



Sezincote: the mansion built by the Indian nabob Sir Charles Cockerell. He inherited from his brother, who had planned to rebuild the old manor house, in 1797, and work began on this house in 1805.

Builders of Gloucestershire Country Houses 1500—1890

by Nicholas Kingsley

In his book *Life in the English Country House*, Dr. Mark Girouard claims that country houses were passports to power: symbols acquired by aspirants to membership of the landed elite to stress their wealth and importance, and thus their suitability for entry to the ruling group in county society. More recently, Professor Lawrence Stone has questioned this view in his book *An open elite?*, and has suggested rather that country houses were symbols not of aspiration to success, but of its achievement; memorials to a gentry family's attainment to full membership of the ruling county group. Stone also questions the accepted view that English landed society was notably more stable and successful at retaining power than its continental counterparts because it absorbed power-hungry families from the worlds of business, finance and the armed services in each generation. He suggests that very few such families actually attempted to transfer their wealth into the possession of landed estates and country houses; instead they achieved a partial withdrawal from their enterprises by establishing themselves in villas on the edges of towns, to which small or medium sized estates were attached, and that these wealthy and successful suburban families pursued a genteel social life, based on the provincial towns and cities, which was similar to that of the landed gentry but seldom came

into contact with it. This debate is clearly one of significance for social historians, and this article will attempt to analyse the social and economic background of the builders of Gloucestershire country houses.

Stone's analysis of house-building and estate-owning in Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire and Northumberland took several years and occupied a number of research assistants. This survey has necessarily been less detailed, and concentrates exclusively on those who built or substantially remodelled houses that were clearly supported by landed estates and would thus be accepted as country houses by both Girouard and Stone. Less information has also been sought about the individual builders, and the effect of these limitations is to reduce the range of questions that can profitably be asked of the material; but the simple analysis that has been undertaken is adequate to suggest at least the outlines of an answer to the question "How open was Gloucestershire's county elite?". This survey considered 155 builders of country houses, and to avoid possibly misleading cross-temporal comparisons they have been analysed in three distinct time-groups: 42 builders from the years 1500—1660; 55 builders from 1661—1800; and 58 builders from 1801—1890. It is perhaps worth noting at the outset that the Gloucestershire county elite seems to have grown

consistently from about 15—20 families in 1500 to 50 by 1660, and on to 80 by 1800 and 120 by 1890. This is in sharp contrast to the pattern of a decline in the 18th century which Professor Stone noted in Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire.

1500—1660

The sample of 42 *builders* from 1500—1660 included 27 men who inherited the estates on which they built or rebuilt houses, and 13 who had themselves purchased their lands. The remaining two men, Richard Pate of Matson House and Sir John Denham at Whittington Court, had married heiresses and acquired their houses in that way. Among those builders who inherited their estates there were two peers, ten knights or baronets and fifteen gentlemen without titles. One of the knights later obtained a peerage (Sir John Tracy), and two of the gentlemen were knighted after completing their houses (John Higford of Dixton Manor and Paul Tracy of Stanway). This contrasts interestingly with the *purchaser-builders*, of whom eight had knighthoods before building, and only five of whom were mere gentlemen. One of the knights, Sir Baptist Hicks, was also advanced to the rank of viscount in 1628, after building his house. Hicks was from a branch of a Gloucestershire minor gentry family which established itself in trade in London. His wealth, however, derived principally from money-lending, in particular to the Crown, and he was an established and familiar figure at James I's court; his brother, Sir Michael Hicks, was secretary to Lord Cecil. Sir Matthew Hale, a prominent lawyer who became Lord Chief Justice in the 1670s, was also from Gloucestershire gentry stock, and the foundation of his Alderley estate was land purchased by his father in 1599, though it was his own legal fortune that paid for the purchase of several additional manors and the building of a large house in 1656—62. Another lawyer was Sir Henry Atkinson, the Recorder of Oxford, who bought Stowell c.1608. John Gunning, who bought Cold Ashton Manor c.1629, and John Dowel, who built Over Court at Almonsbury after 1578, were Bristol merchants, Sir William Wynter, builder of Kings Weston, was a naval officer who profited from royal favour following his part in the defence against the Armada. A few of the purchaser-builders successfully made the transition from yeoman to gentleman: this seems to have been the origin of the Boothes of Stanton Court, and most notably of the Stephens family, who originated as yeomen of Standish, and within three generations had acquired the Eastington, Chavenage, Lypiatt and Cherington estates: Edward Stephens was both purchaser and builder at Chavenage. Sir Thomas Sackville of Bibury was probably an illegitimate son of the 1st Earl of Dorset; Sir Nicholas Poyntz and Sir John Danvers were courtiers. William Knight of Horton Court was an ecclesiastic, but it may be more significant that he was also a friend of Henry VIII, active in promoting the royal divorce; he later became Bishop of Bath and Wells. Overall, at least half the purchaser-builders were known at court; many, like Hicks, Hale, Atkinson and Sackville, could boast a gentry background, and eight out of thirteen had achieved an important step on the road to social acceptance—the acquisition of a knighthood—before building their houses.

