ASHBURNHAM PLACE AND FAMILY

The Ashburnham family were lords of the village of Ashburnham, and elsewhere, for some 800 years. The village itself was *Esseborne* in Domesday Book (1086) and *Esburneham* in the twelfth century; the name is thought to mean 'meadow by the stream where ash-trees grow'.[1] By about 1120 the family had taken its name as their own. It may be that the first of them may have been the feudal lord of Ashburnham in 1086 – Peter de Creil or Criel or Crull, a Norman immigrant awarded land by the Conqueror. For almost all of the remaining time up to living memory – with two intermissions – the Ashburnham estate was owned by this one family. The second such intermission led to a peerage; the first (1611 to 1640) resulted from disastrous financial management.[2]

The family almost always kept a low national profile, rarely engaging in national politics and reserving their activities for local affairs. Some were lords lieutenant of Sussex. They were probably magistrates throughout the period from 1066 to 1924, when the last earl died (and then again from 1935 to 1953), but they went through hard times in the early and mid-seventeenth century through remaining Roman Catholic (an allegiance that ceased very shortly afterwards) and taking the side of the King in the civil war. The family was also heavily involved in the iron-smelting industry. They began it at Ashburnham in 1549, and it kept going to be the last furnace in Sussex, closing in 1813;[3] it carried on as a forge, using metal from elsewhere, until 1827.[4]

They did not enter the peerage until 1689, when on 30 May James II created the barony of Ashburnham. It is understood that the honour was in tribute to the first baron's grandfather who had been a loyal Royalist and whose lands were therefore sequestrated in 1643. He had assisted the Charles I's short-lived escape from Roundhead confinement in 1647. For this act he had been confined to the Tower of London. He attended the king at his execution in 1649, and some of the king's possessions came to him, including the shirt he was wearing when the blade fell.[5] Charles II restored the lands at the Restoration in 1660.[6] The honour may also have been due to the rising wealth of the recipient, who in 1677 had married Bridget Vaughan, heiress to considerable property in mid- and south Wales.[7] The family continued to increase their lands; the controversial fifth earl had some 24000 acres when he died in 1913.[8]

The first baron's grandson, who had been Gentleman of the Bedchamber to Frederick, Prince of Wales, was given the titles Earl of Ashburnham and Viscount St Asaph in 1730.[9] His grandson the third earl (1760-1830) was also a lord of the Bedchamber to the next Prince of Wales, later George IV, who much later rewarded him with the Garter. As sometimes happened, he was summoned to the House of Lords before the death of his father, the second earl in 1812.[10]

The fourth earl, Bertram, was clearly a cultured man for he added to, indeed largely formed, a theoretically priceless collection of paintings and books, and kept up relations with his cousin Algernon Charles Swinburne, who visited Ashburnham Place.[11] Unfortunately, most of his collection was sold by his successor, as will be described below.

His son, also Bertram, became the fifth earl (1840-1913), succeeding in 1878. He became well-known, if not notorious, for his political and religious activities. It is not known why in 1872 he threw over the recent tradition of the family and converted to Roman Catholicism. It appears that, like so many converts to a new faith, he was very eager in its promotion and defence. It took him in some unexpected directions, including an involvement in Spanish politics on the side of the Carlist pretenders to the throne.

Carlism was a major factor in the history of nineteenth-century Spain. In Portugal a very similar movement had arisen, initially with greater success, but primarily through British and French intervention the crisis had been resolved by the overthrow in 1832 of the reactionary pretender who had taken the throne; but the Spanish were left alone to cope with a very similar situation.

Ashburnham Place, about 1900

The problem arose from a change in the laws of succession in 1830. Previously a woman could reign only if none of the male descendants of Felipe V (reigned 1700-1746) were available; now the laws would be similar to those of the UK where sons took precedence over daughters, but daughters over other relatives. The then king's only child Isabella was born in that year, 1830, and the previous heir presumptive, the would-be absolutist king Don Carlos, took exception to his exclusion. He gathered support from a variety of sources, from much of the Catholic Church and from many landowners, who as in Portugal were threatened by a rising liberal tide (which by 1837 produced a constitution for the Spanish kingdom). He also attracted significant minorities such as the Basques, whose own provincial liberties were always in danger of abrogation. As it happened, the defeat of Carlism merely accelerated these liberalising processes. There were three Carlist wars: 1833-40, 1847-49 and 1872-76. The reactionaries were defeated in all of them, but remained something of a force in the land until the time of General Franco.

