

Chapter 4  
Burley on the Hill  
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### Burley in the Middle Ages

Even before the coming of Rutland Water, most visitors' overriding impression of Burley has always been the great house of Burley on the Hill. For centuries, that first sight has been one to take the breath away. In 1953 it was glimpsed by two lady travellers as 'mistily blue in the summer haze, like some fairy palace set in enchanted woods' (Stokes 1969, 37). Rutland's early historian, James Wright, summoned the Muse of Poetry to do justice to the awe-inspiring location:

'Hail Happy Fabrick, whose auspicious view  
First sees the sun, and bids him last adieu!  
Seated in Majesty, your eye commands  
A Royal Prospect of the richest lands . . .' (Wright 1684, *Additions*, 5)

*Distant view of  
Burley on the  
Hill with part  
of Burley  
Fishponds in  
the foreground  
(RO)*

The origins of the settlement of Burley are obscure. Its name suggests a fortified place (perhaps an Iron Age hill fort) close to woods, and indeed the Domesday Book of 1086 records extensive woodland one league long by three furlongs (about three miles by three eighths of a mile). This part of Rutland had been settled by Danes, and Burley fell within the Danish-named 'Wapentake' (hundred or shire division) of Alstoe. The pre-Conquest meeting place may have been the mound, or motte, in what is now the deserted village of Alsthorp. Although listed as the separate manor of 'Awsthrup' in the Domesday Book, it now lies within the manor and parish of Burley.

At the time of the Domesday survey, Burley had 38 villagers and smallholders, working the land of their lord, Geoffrey, 'Gilbert of Ghent's man'. The manor descended through the same families until, at the end of the thirteenth century the heiress, Alice, married Sir Nicholas de Segrave (*VCH* II, 114).



*Holy Cross Church, Burley, in 1927 (Hart)*

Much of the early village of Burley was destroyed by fire in the 1370s, causing such impoverishment that the residents threatened to desert their holdings, and cease working on the lord's land. The Lord of the Manor, Sir Thomas le Despenser, was forced to relieve them of their debts, at the same time establishing an annual fair at Burley. When Sir Thomas died, the manor came into the hands of his brother, the Bishop of Norwich.

By the time of the Wars of the Roses in the late fifteenth century, Burley was in the hands of the Sapcote family, who were supporters of Richard of York and his son King Edward IV. During this period a carved octagonal font was given to Burley Church, and twenty marks (£13 6s 8d) left in the will of Isabel Sapcote, who wished to be buried in the Lady Chapel. But the most conspicuous survivals of this period are the damaged alabaster effigies probably representing Sir Thomas Sapcote and his wife, Joan (*VCH* II, 118).

According to the Military Survey of 1522 the ‘Chieff lord’ of Burley was Edward Sapcote, worth £60 in lands. In case of war, he possessed ‘harness’ (equipment) for himself and three men, plus three horses, two bills (pole-arms with a wide cutting blade), two bows and two sheaves of arrows. His Steward was William Overton, Gentleman, who was worth forty shillings in fees. The Vicar, Gilbert Urmeston, held a vicarage worth £12, the Prioress of Nuneaton held a parsonage worth ten marks (£6 13s 4d), while the parish priest of Burley, Thomas Crispe, had his stipend of five pounds and goods worth 26s 8d. Of the other 25 adult males able to serve as archers or bill men, most were tenants of Edward Sapcote. These worked mainly as ‘husbandmen’ (farmers), with one miller and one weaver (Cornwall 1980, 29).

## John Harington

Following the death of Edward Sapcote in 1550 with no male heirs, the manors of Burley and Alsthorpe were bought by Sir James Harington of Exton, whose youngest son had married Frances Sapcote. Through steady acquisition of estates in Rutland and beyond, by the end of the sixteenth century the Haringtons had built up one of the largest landed fortunes in England, yielding an income of between £5,000 and £7,000 per year. As the lord of many estates, Sir James Harington made his chief home at Exton, where he rebuilt the manor house in splendid style.

In 1570 John, the son and heir of James Harington married the heiress Anne Kelway, who brought more estates into the family, including Coombe Abbey in Warwickshire. As a wedding gift, Sir James settled on his heir the manor of Burley. John inherited his father’s estates in 1591, by which time it is likely that the mansion at Burley had been or was being totally rebuilt.

A great gathering of the Harington family and friends was held at Burley to celebrate the Christmas of 1595. This was vividly described by a French tutor, Jacques Petit, who travelled to Rutland with Sir John Harington’s fourteen-year-old daughter, Lucy, and her new husband, the Earl of Bedford. He compared the scale of Harington hospitality over the twelve days of Christmas with that of the royal court. Two hundred private guests dined in the refectory, while daily banquets were provided in the hall for eight or nine hundred country men and women. These had to be arranged in two sittings, with four or five long tables, each ‘decked with foodstuffs for eighty or a hundred persons at a time’ (Ungerer 1987, 244).

When Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603 the new Stuart king, James VI of Scotland, began a leisurely progress south to claim his crown as James I of England. Sir John Harington and his brother James met the king in Yorkshire, offering their hospitality

*King James VI of Scotland and I of England* (Wikipedia)



when his journey brought him into Rutland. The king reached Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire, on Maunday Thursday 1603, then on Good Friday he slept at Burley on the Hill (then known as 'Burley-Harington' to distinguish it from Burghley, Stamford).

On Easter Saturday, after a morning's hunting in Exton Park, King James and his entourage made their way to Stamford, to stay with the Cecils at Burghley House. After celebrating Easter here, King James was determined to return to Rutland to enjoy further hunting, but this plan was prevented by a fall from his horse, after which the king had to continue his journey south by coach. However, he was to see much more of Sir John Harington and his family. On Coronation Day, Sir John was made Baron Harington of Exton, and he and his wife were appointed guardians of the young Princess Elizabeth. It seemed as if a golden age lay ahead for the foremost family of Rutland as well as for their royal patrons.

During the first decade of King James I's reign, Burley on the Hill saw little of its important owners. Lord and Lady Harington now made their chief home at Coombe Abbey, where Princess Elizabeth was kept safe from the conspiracy of the Gunpowder Plotters, continuing her education under the personal supervision of her guardian.



*Princess Elizabeth, ward of Lord Harington – later the 'Winter Queen' of Bohemia (Bridgeman Art Library)*



*Coombe Abbey, Warwickshire, chief home of Lord Harington of Exton and Burley (SH)*

Barely ten years after the accession of King James I, and the elevation of the Harington family, tragedy struck both families. England was preparing to celebrate the marriage of Princess Elizabeth, and her guardian no doubt looked forward to being relieved of his responsibilities. The royal bridegroom, Frederick, Elector Palatine, arrived in London in October 1612. But within three weeks Princess Elizabeth's brother, Prince Henry, was suddenly dead of typhoid, to be replaced as heir to the throne by his diffident brother, Charles.

The royal marriage was delayed until Valentine's Day, 1613, after which the final duty of Lord and Lady Harington was to escort the princess, at their own expense, to her new home in Heidelberg. By this time Lord Harington, now 73 years old, was exhausted and financially drained. He managed to deliver the princess safely to her new home where he was obliged to stay for three months. He was desperate to return home, but he died of fever in the German town of Worms, in August 1613.

Inheriting an estate encumbered with debts of £40,000, and in poor health since his return from a European tour, the 22 year-old John, now 2nd Lord Harington, drew up his own will. He gave to his heirs power to sell land as necessary to discharge the many inherited debts. Nine days later, he succumbed to smallpox and was buried at Exton. Shortly before his death the Exton estate was sold to Sir Baptist Hicks, a wealthy merchant who was later

*The effigy of Sir John (later Lord) Harington from the Kelway Tomb in Exton Church (SH)*



made Viscount Campden. As he had no sons, it passed to his daughter Juliana and her husband, Sir Edward Noel, who succeeded his father-in-law as 2nd Viscount Campden. Sir Edward Noel also hoped to buy Burley on the Hill, securing his power base in Rutland, but was beaten to that prize by the king's favourite, George Villiers. But Sir Edward's inheritance of Exton and Chipping Campden marked the beginning of the long rise of the Noel dynasty. The 4th Viscount Campden was created Earl of Gainsborough and to this day the Noel family occupies Exton Hall. This was built in the 1850s after a fire had destroyed the early seventeenth-century Exton Old Hall, in 1810.



