

THE PRIORY, DITCHEAT, SOMERSET

A Family and Architectural History

Part 1: History

INTRODUCTION

The minor mansions of England, with which the land is still so richly endowed, await their historian. Even with the increasing interest in local history they seem likely to wait in vain, so laborious the task and so scanty the records. Moreover, the tide of local historical research has moved away from the gentry and their homes into the more fashionable fields of demography and the story of the common man. There are, however, a few amateurs, known to the professionals as 'mere antiquaries' still interested in these subjects. It is good that this should be so as there is a danger of the pendulum swinging too far the other way and the manifold contribution of these houses and their owners to the local community being overlooked.

Among these manor houses, loved not only for their charm and beauty, but also for that 'essence of the past which still lingers like the notes of distant music' is the Priory at Ditcheat, near Castle Cary in Somerset. This was already described as 'exceedingly interesting' but 'comparatively little known' when the Bath branch of the Somerset Archaeological Society visited it in 1909. The house, never in fact a priory, or community of monks, but the rectory, is an intriguing one.

Apart from its ascription to John Gunthorpe, Dean of Wells, and the fact that it had been the home of the Leir family, Rectors of Ditcheat, for seven generations, little seemed to be known about the Priory except the usual medley of tradition which clusters round any notable house. Both the structure of the building and the history of the occupants posed formidable challenges to the investigator. As Dr John Harvey, the noted medievalist, has commented in his *Sources for the History of Houses*, research is dry as dust, but detection breathes romance, so when Sir Christopher Chancellor, the present owner of the Priory, asked me to look into its history and architecture, I could not resist the invitation.

The result is the present paper, an attempt to record the story of a small country house from 1473 until 1977. The broad historical outline is obligingly provided by a curious wooden notice which hangs at the Priory. It reads:

Hanc domum in usum Ecclae. ex munificentia
Johan^s Gunthorpe Rec^s olim edificatam
A.D. 1473 et per piam curam X^{to} Coward;
rec^s postea repatam 1667 Gul^s M. Leir Rector nuper refecit 1864.

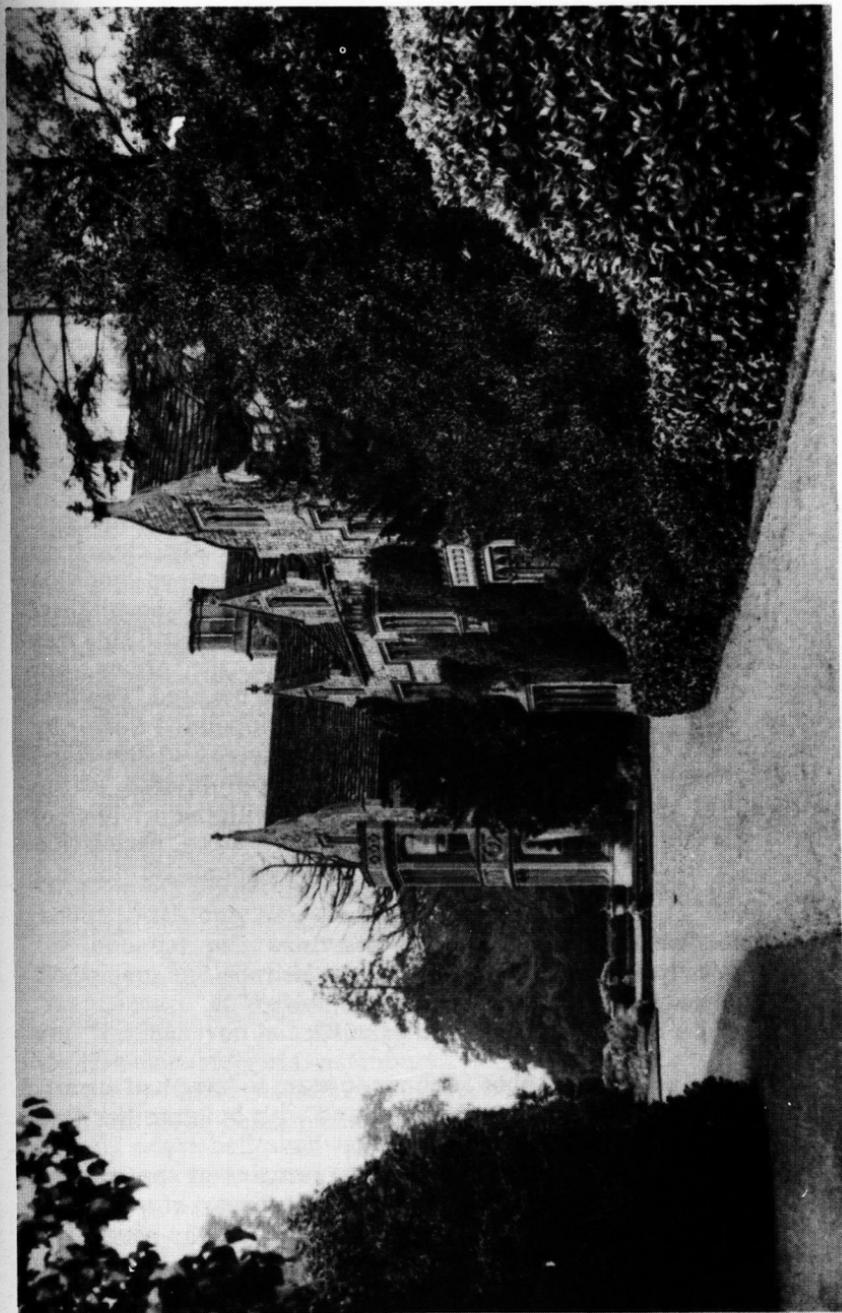
Here is the fundamental framework, a tale of three rectors, Gunthorpe, who first built the house, Christopher Coward who became rector in 1667 and converted the medieval parsonage into a fashionable Carolean mansion, and William Marriott Leir, who, in 1864, turned the clock back and transformed Dr Coward's house into a Gothic manor. These two substantial rebuildings in conjunction with additions and subtractions at various times make this complex house something of an architectural mongrel. Bewildering at first sight, its component parts gradually fall into place with familiarity and its building history now seems reasonably clear. The Priory is already recognised as a Building of Architectural or Historic Interest (Grade two).

In order not to clutter up the narrative I have divided my material into two parts dealing with the history of the Priory and those who have lived there first. The reader should then be familiar with the various figures who played their part in the architectural history of the house dealt with in part two which it is hoped will be published in a future volume of *Transactions*.

The tranquil tale of those who over the generations have lived at Ditcheat Priory starts with the most distinguished resident, John Gunthorpe, Dean of Wells, Rector of Ditcheat, and according to a strong tradition the builder of the original house. This makes an appropriate beginning for the story of a mansion which still continues as a family home. For Glastonbury Abbey, however, the building of a fine new rectory house by a worldly prelate marked the beginning of the end of a connection with Ditcheat which had already lasted more than 600 years.

Ditcheat was part of the possessions of Glastonbury Abbey in Anglo-Saxon times and a 13th century copy of a charter of King Ethelwulf, reputed to date from 842, granting the lands of Ditcheat ('the gate in the dike', that is the Fosse Way) to Prince Eanulf is extant. The bounds of the estate are given and have been recovered by Dr G. B. Grundy¹ who held that the grant consisted of the present parish. Eanulf made the estate over to Glastonbury in 851. By the time of Domesday Book in 1086, Abbot Alnod held 30 hides of land in Ditcheat. A hide is a variable amount but is thought to have averaged 120 acres. Three hides were in demesne, or in hand as a home farm and the stock included two riding horses, perhaps kept for the Abbot's use.

As owners of much of the parish, Glastonbury presumably built the first church and appointed the parish priest. Certainly the advowson, or right of appointment, belonged to the abbey by 1266. By immemorial custom each householder had to give a tenth of his



The Priory, Ditcheat, following the restoration of 1864, a photograph taken about 1890.

produce towards the upkeep of the local priest. When a monastery owned a Rectory it was usual to appoint a vicar (from the Latin for deputy) to carry out the duties of the cure. In this case the tithes were divided, the monastery creaming off the Great or Rectorial Tithes such as corn, hay and wood and leaving the Small or Vicarial Tithes, usually the minor produce and labour services which were more difficult to collect, to the vicar.

Ditcheat, probably because of the importance of the estate, seems from the earliest times to have been a Rectory, the Abbot appointing a Rector (Latin 'ruler') who had the right to all the tithes, great and small, and who enjoyed what would now be called a plum living. As early as 1189 in *An Inquisition of the Manors of Glastonbury Abbey*² compiled for Abbot Henry de Soilli the incumbent of Ditcheat is styled *Persona*, or Parson, a word hardly ever used for a mere vicar. He held a virgate of land, perhaps 30 acres, in return for supplying the Abbot yearly with a pint of honey mead.

In 1266 there was an attempt to demote the Rector of Ditcheat. In that year the Bishop of Bath and Wells gave the church to Glastonbury Abbey, which already had the patronage, on condition that the revenues were used to pay debts and for hospitality, except for a sum which was to be reserved to pay a vicar.³ This was technically an appropriation of the Rectory to the Abbey, but whether it made any practical difference may be doubted. The first recorded incumbent, Stephen de la Haye, was appointed *Rector* by the Abbot in October, 1321. In any case the process was reversed in 1332 when King Edward III granted the appropriation of the vicarage to Abbot Adam de Sodbury, together with the privilege of holding a market and fair and the right of free warren, permission to kill game and beasts as well as to preserve them. No doubt it could be said of Abbot Sodbury:

*A Monk there was, one of the finest sort
Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.
A manly man, to be an Abbot able;
Many a dainty horse he had in stable.*

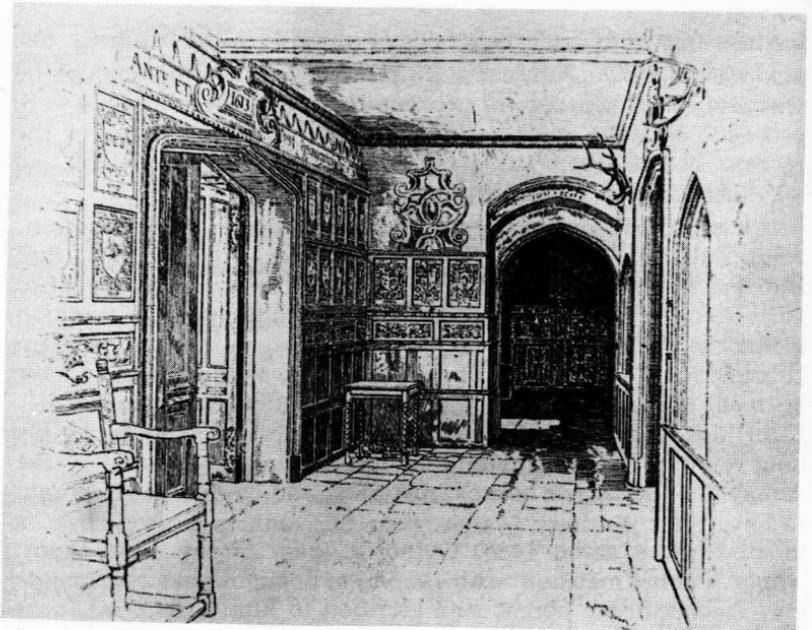
Be this as it may, Abbot Sodbury appears to have had a particular interest in Ditcheat and is credited with building the first Rectory, although the incumbents must have had some kind of residence before his time. There are no remains at the present house to indicate so early a date unless the moat, part of which can still be traced, is a feature of the earlier house. It may have been this building which is faintly reflected in an action taken by the attorneys of the Bishop of Bath and Wells against John Lax who had become Rector of Ditcheat in 1458. A bad choice apparently as

Lax not only held three benefices in plurality without licence but also was only a deacon, not a full priest. If this was not enough he was also under sentence of excommunication. The attorneys were ordered 'to make public citation at the dwelling house of the rectory' in Ditcheat.⁵ Lax disappears from the scene in 1459 and was succeeded by the more prosaic Richard Weton.

It is with Weton's successor, John Gunthorpe, and his patron, John Selwode, Abbot of Glastonbury from 1457 to 1493, that Ditcheat Priory is inextricably associated. The two men appear to have been friends and shared a passion for building. The tradition is that the Priory was built by Gunthorpe yet, as the Rev. William Leir told the Rev. William Phelps in 1830, was 'supposed to have been one of the country residences of the Abbots of Glastonbury'.⁶ Later, this was narrowed down to Abbot Selwode, who during his long reign of 36 years employed the enormous revenues of the Abbey to build manor houses, rectories, and churches. He is said to have built Ashbury Manor, near Shrivenham in Berkshire, a moated house dated 1488, Ivythorne, near Street, East Brent, where 'a noble mansion' with chapel, hall, sumptuous apartments and a magnificent porch, was ascribed to him,⁷ Norwood, near Glastonbury, where Phelps saw his monogram in an oriel window, and New Street at Mells which Leland says he built and where his initials appear on a neighbouring house.

Selwode rebuilt the nave at High Ham Church and was certainly associated with the heightening of the chancel and the inclusion of a clerestory at Ditcheat Church. His initials appear on the battlements. Despite the survival of several Glastonbury terriers and surveys, little contemporary evidence for these building activities is available. It is significant that in a survey of Glastonbury property compiled by the commissioners of Henry VIII about 1540,⁸ only four country seats are mentioned in addition to the abbatial palace at Glastonbury. These are the lodges at Sharpham and Northwode, or Norwood, a house at Pilton, and a 'manor place' at Weston Zoyland. These, say the commissioners, are 'the mansyon houses nowe in the kings handys pteynying to the late monastery of Glastonbury'.

It is possible that Abbot Selwode built the Priory as a Rectory, but Gunthorpe being much abroad or at Wells where he added a palatial wing to the Deanery, the Abbot had the use of the house from time to time. Given the number of country seats he had this is unlikely to have been often. It may be objected that the Priory, even taking away modern additions, was on too grand a scale for a rectory. However, it was by no means unusual for an incumbent of an important living to provide amply for himself. A case in point is the Rectory House of Walton, interestingly enough also ascribed to



The screens passage at Ditcheat Priory in 1909 from P. H. Ditchfield's *The Manor-Houses of England*. The panels, now removed to another part of the house, bear the arms of the Rectors of Ditcheat from 1425 to 1891.

