

A NOTE ON  
THE MANOR OF HARLAXTON  
AND ITS HISTORY  
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by

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## THE MANOR OF HARLAXTON

### AND ITS HISTORY

The recent sale of the Harlaxton estate has aroused much discussion in the district and many incorrect versions of its history are in circulation. It may, therefore, be of general interest if I tell the story so far as it is known to me. I do not profess to know all the facts, but probably know more of them than anyone else now living. The record falls naturally into three periods and I deal with each successively.

### THE DE LIGNES

The first is concerned with the de Lignes. In pre-Tudor days the Manor of Harlaxton changed hands several times. In the 17th century it was owned by a family named Bluet, or Blewitt. It was probably that family who, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth or earlier, built the Old Manor House, of which, alas! so little now survives.

In the year 1619, the Manor came into the possession, probably by purchase, of Daniel de Ligne, a native of Hainault in Flanders, whose family being of the reformed religion had left that country to escape the persecutions of the Duke of Alva, the Netherlands being in those days subject to Spain and the Inquisition. Daniel de Ligne seems to have a personage of noble ancestry and considerable wealth and position. In 1620 he was knighted by King James I, and was High Sheriff of Lincolnshire in 1631. He added to and embellished the Manor House.

There was, until recently, at Harlaxton Manor a portrait dated 1621 of an infant Daniel, who was apparently the eldest son of Sir Daniel. Tradition says his parents had been long married and that he was much treasured as their heir. Some pessimist had predicted his untimely death by misadventure, so elaborate precautions were taken. But his nurse, who had been specially charged to guard him, fell asleep before the fire with the baby in her arms and awoke to find to her horror that he had fallen into the fire. This ill-starred infant was not however the last of his line. Sir Daniel and his lady had other children, and another son Erasmus succeeded to the Harlaxton estate.

The male line of the de Lignes came to an end in 1730, when a later Daniel de Ligne died without issue. This Daniel had a sister who married and had a son, but the son died before his Uncle Daniel. The succession to the Harlaxton estate then reverted to the issue of Elizabeth de Ligne, aunt of Daniel and sister of Erasmus. She married Scrope Tyrwhitt, and after two generations had intervened, her sole descendant was Anne Orton, daughter of John Orton of London and Elizabeth Tyrwhitt his wife.

On the death of her distant cousin Daniel de Ligne in 1730, this lady came into possession of the Harlaxton estate. In 1738 she married George Gregory of Lenton near Nottingham, with this marriage the era of the Gregorys at Harlaxton began. As regards this marriage, I was told many years ago the following romantic story, for the truth of which I do not vouch:-

Anne Orton and her parents had been living in obscurity in London and when Daniel de Ligne died she could not be found. Mr George Gregory was interested, professionally or otherwise, in the family and the estate and took part in the search for the missing heiress. One day he went into a shop in London to buy a pair of gloves. While the young lady behind the counter was serving him, someone in the room behind called "Miss Orton", to which she replied. Mr Gregory pricked his ears and made enquiry. She proved to be the missing heiress. He not only established her claim to the Harlaxton estate, but completed the affair by marrying her and shared in the fortune which he had thus luckily secured to her.

A still more fanciful version of this story was on record at Harlaxton Manor. This said that Anne was stolen as a child by gypsies. George Gregory, who was seeking her, happened on a gypsy camp in Spitalfields, and was attracted by the looks and voice of a young girl who was singing a Lincolnshire lullaby, or according to another version, the "Lincolnshire Poacher". She proved to be the missing heiress; George Gregory bought her from the gypsies, had her educated, and in due course married her.

THE GREGORYS

George Gregory came of a family of standing and influence in the City and County of Nottingham. It is sufficient for our purposes to begin with William Gregory, who was M.P. for Nottingham in 1601, and founded Gregory's Hospital there.

Passing over the next two generations we come to his great-grandson George Gregory, High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire in 1649, and M.P. for Nottingham between 1702 and 1722. He married Susanne, daughter and heir of William Williams of Rempstone near Loughborough, and of Denton. This marriage is of interest for two reasons.

