

## Ashridge House

The story of Ashridge goes back to the time when Edward I's cousin, Edmund, acquired on his travels what he believed to be a portion of Christ's blood. When Edmund succeeded to the title of Earl of Cornwall, he established a monastery at a spot high up in the Chilterns, some 600 ft above sea level and just two miles from Berkhamsted Castle which he had inherited and was his home. The monastery, founded in 1283, was called Ashridge College, and the Augustinian monks, known as Bonhommes, were committed to guard the precious portion of Christ's blood and other sacred relics that were lodged there.

With its royal connections, Ashridge soon became important, and Edward I held a parliament there in 1291. While in mourning over the death of his wife Queen Eleanor, the king spent Christmas with the monks at Ashridge, 'in the cold solitude of the Chiltern beechwoods'. In subsequent centuries Ashridge College continued to have royal patronage. The Black Prince, whose favourite home was Berkhamsted Castle, involved himself in the affairs of Ashridge College, and in his will left it his great bejewelled table to be used as an altar there.

But in the years leading up to the Reformation, Ashridge College went into decline. Henry VIII was a friend of the Rector of the College, but it was only a few years after the king stayed there that he ordered the dissolution of all the monasteries. In 1539 Ashridge was closed, its treasures dispersed or destroyed, and the last monks left forever.

The old monastic buildings were then used by the royal family. Henry VIII held a privy council at Ashridge, and his three children all spent some time. After Henry's death, Princess Elizabeth, the future queen, was staying at Ashridge when her sister Queen Mary had her dramatically arrested on suspicion of conspiracy. Elizabeth was taken from Ashridge under armed guard, ill and in fear for her life, to imprisonment in London.

But of course Elizabeth survived to take the throne, and after that the royal ownership of Ashridge came to an end. In 1604, her chancellor, Francis Egerton, acquired the buildings and lands, and for over two centuries his family were to be there, first as knights, then as earls, then as Dukes of Bridgewater. The most famous was the 3rd Duke, who while still in his twenties became possessed with an enthusiasm – almost an obsession – for canals, and he invested much of his considerable fortune in building them. The network of canals he pioneered in northern England did much to help turn England into the industrial centre of the world, and brought him a great fortune. He was given the name of The Father of Inland Navigation, and a monument to him bearing that inscription still stands on the Chiltern ridge, overlooking the village of Aldbury.

It was not until after he had given so much of his time to his canals that the Duke turned to improving Ashridge, which he had sorely neglected. In fact the buildings were in such a state that he had the lot knocked down. In their place

he decided to build a great palace set in landscaped park, to rival that of other estates being created at that time throughout England. But before the rebuilding had got under way the Duke died, and the title with him, and it was left to his heir, the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bridgewater, to organise the completion of the project. The famous architect James Wyatt was commissioned to design for the house, and Capability Brown and Repton were to be involved in laying out the park.

The opening of the new house in 1814 heralded a period of over 100 years when Ashridge became renowned as a venue for hospitality, at first by the Bridgewaters, then by Lord Brownlow who came in possession of Ashridge after a long legal wrangle in 1853 following the death of the last Bridgewater. Royalty, both British and foreign, prime ministers and the most famous writers and artists of the day were all entertained there. As well as being lavish hosts, both the Bridgewaters and the Brownlows were generous local benefactors.

And so it continued until after the Great War, when in 1925 the then Lord Brownlow put the whole of his family property in the Chiltern area on the market. The process of breaking up Ashridge Park and selling it off to developers had already begun when there was a great outcry to save it for the Nation, leading to a country-wide appeal which resulted in much of the Park and surrounding land being acquired by the National Trust. But nothing could be done to save the precious contents of the House, which were all auctioned off, including the magnificent 16<sup>th</sup> century stained glass from the chapel windows.

The empty house was then sold, and became in sequence a Conservative Party college, a hospital and military headquarters during the Second world War, then a ladies finishing college, and now the Ashridge Business School with an international reputation. Despite all this changes, the house and its extensive gardens have been well preserved.

As for the Park, the National Trust continues to look after it in the public interest. In fact the Trust's Ashridge Estate has grown by acquisitions of adjoining land to include among other assets the Chiltern chalklands of Ivinghoe Beacon and Pitstone Hill. Apart from its varied and beautiful landscape, the Estate has a wide range of wild life, including herds of fallow deer. The Park is often used as a setting for films, such as the Harry Potter pictures.

**By John Cook**