

HIGHCLIFFE CASTLE, NEAR CHRISTCHURCH, HAMPSHIRE

By J. H. Powell

HIGHCLIFFE Castle is situated about eight miles from Bournemouth on the cliffs overlooking Christchurch Bay on the Hampshire coast, and lies on the south side of the Christchurch to Lymington road.

The first house on the site was built in 1773 by Robert Adam for John, 3rd Earl of Bute, the then Prime Minister. The building was shortlived: in 1794, after only 21 years, it had to be demolished because it was endangered by the sea. Somewhat farther from the coast the Earl of Bute's grandson, Lord (Charles) Stuart of Rothesay English Ambassador to France, 1815-24 and 1828-30, built the present Highcliffe Castle mainly in the style of a 16th-century French château. The architect, W. J. Domthorne, therefore incorporated into it masses of ancient Norman stonework and some fine stained glass, acquired in about 1820 from Normandy. The interior was likewise adorned with antiquities from buildings in France.

Lord Stuart died in 1845 and the house passed to his widow Lady Elizabeth Stuart de Rothesay, who entertained there in 1859 Queen Marie Amelie of France, wife of King Louis Philippe. She was the castle's first royal visitor. In 1867 the castle was inherited by Lord and Lady Stuart's youngest daughter Louisa, Marchioness of Waterford, widow of Henry, 3rd Marquess of Waterford, K.P. She continued and developed the social life of Highcliffe Castle, among her distinguished guests being Queen Sophy of the Netherlands (in 1872), the Crown Prince Gustaf of Sweden and Norway (in 1879), the family of the Prince and Princess of Wales (later Edward VII and Queen Alexandra), and the Crown Princess of Germany (the Empress Frederick, daughter of Queen Victoria) and her daughters, who came several times in the 1880's. Other visitors were Mr. Gladstone and Earl Granville. The Marchioness died in 1891 after doing invaluable service to Highcliffe Castle by

