

The THROCKMORTONS of CHESFIELD MANOR

by *Nina K. Freebody*

The present-day visitor to the deserted village of Chesfield, north of Stevenage, finds only a ruined church near an old farmhouse. Three-hundred years ago it was a busy little community, and the scene of the grand funeral of Sir Francis Throckmorton, the head of an eminent Roman Catholic family.

The manor house is an early seventeenth century building of two storeys, its great hall now divided into two rooms.¹ Oldfield, the Hertfordshire artist who sketched the house between 1790 and 1800,² wrote that it had been altered considerably. Since his day the outside view has remained virtually unchanged, and the house still retains some of its original oak panelling, as well as the main staircase with its squared newel posts and turned balusters, typical of its period.

According to the Hearth Tax returns for Graveley cum Chesfield in March 1663 the house was taxed on nine hearths,³ and according to Mr and Mrs Allen, the present occupants, the farm still has nine fireplaces. In 1663 this was one of the largest houses in the village, and was occupied by 'Widdow Clerke'.*

George Clerke of Finches End, Benington, had acquired the manor of Chesfield in Tudor times. Three generations later, in 1646, William Clerke married Mary Bagshaw, daughter of a London merchant.⁴ It was her name which appeared in the Hearth Tax returns as Widow Clerke, her husband having died in the previous month.

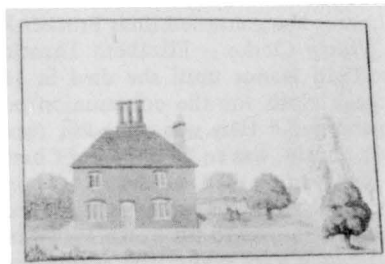
Boys from the Clerke family were well-educated: their names were entered in the records of Cambridge University as scholars from Stevenage school.⁵ William Clerke, who had been taught for seven years by Mr Pierson, a master at the Grammar School, entered St John's College where he matriculated but does not appear to have studied for a degree. However, his younger brother Francis, who was a contemporary of Sir Henry Chauncy at Stevenage Grammar School, gained his M.A.

* *An article about the Clerke family of Benington and Chesfield, written by Edmund Esdaile, is published in Hertfordshire Countryside, February 1983, pages 12-15.*

CHESFIELD. The ruined church and former manor house.

Right: As drawn by H G Oldfield, c.1800. (Photo by permission of Herts CRO).

Below: Little changed today. (Photo by permission of G Seabohm).



degree at Caius College in 1649.

In September 1665, not long after William Clerke died, his eighteen year old daughter Elizabeth married George Throckmorton of Essex, at Benington Church.⁶ As the eldest of William Clerke's four daughters she had received Chesfield Manor as her share of her father's estate.

Her husband was a distant relative of the Throckmortons of Coughton Court in Warwickshire. Most of the family were staunch Roman Catholics and it has been suggested that George Throckmorton was himself a Catholic. The writer Edmund Esdaile put forward the theory that there may have been an unrecorded mass-centre at Chesfield.⁷ But although he was related to a family who were involved in plots against Queen Elizabeth and later the Gunpowder Plot, there is in fact no evidence that George was a practising Catholic although some of his children adopted the Catholic faith.

George Throckmorton occupied himself with the usual pursuits of a country gentleman supervising his estates in Hertfordshire and Essex. He raised a large family most of whom were christened at St Ethelreda's Church, Chesfield. The parish register records the baptism of four sons (John, George, William and Thomas) and four daughters (Mary, Elizabeth, Anne and Francis). However Sir Henry Chauncy, the county historian, recorded four more daughters (Dorothy, Jane,

Katherine and Monica); and Sir Henry would have known them well, since his own daughter Mary married their brother John.

Widow Clerke – Elizabeth Throckmorton's mother, Mary – continued to live at Chesfield Manor until she died in 1671. In her will she gave a green carpet and damask cloth for the communion table in Chesfield Church where she must have worshipped.⁸ Hers was a modest funeral but Sir Francis Throckmorton, her son-in-law's cousin, was to be buried at Chesfield nine years later in great splendour.

