

Sir Isaac Newton's Library

and Chinnor Rectory

How Sir Isaac Newton's
collection of books rested
unseen at

Chinnor Rectory

Chinnor, lying under one of the highest of the Chiltern escarpments, has always been a large village, so that from the 17th century onwards there are records of trades and crafts in addition to its predominantly agricultural interests. The census of 1851 showed 141 men engaged in agriculture, and 101 in various trades of which chair-making, with 43, was the most important. Towards the end of the century chair-making began to decline and other businesses appeared—Spencer Jackson's Iron and Brass Foundry, Siareys, Builders and Wood Merchants, S. T. Good and Co., Joiners, then in 1908 what was to be Chinnor's giant, the late W. E. Benton's Chinnor Cement and Lime Company, today vastly expanded, with its three tall chimneys and their white plumes signalling the position of Chinnor twenty miles away to the north-east and west of the county.

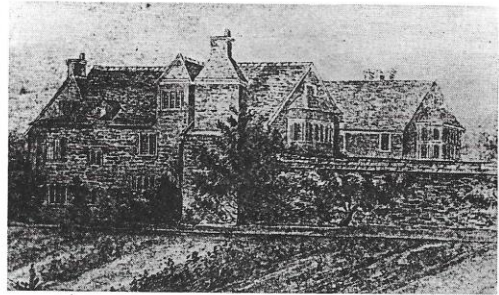
In the 17th and 18th centuries Chinnor was signalling a very different kind of glory—the largest and most magnificent rectory in the county, which for the fifty years between 1728 and 1778 was to house the library of a man whose intellect has been called "One of the world's great glories." The story of how Sir Isaac Newton's library came to Chinnor, how it left Chinnor to disappear for the next 150 years, and was then tracked down from a clue in the Thames Park sale of 1920, is a detective romance, interesting to the local historian, but absorbing to the science historian and to the bibliographer. The detective in the case was Colonel R. de Villamil, who tells the story in his book *Newton the Man*, with a foreword by the great Albert Einstein. In his foreword Professor Einstein stresses how a detailed examination of all the books collected and used by Sir Isaac Newton is essential if we are to see him in his proper perspective, and today this work is in progress, particularly in the major American academic libraries where many of the dispersed Newton books are. But for fifty years in the 18th century they were all together in the library of the Rector of Chinnor.

Briefly, and from the facts which Colonel Villamil unearthed, Sir Isaac Newton's library, after his death in 1727, was purchased by his London neighbour, John Huggins, warden of the Fleet prison. Warden Huggins paid £300 for the entire collection of 1,896 books and pamphlets which he then sent down to his son Charles on whose behalf he had just bought the living of Chinnor. The new Rector pasted the family armorial bookplate in each volume, and that was his library till he died in 1750. The next Rector, Dr. James Musgrave, the husband of Charles Huggins' niece Jane, took over the Newton books, paying £400 for them, overpasting his own bookplate with the Musgrave and Huggins arms, and the motto "Philosophemur," and once again till his death in 1778 the Newton library languished, almost unknown, in the Chinnor rectory. There is no record of any member of the Royal Society nor of anyone from Oxford University making his way out to

Chinnor, but in the *Journal of the Swedish Traveller*, Jacob Jonas Björnstahl, who visited England and Oxford in 1775, there is this note—"About 18 miles away to see Newton's books. The Rector of Chinnor, Dr. James Musgrave, possesses them. They cost him approximately £400 sterling. Here one can find all editions of Newton's works, and most remarkable of all, margins filled with notes in his own hand, and sometimes several pages at the end of the book completely filled with writings by him. I do not doubt that any Newtonian would find not a little pleasure and enlightenment here." And that modestly perceptive 18th-century assessment of the Newton library proved also to be its requiem.

Three years after Björnstahl's visit the Rector died and his heir took the Newton books to the old Musgrave family home, Barnsley Park, in the small village of Barnsley just across the Oxfordshire-Gloucestershire county border. For the next 140 years they were to lie there, even more lost sight of than they had been in Chinnor. That they finally came to light on the occasion of the Thames Park sale in 1920 was the result of an inter-county marriage in the 1830s, with the family now becoming the Wykeham-Musgraves of Thames Park (Co. Oxford) and Barnsley Park (Co. Gloucester).