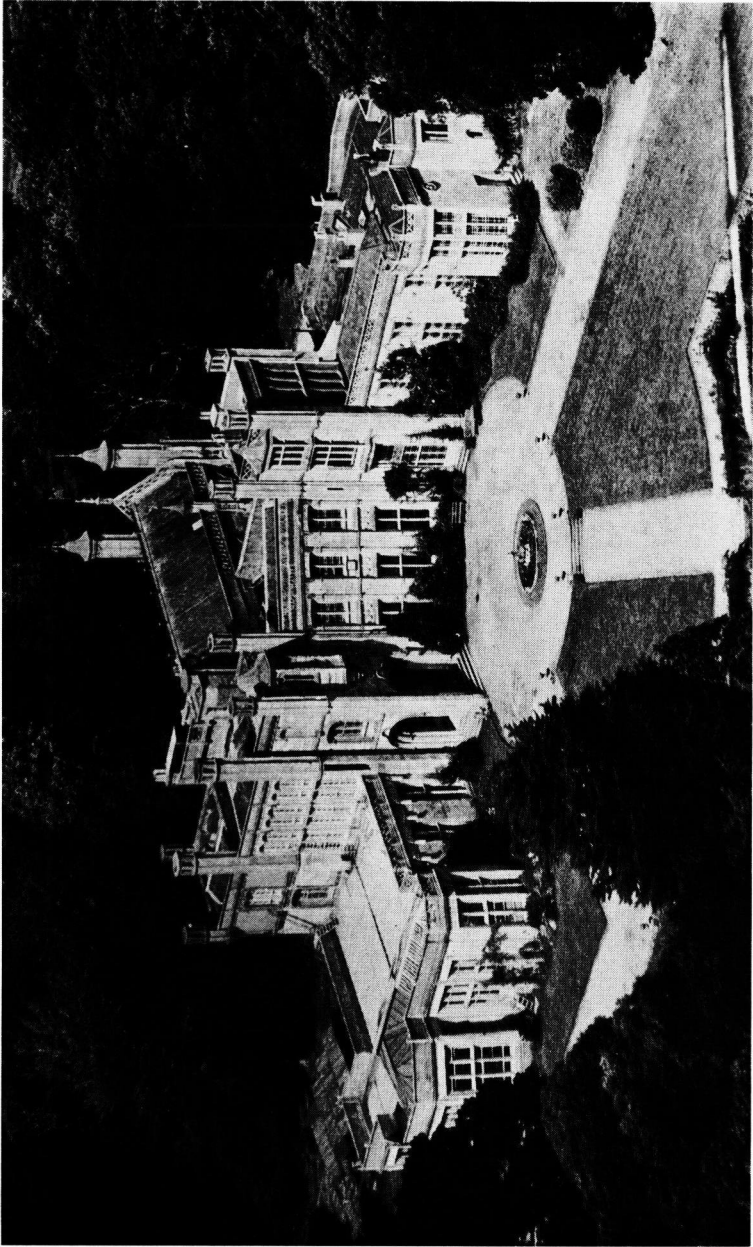


FIG. 1. Highcliff Castle, Hampshire, from the South-east; photograph by B. C. G. Shore
(by permission of *National Monuments Record*)

beautifying the gardens, by planting a wood and by her cliff works, on which she spent £3,000 between 1877-81. She made the cliffs on the estate the best preserved in Christchurch Bay.

Lady Waterford settled the property on a distant cousin, Major-General the Hon. Edward Montagu-Stuart-Wortley, C.B. (born 1857, the son of Francis, brother of the 1st Earl of Wharncliffe), who in his day entertained Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught (1893), King Alphonso XIII of Spain (1916), and Kaiser Willhelm II, in November, 1907, after his official state visit to London. The Kaiser spent three enjoyable weeks at the castle, and for some days of that time the German Chancellor, Prince Bernard von Buelow, was also a guest. The Kaiser's conversations with his host then and subsequently were published on 28 October, 1908, by the *Daily Telegraph* and nearly led to the Kaiser's abdication: the relevant papers are still looked upon as the most valuable documents on Imperial Germany in the pre-war period. Later guests at Highcliffe Castle were H.M. Queen Mary (1928), the Duke of Aosta, later Viceroy of Abyssinia, and Mr. Nahas Pasha, the Egyptian premier (1930).

After the Major-General's death in 1934 his widow, Violet Stuart-Wortley, C.B.E. (1866-1953), continued to live at the castle, despite severe war damage, until about 1945-46, when she handed it over to her son-in-law, Henry Montagu Bertie, 13th Earl of Lindsey and 8th Earl of Abingdon.

The castle was sold by auction in 1952 to become a children's convalescent home. Next year the property was again for sale as extensive repairs were needed, and because it was too damp in winter for such a home, and too costly to maintain. The Roman Catholic Congregation of the Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, also known as the Claretians, were the next owners of the castle, which became a training college for the Order until April, 1967. The centre portion of the castle then suffered very considerable damage by fire, and the Order consequently sold the property by auction in September, 1967. Its repair and future use have not yet been decided. On 28th July, 1968, a further fire broke out. It was soon brought under control but damaged parts of the south-west wing, including the entrance hall and library.

Highcliffe Castle is an irregular building roughly L-shaped. There is a three-storied central block, with an arm of one storey pointing southwards to the sea and another similar arm running to the east. The entrance is an imposing archway serving as a porch to the great hall, lately used as a chapel. This archway is embellished with a variety of leaf clusters and smiling and grimacing stone faces. Over the archway, flanked by two turrets, is a huge stone deer. Below this and within the archway is a large and notable stained-glass window which, with the long windows on the west side of the great hall, gives this part of the building an unmistakable Gothic appearance. Above these west windows and along the whole of the rest of the west front is a stone parapet with the English rose as its motif and stone pinnacles at intervals, so that the castle here takes on the semblance of a French *château*. The south-east or garden porch tower, on the opposite side of the central block, has an exceptionally beautiful French oriel window with most intricate stonework. The central block is joined to the arms on the south-east side by the above mentioned garden porch tower and by another, both with turrets. These and other turrets are really chimneys in disguise. Internally, the centre block contains the great hall, the dining room and the octagon room on the ground floor. Eastward are the drawing room, the library and the winter-garden room. In the external upper half of the drawing room, and above the library windows, are the crests of Lord Stuart's family. Throughout the house the high double-doors are carved in Louis XVI style with Italianate frames of stone or marble and ornate heavy brass locks and finger-plates. Most of the state rooms have French fireplaces with marble surrounds and some have Louis XV decorations on the walls and ceilings, and large gilt mirrors of the same period.

