of a bishop . . . A few of Dr. Taylor's neighbours were his guests that day."

In the next year, Boswell joined Johnson at Ashbourne, and this time his visit extended from September 14th to September 24th; an account of it and of all Johnson's discourses on that memorable occasion is fully recorded in *The Life*.

We will now make the acquaintance of Dr. Taylor's neighbours and circle of friends—the people who met Johnson at Taylor's fireside or at his well-loaded table: and we are now able to do so by reason of the recent discovery at Malahide Castle, Co. Dublin of a large number of Boswell's papers and diaries in which a list of these people is given.

First of all there is the Rev. Wm. Langley, Master of Arts, Head-master of the Grammar School opposite. He was constantly at loggerheads with his governors and



PLATE VIII.—THE OCTAGON DRAWING-ROOM,
built by Robert Adam, 1761-3, at the Mansion, Ashbourne.

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his under-master. Though he and Taylor did not get on well together, as appears by several of Johnson's letters, he was invited to meet Johnson at the Mansion, and Johnson visited him at the school, and in 1774 he escorted Johnson and Mrs. Thrale to Dovedale. He had been appointed head-master in 1752, and as early as 1754 we find the under-master, Mr. Wilson, complaining to the governors of "the head-school-master's various and frequent interruptions of his priviledges (*sic*) as under-master and particularly that of Tuesday last of breaking a table placed in the School for the improvement of the Schollars (*sic*) in Writing and Accounts, and of forcibly throwing it into the School passage belonging to the under-master and likewise for breaking down the fence between their respective Gardens, and doing several other Trespasses of the like Nature." (*Extract from the minute book of the Governors of the Grammar School*). For this offence Mr. Langley's salary was reduced by £10 a year, and the amount added to the under-master's. But the trouble still continued and later in the same year the governors ordered that Mr. Langley "be deprived and removed out of his place as School-master, and no more wages paid to him." Apparently Mr. Langley defied the decree of the governors, for he stayed on; and though new under-masters came and went, he continued to quarrel with them, and they to make frequent complaints to the governors; so that in 1794 when the trouble still went on and the number of scholars had fallen to one, an appeal was made to the bishop of the diocese. There is no record in the minute book of the decision of the bishop, and Mr. Langley continued to hold his post until his death in 1795.

Next there are Mr. and Mrs. John Alsop who, I think, lived at what is now called Vine House in Church Street. John Alsop, like his father before him, was a governor of the grammar school and a Justice of the Peace. He was

one of the executors of Dr. Taylor's will under which he inherited 500 guineas and the doctor's gold watch. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale paid him a visit on July 18th, 1774. He died in 1804 at the age of 78.

Another of Dr. Taylor's friends was Robert Longdon, "a civil and rather spruce squire, intelligent enough. He has an estate of his own, and gets £500 a year as a Cheese-factor." He also was a governor of the grammar school, and the other executor of Dr. Taylor's will.

Next on Boswell's list is Mr. James Davenport, formerly landlord of *The Blackamoor's Head Inn* at Ashbourne. This inn ceased to exist as a separate establishment early in the nineteenth century and became incorporated with *The Green Man*. Davenport died in 1792 at the age of seventy-seven.

Then there are Mrs. and Miss Fletcher "an ugly widow and a fat old maid. Both good cheerful women" according to Boswell. The Fletchers were a Thorpe family and the Rev. Thomas Fletcher, who was probably the husband of Mrs. Fletcher, was one of the under-masters of the Ashbourne Grammar School and would live in the second master's house at the school in Church Street. Mrs. Fletcher is mentioned in one of Johnson's published letters; he seems to have taken a fancy to a coffee-pot which she possessed.

Next is Edward Leigh referred to by Boswell as "Counsellor Leigh, more Squire than Counsellor." He was a mercer in Ashbourne: his death on November 22nd, 1809, at the age of 84 is recorded on a mural tablet in the nave of Ashbourne Church.

Of Miss Packer, "a little shrivelled old maid with a pretty good fortune whom Dr. Johnson used to plague with insisting to be in her will for a Legacy. A perpetual joke," I can find no mention in the Ashbourne records or church registers; nor am I able to identify "Two eminent Tanners," who are mentioned in Boswell's list.

