

# Chequers Court.—A Gift to the Nation.

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THE generous and munificent gift of the ancient, beautiful, and historic mansion of Chequers by Sir Arthur and Lady Lee to the nation for the purpose of providing an official country residence for the future Prime Ministers of England has aroused the interest and public gratitude of the people. The originality of the scheme, the noble idea conceived with so much liberality, and the true spirit of statesmanship displayed in its execution, are worthy of all praise, and future Premiers will be especially grateful to these generous donors who have provided them with a delightful, sylvan, and magnificent retreat, wherein they can recruit their health and strength and alleviate the cares of State amidst the most delightful country in Southern England.

One of the results of this noble gift will be to preserve for posterity the noble mansion which has played no inconsiderable part in national annals. As an example of Tudor architecture it is unrivalled. The scheme devised by Sir Arthur Lee and embodied in the trust deed provides that "no alteration, mutilation, addition or subtraction shall be made to the principal features of the house." This is a wise proviso. Chequers has suffered not a little from the action of late Georgian goths and vandals who wrought havoc in the old mansion. It underwent painful vicissitudes; but all traces of their handiwork have been removed by wise and judicious restorations, with the primary object of bringing the house back to the appearance and atmosphere intended by its original builders. The sash windows which had been inserted on the south side have been replaced by mullioned windows; the mullions on other sides, which had been altered, have been restored. Some foolish-looking battlements have been removed, and the gables replaced. Most of the stucco has been stripped from the walls and the original brickwork has been exposed to view again. The central court has been covered in, and now forms a large and handsome hall, lighted by stained-glass windows in which are the arms of former possessors. The house is now very much the same in appearance as when William Hawtrey built it in 1565, and when poor Lady Mary Grey, sister of Lady Jane Grey, walked through its chambers a disconsolate prisoner.

The situation of Chequers is charming. Right boldly above the rich vale of Aylesbury, and bounding it on its southern side, rises the northern face of the Chiltern Hills; and here we find, cutting their way through the chalk, many of those lovely beech and box-clothed ravines which run up steeply from the flat plain and form the most romantic portion of mid-Buckinghamshire. About two miles due west of the quaint little town of Wendover a lane winds up one of these verdure-clad ravines, twisting and turning through the chalk and gravel. We climb the steep ascent until we reach

“The breezy hill that skirts the down,

Where a green grassy turf is all I crave,

With here and there a violet bestrewn,

Fast by a brook or fountain’s murmuring wave.”

When we have reached “the green grassy turf,” we find that it is a park of considerable size. On the west stands out Beacon Hill, whence Malvern Hills may be seen on a clear day. A little further westward is Kimble Castle, once the stronghold of

“The lofty cedar, royal Cymbeline,”

the reputed birthplace of Caractacus, now a mere earthwork, overlooking the fairest glens to be found anywhere in the Chilterns, so fortunately named “Velvet Lawn,” “Silver Spring,” and “Happy Valley”; and then we see the grand square mass of buildings which rises in so stately a fashion in the very centre of the park, just where the well-grown timber trees form an attractive background to the rich and mellowed brickwork.

Park and house have borne for many hundred years the name of Chequer, which was that of its possessors in the time of Henry II., the family of the Exchequer, or in Latin form, “de Scaccariis.” Elias de Scaccario, the keeper of the King’s Exchequer in that reign lived there, but his house has long passed away. Tradition states that it was rebuilt in 1326. This family died out in the male line in 1554, when by the marriage of the heiress Katherine the estate passed to Sir William Hawtrey, whose family was known by a Latin name, “De Alta Ripa.” The Hawtreys held it till 1597, and Sir William rebuilt the stately mansion which we see to-day, completing the work in 1566. On the north front appears this date, together with the arms of Chequer, Hawtrey, and Coke, a “Haw Tree” and the initials of the builder and his wife, W. H. and A. H.

This house became the beautiful prison of the unfortunate Lady Mary Grey, who was committed to the charge of Sir William Hawtrey. She was the daughter of the Marquis of Dorset and sister

of the still more unfortunate Lady Jane Grey. Lady Mary's offence was that she had ventured to marry, without the permission of Queen Elizabeth, Thomas Keys, the Sergeant Porter of the Royal Court. The results were disastrous. The bridegroom was sent to the Fleet prison and Lady Mary to Chequers, where she stayed two years "without going abroad." She wrote piteous appeals to Mr. Secretary Cecil, one of which is preserved in the British Museum, and is as follows —

"Good Master Secretary, I have received your message sent me by Master Hawtry wherein I do perceive you ar in dout whether I do conteneu my toly still or no ; which I assure I do as muche repent as ever dyd any, not only for that I have thereby given occasion to my enemies to rejoyes at my fond parte, but also that I have thereby incurred the Queen's Maies-ties displeasur, which is the greatest greffe to me, for that the princes favour is not so soon gotten again, and I assure you to be without it is such a greffe to any true subjects hart as no torment can be greater. I most wofull wrecke have so wept, desiring rather deathe than to be any longer without so great a jewel, as her majesty's favor sholde be to me. Wherefor for God's sake as you have begun for to be a means to her majeste in getting me this greate and long desired tressure, so continue untill you have made me so happy as to obtain it for me. And this I will not trouble you any further this tyme, prayinge to God to send you prosperous success.