Sir Francis died suddenly in London early in November 1680. He had been estranged from his wife for some years,⁹ and for that reason, probably, was not taken for burial to his home at Weston Underwood in Buckinghamshire. Coughton Court in Warwickshire, the family home of the Throckmortons since 1409 and the birthplace of Sir Francis in 1640, was still in a state of disrepair after the Civil War and Sir Francis apparently spent much of his time abroad with his son Robert, so possibly for these various reasons it was decided to hold the funeral at Chesfield.

His body was brought from London and laid in state in the great hall of the manor house. For a month preparations were made for the funeral and John Burrey, the House Steward of Coughton, noted all the expenses incurred.¹⁰ The corpse was embalmed in wax, cloth was purchased from various London drapers to be made into mourning clothes for the family mourners. A wax chandler supplied candles and six candlesticks were hired to hold tapers to stand by the coffin for twenty-five days. An heraldic painter was employed to paint Sir Francis' coat-of-arms, which would normally have been displayed outside his house during the period of mourning, but may in this case perhaps have been carried in the funeral procession, and subsequently set up permanently in the church. A bricklayer lined the grave in the family chapel to hold the lead-lined coffin and a smith made the ironwork to support the heraldic banners. Hackney coaches brought mourners from London while waggoners made numerous journeys bringing goods required for the funeral feast. Canary wine was sent from London for the guests but Mrs Pitches of Hitchin provided the funeral wine.

Not many Hertfordshire tradespeople are identifiable in the detailed funeral bill, but Richard Kempton, a Stevenage tailor, using material supplied by a local mercer named Crowch, made the mourning clothes for Mary Sturdy, the Throckmorton children's nurse. She looked after Sir Francis' young daughters Anne and Mary when they attended their father's funeral.

Mrs Elizabeth Throckmorton was reimbursed with £15 for the hospitality she extended to several guests who stayed at the Manor for five weeks. Those servants who watched by the body of Sir Francis were also paid, while the church sexton and the Protestant parson Rev. Philip Osbaldston duly received their fees for conducting the funeral which took place on December 8th. In addition, a statutory fine of fifty shillings was paid for burial in linen instead of wool.

The funeral account totalled £378.19s.1d and by the standards of the late seventeenth century, it was a very expensive affair. This was a point not lost on George Throckmorton, especially as the family estate could hardly afford such expenditure. However, it was carried out in accordance with Sir Francis Throckmorton's last wishes and in a manner befitting his rank.

Sir Francis' wife did not attend the funeral although his son and heir Robert and two of his daughters were presents. A few years later Sir Robert had his father's body removed from Chesfield and taken to Weston Underwood church in Buckinghamshire where other members of the family were buried.¹¹ Sir Henry Chauncy

writing twenty years later mistakenly assumed that the body of Sir Francis had been reburied at Coughton Court, the family home. He commented on the "Banner and Banrol and other Ensigns belonging to his degree" which still adorned the little chapel in St Ethelreda's church, and described the various Throckmorton arms. By the time Oldfield visited the chapel towards the end of the eighteenth century these were missing.

After the pomp and excitement of such a grand funeral the occupants of Chesfield Manor slipped back into their normal routine. In February the following year Elizabeth Throckmorton was safely delivered of a son who was baptised Thomas and was the last of their children to be registered in the parish.

There is very little documentary evidence of life at Chesfield, for the Manor Court rolls have disappeared; but George Throckmorton was indicted at the Hertfordshire Quarter Sessions in 1685 on a charge of damaging the church path from Chesfield to Graveley with his carts.¹²

In January 1685, one Jane Bagshaw was buried at Chesfield and as she had left no will, Elizabeth was given the legal right to administer her estate as next-of-kin.¹³ She may have been a maiden aunt who came to help with the Throckmorton's large family of eleven children.