Just over half the *inheritor-builders* belonged to the old-established gentry families of Gloucestershire, such as the Tryes of Hardwicke, the Guises of Elmore and the Berkeleys of Stoke Gifford, but nearly half were men whose families had possessed their estates for two generations or less, on average for around 50—60 years. Furthermore, some ancient and respected names are missing. The most prominent of all the non-builders were the county's leading family, the Earls of Berkeley. Despite undertaking minor alterations to Berkeley Castle in the late 1630s, they seem to have been essentially content with their medieval home well into the eighteenth-century. This is perhaps explained by their possession of comfortable houses in London and elsewhere, but it is surely surprising they did not feel the need to build to protect their position. Other families who, if they built at all, did not build houses of a grandeur consonant with their prominence in the county, include the Casseys of Wightfield Manor, who sank into respectable obscurity, the Yates of Arlingham, and the Estcourts of Estcourt Park. Resources may, of course, have constrained the activities of some would-be builders, but the Earls of Berkeley and the Estcourts were not in this position, and whilst some of the builders are known to have had considerable rentals, such as the Tracys of Toddington, or windfall inheritances (John Trye of Hardwicke was a grandson of the Duke of Suffolk, for example), others such as the Cottons of Whittington or the Boothes of Stanton were not obviously wealthy. It is clear, therefore, that while many of the long-established county families became country house owners by no means all took up the challenge of the new status symbol, and many of the inheritor-builders were from recently established gentry families which had risen to fortune on the spoils of the Dissolution and the growth of office-holding under the Tudors.

1661—1800

The 55 builders in the sample for the years 1661—1800 were slightly more evenly balanced between *inheritors* and *purchasers*. 18 builders had purchased their estates themselves, while 31 had inherited; another four had married heiresses and acquired their estates in that way. In addition, Sir Samuel Astry had married the heiress to the manor of Henbury, but also bought extensive property to enlarge the estate on which The Great House was subsequently built, and it is thus uncertain whether or not he should be classed as a purchaser-builder. In one case (Lord Chancellor Talbot) the purchaser of an estate died before he could begin rebuilding, and his heir thus appears in the raw sample as an inheritor-builder; if he is more appropriately described as a purchaser the ratio of inheritors to purchasers is 30:19, or slightly more than 3:2. The status of one builder (Samual Hayward of Wallsworth Hall) has not been determined.

Among the *inheritors* only six out of the thirty built on estates which had been in their families for less than 50 years; a good many were rebuilding or remodelling houses built by their ancestors, like Thomas Master of the Abbey House, Cirencester, or the 1st, 3rd and 4th Dukes of Beaufort, who progressively remodelled Badminton between 1676 and the 1750s. Five of the 30 inheritors were peers (the three Dukes of Beaufort

named above, and Lords Bathurst and Ducie), but the decline of knighthood over the previous period is shown by the fact that only five inheritor-builders were knights or baronets, while 20 were gentlemen without titles. One inheritor acquired a peerage after building (Lord Botetourt).

