

Babington House and High Downside

BY THE RT. HON. LORD HYLTON, F.S.A.

THE preservation at Babington House in East Somerset of certain valuable objects, dating from the reign of our last Stuart king, tempts speculation about their origin. They consist of a velvet-covered saddle, a gold-embroidered saddle-cloth, a chased gold watch, with inset miniature of James II, when a youngish man, and another miniature which may represent his Queen, Mary of Modena. Tradition vaguely links these treasures with a royal visit to Babington.

James was certainly no stranger to Somerset, having, though then only ten years of age, attended his unhappy father, Charles I, to Bristol, whilst civil war raged in the summer of 1643. Twenty years later, as Duke of York, together with his first wife, Anne Hyde, he accompanied his brother, Charles II, and Queen Catherine to Bath and Bristol, in the autumn of 1663. James's next visit to the west was after his accession to the throne; reaching Bristol on 25 August 1686, he took up his abode at Sir William Hayman's house in Small Street. After a careful inspection of its powerful defences,¹ 'he parted from Bristol about six o'clock on the morning of the 27th, and arrived at Bridgwater about five the same afternoon, viewing in his passage Weston Moor,' where his army had overwhelmed Monmouth in the preceding year. This journey of the King appears to have almost escaped the notice of historians, though his sudden and unexpected appearance on the recent scene of battle was calculated to arouse varying emotions among its

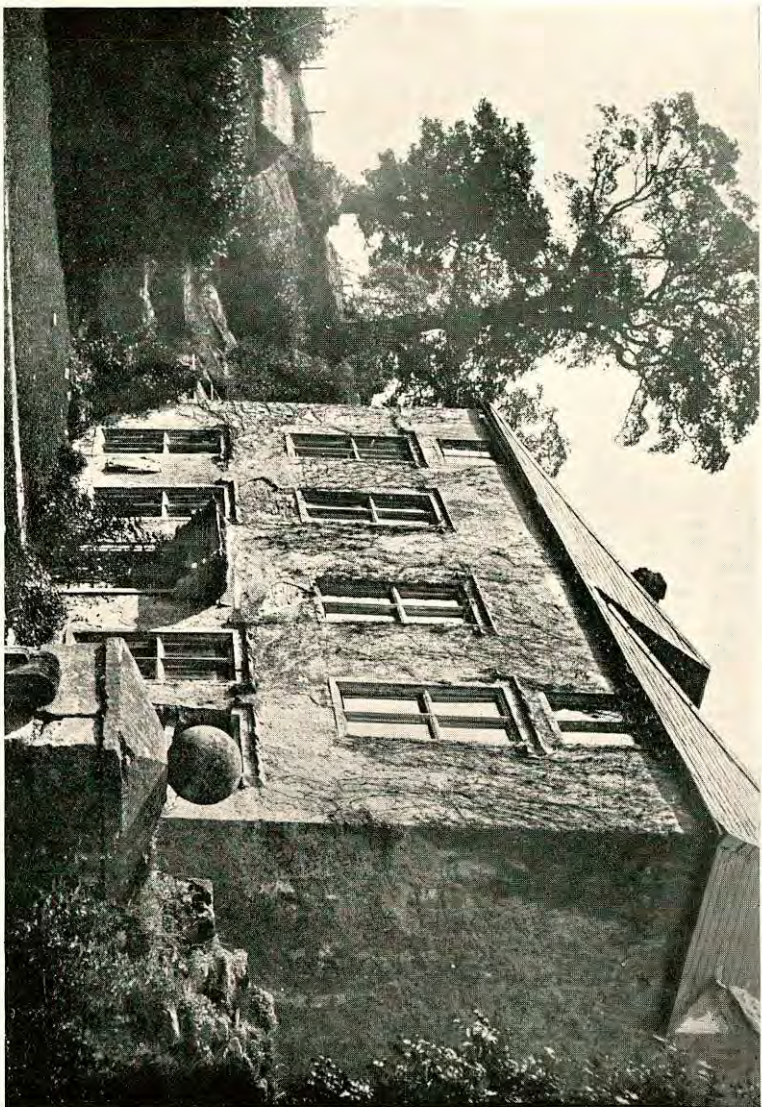
¹ Jarman's *History of Bridgwater*.

eye-witnesses. The sardonic sovereign no doubt enjoyed in full a final sense of gratified revenge, whilst he gazed on the level marsh-lands, so lately drenched with the blood of those luckless peasants, who had dared to enlist under the flag of his presumptuous nephew. Perhaps his cruel satisfaction was further enhanced by the sight of creaking gibbets, which must have been still standing on his passage, bearing grisly reminders of the late 'Bloody Assize'. Among the royal retinue not a few, on the other hand, would have already begun to suspect that his crown was being jeopardised by the violent and tyrannical courses, along which a gloomy temper and an infatuated bigotry were fast hurrying the doomed monarch.

