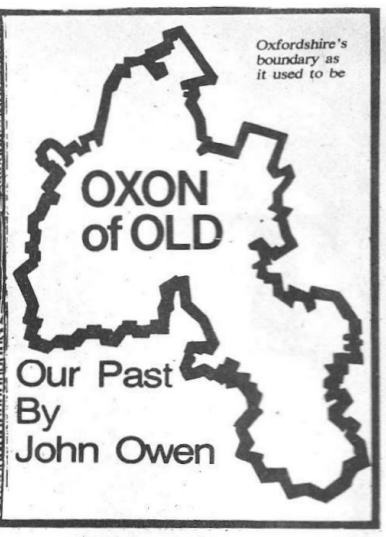
Royal gift for a princely cut



A chapter in Oxfordshire's history ended this week with the death of Major Alastair Miller, owner of Shotover Park. Here John Owen writes about the early history of the estate.

ONE afternoon, Timothy Tyrrell (he was later to become Sir Timothy) a Gentleman of the Bedchamber and Master of the Buckhounds to Henry, Prince of Wales, the eldest son of King James the First, was hunting in the royal forest of Shotover with his master, when a buck was caught.

"By his Employment," as an ancient chronicle relates, "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 for ever."

However, he was to receive a handsome recompense for the disability resulting from this unfortunate mishap, and "as soon as he came to Court, his Highness was pleased, without any application, in a most obliging manner, to give him a grant of the Rangership of the Forest of Shotover and Stow Wood."

This was confirmed by the King, who granted the bailiwick of the forest to Sir Timothy and his two sons for their lives.

Prince Henry died of typhoid, his brother Charles succeeded him, with Sir Timothy as Master of *his* Buckhounds, continuing to serve him loyally, both in peace and in the civil war afterwards, in which his younger son, William, was killed at the siege of Chester.

Loyalty

This "good, faithful and acceptable service to us by our beloved Servant" was acknowledged by Charles when he inherited the throne, and he too confirmed "to the aforesaid Sir Timothy Tyrrell the Office of Steward and Keeper of Shottover and Stowood in our County of Oxford."

The Tyrrells were to "Have hold, enjoy and exercise" this office for the term of their natural lives, "together with all fees, profits, liberties, powers, rights and jurisdictions" as well as "such wages or annual fees, Sir Timothy Tyrrell now hath or heretofore had. . ."

And what went with the estate were not inconsiderable adjuncts, though the trees "fit for timber and also all the Royal Mines" were reserved to the Crown, but including such perks as "all waifs and estrays, goods and chattells of Felons and Fugitives whatsoever."

Shotover was a Royal Forest from the time of Domesday and included not only the whole of Headington and Marston, together with parts of ten other parishes, but at one time extended as far as Wheatley Bridge.

Subject to the stringent forest laws and the severe penalties infringement of them involved, they were frequently poached for deer, and on one occasion when a predecessor of Sir Timothy arrested a number of "scholar poachers," he was assaulted by a battery of stones rained on him from Magdalen Tower.

Ancient

Indeed, in 1640 Sir Timothy was ordered to "seek out all in the neighbourhood who had greyhounds, mongrels, hand-guns, crossbows, nets, traps and other engines to destroy deer."

The Tyrrells held the estate until the last of them died in 1742, during which time they rebuilt the ancient house, said to have been on the site of the obelisk which commemorates the spot where the first Queen Elizabeth bade her famous farewell to the city she had just visited — "Farewell, farewell Oxford dear; God bless thee and increase thy sons in number, holiness and virtue."

The new house was built by the first Sir Timothy, improved by his son, and rebuilt again by Sir Jaes Tyrrell, the next owner, who desired that there should be inscribed on his tomb the words "he built the house at Shotover and made the gardens there."

In October 1664 John Evelyn was entertained there and noted in his diary: "We din'd at Sir Tim Tyrrell's at Shotover . . . There is here in the grove a fountaine of the coldest water I ever felt, and very cleere."

The last of the Tyrrells bequeathed the lease of the estate to an old friend, Baron Augustus Schutz, Master of the Robes and Privy Purse to George the Second, who visited the mansion on a number of occasions; the leasehold was bought and his descendants lived there until 1839.

Shotover was then left to a distant relative, who in turn sold it to "George Gammie Maitland Esq" who had made a fortune in Australia but he was not in possession for long.

An unpleasant character by all accounts he "overstocked the farm with sheep, so that they died in large numbers" and are said to be buried all over the hill.

"Squire Gammie," as he was known, made expensive alterations and finally went bankrupt when the estate was sold again to Colonel Miller.

