

ASTON CLINTON HOUSE 1923–1932

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In an earlier paper, the author noted that in 1923 Dr. Albert Edward Bredin-Crawford purchased Aston Clinton House in order to run it as a school.¹ This paper investigates the house in the 1920s and explains why and how the Rothschild family still maintained their connection to it. Evelyn Waugh's diary of his time as a schoolmaster at the school is drawn upon. The paper follows the school through to its sudden demise in 1931 and the subsequent rather bizarre attempts by Crawford to turn the house into a country club, which led to bankruptcy.

BACKGROUND

After the death of Sir Anthony de Rothschild, in 1876, his wife, Lady de Rothschild, continued to live in Aston Clinton House until her own death in 1910. The whole estate then reverted to the Rothschild Estate and Lionel de Rothschild's three sons Nathaniel (first Lord Rothschild) of Tring Park, Alfred of Halton House, and Leopold of Ascott House, jointly inherited the interest. During the First World War the house had been used by the Commanding Officer of the Twenty-first Division, then encamped on the Halton estate. Sir Anthony's daughters Constance (Lady Battersea) and Annie Yorke remained in intermittent occupation and kept the estate going until 1923. By 1923 Lionel's three sons had died and the Hon. N. Charles Rothschild, Nathaniel's son, had inherited the estate. However he died in October 1923 and his executors were his widow Hon. Rozsika Rothschild, Hon. Francis Robert Henley and Roland Edmund Lomax Vaughan Williams, a barrister.²

Rozsika Rothschild had been dealing with her husband's affairs for some years prior to his death, due to his ill health, and amongst her concerns was the upkeep of the Aston Clinton estate. In May 1921 the Rothschilds' solicitors, Horwood & James of Aylesbury, wrote to Rozsika informing her that the Air Ministry was interested in buying Aston Clinton House, The Rookery (a small Queen Anne residence to the west of St. Michael's church), North Camp and part of the grounds but not the whole estate. Horwood & James were attempting to convince Lady Battersea that she should sell, as the upkeep was £10,000 p.a., and move to The Rookery. Lady Battersea was reluctant to move but was encouraged by the Air Ministry's interest and hoped that the house and grounds would be used as a hospital or convalescent home. Unfortunately,

due to a Treasury veto, the Air Ministry withdrew. Various other people had expressed an interest in the estate, including Lord Onslow's son-in-law; the former Rector of Weston Turville and Rev. Saville of Fenny Compton, but no sale had been transacted.³

In July 1923 the whole estate was put on the market, to be auctioned by Messrs. Farebrother and Ellis, chartered surveyors. The estate comprised about 542 acres and included the mansion and grounds, a timbered park, The Rookery, Rookery Farm, kitchen garden, weekend cottage and several other cottages to be sold either as a whole or in eight Lots.

LOT 1, (Fig. 1) which is the main concern of this paper, was listed as:

The freehold residential estate; Aston Clinton Park with 165 acres is approached by the North Drive from the village of Aston Clinton, which is situated about mid-way between Aylesbury and Tring. It is four miles south-east from the market town of Aylesbury with its stations served by the London and North Eastern, Great Western and Metropolitan Railways, about 3½ miles from Tring, three miles from Stoke Mandeville Station on the Metropolitan Railway and about 35 miles from London. The Mansion, which is immediately surrounded by well-wooded grounds, stands in a finely-timbered park which is approached by two carriage drives, each with a lodge (East and North lodges) at entrance. The drive from the North Lodge traverses the greater part of the Park and is a very pleasant approach to the mansion. Shortly before reaching the house it passes over a bridge spanning a picturesque dell. Both drives, at their termination, encircle a beautiful formal garden with Italian



FIGURE 1 Plan of LOT 1. From 1923 Sale Catalogue of mansion and estate. By courtesy of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society



FIGURE 2 South-east front and entrance front of Aston Clinton House. From 1923 Sale Catalogue of mansion and estate. By courtesy of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society

balustrading, with central flower beds and lawns with groups of statuary. (Fig.2)

The accommodation in the house was summarised as entrance and inner halls, dining room, billiard room, conservatory, morning room, library, drawing room, smoking or oak room, ball room, ladies' sitting room, boudoir, thirteen principal bed and dressing rooms, four bath rooms, complete domestic offices and seventeen secondary and servants' bed rooms. (Figs. 3, 4, 5). LOT 1 also included stabling for 32 horses with accommodation for staff, a blacksmith's shop and a tower with living and sleeping quarters, gardens and pleasure grounds which included an Italian sunk garden, the park and kitchen and vegetable gardens with an extensive collection of glasshouses. The other important buildings included in LOT 1 were the Private Gas Works and Model Farm buildings. The Gas Works, from which the supply of gas was generated for the Estate, was a short distance away from the house on the Aylesbury to Tring Road and included a cottage. Model Farm

buildings were located between Green End Street and Twitchell Lane and comprised cattle sheds around an enclosed fold yard. Three rooms were used by the village as a cricket pavilion with two dressing rooms, as this was adjacent to the cricket pitch, and there was also a stockman's cottage.⁴

In July 1923 Dr. Albert Edward Bredin-Crawford wrote to Farebrother and Ellis, informing them that he wished to establish a school not too far from London and thought that the mansion might be suitable for the purpose. In correspondence between Farebrother and Ellis, the executors and Horwood and James, the vendors' solicitor, the progress of the sale to Crawford can be followed. Crawford was prepared to offer £15,000 for LOT 1 but asked if the purchase could be spread over 8 years. He was asked if he would consider 6 years, which he agreed to, and the executors were advised to accept the offer:

In view of the very large initial expenditure which he would have to make in order to adapt



FIGURE 3 Dining Room, Aston Clinton House. From 1923 Sale Catalogue of mansion and estate. By courtesy of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society



FIGURE 4 Ball room, Aston Clinton House. From 1923 Sale Catalogue of Mansion and estate. By courtesy of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society