*Henry, Prince of Wales, with John Harington of Exton (Nichols 1824, i, 528)*

## George Villiers

The man who bought Burley, as well as Hambleton, Greetham, Cottesmore and Oakham Lordshold and another Harington estate, Coombe Abbey in Warwickshire, in 1620, was George Villiers. The asking price was £28,000. George and his bride, Katherine (*née* Manners), moved into their new mansion in the summer of 1621, planning a great house-warming at which the king would be guest of honour. George Villiers was created 1st Duke of Buckingham in 1623.

*Katherine Manners, Duchess of Buckingham* (Bridgeman Art Library)



Buckingham's house at Burley on the Hill has given rise to many questions. Any evidence on the ground was buried under the grand new house

which was built in the 1690s. Most early writers described the house which Buckingham bought from the Haringtons as

'improved' by its new owner, although Hoskins and Pevsner in the twentieth century echoed James Wright's suggestion that Buckingham completely rebuilt the house during the 1620s. This seems to be unlikely, although Buckingham certainly improved the house, and made extensive improvements to the grounds and surrounding deer-park. New walls were built, nine feet high and three feet thick, with five stone gateways, of which two still stand. Other survivals are the bowling green and the great stable block, described by Thomas Fuller as so superior that its horses 'were the best accommodated in England'.



*A portrait by an unknown artist of George Villiers, later created the 1st Duke of Buckingham* (Wikipedia)



*The Stables built for the 1st Duke of Buckingham at Burley* (Wright 1684, 55)

*Left: The Buckingham Gate on the old Oakham to Stamford road* (RO)

## The 1st Duke of Buckingham and King Charles I

It was apparently his elegant legs that first brought George Villiers, soon to be Duke of Buckingham, to the adoring attention of King James I. Their close relationship lasted for the rest of James's reign, and Buckingham's influence was strongly felt in all aspects of royal policy.

In 1623 the king was attempting to secure for his heir, Prince Charles, marriage to the Spanish Infanta, but her father was proving reluctant. Buckingham and Prince Charles hatched a scheme to travel to Spain in disguise and sweep the princess off her feet. Things did not go to plan and the two young men spent several months kicking their heels at the Spanish court, refused access to the princess. However, this deepened the growing friendship between them, securing Buckingham's role as royal favourite to the second Stuart king as well as the first.

When James I died in 1625, courtiers eagerly observed the new king, Charles I, and the new regime. He proved to be a poor judge of men and policy, and Buckingham soon became an unpopular scapegoat. Ironically, it was Heneage Finch, grandfather of the future owner of Burley, who as Speaker of the House of Commons read out a call for Buckingham's removal in March 1626 (HMC Finch, 1913, i, 43-44).

Another person less than delighted with Buckingham's close attendance on the king was Henrietta Maria. Married to Prince Charles at 15, she saw Buckingham as a threat to her marriage. Skilfully, the Duke made efforts to win her friendship. His most original gift to her was the Rutland dwarf, Jeffrey Hudson. Sadly for Rutland historians, and contrary to tradition, the memorable presentation probably took place in London, since there was no royal visit to Burley at the relevant time.

Buckingham's ignominious end came as a result of his command, as Lord Admiral, of a naval expedition to relieve the siege of La Rochelle. With casualties of 5,000 men, the expedition was a total disaster and on his return he was greeted with hostile demonstrations, partly mitigated by the birth of his male heir, George, in January 1628. A second expedition, this time under the command of Buckingham's brother-in-law, the Earl of Denbigh, proved equally unsuccessful. By now the surviving sailors and troops were sick, unpaid and mutinous. In Portsmouth, rioting sailors were not to be placated with promises of wages from Buckingham's own pocket. One, John Felton, was determined to end what was widely seen as the Duke's tyranny and corruption, and assassinated him on 23rd August 1628.

The death of Buckingham left the king bereft of his dearest friend, and Burley without an adult owner. The grieving king paid the Duke's debts, while his estates and titles passed to his seven-month-old son. A second son was born to Duchess Katherine posthumously, and she and her young children, Mary, George and Francis, lived in York House, close to the court in London.

## The 2nd Duke of Buckingham and the 1st Civil War (1642-46)

Throughout the eleven years while its owner, George Villiers the 2nd Duke of Buckingham, passed through childhood and King Charles ruled without parliament, Burley on the Hill was left to the management of stewards. The first Duke's ambitious plans for its gardens and deer park fell into abeyance and his fine horses no longer occupied their majestic stables.

In 1642, everything changed. On the anniversary of the 1st Duke of Buckingham's death, the king declared war on his parliament, and Rutland fell into the hands of parliamentarians. Sir Edward Harington, a nephew of Burley's former owner, seized Oakham Castle with its magazine of arms and ammunition, and a few weeks later assisted Lord Grey of Groby, Leicestershire, in the occupation of Burley House. With no resident owner, the servants put up little resistance and the magnificent mansion became the headquarters of the Rutland County Committee, governing the county in the name of Parliament.

George Villiers joined the royalist forces, and was with Prince Rupert at the storming of Lichfield, Staffordshire. His estates were now officially confiscated, and Burley became the property of Parliament. Trees were felled, horses commandeered for military use and fortifications dug around the house and stables.

For much of the war, Burley's garrison commander was Colonel Thomas Waite, who led frequent brutal raids on surrounding royalist strongholds. One of his most bitter opponents was Baptist Noel, 3rd Viscount Campden, whose Exton estate had also been commandeered by parliament, but who

led his royalist cavalry in bold campaigns from their bases at Belvoir, Leicestershire, or Newark Castle, Nottinghamshire. Even between members of the Rutland County Committee there were constant disputes, and for a time Waite was replaced by Major Layfield in command of Burley House.

In 1645 the royalists captured Leicester, and there were fears that they might overrun Rutland. The garrison at Burley rushed to improve its defences, only to be reprimanded by the London-based Committee of Both Kingdoms:

'We are informed that in fortifying Burley House there has been more spoil and waste made of that house than is necessary.

*George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham and his brother, Lord Francis Villiers in 1636, after Van Dyck. George inherited Burley on the Hill when only seven months old (Bridgeman Art Library)*





We desire you will consider what is necessary to be done for the fortifying thereof, and that as little damage be done to the building as may be.’

However, with the king’s defeat a year later bringing an end to the first civil war, Burley no longer needed to be maintained as a fortified garrison. The Rutland Committee was ordered to ‘slight’ the defences and dismantle the fortifications ‘without making any further spoil of the house or stables’ (CSPD 1644-5, 1646). However, at some stage during 1645-6, in defiance of the orders of Parliament, Buckingham’s beautiful house of Burley on the Hill was ‘. . . utterly consumed by fire so that at present there remains nothing but certain ruinous parts and pieces of the walls’ (ROLLR DG 7/1/70).

## The 2nd Duke of Buckingham and the 2nd Civil War (1648-51)

During the second civil war the second Duke made his escape abroad. Most of his confiscated estates were granted to the parliamentary commander, General Lord Fairfax. Burley House was uninhabitable, but the 1652 survey reported that William Horton and Thomas Wing were living in the stables. In the same year Fairfax gave up Burley, and some of its assets were sold to Oliver Cromwell, Fairfax’s successor as Lord General.

Unable to return to his estates, Buckingham accompanied the uncrowned future king, Charles II, fighting with him at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. Once again defeated and in exile, he planned and schemed. His opponent, the Earl of Clarendon, predicted with unconscious irony that Buckingham ‘will no doubt marry Cromwell’s daughter or be Cromwell’s groom to save his estate’. He was only partly wrong. Buckingham had set his sights on the daughter of his past enemy, Lord Fairfax.

Lord and Lady Fairfax reluctantly agreed to the match, but despite their pleas for the freedom of their new son-in-law, Buckingham was imprisoned first on Jersey, then at Windsor, and finally in the Tower of London. Following Cromwell’s death in 1658, Buckingham was released from the Tower the following year. With no capable ruler to take his place, King Charles II was recalled to his kingdom. His coronation was on 23rd April 1661.

Restoration of the monarchy brought restitution of confiscated property, and with an income from land and rentals of £26,000 a year, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham was considered the richest man in England. Once again at the centre of court life, except during his frequent quarrels with the new king, Buckingham had little desire to lead a quiet life with his Duchess on their estates at Burley or elsewhere. With his extravagant tastes and love of gambling, it was not long before his great estates were once again encumbered with debt. The stables, all that remained of his house at Burley on the



*George Villiers,  
2nd Duke of  
Buckingham  
(Finch 1901)*

Hill, were little used, except as accommodation for tenants or estate officials.

