

ASTON CLINTON MANOR HOUSE: FROM MOATED SITE TO CLASSICAL MANSION

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Aston Clinton House is remembered as a large, classical building owned, by Sir Anthony de Rothschild, which was demolished to make way for the Green Park Training Centre. Little is known about the house which Sir Anthony purchased, the role of the Duke of Buckingham in its fortunes, or of the existence of a former manor house. This article investigates the evidence for the earlier manor house close to the church and its later role as a farm house. The author puts forward a building date towards the end of the 18th century for the new manor house and suggests that the new house was not demolished after the Duke of Buckingham purchased the estate from the Lake family in 1836 or even when Sir Anthony moved into it in 1853. The author concludes by considering which part of the Rothschild mansion was the original house of the Lakes.

BACKGROUND

Aston Clinton lies beside the A41 (formerly the Sparrows Herne Turnpike Road from Bushey Heath (Watford) to Aylesbury). (Fig. 1) The village, and most of the park of the former Aston Clinton House to the south of it, stands on the level, water-retaining surface of the Gault Clay. However the south-eastern margin of the park, where it was bounded by the Wendover Arm of the Grand Junction Canal, stands on the beginning of the gentle rise into the Chiltern Hills. The church of St Michael and All Angels is between the A41 and the park.

The Lord of the Manor from 1760–1808 was Gerard Lake (1744–1808) (Fig. 2). Lake had a long military career in which he saw service in America, Ireland and India. He was elected as an MP for Aylesbury in 1790 and 1796. Raised to the peerage in 1804, as a baron, and in 1807 as a viscount, Lake took the title of 1st Viscount of Delhi, Leswarree and Aston Clinton. Lake was a life-long friend and confidante of the Prince of Wales and served him in many capacities including first equerry, gentleman attendant and Master of the Horse.

CHURCH FARM

The original manor house of Aston Clinton was located next door to the church of St Michael and All Angels on its south-west side. Although when

Browne Willis visited in 1749 he found no remains of a house but only part of the moat surrounding it,¹ later evidence suggests that a house was standing on the site in the 18th century.

Shortly before Gerard Lake married Elizabeth Barker, in 1770, an annuity was secured to provide for her should she survive him. This deed lists all the properties and land in Aston Clinton, owned by Lake, including the manor house, with barns, stables, orchards, gardens, yards, backsides and dovecotes.² At the time of the enclosure of the parish's remaining open fields in 1814, the working map showed a new mansion house to the south east of the church close to the canal. The old manor house was still in existence, shown within the remains of a moat, beside the church (Fig. 3). Confirmation of this change in the status of the old house came from a description in a deed of 1829: 'The manor house of Aston Clinton now used as a farm house called Church Farm'³. Bryant's map of 1825 marked the house as Church Farm.⁴

In a sale catalogue of the estate in 1836⁵ Church Farm is described as brick-built and tiled with five bedrooms, parlour and farm and back kitchens, pantry, dairy and garden together with a farm yard, granary and dovecote and stabling for eight horses. It was let to Messrs. Thomas and John Goodson. In a later sale of the estate in 1848 Church Farm was let to Joseph and Richard Ballard but the description of the house remains unchanged.⁶