The fifth earl of Ashburnham was the strongest Carlist supporter in the UK. He worked tirelessly for the cause, even after the last defeat. The catastrophe of the Spanish-American war of 1898-99, in which the kingdom lost Cuba and its remaining other Pacific properties, including the Philippines, to the USA was a major factor in the modernisation of Spain, even if the Francoist régime was to interrupt the process. It was also an opportunity for Carlists.

Ashburnham helped by allowing military training on his Welsh estates and by supplying a yacht to carry arms and men to a trusted Spanish port; but it was intercepted at Arcachon and found to be carrying 3664 rifles. Its captain was convicted of failing to make a proper declaration of her cargo, and although the ship and men were allowed to go to Southampton the rifles were detained.[12] No mention is made of Ashburnham in the newspaper reports, but it has been established that it was he who provided both yacht and weaponry and allowed his lands to be used.

On her death the estate went to a cousin once removed: John Bickersteth, grandson of the fourth earl's sister Margaret and nephew of another John Bickersteth who as a land agent had been steward of the Ashburnham estate. He then faced the payment of death duties of some £427,000. First to go were the contents of the house, auctioned at Sotheby's during the summer; they included Claude's *Landscape near Rome with a view of the Ponte Molle*, which went for £13,000. Parts of the estate followed, including Ashburnham Place Farm.[13] The house was advertised to let but presumably attracted no buyers because it continued in the family, and the continuing financial shortfall meant that repairs to it could not be carried out. In 1959 it was therefore reduced mainly to a single storey of its original three. The house was of considerable virtue: built first in 1665 (presumably on the site or close to an earlier house) it was substantially rebuilt in Palladian style in the mid-eighteenth century, and Capability Brown added the orangery and laid out the park. Robert Adam designed the entrance lodges. The house was enlarged early in the following century, when it went Gothic (George Dance the younger); then it was faced in stone and then in brick. It had a well-designed and sumptuous interior.[14] None of this was evident to Nikolaus Pevsner when he went there in the early 1960s, but he did praise the stables, to which he attributed the date of c1720-30.[15]

Bickersteth was an Anglican priest (it was a tradition of his father's family), whose first and only vicarage was at Ashburnham and Penhurst in 1958, after a curacy at Croydon. He established a trust for the house to be a Christian centre for prayer. Parts of it are open to the non-praying public.

Note on sources
The sources from this account are listed at the end, with the exception of http://www.ashburnham.org.uk/images/uploads/ashburnham-place-now.jpg and information gleaned from www.ancestry.co.uk. This latter mainly concerns births, marriages, deaths and probate records.

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[1] A D Mills*: Dictionary of English placenames* (OUP 1998).
[2] Philip Warren: *Then and now in Ashburnham* (in *A tapestry of Battle*, S B Publications 2002).
[3] ESRO website, accessed 17 October 2016.
[4] Jeremy Hodgkinson: The Wealden iron industry (The History Press, 2011).
[5] Warren, op cit.
[6] Whitaker's Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage and Companionage, 1914.
[7] http://www.cracroftspeerage.co.uk/online/ accessed 16 October 2016.
[8] The Times, 16 January 1913.

[9] Whitaker, *op cit*.
[10] Cracroft, *op cit*.
[11] The Times, 16 March 1953; Sussex Agricultural Express, 18 April 1953.
[12] The Times, 19 June 1899 and 7 August 1899.
[13] Sussex Agricultural Express, 11 September 1953.
[14] http://www.lostheritage.org.uk/houses/lh_sussex_ashburnhamplace.html accessed 17 October 2016.
[15] Ian Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner: The buildings of England: Sussex (Penguin 1965).