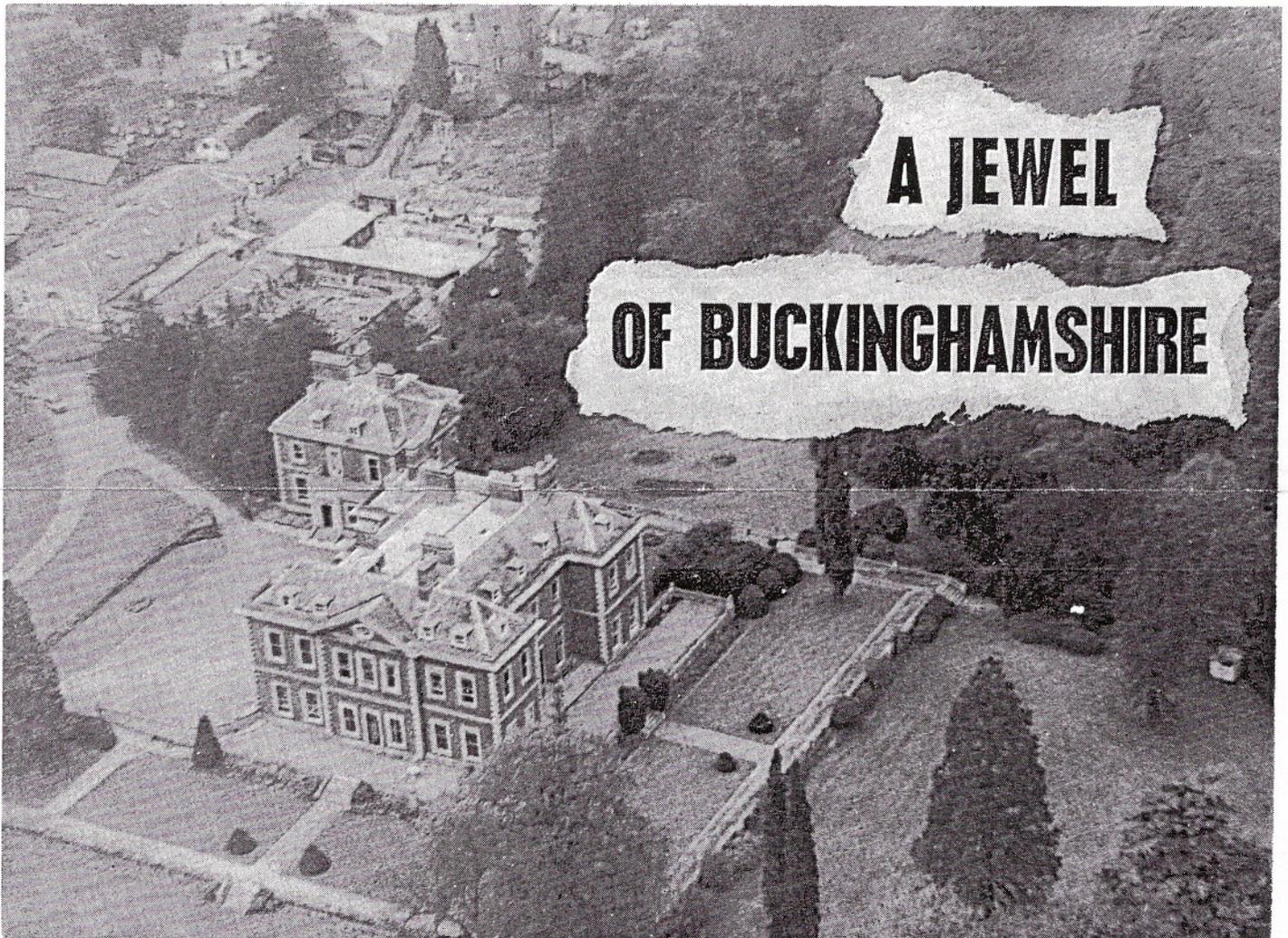


Bucks Life + Thames Valley Countryside, 1972
This ~~estate~~ estate was part of the Whitelocke estates
C. J.



Fawley Court, 1970, showing the library front, the wing and the farm.

FAWLEY COURT ONCE A SEAT OF ENGLISH ARISTOCRACY

Designed by Sir Christopher Wren and embellished over the years by, among others, James Wyatt (a pupil of Robert Adam, who remodelled the interior), Broomwich (famous for his wall hangings), and "Capability" Brown (who landscaped the gardens), Fawley Court, near Henley-on-Thames, is an architectural jewel.