Abbot Selwode. This house which has had the good fortune to survive more or less intact had a hall, two parlours, two butteries with chambers over and another low room also with two chambers over it. Another Glastonbury parsonage, Shapwick, had a hall, four chambers, buttery and kitchen as well as brew and malt-houses, barn, hayhouse, dovecote and 'ii ffeyre orchards.'⁹

Gunthorpe might be the archetype of those ecclesiastics, the holders of rich benefices, so felicitously described by W. A. Pantin in his remarkable paper *Medieval Priests' Houses in South-West England* which appeared in *Medieval Archaeology* in 1957. These 'were likely to be what canon law called 'sublime and literate persons', and many of these were probably employed in royal or ecclesiastical business elsewhere, and would be absentees and pluralists. Such a man's house would probably resemble a manor house; it might well be let to a farmer, but the incumbent might reserve one or two rooms for an occasional visit...a wealthy incumbent would be expected to build and maintain a better sort of house...a rector would be responsible for building and maintaining his house...' To disentangle the respective roles of abbot and rector at Ditcheat Priory is perhaps now beyond the art of man. However, in 1260, according to John of Glastonbury's chronicle,

Abbot Roger de Ford (1252-1261) had a " 'competent' chamber" (*cameram competentem*) at 'Dischesgate'. The rural retreat, the place of solace, which eased the mind of one abbot was sometimes an anathema to his successor. They ceased to be visited and were let out to tenants. Such seems to have been the case at East Brent, Ivythorne and at Hunstrete where Abbot John Chynnock (1375-1420) built a mansion. The abbatial and rectorial traditions of Ditcheat Priory would be accounted for if Abbot Ford's modest residence suffered the same fate, being eventually handed over to Gunthorpe by his friend Abbot Selwode and rebuilt according to proper notions of what befitted 'sublime and literate persons'.

Given the scarcity of hard facts, the traditional ascription to Dean Gunthorpe may be accepted. He was a great builder, rector for 25 years and, as Dean of Wells, resident in the area. That he at least embellished the house was proved when during the unblocking of a window at the Priory in 1912 a quarry of glass was found bearing his initials in yellow stain and contemporary with the Dean.

Little beside the outline of his official career is known about Gunthorpe. He is typical of the new men who climbed into prominence at the court of the Yorkist king, Edward IV, but he got no further than the foothills. His background was that of the gentry and he may have some from Nottinghamshire where a Thomas Gunthorpe, possibly his brother, was Prior of Newstead. Gunthorpe was what we should now call a progressive; he looked forward to the Renaissance rather than backward to the Middle Ages. Some indications of personality survive. He was evidently a man of considerable culture with a deep-seated love of pomp and magnificence which extended to the point of ostentation. He delighted in creating splendid buildings and loved books of which he was an avid collector. His vanity is revealed in the way he embellished both buildings and books liberally either with his coat of arms, *within a bordure engrailed sable, argent a chevron gules between three guns of the first*, initials, or his rebus, or badge, of a gun, a canting allusion to his name popular at the time.

Gunthorpe's initials appear not only at Ditcheat, but also in stained glass at Bristol Cathedral and Stratton-on-the-Fosse Church. They are carved in stone on his tomb in Wells Cathedral. His arms appear in glass at Mark, another church belonging to Glastonbury Abbey.

As a young man, Gunthorpe spent time in Rome where he came in touch with the new learning spreading from the East after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Besides making useful friends at the Vatican, he bought books in the Eternal City. Some of these he gave to Jesus College, Cambridge, and several colleges there

retain volumes which once belonged to him. His copy of Pliny's *Natural History* is in the library of the Dean and Chapter of Wells. There is little doubt that Gunthorpe was one of those who helped to spread the new learning, knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman texts, in England. Christopher Woodforde has suggested¹⁰ that a Latin prose copy of the *Odyssey* which Gunthorpe bought 'was probably the first copy of the *Odyssey* in any form that had come to England since Roman times'.

Gunthorpe was author as well as collector but seems to have confined his writings to epistles and orations. These were delivered during his embassies abroad on the occasion of his reception by various sovereigns. Such occasions as the marriage of Margaret of York and Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, which he attended must have given him immense pleasure. Whether his elegant speeches were equally enjoyed by the eminent persons to whom they were addressed we cannot know. Posterity has not considered them worth resurrecting from their Latin coffins.

In 1454, Gunthorpe was a proctor at Cambridge, his first emergence into recorded history, and in 1465 was first appointed Rector of Ditcheat. He was also Warden of King's Hall, Cambridge, but only lived there occasionally. As we have seen, he was attracted to Rome where he became a Papal Chamberlain and acquired a standing which was to be useful when it came to obtaining licences from the Pope to hold numerous benefices in plurality. He gave up the Rectory of Ditcheat, perhaps when he went abroad. On his appointment as Dean of Wells in 1472 he must have regretted this fat living so convenient to his Deanery and persuaded his friend the obliging Abbot Selwode to re-appoint him in 1473. When Gunthorpe was presented to the Bishop of Bath and Wells 'in a low chamber of the bishop's inn without the Bar of the New Temple' in London, he objected that Gunthorpe already held two incompatible benefices, the Archdeaconry of Essex and the Deanery of Wells whereupon Gunthorpe produced his trump in the shape of the Apostolic letters 'with silken strings of red and blue, after the manner of the Roman Court' allowing him to hold yet another.¹¹

Besides these ecclesiastical preferments, Gunthorpe acquired others of a more political nature. He was chaplain and High Almoner to Edward IV and Secretary to the Queen, Elizabeth Woodville. From time to time he served as an *ad hoc* Ambassador. Gunthorpe reached the peak of his career in 1483 when he became Lord Privy Seal and Clerk to the Parliament. The accession of Henry VII in 1485 placed the servants of the previous regime in jeopardy, but Gunthorpe received a royal pardon. His political future seemed set fair and he undertook two embassies abroad in

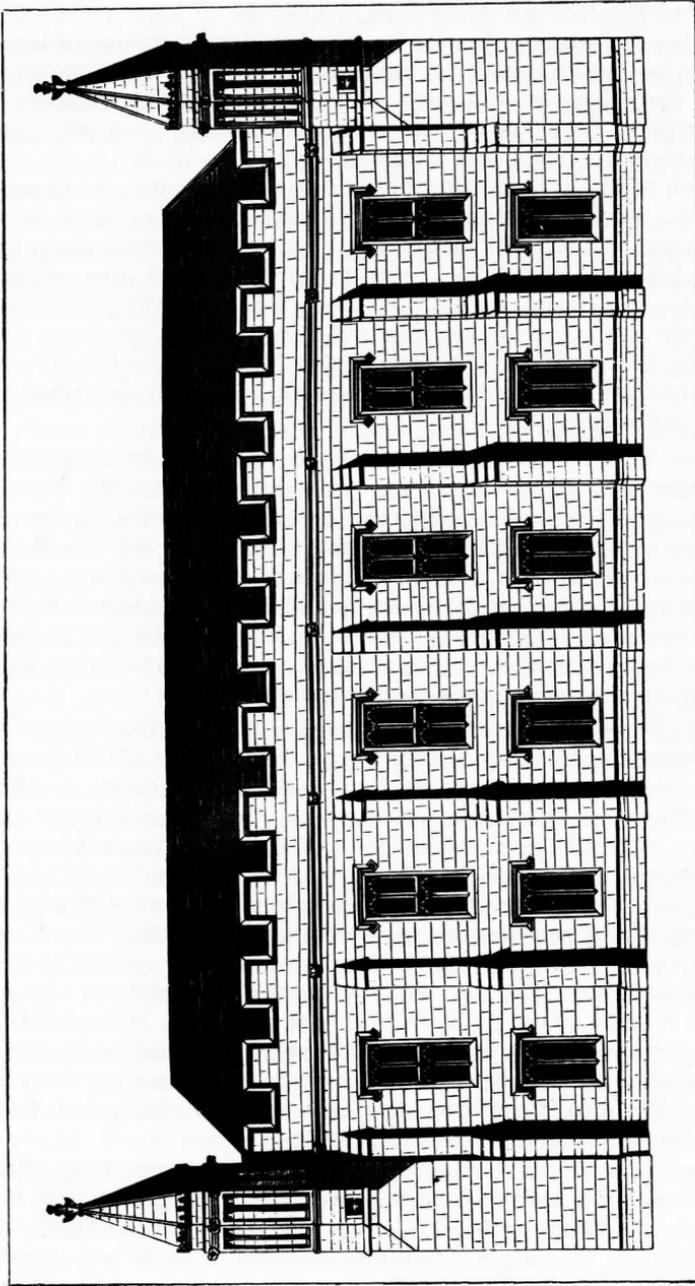
1486 and 1488. Here his promising new career abruptly ended and for the last ten years of his life he, like his bishop, Robert Stillington, was left without political employment. Perhaps the two were able to commiserate with each other and exchange memories of happier times until Stillington was arrested for treason, an event which enhanced Gunthorpe's own importance in Wells.

Both Stillington and Gunthorpe turned to building for consolation, the former erecting a Lady Chapel which has since been demolished, Gunthorpe rebuilding and greatly enlarging the Dean's house at Wells. He seems to have amassed some wealth during his career and, apart from paying for his building activities, presented an image of the 'Glorious Virgin Mary, of silver gilt, weighing 163 ounces' to the Cathedral in 1487. But the Deanery on the Cathedral Green is his chief memorial. It is nicely described by a Victorian writer:¹²

'There is no such quaint, strange, and wholly delightful Deanery, (in the world) as the great rambling ancient house, built round two inner courts, and crying aloud for a hierarchic income to maintain it worthily: which stands near the wonderful west end of the great church: and in which you may very easily lose yourself, and wander about up and down unexpected flights of steps and along great corridors. Its peaceful garden, an unoverlooked expanse of grass and trees, lightened in June with the blaze of flowers: can Winter ever come there?'

Another Dean, Dr Armitage Robinson, thought the house 'an almost unrivalled example of the Perpendicular style of the close of the fifteenth century as applied to domestic architecture' while J. H. Parker, a Victorian authority on Gothic considered the Deanery a 'nearly perfect specimen of a...gentleman's house of the fifteenth century'.¹³ It reflects both Gunthorpe's good taste and his love of self-advertisement, his rebus of a gun being used in great profusion and appearing more than 100 times. The Dean probably entertained Henry VII here twice, in 1491 and 1497, and it has been suggested that the north range was built as a guest wing in honour of the royal visit. It is more likely, however, that the Deanery was many years a-building and this would account for it containing both Yorkist emblems such as the sun and rose of Edward IV, and the 'three daisies on a turf' badge of Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.

It may have been during these years of idleness, 1488-1490, rather than in 1473 which is merely the date of his induction to the Rectory, that Gunthorpe rebuilt the Rectory House at Ditcheat. Not enough of the original building remains to make any worthwhile comparisons with the Deanery, but it was evidently a substantial house befitting his dignity. The outlines of his mansion



The work of Dean Gunthorpe: the south front of the Old Deanery, Wells, reproduced from J. H. Parker's *Architectural Antiquities of the City of Wells*.

notable for the great thickness of its walls can still be traced. It was to remain the Rectory House until 1893. These fine buildings which were to cause his name to be remembered in a small way long after his achievements in Church and State were forgotten, were his swansong. He died on 25 June, 1498, and was buried in St Catherine's Chapel in Wells Cathedral where his tomb can still be seen. The first bequest in his will is £20 'to the parish church of the Blessed Mary Magdalen of Dichesiat...to provide ornaments for the use of the high altar'¹⁴ which surely indicates a certain fondness for the place. His arms remain on the parapet of the chancel of Ditcheat Church commemorating his association with the alterations already mentioned.

GUNTHORPE'S SUCCESSORS

For more than 100 years after Gunthorpe's death the Rectory of Ditcheat was held by a succession of distinguished clerics although as the 16th century wanes they get further and further from the centre of the national stage. His immediate successor was Master William Atwater, professor of divinity, appointed by Abbot Richard Bere after swearing to pay the ancient yearly pension of 40 shillings due from the revenues of Ditcheat to the Abbot and Convent of Glastonbury. Atwater probably came from a local Wells family which would account for his being known to the Abbot. John atte Water of Wells contributed £4. 3s. 4d. towards a loan of £80 to Henry VII in 1486 while members of the family are mentioned in several Wells deeds of the time. Richard atte Water was Churchwarden of St Cuthbert's, Wells, in 1492-93. William Atwater went to Oxford where by a happy chance he was at Magdalen with the future Cardinal Wolsey. This proved a useful friendship. He held several University posts including that of Vice-Chancellor and numerous benefices which meant that Ditcheat rarely saw him.