Even before the Duke's death, many of his debt-laden estates had been settled on trustees. Financial interest in Burley was claimed by his dubious relation, Lady Purbeck. At her request, a survey was made in 1683 of Burley and the Oakham Lordship. This report confirmed:

‘The house was a very fair building of stone but burnt down in the Civill Warrs, nothing left but Walls . . . The stables very large and fair standing, but out of repair. The Park large reputed 7 mile round enclosed with a very high stone Wall, generally very good Land paled with a high pale, in the North part some woods & Timber and good hill-ground, & many both red & fallow Deer in it, The South part kept for Meadow & pasture, the deer do not come in it . . .’.

In 1687 Buckingham died, after hunting, in the house of one of his Yorkshire tenants. The estate he had squandered had once been one of the greatest in England. Moves were already under way for the sale of Burley, and in the absence of a legitimate Villiers heir, it was left to another, more reputable, owner to rebuild the once great house. The arrival of the Finch family was to challenge the local supremacy of the Noels of Exton and from the vision of Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham, the new mansion of Burley on the Hill was about to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old.

## New Arrivals in Rutland



It was in 1689 that details of the Burley estate came into the hands of Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham (1647-1730), who was searching for a country seat in the Midlands. His father, Heneage Finch (named from the Essex family into which his grandfather had married), had risen to become Solicitor General and Lord Chancellor, before being created 1st Earl of Nottingham in 1681, a year before his death. He was buried at Ravenstone, Buckinghamshire, the family seat, where many members of the family continued to be buried.

*Heneage Finch, 1st Earl of Nottingham, father of the builder of Burley (private collection)*

Succeeding to the title in 1682, Daniel Finch married as his second wife Anne Hatton, of Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire, who brought a dowry of £10,000. He sold his London home, Kensington House, to the new king, William III, planning to move his household of 60 people to live near his wife's family.

The tradition which tells of Nottingham's first view of Burley on the Hill while riding to view, with the intention of purchasing, the late Duke of Buckingham's



estate at Helmsley, Yorkshire, is probably inaccurate: but after he first determined to buy Burley, he was able to begin negotiations, which were completed in 1694. As well as Burley, Lord Nottingham acquired the former Buckingham manors of Hambleton, Eggleton, Greetham and Oakham Lordshold. The price was £50,000 for the estate, park and stables: all that was required was to build a suitable house.

As his political views proved less acceptable to the Whig administration of King William III, Nottingham was forced to resign his post as Secretary of State in 1693, resolving 'to go into the country, though I live in the

stables at Burley'. Expressing his intentions to his sons in case he died before the new house was completed, Nottingham hoped that it would not cost much above £15,000: 'For I would not have my eldest son under the temptation of living in town for Want of an House nor of being too extravagant in building one' (Finch 1901, i, 26).

Impatient to see the house quickly completed according to his plans, Nottingham was able to obtain a lease on the Earl of Gainsborough's house at Exton, where the family lived until 1699. In that year they were able to move at least partially into the new house. Lady Nottingham wrote from Burley, 'I can't say we are more settled than when we first came for we still eat at Exton and I'm afraid must do so for some time.' Both the time-scale and building cost were greatly underestimated: the house was not finally completed until after 1710 and the cost was at least double Nottingham's original estimate (Habakkuk 1990, 348-352).



*Above: The inscription on the Heneage Finch engraving (private collection)*

*Left: Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham (private collection)*

## The New House

All the evidence suggests that Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham, employed no architect for his grand new house at Burley. While travelling in Italy as a young man, he had observed the building of Bernini's colonnades in front of St Peter's in Rome, which might have influenced his desire for the striking pair of colonnades at Burley. He had apparently discussed house-building with Sir Christopher Wren, and sought other expert advice. When his ideas had taken shape, Nottingham commissioned a model of the proposed house from the joiner, Thomas Poulteney. When building began in 1694, it was superintended first by Henry Dormer and then by John Lumley of Northampton. The bailiff, Thomas Armstrong, who was paid a hundred pounds per year, lived in a house at the end of the stable which later became the Estate Office (Finch 1901, i, 27).

Bricks, made on the site, were used for the 'carcase' of the building, while the foundations, exterior facings and ornamentations were mainly of Clipsham stone. The stone for the colonnades came from Ketton. Many builders and masons were employed from local quarries but difficulties in maintaining prompt deliveries of the vast quantities of materials required, and a shortage of masons, caused many problems.

*Burley House, from a nineteenth-century print drawn by J P Neale and engraved by H Winkles (private collection)*

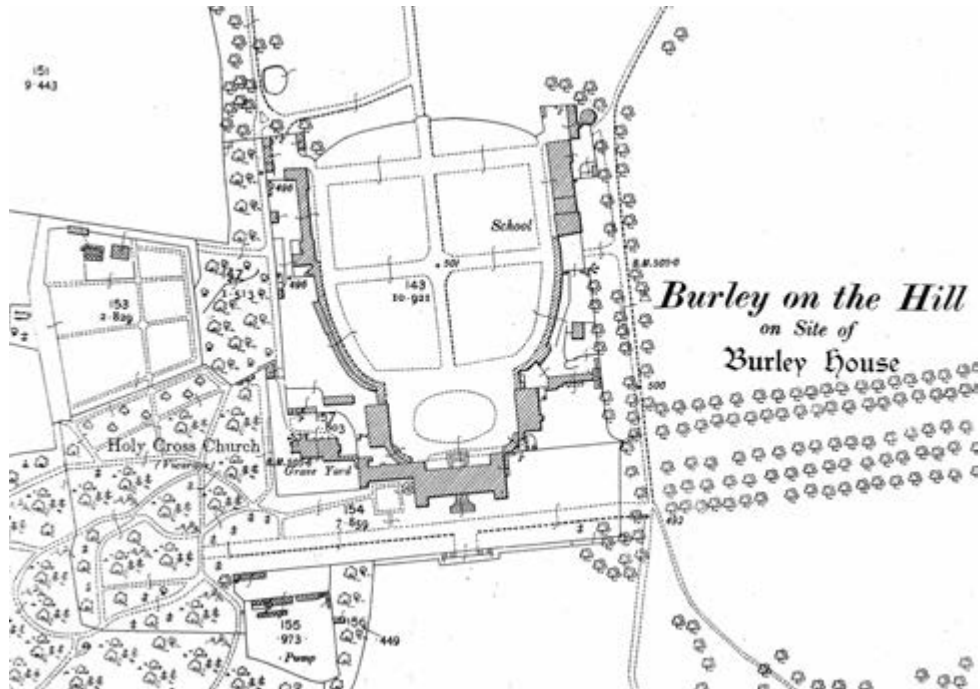


Desperate for skilled stone masons, Nottingham urged his father-in-law to recommend the work to men from Weldon, Northamptonshire, who would be paid between nine and twelve shillings a week. It is easy to sympathise with the view which Nottingham expressed in a letter of 1701, '[Building] is a pleasure your Lordship will not envy me once you have tried it' (Habakkuk 1990, 351).

A detailed account of the years of trials and tribulations, as revealed through the agreements, bills and letters between Lord Nottingham and his various agents, can be found in Pearl Finch's history of her family's home.

Much of the interior work was not completed until 1704, and the family found themselves living among painters and decorators for several years.

Everything was of the finest quality, personally chosen by Lord Nottingham. He ordered walls and ceilings to be painted by Gerard Lanscroun, the Flemish artist who had assisted Verrio in the decoration of Hampton Court. The main staircase was decorated in the baroque style with the history of Perseus and Andromeda, including the winged horse, Pegasus, which featured on the Finch family crest.



In 1901 Pearl Finch described a more human inclusion among the classical subjects depicted in the frescoes of the huge Painted Hall, 60 feet long by 40 feet broad, and half the height of the house. Near the door leading in from the grand staircase were two little figures of Lord Nottingham's children, Lord Finch and Lady Essex Finch, who had watched the artist at work. *Burley on the Hill from the OS 2nd ed 25" map 1904*



Sadly this magnificent room was destroyed in the fire of 1908. Following restoration, it became the great ballroom, commanding spectacular views which, as well as the distant Rockingham Castle, now include Rutland Water in the valley below. *Left: Burley House, main staircase (private collection)*

Many walls within Burley House were hung with tapestries, commissioned by Lord Nottingham from workshops at Mortlake, London, or possibly Brussels. These included a series of The Months, copied from those at Windsor Castle but no longer hanging at Burley in 1901, and Hero and Leander, destroyed in the fire of 1908. Great chimney pieces and mirrors were also ordered from London, causing some concern over their safe delivery to Rutland.