The King rode on from Sedgemoor to Bridgwater, where the courtly language of the *London Gazette* reported that 'the people followed his Majesty with continued acclamations'. *Credat Judaeus!* He returned,¹ via Wilton and Southampton, to Windsor, within easy distance of the newly-formed camp on Hounslow Heath, where the menacing troops were assembled, with which he fondly hoped to overawe any fresh attempt at armed rebellion. They were to prove a broken reed, for, in Macaulay's phrase 'every school-boy' is well aware of their desertion *en masse*, when the Prince of Orange landed in Torbay two years later; but previous to the 'Glorious Revolution' King James was once more seen within the borders of our county, arriving at Bath in the middle of August 1687, where the Queen remained during some weeks for a course of the waters, whilst her husband made a progress through Gloucester and Worcester as far north as Chester. Since James's deposition and flight to France occurred the next year, the Babington relics seem in all probability to date either from his visit to the west in 1686, or from that in the following year.

Let us see who was the master of Babington House at this critical epoch. It is useless to consult Collinson on the point, for, after tracing the descent of the manor with accurate detail (so far as I have been able to check his narration) down to the first year of Philip and Mary, when held by Sir Thomas Griffin of Braybrooke Castle, Northants., in right of his wife, a Newton co-heiress, the historian then drops the subject like a hot

¹ *Hist. MSS. Com.*, 7th Report, 500.



HIGH DOWNSIDE, NEAR SHEPTON MALLET

From a Photograph by the Very Rev. Father E. Horns, F.S.A.

potato, only resuming it in the eighteenth century. It is, however, the fact that Griffin, who died in 1566, had previously settled his manors in Somerset upon a grand-daughter, Mary (daughter of his deceased son Rice, or Rhys), who became wife of Thomas Markham, of Ollerton or Allerton, Notts. (standard-bearer to Queen Elizabeth's Gentlemen-Pensioners), and mother of Sir Griffin Markham, implicated in the Raleigh conspiracy of 1603, and banished from the realm. The confiscation, or loss, of Babington possibly resulted from that affair, and many years elapse before its history can again be retrieved, but an ornate mural monument in Babington Church affords the next clue, commemorating four individuals, viz., Henry Mompesson, Esq.,¹ who died 24 December 1715; his wife, Elizabeth, who died 1726; Thomas Pacy, gent., who died 27 April 1687, aged 73; and his wife, Mary.

Now Mr. Pacy's name is previously found, heading a list of Babington ratepayers in 1673, and that of his sister Margaret, who married William Crabbe, alderman of Bristol,² is recorded in a similar list of 1688 as 'Madam Crabb'. She died in 1693, leaving daughters of whom the eldest was Mrs. Mompesson.³ The wealthy and pious Elizabeth Long, niece and eventually sole heiress of the latter lady, built about the year 1750⁴ the existing and very perfect, little Palladian Church of Babington, placing therein the handsome memorial to her relatives, supported by a marble figure of a chubby cherub.

It was Thomas Pacy, therefore, who owned the Babington estate, when James II was at Bath and Bristol in 1686; and 'Madam Crabb' on the occasion of the King's visit in the late summer of the following year, but it seems unlikely that either of these obscure and elderly individuals should have received the honour of a visit, or valuable gifts, from His Majesty.

¹ Sheriff, 1698. Will dated 13 November 1715, proved P.C.C., 13 February 1716.

² Sheriff, 1665-6; Mayor, 1676; alleged before the Grand Jury in 1682 to be a champion of the Dissenters; died 1702, aged 87. M.I., Temple Church, Bristol. He married Margaret, dau. of Christopher Pacy.

³ Admon. to Mrs. Mompesson, P.C.C., 25 August 1726, granted to Elizabeth Long and Margaret Crumpe, styled her 'grandchildren'. They were, in fact, her nieces.

⁴ Collinson's *History of Somerset*, vol. ii, 451.

We will now consider another quarter, whence these *souvenirs* may have come. Reverting to the already mentioned Elizabeth Long, it should be noted that she was a daughter and co-heir of Sir Richard Crumpe by Margaret Crabbe, and her father,¹ an influential Bristol citizen, served as sheriff in 1665, mayor 1676-7, was knighted 1681, elected M.P. 1685, and chosen at a council meeting, 19 August 1686, one of a committee of sixteen members, 'To manage the entertainment of the King' on his arrival in the following week. May not the richly adorned saddle, now at Babington, have been provided upon this occasion for the city-member's own use, and the watch presented to him by the King as a memento of his loyal reception? If this theory be correct, their subsequent transfer to Babington House is easily explained. The husband of Elizabeth Crumpe was William Long, descended from the widespread Wiltshire house of that name, and a few notes upon his own possessions in this district may be permissible in connection with those of his wife.

As early as the reign of Henry VIII one of his ancestors had obtained a lease of the Duchy of Cornwall manor of Stratton-on-the-Fosse, and by periodic renewals that property was retained in the hands of many generations of his successors. *Fasti Oxonienses* briefly mentions Sir Lislebone Long, baptized in 1613, a barrister, who 'sided with the rout in the time of the Rebellion', was rewarded with the Recordship of London, knighted by Oliver, sat in the House of Commons, and finally acted as Speaker for a few weeks previous to his early death in 1658.

