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Stowell House and Park

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STOWELL HOUSE AND PARK.

BY

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Read at Stowell, 29th August, 1877.

IN Stowell, anciently and properly called Stonewell (whether from a stone-built well, or from some spring having petrifying properties, I cannot say), what I think most worthy of note is the illustration which the mansion and estate afford of the grandeur of Trade and the grandeur of the Law in the fortunes of some of its former possessors. It seems strange that Trade should have flourished in so secluded a spot as this, but it arose from the fine and beautiful fleece of the sheep feeding on the upland pastures near. It was wool that was the staple production of the extensive tract called the Cotswold Downs, and the town not far distant—Northleach—was once a great mart of that commodity. Here lived—not in this house, which was built in the time of James I., but in the mansion which occupied this site—the elder branch of the Tame family—great woolmen of their day—and who had large houses and warehouses in Cirencester, Fairford, and other towns, and extensive estates here and at Fairford, Tetbury, Rendcombe, and elsewhere. The Stowell branch, about Leland's time (HEN. VIII.) was represented by Sir Edward Tame, and from them this estate passed to the Atkinsons, by purchase. The heir-general of that family, Wentworth Lord Strafford, sold the estate to the Howes, a great Parliamentary family in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. Mr. John Howe (either this purchaser or his son) was a zealous and somewhat intemperate politician of the (1688) Revolution time, and apparently not the first so of his family; the printed Law Reports of the time of Charles II., recording against a John Howe a

sentence of Chief Justice Hale, imposing a heavy fine for an assault on Thomas Master, Esq., at an election of Parliament men for Cirencester. Mr. John (Jack) Howe had been sent up to the Convention Parliament as member for Cirencester, and was a conspicuous figure in the House of Commons. The traits of his person and character are shown in the History of England by Lord Macaulay, a writer who, by the close study of the literature of the time, realized, and whose power of word-painting vividly depicted the persons and scenes of his narration. The historian's portrait of John Howe is that of "A person whose body was worn by the workings of a restless, acrid mind . . . He was tall, lean, and pale, with a haggard, eager look, expressive at once of flightiness and shrewdness." It would be curious to see how far this description agrees with the family portrait, wherever that may be. Howe, then a Liberal in politics like his ancestors of the Commonwealth period, became a courtier, and received the lucrative office of Vice-Chancellor to Queen Mary.

But his lack of judgment, and the asperity of his character, instigated him to make attacks on Lords Caermarthen and Halifax, who were friendly to the Revolution settlement, but had served the Crown too faithfully in high office in the late reigns. Their recent services were, in Howe's opinion, no atonement for their past errors. He maintained that the civilities which had passed in the moment of peril signified nothing; "When a viper is in my hand," said he, "I am very tender of him, but as soon as I have him on the ground I set my foot on him and crush him."¹

The magnanimity of the King inclined him to measures of conciliation and comprehension. He was, therefore, averse to Howe's proceedings, and, by messenger, remonstrated with him upon it. But the remonstrance was so rudely received as to give personal offence to the King. Deprived of his office in consequence, Howe joined the Opposition, or Country party, or, as it was nick-

¹ Macaulay's Hist. of Eng., vol. v., 29, 8vo., Ed., 1860.

named, the "Grumbletonians," consisting of some few Whigs and many Tories, or Jacobites. Of his services in that cause only need be here mentioned his attempt to bring about an impeachment of Lord Somers, which signally failed, and (from its local concernment) his attempt to spread disaffection at that critical period, when, to sufferings from war were added the sufferings from the calling in of the depreciated currency with a view to its restoration on a sounder standard.

Speaking in the House of Commons of the distress—"He knew," he said, "part of the kingdom (Gloucestershire) well. The people there were all living on alms, or ruined by giving alms. The soldier helped himself, sword in hand, to what he wanted. There had been serious riots already, and still more serious riots were to be apprehended."

"The disapprobation of the House was strongly expressed. If this county was in a disturbed state, was it not due to Howe's unprincipled agitation? Some Gloucestershire gentlemen took issue with Howe on the facts. There was no such distress, they said, no such discontent, no such rioting, as he had stated".¹

John Howe had been returned as one of the Knights of this Shire in 1698, and when, upon the dissolution of that Parliament a general election ensued in 1701, he again came forward, but was opposed by a candidate of the Party which he had quitted. Lord Macaulay's account of the contest is of striking interest, and is further remarkable as being the last part of his history which he revised. He has, unfortunately, left the description of the Gloucestershire election incomplete, but what he has said, it would be wrong to give in other than his own words.²

"There was one district to which the eyes of hundreds of thousands were turned with anxious interest—Gloucestershire. Would the patriotic and high-spirited gentry and yeomanry of that great county again confide their dearest interests, to the scandal of Parliament, to the renegade, the slanderer, the mountebank, who

¹ Hist. of Eng., vii., 361.