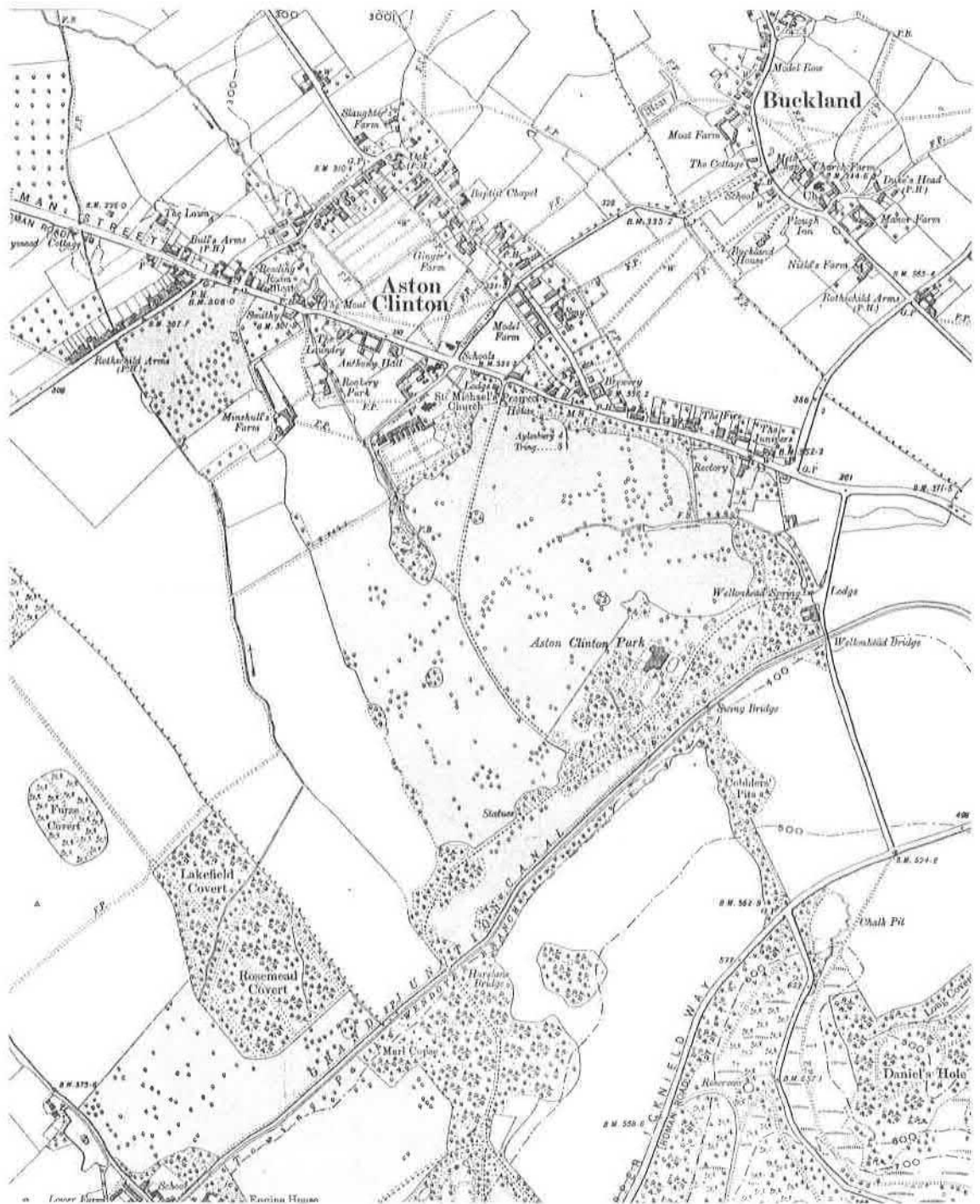


FIGURE 1 Aston Clinton Park in its setting. From Ordnance Survey map, 2nd edition, 1900. Buckinghamshire sheet XXXIV. (By courtesy of the Buckinghamshire Record Office).



FIGURE 2 Gerard Lake, 1st Viscount Lake 1744-1808. Ridley & Blood after S.Drummond. Stipple engraving for *European Magazine*, 1808. (By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery).

On a plan of 1861 the moat surrounding Church Farm had been filled in.⁷ Alice de Rothschild's 1863 drawing (Fig. 4) of the view towards the church, from the grounds of Aston Clinton House, is perhaps the only surviving illustration of Church Farm. The 1877 Ordnance Survey map still shows buildings at Church Farm but by the 1900 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 1) the site had been cleared to make way for the Rothschilds' elaborate kitchen garden. The garden is described in the 1923 sale catalogue⁸ as being in a high state of cultivation and includes a fig house, a vinery and peach and cherry houses. The extensive range of glasshouses and the living quarters for staff can clearly be seen on the map. By 1931 an aerial photograph (Fig. 5) shows the outline of the now

disused kitchen garden standing on the site of Church Farm.

