

THORNBURY CASTLE

by Bryan Little

Thornbury Castle is only a splendid fragment of what its builder intended. The execution, in 1521, of Edward Stafford, third Earl of Buckingham, meant that the great mansion, including older work but mainly planned as a lightly fortified mansion, of the early sixteenth century, was never finished. Had the Duke's project, probably planned by architects who had already designed buildings for the first Tudor sovereigns, been completed Thornbury Castle could have been provincial England's most splendid country house. It would have been fair to call it the Hampton Court of the West of England.

Thornbury was long one of the possessions of the Earls of Gloucester. Through an heiress of that family it became one of the many estates of the Earls of Stafford. Their badge, the Stafford Knot, appears in the decoration both of the castle and of the church close to it. The Staffords became related to the Plantagenet kings. Edmund, the fifth Earl, married Anne, daughter of Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester and Earl of Buckingham, who was one of Edward II's sons. She had vast estates, and when she died in 1438 she was reckoned to be the wealthiest lady in England.

The Earl's son Humphrey became the first Duke of Buckingham and was killed during the Wars of the Roses. His grandson, the second Duke married Catherine Woodville, the sister of Edward IV's queen. He was executed, on the order of Richard III, in 1483. Edward the third Duke was born in 1478. The coming to power of the first Tudor sovereign made his position more secure. He could claim that he had much royal blood and he was personally allowed to bear royal arms within a white border. By 1507 and 1508, when he entertained at Thornbury, in the hall of the older manor, on a spectacular scale, he was one of the richest and most splendid aristocrats. But the most spectacular changes, when "bounteous Buckingham" was still in reasonable favour at Court, came early in Henry VIII's reign.

ARCHITECTURAL PLANS

The Duke planned the splendid enlargement of his manor at Thornbury. The building was to have apartments, private or for storage and the housing of retainers, disposed round two courtyards. The outer yard was to be approached, through a fine gateway, from a "lode" or artificial channel. The castle was not planned as an early medieval fortification, with massively thick walls. The impressive façade of its more private parts was to comprise most of the outer court's eastern side, while comparatively low northern and western buildings were to house servants and armed retainers. Three cannon were included in the armoury and small circular gunports were provided so that small hands could fire on unwelcome intruders, and cross-shaped loopholes were to be for the defensive use of crossbows. A gateway of some size and dignity was probably planned to end the approach from the town.

The spectacular western façade of Thornbury's inner complex is unusual, among England's late medieval buildings, as it bears a record of the year in which the work was started. For a long scroll puts it that the new king gave Buckingham licence to fortify his manor and to "empark" a thousand acres as a private hunting ground. The Duke's creation of a private Forest made him unpopular, and Leland records that the local people cursed him for depriving the farmers of much land "fruitful for corn".

The entrance façade was planned with two polygonal outer towers, staircase turrets, and two inner turrets to flank a splendid vaulted gateway; it expressed the splendour and



South east view of Thornbury Castle. Lyson's "Etching" 1791. Courtesy of the Gloucestershire Collection.

ambition of the Duke who was also Earl of Hereford, Stafford and Northampton, with his motto "Doresavent" (Henceforward), and who was among his period's wealthiest, most ambitious noblemen. He was aged thirty-three when he started the "new building" at Thornbury. In the prime of life, handsome and lavish, he was not without arrogance and selfishness. In 1500 he married Eleanor Percy, a daughter of the fourth Earl of Northumberland. Some years older than Henry VIII he was prompt to show that he too was of royal descent.

However Buckingham might conduct himself his mere existence posed a threat to the Tudor dynasty. In 1499, when Henry VII fell ill, with Buckingham now of age, there was some discussion on the succession at a time when the King's two sons were still boys. In 1509, when Henry VIII became King the Duke was temporarily made Constable of England. But fears that he might claim the throne prevented him from getting this military post as a permanent job. He was on the Royal Council but never got any really high political or military appointment.

Buckingham none the less drew attention to his royal links, and to his wealth which made him easily the richest of the king's subjects. He had a reputation for the splendour and costliness of his dress, particularly at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. In the previous year he had lavishly entertained the King and his Court at his Kentish property of Penshurst Place. He had a fine library, employed several musicians, and made considerable benefactions to the Church and education. He can be described as a Renaissance aristocrat, with a large permanent staff to administer his household and his great estates which were split into eight "receiverships", one of them based at Thornbury. He spent £1,000 a year (nowadays about £50,000) on building work at Thornbury, also large sums on finding husbands for his two legitimate daughters. His son Henry Stafford married Ursula, the daughter of the famous (and eventually martyred) Lady Margaret Pole.

BUCKINGHAM'S DEMISE

In the last two years of his life the third Duke spent more time at Thornbury which was convenient should he wish to visit his important, sometimes troublesome Welsh estates round Brecon where he built a new tower for the church. It could serve as a retreat from increasing political pressures at Court. In 1519 the Venetian Ambassador said that if, as seemed likely, Henry VIII died without a male heir the Duke could secure the throne. The powerful Cardinal Wolsey, suspicious because of the Duke's lavish display, was having him watched and was ready to put political obstacles in his way. He was hostile to Buckingham, (as one finds in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* where Buckingham sneers at

Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* where Buckingham sneers at Wolsey, the son of a butcher at Ipswich, as "this butcher's cur") and, with his own transformation of Hampton Court must have envied what Buckingham was doing at Thornbury. He was certainly behind the accusation of treason which was, in 1521, levelled at the Duke who was summoned to London. What followed amounted to judicial murder, without any really fair trial. The Duke had many supporters in London and he had to be moved from the tower, to and from Westminster, where his trial took place, under armed escort. He was executed on 17 May 1521. He was buried in London, in the Church of the Augustinian Friars which his Bohun ancestors had founded. The Duchess of Buckingham died in London in 1530.