## Letter to Lord Nottingham concerning the delivery of mirrors to Burley, 27th September 1711:

My Lord

I received your Lordship's letter as for ye wood frame it was made according to ye drafts and in order to fix ye glasses and borders and gilt frame. I have bin with ye Waginer and he says that in case the wagin should overturn or any other casolity should happin that he will not stand to ye loss of any glasses; therefore My lord my opinion is that t'will be ye safest way to bring ye glasses by Pon [the carrier] and it will be but labor more compleated, that it would be a great pity that it should come to any damage as for ye gilt frame I have made that in joynts so that I do design to send them in a box by ye Wagin. My Lord it was impossible for me to make ye chimneypiece without making ye wood frame first, I have sent ye wood frame by Pon ye carrier and your Lordships Coach glass in ye box that came with ye coach frame. My Lord I humbly desire your Lordships opinion by ye next post for it is all redy to send away and I design that it may be brought down before ye bad weather com, and this is all at present From

Your Humble Sarvant

Thomas Howcraft (Pearl Finch 1901, i, 78)

It is likely that the total cost of building Burley House, spread over 17 years, came to around £30,000 rather than the £80,000 later suggested (Habakkuk 1990, 352). This included the necessary rebuilding of the Buckingham stables, after a fire in 1705. However, once finished, the mansion was celebrated as a marvel by all who visited it. In a fulsome addition to his *History of Rutland*, James Wright extolled the newly completed house, claiming, 'There are not many in England that can equal, and few or none surpass Burley on the Hill; the very great Grace of this little County'.

## From James Wright's poetic tribute to Burley:

Triumphant Structure! while you thus aspire  
From the dead Ruins of a Rebel fire;  
Methinks I see the genius of the Place  
Advance his Head, and with a smiling Face,  
Say, Kings have on this Spot made their Abodes;  
'Tis fitted now to entertain the Gods! (Wright 1684, *Additions*, 5)



*Drawing of  
Burley on the  
Hill (Wright  
1684,  
Additions, 9)*

## The Finch Dynasty

With the completion of his majestic house, the 2nd Earl of Nottingham and his Countess made Burley their main residence, spending only the first three months of each year in London, where they rented a house before buying one in Bloomsbury Square. The younger members of the large Finch family probably remained in Rutland throughout the year. From the eight children of Lord Nottingham's first marriage, only one, Mary, survived. However, there were nine daughters and six sons surviving of his second marriage, to Anne Hatton. It is claimed that in total the 2nd Earl had 31 children (*VCH* II, 116)! His eldest son, Heneage, became blind following smallpox and died young, but was replaced as heir by the second son, Daniel.

In these early days of party politics, Lord Nottingham was a Tory supporter of the Stuart King James II, and of a 'High' Church of England. Rutland was represented in Parliament by two Whigs, John Noel and Philip Sherard, who supported the Protestant succession, constitutional monarchy and fewer privileges for the Church of England. Lord Nottingham was not happy with this situation, writing to one potential voter:

'I take for granted for I am sure you are persuaded that Mr. Noel and Mr. Sherard are by no means fitt to serve in Parl; to be trusted with all our civil & religious rights . . .' (ROLLR Finch MSS, Box 4969 Rut. 2 iii).

Disqualified by his title from standing for Parliament, Lord Nottingham resolved to procure one of the Rutland seats for his heir, Lord Daniel Finch. In support of the campaign he followed the Whig precedent and created 300 new electors, in a total electorate of only 600, by helping them become 'forty shilling freeholders'. As Lord of the Manors of Oakham Lordshold, Hambleton, Egleton and Greetham, as well as Burley, Nottingham was well placed to influence voters in this period before the secret ballot. He was also a considerate landlord, arranging for cottages to be repaired and re-thatched when needed, not just before elections. The election expenses included the Bell-man, drums, horse hire and 'ten Ordinary's [pub meals] at the Bell' (Finch 1901, i, 275).



*The Finch family crest (private collection)*

When the votes were counted, Lord Finch and his fellow Tory, Richard Halford, came second and third respectively. However, Halford petitioned for the removal of the winner, John Noel, on the grounds of ‘corrupt and undue practices’. The following year Noel was expelled from the House of Commons, and Finch and Halford became the two Tory Members of Parliament for Rutland. Unhappy at the prospect of losing his seat, John Noel had sharp words with Lord Finch, and, according to the *Journal of the House of Commons*, ‘they were required by the House to give their words and honours not to prosecute the matter any further’ (Mitchell 1995, 207-12).



*Watercolour of Burley House from the south-east (private collection)*

Despite Lord Nottingham’s Tory sympathies, by 1711 it was becoming clear that the last Stuart, Queen Anne, would die without an heir and that, with Whig support, the succession was likely to pass to the Protestant Hanoverian dynasty. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Nottingham changed his allegiance to support the Whigs in Parliament. When the next election came in 1713, Lord Finch was to stand in Rutland against his former party, in partnership with a new fellow-Whig, Bennet, Lord Sherard. Finch and Sherard were successful, against the national trend which was still largely Tory. It was likely that many who had supported Lord Finch when he campaigned for the Tories were prepared to transfer their party allegiance and continued to vote for him.

When Queen Anne died in 1714, Lord Nottingham continued in government under George I, serving as Lord President of the Council from 1714-16. Unpopular with long-serving Whigs and their leader, Robert Walpole, he acquired the nickname of ‘Don Dismal’ for his gloomy, swarthy complexion. He was finally dismissed for supporting the six Jacobite peers who plotted for the return of the Stuarts.



During her husband's absences in London, Lady Anne kept him supplied with news (and occasional game birds) from Burley. In November 1718 she wrote:

‘They complain there are so many owls in the [Burley] Woods that they hinder their taking the few woodcocks that there are there, not without reason, you complain those I sent were lean w[hi]ch made me desire you to ask the Dr. (Charles Finch, DD) if there is a receipt to fatten them knowing he has a good many choice ones . . .’ (Finch 1901, i, 208).

## A New Title

There were several branches of the influential Finch family: Lord Nottingham's brother, Heneage, had been created 1st Earl of Aylesford, while his cousin, John Finch, was 6th Earl of Winchilsea. In 1729 John died, and the title of 7th Earl of Winchelsea now descended to his cousin Daniel, 2nd Earl of Nottingham. Rather than use only the new, superior title of Winchilsea, Daniel was resolved to maintain the title and dignity of his own branch of the family. He and his heirs continued to use both the Nottingham and Winchilsea titles. However, he did not live long to enjoy the new title, dying in January 1730. He was buried with his ancestors at the family manor of Ravenstone, Buckinghamshire (the family's estates there included the village of Middleton [Milton] Keynes).

The new 8th Earl of Winchilsea and 3rd Earl of Nottingham, Daniel Finch (1689-1769) had been born in Kensington Palace, in the year following the ‘Glorious Revolution’ which brought William and Mary to the throne in place of the Catholic James II. At the age of 21, as Lord Finch, he was elected to Parliament as a Tory member for the County of Rutland. Following his father into alliance with the Whigs, he was re-elected over the next two decades until, succeeding his father in 1730, he entered the House of Lords. By 1742 he had been appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, and the following year he was named as one of the Regents of the Realm when King George II led his troops into battle in Bavaria, in the War of the Austrian Succession (*VCH* II, 116).

Winchilsea later served as Lord President of the Council under the Whig Prime Minister, the Marquess of Rockingham. The general verdict on the career of this worthy Earl is summed up by his descendant Pearl Finch, ‘He held many important posts in the State, but does not appear to have greatly distinguished himself’ (Finch 1901, i, 282). His name survived for a period on the ‘Winchelsea Arms’, a wayside inn on his estate in Greetham, beside the Great North Road. However, since the late eighteenth century the inn has become better known as the Ram Jam Inn!

Despite following his father's wishes and serving above all the interests of the Finch family, the 8th Earl of Winchilsea left no son to inherit the titles on his death in 1769. His second wife, Mary Palmer, had produced four daughters, unusually named as Heneage, Essex, Hatton and Augusta (tradition holds that the youngest daughter was dressed for some years as a boy to supply the deficit!). The titles and estates were to pass to George Finch, son of Daniel's younger brother, William.