THE NEW MANOR HOUSE

Building date

The author has not found a definitive date for the building of the new manor house but it must lie between 1770, when Church Farm was still the manor house, and 1793 when, on the plans for the proposed navigable cut or feeder from Wendover to the summit of the Grand Junction Canal⁹ a house was marked as 'seat of General Lake' on the site of the new mansion shown on the enclosure award. It is possible that Lake had planned to build a new



FIGURE 3 Church Farm, (immediately south of church) and the new mansion house (immediately north of canal). An extract from the Enclosure Commissioners Working Map 1814, surveyed by John King of Winslow. Reduced from the scale of 3ch=1". (By courtesy of Buckinghamshire Record Office).

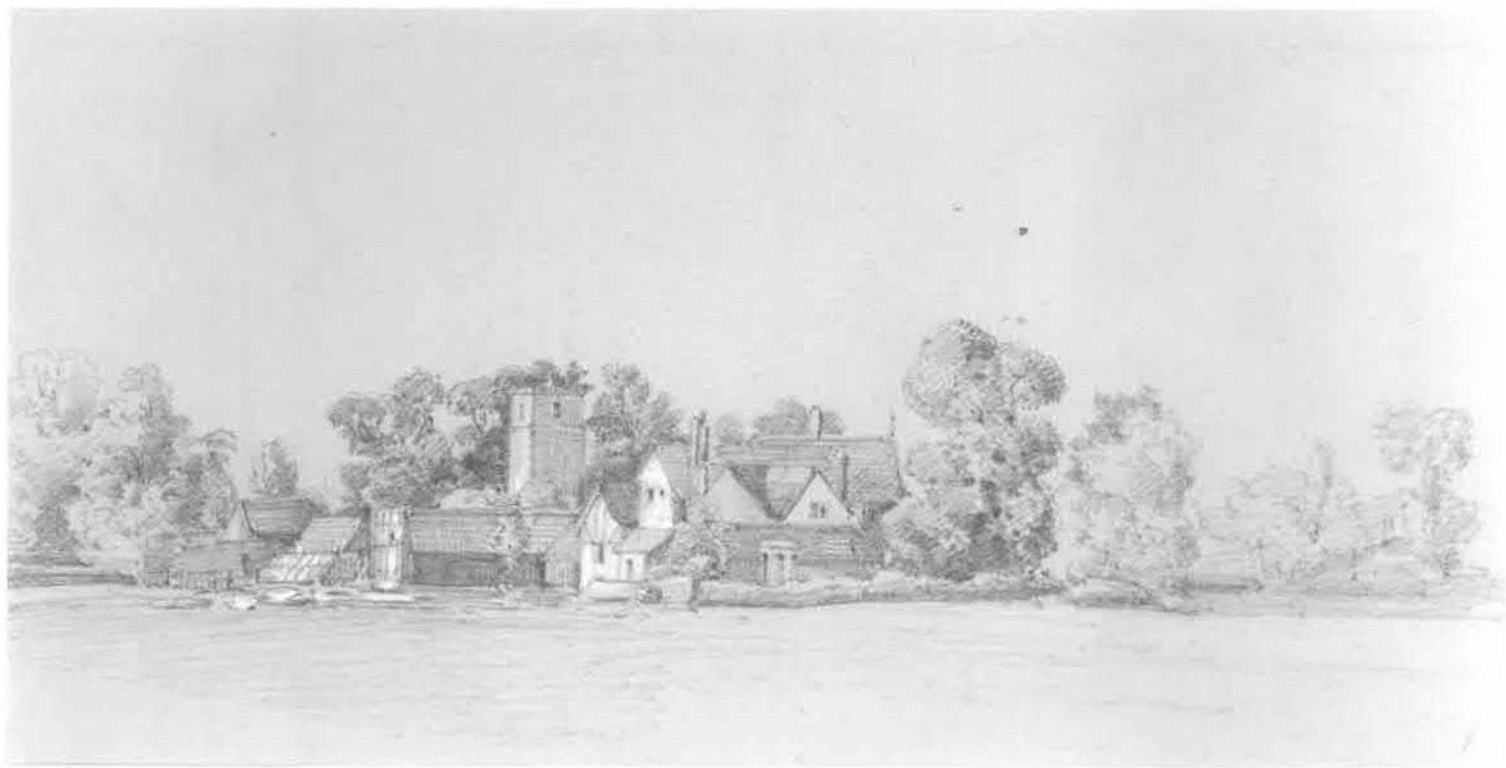


FIGURE 4 Vue du Parc, Aston Clinton – 146.1997. From Alice de Rothschild's sketchbook.1863.
(By courtesy Waddesdon Manor, Rothschild Collection (Rothschild Family Trust)).



FIGURE 5 Aerial photograph of Aston Clinton church showing the outline of the Rothschild's kitchen garden on the site of Church Farm, 1931. (By courtesy of Simmons Aerofilms)

house in 1785 when he applied to stop up a section of the lower end of the road, now known as Aston Hill, where it would have passed through the grounds of the house.¹⁰ By enclosure in 1814 the only access to the house and park was along the

private drive formed from the previously public road leading from the Turnpike road in the village (Fig. 3).

During the 1780s and early 1790s Lake was using Turrett House in Drayton Beauchamp rather

than Aston Clinton as his country residence. This may have been because the old manor house needed repair,¹¹ was too small for his large family of seven children, or for a completely different reason to be explained below. Lake's cousin, Martha Gumley, had built Turrett House around 1777 and this was conveniently close to Aston Clinton.¹² Lake was still using his cousin's house in 1791 and 1792 when an account book of wood from his woodlands shows him taking delivery of faggots there.¹³

1746

Gerard's brother, Warwick (1746–1821), was Manager of the Prince of Wales's racing stables. After a scandal over his race horse, 'Escape', in 1791¹⁴, the Prince had decided to close his Newmarket stud. He looked for an alternative training location away from the public eye and charged Warwick with the task¹⁵. However, it appears that before the 'Escape' scandal, thought