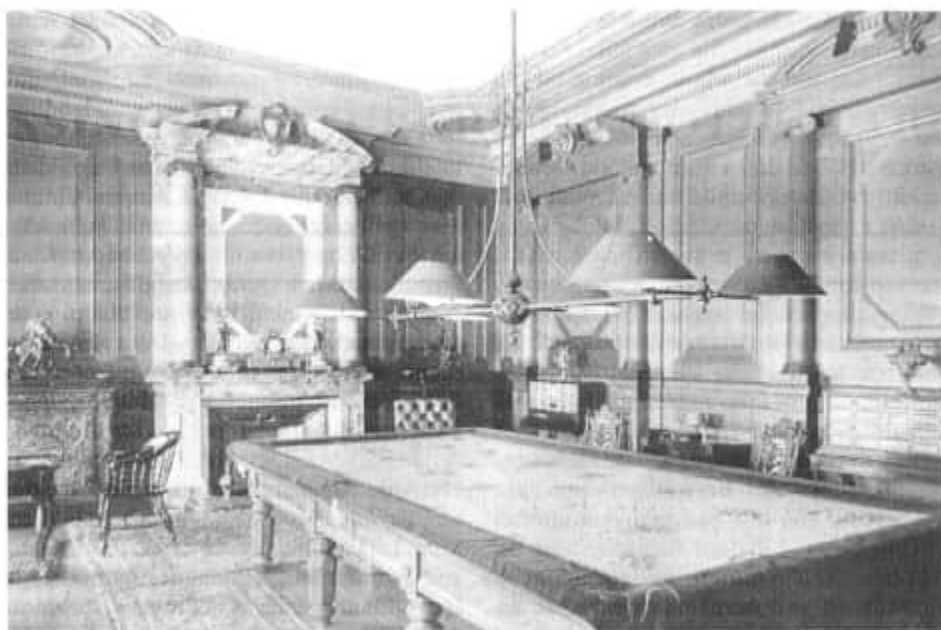


FIGURE 5 Billiard room, Aston Clinton House. From 1923 Sale catalogue of Mansion and estate. By courtesy of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society

the property to his purpose, Mr. Crawford cannot see his way to pay down a large sum on completion, even although he could obtain a substantial part of the purchase money by way of mortgage. It would seem, therefore, that unless your client is prepared to entertain a sale on the basis of instalments spread over a few years it is no use negotiating with Dr. Crawford any further.

Lady Battersea was still anxious for the Air Ministry to take the house, they had expressed renewed interest in September 1923, particularly in LOT 1, but in October they finally decided not to purchase as, after taking expert advice, they concluded that the house was not suitable for conversion to a hospital or convalescent home.

After further discussions over fixtures and fittings, on 22 December 1923 the executors accepted Crawford's offer of £15,000. After a deposit of £1,500 a mortgage was effected to secure £13,500 on the unpaid portion of the purchase money to be payable by instalments. These were to be paid at the rate of £1,500 a year for two years, £2,000 a year for two years and £2,666.13s.4d. a year for three years, all yearly in advance on 31 January. If the

instalments were not paid on time five per cent interest was to be added. It was agreed that the payment of all instalments would be secured on the property by a mortgage in fee to be prepared by the vendors' solicitors at the expense of the purchaser. 'The said purchase price shall include all fixtures and fittings in or about the premises and also three Console Tables which are now in the stable buildings and the fire hose and fittings at the mansion...'

At the time of the agreement several estate cottages were still occupied by former employees of the Rothschilds. W.H. Warren, the head gardener, occupied the Head Gardener's Lodge; George Bates, the night-watchman, occupied The Lodge; George Reeves, the gas works engineer, occupied Gas Works Cottage and Walter Ball, the farm foreman, occupied the cottage at Model Farm. It was agreed that the sale should not be delayed by any of the cottages remaining occupied.^{5, 6} Electoral Registers show that Bates stayed on at The Lodge until 1927 but the other cottages were immediately vacated.

Details of the sales of the remainder of the Aston Clinton estate, which took place during 1923 and

1924, appeared in the *Bucks Herald*. By 5 January 1924 Messrs. Farebothor & Ellis, chartered surveyors, had sold privately, the whole estate with the exception of Rookery Farm.⁷ In August 1924 Rookery Farm was sold to W.A. and A.J. Walker for £4,500. Miss Anna Molique's Institute, on the corner of Tring Road and Brook Street, was sold in May 1924. Miss Molique, a German friend of Lady de Rothschild, had settled in Aston Clinton and involved herself in local good works including setting up a village library and training institution for domestic servants in a Rothschild building which became known as the Institute. Most of the remaining Rothschild-built houses in the village were sold to sitting tenants.⁸

The house was empty when Crawford took possession since, in July 1923, the contents had been put up for auction. The sale had included all soft furnishing, French and Italian furniture, garden statuary and seats.⁹ There was some discussion with a Mr. Davis, who had put in an offer for the marble statuary. Davis wanted the boy figures and vases from the house and bridge, but Lady Battersea wanted to move them to The Pleasaunce, her house at Overstrand in Norfolk. An offer had also been made for the carved panels in the dining room but Lady Battersea wanted them left in the house as she felt that their presence would help the sale.¹⁰

Crawford's immediate concerns were the insurance and maintenance of the house. He employed local contractors, including Hawkins and Hallahan of High Street Aylesbury, to carry out electrical work. He had asked Horwood and James if they could recommend a good architect and a suitable builder to install sanitary and bath fittings, which he considered his first priority.¹¹

Turning now to the grounds and buildings, that formed part of the purchase, Crawford let the grazing rights to Mr. Burnham, a local farmer, as he had no intention of farming the land himself. In correspondence with Horwood & James in December 1924, Crawford explained that he needed more money from Burnham as 'he must have got at least 20 tons of first class hay from the lush meadows towards Halton'. He thought that the grazing rights were cheap at £180p.a. but suggested letting Burnham have it for another year but if he was unwilling to pay another tenant should be obtained. The Gas Works, at Buckland Wharf, were sold in December 1924. This left Model Farm and the

cricket ground, which was offered to Crawford for one year at £25 rent, with an option of purchasing at £500 which he did in 1925.¹² The purchase left the village without a cricket ground and proved to be a sore point that caused friction between village and school. Crawford was happy to lend the ground to the village for sports days and other events, and during August and September, but was adamant that the school would need it every Saturday in term. The Parish Council negotiated with Crawford for the purchase of the fire apparatus, previously owned by the Rothschilds, as the village was setting up its own fire brigade.¹³

THE SCHOOL AND ITS HEADMASTER

Dr. Albert Edward Bredin-Crawford (1863–1952) was educated at Trinity College Dublin, obtaining his L.L.D. in 1895. From 1904 to 1911 he founded and was Headmaster of a preparatory school, called Grange School, in East Croydon, subsequently renamed St. Anselm's.¹⁴ From 1916–1919 he was a mathematics master at Harrow School. In 1923 he founded another preparatory school in temporary accommodation at Pythouse, Tisbury, Wiltshire. It was this school that he moved to Aston Clinton.

What made Crawford, then aged sixty, embark on such a project at a time of economic instability? As already mentioned he had previous experience of founding a school but Aston Clinton was a very ambitious project. He confessed that:

May I say quite plainly that I have a stiff up-hill struggle in front of me to build up my school in order that it will be a paying concern that I am a long way from being a capitalist: and that I shall need all the consideration and help I can get from everybody from the moment I get into residence at Aston Clinton.¹⁵

There would have been various options open to Crawford including a public appeal, a business operation in which he would have floated a company, or funding through the generosity of a private benefactor. There is no evidence to show which route he took. The Education Acts of 1918 and 1921 had included provisions for a census of private schools. While some progress was made, the situation at the end of the First World War and into the 1920s is obscure. Very little evidence of what was actually happening in individual schools is

available. It was not until the 1944 Education Act that registration for private schools was introduced. No official records of Aston Clinton School, Pythouse School or of St. Anselm's have been traced.