## Lady Charlotte Finch

In Burley Church is a beautiful white marble figure, depicting a young, kneeling woman. The inscription informs us that she was 'Lady Charlotte Finch . . . relict [widow] of the Right Honourable William Finch . . . Mother of George Finch, 9th Earl of Winchilsea and 4th Earl of Nottingham'. Born Charlotte Fermor, she was married in 1746 to William, younger brother of Daniel, 8th Earl of Winchilsea and 3rd Earl of Nottingham. They had several daughters and one son, George, who was to succeed his uncle as 9th Earl of Winchilsea. Lady Charlotte Finch is best known for her appointment in 1762 as governess to the new-born George, Prince of Wales, son of King George III and Queen Charlotte. She died in 1813, having seen her son, George, succeed to his uncle's two earldoms and inherit the great house of Burley on the Hill. He erected this monument in her memory in Burley Church, by the sculptor Sir Francis Leggatt Chantrey, whose works include the statues of William IV and George IV in Trafalgar Square.



*Above: Memorial to Lady Charlotte Finch in Burley Church (SH)*



*Left: An engraving of Charlotte Finch (private collection)*

## George Finch, 9th Earl of Winchilsea and 4th Earl of Nottingham (1752-1826)

As the only son many hopes were placed on the young George Finch, especially when it became clear that he would inherit his uncle's great titles. In 1761, the year before his mother, Lady Charlotte Finch, took up her appointment as royal governess, George was sent to Eton, where he became 'Captain of ye 1st form' and was much missed by his mother (Finch 1901, i, 325). At the age of seventeen he succeeded to the Earldoms of Winchilsea and Nottingham, and the great house of Burley on the Hill. He continued his studies, attending Christ Church, Oxford, where he enjoyed the pleasures of racing, balls and (when the season allowed) shooting.

After graduating in 1771, Lord Winchilsea left Oxford to tour Scotland before settling to life at Burley, interspersed with seasons in London and travels as far as Constantinople in 1775. He described the pleasures of country life, writing to his mother in 1774:

'Though Burley affords but little news, I sit down just to let you know that we are very well and very well entertained here, we have been very busy a hunting, and that tired me so much that in the evening I have had no courage to sit down and write, however to show that shooting is not quite deserted, we have packed off today a brace of woodcocks and a hare which

I hope will prove good.'

His eagerness to hunt is confirmed in a letter from his sister, Henrietta, to their mother:

'[Lord Winchilsea] is at present quite provoked at Lord Gains[borou]gh being gone for a week to Lord Exeter's on a coursing and card-playing Party, as he says in ye very prime of ye Hunting season. He really cannot swallow it as you can easily imagine' (Finch 1901, i, 331 & 333).



*The 9th Earl of Winchilsea*  
(private collection)

## Lord Winchilsea and Cricket

The 9th Earl of Winchilsea is probably best known today for his interest in cricket. He was the treasurer of a committee of 'Noblemen and Gentlemen' formed in 1784 to revise the laws of cricket. One important change was to instigate the six-ball over in place of the previous four-ball. As founder members of the MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club), Lord Winchilsea and a colleague prevailed on Thomas Lord to establish a cricket ground in Marylebone, London. MCC later moved to St John's Wood, London, where Thomas Lord is remembered in Lord's Cricket Ground. Winchilsea was a keen player, scoring 54 for MCC at Marylebone in 1792, and 56 on the same ground a year later. On 1st July 1793, the *Sporting Magazine* carried an illustration of a 'Grand Cricket Match played on Lord's Ground Mary-le-bone on June 20th and the

*Cricket match played on 20th June 1793 at Lord's Ground, Marylebone (Raymond Hill)*



following day between the Earl of Winchilsea and the Earl of Darnley for 1,000 guineas'.

In order to enjoy the noble game in Rutland as well as London, Lord Winchilsea ordered a cricket pitch to be laid out on the great forecourt of Burley on the Hill. According to Raymond Hill, it was christened in 1790 with a match between Hampshire and All-England. The site was used for cricket matches until the Second World War.



*Burley cricket team in 1923 (Raymond Hill)*

## Fireworks at Burley

During the 1780s, following the traumatic loss of the American colonies, King George III suffered repeated episodes of what appeared to be mental illness (modern specialists have suggested that he was probably suffering from the inherited disease porphyria). On 17th April 1789, the *Stamford Mercury* carried the following report:

‘The right hon. the earl of Winchilsea, lord lieutenant of the county of Rutland, appointed Monday last for a public rejoicing on his majesty’s recovery, at his lordship’s seat at Burley. An elegant entertainment was given on the occasion to the nobility, gentry, freeholders, and his lordship’s tenants, all of whom received a general invitation.

‘His lordship having engaged an eminent fire worker from London, a scene beautiful beyond description was exhibited in the large court in front of the house, at night. Amidst a variety of works was a pyramid 15 yards high, and a transparency, representing a medallion of his majesty suspended by two cherubs, bearing a crown, G III. Beneath, “Long live the King”. The bust was in a glory; at top of the pyramid was a large crown, and a little below on each side, the letters G.R. which with the corresponding works around, surpassed any thing ever seen in this part of the country. At intervals rounds of cannon were fired, together with repeated shouts of the populace, producing a pleasing awful effect . . .

‘The house and court yard was, literally speaking, like a fair, for many hours. It is supposed that near 4,000 people were entertained. In the left colonade was placed a very large quantity of ale, bread, &c. which was distributed to the populace so liberally, that near two hogsheads of liquor were obliged to be returned into the cellar. The whole entertainment was conducted in that true stile of English hospitality, which reflects the highest honor on the noble donor, and will ever be remembered by his guests . . . .’

## Humphry Repton at Burley

During the 1780s, Lord Winchilsea made improvements to the house and estate buildings of Burley. He was concerned that his tenants and labourers were well treated and housed, publishing his views under the title *An Illustrious Example of Attention to the Condition of the Cottager* (Aston 1989, 312-17). According to Pearl Finch, the Earl was the first landowner to introduce a system allowing his cottagers ‘to hire a small portion of land and to keep a cow’ (Finch 1901, i, 336). He helped to found the Rutland Society for Industry in 1785, and advocated provision for the children of the poor to learn skills for employment (Broughton 1990, 363).

Seventy years after the grounds had been laid out to the Italianate plans of the 2nd Earl of Nottingham, Winchilsea decided that the time had come for a ‘makeover’. Fashions in garden design were as mutable then as they are today. In the 1750s, the famous Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown had been commissioned to redesign the grounds of the greater Burghley House, home of the Marquis of Exeter outside Stamford. The artificial, geometric formalities



*Humphry  
Repton  
(RLHRS)*

of knot gardens and parterres were to be swept away, and Brown aimed to create landscapes ‘more natural than nature herself’. This frequently involved changing the contours and watercourses of the surrounding parkland.

By the time Lord Winchilsea turned his mind to a new garden, Capability Brown was dead and Humphry Repton was the rising star. Using the new term ‘landscape gardener’, Repton quickly acquired commissions with the help of his persuasive ‘Red Books’. These gave the house-owner a collection of water-colour illustrations with folding flaps to show ‘before’ and ‘after’ his proposed changes. He retained formal garden features such as trellises and flower-beds close to the house, divided from the park beyond by balustraded terraces from which residents could view the glories of the landscaped

parkland. Rather than building artificial ruins into the vista, Repton might include ordinary thatched cottages which would be of practical benefit.

When Lord Winchilsea invited Repton to Burley in 1795, he was the most important of Repton’s clients to date. Repton observed the five sharply descending terraces to the south of the house, standing on what he called ‘a table mountain’. He recommended leaving only the uppermost terrace, surmounted with an elegant balustrade, from which the gently sloping lawns (created by moving vast quantities of earth) could be observed. This major change was carried out according to the illustrations in the Burley Red Book.

