By John Owen

IT was the year 1625 and the people of Ashbury, the little village perched high on the Downs, just below the Ridgway, one of the most ancient thoroughfares in the land, welcomed not only a new king, Charles the First, but also a new Squire

Sir William Craven's descendants were to make it their home until modern times.

A self-made man, he was another Dick Whittington. He was a native of a tiny village in the West Riding of Yorkshire and instead of walking to London, made the journey by "common carrier", to be apprenticed to a merchant tailor.

After he had finished his time and become a member of the Merchant Taylors' Company, he went into business with his former master until there was a quarrel over a shop.

Accordingly, in the year of the Armada, William took over the lease of a "great mansion house in the city" where, with two partners, he flourished and carried on a prosperous business until his death.

He was a benefactor of St John's College in Oxford, with which the Merchant Taylors were closely connected, subscribing towards the cost of the library and he also founded the scholarships which bear his name at both Oxford and Cambridge.

He became Warden of the Merchant Taylors' Company and was elected successively an Alderman of the City of London, Sheriff and finally Lord Mayor, when he revived the traditional show which had been suspended for some years "with great splendour".

He also made benefactions to a number of other worthy causes

and more than 500 people attended his funeral.

But it was his eldest son, another William, who was to achieve far greater fame and distinction; his father sent him to Oxford, not to St John's as might have been expected, but to adjoining Trinity, but he left the university before he was 20 to enter the service of Prince Maurice of Orange, where he gained some distinction.

Returning home, he was first knighted by the King and then created a baron eight days later, but it was not long before he went back to the Continent to serve in the army of Gustavus Adolphus, as one of the commanders of the English troops, in the endeavour to restore the former King of Bohemia to his throne.

Ransom

It was then that he met the woman whom he was to serve with disinterested devotion for the rest of her unhappy life — Elizabeth, daughter of James the First, the ex-Queen of Bohemia, known as "The Queen of Hearts" because of her great charm.

He offered £30,000 towards the cost of another expedition to restore her husband, and in the fighting which continued, was wounded and captured together with Prince Rupert, one of the Queen's sons.

He poured out money — £20,000 for his ransom and £10,000 a year to Elizabeth to compensate her for the loss of her pension during the Civil War.

Wayland Smithy, the ancient burial site near Ashbury.

At the end of the war he had become a permanent member of her court at the Hague, and continued to contribute great sums, although his estates had been confiscated under the Commonwealth.

He returned to England with the King, put his London house at the disposal of the ex-Queen, who was then a widow, and it was a popular belief that they had been secretly married, which was not the case.

After her death two years later, he continued to occupy a prominent place at Court, and when James the Second succeeded, was appointed Lieutenant-General of the forces.

He played a great part during the Plague and then the Fire of London. It was said that his horse "knew the smell of a fire at a great distance and was in the habit of immediately galloping off with him to the spot"; indeed the Earl, as he had now become, continued "his activity in the extinction of fires" for some time afterwards.

He remained a bachelor until his death at eighty-eight, when the earldom became extinct, but not the barony which, with his estates, which included Ashbury and its hamlets, went to a distant kinsman.

Ashbury was of great strategic importance in the days of the Saxons and the earthwork known as Alfred's Castle on Swinley Down commanded the two passes across the Downs.

Frontier

Thirteen centuries ago, King Cynewulf of Wessex was driven back to hold this frontier by Offa and his Mercians, who swarmed over all the country between Ashbury and Wallingford, and northwards to the Thames.

Written records relating to the ownership of Ashbury exist for more than 1,000 years, when it was given to the monks of Abingdon Abbey.

At the time of Domesday it belonged to Glastonbury Abbey, and there followed a dispute between this religious house and the Bishops of Bath and Wells, particularly one of them, Savaric, who took possession of the Abbey and excommunicated the newly-elected Abbot.

He shut up the monks without food, had some of them beaten and applied to the Pope to deprive Bath of its cathedral dignity and transfer his see to Glastonbury.

Legend

Eventually, the dispute was settled, and while the bishops kept Ashbury church and its revenues, the Abbey kept the manor until the Dissolution.

The Rectory was a sinecure, the bishops providing a vicar, whose small stipend they paid out of the income of the living, but in 1588, for some reason, the Queen was granted the patronage temporarily, and she appointed a well-known Oxford man, Dr. Walter Bayley, Regius Professor of Physic in the University and one of her doctors.

He was already in holy orders when he took his medical degrees and enjoyed a large practice, being best known for his work "A Brief Treatise on the Preservation of the Eyesight."

Ashbury is most famous for Wayland Smith's Cave, a Celtic burial chamber, a wild and lonely place and one of the greatest archaeological interest.

According to a legend, which is amongst the most ancient of the Teutonic peoples, it is the home of Wayland the supernatural blacksmith; if the owner of a horse which had shed a shoe left the animal unattended at the entrance to the cave, together with a silver coin, he would find, on his return, the horse freshly shod and the money gone.