The choicest parts of three Norman-French buildings were used to create Highcliffe Castle. One was the great manor house or *château* of Les Andelys on the River Seine, built in the first quarter of the 16th century for the Picart de Radeval family and in its day one of the finest examples of late French-Gothic domestic architecture. Cotman painted the mansion in 1818. Two years later it was completely demolished and Lord Stuart, who happened to be in the neighbourhood, was able to buy the most valuable of the

stonework. This included the already-mentioned oriel window, a masterpiece of Gothic pointed architecture. It measures *c.* 34 ft. in length and 17 ft. in breadth and is of Caen stone. The base of the window is particularly elaborate, and around and between the traceried windows are a number of small lively statues. Within the original chamber having this oriel window there died on 17 or 18 November, 1568, Anthony de Boulon, King of Navarre, father of Henri IV, King of France and Navarre. He had been mortally wounded during the siege of Rouen. Another piece of Les Andelys stonework, identifiable from Cotman's drawing, is a long length of moulding *c.* 116 ft. long, 12½ ft. wide and 1½-3½ ins. deep. It is of Caen stone and quite a contrast to any other moulding at the castle, and is to be found on the top of the wall on the east and west sides of the great hall. With a length of modern moulding it forms the transgression of the wall with the parapets. Other carved stones probably from the same source are three corbels with the heads and shoulders of men. One of these is in the centre of the north side of Highcliffe Castle. Les Andelys had four such corbels. There are also, above the western arch of the entrance porch, three Caen stone circles, one with a cable pattern and the others with little Norman devils and fabulous animals. The first of these can be identified in Cotman's drawing in the central part of Les Andelys. Apart from these actual stones, Highcliffe Castle corresponds with the French *château* in the form of its windows—a well-carved mullion and one transom; in the three mouldings around parts of the walls in similar positions to those at Les Andelys; in the same angular buttresses as on the Les Andelys chimneys; the general lay-out of the windows, divisions and buttresses on the south-east front of the central block; and the three doorways in the great hall and the one in the entrance porch—a Tudor arch surmounted by an ogee ending in a crocketed pinnacle.

The second ruined French building to be pressed into service was the famous Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter of Jumieges, about 15 miles west of Rouen, founded in A.D. 654 by St. Philibert and St. Ouen. After the abbey had been pillaged and burnt by the Normans in the 9th century it was rebuilt in Caen stone in the Romano-Norman style and reached an almost unequalled fame as