*Burley south  
aspect before  
removal of  
terraces. From  
Repton’s Red  
Book (private  
collection)*



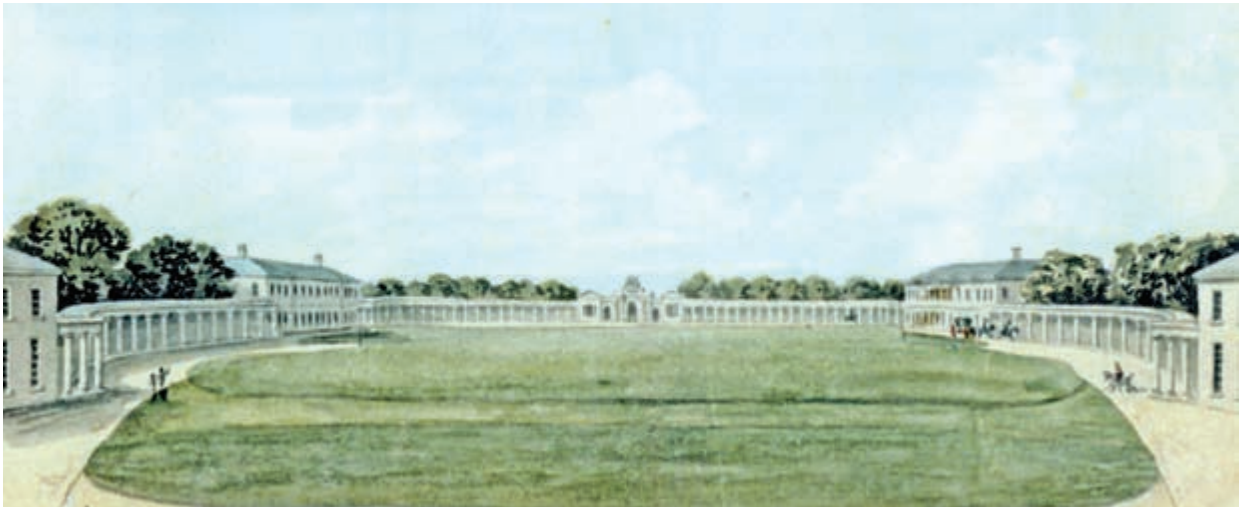


*Burley south aspect after removal of terraces as illustrated by Repton (private collection)*



*Repton's view of the replacement terrace (private collection)*

Other proposals made by Repton for Burley on the Hill included enclosing the north forecourt by extending and linking up the colonnades with a central triumphal arch (Winchilsea had recently opened up this area by demolishing the enclosing wall, leaving only the ornate iron gates and two porters' lodges). He also proposed a new, curving approach from the east, removing the south avenue, significant thinning of the woodland and redesigning the fishponds at the foot of the slope. However, Lord Winchilsea had neither the funds nor inclination to carry out all Repton's suggested improvements. The fine entrance gates remain to this day (Aston 1989, 312-17).



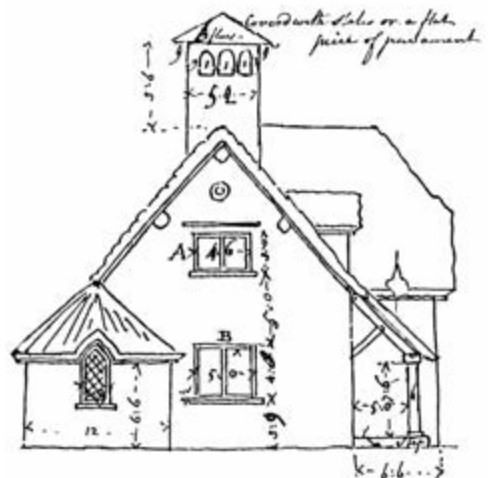
*Above: Repton's proposals for the north forecourt, which were never adopted (private collection)*

*Left: Entrance gates to Burley on the Hill (private collection)*



*Below: John Nash's design for the Home Farm, Burley (Raymond Hill)*

Repton's designs cost £2,500. While they were being carried out, Lord Winchilsea also employed the well-known architect, John Nash, who had laid out two royal parks, Trafalgar Square and Regent Street in London. Nash designed the Home Farm at Burley, for which he was paid £1,500. Following his work on Burley, Humphry Repton continued to work in Rutland, producing a new Red Book with designs for the grounds of Normanton Park, now mostly under Rutland Water. Meanwhile, as a finishing touch to his grounds at Burley, Lord Winchilsea's personal contribution was to design the Hermitage, a reed-thatched 'folly', constructed in 1807 from tree trunks, which burned down in 1960 (Hill 2001, 34, 38 & 70).





## The End of an Era

No doubt influenced by his mother's position as royal governess, Winchilsea's career at court prospered. In 1804 he was appointed Groom of the Stole to King George III (far preferable to the similar-sounding post of Groom of the Stool!). This appointment required the courtier to array the monarch in his state robe, or stole, but would also involve handing him his shirt when he dressed. King George had now been on the throne for 40 years, and was suffering recurrences of the physical and mental illness that had afflicted him in the late 1780s.

Following the French Revolution, England was now engaged in war with Napoleonic France and there were widespread fears of invasion. During this and the earlier American War, Lord Winchilsea raised militia regiments in Rutland. But in addition to political problems at home and abroad, the king and queen were distraught at the scandals and debts incurred by their sons, particularly George, Prince of Wales. In 1811, with no hope of the king's recovery, this unpopular prince was declared Prince Regent to rule in his father's place before becoming king in his own right in 1820.

Burley on the Hill was honoured in 1814 by a royal visit of the Prince Regent and his brother, the Duke of York. Declining the grand bed prepared for him in the State Bedroom, Prince George chose to sleep instead in the large State Dressing Room.



In 1826 George Finch, 9th Earl of Winchilsea died, still unmarried, at the age of 73. In the absence of a legitimate heir, his two earldoms passed to his cousin, George William Finch-Hatton, who had taken the additional surname of his grandmother, Anne Hatton. Finch-Hatton became 10th Earl of Winchilsea (and famous for his duel with the Duke of Wellington!), and the titles descended through this branch of the family, whose home was in *The State Bedroom at Burley on the Hill (private collection)*

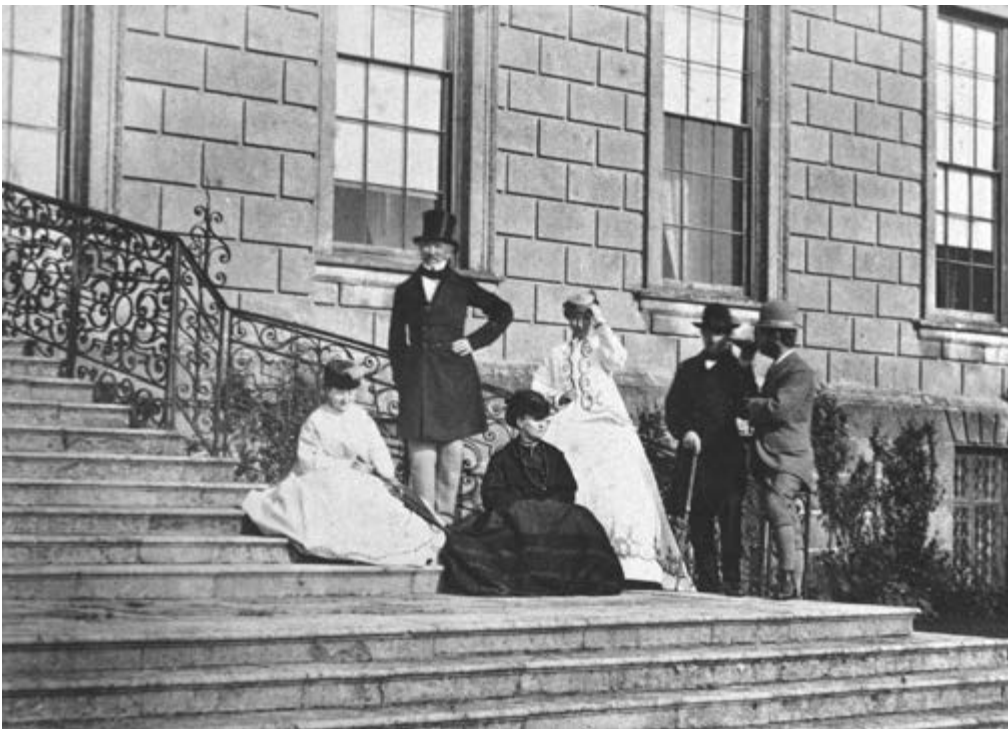
Guildford, Surrey. From henceforth Burley on the Hill would no longer be the seat of a noble Earl of Nottingham or Winchilsea, but the home of an untitled commoner. The first of these was George Finch, natural son of the 9th Earl of Winchilsea.