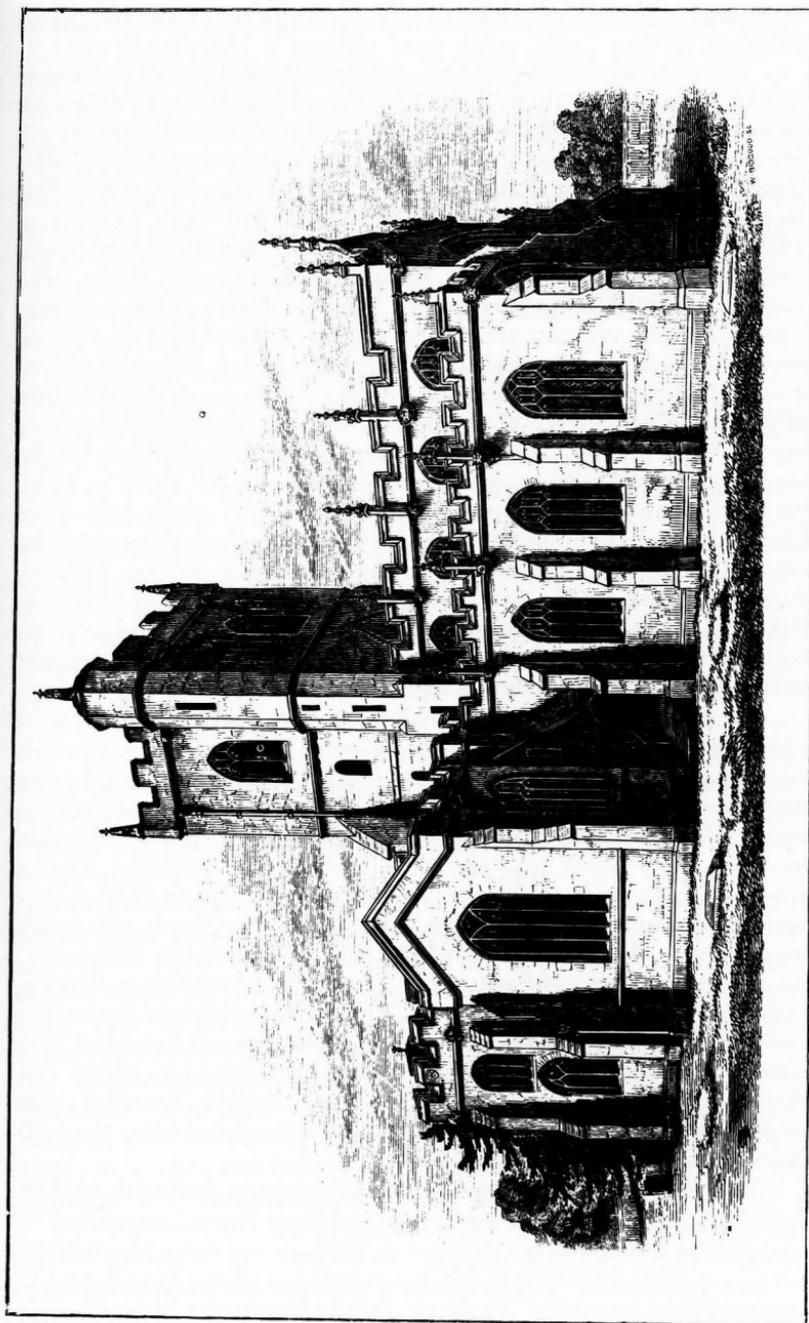
Atwater was Dean of the Chapel Royal in 1502 and Registrar of the Order of the Garter, his 'merits and diligence' being remarked upon. He had a shrewd eye for business and had licence to import 100 tuns of Gascon wine in 1513. Small wonder that he had to borrow £600 from the king the following year. His career was crowned by his elevation to the Bishopric of Lincoln in 1514 when already 74. He died in 1521. Atwater had resigned the Ditcheat Rectory prior to taking up his bishopric and been replaced by one Andrew Ammonius, or Hammond, whose incumbency was brief. He was succeeded by another of Wolsey's friends, John Clerk, in 1519. Clerk was the Cardinal's chaplain, in fact, and much employed by him in embassies abroad, dying while so engaged at Dunkirk in 1541. He, too, reached the episcopal bench becoming Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1522. Clerk cannot have

held Ditcheat for long for in 1519 James Fitzjames was instituted as rector.

The new rector came from a clerical family of distinction which lived at Redlynch, near Bruton, and had close connections with Glastonbury Abbey. Later, during the reign of Elizabeth, the Fitzjames' were to become well-known for their devotion to the Roman faith. Richard Fitzjames, the rector's great-uncle, who died in 1522, was Bishop of London, a man of high character, greatly respected. With Abbot Bere of Glastonbury and the Priors of Witham and Bruton, he was one of the original founders of King's School, Bruton. The bishop's nephew, Sir John Fitzjames (c. 1470-1542), father of the Rector of Ditcheat, was Chief Justice of England and, although not well-regarded, had the courage during the dissolution to intercede with Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's first minister, on behalf of Abbot Whiting of Glastonbury whom he felt had been harshly dealt with by the royal commissioners.

Like his predecessors, James Fitzjames, who was at Merton College, Oxford, in 1509, held many benefices. In Somerset alone he was incumbent of North Cadbury, Wrington, and Kingston Seymour besides Ditcheat. He was also Chancellor of the Diocese of Bath and Wells, sub-Dean and Vicar-General so may have occasionally visited his Ditcheat Rectory. Fitzjames lived in troubled times and being a staunch Roman must have viewed with apprehension Henry VIII's attack on the monasteries building up from inquiries about revenue and the state of monkish morals to outright confiscation and destruction. For those at Ditcheat this culminated in the fall of the great Abbey of Glastonbury, one of the most famous in England and with a European reputation. The shock of this event to devout Catholics like Fitzjames was deepened by the dreadful end of the aged and infirm Abbot Whiting, accused of treason and dragged on a hurdle up Glastonbury Tor and hanged within sight of his abbey and overlooking his broad lands. The horror and dismay these happenings caused to men like Fitzjames, who knew Whiting and had close connections with the abbey, can be imagined.

Ditcheat, like the other Glastonbury estates, reverted to the Crown after nearly 700 years in possession of the monastery. The royal accountants were soon at Ditcheat estimating the value and found that Dr Fitzjames (he was Bachelor of Divinity) was rector there and the living was valued at £40,¹⁵ a substantial sum in the days when one could live on £5 a year. Fitzjames almost certainly trimmed to some extent to the current winds of change in order to keep his rich livings. He did not live to see Catholic worship completely dismantled, dying in 1540, without having to make the choice between apostasy and deprivation like his relative John



Ditcheat Church from the north-west showing the clerestory whose building is associated with Dean Gunthorpe of Wells and Abbot Selwode of Glastonbury.

Fitzjames who was deprived of the vicarage of Chew Magna in 1559.

The next Rector of Ditcheat, Thomas Raynold, was appointed by the king and instituted on 29 January 1540. He held office for 20 years. It was during his incumbency that the former Glastonbury Manor of Ditcheat was bought from the Crown by Henry VIII's Knight Marshal, Sir Ralph Hopton and Dorothy his wife. The Hoptons came originally from Yorkshire, but later settled in Suffolk. Ralph was the younger son of Arthur Hopton of Westwood and Cockfield in that county. His elder brother, Sir Owen, was Lieutenant of the Tower of London. The dissolution of the religious houses and the appearance on the market of thousands of acres of monastic land was Sir Ralph's opportunity as a younger son to establish himself as a landowner. His first foray was to buy the site of the dissolved Priory of Witham with more than 2000 acres of land in 1544 for £572. 16s. 3d. This remained the chief seat of the Hoptons and their descendants the Wyndhams until 1697. In 1546, he made a more costly purchase, that of the great Manor of Ditcheat for which he paid £1,122. At the same time he bought the advowson of the Parsonage of 'Dychesyat' valued by Thomas Argiall, 'clerke of the cote of the fyrst ffruytes and tenthes' at £464s. 5d.¹⁶ Sir Ralph consolidated his holding by buying an episcopal property, Evercreech Park, and almost overnight entered the ranks of the landed gentry of Somerset.

Sir Ralph appointed Thomas Willoughby Rector of Ditcheat in 1560. He appears to have been a relation of Lady Hopton and it may be significant that one of Sir Arthur Hopton's children was christened Willoughby. The new rector was a strong protestant and a distinguished student of theology. He spent 10 years studying the subject and became a Bachelor of Divinity. At the accession of Mary in 1553 he was deprived of his living at Bishopsbourne in Kent, but came into his own when Queen Elizabeth succeeded to the throne in 1558, becoming one of her chaplains. He was also a Canon of Canterbury, chaplain to Archbishop Parker, and Precentor of Chichester. In 1574 he became Dean of Rochester and died in August, 1582. This choice spirit was not to be lost to a remote Somerset village and Ditcheat rarely saw him. When the parish registers begin in 1562, the Rev. Robert Thatcher was curate, or minister of Ditcheat and so continued for more than 40 years through two incumbencies.

There was a house known as the Vicarage to the north-east of the Priory on the site now occupied by Abbey Farm. According to local tradition this was burnt down in 1680. It was not a vicarage in the usual sense but apparently the residence of the curate and it was probably here that Thatcher lived. We know little enough

about him except that he married a local girl, Flower Batt, in 1600. She may have been a second wife as a John, son of Robert Thatcher, and possibly the curate's grandson, was baptised in 1612. The Rev. Robert Thatcher was buried at Ditcheat on 21 January, 1614.

The Rector for whom Thatcher did duty was James Cottington. He was another local man whose family lived at Godminster, near Bruton, and were well-known to the Hoptons. Sir Ralph having died in 1571 and left no son an appointment was made by his widow, Dame Dorothy. James was the son of Philip Cottington, of Leigh-on-Mendip, who made a fortune out of the cloth trade and in his will, proved in 1562, left 4d. to each of his 'wevers'. He bought the Godminster estate which his descendants owned until 1749. James Cottington was a scholar of Trinity College, Oxford, and like so many of his predecessors became a Doctor of Divinity. He was Vicar of East Brent in 1576, Archdeacon of Surrey in 1580 and a Canon of Wells. His career was facilitated by his marriage to Helen, daughter of John Bullingham, Bishop of Gloucester. Cottington left no will when he died in 1605, but is described in his administration as professor of theology at Wells.¹⁷ His eminence in the family was somewhat overshadowed by that of his nephew Francis, who became Lord Cottington of Hanworth and Chancellor of the Exchequer to Charles I.

ARTHUR HOPTON

With the curate provided with a modest house and the rectors largely non-resident, the question arises as to what happened to the Rectory during the 16th century. The tradition is that the Hoptons used it themselves as a country seat and although no documentary evidence can be found to support this contention—there is a dearth of Hopton archives—it seems plausible enough. The Hoptons must have found it necessary to come to Ditcheat from time to time and the Rectory was the best house in the village. As patrons of the living they had some right to it. Sir Ralph, the first member of the family to own the Manor of Ditcheat, had been succeeded by his nephew, Arthur, created a Knight of the Bath in 1603. Arthur married before 1571 Rachel Hall, from Gretford in Lincolnshire, and came into his inheritance soon after. Besides the Ditcheat and Witham properties, the young couple inherited estates in Norfolk and Suffolk and an income of £4000, perhaps the equivalent of £100,000 today and more or less tax free.

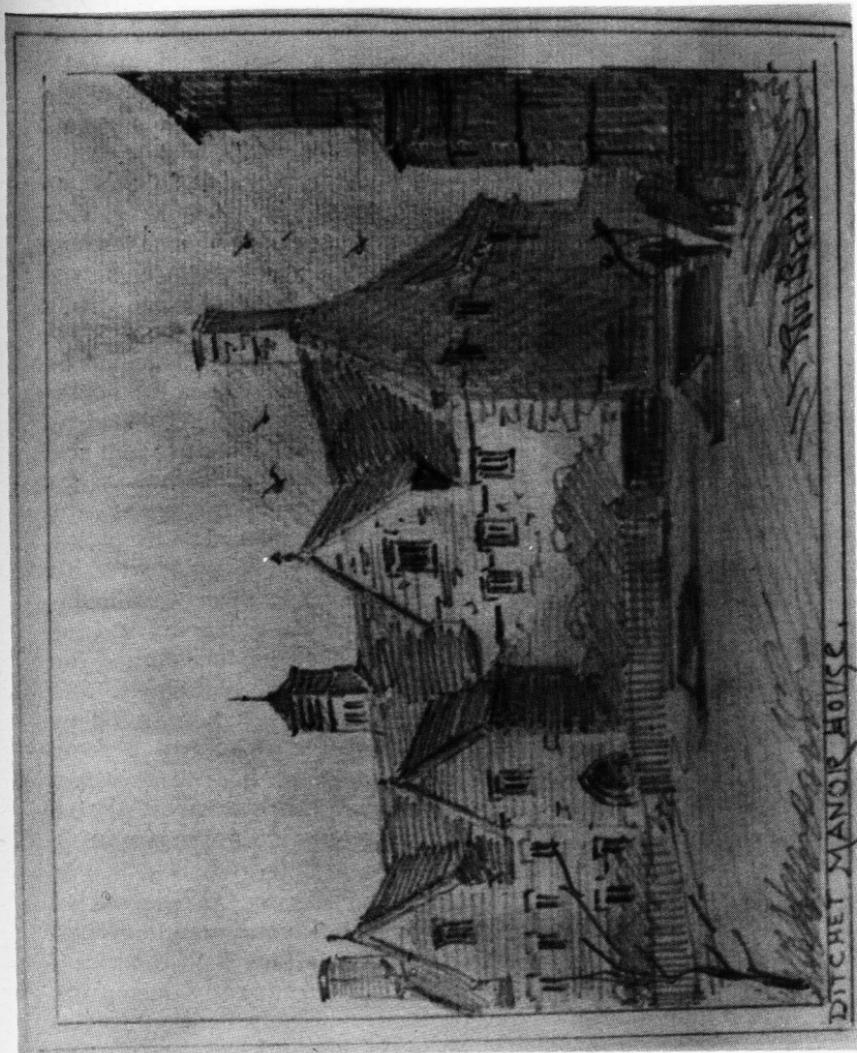
No wonder, as his grandson, Sir John Ernle, wrote¹⁸ Sir Arthur 'having so good an estate thought he might live as high as he pleased and never run out'. It was probably he, wanting a more fashionable and comfortable house than a medieval rectory, who

built the exquisite Manor House next to Ditcheat Church which still survives outwardly little changed. Sir Arthur and his wife are said to have lived at the Rectory while their new house was in the making. This tradition is reflected in a number of carved wooden armorials at the Priory showing the Hopton arms impaling those of their various consorts. These are probably not contemporary but were carved later to commemorate their association with the house. One of the finest, showing Sir Arthur Hopton's arms, *Ermine two bars sable, on each three mullets or* impaling those of his wife Rachel Hall, *argent, on a chevron engrailed sable, between three talbots heads erased, an estoile or*, was given in 1979 to Witham Friary Church (where Sir Arthur and his wife were probably buried) by Sir Christopher and Lady Chancellor, the present owners of the Priory.

Sir Arthur lived at least until 1606 when he chose Richard Alleine, or Allen, to be Rector of Ditcheat. He died at an unknown date of a gangrene of the toe. Despite his great income he had run up considerable debts and could not die in peace because of the thought of the financial difficulties in which his widow would find herself. Dame Rachel, however, rose to the occasion. A born business woman, superb organiser, and evidently possessed of some powers of dissimulation, she had unknown to her husband set up an iron works in Witham Friary. She went there every day at six in the morning to give her instructions and plan the day's work, returning to Witham House at nine, perhaps to greet her less energetic husband when he rose. Her iron works seem to have been a success and with the profits she amassed Dame Rachel was able to pay her husband's debts, assuring him on his deathbed that he owed not a penny to anyone.

Apart from saving money to keep her husband in the manner to which he was accustomed, Dame Rachel did not stint herself keeping great state with a household of more than 100 people. When good servants married she kept the children and brought them up to useful trades. She still found time to spin sheets said to be the finest made. This redoubtable lady lived on until 1633, having been assigned Quarr Grange at Witham as her dower house. Her son, Robert Hopton, that 'worthy gentleman' commemorated by a magnificent coat-of-arms in Ditcheat Church, eventually succeeded as Lord of the Manor of Ditcheat. He built himself a mansion at Evercreech Park, probably in his father's lifetime. One of the rooms had a frieze formed by a wreath of hops springing from a tun, a playful allusion to the family name.