The 21 *purchaser-builders* included one peer, Lord Conway, who bought Sandywell Park for his eldest son, and four knights or baronets. In addition, William Talbot acquired a peerage after building Barrington Park. The origins of the wealth or purchaser-builders are more interesting than their social composition, however. A notable group were those who had made money in Bristol. Thus J. S. Harford was a Bristol banker, John Cossins a Bristol merchant, and William Champion a Bristol and Warmley brassfounder. Bristol money also supported inheritor-builder Richard Clutterbuck's rebuilding of Frampton Court. London supplied fewer new faces in the Gloucestershire social scene, though Robert Campbell, builder of Bowden Hall, was a retired London grocer. Several purchaser-builders had made fortunes locally; John Prinn was a Cheltenham lawyer; Sir Onesiphorous Paul and Timothy Gyde were clothiers in the Stroud area. The remainder of the purchasers had very varied but often gentle backgrounds. Warren Hastings was, of course, one of the greatest of Indian nabobs. Sir Henry Cosby was a retired Major-General; Sir William Keyte had married a Warwickshire heiress, but used her fortune to buy an estate in his home county, and no less than another six purchaser-builders were gentlemen already settled in this county or elsewhere who extended or reshaped their estates.

The group that remains to be examined is the small one who married heiresses. Henry Perrot who married the Bouchier heiress and built Barnsley Park, was an Oxfordshire gentleman and an intimate of the *nouveauriche* Duke of Chandos, William Blathwayt, who married Mary Wynter and rebuilt Dyrham Park, was a politician, and sometimes Secretary of War. Sir Samuel Astry, who had been mentioned above, was a London lawyer but came from a Bedfordshire gentry family. Charles Coxe, who acquired the Nether Lypiatt estate by marriage, was a judge and an M.P., but also came from Gloucestershire gentry stock. The daughter of Speaker Powle, who carried Williamstrip Park to Henry Ireton at the end of the 17th century was also marrying into an established gentry family. It is notable that with the exception of Blathwayt, all these men came from a gentry background, and even he belonged to the socially acceptable world of London office-holding so vividly portrayed in Pepys' diary.

The period 1661—1800 thus shows interesting differences from the previous 160 years, but also strong similarities. The acquisition of an estate was more often followed immediately by the rebuilding of the country house, and the pattern of one man buying land and his son or grandson building a new house, which is apparent in the earlier period, seems to have become less common. There were a large number of self-made men from non-professional backgrounds entering the social elite, but this was still only a tiny proportion of those who made business fortunes, and the majority of purchaser-builders were probably still completing rather than beginning the transition to gentry status. Perhaps most notably, the long-established families were still

showing a strong desire to update houses to preserve their prestige, and to mark advances in fortune by buying new estates or building new estates.

1801—1890

The years after 1800 saw a very rapid and marked change in the pattern of country house building in the county. Not only did the number of large houses being built increase dramatically, but the social composition of their builders altered too. Despite the fact that this period of the analysis is only ninety years long, there were as many builders of major houses in Gloucestershire as in the previous 140 years. Of the total of 58, twenty-five built on estates they inherited, while twenty-nine bought their lands. A further three men married heiresses, and the status of one builder (George Dowdeswell of the Down House) has not been determined, though it is probable that he was an inheritor. The position is again slightly complicated by the fact that two builders (Charles Cockerell of Sezincote and Edward Holland of Dumbleton Hall) inherited from relations who had only just bought the estate when they died and were anyway planning to rebuild. These two men have therefore been considered as purchasers, not inheritors, and adjusting the figures in this way makes it clear that *purchaser-builders* now outnumber *inheritors* by nearly three to two (31:23).