THE Thames valley counties are verily a storehouse of historic buildings, many of which still remain unknown or have been forgotten. One of those villages of repute which should never have been abandoned to oblivion is the Buckinghamshire village of Fawley, only a few leagues from Henley-on-Thames, where all three counties meet. Within its south-

east corner can be found Fawley Court, the former seat of the Mackenzie family, which to all intents and purposes is enjoying a renaissance of social, cultural and historical glory based on a very famous past. It was by a stroke of luck that Fawley Court was acquired in 1952 by the Congregation of Marian Fathers, a Roman Catholic religious order dedicated to education and culture. It seems that they, by their present activities, have put what was once a stronghold of English aristocracy back on the map.

One of the most prominent attributes of this building is the fact that it actually is one of only three private houses which beyond doubt have been planned and executed by Sir Christopher Wren. Undoubtedly as an architectural jewel this building has been mentioned on numerous occasions by well-known authorities, particularly when demolition was threatened in the early 1950s. Now that it has been saved it is high time for the general public to be made aware of its existence and of its connections with the past.

THE history of this beautiful mansion rests on the fact that it was built upon the ruins of a twelfth- or thirteenth-century castle which had up until 1680 formed part of the Whitelocke estates. However, the estate at Fawley was held as security for a loan by Captain William Freeman, a prominent merchant and plantation owner, which was never repaid. A close friend of Sir Christopher Wren, he engaged him to design a residence for his family, and building work commenced at Fawley in 1684. The house was to be sited on a slight ridge overlooking the Thames, where stonework foundations were conveniently discovered. Close by stood the remains of a previous Fawley Court, the Tudor mansion of the Whitelockes. Pillaged and partially destroyed by a garrison of soldiers in 1642 during the civil war, these were to be pulled down to make room for estate offices and a kitchen garden.

In 1688, though not quite finished, the house witnessed the reception of William III, who, stopping there on his

Written and illustrated
by Thomas K. Ziolkowski

journey from Torbay to London, was met by a delegation of peers and the Corporation of the City of London. He was to be but the first of the royal visitors to Fawley Court. Throughout the eighteenth century Fawley was to be the scene of many gatherings and social occasions. Countless references in the diaries of nobility indicate that this was the heyday of the mansion. A visitor in 1777 speaks of the Henley gala week dinner when ninety-two people had to be seated in the hall because the dining room itself was too small, and later of the occasion when she "dined at Fawley Court, to hear the two famous musicians, the Leanders, play on the French horn, whom Mrs. Freeman had down for a week, and invited the neighbouring people around in different parties every day. It certainly was very high entertainment." Mrs. Philip Lybbe-Powys, of Hardwicke Hall, speaks of the numerous visits of George II and George III and of the illuminations to celebrate George III's recovery in 1789 from his first attack of insanity.

The Freemans being a prosperous family, alterations were constantly being made to the fabric and decoration of the house. In 1690 Grinling Gibbons was employed to help model the saloon ceiling, often held to be the finest in Buckinghamshire. Many famous names feature in the records of the house, especially between 1760 and 1780: Lancelot ("Capability") Brown, who landscaped the gardens, using exotics which the family brought from their travels; James Wyatt, once a pupil of Robert Adam, who remodelled the in-

terior; and Broomwich, famous for his wall hangings. Fittings ranged from fire-grates by Tutenar at a cost of several hundred pounds to panels of hand-painted Chinese wallpaper of the Chien Lung period originally intended for Brighton Pavilion.

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THE close of the eighteenth century heralded yet another change. Ideas at Fawley were now turned towards farming. Strickland Freeman had been a great student and supporter of the agricultural innovators, whose methods he soon introduced into the Henley area. Now he himself concentrated his efforts on expanding and improving his estates, which eventually stretched from Nettlebed and Maidensgrove in the west to Remenham in the east. He also took a great interest in public affairs. His death in the 1820s ended the direct family line. The next thirty years were spent in litigation and the settlement of inheritance, leading eventually to the sale and breaking up of the estate in 1853.