With the Manor House now available, the Hoptons had no need to make use of the Rectory and the way was open for the new rector to make his home in the Parsonage House. Richard Alleine

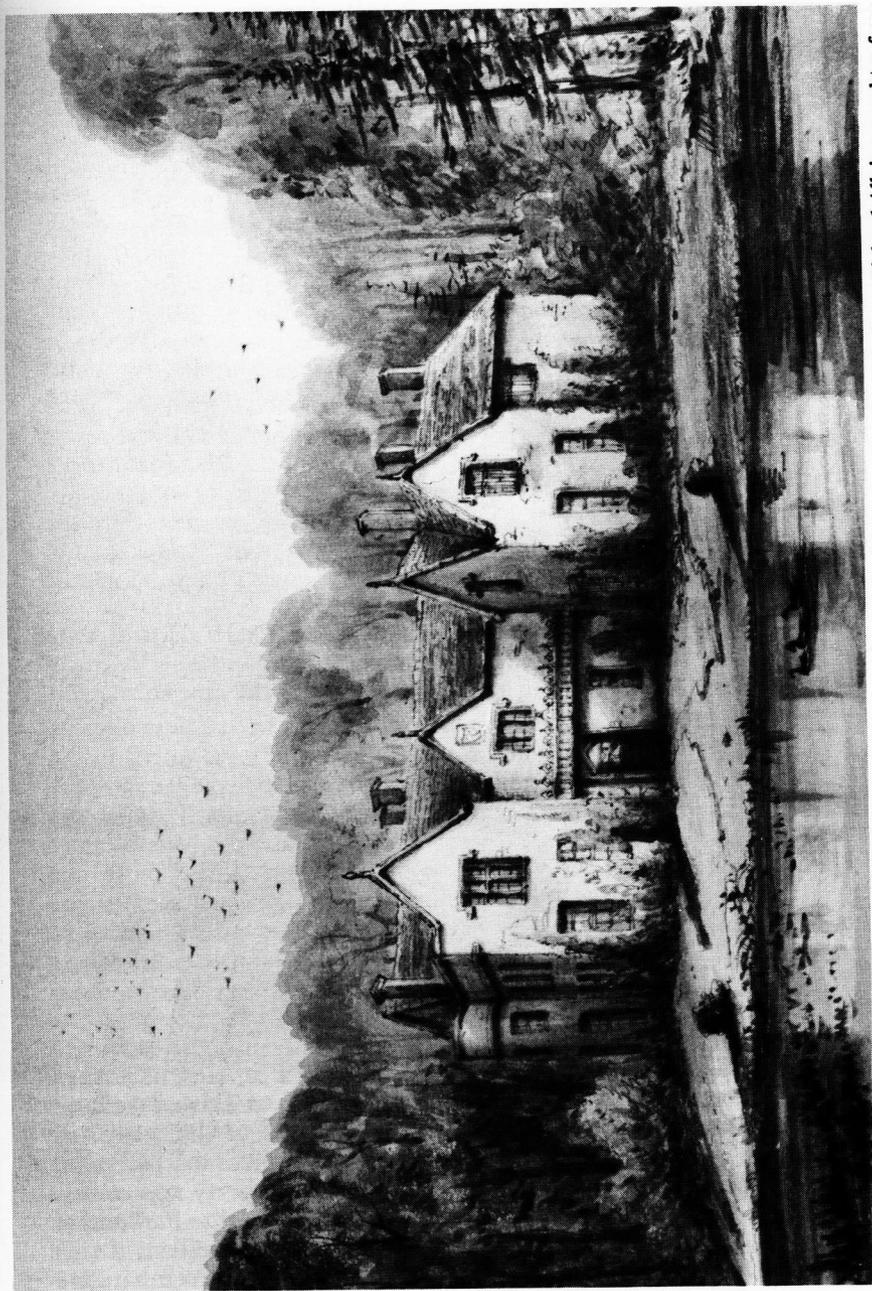


Believed to have been built by Sir Arthur Hopton and later the home of the Dawe family: The Manor House, Ditcheat, from a drawing in the Boodle Collection, Bath Reference Library.

was the first rector whom we can be certain was resident. He first signs the register at the bottom of the page for 1606-1610. The Hoptons, although Anglicans, were decidedly low church and Alleine, who had strong Puritan leanings and was a noted preacher, suited them well. He married a lady called Margaret, who died in 1648, and had a numerous family including Marie, Susanna, Anne, and perhaps Joane, who was buried in 1612. Although Alleine was Rector of Ditcheat for 50 years and was described as 'paineful', that is conscientious and a constant preacher of God's word,²¹ he was overshadowed by the fame, albeit a modest one, of his sons, Richard, baptised at Ditcheat on 18 October 1610, and William, baptised on 13 February 1614. Both youths were educated by their father and inherited his unswerving puritanical principles. They both married Ditcheat girls at the parish church, Richard being united with Lettice Gough on 14 October 1634, and William to Marie Sterre on 6 March 1640.

Richard Alleine went to Oxford and returned to Ditcheat as curate to his father living, in 1637, in a tenement 'one the north-side of the psonage. & hath to it a barne a garden & backsid by supposition three yard'. He was described as pious, prudent and moderate in his views and probably approved of Archbishop Laud's reforms designed to enhance the dignity of worship. In 1641, he became Rector of Batcombe, a Puritan stronghold, succeeding Richard Bernard, a notable character, and in 1652 sat with his father on the Parliamentary Commission to eject scandalous ministers. He welcomed the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 but was unable to accept the Act of Uniformity which forced the clergy to conform to the doctrines of the Church of England and was ejected from his living at Batcombe. He was befriended by Thomas Moore, of Spargrove in that parish, who had a room especially fitted up in Spargrove House for services. This was a breach of the Conventicle Act, which forbade such services. Alleine was heavily fined and, refusing to let Moore pay, went to prison.

The Five Mile Act by which the ejected clergy had to live at least five miles from their former livings, drove Alleine out of Batcombe. He took refuge in Frome where he continued to preach in private houses and enjoyed excellent relations with the vicar, the Rev. Richard Jenkins, who visited him frequently during his last illness and thought highly of him. Alleine's book of tracts, *Vindiciae Pietatis* was well-known in its day and is characterised by spiritual force rather than intellectual brilliance. He died in 1681 and was buried in the nave of Frome Parish Church where his vault was discovered in 1854.²³ His brother William 'a man of good learning and piety, particularly eminent for modesty and meekness. A true, patient labourer in the Gospel, and a most happy



Spargrove Manor house in Batcombe, Somerset, home of a branch of the Coward family of Wells and where Richard Alleine sought refuge. This painting by W. W. Wheatley in 1839, showing the house before the Victorian rebuilding, is reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries.

comforter of many dejected souls' became Vicar of Blandford Forum in Dorset. He, too, was ejected for his inability to accept the Act of Uniformity and repeatedly plundered and ill-treated. He died in 1677.

We are indebted to Richard Alleine the elder for drawing up a terrier of the glebe, or land belonging *ex officio* to the Rector of Ditcheat, in 1637. In it we have our first description of the Priory as 'one psonage. house with a garden enclosed within a mote and stable. Item one barne and stall without. the mote wth. a cloase of pasture at the weste end thereof by estimation five acres'.²⁴ With the Parsonage house went four tenements. One, as we have seen, was occupied by the Rector's son. Others on the east and south of the Rectory were tenanted by Ralfe Eades and Robert Wade respectively, while the fourth, held by John Moores was a 15 acre smallholding at Alhampton. In all there was about 121 acres plus grazing for eight oxen. There is no mention of the Rectorial Manor of which the later rectors were so proud but the fact that the tenements were copyhold, the tenant's rights being protected by the fact that his title was written into the court rolls, shows that it already existed, the ancient labour services having been commuted into small rents.

The outbreak of the civil war between Charles I and Parliament in 1642 found Richard Alleine in a more enviable position than most. Robert Hopton had died in 1638 and the new Lord of the Manor of Ditcheat was his son Sir Ralph II who in due time became Lord Hopton of Stratton and commander of the royal forces in the West, a man of 'a good understanding, a clear courage, an industry not to be tired, and a generosity not to be exhausted'.²⁵ Alleine's good relations with Hopton protected him from the attentions of the royalists when the war was going their way while his known Puritan prejudices secured his standing with the Parliamentarians when victory was theirs. He made the transition from the Book of Common Prayer to the directory of public worship without demur and held office until his death. As Ditcheat was one of Lord Hopton's seats the war could not be ignored and the Rector had to deal with the melancholy fruits of its harvest of death. On 25 September, 1644, he buried Gyles Seward, a captain, on 4 April the following year William ffurnes 'a Souldier', and five days later John Jacksons, another 'souldier'. At the end of the war Lord Hopton went into exile. He never saw the pleasant parish of Ditcheat again, dying at Bruges in 1652. His property was confiscated and sold. The patronage of the Rectory passed to Parliament and was valued at £250 a year (there were 134 families), a rich living indeed.²⁶ Alleine reached the end of his days in comparative tranquillity and died at Ditcheat on 26 June, 1656.



Lord of the Manor of Ditcheat: Ralph, Lord Hopton, the King's man in the West, from an engraving of a portrait said to be by Van Dyke formerly at Petworth House, Sussex. (Boodle Collection).

THE REV. DR. COWARD

Alleine's death seems to have been followed by a royalist attempt to install a candidate of their own choice in Ditcheat Rectory. Their candidate was very much a figure of the *ancien regime* in the person of Robert Baskett, a Dorset gentleman and Oxford graduate who before the civil war had been Vicar of Milbourne St Andrew and Rector of Bryanston. In addition to having been a faithful adherent of Charles I he was married to Selina, aunt of the late Lord Hopton. With Oliver Cromwell still Lord Protector the time was not ripe and Baskett was expelled in favour of a nonconformist, Tobias Tidcombe, another Oxford man who had been admitted a Fellow of Corpus Christi by the Parliamentary Visitors in 1648. The royalist tide, however, was flowing too strongly to be resisted and no sooner was Charles II restored in 1660 than the tables were turned and the king, acting in place of the 'co-heirs', the sisters of Lord Hopton, re-appointed Baskett. As some sort of consolation for his years in the wilderness, Baskett also became a Canon of Wells. He only held the living for seven years. He may have died (he would have been 64) or retired to Dorset. There is no trace of a will or record of his burial at Ditcheat.

The right of appointing a parson to a living was often used by the patron to reward friends or to provide for younger members of his family. It was also a piece of valuable property and the patron could sell the right of making the next presentation to the highest bidder. This accounts for William Coward, *armiger* (a gentleman in possession of an estate as opposed to his male relatives who would be termed *generosi*) appointing his younger son Christopher Rector of Ditcheat. He had bought the next presentation from the co-heirs, the sisters of Lord Hopton, who had by now recovered their estates at Ditcheat and Witham. Christopher Coward, who towards the end of his life, in 1694, became Doctor of Divinity, was instituted on 22 June, 1667.

At the end of the 17th century there were two families of Cowards in the area which is confusing. They were of similar status and both connected with the legal profession. The grander of the two were the Cowards of Spargrove House in Batcombe. Thomas Coward, Recorder of Winchester married Grace, the daughter of Thomas Moore, of Spargrove, whom we have already met befriending Richard Alleine the younger, and settled in Somerset after the death of his father-in-law in 1695. These Cowards adopted the Moore arms, *argent, two bars azure between nine martlets vert*. The Cowards of Wells, on the other hand, from which the new rector came, used the arms which can still be seen on the battlements of Ditcheat Church: *Or, on two bars sable three cinquefoils argent, two and one*. They were settled in Winter-

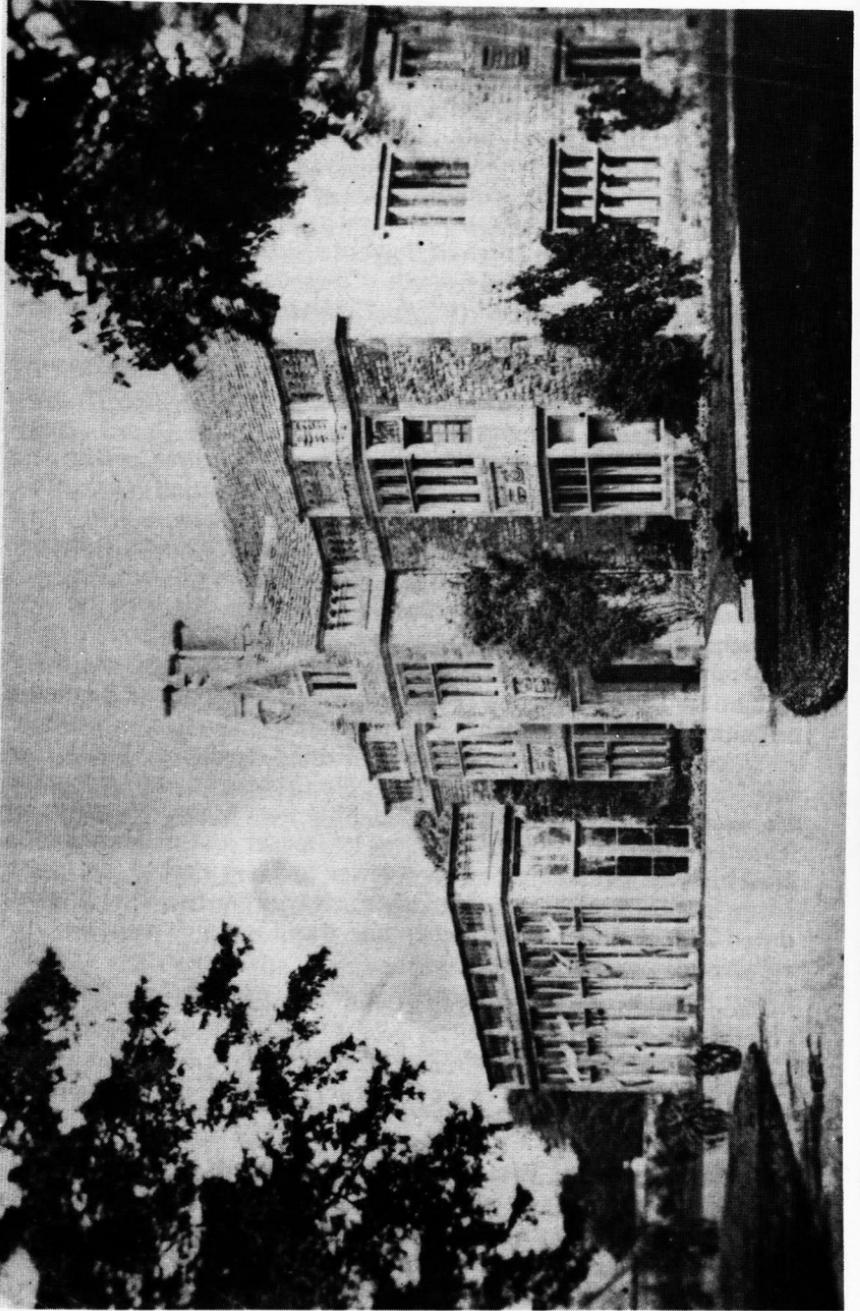
bourne Gunner, Wiltshire, in the middle of the 16th century when a Robert Coward is recorded. His son, John Coward, of West Pennard, yeoman, married Catherine, daughter and heir of Thomas Leigh, Mayor of Wells, and inherited the Leigh mansion of Milton, which still stands. They are buried in St Cuthbert's Church, Wells, where the south transept contains several memorials to the family including that of the Rector of Ditcheat's mother, Catherine, buried on 21 March, 1670. The transept was variously known as the Leigh or Coward aisle. That the Recorder of Winchester was descended from the Cowards of Wells is shown by Arthur Jewers' discovery (*Wells Cathedral*, p. 135) amid the debris of his monument in St Lawrence's Church there of the arms of Leigh (*on a chevron gules three martlets or, a chief of the second charged with a cannon dismantled of the third*), known to have been used by the Cowards of Wells.

