

BLAKEMORE'S FOLLY



The Iron Tower on the Little Doward

by

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High above the river Wye, $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of Monmouth, lies the large Iron Age camp of the Little Doward. Covering twenty acres of the summit of the hill, it lasted as a tribal complex until the Roman occupation. Sometime during the 1840s, an iron tower was built on the western outer vallum by Richard Blakemore of The Leys.

A landmark for miles around, the tower may have been inspired by the enduring fashion for follies and observatories. In 1834 there was a scheme to build a five-storied observatory on the Wyndcliff, between Chepstow and Tintern. As late as 1883, a six-storied Gothic monstrosity of stone was designed for Edward Lowe, F.R.S., of Shirenewton Hall, as a meteorological station, but never built; and over on the Hendre Estate, owned by the Rolls family, a crenellated four-storied 'prospect tower' (now known as Caxton Tower) was built about the same time, and later converted into a keeper's lodge. Its iron garden gate is reminiscent of Blakemore's smaller park gates. His tower was unusual in that it was constructed entirely of iron, which was strong and comparatively inexpensive to an ironmaster like Blakemore. The tower was a symbol of his power and prosperity. Although much uglier than the other towers mentioned, the Leys tower survived for about eighty years.

Originally built c. 1795 by S.O. Attley of London on a virgin site of "bushes and brambles" (5), the Leys had been sold to a Mr. Meek "who, on taking possession, removed the low hedge fence in front of the turnpike road, and built the lofty stone wall (8 feet high) by which it is encircled." (5) A mile away, at about the same time, the mansion of Newton Court was being built for the Griffin family. Meek made other additions, but was there only a few years before selling to Blakemore c. 1820. Blakemore had purchased the Hadnock estate from the childless widow of Philip Griffin in 1815. The Great Doward estate was sold to the Crown by Elizabeth and Catharine Griffin in 1824. By 1821, Hadnock House had been razed for its building materials to be ferried across the river and used in the new mansion, known today as Wyastone Leys.

Until then, Blakemore had been living at Velindre, Whitchurch, in South Wales. The Melingriffith works on the river Taff had been established by Harford, Partridge & Co., a Quaker firm also associated with Ebbw Vale and the Monmouth Forge. Blakemore was a friend of the Partridge family, and partner at Melingriffith and Monmouth Forge. He was managing Melingriffith as early as 1803. By 1807 it was the largest tin works in Britain. He acquired ownership in 1812, and personally directed management until 1838, when he retired to the Leys.

In 1820 Blakemore was High Sheriff for Glamorgan, and Member of Parliament for Wells. The Taff valley between Nantgarw and Whitchurch owed its early prosperity almost entirely to Blakemore and his nephew. They added an ironworks at Pentyrch and opened collieries at Graig-yr-Allt and Rhyd-yr-Helig. Blakemore clashed frequently with the Glamorgan Canal Company over navigation rights on the Taff, and spent £ 20,000 over 30 years in court battles. He usually supported the railways against the canal companies, unless economics dictated otherwise. In 1835 he was a founder of the Newport Dock Company, and after his retirement from Melingriffith, he interested himself in the Glamorgan and Monmouthshire Canal Companies.

Where the Leys park, woods and gardens now stand used to be dotted with cottages - as were the Kymin, White Hill and the Buckholt, other hills near Monmouth. The name Doward probably stems from the Welsh 'Dwy ardd' (two gardens). Blakemore purchased and pulled down the cottages, erected his new house, made

new roads, enclosed the park, added the Lodge and its iron railings, and removed " the abundance of underwood, which shrouded the aspect that fronts the Wye ; sloping the ground, in a fine taste, to the mead which forms its shore." (5) He introduced deer from Llantrithyd, Glamorgan - the former seat of Sir Thomas Aubery.

Many of these actions long rankled in the memories of Doward natives, one of whom, Harry Daniels, remembered in 1956 how his father had told of Blakemore's conflict with the cottagers on the common land, who claimed rights of grazing and timber for charcoal burning. " Blakemore gave a Supper and got them to write their Right away." His heraldic motto was " For God, King, country and law ", and the Ganarew Enclosure Award shows what a large area of the Little Doward was taken from the commoners. Daniels believed that Blakemore had been forced to leave the Leys because an ex-Militia commoner had taken his rifle and shot at him.

Blakemore had a scientific mind, with no interest in history. He efficiently destroyed parts of the Little Doward camp to make his tower and its approach roads. His retiring, rather exclusive nature and singlemindedness made him a reputation for eccentricity. In the South Wales valleys, however, he was remembered as a model employer - benevolent, paying good wages, making high quality goods, and looking after long - service employees. In Monmouth he was known for generosity. From 1840 - 58 an average of fifty tickets were issued annually through the Vicar of Dixton, entitling the poor of the parish (which included the Kymin, Wyesham and Buckholt-side) to free coal, ranging from two to twelve hundredweight. Bread tickets were also granted.

In 1855 Blakemore died, aged 80 and unmarried. His heir and nephew was Thomas William Booker, a striking personality who was Member of Parliament for Herefordshire and, since 1848, High Sheriff for Glamorgan. He was following very much in his uncle's footsteps. He added Blakemore to his name on inheritance, having taken over Modingriffith in 1838. A land speculator, he owned several thousand acres. In 1834 he had won a medal and prize in the Cardiff National Eisteddfod for an essay on 'The Mineral Basin of South Wales, and the National Benefits arising Therefrom.' Had he not died in 1858, aged only 58, who knows what he might have done to the Leys ? His three sons were not interested in the estate, and it was sold to John Bannerman of Manchester in 1861.

It seems to have been the Bannermans who added 'Wyastone' to the name. Heath (1826), Roscoe (in various editions 1837 - 62), Twamley (1839) and other travellers all called it 'The Lays' or 'The Lays House'. The textile firm of Bannerman & Sons had been founded by Henry Bannerman, formerly a Perthshire farmer, in Manchester during the early 19th century. Of his five sons, four were partners in the business, and it prospered mightily throughout the century. John owned the Leys until 1870, when he died aged 74. His brother Henry's nephew was to become Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman, Liberal Prime Minister in 1905. John's son by a second marriage was James Murray Bannerman, who was a lieutenant in the Royal Monmouth Militia. In 1871 he won the Croft y Bwla Challenge Cup for rifle shooting at the Butts in Monmouth. In 1876, the estate covered 419 acres. He died in 1915, aged 69. A Victorian monument to the family stands in Ganarew churchyard.

Those few people who can remember the iron tower today often confuse the name Bannerman with Blakemore, saying that Bannerman was a great ironmaster in South Wales who erected the tower to see his blast furnaces working. Another version has it that the owner was a shipping man who liked to view his vessels in the Bristol