## George Finch (1794-1870)

Educated at Harrow and Cambridge, at the age of 26 Mr George Finch became Lord of the Manors held by his father, and owner of the beautiful mansion of Burley on the Hill. He had been granted the use of the Finch arms in 1809. In 1832, following the passing of the Reform Bill, Finch was elected as Member of Parliament for Stamford and later, for a short period, for Rutland. He combined evangelical Christianity with a love of hunting and cricket, encouraging his sons to hunt and his servants to join the estate cricket team.

George Finch's first wife, Jane Tollemache, had died aged 19 in child-birth, only two years after their marriage, and his second wife was Lady Louisa Somerset, daughter of the 6th Duke of Beaufort. She lived to the age of 86, and in 1892 was buried in the family vault in Burley churchyard. A vivid personal addition to the account of this event is recorded in pencilled marginal comments in the pages of Pearl Finch's *History of Burley on the Hill*, published 18 years later. A younger relative has added the intriguing note:

'Yes, & I was nearly buried there too. Being a bit inquisitive I went down the vault the day before she was buried & my cousin Somerset closed the door down' (Finch 1901, i, No. 15 of 200, 339-41).



*A family group on the steps of Burley House, 1867*  
(private collection)



*A family group  
inside Burley  
House, 1867  
(private  
collection)*

## George Henry Finch (1835-1907)

In 1870 George Henry Finch, Conservative Member of Parliament for Rutland, County Councillor and Privy Councillor, inherited Burley on the Hill. Following in the family tradition, he was a keen huntsman, and his daughter, Pearl Finch, records his University tutor attempting to reduce his desire to hunt on six days a week down to two! His first wife died in 1865, leaving a son and two daughters, and in 1871 G H Finch married Edith Montgomery, daughter of an Inland Revenue Commissioner, who bore him seven further children. His parliamentary career lasted for 34 years, but after 1885 no further elections were contested, and Mr Finch was returned unopposed, becoming Father of the House in 1906.



*Silver Wedding  
celebrations of  
George Henry  
and Edith  
Finch, 1896  
(private  
collection)*

## The Twentieth Century

Pearl Finch's account of Burley on the Hill ended in 1901, six years before her father's death on 22nd May 1907. He was fortunate not to have seen the disastrous fire which caused such devastation at Burley a year later. The new owner of Burley, Alan George Finch (1863-1914), was the son of G H Finch by his first wife. In 1893, the year of the notorious Jameson Raid, he had been sent to fight in Matabeleland, South Africa, under General Carrington. On inheriting the estate, he rented it out temporarily to Freddie and Henry Guest.



*Pearl Finch (right) and family members (private collection)*

Frederick Guest was later to become a well-known politician, but in 1907 he had recently retired from active army service in order to serve as private secretary to his cousin, Winston Churchill, then a junior minister in the Liberal government. Guest had recently married an American heiress, Amy Phipps, while Churchill was about to become engaged to Clementine Hozier.

In the early hours of 9th August 1908, following a party, fire took hold of Burley on the Hill. Clemmie was then on the Isle of Wight, and on hearing reports, anxiously telegraphed Winston. Fortunately no-one was injured, and Churchill's reply gave a young man's view of the event, although it was probably not shared by his hosts, nor by the house's absent owner:

'The fire was great fun and we all enjoyed it thoroughly. It is a pity such jolly entertainments are so costly . . . The pictures were of small value, and many, with all the tapestries and about half the good furniture were saved . . . Whole rooms sprang into flame as by enchantment. Chairs and tables burnt up like matches. Floors collapsed and ceilings crashed down. The roof descended in a molten shower. Every window spouted fire, and from the centre of the house a volcano roared skyward in a whirlwind of sparks . . .' (Hill 2001, 48).

*Melton Mowbray  
Fire Brigade at  
Burley on the Hill  
following the fire  
on 9th August  
1908 (Hart)*



Despite the attentions of the Melton Mowbray fire brigade, estate workers and residents of the house – including Churchill directing retrieval operations with a coat over his pyjamas! – most of the interiors of the western half of the mansion were destroyed. These included Verrio’s Painted Hall, subsequently restored as the Ballroom, although the painted Grand Staircase survived. The terrible effects of the fire were exacerbated by shortage of available water as well as the primitive fire-fighting equipment. Subsequently, a reservoir was built under the south terrace, supplied by rain-water from the roof and drains (Hill 2001, 53). A period of restoration ensued, which included the beautiful Adams Dining Room with its ornate ceiling and fireplace.

*Burley on the  
Hill following  
the fire in 1908  
(Hart)*



*Above: Part of the ceiling in the Dining Room at Burley on the Hill (private collection)*

*Left: The Dining Room at Burley on the Hill (private collection)*

*Below: A group of convalescing officers at Burley in 1918 (Raymond Hill)*

### **Burley on the Hill during the Great War**

During the First World War, Burley on the Hill was used as a hospital for officers recovering from trench warfare. One patient was 2nd Lieutenant Harry Howard, of the Royal Field Artillery, who stayed with the Skirth family at Home Farm, Burley, attending the hospital for daily treatment. Harry Howard recorded his time at Burley with a Brownie Box camera.



When Burley's owner, Alan George Finch, died in 1914, he was succeeded by his half-brother, Wilfred Henry Montgomery Finch (1883-1939). He also fought in the armed forces, reaching the rank of Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. He never married, and died in 1939. At this point, parts of the Burley Estate, including the village of Eggleton, were sold to meet death duties.

Burley on the Hill passed to a cousin, Colonel James Robert Hanbury, whose grandfather had married Gwendoline Finch. From 1945 he lived at Burley vicarage until he moved into Burley on the Hill in 1956. Following an uprising in Hungary that same year, refugees came to live in the mansion. One of these was Tibor Andres, a member of the Budapest Opera Orchestra, whose sole possession was a flute, which he practised in the bathroom at Burley, when not required to help shovel coal! He remained in touch with Raymond and Eunice Hill, returning to visit Burley in the 1990s (Hill 2001, 149).

During the 1950s the house was opened to the public for a period, and an illustrated guidebook was produced for visitors. Colonel Hanbury fully enjoyed the pleasures of country life. In true Burley tradition, he was a keen huntsman with the Belvoir, of which he was Master between 1947 and 1964 (Burke 107th edition, i, 380). However, he was described as 'not a good manager of assets', and by the time of his death the financial burden of maintaining the great house had become an insuperable problem (Duckers & Davies 1990, 172).



*Wilfred Henry  
Montgomery  
Finch  
(Raymond  
Hill)*

## Burley during the Second World War

From 1940-45, Burley on the Hill was once again used as a convalescent home for injured soldiers. Up to 150 patients were cared for under Matron Goodband and her nurses, many of whom attended a reunion in 1974. When the war ended, the mansion was occupied by the Red Cross as an orthopaedic rehabilitation centre for military personnel, and specialist diabetic hospital (Hill 2001, 60 & 118).



*Matron Miss E Goodband MBE with members of her nursing staff at Burley, 1941 (Raymond Hill)*



The last resident owner of Burley on the Hill was Evan Robert Hanbury, who succeeded his father, Colonel Hanbury, in 1971 at the age of twenty. For many years the great forecourt became the venue for the annual Rutland County Show, featuring livestock and equine events as well as popular stalls. But in 1990 everything changed. The mansion, parkland and wood were sold to the international tycoon, Asil Nadir, who proposed to turn Burley into ‘the classiest Country House hotel and sporting estate’, with two world-class golf courses, footmen and chambermaids in appropriate ‘turn of the century’ uniforms (Duckers & Davies 1990, 172). However, before the necessary planning enquiry could be held, Nadir’s empire was in receivership and the owner of Burley on the Hill was in Cyprus, evading serious fraud charges.

*Colonel James Robert Hanbury with his sons Evan and Tim, on the grand staircase of the mansion (Raymond Hill)*



# How could Mr Polly Peck let my house crumble?



**PICTURE POWER**  
IN THE SUNDAY EXPRESS

by Joanna Bale

THIS is the sorry state of a once-magnificent mansion belonging to fallen Polly Peck tycoon Asil Nadir.

It stands empty and decaying, a victim of the spectacular collapse of his £2 billion business empire.

The Grade 1 listed Burley House at Burley on the Hill, Leicestershire, is riddled with wet and dry rot.

Its walls are a mass of crumbling plaster and its once-immaculate gardens untidy and overgrown.

Beautiful tapestries and murals are left to disintegrate and fade away, long-forgotten by Mr Nadir, who faces 18 charges of theft and false accounting.