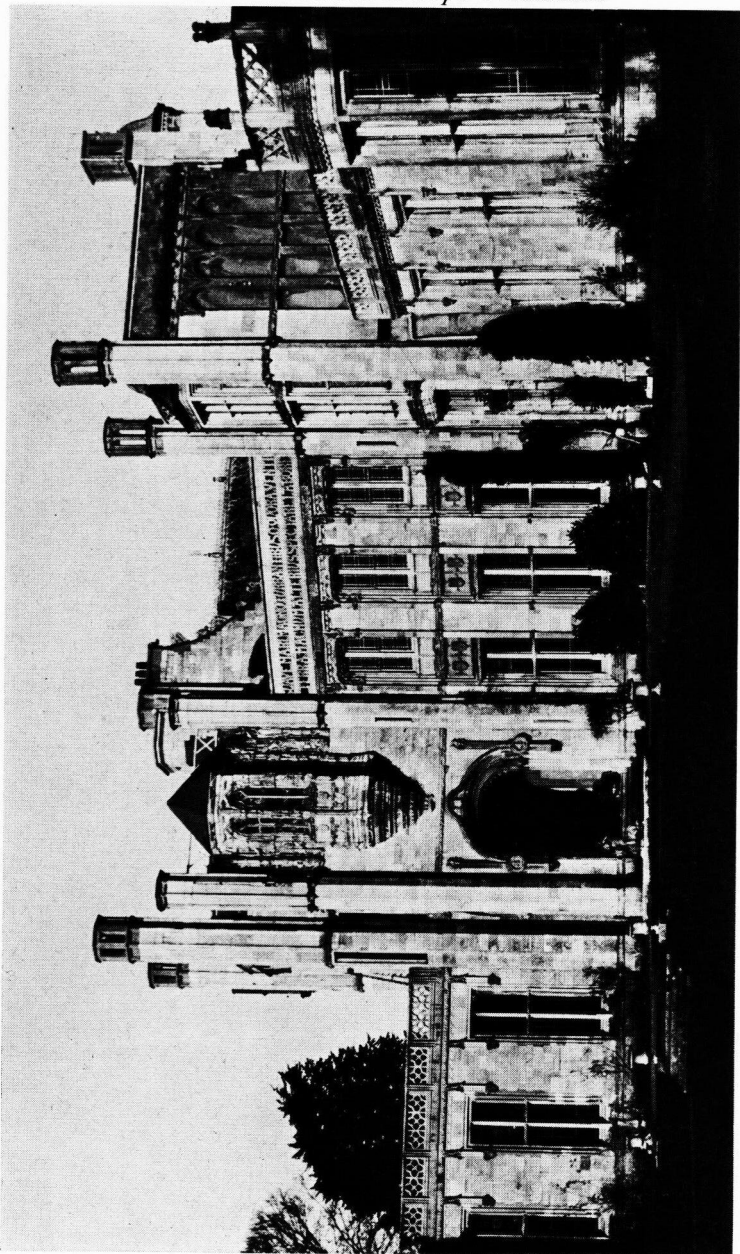


FIG. 2. Highcliff Castle, Hampshire, the central block;
photograph by B. C. G. Shore

the great centre of culture in northern France and as a model of perfection. In February, 1790, during the French Revolution, the abbey was suppressed, and in 1802 a certain M. Le Fort bought the cloisters 'to make money' by selling the carved stonework. By 1821 the cloisters and the arches of the great cellar had "utterly vanished", say Turner and Deshayes. Saville speaks of a 'lord' who rebuilt the cloister in the middle of his park and Canon Jouen adds that this lord was "Lord Stuart de Rothsat of High Cliff in Hampshire." The entrance and garden porches of Highcliffe Castle have carved stones similar to those in the vestibule of the abbey's great cellar or Hall of the Knights. The east and west arches of the Highcliffe entrance or north porch each have twelve stones with a crossed decoration in each lower angle with little flat heads or leaves, as in the vestibule's eastern doorway (west side) at Jumieges. The eastern arch of the north porch and the western arch of the garden or south-east porch of Highcliffe Castle have two patterns similar to those of the magnificent western arch of the vestibule on the west side of the abbey's great cellar; and the west side of the south-east porch has as well pointed-staff moulding as under the zig-zag moulding at Jumieges. Sixty dog-tooth patterns with each tooth bearing a carved fleur-de-lys can be seen in both the interior of the eastern arch of the north porch at Highcliffe and the 'intrados' of the Jumeiges arch. Further, high up in the corners of Highcliffe's north porch are four beautifully carved corbels of considerable size supporting the ribs of the vault: they once graced the vaulting shafts of the Jumieges cloisters. One capital with a simple but peculiar type of ornament located on the extreme north of the western arch of the north porch at Highcliffe agrees in every detail with a drawing by Destroyers executed in 1818 of the ruins of the church of St. Peter, the first church built in the abbey precincts. Lack of other detailed drawings of the French abbey prevents other certain identification but it is probable that the three Caen stone corbels with human heads carved in the typical early Norman style and now fitted into the south-west wall of the winter-garden room at Highcliffe were once part of the 7th-century monastery, possibly on St. Peter's Church.

Until 1952 the interior walls of the great hall had 37 Gothic oak panels depicting the lives of Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin.