However a parallel may be drawn with a school founded in the 1890s by Alexander Devine at Glebeland, Mitcham, Surrey. In 1933, after several moves, the school settled at Iwerne Minster, Dorset, in the manor house built by Lord Wolverton, and became known as Clayesmore House School. The connection with Aston Clinton is not only a similarity of fortunes over the years but it was to Iwerne Minster that Crawford moved in 1932 after the closure of Aston Clinton. Alexander Devine had acquired half of his initial pupils from public schools after having written to the headmasters offering to take over their failures and misfits and to give them more attention in small classes i.e. his school would be a 'crammer'. The only option for public schools with pupils who were poor performers, and unlikely to gain entrance to university, was expulsion which was not good for the image of the school. Crawford may have followed Devine's strategy when recruiting for Pythouse and Aston Clinton.

An advertisement in *The Times* headed 'Pythouse...Wiltshire and Aston Clinton Park, Buckinghamshire' advised that the move from temporary accommodation at Pythouse to Aston Clinton Park, recently purchased from the Hon. N.C.Rothschild, would take place in April 1924. The school, described as a quasi-public school with Eton, Harrow, etc. ideals, would be known as Aston Clinton School, Buckinghamshire, and the summer term would begin on 8 May, 1924.¹⁶

The prospectus for the school at Pythouse, dated May 1923 survives.¹⁷ For Aston Clinton School a small undated brochure, without any text, shows the interior of the house with the billiard room in use as a classroom and the dining room equipped with institutional tables and chairs. In the grounds there are pictures of the boys playing cricket and football. This may have been a prospectus for the school.¹⁸ (Figs. 6,7) Strangely, neither the school nor Crawford are listed in the contemporary Buckinghamshire directories, although they do appear in Wiltshire directories when the school was at Pythouse. Assuming that the details in the prospectus for Pythouse also apply to Aston Clinton, the purpose of the school would have been to provide education and training of the best public school type: a

smaller school following as closely as possible the lines of those schools. The aim was to provide 'for parents, who anyway prefer it, a smaller establishment for their boys, where their potentials can be properly developed' and 'The proper individual attention required at most times by all boys, and always by some'. The fees were 60 guineas a term up to the age of sixteen, afterwards 70 guineas.

At Pythouse the forms were small with no more than twelve to fifteen boys per master. The curriculum was based on the revised requirements of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. These had been recently broadened with modern languages instead of Greek, and now included English subjects (History, Literature and Composition) as well as Physics and Chemistry (science had become a necessity for national survival, and in particular for many posts of leadership at the top levels). The prospectus claimed that boys educated at the school would not experience any difficulties with their entrance exams for universities. Dr. Crawford maintained that the 'energies and enthusiasms of boyhood are braced and heartened by hard work for reasonably short periods, and that even the indolent boy tends to become diligent, and the backward boy interested and eager to make good.' Sports were well represented at the school, showing a contemporary approach, as from the 1870s to 1920s rugby and cricket had graduated from pastimes and boyish occupations to the status of a major part of the curriculum. A scheme to give boys an opportunity to learn practical farming, concurrently with their school work in their last year or two, was apparently under consideration, but whether this was ever carried out at Pythouse is not clear; certainly, as already mentioned, Crawford had no intention of farming the estate at Aston Clinton.

The Pythouse prospectus lists the preparatory schools from which some of the boys came and this included Swanbourne School, Winslow. Another was Windelsham School, Surrey where the Headmaster was Oswald Bradnack, with whom there are two local connections; one of his pupils became a general practitioner in Thame, Oxfordshire and his grandson currently lives in Haddenham, Buckinghamshire. Among the parents and guardians of some of the boys were Rt. Hon. Lord Heytesbury, General Sir. F.C.Poole, and Lady Marjory Binney. Lord Heytesbury had only one son, William Leonard Frank Holmes à Court, who later married

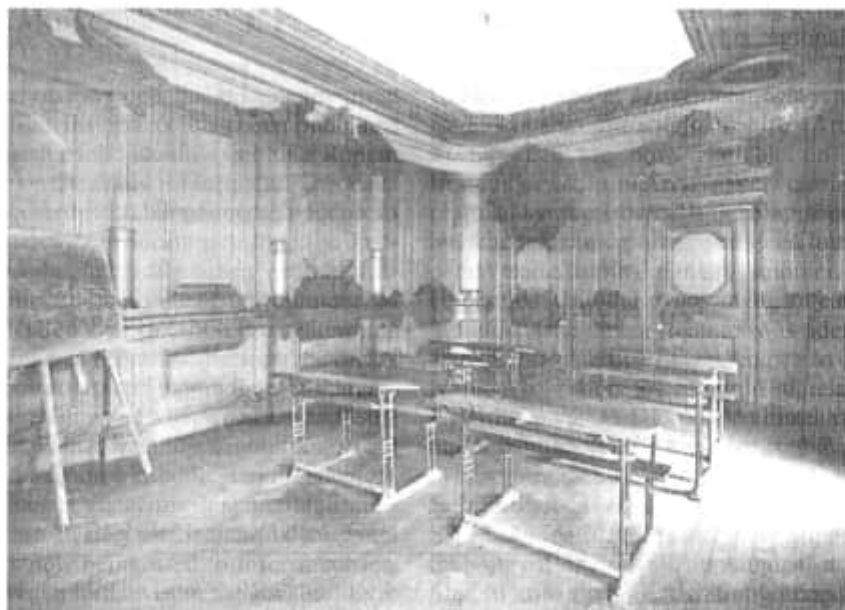


FIGURE 6 Billiard room in use as a classroom. From a probable prospectus for Aston Clinton House School. By courtesy of Hilda Isabel Marriott