It was natural that so highly placed a nobleman should employ master masons who worked on buildings commissioned by the Crown; various features at Thornbury suggest that one of these architects, who had Royal commissions at Westminster Abbey, who knew of recent work by Robert Janyns at Windsor Castle, and who was concerned with the design of the new Cathedral (now "the Abbey") at Bath was Buckingham's designer at Thornbury. This was William Vertue who, with his brother Robert, who died in 1506, was the designer both at Bath and of the splendid Henry VII Chapel at Westminster Abbey. The projecting window lights, semi-circular or triangular, of the eastern windows of the Chapel at Westminster, closely resemble the "oriel" windows of the residential southern wing at Thornbury. On their inner sides the mullions at Thornbury bear many heraldic badges to which the Duke's illustrious descent entitled him. They include the Stafford knot and the flaming axle of Woodstock, the mantle of Brecknock, the white swan of the Bohuns and the chained and crowned antelope of Henry IV. The southern range at Thornbury is of great importance in England's early Tudor architecture. Other fine features were the elaborate brick chimney stacks, which have the Stafford knot among their devices and the date 1514; in their Gloucestershire setting they were, when set up, a rarity.

Buckingham's plans for the frontage of the castle's inner buildings were most imposing, in terms of display if not in fortified strength. The gateway with the inscription above it, was completed and survives. But nothing remains of the room above the gateway which may have been meant to have an oriel window. Inside the court the private rooms of the Duke and Duchess lay on the southern side; their northern elevation is less than spectacular than that facing the churchyard. But one room has a six-light two-tiered window projecting as an obtuse triangle. Across that yard a series of kitchens, larders and a bakehouse is in a simpler early Tudor style. Inside the private living quarters the lounge doorway is in the late Perpendicular style. In its spandrels, and elsewhere, one sees a rich display of the third Duke's heraldic badges. The ceilings of these living rooms were put in during the castle's Victorian renovation.

ROYAL VISITORS

After Buckingham's execution the King confiscated the unfinished castle, and nothing more was heard of the chantry college, with its twenty-two stalls for priests, clerks and choristers, in 1514 set up in the chapel beyond the great hall. The castle was the only Royal residence in the West of England, and was available for visits by members of the Tudor Royal Family.

The first of these visits, in 1525, was that of Henry VIII's eldest daughter, the Princess Mary who was, at the age of nine, the heir to the Throne. She was on her way to Ludlow Castle to take up the post of President of the Council of Wales. She had a large retinue, with ladies in waiting in black velvet gowns, several gentlemen and a minstrel in her suite, and many servants decked out in her livery of blue and green. The

Princess was only at Thornbury for a few days, but the large party must have strained the available accommodation.

In August 1535 Henry VIII, and his second Queen Anne Boleyn, were at Thornbury on a "progress" which had started at Windsor and included Tewkesbury, Gloucester and Berkeley Castle, also a week at Thornbury. The plan included a visit to Bristol, but this was cancelled as there was plague in the town. The Mayor of Bristol sent a delegation, along with ten fat oxen and forty sheep to help feed the Royal party. Thomas Cromwell, the King's Chief Secretary, was included in the Royal retinue, and he gave the Bristol delegates a kind reception.

More repairs were carried out to Thornbury Castle in 1547, and in 1554 Mary I restored the castle to the Stafford family. But Henry Stafford, the late Duke's eldest son, had to be content with the barony of Stafford. The castle went steadily into ruin, and much decay had occurred by 1582. The "new building" started in 1511 was still standing, as also were the kitchens across the inner court and the unfurnished lodgings in the outer court. But much ruin had occurred among the other buildings, including the hall and the chapel, of whose above-ground appearance little is now known. Some walkways connecting the various buildings were paved with brick.

THE CASTLE IN RECENT TIMES

In the eighteenth century parts of the western range were refitted as a house for the agent who looked after the Stafford's considerable estates near Thornbury and elsewhere in Gloucestershire. In 1727 the second Earl of Stafford sold the estate to his Catholic cousin the eighth Duke of Norfolk; the profits of the estate went to Lord Philip Howard, the ninth Duke's brother, who lived at Buckenham in Norfolk. The then agent, who supervised repairs to the castle and to the sea wall along the estuary, sent him "pots" of sturgeon and bottles of Bristol Hotwell Water.

Thornbury was eventually settled on the Church of England branch of the Howard family whose main estate was at Greystoke Castle in Cumberland. Henry Howard, who was only twenty-two when he succeeded to the Greystoke and Thornbury property, eventually restored the chancel of Thornbury church, and in the 1850s, the residential wing of the castle. The architect was Anthony Salvin, well known for his restoration work on various castles, including Windsor, Caernarvon and Dunster. He put in many new ceilings, restored missing mullions, and inserted new panelling, attractive decorative ironwork which features the Stafford knot, and the nobly coloured heraldic overmantel above the fireplace in the lounge.

Henry Howard divided his time between Greystoke and Thornbury, and died at Thornbury in 1875. His elder son succeeded to Greystoke, but Thornbury went to his second son Edward Stafford Howard who sat in Parliament and held junior ministerial office. Later in life he became the first Mayor of Llanelli near the home of his second wife. His son, Sir Algar Stafford Howard, took his name from the last pre-Conquest owner of Thornbury. He became an expert genealogist and held the highest heraldic post of Garter King of Arms. During the Second World War he arranged for the safe storage at Thornbury of the valuable records of the College of Arms.