

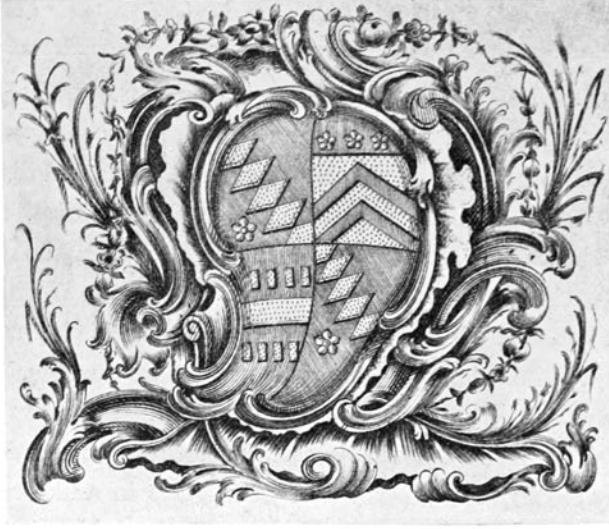
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978-1-108-07621-0 - Chawton Manor and its Owners: A Family History

William Austen Leigh and Montagu George Knight

Excerpt

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BOOK PLATE OF THOMAS KNIGHT

CHAWTON MANOR AND ITS OWNERS

CHAPTER I

EIGHT CENTURIES



It is told of a celebrated historian who flourished in the Victorian age—more celebrated, perhaps, for picturesque statement than for patient investigation—that he was once turned loose in the library of an old house particularly rich in manuscripts dating from the period with which his work was specially identified.

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identified. Between each bookcase round the walls of the room were carved oak pilasters. The historian was directed to one of these pilasters, the front of which opened and disclosed a rich treasure of documents bearing on his studies. These he examined with some care ; but when he was told that the cupboard behind this pilaster was only a specimen of what was to be found behind every pilaster in the room, his heart failed him, and he declined to carry his researches further. It is possible that the future historians of England—those especially who are occupied in describing the social and economic conditions of the country—will find themselves in a like manner overburdened with the information provided, whether in manuscript or in print, by the numerous family chronicles of the present date. But, after all, nothing can be so useful, either for imparting valuable information or for correcting hasty theories, as accounts which give typical instances of individual villages and families. We need not, therefore, scruple to add our small mite to the store which is growing on all sides ; for among the typical instances to which we have alluded Chawton can fairly claim an honourable position. The beauty of the situation, the venerable age of the Manor House, the old-world character of the village, and its literary associations ; the fact that the property (though it has been owned by members of several families) has only once since the Norman Conquest changed hands by way of sale and purchase—all these advantages give the place a peculiar title to be considered as a specimen south English manor.

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Our plan is to give in our first chapter a brief *résumé* of the history of Chawton and its various owners, and afterwards to descend into particulars, grouping them under the following headings: (1) Manor, (2) Church, (3) Manor House and Families of Owners.

Chawton may be said to be in the valley of the Thames, as it is placed on rising ground near the sources of the Wey. The form of the place-name in Domesday Book, 'Celtone,' makes it improbable that it has anything to do with the chalk which, mixed with clay, brick-earth, and gravel, abounds in the parish. At one end the Manor runs into the immediate neighbourhood of the green sand; while, for timber, the whole area is rich in beeches, oaks, and elms. The village stands about one and a half miles distant from the town of Alton, at the point where the main roads leading respectively to Winchester and to Gosport separate. Just on the junction stands the small house where Jane Austen passed the last eight years of her short life. At the further end of the village, on the Gosport road, stand the Rectory on the right hand and the Church on the left, and, on the rising ground behind the Church, the old Manor House. Behind the house rise still further the garden and shrubberies, and at the summit of the hill a terrace commands a view over the Church to the high beech woods on the western limit of the parish, known as Chawton Park. The place is not far from the great world, and there are several residences of some size in the village; but the verdure, the luxuriance of timber, and the

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the absence of any buildings obviously new, give to the casual visitor the idea of a home deep in the country, and the impression is strengthened by a longer stay. There is no reason to doubt the continuance of the conditions which produce this impression, if only travellers to Alton will possess their souls in patience, and abstain from endeavouring to induce the London and South-Western Railway to increase the very moderate speed of their trains on that branch.