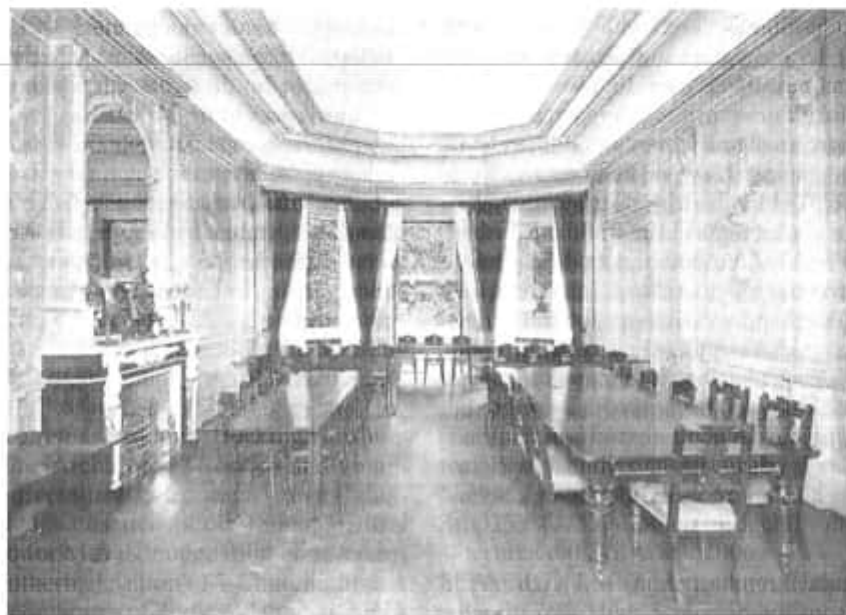


FIGURE 7 Aston Clinton House School dining room. From a probable prospectus for the School. By courtesy of Hilda Isabel Marriott

Crawford's youngest daughter Beryl. There was also a list of people to whom reference could be made, including the Rev. Lionel Ford, Headmaster of Harrow and several Harrow masters.

STAFF AND PUPILS

Perhaps the most famous person connected with the school was the writer Evelyn Waugh who was an assistant master from 1925 to 1927. Educated at Lancing College and Hertford College, Oxford, Waugh admitted to having done very little academic work while at University, which resulted in a third class degree. What he did do at Oxford was to drink heavily, becoming a member of the Hypocrites Club. As pubs were out of bounds to undergraduates a number of drinking clubs sprang up within the colleges and the Hypocrites Club was the most notorious. It had a reputation for homosexual activities as well as riotous drinking and was finally closed down in 1924. A meal to celebrate the coming of age of Waugh's friend Lord Elmley, and the demise of the Hypocrites Club, was held at the Spreadeagle Inn, Thame, famous for its eccentric host, John Fothergill, who wrote:

A party of 50, the last, the funeral bake meats of the just-suppressed-by-the-proctors club ... Harold Acton made a speech full of incredible precocity and rare quotations which would have surprised Aubrey Beardsley ... The dancing was terrific. I have an image as of wild goats and animals leaping in the air ... I am grateful to the Hypocrites set. Whatever their indiscretions and unpopularity in Oxford, they did like good furniture and a beautiful room, good food and wine and they practised conversation.¹⁹

After University, Waugh had already seen himself as a writer but then felt that he could not compete with his brother Alec, already a successful author. Also a competent artist, Waugh enrolled for a term at art college but did not find it to his taste. Needing to earn some money he decided to try his hand at teaching. His first post was at Arnold House in Llandulas, a school catering mainly for the sons of professional families from Lancashire and Ireland. Later he used the school, as Llunbba Castle, in 'Decline and Fall'. Unhappy at Arnold House, in 1925, he applied for other posts and was appointed to Aston Clinton School from September of that

year. One of his Oxford friends, Richard Plunket Greene, was already teaching there and had alerted him to the vacancy. Plunket Greene was a heavy drinker and former member of the Hypocrites club. He left Aston Clinton at the end of 1925 to become music master at Lancing College, Waugh's old school.

Waugh's diaries, although full of records of drunkenness and a sprinkling of scandals, do provide a contemporary account of his time at Aston Clinton and the only details that exist of the school. The diaries have been used extensively in the next section of this paper.²⁰

One entry describes Waugh's arrival on his first day of term, 1925, accompanied by Greene and his fiancée Elizabeth.

24/9/1925. It was a dreary beginning of term. Richard's car was affected with a 'wheel wobble' ... and he arrived very late; we drove down in cold twilight and reached Aston Clinton just early enough for us to go into dinner very late ... there was dead silence while we sat down at a bleak table in front of a prodigious ewer of water. After a wretched dinner we took Richard's car to have the wheels mended and sat for a while huddled over the fire at The Bell Inn in the village, all three of us deeply depressed. Soon Elizabeth left for London and left us to a house of echoing and ill-lit passages and a frightful common-room.

Waugh's first impression of the school, although not quite favourable, was that it was much better run than Arnold House, by a headmaster who at least made an attempt to treat boys and staff decently.

25/9/1925. The timetable is not finished and I have had a fairly easy time. The Headmaster made a speech to the boys telling them how different he was from other headmasters who, when boys broke things, would beat them for it, while he appealed to them as gentlemen not to do such a thing again. All this in a most unattractive and affected manner. I took languid, lengthy, and incredibly ignorant boys in English ... after tea I supervised an examination and taught boys English ...

26/9/1925. I taught boys in the morning and after a rather glum awakening began to be a little

more at home in this frightful school...after luncheon I played football and after that had a bath in a marvellously luxurious bath – the only physical comfort I have been able to discern in this prodigious house.

1/10/1925. I had to teach shooting in the morning which was rather a farce because I let them shoot with the guard over the foresight and the wind gauge registering a hurricane. However even when this was put right they failed to hit the targets ... After luncheon, while Richard was waiting to take me to London, Crawford drew me aside 'to compare our ideals'. I got some money out of him for the Library and drawing class. [In London] after tea I bought plaster casts for the mad boys who draw...

14/12/1925. There are only two more days left in this term and I am glad of it ... I am tired of this term and most of the boys. Some are charming. I go and talk to them in the evenings usually, and that is the nicest part of the day. I am rehearsing a scene from *The Tempest* with them.

Waugh seems to have got on well with Dr. Crawford and his family. He describes taking tea, with his friend Richard, with Dr. Crawford's daughters Dorothy and Vera 'in an enormous drawing-room with nakedness on the roof ...' (a reference to the Italianate ceiling). At another time, taking tea with Dorothy and Vera, they were joined by Beryl, their younger sister, and her fiancé Bill Holmes à Court. At the start of a new term in January 1926 Crawford offered Waugh a room in the stable block which he found more comfortable once he had bought some furniture. Later that year he complained of the cold, coal being very short and the weather inclement. He mentions that the only good thing about the house was the bathrooms. As already mentioned, Crawford made plumbing and sanitary fittings his first priority.

The School was close to The Bell public house, then owned by Mr. & Mrs. John Herbert Gladding. Waugh spent a great deal of his leisure time at The Bell, frequently eating and drinking there in preference to consuming the school meals, and entertaining his friends from London and Oxford:

4/11/1925. Enormous body arrived from Oxford in three cars Arden Hilliard, Claud [Cockburn, Waugh's cousin from Tring], Matthew Ponsonby, two Hardings, Michael Tandy, Patrick Gamble

and others. They were a little drunk when they arrived and drank masses of beer at The Bell. Match (Rugby) was a success. There was a little school after tea – one period during which they broke their motor cars and overran Dr. Crawford's flower beds and drank more beer. Afterwards when they had all gone away ... Mr. Gladding was lamenting the cheap red wine which Arden [Hilliard] had poured over his Dutch table, we found that no one had paid any money at all and Richard and I were left to face a bill of some £8 or £9.