had already been given to a new location. From 1789 to 1791 the account book of wood (referred to above) records that Warwick and the Prince of Wales had been taking delivery of large quantities of beech and ash at Aston Clinton. This wood could well have been used for fencing around a stud. As the Prince's connections with both Warwick and Gerard were so close it would have been appropriate for the stud to be located at Aston Clinton.

Evidence that a stud existed comes from a painting by George Garrard (1760–1825) entitled "Race horses at Aston Clinton 1791. Sketched from the Prince of Wales's stud at Aston Clinton 1791".¹⁶ No topographical features appear in the painting but it would be logical for there to be a house or lodge to accommodate the Prince and his retinue. The account book of wood records that in addition to the beech and ash, regular deliveries of faggots were made to the Prince and Warwick at Aston Clinton during 1789–1791, indicating the existence of a residence. If Warwick and the Prince were using the new mansion as a sporting residence that would be another reason why Gerard remained at Turrett House.

The period 1808–1848

After Gerard Lake's death in 1808 his son, Francis Gerard (1772–1836), inherited the title and the estate and used the house as his country residence. After his death, in 1836, the contents of the house were advertised for sale and included a well-stocked wine cellar, valuable paintings, good china

and a collection of books. Sporting activities were represented by saddles, punts, fishing nets, guns, a brace of greyhounds and a pointer.¹⁷ Francis died without heirs and the title and estate passed to his younger brother (another Warwick) (1783–1848). Warwick had a chequered career, including a court-martial and dismissal from the Navy, and so possibly for personal or financial reasons decided to sell the house and estate. The sale attracted the attention of the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos. At that time the estate was of 1,055 acres valued at £1,000 per annum, and was seen by the Duke as an investment to pay off debts. Due to the acute financial difficulties of the Duke, the purchase could not be completed until he had sold the Norton Estate in Hampshire. Acrimonious letters were exchanged between the Lake and Buckingham solicitors and it was not until 1838, after Lake had threatened to withdraw from the sale, that the purchase was finally concluded at £23,426.¹⁸