William Cuttes, a Chesfield labourer, made his will in 1681 and among other bequests he gave "each of the children of my master George Throckmorton a pair of gloves or two shillings each". He also gave a pair of gloves to the children's aunt, Mrs Jane Hyde their father's sister.¹⁴ Jane Throckmorton had married Humphrey Hide of Hurst in Berkshire in 1662; she was probably a widow living in her brother's household, by the time Cuttes died.

There are occasional glimpses of George Throckmorton in his role as Justice of the Peace. For example, in 1688 he became involved in a dispute between the Overseers of the Poor for Hitchin and a pauper, Thomas Tristram of St Ippolitts, who was suffering from a "fistula in ano"¹⁵. William Bromfield the "chururgeon" of Hitchin had refused to proceed with the poor man's treatment until the Overseers agreed to pay him. George Throckmorton, possibly acting as Justice of the Peace, signed the order but the bill remained unpaid. Consequently, the authorities ordered that the fee of £3 should be paid together with 3/- costs.

Reginald Hine, the Hitchin historian, revealed that Bromfield, a Quaker, was in fact an apothecary from Warrington.¹⁶ He was imprisoned for practising without a licence,¹⁷ but later entered the service of James II as physician to his second wife, Mary of Modena. In March 1689 he accompanied the exiled king to Ireland when he began his forlorn attempt to regain the English throne from his Protestant daughter Mary. Although George Throckmorton may not have been a Catholic he was considered to be a Jacobite sympathiser, and consequently his letters were intercepted. One letter, addressed to "Geo. Trogmorton Esq., at Hitchin in Hartfordshire" from W.B., dated 9th June 1689, fell into the hands of the Attorney General.¹⁸ The correspondent, who was certainly William Bromfield, described the situation in Ireland and enclosed a blank commission, for the writer hoped that George would be tempted to join a Jacobite army to be raised in England. Bromfield concluded his letter by sending his love "to thyself, wife, Miss Hyde and all thy children". The danger which this threatened to the Throckmortons passed away when, after losing the Battle of the Boyne, James II returned to France. In his *Hitchin Worthies* Hine described William Bromfield's career as a Quaker spy in some detail.

Despite the fact that George Throckmorton now lived at Chesfield, he still held

the family's Essex estates at Magdalen Laver and Hol Hall, Rivenhall, together with a corner house adjoining Bedford Bury in New Street, Covent Garden, London which his father John had bequeathed him in 1664.¹⁹ Sometimes the family must have returned to Essex, for two of his daughters, Dorothy and Jane, were christened at Magdalen Laver in 1670 and 1672.²⁰

In 1687 he sold the London house occupied by Francis Ducailla and John Browne to Edmund Godwin for £686.²¹ His Essex estates were mortgaged, for no doubt with such a large family to maintain he would not be a wealthy man. In 1690 he mortgaged Rivenhall Manor and a cottage called "Maggotts" to Sir Henry Chauncy and his son for a year.²² Two years later Lady Elizabeth Slingsby held the mortgage for £800.²³

By the time George made his will in April 1695 some of his children were married.²⁴ Mary was the wife of Thomas Bromfield, gent. – no connection with William Bromfield has been established – and their son Thomas was baptised at Chesfield shortly after his grandfather's death in October the same year. Elizabeth had married Edward Fitzgerald, 'Doctor in Physick' while Dorothy became the wife of John Hurst of Haverill in Essex. An unusual entry in the baptismal register for 1699 records Dorothy Mary Hurst daughter of John Hurst, gent., "born at Chisfield as certified by her friends", an obvious reference to a child of this marriage.²⁵ At one time there had been an inscription in the chapel to John Hurst of Baldock who died in 1700 aged 82.²⁶

Mary, the sister of Sir Henry Chauncy the historian had also married into the Hurst family. When, in 1670, William Hurst of Haverhill made a marriage settlement on his future wife, her father wrote on the back of the document "My Daughter Mary Hurstes Joynture" which included property in Baldock, Willian and Bygrave together with the White Horse, Baldock.²⁷

George Throckmorton's bequests to his family were more modest, and apart from the gift of £50 to his eldest daughter Mary, the rest of his sons and daughters received £300 each. This sum was to be given to them in the order in which their names appeared in the will.