30/1/1926. On Tuesday night Richard and Liza suddenly arrived and I got drunk ... I have had to start another account at The Bell. Nothing more happened until Saturday. I played games and talked to the children and ate a few meals at The Bell.

On the previous Thursday Harold Acton [a lifelong friend of Waugh, he had been the dominant undergraduate aesthete of his Oxford generation] came over in a car from Oxford for the day ... we lunched and had tea at The Bell and dined at (the Spreadeagle) Thame. We all dined at the George [Oxford] and became enormously drunk. It was quite like the Hypocrites days'.

Waugh complained about the quality and quantity of the food provided in the school and described how the boys went in a deputation to Dr. Crawford carrying some bad meat but were repulsed. Margaret Lowe, an Aston Clinton resident at the time, remembered seeing the boys buying loaves of bread from the village baker to supplement their school diet.²¹ In addition to spending time at The Bell, Waugh went shopping, and to the cinema, in Aylesbury, and travelled frequently to London and Oxford. In January 1926, Richard Plunket Greene bought him a Douglas motor bicycle, which meant that he could travel around with greater ease. The motor cycle proved to be unreliable and a few months later Waugh invested in a Francis Barnett but that also gave him some difficult moments. (Fig. 8)

10/6/1926 Ate an early dinner at a chop-house in Fleet Street, and started for Aston Clinton. From then on everything went wrong. I had a puncture in the Strand and got it mended only after pushing it a long way. In Kilburn I ran out of petrol and spent half an hour getting some. Then the tyre went flat again. I finally left it there. A

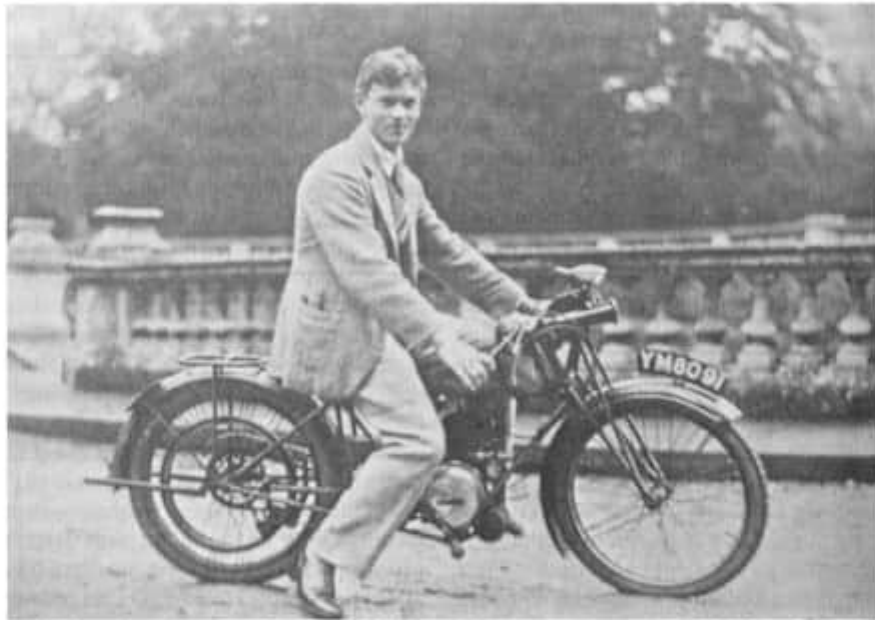


FIGURE 8 Evelyn Waugh outside Aston Clinton House School 1925. Reproduced with the permission of the Evelyn Waugh Estate. Note that the urns have been removed from the balustrade shown in Fig. 2, they were either sold or transferred to The Pleasaunce, Overstrand, in 1923

kindly man at a coffee-stall told me that a milk-lorry left the stall at 5 for Aylesbury. The early trains are all off and this seems the only way to get back. [Went to his mother's house until early morning]. At 4a.m. I walked to Cricklewood. The milk-lorry never turned up. At 5.30a.m. a man in a newspaper van offered me a lift as far as Elstree. From there I walked to Bushey, got a bus to Watford, a train to Rickmansworth, another train to Wendover, and a taxi to school at about 9. Since then I have been rather tired.

The spring of 1926 was the time of the General Strike. At the beginning of the summer term in May only fifteen pupils turned up, Crawford went away, leaving another master in command, and Waugh decided to 'escape the boredom under a colour of duty' and enrolled as a despatch rider and later as a Special Constable. However after several days when he turned up for duty and was told he was not wanted he obtained a discharge and returned to the school.

Waugh had made an early attempt at a novel, never published, while at Arnold House and contin-

ued to write at Aston Clinton. He wrote *The Balance: a yarn of the good old days of broad trousers and high necked jumpers*; a short story which he sent to various publishers including Leonard Woolf, hoping for publication by the Hogarth Press. In October 1926 it was eventually accepted for publication in *Georgian Stories*, edited by his brother Alec; Waugh was paid £2.5s.6d. On the strength of this success, Waugh wrote to the publishers Kegan Paul, who were publishing a humorous series on the future, to suggest himself as the author of *Noah, or the future of intoxication* but this did not materialise. The previous year Waugh had decided to write a book on the Pre-Raphaelites. He found the subject absorbing and had a particular admiration for Holman Hunt, to whom he was distantly related, and Rossetti.²² His great friend Alistair Graham (later to form part of the character of Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited*) came to stay at The Bell for a few days and informed Waugh that he had purchased a printing press (at one time they had shared an ambition to own one) and asked him to write something for it. Waugh's essay *PRB; an essay on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood 1847–*

1854' was privately printed by Graham on the press which he had named The Shakespeare Head. Waugh used his artistic skills to draw 'a charming cover design for the school magazine' and no doubt also contributed to it. Unfortunately no trace has been found of any of the issues of the magazine.