In the 1836 sale catalogue the house was described as 'A shooting box' with extensive plantations, pleasure grounds and park, with shaded walks and fish pond adjoining a timbered park. The house contained four best bedrooms and five secondary and servant's sleeping rooms. On the ground floor, there was a 'cheerful' drawing room with a bow window and a dining room. There were servants' quarters and an enclosed yard with wash-house and laundry, a double coach-house, stables and loose box. Among other buildings was a blacksmith's shop, forge and a carpenter's shop. When the Duke's son the Marquis of Chandos sold the estate in 1848 the house was described, in the sale catalogue, as a 'newly-erected and most desirable brick-built and stuccoed sporting residence'. Kelly's Directory of 1854 refers to the Duke of Buckingham having re-built the house. In his paper on Almodesham House in Amersham however Chenevix Trench warns against taking re-built too literally; he writes 'The conveyance states that the building was 'some time since new-built or re-built ... this phrase could continue to be applied to an altered house for a generation or more; it was used of Ceely House, Aylesbury, more than 50 years after it was rebuilt'.¹⁹ However the most convincing evidence came from Sir Anthony de Rothschild's daughter, Constance, who wrote that her father had been fortunate enough to find a small country house in Aston Clinton, formally the home of the Lake family, into which they moved in

1853.²⁰ Constance is unlikely to have referred to the house as the Lakes' former home if it had been a completely new house built by the Duke of Buckingham.

As no evidence has been found to support the claim that the Duke demolished the shooting box, the author suggests that he carried out repairs and made some changes to the layout of the rooms. The bedrooms and sleeping rooms described above became six principal bedrooms and three servant's rooms. It still had a 'cheerful' drawing room with a 'window to the floor' and a dining room. The only addition to the description in the 1848 sale catalogue is a portico entrance. The small-scale plans that accompany both the 1836 and 1848 catalogues show an identical scatter of buildings on the site, and in the same location as those shown on (Fig. 3). Some changes to the layout of the grounds are apparent. The 1836 plan does not show the drive down from the Turnpike but the 1848 does, terminating at the largest building.

The Rothschild era

Baron Mayer de Rothschild attended one of the many sales of the Duke of Buckingham's estates in October 1848.²¹ The Aston Clinton estate was due to be the principal property for auction at £25,000 but was withdrawn. When the estate came up for sale again in July 1849²² the Rothschilds had discussed a possible purchase within the family. They agreed however to offer no more than £26,000, as 'It is not like a fancy place' and should be treated as an investment only.²³ Yet Sir Anthony de Rothschild decided to make it his country home and, as already mentioned, finally moved into it in 1853. The family felt that the house was too small and quickly engaged the services of Sir Joseph Paxton, the architect of Mentmore, to extend it for them. In effect the work was carried out by Paxton's assistant, and future son-in-law, George Henry Stokes²⁴ and the builder was George Myers. By 1856 alterations to both the interior and exterior of the existing house had begun in order to accommodate the extensions. Alterations were made to the eaves of the old house to form new cornices; a parapet was added; the roof leaded and air flues added under the house. Chimney stacks were changed in size and position and the exterior walls were cemented. Alterations to the old porch were made, steps were

added to the outside of the drawing and dining room windows and inside the house some of the rooms were converted. The conservatory was taken down and a larger one built.²⁵ A drawing by Alice de Rothschild (Fig. 6) shows the main front of the house in the 1860s after the changes were made.