The social composition of the *inheritor-builders* in this period is of some interest. No less than seven of the twenty-three were peers (the 6th Duke of Beaufort, and Lords Sherborne, Ducie, Northwick, Eldon, Gainsborough and de Mauley), while three were baronets (Sir George Jenkinson, Sir Herbert Jenner-Fust and Sir John Dorington), and two of the thirteen gentlemen without titles subsequently became peers (1st Earl of Ducie and 1st Earl of Rdesdale). As many of these titles were new, the buoyancy of fortune of the families concerned had evidently found expression in the acquisition of titles as well as in the construction of new houses. Most of the inheritor-builders came from long-established families; only five of the twenty-two came from families which had owned their estates for less than fifty years, and of these only three can be positively identified as the sons or grandsons of men who had bought their estates on the profits of trade: Thomas Butt's father was a Chalford millowner; Josiah Gist's father a Bristol merchant; George Milward's grandfather Lord Mayor of London.

Among the *purchaser-builders* there were Lord Ellenborough and the Baron de Tuyll, two baronets (Sir Francis Goldsmid and the Rev, Sir William Darell), and two men who subsequently acquired baronetcies (Sir Charles Cockerell and Sir Paul Wathen), but the sources of wealth that enabled men to buy estates and build houses were notably more diverse than formerly. Lord Ellenborough and Cockerell made their fortunes in India. Henry Crawshay, who built Oaklands Park for himself and then Blaisdon Hall for his son, was a Welsh ironmaster; Sir Francis Goldsmid a Jewish bullion broker; William Leigh, the builder of Woodchester Park, was the Catholic son of a Liverpool merchant with property interests in Australia. John Orred, builder of Ashwicke Hall, was an attorney, also from Liverpool, and Henry Brassey of Copse Hill was the son of the millionaire railway contractor, Lord Brassy.



Ebrington Hall: the surviving fragment of a house built by a member of the Keyte family, as tenant of the Fortescues, c.1615.

Local fortunes were also transformed into country estates. Stephen Cave was a Quaker banker from Bristol who bought and remodelled Cleve Hill House. Sir Paul Wathen was a Stroud clothier and banker, W. C. Lucy a Gloucester corn merchant, and Thomas Fulljames an architect, albeit one whose father had already made a fortune out of land-surveying and bought a country house, which Fulljames junior sold in 1864, using the profits to build a new house to his own designs. Two of the purchasers were archetypal prosperous squarsons (Rev. R. W. Hippisley and the Rev. Sir William Darell), both from established gentry backgrounds. Hippisley had an unusual motive for building: Quarwood was constructed at a safe remove from Stow-on-the-Wold after his parishioners rioted and burnt him in effigy in 1855. The backgrounds of several purchasers have not been identified, but only four of the thirty-one can be positively identified as existing landowners, enlarging their estates or moving from another part of the country. The rest seem to have been empowered to buy and build by the profits of trade or the professions, even if some of them had started from nebulously polite origins.

Overall, it is clear that access into the privileged world of the country elite became progressively easier and faster as time passed. In the 16th and 17th centuries, it was relatively uncommon for new recruits to both buy an estate and build a house in one generation, and there seems to be some evidence for Stone's contention that

country house building was a mark of arrival and social acceptance. The majority of new families came, furthermore, from the tight-knit world of the Court and the civil service, while during the eighteenth century, when the middle and monied classes became more politically important, the backgrounds of new recruits to the elite are more diverse. By the 19th century the number of those buying their way into country house society outnumbered that of those already within it who built to bolster or enhance their prestige. In Gloucestershire at least, therefore, it looks as though the oft-repeated claim that county society was an open elite, easy for the newly rich to penetrate, has a certain and slowly increasing validity. This study has not sought to examine the evidence for a class of suburban villa-dwellers such as Stone describes, but it is clear from other research that this existed too, not only in the vicinity of Bristol, but also around Cheltenham, Cirencester, Stroud and Tewkesbury, and perhaps to a lesser extent near Gloucester. The more open elite of Gloucestershire was thus not a substitute for Stone's town gentry, but existed side-by-side with it. Finally, is it straining credulity too far to wonder whether, in the radically altered social circumstances of the 20th century, the traditional openness of the landed gentry of Gloucestershire is one of the factors which has recommended the county to newcomers and thus helped to preserve our heritage of country houses from the holocaust of demolitions that befell Hertfordshire, Essex or Yorkshire?



Blaisdon Hall: the mansion built by Henry Crawshay of Oaklands Park for his son in 1875—76.

[Image from front cover]