Now the former owner of the house has spoken out for the first time, attacking him for letting it descend into dereliction.

**Despair as farmer sees his heritage for sale at mere £3 million**



FALLEN TYCOON: Nadir

Rescue came for the neglected mansion in the form of a partnership between the former owner, E R ('Joss') Hanbury and the architect, Kit Martin. While Joss Hanbury resumed management of the estate, Martin converted the Burley mansion and its outbuildings into a series of luxury houses and apartments. Now among the most desirable residences in Rutland, the homes look out over the south avenue to Rutland Water beyond, northward over the great

courtyard, or across the wide expanse of the Vale of Catmose. No doubt the new inhabitants of Burley on the Hill rejoice to share this 'most beautiful and noble Edifice, with all those other requisite Imbellishments about it, that are suitable to so magnificent a building' (Wright 1684, *Additions*, 2).

*This article appeared in the Sunday Express of 28th July 1991*



*Burley on the Hill from the north-west in 2005 (John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)*

## The Estate Workers

The 1881 Census lists 21 indoor staff living at Burley on the Hill. The seven men named include a butler, ‘boy’ and footmen, while the women included a governess, housekeeper and various maids. In addition, the gardens, stables, workshops, sawmill and woods could not have been maintained without a small army of workers ranging from grooms to gardeners, living on or around the estate. Raymond Hill pays tribute to many of these in his book of 2001, *Burley on the Hill Mansion*. He recalls how estate workers were regularly called upon to clear snow off the leaded roof of the mansion, in case water leaked through the seams. It was cold, exposed work, with the one compensation that they could see all over Rutland!

*Estate workers  
shovelling snow  
off the roof of  
the mansion in  
1947*  
(Raymond Hill)



One such estate worker was Alick Freer, who began work at Burley in the 1950s. He was employed by Colonel Hanbury’s agent, Mr Mellish, taking over his brother’s former job as woodsman, for five pounds per week and a home at Rose Cottage. The basic woodland management included wood felling, coppicing, cutting stakes, binders and pen sticks, digging ditches and keeping the rides clear. Alick worked with the Wood Foreman, Jim Charity, to plant thousands of trees in place of those felled, on piece-work at seven shillings per hundred. Logs were cut in the steam-driven sawmill and sold by the sack for half a crown (12½ pence), and all the fires in the mansion had to be supplied. As Alick recalls:

‘Hunt Balls were the worst. We used to have logs then about two foot long and we used to have to carry them up flights of stairs to the big open fireplace for the Hunt Ball. Up and down, up and down . . . .’

When Alick began work in the woods at Burley, there were four full-time woodsmen and three full-time gamekeepers. But as others died or left the estate, Alick Freer was asked to take on more and more work. Eventually, ‘there was only me left on the wood side of the estate, and I was woodman, gamekeeper and everything’. He used to trap vermin and hang them along the whole length of one of the rides. Alick retired in the 1990s having worked for the estate for 40 years.

Much of the Burley estate was directly farmed by tenants such as Jim Ellis of Home Farm, employed by Colonel Hanbury as farm foreman and in charge of all the stock. His wife, Sheilah Ellis, became locally renowned for her skill as a shepherd, appearing in 1982 on the TV programme 'One Man and his Dog' (Buxton & Martin 2001, 65).

## Village Life

One important worker who lived in the village outside the gates was the blacksmith. In 1881 William Chambers, aged 29, lived at the forge with his wife, Lucy and two-year-old son, Rupert. Thirty years later, William Chambers was still shoeing farm horses, ponies and hunters at his forge. His smithy still stands today, 'under a spreading chestnut tree' (Longfellow), sufficiently picturesque to have featured in an advertisement for Cherry Blossom Boot Polish.



Chestnut Farm, behind the Forge, was for almost three centuries the home of the Lane family, including James Lane, coachman to George Finch. For a time it was a public house known as the Horse and Groom, but in the early nineteenth century this was closed by the last Earl of Winchilsea, who moved the public licence to Hambleton. Chestnut Farmhouse continued as the village Post Office until 1939, when the postmistress, Fanny Lane, retired. In the early years of the century the Royal Mail van would change horses at Burley, and Mr Lane was paid ten pounds a month to deliver the mail for a radius of four and a half miles around Burley (Hill 2001, 91).

Until 1944, the children of villagers and estate workers attended Burley Village School, held in two rooms of the mansion's stable block. This school had been established by George Finch in the 1860s, with Miss Eliza Brown teaching the infants and the older children taught by Miss Martha Carr. In



*Burley Village Feast Day, 1925* 1922, Burley School won the Rutland Morris Dancing Competition, although by now the number of pupils had declined from over 60 to 24 (Traylen 1999, 54).

(Raymond Hill) Raymond Hill remembers entering the fancy dress competition of Oakham Carnival in 1945, wearing costumes made by Miss Edith Lane of Chestnut Farm. Miss Lane was a loud singer and she was greatly missed if absent from church, as the congregation looked to her to lead the singing (Spelman 2000, 90). As well as the regular church services there would be celebrations such as Christmas, May Day and Harvest. The annual fête, which began as Burley Village Feast Day, would be held in the forecourt of Burley on the Hill, or occasionally at the Vicarage.

## Burley Wood and Fishponds

As well as a valuable source of timber and a sporting facility, Burley Wood was a place of endless pleasure for the local children. They might be taken out on nature walks by their teacher, or play around the area known as the Lion's Den. Burley Wood's great rides, laid out by the Duke of Buckingham, survived the recommended 'improvements' of Humphry Repton, and still today provide magnificent vistas as well as convenient sectors for hunting and shooting.

As the largest tract of ancient woodland in Rutland, Burley Wood is rich in flora and fauna and was made a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1992. Each spring brings spectacular displays of Bluebells, while there are rarer plants such as slender St John's Wort and woodrushes. Observations made by Rutland Natural History Society in 1989 recorded 73 species and varieties of mosses and liverworts, 154 different fungi and 80 lichens growing on bark, including eight lichens not previously recorded in Leicestershire and Rutland. Uncommon butterflies included Speckled Wood, Purple Hairstreak

and Essex Skipper. There were 34 species of moth, 55 species of hoverfly, 41 of crane-fly and 183 beetles. Two varieties of bush-cricket infrequent in Leicestershire and Rutland are commonly found in Burley Wood (Jeeves 1990, 68-70).

Even before the coming of Rutland Water, Burley Wood was well-known for its birdlife, including breeding Redstarts. A century ago, local landowners with an interest in birds shot as many varieties as possible, to add to their collections of stuffed birds or eggs. George Henry Finch, owner of Burley, was proud to provide notes on his impressive collection of stuffed birds for Haines' publication of 1907, *Notes on the Birds of Rutland*. In addition to specimens shot in the woods, many of the birds noted in the book were water fowl observed at Burley Fishponds, such as the Common Snipe which were reported as regularly breeding there.

It was not only bird-watchers, but also local fishermen and youths who knew the delights of the Burley Fishponds, which had lain for centuries at the foot of the wooded slopes of Burley on the Hill, at the end of the south avenue leading to the Buckingham gate on the old Stamford Road. Close by were the Cow Yard, Keeper's Cottage, former Toll Cottage and an unusual hovel, built into the dry stone wall. During many winters, the fishponds and flooded fields beyond would regularly freeze, and became a popular venue for ice skating. Eddie Butcher remembers how, in the 1930s, 'At night cars drove round the lake and shone their headlights on to it and skating went on all night' (Spelman 2000, 125).

*Burley Fishponds are revealed when Rutland Water is at low level (RO)*



*An aerial view of Burley on the Hill showing the now-flooded fishponds and the avenue leading to the house (John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)*

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, both Burley Wood and the Fishponds provide valuable habitats for birds whose numbers and very survival have been under threat. Red Kites and Sparrowhawks fly above and the reintroduced Ospreys nest nearby. When the reservoir was built in the 1970s, the fishponds area fell inside its perimeter, and was to be flooded and incorporated into Rutland Water. Before this happened, quantities of reed and other plants were uprooted and replanted around the new lagoons of the Nature Reserve at Eggleton. But the former fishponds in the north arm of the reservoir remain an important, secluded area of the Rutland Water Nature Reserve. Although for much of the year they are lost to view, during a dry season when the level of Rutland Water falls, the Burley Fishponds are once again revealed, their raised causeway at times now dense with Cormorants and other water birds (*see* Chapter 14 – Rutland Waters).