Firstly, it brought George Gregory into touch with the Harlaxton neighbourhood owing to his wife's inheritance of a small estate at Denton. The Williams family, by the way, were said to be descendants and representatives of the ancient family of "de Denton", who came to an end in the 15th century. The Williams Manor House is the old house abutting on the village street of Denton, known, though no longer ivy clad, as the "Ivy House".

Secondly, George Gregory's marriage to Susanna Williams brought about a relationship between the families of Gregory and Welby, which accounted for some of the complications of later years. Susanna's aunt, Eleanor Williams, was the wife of William Welby the owner of the larger Manor of Denton. So Susanna Gregory and William Welby's children were first cousins. The son of George and Susanna Gregory is that George Gregory who, as we have already seen, married in 1738 Anne Orton the heiress of the de Lignes, and so became owner of the Harlaxton estate. George and Anne had, with other issue, two sons who figure largely in later developments.

The elder son, George de Ligne Gregory, who was High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire in 1793, died unmarried in 1822. By his will he settled the Harlaxton and Nottingham estates on his three brothers and their issue successively and, failing them, on John Sherwin. John Sherwin seems to have been a very remote relative of the Gregorys. Some say he was the family solicitor and was put into the entail after all the surviving Gregorys as a kind of formal compliment.

The second son, William, inherited the Rempstone and the small Denton estates which had come to the Gregorys through his grandmother Susanna, nee Williams. This William took the surname of Williams and became William Gregory Williams. He had a son, Gregory Williams, who succeeded him in those estates, and on the death of his uncle George de Ligne Gregory in 1822, also succeeded to the Harlaxton and Nottingham estates whereupon he dropped the surname of Williams and became Gregory Gregory of Harlaxton.

This Gregory Gregory is the builder of the vast pile now known as Harlaxton Manor House. During the 18th century the Gregory family had apparently made their headquarters at Rempstone Hall, and the Old Manor House at Harlaxton was unoccupied. As Daniel, the last of the de Lignes, was a bachelor and lived mostly in London, it was probably not lived in after about 1700. This home of the Bluets and the de Lignes must have been in its prime a gem of Tudor and Jacobean architecture. There are charming views and a model of it at Denton Manor, and a similar model was at Harlaxton Manor. During the 18th century it gradually fell into decay, but remained a picturesque ruin, much visited by sightseers, till about 1850 when Gregory Gregory, regarding its condition as dangerous, ordered its demolition, which was only too effectually carried out.

Gregory Gregory must have inherited apart from the estates considerable wealth the source of which is not clear, as the great development of the city of Nottingham had not at that time taken place. As a young man he is said to have been attached to some of our Embassies abroad, and was thus in a position to indulge in the then fashionable craze for acquiring foreign works of art. He bought with very varying discrimination statuary, furniture, tapestries, books and silver plate, though but few pictures. This collection, later known as the "Gregory Heirlooms", was to furnish and embellish the great new palace which he now, with the assistance of the architect Salvin, proceeded to build. I have heard that for 20 years, from 1827 onwards, he spent £10,000 a year on its construction. This at the present cost of building would represent at least half a million. While the building was in progress, Charles Greville, the celebrated diarist, was visiting at Belvoir Castle and went over with a party to see Harlaxton. He greatly admired the old ruined manor house, and made some pungent comments on the folly of a man who could let such a treasure perish, and spend great sums of a vast new house to which there was not descendant of his own to succeed.

Gregory Gregory lived chiefly at Hungerton Hall on the estate while supervising the progress of the building of his new mansion. It is doubtful whether he ever actually occupied it. He certainly did not live to enjoy the realisation of his dreams for long, as he died in 1854. He never married and the future destination of his great house and estates must have been a perpetual anxiety to him. In his later years, his only surviving Gregory relative was an elderly cousin who was also childless. This cousin George Gregory would succeed to the estates under the settlement made by George de Ligne Gregory, but after him the only surviving name in the settlement would be that of John Sherwin. Gregory Gregory and John Sherwin were very remotely connected, and were not on good terms.