William Coward, of Milton, grandson of John Coward and Catherine Leigh, was born in 1602 and married Catherine, daughter of Edward Poulett, of Goathurst. They had at least eight children of whom William, who died in 1705, was Recorder and M.P. for Wells. The fourth son, Christopher, was born in 1636 and went to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. By 1664 he was already a Canon of Wells and became Rector of Sampford Peverell in Devon the following year before moving back onto his home ground at Ditcheat in 1667. He was also incumbent of Kingston Seymour which his predecessor, James Fitzjames, had once held.

Dr Coward had seemed a confirmed bachelor, but in his middle fifties he took to matrimony. He chose a young bride from an excellent and wealthy family. She was Mary, daughter of Thomas Freke, of Hinton St Mary in Dorset and of Hannington Hall in Wiltshire. There exists a letter to Mary Freke, the future rector's wife, from her grandmother, Mary Freke (née Doddington) dated 28 November, 1685, when she was 15, which indicates her religious background:

'I hope you have a bible & that you will not neglect to read in that daylie...my prayers ar for you all, be sure you diligently & faithfully, now seeke yr. Creator, now in ye days of yr. youthe, & then besure he will never leave nor forsake you, no more shall I while I live, if you do so'

With his wife, whom he married in 1691, Dr Coward received a marriage portion of £1,100, £600 of which was laid out in the purchase of a farm at Alhampton called Austin's tenement, for the use of their sons. Failing these, it was to go to Mary Coward to increase her jointure and to her heirs.



The home of Mary Freke, who married two successive Rectors of Ditcheat: Hannington Hall, Wiltshire, about 1870.

The chief events of Dr Coward's incumbency were the sale of the Ditcheat estate and the rebuilding of the Rectory House. The co-heirs finally sold the estate in 1669 to Edmund Dawe, a Dorset gentleman, who bought the Manor House and its lands, the advowson, and a moiety, or half, of the Manor of Alhampton. Mr Dawe was living in Ditcheat by 1681 when his son John was christened at the parish church on 22 August. He apparently brought with him the fine panel of red and yellow heraldic glass showing the arms and crest of Dawe and dated 1618 which still remains. As for the Rectory, Dr Coward was already improving it in 1670 and may have further enhanced its amenities in honour of his young and illustrious wife turning the medieval house into a comfortable and fashionable residence. The house was too big for the Cowards, who remained childless, and partly let out. An inventory drawn up after Dr Coward's death by his widow (Appendix) indicates a house of ample rooms full of books, pictures, fine furniture and hangings and well equipped with practical household goods.

On the national stage a number of happenings within a few years of each other had repercussions which were felt at Ditcheat Rectory. The first and most violent was the rebellion of 1685 when James, Duke of Monmouth, landed at Lyme Regis to have a tilt at the crown of his catholic uncle, James II, in the protestant cause. King Monmouth and his hoards came close to Ditcheat, passing through Shepton Mallet, both in their advance towards Bristol and during their return on their way to rout at Sedgemoor. The disorganised and demoralised troops were infinitely more dangerous on the retreat. It was at this time that they caused so much destruction at Wells Cathedral. Dr Coward, like most of the Anglican clergy, felt no sympathy for this insurrection against the anointed king from whom they did not yet feel any threat. He may have found it politic to absent himself from Ditcheat for a time and, like the Thynnes at Longleat, send his plate away for safe keeping until the crisis was passed.

By 1688 the clergy were not so confident of the royal intentions and resisted the Declaration of Indulgence of that year by which liberty of conscience was extended to catholics and nonconformists alike. Many saw the Declaration as preparation for a catholic take over. Matters came to a head when Archbishop Sancroft of Canterbury and six other bishops refused to allow the declaration to be read in their churches and were sent for trial on a charge of high misdemeanour. They were seen as champions of a threatened Church and popular feeling ran strongly in their favour. As Bishop Ken of Bath and Wells was among the seven, events in

London were followed anxiously in Somerset. Dr Coward shared this concern. On June 30, after a famous trial, the bishops were acquitted and perhaps the church bells rang and the bonfires blazed at Ditchheat as elsewhere, although it is doubtful if the villagers got round to burning the Pope in effigy. Certainly at nearby Castle Cary the Churchwardens spent two shillings on 'beere to make the Ringers drinke when the Bishop was sett at Liberty' and six shillings on an even better party when Ken returned to his diocese. There is still at Ditchheat Priory an interesting, if bucolic, painting of the seven bishops taken from a popular print of the day and in a handsome contemporary frame. It has recently been restored. There is reason to think that this was acquired by Dr Coward as a memorial to this signal victory of the Church and that it has remained in the house since.

THE LEIRS

In March, 1699, Dr Coward died. His widow determined that he should be buried with fitting pomp and spent 14s. on a shroud of fine crepe and 6s. 9d. on a winding sheet of the same material. She bought all manner of black and white 'stuffs' for mourning hangings and the appropriate garb for her household: six mourning hat scarfs, two yards long at 18d. each, 11 hat bands of Italian crepe, three dozen pairs of men's gloves at 14d. and three and a half dozen of women's gloves. For herself she bought 'a Girdle for a widdow of fine crape 8s'. Nor was the funeral feast forgotten, Mrs Coward paying out £3. 6s. for funeral wines and 20 shillings to Edwarde Cheeke of Bruton for ten quarts of sack, a sort of dry sherry.²⁹ Finally, as the parish register records 'Christopher Coward Rect^r of Ditchheat and doctor of Divinity' was buried by Mary his widow. His memorial stone in the chancel, now unfortunately itself buried under Victorian tiles, bore the following inscription:

'In hope of a blessed resurrection, here lyeth the body of the Rev. D^r Christopher Coward, late Rector of this parish. A man of justice most strict and exemplary, and in patience and meekness a pattern truly Christian. He dyed the 16th day of April Anno 1699, aetatis suae 63'.

Already waiting in the wings was Dr Coward's successor in the person of young Thomas Leir, eldest son of the Rector of Charlton Musgrove, near Wincanton. He lost no time in taking possession of the living, his first, and was instituted on 26 April, 1699. The Leirs claimed to be of German descent deriving their name from Leer on the River Ems in Westphalia. However, the name is found in England as early as 1275 when a Hugh de Leir

appears in the Hundred rolls. The name may come from Leire in Leicestershire or one of the three Layers in Essex. Alternatively, the name may have an occupational origin, a 'layer' being a man who placed or set in position stones used by freemasons. Or it could be a corruption of le Eyr, the heir, a form that is found in 1327. By 1600, the Leirs were a Devon family and considered that they had been seated in that county 'many centuries'.³¹ They were not originally wealthy and were proud to recognise as their head, Sir Peter Lear, baronet of Lindridge in Devon, who died in 1682 and whose memorial in Bishop's Teignton Church quaintly refers to him as:

A man of sagacious mind, talents and foresight which favoured the accumulation of wealth...He beheld the customs & the cities of many races & at length worn out with the weariness & languor of life, even amid the rich good things of fortune...retired to this place. By his only wife...he had progeny not a few, but none to survive him.'

Sir Peter's nephew and heir, Sir Thomas, was at Wadham College, Oxford, with Thomas Leir the second, whom we shall meet. The baronetcy became extinct with his death in 1705.

The ancestry of Richard Leir, who left his native Devon in 1617 to become Rector of Charlton Musgrove is unknown. His descendant, the Rev. Randolph Leir, Rector of Charlton Musgrove from 1886 until 1914, considered that he was the son of Richard Leir, of Totnes, mentioned in the Visitation of Devon in 1620. Richard the son, if indeed he was, was born about 1587 and went to Exeter College in 1603. On entering his name was given as Layer, when he received his B.A. it became Lyer, finally arriving at Leir with his M.A. He married a local girl, Joan Taylor, of Ottery St Mary, in 1614 and had five children of whom the eldest, Thomas Leir II, succeeded his father as Rector of Charlton Musgrove in 1654, although because of his Anglican propensities was not instituted until 1659. He married into another clerical family, his wife Mary being the daughter of the Rev. William Seaman, Rector of Upton Scudamore in Wiltshire. In the meantime the advowson of Charlton Musgrove had been acquired by the Taylors, the Rector's mother's family, and became vested by inheritance in that of Leir. They held it over eight generations until 1914.

Thomas Leir I was born on 14 May 1620 and lived to be 93, almost into the reign of George I. Like his father, he went to Wadham College. His relationship with his parents was close and affectionate. His letters to them from Wadham between 1640 and 1649 survive and throw much light on the life of an undergraduate as well as giving a view of the troubles of the time from an unusual

angle.³² He lived in Bullers Inn and when called before the Parliamentary Visitors, searching out royalists, declared that he acknowledged himself 'bound both by the laws of God and man to be obedient to all just and lawful authority' a diplomatic answer which passed muster with the Visitors, although one of which Thomas was not proud, asking his father to keep it quiet. From the scene of these exciting events he returned to take up his cure at Charlton, in due time sending his own eldest son, Thomas Leir II, born in 1672, to Wadham in 1688.

Like most fathers, Thomas Leir sought to secure the future of his sons. He earmarked Charlton Musgrove for his younger son William and began looking round for a richer living for his son and heir. His choice fell upon that of Ditchheat and in 1695 Edmund Dawe, the patron, agreed to present young Thomas at the next vacancy in return for £100. This was something of a leap in the dark as Dr Coward was only 59 and might live many years. Thomas' father was not a rich man and to find £100 in addition to keeping him at Wadham was a considerable strain. A fine admonitory letter from the father at Charlton to the son at Wadham, dated 15 January, 1695/6, survives and graphically describes Mr Leir's plans and difficulties.³³

'You must endeavour to live as frugall as possible that I may not be forced to sell to much land to compasse this for you... This I hope will neere doe yr. businesse, if you presse not to hard upon me: if you doe, there must more be sold: w^{ch} were better kept (if it might be) Tis you that will suffer & finde ye want of it hereafter, not I. I 'le endeavour to p'sent it for you: Doe not lash out & build to much upon ye expectation of this, ye p^r sent incumbent may make you wayte a long time before it fals: so that you can live without it in ye interim, it will be ye more for yr. credit when you come to enjoy it.'

He adds that he is selling land and leases to raise the money and has Thomas received the six guineas that he has sent. In May, 1697, he tells his son '...money is short at present & I can badly supply you, being harvest time w^{ch} required much expence, & ye taxes are very great'. However, there was always hope of an inheritance. Uncle Gregory has died 'writing of a Book but an hour before he dyed'. His heir is Edmund Seaman, cousin of the younger Thomas and 'if he fayle to have issue male, you are ye next'.³⁴

Thomas Leir I now had two sons at Wadham. William, the younger son had gone up in 1694 and is listed as a chaplain in 1699. Thomas II was already making a name for himself delivering the Goodridge obit speech there in 1696 and becoming a Fellow

two years later which carried with it a welcome stipend which was paid until 1700. Just as his financial position was improving, Dr Coward died and in accordance with the agreement Edmund Dawe presented Thomas Leir to the Rectory of Ditcheat. He seems to have been in two minds as to whether to continue his academic career (paying a curate to do his duty at Ditcheat) or to take up his cure. Dr Coward had let part of the Parsonage House to Ralph Maby, the two men jointly paying the window tax of five shillings which had been introduced in 1696. Leir continued to let part of the house and glebe lands with all buildings and tithes to John Maby, yeoman, from 18 May, 1699 to the following Lady Day for the princely sum of £130 so recovering in a year more than the whole of what his father had spent on the purchase of the living. Maby was to have 'all that part of the parsonage house of Ditcheat...lyeing on the left hand of the passage leading to the Garden wth all Rooms that the stairs in the same directs unto. The Butteryes or apartments the door of w^{ch} is in the Garden', Leir reserving the inner stable 'and all fruits of the Garden not sett or planted by Ralph Maby son of the said John Maby the now or late occupier of the whole or part of the said premises'.³⁵ Maby presumably had the eastern end of the house with the kitchen with its own entrance and bedrooms above, a veritable self-contained flat.

