

Our speaker was Rhoderick W. J. Jones who as Ground Manager at Ashburnham Place for the last 19 years, has been responsible for the restoration of the historical landscape of Capability Brown. At the same time he has become very interested in its history dating back to 1066 when William the Conqueror gave 'Sussex' to one of his Norman supporters.

The first written record, dated 1194, refers to land given for the building of Battle Abbey. It shows that Reginald, a Norman, had adopted Ashburnham as his surname. For the next couple of centuries the family rose in importance becoming Sheriffs of Sussex. The flourishing iron industry made them wealthy enabling them to undertake building works in Kent and Sussex which included the Tower at Scotney Castle.

During the Reformation John Ashburnham and family became recusants, remaining Catholic even though they had to pay a penalty the equivalent of £3500 a month. Eventually Queen Elizabeth confiscated Ashburnham Place and imprisoned John where he died.

John's son, Sir John, disagreed with his father, instead supporting Elizabeth who then re-instated him at Ashburnham Place. It didn't do him any good as he speculated on land and commodities ending up deeply in debt. He sold Ashburnham Place for the equivalent of £8000 but this was not enough to pay his debts. He died in a debtor's prison leaving a 17 year son with nothing to inherit.

The son, known as John the Cavalier, married Frances Holland who happened to be very rich. Gradually, bit by bit, he bought back Ashburnham Place. Through his mother's connections with the Duke of Buckingham, by the age of 24 John attended the court of Charles I and was appointed a groom of the bedchamber. In the civil war he helped Charles I to escape to the Isle of Wight but Charles was then captured. Thus John was disliked by both the royalists for the capture of the king and by the parliamentarians for supporting the king. Cromwell imprisoned him and took his house. Somehow, he married his second wife, again a wealthy woman, and used some of her money to help Charles II in waiting. By the restoration, although John had survived the rack and dungeons he was very aged by his sufferings. Once Charles II was back he rewarded the doddering old man with gifts of land in Bedfordshire, Suffolk, Corset, Yorkshire and elsewhere. First John rebuilt the church in Ashburnham which today is still a fine example of the Stuart period and worth visiting. The house was then rebuilt but on a new site. When John the Cavalier died everything was inherited by his grandson, John, who had already inherited a fortune from his uncle.

This young man John was ennobled as Baron Ashburnham but lived in Suffolk at Anthill Park conveniently near Newmarket racecourse. The Baron was succeeded by his second son, John, who became the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Ashburnham, a title that existed until 1924 but he lived in London. It was his son, John, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl who returned to Ashburnham with a wealthy wife.

It was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl who engaged Capability Brown to transform the landscape from straight to curvaceous lines including 3 lakes, an orangery, an ice-house and 4 acres of walled garden. The house too was changed to a Georgian frontage and Ashburnham Place looked its best.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl, George, immediately began enlarging Ashburnham Place to house his large collections including porcelain, manuscripts and art.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Earl, Bertram, was also an avid collector. He lived the high life of the Victorian era, hunting, shooting and fishing around his 5 stately homes. He left his mark at Ashburnham by covering the whole house with an exterior of brick work. It took 9 years just to make the bricks! He thought his family was well established as he had 11 children. "This dynasty will last forever". Little did he know.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Earl, Bertram, changed everything. At 27 he became a Catholic. He is reported to have sold treasures worth the equivalent of £60 million and given the money all away. He built and endowed the Catholic Church in Battle. He had no heir, his only surviving child being a daughter, Catherine. Instead, his brother Tom became the 6<sup>th</sup> Earl. Tom was a military man and had never expected to inherit. He returned from shooting tigers in India and visited Ashburnham which he said he loved. Promising to come back, he went to live in Canada. Arriving back in London, still childless, he announced he was selling Ashburnham and promptly died. He was the last son of the 11 children and the last Earl of Ashburnham.

Catherine, the daughter of the 5<sup>th</sup> earl, was the next in line. She had entered a convent in Wales, but from a sense of duty she returned to the family seat in 1924 where she faced large death duties. In 1944 a bomber aircraft crashed nearby causing considerable damage to the roof which eventually led to rot setting in. In 1953 Catherine, the last Ashburnham, died, the 45<sup>th</sup> to be buried in the family crypt.

The rotting house with £427,000 death duties was inherited by a 27 year old theology student, John Bickersteth, the grandson of an Ashburnham daughter. He chose to sell the remaining treasures rather than make the villagers homeless by selling their houses. The house was developed as a Christian Training Centre for the Laity which it still is today.

Joan Grace