There are several curious analogies between the history of Chawton and that of another old place in the North of Hampshire, viz. the Vyne, near Basingstoke. The late owner of the Vyne, Chaloner Chute, in his interesting history of the property,¹ tells us that it was one of seventy lordships (fifty-five being in Hampshire) which were given by William the Conqueror to Hugh de Port. Chawton was another of the fifty-five. Less than two centuries later we find it in the hands of Robert de St. John (the de Ports having taken the name of St. John on their intermarriage with that family), and it is then stated that the rights of free warren, assize of bread, &c., had been in the hands of St. John's ancestors 'from all time.' But there were many branches of the St. John family, and the Vyne and Chawton fell into the hands of different offshoots: the Vyne, in succession, to the families of Cowdray and Sandys; Chawton to those of Poynings, Bonville, and West.

¹ *A History of the Vyne in Hampshire*, by Chaloner W. Chute of the Vyne. Winchester and London, 1888.

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West. In the middle of the sixteenth century the Wests first leased and then sold the property to the Knights, this transaction constituting the one sale of the land which has occurred since the Conquest. At the Vyne the single instance in which land and mansion passed by sale occurred in the next century, when the Sandys family, crippled by their losses in the Civil War, found themselves obliged to part with the place, and it became the property of Chaloner Chute, who was Speaker of Richard Cromwell's short parliament. Since these dates the Vyne and Chawton have always been in the hands of Chutes and Knights respectively, though in both cases the name has more than once been assumed with the possession of the lands by female or collateral branches. It is interesting to trace a similarity of fate between two old Hampshire houses, connected as they are by the old friendship and the modern relationship of the families who own them.

We return to Chawton. The Knights seem to have been preparing themselves through many generations for their future position as squires, and to have held land in the parish at any rate since the time of Edward II. It is hardly probable that the St. Johns ever lived in the place, although an 'extent of the Manor' in 1302 states that it consisted of a 'capital messuage with a garden and other easements of the Court worth 10s.,' as well as about 500 acres of land. In the absence of the great folk it would be easier for a local family to assert itself; and we find the Knights prominent in the earliest Court Rolls which have been preserved.

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In 1524 William Knight had a lease of the 'cite of the Manor place' and farm of Chawton, with the West Park, for which he paid £25. This lease was renewed to 'John Knight the younger,' and afterwards (1551) the land included in it was sold to him.

It was stated above that there has been only one sale of Chawton. This statement requires correction so far as the Manor and Advowson are concerned. These latter rights were sold in 1558 to Thomas Arundel, and his son sold them in turn to Nicholas Knight (son of John) in 1578. The Knights were now fairly fixed in their new possession. Nicholas had a large family, and his eldest son John was in a position to carry on extensive building operations at the Manor House and its stables, his accounts for which are still in existence; nor has the Mansion itself been much changed from the state in which he left it: There are many indications to show that he was building on to an old house—for we know that an older moated house existed, and John Knight took a good deal of trouble to fill up the moat. We shall see later on how far it is possible to distinguish between the portions of the Manor House added by him and those which he found already in existence.

John Knight was evidently a man of some importance. In 1588 he contributed £50 to the funds raised by the Queen in connexion with the Spanish Invasion; in 1609 he was High Sheriff of Hants. But his marriage does not seem to have been a happy one, and his only child (a daughter) predeceased