During the predatory rule of the Commonwealth Sir Lislebone had purchased the freehold of Stratton Manor (*Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* xxx, i, 87). His widow, Frances, had to make the best terms she could after the Restoration in order to retain her residence at Stratton—her late husband's purchase being treated as null and void, and the manor resumed by the Duchy, the authorities, however, granting a lease in 1662 to her, and to her son, George. The latter, on attaining years of discretion, seems to have become a loyal subject to the King, for in 1673²

¹ M.P. for Bristol, 1685; buried St. Thomas, Bristol; will proved 1 February 1699-1700.

² Duchy of Cornwall Records.

he was appointed bailiff of a Duchy manor, and by letters patent, dated 12 April 1675, steward for life of all the Duchy manors in his district. The striking difference between the politics of the Republican Sir Lislebone, and of his son, was perhaps due in part to the marriage of the latter with Mary Jennings, who came of an eminent royalist family at Curry Rivel, and had money, which may have provided the wherewithal for George to acquire a small estate of his own,¹ and to build a 'good seat' at High Downside, near Shepton Mallet, for which he was paying rates in 1672. This house, in its present forlorn condition, has been kindly photographed for me by the Very Rev. Prior Horne (Plate XI). Built in a sheltered fold of the southern slope of Mendip, and now generally known as Winsor Hill, some trace of old-time dignity still clings to the decaying fabric. The site had belonged of yore to Glastonbury Abbey, and was held 44 Elizabeth by John Barnard. It should not be confused with the Strode house, also called Downside in Shepton, nor with the present great abbey and school of the same name further north.

When George Long first occupied High Downside, both his grandmother Mary, daughter of Thomas Lovibond of the Isle of Wight, and his mother Frances, daughter of John Mynns of Epsom, were still living. The elder of these ladies died in 1691, having survived her son, the Speaker, thirty-three years, during which period she may have continued to reside at Stratton. As George's name is not found after the last-mentioned date among Shepton ratepayers, he may have moved to Stratton on his grandmother's death. He himself died in 1705, aged 62;² his wife, born Mary Jennings, survived him, and as 'Widow Long', then seventy-four years of age, in the year 1717 was rated for 'High Downside'; she died in 1725, and whether her son William, the last male of the family, followed her there, or went on living at Stratton is not certain, though his monumental inscription in Stratton Church, describes him as 'of Downside *juxta* Shepton Mallet,' and as late as 1818 Mrs. Frances Knatchbull's monument in the same church specifies her descent from 'the ancient family of the Longs of Downside'.

¹ Lord Strachie's MSS.

² Admon. to son William, as of Downside in Shepton Mallet, P.C.C. 13 July 1705, widow Mary renouncing.

By letters patent, 18 March 1707, William Long had been appointed for life steward of the Duchy manors, and interested himself in working coal mines both on his own, and on the Duchy property. He died in 1738,¹ aged 63, having survived his only son of the same name, and left two daughters, Frances, born in 1718, and Judith in 1720, his co-heirs, of whom the elder died unmarried in 1769,² while the younger at the mature age of thirty-eight became the wife³ of Major Norton Knatchbull, fourth son of Sir Edward Knatchbull, bart., and on her sister's death entitled to all the estates formerly held by the Pacys and Mompessons at Babington, by the Longs at High Downside and elsewhere, with the leasehold manor of Stratton, and fine plate and portraits representing Mrs. William Long's share of Sir Richard Crumpe's fortune.

Frances, only surviving child of Major and Mrs. Judith Knatchbull, married in 1785 her cousin, Capt. Charles Knatchbull, R.N., and died without issue, 18 March 1818, being the last descendant of Speaker Long.

The manor of Stratton was finally resumed by the Duchy of Cornwall some years since on the expiration of the last life by which it was then held, thus terminating a tenancy by the families of Long and Knatchbull, covering between three and four centuries, and now only marked by a display of the Long shield on its manor-house.

The present mansion of Babington, approached from south and east by avenues of aged elm trees, may fairly be attributed to its Mompesson owners towards the close of the seventeenth century, with alterations on the north side about the years 1793-4 by Charles and Frances Knatchbull, who arranged a large bow-windowed dining-room on the ground floor, and corresponding drawing-room above, enriched with marble mantelpieces, and delicate plaster-work decorations in the style of the Adam brothers. They left untouched the earlier

¹ Baptized, Shepton Mallet, 1676. M.I., Stratton. His widow died 1765, aged 83.

² Admon., 'late of Stratton-on-Fosse', to sister Judith 31 March 1770.

³ Marriage Settlement, dated 1758; died 18 May 1792. M.I., Stratton. She seems to have occupied Stratton House as a widow, and not Babington. Will proved P.C.C., 9 July 1792.

entrance hall, main staircase, and parlour to right of the entrance. The house contains many interesting portraits of Longs, Knatchbolls and their kinsfolk with a quantity of old oak and other antique furniture. The panelling of the library was moved there by the present owner from the deserted home of High Downside. An exceptionally fine pair of tall stone piers, in rusticated courses, crowned with figures of pineapples, as on the church, stand about a quarter of a mile north of Babington House; Mrs. Knatchbull believes them to have been flanked formerly by lodges, once the principal entrance to her demesne.