² Ibid, viii., 297.

had been during thirteen years railing at his betters of every description with a spite restrained by nothing but the craven fear of corporal punishment and who had in the last Parliament made himself conspicuous by the abject court he had paid to Louis, and by the impertinence with which he had spoken of William. The Gloucestershire election became a national affair. Portmanteaus full of pamphlets and broadsides, were sent down from London. Every freeholder in the county had several tracts left at his door. In every Market Place, on the market day, papers about the brazen forehead, the viperous tongue, and the white liver of Jack Howe—the French King's buffoon—flew about like flakes in a snowstorm. Clowns from the Cotswold Hills and the Forest of Dean, who had votes but who did not know their letters, were invited to hear these satires read, and were asked whether they were prepared to endure the two great evils which were then considered by the people of England as the inseparable concomitants of despotism—to wear wooden shoes and to live on frogs. The dissenting preachers and the clothiers were particularly zealous, for Howe was considered as the enemy both of conventicles and factories. Out-voters were brought up to Gloucestershire in extraordinary numbers. In the City of London the merchants who frequented Blackwell Hall—then the great emporium for woollen goods—canvassed actively on the Whig side.”—*Ibid.*

Sir Richard Cocks and Maynard Colchester were returned members for the county. But at the next election after the demise of King William, Howe was returned with M. Colchester. The last Gloucestershire election of King William's reign was further remarkable for the law suit arising out of it, brought by Mr. Howe against a gentleman of the county—Mr. John Prinn, of Charlton King's—for these words, alleged to have been spoken at Cirencester Market during the contest:—“Do not vote for Howe, for he is a Jacobite, and is for bringing in the Prince of Wales and Popery to destroy our nation.” For this slander of a Justice of the Peace and Parliamentary Candidate, £400 damages were given. A new trial was refused, and an appeal to the Exchequer Chamber not prosecuted. Mr. Prinn then appealed to the House of Lords on

points of law, and Mr. Howe, having printed a case in which he spoke of the verdict as having been given by twelve gentlemen of the county of unquestionable credit, Mr. Prinn printed his case, in which he alleged that the jury was so packed by the Sheriff (Sir S. Eckley), a favourer of Mr. Howe, as to consist entirely of voters for Howe. The judgment was, however, affirmed by 48 Lords against 35.

The charge against Mr. Howe of being a Jacobite seems to have been well founded. He was a member of a club at Cirencester of persons, spoken of by Rudder, in the history of that town, as having been adherents to the Pretender, though, he adds, that in his time the members were well affected to the Constitution, as are their successors, for this club is still in existence. Mr. Howe retained the good opinion of a very large party in the State, and particularly in this county, to his death, which took place in 1721. He was succeeded in his estates by his son, who was ennobled by the title of Lord Chedworth. This was during Sir Robert Walpole's administration, from which circumstance we may assume that the politics of this family had again changed. To him succeeded (1742) his eldest son, who, for four years, was Lord Lieutenant of the county. From certain suits in Chancery it appears that he was remarkable for connubial unblestness. On his death (1762) without issue, his brother succeeded. He died in 1781, and then the title and estates devolved upon his nephew, who was the son of a third brother. The latter lived in comparative seclusion amongst his mother's relations in Suffolk, taking little interest in, and seldom visiting, Gloucestershire or Wiltshire. A friend of his, the Rev. T. Crompton, some time after his decease, published letters that had passed between them from 1780 to 1795.

Amongst these is one dated October, 1781, just after his accession to the title and estates, in which he says he had made but one resolution, and that was, not to live in Gloucestershire, a resolution which had been taken for some years. Only one letter is dated from Stowell Park. In that he professes a child-like ignor-

ance of business, and disposes of some of it in a style playful enough. This Lord died unmarried in 1804, and with him the title became extinct. His character is given in the inscription on the tomb to his memory in St. Matthew's Churchyard, Ipswich :— "He was a nobleman of superior abilities, well versed in every branch of elegant and polite literature. An able, active, and upright magistrate ; intimately acquainted with the laws and constitution of his country ; a strenuous supporter of civil and religious liberty ; firmly attached to the principles established at the Revolution, and a sincere believer in the truths of Christianity." This Lord made, by his will, a disposition of his large estates which was thought singular, and which was impugned on the ground of a predisposition to insanity, but without success. He passed by his relations, but gave a great number of legacies to his theatrical and other friends, and very large ones to his executors and trustees—Wilson and Penrice. That "illustrious statesman and true patriot," Charles James Fox, was a legatee for £1,000. By the trustees, all the Howe estates in this county were sold and dispersed.

One large lot—Stowell and Chedworth—was purchased by Sir William Scott, Judge of the Admiralty Court, elder brother of the great equity lawyer, Lord Chancellor Eldon. In 1821 Sir W. Scott was raised to the Peerage, and took his title from this place. He had one son and one daughter. The son, unfortunately, died unmarried a few months before him, and the father, it is stated in the "Gentleman's Magazine" (January, 1836), having made over to this son, in the son's lifetime, a considerable portion of his estate with a view to save legacy duty, had, on thus becoming representative of his son, to pay such duty on his own property. Lord Stowell died full of years and honours in 1836. By his will the estate went to his daughter, Lady Sidmouth, and on her decease without issue, to the descendants of his brother, the Lord Chancellor. The noble Lord who now holds it is such descendant, and represents the two great lawyers, the Brothers Scott. By his possession of this mansion and estate, may, I think, be aptly illustrated the grandeur of the Law.