

CHRIS KOENIG on the story of the Shotover estate near Oxford

Ownership of forests has been a bone of contention since time out of mind, particularly near Oxford. Take Shotover, for instance, that lovely house and park that you glimpse briefly as you whizz by on the A40. It was built from the proceeds of a Royal Forest which was disafforested — that is, ceased to be governed by Forest Law — in 1660, after years of neglect.

The story goes that Shotover Park came into the possession of Timothy Tyrell, a master of hounds, after a hunting accident involving Prince Henry, the elder son of James I, early in the 17th century. As Master of the Royal Buckhounds, Mr Tyrell was holding a dead stag for the prince when the accident occurred. A chronicle relates: "By his employment, he held the Buck's head for the Prince to cut it off, in doing which His Highness cut the Master of the Buckhounds across the hand, which disabled him of the use of it forever".

As recompense for that unfortunate event Mr Tyrell (later Sir Timothy) was granted the rangership of Shotover. And when Prince Henry died of typhoid in 1612 his younger brother — later Charles I — confirmed the appointment; and the Tyrell family then remained at Shotover until 1742, when the last of them died. Alexander Schutz, a friend of George II, then acquired the freehold from the Crown.

But until 1660 the Tyrells were extraordinarily powerful. The Royal Forest then extended over Headington and Marston and parts of ten other parishes, and continual battles raged between them and local people, who had common rights within the forest. In 1640, Sir Timothy even began "to seek out all in the neighbourhood who had greyhounds, mongrels, hand-guns, crossbows, nets, traps, or other engines to destroy deer".

All the same, the forest went into decline, and of course the Civil War did not help matters either: old trees were felled by the Royalists along the approach to Oxford, and when the Parliamentarian General Fairfax captured Shotover Hill in 1645 there was further devastation. People with rights of common — for example to graze cattle or allow pigs to forage — were compensated at the disafforestation of 1660 with grants of land; but discontent over the enclosure of commons simmered on for more than 200 years. For instance, as late as 1871 enclosures made by from Headington. And in 1878 the people of Wheatley were reported to be "very jealous" of their 20-acre common — with which, however, they reluctantly agreed to part in exchange for



■ FINE SIGHT: Shotover House, dating from 1714, is possibly the work of William Townsend

Estate gained in hunting accident

compensation.

Negotiations were not helped by the character of Gammie Maitland, who bought Shotover in 1854. He had a habit of striking foes with a riding crop. He went bankrupt in 1871 when the estate was sold to Colonel James Miller, ancestor of the present owner.

James Tyrell began building the classical house that stands near the A40 today in 1714. The architect is unknown, but Pevsner points out in the Oxfordshire book in his *Buildings of England* series — that the mansion has strong links with The Queen's College, Oxford, and that the builder may, therefore, have been William Townsend — who worked with Hawksmoor at Queen's.

Shotover possesses a rare survival in a formal

garden dating from 1718. It includes a Gothic temple (its back can be seen next to the A40) reminiscent of Townsend and Hawksmoor's work at All Souls. An obelisk and another garden temple, by William Kent, also exist at Shotover. In the 1980s, the Kent temple was badly damaged by trees falling on it. It was restored in 1988 with help from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission

The old road from Wheatley to Oxford — now a track across the top of Shotover Hill called Old Road — was replaced by what is now the A40 in 1789, largely because highwaymen made the lonely way too dangerous to travel. The founder of the Methodist Church, John Wesley, was waylaid there in 1737. Now the old road skirts the part of the ancient forest that has become the Shotover Country Park, managed by Oxford City Council. As for the origins of the name Shotover, theories abound. But Robert Graves in his classic book *A Wife for Mr Milton* favours the idea that it derives from the Norman French *Chateau Vert*, after the Royal hunting lodge that once stood in the forest