The take over of the remaining part of the Rectory inevitably brought Thomas Leir into contact with the wealthy and attractive young Widow Coward. She was still only 29. Before returning to her ancestral home at Hinton St Mary she offered the new incumbent who hitherto had lived in lodgings some of the furniture and effects and drew up the inventory already mentioned which tells us so much about Ditcheat Rectory at the time. Amid all this discussion of business a more tender relationship blossomed. To the widow there were advantages in retaining her home and gaining a young and well-educated husband. To the rector the prospects of an alliance with a distinguished county family and the capture of a well-endowed wife were alluring. Mrs Coward had money of her own and drew up a balance sheet of her assets. Her annual income she estimated at £222 a year mostly from an estate called Cooks at Ditcheat and Fryon Farm at Over Stowey. In addition she had £300 cash and £350 in her jointure. Thomas Leir's quandary, torn between the familiar delights of academic life and the sweet, but unknown, hazards of matrimony, is expressed in a charming and courtly letter from Thomas' brother William to Mrs Coward, whom he had not yet met, dated 'Oxon June ye 17th 1700', presumably soon after their engagement:

'Dear Sister,

Tho unknown, I though fitt to wish You joy of a Brother,

whose Friends were very unwilling to part with Him Here, & He (I dare say) loath to leave Them; Untill, after a discreet deliberation, He found out your Beauties, both of Body, & Mind, to over ballance so great a loss; w^{ch} no ones, I think, but y^r own could have been sufficient: Wherefore, Dear Sister, I long to be in the Country not only to return you thanks at y^r own House for y^r kind Invitation Thither, w^{ch} I am now forced to do by Letter, But also to see my Brother's Happiness, w^{ch} will not a little contribute to my own, who really am a well-wisher to you both; and Therefore, Dear Sister, do assure you that I am y^r Loving Brother, & ever shall be y^r Humble Ser^t Will. Leir³⁶

LANDED GENTRY

The marriage took place at Hinton St Mary later in the year and Mary's furniture and effects returned to Ditcheat Rectory. These included a high-backed pear wood chair which she had brought from Hannington which long remained in the house and a portrait of Dr Coward, well-fleshed but not expressing the jollity such a condition is said to bring. Little is recorded of the couple's married life although an undated and rambling letter from Mary Leir to her husband exists asking him to help 'at secrete times namely twice a yere' various persons in fulfillment of a promise he had made to her 'before & after i made you my husband I hope i then discharged my duty in becoming a more obedint wife then formally'.³⁸ Be this as it may, she gave him five children of whom Thomas Leir III, born in 1702, was the only son. Their combined resources allowed them to buy the advowson from the Dawe family for £1,050 in 1727, so turning Ditcheat into a family living like Charlton Musgrove. Leir was not above prospecting for copper on his wife's Fryon Farm at Over Stowey. 'Two tuns & seven hundred of Oar' were sold in 1726, but the Rector's share of the profits was only £1. 12s. 5d. which made it hardly worth the trouble.³⁹

Neither Thomas nor Mary Leir made old bones. He died aged 58 and was buried at Ditcheat on 16 September, 1730. She survived him seven years. Leir had made a good match and laid the foundations of future wealth and status, but he was still only a minor clergyman and his will, lost, alas, in the raid on Exeter in 1942, was proved in the Archdeacon's Court at Wells along with those of the yeomanry and minor gentry. Thomas Leir III, who succeeded as Rector of Ditcheat and followed his uncle William as Rector of Charlton Musgrove in 1743, went a long way towards remedying this situation by marrying in 1733 Elizabeth, the daughter of Paul Methuen, the wealthy clothier of Bradford-on-Avon, a match of which the Leirs were proud. Thomas received a dowry, or as it is

rather bleakly called in his receipt, 'consideration money' of £1,000, with her, although it was not finally paid off until 1747. He kept up the rights of the Rectorial Manor holding Courts Baron in the Parsonage House. Six children were born of his marriage to Elizabeth Methuen of whom the eldest, Thomas Leir IV, first saw the light in 1738, but his family life was sad. John Methuen, his third son died young while his two other sons, William and Paul Methuen, were both insane. Little else is recorded of a long life of nearly 80 years. He died in 1781 having been Rector of Ditcheat for more than 50 years and in his will desired to be buried in Ditcheat Churchyard 'as near my family as may be'. He left his estates in Charlton Musgrove and Maperton in trust for his two mental sons as well as £4,000 which was to be augmented by timber sales on these estates, for their care and maintenance. His unmarried daughter, Hester, received £2,000 and his books were to be divided amongst all his children so presumably the sons had periods of lucidity. William lived until 1822 and Paul until 1840. Mr Leir had not been completely oblivious of treasure on earth and in his lifetime the family fortune was increased and consolidated.

This increased affluence which took the Leirs from prosperous country clergy into the ranks of the landed gentry was due less to the prudence of the father than to the advantageous marriage made by the son. Thomas IV had married in 1764 Mary, daughter of John Shore, a rich Warminster grocer. The future Mrs Leir recorded in her diary on 26 August, 1763 'the first time I saw Mr Leir who came to drink tea at my Fathers'. Romance progressed at a sedate pace until in the following July she 'went with my aunt & Mr Leir to Bristol in Business about settlements'. Mrs Rogers, wife of the Vicar of Warminster, was by birth Gratiana Methuen and sister of Elizabeth Leir, the prospective bridegroom's mother. We may surmise that it was she who alerted the Leir family to the excellent match that might be made in Warminster.

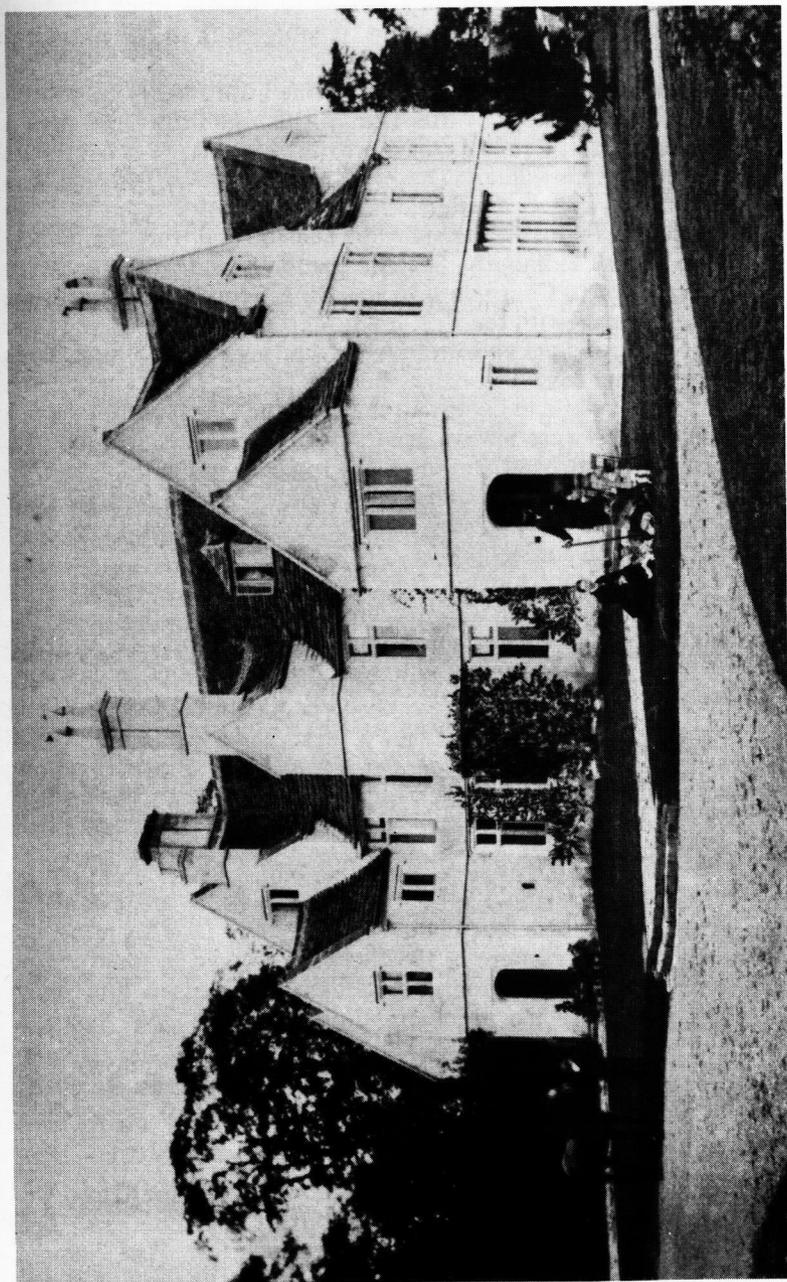
To have a grocer as an in-law is a concept that might not be expected to appeal to the Leirs in those days of pride of birth. But neither the English aristocracy or gentry had ever disdained money; besides there was more to the Shores than groceries. They were originally a Wiltshire yeoman family whom their descendant, Mr W. B. Shore, has traced back at Maiden Bradley to 1536. A silver flagon which the family gave to the church there is still one of its treasures. A branch established itself at Whatley, near Frome, before 1700, and remained a well-known local family until the estate was sold in 1959. Mary Shore's father, John, who had migrated to Warminster via Mere and Edington, married Jane Kington, who came of a substantial, but unpretentious, Wiltshire family who as late as 1705 modestly styled themselves as yeomen.

They had land at Whitley, near Melksham, and at Corsham where, in 1657, the Kingtons built themselves the handsome house of Jaggards which became their chief residence. It still stands and remains a perfect example of the home of a prosperous yeoman of the day.

At the age of 21, on November 29, 1764, Mary Shore (as she recorded laconically in her diary) 'Was married. Breakfasted with Mrs Rogers & came with my Aunt Alsop to Ditcheat' where the couple spent their honeymoon with her in-laws. In December, they went to live at Charlton Musgrove, but were unable to shake off Aunt Alsop who went with them. Through a series of deaths Mary Leir inherited the accumulated estates of both her parents' families. Mr Kington, of Jaggards, died in 1766 leaving his estate to Mary's brother John Shore. When he died childless in 1771, Mary inherited not only Jaggards and Whitley, but also Weston, near Bath. Her great aunt Anne had married Richard Macie, of Weston, and on the death of the last Macie in 1761 the estate came to the Shores. Some estimate of the value of the Jaggards and Weston estates can be gained from the fact that in 1844 the combined estate brought in an income of nearly £1500, much more than £30,000 a year in today's money.⁴⁰ Mary's father also left her money and property when he died in 1777. All this made Mary Shore a desirable *partie* even if her blood was not as blue as it might have been. The Shores were not armigerous, but this difficulty was overcome by Mary using the Kington arms which the Leirs charged on their own as an inescutcheon of pretence so demonstrating her position as an heiress. Her wealth enhanced the social status of the Leirs immeasurably.

THE SQUARSONS

Thomas and Mary Leir had nine children, six sons and three daughters. The eldest son, born in 1765, was Thomas Leir V. Two sons went into the church, one was a country gentleman, another a barrister while two died young. None of the daughters married. In 1772, they moved to Jaggards where they remained until the summer of 1784. Thomas Leir's father died in 1781 and his mother retired to the dower house of Balsam in Wincanton. He was instituted to both the livings of Ditcheat and Charlton Musgrove and because of the 'integrity of his Life, good morals, Competent Learning and sound doctrine' was appointed chaplain to Lord Boston.⁴¹ On one of his occasional visits to Ditcheat in 1782, he found time to call on Parson Woodforde with whom he had been at Winchester.⁴² A serious illness which affected Thomas Leir and killed his son John early in 1784 seems to have decided the family



The heritage of Mary Shore: Jaggards, Corsham, Wiltshire, built in 1657.

to return to Somerset and they moved to Balsam while Ditchat Rectory was made ready for them, coming back to the ancestral home on 14 June, 1784.

Life at Ditchat Rectory from this time until 1802 is illustrated by an artless diary kept by Mrs Leir.⁴³ Although little more than a bare recital of facts it reveals the day to day life and pre-occupations of a country gentlewoman. The even tenor of life at Ditchat was enlivened by visits and entertainments. The Leirs seem to have taken to the fashionable craze for the seaside and were frequently at Lyme Regis, Sidmouth, Seaton, Exmouth and Weymouth. In 1789 they went to Charmouth to see King George III. They were particular friends with the Rev. John Methuen Rogers (son of the Vicar of Warminster) and there were many visits to him and his wife, the former Miss Prowse, at Berkley House. Occasionally, the Rogers' would come to Lyme and they and the Leirs would take tea together. There were always excursions to be made. In 1788, the Leirs went to Stourhead and the following year to Fonthill. In 1795 there was 'a Tour in two chaises to Axminster' and in 1802 they 'made a party to Ford Abbey'. Another diversion was to give 'a little Dance to all our Neighbours'.

Family matters loomed large: christenings, meetings with prospective brides and in-laws, illness, weddings, and deaths. Education was also a pre-occupation. Richard (1772-1850) stammered and had to be sent to a special school in London, apparently successfully as later he went 'to chambers at Shepton (Mallet) to carry on his business' as a barrister. John and William went to school at Mr Huntingford's at Warminster (Lord Weymouth School) while daughter Elizabeth was entered at Miss Waggstaff's at Bath which allowed the Leirs to frequent that city and go to the play.

For the first time in generations the eldest Leir son did not go into the Church of England. Thomas V was to be Squire of Jaggards and Weston and Justice of the Peace. Like his father he went to Winchester where in 1782 he was engaged in some scrape which involved the beating of a servant and caused him much anxiety. Otherwise his problems appear to have been financial coming up against the characteristic thrift of Leir fathers. He explains them in a delightful letter to his mother, whom he addresses as 'Hon: Madam' dated from Winchester on 27 June, 1782. He was then 16:

'I have received half-a-guinea more from Mr Huntingford (his tutor) than my father allowed: methinks I hear him say "Tom spends a monstrous deal of pocket-money at Winchester"'. I wont deny it, but beg him to consider the situation of a poor

Fellow (with the devil got to the button hole of his pocket) obliged either to show his poverty before a multitude of rich companions, or do—in short, do, as I hear done to hide it. Now you must know I am most horribly afraid of being thought extravagant (Father will say this proceeds from a consciousness of deserving it, but beg him to put the best construction upon things)...’ He concludes: ‘Gold was spent in a very honest way. Now I am very much ashamed to say I want more to buy spurs...’⁴⁴

On another occasion he expresses gratitude to his parents for his ‘whole happiness’ and hopes that he will ‘never want a continuation of that kindness, you have through my whole life shewn me’.

Unfortunately, this happy atmosphere did not last. Thomas V married in 1794 Jane Jekyll, daughter of the Vicar of Evercreech, and eventually settled at Weston. The couple had eight children and Thomas became beset with more serious monetary problems than those which had troubled him at Winchester. He worried incessantly about the future of his family and, although his mother’s property had been settled on him, became obsessed by the thought that he was being deprived of future expectations in favour of his brothers. Matters came to a head in 1804 when in answer to one of her son’s letters Mrs Leir says she can make no reply ‘whilst you harbour such a very bad opinion of your nearest & best friends. You must be a very unhappy Person, you see everything in the wrong light & turn what might be your greatest good into Poison’ and refers to his ‘wicked unforgiving Spirit’. Mr Leir declared that his son ‘most egregiously forgets his Duty to me his Father’.⁴⁵

Poor Thomas V’s problems only increased as his children grew up. Macie, one of the sons, idled round Oxford using up (as Thomas V complained to his mother) as third of his father’s income. Old Mrs Leir weighed in with some sage advice. She advised that her grandson be taken away from Oxford where he might ‘marry the Barr Maid of some Inn’. She does not think the army the answer (‘ask him how he would like to be in such a Battle as Waterloo’) but suggests his father has him home: ‘It will be pleasant for him to go everywhere with his Sisters to take care of them, Read to them, Accompany them in Music & they may improve each other. Give him if you can a taste for Gardening & to know a little of Farming...oh that it might be possible to procure a Situation for a Gentleman that would fill up his time & bring in something’.