It is hard to gain any idea of the number of boys at the School and it is not known how many of them transferred from Pythouse. The photograph of the dining room, at Aston Clinton, shows tables and chairs for approximately thirty boys. The class room photographed has room for about twelve pupils. As already mentioned, Pythouse School had small classes for about twelve boys and apparently Clayesmore School had a total of only thirty pupils. Waugh refers to four new pupils at the beginning of a term and reflected that it was difficult to play games successfully with only ten per side. Waugh befriended two pupils, but only refers to them by their christian names of Edmund and Charles. They kept his room clean and tidy and often took tea with him. In 1926 he mentions that a boy called Blackburn had been put into the dormitory with Edmund and Charles. At one of the tea parties Waugh was joined by two prefects and a boy called Baxendale, probably the son of Mrs. Baxendale who is listed as one of the parents with pupils at school in the Pythouse prospectus. Waugh also mentions a 'swaggering boy called Kelly, who is subject to epilepsy', who may have been the son of F.N.Kelly of East Preston, Sussex, who is also listed amongst the parents in the Pythouse prospectus. A boy called Kelly stayed at Waugh's parents' house in London during a vacation. Waugh refers to a match against an Oxford school being won through the efforts of a boy called Archie Harding. In the late 1920s there are reports in the *Bucks Herald*, of cricket matches against the Bucks County Surveyors XI or Aston Clinton village. In a match against the village on 26 July 1929 some pupils are listed by name Baker, Prichard, Ellis, Byfield, Tompkins, Hollins, Barry, Pearce, Davies, Lewin and Leather.²³ Reference has already been made to Crawford's future son-in-law, William Holmes à Court, as a pupil at Pythouse but he had presumably already left the school before it transferred to Aston Clinton. He married Crawford's youngest daughter Beryl in May 1926 and graduated from Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1928. He would have been eighteen years old when the school transferred to Aston Clinton.

Waugh was only twenty two years of age when he started teaching at Aston Clinton, not much older than the boys, and seems to have had a good relationship with them. As mentioned above, his happiest times were when he went to talk to the boys in the evenings. Christopher Sykes, a friend and official biographer, says that Waugh told him that some of the boys, who had lost fathers in the 1914-18 war, asked him to observe the '2-minute silence' with them on Armistice Day as Crawford had refused to recognise it. It is not clear whether Waugh carried out their wishes but it would have been contrary to his opinion, in November 1919, that the event was 'a disgusting idea of artificial reverence and sentimentality'.²⁴

Waugh described regulation dress for masters as a morning coat for daily wear and tall hats and tail coats for church. Waugh's salary was initially £40 a term but after an argument with Crawford, who had promised an increase, it was raised to £50 (his salary at Arnold House had been £160 per annum). Crawford refers to G. Webb as one of his assistant masters who is mentioned again in a letter from the Rev. Coth in connection with the use of the cricket ground.²⁵ Waugh's friend Richard Plunket Greene taught music. Waugh himself took English, drawing, and supervised games. Captain Leonard Hyde-Upward, nicknamed 'the cavalry officer' was an usher. Another usher was Tetley but he apparently left after an argument with Crawford over the date for ending term. The games master was Gleed, from Brasenose College, responsible for teaching tennis, shooting, hockey, boxing, football, rugby, physical education, drill and running. Gleed had a fairly rough time as he was unpopular with the boys and not very good at his job. Waugh referred to another master called Chambers as 'dotty Alec'. Clifford George Attwell was a new usher, an ex-King's School, Worcester, boy who had graduated from Christ Church, Oxford, in 1926. Almost teetotal on arrival in January 1927 Waugh introduced him to the delights of The Bell and they became drinking companions. Several other names appear in the Electoral Registers under Aston Clinton School and were probably masters. From 1925 to 1926 William Steer; 1926 to 1929 Lawrence Gray; 1927 Charles West; 1928 Cutbert Llewelyn Rice; and 1928 to 1930 Hamish Rutherford.

Unfortunately for the history of the school, the diary entries for Aston Clinton end in January 1927 when Waugh and Attwell were sacked following a

night of drunkenness in which Waugh had made passes at the matron. Crawford discovered them the following morning laughing about their escapade and dismissed them on the spot. Waugh had to leave immediately. Attwell was allowed to stay until the end of term. (Crawford may have changed his mind about Attwell as his name still appeared in the October 1928 Electoral Register).

20/2/1927. Upward [Captain Hyde-Upward] very grave and helpful, the boys shy of being seen speaking to me. I walked in the ruin to Stoke Mandeville to meet Bobbie. I packed hurriedly leaving my books to come on by goods and slipped away feeling rather like a housemaid who has been caught stealing gloves. I rang up my parents to apprise them of my coming, and dined in a very sorrowful household.

Finding it difficult to obtain teaching posts after his dismissal, Waugh was appointed to a temporary post for a term at a school in Notting Hill. In April 1927 however, his career as a schoolmaster ended and his literary career began.

FROM SCHOOL TO SYNDICATE

It appears that Crawford was struggling financially with the school. In January 1925 he had enquired of the executors if they would accept a cash settlement. The executors' solicitors advised them that they should allow a reasonable discount on the £15,000 if Crawford's offer was accepted, and while this would have been an attraction to him, he did not pursue it. Crawford paid the early instalments of the mortgage in 1925 and 1926, but nothing was paid in 1927 and subsequent payments were erratic. In October 1926 Waugh had recorded 'the Headmaster spent most of the day showing a man over the school ... I suppose he is trying to sell it'. Crawford made some attempt to catch up with payments as Redhead, in a letter to Rozsika Rothschild in 1929, felt that he was doing quite well with the school. But by 1930 he owed £7,250 plus £471.15s.1d. interest.^{26, 27}

Several times during 1928 and 1929 Crawford had placed advertisements for pupils in *The Times*, in which he extolled the virtues of the school, its wonderful accommodation and grounds. There was a sense of desperation as the adverts became more and more elaborate. The qualifications of teaching

staff were extolled and the house described as standing in grounds of 200 acres, consisting of park and woodland, with cricket and football fields, tennis courts, rifle range etc., and of noted beauty in open, healthy country, some 400 ft above sea level! Crawford suffered a further blow when his wife Alice (Lallie) died at the age of sixty four on 15 June 1929. Two more advertisements appeared for the School, one in October 1929, in which he invited parents of prospective pupils to visit, and the last on 22 February 1930. At the same time, the advertisements placed by one of Crawford's daughters, for domestic staff, which had appeared at regular intervals from 1924, also ceased. Rather poignantly Miss Crawford placed two further advertisements in September 1930 from Aston Clinton House for a single-handed cook and a parlourmaid 'wanted for a private family in the country; family three; staff of 4 servants ...' In 1929 or 1930 a new 5-bedroomed house was built at the north end of the park. Crawford must have been responsible for its construction and possibly intended to move to it from the school. It was called The Red House which must have been confusing for local trades people as there was already an older house in Aston Clinton with the same name.