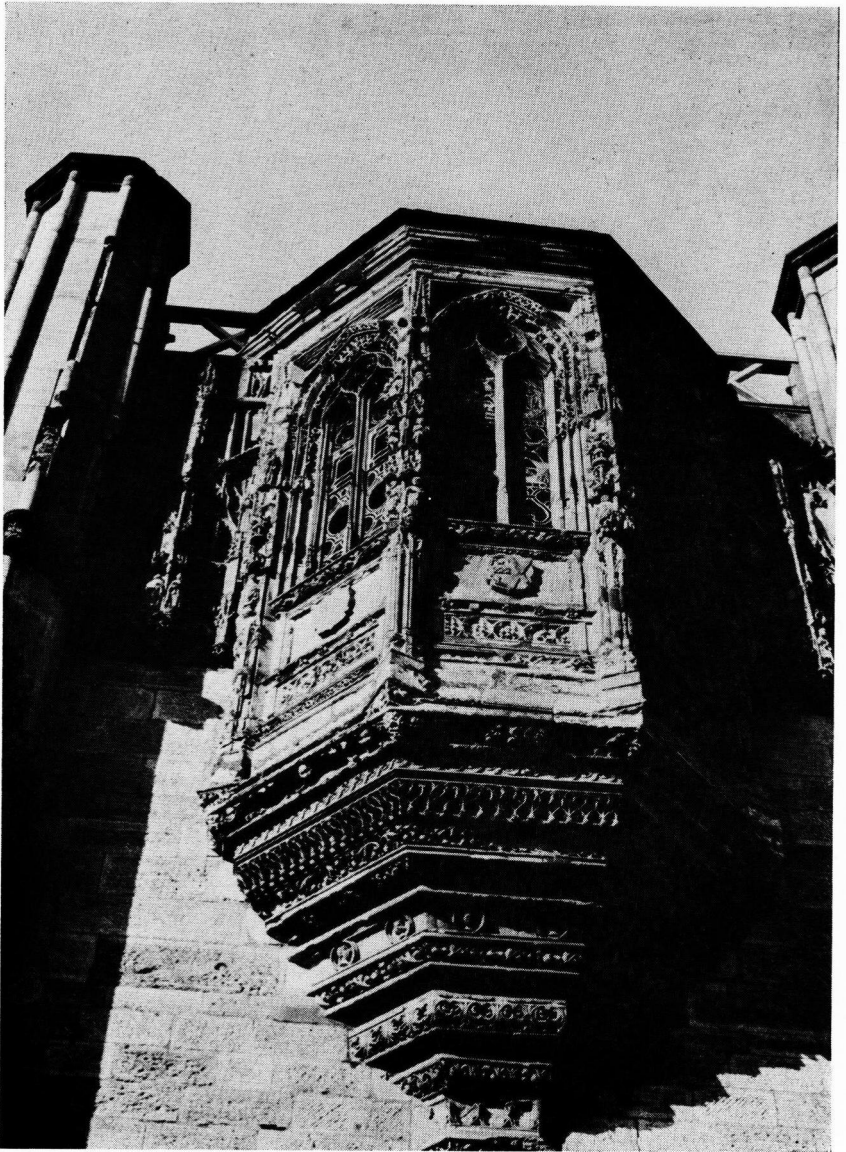


FIG. 3. The Oriel Window of Highcliffe Castle; photograph by B. C. G. Shore

These panels were bought for the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Conservator, Miss N. Freeman, says that the records reveal that Jacques d'Ambois, Abbot of Jumieges, in 1501 ordered new stalls for his church and that these panels can be ascribed to exactly that date. This discovery confirms the tradition in the Stuart family that the panels came from Jumieges.

Lord Stuart brought from France not only the above portions of the Abbey of Jumieges but also definite building ideas. These he carried out in the great hall, built in the form and style of a little church, and latterly used as such. The windows, furniture and sculpture are all of an ecclesiastical type. The four great archways of the house are also built in the Norman style of Jumieges.

A third source of material for Highcliffe Castle was the little church of St. Vigor in the Rue des Bons Enfants in the western quarter of Rouen. This church was partially destroyed in the French Revolution and the remaining ruins were annihilated by bombing in 1944. It was probably Lord Stuart who acquired some of its fine 15th and 16th-century stained glass. Most of this is in the large north window of the great hall. This window, partly of Caen stone, is 30 ft. long and 13½ ft. broad, divided by mullions into five sections, the much traceried upper portions of which are filled with modern glass. The central part of this great window is filled with glass depicting the Root of Jesse, in the midst of which are the Blessed Virgin and Child surrounded by some 30 saints equally distributed over the window, which has sky-blue as the main colour. To the right and left of the Jesse glass is glass of an earlier date. This consists of two fine groups of angels, one of which groups is evidently part of an Adoration of the Magi (beginning of the 15th century) and the other part of a Last Judgment (end of the 15th century). An inscription in Old French on the Jesse glass says that this was made in 1547 for a church dedicated to St. Vigor, so M. Lafond, the stained glass expert, was able to ascribe the making of it to the School of Rouen, then under the influence of Arnoult of Nimegue, and prove that the original provenance of the glass was the church of St. Vigor in Rouen. The extension of the Jesse window by the 15th century side panels was evidently because of the great size of the Highcliffe window. This glass was severely damaged in the Battle of Britain

but has been very carefully restored. Parts of two of the side windows of the great hall have glass figures of the Blessed Virgin and St. Andrew in much the same style as the figures in the great window.