When Mrs Leir was an ageing widow—she lived to be 87, dying in 1829—she was still being badgered by Thomas V about

his difficulties. She replied to one of his letters in 1816 with a characteristic robust humour: 'After my Death, *Then* you will have a good addition be not afraid. I am much on the *decline* you may not wait long. Therefore keep up your Spirits...you see the wrong side of things & write such things as was never thought of...Pray take some Medicine take a ride on Lansdown every morning, Do not vex about trifles...' ⁴⁶ Thomas' fears were only stilled by death in 1836. His son sold Jaggards to provide for his younger children and the eldest, Weston, branch of the Leir family leave our story.

Thomas Leir IV died in 1812. His will ⁴⁷ is a dry document cluttered up with bequests of land. The mantle of the Church fell on his two younger sons, William, born in 1768, and Paul, born in 1770. William was left the Rectory of Ditcheat while Paul inherited that of Charlton Musgrove. The livings were not again to be held by the same parson. Curiously. Paul, like his great-grandfather, married a Freke (Fanny) from Hannington Hall, daughter and co-heir of William Freke, and gained several farms as well as a wife. He used some of his wealth to rebuild the Rectory at Charlton in 1825 'a large and handsome edifice...surrounded with plantations'. ⁴⁸ The Leirs' estate at Charlton from which Thomas I had had such an ado to scrape up £100 to buy his son the presentation of Ditcheat, now consisted of five farms, numerous cottages and thousands of acres. When sold early in the 20th century it realised £30,985.13s, perhaps £600,000 in modern terms. Richard, the barrister was, appropriately enough, left his father's law books as well as more valuable assets. About 1820 he built Ringwell House in Ditcheat for him and his sisters. Charles died aged 24 in 1803. Both he and his father are commemorated by elegant black and white marble monuments in Ditcheat Church by Thomas King and Sons, of Bath, a firm noted not only for the number of tablets they produced but also for their good taste.

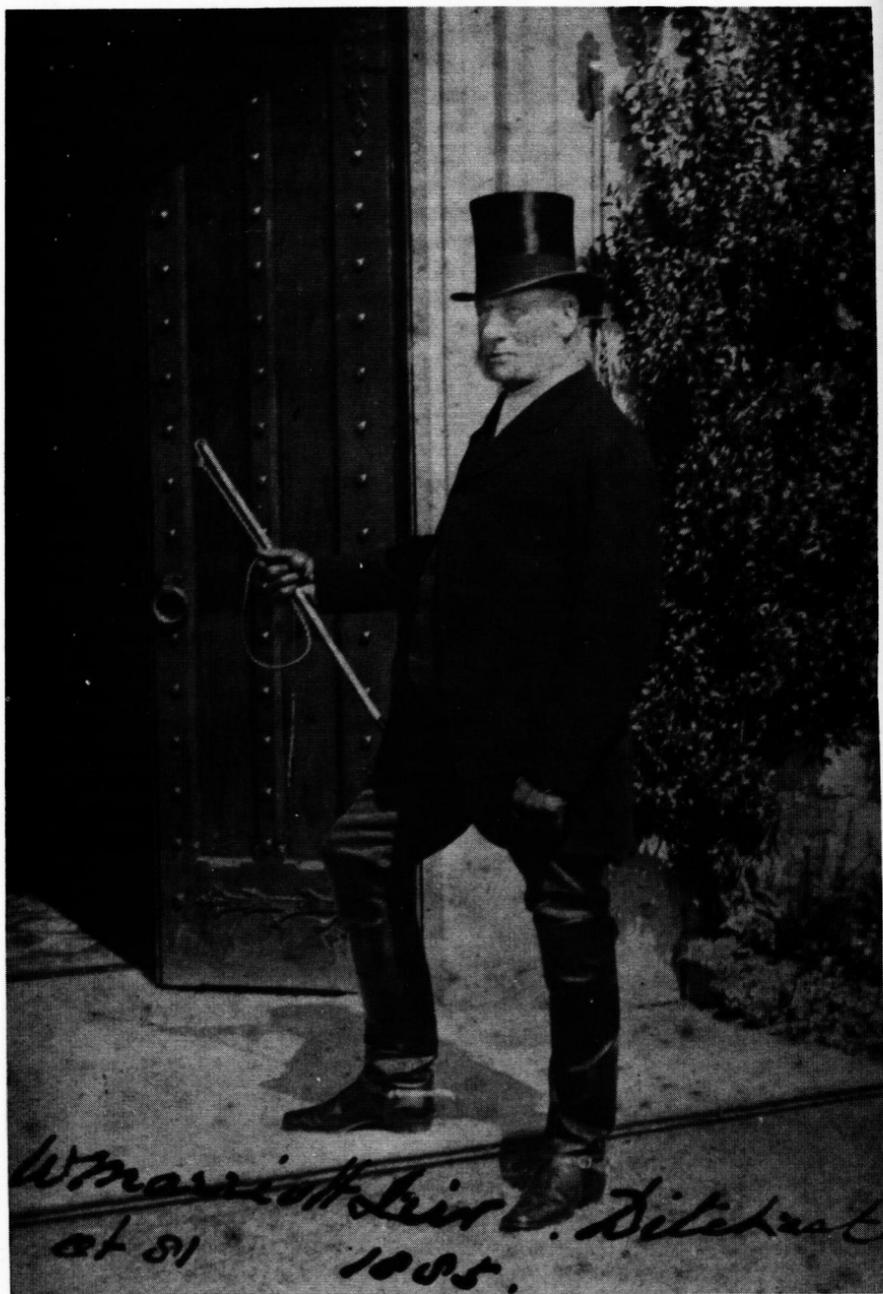
William Leir, like his grandfather, was to be Rector of Ditcheat for half a century. He went to Queen's College, Oxford, his mother noting in her diary, rather expansively for her, on 13 June, 1787: 'William was enter'd at Queen's College. We saw the Theatre Painted Windows at New College Walks'. In 1803, he married Harriott, daughter of Randolph Marriott, of Leases Hall in Yorkshire, and whose maternal grandfather was the Bishop of Bristol. As his father held both family livings, William had to look around for another parish and became Vicar of Ansford, although he did not live at Parson Woodforde's old house but at Galhampton. The Marriott connection was a source of pride and both William's sons were given the patronymic as a second name. As a wedding present Harriott received a rose wood bureau bookcase which had been made in India for her ancestor, General Marriott, commander

of the Bengal Presidency, the doors ornamented with glass panels painted in China. This became a family heirloom.

Nine children were born to William and Harriott Leir. Both sons dutifully followed family tradition and entered the Church in preparation for one day occupying the family livings. They were at Wadham College, Oxford. William Marriott Leir eventually became Rector of Ditcheat. Charles Marriott Leir, born at Galhampton in 1812, inherited the Rectory of Charlton Musgrove when his uncle Paul and his wife Fanny died within ten days of each other in 1845. He himself died 'after severe and long protracted suffering, borne with Christian resignation'⁴⁹ in 1864. His youngest son, Lewis Randolph Marriott Leir, born in 1860, was the eighth and last Leir Rector of Charlton Musgrove (1886-1914). Of the daughters, Harriet eloped with a young lawyer, George Augustus Woodforde. This was in 1832. It is said that Harriet climbed from her bedroom window at Ditcheat Rectory and down a giant pear tree that grew against the wall to join her lover waiting with a carriage and pair to rush them to their wedding at Ansford. If so, her father forgave them as he settled £6,000 on his daughter and £500 on his son-in-law. Another daughter, Sophia, married Major Charles Dawe, from Ditcheat Manor House, while Emma chose the Rev. L. C. Davies who proved useful in keeping the family living of Charlton warm from 1864 until 1876 when there was again a Leir available to fill it.

HUNTING PARSON

William Leir was Rector of Ditcheat for almost fifty years from 1812 until he resigned at the age of 93 in 1861. He was content with the life of a country clergyman and magistrate, devoting himself to the Church, the running of his estates, sporting pastimes, and improving and enlarging his rectory which he turned into a comfortable modern house. He was much absorbed by local affairs such as the case of the celebrated Ditcheat farmer William Kingston who was borne without arms or shoulders but had 'all the strength, power, and dexterity of the ablest and most regularly made men'.⁵⁰ Kingston not only worked his farm, but also fed and dressed himself, wrote, cleaned his shoes, shaved himself and lit his fire, all with his feet or toes. He could lift ten pecks of beans with his teeth. Kingston married and had a family. People from far and near came to see him including John Wesley. Mr Leir was much interested in Kingston and personally saw him perform many of these feats. In 1831, he conducted Kingston's funeral, giving permission to the family to put a large block of Keinton stone on the coffin lest anyone should interfere with the remains of this celebrity. A glimpse of William Leir at the age of 82 is provided



Dressed for the hunt: The Rev. William Marriott Leir standing outside the Priory in 1885. He was then 81.

by the 1851 census. He was then living at the Rectory very much a *paterfamilias* surrounded by five of his children including Charles, the Rector of Charlton, and Charlotte, who was deaf and dumb. He also had two great nieces staying making a total of six female relatives to attend to his creature comforts, although Harriott his wife had died in 1843. There was a modest household (the census, of course, recorded only the living-in staff) consisting of a lady's maid, housemaid, cook, footman and two grooms.

It was during William Leir's time that the Tithe Commutation Act was passed in 1836 by which payments in kind were replaced by a fixed rent charge, a change that cannot have been welcome to the conservative rector. Locke recorded that the Ditcheat Rectory was 'deemed the best in the county except Huntspill for to say nothing of tithe in kind as a rectory one tenth part of the parish will produce one thousand pounds per annum to which must be added four hundred acres of Glebe worth 500l per annum more...'⁵¹ The Tithe Commissioners, while finding that Leir owned all the tithes, great and small, were less generous, finding that there were only 103 acres of glebe and fixing the rector's rent charge at £775, the equivalent of little short of £20,000 today.

The longest lived of all the Leir rectors died two days before Christmas, 1863, in his 96th year. His eldest son, William Marriott Leir, had already succeeded him as Rector of Ditcheat two years before. Born in 1805, he had been Rector of West Bagborough from 1855. In 1840, he married Mary Anne, daughter of Edward Langford. The Langfords came from Trungle Manor in Cornwall, but had local connections in that Mary's brother Edward lived at Hunstrete House, near Paulton, which he rented from the Pophams. By a curious coincidence, Sir Christopher and Lady Chancellor, who bought Ditcheat Priory in 1977, had previously lived in that house. Leir was best known in the locality as a fearless rider to hounds, the hunting parson *par excellence*. He was also something of an antiquary, much interested in the remains of a Roman villa with tessellated pavement found by Colonel Woodforde in a field called 'Portway' at Ditcheat, in the genealogy of his own and other local families and especially in his descent from the Plantagenet kings. He was also keen on heraldry. It was in accordance with these inclinations that as soon as his father died he rebuilt the comfortable looking and unpretentious rectory of his ancestors in the fashionable Gothic style.

Leir continued to hunt into his 80s, not only with the local foxhound packs, but also taking a hunting box at Porlock Weir on a regular basis so that he could ride with the staghounds on Exmoor. *The Country Gentleman* described him as 'a fine specimen of the old school, who, despite his seventy-eight summers, is still hale

and hearty, and is not to be denied participating in the pleasures of the chase in the cheery Blackmoor Vale'. He was held in respect and affection by both friends and tenants and characterised by distinguished manners which reflected the elegance of the 18th century. As a young man he had been attached to the North Somerset Yeomanry and was called out during the Bristol riots in 1832. He and his colleagues marched from Wincanton to Bristol and stayed three days. They left Wincanton at 11 pm and reached Bristol at 5 am which underlines the stamina which was to stand him in good stead in the hunting field.

When the Rector died on 5 May, 1891, after 30 years in office, he was much mourned. 'Mr Leir was very much interested in all rural pursuits', recorded the local paper. 'He bore the reputation of a most kind and considerate landlord, and was remarkable for the kindness and serenity of his disposition. He will be sincerely mourned by a wide circle of relatives and friends, who saw in the graces which marked his character the evidence that he was, in the truest sense of the word, a "fine old English gentleman."' ⁵²

The hunting parson had a small family by Leir standards, three sons and a daughter of whom only the two eldest sons concern us here. The son and heir, Richard Langford Leir, born in 1841, decided against going into the Church. This was against family tradition but not unprecedented as his great uncle, Thomas V had made a similar decision as we have seen. Richard opted for a military career and was commissioned ensign in the 38th Foot in 1859. The mantle of the Church fell on his younger brother Charles Edward, born in 1842, who duly served his turn as Rector of Charlton Musgrove from 1876 until 1886 when he gave way to his cousin Randolph.

Richard Langford Leir was a strong conservative, much interested in hunting and all country matters, like his father keen on family history, proud of his ancestral home and of his heritage. He kept in close touch with his cousin Randolph at Charlton and they exchanged letters about the family pedigree and about the shooting prospects. He was fascinated by the family pictures and furniture and drew up a list of what he considered to be heirlooms. He rose steadily in the army attaining the rank of Major-General. At Staff College he was popular with his fellow officers and, inevitably, Master of the College Hounds. When he retired after ten years in that pleasant office in 1883 to join his regiment abroad he was presented with a valuable piece of plate in recognition of 'the able way he has hunted hounds'. Upwards of 100 Staff Officers subscribed, a fact of which Leir was proud.

In November, 1887, Major-General Leir married Henrietta Anne Piggott, a widow, who was the daughter and heir of Lord



The Revd. W. M. Leir and family outside his hunting box at Porlock Weir, Somerset. About 1880.