By 1930 the national economic depression was deepening and it is possible that parents could no longer pay the school fees. This was certainly the case at Clayesmore School where four boys left within a year with their fees unpaid. In contrast to Aston Clinton, Clayesmore's fortunes were turned around in 1935 when it went into liquidation and re-opened as a limited company. An influx of boys from a school in Scotland, with which a link had been formed, raised the number of pupils to 100. From that date the school thrived and it still exists today. As we will see, Crawford tried a different solution at Aston Clinton, one that proved disastrous. With the lack of any evidence to the contrary it is possible that by 1930 there were very few, if any, pupils left. Hyde-Upward and Hamish Rutherford are the only two teachers listed on the Electoral Register for 1929 and in 1930 only Rutherford. It seems that Crawford had no option but to close the school. In the *Bucks Herald* of 5 December 1930, the following advertisement appeared:

By instruction from A.E.Bredin-Crawford "Aston Clinton House"... sale of valuable

household furniture, school equipment and sports tackle consisting of the appointments of about 24 bedrooms, a boudoir grand piano and an upright piano-forte ... oil paintings and watercolours by well-known artists ... school desks and tables ... and a 14h.p.4-seater Rover touring car.²⁸

A NEW BEGINNING

In February 1931 the *Bucks Herald* carried a report that Aston Clinton had been purchased by a syndicate and would be opened in April of that year as a luxurious sports hotel, country club and restaurant. The syndicate was chaired by Crawford, Captain J.R.C. Cowan would be the riding master, Major Charles Cooper Harrison would take charge of the golf course, Captain J.W.Berwick would be general manager and Mr.G.M.Richardson estate manager. Vice-Presidents included the Earl and Countess of Haddington, Lord Portarlington, Maria, Countess of Lathom, Viscountess Elibank, Lord Suffield and Lord Carlow.

No expense was to be spared in the amazing project. Weekly dances were planned to accommodate 400-500 people. The Hotel was to have 60 guests who would dine in the 'Flemish room'. All outdoor facilities would be provided including hunting, riding, tennis, squash, archery, croquet, miniature golf and swimming. The golf course, which was planned to extend over the whole estate, was to be prepared by J.H.Taylor, a well-known golf professional. A landing ground for light aeroplanes, and motor and air rallies was planned. Dances with an instructress, mannequin parades and chamber concerts were also to feature. It was reported that the 'cinema people at Elstree' were interested in the venture! The exterior of the house was to remain untouched but the interior would be attractively decorated by the Countess of Lathom, apparently among the 'first three interior decorators in the country'. The work was estimated to be completed by the first week of April. The Syndicate had decided that the membership fees should be kept low, with an entrance fee of only one guinea.²⁹

In many ways the choice of flying as one of the attractions of the proposed country club was astute. In 1931 flying was becoming a popular activity for those who could afford it. *The Illustrated London News* advertised the Airwork School of Flying at Heston,³⁰ *The Tatler* had launched its first Flying

Section and was inviting readers to apply for flying lessons through their 'Tatler Scheme'.³¹ Amy Johnson, Viv Bruce and Winifred Spooner were among the women pioneers of flying. Only a year later the *Bucks Herald* carried an article for National Aviation Day on 22 April 1932 offering free 10s. flights to 20 lucky readers to fly with Sir Alan Cobham. This was part of his campaign to arouse a stronger and wider interest in air development. One of his main objects being 'to secure from the nation a million signatures as a mandate, to be presented to the Government, as a proof of the force of public opinion in favour of more progressive air policy'.³²

THE GRAND OPENING

Almost exactly two months after the announcement in February 1931, the *Bucks Herald*, *The Times* and *The Tatler* all reported on the opening of the Aston Clinton Country Club on 18 April. The Countess of Lathom had completed the interior re-decoration, at a cost of £7,250, and the bedrooms had been furnished. But the opening was premature as of the various sporting facilities promised only the tennis courts were ready. The golf course was under construction, the squash court and swimming pool were yet to be constructed. In spite of the report in *The Tatler* that 'another country club, Aston Clinton, has established its own aerodrome' the landing ground for light aircraft was merely an adjoining field, although the promoters were still planning to form a members' flying club. In spite of appalling weather, in which heavy rain had turned the ground into a mudbath, media reporting of the event claimed that it had been a great success, well attended by an enthusiastic public. It was suggested that the promoter's aim of a membership of 2,000 would not be too difficult to attain.

The events of the day were many but the highlight must have been the arrival of seven aeroplanes which had completed a course of 35½ miles and had taken the form of a treasure hunt starting from Hanworth Airpark and involving four changes of course. The Hon. Mrs. Victor Bruce, who in February had completed a flight around the world, was the guest of honour, opening the event (Fig. 9) and giving a display in a Bluebird, all metal plane. Other aeroplanes landed and gave flying displays including inverted and crazy flying and acrobatics; others were prevented from flying by the inclement weather. Amy Johnson, who at the time was living



THE HON. VICTOR AND MRS. BRUCE
At the opening of the new Country Flying Club at Aston Clinton, near Aylesbury, where the going underfoot was extremely heavy, hence the pick-a-back operations. The Hon. Mrs. Victor Bruce, heroine of the great flight to Japan, performed the opening ceremony.

FIGURE 9 The Hon. Victor and Mrs. Bruce at the opening of the Aston Clinton Country Club. From *The Tatler*, no.1557, April 29, 1931, page 190. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

in Monks Staithe, Princes Risborough, was also present but did not fly. Lunch was served in the panelled dining room to a large company. Other entertainments included a display by a physical culture expert, a mannequin parade and demonstrations of golf strokes. The proceedings concluded with a dinner dance during which a cabaret show was given by 'Maslova and Katrina, burlesque dancers and Mr. Lew Young, in song, comedy and dance'.^{33, 34, 35}

From May to July 1931 advertisements appeared in *The Times*, placed by Captain Cowan, for 'hacking at 5s. per hour and offering residential accommodation in Aston Clinton House, with good cooking, at 4½ guineas per week'. The adverts in July quoted 'hacking at 6s.6d. for 1½ hours in beautiful country; expert tuition. Full board resi-

dence, 2 charming bed rooms, valetting no extras. In mansion 165 acres; own horse, hard courts etc.'³⁶

THE UNFORTUNATE END

But the glory was not to last; bankruptcy followed all too swiftly. The hotel closed and the property was vacant from October 1931. The caretaker was dispensed with by April 1932 and the creditors unpaid. The property was empty from April-August 1932.³⁷

From the bankruptcy proceedings a detailed account of the setting up of the syndicate, the personalities involved and its rapid decline, emerge. Calor Ltd. plumbers and sanitary engineers, had presented a petition to the High Court on 15 April 1932 and the winding-up order was made on 2 May 1932. The syndicate had been promoted by Crawford and William Duncan, the managing director, and registered as a private company on 9 January 1931. The nominal capital was £20,000 divided in £1 shares. The company had been formed to purchase from Crawford the freehold mansion, land and premises known as Aston Clinton Park, and to carry on the business of a hotel and restaurant. The number of shares issued were 15,152 of which 1,902 were issued and paid for in cash, Crawford owned 13,250.