Gregory Gregory's aim was that, failing the Gregory family, the whole estate should go eventually to his kinsman, neighbour and friend, Sir Glynne Welby, Baronet, of Denton, and his family after him, and that the Harlaxton and Denton estates which were much intermingled should be united. There are still traces of a drive which he commenced to make to connect the houses of Harlaxton and Denton.

With this object in view Gregory Gregory made his will. It provided that anyone (i.e. his cousin George and John Sherwin) succeeding to the settled estates should also enjoy the use of his personal estates, providing that within a year of succeeding such successor would resettle the reversion, failing issue of his own, on Sir Glynne Welby and his issue. But if no such resettlement were effected within the year, then the trustees of his will were to hand over his own unsettled property to Sir Glynne Welby at once.

On Gregory Gregory's death in 1854, his cousin, George Gregory, the last of the Gregorys, succeeded. He fell in with the terms of Gregory Gregory's will, and had possession of both estates until he died in 1860.

THE SHERWINS AND PEARSONS

John Sherwin then succeeded to the settled estates. Difficulties and disputes immediately ensued. I have heard that friction first arose in regard to felling of some trees in Harlaxton Park. He was elderly and married without issue, so his motive in upsetting Gregory Gregory's plans is not clear. Probably there were faults on both sides, and the respective legal advisers did not minimise the difficulties of a complicated situation. Attempts at compromise were made and failed. Litigation on minor points was in prospect and took place later. At the end of the year it was clear that John Sherwin, now Sherwin-Gregory, had not made and had no intention of making the resettlement stipulated in Gregory Gregory's will.

The trustees of that will therefore took possession of all the unsettled property, including the estates at Rempstone and Denton, certain investments and all that part of the contents of Harlaxton Manor which had been collected and placed in it by Gregory Gregory. This property they handed over to Sir Glynne Welby, who then assumed the surname of Gregory after that of Welby. His son, Sir William Welby-Gregory, on succeeding found himself the possessor of a quantity of heirlooms partly consisting of furniture and works of art so large and cumbrous as to be unsuited to any house less palatial than that built by Gregory Gregory. He therefore sold some of them, and had to obtain a special Act of Parliament to enable him to do so. As to the rest he felt it his duty to rebuild Denton Manor on a scale adequate to contain them, and money from the same source was used for the purpose. His son, the present owner, has not assumed the surname of Gregory.

John Sherwin Gregory thus, to his own detriment as it seems defeated the purpose of Gregory Gregory. His motive in doing so is the more obscure in that not only was he childless, but apparently he had no relative to whom he wished to leave the Harlaxton estate after the death of his wife. He had to invent an heir, and his choice fell upon his godson, Thomas Sherwin Pearson, youngest son of an old friend of his, General Pearson, but no relation of either the Sherwins or the Gregorys.

John Sherwin Gregory died in 1869. His wife survived him and held the Harlaxton and Nottingham estates till 1892, when Thomas Sherwin Pearson succeeded and assumed the additional surname of Gregory. He died in 1935 and was succeeded by his only son, Major Philip Pearson-Gregory, who has now sold the Harlaxton estate.

CHARLES G E WELBY

DENTON MANOR  
July 1937

A footnote on the history of occupancy at Harlaxton Manor from the last Gregory to the present.

In October 1937, the Manor was bought by Mrs Violet Van der Elst, who renamed the property 'Grantham Castle'. Mrs Van der Elst was rather an eccentric lady who had built up a cosmetic empire with a turnover of about a million pounds sterling a year. Much of her fortune was employed in a dedicated, but somewhat bizarre campaign against capital punishment. During the Second World War she allowed the Government to use the property for billeting troops. On her return to 'Grantham Castle' when the war was over, she was disenchanted to find that much of the land had been allocated for agriculture leaving only 10 acres for parklands.

In March 1948, the Manor was purchased by the Society of Jesus who used it as a training college for priests. From 1965 - 1968 Stanford University, a Californian institution used the Manor to house their British Campus.

The University of Evansville, whose home campus is in Evansville, Indiana, opened its British campus, Harlaxton College, at the Manor in the fall of 1971.