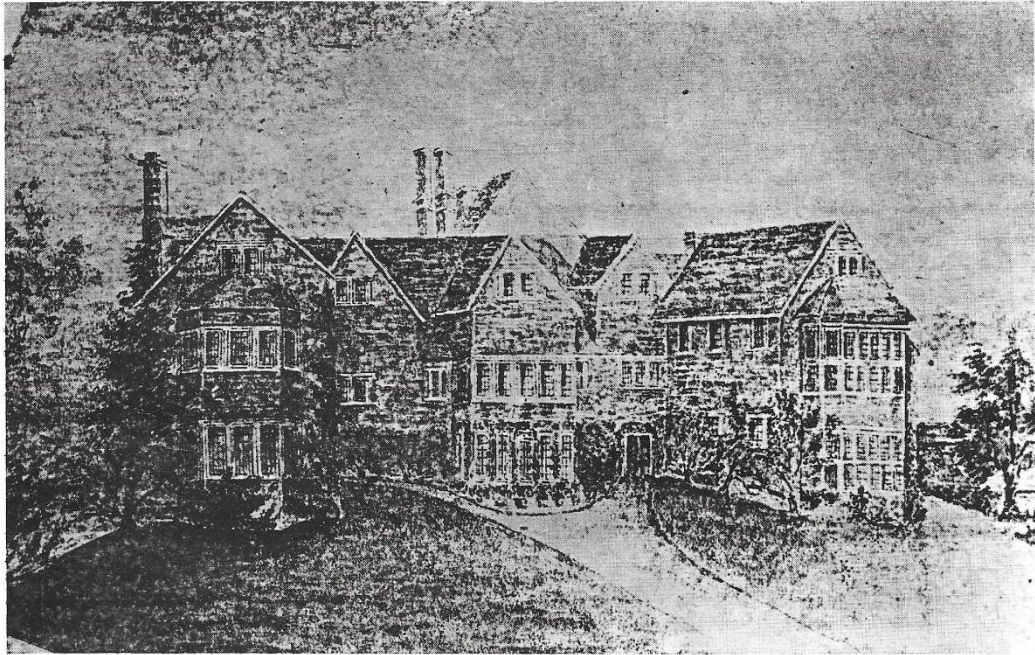
Thames Park, with its mansion and contents, were put up for sale in 1920, and to help swell the books in the sale many of the Newton books were sent across from Barnsley Park. In bundles, some of 200 volumes, and reckoned by the auctioneer to be of little value, they were knocked down at give-away prices. Eventually, of course, the world of learning was alerted, and Colonel de Villamil was the sleuth



who tracked down what remained of the Newton library at Barnsley Park. In the British Museum Library he found the original inventory of the 1,896 books sent down to Chinnor in 1728, but of these only 860 now remained at Barnsley Park. Through the generosity of an anonymous American these were purchased by the Pilgrim Trust and presented to Sir Isaac Newton's old Cambridge college—Trinity College.

The hunt for the missing volumes continues today. As they come to light each is studied for any annotations and comments in Newton's own hand, and a book is in progress which, it is hoped, will add another dimension to one of the greatest intellects of all time. How much easier the task would be if this library had just quietly continued in Chinnor rectory.

18th-century Chinnor might have been little concerned with its Rector's library, but it must have been aware of, and proud of, its rectory. Because it has always been a wealthy parish, Chinnor has had a number of distinguished Rectors, and it was one of



these, Nathaniel Giles (rector, 1629-44), who built the great rectory which the 17th-century antiquary, Robert Plot, in his most celebrated work *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1677) listed as one of the great houses in the county. In greatness and elegance of building, he wrote, it is little inferior to the structures of minor nobility. There were 22 rooms, a large courtyard with a building called "The Banqueting House," two stables, barns, and a brick-walled garden of which part of the wall still stands today. More surprising than the cost, an estimated £2,000 to £2,500, an enormous sum for those days, was that for help and advice in his building, the Rector, a Royalist sympathiser, turned to his Parliamentary friend, the great John Hampden. The next few years must have tested the old friendship, with the Rector joining the Royalists' ranks in 1643, being sequestered by the Parliamentary visitors and seeing his rectory "impaired and defaced" by the militia. Yet on June 18th of that same year, after the battle of Chalgrove Field, where John Hampden had been mortally wounded, it was the Rector of Chinnor who was at the bedside of his old friend as he lay dying in Thame.

With the Restoration, Chinnor had another distinguished Rector—William Paul—who had been chaplain to Charles the First, and who, later becoming Bishop of Oxford, was allowed to retain the rectorship of Chinnor, spending £100 on repairing the damage done to the rectory by the Parliamentary militia.

After the Huggins family patronage came that of the Musgraves, and while this family seemed to have appreciated their famous rectory, their Rectors, mainly family appointments, did not. When their neighbour, the Rector of Waterstock, declared "that notwithstanding its strange largeness, it was the most

ill-contrived parsonage in England," they must have agreed wholeheartedly, because in 1815 it was pulled down. The Musgraves commissioned the architect Richard Place, of Lechlade, to build a new rectory in the contemporary manner, and for the next hundred-and-fifty years, the Rectors lived happily in a harmonious and commodious Regency rectory.

The first of these Rectors, Sir William Augustus Musgrave, must have been especially happy. He was a confirmed bachelor who could have been embarrassed by "The Banqueting House" built to house the traditional Easter Monday entertainment for the parishioners, but his parishioners were never very much uppermost in Sir William's mind. He was a landowner first, then the parish priest, who worked on his land and in his garden, even on Sunday. His bishop, Bishop Wilberforce, described him as "wholly irreligious"; his parishioners complained of spiritual neglect, and by 1860 his parish church was reported in worse repair than any other in the diocese. He finally died in 1875 after the longest and most disastrous incumbency in the history of the parish, but his rectory survived till 1962. Then, as sumptuous Jacobean was forced to give way to gracious Regency, so Regency bowed out to the new Elizabethan Labour Saving.

At least the Newton books were spared this final indignity. In the beautiful Wren Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, towards whose building Sir Isaac Newton himself subscribed forty pounds, in the Babson Institute, Mass., in the University Libraries of Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and especially in the splendid Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, they are being housed with dignity and honour.

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