

# REVIEWS

## CASTLE HOUSE BUCKINGHAM

Julian Hunt and John Clarke

*Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 2007*

xviii + 126 pages including 62 illustrations, £14.95  
ISBN 978-1-86077-449-2

Castle House is “Buckingham’s own stately home” according to this book’s cover. It was never in serious competition with Stowe or even Claydon, but the early 18<sup>th</sup> century south front is one of the town’s most distinctive features, and conceals a considerably older building with 15<sup>th</sup> century parts surviving in the east and west wings. The authors researched the house’s history at the request of the then owner, Barbara Edmondson, who with her husband restored it from the much-decayed state in which they bought it in 1978, and her foreword includes some reminiscences of the difficulties they encountered and discoveries they made.

The name Castle House only came into use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and there was no connection with the site of the castle. Although it was the finest house in the town from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it seems not to have had a distinctive name, usually being referred to simply by the name of the owner at the time. It was only briefly a farmhouse, and it was too far away from the centre of the town to be a conventional merchant’s house, leading the authors to speculate that it may be the otherwise unknown location of the leper hospital of St Lawrence, which ceased to function in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The site was owned by William Barton, coroner of North Bucks in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, and remained in the family until it passed through the female line to the Fowlers. Richard Fowler, who was Edward IV’s Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, may have developed the house into the multi-gabled building which can be seen on the Speed Map of 1610. Catherine of Aragon stayed at Buckingham with his son or grandson, very probably at Castle House. Two small clarifications for chapters 2-3. On p.13: John Barton junior was seneschal rather than “steward” of St Albans Abbey (in fact he is mentioned as such in the Winslow Court Books for

1429), a post which put him in charge of the abbey’s courts and made him its legal representative in dealings with Parliament or the king. On p.34: it was William Carey, husband of Mary Boleyn (now a familiar figure to viewers of *The Other Boleyn Girl*) who acquired the borough of Buckingham in 1526; their son Henry sold it in 1552.

After a protracted legal dispute, Castle House came into the ownership of another upwardly mobile Buckingham family, the Lamberts. William and Mary Lambert substantially rebuilt it around 1617: their initials and that date are on the oak chimney piece in the great parlour, and there is a datestone of 1623 also with their initials. In 1644 Charles I used the refurbished Castle House as his temporary headquarters and held a council of war in the great parlour, eventually rejecting a rather desperate proposal to march directly on London from Buckingham.

The house’s ownership changed hands several times after the Civil War before it was acquired by the Rogers family, initially John Rogers, who rose in self-described status from draper to merchant to gentleman, a rank which was apparently based on owning Castle House. Although the house provided accommodation for visiting assize judges, it was not a good base for further elevation into the landed gentry, since there was no scope for creating a park around it. William Lowndes, building Winslow Hall in 1700, faced a similar restriction on an urban site, but was at least able to demolish the nearest buildings to create a clear vista to and from his new house across open country. Mathias Rogers in c.1708 may have set out to emulate Winslow Hall, but did not get further than replacing the south front before the money ran out. The consequent preservation of many of the house’s earlier features must have caused frustration at the time but is something greatly to be welcomed now.

Castle House escaped the fire of Buckingham in 1725, although Mathias Rogers had already insured it. After he died in 1753, the house was occupied by tenants and then sold. The sale bill from 1798

survives, describing it as “a capital freehold mansion”. It was bought (although not lived in) by Philip Box, who had opened Buckingham’s first bank in 1786. At this stage its ownership was separated from a long association with the Cross Keys Inn, which the authors locate at 4-6 West Street. They painstakingly trace the house’s descent through various members of the Box family until it was sold to Thomas Hearn, solicitor and later “gentleman”, in 1837 (they have searched unsuccessfully for a copy of this conveyance). He demolished the north range, creating the present-day three-sided form. More alterations were carried out in 1881 by his son Henry Hearn, who welcomed members of the Bucks Archaeological Society on a visit in 1884. After his death in 1903, the house was sold as “an exceedingly comfortable family residence” with “11 good bed and dressing rooms, 6 servants attic rooms”. It was bought by another well-known local figure, Herbert Edward Bull, a director of the Aylesbury Brewery Company. After being owned by his widow and son, it was taken over by Buckingham Borough Council in 1963, and sold to the Edmondsons by Aylesbury Vale District Council in 1978.