By the time the Rothschilds sold the estate in 1923 the house had grown from its humble origins to a classic mansion with seven reception rooms, billiard room, ball room, 13 principal bed and dressing rooms, 17 secondary and servants' bed rooms, four bath rooms and complete domestic offices. There was stabling for 32 horses and two lodges had been built. The sale catalogue is illustrated with pictures of the sumptuous interior of the house and the formal gardens.

The last years

After the death of Lady de Rothschild in 1910 her daughters, Annie and Constance, kept the estate going until to the 1st World War, when it was used by the Military, and finally sold it in 1923. Dr. Albert Edward Bredin Crawford purchased the house and grounds for £15,000.²⁶ He was a schoolmaster and used the house as a school for backward boys. Evelyn Waugh was a master at the school for a short time from 1925 and in his diaries referred to it as 'an inconceivably ugly house but a lovely park' and 'a house of echoing and ill-lit passages and a frightful common-room'.²⁷ The school did not prosper and by 1932 the house was on the market again. The general remarks in the sale catalogue of 1932²⁸ describe the house as eminently suited for a club, school or institution. A valuation list of 1934, updated to 1954, shows the changing fortunes of the house over the twenty years. It lists the owners as Howard Park Estate, E.K.Cole (Echo Radios), H.M. Treasury and Thames Side Development Properties Ltd. and finally Green Park Hotel.²⁹ A brochure for the Howard Park Hotel advertised 'A week-end spent in these luxurious quiet surroundings is well spent, and the hours will slip by ... broken by an occasional dance in the wonderful oak ballroom ...'.³⁰

In 1958, The Department of Transport proposed a route of a southern bypass to Aston Clinton traversing a section of the park. In part the proposal was rejected because of the environmental damage to the park.³¹ However an alternative fate for the



FIGURE 6 Main front of Aston Clinton – 146.1997. From Alice de Rothschild's sketchbook. c.1863.
(By courtesy of Waddesdon Manor, Rothschild Collection (Rothschild Family Trust)).



FIGURE 7 upper: Aston Clinton House showing the SE front (facing the canal) and the NE side. 1956. (By courtesy of English Heritage. National Monuments Record).
lower: Aston Clinton House showing the NW front (facing Aston Clinton village) and the SW side. 1956. (Both images by courtesy of English Heritage. National Monuments Record).



FIGURE 8 Aston Clinton House showing the NW front and the NE side. 1956.
(By courtesy of English Heritage. National Monuments Record).

house was not far away. Buckinghamshire County Council acquired the house and park in three lots from 1959 – 1967.³² The house was demolished and Green Park Training Centre built in its place. Today nothing remains of the former mansion; the only reminder of its existence is the balustrading which once encircled the garden at the front of the house. The wooded parkland is still there and features of the former formal gardens can be found among the undergrowth.

CONCLUSION

Photographs taken before demolition, for the National Buildings Record, (Figs. 7–8) afford a chance to look at the exterior of the house in detail and to come to some conclusion about the location of the original 18th century house. It could not have been part of the south east front (Fig. 7, upper), facing the canal, because, at that time, there was no access from that direction. On the

north west frontage, facing the village, the square extension on the right-hand side of (Figs. 7) lower and 8 was built by the Rothschilds to house the ballroom with its loggia to the Italian garden. That leaves the portion projecting forward from the conservatory on the north east corner of the house, (on the left-hand side of Figs. 7, lower, and 8) as the most likely to have been the original house. Its architecture was different to that of the rest of the building, it faced the village and would have been in the right position for the old carriage drive from the Turnpike. A large bow window opened onto a flight of steps, which, as we have seen, were added in the 1850s, (half hidden by grass in Fig. 8) out onto the grounds. In Fig. 7 upper, a projection can be seen on the north east side with a flight of steps. This may well have been the old entrance and the author suggests that it marked the extent of the 1850s house and that the remainder of that wing, coming forward to the south east front, was added by Sir Anthony.

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