The origin of the name Shotover has produced a number of diverting stories, including one which has passed into legend, about a man, Harry Bear, who lived close to a quarry between Shotover and Headington.

He had a friend named Hill who lived at Wheatley and who, when he wanted to talk to Harry shot an arrow over the hill to his house, and Harry would reply by similar means.

Hence the hill came to be called "Shotover." The name "Harry Bear" is a corruption of "Harry Bath," who is connected with the gigantic figure of an archer who was at one time cut in the turf by the side of the old coach road which went over the hill.

The story has been immortalised by an ancient rhyme which ends:
"But old Sir Harry Bath is not forgot
In the remembrance of whose wondrous shot
The forest, Sir, (believe it they that will)
Was named Shotover as we call it still."

The truth is of course far more mundane, the derivation is from Scotorne which means a steep hill or slope.

Shotover was never a village or a parish, but an extra-parochial district, consisting of the mansion and a few scattered houses, which became two civil parishes, Shotover and Shotover Place in 1857, some years later were joined with Forest Hill, "thus" as one historian notes, "the entity of the old Royal forest was destroyed."

The main road from Oxford to London went by way of Cheney Lane over the top of the hill, a Royal way indeed for it was traversed by kings and queens en route from the capital or Windsor to their manor of Woodstock and the university city.

Tedious

But it was a tedious journey for everyone, especially those who had to travel by public transport which meant, until 1699, a two-day trip with an overnight stop at Beaconsfield.

In April of that year a "flying coach" was inaugurated, and among those who sampled the new service was Anthony Wood, who wrote in his diary later: "Entred into the coach at the tavern downe agst All Souls College, precisely at six of the clock in the morning and at seven at night they were all set downe in their inn at London."

The diarist stayed there for ten days, and, he adds, the cost, including the fare was two shillings short of £3.

However, the journey was not without its perils; and on a December day in 1689, Dr Mathew Slade, a Dutch visitor, died in the coach "between the top of Shotover Hill and Wheatley — suppos'd to be occasion'd by the violent motion of the vehicle going up Shotover Hill."

Footpads and highwaymen were a constant menace to travellers and no one was immune as an entry in the diary of Charles Wesley in October 1737 discloses.

Begged

"I set out for London" he wrote. In a mile's riding my horse fell lame. I sung the 91st Psalm and put myself under the divine protection. I had scarce ended and turned the hut on Shotover Hill when a man came up to me and demanded my money, showing, but not presenting, a pistol.

"I gave him my purse. He asked how much there was. 'About 30 shillings.' 'Have you no more?'

"'I will see.' I put my hand in my pocket and gave him some halfpence. He repeated the question: 'Have you no more?'

"I had thirty pounds in my private pocket; bade him search himself, which he did not choose.

"He ordered me to dismount, which I did, but begged hard for my horse again, promising not to pursue him. He took my word and restored him.

"I rode gently on, praising God. My bags and watch and gold the robber was forced to leave me. By the evening I had reached Westminster."

There were accidents too to contend with as well as other misfortunes. A mad dog ran amok, bit some of the "Hon Capt. Bertie's hounds," as well as a man on his way to Oxford (and two others in St Clement's) before it was finally despatched in the New Inn yard.

In snowstorms, coaches and post chaises had to be dug out of the drifts and a coach overturned at the foot of Shotover after the coupling reins broke, injuring the driver and killing another unfortunate "with a wife and five small children."

Finally, in 1775 the new road via Headington was built and travelling improved.

Crime

But Shotover was noted also for one of Oxford's "curiosities" as Dr Plot described it — 'an ochre" asserted to be "the best of its kind in the world . . . . of a yelow colour and very weighty, much used by Painters simply of itself, and as often mixed with the rest of their colours."

It was dug on the east side of the hill "on the right hand of the way leading from Oxford to Wheatley," though, adds the 17th century pundit, "it might also be had in many other parts of it."

It is believed that this ochre was used to decorate the famous Painted Room at the former Crown Inn in Cornmarket, and it was also extracted illegally for sale.

Squire George Schutz had to issue a public warning that he would prosecute all those who bought "oaker" from vagabonds at fairs and one miscreant appeared before the judges at the County Assizes for this crime.

The departure of the Schutz squires saw the end of the County Fair at Shotover with its "greasy pole and throwing at snuffboxes and bowling for a pig."

The last of the family used to send his valet to toss sovereigns into the air for the crowd to catch; on one occasion, it is recorded, a dog swallowed two — the result of which is not disclosed.

Shotover Plain — a delight for the walker