From Chekers the vi daye of february, 1566

Yours to commande duringe

my lyfe, MARY GRAYE."

After two years Lady Mary was placed under the charge of a less vigorous gaoler, her aunt, the Duchess of Suffolk. The estate passed by the marriage of the heiress Bridget to Sir Henry Croke at the end of the 16th century. She died in 1638, and her monument appears in Ellesborough Church. She must have been a somewhat masterful lady, as she is thus described: "*Fœminæ nihil habens nisi sexum.*" The Crokes were Cavaliers, fought for King Charles in the Civil War, and were deprived by Parliament of their estates. However, Sir Henry recovered the property by paying a composition, and it remained in the family and passed by the marriage of Mary, daughter of Sir Robert, to John Thurbarne, M.P., Serjeant-at-Law. She had no issue and left the property to her husband's only child by a former marriage, Joanna, who married as her second

husband John Russell, the third son of Sir John Russell and Frances, daughter of Oliver Cromwell. It was in consequence of this marriage that Chequers became possessed of the magnificent collection of Cromwell portraits and relics which form so interesting a feature of the mansion.

Chequers remained in the Russell family until the death of Mary Russell at the beginning of the last century, when it passed to her cousin, Dr. John Russell Greenhill, whose son, Sir Robert Greenhill, assumed the name of Russell and was created a baronet in 1831. At his death in 1836 the estate passed by will to his cousin, Sir Robert Frankland, who assumed the name of Russell. His widow died in 1871, and Chequers passed to her fifth daughter, Rosalind Alicia, who married in 1854 Frances L'Estrange Astley, a descendant of Sir Jacob Astley, who fought in the Civil War, was Governor of Reading during one of its sieges, and commanded the King's infantry at Naseby. The last member of the Astley family who owned Chequers, Mr. H. J. Delavel Astley, died without issue in 1912. Sir Arthur and Lady Lee became life tenants of the estate eight years, and began their beneficent work of restoring the house and gardens and subsequently acquired the freehold for the purpose of presenting it to the nation in accordance with the scheme to which reference has been made.

In the interior the rooms have been altered from time to time, but the magnificent library, lighted by lofty bay windows, and eighty-one feet in length, still forms two-thirds of the upper floor of the west front. The small room in which Lady Mary Grey is supposed to have been imprisoned is at the north-east angle, and now forms an inner drawing-room. The little china closet which opens out of this room is really the staircase by which the lady ascended to her bedroom.

The treasures which Chequers contains are extraordinarily interesting, but are far too numerous to be recorded in this article. Of Cromwellian portraits there are a three-quarter portrait by E. Walker, a miniature of him by Samuel Cooper, and a picture of him when an infant, dressed in a white light dress with a close-fitting lace cap. But this is not believed to be genuine by good authorities. Among the relics are a life mask, a ring with a miniature by S. Cooper, his swords and his slippers. Portraits of his family are numerous, including those of Richard Cromwell, Henry, Bridget, Mary (the two last painted by C. Janssen), Elizabeth (Mrs. Claypole), Frances (Lady Russell), John Claypole; Thurloe, his secre-

tary ; Jeremy White, his chaplain ; Cornet Joyce, who captured Charles I. ; General Lambert, by F. Bol ; Cromwell's wife, by S. Cooper. Sir Arthur Lee is a great collector and connoisseur of pictures, and has added considerably to the store of paintings, including examples of the English School by painters such as Raeburn, Reynolds, Crome, Constable, Gainsborough, Hoppner, Lely, and others, besides several by Dutch artists.

There used to be an unknown portrait, the *fac-simile* of one at Denton, with the legend :

“ Away I passe from what I was.

What I give I have, that I keep I lose.”

It may still be there, with others that formerly adorned the walls, including a painting of Charles II., with Colonel Lindsay, Lord Wilmot, and Colonel Gunter meeting after the battle of Worcester ; James, seventh Earl of Derby, beheaded at Bolton ; Prince Rupert (Vandyck ?), and Mary Queen of Scots by a French artist.

The library contains many rare treasures, valuable early books and choice editions, autographs and manuscripts, but it is impossible to record its varied and interesting contents. It is pleasant to reflect that owing to this priceless gift to the nation these collections will not be dispersed, but will remain in the house that has sheltered them so long.

It is appropriate that this country home for the Prime Ministers of England should be situated in a county that is rich in Statesmen. Buckinghamshire has produced no less than seven Premiers—James Stanhope (1717—18), George Granville (1763—5). William Petty, Earl Shelbourne (1782—8), William Henry Cavendish Bentinck, Duke of Portland (1783, 1807—9), William Wyndham Grenville, Baron Granville (1806, 1807), John, Earl Russell (1865—66), and Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield (1868, 1874—80). The memories of Burke still haunt the shades of Beaconsfield, though his home, Gregories, is no more ; and near by is Great Kimble, where John Hampden sounded the call to freedom, and Wendover, for which Burke and Canning sat. The air of Buckinghamshire is evidently good for statesmen.

Future Ministers or other high officials of State who will have the privilege of living beneath the ancient roof-tree of Chequers Court, will ever be grateful to Sir Arthur and Lady Lee for this magnificent gift, and the nation is proud to accept that which has been so generously offered and so wisely bestowed, one of the stateliest homes in England.