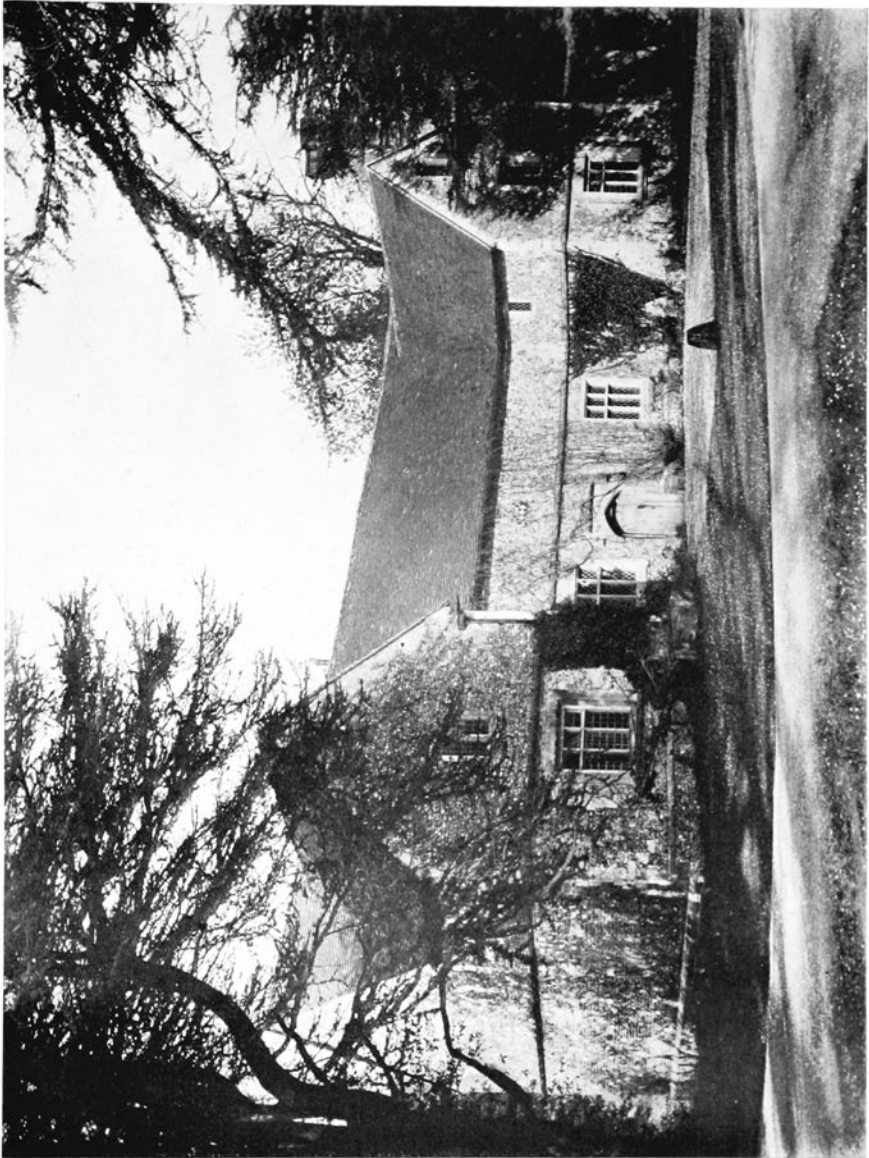
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STABLES BUILT BY JOHN KNIGHT, 1593

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predeceased him. His next brother, Stephen, had sons, the eldest of whom, another John, was looked upon as heir; and the following entries in John Knight's accounts show his care for his nephew: 'To Mr. Knight of Froyle for teaching and boarding John Knight for half a year. For gloves, stockings, shoes, and suit, hose, jerkin and doublett.' 'Mr. Starking for teaching John Knight for five weeks before and after he went to Bighton.' Stephen was a clerk in the Petty Bag Office, and an interesting correspondence between the two brothers is preserved; some of it, however, too full of family allusions to be intelligible to the modern reader.

The younger John became a lunatic some years after he grew up. He died young and unmarried, and was succeeded by his brother Richard. Richard died in 1641, leaving one little boy, and there was no one to represent the family actively when the Civil War broke out. They seem, however, to have been loyal to the King, for many payments to Basing House are recorded. Richard's son, another Richard, was knighted after the Restoration, and the recumbent marble effigy in the Church bears witness to his importance. But we are now reaching the end of the Knights in direct male descent.

Sir Richard had no children, and devised his estate to the grandson of his aunt Dorothy, who had married Michael Martin of Ensham in Oxfordshire. This grandson, Richard (Martin) Knight, his brother Christopher, and his sister Elizabeth, were all owners in succession, the last

last named for much the longest period. She was also the most prominent figure of the three in our history; for fate directed that she should have the final disposition of the estate.

She married twice; both her husbands were men of station, both were members of parliament for Midhurst, and both had to take the name of Knight. Having no issue by either, she sought for an heir among her collateral kinsmen, and thus she was the last descendant of the original family of Knight who reigned at Chawton. Elizabeth and her first husband, William Woodward, represented between them (on the female side) one branch of the ancient Sussex family of Lewkenors. The Lewkenors had intermarried with the Mays and the Mays with the Brodnaxes of Godmersham Park, near Canterbury. Elizabeth found a successor in her cousin, Thomas Brodnax by birth, who had already changed his name to that of May. He united the properties of Godmersham and Chawton, and, like his predecessors at the latter place, took the name of Knight. It was during his tenure of the property that an important event occurred in the history of the estate and Manor of Chawton, viz. the enclosure of the common land, which was carried out in 1740-1.

Thomas Brodnax's wife was a Monke, her mother was a Stringer, and *her* mother was an Austen, of Broadford Manor, Horsmonden. This lady's great-nephew, George Austen, Rector of Steventon and Deane, was therefore second cousin to Brodnax. Brodnax's son Thomas and his
 wife,