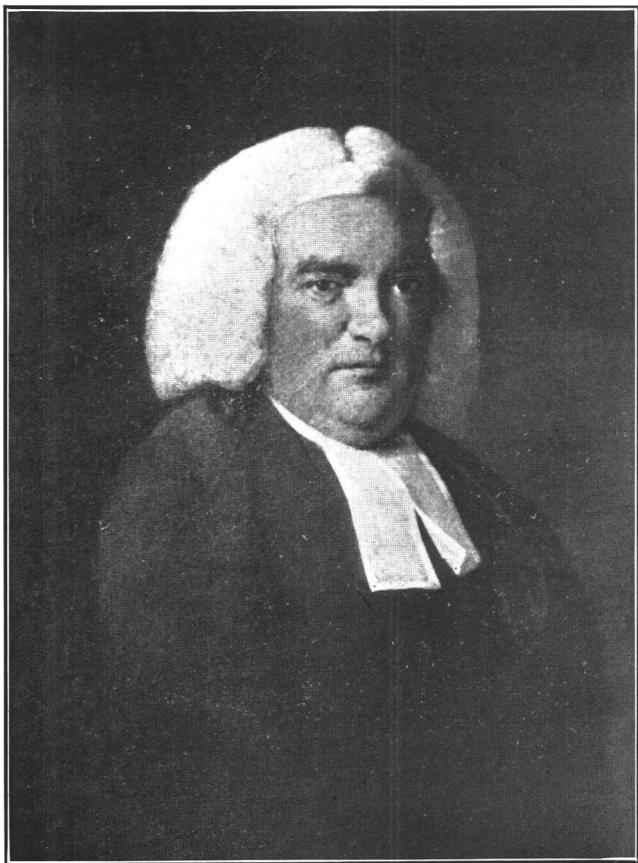


PLATE IX.—PORTRAIT OF DR. TAYLOR,
of the Mansion, Ashbourne, friend of Dr. Johnson.

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There were several tanneries and many tanners in Ashbourne at that time: Ashbourne was famous for its tanneries until the middle of the nineteenth century.

The last name on the list, and perhaps the most interesting of Dr. Taylor's friends, is Mr. Brian Hodgson, who lived in the large house nearly opposite the Mansion and next to the grammar school, until a few years ago the residence of Dr. Alexander Boswell a descendant of James Boswell's brother John. Brian Hodgson was first of all landlord of *The George*, Stamford, Lincs., and afterward of *The Old Hall*, Buxton, whence he retired to live in Ashbourne some time before 1767. He is the founder of a well-known county family, the Hodgsons, of Clopton Hall, and one of his descendants was Brian Houghton Hodgson, a noted Indian administrator at the beginning of the 19th century. The first Brian had a large family: his second daughter Margaret married in 1765 the Rev. Beilby Porteous, chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who afterwards became successively Bishop of Chester and of London; his fourth daughter Elizabeth became the wife of Edward Leigh already mentioned.

Most of these friends of Dr. Taylor's were no doubt very worthy persons; but their intellectual, if not their social, standing must have compared unfavourably with the galaxy of scholars and *litterati* that belonged to *The Club*, or that met Johnson at the Mitre Tavern—Goldsmith, Reynolds, Burke, Gibbon, Burney, and Garrick. Nor was Taylor himself a man of great intellectual attainments or conversational powers, "his talk was of bullocks." Can it be wondered then that Johnson in his letters of later date often complained of the weariness of the life at Ashbourne, the heaviness of the time and his solitude? "I have no company" he writes to Boswell on July 26th, 1784: "the Doctor is busy in his fields and goes to bed at 9," and again "I have little company and amusement. I live in dismal solitude."

This necessarily brief and sketchy account of Johnson's association with the Mansion may aptly conclude with a repetition of the pious wish for the future of the house, which Johnson sent to Taylor. The inscription has recently been carved on the lintel of the front door:

Stet domus haec donec testudo perambulet orbem
Ebibat et donec fluctus formica marinos.

A truly Johnsonian sentiment !

(The photographs from which the plates that illustrate this paper are reproduced were kindly made for me by Mr. H. Hinge, Photographer, Ashbourne; the plan was drawn by my son Mr. Ralph E. Sadler, A.M.Inst.C.E.).