Les Andelys, Jumieges and Rouen are all on the River Seine, which is deep enough in this part for heavily-laden barges. Only a mile from Highcliffe Castle there existed in Lord Stuart's time a convenient landing-place called "Steamer's Point". Lord Stuart left no documents but there is little doubt that the stone and glass from Normandy for Highcliffe came by water, and 1820 is the date indicated.

The above account details the antiquities definitely assignable to Les Andelys, Jumieges and St. Vigor. There are many other ancient stone carvings and some wood carvings that cannot be so ascribed owing to the absence of visual and other evidence. The unidentified stonework includes 8 Caen stone Gothic niches on the exterior of the castle, several gargoyles, 5 of little men in wide cloaks and 4 of fable animals placed as though gliding down a chute (on the central roof and the corner of the gutters), and 10 Norman-style window corbels on the north side of Highcliffe and mostly in the form of human and animal heads. There are also in the north porch 3 capitals of Caen stone and 6 bases partly in Caen stone; and in the south-east porch 2 capitals and 8 bases in Caen stone, and 2 buttresses on each side decorated with carved human heads. Other ancient stone carvings include 33 ft. of zig-zag moulding along the north side of the central block, combined with a rose and laurel moulding; and other combined traceried mouldings in the framework of the garden entrance on the south side of the parlour. There is also a stone fireplace in the winter-garden room with numerous angels holding ribbons and coats of arms, while within the northern entrance to the great hall is a tympanum with God the Father surrounded by little angels and creating the world. Some carved stone panels can be seen in the south-east entrance as well.

As to wood carvings, in the room with the oriel window there are 48 mediæval oak panels, *c.* 16 ins. by 8 ins., carved with formal patterns, flowers, medallions, group scenes and a fine base relief. These panels are on the door, the cupboard and the shutters.



FIG. 4. Highcliffe Castle: Interior showing Louis XVI style double doors and door-case; photograph by B. C. G. Shore
(by permission of National Monuments Record).

Over the fireplace is the most valuable woodwork left at Highcliffe. This overmantel measures 50 ins. by 20 ins. by 8 ins., and has medallions, fleur-de-lys, small angels, and two devils playing the mandolin. In the west door of the great hall is another oak panel of fine inlaid work, originally a supplement to the 37 Jumieges panels once round this room. This panel is of St. Christopher and the Child Jesus and measures 51 ins. by 15½ ins. The library retains 2 small panels from a set of 7. They are group scenes, 17 ins. by 7½ ins.

Some of the stained glass is also of unknown origin. In one west window of the library are 8 pieces, three of them, 40 ins. by 25 ins., of an exquisite beauty, with Biblical scenes. Below these, in five frame-sections, are 5 circles with coats-of-arms surrounding the double eagle of the Holy Roman Empire and green-white arms. These circles have inscribed the date 1590 and either Swiss or German names on the coats-of-arms. The 'dormitory' also has 5 ancient coats-of-arms, in the west window. The right and left windows of the oriel also have some fragments of German glass, one dating from 1619. The centre glass of the oriel seems to be three-fourths original. Here are two noble ladies in French costume of approximately the end of the 15th century. Each is saying her rosary. A second motif in this part of the window perhaps depicts Lazarus rising from the dead. The top corner coat-of-arms is undoubtedly French.

It will be realized from this account and much more from the illustrations that Highcliffe Castle, though not particularly old in itself nor exceptionally historical, is unique. Its general plan and position reflects the English taste for Romantic-Gothic in the early 19th century, and it contains some of the finest features of a little Norman church, a famous French abbey and a great French château. For these reasons the castle is on the Statutory List of Scheduled Buildings, Grade I; and, thanks in large part to the efforts of members of this Society, had a Building Preservation Order of 1966 confirmed by the Minister of Housing and Local Government in March, 1967.¹

¹ Three illustrated articles on Highcliffe Castle appeared in *Country Life*, 1942, under dates 24th April, 1st and 8th May.