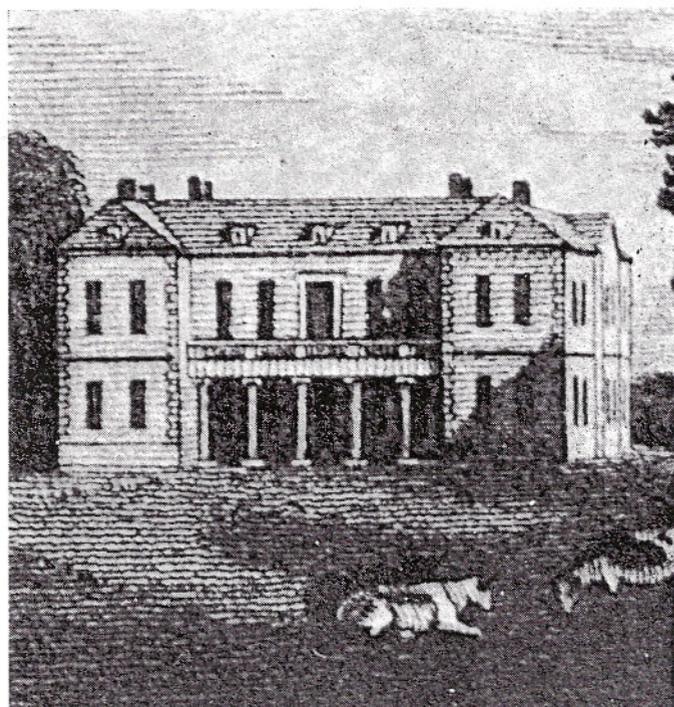
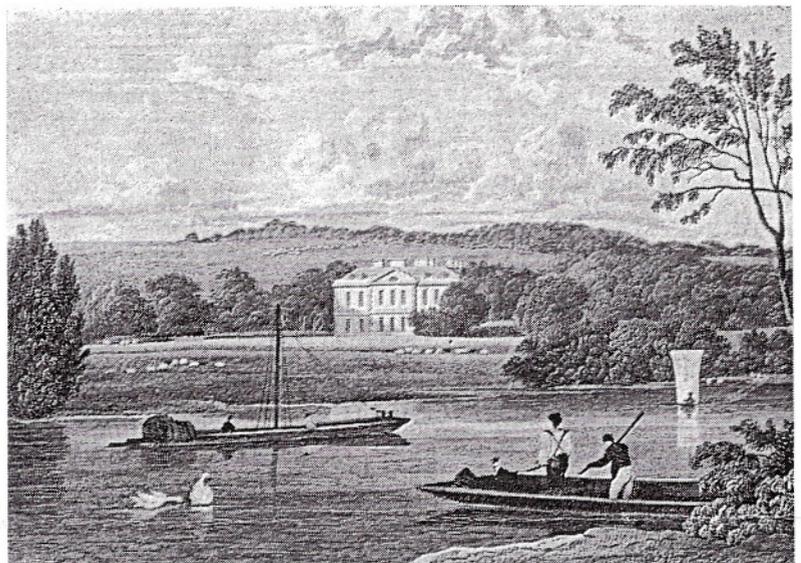
The mansion of Fawley Court and a portion of its estate were sold to Edward Mackenzie for £90,000. His descendants

still reside in the locality today. A pioneer of railway building in France, he transformed the gardens, retaining, however, a great deal of the original landscaping. He planted a vast acreage of woodland and restocked the famous Fawley deer park. His interests lay mainly in county rather than national affairs and important positions in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire were filled by the Mackenzies until 1952. His plans for the house were ambitious, but few materialized. Two wings were planned—one to include a study, a billiard room and extra accommodation, the other to contain a ballroom and a gallery to house his large collection of pictures. The first wing was added in 1884, but death intervened and the second remained but a plan.

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Social gatherings were still common and a whole booklet has been published on the famous costume ball of 1863. Even schoolchildren were brought from far and near, and perhaps the smallest school in the area, at Bix, recorded such an afternoon spent on the lawns at Fawley Court.

A photograph of an old print of Fawley Court (about 1770), looking towards the library front.



A front view of Fawley Court about 1690-1710, showing the original house by Wren. Reproduced by courtesy of the Victoria and Albert museum.

IT seems that the twentieth century and the two world wars brought a rapid decline of Fawley as the focal point of the community, but at last it has regained some of its character. It is used as a centre for education, and houses not only a school but fine collections of antiquities, from manuscripts and arms to Greek and Roman sculpture. No longer do pictures by Canaletto or Rubens adorn the walls, but even so the atmosphere now recreated at Fawley Court seems to attract countless thousands to visit the house every year, particularly on the annual festival held there on Whit-Sunday.

This is but one of several historic buildings in this area whose present functions play a great part in the community but which are often overlooked.

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