The Directors named in the above *Bucks Herald* report of February 1931 were listed with the addition of Miss Sybil Allday (she resigned in February 1932) and Captain Richard Malcolm Roberts who was appointed on 3 July 1931. Major Harrison resigned in September 1931. The Directors received no fee but, with the exception of Crawford, entered into service agreements with the company. Duncan was appointed for five years at £300 per annum, Cowan as estate manager was given a salary of between £130 and £150 per annum as were Berwick, Harrison and Roberts. All had free accommodation, Cowan was living with his wife in the Red House, the others were listed as living with their wives in Aston Clinton Park. They were all entitled to 10% on the entrance fees for the first year's subscriptions received.

The company took over an existing mortgage of £7,250 and the directors anticipated that a new mortgage of between £10,000 and £12,000 would be raised to redeem the existing one; however this was not achieved. In September 1931 a second



FIGURE 10 Red House. From 1932 Sale Catalogue of the Aston Clinton Estate. By courtesy of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies

mortgage was issued for a loan of £1,000 in Cowan's name as security and in October 1931 a third mortgage in Harrison's name for £2,000. By 31 October 1931 the company was in the hands of Maurice James Wilson, accountant and auditor, the appointed Receiver.

The liabilities of the company amounted to £23,264.6s.1d. There were only three secured creditors. The Rothschild Trustees received £7,597.18s.4d. from the first mortgage. Cowan received £1,040 from the second mortgage and Harrison £2,075 from the third. Many of the unpaid creditors were local Aylesbury and Tring businesses, including Hawkins & Sons of Aston Clinton for fuel, Rodwells of Tring for goods and de Fraine of Aylesbury for publicity. Bakers, garage owners, decorators, suppliers of food and drink, entertainers etc., both national and local, all remained unpaid. Looking at the list of creditors it seems likely that bills for the opening ceremony of the Hotel were among those not settled.

The failure of the company was attributed, by Duncan and Crawford, to its inability to obtain a higher mortgage than the original. They claimed that there had been a lack of experienced manage-

ment at the hotel and that co-operation amongst the directors had not been good. The bad weather during the season was also blamed for the failure of the enterprise. The club had between 500 and 600 members, but of those, more than half were honorary members who did not pay subscriptions. The subscription charge to ordinary members was £1.1s with an entrance fee of £1.1s. When it closed down in October 1931 the company had only received £406.12s.6d. from fees and subscriptions and the hotel takings only amounted to £2,777.13s.6d.³⁸

THE NEXT STAGE

In July 1932, the 'freehold estate known as Aston Clinton Park' was on the market by direction of the mortgagees, the whole extending to 162 acres, only 3 acres less than LOT 1 in the 1923 sale. The property was offered as a whole but with the option of sale in nine Lots. The sale catalogue description of the house and grounds, with the exception of Model Farm (Crawford had earlier purchased it from the Rothschild Estate) and the East Lodge, was almost identical to LOT 1 in the 1923 sale but some changes had been made both to the grounds

and the house. The newly built Red House, already mentioned, was listed as 'a recent owner has built a modern 5-bedroomed house close to the north lodge at a cost of something over £2,000. This is very suitable for a bailiff or estate agent.' (Fig. 10)

The kitchen garden had been cleared and the Rothschilds' range of glasshouses demolished. Areas of the parkland were designated as building plots in the sale catalogue. Those fronting onto the London Road were described as 'with long main road frontages to the village, these plots are finely timbered, having open park land in the rear, and are ripe for immediate development'. LOT 8 in the sale catalogue was described as 'an important area of building and accommodation land forming part of Aston Clinton Park and the old kitchen gardens, with a frontage to Church lane'. Inside the house the description of the rooms was similar in the 1923 and 1932 catalogues with the exception of the conversion of some of the smaller rooms into bedrooms.³⁹

The property was auctioned by Messrs. Knight, Frank and Rutley at the Bull's Head Hotel, Aylesbury, on 16 July 1932. The *Bucks Herald* described the event as local history in the making, the end of an era. Happy memories of the Rothschilds' days were recalled and many tenant farmers, who had been on the rent roll of the late Sir Anthony de Rothschild, were present. No mention was made of Crawford, the school or the Aston Clinton Country Club. Bidding started at £5,000 the property going for £8,500 to Messrs. Tyler & Co, Surveyors of Holborn Viaduct who purchased for Charles Richard Stirling of Sysonby Lodge, Melton Mowbray.⁴⁰

In a letter to Redhead, Rozsika Rothschild regretted that the estate had only raised £8,500. She expressed concern about the circumstances under which Crawford sold to the Syndicate and the amount of money the latter had lost. She enclosed a letter from Crawford, the contents of which had given her some anxiety, and asked for Redhead's advice. Neither Crawford's letter or the reply survive in the Rothschild Archive but Crawford was possibly asking for money. Rozsika told Redhead that she had recently met someone who knew Crawford well and had been with him at Aston Clinton and had described him as an 'evil' man in every respect.⁴¹

On behalf of Charles Stirling Messrs. Tyler & Co. offered to the parish council a portion of the

Aston Clinton Park Estate, having an extensive frontage to Church Lane and an area of about 7.5 acres for allotments. The offer was considered by the council but turned down.⁴² Tyler & Co. had also asked Crawford if he would like them to deal with the sale of Model Farm. He obviously declined as W.Brown & Co., auctioneers, placed an advert in the *Bucks Herald* for the cricket field and model farm buildings (with cottage). The cricket field was described as 'ripe for development and the buildings lend themselves for conversion into bungalows and cottages.'⁴³

The site was purchased, for development, in December 1933 by H.C.Janes Ltd., builders of Luton.⁴⁴ In Crawford's financial difficulties the £900 must have been very welcome. Only one building from the Model Farm stands today at 35, Green End Street; the remainder of the site was developed for housing.

CONCLUSION

And so the connection with the Rothschild family ended and in 1933 Charles Stirling re-named Aston Clinton House the Howard Park Hotel and it began the next stage of its life. Crawford left Aston Clinton in 1931 for Iwerne Minster in Dorset. There is no evidence that Crawford had any connection with Clayesmore School but he probably wanted to be close to his daughter Beryl, and son-in-law Bill Holmes à Court, who were living nearby at Warminster. In the 1932–1933 Electoral Register of North Dorset, Crawford and his daughters Dorothy and Vera were living at the Post Office, Iwerne Minster. They do not appear in the following years, so had moved on fairly quickly. There is no further trace of Crawford until 1951 when the Harrow School Register records his address as 44, Porchester Square, London. The Register contains no other details of him after 1919 when he left Harrow. He died in 1952, aged 89, and the Aston Clinton Burial Register recorded that he died in Paddington. His ashes were buried in his wife's grave in the churchyard at Aston Clinton.(Fig. 11)

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