His wife Elizabeth was instructed to sell Hol Hall Manor in Essex to pay his debts and funeral expenses.²⁸

Remembering the extravagant funeral of Sir Francis Throckmorton, George requested that he should be buried with "as small cost and charge as possible, privately in the night . . . without any other company at the funeral than those of my owne household in my owne Chepell adjoining to the parish church of Chisfield".

Elizabeth received the "little purse of cloth of gold with the money in it", as well as the household goods, plate, rings, books and livestock for the maintenance of the three youngest children. The family portraits mentioned in the will have seemingly vanished. John, the eldest son, inherited Chesfield, and to George descended Magdalen Laver. John's three children born at Chesfield died in their infancy and their mother Mary – fourth daughter of Sir Henry Chauncy – was buried in 1702.

Elizabeth Throckmorton continued to live at Chesfield for some years after her husband's death, and John was responsible for discharging his father's bequests out of the estates. Edward Lawndy, an opportunist Baldock attorney, was interested in purchasing Chesfield Manor. A series of indentures dated 1702-1704 and made between Lawndy and six of the Throckmorton heirs show how he acquired their share of the legacy belonging to their sister Katherine who had died earlier.²⁹

In 1704, on acquiring the estate from John and his second wife, Lawndy agreed to hold £800 to indemnify himself against any unpaid bequests and also gave Elizabeth £40 yearly. John was given £200 for his share of the legacy. Five years later Elizabeth released her share of Chesfield to Lawndy for £100 and £24 p.a. She died in £710 and was buried in the Clerke family vault in Chesfield Church.

Jane Throckmorton, the executor of Katherine's estate, does not appear to have claimed her share of her sister's legacy from Lawndy earlier. When she approached the attorney he refused to pay on the grounds that he was only liable during Elizabeth's lifetime. According to records of the Master of the Rolls she took the matter to Court.³⁰ Lawndy, who was then about 80 years old, acknowledged that he had made a mistake and accepted that he was responsible for legacies as outlined in the will of George Throckmorton.

John Throckmorton died in the Fleet Prison in September 1711. He reputedly made a will in favour of his sister Jane and her husband Dr Fitzgerald. In the Essex County Record Office there are documents³¹ which chart the dispute over the custody of John Throckmorton's daughter Mary by his second marriage. But that is another story.

Coughton Court has little evidence amongst its vast archives of any correspondence between Sir Robert Throckmorton and his Hertfordshire cousins. However, it is interesting to note that in June 1714, Sir Robert instructed his legal agent Nathaniel Pigot to include George and Thomas of the 'Chiesfield' branch of the family among those on whom his estate was to be entailed "it having pleased the divine providence to reduce my issue male to a single thread." In yet another letter it appears that Sir Robert had the gift of a second son.³² But for those 'threads' Coughton Court and its estates might have come into the hands of the Throckmortons of Chesfield.

In an undated letter c.1712 it seems that Sir Robert planned to send his son to a school at Bushey House, in or near London, kept by a Mr Warton. However, Mr Ridle the owner had given Wharton notice to quit as he "is resolved the school and shall be no longer kept there". Was this Bushey in Hertfordshire? That mystery is still unsolved.

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7. *The Tablet*, 22 August 1953; also correspondence with G. Seebohm of Chesfield Park.
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18. HCRO. Gerish Collection: Gravelèy cum Chesfield.
19. Essex RO D/DU 330/24.
20. Parish registers.
21. HCRO 28952/3.
22. Essex RO. D/DU 742.
23. Essex RO. D/DHt 721.
24. Essex RO. D/DU 918.
25. HCRO Chesfield PR.
26. HCRO. Gerish Collection: Graveley cum Chesfield.
27. Document in possession of the author.
28. Essex RO. D/DXr 52. Elizabeth had been given power of attorney to let or sell this property in 1689.
29. Documents in possession of G. Seebohm of Chesfield Park.
30. PRO. C 33/320.
31. Essex RO. D/DP F313.
32. Throckmorton Archives, Coughton Court, Warks.