The flourishing genre of house history can, as in this case, provide great insight into a whole community. Nearly all the owners of Castle House came from established Buckingham families, for whom the house represented an expression of social status which in some cases justified incurring considerable debt. The book is therefore a history of Buckingham as well. Comparable houses at Wisbech and Grantham are owned by the National Trust. Even if Castle House has not achieved that recognition, its history is now open to the public.

*David Noy*

#### RIVER THAME: OLD CHILTERN’S SON

Tony Chaplin

*Tempus Publishing Ltd., 2007*

ISBN 978-0-7524-4373-7

136 pages, including 8 pages of colour photographs, 35 part-page black-and-white photographs, 2 maps, and 8 pages of references, bibliography, and index. £14.99.

The author takes us on a journey of some forty miles along the river through pleasantly rural countryside. After discussing literary references to the

Thame in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, he starts with the river’s multiple sources east and north-east of Aylesbury, and then follows it across mid Buckinghamshire and east Oxfordshire, to end at the confluence with the River Thames at Dorchester (which he points out, should be known as Dorchester on Thame). Few individual events of national significance have occurred in the valley of the Thame during the last two thousand years, but much has gone on that is typical of the history of the south midlands, from open field cultivation to water milling or Civil War skirmishes. Each of these topics, and many more, is introduced in a succinct essay at the place where the river first encounters it. In addition there are numerous observations on the valley’s natural history and on the great families who have held land there and shaped its appearance.

The very readable style carries the reader easily past the many places of local historic interest on the Thame’s banks. The journey is arranged in eight chapters, seven of which cover short lengths of the river while the eighth deals entirely with the town of Thame and the surprising number of great men who were educated at Lord William’s Grammar School. This is essentially a book to be read straight through, rather than used for quick reference. Whereas places, great families, and other famous people appear in geographical order down the valley and are well indexed, local history topics and natural history subjects also appear in geographical order but are largely unindexed – which is a pity.

The section of colour photographs is a delight and captures the valley’s character well, while the black-and-white pictures include thirteen views of bridges and five of watermills taken from viewpoints which may be new even to readers familiar with the valley.

Omissions and slips are rare, which makes the few more obvious when they occur. On page 77 we are told that Camden identified Yttingaford, where King Edward and the Danes made a treaty in 907, as Ickford, on the Bucks./Oxon border, but it would be helpful to point out that subsequent research has moved the supposed site to the Bucks./Beds. border, south of Leighton Buzzard. On page 50 a photograph is captioned as the flooded future site of Thame service station but is looking in the wrong direction.

Most of the River Thame’s valley only comes to

public attention when annual floods turn its level floor into a lake that stretches for miles. The author's impressive breadth of reading and familiarity with the valley highlights its wealth of local history and accessible wildlife, and he is to be congratulated for encouraging us to look at the valley more carefully when the river is not in flood.

*Peter Gulland*

## BUCKINGHAMSHIRE'S FAVOURITE CHURCHES

Julian Hunt

*RJL Smith & Associates, Much Wenlock, Shropshire, in association with The Buckinghamshire Historic Churches Trust*

xii + 136 pages including 155 illustrations

*Hardback: ISBN 978-0-9552580-3-9, £20.00*

*Softback: ISBN 978-0-9552580-2-2, £14.95*

This book was published in June 2007 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Buckinghamshire Historic Churches Trust. It is dedicated to the memory of Elliott Viney – the last survivor of the founding BHCT trustees – who died in 2002. Elliott was Chairman of the Trust's Inspection Committee for many years, making good use of his vast knowledge of Buckinghamshire's churches.

Books that select particular churches as 'favourites' are always open to the objection that the selection has been wrong. The problem is compounded if authors go further and attempt to rank their favourites. Thus, Simon Jenkins's *England's Thousand Best Churches* (1999) – which gave 'star ratings' to the churches described – encountered a good deal of criticism. In fairness to Jenkins, however, it is striking that all of the 24 Buckinghamshire churches he described are now included in the total of 55 covered in *Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches*.

Having decided to produce the book for its Golden Jubilee, the BHCT established a committee to oversee the project, and to choose the churches. It was clearly important to cover all periods and to find representative churches from all parts of the historic county. The committee chose Julian Hunt to write the book and RJL Smith as the publisher. The firm has produced many excellent guides to churches. Julian has been a well-known author in Buckinghamshire for many years, although I think

he would be the first to admit that churches and their architecture have never been his primary interest. However Julian has again shown his versatility, using his research and writing skills to produce a book that is informative, accurate, and readable.

*Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches* has been well received and the choice of churches generally approved of. This sort of book presents authors with difficult choices. There are different ways of presenting churches; all have their advantages and disadvantages. The overriding need, of course, is to make information easily available – and this is best achieved through an appropriate series of indices. The structure adopted in *Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches* is to focus chapters on particular architectural styles – in other words, roughly by date. Many churches do have a dominant style, and some are wonderful survivals from single building operations. The problem is that the majority of churches bring together different styles and are the work of many centuries. In many cases, there is still uncertainty as to the sequence of events. Such mysteries often add to the joy of visiting churches and the detailed study of an individual building can become a lifetime's work for some enthusiasts.

*Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches* begins with a chapter on 'Saxon and Norman Churches', which, quite rightly, starts with Wing, Stewkley and Fingest. However, it also includes Dinton and Twyford (which only have Norman south doorways) and Lillingstone Dayrell (which only has a Norman chancel arch). In many ways, it seems strange that these churches are found in the first chapter at all. There is logic for the inclusion of Hanslope here because of its wonderful Norman Chancel – yet the most distinctive feature of the church is surely its magnificent Perpendicular style tower and spire. The absence of cross-referencing or indexing means that readers have no means of 'picking up' on these splendid 15<sup>th</sup> century features at Hanslope unless they read the 'Saxon and Norman' chapter.

The subsequent chapters deal with churches in the Gothic Styles of Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular. Post-reformation churches are grouped into Classical, Gothic Revival, and 20th century, with the final chapter reserved for Non-Conformist and Catholic Churches. In all fifty Anglican churches are described. The first para-

graph about each church describes the location of the parish, together with its size and present day population, and then goes on to provide some basic facts about the foundation of the church and its early history. The descriptions are comprehensive; important features and monuments are covered and any unusual items mentioned. Many churchwardens seem to have been very pleased with the accuracy of the entries on 'their' churches, surely the finest tribute.

There are good descriptions of the way that changing tastes have resulted in major alterations – such as the adaptation or rebuilding of the three 'preaching hall' churches at Buckingham, Marlow and Slough. It is good that some unusual churches – certainly not everyone's favourites – have been included. Examples include St James's, Gerrards Cross, with its extraordinarily eccentric exterior, and St Francis at Terriers (High Wycombe), a work of Giles Gilbert Scott, opened in 1930. Julian Hunt shows that St Francis is a masterpiece of lighting control. Apparently it was even better before the false floor was added in the tower, obstructing its 'lantern tower' effect. This is one of very few important facts that Mr Hunt has missed.

The last chapter quite rightly includes Pugin's Catholic Church of St Peter in Marlow. It also includes four important non-conformist buildings: the Quaker Meeting House at Jordans; the Baptist Meeting House at Winslow; Chenies Baptist Church; and Newport Pagnell Methodist Church. Given the importance of non-conformity in the history of the county, it is understandable that the author should regret that it was not possible to include more chapels – but he does list another 15 which are worth seeking out.

All 55 churches have at least two illustrations, mainly modern photographs. Many photographers

are represented, but the vast majority – 106 of the 155 – have been specially taken by R.J.L. Smith, the book's publisher. Smith's are renowned for good church photography, and they have certainly lived up to their reputation in *Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches*. The most surprising photographs are two of the interior of the Bedford Chapel at Chenies. Permission is not often granted to take such photographs; until this book appeared the most recent I had seen were in books published in 1901 and 1912 and on a postcard posted in 1909. Some might question whether the Bedford Chapel, a very private chapel with extremely limited access, should be included in the book at all.

Over the last 50 years, the Buckinghamshire Historic Churches Trust has made grants of £894,000 to 240 churches and chapels in the county (including 36 non-conformist buildings). In the past, I have found it a little difficult to find out about the BHCT. It has now launched a group called "Friends of Buckinghamshire Historic Churches", which together with *Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches*, should raise awareness of the BHCT, and its good work.

One important fact not recorded in the book – is that 22 Anglican churches have closed in Buckinghamshire since the BHCT was founded 50 years ago, and a vast number of non-conformist chapels have also closed for a variety of reasons, not always through lack of congregations. Perhaps this book should have looked ahead a little more and considered the ever increasing pressures likely to threaten survival of our churches in the future. At very least, it is essential that, in another fifty years, all of the 'favourites' covered in this book should still be there to enjoy.

Michael G Hardy