Dorchester, and representative of the distinguished military family of Carleton. The new Mrs Leir was a woman of great beauty and illustrious descent and fully aware of both. Her husband had to apply for a Royal Licence to add the name Carleton to his own which was granted in 1888. The General seems to have taken the lady's view of the matter, was pleased with his great match, and used liberally the Leir arms on which those of Carleton were charged as an inescutcheon of pretence, denoting his marriage to an heiress. Mrs Leir-Carleton was anxious that her family title should be revived in her person. Even in those days she must have had powerful friends to achieve her purpose, but achieve it she did and on 3 July, 1899, the Prime Minister himself, the Marquess of Salisbury, wrote to Mrs Leir-Carleton (whom we must now call Lady Dorchester) that:

'Her Majesty has been pleased to direct that the Barony of Dorchester shall be confirmed upon you and your heirs male in recognition of the distinguished military service rendered to her and her predecessors by so many of your family'.⁵³

Lady Dorchester had children by her first marriage and her eldest son eventually inherited the title.

THE PRIORY

When William Marriott Leir died in 1891 a situation unique in the family arose. His younger son, Charles Edward, became Rector of Ditchat and inherited all his father's furniture, 'horses and brougham carriage, saddlery, harness and stable furniture', a 'silver teapot, cream jug and sugar basin and all my plated articles except the entree dishes'. However, all the Ditchat property went to the eldest son Richard together with 'all my plate and my plated entree dishes, Soup tureen and dish covers...my Indian cabinet and a dinner service of Spode china'.⁵⁴ When this had happened in the case of Thomas V it had been possible to endow the eldest son with the mother's inheritance and keep the Ditchat property for the second son. Now Charles Edward Leir found himself with an enormous rectory but without the estate to maintain it. The problem was overcome by arranging an exchange of houses. The General gave Ringwell House, which had been built by his great-uncle Richard for a new rectory and received the old house in exchange absolutely as his own home. So in 1893 after more than 400 years in the service of the Church Gunthorpe's mansion became a secular home. The General cast round for an appropriate antique name and came up with the Priory which, if it had no foundation in fact, was suitably impressive.

At the time of his marriage, General Leir-Carleton retired

after 28 years in the army and henceforth spent most of his time at Greywell Hill, the Dorchester seat in Hampshire. Ditcheat Priory was now used occasionally as a hunting and shooting box. Nevertheless, he was devoted to the home of his ancestors, did much to embellish it and arranged exchanges with the glebe in order to surround the house as far as possible with its own land. He and Lady Dorchester were much at Court and constantly attending shooting and country house parties. They had no children and as the years crept on the General began to consider the future of the Priory, which, with an almost 18th century confidence, he imagined as continuing to be the family seat for generations. His brother, the Rev. Charles Edward Leir, last of the name to be Rector of Ditcheat, had married Frances Mary, daughter of the Rev. Thomas Fox, Rector of Templecombe. They had two sons and six daughters. Ernest became a rear-admiral, while Mildred married the Rev. Henry Tripp, who followed his father-in-law as Rector of Ditcheat when he retired in 1917 (he died in 1924) and remained until 1946. It was the eldest son, Hugh Charles Musgrove Leir, born in 1881, whom the General chose as his heir when he drew up his will in 1920, entailing the property on him and his descendants in primogeniture, and failing these on the other male members of the Leir family in due seniority, and finally, *faute de mieux*, to the females. He also drew up a list of heirlooms attempting to include the oak panelling, mantlepieces, decorations at the Priory although he knew very well they were fixtures.

In 1925, Lady Dorchester died and the old General retired to Ditcheat where he died on 18 December, 1933, at the age of 92 leaving instructions 'to be buried beside my father in the Leir Vault outside the East end of the chancel of Ditcheat Church'. He had already chosen the wording that was to go on his monument on the north wall of the chancel and he left this in his plate chest.

Up to this time the Leirs had been a somewhat stolid family who held on to what they had and judiciously increased it. They could not be called by any stretch of the imagination adventurous. With Hugh Leir all this changed. As a young man he abandoned the safe and traditional paths and went out to British Columbia as a pioneer and founded a successful sawmill on the Penticton River. In 1914, he married Joyce Hassell. They had 11 children born and bred in Canada and who naturally became Canadian citizens. Hugh Leir himself never lost his love of the family home and after inheriting the Priory, which he re-named Abbey House, came over from time to time while retaining his base in Canada. Little had been done to maintain the Priory in the General's last years and it was at this period that it began to deteriorate. After the Second World War, Hugh Leir spent more time at the house and made



A strong Conservative and interested in all country matters: General Richard Leir-Carleton about to ride to hounds in 1907 when 66.



Conscious of her beauty and high rank: Lady Dorchester sitting at the window seat in Ditcheat Priory library. About 1905.

additions and improvements, but did little to halt the decay of the basic structure. In extreme old age Hugh Leir came to live permanently in the home of his ancestors, dying at Bath in 1971 at the age of 90.

Although Hugh Leir's Canadian family were interested in their English past, a stately home in the old country was surplus to their requirements. In 1975, not without some heart-burning, the mansion which had housed the Leir family for 276 years was sold, albeit Richard Hugh Leir, the present head of the family, retained the advowson of Ditcheat Church. The buyers were the Barber family, local people of old Somerset stock and successful farmers. They farmed the land which had formerly gone with the house, but found that they could not cope with the Priory and its outbuildings which were in an advanced state of dilapidation with water pouring through the roof and dry rot rampant. Concerned for its preservation they made the right decision to sell the property to someone able and willing to undertake its restoration. For two years more it mouldered, awaiting its destiny.

In 1977, on the verge of irretrievable ruin the Priory found its saviours. Sir Christopher and Lady Chancellor, who lived at Hunstrete House, another former Glastonbury Abbey property in what used to be called North Somerset, and were now looking for a smaller house, came to see it. They were both immensely attracted to the house and with considerable courage and amid prophecies of doom about its state of repair bought the Priory from the Barbers. A major programme of restoration had to be put in hand including the renewal of the whole roof before the Chancellors could move in to their new home in 1978.

Sir Christopher, well-known as the former head of Reuters and more recently as Chairman of the Bath Preservation Trust, is the son of Sir John Chancellor, a distinguished colonial servant, once High Commissioner in Palestine. He comes of an ancient Scottish family, long seated in Lanarkshire. He is 19th in descent from William Chancellor granted lands at Shieldhall in that county in 1432. Sir Christopher can be said to be a Somerset man by adoption and has worked tirelessly for the preservation of its architecture and countryside. For Lady Chancellor moving to Ditcheat was rather like coming home for she is the daughter of Sir Richard Paget, Bt., and was brought up at the family seat, Cranmore Hall, only a few miles away. It was sold in 1945 and is now a school.

Ditcheat Priory has weathered the storms of five centuries and now seems set fair to endure several more. Saved at the eleventh hour from ruin or being turned into an institution, a crisis which perhaps in the fullness of time will be seen as only a slight hiccough in its progress, it is now once again an elegant house and, more-

over, a comfortable home, filled with fine furniture, pictures and books. The faces in the portraits may have changed but the atmosphere is just the same. To those who saw the house only a few years ago this seems little short of miraculous.

*As when the weary traveller, with surprize,
Sees sudden verdure in the desart rise;
Thus midst the waste the beauteous pile appears,
And mocks the spoil of time, the wreck of years.
Admiring crouds the pleasing change explore,
While order reigns, where discord spread before.*
(Samuel Bowden)
M. McG.

NOTES

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21. Parliamentary Survey, 1650, Lambeth Palace (comm. X11a/15/412-13)
22. Glebe Terrier, 1637, Somerset Record Office.
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- 27, 28, 29. Leir archives.
30. W. Phelps, *History of Somerset*, London, 1839, 2, p. 271. Phelps must have misread the date as the parish register confirms that the funeral was on 2 April.

31. Burke's Commoners, London, 1838, p. 579.
- 32, 33, 34. Leir archives.
35. Leir archives.
36. Leir archives.
37. This portrait, together with one of his wife, Mary Freke, is in the possession of her descendant, Mrs J. Tait, of Bovey Tracey, Devon.
- 38, 39. Leir archives.
- 40, 41. Leir archives.
42. *Parson Woodforde's Diary*, II, p. 31.
43. Leir archives.
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46. Leir archives.
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52. *The Western Gazette*, 15 May, 1891.
53. Leir archives.
54. From his will at Somerset House.

APPENDIX

Inventory of goods at Ditchat Rectory, 1699

This paper was drawn up by the widowed Mrs Coward when preparing to leave the Rectory to make way for the new incumbent, the Rev. Thomas Leir, before she accepted his proposal of marriage. It is now in the possession of her descendant, Mrs J. Tait, of Bovey Tracey, Devon. Inventories for houses in north-east Somerset are rare owing to the destruction of probate material during the raid on Exeter in 1942 so this is an important document in its own right. It gives a good cross-section of the miscellaneous objects which went to furnish a gentleman's house. It reveals a civilised syle of life, the house well furnished, hung with pictures and tapestries, bestrewn with rugs, and with ample household implements and equipment. The chessboard and books hint at Dr Coward's recreations. *Cases of Conscience*, by the royalist divine, Robert Sanderson (1587-1663), later Bishop of Lincoln, was a record of deliberate judgements in cases of morality brought before him, and may have helped Coward in his parish work. *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, by Richard Hooker (1553-1600) was famous in its day, both as literature and as theology. It is interesting that Mrs Coward had no doubt that 'Ye Terms of ye Law' was by Thomas Blount (1618-79), author of *Ancient Tenures*, although it is recorded in the DNB as only 'supposed to be by him'. For the rest, Dr Coward seems to have been well provided with cider and beer while 'ye bottles left' indicate even better beverages. The values are given in pounds, shillings and pence while many objects were sold by weight as was customary.

Goods already bought the price agreed for by Mr. Leer.

| | | | |
|--|---|----|----|
| For Blounts terms of ye Law | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| For Hookers Eccles. Policy | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| For Saundersons cases of conscience | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| For 1 bed bolster & 2 pillows of 92LB ½ | 4 | 12 | 6 |
| For a 2d bed bolster & 2 pillows of 102LB ½ | 5 | 2 | 6 |
| For a furnace weighing 84 pd | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| For ye boyler 28LB ½ | 1 | 8 | 3 |
| For ye old parlour grate hanger fire shovell tongues & poker of 73LB | 0 | 18 | 3 |
| For a new brasse kettle of 19LB ½ | 0 | 19 | 6 |
| For ye furnace Iron of 72LB & ½ | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| For ye hall grate & cheeks 136LB | 1 | 13 | 9 |
| For a gridiron 2 roasting dogs, 2 pott hangrs a fender a pair of tongues a poker shovell a grate shovell & a grate hander 87LB ½ | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| For ye Iron chimney back 86LB | 0 | 7 | 8 |
| For 2 pair of dogs for Chamb. chimneys 24LB | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| For 2 fire shovells & 2 pair of tongues 1 new | 0 | 5 | 0 |

| | | | |
|--|-------|----|----|
| For 2 great dishes 4 lesser & a porringer 32LB ½ | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| For ye Iron of ye Roller 31LB ½ | 0 | 7 | 8 |
| For ye two stones 5 foot | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| For ye stone table measuring 13 foot | 0 | 6 | 6 |
| For a dozen of plates | 0 | 12 | 0 |
| For ½ a dozen knives & ½ a dozen forks | 0 | 12 | 0 |
| For a closestoole & pan in it | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| | <hr/> | | |
| Summe totall | 25 | 9 | 10 |
| | <hr/> | | |

Goods approv'd of ye price not agreed to

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|----|----|-------------------|
| For ye Hall turkey work couch | 0 | 8 | 0 |
| for ye stool to it | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| For ye oval table in ye Hall | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| For ye square table in ye Hall | 0 | 4 | 6 |
| For ye corn bin in ye farmm | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| For ye Bruing vate | 0 | 16 | 0 |
| For ye Bread braker | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| For ye 3 ladders | 1. | 26 | rung 4s 4d |
| | 2. | 9 | rung 1s 6d in all |
| | 3. | 15 | rung |

Hall chamber

| | | | |
|--|---|----|---|
| For ye bedstead Buckrum tickin and rodde | 0 | 15 | 0 |
| For ye Inner & outer valans head & tester white 1£ 5s. outer 15s. | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| For ye Hangings | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| For chairs 8s 4d less 2d 5 in all | 0 | 12 | 0 |

Kitchin Chamber

| | | | |
|--|---|----|---|
| For ye Hangings | 1 | 10 | 0 |
| For ye chairs 2d less 3d Elbow one | 0 | 11 | 0 |
| For ye Tester bedstead Cord matt & quilt | 1 | 10 | 0 |
| For ye Curtaine & valans | 1 | 14 | 0 |
| For ye fine white Rugg | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| For 3 blanketts | 0 | 10 | 6 |

| | | | |
|--------------|----|----|---|
| Summe totall | 14 | 10 | 6 |
|--------------|----|----|---|

Odd Things

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Chafindish 6s Skimmer 2s | 0 | 8 | 0 |
| Candlesticks 6s. Brasse snuffers 1s | 0 | 7 | 0 |
| 2 chopping knives & saucepan | 0 | 1 | 8 |
| 3 Ladders | 0 | 4 | 0 |

Goods offerd you as convenient

| | | | |
|--|---|----|---|
| The Syder press & mill | 2 | 10 | 0 |
| 41 printed frame cutts about ye hall & Staircase at 8d each | 1 | 7 | 4 |
| 4 Lesser framd pictures in ye parlours | 1 | 12 | 0 |
| Chimney picture | | | |
| 2 greater pictures in parlour | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| The great Hall picture | 1 | 16 | 0 |
| Barrells | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Book shelves hangings & couch in closet | 1 | 10 | 6 |
| 2 Glass cases | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| A pair of stands | 0 | 8 | 0 |
| Tables & chess board | 0 | 15 | 0 |
| Brush besom & rubber | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Guns | 2 | 15 | 0 |
| Cooks Cowsls | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 2 chairs | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| 2 pillows | 0 | 7 | 0 |

Cellar

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|----|---|
| 2 tables there | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| 6 shelves & a rack | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| Napkin press | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| Safe | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| 3 horses | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| powdering tub | 0 | 1 | 0 |

| | | |
|----|----|---|
| 16 | 11 | 6 |
| 1 | 15 | 0 |
| 1 | 10 | 0 |

Parlour curtaines & sconces
 Leaden wheight
 Bucket
 The Table Bedstead
 Six glasses & ye bottles left

Left if bargained

All ye window curtaine rods
 3 Iron Barrs to ye farmers windows
 A spring lock on parlor door 7s
 Cupps & glasses
 The passage door
 Earthenware